

Groen: "Lecture Senshi Sōsho Invasion of Dutch East Indies".

An impressive Japanese source.

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The Pacific War had a major impact on the Netherlands. It was the beginning of the end for the Dutch colonial empire in Southeast Asia. It was also the beginning of a war in the Indonesian archipelago that was to last for ten years. For many Dutchmen and Indo-Europeans the war years were a watershed in their lives; each of those affected tried to process their experiences in their own way. For a number of them, this meant undertaking research into answering the question as to why armed forces in the Netherlands East Indies could have been defeated so swiftly in 1942. Such research mostly came to a dead end on account of the fact that they, similar to most western researchers, were not familiar with the Japanese language and were therefore unable to study Japanese source material. As Herman Bussemaker, historian and one of the leading opinion makers within the Indies community in the Netherlands, lamented: "It is my sincere hope that one or more young Dutch historians [will be able] to translate whatever Japanese source material is available".¹ Willem Remmelink and his team have now turned hope into reality. We have before us a translation of part of the Senshi Sōsho series, which describes the Japanese army's invasion of Netherlands East Indies.



This is neither the time nor the place for an in-depth explanation of how this voluminous manuscript came about. In short, it is a compilation of original military documents from the war years, including operational orders from senior to lower levels, operations reports, post-war memoirs and post-war information originating from and interpreted by veterans. Similar to all sources consulted by historians, sources must be critically assessed. I, for example, noticed that this manuscript does not devote a word to the excessive violence carried out by the Japanese, such as the executions of prisoners-of-war near Tarakan or on the Tjiater Pass.

Nevertheless, this part of the Senshi Sōsho series has much to offer western, particularly Dutch, readers interested in the subject. It is as if a curtain has been lifted, that is to say that is the feeling I had while reading the texts about the attack on Palembang, the capture of Kalidjati or the battle near Leuwiliang. For the first time, we can now examine in detail what was behind the Japanese forces' thinking and operations and what drove senior and lower level Japanese commanders. As a result, we can now compare how both sides reported on the same operations and thus make an attempt at an integrated analysis. However, such a comparative integrated analysis is still in the future. This

afternoon I would like to share with you a number of general observations I myself made while reading the translation of the manuscript.

First of all, I was struck by how risky the Japanese plans for the conquest of Southeast Asia actually were. According to the original plans, this immense area was meant to fall into Japanese hands in just 150 days, in an operation to be carried out in two phases.² In the first phase, lasting approximately one month, the 14th and 25th armies had the task of capturing the Philippines, British Borneo and Malacca. Those were the stepping stones to the second phase, the capture of Netherlands East Indies. In that second phase, first the airfields in South Sumatra, South Borneo and Celebes had to be captured; from there, air supremacy over the Java Sea and Java itself was to be gained. Subsequently, Java could be captured within an estimated two months.³ However, two of the three divisions initially considered necessary for the invasion of Java in the second phase were also to be deployed during the first phase. How quickly these troops would actually be ready for renewed deployment and what condition they would be in remained to be seen.⁴ A second risky aspect of the plan concerned the fact that the tempo of land operations was dictated by the time required for the capture of enemy airfields. Air dominance and air support of Japanese army units, often inferior in numerical terms, was a leading principle in Japanese doctrine. The destruction of the airfields would therefore have put an end to the Japanese plan. Finally, the recycling of units demanded meticulous preparation in terms of logistics, or as this study puts it: 'The units concerned had to move as a clockwork of gears and cogwheels'.⁵

