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Summary and Conclusions

From 1597 until 1795, the Dutch navy comprised five admiralties, each with its own shore organisation. Though distinct in size, capacity and location, all five had the same mission: to build, maintain and equip warships for the purpose of defending the Republic and its interests, especially its trading interests. The admiralties fulfilled this mission with a highly diverse fleet of ships. Their vessels could be deployed for various uses, from convoy to guard vessel and from cruiser to battle ship. Whatever the uses to which they were put in practice, these warships were primarily designed as weapons and instruments of power, and it is from this perspective that the operational deployment of warships has traditionally been studied and chronicled. Usually, this has involved consideration of the specific reason(s) for their deployment, of the results thereof, and of the main players: the political leaders who ordered the deployment and the ships’ military commanders who carried out those orders.

A warship was more than a fearsome weapon or instrument of power to be wielded by the government, however; it was also a mobile enterprise with its own labour code and working procedures. This understanding puts an entirely different perspective on the deployment and functioning of warships in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, opening up a world far removed from the familiar spectacles of gunsmoke and derring-do. Viewed in this light, a naval commander was no longer merely a military officer commissioned by the admiralty to perform a particular task, but also a seafaring entrepreneur with his own private interests. As far as pursuing private interests went, this applied equally to the ship’s clerk (scheepsschrijver, whose job covered several activities of both the purser and the captain’s clerk). Scarcely researched to date, this non-commissioned officer occupied an important position both on board and on shore. Indeed, he was even a key figure in many respects. It is this figure who forms the focus of this study, considered within the context of the warship as a seafaring enterprise.

Up through the mid-seventeenth century, naval commanders might in fact be merchant shipping captains who hired themselves and their crew and shipped out as privateers for a single campaign or an entire expedition. From 1626, the navy of the Dutch Republic also employed captains in permanent service. Assigned a vessel, they then no longer brought their own manned and modified merchant ships into battle. Yet, in practice, the distinction was much less significant than it might seem. Both types of captains received the same wage – namely, 30 guilders per month – and both were responsible for arranging food and drink for their crew. The reimbursement they received for these pro-
visions, known as the so-called costpenningen, or provisioning pennies, usually amounting to 6 or 7 stuivers per crew member per day, was a much more lucrative source of income for captains than their actual standard monthly salary. These reimbursements for board provisions always concerned large sums, often several thousand guilders at once, and a profit margin of 1 to 2 stuivers per crew member per day was common in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In order to work out to how many provisioning pennies a captain was entitled, it first had to be established how many men he had aboard to feed each day. Temporary onshore leave, deaths and desertions changed the ship’s population almost daily. As such, accurate records of both the ship’s voyage and the number of men on board were absolutely essential. Historically, the ship’s clerk was the person charged with responsibility for tallying these numbers and keeping the written records. Aside from this administrative management, the clerk also had a wide range of other duties pertaining to non-military matters aboard the ship, to the extent that he would become the linchpin of this ‘seafaring company’ – the vessel provisioned and commanded by the captain.

A clerk serving on a warship was originally, and right into the early seventeenth century, a confidant of the captain – possibly his son or another family member, or a manservant or crew member who had worked for him for many years. In principle, the clerk’s influence on the overall enterprise was minimal. He simply kept the muster roll and the ship’s other record books as instructed by his boss, to whom the ship often, as mentioned, belonged. The registration of payments and crew members who entered and left service were all directed by the captain. As well as providing bed and board for his crew, the captain might also stand in for advance wages they received upon signing on, provide sailors’ clothing and kit on credit or pay out advances if the admiralty took too long to disburse the agreed rents, wages and reimbursements for food expenses. Indeed, captains at this time were not so much military men in the strict sense of the word as they were small, independent entrepreneurs who alternated naval warfare with piracy and merchant shipping.

