

An Indonesian sailor from
a naval band meets Prince
Bernhard at the Netherlands
Exhibition in Belfast, May
1943 (collection NIOD | 93178)

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Indonesian Personnel
in the Royal
Netherlands Navy

This two-part article examines the Royal Netherlands Navy's (Koninklijke Marine, KM) longstanding practice of using indigenous sailors in its East Indies squadron. It argues that the Netherlands decision to use Indonesian personnel in its naval forces in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) resulted in a peacetime advantage in terms of numbers of sailors on duty but ultimately a disadvantage in times of crisis when Indonesian sailors acted against the interests of the Netherlands state. In part one (November 2024 issue) the article briefly traces the Netherlands decision to begin and then expand indigenous

recruitment, including the internal debate among KM officers about this practice. The landmark event in the KM's history during the 1930s, a 1933 mutiny on the armored ship Hr.Ms. *De Zeven Provinciën* that trained Indonesian personnel, continues the story. In this second part the article turns to the war years when manpower concerns became even more acute and concludes with the post-war independence movement and the gradual ending of KM use of indigenous sailors.

LEES VERDER →

The NEI Campaign

Japan attacked the colonial possessions of the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands in December 1941. Major losses suffered by the United States Navy at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the Royal Navy off Singapore permitted the Japanese to quickly conquer vast areas of Southeast Asia and the western Pacific Ocean. The morale of KM personnel in the NEI gradually was shaken by the rapid onslaught of the Japanese. One source indicates that the situation was particularly acute for shore-based personnel as they had greater opportunities to desert than men assigned to ships and aircraft.¹ Many of the Indonesian personnel served on shore duty or in small craft due to their lower education levels.² These men, and civilian Indonesians, were demoralized by the first Japanese air attack on Soerabaja on 3 February 1942.³

The Allied military and naval position in the NEI rapidly worsened during February. Large numbers of Indonesian sailors deserted their ships toward the end of the month. These men (and perhaps also European and Eurasian personnel) feared what would happen to their ships while seeking to escape and were unwilling to leave their families behind. Minesweepers at Soerabaja experienced desertion of about 120 men, mostly Indonesians who had been drafted into the KM.⁴ However, the Indonesian sailors who belonged to the crews of ships serving in the Allied combined strike force that fought the Battle of the Java Sea did not desert in late February when the ships put into port to refuel.⁵

With the Allied squadron shattered in the Battle of the Java Sea, the KM eventually decided in early March 1942 to evacuate its forces from the archipelago. "At the start of the evacuation Rear Admiral Koenraad gave orders for there to be no discrimination between European and Indonesian personnel. It soon became apparent that the ships Vice Admiral Helfrich had recalled to port were not enough to transport all the men pouring into Tjilatjap [today Cilicap]. As a result, the Europeans were given priority to go aboard the evacuation ships. From the Dutch point of view, hundreds of Indonesians had already deserted and the loyalty of those remaining was no doubt in question."⁶

Of the Indonesian sailors who were captured by the Japanese, some were treated better or released from captivity after a few months. This was likely due to the Japanese propaganda effort to convince the Indonesians that they and the Japanese were all Asians, and so were natural allies. Indonesians who survived the loss of the light cruiser Hr.Ms. *Java* at the Battle of the Java Sea were released

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One of the relatively few Indonesian officers in the KM. The insignia on the lapel includes a radial engine superimposed on a two-blade propellor indicating he is an aviator, possibly one of the men who from early 1942 onward were trained in Australia and then the United States (collection NIOD | 92592)

from prison on 29 April 1942 on the occasion of Emperor Hirohito's birthday.⁷ However, Moluccans had a different experience. "[T]he Malukuans became a separate group within the native sailors. Most of the captured Malukuan navy men (and probably many more Menadonese and Timorese as well) were not promptly released, as their Indonesian colleagues were. Known for their loyalty to the Dutch, they suffered the same fate in Japanese hands as the allied military men."⁸

No source has emerged that specifically addresses the performance of Indonesian personnel during the three months of hostilities in the NEI. This may be a result of the assignment of so many Indonesian personnel to shore duty or small vessels not in direct contact with the enemy. In addition, widespread desertion of Indonesians in late February and early March 1942 removed these men from potential combat situations. For those Indonesians who served on warships, some were decorated.⁹ Two of the administrative branch midshipmen taken prisoner were decorated by the Netherlands government. The lack of sources on Indonesian performance could also be the result of loss of records during the evacuation of KM headquarters to Ceylon (today Sri Lanka).

