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Ambonese resistance member Coos Ayal tells of her battle against the Japanese in New Guinea.

Resistance in the Dutch East Indies

The 1986 Indies Resistance Act is the most recent Dutch legislation for members of the resistance and victims of war. It had taken a long time for a separate Act to be drawn up specifically for the resistance in the Dutch East Indies, since so little was known about it. Resistance was not something that was frequently discussed; it took place in deepest secrecy and evidence was difficult to find. In addition, it had been thought that resistance would have been impossible in the Dutch East Indies. After all, the Dutch had been interned at an early stage, and the ethnic Indonesian Dutch and Chinese populations as well as the former KNIL-soldiers who had remained outside the camps were watched warily by local people, the political spy service and the much-feared Japanese military police force, the Kempeitai. Arrests and torture were daily occurrences. Yet there was resistance, and many people paid for it with their lives. For example, fighting continued on many islands even after the surrender, sabotage was carried out, support and vacuum units were set up, weapons were collected and spies were operating for the allies. This edition of Aanspraak looks at the experiences of this extraordinary woman in the Dutch East Indies resistance.

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Ambonese resistance member Coos Ayal tells of her battle against the Japanese in New Guinea.

Coos Ayal spent three years fighting with an Indonesian-Moluccan resistance group in the jungles of New Guinea. When the Japanese invaded New Guinea in April 1942, she was living with her uncle Nahuwae, who was a civil servant. Together with her uncle and aunt, she fled into the jungle, joining a group of 62 guerrilla fighters, and was the only woman to survive the bitter fighting, alongside sixteen men.

To New Guinea

‘My Ambonese parents had six children and lived on the island of Nusalaut. I was born there on 15 April 1926, a child of a strict Protestant family. My uncle Nahuwae was a civil servant in New Guinea, and visited us together with his wife when I was six years old. They had no children and were eager to bring me up, and my mother agreed. Leaving was difficult. When I was twelve, we received a telegram saying that my mother had died giving birth to her seventh child.’

Surviving in the jungle

‘On 12 April 1942, a Japanese flotilla dropped anchor in the bay at Manokwari. Having read reports of Japanese atrocities, my uncle and aunt fled with me, joining a group of guerrilla fighters led by KNIL captain Willemsz Geeroms. We had no choice but to accompany them on a dangerous journey through the jungle and mountains to the northern coast of New Guinea known as the Vogelkop. Armed with pistols and rifles, we attacked Japanese camps, sometimes with help from the local population. At the age of only sixteen, I was also given a rifle and a knife. When we began there were 62 of us all together, and my aunt and I were the only women. Sergeant Kokkelink had immediately

told the men, "Anyone who lays a finger on Coosje will pay the consequences!" So I always felt safe. My duties were the same as those of the men: to eliminate as many Japanese as possible. But I also mended their clothes and dressed their wounds. Day and night we walked through the swamps and the rain forest, exchanging fire with the Japanese much of the time. Once a fragment of a hand-grenade lodged above my eye. We suffered greatly from deprivation, illness and unbearable hunger. When it rained, we would catch the water in our hands to drink it. And we slept in separate camps so that the enemy could never catch all of us at once.'

An unexpected attack

'The enemy became increasingly active, sending ships full of troops which our resistance members tried to overcome. Sergeant Kokkelink moved our camp from a hill with a good view to the banks of the Aroepi River, where he looked for cover so we could wait for the enemy. In the meantime, three men from a different resistance group had fled to us after discovering a big Japanese patrol and shooting dead some of the Japanese soldiers as they were bathing. Retaliation was sure to follow. On 18 April 1944 I was with my uncle at the riverside, which we used both for bathing and as a latrine. We heard the attack, and from our hiding place in the undergrowth at a distance, we saw the Japanese when they appeared at the top of the hill. I saw the captain, Willemsz Geeroms, reach for his weapon, but it was too late. Many of our fellow fighters lost their lives during the attack, and the Japanese set fire to our camp. They took the captain and my aunt away, and later beheaded them. A Papuan messenger brought us a message from our imprisoned captain in which he urged us to surrender. But no one was willing to do that. In a letter, Sergeant Kokkelink answered "that we would ignore his orders because he was in the hands of the enemy, and that we would continue to fight to the last man." After the Japanese attack, my uncle immediately sent me to the second camp, towards Aroepi, to warn the other men. After running for six nights and days I met a Papuan boy on the road. He told me, "Tell me where they are and I will take you to them!" I did not dare trust him, since so many Papuans had accepted payment as spies. So I answered, "You go to the second camp, then come back to me!" When he brought back one of our men, I knew it was safe. We quickly broke up the second camp and continued to run from the Japanese. Of the initial 62 people in our resistance group, only seventeen remained. Sergeant Kokkelink decided to lead us on a march eastwards in the hope of reaching safer territory. After walking for a week we found a good hiding place along the Adjai River.'

