

CHAPTER EIGHT

OPERATION POTSHOT: DUTCH AIRMEN IN
THE DEFENCE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1944

Charles S. Eaton and Silvano Jung

Although only an insignificant footnote in the history of the Pacific war, one incident, known as ‘Operation Potshot’, proved to be an unexpected excitement for two Netherlands East Indies Air Force (NEIAF) Squadrons. Indeed, some of the Dutch airmen of 18 NEI Squadron (Sqdn) of B 25 Mitchell bombers and 120 NEI Sqdn of Kittyhawk fighters, referred to the whole exercise as being one of a ‘bizarre kind’.¹

Potshot was approximately six kilometres north of the present day airstrip at Learmouth on Exmouth Gulf, Western Australia. The base was originally named ‘The Potshot Venture’ by the United States Navy (USN) and it was initially used for refuelling submarines.² Later, the base would be serviced by seaplane tenders, which provided support to Catalina flying boats of the United States Navy’s (USN) Fleetwing Ten.³

In March 1944 there was a major and sudden re-deployment of the RAAF’s 79 Wing, based in Batchelor in the Northern Territory, to Potshot; 18 NEI Sqdn was a unit of that wing. Earlier that month, Japanese aircraft carriers

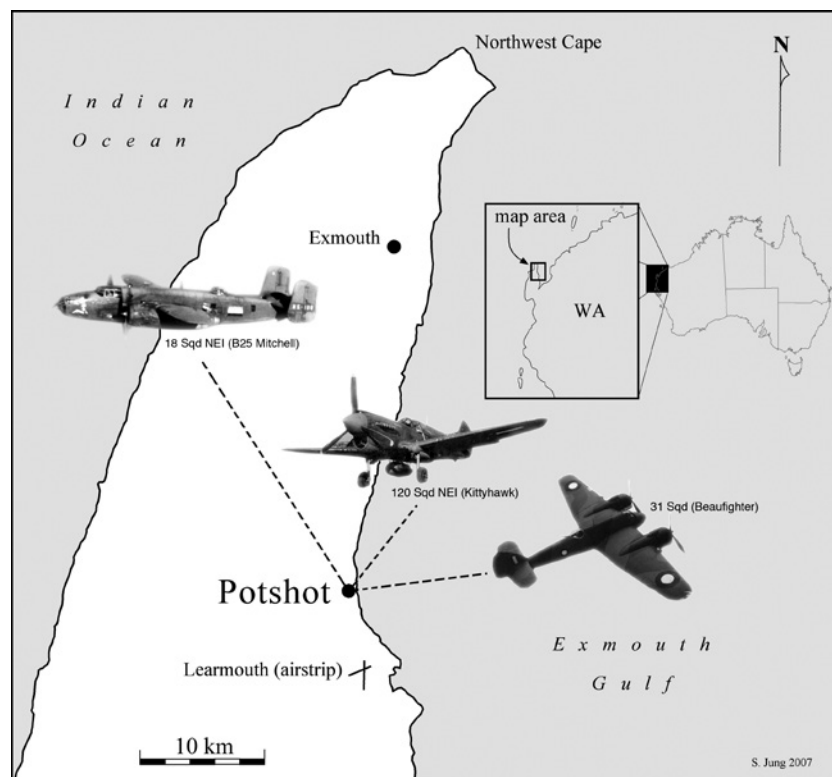


Figure 1
Potshot location map (After McNabb, 1995).

had been seen to arrive in Singapore harbour and some of their capital ships were reported to be in the Indian Ocean.⁴ As Japan had suffered a series of defeats elsewhere, it was thought that they might try a face-saving diversionary attack, either on the air bases around Exmouth Gulf, or on the port city of Fremantle.⁵ The Australian High Command did not want to be caught off-guard, so it ordered two squadrons of 79 Wing — 31 (Beaufighter) Sqdn and 18 NEI Sqdn — *post-haste* to Potshot airstrip in the Exmouth Gulf to repulse any Japanese attack. In addition 120 NEI (Kittyhawk) Sqdn, although based in the eastern states, was seconded to 79 Wing to act as fighter protection for the bombers.

