

The Broome Air Battle 3 March 1942 - Nonja Peters

First Draft Only

JCPML

A largely unacknowledged aspect of the Dutch presence in Australia is the major airlift out of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) via Broome on the Western Australian coast, in front of the Japanese Occupation in 1942. It was occasioned by the outbreak of the Pacific War on 7 December 1941, which forged a three and a half year alliance between the American, British, Dutch and Australian (ABDA) military in the interests of the defence of the Region, including Australia.<sup>1</sup> However, the Allies proved powerless against both the Japanese army and advancing navy.<sup>2</sup>

Evacuation to Australia of selected NEI bureaucrats and military personnel with the expertise to continue the war effort, began two days after the Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, but only after the NEI Administration had assured John Curtin's Government that they would cover all financial responsibilities associated with their exile in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

Broome was chosen because it was the closest port to Java and could take both land-based aircraft and flying boats. Reports by Douglas Gillison, the RAAF's official historian, note how the evacuation operation transformed the sleepy pearling town of Broome into high air traffic port, which he likened to *La Guardia Field* (New York's airport) at its busiest.<sup>4</sup> Around 57 aircraft were being processed in one day and between 7,000 and 8,000 refugees passed through Broome in the 14 days before the Japanese Occupation of Java.<sup>5</sup>

However, the window of opportunity it provided was limited. In fact, all shuttle flights were discontinued the day after the *Battle of the Java Sea* on 28 February, which in itself had seen a valiant attempt, to no avail, by the combined Allied fleet to stop the invasion of the NEI.<sup>6</sup> The Java route was however, reopened again briefly on the night of 2 March 1942, to enable the *Marineluchtvaartdienst* (Naval Air Service, or *MLD*) to evacuate their last nine flying boats (5 *Dorniers*, 4 *Catalinas*). This unexpected evacuation gave the boat's crews and their families, a few remaining VIPs and some of the Java Sea Battle orphans and widows a last chance to exit the NEI.

The flying boats, departed Java at night by stealth from secret hiding places in Lake Grati, Lengkong, Teloengagoeng and Tjilatjap, with 80 crew and 81 civilians.<sup>7</sup> They arrived at Broome seven-hours later, on 3 March 1942, where they joined six United States Navy (USN), Royal Air Force Squadron flying boats already lying at anchor on Roebuck Bay, awaiting refuelling for their flight to Perth.<sup>8</sup>

Now in Australia, the Dutch evacuees thought themselves safe from the Japanese. Consequently, as they waited, the last thing on their minds was an air raid. In fact most adults were busy making sure their children did not fall in the water.<sup>9</sup> However, at 9.30am, not long after coming to rest, nine Japanese Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero fighters and a Japanese reconnaissance plane, on orders to close the evacuation route, entered Roebuck Bay airspace; and on sighting the flying boat squadron levied a brutal attack on the entirely unprotected aircraft.<sup>10</sup> As the Zeros made slow fly-pasts with open cockpits, the same parents started pushing their children into the water in an effort to save them.<sup>11</sup>

Eye-witness reports describe the ensuing 20 minute attack, as an horrific massacre. Before long all the boats had burst into flames. Survivors recall that even under water you could hear the noise and feel the pressure of the Japanese bullets.<sup>12</sup>

The Japanese raid destroyed 26 aircraft including one Zero,<sup>13</sup> those at Broome Aerodrome, a DC-3 at Carnot Bay just north of Broome and a B-24A 'Liberator' off Cable Beach, killing all but one of the twenty-one people on board.

For the Dutch, it was a dark day in the history of the *MLD*. All told, 48 of the 161 on board the flying boats lost their lives by gunfire or while swimming through burning oil – 16 men, 12 women and 20 children –.<sup>14</sup>

Also many heroic acts took place there. For example Willy Josina Maria van Aggeren, who lost both her parents that day, was ferried to safety on the chest of the pilot who later adopted her. David Sjerp, only sixteen months old, was saved by his father Bastiaan Sjerp, captain of Dornier X-20.<sup>15</sup>

Albert van Vliet, a crewmember on Catalina Y-70 blames the lack of warning, together with the large number of people (26) on board, for the massive loss of life

three crew and 10 passengers (6 children) on Y-70. They included four Lokman children, both parents and two siblings survived. The bodies of Hendrika, Jeanette, Jan and Johannes Lokman were never recovered. The entire Brandenburg family father, mother and child; Pieter Schraver and his wife and Mrs Kuin and her child all died as did the Hendrikse, who were found dead wrapped in an embrace – she could not swim. He made the ultimate sacrifice.<sup>16</sup> The many more courageous stories are beyond the scope of this article.

