

THE DUTCH TURN UP DOWN UNDER

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the WA Maritime Museum held a conference in Fremantle to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the transfer of flag in March 1945. The event marked the winding up of Fremantle as a World War II Allied submarine base, which had contributed so successfully to countering the Japanese offensive in Southeast Asia. The Commander of the Royal Netherlands Submarine Service, Captain Hans van der Ham, in his address to this conference, described the Dutch submariners who made it to Fremantle as ‘exiled, exhausted but not expired’. He said that these submariners had left an enduring legacy, although it was not as well known as that of Dirk Hartog and the Dutch shipwrecks on the Western Australian coast. This chapter gives a brief overview of the sojourn of the Royal Netherlands Submariners at Fremantle during WWII. Its focus is the impact of this war on the vessels and the Dutch submariners who visited Fremantle.

THE WAR

After Japan’s aerial attacks on bases in Pearl Harbour, Philippines and Malaya, the United States of America and its Allies declared war on Japan in December 1941. British, Dutch and Australian Allied commanders had underestimated Japanese military, aerial and naval strength and capabilities. This pronouncement, rendered naval bases situated in the Southeast Asian colonies under America (Philippines), Britain (Singapore and Malaya) and the Netherlands East Indies (NEI - now Indonesia) vulnerable to Japanese aggression. With obsolete submarines and scant reserves, the Dutch held off Japanese aggression before the Allies were forced to retreat to Western Australia.

The USA commanded twenty-nine submarines based at Cavite near Manila. The first of the naval bases to fall was the American base at Manila, forcing their submarines to seek refuge in Allied bases in Surabaya, Java, and Darwin on the north coast of Australia. The Royal Netherlands Navy had operated submarines from Surabaya since World War I, and after December 1941 their fifteen submarines were deployed defending their bases and British Singapore, where two British submarines, the *Truant* and *Trusty* were based.

By early February 1942, Japanese invasion of Malaya had advanced and the British had withdrawn to the ‘unassailable’ fortress at Singapore. On 13 February, the Allies fought unsuccessfully—in the Battle of Palembang—to prevent the Japanese from capturing the major oil port in eastern Sumatra. Singapore fell two days later on 15 February 1942. On the night of 19 February, an Allied force attacked the Eastern Invasion Force off Bali that

became known as the Battle of Badung Strait. On the same day the Japanese First Air Fleet attacked Darwin's harbour and airfields to successfully stop the Allies using these bases against their planned invasions of Timor and Java. Throughout February and March, the Australian ports of Darwin, Broome, Derby and Wyndham and the northern ports of New Guinea, Bali in Indonesia, Burma and Timor all suffered air raids or invasion.

On 27 February 1942, Japanese amphibious forces gathered to strike at Java. The main American-British-Dutch-Australian Command (ABDACOM) naval force, under Doorman, sailed northeast from Surabaya to intercept the Japanese convoy, in what is now known as the Battle of the Java Sea. The battle comprised a series of attempts by Doorman's Combined Striking Force to attack the Japanese forces over an intensive seven-hour period, but the Japanese rebuffed every attempt and inflicted so much damage on the Allies that their naval operations in Asia were severely curbed.

These heavy Allied losses enabled Japanese land forces to invade Java on 28 February. Although the Dutch troops, aided by British remnant forces, fought valiantly for another week, Japanese strength inevitably won the battle of attrition and the ABDA forces surrendered on 9 March. The Americans and Dutch retreated from Southeast Asia with the intention of using Darwin as a base. On arriving at Darwin the American submarine commanders found that it was unsuitable as a naval base as it was vulnerable to air raids and the harbour was subjected to semi-diurnal tides (up to eight metres). The town also lacked the necessary infrastructure and was isolated. The submarines retreated to Exmouth Gulf and finding it similarly unsuitable they consequently retreated to Fremantle.

The arrival and subsequent submarine patrols out of Fremantle were a tightly guarded secret. Even the submariners who served at Fremantle during the war were unaware of the size, extent and success of submarine operations undertaken until *Fremantle's Secret Fleets* was published in 1995, followed by a documentary of the same name.

THE VESSELS

After declaration of War, Britain, United States, The Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand were involved in strategic defence negotiations. The Allies looked to the US, British and Dutch naval bases in Southeast Asia to resist Japanese aggression. However, neither the British nor the US Navy were well prepared for war in Southeast Asia.

