

# Eva de Graaf

## Rotterdam

### Pilot



# EMPA

Discrimination! It is Kingsday (an annual Dutch celebration of the King), just before midnight, when I step on board a container feeder which I have to pilot out of the port of Rotterdam. "It is a national holiday, and only the women are working!" The captain burst into laughter when he explained that earlier that day, one of my fellow female pilots brought the vessel in.

It is, among other things, one of the moments that made my work as a pilot great. Since the number of female pilots and seafarers is increasing, most of the captains and crew are well accustomed to seeing us ladies arrive on board. That is if you don't take into account the occasional "Who are you?" from a mate who is still sleepy and just arrived to start his bridge watch. Standing in my uniform and giving helm and engine orders, it seems like an odd question. A swift reply, "Housekeeping!" usually breaks the ice. The few times it doesn't break the ice, I can always rely on my experience.

I started working as an officer at age 23. At that time, I was usually the only female on a ship with a crew of 33. As a young seafarer, you learn quickly: keeping a bridge watch at night, only you and a lookout awake while everyone else on board is sleeping. They trust you to keep them safe.

Besides my apprenticeships, I've worked my whole career on gas carriers. Three months on, three months off. That means three months of working up to 70 hours a week, followed by three months of spending time with family and friends and travelling the



*Eva de Graaf*

world. As a third mate on small tankers, we had a busy trade in North Western Europe. Most of the terminals were close to the city. As we had bicycles on board (I am Dutch, of course!), there was always the opportunity to explore the city. Spending a month in a dry dock in Ferrol, Spain, was the highlight of that period. We played soccer against the team of the ship yard, going ashore and eating as much seafood in one month as I probably will for the rest of my life!



As I transitioned to working on larger LNG carriers, the voyages became more extensive. Our routes took us globally, starting with loading in Nigeria, navigating around the Cape of Good Hope, and unloading in South Korea, Japan, or China. We would then continue loading in Australia via the Panama Locks and discharge in the Gulf of Mexico. The ports were more remote, and the port stays were busier. Therefore, shore leave was seldom. Usually, I was glad I had gotten to see my bed for a few hours before we had to cast off and set out to sea again. And the best shore leave? When you sign off, start your holidays! Thanks to signing off in ports worldwide, I have been on holiday in Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Israel and Hong Kong. Signing off and requesting the company to delay your flight for a few weeks was a perfect getaway after months of hard work.



*As an apprentice onboard a general cargo ship*

Not only the holidays but also at sea life was good. Working in a team, maintaining the vessel, keeping the drills at a high standard, standing watch, and seeing numerous sunsets. When you are working, eating and spending your time off with the same people for months, you become close as a team. We organised Christmas, Easter, New Year and numerous other parties; all came with good food or even a BBQ! I organised ping pong tournaments and movie marathons, wrapped Christmas gifts for the whole crew and ordered new gym equipment. When I was an apprentice on a general cargo vessel, we even built a swimming pool on board!



As I progressed through the ranks, the management aspect of the job took on increasing importance. As a Chief Mate, I was responsible for three Junior Officers, eight AB's and two apprentices. I learned a lot about managing your team and their time, as well as planning and coordinating maintenance jobs between departments. As a female, I was usually the person the crew came to when there was an issue on the mental side of life at sea. Spending months at sea and missing your loved ones can be lonely sometimes. Everyone occasionally wonders, "What on earth am I doing at sea, and why do I not have a normal 9-5 job?" However, a close team, a comforting word, and good laughter usually solved the problem. Otherwise, there was always karaoke!

In 2020, when COVID came along and I got into my late thirties, the big questions came. What do I want to do with the rest of my life? Do I want to stay at sea another 30 years until my retirement? Can I have a regular office job since I have never had one? At that time, I was working for Shell. I moved to Shell a few years earlier since it gave me many career opportunities besides working at sea. They offered great jobs, even with some travelling, but every time I walked into an office, I literally got chills. My body screamed:

"No! This is not you, Eva; get out of here!" I couldn't imagine myself commuting every day, the traffic jams, the meetings, the long hours writing emails...

A former schoolmate came up with the solution: pilot in Rotterdam! I wasn't sure it was the right choice for me, but I gave it a shot. I passed the tests and interviews and started the training in January 2022. The further I got, the more I learned, the better the manoeuvring went, and the more I loved being a pilot. My inauguration followed in March 2023, and since then, I have piloted over 300 vessels independently in and out of Rotterdam.



I've got the best of both worlds as a pilot. I have a rotation of one week on and one week off, meaning I still have a lot of free time to spend with friends and family and travel. And although I only sail to the port of Rotterdam now, the job is never boring. Not one voyage is the same. Some captains are friendly and chatty, and time flies; on some voyages, you request to switch on the radio to kill the silence. Sailing on a beautiful sunny day with no winds is a real treat, but berthing the vessel safely in storm conditions is quite demanding. However, the moment you step off the vessel, you shake the Captain's hand, and he thanks you for the job well done, which makes it very rewarding.

Or, as a Captain once said after I did a perfect manoeuvre my way (after I convinced him his plan was bound to fail): "Women are always right!" Gotta love your job, don't you?!