

A DUTCH NEW GUINEA (WEST IRIAN) TRAVEL STORY

by Ken Wilkinson

During December 1944, a Dutch Kittyhawk Squadron based at Merauke sent some of their pilots up to our squadron for operational experience as we were very busy at the time, attacking airfields, oil fields etc as far afield as the Halmahera Islands, which were a long distance from Noemfoor Island.

After flying several missions they returned to Merauke led by their CO, Major Maurenbrecker, unfortunately one of their aircraft went unserviceable and was not ready until the next day. On the morning of 3rd January 1945, Flight Sergeant Wal Tychsen and myself were advised to accompany the Dutch officer, stay the night and fly back the next day.

We were to fly direct to Merauke and on checking the maps, we noticed that there was a mountain range up to 16,500 feet (5029 metres), so it was decided to fly at 19,000 ft (5790 metres), so after lunch we headed off.



*Ken Wilkinson & Lyn Stillman
Noemfoor 1944*

I must mention at this stage that the Dutch aircraft were early model N15s which did not have proper blind flying instruments, namely artificial horizon and directional gyros, whereas we had later model N25s and 30s which had the full blind flying panel.

We climbed on track and switched on our oxygen supply as we went above 10,000 feet.

After a while we could see a huge cumuli-nimbus black cloud system ahead of us, and our training was to not venture into these turbulent clouds as they could break up aircraft, so the leader should have turned back to be on the safe side rather than risk three pilots and aircraft.

Instead he bored straight into it and the buffeting was terrible, I was on the leader's left and very close for cloud flying and I started to get the awful rushing sensations common in cloud flying when normal senses go out of control and you must trust your instruments implicitly.

I noticed that Wal turned away and as it happened he returned to Noemfoor, then the leader slid out of sight and I was left alone in this shocking situation, so I naturally headed for self-preservation by focusing on my instruments which to my horror were spinning out of control as my aircraft had exceeded the gyro's limits.

I was then left with the basic instruments ie turn and bank, airspeed indicator and inclinometer, so I firstly concentrated on levelling wings as I could sense that I was in a spiral dive and I reckoned that I was close to that high mountain range.

Wings level, I eased back on the stick to reduce speed when everything happened, my sun glasses fell off, the oxygen mask unclipped and the stick jumped out of my hand, it was vibrating badly and I had to use both hands to grab it. I was puzzled as to what caused this problem, but as speed reduced it stopped and then I was through the cloud, right side up and flying OK.

My main concern during this worst cloud situation that I ever experienced, was that I was going to my death in the wilds of New Guinea just as I was almost due for two weeks home leave.

At this stage I thought that the Dutchman would have crashed into the mountain, when I suddenly heard his voice calling me and that gave me a lot of pleasure. I am sure that he was also very relieved to hear mine.

I told him that I would continue on to Merauke as planned, but I went down to a lower altitude hoping to pick up a landmark or two, but it was hopeless, so I flew the course originally planned and eventually reached the coast well to the west of Merauke. Fortunately the weather was fairly good, so I was able to head in the right direction.

When I was about five minutes from Merauke, I heard the Dutchman calling for landing instructions and then I started to descend and as I built up speed the stick jumped out of my

hand again. I noticed that the indicated airspeed was 250 mph so I reduced speed and the terrible vibration stopped.

The landing on the Marsden steel runway was without incident and I was very pleased to taxi in to the Dutch squadron area and switch off.

I was greeted by their engineering officer who wanted to know if there were any problems with my aircraft and I explained the vibrating stick problem and he appeared non-plussed but said that they would do a visual inspection which soon revealed the problem. The trim tab rod on one of the elevators had snapped because of the turbulence and had affected the aerodynamics of the aircraft. They replaced it.

While still near the aircraft an Australian ground staff chap asked me if my name was Wilkinson, and I naturally replied in the affirmative, and as his face started to look familiar he said his name was Rose and we were in the same form at Caulfield Grammar School

I remembered him well as he used to tell me about his older brother Ian who was a pilot graduate at Point Cook just before the war and my classmate kept me posted about his older brother's activities as he knew that I was keen to be a RAAF pilot when old enough, hopefully. I later met his brother but more of that later.

I was driven to the Dutch camp and allocated a tent. As I was an NCO, I had to live with the Indonesian pilots who were all NCOs, but I used the Officers' Mess and was looked after by Dutch officers. They had real Aussie fresh meat and beer and it was terrific. We were on American rations, which did not include any fresh meat, and we had very little beer normally.