The order was given to Group Captain Charles ‘Moth’ Eaton, Commanding Officer of 79 Wing, by the RAAF’s operational command to transfer his headquarters and the two squadrons to Potshot at 7.30 pm on 8 March 1944. Eaton was a permanent RAAF officer, who had been both a soldier and a reconnaissance pilot in WWI. In 1918 he was a fellow inmate with Captain Charles de Gaulle in the dungeons of *Festung Neun*, a German fortress that specifically catered for ‘undesirable’ prisoners of war. After participating in the first air survey of India, Eaton migrated to Australia where he commanded two dramatic searches for lost airmen in the Australian desert prior to WWII.⁶

By 10 am the next day, 18 and 31 Sqdns left Batchelor and Coomalie Creek and landed at Potshot that afternoon.⁷ Eighteen transport aircraft were employed just to transfer the Wing’s equipment and ground personnel. The aircraft arrived in the middle of a tropical cyclone, but as urgency was essential in response to what was considered a serious threat to Australia’s security, the weather factor was disregarded. The historian of the Dutch war effort in Australia, Douglas Hurst, wrote that the cyclone was so powerful, with winds up to 200 kilometres per hour, that when landing, some of the 18 Sqdn’s bombers had to put on ‘power to avoid being blown backwards and landed almost vertically, like a helicopter’.⁸

On landing, all aircraft were confined to the airstrip’s apron, to move off the tarmac would have resulted in ‘bogging’ in the saturated earth. The cyclone had ‘converted the airfield and camp into a swamp’.⁹ One of 18 Sqdn’s Australian guards, LAC Clive Digglmans, had vivid impressions of Operation Potshot:

Well, what a panic there is today, they have given us about two hours to get ready to move, we don’t know where we are going, but FO Curtis says he does not like it at all, and that we are going to a very hot spot and the whole Squadron is going by plane ... so things don’t look too good ... I have written to Mum and told her not to worry about me. We left at about 10 a.m.... We landed at Wyndham, the weather was very rough on the way over ... the plane was wallowing all over the sky ... I have never seen so many close shaves in my life.¹⁰



Figure 2
RAAF and NEIAF airmen of 79 Wing
Exmouth Gulf, March 1944. Second from
left, later General Dirk Ajses of the Royal
Netherlands Air Force (Photo. No. P920775,
Charles Eaton Collection).



Figure 3
Kittyhawk of No. 120 NEI Squadron, Potshot, March 1944 (Photo. No. P920782, Charles Eaton Collection).



Figure 4
Beaufighter of No 31 Squadron at Potshot March 1944 (Photo. No. P920783, Charles Eaton Collection).

Once the squadrons and their support staff were established in Potshot, Eaton immediately drew up an elaborate network of defences for the Wing's temporary base. Perhaps his experiences as a Lance-Corporal in the trenches on the Western Front in 1915 and defending Vimy Ridge a year later, helped form his defence planning, as his trench layout and machine gun deployment strategies were purely 'army'. Eaton's defence orders were outlined as:

INFORMATION

- I. Enemy Forces. Hostile Forces may be expected to make attacks on this Base in the near future by means of low flying aircraft, airborne troops or a naval force. These attacks may be heavy and might be simultaneous.
2. Own Forces. Available to defend this base in such an eventuality are the following aircraft and personnel of 79 Wing and 72 O.B.U. [Operational Base Unit]
 - 79 Wing HQ consisting of 12 personnel of all ranks. O.B.U. 98
 - 18 Sqdn 76 consisting of ground staff, all ranks together with 15 B 25 A/Craft complete crews.
 - 120 Sqdn (N.E.I.) consisting of 94 ground staff, with 8 Kittyhawks, complete with crews.
 - 31 Sqdn (RAAF) consisting of 89 ground staff, with 11 Beaufighters, complete with crews.
3. Defence Equipment available consists of 14 .50 cal. M.G.s, two Bren guns, and all personnel armed, in the case of Officers, with pistols, and of other ranks, with Tommy guns, rifles and bayonets. There is an adequate supply of ammunition for all weapons, the .50 M.G.'s are sited to cover the runways and dispersal areas, the Bren Guns are in a position to cover the Camp Area. Of the personnel of 18 Sqdn there are two fully equipped and trained Security Guard sections, totalling 23 men.