In 1950, Admiral C.E.L. Helfrich, a wartime commander of the Dutch Navy based in the NEI and Australia, when reflecting on his Southeast Asian war commission, noted that the Dutch Navy, despite its elderly submarines, was better prepared to retaliate against the Japanese. Dutch submarines were deployed in forward defence just two days after the attack on Pearl Harbour. However backup assistance was frustratingly slow in arriving and when it did arrive, it was simply too late.

At the time, the Royal Netherlands Navy operated a total of thirty submarines. Some were based in Europe, the rest being in the NEI. After the Blitz and invasion of the Netherlands by the Germans, the Royal Netherlands submarine fleet dispersed to British ports, where unserviceable submarines were scuttled and operational submarines placed under British Command. In the Gulf of Siam, seven Dutch boats were placed under British operational control. Another three were stationed at Borneo under Dutch command.

Before the war, a number of Dutch submarines were built for operation in tropical waters (K-class) and assigned to the Netherlands' colonies (Kolonie). Their newer O-Class submarines were built to operate in both cold and warm water environments. When war broke out twelve K-Class and three O-Class submarines operated out of Surabaya, but only eight of these fifteen submarines were less than eight years old. The other seven submarines were more than eight years old and because they needed a lot more maintenance, several had been decommissioned. However with the exigencies of war, *KVII*, *KVIII*, *KIX* and *KX* were recommissioned and returned to service.

In December 1941, the Dutch submarines, commanded by Lieutenant-Admiral Conrad Helfrich, sank and damaged twelve Japanese ships, two small warships and four transport and troop ships. This earned them the reputation of being the 'Ship-a-day Helfrich boys'. In the same month the Dutch losses were also heavy. *KXVI*, *KXVII*, *O16* and *O20* were lost in action in the South China Sea. *KVII* and its entire crew were lost in an air attack on Surabaya in February 1942. Prior to the Japanese invasion of Java, the Dutch had already lost a large part of their Air Force, Navy and many of their servicemen in the war against Nazi Germany.

It was a huge blow to the Allies' defence to have to fall back to Surabaya and Tjilatjap, Java. Moreover with the continued Japanese air raids, plus failing



Figure 1
World War II Dutch submarine veteran.
Crew of HNMS O21 (with Willem Broetjes on
the LHS) in the forward torpedo room.
WA Museum, MHA4592/18, Courtesy:
Willem Broetjes.

repair and support facilities, it was clear that they could not hang on much longer. As the Dutch retreated, they destroyed any facilities that may have assisted the Japanese. *KVII*, *KX*, *KXIII* and *KXVII* went with the British submarines to Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and three came to Fremantle, where they operated under United States command.¹

FREMANTLE

On 3 March 1942 when the Allied Navies' Southeast Asian submarine fleets began arriving, Fremantle was totally unprepared for its role as the Allies' largest submarine base outside of Pearl Harbour. By 10 March, there were twelve submarines being repaired and serviced there. These submarines were in extremely poor condition. *KIX*, which joined the Royal Australian Navy for anti-submarine training, served thirty-one days at sea with the Royal Australian Navy and holds the distinction of being the only Australian submarine operated and commanded by the RAN during World War II.

KVIII was scrapped after being stripped of anything useful. The bronze conning tower was removed and installed on Fremantle's pilot boat, *Lady Forrest*, but this was removed in the 1960s and scrapped. *KVIII's* main motor was installed in the winch house of the No 1 Slipway at the West End of Fremantle Harbour and used to haul submarines and ships up the 3,000-ton slip. The hull was towed to Jervois Bay, South of Fremantle, and later destroyed. The motor remains an important element of the main winch room of the No 1 Slipway. *KXII* was sent to Sydney for repairs and continued in service. At the end of the war, it was sold to a syndicate of Australians who had it placed on display in Lavender Bay, Sydney, next to the entertainment park, where it provided the park with power.

Seven of the European based Dutch submarines also eventually operated from Fremantle from July 1943 to August 1945. The Dutch submarine war in the Far East was conducted from Fremantle, principally under the operational control of Admiral Christie and later Admiral Fife, United States Commanders of Submarines, South West Pacific, and later under the operational control of the Royal Navy Submarine Eighth Flotilla, tendered by HMS *Maidstone* and HMS *Adamant*, after it arrived in Fremantle.²

The Dutch submarines that operated out of Fremantle included *O21*, which came from Colombo and operated periodically from 1943 to 1945. It was followed by *KXV* in February 1944 and *KXIV* in April 1944. Both of the latter undertook patrols for the Netherlands Forces Information Service (NEFIS). In September 1944 *O19* survived damage caused by depth charges on its way to Fremantle to operate with the Eighth Flotilla. In July 1945 while on its way to set up mines and ammunitions for a new base in Subic Bay, it ran aground in the South China Sea. The crew was picked up by USS *Cod* and *O19* was then destroyed.

