

## **Prewar assessments of the KNIL by Australian military officers**

In November 1941, Major J. H. Brown, an Australian officer, visited Java and attended several military exercises intended to practise offensive operations. He reported several important shortcomings.

“No fire plan had been prepared, nor had any reconnaissance been carried out. The attacking battalions moved forward about a mile from the front, still well behind the line, and after three hours of daylight they were having breakfast. The attack suffered from a lack of drive...”

Major Brown concluded that such an exercise “would have been fatal in actual operations.” However, he noted that, unlike the troops’ tactical performance, their equipment and artillery were generally good:

“The infantry and artillery are well equipped and considerably ahead of our own army [in] regimental and battalion equipment. The main weakness is considered to be in practical experience.”

Based on Brown’s findings, the Australian Directorate of Military Intelligence issued a report stating that while the KNIL was generally well equipped, its training was largely theoretical. It noted that:

“Their knowledge of offensive tactics is more theoretical than practical, and their training is mainly defensive.”

In other words, even when preparing for offensive manoeuvres, the KNIL operated in a fragmented and hesitant manner, reflecting its limited experience in modern field operations.

In February 1942, Lieutenant General Sir John Lavarack, GOC I Australian Corps, provided a similarly bleak assessment:

“Its [the KNIL’s] capacity for resistance against a strong attack will not be great. The Dutch themselves will fight, but they are inexperienced and not highly trained. The rank and file, mostly local troops, don’t look very stout... [The KNIL] rely very largely on civil sources for their supply, transport, repair, signals, provost, and other services, and are consequently not mobile.”

He added that the KNIL was therefore:

“Incapable of transfer to other areas, such as Sumatra, or even to the central zone of Java itself. A NEI division, if transferred, say, to South Sumatra, would be unable to fight.”

Lieutenant General V. A. H. Sturdee, Chief of the General Staff of the Australian Army, concluded that the KNIL:

“Should be regarded more as a well-equipped Home Guard than an army capable of undertaking active operations in the field.”

Ultimately, the KNIL and its Allies were defeated by a well-coordinated Japanese joint operation carried out with aggressive efficiency. The KNIL lacked, at every level, combat experience and training in modern warfare, and suffered from weak command and control. This combination led to decreasing morale and effectiveness.

Source: [The Netherlands East Indies Campaign 1941-1942 by Marc Lohnstein](#)