INTENTION

- I. This base will offer the most strenuous resistance to any form of attack¹¹

Eaton had just 369 Dutch and Australian men of all ranks, including himself, to defend Potshot airstrip from a possible Japanese land invasion. He strengthened his defence network by strategically deploying anti-aircraft and machine guns with their respective arcs of fire, organising perimeter and beach patrols twenty-four hours a day and providing adequate ammunition, food supplies and back up medical services with first aid posts. Mobile teams were appointed in case of enemy breakthroughs, trenches were dug, and all

ranks were issued with either pistols or Tommy guns, emergency rations and full water bottles. In a central and well-guarded storage area, Eaton ordered that there be a week's provisions and water for 370 men. In his demolition and evacuation orders, Eaton listed twenty-six possible eventualities and what action each section leader should take.

In spite of the weather, aircraft of Eaton's two Dutch squadrons and 31 Sqn RAAF managed sea reconnaissance flights, but no Japanese ships or aircraft were sighted. After ten days, 'Operation Potshot' was called off after what was described as 'a very tough ten days'. Eaton gave his officers and airmen relaxation and recreation time to trawl off the fish-rich coastline of Exmouth Gulf. After returning to their home base, Batchelor was a very welcome sight for some of the Dutch airmen: 'our humble tent camp seemed like El Dorado in comparison to Potshot.'¹²

Hurst wrote, that one Australian engineer attached to 18 NEI Sqn concluded that the whole operation was 'a waste of time' and influenced his Dutch pilot to fly a Mitchell bomber to Perth for 'essential repairs'. Although the repairs were unsuccessful when trying to 'fix their troubles', it gave the young engineer ample opportunity to see his wife and newborn baby! Hurst continued: 'Once repaired there (in Boulder), they then flew back to Batchelor, having completed one of the best executed exercises in international co-operation held during the war'.¹³

It is not known if his wing commander 'Moth' Eaton was aware of the questionable validity of the Mitchell's 'essential repairs', but Eaton also flew down to Perth in a Beaufighter of 31 Sqn at the same time.¹⁴ Charles Eaton was later honoured when Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands bestowed on him the prestigious decoration of 'Knight Commander of the Order of the Oranje Nassau with Swords', perhaps for his efforts in 'international cooperation' in welding the RAAF and NEIAF into efficient fighting units of 79 Wing.¹⁵⁻²⁰ In late 1944 Charles Eaton was appointed Air Officer Commanding Southern Area and in 1947 he became Australia's representative on the UN Consular Commission, that supervised the cease-fire of hostilities in Indonesia. He was to become the last Australian Consul General appointed to the Netherlands East Indies and in December 1949 he was appointed Australia's *Chargé d'Affaires* to an independent Indonesia.

While many believed that 'Operation Potshot' was a waste of time, the deployment was efficiently carried out in shocking conditions and it was a miracle that no serious damage was recorded by the squadrons involved. In 2005 it was revealed by Professor Hiromi Tanaka, of Japan's National Defence Academy, that the Japanese had between five and ten spies stationed on small islands around the Australian coast during the war. Furthermore, in 1944, 17 suspected Japanese informers masquerading as 'ethnic Chinese from Japanese-occupied Java', were picked up on board a boat named the *Bandoeng Maru* only three miles off the coast of Western Australia.¹⁶ The Japanese were fully aware of the airstrip at Potshot and of other airstrips on the west coast, some of which were bombed. The possibility of a surprise



Figure 5
June 1944. Fishing at Potshot. L-R: Unknown, Maj. Dirk Ajses, G/Cpt Charles Eaton (Photo. No. P920789, Charles Eaton Collection).