Zwaardvisch arrived in Fremantle in September 1944, working with the Eighth Flotilla. *Zwaardvisch* sank a large Nazi German submarine that was

carrying the latest German military technology to Japan. The Nazi Officers were taken prisoners and interrogated at Fremantle by the Americans before being interned. *Zwaardvisch*'s commander received the Netherlands' highest military award for bravery (MWO) and the crew also received citations.

In 1995, according to Captain van der Ham, the Royal Netherlands Submarine Fleet Commander, *Zwaardvisch* returned home safely, 'with the broom in top'. This is a tradition established in the 1600s and 1700s by Admiral Tromp, a famous Admiral in the Golden Age of Holland, when the Netherlands had four wars with England. The Dutch thought the British were very arrogant and that: 'they really thought they ruled the waves'. Every Dutch ship was required to greet other ships in international waters, but when it came to English ships, Admiral Tromp refused. Instead he hoisted a 'broom in top.' This was a way of saying 'I sweep you clear from the ocean.'

KXI arrived at Fremantle in March 1945 and was in such a poor state of repair, that it was decommissioned and the hull sunk off Rottnest Island. *KXI*'s gun was installed at Freshwater Bay Yacht Club, where it remains today. *O24* arrived in Fremantle in April 1945. *Tijgerhaai* (ex *Tarn*) arrived in September 1945 after the Victory in Japan. *KXV* was the first Dutch submarine to return to Batavia in the NEI in September 1945, followed in October by *KXIV*. *O23* arrived in Fremantle in September 1945, too late for active war duty and went on to Java.

THE SUBMARINERS

The Royal Netherlands Submarine Service ended its final chapter of World War II in Fremantle. After being forced out of the NEI, the submarine crews were deeply depressed but on arriving in Western Australia they were

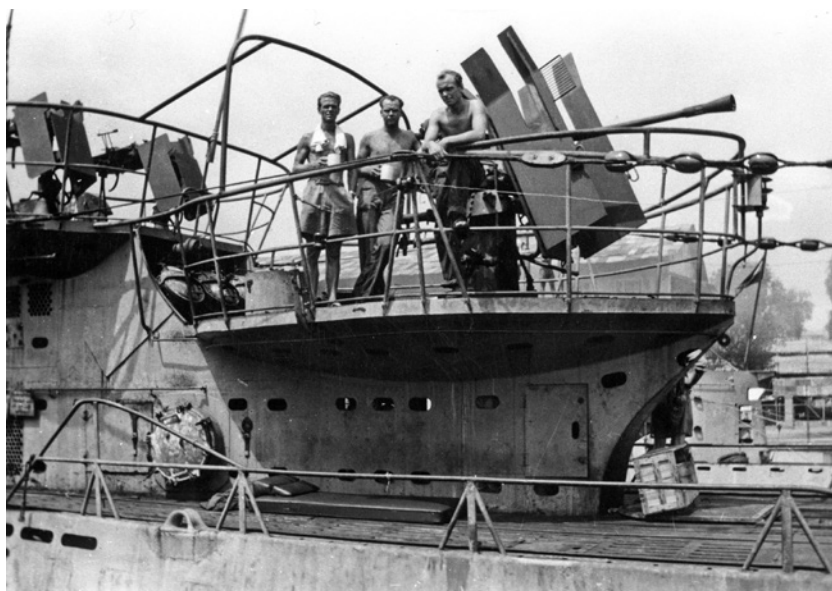


Figure 2
World War II Dutch submarine veteran.
Dutch submariners on board a captured but unidentified Nazi German submarine at Batavia (Jakarta). WA Museum, MHA4592/25, Courtesy: Ary Jongejan.

impressed by the expansiveness of the country, the good life its residents appeared to have and the heartening hospitality of the Western Australians.

In March 1942, when *KVII*, *KIX* and *KXII*, reached Fremantle, the crews were bereft. Some of the men spoke of feeling both isolated and lost as well as robbed of their personal dignity, because they were forced to evacuate from Java, to help continue the war effort from Australia, and leave their wives, young children and all their possessions in chaos and danger and to an unknown fate. Duty had forced them to depart without being able to make arrangements for the protection of their loved ones. Arriving in Fremantle after experiencing so much loss and trauma, it was an enormous relief to these Dutch servicemen to find that life was going on peacefully somewhere and that the Fremantle and Perth citizens embraced them so warmly.

