

THE DIAMOND MYSTERY

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On 7 December 1941 Pearl Harbour is attacked by the Japanese. It is the beginning of the war in the Pacific. In the following months the Japanese invade countries in South East Asia: Hong Kong, the Philippines and Malaya. On 10 January 1942 the invasion of the Dutch East Indies begins and Singapore falls on 15 February. At the end of that month the Japanese destroy a combined Dutch, British, Australian and American fleet during the battle of the Java Sea.

As any hope of effectively halting the Japanese advance shrivels, the Dutch High Command in the Netherlands East Indies decides to move selected military material, personnel and evacuees to the safety of Australia.² Because Darwin had been under attack from the enemy, the small town of Broome³ is chosen as a landing site for flying boats and aeroplanes. Some 8000 refugees pass through Broome in barely two weeks; the small town is not set up for so many people, with only one hotel and one refuelling boat. An American lieutenant, John Rouse, commented later that ‘Broome resembled La Guardia airport at its busiest.’⁴ On 1 March enemy troops land on the north coast of Java.

At a quarter to midnight on 2 March 1942, pilot Ivan Smirnoff waits on the tarmac of Bandung’s Andir Airport. Captain Smirnoff was Russia’s fourth highest ace in WWI. He was awarded a string of decorations, including the Order of St. George – the Russian equivalent of the Victoria Cross. As a member of the Imperial Army, he was forced to flee Russia after the revolution, later becoming a naturalised Dutch citizen and a senior pilot for KLM.⁵

Smirnoff, who has seen many battles, realises that Java may fall at any moment. He can see the Japanese bombs exploding in the distance and he is desperate to get his planeload of refugees out. The passengers on the DC-3 include Maria van Tuyn (a Dutch pilot’s wife) and her 18 month old baby Johannes, Joop Blaauw (the mechanic), Jo Muller⁶ (the radio operator), Daan Hendriksz, Pieter Cramerus and five others.⁷ Maria and her baby sit in the co-pilot’s seat, as all other seats have been removed to make room for cargo and passengers.

Just as the party receive clearance for take-off, the cabin door unexpectedly opens and an airport official called Wisse makes his way into the cockpit. He thrusts a brown paper bag at Smirnoff, demanding that the captain take good care of it. ‘It’s very valuable,’ the man insists, and informs Smirnoff that the Commonwealth Bank of Australia will pick up the package in Sydney. The agitated Smirnoff throws the bag nonchalantly into a cabinet. ‘Guard it safely!’ the man repeats; clambering back over the passengers he leaves the plane. The pilot starts the engines and the plane creaks and groans into

take-off position. Smirnoff's Douglas Dakota will be one of the last planes to leave Java.

As the Dakota flies over the Indian Ocean, its passengers doze, but Smirnoff remains on the lookout for Japanese fighter planes. As dawn breaks, the coastline of Australia emerges in the distance. A few hours later they reach the coast. If all goes well, they will land in Broome in less than an hour. After refuelling, they will resume their journey, first to Perth and then on to Sydney. In the distance Smirnoff sees what looks like smoke on the horizon around the location of Broome. 'Is there any signal coming from Broome?' he asks his radio operator. 'The safe signal is on,' Muller replies, looking puzzled. At that instant the Dakota is strafed by a shattering round of staccato machine-gun fire.

Unknown to the crew and passengers of the Dakota, enemy planes had launched an attack on Broome in the early morning hours. Japanese reconnaissance planes had run a survey of Broome's port and airfield during the past days and had noticed the heavy traffic. At 7.05 am, nine Japanese Zero fighters and a Babs reconnaissance plane under the overall command of Lieutenant Zenziro Miyano take off from Kupang in Timor, heading for Broome.

That morning Roebuck Bay, the town's port, is littered with flying boats, most of them Dutch and carrying refugees, widows and orphans from the Battle of the Java Sea just days before. The refugees are crammed into the hulks of the flying boats waiting for the lugger, Nicol Bay, to refuel the aircrafts. Each boat takes forty minutes to refuel, but with the low tide the lugger cannot reach the boats. The passengers have been waiting for hours, but they believe they have reached a safe haven. There is relief among those who have been lucky enough to squeeze on board.

