

The 'Floating Dutchmen': The Netherlands Merchant Navy in the Pacific War

By Jack Ford

The Netherlands' greatest contribution to World War II was undoubtedly its merchant marine, and nowhere did this fleet have a more important role than in SWPA where the early part of General MacArthur's offensive against the Japanese was almost totally dependent upon the transportation services provided, in the main, by Dutch ships. Even after US sealift capabilities became more readily available, the Dutch ships continued to support Allied forces and to suffer losses of men and vessels. This article reminds readers of the role played by the Dutch, and of some of the issues that arose for Australia and the Allies from their involvement.

Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, thus triggering the start of World War II. Britain and France gave Germany an ultimatum that expired on 3 September and, as a result, Britain and the Commonwealth (including Australia) declared war. But the Netherlands maintained its tradition of neutrality that had saved it from the ravages of World War I. For the next ten months, the Dutch maintained strict neutrality but on 10 May 1940, Germany took no notice and invaded the Netherlands. The Dutch had not fought a major war since 1667 and their small army and navy were no match for the German forces that included paratroops and panzers. After five days of resistance, the Netherlands surrendered but not before the Dutch Royal Family was evacuated to Britain.

As only remnants of the Dutch Army and Royal Netherlands Navy (RNN) with their respective air services managed to escape to Britain, the largest contribution that the Dutch could still offer the Allied cause was its vast merchant navy. The Dutch estimated that they had 500 merchant ships and 15,000 crewmen available for the war effort after 14 May 1940.¹ This fleet serviced the Dutch Empire, particularly the numerous islands of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI, now Indonesia) plus the Dutch West Indies (Surinam and the Dutch Antilles of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao). On 10 May, 29 (two others scuttled) German merchantmen that had been sheltering in neutral NEI or West Indies ports were seized, with 161,232 tonnage added to the Dutch merchant marine.²

While many of the ships were small coasters suitable for inter-island traffic, there were also larger vessels of which the most important were the oil tankers belonging to Royal Dutch Shell. The shipping lines Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM) and Koninklijke Nederlandsche Stoomboot Mij (KNSM) also contributed a number of long-distance vessels. Control of Dutch shipping rested with a Government-in-Exile that was established in London under Prime Minister Dr D.J. de Geer. When de Geer returned to Occupied Holland in August 1940, Dr

Pieter Sjoerd Gerbrandy became the new Prime Minister in London. As KPM had facilities in the NEI, it transferred its head office to Java. It maintained subsidiary booking offices elsewhere. In Australia, KPM's Head Office was located at 'Paketvaart House', 255 George Street in Sydney. The General Manager was Anton Bakker who had joined KPM as a purser in 1912. In 1922, he came to Australia where he was appointed Assistant Manager. His wife Kathleen and two sons and two daughters also lived in Sydney.³

For the next 18 months, the Dutch merchant navy played a limited role in the war in Europe and the Middle East. The Indian Ocean was the main theatre in which the Dutch ships operated as they carried oil, rubber and other NEI raw materials to Britain. During this period, the main danger to the Dutch vessels came from German submarines and surface raiders. The Italians also sent two raiders (*Ramb I* and *Ramb II*) and the sloop *Eritrea* into the Indian Ocean but they were never a threat to the Dutch, as Italy had not declared war on Holland. *Ramb I* was making her way to the neutral NEI when the light cruiser HMS *Leander* sank her on 27 February 1941. The Germans would use Dutch markings to disguise their surface raiders to exploit the proliferation of Dutch vessels sailing the Indian Ocean. When the German raider *Kormoran* sank the light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* on 19 November 1941, *Kormoran* was able to draw the *Sydney* closer by disguising herself as the Dutch *Straat Malakka*.

Dutch ships were engaged in reinforcing the Middle East during 1941. The liner *Nieuw Amsterdam* was part of Convoy US9 which left Sydney on 4 February carrying Australian and New Zealand troops to Egypt. The convoy reached Bombay where the troops were transferred to other vessels including *Slamat* and *Westerland*. They reached Suez on 15 March. Subsequent convoys US10, US 11b and US12b also contained Dutch ships.⁴ Dutch ships served the British forces in the Mediterranean in the Greek and Cretan Campaigns (March to April). Due to Australia's small merchant fleet, Dutch ships carried Australian forces to Malaya. *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt*, *Marnix van St Aldegonode* and *Sibajak* delivered the Australian 27th Brigade to Singapore on 15 August 1941.

The most memorable contribution that Dutch merchantmen made to the war effort in 1941 was the conversion of the world's largest motorship *Oranje* (19,850 tons) to a hospital ship. In February 1941, the Gerbrandy Government offered to pay to convert the *Oranje* to a hospital ship to be used by Australia and New Zealand. This offer was accepted and she reached Sydney on 31 March where the conversion was completed. On 1 July *Oranje*, the world's fastest (speed of 26 knots) hospital ship, left Sydney for Suez in the Middle East where she took on board her first patients. Initially both her medical staff and crew were Dutch but, after the outbreak of the Pacific War in December, Dutch medical staff were needed in the NEI. Three medical staff and the ship's captain remained aboard to be joined by 140 Australians and New Zealanders.⁵ In May 1942, the Dutch had the British take over financial responsibility for maintaining *Oranje*. After the last Australian wounded were returned from the Middle East, Australia finally withdrew its staff in February 1943. She continued to serve New Zealand. *Oranje* completed 41 trips and carried 32,461 patients throughout the war.⁶

At the start of the Pacific War on 7/8 December 1941, the Japanese initially did not attack the NEI. Still, as a result of plans drawn up at the Singapore Conference (22-25 February 1941) Australian reinforcements were despatched to Ambon and Timor in the NEI. Again the Australians had to call on the Dutch to help with shipping and 'Gull Force' sailed for Ambon

on *Both*, *Patras* and *Valentijn* (2,071 tons) on 14 December. Throughout December 1941, KPM evacuated women and children from the outer Indies to the supposed safety of Java.

War reached the NEI on 24 December 1941 when the Japanese began bombing Tarakan, Dutch Borneo. While the Dutch had declared war on 8 December, the Japanese did not reciprocate until 12 January 1942, the day after they invaded Tarakan. But Dutch NEI forces had been actively engaged against the Japanese during the intervening 34 days, primarily in helping to defend Malaya and British Borneo. To assist in the defence of the NEI, a joint Allied command ABDA (American, British, Dutch and Australian) had been established in the NEI capital of Bandung on 10 January, but it was too little, too late. The NEI Campaign lasted until 8 March and in those 57 days the Dutch lost the vast majority of their defending troops, warships and aircraft. The Japanese did not escape lightly, losing 13 warships, 15 transport ships and 171 aircraft.⁷

Ferrying reinforcements and supplies between ports or evacuating essential personnel was the Dutch merchant navy's main contribution to the NEI Campaign. For example, a KPM ship delivered 203 NEI soldiers to Babo, Dutch New Guinea on 12 January 1942 and returned to Java with surplus private wireless sets for the NEI army.⁸ *Zaandam* brought bank drafts, police files and some NEI officials, led by Dr Jacob van Hoogstraten, to Fremantle in Australia on 6 March. The voyages did result in some losses, due mainly to Japanese bombing such as when *Sloet van de Beele* (2,997 tons) was sunk on 17 February while evacuating the garrison of Billiton Island. After the Allied failure in the Battle of the Java Sea (28 February), Dutch shipping began escaping from Java. Cilacap in south Java became the primary departure point until 4 March when a Japanese carrier raid devastated the port. From 3-7 March, 19 Dutch ships were lost at Cilacap.⁹ The majority were small vessels whose crews had deserted after the raid, or they did not have the range to reach safety and were scuttled. But the largest single Dutch merchantman loss (38,215 tons) occurred in the seas south of Java between 27 February and 4 March 1942. Allied losses in ships fleeing Java included eight Dutch ships sunk and three captured, including the converted hospital ship *Op ten Noort* (6,076 tons).¹⁰ The Dutch lost approximately 60,000 tons of merchantmen in the NEI Campaign. KPM lost 84 of its 140 ships.¹¹

Still, many ships did manage to reach either Western Australia or Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Fremantle was so full of Dutch evacuation ships that the Australian wharf labourers derisively called them 'The Flying Dutchmen'. Among the ships (and cargoes) that fled to Fremantle were: *Albekirk* (trains and US 7th and 19th Bombardment Group ground crew), *Boisevaan* (14,134 tons, gold), *General Verspyck* (evacuees), *Rhys* (gold), *Sloterdijk* (Dutch ex-motor torpedo boat crews), the steamers *Tavalië* (8,178 tons) and *Tjimanoeë* (5,628 tons, British Navy and merchant sailors) and *Zaandam* (government evacuees). *Tavalië* and *Tjimanoeë* rescued 69 survivors from *MMS 51* and *Anking* (both British) sunk south of Java on 4 March. The survivors lauded the *Tjimanoeë*'s (and presumably *Tavalië*'s) crew whose 'kindness and hospitality ... were beyond praise.'¹² An unusual cargo was 2,000 Japanese civilian internees guarded by 200 NEI soldiers who were put aboard *Cremer* and *Van Heemskerck* on 16 January. In Darwin, four small ships, *Griffioen*, *Harmsen* (30 tons), tankers *Soedoe* (210 tons) and *Minjak Tanab*, arrived in April and May with Australian soldiers who had escaped from Ambon, plus civilians and the Dutch garrison from Babo, Dutch New Guinea. The latter two were river motorboats of the oil company Nederlands Nieuw-Guinee Petroleum Maaatschappij (NNGPM), a Dutch Shell subsidiary. The small ship *Gloria* entered Merauke, Dutch New Guinea carrying similar cargo, as did *Arvadia* which reached Thursday Island, Queensland.

