



Ships

Flying Dutchman

[Home](#)

[Archives](#)



Flying Dutchman

Legend of The Flying Dutchman

By James Donahue

As the story is told, an ancient 17th Century Dutch sailing ship is occasionally seen by ship's crews as their vessels battle the elements to

clear the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa.

This ghost story has its origins in both Dutch and German legend. The most common is a tale about a Captain Hendrick Vanderdecken, who set sail in 1680 from Amsterdam to Batavia, in Dutch East India, and disappeared in a gale while rounding the cape.

It is said that Vanderdecken ignored the danger and pressed on into the teeth of the tempest. The ship foundered, sending all aboard to their deaths. As punishment for his foolishness Vanderdecken and his ship are doomed to spend eternity fighting the tempest at the Cape.

Ironically the name Vanderdecken means "on deck" in Dutch.

There is a second version of the story. This one tells of a Captain Bernard Fokke who was known for the uncanny speed of his trips from Holland to Java and people said he was in league with the devil.

A third version changes the name to van Straaten, and yet a fourth version claims the captain's name was Ramhout van Dam.

In all of the stories, the ship remains unnamed. The reference to the "Flying Dutchman" appears to describe the cursed captain and not the ship.

According to most versions, the captain refuses to retreat in the face of the storm. In yet other stories, some terrible crime occurs on the ship, or the crew is struck by the plague and is not allowed to enter any port. For

whatever the reason, the ship and its crew are doomed to sail forever.

Literary buffs easily recognize this as a very old legend that dates back to the earliest of writings. Homer wrote of the traveler Ulysses who yearned for home. German mythology includes stories of heroic figures that crossed the waters and later were buried on land with their ships, or their bodies sent out to sea aboard their ships to drift forever.

One German legend tells of Herr von Falkenberg, a captain condemned to remain on the waves aboard a crewless vessel and playing at dice with the Devil for his soul.

Thus the Flying Dutchman is a retold old myth, rekindled by the Dutch during an era when they were masters of the sea. The story typifies their personal battles against the sea, and centers at a place most feared by the sailors of old, a point at the southern tip of Africa where it was almost always stormy and many a sailing ship was lost.

While there is general agreement that the Lost Dutchman is merely a legend, there have been actual reported sightings of a 17th Century sailing ship battling the elements at the Cape of Good Hope over the years.

Perhaps the first officially reported sighting occurred in 1835 when a crew of a British ship was rounding the cape and observed a “phantom ship” approaching in the shroud of a severe storm. The British crew said the vessel appeared to be on a collision course, but then it suddenly vanished.

The H.M.S. Bacchante encountered the Flying Dutchman again in 1881, also at the cape. The following day one of the two men that made the sighting fell to his death from the rigging, thus enhancing the story to include a curse on those that see the ghostly vessel.

A more recent sighting was made by people on the shore in March, 1939. What was astounding was that it was seen by dozens of people who all gave a detailed description of a Dutch merchantman from the 17th Century.

The last recorded sighting occurred at Cape Town in 1942 when four witnesses saw a sailing ship enter Table Bay and then disappear before their eyes.

HOME

The Mind of James Donahue

The Mind of James Donahue

Great And Lost Ships Of The World