Nearing Broome, the Zeros take up attack formation and in the ensuing air raid, the aircraft on the bay become exploding fireballs and dozens of men, women and children die. After raiding the bay, the Zeros set course to the airport, where they destroy every plane on the tarmac.

Leaving behind carnage, bewilderment, fear and misery, the Japanese squadron is returning triumphantly when they intercept the Dutch DC-3, approaching the western coastline near Carnot Bay, some eighty kilometres to the north. The cumbersome unarmed aircraft is no match for the agile silver fighters. Bullets spray into the aircraft. Maria van Tuyn is hit and her baby cries hysterically. The cockpit windows are shattered and Smirnoff is hit in both arms as well as his legs. Still, he is able to fling the plane into evasive manoeuvres, ducking and weaving the craft away from his attackers.



Figure 1
Captain Ivan Smirnoff. Courtesy: Broome Historical Society.

One of the passengers, Pieter Cramerus, describes the seconds that follow as ‘the greatest flying show anybody in the world will ever see.’⁸ As the port engine burst into flames, Smirnoff knows the fire will spread to the fuel tanks and explode. Their only chance is a hasty beach landing. He brings the plane down in a tight spiral, pushing the control column forward and side-slipping close to the dunes. As the DC 3 rolls to a stop, the wing dips into the surf, effectively dousing the burning engine. Zeros circle above, still strafing the beached plane. Hendriksz and Maria van Tuyn are bleeding badly and as Joop Blaauw pushes the cabin door open, bullets hit him in both knees. Of the twelve who had boarded the Dakota in Java, Van Tuyn, Blaauw and Hendriksz are badly wounded, Smirnoff has been hit in arms and legs, Cramerus and Vandenburg have suffered wounds to their back and arms and the baby’s foot has been shattered.

Figure 2
Initial grave-site for the victims of the
Broome raid. Courtesy: Broome Historical
Society.

After the Zeros disappear, the survivors carry the wounded to the shore and set up camp on the remote beach. There is some food and water taken from the aircraft, and the parachutes are used to set up a makeshift camp.



Remembering the package, Smirnoff sends one of his crew back into the aeroplane to retrieve it, but the fumes and the water made it almost impossible to get into the cockpit. After two unsuccessful attempts to salvage what is left in the aeroplane, the loss of the package is pushed to the back of Smirnoff's mind as he is forced to deal with more pressing issues of survival. In the hours and days that follow, Hendricksz, Blaauw and Maria van Tuyn die. The survivors bury their bodies in shallow graves on the beach. Water is rationed. What affects the marooned passengers most is the pleading voice of the child constantly asking for water. After a few days Smirnoff sends four of the fittest survivors out to search for help. They head south. They do not realise that the closest settlement is a mission post at Beagle Bay, forty kilometres to the north.

On the fifth day the baby dies and Smirnoff buries the little boy next to his mother. The men sit on the beach, frustrated and exhausted.

In the south, the four men split into two groups, hoping that this will enhance their chances of finding help. After stumbling through the bush for three days, Cramerus and Muller run into a party of Aborigines. Despite their lack of English, exhaustion and dehydration they are able to explain that their plane has crashed and there are others stranded on the beach. The Aborigines warn Brother Richard Bessenfelder of the Beagle Bay Mission, who sets out with a few men and a donkey cart. Following instructions from Muller and Cramerus, Bessenfelder is able to locate the stranded and her survivors.⁹ The men are brought back to the mission to recover from their ordeal. As word travels to Broome, an Australian National Airways representative makes a DC-2 available to Smirnoff and the survivors. They are taken to the hospital at Port Hedland.