After the fall of the NEI, their merchant navy was the most significant surviving Dutch strategic asset. Dutch dissatisfaction with the poor level of assistance received from the other ABDA members had been growing during the final stages of the NEI Campaign. There was a fear that the Dutch may retain this resentment, which might lead to Dutch non-cooperation over the use of their merchant fleet. Thus in Australia the External (Foreign) Affairs Department released a paper 'Proposed Measures to offset Dutch Resentment at Allied Failure to Send Reinforcements' on 17 April 1942. As regards shipping, External Affairs recommended:

‘...Co-operation in control of shipping evacuated from the NEI – as little haggling as possible about conditions of charter etc. Dutch to be asked to share control of shipping in Australian waters e.g. by Dutch representative on the Shipping Board...’¹³

The first order of business was the disposal of ships' cargoes. The Dutch had already established a NEI Purchasing Commission based in Melbourne on 24 January 1942. It was superseded on 8 April by a NEI Commission led by Dr. van Hoogstraten. The new commission negotiated with the Australian Government over the purchase of these cargoes. Of particular interest were the military supplies destined for the NEI that had reached only as far as Australia before the surrender on Java. A priority was the 18 Vought Sikorsky Kingfisher seaplanes, 31 Douglas Boston light bombers and 17 Brewster Buffalo F2A fighters that were crated in Dutch holds. These planes were purchased and allocated to the Royal Australian Air Force. Non-military supplies, such as textiles and yarn or the two locomotives on the *Albekirk*, were also needed for Australia's hard-pressed war economy. It was not until 1 July 1942 that the Curtin Government ordered a full inventory of the cargoes still on Dutch ships, recognising that they might include 'goods and materials which were in short supply and could be used for munitions or for general supply purposes.'¹⁴

There were some cargoes that the Australians could not have. The NEI Gold Reserves of ten million guilders that had arrived on the *Rijs* on 21 January 1942 had been delivered straight to Australia's Treasury Department for safekeeping.¹⁵ More gold bullion delivered by *Boisveaan* on 24 February was transferred immediately to the Commonwealth Bank.

Surviving Dutch ships were allotted to an Allied shipping pool that was managed by the British Ministry of Transport. On 30 March, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff had created a new command structure for the Pacific Theatre. Australia and the NEI (except Sumatra) were allocated to the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) command led by US General Douglas MacArthur. Sumatra was put in Britain's South East Asia Command (SEAC). Dutch ships were also allocated to SEAC, the first losses occurring when three Dutch vessels were sunk during the Japanese carrier raid on Ceylon from 5-10 April 1942.¹⁶ *Planicus* (8,500 tons) was converted to a RNN Auxiliary submarine depot ship based at Ceylon. *Ophir* and *Melchoir Treub* were converted to hospital ships based at Bombay.

Dutch ships were allotted to the US forces in Australia and designated as United States Armed Transports (USAT). Some ships were unarmed and ten were refitted in Australia with naval guns manned by Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ratings. They were classified as Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS), with Australia outfitting a total of 47 Dutch vessels as DEMS.¹⁷ The situation created in the SWPA was unusual as the merchantmen were controlled by the US Army rather than by the US Navy. But this US control was not unchallenged by the Dutch. The Gerbrandy Government wanted negotiations over the use of Dutch ships to be

held in London with US Government representatives. The US Army in Australia wanted to charter the vessels immediately from the NEI Commission. This disagreement continued for months.

The Allied Consultative Shipping Council (ACSC), formed by the Australian War Cabinet on 10 March 1942, administered all shipping in the SWPA. Commander Gerlof Berthy Salm, the Dutch Naval Liaison Officer in Australia, attended the first ACSC meeting on 16 March. The Dutch were invited to appoint a representative to the ACSC and Mr van Diense from KPM was chosen. Salm would also attend meetings if Dutch naval matters were discussed. Salm stressed at the first ACSC meeting that the NEI Commission 'would run Dutch ships in the area, and would be in consultation with London regarding the chartering of such ships.'¹⁸ The British representative to the ACSC, Sir Thomas Gordon, supported the Gerbrandy Government in its demand that the chartering of Dutch ships be settled in London. But the NEI Commission's van Hoogstraten and Mr Wasserman, plus Mr Lammers from KPM, had already reached a shipping agreement with US Army representatives. The London Dutch did not want the NEI representatives in Australia to have such independence and so continued to press for further negotiations. Finally, it was announced at the ACSC meeting of 10 June 1942 that an agreement had been reached. The charter had been approved in London by the British Ministry of War Transport that had negotiated with the US War Shipping Administration that would then sub-charter the vessels to the US Army.

KPM was changed by these events. Its representative Lammers had pushed for ACSC support for creation of a KPM Liaison Officer position on General MacArthur's staff. While this did not eventuate, the ACSC did acknowledge the importance of the company by recommending that 'the KPM organisation should act as agents for Dutch vessels chartered to the US Army.'¹⁹ This included non-KPM vessels. Yet the war situation had also neutralised KPM business operations. With the US Army chartering all KPM ships operating in the SWPA, KPM had minimal control over its ships. With no assets to control in Australia, KPM effectively became a department of the NEI Commission. When the NEI Commission was formed in April 1942, its mandate included 'the welfare of the personnel of the Netherlands Merchant Marine'²⁰ and, with its particular expertise, KPM increasingly assumed this role for the NEI Commission.

Initially 21 Dutch ships were chartered for the SWPA.²¹ The US Army wanted three more ships of between 8,000 to 10,000 tons from the Dutch but only smaller vessels were available. So six more merchantmen (12,889 tons total) reached Australia in December 1942 and January 1943.²² Even before the June agreement had been reached, some Dutch vessels were working in Australian waters. On 30 March 1942, it was announced that a KPM ship had carried 3,500 tons of potatoes from Tasmania. In April, the *Serooskerke* had been part of the convoy that brought home Australia's 6th and 7th Divisions from the Middle East.

The delays in cargo disposal were affecting the use of the ships allotted to the SWPA. By 13 April 1942, there were still 8,500 tons in Sydney and 3,500 tons in Melbourne of loaded Dutch cargoes that prevented these ships from further use.²³ In one case, in April 1942, Sydney waterside workers refused to unload cement from a Dutch ship because of health concerns about cement dust. It was an example of the poisonous relations developing between the Communist-led Australian Watersider Workers' Union and the NEI Commission. The remaining Dutch cargoes were eventually cleared through the use of ships' crews and US Army troops.

There was further disruption when 2,000 Indonesian crewmen went on strike on 1 April 1942. The Indonesians did not like Australia's colder weather and demanded winter clothing plus equal pay with Australian seamen. This latter demand was blamed on the subversive influence that the 'wharfies' and the Australian Seamen's Union were having on the Indonesians. The Indonesians were only paid £2 per month while the Australians were paid £22 per month. After ships were scuttled in Java when Indonesian crews deserted due to Japanese bombing raids, the Dutch classified their seamen as military personnel subject to military law. The NEI Commission responded by placing 800 strikers in Sydney's Long Bay Gaol before moving them to internment camps at Loveday (South Australia) and Cowra (New South Wales), guarded by a scratch company of troops from the Koninkrijk Nederlandsch-Indische Leger (KNIL or Royal Netherlands-Indies Army). The negotiations of the Australian Seamen's Union with KPM to release the strikers stalled. While the Australian Government was embarrassed to see strikers imprisoned, it was also concerned that the granting of the pay demand of the Indonesians might cause problems with other non-white ship-crews in the SWPA. Everyone knew the critical importance of getting the crews back to work so the ships could contribute to the war effort. Still, the strike dragged on into August 1942 and the NEI Commission became increasingly concerned that the strikers were so enjoying camp life that 'it would be impossible to get them to return to work.'²⁴ So KPM granted the strikers their pay claim plus an 8-hour day and the Indonesians returned to their vessels. On 30 November 1942, Australia formally recognised a Dutch royal decree that Dutch merchant crews were subject to Dutch military law.

