The Australian discovery of Indonesia, 1945

Using interviews and correspondence with former Australian soldiers who served in Indonesia in 1945–46 and with Indonesians who remember that period, Anthony Reid examines the beginnings of the modern relationship between Australia and Indonesia. He shows that few Australians knew or cared about Indonesia in the 1940s and that Australian soldiers were sent there ill-prepared for their encounter with a very different culture. These accounts of individual experience suggest the range of soldiers’ reactions to this situation.

Indonesia, we now realize, represents the greatest single challenge to Australian foreign policy. The two young nations are forever neighbours, of very disparate populations and radically different cultures. Mutual ignorance is still high, and misunderstandings can easily create unflattering racial or national stereotypes. Millions of Australian dollars have been spent to promote people-to-people contact (most recently through the Australia-Indonesia Institute), though the unplanned impressions formed through tourism and the media will play a bigger role in determining what the two sides think of each other. Amidst all the attention given to this relationship between Australians and Indonesians, there has been surprisingly little interest in its sudden beginning in the crucible of the Pacific war.

The war catapulted almost 50,000 young Australians into Indonesia in 1945. Thirteen thousand men of the 26th Brigade Group captured oil fields, airport and town of Tarakan Island, off Borneo’s northeast coast, in the first half of May. After nearly 30,000 men, comprising the remainder of the 9th Division, had occupied the Brunei Bay area of British Borneo in June, the 7th Division launched the largest amphibious operation in Australian military history against Balikpapan in early July. Thirty-three thousand men went ashore at this eastern Borneo oil town after a massive bombardment. Since these operations occurred after the re-occupation of the Philippines and the American attacks on Iwo Jima and Okinawa (February–April), their strategic significance was far from clear.

To the end, however, the Australian Government in its relations with MacArthur (who wanted to keep Australian forces in action under his command) took the view that it was their job to reason why.

After the Japanese surrender in August some of the Australians in Borneo and others from Morotai and Darwin fared out to take control of the eastern two-thirds of Indonesia — Bocas, Sulawesi and all the eastern islands, home to twice the population of Australia. This paper examines this rude beginning of a relationship between two very different peoples. Did this sudden immersion into a different world radically affect the lives of these thousands of young Australians? How did the Australians, in turn, influence a new nation just at the threshold of its struggle for independence?

The flavour of some of these early Australian-Indonesian relationships is apparent in the individual stories of Australians who served in Sulawesi. None of the men whose stories are told here was typical; indeed they have been selected because their involvement was exceptionally intense. As extremes of interaction of various types, they may be seen to represent the full range of Australian reactions to being thrown into this extraordinarily different world.

The tasks of the Australian forces after the surrender were to disarm and concentrate Japanese troops prior to their repatriation, to free Allied prisoners of war and internees, and to maintain law and order until authority over the civilian population could be returned to the pre-war Netherlands Indies authorities. These tasks were carried out swiftly and efficiently as possible. Even when it became evident that the imposition of unpopular Dutch colonial authority was incompatible with the preservation of law and order, there was no basic rethinking of the original objectives. It was the end of a hard war.

By 1945 most Australians wanted to go home and start a new life. The majority of those in Indonesia were there for only three or four months, none for more than nine months. The relative homogeneity and insularity of Australia in 1945 must also be borne in mind. Positive experience of other cultures was not common and knowledge of South-East Asia almost wholly lacking. Veterans of the middle east fighting had stereotypes about ‘wogs’ in their heads, but these tended to give way to the term more commonly used in New Guinea, ‘boong’. These over-eager local labour in Indonesia were apt to be called ‘boong-bashers’, again by analogy with northern Australia and New Guinea. It may be significant that both the most sensitive and the most crude Australian responses to Indonesia came from young Australians, fresh from the Australian cities, who had not had the hurrying experience of the New Guinea campaigns.

