

Dutch Forces in Australia in WWII – Doug Hurst

In the three months following their attack on Pearl Harbour powerful Japanese forces over-ran much of South East Asia and the Islands to Australia's north. Such was their superiority that they quickly occupied most of Indonesia, then a Dutch colony called the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). Captured territory included Timor from which they launched their attack on Dutch aircraft in Broome on 3 March 1942.

The countries of South East Asia had feared Japan's growing military power for some years. In response to Japanese aggression in China during the 1930s the Dutch had built up land and sea forces, each with air support. As the threat increased in 1941 they formed a hasty alliance with American, British and Australian regional forces, based on Singapore as the hub. Called ABDA, the alliance was never a cohesive force and was soon defeated by the more powerful, unified and better led Japanese.

When ABDA forces lost the Battle of the Java Sea on 26 February 1942, all hope of saving the NEI was gone and selected remnants of NEI forces relocated to Australia. As well as the aircraft destroyed in Broome, these forces included a cruiser (later joined by three more warships), three submarines (later joined by three more), a minesweeper, a few hundred troops and some aircraft, mostly transports, trainers and flying boats. Over two hundred more aircraft, mostly B-25 bombers, P-40 Kittyhawks and C-47 Dakotas, were added during 1942-3.

These resources were warmly welcomed and quickly integrated with Allied forces still fighting frantically to stop further Japanese advances into Australia's northern approaches. But even more important were the KPM (Royal Packet Line) merchant ships, some already at a permanent base in Sydney and others relocated to Australia from throughout the NEI.

Australia had virtually no merchant navy and the 28 KPM ships became the major Allied supply line during the most critical stages of the decisive New Guinea campaigns of 1942-43. Indeed, KPM ships became a life-line to Australian and US forces in PNG in those times, delivering some 1 000 000 tons of supplies and 100 000 troops to the allied forces.

Their contribution is hard to overstate. 19 of the 27 merchant ships allocated to General MacArthur's command were Dutch, mostly from KPM. In all probability, without these Dutch ships, the Allies could not have beaten the Japanese in Papua New Guinea in 1942-43 and the war would have been a longer and harder affair for the Allies.

Many Dutch merchant ships became well know to Allied fighting men – the Balikpapan, for instance, served throughout the war, ferrying troops back and forth to the fighting. Naval ships too became well known, operating in the Indian and Pacific oceans. In early 1943, Royal Netherlands Navy (RNN) ships based in Fremantle helped escort the Australian 9th Division back from the Middle East.

When the multi-national US 7th Fleet was formed, at first it was mostly Dutch and Australian ships, the Dutch contributing two cruisers (*Tromp and Jacob van Heemskerck*), two destroyers (*Van Galen and Tjerk Hiddes*), two submarines and a minesweeper. The RNN's Australian headquarter was in Melbourne and the Dutch had a permanent officer on staff with the USN in San Francisco. Ship's crews were almost entirely Dutch with only occasional supplementary manning from allies.

The NEI Army, the KNIL, was mostly destroyed or captured during the invasion and during 1942 only 1074 of the original 90 000 strong force reached Australia. By mid-1942 they were headquartered in Melbourne and 745 men were garrisoning some parts of the NEI not occupied by the Japanese. Not surprisingly, this small force was outnumbered everywhere and withdrew to Australia, to operate mainly with the Australian Army until the closing stages of the war.

KNIL numbers grew during the war, boosted by recruits from Dutch colonies like Surinam and the Dutch Antillies. By 1944 the KNIL could supply infantry, guides and interpreters to assist the Australians re-taking Dutch territories. With time, the KNIL also included an Intelligence Service that conducted special operations (sabotage, setting up undergrounds etc) in former Dutch territories, including the NEI – very dangerous work, with 42 of the 250 who did 36 operations captured and killed.

By war's end the KNIL numbered some 5000, including a Women's Corps, the VK, (in which 1059 women served during and after the war), and a Papua Battalion formed and based in New Guinea.

Two air combat squadrons (Nos 18 and 120) and two transport flights were formed in Australia, supported by an Australian allocation of 700 personnel to fill maintenance and other support roles and by access to Australian facilities like airfields and workshops.

No 18 was a B-25 Mitchell bomber squadron, formed in Canberra and deployed to the Northern Territory in late 1942 where it operated mostly from the large Allied airfield at Batchelor, south of Darwin. An outline of these times and the squadron's sudden fame when they sank a submarine off the NSW coast in June 1942 is given in the accompanying article on Gus Winckel.

Equally important is the fact that No 18, and later on No 120 squadron, were both composite squadrons within the RAAF, under RAAF operational command, but commanded by Dutch officers, and manned roughly 50% by Australian and Dutch/Indonesians.

This unique arrangement eventually worked well, but only after special measures were taken to handle language problems and discipline. Orders were printed in Dutch and English and squadron management always included an RAAF Squadron Leader. These arrangements were further modified in 1944 when students from a Dutch flying school in Jackson Mississippi – run with the assistance of the USAAF – began arriving.

Students from Jackson included escapees from occupied Holland and the NEI and Dutch citizens from unoccupied Dutch territories or allied or neutral countries. More than 700 trained in Jackson, the bulk of whom finished up in Australia. In combination with arrivals from other sources this made the Dutch squadrons very 'multi-cultural' decades before the term was invented.

In July 1944 18 Squadron welcomed 34 West Indians, and 38 (including six Chinese nationals) from the NEI, many of whom were escaped POWs. Soon after, the squadron included 38 nationalities speaking 13 different languages. Special measures to cope with this diversity included a special mess to provide Asian food and when the Queen's Birthday parade was held on 31 August the Commanding Officer addressed the squadron in Dutch, English and Malay.

No 120 Squadron, flying P-40 Kittyhawks, was also formed in Canberra, along with the PEP – the Personnel and Equipment Pool – a training and support unit for both Mitchells and Kittyhawks that remained in Canberra.

120 Squadron, with 24 aircraft, 28 pilots and 260 ground staff initially operated from various Australian bases until being based in Merauke, in the unoccupied part of what was then Dutch New Guinea, from April 1944 on. Their main roles were army support, bombing and anti-shipping. Pilots were mostly Dutch, but Australians frequently flew with the squadron and all specialist fighter combat instruction was done in the RAAF.

The two transport flights were based in various southern locations, with a main role of supporting the combat squadrons in the north. The main aircraft used were converted Mitchells and C-47 Dakota. The transport flights, unlike the combat squadrons, were not part of the RAAF until the very end of the war when they became No.19 Squadron, RAAF on 15 August 1945.

As such, they routinely operated from Australia to Indonesia and return for the next two years, despite union black bans on Dutch shipping to Indonesia. Most other Dutch aviators, along with their aircraft, were transferred to Indonesia at war's end to support Dutch efforts to re-establish the NEI. Army personnel too were sent to Indonesia, as were some ships and their crews.

It was all in vain for the Dutch, whose re-colonisation aims were, in the main, not supported by their WWII Allies and opposed by increasing numbers in Holland. When Indonesia was formed on 27 December 1949, the peace settlement included the handover of a good deal of Dutch equipment, including most of their aircraft. Some Dutch servicemen stayed on in the peace-time defence forces, some returned to Holland, and quite a few settled in Australia, the country they had helped defend during the Pacific War.

This article, authored by Doug Hurst, was published in a 2012 booklet titled "Broome" that was issued by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Australia in honour of the 70th anniversary of the Japanese air raid on Broome.

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