From Evacuation of the NEI to Allied Victory

A small part of the KM squadron in the NEI managed to escape the archipelago to either Ceylon or Australia.¹⁰ Slightly less than 500 Indonesian personnel were among those who successfully evacuated the NEI.¹¹ This includes

crew members of warships able to sail to Ceylon or Australia, as well as those personnel who were passengers on naval or merchant ships.¹²

Upon reaching Australia, Indonesian sailors aboard the flotilla leader Hr.Ms. *Tromp* requested to return to the NEI. The ship's gunnery officer then spoke to the Indonesians, who agreed to remain with the ship.¹³ This unusual request by the Indonesian personnel was part of some larger unrest among the crew during the ship's dockyard repair period at Sydney. The commanding officer of *Tromp* at the time, Commander J.B. de Meester, described the situation in postwar testimony to the Parliamentary commission investigating the government's performance during the war. He did not think the request was truly serious but simply reflected the lack of any meaningful duties while repairs were made. Once normal duties resumed, no further unease among the Indonesian personnel was evident. Concern for the wellbeing of Indonesian crewmembers during the refit period led to them being billeted on a Netherlands merchant ship of the KPM line while the European crew members were housed in Sydney. Since the

KPM ships had Indonesian crewmen, the *Tromp's* Indonesian crew could enjoy meals prepared according to their preferred diet as was common practice on KM ships.¹⁴

The light cruiser Hr.Ms. *Sumatra*, which had been sent out of the NEI in early February 1942 during a major refit, was based at Portsmouth, England, from October 1942. Its crew included about 80 Indonesian deck, engine room and steward ratings. The KM admiral in charge of forces in Britain requested a report in March 1943 from the ship's captain regarding the behavior of the Indonesian sailors when ashore in a setting so different from the NEI. Reports written by five of the ship's officers with direct responsibility for these sailors did not indicate any problems.¹⁵

The cost of war to Indonesian sailors was high. One set of figures at the end of hostilities gives 176 killed, 268 missing in action and 1,739 status unknown.¹⁶ It seems plausible that many of the men in the status unknown category may have left the KM with the Netherlands surrender in March 1942 or the Japanese surrender in August 1945, giv-



Sailors on the deck of the submarine Hr.Ms. K XV in July 1943 upon arrival in the United Kingdom (collection NIOD | 92953)

en the chaos of those times. Another source shows that about 500 Indonesian sailors died on active duty during the war in the Pacific. Most of these were lost on warships sunk in action but about 55 were killed while prisoners when Japanese merchant ships taking them to Japan were sunk by submarines.¹⁷

The performance of Indonesian sailors between the loss of the NEI and the Japanese surrender appears to have been satisfactory, but few sources exist to confirm this. The officer in charge of naval personnel for the Indian Ocean theater between mid-1943 and late 1944, Commander P.J.G. Huijer, was interviewed in 1951 by the Parliamentary commission investigating the government's performance during the war. When asked about what his duties involved as head of personnel, Huijer said, "Everything: transfers, crews, all kinds of formal requests from the crews; moreover, London left all affairs of Indonesian personnel to me. I had to satisfy the Indonesian staff, make sure they did what we wanted. That went excellent."¹⁸ The total number of Indonesian personnel who evacuated the NEI in March 1942 was roughly 500 men, so the lack of sources that address the performance of Indonesian sailors could be a function of how few indigenous sailors remained on active duty.

The Postwar Nationalist Movement

Days after the Japanese surrender, Indonesian nationalists declared a republic on 17 August 1945. This action confirmed Netherlands wartime fears about the Japanese occupation leading to possible independence for the islands. As the KM began to transfer its ships from Australia and Ceylon to the NEI, it now also faced the issue of whether its indigenous personnel would remain loyal to the Netherlands state or support the newly declared republic. This was particularly of concern once the Netherlands began major military campaigns against the nationalists, the so-called First and Second Police Actions (*politieacties*) that began in July 1947 and December 1948 respectively.¹⁹