Johannes Loep, who arrived here in March 1942, recalled the reaction of the men on board the Dutch submarine supply ship *MV Jansen* when they first sighted the beautiful WA coastline and Fremantle Harbour. They had left Tjilitjap after the Java Sea Battle and the voyage to Fremantle took ten days. For seven of those days they had had little to eat and they were all hungry. The ambulances were waiting to take the wounded men to Hollywood Hospital.

Coming ashore was like coming home, we received a hero's welcome, at least it lifted our self-esteem. We all received a £1 note [and] the first thing we did was go to a restaurant for a meal. Before taking an order the waitress placed a plate with a dozen slices of bread on our table. Within a couple of minutes, we asked for another helping. She was so amazed to see the bread gone, [so] I explained to her that we hardly had anything to eat for the last week. After a good meal which cost us 1/6 each, we left for the pub. Wherever we went we were treated like heroes and didn't have to pay for any drinks. At the end of the day I still had 18/6 in my pocket.

The Dutch submariners were initially housed aboard *MV Jansen*, but when it was due to leave Fremantle port, the submariners were transferred to the *Wang Phu*, an old merchant ferryboat that had escaped China in the early days of the war. The vessel was chartered to provide the Dutch servicemen with accommodation and stowage of their belongings. Johannes Loep recalls some of the lighter moments of living on the *Wang Phu*:

... As the ship was moored in the middle of the harbour, a boat had to deliver our stores. In the Dutch navy everyone is entitled to a bottle of beer [a day while] in port. ... the Americans ferried all our men and stores, but refused to carry any beer. This [situation almost] started another war. Anyway, after much discussion, the Yanks eventually gave in [and] the Bosun on their Liberty boat who had first refused was then quite happy to comply.

After unloading the first cases of beer we invited the boat crew for a drink. They left some time later in a very happy mood. As an ex-Merchant seaman I could speak English so I went with the Chief Bosun to arrange for our daily food supply from the American navy. Our chief was a bit of an old grump, used to peace-time navy rules. Everything had to be weighed, etc, until the Yankee storekeeper told him you can only get sides of beef or pork, no weighing. The Yank got me on side and said come and have a drink (even if it was against all navy regulations). He liked his Bourbon.⁴

After a while we went back in a happy mood. Our Dutch chief asked me if I had a drink. I reminded him that there was no alcohol on board American ships!

Jan Van Hattem recalled the funnier moments created by language differences:

Boats coming from the UK, as a rule, spoke English reasonably well. They knew that to learn a language, you [had to] get yourself a girlfriend who speaks it and no other language. After all, unless you talk, you don't get anywhere, wherever that may be. Boats coming from the Indies had greater difficulties, but generally caught on [to English] very quickly.

We had all heard that in Australia you could call a dark horse a fair cow and be understood. Everyone knew that a bison was what an Australian Liday washed her face in. There were difficulties in sorting which was Hay Street and which was High Street, and the old chestnut of the man in hospital waking up and asking: "Was I brought here to die?" and being answered, "Oh no, yesterdie."⁵

In the years before the War, the Netherlands Navy ships and submarines paid regular visits to Australian ports, especially Fremantle which was a vital refuelling depot before their final Indian Ocean leg to Java. After March 1942, Fremantle and Perth helped to revitalise the lives of their Dutch visitors. Although the American Command provided hotels, rented for servicemen to use on their leave, which was usually only one or two weeks, the Dutch submariners never needed to use them. Many Dutch crew lived ashore as guests of Australian families who had taken them in.

Jan Van Hattem recalled that:

Accommodation for Dutch submariners was found in a building in the grounds of UWA [University of Western Australia] near Crawley Bay, previously used by the American Patrol Wing 10 Flying Catalinas. I believe it still stands today, hidden by other buildings. Built entirely of corrugated iron, with very little insulation against the heat, it could become terribly hot. To provide some sort of relief, a sprinkler system was erected on the roof,...As it was not allowed to use scheme

water for [the sprinkler system], the [water] tank was refilled every now and then from the river. ...

Other buildings in the grounds of UWA were a garage, and the officer's club, "Coca Cola". A large part of the income of this club was provided by two slot machines, leased from a "gentleman" who appeared every morning to count the takings from the previous night, and share them 50-50.

