Thousands of men sailed on board the ships of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from the Dutch Republic to Asia. The return fleets sailing back to Europe carried thousands as well. Yet there was a remarkable difference between the number of those departing for Asia and those returning home. Their numbers are well-known: between 1602 and 1700, 317,800 men left the Republic and 114,400 returned, and between 1700–1795, no less than 655,200 persons sailed out and 252,500 repatriated. The character of this migration to Asia differed from the migration in the Atlantic. On board of the East Indiamen were mainly young men, sailors, soldiers, craftsmen and some higher officials. The great majority of them will have had the intention to return home after one, or perhaps two terms of service—one term being mostly five years. The just-mentioned figures make it clear that many of them never saw their home country again. Much has been written already on this migration. The ever-growing need for personnel by the Company, the origin of those on board, the effects of the migration on the population in the Republic, and the differences between the categories of servants have all been analyzed. Yet, these analyses have been based on sample surveys and could not take into account the careers of individual Company servants. It was, for instance, impossible to find out if sailors or soldiers made more than one voyage to the East, or to investigate the differences in the fate of common soldiers and the higher ships officers.

At this moment a project is going on that will make it possible to analyze this migration much more in detail: the construction of a database of the personnel of the VOC in the eighteenth century on the basis of the ship’s ledgers. The personnel administration of the VOC was based on the so-called scheepssoldijboeken, ship’s ledgers, containing a salary account of every man that sailed to Asia in the service of the Company. In these books, the name of the soldier or
sailor, his rank and his place of origin is noted as well as his career in Asia. His account is credited with his yearly earnings and is debited with the amount that is paid from his salary to his representatives at home and other rightful claimants, or what is paid to him overseas. The account is closed when the sailor or soldier leaves the Company’s service, for instance after returning to patria, or when he dies. If there is a positive balance, he will receive the remainder—in which case the account is signed by him. In case he has died, the remainder is paid to his heirs. The VOC archives contain a nearly complete set of ships ledgers for the eighteenth century (2,797 volumes). Thus, details are available for all the 655,000 men who were enlisted in the Company’s service between 1700 and 1795. The database is under construction but can already be used. At this moment, the data for the chambers (departments) of Zeeland, Delft, Rotterdam, Hoorn and Enkhuizen are available—although they will be corrected and augmented with some details. These five chambers were responsible for half the yearly equipage (the manning of ships to Asia) by the VOC, the other half was done by the chamber of Amsterdam.¹ A good example of the possibilities for new research is given in a recent article, that analyses the origin of the Flemish sailors and soldiers in the crews of the VOC ships from the chamber Zeeland in great detail.²

Making occasional use of the database, I will discuss two aspects of the “VOC migration” in this article: the recruitment of soldiers and junior merchants by the directors of the VOC. These groups represent the extremes in the hierarchy of the VOC, the soldiers being the lowest, the junior merchants the highest rank of those who entered the service of the Company. Within the context of this article the conclusions can at best be provisional, but I hope that to demonstrate the value of the database and to show the possibilities for further research.

¹ The website is http://vocopvarenden.nationaalarchief.nl. At this moment (June 2008) the data of the chambers Delft, Rotterdam, Hoorn, Enkhuizen and Zeeland are included, constituting half of the total number of ship’s ledgers. See also: Ton van Velzen, “Uitgevaren voor de Kamers: 700.000 mensen overzee,” in Jan Parmentier, ed., Uitgevaren voor de Kamer Zeeland (Zutphen: De Walburg Pers, 2006), 31–46.