

The Voice of War: Reporting and Debating about Dutch Naval Operations in the Dutch East Indies

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The years 1940-1950 were a traumatic period in Dutch history. The events of the Second World War and the War of Decolonization still resonate in the lives of the children and even the grand children of the survivors - veterans and civilians, - in the Netherlands, Indonesia and Japan.

In the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War, the United States, Great-Britain, Australia and the Netherlands, faced the Japanese. Political and economic infiltration during the 1920s was the first step in Japan's expanding influence in Southeast Asia. Relations between Japan and the Western powers deteriorated as a result of the former's military intervention in China in 1937. German victories in Europe forced the British to redeploy their forces in its overseas territories and enabled the Japanese to move southward, seeking for natural resources, the most important of which were the oil fields in the Dutch East Indies. Fearing Japanese aggression, the Dutch government in exile did not call its naval forces back to Europe.¹

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was planned with great care. This first wave of attacks crippled the US Pacific Fleet. The Pearl Harbor Raid of 7 December 1941 was directly followed by the invasion of Malaya and the Philippines. Only three days later the Royal Navy battle cruiser *Repulse* and the battleship *Prince of Wales* were sunk north of Singapore. December 1941 and January 1942 saw crisis following crises for the Allied powers. Hong Kong was attacked; Guam and Wake Island were lost. The Japanese invaded British Burma and Celebes (Sulawesi), captured Manilla and took Tarakan, a strategic island north-east of Borneo (Kalimantan). Singapore, the major British military base in the region, was forced to surrender on 15 February. Timor, Bali fell.

The Allies responded to the Japanese offensive by activating the American-British-Dutch Australia – ABDA - command in early January 1942, led by General Sir Archibald Wavell, to

¹ Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie, Losse stukken, 1241.

co-ordinate Allied operations and to hold the so-called Malay Barrier. The naval component was commanded by Admiral Thomas C. Hart from the US Asiatic Fleet until he was replaced by Lieutenant-Admiral Conrad E.L. Helfrich of the Dutch navy in mid-February.² Because of the rapid collapse of the Allied resistance – despite a few successful operations of Dutch submarines and the Fleet Air Arm -, the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington had to modify the initial order ‘to defend Java with the utmost resolution by all available combatant troops’.³ Some air forces and troops were withdrawn. Wavell resigned as supreme commander on 25 February and left Java for India.

That was ‘a date of destiny in the ABDA-Area’⁴, leaving Helfrich and the Combined Striking Force under Rear-Admiral Karel Doorman to organize the maritime defense of Java. The same day British ships were sent to the Dutch naval base Surabaya to reinforce the Combined Striking Force, as an invasion was feared first from the East.

The Japanese Dutch East Indies campaign involved two lines of advance, East and West of Borneo. It was divided into two phases. In the first, Dutch outposts were attacked and occupied. Naval forces landed troops at key points to secure or construct air bases from which aircraft could operate, covering the next advance. From these strategic positions Java, the last bastion of defense, was surrounded for the final assault in the second phase.⁵ If the original military plans had to be revised, for whatever reason, the Japanese were masters in improvisation.⁶

On 27 February the Japanese invasion fleet was observed by an Allied aircraft. This report reached Doorman in the afternoon. The Combined Striking Force at once left Surabaya and proceeded to sea to seek the Eastern Covering Group of Rear Admiral Takeo Tagaki and to fall on convoy.

The Combined Striking Force, composed of Dutch, American, British and Australian warships, engaged the task force of the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Java Sea. They were not ill-matched, with five allied cruisers and ten destroyers facing four Japanese cruisers and fourteen destroyers. The battle raged intermittently over a seven hour period from mid-

² Marcus Faulkner, *War at Sea. A Naval Atlas 1939-1945* (Barnsley 2012) 101; Ph.M. Bosscher, *De Koninklijke Marine in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*. Deel 2 (Franeker 1986) chapter VII.

³ G. Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942. Australia in the war of 1939-1945*. Series two; vol. 1 (Canberra 1957) 597.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 603.

⁵ Faulkner, *War at Sea*, 101.