In the period following the Instruction for the Admiralties of 1597, this began to change. Within the five admiralties, the composition of a warship’s crew was no longer left to the captain’s discretion, in spite of the fact that he was still in many cases the ship’s owner. Instead, important positions such as his deputy, lieutenant and also his bookkeeper or clerk were now appointed by deed by the relevant admiralty board. Such a captain, appointed by the admiralty on a one-off or permanent basis, might still be able to nominate his son or some other person for the office of clerk, but now members of the admiralty council could also advance candidates. Regardless of who was nominated or stood for the post, every candidate had to attend the Prinsenhof in person, where the admiralty had its administrative seat. Here he had to present himself to a meeting of the members of the admiralty board, providing a reference if he had one. Once a candidate had been approved, he could immediately be installed as clerk. This involved a formal reading of the clerk’s briefing and his recitation of the oath of office, in which he pledged
not to use his position for wrongful ends. Issued to the clerk after the reading, the brief-
ing contained a summary of the most important duties and roles of the clerk’s office on
board a warship. A deed of appointment was also drawn up for the clerk at this time by
the secretariat of the Prinsenhof, specifying the captain to whom he was to be assigned
as clerk. As well as an oath of office, the clerk – like all crew members aboard a warship
of the navy of the Republic – had to swear an oath of allegiance to both the States-General
and the admiral general on what was known as the general rules of order (artikelbrief).
This comprised a summary of all the rules that everyone on board had to follow, along
with the penalties for violation.

These requisites – of an appointment by deed and a double oath – provide an indica-
tion of the importance and responsibility attached to the clerk’s position. Yet there were
no special manuals or strict acceptance criteria for the job. There was an age restriction
stating that clerks had to be at least 21 years old, but even this basic criterion was occa-
sionally ignored, and an 18 or 19-year-old candidate of solid repute nominated by a mem-
ber of the admiralty council would not be turned away. Once in possession of his deed of
appointment, the clerk could immediately enter the employ of the captain to whom the
admiralty had assigned him as a non-commissioned officer.

In practice, clerks appear to have exercised a wider range of tasks than provided for
in their briefing. As a rule, their primary duties consisted in the recruitment and enlist-
ment of sailors. After an initial group of applicants had been enlisted at the Prinsenhof
to provide a skeleton crew, the clerk took over, continuing to sign on personnel until the
muster roll was filled with the requisite number of seamen.

His role in the recruitment process made the ship’s clerk a familiar figure in seven-
teenth-century portside neighbourhoods, where he grew to become the main liaison be-
tween the employer (the admiralty), the employees (the sailors who entered service) and
the suppliers both of those seeking employment (crimps and recruiters) and of the ship’s
equipage (clothiers, tobacco merchants, shoemakers, liquor merchants, etc.). Whereas
the work of recruiting and enlisting crewmen was initially performed by the captain
himself, once he became an employee of the admiralty this job increasingly devolved to
his clerk. Rather than setting out in the company of their captain, as in the past, clerks
now went alone or were joined by the lieutenant and/or skipper. Like the clerk, the lieu-
tenant and the skipper were signed on not at the Prinsenhof but by a deed of appoint-
ment issued prior to this by the admiralty. This trio directed the work of outfitting, sup-
plying and providing a crew for the warship assigned to (or contributed by) the captain.

The skipper’s primary concern was to ready the vessel, whilst the clerk concentrated
on signing men on and bringing them on board, and the lieutenant on coordinating on-
board preparations and supervising the loading, which was carried out by members of
the skeleton crew employed earlier as well as labourers from the dockyards and ware-
houses. To provision the ship the captain would hire independent skippers and his own
staff, family members and possibly also a paid agent to represent his interests, known as
a solicitor (solliciteur). The captain, who usually embarked just before the ship set sail,
could also, if necessary, call on the lieutenant, the clerk and the steward and cook (both part of the skeleton crew) to supervise the provisioning arrangements. This division of duties remained unchanged over two centuries, although mutual relations between the lieutenant, skipper and clerk did change during that time.

