

## **Johannes J. Loep**

### **Australia Remembers 1945**

I was invited to give a short speech at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Submariners Reunion in Fremantle, about my experiences with the Dutch submarines and to give it a suitable title.

I thought Reluctant Hero or Reluctant Conscript. I decided 'Reluctant Conscript', I shall explain why.

"Would you like to go to Australia?"

That was the question the Dutch consul in Manilla asked me. I said yes, even at that time I didn't know very much about Australia besides the few things I had learned at school as a boy in Holland. Such as Melbourne, Sydney and the fact that a Dutch commercial plane called the Uiver won the London to Melbourne air race in 1934 and we all had a national holiday.

I sailed to Batavia (now Jakarta) where I found out that my new job was to pick up a Dutch bucket dredge, called the "Nanking" which had to go back to the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), after it had completed the dredging of the Hobart harbour for the new bridge in 1941.

We started our trip to Australia onboard the M.V. Gordon of the Blue Funnel Line. Things became a bit more warlike at night. No smoking on deck, because the warnings had come, there was German raiders around the Australian coast. We arrived in Fremantle, for most of us for the first time. I was then 25 years old.

There was not much evidence that there was a war on. The following day we boarded the MV Duntroon on our way to Melbourne. Due to engine trouble, we arrived a day late and missed the Melbourne Cup, not that this worried us, we had never heard of it anyway.

Now to Hobart, to make the dredge ready for its sea trip. One has to see a bucket dredge, to know what it means, to make a long sea voyage, especially in wartime. One foot freeboard.

On the grapevine we heard that the Sydney was sunk by a German raider. But we had to go to Newcastle, Bowen, Townsville, and Cairns, next port of call Thursday Island. Then it happened, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1941 – the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour; we waited for a week, fishing big sharks etc. then the order came, 'Proceed to Darwin'.

Having sailed right around Australia, we had not seen any defence, ship or plane anywhere. While we waited in Darwin, some smart Alec discovered we had to go to Koepang in Timor. We had to empty our only hold in the dredge, so that the Australian Air Force could load 15 tons of bombs, which they did on Christmas day 1941, actually the lumpers did it, and got paid £2 an hour.

On the way to Koepang we got stranded on an island called Roti, after a few hours we managed to refloat the dredge, minus one propeller, and we slowly crawled into Koepang, where the Australian airmen unloaded the bombs. Thank God. Our sea voyage ended in Soerabaja, where I was paid off.

Two days later I was called up for military service, with the option: Army or Navy, I chose the Navy. My training lasted only a short time; they needed tradesman more than anything else.

The war started to hot up, regular bombing of the base and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1942 we were ordered to leave the base. I found my way to a place called Tjilitjap on the south coast of Java, where a ship the M.V. Janssens, a submarine supply ship was ready to take us to Australia. Before we left the outer harbour, the native crew, jumped ship and we had to take over.

First day out, the Japanese found us and machine-gunned the ship.

After a discussion, some decided it was too dangerous to continue and asked to leave. The captain asked for volunteers, to take the ship to Australia, I was one of them. After all it paid off to be a reluctant conscript, at least I was able to escape Java and come to Australia, where we arrived on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> March 1942.

What a beautiful sight it was for us onboard the Dutch submarine supply ship "M.V. Janssens" to see Fremantle after ten days at sea, from Java to Fremantle. And not much to eat for about 7 days. The ambulances were waiting to take the wounded seamen from the Java sea battle, some Dutch and Americans off the cruisers Houston and Marble Head. The Yanks made a picture of it, the story of Dr. Wasser.

Coming ashore was like coming home, we received a hero's welcome; at least it lifted our self-esteem. We all received a £1 note, the first thing we did was to go to a restaurant for a decent meal. Before taking our order, the waitress placed a plate with a dozen slices of bread on our table, within a minute we asked for another helping. She was so amazed to see the bread gone; I explained to her that we hardly had anything to eat for the last week. After a good meal, which cost us 1/6 each, we left to see the town. Wherever we went, we were treated like heroes and didn't have to pay for any drinks. At the end of the day, I still had 18/6 in my pocket.

The navy got bigger; they established a new HQ in the CML building at St. George's Terrace. More subs started to arrive, K8, K9, K11 and K12. The K8 required some men in the engine room and they picked me. Having survived the trip to Australia, I was sure this was the end of me.