We went to the pictures that night and saw a wonderful show 'Thank Your Lucky Stars' which was got up for war-time morale building purposes and it was a Warner Bros Spectacular and starred all Warner's stars including Bette Davis, Ann Sheridan, Dinah Shore and I loved it. I have seen this show at least six times and even have a video of it.

Next day I tested the aircraft and it was OK, I was then advised that another seven Dutch officers were going to join our Squadron and I was to accompany them.



FtSgts Lyn Stillman, Ken Wilkinson and Jack Gauntlett, Noemfoor Beach

We took off and headed for Hollandia and as we climbed to our cruising altitude the weather was shocking and the leader decided to turn back and I agreed with his decision, so we got back without any problems. That night we saw another film 'Cab in the Sky' which had an all black cast I think and featured Cab Galloway's Orchestra and Lena Horne singing songs, one of which was her classic 'Stormy Weather'. It was great spending another night there if only for the food, grog and entertainment. The Dutch had a good war there, although Merauke was a swampy, insect infested place.

The following morning we set off again, even though the local weather was not good and after flying between dreadful layers of dangerous looking cloud systems, the leader again correctly turned back. Unfortunately the weather had closed in at Merauke and there were eight of us in tight line abreast formation descending through rather turbulent air. When our ETA was nearing we could not see the deck at all. When close formation flying in cloud you have to watch the aircraft next to you very intently, but I managed to look at my altimeter quickly at times and it was alarming. My last peep was 100 feet and no land or sea in sight, when suddenly we were through and over the sea. The leader turned 180°. To get back to the coastline and we eventually found Merauke and for the first time since my training days I had to do a low level circuit at 50 feet with seven other aircraft. Not a great experience as we had to do very wide circuits and it was easy to lose sight of the strip and the aircraft in front of you, as the Kittyhawk with wheels and flaps down and at low speed, had a very high nose up attitude which affected the view considerably.

Fortunately all aircraft got down safely and that remains the lowest let down procedure that I have ever experienced.

Two of the Dutch pilots took me to Merauke village where there was a main drag with a couple of cafes would you believe? We went into one for our lunch and I have never enjoyed a meal so much. We ate a large bowl full of rice, chicken and vegetables in a soup. It was more appreciated I guess because an hour or so earlier we did not think that we would have another meal.

On the third attempt after lunch we made it to Hollandia, we were in sight of jungle, swamps and mountains and I was very much aware that I was flying a single engine aircraft over that most inhospitable country. We had been told that some tribes had never seen a white man and it was believed some were cannibals.

From Hollandia we flew over sea most of the trip in rain just the opposite from the previous leg, but my trusty Allison engine never faltered. Fortunately I never had engine failure in the robust Kittyhawk.

In retrospect I can recall flying in some terrible weather in Dutch New Guinea and the Halmahera group, but the Merauke experience was the worst of my flying career in war and peace. One can only be thankful for the excellent training that the RAAF provided even in wartime for instrument flying and hours spent in the Link Trainer which was known as the 'horror box'. On Tiger Moths and Wirraways we were taught spin recovery on basic instruments, while 'under the hood'.

My logbook records for the trip were:

| | | | |
|--------|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| 3.1.45 | Kittyhawk A29-810 | Noemfoor-Merauke | 3.45 |
| 4.1.45 | Kittyhawk A29-810 | Test tail flutter | .40 |
| 5.1.45 | Kittyhawk A29-810 | Merauke-Hollandia return | .45 |
| 6.1.45 | Kittyhawk A29-810 | Merauke-Hollandia return | 1.00 |
| 6.1.45 | Kittyhawk A29-810 | Merauke-Hollandia | 2.30 |
| 6.1.45 | Kittyhawk A29-810 | Hollandia-Noemfoor | 2.20 |
| | | Total | <u>11.00</u> |

Note: As I had volunteered to stay in the RAAF I was posted to Urinquiry at the end of 1945 and Wing Commander I F Rose was Officer Commanding and I mentioned to him that I went to school with his brother and we had a general chat about things.

In the early 1950s when I was flying with No 21 City of Melbourne Fighter Squadron he was then the Director of Flying Safety and I met him at Laverton a few times but never saw my classmate again.

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