Nobody had foreseen before August 1945 that Australian troops would be responsible for post-surrender administration in much of Indonesia. Allied planning had been for Mountbatten’s South-East Asia Command to take post-war responsibility for the whole of Netherlands Indies and it was only on 15 August, following the unexpectedly sudden Japanese surrender, that the Australian area of responsibility was extended to cover all of Borneo and eastern Indonesia. It was not surprising, therefore, that no preparation had been made for this task. The only planning for Australians to acquire some competence in dealing with south-east Asians came from Colonel Alf Cochrane’s extraordinary Directorate of Research. Early in 1945 this unit had begun preparing for a civil affairs role in the planned Australian occupation of British Borneo, despite well-developed British planning for the same task.
Borneo rather than Indonesia. Both were woefully inadequate guides to the upheaval of post-war Indonesia.

In August 1944 RAAF headquarters in Melbourne had printed, for restricted circulation, a few hundred copies of Elementary Malay, prepared as a guide for RAAF personnel. This was intended 'to simplify Malay to such a degree that RAAF personnel forced down in Malay-speaking areas could speak and understand it with minimal effort. Those more interested were referred to Hamilton's Malay made easy. Also included were four introductory pages of racial stereotypes. The Malays were 'an easy-going and rather lazy race', but would 'in most cases, show respect for and willingly assist the white man'. Since British and Dutch governments had done so much to improve their welfare there is no doubt that the great majority of the Malays will welcome the return of the white man'. The Chinese were 'a very progressive people, shrewd in business.

The majority of Chinese in the Islands are loyal to the Chiang Kai Shek Government, but others, often with a view to the main chance, are not reliable. The Eurasians are 'a very useful community ... usually employed as teachers, nurses, clerks and typists'.

Subsequently a Borneo book for servicemen was assembled for issue to those taking part in the landings in Brunel Bay and Balikpapan. This was filled with tips for survival: how to eat snakes, cassava, and durian; how to avoid hookworm, crocodiles and sleeping under coconut trees. Where the RAAF book had interpreted Indonesian in terms of British Malay racial categories, the Borneo book made the distinction between Muslims and 'pagan' Dayaks. Apart from this distinction, the people were all 'natives', undifferentiated by language or ethnicity. With these sources as guides, it is not surprising that Australian officers appear never to have discovered whether they were governing Bugis, Makassarese, Banjarese or Minangkabau, and that official correspondence never got beyond 'natives', or at best 'local Malays'. Neither booklet ever introduced 'Indonesia' or 'Indonesian', the terms by which the educated Borneo, at least, wished to be known.

The Borneo book's four paragraphs on the Dutch East Indies describe the pre-war government structure and the Folkerts, but make no mention of nationalism or of any possible impact of the Japanese occupation. In contrast to the RAAF booklet it described the Muslims as not, as a rule, very devout followers of the Prophet ... Religion does not bother them much. At the same time ... you may run across a few fanatics who dislike the infidel — which means you.7

Its most significant advance towards reality was the advice that

the native, whether Mohammedan, Pagan, or Christian, has no reason to love the white man any more than he does the Jap. If he gets a better deal from the Jap than he does from you — well, what then?8
The diggers did indeed find Indonesian women attractive, in apparent contrast to the situation in Melanesia. Venereal disease, the army's only index in such matters, was at exceptionally low levels through all the fighting in New Guinea and the Solomons but increased dramatically in Indonesia. In South Sulawesi, 'non-specific urethritis' headed the list of military ailments, and the commander complained that there are many brothels which are difficult to control. All women examined have been found to be infected.

The terrible depredations of the last year of the war, and the relative abundance brought by the Australians ensured that sexual offers did not come only from the prostitutes. The Australian commander in Palopo (South Sulawesi) wondered why so many tens of 'better' were disappearing from the military stores until he visited a local Chinese shop and was greeted in English with the question, 'You fuck my wife for some butter?' A few diggers did effectively cohabit with Indonesian women, returning to barracks each day. At least one Australian-Indonesian union was well-remembered in Bali Kopan as a result of the child left behind and his mother's outspoken indignation at being abandoned. Unhappily there appear also to have been a few brutal incidents, not usually recorded in Australian documents. A Dutch source alleged the systematic rape of the women of one Indonesian village by an Australian unit, evidently younger recruits recently arrived from Australia. Closer relationships between Australian soldiers and Indo-

eseans were restricted by military discipline (it was still illegal for a soldier to bring home an Asian wife), by the shortness of the Australian stay, by group solidarity, by inadequacy of grasp of the language, and probably by prejudice. Although hundreds of Japanese and a number of Dutch, Indian, and British soldiers serving in Indo-

enesia were required to join the anti-colonial struggle, often marrying Indonesian women, no Australian appears to have done so.

