“We Began to Belong More and More”

Dutch Evacuees from the Netherlands East Indies in Wartime Australia

Brisbane at War – Australian War Memorial

The Australian War Memorial’s mission is to lead remembrance and understanding of Australia’s wartime experience. As a shrine, museum, and extensive historic archive, the Memorial tells the story of Australians at war—and, in doing so, preserves the stories of those whose lives became entwined with Australia’s own. Among the Memorial’s collections are records that document the Dutch experience of the Second World War: personal papers, diaries, interviews, and official correspondence that came to the Memorial through relationships forged between Australians and the Dutch over a shared experience of conflict.

Between late 1945 and July 1946, thousands of Dutch civilians from the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) passed through Australia. Most were women, children, and elderly men who had survived years of Japanese internment. They arrived impoverished and malnourished seeking temporary sanctuary in a country itself struggling with post-war housing shortages. Brisbane, with its proximity to NEI air routes and the military camp at Wacol, became one of the principal staging points for the evacuees.

The Herald (Melbourne) reported in November 1945—three months after the Japanese surrender—that some 200,000 Dutch subjects in Java were in greater danger than at any point during their captivity. The press reported that the Indonesian independence movement had turned Java into an active conflict zone, and former internees remained confined to prison compounds, facing massacre, starvation, and disease. Australia’s representative in Java, Mr MacMahon Ball, urged the Commonwealth to accept up to 50,000 evacuees. Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell initially agreed to receive 10,000, designating Camp Columbia at Wacol, Camp Casino in New South Wales, and Camp Darley in Victoria as reception centres, with army tents supplementing hut accommodation.

From late December 1945, the NEI Air Force flew nearly 100 evacuees a week from Batavia to Archerfield aerodrome, staging them at Camp Columbia. Colonel W. Zersteegh, commanding the evacuation squadron, hoped to increase the service to 1,000 a week. From Wacol, many evacuees were dispersed to rehabilitation centres across Australia—guest houses at Southport, Coolangatta, Cowes, Katoomba, and elsewhere.

Brisbane remained a central staging post, accommodating up to 1,500 evacuees at peak periods.

Others arrived by sea in grim conditions. The cargo vessel Tjibadak reached Melbourne with 370 people crammed into a space designed for 50, after a three-week voyage surviving on bully beef in the ship's hold. All were penniless, with practically no possessions beyond the clothes they wore.

The evacuees arrived with most not really knowing what reception they would receive. A Dutch spokesman confirmed that people in Batavia had believed Australia was politically opposed to them. On arrival, however, they found ordinary Australians kindly disposed and sympathetic.

The Memorial holds the personal papers of Mrs M Koningdozysberger-Dozy (Collection PR88/139), whose account offers a vivid window into the evacuee experience. She was 22 at the outbreak of war and had been living in the Dutch colonies, married to an officer of the Royal Netherlands Navy. They were living in Celebes when the Japanese arrived on 7 February 1942. Her husband was killed and she was imprisoned.

At war's end, ill and weakened, she was taken to a hospital where she met Australian soldiers for the first time. In September 1945 she was flown to Australia. She recalled lunch on the north coast—real bread and butter!—before travelling through Darwin and Cloncurry to Brisbane, where she took up work as a youth welfare officer at Juliana Camp in Coolangatta. She noted that she had no formal qualifications for the welfare role.

Writing to a Brisbane journalist in 1989, she described Coolangatta as a "beautiful resort" where they had come to build strength and prepare to return to the colonies after three and a half years of internment. She recalled the shock of handling money for the first time in three and a half years, being given £150 to buy clothes—and, thinking they would return to the East Indies, buying only summer clothes. She also remembered receiving too much rich food too soon, which made her ill.

Mrs Koningsberger-Dozy wrote of earlier evacuees who had arrived by the ship Bloemfontein ahead of the Japanese invasion in 1942. These earlier arrivals stayed in Australia and later helped the newer evacuees who came in 1945. Children attended local schools, though integrating them after their trauma was difficult. The camp adults sought work and picked up all manner of jobs. "We began to belong more and more" she

wrote of their growing ties with the locals of Coolangatta. Meeting in church or at the beach and invited to homes and on trips into the countryside.