The policy of the KM regarding its Indonesian personnel during the post-World War II period is not clear. Given the size and importance of the Indonesian component to the prewar navy, one would think that KM records of the time would contain numerous files about Indonesians. However, there were relatively few files located in the National Archives of the Netherlands in The Hague that are specific to Indonesian personnel. The handful of national archives files and various secondary sources suggest the KM ini-

tially continued prewar practices until political and military developments forced changes upon the fleet. With the end of the war, many Indonesian personnel left the KM. According to reserve Lieutenant A. Hopman on the submarine Hr.Ms. *K XV*, the crew included Indonesian enlisted personnel and junior officer R. Subijakto. Once *K XV* arrived at Soerabaja at the end of hostilities, Subijakto left the ship.²⁰ Hopman says that similar things happened on other KM vessels, and that European personnel understood that the indigenous personnel wanted to end their service to the colonial power's military with the advent of a nationalist movement.²¹ This story is corroborated by another source, with the added detail that Indonesian personnel on *K XV* were meeting secretly as early as 1943 to discuss the post-war independence issue.²²

Another example of Indonesian personnel agitating for independence occurred among enlisted men stationed at the KM headquarters barracks at Queen's Mansions, Melbourne, Australia. In early October 1945, thirty enlisted men were arrested for refusing to work.²³ The KM investigation revealed that while some of the sailors were supporters of the independence movement, others simply wanted to leave the KM.²⁴

The situation had grown so serious that by early May 1946 the Commander in Chief of the KM, Admiral C.E.L. Helfrich, issued a directive concerning the unrest. Helfrich viewed the KM as still being at war and thus the KM could not accept any internal discord. Good relations among naval personnel were essential. European and Eurasian personnel of the KM must not harm Indonesian personnel, and the reciprocal treatment was expected of Indonesian personnel. The red and white flag or other symbols of the republicans were prohibited from KM ships or bases. Helfrich ended the directive by saying, 'It is my wish that severe action should be taken against persons who violate the directions given here. In connection with safety, there should be no hesitation in removing disloyal elements from posts where they could harm the Royal Netherlands Navy.'²⁵

Despite the severe punishment that would be applied to any republicans among the Indonesian personnel, pro-independence activity continued to occur. The KM deputy chief of staff for intelligence in the NEI, Captain G.B. Salm, wrote a memo in late September 1946 documenting this. He was aware of attempts by Indonesian personnel serving in the West Indies, Suriname, Ceylon, and the Netherlands itself to communicate with fellow Indonesian sailors and rally them to the republican cause.²⁶ Indonesian personnel serving in the Netherlands in 1946 and 1947 sought discharge from the KM. The navy processed the discharges and sent the men back to the NEI, but was aware that the newly discharged sailors could potentially join the republican forces upon their arrival in the islands.²⁷

Some Indonesian personnel wishing to leave the KM, whether because of opposition to colonial rule or for some other reason, deserted their ships and bases.²⁸ In reporting to headquarters that three Indonesians had deserted the destroyer *Van Galen* in mid-November 1945, the ship's captain asked that the deserters be replaced by



Indonesian sailors of a 3-inch anti-aircraft gun crew on the flotilla leader Hr.Ms. *Tromp* in 1945. Note the combination of British and Dutch helmets. The metal framing behind the gun mounting is possibly to prevent the gun from training in a direction too close to the ship (Nationaal Archief 2.24.01.09, ANEFO series | 935-3359)

European personnel. The captain of the militarized colonial maritime service (*Gouvernementsmarine*) ship *Zuiderkruis* also reported in mid-November 1945 that 28 of the 84 men on his ship, all Javanese, had deserted the ship effectively taking the vessel out of service. The anti-aircraft cruiser *Jacob van Heemskerck* lost 13 Indonesian sailors to desertion in three days in early December 1945. The naval air service, the shore command at Batavia (today Jakarta), and the sloop *Van Kinsbergen* also reported deserters. Most of the men deserted between October 1945 and June 1946 with just six desertions in 1947 and 1948. The reports generally indicate that the sailors were granted shore leave and never returned to their unit. It was common for two or three men to desert at the same time. The deserters were often servants, stokers, and deck sailors though other ratings were shown in a list of 123 sailors

who deserted the KM in the NEI between 1945-1948. Of the 123 men, only five (4%) appear to be European Dutch from their names and ratings.

While the KM monitored its Indonesian personnel for potential disloyalty and sought to track down deserters, it simultaneously returned to a decades old debate within the government and the navy. Should the KM be a global force that defends the interests of the Netherlands state around the world (*Rijksmarine*, state or national navy) or be primarily a defense force for the NEI?²⁹ In addition to the prewar problem of the KM squadron in the NEI answering to the NEI government as well as the KM high command in The Hague, the issue of the political unreliability of Indonesian sailors increasingly made the KM leadership envision the KM as a global rather than regional force.