A few days later a Broome resident, larrikin beachcomber Jack Palmer, sails north, hunting for dugong.¹⁰ As he passes Carnot Bay he notices the stranded Dakota. He cannot resist the temptation to take a look inside the wreck to see if there is anything he can salvage. Wedged behind the fuel tanks he discovers a brown paper package. Returning to his lugger, Palmer opens the sealed package and gazes spellbound as hundreds of glistening diamonds blaze back at him. 'I'll never have to work again', he reportedly declares to his Aboriginal workman.¹¹

At Pender Bay Palmer meets up with two Broome acquaintances who are also escaping the war. He offers Jim Mulgrue and Frank Robinson some of the diamonds, but later that evening, the men get into a brawl and Palmer demands they hand the stones back.

In the days that follow, Jack becomes very generous with the diamonds and before long, he trades them for tobacco, uses them in card games and gives them as gifts to the many Aboriginal women he has befriended. About a month later Palmer decides that he would like to join the army. He is not a young man anymore; when he enters the office of Major Gibson in Broome, he hopes to receive a reward and an enlistment. He has a salt- and pepper-shaker full of diamonds; Gibson stares dumbfounded as the dishevelled,

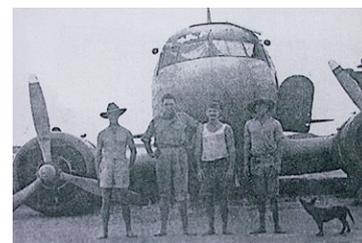


Figure 3
Dakota plane with Crew. Courtesy: Broome Historical Society.



Figure 4
The wing of the Dakota. Courtesy: Juliet Wills.

bronzed beachcomber empties it out on his desk. Palmer tells Gibson that he found the package in the water near Carnot Bay.¹² According to Palmer the package fell apart as he picked it up and most of the diamonds were lost in the surf. What he has emptied on the Major's desk is what he was able to salvage, he claims. For his honesty, Palmer is appointed as a coast watcher at Gantheaume Point.

Because there were no documents sent along with the diamonds, no one knows exactly how many were lost. Diamonds are counted in 'lots.' Documents of The Commonwealth Bank reveal that there must have been some sixty-five lots.¹³ Jack Palmer has handed in only twenty-four. A search is organised and Jack Palmer is asked to return to the crash site with a search party to recover any stones that may have been overlooked when he opened the package. Nothing is found. As the search for the lost diamonds intensifies, quantities of diamonds start showing up around the Kimberley. According to police reports¹⁴, an officer finds a matchbox full of diamonds in his car, an amount of diamonds is found in the fork of a tree and Aborigines, fearing retaliation, begin throwing any diamonds they have into the wells around Beagle Bay. A Chinese tailor from Broome is charged with possessing diamonds when he lands in Perth. In his luggage police find 460 diamonds.¹⁵

In May 1943 the news of the diamonds hit the headlines. Jack Palmer, Jim Mulgrue¹⁶ and Frank Robinson are arrested for the theft of the missing cache. They are taken to Perth and on 12 May a trial is held. Among others, Smirnoff, Gibson, Mulgrue and Robinson take the witness stand. Palmer never takes the witness stand, possibly because his lawyer prevented it, though the trial transcripts do not reveal why.¹⁷ In summing up, his lawyer describes Palmer as a poor simple fool who, after removing the diamonds from the plane, had no idea of their value. His lawyer appeals to the jury and points out that Palmer 'has proved himself a good and loyal soldier; he is the type the Australian Army wants'. It takes the jury thirty minutes to make up their minds. They acquit Palmer, Mulgrue and Robinson. In his biography, Smirnoff recalled the judge summing up:

You have been lucky with this finding. Whether your conscience will come up with the same conclusion I cannot judge but I can tell you this, that under circumstances such as these, the sudden discovery of these immeasurable riches in the wreckage on a lonely beach would have been too great a temptation for any man.¹⁸

In the end, the diamonds returned to the Netherlands East Indies Trade Commissioner have an estimated value today of over A\$20 million. An even greater amount has never been recovered. Frenzied searches have been held over the years, but nothing has been found. Several expeditions have dug up wells at Beagle Bay, but no diamonds were unearthed.