Accommodation for the Indonesians was more the problem of Australian racism. The NEI Commission found it difficult to rent hostels where their crews could spend their shore leave, with van Hoogstraten complaining that 'Suitable premises have been located in various places but each time difficulty was met with the owners or with the Municipal Council for the district on the grounds of the undesirability of coloured seamen...' He asked for the support of the Council (ACSC) in overcoming this prejudice.²⁵

The Australian Government's only assistance was to have the Dutch ships refitted with better sleeping and messing facilities. The medical needs of the crews was another NEI Commission responsibility. From 1942, the NEI Commission ran the Princess Juliana Hospital at Kent Street, Turrumurra, on Sydney's North Shore. The hospital was established so that its staff could be trained to deal with the special dietary and language needs of its Dutch or Indonesian patients.

Ship maintenance was another priority. Captain Hermanus Koning arrived from Ceylon on 18 August 1942 to be the maintenance superintendent. Repairs were primarily conducted at Sydney, Newcastle and Townsville. Koning operated from Townsville, as it was a forward base. He had about 25 mainly Indonesian staff and was joined by Mr Kroese in October 1942, by Third Mate J.V. van Noordene in January 1944 and later, by Mr I. Douwe.²⁶ As Sydney had the best dry-dock facilities, the NEI Commission based a Dutch Inspector of Navigation there. Commander Knollema (RNN Reserve) and Mr S.L. Vellenga were appointed as assistants on 13 April 1943. They were 'to issue, to cancel, to renew, in the name of the Netherlands Government, certificates of seaworthiness, safety certificates and radio certificates, and to grant dispensations where necessary.'²⁷

While the Dutch provided cruisers, destroyers, submarines, smaller warships, air squadrons and soldiers to the SWPA, the greatest Dutch contribution came from their merchantmen.



Captain H. Koning (standing second from left) and his maintenance staff at Townsville, 1944

Marie Briggs-Koning

These vessels provided a sea transport capability for MacArthur's troops and this was vital to the success of his planned offensive in New Guinea. As MacArthur's rival, US Admiral Ernest King, would not allot aircraft carriers to the SWPA, MacArthur improvised by constructing airfields and using the Dutch vessels to push his advance along the New Guinea coast.

The NEI islands in the Arafura Sea comprised three island groups - Kei with the main port of Toel; Tanimbar with the main ports of Saumlaki and Larat; and Aroe (Aru) with the main port of Dobo. The Dutch 'Plover Force' had garrisoned Dobo and Saumlaki, but the Japanese invaded Dobo on 30 July 1942 and Saumlaki on 31 July. In late July 1942, *Soedoe* was loaded with KNIL reinforcements for Saumlaki garrison but the Japanese attack on 30 July forestalled her sailing. The last of 'Plover Force' evacuated on 13 September.

The Dutch ships took reinforcements to threatened locations in the SWPA. Convoy 'ZK8' carried the Australian 14th Brigade to Port Moresby in Papua on 18 May 1942. The convoy was an all-Dutch affair comprising *Bantam*, *Bontekoe*, *Van Heemskerke* and *Van Heutsz* with the RNN light cruiser *Tromp* as one of its two escorts. MacArthur wanted a strategic airfield built at Milne Bay on Papua's south-eastern tip. *Bontekoe* and *Karsik* formed the first convoy to Milne Bay where they arrived on 25 June carrying construction gear, Australian troops and US engineers. The *Swartenbondt* delivered the first RAAF personnel to use the completed Milne Bay airfield. In early July, *Tasman* delivered the Australian 7th Brigade's vanguard to Port Moresby. On 11 July, *Tasman* sailed to Milne Bay from Port Moresby carrying an advance force of the 7th Brigade to garrison Milne Bay.

The Milne Bay trips were uneventful until the Japanese invaded Buna on Papua's north coast on 21 July and Milne Bay on 26 August 1942. Japanese warships and aircraft sought to prevent Allied reinforcements reaching the battle zones and so escorts more powerful than the usual small Australian corvettes were required. The destroyer HMAS *Arunta* escorted *Tasman* on a voyage to Milne Bay on 25 August but the ships returned to Port Moresby upon reports of Japanese cruisers seen nearby. *Tasman* returned to Milne Bay on 1 September and enemy aircraft attacked it the next day. On the night of 2 September, Japanese cruisers entered Milne Bay to evacuate their wounded and ignored *Tasman*. When on 5 September, Convoy Q2 comprising *s'Jacob*, *Anshun* (British), *Arunta* and the sloop HMAS *Swan* reached Milne Bay, the Japanese were not as distracted, for they sank *Anshun*. The Battle of Milne Bay, the first Japanese land defeat of the War, ended on 5 September 1942 with the final evacuation of Japanese troops. Dutch ships played an important role in the build-up of this Allied base and in its continued supply. *Japara* and *Van Heemskerck* delivered cargo to Milne Bay on 12 September and were protected from two nearby enemy destroyers by an escort of five Allied destroyers. *Van Heutsz* and four other merchantmen supplied Milne Bay on 17 September 1942.

The importance of the Dutch ships was repeated to a greater extent during the Buna battle that began on 29 October 1942. Allied troops attacking Buna had supply difficulties. Supplies were brought forward along the Kokoda Track by Papuan carriers or by transport aircraft to Dobodura airfield near Buna, but neither method could deliver large quantities. In mid-November, a system of convoys was organised to land supplies at Oro Bay close to the Buna frontline. Designated 'Lilliput' convoys, they were loaded in Australia, sailed to Port Moresby and then on to Milne Bay before being split into groups of two ships escorted by corvettes for the final run into Oro Bay. Only two merchantmen at a time could be sent, due to the limited facilities at Oro Bay.

Almost without exception the 'Lilliput' merchantmen were Dutch. They were *Balikpapan*, *Bantam*, *Bontekoe*, *Both*, *Janssens*, *Japara*, *Karsik*, *Maetsuycker*, *Patras*, *Reijnst*, *s'Jacob*, *Swartenbondt*, *Tasman*, *Thedens*, *Van den Bosch*, *Van Heutsz*, *Van Outboorn*, *Van Spilbergen* and *Van Swoll*. Only five other merchantmen participated in 'Lilliput.' These nineteen Dutch ships constituted the majority of the 27 Dutch vessels allotted to MacArthur.

The first 'Lilliput' convoy was largely a Dutch affair comprising *Maetsuycker*, *Cremer*, *Bontekoe*, *Japara*, *Bantam*, *Both*, *Balikpapan* plus *J.B. Ashe* and *Jesse Applegate* (Australian) escorted by *Arunta* and the corvettes HMA Ships *Ballarat* and *Katoomba*. The convoy left Townsville on 15 November and reached Milne Bay on 19 November. *Japara*, *Bantam* and *Balikpapan* were selected to trial the passage to Oro Bay, and *Japara* made the first successful run on 18 December. In the vital stage of 'Lilliput', (December 1942 to February 1943), twelve Dutch ships only were used. They delivered 2,400 fresh troops and 40,000 tons of badly needed supplies to the Buna Front.²⁸

During 'Lilliput', the US Government was sometimes critical of the performance of the Dutch ships. It took a dim view of the delays in getting some of these ships ready even though Australia's difficult waterside unions were often the cause. Secretary of the NEI Commission Jan van Holst Pellekaan requested Washington be informed by the ACSC that Dutch vessels were carrying 75% of all cargo taken to New Guinea.²⁹ Conditions on the ships were often makeshift. Australian soldiers aboard the *s'Jacob* described it as 'a mobile refrigerator ship and certainly no passenger vessel as far as comfort was concerned.'³⁰

Japanese air cover over Papua was a danger to the 'Lilliput' ships. The first convoy for 1943 comprised *Van Heutsz* escorted by *Katoomba*. On 9 January, *Van Heutsz* had reached Oro Bay where it was attacked by four Japanese dive-bombers. The planes scored a direct hit on No. 3 hold where aviation fuel and ammunition was stored, plus two near misses. The ship's electrician and quartermaster, together with a US soldier, were killed. On 18 March, nine enemy bombers sank *s'Jacob* off Oro Bay. She was carrying 72 passengers, the majority of whom were wounded in the air raid, while the ship's First Mate and four others died. Nine bombers attacked *Karsik* in the same area but she was undamaged. On 28 March, 18 Japanese bombers sank *Bantam* and *Masaya* (US) in Oro Bay. *Bantam* received seven bombs that killed seven crewmen and wounded many others, including Captain Mulleanaux, but not before the captain had organised his crew to fight the ship's fires and to move the vessel away from the jetty. *Bantam* grounded and became a total loss, and the Japanese lost only one aircraft in the raid. On 29 March, the wounded were transferred to *Van Outhoorn* for transport to Sydney's Princess Juliana Hospital.

