

Extract from “The Fourth Ally” used with permission of the author, Mr. Doug Hurst

In his book Canberra 1913 – 1953, Jim Gibbney wrote of 18 Squadron:

“Poor leadership and unsatisfactory living conditions brought tensions among a group of home-sick exiles.....In November, 1942, a lieutenant (W. Burck) and two sergeants (H. Kelder and H. de Lyon) who were disaffected because their families had been left to the Japanese in the (Netherlands East Indies) islands, planned to steal a (B-25 Mitchell) bomber and fly home, but they were incautious enough to trust another NCO (Sgt. Mjr. A. Scholte), who betrayed them. They were (allegedly) caught by the Dutch authorities trying to make radio contact with the Japanese from a room in the Queanbeyan Hotel.....The incident generated a flood of rumours around the city and there are still those who believe that the culprits were actually German infiltrators with a plan to bomb Parliament House.”

This incident owed much to a period of enforced idleness on the squadron caused by a spate of unserviceable aircraft. The resultant boredom added to the frustration of the three men who seem to have done most of their “plotting” during heavy drinking sessions. As trained aircrew they would have known full well that a Mitchell bomber could not possibly fly from Canberra to Java, and would have also known the “welcome” awaiting them there from Japanese fighter planes. Furthermore, they did little to keep their “plan” secret – indeed, many in the squadron who heard them speak of it, dismissed the talk as drunken bravado and a harmless outlet for their frustration.

Unfortunately for the naïve three (plus a fourth man implicated in the scheme; Sgt HJ Burgers) Dutch military intelligence (led by Major SH Spoor who only five years later became Commander in Chief of the NEI Forces) saw things differently. Taking them seriously, Major Spoor conducted an “investigation” and had them charged (with treason and betrayal). Court martialled in Ceylon by a Naval court (onboard the S.S. Plancius), sergeants Kelder and de Lyon were sentenced to twenty years (the Prosecution wanted them sentenced to life). Lieutenant Burck was sentenced to life but in his case the Prosecution wanted the death sentence. All sentences were later reduced to 10 years.

(Sgt. Burgers was incarcerated from the time of his arrest on 29th Nov., 1942 until the time of his verdict on 25th Oct., 1943: 11 months. He was found guilty of being aware of, but failing to report the “plot” to his superiors. This is quite absurd because it had been well established that the squadron commanders had been aware of the “idle talk” from the outset, and they had decided that it did not warrant being taken seriously).

The entire fiasco certainly suggests that Gibbney’s “poor leadership” comment is justified. Unfortunately he does not say if the fault lay with the very senior officers stirring the racist pot (i.e., Gen. van Straten and his staff), those in charge of Military Intelligence, i.e., Major Spoor (probably the main antagonist – his part in the matter has all the hallmarks of an over-reaction, or perhaps it was his way of drawing attention to himself in his quest for rapid promotion) or was the Commanding Officer, Major Fiedeldij at fault for not nipping the problem in the bud at squadron level? If Fiedeldij had informed the accused that he was aware of the nonsense, and if he had informed them of the possible outcome of their ridiculous rantings, then the matter would not have progressed any further.

Whatever the cause, the incident would have added further to the difficult task of creating a cohesive squadron. But what of the four accused? They have never been pardoned or at least received an apology for the unjust treatment meted out to them. The whole affair remains a pathetic blight on the Dutch judicial system of the time, which should be redressed for the sake of the families of the accused.