Jim Mulgrue returned to Broome, working in various stores, and Robinson travelled the world going from port to port, never staying in one place long. As for Diamond Jack . . . he became known as the 'richest man in Broome'.

After the war, he bought a blue Chevrolet and a house in Walcott Street, both of which he purchased outright.¹⁹ Residents in Broome remember the day that Diamond Jack gave a group of wharf labourers their entire wages from a roll of notes he pulled from his pocket when their pay was late arriving at the jetty office.²⁰ He worked now and then, but mostly continued what he liked doing best: fishing, beachcombing and hunting for dugong.

Palmer died in 1958, taking with him the secret of the lost diamonds.²¹ Rumours have it that Jack died with a suitcase full of money under his bed, and residents of Broome believe that Jack hid the bigger part of the missing diamonds somewhere in the region of Broome. Treasure hunters still visit the remote north-west coast in the hope of one day finding them.

At Broome's town beach, a small graveyard sits atop a grassy hill. A small modern plaque marked 'Diamond Jack' is the only memorial to the larrikin who sailed the northern shores and found a great treasure.



Figure 5
The new memorial at Smirnoff Beach opened by the Dutch Ambassador in 2013. Courtesy: Juliet Wills.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This essay is based on the book *The Diamond Dakota Mystery*, by Juliet Wills with Marianne van Velzen, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2006.
- 2 Peters, N., 'Evacuations into Australia from the Netherlands East Indies, 1942-1948', in Nonja Peters, ed., *The Dutch Down Under*, Sydney, Wolters Kluwer, 2001, pp. 115-16.
- 3 D. Swierstra, unpublished manuscript containing accounts from Broome air raid survivors, 1972.
- 4 Diary of Gen. John A Rouse, cited in W H Tyler, *Flight of Diamonds*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1987, p. 66.
- 5 Coupar, Anne, *The Smirnoff Story*, Jarrolds, London, 1960.
- 6 Jo Muller, interview with Thom Olink, *Haagsche Courant* 1972.
- 7 The account of the Smirnoff-led escape and its tragic aftermath is based on Ivan W. Smirnoff, *De Toekomst heeft Vleugels*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1947.
- 8 Pieter Camerus, cited in W H Tyler, *Flight of Diamonds*, p. 12; Camerus, Pieter, interview with Juliet Wills, 11 February and the 4th of March 2005. March 2005.
- 9 Richard Bessenfelder, unpublished ms, La Grange, Battye Library 1977.
- 10 Trial Transcripts, Supreme Court of Western Australia, trial of Jack Palmer. James Mugrue and Frank Robertson, May 1943.
- 11 W H Tyler, interview with Connie and Willy Tadpole Chatwell, 1968.
- 12 Interview with Major Clifford Gibson, *The Daily News*, cut out undated, Broome Historical Society.
- 13 'De Javasche Bank-Diamonds', Secretary Department General Correspondence, Permanent Archives, Commonwealth Bank, 1942-43.
- 14 'Alleged theft of Java jems', *The Northern Times*, 7 and 21 May 1943; 'The Dutch diamonds', *The West Australian* April-May 1943, various articles with the same name.
- 15 Police Service Records of James Duff Cowie, Peter Meikle Cameron and Detective A. R. Blight, Western Australian Police Historical Society n.d.
- 16 Daryll and Cheryl Mulgrue, (grandchildren of James and Lilian Mulgrue), interview with Juliet Wills, 2005.
- 17 Trial Transcripts, Supreme Court of Western Australia, trial of Jack Palmer. James Mugrue and Frank Robertson, May 1943.
- 18 Ivan W. Smirnoff, *De Toekomst heeft Vleugels*, p. 139
- 19 Henderson, J., 'Diamonds are missing forever', *Australian Playboy*, November 1979.
- 20 Val Burton, interview with Marianne van Velzen, Broome Historical Society, May 2003.
- 21 Father Kevin McKelson, (the last person to see Palmer alive), interview with Juliet Wills 2005.