The last Dutch loss during 'Lilliput' was on 14 April 1943 when *Van Heemskerck* was sunk in Oro Bay when nine enemy bombers attacked her together with *Van Outhoorn*, *Balikpapan* and *Gorgon* (British). *Van Heemskerck* was unloading when the raid began so twenty US soldiers with a jeep mounting a .50-calibre machine gun were hoisted on board to provide anti-aircraft cover. Two US soldiers were killed while seven US troops and ten crew were wounded in the raid. *Van Outhoorn* suffered two near misses that seriously damaged the hull, with eight crewmen dead and twelve crew and six US soldiers wounded. *Balikpapan* claimed two enemy bombers. The loss of three ships (total 8,225 tons) in just over a month alarmed the Dutch.

KPM Superintendent Captain Koning inspected *Van Outhoorn* at Oro Bay on 29 April 1943. He wrote a report that condemned the conditions under which the Dutch ships were forced to operate. He complained of there being 'little or no appliances to save ships in any New Guinea ports'; that there were 'no fire fighting appliances or salvage pumps to keep a ship afloat if she is hit'; that Milne and Oro Bays had 'no suitable tug-boat to assist ships' and this had contributed



KPM Line ship Van Oothorn

Collection of Bjorn Larsson

directly to *Bantam's* loss; and that some ships were 'sent from Port Moresby or Milne Bay to Oro Bay without [air] escort.'³¹ KPM sent an official protest to the Naval Officer-in-Charge at Port Moresby that resulted in the temporary suspension of Dutch voyages to Oro Bay. The captain and officers of *Bontekoe* refused to take their ship any further than Milne Bay. This dispute was quickly resolved, as the Dutch knew that their vessels were vital and Allied air cover had increased after the fall of Buna on 2 January 1943.

The Dutch tried to salvage their ships at Oro Bay. *Van Outboorn* was sent to Sydney for repairs but efforts to salvage *Bantam* failed. KPM sent salvage expert Captain Noorden to Oro Bay in May 1943 and he confirmed to Lammers of the ACSC that the ship could be saved rather than leaving her as a coal hulk in Milne Bay as the Australians wanted. Within a year, *Bantam* was raised and towed to Sydney. After it was found that it would cost nearly £40,000 to refit the ship, the NEI Commission handed it over to the RAN for use as target practice in 1944.³²

Australia was approached to replace the Dutch shipping losses. Dr. H.J. van Mook, Gerbrandy's Minister of Colonies, had requested this in a letter of 3 December 1942. He inquired whether the fleet could be rebuilt in Australia given 'the enormous losses of the KPM fleet during operations in the Netherlands Indies (60% of the fleet) and since then, especially in Australian waters.'³³ Van Mook required 2,000-ton ships suitable for use in NEI coastal waters during and after the War. As an incentive for Australian support, van Mook stressed that not only were a considerable number of ships to be built in Australia but also that they would be used to carry the increased post-war trade between the two countries. On 2 May 1943, the Australian Government finally replied, making it clear that Australia was interested in the Dutch proposal due to its benefits to local industry and trade, but that Australian shipyards were too busy with war work to handle building ships for KPM. Australia's inability to meet the immediate need for new Dutch ships was to have future repercussions. During discussions on post-war issues held in Melbourne on 3 December 1944 between NEI and Australian officials, the Dutch made it known that they had changed their minds and intended to have the wartime losses in merchantmen replaced in British, rather than Australian, shipyards. The main Australian argument - that the Dutch had a strategic interest in seeing that Australian shipyards developed post-war to serve Asia - had been unconvincing.

On 14 May 1943, twenty bombers attacked *Reijnt* and *Thedens* in one of the last 'Lilliput' convoys to Oro Bay, but the ships were unscathed and the Japanese lost seven aircraft. 'Lilliput' ran until June 1943 and, in its entirety, comprised 39 convoys run in 40 separate stages with the delivery of 3,802 reinforcements and 60,000 tons of supplies, most of which arrived on Dutch ships.³⁴ The Dutch role in 'Lilliput' was vital. Two special missions illustrate this importance.

In December 1942, with Australian and US forces stalled at Buna, tanks were needed to break the Japanese defences but there were no landing craft suitable in the SWPA for delivering tanks. The solution was to use *Karsik*, as she had been a train ferry at Batavia and could load and unload the tanks, whereas earlier attempts using other vessels had resulted in the tanks sinking upon unloading. *Karsik* left Port Moresby on 8 December carrying four tanks from the Australian 2/6th Armoured Regiment and delivered them to Oro Bay on 11 December. Pleased with this success, the Allies required *Karsik* plus *Japara* to bring another four tanks to Oro Bay on 16 December in Convoy 'Tramsik'. The arrival of the tanks at Buna enabled the Australians to penetrate the Japanese defences on 18-19 December 1942, which helped improve the sagging morale of the Allied troops. The other special mission was as part of 'Operation Accountant' in

February 1943. *Bontekoe*, *Karsik* and *Van Heemskerck* carried the US 162nd Infantry Regiment from Australia directly to Oro Bay. This regiment was the vanguard of the US 41st Division and it relieved the exhausted US 32nd Division, stalled outside Buna. The Dutch ships delivered 3,200 fresh US troops to Buna from 21 February to 4 March 1943.³⁵

Australia and the US recognised the valuable service given by the Dutch ships to MacArthur's first offensive in the SWPA. Tributes are paid in both nations' official war histories. The Australian naval history states that:

LILLIPUT itself remained a monument to the fine service of the Dutch ships which, almost without exception, constituted its transport side. Their contribution was invaluable and during the period of LILLIPUT they were irreplaceable. But the strain of the air attacks, and the loss of three of the ships were telling, particularly on their native crews....³⁶

The US naval history of the Buna Campaign also praises the Dutch ships:

‘Of 2,500 to 4,500 tons burthen, they were officered by outstanding Dutch seamen, and were manned by the most part by Javanese - whose stoical and fatalistic attitude towards air attacks made for reliable crews...Nobody slept on these voyages. At night the ships snaked through the reefs. By day they dodged Japanese bombs and strafing bullets. On 16-17th November, 1942, four ships sank under bombing attack, the supply line interrupted, and a planned advance by the 32nd Division was delayed three weeks.’³⁷

Apart from ‘Lilliput’, the Dutch vessels of the SWPA conducted other tasks. On 4 September 1942, *Van der Lijn* was damaged in a collision with *Perthshire* at Townsville while in a convoy that included *Cremer* and *Van Heutsz*. On 26 April 1943, *Reijnt* was part of Convoy ‘GP48’ off Sydney where a Japanese submarine sank *Limerick* (British). An important contribution was made by *Tasman*, which was converted into a hospital ship on loan to the new US 7th Fleet. She joined the fleet on 19 June 1943. *Cremer* was lost on a reef off St. Bess Island near Mackay on 9 September and *General Verspijck* delivered US Army cargo to Milne Bay on 13 November 1943.

Dutch ships not allotted to the SWPA also served in the Far East. On 25 July 1942, the Japanese submarine *I-169* sank *Tjinegara* (9,227 tons) sailing from Newcastle (NSW) to Noumea. *Tjimanoeck*, *Serooskerck*, *Madoera*, *Tjisadane* and *Klippfontein* visited the SWPA between 26 May and 4 October 1942. *Tarakan* (8,183 tons) was part of Convoy ‘OWI’ carrying oil refinery equipment across the Indian Ocean to Abadan in the Persian Gulf, when, on 28 November 1942, the convoy encountered the German Navy auxiliary *Ramses*. The convoy’s escorts, which included the RNN anti-aircraft cruiser *Jacob Van Heemskerck*, sank *Ramses*. The Japanese submarine *RO-103* sank *Aludra* near Guadalcanal on 23 June 1943. *Straat Malakka* and the liner *Nieuw Amsterdam* visited Australia occasionally during 1942-44. *Straat Malakka*, a DEMS, had four Oerlikon guns added in Melbourne on 18 June 1942. *Nieuw Amsterdam* brought Italian internees to New Zealand in 1942.

