

Presentation Matthieu Borsboom "*The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal*".

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor to be here this afternoon with you and discuss the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia. Of course, this is an afternoon of academic discourse and since in my mind the similarity between academic discourse and a church sermon is that both require the hardship of being able to sit still and listening, I don't mind if you feel the urge to move after two speeches. Please feel free to do so.

Even though we are having an academic discourse, what we are discussing had an enormous impact on many people till this very day. We should acknowledge that as well. I am not an historian, I am not an academic, I am navy. I want to discuss with you my personal experience, as a member of the Advisory Board, reading this volume from an operational perspective.

When you start reading it, what is your background, how do you look at it?

When I was a child, we learned in elementary school and high school about the war. But we learned about the war in Europe, what happened there. Not about what had happened in the East Indies. It was, when I went to Naval College, that I indeed met, and was educated by, Philip Bosscher, the naval historian mentioned earlier. Moreover, the neighboring Naval Museum had at that time already a very good exposition on the battle of the Java Sea and the roles of Doorman, Helfrich, and many others.

But I also started to learn about the hardships suffered in that part of the world when I met my wife, because her parents were born and raised in the Dutch East Indies, and her family had indeed been interned in the camps during the war. Then, during my career, the history of the Royal Netherlands Navy in the Dutch East Indies kept hovering in the background, but however important that history was, it was, of course, not my core task. It was when I became commander of the Navy for five years, from 2010 till 2014, that I got involved in strengthening the bonds with the Indonesian Navy.

It was on one of these occasions when visiting Surabaya, Jakarta and other places, that this history became so much alive again that you could almost feel it. I recall that I asked my staff to follow me in the footsteps of Rear Admiral Doorman, going to where he was before he left for the battle. We were at his house and shared pictures with Theo Doorman, his youngest son, who had joined us to Indonesia and who is also present here today. It left an indelible impression. In the actual historical setting, you feel the tension of the discussions of what to do: "To go or not to go." "Do we stand a chance, or not."

On my second visit to Surabaya, I invited Admiral Marsetio, the commander of the Indonesian Navy, to join me in laying a wreath at Kembang Kuning, the war cemetery where also the monument for the Battle of the Java Sea is located. It was the first time that we did this together in commemoration of all those who had died in the battle.

After the ceremony, we went behind the monument. I know many of you have been there. If you go behind the monument you see engraved all the names of the sailors who died in that battle. Dutch names, of course, but it was striking to see so many Indonesian names. They had been brothers in arms on the same ships, in the same aircraft, in the same struggle.

Again, at the 70th anniversary of the commemoration of the battle in the Kloosterkerk in The Hague, I was honored to announce that the biggest ship of our navy afloat at this moment would be christened Karel Doorman. I think that this was of great importance, especially to the many survivors of the battle, as it was probably one of the last times that they could be present at the commemoration in this church.

So, from my background, I got to know the “Dutch view,” I learned the “Indonesian view,” and when dealing with the allies, I got to know the “Allied view” on the Battle of the Java Sea and the Invasion of the Netherlands East Indies.

But what did I know about the “Japanese view”? Not too much. Yes, when I was small, I once made a model of this big battleship, *Yamato*. Maybe some of you did as well. You could glue it all together. I see many of you nodding. For prospective naval officers it was good practice, wasn’t it? Of course, I also saw the Hollywood movies on Pearl Harbor and read a couple of books. Later, I got to know the commander of the Japanese Navy, and I learned more. I met successive Japanese ambassadors to the Netherlands, especially in connection with the Japanese garden in Den Helder, the home port of the Dutch Fleet, which gave me some insight in the beauty of Japanese culture. But did this contribute to really understand what had happened during the invasion of Dutch East Indies? No.

If you do not know the other sides’ angle, you do not know the whole story. What you will do, is simplifying it. Maybe you are also prejudiced. My starting point, when reading this book was to try getting a complete picture. I think that with this volume, we have now in our hands the possibility to look at this campaign from a different dimension.