Figure 6
No. 79 Wing HQ at Potshot, March 1944 (Photo. No. P920774, Charles Eaton Collection).

decoy attack in 1944 by the Japanese forces on the west coast of Australia was very real. Furthermore, if the Japanese had made an attempt to destabilise the Allied war effort by attacking the west coast of Australia, and no effort had been made by the Australian High Command to counter that threat, the political fallout would be deafening right up to the present day.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Eaton, C S., 'Cross in the Sky' <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/4007270?searchTerm=&searchLimits=-l-publictag=Gilbert+Eric+Douglas>.
- 2 McNabb, E., *Pot Shot profile 1942/1946*, published by the author, 1995, p. 5.
- 3 Patrol Wing Ten war diary, microserial 41176, Naval Historical Centre, Washington, February 1942.
- 4 McNabb, Appendix H.
- 5 Powel, A., *The shadow's edge: Australia's northern war*, Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp.150,152.
- 6 Eaton, C S., 'Cross in the Sky', as above.
- 7 National Archives of Australia, series number: A11243, control symbol: Z1, title: '[No 79 (GR/Bombers) Wing] - [Operation] Potshot Report — copy number 5', National Archives of Australia, Canberra, ACT; National Archives of Australia, series number: A11243, control symbol: 3/5/int, title: '[No 79 (GR/Bombers) Wing] — Operational data', National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra, ACT.
- 8 Hurst, D., *The Fourth Ally: The Dutch forces in Australia in WWII*, Canberra. 2001, p.103.
- 9 C Digglmans, 18 Squadron Newsletter.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 National Archives of Australia, series number: A11243, control symbol: 3/5/int.
- 12 Hurst, p.105.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 P Delany, 31 Sqdn. Log Book March, 1944.
- 15 Odgers, G., *Air war against Japan: 1943-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957; C Eaton, 'Summary of contact with N.E.I Air Force', 18 Sqdn Newsletter April 1990; R Lugg, personal correspondence on Group Captain Charles Eaton and 79 Wing at Batchelor, 1994; N M Parnell, *Whispering death: a history of the RAAF's Beaufighter Squadrons*, Reed, Sydney, 1980; J Staal, personal correspondence, 23 December, 1993; H van Beuge, Personal Correspondence, 19 April, 2002.
- 16 H van Beuge, Personal Correspondence, 19 April, 2002.



BACK TO HEALTH

DUE to the co-operation of the Fairbridge Farm School Council, more than fifty Dutch children who have suffered all kinds of privations in Japanese prisoner of war camps are being restored to health at Fairbridge Farm School at Pinjarra. The number will shortly be raised to seventy. Some children suffered severely through under-nourishment, but perhaps the worst feature of their captivity was the Japanese ban on teaching of every kind. In the healthy surroundings at Fairbridge the children are rapidly putting on weight and are forgetting the squalid conditions which they had to suffer for several years.

Lessons occupy two hours morning and afternoon. Children learn Dutch and English, arithmetic, drawing, history. Older children learn more about Australia, and girls are taught needlework. One child of ten cannot yet read or write, and most who were young when imprisoned have had no teaching except what their mothers were able to give them secretly.



These interested Dutch boys and girls are learning basic English. Their teacher is Mr. M. R. Kirkpatrick of the Education Department. In two hours they had learnt a number of simple words and understood directions such as "go in," "come out," "put down your red and pencil." The boys had typical Dutch names such as Hans, Pieter, Jan, Klaas and Dickie. Some of the girls were called Marietje, Anne-Liesje, Truusje and Marianna. The letters "je" mean "little."



Circle: Australian sunshine is helping the children back to health, and when possible lessons are given outside under the tall gums. All these children have put on weight since going to Fairbridge.

Sport is not neglected. The boys play cricket and soccer, and the girls play baseball (with a soft ball) and tennis. The children's ages range from six to fourteen. Some have lost their fathers, others have not seen their fathers for years. Some of their mothers are in hospital. There are four children of one family at Fairbridge. Their father died in a prison camp, and their mother is still in hospital in Perth.

Twenty-Two — THE WESTERN MAIL, February 14, 1946

The young evacuees are introduced to a schooling and health rehabilitation regime as boarders at Fairbridge Farm School, Pinjarra WA 1945-1946. Courtesy: *Western Mail* February 14, 1946.