

Classic Dutch Yachts and the Real James Bond

By Dave Gerr, © 2012 Dave Gerr

Wrested from a portion of what was a large, shoal, saltwater bay opening to the North Sea—the former Zuider Zee—is a monumental feat of Dutch engineering. This is the IJsselmeer, a manmade, freshwater lake of some 1,100 square kilometers (425 square miles). At the tip of a small peninsula jutting eastward into the IJsselmeer, lies the town of Enkhuizen.

A port to hundreds of boats, Enkhuizen is also home to the Zuider Zee Museum, which houses a variety of exhibits. I'd traveled there for one exhibit in particular, however: The entire ground floor is the Ship's Hall, a collection of wooden Dutch boats—the largest such assemblage anywhere.

I've always admired Dutch boats, which—among other things—included the first yachts in the modern sense. Indeed, the very word “yacht” comes from Dutch. The traditional Dutch boiers, botters, hoggars, and more, were all on display, along with more conventionally shaped craft. There were fishing boats and small workboats in addition to the yachts. The bluff bows, shoal draft, and massive leeboards of these vessels are well known, but seldom seen outside of Holland.

One of these boats in particular caught my eye. A classic Dutch boeier 31 feet (9.5 m) overall, her varnished topsides and cabin gleamed. Her rudderhead was capped by an intricately carved golden bird of prey. In perfect shape, she appeared ready for a cruise. My friend, reading aloud, translated the extensive infor-

mation on the plaque nearby.

Her name was *Sperwer* or sparrow hawk and thus the carving on her rudderhead. She'd been owned and sailed by a fellow named Merlin Minshall, who'd used her to explore the coasts and rivers of Germany and neighboring countries prior to World War II. And then things got interesting . . .



Albatross, built in 1881, is very similar to *Sperwer*

Merlin Theodore Minshall, it turned out was an adventurer, race car driver, and sailor. Born in 1906 and raised to proper British society, he received the expected British public-school education and then attended Oxford. From there, he studied architecture at London University. But Minshall disliked this upper-crust life. He gave it all up to sail his boat *Sperwer* around Europe.

Minshall was also regularly reporting on German coastal installations and transport to British intelligence. (Perhaps, this came to pass because his mother had been a British spy during World War I.) Minshall also married his first wife at this juncture. She'd had no previous sailing experience, and they were soon separated, later to be divorced.

Minshall, was not alone for long, however. While sailing the Danube, a beautiful German girl joined him. It turned out that this was no accident, and that she was a German counterspy. In fact her mission was to seduce Minshall and then kill him! She nearly succeeded. The *fem fatale* poisoned Minshall's food and

Classic Dutch Yachts and the Real James Bond - continued*Sperwer (Sparrow Hawk)*

31 ft. (9.5 m) LOA - 27 ft. (8.3 m) WL - 10 Tons - 1,000 sq.ft. (93 sq.m) Sail Area

Sperwer was built 1886 by Eltje Holtrop van der Zee, in Joure as a auxiliary/motorized boeier. Widely recognized as the most skilled boeier builder of his era, Holtrop van der Zee's *Sperwer* was considered very fast. In racing at Sneekermeer, in 1892 for the New York Society Cup, *Sperwer* finished first. She was shipped to England in 1926 and purchased by Merlin Minshall in 1931. Minshall's plan was to sail her completely across Europe through the Seine, the Marne Rhine Canal, the Rhine, the Ludwig's Canal (just barely navigable), and then along the whole length of the Danube to the Black Sea.

The actual journey took two years and was published in National Geographic Magazine, May 1937. The National Geographic article, however, covered strictly the sailing and left out any reference to spying adventures or to meeting such Nazi officials as Herman Goering. *Sperwer* ultimately went to the Zuider Zee Museum in 1946.

he was near death for several days.

On recovering, Minshall returned to his sailing and spying. He was reporting to Special Branch of British Naval Intelligence, and directly to none other than Ian Fleming. (Yes, the creator of James Bond.) Minshall's designation number was, you guessed it, 007! His gun was a Walther PPK carried in a shoulder holster, with a back-up Beretta .25 concealed in his pants. A top marksman, Minshall was also both a judo and karate expert. It's almost certain that Merlin Minshall was one of Fleming's inspirations for James Bond. (The other was likely the incredible spy Sidney Reilly.) So here, lying quietly in this out-of-the-way museum in a Dutch seaside town, was the real James



Merlin Minshall
© National Portrait Gallery, London

Bond's own boat . . .