With the NEI oilfields enemy-occupied, oil from the Middle East for the SWPA was often carried across the Indian Ocean by Dutch tankers. The tankers belonging to either Royal Dutch Shell, Petroleum Maatschappij La Corona, or NV Nederlandsche-Indische Tankstoomboot Maatschappij were particular enemy targets. The tanker *Genota* (7,987 tons), having delivered oil to Geraldton (Western Australia) was captured and sent to Singapore by the Japanese surface

raiders *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru* on 9 May 1942. On 14 June, the German surface raider *Thor* sank the tanker *Olivia* (6,307 tons). The tanker *Gadila* also plied the Indian Ocean. It was in this ocean, a shared SWPA and SEAC responsibility, that the Dutch merchant navy achieved a spectacular military feat.

The tanker *Ondina*, escorted by the Indian corvette *Bengal*, left Fremantle on 5 November 1942 en route to Diego Garcia and Abadan. On 11 November, *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru* attacked the ships some 1,400 miles northwest of Fremantle. The odds were in the Japanese favour as *Hokoku Maru* (10,438 tons) and *Aikoku Maru* (10,437 tons) carried sixteen 140 mm (5.5 inch) guns, eight torpedo tubes plus four aircraft, compared to the 3-inch gun of *Bengal* (650 tons) and the DEMS 4-inch gun of *Ondina* (6,431 tons). The DEMS gun crew comprised three Royal Artillery gunners and five RNN gunners commanded by Able Seaman B.A.G. Hammond RAN Reserve (RANR). *Bengal* signalled *Ondina* to escape independently while the corvette positioned itself between the tanker and the enemy. Captain William Horsman of *Ondina* ignored the order and joined *Bengal* in firing on the *Hokoku Maru*. *Ondina* scored first, a direct hit on the aft of *Hokoku Maru* causing 'a violent explosion and throwing the debris of the two planes housed on the after deck into the air, and a fierce fire resulted.'³⁸

Aikoku Maru had stood aside, assuming that *Hokoku Maru* could handle two vulnerable ships but then she began to attack *Bengal*. *Hokoku Maru* concentrated its starboard guns on *Bengal* and port guns on *Ondina*, wrecking the tanker's topmasts and main aerials. *Ondina* obtained five more hits in rapid succession on the raider's bridge, midship superstructure and stern. The resultant explosion blew off the stern of *Hokoku Maru* and she sank. *Bengal* was afire from two direct hits and had but five shells left. The corvette laid a smoke screen to assist *Ondina* to escape and, believing that the tanker was withdrawing, sailed for Colombo. Horsman's last sighting of *Bengal* was of her afire and heading into the smoke screen. Out of ammunition and believing *Bengal* was sinking, Horsman signalled surrender to the Japanese, but *Aikoku Maru* scored six more hits on the tanker. The last hit killed Horsman on the bridge and destroyed the starboard midship lifeboat. The 56 crewmen boarded the remaining three lifeboats and two life rafts to wait capture, while the raider continued firing on *Ondina* and launched two torpedoes that blew large holes below the waterline. The tanker began to list to starboard. *Aikoku Maru* machine-gunned the survivors in the water, killing the Dutch Chief Engineer and two Chinese crewmen. *Aikoku Maru* shelled the tanker's starboard bow twice more before heading to rescue the *Hokoku Maru* survivors, and then fired a third torpedo at *Ondina*, which missed, before sailing away.

Once it was clear that the enemy were not returning, Second Officer Bakker, Third Engineer Leys, Hammond, Gunner Ryan (RA) and three Chinese reboarded *Ondina* to assess the damage. The engines worked. After flooding the port tanks to correct the ship's list, the crew were ordered aboard to extinguish a forecandle fire. *Ondina* then raised steam for Australia and she limped into Fremantle on 18 November 1942.

Hammond was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal and the Netherlands Bronze Medal. Captain Horsman received a posthumous award. Special recognition was also sought for Bakker, Leys and Quartermaster Ah Kong who was at the helm during the action. The owners, Royal Dutch Shell, granted the Chinese crew a cash bonus on 28 January 1943. The company wanted to publish this story in its *Shell Magazine* and *Shell House Journal*, but the official censor restricted it to writing on the entertainment provided to *Ondina*'s crew by the company's

Fremantle representatives. Specifically the articles were not to mention the shallow draft of Japanese torpedoes lest this intelligence reach enemy agents.

Despite this remarkable Allied victory, there was some minor controversy. The tanker's Acting Captain M.J. Rehwinkel accused *Bengal* of abandoning *Ondina* to the Japanese, and his Chinese crew of cowardice. RAN authorities, after interviewing all survivors, concluded that Rehwinkel was an unreliable witness. It was thought that Rehwinkel had influenced Hammond to make little mention of *Bengal* in his own report. *Bengal* was exonerated. The RAN reported that it had:

‘... interrogated the Acting Master M.J. Rehwinkel first, who was in an excited condition... This man's subsequent actions showed that he was extremely jealous of the other Officers and Engineers for the leading part they had played and his attitude towards the Chinese crew when he asked for a guard to be placed on board from a Dutch Warship in port with instructions to shoot any Chinaman attempting to go on shore and also his attitude towards the Second Officer showed that no reliance could be placed on his account of the action. This is also ... the opinion of the Agents - The Shell Company.’³⁹

After Shell had sent Mr D. Erskine and Mr J. Browning to inspect the damage, the company decided that *Ondina* was no longer viable as a tanker, and she became a RNN submarine depot ship at Fremantle and later at Exmouth Gulf (WA). On 1 September 1943, the Operation ‘Jaywick’ raiding party in MV *Krait* drew supplies from *Ondina* before proceeding on to its famous Singapore raid. The Allied commandoes noted that the ship still had a ‘hole in her side ... as big as a large room - big enough to hold a twelve foot shark.’⁴⁰

Merauke was the last NEI town unoccupied by the Japanese, and the Dutch devoted much of their remaining resources to hold Merauke. A KNIL heavy weapons company plus three RNN minesweepers were sent as an initial garrison. The small ships *Griffoen*, *Soedoe* and *Minjak Tanab* maintained a regular supply run from Darwin. *Van Heemskerke* delivered larger cargo and in an air raid on Merauke on 27 December 1942, the ship was severely damaged, losing three crew killed and four wounded. The damage kept *Van Heemskerke* in a Brisbane dry dock until May 1943. The Dutch finally convinced MacArthur of the importance of Merauke as an airbase and, on 6 May 1943 in Operation ‘Moultrie’, he ordered the Australian 11th Brigade to Merauke, transported on the *Balikapapan*, *Both*, *Van der Lijn*, *Japara*, *Janssens* and *Karsik*. Merauke's small wharf could not handle multiple large ships, so the Dutch were asked to send the small ships *Lily*, *Cootje* and *Kamphen* to help unload the larger vessels. On 31 May *Lily* and *Cootje* were sent to Australia for an overhaul, which again slowed unloading, and the last reinforcements reached Merauke on 4 July 1943. The development of Merauke's airstrip drew the attention of the Japanese and, apart from frequent air raids on Merauke, the enemy targeted shipping supplying the base. On 26 June 1943 Japanese bombers attacked *Harmsen* in the Torres Strait but she escaped major damage.

In May 1943, *Both* was earmarked for the controversial transfer of Indonesian political prisoners from Tanah Merah internment camp in Dutch New Guinea to Australia. Some of the prisoners had participated in the 1927 Nationalist Uprising in the NEI. Many were communists. The Australian Government was disconcerted by the prospect of hosting a prison camp for people interned for their political beliefs. The *Both* voyage was cancelled and a Dutch Catalina undertook the evacuation instead. It took 11 flights from 27 May to 6 June 1943 to deliver the internees and some civilian evacuees to Horn Island, Queensland. The internees were put

aboard a ship (possibly *Both*) for their final destination of Sydney where they were unloaded and sent to camps at Liverpool and Cowra in NSW. They got word of their plight to the powerful waterfront unions which lobbied for the internee's release. This issue only increased the anti-Dutch feelings of the Australian union movement.

By 1944, six additional Dutch merchantmen, including three new vessels, were allotted to the SWPA to offset the losses suffered in the 1942/43 Papuan Campaign.⁴¹ One was a pre-war KPM ship, while two of the older vessels belonged to KNSM. The three newer ships were built in Portland, Oregon in 1943-44 for KPM, and were lent to the US Army in the SWPA for the war's duration. The six ships joined the other 20 surviving Dutch vessels in assisting MacArthur's offensive in New Guinea. In January 1944, *Van der Lijn* transported the RAAF personnel from No. 21 and No. 23 Squadrons from Brisbane to Nazab, New Guinea. The small tanker *Minjak Tanah*, now converted to a RNN stores ship, grounded on Thrush Reef off Cape Grenville on 19 July 1944, and it took five days to free the ship, which continued to Brisbane. On 26 July *Japara*, en route from San Francisco to Milne Bay, collided with *Francis A. Wardwell* and, after making temporary repairs, she returned to the USA.

