

Maurits Groen: 18th Squadron Veteran

Interview: Dr Sue Summers, MERC, Curtin University

DOB: 07.12.19 (Amsterdam)

Lived in NEI from 1934 – 1937

Arrived Australia 1948, studied medicine for 2 years, then became a diamond trader.

From a Jewish family: lost all of family in WWII except for one person.

The son describes the father as very secretive: see second generation interview of David Groen.

Maurits: I was in the 18th Squadron. First of all let me tell you from the 18th Squadron which was a combat squadron; the 19th squadron which was a transport squadron at will. The most important part of the 18th Squadron was a tour, as they called it, from Bachelor, which is now called Rum Jungle near Darwin. It was an airstrip, cleared, camp, tents, very poor food, fresh food by DC3 once a week, and combat missions as and when required. Each crew had a number. You'd sleep in your tents. In the morning there would be calls over the intercom in the trees calling on cooks, armaments' people, fuellers, mechanics, and eventually the dreaded number of your crew: 'Report to the briefing tent'. Then you're told what to do and where to go, and what to do about it. ... the dread was in hearing your own number [laughter], and I'm exaggerating somewhat. You'd turn over and say, " I wish they'd turn the darned thing off and leave me in peace!" It was search and destroy or bomb this place, or a ship sighted, and sink this ship. Before I joined 18th Squadron, I had just had quite a lengthy period in England, where things were different. We flew raids over Germany and France. It was more intense, more organised, bigger quantity of planes, more missions, much more intense than these big distances we covered in Indonesia. Because from Darwin the distance was a bit too great to go directly to Indonesia. We normally went to Truscott first – the North Western Australian bit – to refuel. That was one of the North Western airfields that could cope with B25s. We'd refuel, and then do what ever we had to do. Return to Truscott, refuel, and then go back to our base in Bachelor. That would break up the distance. And the fuel usage would eliminate too much weight in bombs so it was better to go to Truscott which was still in Australia and re-load there. And then go a greater distance. Exciting yes, but as I say not as intense as it was in Europe. End of story.

Sue: Tell me about some of the missions that you went out on, what comes to mind, what stands out more than the others.

Maurits: Well, the Americans were doing all the heavy fighting really, all the recapturing of the various islands. On the way to the Phillipines, on the way to Guam and all their area of expertise. We concentrated on the Netherlands East Indies. Although occupied, it was obviously not so important to the Japanese to hold because it wasn't anywhere near their homeland and it wasn't as heavily fortified and compared to say Europe was rather mild.

Sue: What areas were the Japanese fortifying than the the NEI?

Maurits: All the islands close to their homeland. ... the NEI was the focus of our range of missions.

Sue: Was it also your role to defend Australia at the same time?

Maurits: Certainly, because this was the period when the Brisbane line was still in existence. That was the part of Australia that was going to be sacrificed to the Japanese. ... Well the Australian Government had made the decision that only south of the Brisbane line was to be defended. Australia was too large. Wise or otherwise I do not know. [Sue: Did that line include WA above Brisbane?] That I don't know. The Battle of the Coral Sea altered that dramatically. That was in 1942 or 1943. At that stage there were umpteen Japanese troop ships with about 10 thousand soldiers coming to Australia for Australia to be invaded. And the battle of the Coral Sea sank most of those transports. That almost took away the direct threat from Australia, although places like Broome were still subsequently bombed, but they were almost minor incidents.

Sue: As I understand it, there were probably 2 or 3 hundred Japanese attacks on Australia. Minor ones.

Maurits: Yes, compared to the European theatre, minor ones.

Sue: Yes, but I think there were about 2 or 3 hundred strikes, and as far as I understand it, there was censorship and the Australians didn't know much about this? Is this correct?

Maurits: Probably, yes. Probably. The army, air force, the information I got – for instance in Bachelor, there was no access to anything. Radio, and that was heavily censored of course. Ah, what went on in the rest of the world was so heavily censored that we barely heard anything about it.

Sue: So how many attacks on Australia were you aware of?

Maurits: Well the main one was Broome, because the 18th Squadron was involved in that. And one of our pilots who is here now, Gus Winckel, shot down a Japanese aircraft – in fact there's a street named after him in Broome. The evacuation from Java, I was not involved in that. They encountered opposition, but I was in England in that time.

Sue: The 18th Squadron was very active in the evacuation of Java?

