

he Dutch Consulate in Perth

W. (Wim) Arriens

Because, in the 1950s, Fremantle was the first Australian landfall for Dutch migrant ships, large numbers disembarked there. It was therefore unsurprising that the Dutch Government opened a Consulate in Perth. Another reason may have been that West New Guinea was still Dutch territory, and Dutch warships might have to call via Fremantle.

The first career Consul was W. (Wim) Arriens, who, with his wife Gree, did much to organise the Dutch community and uphold Dutch name and prestige. A newcomer to the consular service (he joined after the war, having long worked in shipping), Wim was middle-aged, small of stature, and somewhat autocratic. He was not easily intimidated—neither by Dutch nor Australian counterparts. He also had a gift for telling simple stories in an appealing way, making his ideas and feelings unmistakably clear.

More importantly, Wim and Gree brought cohesion to a widely dispersed community: organising gatherings, taking a personal interest in families, and mediating between groups when needed. Twice a year—on New Year's Day and on Queen's Birthday—they hosted open-house receptions. In the hard early years, these were highlights: wives could dress up, and everyone enjoyed a drink and a nice snack many still couldn't afford themselves.

Wim worked to create business contacts for emigrants who wanted to import Dutch products or export from Australia. He had some successes, but often felt hampered by indifference or incompetence in The Hague—among civil servants and Dutch industries.

Beyond consular duties, Wim and Gree were determined to learn the country. They made extensive car expeditions, drawn to parts of Western Australia then not open to normal traffic. North of Carnarvon there were no made roads. If you wanted to go farther north, the coastal supply boat—servicing towns from Perth to Darwin—was the way. They chose instead to drive to the Kimberleys, a risky undertaking. If you bogged or lost your way, help could be hundreds of miles away; people not uncommonly perished from thirst, hunger, or sunstroke.

Such trips required strict rules. You checked out at the last police station before entering the desert (route and timing logged and relayed by phone or radio), then checked in at the next post, reporting any cars you'd seen. If travellers didn't arrive within a set time, reconnaissance went out to find them. If you got stuck, you stayed with your car—you did not proceed on foot. Many who broke that rule were never found.

Travel in this semi-desert was like navigating at sea: from the end of the made road you followed a compass course for 30–40 km, stopped to find a post or cairn, then set the next leg—easy enough if your compass was correct. On their return they told of a little hotel in the middle of nowhere where they stayed a night. Sheets and towels hadn't been washed in a long time—there was simply no water. The landlord told them the tank water was only for washing hands and brushing teeth, not for drinking: that's what he had beer for...!

By the end of his term, Wim attempted a near-impossible task: bringing cohesion among the various Dutch groups in a kind of federation. In those days Protestants and Catholics were strictly separate, with three or four denominations; there were also socialists, liberals, Frisians, Hollanders, Brabanders, Limburgers—each with its own prejudices, clubs, and associations. Dutch society, pillars and all, had been transplanted to Western Australia. Wim hosted meetings at home to test cooperation. The result was zero: sessions ran into the small hours; everyone wanted something

different; willingness to cooperate was minimal. Unity would come only when a real Dutch interest was at stake. Soon after, Arriens was transferred to Melbourne as Consul—a well-earned promotion for him and for Gree.

G. E. (Gé) van Lanschot

After Arriens, G. E. (Gé) van Lanschot took over in Perth—a very different figure in appearance, temperament, and method. From a well-known Brabant banking family, he was a professional Consul who had spent his entire career in the Foreign Service. He arrived in his late fifties with his young wife Lieke and their daughter Geraldine.

They rented a beautiful old Lee Steere house on a hill a few hundred metres from the CBD: large rooms, an attractive garden—ideal for receptions, dinners, and official functions.

During his tenure, Dutch warships regularly called at Fremantle en route to New Guinea. Van Lanschot ensured refuelling and resupply—and that crews were welcomed and entertained. This was delicate work: the Seamen's Union and Wharf Labourers' Union, both under strong Communist influence, opposed anything they labelled "colonial" and often refused tugboats. Van Lanschot leaned on the Royal Australian Navy and on protocol—never giving Australian authorities room to doubt their responsibilities toward visiting warships of a friendly nation.

Even so, neither he nor the authorities could budge the unions on tug availability. Warships had to berth under their own steam. For destroyers this was fine; for the aircraft carrier Karel Doorman, with her high wind-catching superstructure, it was another matter. Confident the Dutch would be stymied, union leaders withheld tugs.

At the appointed hour the Karel Doorman nevertheless entered the harbour under her own power. A few aircraft were parked diagonally on the flight deck, their propellers aligned with the hull. As the ship began her swing to turn inside the harbour, the aircraft engines roared to life. First the ship turned mid-harbour, then was inched to the quay on the thrust of the aircraft motors—to cheers from the Dutch crowd. Australian naval linesmen were just as enthusiastic, and the dockers expressed their admiration in typical fashion: "The bastards made it...!" For the record, since the Karel Doorman berthed under her own steam in that way, Australian aircraft carriers have also dispensed with tugboats.

Community coordination and the H.M. "Amsterdam"

About a month before the first ship, H.M. "Amsterdam", was due past Fremantle, Van Lanschot asked what should be done for the crew. Excursions and a Ball were obvious, but most important was ensuring every crew member mixed with the local Dutch and was welcomed into homes.

Van Lanschot renewed contacts with community groups and convened a meeting at his home. Although everyone was now willing to cooperate (because a direct Dutch interest was at stake), the meeting again turned into a long nightmare. Some people spoke endlessly; when Gé pressed for decisions and less trivia, one group protested that the Consul was not neutral.

Afterwards, over coffee, I suggested Gé not chair future meetings but attend in an advisory capacity—remaining neutral while still giving guidance. As a result, I was invited to become President of the "Welcoming and Party Committee."

My aims were simple:

1. keep meetings short; give everyone a chance to speak; curtail the multi-speakers;
2. work from a set agenda so we weren't talking past each other;
3. use a two-round discussion—proposer explains; each person comments in turn; one more round; then vote. Everyone gets two chances to state a view.

It worked: meetings never exceeded two hours.

Dutch society, pillars and all, had been transplanted to Perth, but there was one club few objected to: the Dutch Soccer Club Windmills. Mostly young, well-organised, many had served in the Army in Indonesia (1945–1950) and felt a kindred spirit with the Navy boys headed for New Guinea. They understood instantly what the crew would want and were key members of the committee; without them, success would have been far harder. Churches also helped—forming subcommittees for excursions and home visits. It was good to see how Dutch people could cooperate when needed and accommodate matters of principle. For example, one church group—on religious grounds—did not wish to help organise the Ball. They themselves proposed that, at meetings, the Ball be debated last, so they could retire beforehand.

We welcomed Dutch naval visits to Fremantle four times. Crews and migrants alike enjoyed the occasions. I considered it an honour to serve as President of the Dutch Committee, backed by the great majority of Western Australia's Dutch colony. And we should not forget Van Lanschot: with his sound advice and active support, he made it all possible. He was a good Consul.

Later Consuls

After Gé and Lieke left, two more career Consuls were appointed. Neither became the centre of community life as Arriens and Van Lanschot had been. New Guinea was no longer ours, the Consuls were elderly men on their last posting before retirement, not particularly motivated, and with non-Dutch wives understandably less invested in the Dutch colony. The Consulate's earlier momentum faded.