



CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Broome 1942: 70th anniversary of the bombing of Broome

The *Broome 1942* exhibition was launched by Lieutenant Colonel Herman Verhoef, Dutch Defence Attache, on 28 February 2012.

I am pleased to join you here in Perth today for the opening of the Broome 1942 exhibition.

As you are well aware of, this year marks a special year for Australian-Dutch relations, as we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Japanese air raid on Broome on 3 March 1942. I thank you all for being here.

Your presence at the launch of this exhibition is important, as I will explain in a moment. I would first however like to express my particular gratitude to the people who organized and created this enlightening exhibition and to Curtin University for hosting it. To be here today at this highly regarded University is a great pleasure.

As I said, your interest in this exhibition is important. For many Australian and Dutch people, the history of the Broome air raid –regrettably– has remained unknown. This exhibition will not only inform people about the Australian-Dutch partnership during World War Two; it will also safeguard an important piece of Australian and Dutch history for future generations. Students could play a key role in preserving the shared Australian-Dutch history.

If we look back in history, Australia and the Netherlands share a special partnership. From the arrival of Dutch merchant ship Duyfken at Australian shores in 1606 to the recent close cooperation in Afghanistan where we have been close comrades and in several wars we fought shoulder to shoulder.

On the 4th of May, the Dutch celebrate their National Commemoration (or 'Dodenherdenking') Day. The theme of this commemoration for 2012 will be 'freedom'. Fortunately, most Australians and Dutch born after the War have no personal experience of what it is like to have one's freedom taken away. Nevertheless, we must always remind ourselves that freedom is a privilege. Let us think only of those in the Middle East, whose fight for freedom has now become a daily reality.

Nowadays we can only imagine what 'freedom' must have meant for those who lived through WWII. Their war experiences are humbling. And as I look upon Broome's tragic history, I am thankful for the peace we have been enjoying here over the last few decades.

This year is also a special year because it witnesses a major change for the collective memory of the air raids in Australia during WWII. The bombing of Darwin, Australia's 'Pearl Harbour', has been recognized as a Day of National Remembrance, alongside Australia Day and Anzac Day. Prime Minister Gillard has also expressed her determination to make the Darwin air raid part of the new national history curriculum.

WWII was a particularly important period for cooperation between the two countries. Where the Australians played an important role in freeing the Dutch people in the Netherlands from the German occupation, the Dutch in turn played a significant role as a major ally in the Australian war efforts in the Pacific region. The Dutch forces were the so called Fourth Ally.

The Dutch KPM (Royal Packet Line) merchant ships -a total number of 28- started operating from Australia during the War as part of the allied efforts. Since Australia at the time had virtually no merchant navy, the Dutch ships became fundamental for supplying the allies during the decisive New Guinea campaigns in 1942-43. Even more so, of the 27 merchant ships in General MacArthur's command, 19 were Dutch. Without these ships it would have been close to impossible for the allies to defeat the Japanese in PNG, and the outcome of the war in the Pacific would perhaps have been different.

In 1942 the Japanese threat increased in the Pacific. Dutch forces from Indonesia - then a Dutch colony called the Netherlands East Indies (NEI)- therefore formed an alliance with American, British and Australian forces (ABDA).

In anticipation of the Japanese occupation of the NEI at the end of February 1942, a major airlift of Dutch forces and civilians out of the NEI began. Broome, a beautiful small pearling town in the tropical northwest of Australia was chosen as a stopover port. Here, the flying boats refueled before the aircraft would fly on to safer places in Australia, such as Perth and Sydney. Broome was ideally situated for this purpose; it was both close to Java and able to host land-based aircraft as well as flying boats. For two weeks, it turned into the hub of allied air evacuation from Java. Between 7000 and 8000 passengers are believed to have passed through Broome on their way to the safety of Australia.

Although flights were discontinued after the Battle of the Java Sea on February 27, the escape route to Australia briefly re-opened on 2 March. As many people as possible were fitted into the 9 flying boats that set route for Broome, in a last attempt to transport people to the assumed safety of Australia. Among these evacuees were many widows and their children, who had only just lost their husbands and fathers in the Battle of the Java Sea. As they waited aboard the flying boats in Roebuck Bay - either to be transferred further south or to be ferried ashore - they were unaware of the imminent Japanese threat.

As the flying boats lay in the bay, on the morning of that March 3, Japanese aircraft arrived in Broome. What followed was a 20-minute massacre. Many of the people on the ground did not survive the air raid, dying trapped aboard the flying boats or while trying to swim ashore. Estimates are that at least 100 people died that tragic morning, of which 64 were Dutch civilians and military personnel.

Some of the victims could not be identified and still lie in unmarked graves. They had escaped the Japanese camps, only to die far away from their homeland.

March 3, 1942, also formed the stage for many selfless and remarkable acts of courage, however. Of the numerous accounts of people risking their own lives to save

others, Dutch ML-KNIL pilot First Lieutenant Gus Winckels' is one of the most well known in Australia. The young Lieutenant became famous for shooting down a Japanese Zero with a handheld machine gun from the ground during the Broome air raid, scorching his hand to the bone holding the red-hot gun. He made the only Japanese victim that day. Yet, this was not the end of it. After organizing the evacuation of Broome's surviving victims he flew back to Bandoeng to pick up more evacuees. Upon return, he flew another 29 hours to pick up remaining officers of the RAAF in then extremely dangerous Java, risking capture and death.

In spite of such courageous acts, for all of those who suffered losses and witnessed the horrendous events of that day, life would never be the same. Despite the eventual victory of WWII by the allied forces, the human toll for both our countries had been too high.

Today, 70 years after that fatal attack on Broome, we look back at a long and close partnership between Australia and the Netherlands. The ties between these partner countries were strengthened by their WWII alliance, as well as by the Broome tragedy.

Stories of the WWII days tell of close friendships between Australians and Dutch. We share many values, and there is much common ground and many similarities between the two peoples. This is one of the reasons that many Dutch chose to make Australia their new homeland after the war. I am proud to say that these unsung heroes became the cornerstone of the Dutch community still flourishing in Australia today.

As in those days when Australia and the Netherlands were comrades in war, today the Netherlands still looks at Australia as a valuable partner and close and trusted friend. We trust this bond will only increase in the future.

Students at Curtin University are among the few to be exposed to this tragic, but important piece of Australian-Dutch history. I am very pleased with the growing recognition of the significance of the Darwin air raid. It raises the awareness of

Japanese air raids in Australia, of which Broome was the second worst to be hit. It also keeps the stories of the victims of these air raids alive.

Again, I would like to thank those who made this exhibition possible, and you all for being here today. I hope that 'Broome 1942' will attract many visitors, and of course, I expect that it will prompt you all to start PhDs in the history of Australian-Dutch cooperation – All right, that might be slightly unrealistic. But people like Nonja Peters are incredibly important for the preservation of Dutch cultural heritage in Australia, and I can only hope that the students at Curtin University, as the next generation of researchers, experts, and leaders, will keep the history of Broome and its victims alive for Australia's next generations.

For the people who are interested, tomorrow there will be a commemoration service at the Karakkatta cemetery in Perth. On March 2 and 3 activities and a commemoration service are organized in Broome.

I hereby launch the exhibition.