Some Australians, at least, found the Indonesians they met in the Pacific an attractive race, kindly, hospitable, clean, hardworking and intelligent, while leading soldiers professed sympathy for their 'life of continual struggle under the harsh domination of the Dutch imperialists.' My 7th Division informants generally saw Indonesians as ineffective and sympathized with them as underdogs in relation to the arrogant Dutch. Nevertheless it remains surprisingly hard to find among the veterans any who formed deeper relationships with Indonesia or Indonesians as a result of their experience.

Given this background, and especially the substantial number of nationalist 'peruna' activists they killed, wounded or imprisoned in eastern Indonesia, it is remarkable how popular the Australian troops were. Somehow they earned both the gratitude of the Dutch for reimposing the colonial order in eastern Indonesia (in marked contrast to Mehtatten's policy in Java and Sumatra) and the plaudits of Indonesian nationalists for their apparent sympathy. To some extent this was based on the fact that for the first time in pro-Indonesian activities, mostly associated with the Australian Communist Party, in the 7th Division and the media in Australia. When a motion was moved at the Indonesian National Council (KINP) in November 1945 that British troops should be withdrawn from Java and replaced by Australians and Americans, this was based primarily on the symbolic statements and actions in favour of independence of a handful of Australian communists among the troops at Bali Kopan, not on the policy pursued by the Australian forces. Yet the Australians were also appreciated because they were liberators well-supplied with goods. Unlike the Japanese they paid in valued goods for what they got in fresh food and services. Unlike the Dutch they showed no interest whatever in retaining as colonists.

The directness, lack of pretension, and even perhaps the Friendliness of the Australians were a welcome change from both the Dutch and the Japanese. One Makasar informant insisted that the Australians were like Makas-

sar — straightforward and liking a joke. They were usually drank by evening, he claimed, and the only two words of their English which stuck in this informant's mind were obscenities. Though they spoke virtually no Indonesian, they were ingenious at miming their needs, dipping their toes and ebbing when they wanted a chicken. On the other hand egalitarian directness had its limits on both sides. The proud aristocrats of South Sulawesi had traditionally been regarded as heaven-descented, their sacred feet never allowed to touch the ground. When the giant Western Australian farmer who commanded the 2/6th Battalion talked tough to the rajah assembled in the palace of Wamipone about accepting Dutch official and put his boot on a royal chair, those present were outraged as well as intimidated. There was a similar shocked reaction when three diggers charged into the palace of the ruler of Luwu armed with tommy-guns and a Dutch flag which they demanded the queen should immediately fly.

In the Nustengara chain of islands east of Bali the original assumption that people would be pleased to see a restoration of the Dutch was not fundamentally mistaken. One Flores informant remembered the excitement of the arrival of the Australian cruiser Lioness at Ende on 7 December 1945:

People were overjoyed at the arrival of the first ship. They had been in refuge from the bombing up in the hills, but they came rushing down to greet the ship as a sign of their delight at this symbol of deliverance from a period of terrible oppression and hardship. This first ship brought emergency supplies and medicines which were desperately needed, especially the quinine in this malaria-infested area. People did not really distinguish between Dutch and Australians — the officers had come to liberate us.

The Australians were met on the jetty at Ende (chief town of Flores and headquarters of the influential Catholic mission) by the raja, the bishop and other dignitaries, Australian, British and Dutch flags, and a choir singing the British and Dutch anthems. In Maumere (north Flores) three days later there was a magnificent reception even exceeding Ende. NICA (Netherlands Indies Civil Affairs) unit obviously very

welcome ... Rajah exalted himself in entertainment, with a feast and native dancing — A memorable day ... Hope rajah retains his enthusiasm a little. This is a little worrying but quite an experience."