In the *Journal of Military History*, a renowned American journal, there is a review of the previous volume, *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, which tells the story from the Japanese Army point of view. The review states, and I quote: “The importance of the Invasion of the Dutch East Indies copy is that it reveals that the Japanese who defeated the colonial Dutch troops in the Netherlands East Indies were not lunatics wielding Samurai swords, who simply showed up on the beaches of the Netherlands East Indies, shouting *banzai*, and then somehow defeated the KNIL. On the contrary, they were military professionals.” The question which I posed myself was whether this is also applicable to their naval counterparts? That is the question, I will try to answer here.

But before so, I want to say that being part of the Advisory Board was a great honor. I think that Willem Remmelink and his team did a tremendous job in translating and making it available to all of you, the academic world, the military world, and to further research. The book finally opens up the Japanese angle.

What were my observations? I only can sketch a few, because the book is more than 660 pages, crammed with information, detailed information, high level information and highly interesting information.

First of all, the whole planning of this invasion at the highest level, not only the Java Sea campaign, but the whole operation of the invasion of Southeast Asia, was conducted between April 1941 and 10 November of 1941, ending with the Tokyo agreement between the Army and the Navy.

At the start of the book, we find piles of documents dealing with the planning, the detailed planning, overall assessments and planning. “Who is doing what?”. “What are the missions?”. “What are the targets?”. “Which units are going to be contributed?”. “What is the outline?”. “What is the timeline?”. “How are army and navy going to collaborate?”, “In what order?”. “Is it separated over time?”. “Is it geographically separated?”. “How can we do the support role?”, etc., etc. Also, task-force orders are attached. You will even find unit orders. And it is not just paper work, it is really proper staff work, you can see the whole tableau. They brought in officers from all over the army and navy to work on all these scenarios, options, and alternative plans. They looked at opportunities when, as always happens, the plans might not work out as planned.

For example: “Different timings,” “When the maintenance would fall,” or “When there would be a delay in mining countermeasures,” or “Fatigue of crews” or whatever. Many alternative conditions were inserted in these plans. In other words, the staff work was excellent.

At Tarakan, they had to conduct, for the first time, large scale minesweeping operations under fire. It was a rather difficult operation, but they managed it, because they adapted their strategies. The minesweepers had to go in pairs. They had to bring the minesweeping equipment to smaller units to be able to do it. So, here we see a great deal of flexibility. It was also in this particular mission that *HNLMS The Prince of Orange* was sunk by the Japanese destroyer “*Yamakaze*,” but not after that she had laid 110 sea mines, giving the Japanese minesweepers a really bad day.

My third observation concerns a “blue on blue,” or friendly fire incident during the Manado campaign on 11 January 1942, when a Japanese seaplane shot down a Japanese transport plane. Within an hour, a message goes out from the chief of staff. He describes what had happened, gives an analysis, tells what has to be done and to be altered to all entities, either in the air or at sea, and makes them aware. This is really a form of a closed loop learning curve.

Only three days later, we have another example. An army land-based reconnaissance aircraft flying over the Moluccan sea near Tidore on reconnaissance had noticed no less than thirty oval black shaped objects, which he claimed to be 30 submarines. When you detect 30 submarines, there is something really bad happening. So, the question is, could it be 30 submarines? And then you see a proper in-depth analysis unfolding. “Is it likely?” “No.” “Can it happen?” “Yes.” “What should we do?” “Discard it and claim it as non-sub, or should we have a look at it.” It was decided to have a closer look and do a sort of preliminary additional sweep of this particular area of the sea. The sweep was conducted, and then the observation was classified: “Whales.” It seems simple, but the many navy men in this room know that this is the way you deal with it. We have been there. We have seen it. It is the professional way of handling such a situation.