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Indonesian recruits aboard the minesweeper and training ship Hr.Ms. *Abraham Crijnsen* are taught to speak Dutch by a petty officer, 29 March 1945 (collection NIOD | 92088)

As a result of the nationalist campaign against Netherlands colonial rule, the Linggadjati Accord signed on 15 November 1946 established a federal structure for the islands but still within the framework of the Netherlands state. This new political entity was called the *Verenigde Staten van Indonesië*. The accord soon fell apart due to mutual distrust and disagreement about the degree to which the new political entity would be subservient to the Netherlands state. It did, however, raise the issue of how different regions of the NEI envisioned their future relationship with the Netherlands. The Ambonese (or Moluccans), many of whom were Christian and generally loyal to the Netherlands, began to seek autonomy within any future federal structure rather than be incorporated into a largely Muslim and Javanese-dominated Indonesia. That in turn affected the willingness of Ambonese personnel in the KM to remain in the navy.

The internal debate within the KM about its purpose was reflected in the competing desires to increase the number of personnel on duty in the NEI, and to become a more homogeneous force. The commanding officer of the KM in the NEI, Rear Admiral (later Vice Admiral) A.S. Pinke, wanted to recruit 600 more Indonesians but the Minister of the Navy in 1947 forbid it.³⁰ A study of Vice Admiral Pinke's tenure as KM commander in the NEI conveys the KM leadership's skepticism of the value of Indonesian personnel to the service.

The idea of enlisting more native sailors was already treated very suspiciously here. In the future, these personnel should serve on the same footing as the European crews and hence from time to time also make a Dutch 'tour.' The Naval Staff doubted whether such an arrangement was feasible in the current

Indies. Something else was whether or not to worry about that. When the Royal [Netherlands] Navy embarked on such an arrangement, it was partly back to prewar personnel. The [Commander in Chief] frankly expressed his opinion that only Dutch people should serve in a Dutch Navy. After all, only these personnel could be deployed anywhere in the world to represent Dutch interests. And there was also the problem of the political reliability of native personnel. No, the Naval Staff did not want to hear of such a drastic solution.³¹

The combined effects of ending recruitment of Indonesians, allowing discharges, and desertion sharply reduced the size of the Indonesian component of the KM. By February 1947 the number of active-duty Indonesian personnel in the KM had dropped to 682 men.³² This was substantially lower than its high point of about 2,500 in the 1930s.³³ Indonesian personnel were less important to the KM after the war than before if for no other reason than there were fewer of them. Among the Indonesian personnel who had left the KM were several of its relatively few commissioned officers. The KM was aware that these former officers were now serving with the republican forces.³⁴

Once the decision had been made in 1949 to grant independence to the NEI, plans had to be made for the disposition of the KM's Indonesian personnel. Among the options was for KM personnel to join the newly established armed forces of Indonesia. In that case, the question arose of how to determine pension amounts for service of 20 years or more in the KM.³⁵ The other options were to retire from the KM or remain on active duty. Indonesian personnel needed to make a choice among the three options before December 1949.³⁶ During the transition to eventual Indonesian independence, the KM continued to monitor its current and former personnel for sympathy toward or service in the republican forces. Between August 1948 and February 1949, the KM was aware of about 50 of its former personnel serving in the republican armed forces.³⁷

Most Indonesian personnel left the KM in 1949 but about 80 men refused to leave the navy. These men were mostly if not all Moluccans. Eventually, they and their families were brought to the Netherlands and continued to serve well into the post-war period. These men eventually became citizens of The Netherlands. The last Moluccan retired from the KM in 1965.³⁸

Discussion and Conclusion

The KM was a small regional navy from the late 1800s through the mid-1900s. Even discounting the use of obsolete ships and a naval air arm that lacked fighter and attack aircraft, the KM was not nearly as capable as it might have seemed based on numbers of ships and personnel.