When I came back from the *O19* disaster, having no ship to go to, one of my duties I was appointed to, [was to] check on those dealings. I don't think the operation was quite kosher, but we were not likely to be raided by the police. Whenever the owner decided the machines were not producing enough profits for him, he made a few alterations involving a screwdriver to rectify this, benefiting us as well.

Officers were housed in the American Bachelor Officers' quarters, a wooden building on the site where Currie Hall now stands, near King's Park opposite UWA. Several other buildings in Perth and Fremantle were in use for various purposes, amongst which a torpedo workshop, shared with the British, and in Mouatt Street was an office for the engineer in charge of mechanical supplies. Whilst in Perth one floor of the CML building was taken over for administrative purposes. At that time this was the tallest building in Perth and quite clearly visible from a distance.⁶

Jan Van Hattem became third officer on board *Zwaardvisch* after serving on the ill-fated *O19*. At Fremantle some of the men were accommodated on the *Zwaardvisch* and his job was to act as paymaster, 'looking after all the needs of the inner man', plus to keep the books and arrange accommodation while the submarine was in Fremantle. 'Looking after the needs of the inner man' required Jan to organise a truck and volunteers to sample, select and fill some beer barrels with wine for the Dutch submariners. However, 'After about four wineries, all wine tasted the same so we decided on one, and filled the barrels.' Jan recalled that '[the wine was] fairly young and potent stuff, as only the Yugoslavs there could make it. Certainly not everybody on board drank it, but it was reasonably successful. It was certainly better than Panadol [sic] if you wanted a good sleep in noisy surroundings.'⁷

As far as accommodation was concerned, the British-built boats were superior to the Dutch, but the Dutch boats were much faster. Some worthwhile alterations had been made to *Zwaardvisch* when she was being built. For example, the grill was taken out of the galley stove and replaced by a large boiler for potatoes. A large Turbo fan was installed, primarily for emptying ballast tanks..., but as a bonus, it acted as an air conditioner [when the submarine was] under the surface of the sea. Air from inside the boat was compressed, and thereby

treated. This hot compressed air was then cooled with seawater. On expansion it cooled considerably and was returned to the inside of the boat, thereby producing a large amount of fresh water, used for washing and cleaning. That meant that there was never a shortage of water for drinking. There was a very large freezer on board so that there was meat for about six weeks, a luxury unknown on the Dutch built boats.

When *Zwaardvisch* was built, her first provisioning was done by the shipyard according to British Navy rules. Among the provisions were twelve half gallon jars of rum. They disappeared the first night from a shed where all provisions were stored. It took me six months to write them off with the kind help of Supply Chief petty officers on board submarine mother ships. Whilst browsing through the Dutch Navy regulations re provisioning submarines in tropical waters I found that among the daily rations were 4 fluid ounces of red

Figure 3
HMAS Stirling, Garden Island, WA.
Dutch submarine Naval Base, Crawley Bay, Nedlands, WA on 5 March 1947.
WA Museum, MHA/4561/24, Courtesy: Command Public Relations.



wine per man per day, probably to provide vitamins for those who did not see daylight during a patrol, notwithstanding the fact that vitamin pills were supplied.⁸

Life on shore in WA was therefore a welcome relief from life onboard a submarine. Dutch submariners when on leave, were under strict orders not to discuss any of their missions and movements. Not that this prevented them from enjoying themselves as Jan Van Hattem explains:

Life ashore in between patrols was a very different matter [from life onboard]. Various relationships sprang up very quickly, quite a few with marriage as the result. A few days after the arrival of *Zwaardvisch*, I was invited to a wedding reception in the Orient Hotel, Fremantle. The bride approached me and said,

“You have known ---- whoever it was ---- do you think I am doing the right thing?” What could I say? Mateship and all that. They are still married. Some six months later *Zwaardvisch*'s engineer officer decided to get married. There was a mandatory two months notification period, to allow naval authorities to make whatever enquiries they want to make. He could not observe this, and all sorts of excuses were made to explain why not, and he got away with it. But when a few days later I announced my intention to do the same thing, I was told by the CO that they could not make the same excuses twice, and as due punishment for not giving the required two months notification, but only two weeks, I got two days confined to barracks, which I was allowed to take on the days I was on duty anyway, so that was no great pain.