Minshall's continued to live the sort of exploits needed to fill any Bond movie. Disgusted by the Nazis and other fascists he was encountering and frustrated by his inability to get the British government at the time to take a stand against them, Minshall turned to car racing. The wild road races of the era are generally illegal today, but were immensely popular at the time.

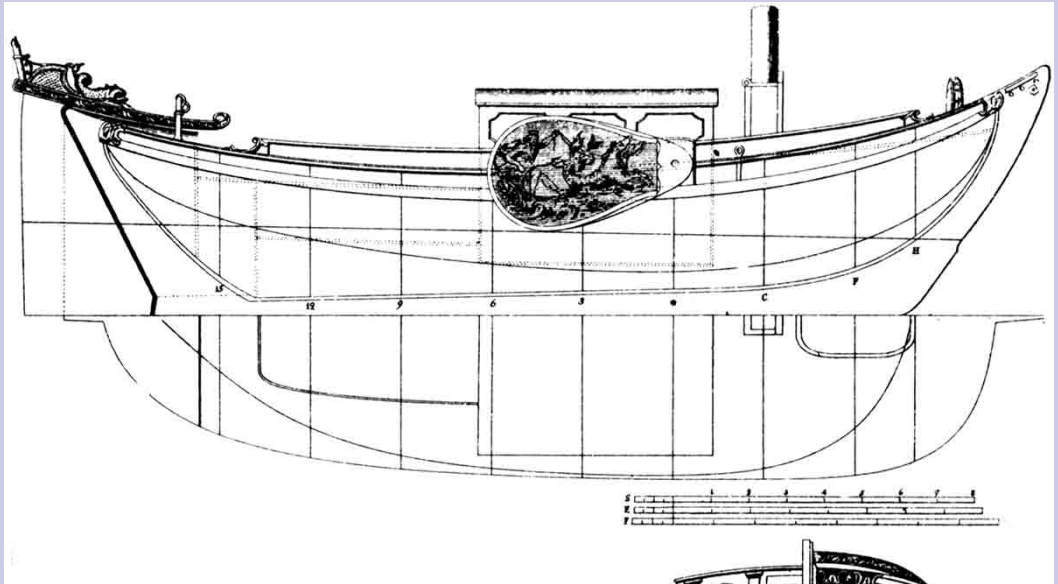
Twice a competitor in the Monte Carlo Rally in 1937, he was presented with a trophy by none other than Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. This was for the Italian Foreign Challenge Trophy, a three-day, 4,000-mile car race be-

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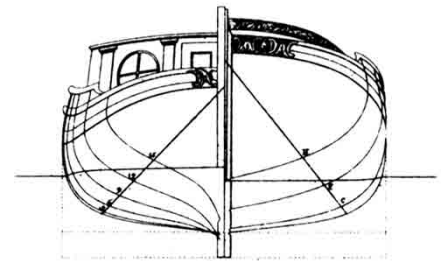
tween Rome and Sicily. There were more than 400 entrants. Only half the entrants finished and four of the drivers died during the race.

Minshall's car was a Singer 1.5-Litre Le Mans Special, a car that had come close to winning at Le Mans. With a flare for tinkering and invention, Minshall fitted the vehicle with several unique features, including headlamps that turned with the wheel (a development that would be first be adopted by Citroen some twenty-five years later). Minshall next raced north to south across the Sahara in a three-wheeled light truck. It was the first air-cooled vehicle to accomplish the feat.

Returning to England, Minshall yet again tried to get the powers in Whitehall to take action on all he was learning about the fascists during his travels. (Minshall was still reporting back on what he found.) The appeasement-minded British government at the time would still do nothing, but did give Minshall a



Lines of a 25-foot 4-inch (7.7 m) boeier from the 1768 text *Architectura Navalis Mercatoria*, by F.H. Chapman. Beam is 8 feet 4 inches (2.5 m) and draft 2 feet 5 inches (74 cm). She is described as a "Dutch scout or boyert." Even though built more than a hundred years later, the lines of Sperwer are of remarkably similar form.



