



No 18 NEI Squadron, Australian War Memorial

The Territory Remembers

No.18 NEI Squadron and its Australian roots

By Elmer Mesman

The Dutch held many colonial possessions in what is now Indonesia before WWII. When the Japanese forces began to push south after Pearl Harbour, they drove out many thousands of people whose entire lives had been bound up with Holland's far-flung possessions. Some of this ended disastrously. The attack on Broome in early March 1942 was the second-biggest air raid in terms of fatalities in Australia's history. But the Dutch forces regrouped and came back. One important operation was mounted from the Northern Territory with a squadron of bombers.

Archerfield, RAAF Canberra

After the Dutch colony of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) capitulated to the Japanese on March 8 1942, thousands of Dutch and Indonesians working for the Dutch fled to Australia. They included many military formerly working for KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlands Indie Leger – Royal Netherlands East Indies Army). Already on 4 April 1942, not even a month after the capitulation, No.18 NEI Squadron was formed at RAAF Station Canberra known as Archerfield.

Major General van Hoyen, Operating Commander NEI Forces in Australia and Air Chief Marshall Sir Charles Burrett, RAAF Chief of Air Staff, agreed to form a Dutch Squadron of 18 B-25 Mitchell twin-engine bombers. This Squadron would be under the operational control of the RAAF but its personnel and aircraft would be provided by the NEI authorities. In case of insufficient NEI staff, the RAAF would provide further personnel to complement

the Squadron to full operational levels. When formed in April 1942, No.18 Squadron consisted of 80 NEI staff in Canberra and 50 at the NEI Commission for Australia in Melbourne.

An agreed 18 B-25 Mitchell bombers were originally assigned to 18 Squadron mid-March 1942. But due to immediate need by the US 5th Air Force for use in New Guinea, it would take another month before the first five B-25s arrived at Archerfield, RAAF Canberra. The Dutch NEI base at Canberra primarily had a training role. NEI Rear Admiral Coster made it clear that as soon as No.18 Squadron was ready for action both tactically and operationally, it would be placed under the control of the USA supreme commander General Douglas MacArthur in the same way as all the other forces. When establishing and setting up the squadron's base in Canberra, it would remain under Dutch command until the NEI headquarters in Melbourne would declare it operationally fit to hand over to RAAF control.

Although the time 18 Squadron spent in Canberra was intended to be for training only to get acquainted with the their bomber, it did not take long before it was deployed to good use in anti-submarine and patrol operations, with its first operational success on 5 June 1942 sinking a small Japanese submarine off the East Australia Coast. ¹

On July 6 1942, 18 Squadron was declared a Netherlands unit and no longer a RAAF command, although the Australian RAAF personnel assigned to keep it at its

strength would be available as long as necessary. In fact, this would remain the case throughout the entire period on Australian soil during World War II.

Meanwhile, 18 new B-25 Mitchell bombers arrived from the US and brought 18 NEI Squadron to its full operational standard. Modification to the new factory aircraft had to be made but with the lack of proper spare parts and additional equipment being universal to all

squadrons, priority was given to units in combat rather than training units. The need for larger fuel tanks would later result in dangerous and even catastrophic situations.

The need to move away from the cold climate during the winter in Canberra became imperative. Most NEI personnel had come from warmer and more tropical climates and had a rough time getting used to local conditions, not to mention the primitive tent housing provided.

Finally in October 1942, 18 Squadron was declared ready for operational services. As moving a Squadron that grew to 40 NEI officers, 210 NEI airmen with eight RAAF officers and 300 RAAF airmen would take quite some time and effort, Admiral Coster requested the unit be put under RAAF control from 1 December. This gave the time to set up base at the allocated aerodrome at MacDonald south of Darwin to become the first wartime operational Dutch base in the Northern Territory.

McDonald Field

McDonald Airstrip² was constructed in the second half of 1942 as a basic sole airstrip, with taxiways in two loops at one side for positioning aircraft. It was first known as Burkholder Field and was situated some 16km northwest of Pine Creek. It was not up to standard to accommodate NEI 18 Squadron with its medium range B-25 bombers. The airstrip was made out of gravel and too short for fully-loaded and heavily-armed bombers. Formation landing was impossible, as the airstrip was also too narrow and the shoulders of the airstrip too soft with the risk of getting bogged upon landing. The airstrip was basically the only part of the aerodrome and a campsite to house its personnel was non-existent.