Japanese atrocities made the Indian Ocean convoy routes particularly dangerous in 1944. *Tjisalak* (5,787 tons) left Melbourne on 7 March 1944 and was sunk in the Indian Ocean by the Japanese submarine *I-18* on 26 March. The Japanese massacred any survivors found in lifeboats, and took prisoner only five crew, four Dutchmen and one Indonesian. In comparison, *Straat Soenda* (8,300 tons) made two unchallenged voyages across the Indian Ocean around the time of *Tjisalak*'s loss. On 3 March 1944, *Straat Soenda* picked up eight survivors of the British ship *Ascot* that on 29 February had suffered a similar fate to *Tjisalak*. After she delivered the *Ascot* survivors to Sydney on 17 April 1944, their horror story gave an indication of *Tjisalak*'s fate. *Straat Soenda* left Fremantle for Colombo on 26 May. The Holland-Australia Line vessel *Saparoa* was involved in an incident that did nothing for Dutch/French relations. *Saparoa*, a freighter with limited accommodation, was asked to give passage to two French soldiers. The captain refused, claiming that only officers could be given ship's accommodation. *Saparoa* left Fremantle for Mombassa on 18 June 1944 without the soldiers and the French sought compensation from the Dutch for the cost of flying their troops to Fremantle to catch *Saparoa*.⁴² *Meerkerke* (7,995 tons) departed Fremantle on 1 July 1944, carrying ten British, Indian and Australian servicemen to Ceylon, while *Tjibadak* left Melbourne on 25 June 1945 with 23 Australian officers, two Indian Army officers and six civilians bound for India.

Other Dutch vessels were employed on runs between Australia and New Zealand. *Straat Malakka* sailed from Melbourne to Wellington on 22 June 1944 with ten civilians and *Thekens* sailed from Newcastle for New Zealand with 13 New Zealand servicemen on 29 June 1944. *Bontekoe* left Sydney carrying 110 New Zealand servicemen on 6 August 1944.

The first liberation of NEI territory was MacArthur's drive along the northern Dutch New Guinea coastline (22 April-30 July 1944). Dutch assistance was limited to diversionary raids on Timor, the Arafura Sea islands and southern Dutch New Guinea by the Mitchell bombers of No. 18 (NEI) Squadron and by intelligence and security patrols by the Netherlands East Indies Intelligence Service (NEFIS) and the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA) units. Often these patrols were carried on small Indonesian fishing boats (*praus*) or Papuan outriggers. Other Dutch vessels assisted in the five major seaborne invasions that constituted this campaign. These included *Maetsuycker* at Hollandia at the start of the campaign, while the

hospital ship *Tasman* was at Sausapor at the campaign's end. On 31 August 1944, *Tasman* took aboard some of the 504 Allied casualties that were suffering from battle fatigue, scrub typhus and other tropical diseases.⁴³ The role of the Dutch merchant marine in the first recapture of NEI territory was lauded by the exiled Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in her radio broadcast on 10 May 1944: 'Honour to those ...on our merchant ships and in the air, and now also shoulder to shoulder also with our allies for the liberation of New Guinea...'⁴⁴

MacArthur's next offensive was directed against Morotai Island at the tip of Halmahera in the NEI. On 15 September the US 31st Division assaulted Morotai, which became a major base for MacArthur's promised return to the Philippines that began with the invasion of Leyte on 20 October 1944. In November, two more small parts of the NEI were liberated when the Asia and Mapia Island Groups, 100 miles northwest and 160 miles northeast respectively of Sausapor, were captured by the US 31st Division for radar station sites. One Dutch ship was lost during the Philippines campaign. On 25 December, *Sommelsdijk* (9,227 tons) was hit by a Japanese torpedo-bomber while unloading US Navy stores at Guuan Harbour, Leyte. Her cargo caught fire and, despite rescue efforts by the corvette HMAS *Gascoyne*, *Sommelsdijk* was a total loss by the next day, suffering 70 casualties.⁴⁵ *Janssens*, *Maetsuycker* and *Tasman* also served at Leyte.

Dutch ships were still primarily used to support the Australian mopping-up campaigns in New Guinea, New Britain and Bougainville. *Van der Lijn* ran aground at Siador, New Guinea on 4 September, and two Australian tugs had to tow her to Milne Bay for repairs. *Swartenbondt* brought the Australian 36th Battalion to Cape Hoskins, New Britain on 8 October, but this voyage was not a success for Dutch/Australian relations. The soldiers complained bitterly that the ship's cramped and filthy accommodation had forced them to undertake a major clean-up of the vessel. The Australian authorities at Finschhafen had given the captain of *Swartenbondt* charts to take the ship only as far as Talasea as it was thought too dangerous to send an unescorted ship to Cape Hoskins. *Swartenbondt* nearly struck a reef and her captain had to be talked into using army maps to continue to Cape Hoskins.⁴⁶

As MacArthur had most of the US air squadrons engaged in the Philippines campaign, the Australians were having difficulty gaining air support for their operations. On 11 December 1944 RAAF Headquarters informed the Dutch that No 18 and No 2 (NEI) Squadrons were to transfer to Jacquinot Bay, New Britain to support the Australian 5th Division's drive on Rabaul. No. 18 Squadron's advance party flew to the Bay on 7 March 1945 with a third echelon of 84 personnel sailing on *Bontekoe* on 21 April. *Bontekoe* was also used to transport No. 120 Squadron to the Bay.⁴⁷ On 12 April, the squadron's equipment and personnel were loaded at Merauke, but on reaching Jacquinot Bay on 9 May, the Squadron found that plans had changed. From 21 May to 8 June 1945, No. 120 Squadron's personnel were aboard *Bontekoe* headed for the forward airbase at Biak, Dutch New Guinea.

As the war entered its sixth year, the Dutch were finding it increasingly difficult to replace shipping losses and to keep their ships crewed due to attrition in personnel caused by death and disease. The colder climate in the southern parts of Australia affected the health of the Indonesian crews, while those NEI citizens, who were liberated in the 1944 Dutch New Guinea and Morotai campaigns, were suffering from Japanese ill treatment and so required a recovery period that prevented their immediate use by the Dutch. Every effort was made to find vessels and keep them sailing.

During 1944-45, the Dutch even resorted to abducting fishermen to find crews for their ships. To discourage Indonesian collaboration with the enemy, and with the Japanese also using *praus*, Allied submarines attacked all *praus* and captured their crews. These poor unfortunates were either taken to Ceylon, Darwin or Fremantle where they were interrogated by NEFIS. These new 'recruits' were then sent to Melbourne for training on the RNN minesweeper *Abraham Crijnsen*. Nine *praus* and the merchantman *Akegata Maru* surrendered their crews in this way.⁴⁸

On 24 January 1945, the Netherlands Legation in Canberra informed Australia that, due to the Dutch merchant fleet's heavy losses, it was proposing a temporary amendment to the 1929 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea. This Convention had specified that a ship be classified as a passenger vessel if it carried more than 12 passengers; this then set standards as regards the number of lifeboats to be carried. The Dutch suggested that, as some of their smaller ships were being used for US and Australian troop transports, these vessels contravened the Convention. To skirt the legal liability question if there were deaths resulting from insufficient lifeboats if one of these ships sank, the Dutch proposed to cover themselves by having Dutch Shipping Inspectors issue certificates which specified the number of passengers to be carried on each voyage. Australia immediately approved the Dutch inspection certificate system for use on Dutch ships using Australian ports.⁴⁹

Dutch efforts to obtain small craft to meet coastal shipping requirements for the liberated parts of the NEI met with little success. In April 1944, the American Henry J. Kaiser Company announced that it would build 30 coastal cargo vessels for use in Dutch war operations and for the transport of relief supplies.⁵⁰ Construction was to commence in early 1945. The ships were to be paid for in cash rather than through Reciprocal Lend Lease (RLL). But they were never built, presumably due to the unavailability of construction materials. A similar fate befell Dutch efforts to have wooden barges built in Australia in 1945. The Australian Government used its Washington Legation to thwart the procurement of US lumber for the construction of the barges. It was felt that the Dutch should not get the wood via RLL as it was to be used for civil and not military purposes. It was also thought improper to allow the Dutch to import wood into Australia to meet NEI civilian needs when the Australian domestic building market was already suffering from a timber shortage. Still, the Australians did concede that such reasons 'may savour of quibbling.'⁵¹

Morotai was utilised by the Dutch for boatbuilding. In early 1945, a NEFIS and Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) operation sent the 'Giraffe' party to Tahoelandang Island situated between Halmahera and Mindanao. Led by Lieutenant Brunnings (NEFIS) and Captain Trappes-Lomax (AIB), 'Giraffe' aimed to recruit local Sangirese boat-builders who would be taken to Morotai to make *praus*. 'Giraffe' recruited eight shipwrights who constructed boats for NEFIS patrols and to meet local needs such as for fishing boats.⁵² NEFIS learnt from this experience and before NEFIS occupied Damar Island on 12 June 1945, a ketch was bought for servicing the island's population.