Another means the Japanese used was the covert operation. I give you one example. The oil of the Dutch East Indies was the main target of the Japanese attack. After Tarakan, Balikpapan and its oil refineries became the next target. Since the oil fields of Tarakan had been thoroughly destroyed, they thought of a means to capture Balikpapan intact. At Tarakan they had captured Captain Colijn, the son of a former Dutch prime minister and a friend of the garrison commander of Balikpapan. So, they made a plan, according to some sources Colijn himself had suggested it to them as a means of escape, to send Colijn to Balikpapan to convince the garrison commander not to destroy the refineries. That was a good plan, and they carried it out by putting Colijn and another officer on a steam launch to Balikpapan. However, the mission was discovered by a Dutch flying boat, who intervened with the steam launch, retrieved Captain Colijn, and in the end the refinery was destroyed despite Colijn and his message. So, there was not a great deal of success in this covert operation, but I just give it as an example of the Japanese flexibility to even undertake unconventional operations.

Only a week later, at the Army-Navy Manila conference, we see a big dispute that had already been looming for some time about the way to proceed. The army’s position was: “We have to rush and go into a battle of pursuit. We should not give the enemy time to recover. Just go” The navy maintained: “Prior to launching the convoys of the landing forces, we need air dominance, we need supremacy, if not, and I quote, this is a useless loss of life”. This was a rather considerate position. It was a big struggle and they had to find a compromise. I see many captains and former captains in this room and they will recognize the situation. A certain captain called Yanagisawa managed to make a compromise which in itself was interesting. But the main

point is that they came to a compromise and an agreement from which the preparations were conducted for the operations in the Java Sea.

What is striking here may be subsumed under the umbrella “Flexibility.”

First of all, when these operations were prepared, they changed the forces, when they thought the enemy forces, Dutch and others, were stronger than expected and they added own forces. They changed the organization, the command structure. They changed as well the plan due to the weather outlook. They changed the timeline of proceeding according to the actions of the allied forces. And they used “Commander intent.” Something which is very fashionable nowadays, but was already fashionable in the times of the Dutch 17th-century admiral De Ruyter. The Japanese understood this well. High level intent of the commander and then the subordinate commanders get the freedom to maneuver. For example: The commander of the landing forces was allowed to decide where to anchor, how to anchor, the formation, and how to conduct the operation. If you add this all up, in the preparations for the battle of the Java Sea, you see that in all the lines of operation there was a great deal of flexibility.

But sometimes you have to intervene. In the attack on western Java, we have two commanders fighting, not a real fight because both were Japanese, but they did not agree. One said: “We have to attack,” while the other said: “We have to be careful, we have to wait.” This discussion is interesting, because one was superior to the other one at the naval academy, but not in rank commanding the divisions at sea. It resulted in some form of stalemate, and then you see again the chief of staff of the fleet, intervening in this quarrel between his subordinates and tell to one of the two: “You are in charge”. This is what I would call command and control properly executed.

When we go now to the battle of the Java Sea itself, we see another example of considerate action. During the second phase of the day time engagement, Rear Admiral Nishimura, the commander of the 4th destroyer squadron claimed victory, already six minutes past seven in the evening. At that time, there was a lot of confusion, there were still these smoke screens, which prevented a clear assessment of the situation. Despite claiming victory, the same admiral signaled: “I will reverse the convoy.” This was another example of a cautious action.

If we look to the “after-action reports,” a third of this book consists of after-action reports, we see the Japanese looking at their own actions and what they could learn from them. I will give only a few examples.

In the after-action reports in March after all the sea engagements were finished, they discussed the self-destruction of the torpedoes, friendly fire, the need for more drills, the types of shells that were not correct, the damage assessments that were not precise, etc., etc. Pages and pages of self-critique, very open and fair and trying to learn from it.