Maurits: The 18th squadron was very active in that theatre. It was a limited theatre because of the range of the planes, and to carry a heavy load, the range was even made smaller because of the weight. B25s were a medium bomber, not a long-distance bomber by any means. We did do things like strafe Japanese encampments. Fun more than anything else [laughter]. There was one camp – and I've forgotten the exact spot – which held a parade with Japanese marines at a certain time every morning at 7.30, and if you

went over that at 7.30, you could strafe them at will because they wouldn't lie down, they wouldn't run, they just stood there. So that was fun, until that was stopped.

Sue: How was that stopped?

Maurits: It wasn't worth the risk.

Sue: You were part of the RAAF as well?

Maurits: Under the RAAF overall command, yes.

Sue: So it was a joint Netherlands and Australian unit?

Maurits: Yes. Even the 18th Squadron which was mostly NEI personnel there were quite a number of Australian gunners. The minority were Australians.

Sue: Who trained you?

Maurits: It was all Dutch trained.

Sue: So the Australian minority were also Dutch trained?

Maurits: No, it was a combined – the base was combined Australian and Dutch. The Australians were in charge of the base, but the Dutch were in charge of the troops on the base.

Sue: I'm very interested in the plaque in Brisbane, which commemorates the contribution of the Dutch to the defence of Australia, and I feel very few Australians know of this. And that is part of the reason for this study.

Maurits: May I just add something to this? I am an ex-veteran under Dutch command. We tried very hard to get a Gold Card. A Gold Card to the Australian meant that the government helped with their medical expenses above a certain age. Personally it's not very important to me. Thank goodness I have enough funds to look after myself. But I've just been diagnosed with cancer with some reasonably large expenses. With an Australian Gold Card the Australian government takes care of that. I am not eligible for that because I was in a foreign unit. The Australian government does not recognise our participation in the defence of Australia. It's a bit of a sore point. To me personally, as I say, thank goodness, I have enough funds not to worry about that part of it.

Sue: But didn't you say it was a combined RAAF/Netherlands East Indies venture?

Maurits: Yes, we were under Australian command.

Sue: Then surely you have legal grounds to challenge ...

Maurits: I haven't examined the legality, or challenged anything, but I am refused a Gold Card by the Australian government and all the other people who were under similar circumstances.

Sue: How do they word that refusal?

Maurits: Well, there are people more competent than I to answer that question. Because I was not directly involved in that. I just know the consequences are that I am not recognised as a worthy recipient of a Gold Card which entitles me to certain medical expenses that I don't have to pay for myself.

Sue: When did you choose to migrate to Australia permanently?

Maurits: In 1948 ... I came straight form Indonesia. I had married an Australian woman at that stage. And she was in Indonesia with me for about a 1 & 1/2 to 2 years and I came back to Australia; I studied medicine here at the University of Queensland. I didn't graduate because again I was refused financial aid by the Australian government.

Sue: Was it given to others at that time?

Maurits: Yes, for Australian ex-servicemen. Yes. Who qualified under certain circumstances, with the right certification anyway.

Sue: Have you become a naturalised Australian?

Maurits: Yes, as soon after 1948 as possible I became naturalised.

Sue: So even though you were naturalised, you still couldn't access help to university, to a Gold Card, and you're married to an Australian? Could you join the RSL at the time?

Maurits: I was a member of the RSL at that stage.

Sue: Because there are some Dutch, I am told, who could not join the RSL in the 1950s.

Maurits: No, I joined the RSL and we were recognised as an Australian Squadron to be honest with you. It was NEI, but it was under Australian overall command. I was recognised as a veteran, but I can't say just who recognised me, I don't know that.

Sue: Do you have a letter from the Australian government, like Gus Winckel, acknowledging, celebrating your participation?

Maurits: I think he was a bit exceptional with Broome incident, where he shot down – he received a bit of notoriety. I was one of the also-rans more than anything else. ... No, no there are no exceptions. None of us got a Gold Card. As I say I was a pilot and navigator and did everything I was asked to do but I wasn't as outstanding as Gus Winckel.

Sue: Yes but you still contributed to the defence of Australia ...

Maurits: Well I did everything that I was told to do and he did it perhaps with more aplomb.

Sue: Do you have any photos or documents that could be scanned...

Maurits: I have some orders in Dutch about what to do. I was in charge of one group who had to search and destroy in a number of places. I still have ... I would have more things. I'll give them to John.

Sue: Thankyou very very much, you've made a wonderful contribution.

63 minutes