Still the most important true sailor aboard warships in the medieval period, the skipper began to lose influence and ground to the lieutenant and ship's clerk. The lieutenant became the captain's official deputy, ousting the skipper as second in command. Over the course of the first half of the seventeenth century, his independence and responsibility grew, until he was not only the captain's official deputy and chief assistant, but could also obtain an admiralty posting as independent commanding officer and effectively hold command of a ship. The office of clerk underwent a similar evolution. He, too, rose to supersede the skipper in the ship's hierarchy, but not until later, in the eighteenth century.

At mid-seventeenth century, the skipper was still clearly the third-in-command. Officially, he was the ‘first deck and non-commissioned officer’, ranking just below the two senior officers – the captain and the lieutenant. As the number of officers on board proliferated over the second half of the seventeenth century to keep pace with expansions of the admiralties’ ships and crews, the skipper saw himself descending even lower down the ladder in rank and authority. The number of lieutenants on board went from one to two, three and eventually even four or more, with the first lieutenant ranking above his colleagues as the captain’s deputy. The clerk also acquired reinforcement in the form of an official assistant. These assistant clerks first made their appearance in the navy of the Dutch Republic in 1664, on the eve of the Second Anglo-Dutch War. The introduction of these ‘second clerks’, as they were known, signals an increase in the duties and administrative workload attending the clerk’s office, much like that of the other deck and non-commissioned officers, many of whom had been assigned one or more assistants even earlier, during the First Anglo-Dutch War. Yet, in the clerk’s case, the implications were greater as his status, position and importance were also involved.

The briefing on which ships’ clerks swore their oath of office attest that their duties and decision-making power grew over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Originally, this briefing was a limited list of articles setting out rules by which a clerk was professionally obligated to abide, together with a general description of his work and duties. Though in principle all ships’ clerks under the five admiralties performed the exact same work, each admiralty adopted its own clerks’ briefing, some intended only for clerks in service on inland waterways, while others applied solely to a particular voyage or campaign. In the 1620s, the States-General issued the first briefing meant to apply to all ships’ clerks, but this ‘Civilian instruction by which shall be regulated the Clerks on the Country’s ships of war’ only briefly supplanted the models drawn up by the individual admiralties themselves.

In 1641, the admiralty board of Rotterdam decided to review its existing general rules of order and the clerks’ and captains’ briefings issued by the States’ General with a view to
improving accountability for the ships’ stores and supplies. This particularly concerned the stores that, according to custom, the admiralty allowed captains to purchase on their own and claim as expenses. The system under which they could claim expenses for the duly purchased brooms, pails, mops, candles, locks and suchlike was changed into one with a fixed set of reimbursements. Items not accounted for under the new rules had to meet stricter conditions. Thus, if a captain bought a component to maintain or repair his ship en route, it no longer sufficed to hand over the receipt to receive a reimbursement of the expense. Instead, he would also have to present a statement in which the lieutenant and the skipper or else two other officers (e.g. deck officers) provided their confirmation that the purchased goods had actually been delivered and used on board. The new rules also drastically expanded the clerk’s traditional task of inspecting the ship’s use of gunpowder. From 1643, the clerk had to record every single cannon fire, including a notation of the weight of the cannonball, the quantity of powder used and the reason for firing. The new rules introduced in 1643 were an expansion of the briefing as issued by the States-General in 1629, which the Rotterdam admiralty continued to uphold unchanged.

In Amsterdam, the seat of the country’s largest admiralty, a separate new briefing was drawn up for all clerks in 1657. Efforts to gain firmer control over the ship’s stores and supplies distributed by the boatswain led to a far-reaching expansion in the supervisory duties of Amsterdam’s ships’ clerks. From 1657 they were required to keep a written record of all naval goods the boatswain supplied to deck officers and non-commissioned officers, which record then had to be handed over to the boatswain after the journey’s end. In 1697, the Rotterdam admiralty adopted these 1657 Amsterdam measures and extended them. Over the course of the eighteenth century, both the Rotterdam and Amsterdam admiralties expanded the clerk’s watchdog role yet further, now also putting him officially in charge of conducting periodic inspections of the sailors’ clothes and kit.