One of the weekend papers *The Mirror* specialised in writing up the more colourful events of the week, with great emphasis on divorce cases. It specialised in lurid headings and headlines in the form of the most frightful puns. One example comes to mind: “He Gave Her a Ring. But it was Only a Phony”, referring to a breach of promise case, the relationship being terminated over the telephone. Another instance springs to mind of a judge sitting in judgement on a series of divorce cases. After three cases in which three successive Dutch servicemen were cited as co-respondents, the learned judge remarked, “My, my - the Yanks will have to look to their laurels!”

For entertainment there were the cinemas, dance halls such as the Pagoda in Como, which still stands, night clubs like the Cabarita, United Services Club and the Lido. On many occasions ships' parties were held, quite a novelty for us, where Dutch, British and American submarine crews partied together as shown in photographs that have survived these last 50 years. One memorable party was held by the combined crews of *O19* and *Cod*. Streets in Perth and Fremantle were,

for the most part, pretty safe - certainly in comparison to what they are now.

There were numerous canteens where dancing took place, like the Government House ballroom and the Perth Town hall. Eating places such as the Florentino Cafe, The Green Gate, The Silver Buffet - to name a few - where food and cheap meals were enjoyed. The latter was one of several that was manned by volunteers. There was the well-loved Bernie's, where you toasted buns and barbequed your steak, but if you preferred a crayfish roll, Bernie or one of his helpers prepared it for you. The dining rooms of most hotels provided good meals, and there were Chinese restaurants in James Street, Perth, and High Street, Fremantle. Molinari's, a roadhouse somewhere near Karrinyup, which in those days was almost in the country, where Italian food was served, their specialties being squab pigeons, home grown and cooked to perfection, and Zabaglione, which was superb. For those with their own transport there was the Olde Narrogin Inne in Armadale. Undoubtedly there were many more, but best of all was the hospitality which we received in the homes of the people throughout Western Australia. Proof of this is the great number of visiting servicemen who lost their hearts to West Australian girls, which culminated in many happy and enduring marriages. I speak from experience.⁹

However, life was not all canteens, dancing and romance. A total of nine Dutch submarines were lost by enemy action, scuttled or grounded, and four were paid off before the end of the war. Some 136 men lost their lives in



Figure 4
Wedding photo of Joy and Ary Jongejan in Perth, Western Australia. WA Museum, MHA4531/27, Courtesy: Ary Jongejan.

action and more were lost on transports returning to Europe. Between 1942 and 1945, the Dutch submarines made 84 Southeast Asian patrols. Twenty-seven patrols originated from Fremantle as well as 50 special missions.¹⁰ The presence of the Dutch submariners in Western Australia during World War II was, for some of the servicemen, a temporary transition before returning to their homeland, and for others a place they chose to make their home. Their Western Australian encounters, some brief and others enduring, remain an important historical legacy of those turbulent war years.

Although Dutch submariners and servicemen generally integrated well into Western Australian ways of life, political attitudes began to change after the war when the Dutch began making arrangements to return and govern the NEI. Due to the great distance between European ports and Fremantle, vessels going to the NEI were forced to re-fuel at Fremantle but under the leadership of Paddy Troy, at Fremantle, the waterside unions boycotted the servicing and refuelling of Dutch vessels. Troy's tactic was to delay the return of the Dutch to the NEI, in order to give the Indonesian independence movement time to organise against the return of the Dutch. Although the actions of the unions were politically divisive, they did little to undermine the strong social bonds formed during the war years between Western Australians and their Dutch guests.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hans van der Ham, Captain, Commander, Royal Netherlands Submarine Fleet, "Dutch Submarines Down Under, Exiled, Exhausted but Not Expired", International Submarine Convention, WA Maritime Museum, 1995, held by the Maritime History Department, Western Australian Museum.
- 2 Cairns, Lynne, *Secret Fleets. Fremantle's World War II Submarine Base*, Western Australian Museum, Perth 2011. Published with the assistance of the Australian Association for Maritime History, p. 167
- 3 H. van der Ham, "Dutch Submarines Down Under, Exiled, Exhausted but Not Expired".
- 4 Johannes Loep, RNLN Retired, comments recorded during the International Submarine Convention, WA Maritime Museum, 1995, held by the Maritime History Department, Western Australian Museum.
- 5 Jan Van Hattem, "Dutch Submarines that Operated from Fremantle", International Submarine Convention, WA Maritime Museum, 1995, held by the Maritime History Department, Western Australian Museum.
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 *ibid*; PS: Panadol was not available until after World War II, Bex and Asprin were most popular brands.
- 8 *ibid*
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 *ibid*