

## The strategic position of Merauke during WWII

When General MacArthur began an offensive on mainland New Guinea on a modest scale in 1942, he was threatened in the left flank by the movement of the 5th and 48th Japanese Infantry Divisions from the west to the Timor-Ambon area north of Darwin. One of the headquarters of the Japanese was located near the town of Dobo on the Aroe Islands. If we look at the map, we see that the Aru Islands are directly opposite the Merauke-Tanah Merah area; they therefore posed a direct threat to New Guinea's "free" deal: Merauke was the main target. In an arc on the north coast of mainland Australia, 67 airfields were constructed. The possibility of invasion was considered by MacArthur's Allied staff, but the intelligence gathered about the enemy objectives and movements was completely contradictory and in fact did not interfere with MacArthur's offensive plans, although Merauke was militarily reinforced with a number of infantry units the size of a brigade.



Figure 1 - Netherlands New Guinea. Merauke in the south, Tanah Merah a bit further north and the island in the Arafura Sea occupied by the Japanese.



Figure 2 - Some of the airfields in northern Australia. (Source Oz at War)

While Merauke was never occupied by the Japanese, it was bombed frequently and at regular intervals, especially in the years 1942 and 1943. The first Japanese air raid took place on December 22, 1942, by aircraft of the 23rd Japanese Air Flotilla, stationed at Kendari (Sulawesi) and Ambon. We also now know that General MacArthur had plans, in addition to the attack on the 'back' from New Guinea to the Philippines, to occupy the islands in the Arafura Sea to use them as a springboard for a push to Sulawesi and Borneo. Lack of troops and equipment and the disadvantages of the great crossing of the Timor and Arafura Seas and the Flores and Banda Seas were reasons to abandon this plan and continue the fighting in this area through an air war. However, an order was given to build an airfield at Merauke to provide the necessary air defence in the event of attacks by the Japanese air force. In June 1943 a start was made on the construction of a strip by American troops, but the work was stopped a few months later when these troops were urgently needed elsewhere (namely in Guadalcanal).

The township of Merauke was in fact razed to the ground by the Japanese bombing. Some scattered buildings and huts were still standing; they lay along the sparse roads that either dead in the jungle and in the swamp Or ended up on the beach at the mouth of the Merauke River. This river with its

yellow-coloured water comes in large bends from the north and is fed with water from the central mountain range of New Guinea. The surrounding forests are mangrove forests. The mangrove stands with its roots in the swamp and thus forms an impenetrable jungle, in which millions of malaria mosquitoes and other pests are a perpetual nuisance for the inhabitants of the village. As a contraceptive against the dreaded malaria, the staff had to take the well-known atabrine tablets. The result was the yellow complexion of the Merauke-goers. To the north and east, the flat primeval forest merges into rolling terrain, which forms the spur of the high mountains with its Carstenz and Wilhelmina peaks: the highest peaks are nearly 15,000 feet. On these peaks there is eternal snow and they are only rarely visible and then only in the morning hours. By noon, the tropical rain front begins to build up over the central mountain country, discharging itself into heavy thunderstorms and heavy rains. It is the most ominous natural phenomenon of the mysterious 'paradise island' of New Guinea.

The defence of Merauke was a point of discussion at the meeting of the Advisory War Council on January 25, 1943. There it was decided to finish the construction of the airfield, because it turned out that the Japanese were strengthening the Timuka-Kaukenau area and apparently had great interest in Merauke. This was noticeable in the reconnaissance flights over this area. If the Japanese occupied Merauke, the possibility was not excluded that they could put the already partially constructed airfield into operational use within a very short time. As a forward Japanese airfield, it could be a threat to MacArthur's New Guinea offensives.

It was not easy to make a strip along the coastal strip near Merauke on the marshy surface as a landing ground for medium-weight aircraft. The Americans then decided to cover the runway with PSP (Perforated Steel Plates), which resulted in a very useful runway extending in the foothills of alang-alang (low bush). Around the end of June 1943, the airfield was ready and on June 30 the first plane landed there.

There were hardly any navigation options. Apart from Merauke station, there were no sounding stations, while the P-40s were soon unable to maintain contact with Radio Merauke on their overland flights, because the on-board transmission/reception equipment was too weak for this. At a later stage, when Hollandia and Biak were captured from the enemy, the vast area was given more navigation possibilities, but there was certainly no overlap, so that the P-40s flew for most of their flights from 800 to 1000 km without contact with a ground station. When one considers that the P-40 is a single-engine aircraft, whose liquid-cooled Allison engine was not known for its reliability, one has a vague idea of the difficulties faced by the pilots of the 12oe, even without meeting the enemy. It was repeatedly reported during the briefings that an American or an Australian transport plane had disappeared over the jungle and never arrived at its destination. A similar fate awaited the fighter pilots with their single-engine aircraft. The jungle never revealed its secrets: every pilot knew and realized that getting lost or a faulty engine meant an emergency landing in the jungle, from which one could never be saved. In addition, the Papuan people were notorious for their murderousness and head-snapping.

Source: [De Militaire Luchtvaart van het KNIL in de jaren 1942-1945 by O.G. Ward](#)