⁶ *The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal*. Willem Rimmelink ed. (Leiden 2018) 400-553.

afternoon to midnight. Within a few hours, two Allied ships were lost. Just before midnight, the Dutch cruisers *Java* and the *Ruyter* were sunk by a torpedo salvo. Doorman went down with his flagship. Nearly 1.000 Dutch naval personnel died.⁷ The first sea battle in the Pacific War and the first sea battle of the Royal Netherlands Navy in 150 years ended in a devastating defeat.

In the following days, and a number of significant engagements in Sunda Strait, between Java and Sumatra, and the Java Sea, most of the Allied naval forces were destroyed. The activities of the Combined Striking Force postponed the invasion for twenty-four hours. Java fell after a campaign lasting less than two weeks. On 8 March the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces – Lieutenant-General H. ter Poorten, - announced the surrender of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army. Three and a half years of Japanese occupation had a significant impact on post-war developments and the end of Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia.

Ladies and Gentlemen, these events are historical facts: when, who and what.

It is much more interesting to investigate causes and explanations: how and why.

How to explain Japanese rapid conquests in China, the Pacific, and Southeast Asia?

Why opted Admiral Helfrich for offensive actions?

This afternoon I would like to review – briefly - the historiography of the Pacific War and I would like to discuss differences of opinions about Dutch maritime strategy and tactics.

The news, the terrible news of the resounding defeat of the Combined Striking Force and the surrender of Java, reached the Netherlands within two weeks.

‘Fourteen thousand naval personnel died’, headlined a newspaper.⁸ Family, friends, colleagues, all were deeply worried about their loved ones.

From London, Queen Wilhelmina tried to keep up morale. She spoke on Radio Oranje: ‘Our fleet has kept its honor, and has caused heavy losses to the opponent, acting in the spirit of the glorious past. The Dutch fleet will recover and be rebuild’.⁹

An American war correspondent had the opportunity to interview a Dutch naval officer, a survivor of the Battle of the Java Sea. His article propagated optimism and a fighting spirit.

⁷ Bosscher, *De Koninklijke Marine*, 281-290.

⁸ *Haagsche Courant*, 24 maart 1942 (www.delpher.nl 2 September 2018).

⁹ Anita van Dissel, ‘De Javazee. De Slag in de Javazee’ in: Wim van den Doel ed., *Plaatsen van herinnering. Nederland in de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam 2005) 118-119.

Doorman was portrayed as ‘the most offensive-minded man in the entire Dutch navy’.¹⁰ The people in occupied Holland liked to hear about that sort of courage and daring. As historian Caspar Dullemond has shown, the tactical signal ‘All ships follow me’ was changed to the more encouraging ‘I’m attacking, follow me’.¹¹ These words – actually fake news – were reproduced and reframed. Dramatic propaganda pictures, the portrayal of Doorman and his slogan has become part of our collective memory.

In the 1950’s the Americans, British and Australians all published official series about their operations in the Pacific War, written for the general reader.¹² The authors were ‘embedded’ army and naval officers, sometime victims themselves. In the Netherlands, Admiral Helfrich published his *Memoires* and popular books were sold well.¹³ The *Parlementaire Enquêtecommissie Regeringsbeleid 1940-1945* (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee Government Policy 1940-1945) did, however, hardly discuss the fall of the Dutch East Indies, but focused on May 1940 and the chaotic events in 1945 in Southeast Asia.¹⁴

Not until the 1980s, the first Dutch official, or semi-official, books about the naval operations in the Pacific were published. I’m referring to Lou de Jong’s volumes about the Dutch East Indies and the publication of *De Koninklijke Marine in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [The Netherlands Royal Navy in World War II] of Ph.M. Bosscher, for a long time the most authoritative book on this subject.¹⁵ Bosscher was a naval officer and a professional historian.

There was widespread consensus amongst these scholars about the rapid Japanese advance in Southeast Asia and the fall of Java. The main factors of the disastrous defeat in the Battle of the Java Sea were Doorman’s lack of air power during the battle; limited experience in joint and combined operations; bad communications due to bad weather conditions; the enemy’s

¹⁰ Caspar Dullemond, ‘Doorman, wij volgen!’ De geschiedenis van een misverstaan signaal’ in: Caspar Dullemond ed., *De Javazee-campagne na 75 jaar. Sporen van de strijd van de Koninklijke Marine tegen Japan, december 1941-maart 1942* (s.l. 2017) 138.

¹¹ Ibid., 135.