The first true modern yachts were boats of this type. They were developed in the 1500s to 1600s, when the Dutch had one of the greatest naval trading empires the world had ever seen. Shoal, handy vessels were needed to track and control smugglers and deal with other illegal mercantile operations. The craft used were called "jaghts." This is from the Dutch "jagen," meaning to hunt; they were hunting smugglers.

Wealthy Dutch ship owners and government officials soon found that simply messing about on the company jaght was fun on it's own. In 1660, the "jachtschippen" *Mary* was presented as a gift to Charles II of England. King Charles enjoyed his new boat so much he soon took to designing his own. The craze spread through England as well as Holland and beyond. So it is that we have the Dutch to thank for not only the word "yacht," but for yachting itself.

commission as a sub-lieutenant in the RNVR (the Royal Naval Reserve).

Not exactly the type of person to take orders graciously, it wasn't long before Minshall was at loggerheads with the director of naval intelligence, Admiral Godfrey. It was Ian Fleming who smoothed things over to keep Minshall out of trouble.

After the war broke out—based on his first-hand knowledge of the Danube—Minshall was sent on a mission to disrupt the shipment of grain and oil from Romania to Germany. The goal was to block the Danube at the beautiful gorge—known as the Iron Gates—at the boundary between Serbia and Romania. In this instance, Minshall was dispatched by Fleming and Sir Robert Bellairs, coordinator of intelligence to the War Cabinet. Minshall's cover was as a British vice consul.



The sparrow hawk carving on Sperwer's rudderhead

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He had a cyanide capsule drilled into one of his teeth and false-bottom luggage packed with detonators. High explosives were disguised in the red-and-gold-foil packaging of a well-known candy, Mackintosh's toffee deluxe. Yet more gelignite was shipped to him in the diplomatic pouch.

After failing in an initial attempt to bribe the local shipping pilots with gold sovereigns to either leave or foul things up, Minshall commandeered several British ships and had a crew of British ratings sent out from England to work them. The aim was to sink ships in the Iron Gates thus blocking the river.

In the days of travel and preparation involved, there were two attempts on Minshall's life. One of these occurred aboard the Orient Express, where Minshall recognized the German agent and poisoned his would-be assassin's wine while they were both in the dining car. Minshall then disposed of the body, by standing the dead man up, wrapping an arm around his own shoulder and walking him—as if he were a drunk friend—to the men's room. Once inside, Minshall opened the window and shoved the corpse out of the moving train.

Ultimately, the plan to sink boats in the Danube was abandoned because the Germans apparently siphoned the fuel out of the boats of Minshall's little fleet. The small flotilla ran dry, and—dead in the water—they and Minshall's men were captured. Minshall escaped in his launch, which was following behind. Filling the launch with explosives, he then ran it at



The Iron Gates gorge on the Danube



Foreword by LEN DEIGHTON



Minshall and his teammate and companion with his Singer 1.5-Liter Le Mans Special

www.singercars.com

top speed into a railway embankment, where oil barges were pulled through the rapids.

Later that same year (1940), Minshall oversaw Operation Shamrock. In this, a commandeered fishing smack was used as a base for monitoring German U-boat movements in the Gironde Estuary, in the Bay of Biscay.

Minshall was next placed in charge of a section at HMS Flowerdown. Using "Z machines" (radio direction finders and transmitter analysis) they tracked the positions of ships of all sorts. Indeed, Minshall was thus a direct participant in the hunt for the Bismarck.

Naval intelligence then moved Minshall to Fiji and on to New Zealand, where he was engaged in still more intelligence operations. This was followed by a posting in occupied Yugoslavia, where Minshall was in charge of the Allied Naval Mission to Tito.

Retiring as a Lt. Commander, RNVR, Minshall finally settled into the quiet life of an architect. He lived uneventfully in Norfolk, with his fourth wife and their four sons until his death in 1987, at the age of 81.

You can read about Merlin Minshall's wartime adventures in his book *Guilt Edged*, published in 1977. He also wrote *The Adventurer*, a book specifically about his travels aboard *Sperwer*.

Zuider Zee Museum:
www.zuiderzeemuseum.nl