As the M.V. Janssens was leaving we transferred to an old merchant ship the Wang Pu, anchored in the middle of the harbour. The Americans were to ferry all our men and stores to and from the Wang Pu.

In the Dutch navy, each person is entitled to a bottle of beer a day when in port. The American navy is of course "Dry". This nearly started another war, after some high level negotiations, they brought our first load containing beer. After the unloading, we invited the boat crew onboard for a drink and they left some time later in a very happy mood, "war averted".

In the merchant navy I had learned to speak English, thus I went with the chief bosun, to arrange for our daily food supply from the American navy. Our chief was a bit of an old grumpy, used to peacetime navy rules, everything had to be weighed and checked. The Yankee storekeeper soon told him, you can only get sides of pork or beef, no weighing. While grumpy was looking around for what was available, the Yank took me aside, and said, Dutchy come and have a drink (even though it was against all navy regulations). He liked his bourbon, and so did I.

Life went smoothly for a while, overhauling the diesels and other machinery. Then one day we went for a test run. My first taste to be underwater. With all the noises and whistling I suddenly discovered we were underwater, "No Smoking". In May 1942 the Yanks inspected our old rust heap and declared it unfit for war service.

At one stage our navy HQ bought a small motorboat. I had the job to install a reconditioned inboard engine in the boat, which was moored at the Fresh Water Yacht Club. I could have spent the whole war there, but it lasted only one week.

Six of us were transferred to England. Fremantle and Perth had been good to us. When the day came for leaving, we assembled at the Perth railway station, to berth a troop train to Melbourne and Sydney, and from there, by boat to Auckland New Zealand and Britain. Some of our chaps had girlfriends and saying good-bye came very hard. When the train was due to leave, a lady played "Maoris Farewell" on the piano in the bar of the station. It was very moving, a lot of tears, even I was moved by it and swore I would return to Perth.

August 1943, Dundee Scotland, we had just returned from a patrol on the Norwegian coast, onboard the Dutch submarine O15, when another Dutch sub arrived. I found out that she might be going to the Far East. The war in Europe had become much better for the Allies and that's why more ships would be sent to the Far East.

One of the crew was very keen to remain in Europe and I was willing to change with him, hoping that if the sub went to the Far East, we might finish up in Australia. Because Trincomalee in Ceylon was the base for surface ships, crews of surface ships didn't mix too well with submariners. My transfer was agreed to, so off to the Far East. We spent a week in Colombo dry dock and then the order came, "Proceed to Fremantle". THREE CHEERS.

I had picked a winner; it is hard to describe the joy when we arrived in Fremantle, a harbour full of all kinds of nationalities and ships, both war and

merchant. When we docked, an American navy band played Roll out the Barrel. After a medical check and a hot bath, remember at that time Dutch submarines provided drinking water only for drinking and cooking. Next stop the American navy canteen for free beer, for two hours.

We would be attached to the American submarines fleet, for special duties.

We, that is our sister sub the K14, were moored in front of the Orion, an American submarine mother ship. We received all our supplies from here, including one carton of American cigarettes a week.

Things had somewhat changed, since I last left Fremantle in 1942. Our base was now in the ex-American flying boat base at Crawley Bay. There were barracks for the land based naval personnel, including a wet canteen, with one of the best dance floors in Perth. Every Sunday night, there was a live music band and no shortage of beer.

The navy had decided that the crews of the submarines, while in port, in between patrol, would be paid to board with local people, in the Perth suburbs. Three of us stayed with Mr. And Mrs Thomas in Waverley Street, Shenton Park. It cost us £1-10 a week, which we paid even when we were not in port and out on patrol duties for 3-4 weeks.

Early in 1944 when we came back from a patrol, the navy booked us in for a week in the Hyde Park hotel. At the end of the week, an urgent message went out to all submarine crews, to report back to base the next morning. All the ships evacuated the harbour, the subs went to sea to form a defence and protect the coast. After 3 days we received the all clear, false alarm.

Our duties with the Americans, was mostly to drop people with radios on different islands in the Java Sea. Our hardest job was very often coming through the Lombok Strait, into the Java Sea, due to the strong current. The Yanks were always willing to help.

Once in a while on a Sunday, we hired a taxi, one with a charcoal burner on the back, for the trip to the Rockingham Hotel, where on a Sunday, only for a few insiders the bar was open. There was no Sunday trading during the war years. It was only a small back room, but we had a good time. Only the taxi driver was not always the most sober of us.