One of the service's great weaknesses was the reliance upon substantial numbers of personnel from its main colony. On three occasions (1933 pay cuts and mutiny on Hr.Ms. *De Zeven Provinciën*, 1942 desertion upon imminent Japanese victory, 1945-1949 support for independence) over about fifteen years and in different scenarios, Indonesian personnel in large numbers acted according to their

individual self-interest and against the interest of the KM and the Netherlands state. While Indonesian personnel appear to have served satisfactorily (though with lower performance expectations in less demanding roles) during peace time and after the KM was driven out of the NEI in March 1942, Indonesian naval personnel were unreliable during times of crisis for the Netherlands state. The greatest fears of KM officers about Indonesian sailors during the late 1920s, some of whom wrote commentaries for *Marineblad* warning of this concern, were realized three times in less than fifteen years. The sizeable loss of personnel due to arrest, desertion, and discharge resulted in the KM temporarily becoming a much less capable force.

The KM had an opportunity in 1933 after the *De Zeven Provinciën* mutiny to make a profound change to their personnel practices. While the KM suspended temporarily the recruitment of Indonesians, that ended after four years as the Great Depression and the rise of Japanese aggression compelled the Netherlands to rely again on colonial subjects for military service. The mass desertions of March 1942 were a second opportunity for the KM to reconsider its use of indigenous personnel. Wartime personnel shortages would have necessitated keeping those Indonesian personnel who escaped the NEI on active duty. Once Japan surrendered the KM could have demobilized all indigenous personnel and replaced them with prewar personnel and new recruits from the recently liberated Netherlands. Instead, it largely returned to prewar practice though it stopped recruiting Indonesians. Completion of service without reenlistment in combination with desertion then caused the gradual decline of indigenous naval participation rather than the KM deciding to do so.

When evaluating the combat potential of military forces, whether present day or historical examples, the analysis must consider the social cohesion of those forces. Differences among the personnel, whether based on gender, ethnicity, language, religion, social class, political values, or other characteristics may lead to internal discord. If the discord becomes substantial and is not addressed, it can ultimately become a serious problem that affects operational performance.

A Dutch naval historian has pointed out that much naval history literature focuses on operational history instead of personnel matters.³⁹ While operational history is certainly a key component of the collective literature on naval history, personnel matters are vital to the effective

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functioning of any military service, command, or unit. If a military service is understrength, poorly trained, has low education levels, weak leadership, indifferent morale, or cultural divides, that service has a fundamental weakness that may prove decisive in time of war. The Netherlands decision to use Indonesian personnel in its naval forces

in the NEI resulted in a peacetime advantage in terms of numbers of sailors on duty but ultimately a disadvantage in times of crisis when Indonesian sailors acted against the interests of the Netherlands state. Indonesian sailors in the KM were a double-edged sword, capable of cutting the enemy with one edge of the blade but also of hurting the Netherlands with the other edge.



An example of cultural analysis of Indonesian personnel, published by LTZ2 J.W. Bach Kolling in *Marineblad* 49 (1934): 627 (courtesy of the KVMO)

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Using *Marineblad* as a Historical Source

Marineblad has been published continuously since 1886 with a short interruption during and shortly after World War II (1943-1947). The 130+ volumes together comprise a valuable source that can be explored by historians and authors of *Marineblad* articles. For topics that have been of interest to KVMO members over time, the existence of *Marineblad* articles written decades apart could provide insight into the evolution of that matter.

‘Double-edged Sword’ made use of numerous letters to the editor of *Marineblad* during the early to middle 1900s. These letters share direct observation and personal experience. When combined with official government records from the Netherlands national archives, the commentaries about the use of Indonesian personnel provide insight into the *Koninklijke Marine*’s personnel practices.

The Netherlands national library has digitized older issues of *Marineblad* from 1886 to 1940. These can be accessed via the national library’s Delpher database (www.delpher.nl) which contains books, journals, and newspapers. After first selecting journals as the desired publication type, select the advanced search

mechanism and enter *Marineblad* for the title. Then enter key words and the search function will bring up individual pages where those words are found.

Researchers can also make use of a *Marineblad* index for 1886-1968. The informally titled *Inhoudsopgave Marineblad* compiled circa 1969 by an unknown author is divided into fourteen lettered sections for: individual ships; navigation and hydrography; strategy and tactics; artillery and rockets; torpedoes and the submarine service; signals, communications, radio, radar; aviation; the marine corps and small arms; training; medicine; sport; social developments within the KM; military law; historical topics. For each topic, articles are listed by year and title. A copy of this scarce item is held by the *Defensiebibliotheek* at Breda.

The archive section of the *Marineblad* website contains annual tables of contents and complete issues in PDF format. Tables of contents exist for the years 1994-2005. For each annual volume, the articles are listed in consecutive order with author, title, issue, and first page. Complete issues in PDF format are available from 2021 to the present.