

Bomber Boys

Book review -

by Marianne van Velzen

In March 1942, with the Japanese just about to invade Java, a Dutch Air Force transport pilot and an Aussie dispatch rider escape in a Lockheed Lodestar from near Bandung to Australia. They crashed near Darwin (Stapleton Station - south of Batchelor and about 10 kms NW of Adelaide River).

The efforts to get refugees out of Netherlands East Indies (NEI) led to some heroic flights and also led to tragedy when 9 Dutch flying boats were sunk on the water at Roebuck Bay (Broome) on 3 March 1942. There were also .. QF flying boats sunk, and a number of land aircraft destroyed at Broome Airport. One USAF Liberator was shot down and also one Japanese Zero.

Gus van Winckel shot down a Zero using a machine gun hastily removed from a Lodestar.

Dutch airmen who had escaped made their way to Archerfield and were anxious to join the fight against the Japanese in the Dutch East Indies. Military bureaucracy kept them in limbo for a long time.

The pilots were frustrated that they could not go back for their family members whilst senior officers brought families and even pets out. The Dutch pilots were stranded in Australia with no country to return to (after NEI surrendered to the Japanese). Some Dutch pilots thought about stealing an aircraft to fly back to try to save their families. The war effort seemed to have shifted from liberating the East Indies to saving PNG.

The pilots were ordered to take the Dutch aircraft to Wagga for hand over to the USAF.

On the ferry flight from BN to Wagga, the Dutch airmen flew under the Sydney Harbour Bridge to get attention. (Two DC-3s and a Lodestar in formation).

More than 100 Dutch airmen escaped and made their way to RAAF Archerfield Qld, and eventually to Canberra where the RAAF created a Dutch squadron, No 18 NEI. (April 1942), using the Dutch crews and bolstered by air gunners, mechanics and other support staff from Australian squadrons. (271 men started but 70 or so left because of language and cultural difficulties. Major Feideldij was Dutch-Javanese and spoke to the men in English, Dutch and Bahasa).

The story covers training and eventually flying anti-submarine patrols off the East Coast of Australia. The Dutch earned the respect of the Aussies when they sank a Japanese submarine. (4 June 1942) Gus awarded DFC but the Dutch overruled it! Promoted Flt Lt.

The pilots grew disgruntled and 3 started to plot a return to Java even saying it would be better there and working with the Japanese than being stuck in Australia without their families. The 3 were caught, arrested and sent to gaol. Pardoned after the war by Dutch Queen, Juliana.

The Squadron was relocated to MacDonald Airfield (north of Pine Creek, NT) and eventually to Batchelor, near Darwin.

The move from CBR to MacDonald Airfield is covered in some detail and is interesting. Early December 1942, 700 men and 750 tons of equipment moved by train and then truck. (Queanbeyan to Tocumwal then change of trains to Victorian gauge and then again before Adelaide. It took 8 days from CBR to ASP). Truck roll-over story - they thought his brains were splattered - it was tinned spaghetti! It took 16 days to get to MacDonald. They only managed 200 miles on a good days' travelling. They arrived to find very primitive conditions and no drinking water. The water had to be carted from Katherine (60 miles). The first B-25s arrived 2 days before Christmas.

Some of the crews were sent to Jackson, Mississippi to train on B-25s. Eventually 2 B-25s became available in Canberra. The crews had to more or less teach themselves. Later on there was some conflict between the experienced veterans and the US trained "experts", but this was soon resolved as the realities of combat operations were encountered.

Originally known as *Burkholder Field*, the runway was 6,000 feet (1,800 m) long and 100 feet (30 m) wide. Renamed MacDonald Airfield in honour of [Wing Commander JRG McDonald](#) of [No. 13 Squadron RAAF](#) who was killed at [Laha](#) on 10 December 1941

[No. 18 \(Netherlands East Indies\) Squadron RAAF \(B-25\)](#) - (18 January 1943 till 7 May 1943)

As the cover says, this is more than a story of over 900 bombing raids, reconnaissance missions and attacks on Japanese shipping during the 3 years of the Squadron's existence. It is a story of a group of very different men thrown together with a (mostly) common purpose, and the strange, sometimes difficult friendships they formed.

Capt De Jonhg ran out of fuel and landed in a swamp. Supplies were dropped but taken by crocodiles. Took 4 days to get rescued and another 3 days to get back to base. During that time a B-25 had crashed on night take-off killing all 9 crew members. They were buried in the Adelaide River cemetery.