The same applies to the submarine actions. Although here there is a little bit of a twist, which is worth closer attention. The commander of the second destroyer squadron, Tanaka, shows himself rather happy about the suppression of submarines, stating: “We are very successful, because we suppressed them, we know they come to the surface after sunset, but that is the moment we take them out, we keep them deep so they run out of capacity and batteries. We use proper dispositions, etc., etc.” In short, his feedback was rather optimistic. But at the same time, ten pages further in this book, you will find an after-action report about anti-submarine warfare. In these antisubmarine warfare lessons learned, you will find false alert rates to an astonishing degree, with complaints about the sonar not performing very well, not enough people understanding the sonar equipment, etc., etc. According to the analysis in the book, the poor

anti-submarine warfare quality was covered up by the low impact of the allied submarine attacks, leading the Japanese to think that they were doing much better than they actually did. It put them to sleep in the particular case of antisubmarine warfare, leading within half a year to a game changer when the allied submarines started having a real impact on the Japanese fleet.

I can continue with the after-action reports from the air campaign, but I will shorten it. They were very aware that they had poor identification. They understood that they were not very good at using radio silence, communication silence procedures, and needed more further reconnaissance. For example, when a reconnaissance aircraft mistook a fishing fleet for a convoy, they send out four units to attack a fishing fleet, which was not a good idea. If you are really interested in details, and who is not, you can find them in abundance. For example, one detail in an air campaign debrief specifically states that when you are in an aircraft and you are operating from a forward airfield, there will be no barracks, and you will have to sleep under the wings of your aircraft, often in a jungle environment, so you don't need three blankets, you only need one. It is an interesting detail from a debrief.

Now, if you add all this up, and that was what I did, you can ask yourself the question, as I did in the beginning, whether the Imperial Japanese Navy was a rated machine, or an adaptive machine. The invasion of the Dutch East Indies involved large-scale, skilled naval operations. Far above my own naval experience. Like many of you here in the room, we had during the cold war some experience with multi-carrier battle group exercises off the coast of Norway, which could involve four, or five carriers, dozens of service combatants and maybe dozens of submarines. We do know large scale. We do know the staff work. But it was a cold war, it was not a hot war. It was not an invasion. If you take a closer look at what happened here, it was a huge operation.

And that brings me to my conclusion. Seen from my perspective, my background, my prejudices, my simplified vision of the Japanese Navy, after reading this volume, I changed my opinion, the Japanese Navy had great strength. They had very good command and control, were well-organized, did proper staff work, were well-trained, and partly well-equipped though not on every instance. They used a lot of feedback tools and were very open internally to discuss them. They really knew and understood how to use and how to work with joy. Overall, they were highly adaptive.

I would like to conclude with two remarks.

First of all, I want to introduce André Hissink.

André Hissink is 99 years old. He is a Dutchman, he is a naval aviator, he is a pilot. He was there in the Java Sea, and after that he went to the UK, and he flew sixty offensive missions over Germany. I met him at the home of Colonel Loos where we had dinner together. It was a great opportunity to ask him about the battle in the Java sea. He made two statements. The first of them was: "We underestimated the Japanese forces totally". When I asked him: "So, was it a good idea to engage in the battle of the Java Sea,?" his answer was: "You had to do it, it is some sort of pride." That is something we need to remember.

I would like to finish with another observation of an eyewitness.

A few days ago, I was in Bronbeek, near Arnhem, where there is an exhibition. It is an exhibition of the cartoons of Brouwer. He made these cartoons when he was prisoner of war in the Changi camp in Singapore. He was born in Borneo. Being very creative, he went to art school in the Netherlands. After going back to the Dutch East Indies, he was at the beginning of 1942 enlisted in the KNIL, the Dutch colonial army. On the 26th of February 1942, on the eve of the battle, he

was on duty with a buddy in fort Menari. Fort Menari is on a small island north of Surabaya, overlooking the Strait of Madura.

I quote from his manuscript: “Ten minutes past six, we see the first cruiser silently passing the curtain of water. First the bow, then slowly the whole ship. This vague silhouette must be the *De Ruyter* with Rear Admiral Doorman”.

“Bloody awful,” says my buddy, “Do you think they will win?”

“I do not think so. Not many will survive. They must have known. These sailors are real heroes.”