

Chapter from a book on the Dutch WWII Military in Australia

Aims, Objectives, and Background History

Although Dutch naval vessels had been visiting Australian shores since before WWI, these visits were generally pleasant and left minimal impact, aside from a few men who jumped ship or were enticed to stay. The chapters in Part II of this book are dedicated to the Dutch military presence in Western Australia since WWII. The authors contributing to this section explore the social and political context that fuelled the wartime relationship between the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) and Australia.

Japan's aggressive expansion into Southeast Asia in the 1930s triggered the Pacific War. During WWII, most Dutch in Australia arrived from two significant evacuations from the NEI. The first evacuation occurred just before the Dutch capitulation at Kalidjati on 8 March 1942, and the second followed Japan's surrender on 15 August 1945. This section includes chapters and vignettes by Jung, May, Summers, Appleyard, Houen, and Peters that discuss who these evacuees were, how they were received, and what happened to them.

During WWII, relationships in the Asia-Pacific region, typically strained, were eased by the fears incited by the Japanese incursion. Fears of invasion, especially after the HMAS Sydney was lost in 1941 and Broome and Darwin were bombed in early 1942, forged an alliance between Australia and the NEI, which had previously ignored each other. As the war progressed, the NEI Administration became the only foreign government-in-exile on Australian soil, though the amicable relationship began to sour towards the war's end. Tensions were exacerbated when the NEI's official radio station, Anip-Aneta, attributed the downturn to the exhaustion of Dutch forces in defending Malaya and Singapore, which had ultimately left them vulnerable.

In response to the Japanese advance, around 10,000 Dutch, Eurasian, and Indonesian bureaucrats and military personnel were evacuated from the NEI to Australia to continue the war effort. The NEI Administration eventually established its base at Camp Columbia in Wacol, Queensland, taking over from the American military, and set up an air base at Batchelor, NT, to launch missions into occupied NEI. Despite feelings of abandonment by the Allies, the NEI Administration provided vital resources, including naval and merchant ships, military planes, and bauxite supplies, to the Allies and Australia.

The first major evacuation from the NEI had been planned without a strategy for a general evacuation. With an overwhelming number of Dutch nationals (80,000) and Indo-Europeans (200,000) in the NEI, authorities expected Japanese occupation to mirror the Nazi occupation in Europe. Governor-General Starckenborgh Stachouwer ordered most Dutch officials to stay behind and share the Indonesians' fate, though a limited evacuation of essential government and military personnel was permitted.

Evacuation officially began two days after Singapore fell on 15 February 1942, with the NEI Administration agreeing to cover associated costs. Those evacuated left from Tjilatjap, the main naval base in Java. Many who attempted escape were lost at sea, but others made it to Australia via battleships, submarines, and aircraft. The evacuees included naval and air force personnel, bureaucrats, Eurasians, and Indonesians, compelling Australia to temporarily suspend the White Australia Policy to accommodate them. Estimates of Indonesians among the evacuees ranged from 3,000 to 5,000, including government employees, military personnel, and refugees. Political prisoners from Tanah Merah prison settlements were also evacuated to prevent their

capture by the Japanese, who had incarcerated Dutch and Australian POWs and forced civilians into internment camps with brutal conditions.

Japanese occupation brought sweeping changes to the NEI, banning Dutch language and culture, imposing Japanese ideology in schools, and creating a surveillance system to control the population. Many Indonesians were recruited as slave labour, and youth were militarized in preparation to resist Allied forces. Japanese promises of independence gained the support of nationalist groups, though these pledges only materialized as Japanese losses mounted.

Following Japan's surrender, Sukarno declared Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945, but the transition was marked by violence, particularly against Dutch nationals who had endured years in Japanese POW camps. Former internees, along with Eurasians, Ambonese, and Mendonese who had served the Dutch, were attacked by nationalist pemuda fighters.

In Australia, the NEI Administration quickly established the Netherlands Indies Welfare Organisation for Evacuees (NIWOE) to support evacuees in major cities, providing healthcare, schooling, and accommodation. Western Australia accommodated around 800 evacuees, including 600 in Perth and others at Fairbridge Farm. Evacuees registered through NIWOE, and authorities granted temporary exemptions to remain in Australia.

Approximately 1,000 evacuees chose to stay in Australia permanently, while others repatriated to the Netherlands before returning to settle in Australia, seeking a warmer climate and proximity to their former homeland.