From the issue of the first printed clerks’ briefings in the 1720s, a clear trend began to manifest itself, with the briefings becoming ever more detailed and wider in scope over time. The same was true of the general rules of conduct, which applied not only to the ship’s clerk, but all crew on board. In short, there was a steady proliferation in the number of rules and guidelines that served to create additional work for the clerk.

At sea, the ‘core business’ of a ship’s clerk was and remained the keeping of three rolls, or registers: the muster roll, the ship’s logbook and the debt register. But the information he had to record in them became ever more encompassing and precise and required ever more detailed specifications. As the ship’s organisation took on an increasingly bureaucratic character, its emphasis also shifted, towards tightening controls on the captain and other members of his staff and in particular on how they used the stores and supplies placed at their disposal by the admiralties. The first steps in this direction date from the first half of the seventeenth century. At that time, the admiralties were still chiefly concerned with implementing a sound naval administration, including via the briefings for the clerk and captain. The obligation to keep daily notes and be present on board every day (which not even the captain could overrule) indicates the central and regulatory role
clerks were accorded by the shore-based authorities. The muster rolls and logbooks they kept were needed, among other things, to verify the amount of board money to which captains were entitled and where and for what purpose they had deployed their ship. It was only during the first four decades of the seventeenth century that the clerk’s job to inspect naval stores and supplies furnished by the admiralty remained restricted to checking the use of gunpowder in order to discourage unnecessary salutes.

The subsequent expansion in the clerk’s onboard inspective duties reflects the way in which the role of the navy itself was changing within the Dutch Republic. The seventeenth century’s ‘fighting navy’ became the eighteenth’s ‘convoy navy’, as maintenance activities and providing escorts for trading vessels gained precedence. Participation in punitive missions and sea battles had become a thing of the past. As a non-combatant who was more likely to get in the way than be of any real use during a sea battle, the position of the ship’s clerk enjoyed a boost from the Republic’s severely diminished influence as a maritime power.

The increasing decorum that, even before 1700, was attached to the ship’s commander – who became more concerned with showing the flag and less with putting in a heroic performance – also rubbed off on the ship’s clerk. In December 1765, the first regulations governing the uniforms of naval officers were adopted. Though midshipmen and ships’ clerks did not (yet) officially rank as officers, they too were issued with uniforms for the first time that in any case conveyed this appearance. With the exception of the insignia distinguishing ranks, their uniforms were virtually identical to those of the flag officer, captain, commodore and lieutenant. This also signalled that the clerk had now superseded the skipper in rank aboard the ship not only on paper but also in actual and outwardly recognisable fact. Some 15 years later it even became possible for a ship’s clerk to sail as a real officer with a rank equal to a lieutenant. In the new configuration introduced in 1781 ships’ clerks occupied what was admittedly the lowest rung in the officers’ corps, meaning even the most junior lieutenant had precedence. Even so, not a single other deck or non-commissioned officer would ever achieve a similar elevation to officer status during the period of the Republic.

In two hundred years’ time, the clerk had ascended from subordinate secretary to the most important deck officer on board a warship. His duties expanded apace, became more valued and eventually gained him an influential central position both on shore and on board. Out at sea, the clerk continued to hold this key position. His job required remaining in contact with the admiralty whilst on board the ship, and any sailor needing clothing, a hammock, tobacco or a cash advance had to come to him. As his briefing expanded to the administration of the financial accounts of both the ship’s provost and surgeon, his influence grew further. And owing to his notarial tasks, which included the preparation of ‘month-letters’ (maandbrieven, authorising a sailor’s family to collect three months’ wages from his salary account), IOUs, wills, inventories and letters of attorney, he was also intricately involved in the day-to-day lives of ordinary sailors aboard the ship. Everyone was acquainted with the ship’s clerk, down to enlistees who had had
little contact with him while still on shore. Once embarked, the clerk led the prayers twice daily and furthermore was charged with reading aloud the general rules of conduct to enforce discipline among the crew.