The son of this raja, interviewed 40 years later, remembered the Australians only their enthusiastic incompetence in a very unequal soccer match against the local skill, "people nearly died laughing." The diggers put on a brave show at this unfamiliar sport wherever they could, and undoubtedly won friends by losing so soundly to undernourished Indians despite their greater size and fitness. The Australian radio message from Ende recorded that the 'large crowd vigorously applauded sustained and sometimes successful efforts of the Lioness goals.'

In Flores and Sumbawa the Australians encountered only minor displays of support for Indonesian independence. What they did see they sought to downplay in an effort to convince the Dutch that there were no obstacles to their return, so that the diggers could hand over to them and go home in time for Christmas. Even if the Australian fighting man had little knowledge of, or intimacy with, the Indonesians he encountered, he quickly developed an antipathy to Dutch officers which sometimes ranged him on side with Indonesians despite his orders. It seems that every

Australian soldier who served in Indonesia has until Dutch stories to tell. The basis for this was partly the contempt of battle-hardened soldiers for know-all civilians telling them what to do — especially foreign civilians newly clothed with Allied officer rank in NICA. Australians also perceived the attitude of the returning Dutch colonials as arrogant, hierarchic and pretentious, and resented their claims that Indonesia was theirs and their attempts to prevent or control relations between Australians and Indonesians.

It was this antipathy for Dutch pretensions which provided what broader support there was for the small minority of actively pro-independence communist soldi-

ers among the Australians. A communist-initiated petition on behalf of the Indonesians, signed by 80 7th Division men at Bali Kopan, was forwarded to Sydney with the words, 'To quote the most freely used phrase among our chaps, "The Dutch are a mob of bastards."' One nationalist in Bali Kopan said that his happiest memory of the Australians was when they threatened the local Dutch talent in a game of soccer which ended in a brawl, the Indonesian crowds cheering lustily for the Australians.

In fairness, it must be conceded that the Australian soldier was not always blameless when he fell foul of Dutch authorities. Frequently it was the Dutch who blew the whistle on profiteering and malpractice, as in the case
of the 2/31st Battalion in Banjarmasin. This unit had fought heroically at Balikpapan, but found Banjarmasin's diamonds too great a temptation and developed a number of racketeers to obtain them — including the printing of Japanese-period currency on a press which had come their way. According to the NIGA report, the Australian battalion had done good business in this way, with the commander in the lead. When Dutch officers complained and the unit was hurriedly withdrawn, more than a million guilders in improperly-obtained goods and cash was reportedly taken from it. In Makassar a battalion commander had to be cashiered when it was discovered that he was attempting to have a Packard sedan sent out to Australia for him.

All in all the Australians did a very valuable job for Dutch colonialism, in the name of restoring order, but at the level of the ordinary soldier they made it clear they had no love for the Dutch. They could have ended up antagonizing both sides, but seem to have achieved the reverse. They undeniably earned more goodwill than enmity for Australia. For the thousands of young Australians involved, the Indonesian experience seems to have been less profound than one might have expected. It contributed a little, but only a little, to the subsequent process of learning to live with Indonesia. No Indonesian career emerged from it, so far as I have established. There was a broader effect, summed up by one former sergeant in intelligence, later to become a prominent diplomat and administrator of New Guinea: 'It made me restless; it made me aware there was a different world out there.'

There were, however, already some Australians for whom Indonesia was a great deal more: not only an exotic neighbour but a kind of screen on which to project the hopes, fears, guilt, and ideals of a European population in uneasy possession of a fine piece of South Pacific real estate. Through the experience of such people — often painful, sometimes exhilarating — Indonesia has helped Australia to understand itself.

I have selected the stories of three soldiers whose experience with Indonesians was particularly intense. None of them was typical, but the very different ways they responded told us something of the potential of young Australians of their day when suddenly confronted with an unfamiliar world.

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