Poisonous fruit

'Sometimes we and the Japanese were camped on opposite sides of a river, but we no longer shot at each other, because neither side had the bullets to spare. We found small bananas and vegetables on Papuan plantations. One day in the jungle I found some large fruits that looked like apricots and took them home to the men, though I did not eat any myself. The next morning we understood that they were poisonous. Everyone's lips and faces had swelled, and everyone had stomach ache. Luckily no one blamed me.

We were constantly afraid of being discovered and shot at by the Japanese, so we never slept easily. I always kept my little bible under my pillow of leaves, and every morning and evening I would pray for protection and courage. At one point I had every tropical disease at the same time – dysentery, malaria and beriberi – and I was at the end of my strength. My uncle stayed behind with me, but Kokkelink told him, "If she can't keep up with us, you will have to shoot her, because she must not fall into the hands of the Japanese!" My uncle could not bring himself to do that. He bathed my face with water, prayed for me and encouraged me, saying, "Coosje, you must carry on!" And, miraculously, my strength returned. We quickly rejoined the others. If our journey had lasted even

two weeks longer, I would not have survived. I had oedema as a result of hunger, leeches and tropical ulcers on my feet.'

Loyal to the Netherlands

'We survived, thanks to three loyal clan leaders. Their men protected us and supported us in battle until the very end. We carried the Dutch flag with us, rolled up in a bamboo cane. One day we had received a message in a bamboo tube from a Papuan messenger. Our Sergeant Kokkelink hardly dared to open it, fearing it could easily be a bomb. But instead it was a letter from a naval lieutenant, Abdul Rasak, who wrote, "Dear fighters, we are a unit of the Dutch-Indonesian forces and have landed on the Kebar plains. We have been ordered to find you and make contact. We enclose a flag with this letter, as proof of our presence." Even though no one knew him, and it could have been a trap, it was true. On 4 October 1944 we were liberated by Abdul Rasak. He began preparations for us to be rescued, and arranged with the three clans for a landing strip to be built on the coast so that a plane could come to take us away.'

Heroes

'We were received like royalty in Rasak's army camp. We gobbled up rice like hungry pigs. As soon as the landing strip was finished we were flown to Hollandia, the capital city of New Guinea. In the hospital, I was shocked at the sight of my swollen, ravished face in the mirror. When I saw Japanese people in the internment camps in Hollandia, I trembled in fear. After being cared for so well for two weeks, I was flown to Brisbane. Stepping off the plane in my old rags, I received a hero's welcome. A company of women officers stood at attention, and General Van Mook was waiting for me together with my uncle and our men. I went on to train as a nurse, then completed infantry training and was promoted and became Corporal Ayal. After the war, we sent the flag with our names on it to Queen Wilhelmina. One day, General Van Mook called me into the canteen, and I was awarded the Dutch Cross of Merit on behalf of the Queen. In a handwritten letter, she thanked us for the flag and for our loyalty to the Netherlands. That letter now hangs framed on my wall. I met my husband in an army canteen in Brisbane. He was from Curacao and had been billeted to our base. We had a huge party at our wedding. My husband later got a job in Curacao, with Shell, and we had nine children. It was not until I returned to Ambon thirty years later that I saw my father and my family again. My father had never stopped believing and insisting to anyone who asked that I was still alive.'

Remembrance

'I was awarded the Resistance Memorial Cross by Prince Bernhard in 1981. When I wanted to return to the Netherlands from Curacao with my family, I wrote to him for help and everything was arranged. I was provided with a furnished house in Ridderkerk, plus a pension for members of the resistance. I always attend the remembrance ceremony in The Hague on 15 August, and I am often asked to lay a wreath. Our resistance group Kokkelink always met twice annually. Now, Piet de Kock (93) and I are the only ones left. I regularly wake up screaming. In my nightmares I am running for my life, fleeing Japanese soldiers who are shooting at me, but I never talked about this with the men here. There are some battles one has to fight alone.'

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