¹² See: S.E. Morison, *The rising sun in the Pacific 1931-april 1942. History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*. Vol. 3. (s.l. 1948); Gill, *Royal Australian Navy*; S.W. Roskill, *The war at sea 1939-145*. Vol. II. The period of balance (London 1956).

¹³ For example: A. Kroese, *Neerlands zeemacht in oorlog* (Den Haag 1944); K.W.L. Bezemer, *Zij vochten op de Zeven Zeeën; verrichtingen en avonturen der Koninklijke Marine in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Zeist 1954).

¹⁴ *Parlementaire Enquête voor het Regeringsbeleid 1940-1945*. Vol. 8 (Den Haag 1956); *Leeuwarder Courant*, 15 September 1956.

¹⁵ Lou de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog 1939-1945*. Deel 11a-c (Den Haag 1984-1986) (<https://www.niod.nl/nl/download>); Bosscher, *De Koninklijke Marine*.

superiority in torpedo materiel; and supreme efficiency, precision and tactics of the Japanese.¹⁶ Other than the Combined Striking Force, Tagaki's task force was an integrated and highly trained joint force.¹⁷

However, recently some historians have called these conclusions into question and have criticized Dutch maritime strategy and tactics.

In general, the debate focuses on:

First, the deployment of submarines and battle cruisers for the defense of the Dutch East Indies. Lieutenant-Admiral J.Th. Furstner, the minister of the Navy and Commander of the Naval Forces, and Helfrich, supported the battlecruiser plan, which assumed that two or three Dutch battlecruisers could bring the Japanese maritime advance to Southeast Asia to a standstill.¹⁸ According to their navalist ideas, capital ships were the chief weapon to command the sea. Jaap Anten and others contest this maritime strategy. The invasion of Java could have been stopped if submarines had been made the core of the fleet. The so-called wolf pack tactic, which concentrated a large number of submarines, would have been successful against a transport fleet.¹⁹ Anten states that the Battle in the Java Sea was strategic and tactical lost in advance. His opinions caused a great deal of controversy. It is interesting to know that surface warfare finally played a vital role in American success in the Pacific.²⁰

Second, the differences of opinion between Helfrich and Doorman.

Doorman and others doubted whether it was wise to fight to the last. The question is: When is it right time to disengage? Helfrich's personal inclination, based on political and moral considerations, to fight to the last ship and till the bitter end, is understandable.²¹

¹⁶ Bosscher, *De Koninklijke Marine*, 349-352; Morison, *The rising sun*, 358; Gill, *Royal Australian Navy*, 607-624; Roskill, *The war at sea*, 13-19; Ken Hansen, review of David C. Evans, *The Japanese navy in World War II: in the Words of Former Japanese Naval Officers* (2nd ed. Annapolis 2017) in *International Journal of Maritime History* 30:3 (2018) 570.

¹⁷ Roskill, *The war at sea*, 130.

¹⁸ Jaap Anten, *Navalisme nekt onderzeeboot. De invloed van buitenlandse zeestrategieën op de Nederlandse zeestrategie voor de defensie van Nederlands-Indië, 1912-1942* (Amsterdam 2011) 695. See also: Henk Bussemaker en Janet van Klink, *De Tegenaanval. Anton Bussemaker 1900-1941, onderzeebootcommandant* (Zutphen 2016).

¹⁹ Anten, *Navalisme nekt onderzeeboot*, 624-652, 692-704.

²⁰ Vincent P. O'Hara, *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis: Surface Combat 1941-1945* (Annapolis 2007).

²¹ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy*, 625; Bosscher, *De Koninklijke Marine*, 297-298.

Some have questioned Doorman's tactics during the battle²², but admiration for his stubborn determination and sense of duty predominate.²³

Today, the publication of *The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal*, represents an important step in the historiography of the naval operations in the first five months of the Pacific War. The following months saw the Japanese setback at the Battle of the Coral Sea and the defeat at the Battle of the Midway. The translation of this part of the *Senshi Sosho* offers new perspectives. We can now compare how both sides reported on the same naval operations. Could submarines have been able to stop the Japanese invasion of Java? How decisive was the Japanese modern Long Lance torpedo? Did Doorman really had a chance? *The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal* certainly gives more details.

²² Bosscher, *De Koninklijke Marine*, 292-296.

²³ Morrison, *The rising sun*, 358.