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Wolraad Woltemade is a name synonymous with self-sacrificing courage. Wolraad was born in Hesse-Schoumberg in Germany. As an adult he had migrated to the Dutch settlement at the Southern tip of Africa where he worked as a dairy farmer for the Dutch East India Company.

The Cape of Storms

It was a stormy winter night in June 1773. All night the storm raged. The five ships in Table Bay were buffeted all night and pounded by the turbulent waves. Bright streaks of lightning lit up the imposing Table Mountain and the little settlement of Cape Town. Few of the sailors got much sleep that stormy night as the wooden ships creaked and groaned and strained at their anchors.

De Jonge Thomas

Captain Barend Lameren was concerned as his ship, *De Jonge Thomas*, broke its moorings and began to drag its anchor. There were 270 men, women and children on board the ship, along with a valuable cargo from the East. As the storm intensified, just after midnight on 1 June 1773, the Captain ordered the ship's cannon fired to warn the people on shore that they may need help.

Shipwreck

Shortly after 5 AM *De Jonge Thomas* broke loose from its last anchor and began to be forced onto the jagged rocks of Salt River mouth. With a loud crash the stricken ship broke in half and passengers and sailors began falling into the raging sea. Many drowned attempting to swim to shore. Only the strongest swimmers succeeded in reaching safety against the current of the river mouth.

Soldiers and Spectators

Soon a platoon of 30 soldiers came marching up. Governor Van Plettenberg had ordered them to prevent looting and to assist survivors of the shipwreck. The youngest son of Wolraad, Corporal Christian Ludwig Woltemade, was one of those soldiers. The officer in charge warned people who had gathered on shore not to go near the turbulent waters. Some had come to watch. Some to try and help. Others were opportunists seeking to loot cargo washed upon the shore.

Woltemade and Vonk

Just then an old man on a large black horse rode up. He was 65 years old, Wolraad Woltemade. His horse's name was Vonk (Sparkle). Throwing off his coat and shirt, Woltemade took a rope and galloped into the freezing waters of the turbulent sea. As he and his horse reached the ship he threw out the rope and made for shore towing two men behind. As they reached the shore, bystanders hurried to help the survivors out of the swirling surf.

Saving Lives

Immediately, and without a word, Woltemade turned his horse around and plunged back into the icy sea. Seven times, he rode and swam out to the ship rescuing 14 people. This took several agonizing hours. The sea was icy cold, the waves were mountainous and the current very strong.

Once More

The bystanders and soldiers on the shore insisted that he could not carry on. His horse was too exhausted and the storm was too intense. But the cries from the ship spurred Wolraad Woltemade on. *"Once more"*, he said. Though exhausted he plunged back into the sea an eighth time, swimming through the wild waves to the stricken *De Jonge Thomas*. This time 6 men leapt from the ship, and grabbed hold of the horse's mane, bridle, saddle and tail. It was too much, Wolraad Woltemade and his gallant horse, Vonk, plunged beneath the waves under the weight of so many panicking people. They all sank beneath the waves and were drowned.

Heroism Honoured

In honour of Wolraad Woltemade's unselfish sacrifice and bravery, the Dutch East India Company named a ship after him: *De Held Woltemade*. Later, the Republic of South Africa made the Wolraad Woltemade the highest civilian award for bravery in the country. His name was also given to a number of streets and suburbs in South Africa and to one of the most powerful salvage tugs in the world, built in 1976.

The Woltemade statue by Mitford-Barbeton can be seen in the grounds of Old Mutual in Pinelands.

Inexplicably though, the inspiring true story of Wolraad Woltemade has been removed from school history books.

To Christians, Wolraad Woltemade stands out as an example of dedication to saving the lost.

Rescue the Perishing

"Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, snatch them in pity from sin and the grave;

Weep over the erring one, lift up the fallen, tell them of Jesus, the Mighty to save. ♦

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying; Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save ♦

Rescue the perishing, duty demands it; strength for thy labour the Lord will provide;

Back to the narrow way, patiently win them; tell the poor wanderer a Saviour has died.

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