Everything from extending the strip and setting up a camp to include kitchens, waterholes, tents, toilet facilities, operation huts, etc. had to be erected by the Advance Party arriving on 11 December 1942. Upon arrival disappointment amongst the officers and airmen was all too obvious. Some quotes from the officers clearly show their feelings:

“A bigger mess than here in MacDonald is almost unthinkable.”
 “MacDonald Airbase was nothing. The crews had to make everything on their own. Initially it didn't even have a proper airstrip.”

“At start we didn't even have tents, no officer's mess and hardly any food. We went out hunting to shoot Caribou's³ to get meat for food. Morale was not as good as we hoped.”

Needless to say 18th Squadron first Commanding Officer

Major Fiedeldij had a hard time getting his airbase of ground allowing his Squadron to get up and running in the shortest possible time. Hence no operational sorties other than familiarisation flights over surrounding areas would be carried out in December 1942. Finally on 18 January 1943 18th NEI Squadron's move to MacDonald was officially completed, more than a month after the first advance party arrived. It needs to be mentioned though that these harsh conditions and circumstances weren't isolated to 18 NEI Squadron alone. RAAF and US squadrons and units arriving to the Northern Territory around the same time between July 1942 and early 1943 experienced similar difficulties.

No.18 NEI Squadron had a diverse role in activities being assigned to it when operating from the North Western Area, as it was called during wartime operations:

1. Sea reconnaissance, flights between six and seven hours over occupied territory mainly the former NEI islands. These operations were primarily to scout for potential Japanese attacks and enemy shipping between the islands.
2. Day and night bombing of Japanese targets.
3. Low level 'mast heads height' attacks on Japanese shipping.
4. Reconnaissance and photography of special targets.
5. Special assignments like leaflet dropping with war propaganda over enemy territory.
6. Friendly shipping protection between Torres Strait and Melville Island all the way up to Darwin
7. Dusk to dawn stand-by patrol.
8. Target practise and training together with other (fighter) squadrons in the same area.

The operational range of the Mitchell B-25 Medium Range bomber would be the centre of a bitter debate and negotiations between 18th NEI Commanding Officer Fiedeldij, with his NEI headquarters in Melbourne and RAAF Headquarters NW Area. RAAF command pushed

the operational range to the maximum limit as indicated by the B-25's designer's specification, ignoring a maximum bombload, extra ammunition for protection and enough fuel for evasive action.

It took Major Fiedeldij until April 27 1943 to convince RAAF, NW Area Command and the NEI headquarters to limit operational range requirement

from 1700 to 1200 statute miles. This came only after yet another loss of one of his aircraft due to fuel shortage. The B-25 made a forced landing on the beach of Melville Island (B-25 N5-133 recovered and salvaged in 1982) after a raid of 1250 miles, attacked by three Japanese fighter aircraft, and damaged. The NEI headquarters was convinced only after a trial mission with a B-25 on reconnaissance to New Guinea of 1375 miles returned with only 120 US gallons of fuel left in its tanks, well below its safety limit.

The 18 NEI Squadron operated in the NW Area focussing on East Timor, Tanimbar, Kei and Aroe Islands. The Japanese Navy Marine Base in Ambon and South West coast of New-Guinea was a major target for the bomb loads of No 18 NEI Squadron from Batchelor. Most missions could only be accomplished by refuelling and loading of bomb ordnance in Darwin to the north on the way to and from the target area, making it time consuming, inefficient and exhausting for the crew.

Coinciding with this were other difficulties. Darwin was insufficiently equipped with only British bombloads not fitting in the American B-25 bomb racks and fuel bowsers weremade to accommodate much older and British aircraft types like Hudson, Beaufort and Beaufighters. Such aspects made the position of MacDonald airfield less and less desirable for No.18 NEI squadron. The only and needed solution was improved aircraft with better armament for defence while in flight, and relocation of the entire NEI 18 Squadron to a base closer to the coastline.

Batchelor Airfield

On 12 and 13 April 1943 the Squadron finally made the move to the newly assigned airfield based in Batchelor. This airfield was closer to Darwin and much better equipped as it housed both USAAF and RAAF squadrons operating both small and large British and American aircraft, including B17 long-range bombers.