The monthly wages of a ship’s clerk were not high in proportion to the wide-ranging nature of the tasks and the intellect and responsibility demanded of him. Other deck and non-commissioned officers with fewer responsibilities and whose jobs were simpler, perhaps involving manual labour, often earned the same or even a higher wage. However, the clerk’s other activities provided him with a sizeable, structural supplementary income, similar to the captain, albeit smaller. For the captain of an admiralty ship, the monthly wage had been of secondary import for two centuries: the real bulk of his earnings came from reimbursements he received from the admiralty for provisioning the ship. Though these reimbursements might fluctuate, provisioning pennies always provided more than a captain’s salary, even in times of relative hardship with inflation in food prices and little work. This was not true for clerks, the difference between their monthly wages and supplementary earnings being much smaller. In spite of his many side jobs on board the ship, the clerk’s monthly wage was still his most important source of income. Only sometimes did the taking in or capture of an enemy ship or trading vessel contribute to this income.

If he was lucky, his permitted side jobs might enable a clerk to bring in double his monthly wage, putting it on a par with or slightly above the monthly salary of his captain (not counting provisioning pennies). But that was about the most he could hope for, unless he possessed the capital to extend credit to the crew from his own means. In the seventeenth century, the admiralties permitted charging an astronomic interest on credit at a rate of 40%. Yet ships’ clerks did not come from a moneyed class. Where they managed to obtain a few hundred or thousand guilders during their service, it was usually also through interest-bearing loans or provided for a fee by their solliciteurs or correspondents and consuls with whom they worked abroad. Any further supplementary earnings required little or no further investment, but were also considerably less lucrative. The preparation of official documents (for fellow crew members or the naval court martial) yielded no large sums, nor did keeping the accounts for the provost and surgeon. With smoking nearly ubiquitous amongst sailors, the clerk’s monopoly on the sale of tobacco on board afforded him the chance to cast a wide net. But by the latter half of the eighteenth century, unbridled profit-seeking had led to complaints and intervention by the Rotterdam admiralty board, which fixed a maximum price for the sale of tobacco in 1762.

The fact that the Rotterdam admiralty board felt the need to regulate the prices clerks charged aboard its ships is indicative of the changing position and mentality of the clerks themselves. After the mid-eighteenth century, warships were very frequently deployed as convoy escorts on sea voyages that might last some 18 months and called at various foreign ports. Clerks always played an important role on such missions, because they could supply the crew with money and clothes before they went on shore leave and moreover often possessed useful contacts in different countries who could provide local
knowledge. As the clerks’ importance increased, so did their commercial mindset.

The first clear signs of this changing mentality can be noticed in the early eighteenth century. In 1706, for example, without any justification, a group of three ships’ clerks under the Rotterdam admiralty suddenly began charging a commission for the distribution of the hammocks that the admiralty sold on board, which they deducted from the sailors’ salaries. When the practice met with no objection from the Prinsenhof, the impromptu commission was swiftly adopted as a vested right by all Rotterdam’s ships’ clerks. Most likely, the failure of the administrative staff at the admiralty’s central payment office to intervene was due to the fact that the clerks handed over a fixed share of the collected fees to that selfsame office. A similar episode is documented relating to psalters that the Rotterdam admiralty made available to the seamen. In 1722, one clerk took it upon himself to begin charging a commission for their distribution as well, whereupon all his colleagues did the same. Soon the ships’ clerks of the other admiralties began charging similar commission fees to their clientèle.

In Rotterdam, this commercial disposition received further impetus from the admiralty board’s decision in 1759 to henceforth allow ships’ clerks to personally buy in the clothes and kit on which they had been charging these commissions. In the past, the purchasing had always been done by the admiralty, keeping in check the commissions that clerks could charge on these sales. Immediately following this decision, clerks sought to inflate their revenues from the sale of sailors’ kit and clothing more than ever, once more forcing the admiralty board to intervene and impose rules and price agreements to protect sailors from overly profit-hungry clerks.