As if this was not enough, the risks were amplified to a considerable degree by substantially speeding up the operation. The invasion of Java, originally to be achieved within 103 days, was first cut by over 30 days, later adjusted to 20 days.⁶ These repeated changes to the already tight schedule caused logistic chaos, which seriously jeopardised the Java operation.⁷ Estimates regarding the capture of the airfields on Borneo and South Sumatra had also been much too optimistic. They had either been thoroughly destroyed or had to be extended and resupplied after their capture, which involved further effort. Consequently, on 18 February 1942, the ship convoy carrying the invasion force had to set sail for Java before the air force had been able to land the decisive blow in the air campaign for the island, as prescribed by Japanese doctrine.⁸ In the manuscript, each change to the schedule is given extensive attention. Readers are able to distil the rationale behind the changes from the views exchanged during the consultations held. The Southern Army had made it a matter of honour to carry out its operations earlier than scheduled in the original 150-day time frame presented to the Emperor.⁹ In addition, it wanted to prevent the Allies sending timely reinforcements to Southeast Asia.¹⁰ Finally, one of the underlying politico-strategic arguments of the Imperial General Headquarters was that Japan was to have achieved an 'undefeatable position' in Southeast Asia, should the Allies manage to stay in the war longer than expected.¹¹

The tempo in which the operation plan for the conquest of Southeast Asia was to be carried out meant that at the strategic, operational and tactical levels there was a great deal of emphasis on offensive and surprise operations, which were to culminate in a decisive blow. This had been one of the leading principles of the Japanese army combat doctrine since the turn of the century.¹² In fact, the terms *surprise attack* and *surprise landing* occur over 83 times in this publication. The ultimate example of a surprise operation at the strategic level is, of course, the attack on Pearl Harbor. Incidentally, the plan for that particular attack originated from the Japanese navy, which was looking to repeat the feat of dealing a decisive blow such as the one at Tsushima in 1905.¹³ The

simultaneous attacks on the Philippines and Malaya were also intended to surprise the Allies and compel them to divide their forces. On the tactical level, a surprise offensive was to take the shape of nocturnal attacks, attacks on the rearguard of the opponent, involving several columns.¹⁴ A textbook example of such an attack involving all the aforementioned elements was the attack of the Sakaguchi Detachment on Tarakan.¹⁵

Paratroop landings were a novelty in the realm of surprise offensives. These were planned for attacks on the oil refineries and oil supplies in Balikpapan and Palembang in order to guarantee these strategic objectives falling undamaged into Japanese hands.¹⁶ Ultimately, the army only conducted paratroop landings at Palembang, with priority on the capture of the airfield. That was indeed taken by the Japanese with no damage, as was the largest of the two oil refineries. However, the Allied air force managed to destroy the still-functioning oil refinery a few days later.¹⁷ The paratroop landing at Palembang airfield indicates just how important the capture of airfields was considered to be and how essential the element of surprise was to avoiding destruction of this objective. This strategy failed completely when employed during the attack on Ledo airfield in Central Borneo. It was not until a month after the landing at Kuching in British Borneo that the Kawaguchi Detachment captured the totally destroyed airfield, which was considered to be of crucial importance to the air attacks on South Sumatra and West Java. The manuscript states that almost 8,100 men worked day and night to repair the airfield and bring in supplies. Just who those 8,100 men were is not clear; they were probably forced labourers from the native population. Despite their efforts, the airfield remained unusable during the further Japanese advance.¹⁸ On the other hand, on 1 March the Shōji Detachment managed to capture the important military airfield at Kalidjati on West Java in what is called a 'blitzkrieg-like' operation nine hours after the night landing at Eretan on the north coast of Java.¹⁹ It was a strategic victory. The day after, the Japanese air force, which had immediately started operating from Kalidjati, made short work of the 'major counterattack' undertaken by the colonial army.²⁰ After that, there was only a single line of resistance, the one in the Tjiater Pass, between the Shōji Detachment and Bandung, the military capital of Java.