Australian military personnel were also caught up in the horror. Xav, notes:

‘Inside the flying boat I could hear a baby crying and against the window I could see the faces of a half a dozen children, noses flat against the glass, eyes restless and curious’. Xav then began refuelling the flying boat from his lighter. However, when the attack began he notes: “now the faces at the window were contorted with panic, terror-stricken fingers clawing at the glass...’ Two of the women and four children died in the plane. Fourteen made it to the lighter – five women and nine children and now looking at them, I did notice that ... two of the women and one of the children were badly burned, their clothes flaked and black, their skin cracking and lifting, the flesh shrivelling and turning a reddish-brown. The kid was screaming with the pain the women were silently crying biting their lips... I turned to the two youngsters, both little girls, who had been hit by bullets. One of them had fainted and a woman was cradling her head in her lap. The other just sat and stared at the shattered stump of her arm. After taking them to shore these military men prepared for further rescues. Back in the lighter Xav recalls: ‘ It was like watching a newsreel, something you know is happening but has no connection with you.... What a slaughter....Now there were floating pools of fire about all the boats and we could see figures leaping from the boats into the fire. There were heads bobbing about in the water ...luckily the tide was coming in..... We slowed, and bent over the side of the lighter, dragging them into the lighter. I was weak inside with revulsion at the way some of them were burned.... I leaned over and lifted a little boy, whose head was singed and bald, from a man who, as soon as I took the kid, slipped back into the water and disappeared beneath the surface. The planes came in again.... I saw

the nose of one dip and, standing there stunned by the inhuman brutality of it, I watched him come down growing bigger fast, blotting out the sky, and I heard the bullets coming across the lighter, and then he was gone. ...I turned and the first thing I saw was the little kid I had just dragged out of the water. I leaned quickly over the side and was violently sick. A bullet had hit him in the face.<sup>17</sup>

During the Japanese attack 26 aircraft were destroyed including one of their Zeros, those at Broome Aerodrome, a DC-3 at Carnot Bay just north of Broome and a B-24A 'Liberator' off Cable Beach, killing all but one of the twenty-one people on board.<sup>12</sup> For the Dutch, it was a dark day in the history of the *MLD*. All told, 48 of the 161 on board lost their lives -16 men, 12 women and 20 children – by gunfire or while swimming through burning oil.<sup>18</sup> Many heroic acts took place that day.

The Dutch community in Perth hold a service in May every year – to commemorate the end of war – at the Dutch enclave at the Perth War Cemetery. It includes laying a rose on the gravestones of the 35 Broome victims buried there.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack. M. Ford, *Allies in a Bind: Australia and the Netherlands East Indies in the Second World War*, published by the Australian Netherlands Ex-Servicement and Women's Association, Queensland Branch, Loganholme, QLD, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> M Prime, *Broome's one day war: the story of the Japanese raid on Broome on 3rd March 1942*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn, Broome Historical Society, Broome, 2004; D. Hurst, 2001, pp. 49,171.

<sup>3</sup> N.Peters, 'Evacuations into Australia from the Netherlands East Indies 1942-1948', in N.Peters (ed) *The Dutch Down Under 1606-2006*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, pp.112-131; *From Tyranny to Freedom Dutch Children from the Netherlands East Indies to Fairbridge Farm School 1945-1946*, Black Swan Press, Curtin University, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Gillison, Douglas (1962), "Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942", *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Series 3 (air), vol I, AWM, Canberra, ACT, pp. 463-46.

<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> S.Jung, *One-Way Flight to Hell: NEI Dutch refugee experiences of the Japanese air raid at Broome, Western Australia (WA) 3 March 1942*, in N.Peters (ed) *The Dutch in Western Australia 1616-2016*, WA Museum Press forthcoming 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

D. Hurst, *The Fourth Ally: The Dutch Forces in Australia in WWII*, self-publication, Canberra, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Jung

<sup>10</sup> van Dulin, J., Krijsveld, W.J, Legemaate, H.G., Liesker H.A.M. and Weijers, G. ' *Geïllustreerde Atlas van de Japanese Kampen in Nederlands Indië*, Asia Minor, Ziedrikzee, 2002, p.21.

<sup>11</sup> Jung

<sup>12</sup> Xav, 'They Came in the Morning: Broome, March 1942', in Jenny Gregory (ed) *On the Homefront*, University of Western Australia Press: Perth, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Its destruction attributed to Dutch aviator Gus Winckel, interview 2005.

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<sup>14</sup> Dulin et al 2002, p.22.

<sup>15</sup> Jung

<sup>16</sup> ibid

<sup>17</sup> Xav 1997, pp.147-148.

<sup>18</sup> Dulin et al 2002, p.22.