The commercialisation of the profession was reflected in the typical clerk’s background. No other person on board a warship practised so variegated a profession as the ships’ clerk, who had to straddle many spheres. Whilst on the ship he combined all manner of tasks that on shore would be carried out only by specific practitioners, such as notaries and ministers. Indeed, several ships’ clerks were trained as notaries or ministers, in which case they enjoyed an elite position and could expect to be assigned to an admiral. Yet such qualified clerks were a small minority. The average ship’s clerk was attached to a captain or commodore and came from an entirely different background. However diverse those backgrounds, all ships’ clerks had two important things in common: they lived in or near a city where an admiralty was based and had already been closely involved in the shipping trade or navy before putting out to sea as a clerk. That involvement could have been on shore or at sea; if at sea, they had usually served before as seamen or midshipmen.

For a seaman, ship’s corporal, quartermaster or other non-commissioned officer to be posted as clerk was invariably a promotion, and normally also the highest rung they could achieve in their seafaring career. This was not the case for midshipmen. A midshipman would only be posted as a clerk if there was no other suitable candidate on the ship or if he was a captain’s son and temporarily assuming clerical duties as part of his practical onboard training as a naval officer, in which case the post was simply a stepping stone.
The same applied to the myriad of administrative clerks and other assistants working for the admiralty on shore, for whom an appointment as clerk on board an admiralty yacht or other inland vessel also presented a chance to acquire an office as chercher (enforcing particular import and export duties), or who hoped to move up to a higher-paid administrative post at the Prinsenhof after several years' service as a ship's clerk. Further down the ladder was another rung of admiralty employees such as valets and halberdiers, who might become clerks on board seafaring warships. Their motives are less clear.

Most ships' clerks were not sailors born and bred but had some other connection to shipping. They might be employed as (or be the son of) a shopkeeper, merchant or other small businessman, or an innkeeper, and in that capacity engaged in lodging sailors and/or supplying their personal outfitting. Effectively, they accompanied their own customers – or, better yet, their debtors. For, in practice, their customers nearly always paid for their clothing or accommodation on credit, settling their debts at a later date by means of an IOU, a month-letter or other deduction from their salary earnings. On the ship, this breed of ships' clerk continued to practise the trade they carried out between journeys in partnership with their wives or other relatives on shore. Though thoroughly familiar with the seafaring world by virtue of living in a port town, the run-of-the-mill ships' clerk was not himself an ex-sailor or sailor’s son. As a rule they were married and had been born within the borders of the Republic or just beyond in towns in Flanders and Germany. They were a motley crew of men with no specific training for serving as clerk aboard a warship, but who were practised in one or more of the requisite duties and of good – or at least not ill – repute.

The uncoupling of the offices of ship's clerk and ship's commander marked the essential first step in the professionalisation of the Dutch navy. Another key step in this process was the States-General's later effort to promote greater unity in the regulatory mechanisms of the various admiralties. This led to an identical oath of allegiance for all naval crew members in the service of the Republic, from 1619, and from 1626 to the permanent appointment of captains. A next fundamental step came in 1654 with the introduction of a standing fleet, which was subsequently reflected in the new clerks' briefing issued in Amsterdam in 1657, obligating clerks to carefully monitor the (responsible) use on board of all state goods furnished by the boatswain. Over the eighteenth century, the clerk's monitoring duties would be extended within a less militant framework.