The emphasis on surprise offensives required a great deal of improvisation and drive to succeed from Japanese commanders. But these qualities were expected of them. Japanese combat doctrine demanded 'imaginative leadership and initiative'.²¹ This suited a method of command and control that resembled the '*Auftragstaktik*' of the Prussian and German armies. This was 'a command method stressing decentralized initiative within an overall strategic design', as Gunther Rothenberg described it.²² That is precisely what we see in the succession of operation plans and orders, from senior to lower levels, in this publication. The commanders at the highest level set the objectives and determined the means, the campaign design and the time-schedule. Their subordinate commanders then decided in a top-down fashion, but always in close consultation, how these objectives should be realized. The operation plans laid down by the army- and division headquarters were seldom very detailed; so lower level commanders kept much freedom to act according their own views.²³ The staff officers were the links in the chain of this structure. Just as in the German army, they had to ensure that the operation plans of sub-commanders fitted in with senior commanders' intentions. They sometimes designed operation plans themselves or even led the operations in question.²⁴

This command structure, mission command as it is known today, was not without its drawbacks. Sometimes commanders were found to have misunderstood their objectives. For example, in 1941 Major General Kawaguchi appeared not to have understood the necessity of an immediate advance

to Ledo airfield after the capture of Kuching on Christmas Day. Southern Army Headquarters in Saigon had to remind him several times of his objective. The Headquarters refused to accept his explanation for the delay, i.e. the monsoon, destroyed bridges and unnavigable roads owing to knee-deep mud. It was only after Kawaguchi had set course for Pemangkat, 400 kilometers further down the coast, with an improvised fleet of requisitioned sailing and motor boats that Saigon was placated.²⁵

During the operations on Java, General Imamura, the Commander of the 16th Army, had difficulty keeping a grip on his sub-commanders after various ships had been hit, probably by 'friendly fire', during the landing in Bantam Bay.²⁶ Almost all communication equipment was lost and Imamura was without communication lines for days. The army commander had foreseen that, owing to the large distances between the landing locations and the widely dispersed objectives to be attacked, the four attacking groups would need to be given more autonomy. In order to prevent division and detachment commanders being too self-willed, they were issued with relatively detailed directives and assigned 'dedicated staff officers'.²⁷ Some commanders nevertheless drew up their own plans. On East Java, for example, the division commander had set his sights on dealing the decisive blow on the river Brantas. However, the detachment under Major General Abe had pushed forward so rapidly that the division commander only had to carry out rearguard skirmishes.²⁸ But the clearest example is of course the advance of the detachment under command of Colonel Shōji. Imamura had purposely selected him on the basis of the special bond between them, thinking that Shōji 'would be of one mind with him'.²⁹ Contrary to Imamura's operational directives, on 4 March Shōji decided to independently launch an attack on Bandung with his two battalions. Up until then, the resistance he had encountered had made no impression on him and he wanted to at least emulate the success that his fellow regimental commanders had achieved at Palembang.³⁰ He disregarded the advice given by his more cautious staff officer, all the more because the air force commander was prepared to support him.³¹ When Shōji informed General Imamura of his progress one day later, Imamura saw his move as a dangerous divergence from the operation plan. But to the Southern Army, he claimed that it was an outside chance, so that he wouldn't be accused of cowardice.³² This succession of events illustrates just how delicate the balance is between acting with initiative and acting recklessly. The result, victory or defeat, determines whether acting independently is applauded or maligned. Incidentally, this example shows the undiminished importance of traditional martial values such as honour, courage and determination in the Japanese army.³³

My last observation focuses on what is in some aspects the advanced character of the Japanese army. In contrast, other historians have emphasised its relatively traditional nature,³⁴ as it was indeed a light infantry army on plimsolls and bicycles, without heavy artillery and with few and only light tanks. The Japanese army retained indeed a doctrine which emphasised offensive operations, much the same as the Allied armies had before the first world war. But in other aspects, the Japanese army was surprisingly modern. During the inter-war years, Japan saw the value and possibilities of aircraft, both on land and at sea, as no other power did. The navy developed a doctrine which put the aircraft carrier instead of the battleship in a central role.³⁵ Just as in Germany, the air arm of the army developed a successful doctrine for air dominance and tactical air support during land operations. The deployment of paratroops, following the example of the German successes of spring 1940, was also modern.³⁶ The fact that the paratroop landings at Palembang were by no means a complete success clearly illustrates that such landings, although modern, are also difficult to carry out and prone to failure. The final modernism I want to draw attention to is the employment of 'black

clandestine broadcasts' made by the Southern Army in Saigon. These radio broadcasts, made between 1 and 9 March, created a great deal of disinformation, which disrupted the already chaotic defence by the Royal Netherlands Indies Army (KNIL) even further. The origin of the confusion over the KNIL's cease-fire – or capitulation – orders on 8 March can be found in these radio broadcasts.³⁷