Improvement of maintenance and service levels compared to MacDonald were encouraging for both officers and airmen. The move to Batchelor brought more than the necessary operational advantages. For personnel, it brought a camp site with all the facilities the personnel had missed in previous camps in Canberra and

MacDonald. They included electricity in every tent, telecom between internal sites, an open air cinema, sporting facilities and swimming areas, local camp broadcasting with music, bus services, hospital and church services, and last but not least hot and cold water. No wonder that Batchelor would remain the base for No.18 NEI Squadron until almost the end of the war.

During September 1943 replacement crews from the Dutch Flying School at Jackson, Mississippi, arrived at Batchelor and brought their own better-equipped B-25's, replacing the older ones with heavier nose armament and longer range fuel tanks. The arrival of the new recruits and aircraft, better facilities and joint operations on Batchelor Airfield with the USAAF and RAAF gave the well needed boost to the NEI personnel which, by now, had grown to an average of 82 officers and 492 other ranks by the end of 1944.

In 1944 the Squadron had a total of 1240 operational sorties ranging from leaflet dropping, low-level strafing and bombing of strategic targets well into enemy territory. The end of 1944 also meant an end of No.18 NEI Squadron at Batchelor Airfield as 79 Wing (including No 2 RAAF and No 18 NEI Squadrons) being assigned to Jacquinot Bay in the New Britain Area (Papoea New Guinea).

No.18 NEI Squadron operations from Batchelor ended from 1 May 1945 and all staff and equipment relocated. Already in June the same year, No. 79 Wing had moved further out to Morotai, one of the eastern Indonesian larger islands strategically positioned closer to Japan. Movement of 79 Wing was so rapid that some personnel, including both RAAF and NEI staff, did not even have the chance to get ashore in Jacquinot Bay but had to stay for a total of eight weeks pending a decision to move on to Balikpapan, Borneo. Finally when the decision was made, 79 Wing including No.18 NEI Squadron arrived at Balikpapan on 17

July 1945. This base would be the last where 18 Squadron was a combined RAAF and NEI operation, as from 25 November 1945, the RAAF component to the 18th NEI Squadron was disbanded ending a four year association.

On 15 January 1946, No 18 NEI Squadron became a total Dutch squadron but, following pressure from the US and UNO, the Netherlands began cooperating with the Indonesian Nationalists who fought for independence from the Dutch. All occupied airfields were returned to the Indonesians and the Dutch squadrons disbanded or transferred to the now free Republic of Indonesia. No.18 Squadron was the last Dutch squadron to be transferred to the Indonesians and finally disbanded on 25 June 1950. Most personnel returned to the Netherlands or took their discharge in America or Australia.

In total 4000 men of 38 nationalities served in No.18 NEI Squadron during the eight years of its operational life. While fighting the Japanese No.18 NEI Squadron lost 19 Mitchell B-25 bombers and 102 of its crew, with 21 of them being RAAF personnel assigned to No.18 Squadron. Lest we forget.

Notes

1. Ed: Dutch records may be mistaken here. There was no Japanese submarine lost around that time off the east coast, although there were plenty of attacks made on possible contacts.
2. Ed: the author notes three different spellings for this strip: McDonald, McDonnell, and MacDonald. (The strip was indeed originally called Burkeholder.) According to aviation historian Bob Alford the correct spelling is McDonald.
3. Ed: it is unclear what is meant by this, but presumably a Dutch officer's perception of a buffalo, then present in the NT in large numbers before being shot out half a century later, might have been confused with a Canadian caribou.

References

- De Militaire Luchtvaart van het KNIL in de Jaren 1942-1945, OG Ward
- Up in Darwin with the Dutch, Gordon Wallace 1983
- Australian Air Force since 1911, NM Parnell & CA Lynch
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Elmer Mesman is the Commercial Manager Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg) for Qantas Airways, based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Besides his professional career within Qantas he is a freelance journalist travelling the world for several local magazines ranging from sports to historical publications. His fascination with aviation, WWII and Australia brought him to the Northern Territory in September 2015 to explore all the sites and traces of Dutch wartime influences, with No.18 NEI Squadron being one of them as main topic. With emphasis on 70 years of liberation in Europe he thinks it is time to put the forgotten role and sacrifices of fellow countrymen on the other side of the world in the spotlight.