Sibigo was the last Dutch ship to be lost during the Pacific War. She left Townsville for Langemak on 13 March 1945 and had a steering breakdown in the Coral Sea on 15 March. *Thebedens* was nearby so it moved to assist. *Sibigo's* captain radioed that minor repairs had been made and his ship would proceed under her own steam. The next day, the Naval Officer-in-Charge at Townsville tried to radio *Sibigo* to offer *Both* for assistance, but a cyclone had sunk her on 16 March. On 22 March, searching aircraft and *Van Heutsz* found 13 survivors. The



The last Dutch loss of the Pacific War, Sibigo c1945

Australian Government recommended Able Seaman Jack Stuart Murray (RANR) of *Sibigo* for a posthumous Royal Humane Society of Australasia medal, for his actions in trying to rescue provisions that had been dropped by a plane near one of the survivors' rafts on 21 March.⁵³

Tasman remained a US hospital ship for 21 months until 20 March 1945 when she retired to undergo a major refit. *Maetsnycker* was converted to a US 7th Fleet hospital ship by February 1944, serving in Dutch New Guinea before entering Australian waters on 5 January 1945.⁵⁴ The Dutch dispatched another hospital ship, *Tjitjalengka*, (10,792 tons) from Europe in April 1945 to assist in the Philippines.

The war in Europe ended on 8 May 1945. Italy had previously surrendered on 8 September 1943 but the German occupation of the country kept it as a war zone until May 1945. *Nieuw Amsterdam* had been repatriating Italian prisoners of war from Australia and New Zealand to liberated parts of Italy during 1944-45 and the hospital ship *Oranje* left for Australia on 10 July 1945 with 35 Australians released from European POW camps.

With the Netherlands liberated, the Dutch planned to raise an army of 30,000 troops to be sent to Australia to retake the NEI. The Dutch had difficulty getting troops to the SWPA due to existing shipping shortages. In May 1945, they asked the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff for the use of six Dutch ships to transport the new army to Australia. But it was the Allied shipping pools, particularly the British Ministry of War Transport, that controlled Dutch ships. During March to May, the US Army in the SWPA returned control of all its Dutch vessels to the British Ministry and in May, the British Ministry allocated *Van Outhoorn*, *Van Swoll*, *Pabud*, *Karsik*, *Japara*, *General Verspijck*, *Stagen*, *Van Spilbergen*, *Thedens* and *Van den Bosch* to the Australian Shipping Control Board, while the Dutch were unable to get access to even one vessel.⁵⁵ At the United Nations Plenary Conference in San Francisco (25 April to 26 June 1945), the Dutch discovered that the British were stalling over the ships' use, as they wanted the Dutch ships to transport British reinforcements to the SEAC.⁵⁶ Intense diplomatic pressure was then placed on the US Government for the release of the ships and on 13 July the Dutch Foreign Minister met with the US Secretary of State to discuss the issue. They met again just prior to the commencement of the Potsdam Conference on 17 July but the issue remained unresolved.

As the war approached its conclusion, Australian unions agitated for better pay and conditions to be secured in preparation for peacetime. Industrial unrest spread on the waterfront to Indonesian seamen with the encouragement of the Australian Seamen's Union. In May 1945, KPM announced the deferment of Notice No. 62 which stated that this standard seaman pay entitlement would be held over by KPM, pending an examination of whether individual Indonesians had given continuous and satisfactory service. The result was that some Indonesian crewmen went on strike to protest this deferred pay decision. By July, the Dutch had had enough and arrested two of the strike leaders, Petty Officers M. Soeprapto and W. Pande Iroot. They were to be deported to the Tanah Merah internment camp. Both were influential Indonesian nationalists through being on the executive of Sydney's Indonesian Club. The Australian union movement supported the nationalists so pressure was brought to bear on the Australian Government to prevent the deportation but to no avail. The Australian Government's view was that the two Indonesians could remain in Australia if they had certificates guaranteeing their employment. But as the seamen 'refused to return to sea when required by their employer' and then 'their certificates of exemption expired,' they should be deported.⁵⁷

The final months of the Pacific War saw the Dutch engaged in a series of operations codenamed 'Oboe' that aimed to liberate more NEI territory. On 1 May 1945, the Australian 26th Brigade and a NICA unit attacked Tarakan, Borneo. Nearby Sedau Island was captured on 30 April. The Dutch contribution to the invasion fleet was *Balikipapan*, the hospital ship *Maetsuycker* plus the KNIL 1st company (140 men), a NEFIS Intelligence Officer and a NEFIS field interrogation unit. On 1 July 1945, the Australian 7th Division and attached NEI units (KNIL 2nd Company, a 'Large' NICA unit, and enlarged NEFIS unit) assaulted Balikpapan. The invasion fleet included the RNN cruiser *Tromp*, the merchantman *Tasman* and *Maetsuycker*.

Japan agreed to surrender on 14 August 1945 and MacArthur ordered that no Japanese surrenders be taken anywhere else until the official ceremony in Tokyo Bay. The hospital ship *Tjitjalengka* was at Tokyo Bay on 2 September and on 11 September *Van den Bosch* carrying an Australian occupation force and escorted by the RNN minesweeper *Abraham Crijnsen* observed the Japanese surrender at Koepang, Timor.

The most important contribution made by the Dutch to the SWPA came from their merchant marine. Thirty-three Dutch merchantmen were allotted to the SWPA, while other Dutch vessels served in SEAC and the South Pacific. The dangers faced are reflected in the loss of fourteen ships. The merchantmen performed a vital transport role in the SWPA, carrying supplies to the troops in Papua at a time when overland and air supply lines were totally inadequate. These coastal vessels were General MacArthur's substitute landing ships, helping him to his first victories in the Pacific War.

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¹ Lieutenant Commander A Kroese, *The Dutch Navy at War*, (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1945), 13.

² Kroese, *The Dutch Navy at War*, 16

³ Joseph A Alexander, *Who's Who in Australia XI edition*, (Melbourne: The Herald and Weekly Times Ltd, 1941), 91

⁴ G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1985), 434. 'US 10' included *Nieuw Amsterdam*, 'US11b' included *Sibajak, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Marnix van St. Aldegonde*, 'US12b' included *Marnix van St. Aldegonde, Sibajak, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt*.

⁵ National Archives file, Series A1608/1, Item C61/2/5. War Section hospital ship *Oranje*, Department of the Army Secretary to Prime Ministers Department Secretary, memorandum 12 April 1943. The four: Ship's Captain Potjer, O-i-C of the Hospital Colonel Gerrards, Dr. Brandon, Major Sydewint

⁶ Walter Kudrycz, Nick Fletcher, Sarah Cowan, 'Allies in Adversity', *Wartime* 34 (2006), 30

⁷ Ford, *Allies in a Bind*, 48

⁸ Johan Fabricius, *East Indies Episode: Shell War Achievements (3)*, (London: The Shell Petroleum Company, 1951), 72

⁹ David A Thomas, *Japan's War at Sea*, (London: Andre Deutsche, 1978), 205-206. Dutch merchantmen losses at Tjilatjap: *Manipi, Kidoel, Rokan, Pasir, Tobiti, Barentz, Sipora, Mandar, Dajak, Ajeb, Sipirok, Reteb, Mampava, Makian, Rengat, Nias, Kampar, Asaban, Alfoer*

¹⁰ Thomas, *Japan's War at Sea*, 205. Sunk: *Toradju* (981 tons), *Modjokerto* (8,806 tons), *Tomobon* (983 tons), *Sigli* (1,579 tons), *Bintoeban* (1,021 tons), *Parigi* (1,172 tons), *Siantar* (8,667 tons), *Merkus* (865 tons); captured: *Tjisaroea* (7,089 tons), *Duymaer van Twist* (1,030 tons). *Rooseboom* was sunk in the Indian Ocean carrying evacuees from Padang, Sumatra

¹¹ Marie Briggs-Koning, *Footsteps in Memories ...*, (Launceston; Marken, 1999), 186.

¹² G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942*, (Canberra; Australian War Memorial, 1985), 631

¹³ National Archives file, Series A981, Item NEI 15, Part 2, NEI Defence General, External Affairs Department, *Proposed Measures to offset Dutch Resentment at Allied Failure to Send Reinforcements* 17 April 1942.