Across Queensland, trained Mothercraft Association volunteers met evacuee trains, the Red Cross stood ready with supplies, and the Country Women's Association established evacuation committees. The broader community response was largely generous, though not uncomplicated.

Overcrowding was a persistent concern. Toowoomba's population had swelled by 5,000, with accompanying anxieties about tropical diseases. The Dutch authorities themselves objected to disused army camps, preferring hostels and houses. Despite asking for 50,000 places, fewer than 6,000 refugees had arrived by February 1946. Industrial disputes added further difficulty. The former hospital ship Tasman was declared "black" by the Waterside Workers' Federation on each of its three trips to Australia, meaning the Dutch internees had to unload their own ship. These disputes were entangled with broader sympathies for Indonesian independence; a Dutch parliamentary commission later blamed Australian trade unions for seeking to hinder the Dutch return to the NEI.

The evacuation scheme was always intended as temporary—four to six months of rehabilitation. By March 1946, the NEI Government ceased evacuations, citing a lack of foreign currency. Ships including the Tasman and Bloemfontein called at Australian ports to embark evacuees, many of whom were bound for Holland rather than a still-disrupted Java. When the Tasman pulled away from Fremantle in June 1946 with 530 people aboard, many were tearful, and numerous Australians were among the crowd that farewelled them. By January 1947, when the final 48 evacuees sailed from Brisbane, only two of the roughly 3,000 rehabilitated in the city since November 1945 remained. Sailing with them were five Australian brides of Dutch soldiers.

Mrs Koningsberger-Dozy wrote of the struggle for Indonesian independence and its impact on the hopes and plans of the camp community. She was offered a job in Sydney, but had family ties in Holland and returned home to Utrecht.

Many evacuees, however, came back. Some returned as part of the broader post-war migration, and friendships formed during the evacuation period became the foundation for a large and enduring Dutch community across Australia. Marriages took place between Dutch evacuees and Australians, cultural experiences were shared, and these personal bonds became the social context for political actions when the war ended.

The Memorial's Collections

The Memorial's archive preserves a rich record of the Dutch wartime experience. The collections include letters written by Dutch people returning to the NEI to friends and family in Australia, as well as impressions and memoirs by Dutch NEI civilians and prisoners of war who settled here. The archive also holds interviews conducted as part of war crimes investigations, alongside diaries and personal papers donated by those who experienced internment and later made Australia their home.

Jan van Os, a member of the Royal Netherlands Navy, survived captivity at the Makassar Camp in Celebes and settled in Australia after the war. His collection includes a diary written in Dutch between 1942 and 1945 with an English translation, a personal memoir, and a sound interview in which he discusses his experience as an evacuee from the Atherton Tablelands, where he described being treated like a hero, to Melbourne, where he stayed until 1947. He and his Australian war bride travelled to Holland before returning to settle in Australia in 1948.

The wartime diary of Louisa Sophia Hamers, a Dutch national, records her internment between 1943 and 1945. Louisa wrote of the growing cruelty and strictness of the Japanese over the years, alongside small glimmers of happiness and hope sustained through the continued practice of Dutch culture and the celebration of events such as birthdays. She did not survive her internment. Her daughter, who emigrated to Australia after a period of rehabilitation in Adelaide, donated the diary to the Memorial in 2016.

Together, these official records and personal papers form a valuable record of the Dutch experience of war—the suffering of prisoners and civilian internees, the upheaval of evacuation, and the lives rebuilt in Australia. Mrs Koningsberger-Dozy's letter, alongside the diaries of Jan van Os and Louisa Sophia Hamers, forms part of a historic archive that tells not only the Dutch story of war, but also the story of Australians of Dutch origin and the ties that endure between two nations shaped by a shared experience of conflict.

Robyn van Dyk

Head, Research Centre

Australian War Memorial