

WA125
GLENELG RIVER, NORTH OF
BROOME 28 OCT 1945

MITCHELL N5-254'S LAST FLIGHT^{1,2}

by Coert Munk

By August 1945, the war in the Pacific had ended with the surrender of the Japanese forces. The situation in the NEI / Netherlands East Indies had to be reconstructed. Part of this reconstruction plan was the introduction of new NEI money. The Department of Finance of the new NEI Government had arranged for the production of the new money, both in paper as in coins. By October 1945 the new money was ready for shipment to NEI. Part of the money was shipped by plane. For this purpose, four NAA B-25 Mitchell bombers were available. These four aircraft were prepared for their flight[s] at the airport of Archerfield near Brisbane. In order to protect the shipments to the Java Bank, a guard was on board of each flight. He played a vital role before departure, en route and upon delivery in NEI.

One of the aircraft involved in the money transport was NAA B-25J Mitchell N5-254, a rather new bomber, built with USAF serial 44-30900 and received by ML KNIL / NEIAF on 19 April 1945. After the end of the war, the plane was available with PEP, the Personell and Equipment Pool of ML KNIL / NEIAF. The aircraft was prepared at Archerfield for a flight on Saturday 27 October '45. Captain of this flight was 1st Lt B.J. van Kregten; he had volunteered for duty when the war started. Living in Buenos Aires, he was sent to RNMFS in Jackson where he received his pilot training. After having gained his wings and being trained on the B-25, he was detached with 18Sq ML-KNIL / NEIAF. Further to the crew of Van Kregten were Vaandrig C. Borneman was his 1st officer, S-M Megens was radio-operator and S-M R.B. Baert was the flight engineer in the crew. The logs of the plane indicated that 254 was in good condition, albeit rather close to a major inspection. This was no problem for the flight of the day, however. The crew was not that experienced. Borneman was a well trained co-pilot, but had limited knowledge of navigation. Megens lacked flight experience, as well did Baert. On behalf of NICA (Netherlands Indies Civil Administration), Mr. A.H.J. Nord joined the crew as guard.

Saturday afternoon 27 October 1945 saw the arrival of Mr. Nord as well as the three guards of the other aircraft involved. Nord and his colleagues were armed with a M1 carbine. They all were present when the bombers received the cargo. 254 received:

- 10 boxes coins 1ct
- 7 boxes coins 10ct
- 7 boxes coins 25ct
- 15 boxes paper money
 - 6 x marked SA
 - 2 x marked A
 - 4 x marked F
 - 2 x marked C
 - 1 x marked D

Total value DFL 900.000 (prices 1945)

The box with SA marked money was the most valuable. Nord had received instructions by NICA to drop this box as last one in case of emergency. Commander of the flight Van Kregten ordered that

all boxes had to be secured with metal strips in the bomb bay, which happened.

The Mitchell took off Archerfield on Sunday morning, around 08.00LT. Two of the guards of the other bombers were drunk after their tour in Brisbane on Saturday evening. Mitchell 254 landed at Cloncurry for refuelling on 12.45LT. Nord was happy to have a walk outside, he suffered from air sickness. During refuelling, Van Kregten decided to fill the normal tanks only. The aux tanks were kept empty. Thus he reduced the weight of the plane during the flight of approx 5 hrs.

Quite soon after take-off from Cloncurry for Truscott at 14:00LT the flight experienced bad stormy weather, the approaching west monsoon. Commander Van Kregten was very busy keeping the aircraft controlled in flight; he relied on Borneman's navigation. After having crossed two heavy storm fronts, the latter with severe rain, Van Kregten asked Megens to check the position of the aircraft with radio bearings. Megens kept silence and answered finally that he forgot his book with radio frequencies. Van Kregten ordered to contact Truscott; he knew the frequency from his frequent flights between Cloncurry and Truscott. Megens contacted Truscott and got the answer by radio that the man who had to give bearings was having tea. Someone had already gone to pick him up from the camp, about 30 minutes driving from the tower. Time ran out.

Commander Van Kregten decided to fly straight West to the coast and he activated the SOS beacon. His idea was to find the coast and fly a northerly heading to Darwin from then on. In between Nord found out that there was a problem, he kept his mouth shut in order not to bother the crew. In order to save fuel, one of the engines had been switched off. The Mitchell however lost altitude because of the single-engine performance of the too heavy plane.

Suddenly the clouds broke and ground sight as regained. They flew in an area with small islands near the coast. Van Kregten decided to ditch the plane

after having concluded that they couldn't make the destination. The standard ditching procedures was carried out. The ditch was very heavy; the bomber became filled with water almost immediately. The crew left the sinking bomber via the escape hatch on the cockpit roof and climbed on the RH wing. Nord and Borneman filled the dinghy with pressurised air. All climbed on board the dinghy. It was dark, and still raining.

Very soon afterwards, the Mitchell dived nose down in the deep, precious cargo included! The crew in the dinghy paddled to the shore and checked for possible injuries. Van Kregten was slightly hurt on nose and cheek. The emergency equipment on board the dinghy was hardly of any use. It was not possible to light a fire in the soaking wet bushes. All men hardly slept during that first night.

Next morning they decided to paddle to the mainland coast. The sun was warm and dried all wet clothes very soon. One or two aircraft passed by. The men couldn't contact these aircraft with signal guns or reflecting mirrors. They found shelter near some rocks on the shore. In the afternoon of 29 October, a B-24 Liberator spotted the five men. The B-24 dropped supplies, later followed by a B-25. On the 30th a small boat came to pick them from the rocks. The five were brought to the local mission station Kunmunga. Captain Victor Pedersen of the Salvation Army flew Van Kregten, Megens and Nord to Truscott in his Dragon Rapide. Mr. Eich, a NICA representative and colleague of Nord, was there to hear the story.

An Australian-Netherlands investigation team went to Bundaberg. They had several hearings with all involved. 1st Lt Van Kregten stated that the accident was caused by a combination of several factors:

- the B-25 was close to a major inspection;
- it was not possible to dump the cargo. It was attached with metal strips in the bomb bay. The load of the cargo made flying on one engine impossible;
- the crew was too inexperienced for this long flight;
- the maps of the North-Australian area were inaccurate and the deviation of the compass was unknown [this was caused by high quantities of metals in the ground];
- the radio operator at Truscott was off for tea when he was needed most;
- there was no reliable weather information available.

The investigation team concluded that several avoidable mistakes have caused the accident. Further investigation was not regarded as necessary because of the relationship with the Australians and because there were no casualties. "Only" a B-25 and its precious cargo was lost.

Army News, the magazine of the Salvation Army reported on 19 December that a local fisherman had found 5 boxes of paper money. The money became available in Broome before it was issued officially via the Java Bank..... The wreck was never lifted because [1] the exact location was unknown and [2] the water was too deep. It's still there, between Broome and Truscott.

Van Kregten left the ML KNIL very soon afterwards. He returned to Buenos Aires as local KLM Agent. Later he moved to Mexico City, where he supported setting up the Sabena line between Belgium and Mexico.

Nord became military lawyer with the court in Tokyo; he claimed several death penalties for war criminals on behalf of the Netherlands Government.

Note

1

The article was written, based upon the following articles on the flight:

- "Geldtransport naar Indië" by Bas Kreuger, MLM Nieuwsbrief 70, July 1999
- "Geldtransport", a chapter in the book 'Kemajoran' written by Jan Hagens

2

There are two different dates of the crash reported. The MLN article reports 28 October 1945, the book Kemajoran states 21 November 1945. This last date is also mentioned in other reports, but one never knows "who quotes who".