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- ¹⁴ National Archives file, Series A2680/1, Item Advisory War Council Agenda, Advisory War Council Agendum, Advisory War Council minutes 1 July 1942.
- ¹⁵ 10 NAA A981, Item NEI 30, Safe Custody in Australia for Goods and Currency from the NEI, Treasury Department to External Affairs Department, letter 21 January 1942.
- ¹⁶ *Batavia* (1,279 tons), *Van der Capellen* (2,073 tons) *Banjoewangi* (1,279 tons), Capt. H. Koning (*Van der Capellen*) went to Australia in August 1942 to head the KPM maintenance unit
- ¹⁷ Alex Marcus, *DEMS? What's DEMS?*, (Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1986), 193-202. *Alphard*, *Barendrecht*, *Barneveld*, *Berakit*, *Bintang*, *Bontekoe*, *Dempo*, *Fort Wilhelmus*, *Gadila* (8,068 tons), *General Verspyck*, *Indrapoera*, *Japara* (3,323 tons), *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt* (19,787 tons), *Karsik*, *Luna* (1,456 tons), *Madoera*, *Maetsuycker*, *Malhina*, *Marnix van St. Aldegonde* (19,129 tons), *Merak* (1,754 tons), *Nieuw Amsterdam* (36,000 tons), *Nieuw Holland* (10,903 tons), *Nieuw Zeeland* (10,906 tons), *Ondina*, *Pabud* (2,069 tons), *Patras* (2,065 tons), *Phrontis*, *Reijnst*, *Rembrandt*, *Ruys* (14,155 tons), *Salawati*, *Sibajak* (12,040 tons), *Sibigo* (1,594 tons), *Slamat* (11,636 tons), *Stagen*, *Straat Malakka* (6,439 tons), *Straat Soenda* (6,439 tons), *Thedens* (2,071 tons), *Tjibesar*, *Tjisadane*, *Van den Bosch*, *Van Heemskerck*, *Van Heutsz*, *Van Outhoorn*, *Van Spilbergen*, *Van Swoll*, *Westernland* (16,479 tons), *Zaandam* (10,909 tons).
- ¹⁸ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 193C, Allied Consultative Shipping Council, ACSC minutes 16 March 1942.
- ¹⁹ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 193C, ACSC minutes 30 March 1942.
- ²⁰ National Archives file, Series A981, Item NEI 66A, Transfer of NEI Government to Australia, Dutch Ambassador van Aerssen Beyeren to External Affairs Minister Herbert Evatt, letter 7 October 1942.
- ²¹ *Balikpapan* (1,279 tons), *Bantam* (3,322 tons), *Bontekoe* (5,033 tons), *Both* (2,608 tons), *Cremer* (4,608 tons), *General Verspyck* (5,084 tons), *Janssens* (2,071 tons), *Japara* (3,323 tons), *Karsik* (2,191 tons), *Khoan Hoea* (1,238 tons), *Maetsuycker* (4,131 tons), *Sibigo* (1,594 tons), *s'Jacob* (2,839 tons), *Stagen* (2,539 tons), *Swartenbondt* (5,084 tons), *Tasman* (4,992 tons), *Van den Bosch* (2,382 tons), *Van der Lijn* (2,464 tons), *Van Heemskerck* (2,996 tons), *Van Heutsz* (4,552 tons), *Van Spilbergen* (3,237 tons).
- ²² *Pabud* (2,075 tons), *Patras* (2,065 tons), *Reijnst* (2,426 tons), *Thedens* (2,071 tons), *Van Outhoorn* (2,069 tons), *Van Swoll* (2,147 tons).
- ²³ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 193C, Allied Consultative Shipping Council, ACSC minutes 20 May 1942.
- ²⁴ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 193C, ACSC minutes 5 August 1942
- ²⁵ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 193C, ACSC minutes 28 July 1943.
- ²⁶ Marie Briggs-Koning, *Footsteps in Memories and ...*, (Launceston: Marken, 1999), 181-182.
- ²⁷ National Archives file, Series A989, Item 1943/595/10/4, NEI appointment of Naval Inspector, Dutch ambassador van Aerssen Beyeren to Prime Minister Curtin, letter 13 April 1943
- ²⁸ G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1968), 268-269.
- ²⁹ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 193C, Allied Consultative Shipping Council, ACSC minutes, 10 March 1943.
- ³⁰ Alex E Perrin, *The Private War of the Spotters: A History of the New Guinea Air Warning Wireless Company February 1942-April 1945* (Foster, VIC: NGAWW Publication Committee, 1990), 143
- ³¹ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 156G, *Van Heemskerck*, Townsville Naval Intelligence Assistant to Townsville Staff Officer Intelligence, report 29 April 1943.
- ³² NAA MP 456/4, Item 1943/151, Casualty Bantam Oro Bay, Bantam Salvage Board report, 23 May 1943
- ³³ National Archives file, Series A989, Item 1943/600/9, Construction of NEI Ships in Australia, van der Plas, Memorandum 2 May 1943.
- ³⁴ G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1968), 269.
- ³⁵ G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945*, 269-270.
- ³⁶ G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945*, 283.

- ³⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison, *Breaking the Bismarck Barrier 22 July 1942-1 May 1944: History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume VI* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1950), 37, 47.
- ³⁸ NAA MP1587/1, Item 164Y, Destruction of Japanese AMC *Hokaku Maru*, Fremantle Naval Staff office to Melbourne Director of Naval Intelligence, report 22 November 1942.
- ³⁹ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 164Y, report 22 November 1942.
- ⁴⁰ Ronald McKie, *The Heroes: Australia at War series*, (Sydney: Pacific Books, 1970), 62.
- ⁴¹ *Luna*, *Merak*, *El Libertador* (1,913 tons), *Fort Amsterdam* renamed *Buna Baai* in 1953 (1,780 tons), *Fort Rensselaer* renamed *Milne Baai* in 1953 (1,897 tons), *Fort Wilhelmus* renamed *Oro Baai* in 1953 (1,897 tons)
- ⁴² National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 482J, *Saparoa*, *Saparoa* fare – Fighting French to Western Australia, note 24 October 1944.
- ⁴³ Robert Ross Smith, *The Approach to the Philippines: United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific*, (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1953), 446.
- ⁴⁴ National Archives file, Series A989, Item 1943/595/2/1, Summary of Developments re Netherlands Government in London, Bruce to External Affairs, dispatch on Queen Wilhelmina's speech on *Radio Oranje* 10 May 1944.
- ⁴⁵ National Archives file, Series MP 1587/1, Item 482Z, *Sommelsdijk*, voyage reports, 11-25 December 1944.
- ⁴⁶ Peter Charlton, *The Unnecessary War*, (Melbourne: The Macmillan Company of Australia, 1983), 94.
- ⁴⁷ Wallace, *Up in Darwin*, 32.
- ⁴⁸ Australian War Memorial file, Series AWM54, Item 423/11/6, Netherlands Intelligence Reports on Enemy Activities and Conditions in Netherlands East Indies (Parts 1-25) 1943-1945. Examples: 2 Indonesians sailing a prahoe in the Dampier Strait were captured by a RNN submarine on 24 April 1944 and prahoe *Doenia Baroe* was sunk near Pasi Ipoh with its crew of Captain Soeliman Asik, Kasim, Saptoc.
- ⁴⁹ National Archives file, Series A1066, Item IC45/30/2/2, NEI Treaties and Conventions, External Affairs to Dutch Legation, letter 24 January 1945.
- ⁵⁰ National Archives file, Series A571/2, Item 44/1061 Part 1, Financial Relations with the NEI, Allied Supply Council report April 1944.
- ⁵¹ National Archives file, Series A571/2, Item 44/1061 Part 1, Australian War Supplies Procurement (USA) officer to Department of Trades and Customs, letter 6 June 1945.
- ⁵² Ind, Spy Ring Pacific, 262-73.
- ⁵³ National Archives file, Series MP1587/1, Item 160, *Sibigo*, Department of Navy to the Royal Humane Society of Australasia, letter 10 May 1945.
- ⁵⁴ Commander F.C. Van Oosten (Director of Naval History, Netherlands Ministerie van Defensie-Marine) to Dr. J. Ford, letter 4 May 1983.
- ⁵⁵ National Archives file, Series MP285/12, Item WOB2, Shipping Control, Netherlands, Papers of Mr LF East, Shipping Control Board of Australia to KPM, letters May 1945.
- ⁵⁶ Robert J Wolthus, *United States Foreign Policy towards the Netherlands Indies 1937-1945*, (PhD thesis: Johns Hopkins University, 1968), 398.
- ⁵⁷ National Archives file, Series A1066, Item IC45/61/54, Request from S. Spillman re Petty Officers Soeprapto and Pande Iroot, External Affairs to JH Scullin MP, letter 31 July 1945.