This last detail illustrates once again what the strength of this impressive publication is: the large volume of detailed information on military operations about which we, up until now, literally only had a one-sided view. This important source can, as I have already mentioned, be used to compile a detailed comparison of information from both sides. This will allow anyone interested in this war in the Indonesian archipelago an opportunity to make a more balanced analysis of the fighting, more than was previously possible. The translation of this part of the *Senshi Sōsho* series therefore represents an important step in the historiography of the collective war experiences of Japan, the Netherlands and Indonesia.

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¹ H.T. Bussemaker, *Paradise in peril. Western colonial power and Japanese expansion in South-East Asia, 1905-1941* (PhD UvA, 2001) 757.

² *The Invasion of the Dutch east Indies. War History Series (Senshi Soshō) nr. 3.* Compiled by the War History Office of the National Defense College of Japan, edited and translated by Willem Remmelink (Leiden University Press 2015) 59.

³ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 4-9, 44-48, 56-69, 76-81, 100, 155.

⁴ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 267.

⁵ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 6.

⁶ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 8, 9.

⁷ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 133, 151.

⁸ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 428, 448-450.

⁹ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, SS 25, 26, 59.

¹⁰ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 26, 42, 276, 420, 425, 456

¹¹ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 42.

¹² E.J. Drea, *Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet tactical Combat 1939*. Fort Leavenworth Papers, Jan. 1981, 17-18; see also J.A. Drea *In the Service of the Emperor. Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (1998) 1-14.

¹³ W. March, 'Different shades of blue'. Interwar air power doctrine development. Germany and Japan. *The Canadian Air Force Journal*, spring 2009, vol. 2 no. 2, 21-26.

¹⁴ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 408.

¹⁵ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 174-181.

¹⁶ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 82, 355: On January 18 the oilreserves at Balikpapan were already destroyed.

¹⁷ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 272-273, 282, 333-344.

¹⁸ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 311, 312, 315, 451-453.

¹⁹ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 193, 507-508.

²⁰ J.J. Nortier, P.Kuijt, P.M.H. Groen *De Japanse aanval op Java, Maart 1942* (Amsterdam 1994) 121-134.

²¹ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 19; Kyoichi Tachikawa, 'General Yamashita and his style of leadership', in B. Bond, Kyoichi Tachikawa ed., *British and Japanese military leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945* (Abingdon 2004) 78. 'Its conduct (of larger units PG) requires the skill to take advantage of the operational situation by especially brave and bold decisions and manoeuvre'.

²² G.E. Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment', in P. Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton 1986) 296.

²³ For example *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 69, 81-88, 95-98, 142-145, 155, 173-176, 198, 226-233, 237-240, 245, 259, 270-273, 282-284, 288-289, 316-319, 353, 392-393, 404-409, 434, 460-467, 538-540, 549, 551. Compare: Faris R. Kirkland, 'Combat Leadership Styles: Empowerment versus Authoritarianism', *Parameters* (December 1990) 62, 65-66.

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- ²⁴ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 102, 171, 194, 202, 205, 208, 240, 251, 272, 283, 345, 355, 369, 465; compare Rothenberg, 'Moltke', 301.
- ²⁵ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 197-203, 220.
- ²⁶ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 471.
- ²⁷ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 460.
- ²⁸ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 549, 558-563
- ²⁹ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 251.
- ³⁰ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 512, 513, 516.
- ³¹ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 518, 521.
- ³² *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 498-500, 502-503.
- ³³ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 90.
- ³⁴ Bussemaker, *Paradise in peril*, 746; Drea, *Nomonhan*, 90.
- ³⁵ March, 'Different shades of blue', 25-26
- ³⁶ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 23.
- ³⁷ *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, 576-585.