October 1944, we had to go into dry dock; the only place was Williamstown, Victoria. It was the time for the racing spring carnival. I went to see the Caulfield Cup and backed the winner. I made £25. The whole dockyard advised me to put my winnings on the same horse in the Melbourne Cup, which I did. Only halfway during the race my horse fell and broke its leg, and I did my dough.

On returning from patrol, going south from Geraldton, we entered what was called "Bomb free alley". That was a narrow strip, all returning subs had to use, on the way to Fremantle. A torpedo was fired at us. Later on we found

out that it was the last torpedo the USS Nautilus had. Luckily it missed. In Fremantle they apologised for it and over a few drinks in the naval canteen, we accepted their apologies.

Early in '45 a cyclone hit Exmouth. Damaging the batteries of our sister submarines the K14, she had to return to Fremantle. We had to stay in Darwin and take over her next patrol. For the next few days the navy sent us to a so-called rest camp, metal beds with cyclone mesh and no mattresses. Toilets were an open latrine, a hundred yards away, we were glad to go back to the sub.

Back on patrol, near the southeast coast of Java, we spotted a small motorboat; we had to fire a few shots to make her stop. When we came closer, the crew jumped ship and swam ashore. One man, the boat's engineer, stayed on as he had a bullet imbedded in his left nipple. When we had him onboard, our quartermaster, with the help of a penknife, removed the bullet. With a bit of sulphur powder, he survived to be interned in Fremantle.

Saturday May 5<sup>th</sup> 1945, when the war in Holland ended we were in the Ascot hotel. I asked the bar manager to give every one in the bar a drink at 4pm, coinciding with the time in Holland becoming free. The manager did it all right, not only in the bar where we were drinking, but also in the other two bars. After that everybody came around and returned the drinks. Come closing time at 6pm, the bar manager, not only said forget about the bill, but he also gave me a carton of cigarettes.

A few more patrols, in the Indian Ocean, to speed up the war.

Early in August 1945 we arrived back in Fremantle. My landlady, Mrs Thomas, asked me to escort a young lady to one of her Red Cross dances. I couldn't refuse, seeing it was for the Red Cross. I had to behave, not too many drinks before I met my blind date. It changed my whole life, because I fell in love with Nance, first up. I enjoyed the dance very much.

August 14<sup>th</sup> 1945, the daughter of the people (O'Keefe) next door in Shenton Park needed an escort to a Masonic ladies night, so I obliged. About 10pm, the news came in, the Japanese would surrender. Suddenly everybody went home to be with family and friends. "What a relief." The whole street dug up all sorts of drinks and we had an all-night party till the early hours of the morning.

The next day, VP day, after the whole day off to celebrate with friends and strangers we had to go back to the sub. A few days later, I was transferred to a base job, and the K15 returned to Indonesia without me. I stayed in Freo until just before Xmas '45 when I was transferred to another sub, the "Tygerhaai" for duties in Indonesia. I had one trip back to Fremantle in June '46 for 3 weeks, then back to Indonesia.

The only thing wrong, due to the Dutch navy red tape, it took more than two years before I could leave Indonesia permanently and Nance and I could get married. The first time by proxy in Macassar in Celebes and the second time,

a church wedding in Australia. I left Indonesia and received a Honourable Discharge in Melbourne in December 1947 and on December 24<sup>th</sup> 1947, Nance and I were finally together, after a church marriage service in Shenton Park.

I had £5-0-0 left when I started my civil life, and a job in the Midland Railway workshops.

During the Submariners Conference at Fremantle Maritime Museum in 1995, we were kept very busy with all sorts of official functions, during the day and evening. Afterwards I wondered how Nance managed to keep up with going out so often, as she was very unwell at this stage. On Friday night 24<sup>th</sup> March at the Conference dinner, we sat with the Dutch Commanding Officer Submarine Service Captain J.M. van der Ham, Neil van Hazel RNN (Ret.), his wife Margaret, Gwen and Andre Bruinhout, he was an old shipmate of mine onboard the "K XV". The captain presented me with his own Gold Submarine Badge, as I had never received any official medal or recognition, monetary or otherwise, from the Dutch navy.

Nance and I were happily married in 1995 when unfortunately on the 13<sup>th</sup> August Nance passed away after being married for 48 years.

I am still alive November 2004.