In order to ensure that clerks could act independently of their captains, the admiralty boards applied a divide-and-rule strategy: the captain retained his lucrative revenues from the provisioning pennies, but did not have the authority to dismiss his clerk, while the clerk would report any negative findings to his admiralty board through his contacts at the Prinsenhof, correspondence with the onshore authorities and via his entries in the ship's logbook. To prevent the clerk from gaining too much power and influence in his turn, or from being tempted into fraud, his work was also subject to regular inspections whilst on board the ship. This involved checks of the muster rolls and debt registers performed by the mustering officer and the captain at the admiralty's instruc-
tions, always working together and in the presence of the crew. Certain activities also required constant monitoring of the clerk by at least two other people, such as during the preparation of an inventory of an estate or when compiling lists of revenues from onboard auctions of sailor’s clothing. After the crew was discharged and disbanded, the ship’s account records were handed over to the central payment office and secretariat for close inspection. Any finding or suspicion of misappropriation of funds or deficits had immediate consequences for the clerk, who was called to account for himself and had to wait much longer for his final payment. Ultimately, he could be fined, have his wages cut or withheld entirely and ran the risk of not being reimbursed for his costs and outlays. In the worst case, the clerk would be fired and his name put on record as being prohibited from ever again serving the country in any capacity. But such cases were rare.

As long as a clerk kept the ship’s debts within limits and ensured the crewmen never owed him more than a quarter (the Amsterdam admiralty) or a fifth (the Rotterdam admiralty) of their earned income, he was relatively impervious and safe from blame. The admiralties even long turned a blind eye to their acquisition of fellow sailors’ monetary instruments (such as IOUs and maandbrieven, kostbrieven and restantbrieven) at undervalue. And although fixing price agreements for tobacco sales served to clamp down on outright profiteering, for a span of two centuries clerks had discretionary power to charge exorbitant rates of interest for the provision of cash advances - and cash advances accounted for the lion’s share of sailors’ debts. Indeed, the high interest rates they brought to bear were even openly defended by the admiralty boards. This was partly due to self-interest: if ships’ clerks where to quit their banking services, the admiralties would have to provide money for cash advances themselves. From their point of view, it was more advantageous to leave the organisation of advances to the ships’ clerks. Crew members who wanted to take out an advance, which they did of their own free will rather than out of any obligation, simply had to pay the – possibly heavy – price. The same applied to sailors who bought off their zeedoop, a fixed ceremony at the crossing of the equator or another special place at sea.

Though the admiralties were government institutions, they functioned rather more like family businesses, very much controlled by a small circle of families. Onshore staff, from the simple chamberlain to the presiding head of the admiralty board, were all driven by private, personal interests. Whereas salaries were fixed, there were always emoluments and every post offered opportunities for additional income, which were exploited on a massive scale: halberdiers who invariably combined the delivery of new recruits on board with the sale of hard liquor, bailiffs who hired themselves out to act as paid representatives for captains and ships’ clerks, mustering officers who bought up month-letters and paid advances on monthly wages, provosts who financed the payment of captains’ provisions and were allowed to maintain a personal craft at the admiralty’s expense – these are just a few examples. The admiralty boards’ freedom to hand out all manner of lucrative jobs only exacerbated conflicting interests and interdependence amongst the members. A key exponent of this commercialisation of the navy were its ships’ clerks,
appointed by deed by the admiralty board and subsequently left free to squeeze money from their fellow sailors.

Indeed, ships' clerks were more commercially-minded than most of the men on board. It was a quality intrinsic to the position and engendered distrust among those who sought the clerk's services. But he was by no means less trustworthy or more criminal than the rest of the crew or the staff at the Prinsenhof. The admiralties profited greatly from their ships clerks, non-combatants who were a key link in the inherently laborious work of naval recruitment. Furthermore, they enabled the authorities on shore to take firmer control of onboard logistics and of overseeing the work of the ships' commanders. It were the ships' clerks who effectively 'tamed' these warship captains and steered their transformation from entrepreneurs who were out for spoils, answering to no one, into obedient and manageable military officers in the service of the state. This was a crucial facet in the further professionalisation of the navy. Once the smoke of the major seventeenth-century European sea battles had well and truly cleared, it grew increasingly evident that the role of the naval ships' clerks had long since evolved from warfaring foreman to seafaring branch manager.