

Note from Lieutenant General Montagu Stopford on the British commitments in the Netherlands East Indies (22 November 1946)

Caption: On 22 November 1946, British Lieutenant General Montagu Stopford, Commander-in-Chief of the South East Asia Command, sends a note to the Chiefs of Staff in which he outlines the development of the situation in the Netherlands East Indies between 1945 and 1946. He particularly focuses on the role and commitments of British forces in the region.

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FROM : S. A. C. S. E. A.

TO : CABINET OFFICES

SEACOS 792

22nd November, 1946.

For Chiefs of Staff from Stopford.

THE BRITISH COMMITMENTS IN THE
NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES.

PART 1.

At Potsdam in July 1945, it was first proposed that South East Asia Command should take over on 15th August (or as soon after as possible) the responsibility for the areas of French Indo China (South of 16 degrees North) Borneo and the Netherlands East Indies, thus freeing General MacArthur's forces for the contemplated assault on Japan. On 2nd August these proposals were embodied in a directive to Sacsca from the Combined Chiefs of Staff. On 14th August the Japanese accepted the terms of unconditional surrender, and in accordance with the Chiefs of Staff decision, Sacsca assumed the responsibility for Java, Bali, Lombok and French Indo China (South of 16 degrees North) on 15th August; and for Borneo, New Guinea, Celebes and the remainder of the Netherlands East Indies as soon as the necessary forces could be made available.

The tasks laid down by the Chiefs of Staff were :-

- (a) The re-occupation of the key areas of Occupied Territories.
- (b) To accept the surrender of the Japanese Forces and enforce the terms of unconditional surrender.
- (c) To succour, release and repatriate the Allied Prisoners of War and Internees.
- (d) To disarm and concentrate Japanese preparatory to their repatriation.

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(e) To establish and maintain law and order preparatory to handing the territories to their respective Civil Governments.

(f) To collect information regarding, and try War Criminals.

These tasks were great. The distances to the new areas from existing bases in India and Ceylon were vast. South East Asia Command now comprised an area of 1,600,000 sq. miles, with a population of 128,000,000. All available resources were in their deployment for the assault on Malaya and Singapore (Operation Zipper). As it was by no means certain that the Japanese in South East Asia Command would obey the Imperial order to lay down their arms it would have been militarily unwise to deploy any major forces from this operation which would jeopardise its success should the Japanese resist.

From the outset it was clear that there were not enough troops available to meet these increased commitments; even had the troops been available there were not enough ships, and even had shipping been adequate, extensive minesweeping operations had to be carried out before convoys could be deployed. As regards air transportation, this too was limited and could only be employed from areas within reach of Burma airfields.

Above all, as a glance at map will show, it was vital to secure an advanced base at Singapore before any further operations could be embarked upon. The forces for the re-occupation of Singapore were at sea when orders were received from General MacArthur that, owing to the uncertainty of the reaction of Japanese Commanders to the Imperial orders, no landings or re-occupation would take place before the formal signing of the surrender terms in Tokyo. This imposed a delay of 12 days on South East Asia Command plans for re-occupation.

These problems were by no means the only ones to be faced. In hundreds of prison camps, separated by thousands of miles, were tens of thousands of Allied soldiers enduring terrible hardships and dying daily from disease. Also in overcrowded camps throughout the Command there were thousands of European internees, all praying for liberation. In addition there were 750,000 Armed Japanese, many of whom were located in the remotest parts of the Command.

No reliable intelligence on the situation existing in the Netherlands East Indies was made available to South East Asia Command at the time when these territories were added to the Command.

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The Republic of Indonesia had been proclaimed on 17 August, and some days later the Indonesians announced their intention of resisting to the death if Dutch Forces were landed, but the true political situation only became evident as Allied forces moved in later in September.

An Indonesian Independence Movement which existed before the War was largely fostered by the Japanese during their occupation mainly to meet their own ends. In addition a considerable youth Movement, indoctrinated with Hitler Jugend ideals, trained and armed by the Japanese had been built up by the latter before their collapse. The Indonesian Armed Forces fell into three categories. Firstly the T.R.I., the regular Army of the Republic organised into Divisions. Secondly, the Irregular Forces which included(?) the Youth Movement, and lastly the various terrorist societies. The arms and equipment of these forces was greatly supplemented by the majority of the Japanese in Central and East Java, who in direct contravention of orders received, handed over their arms and went into voluntary internment.

Although there was almost a complete lack of reliable intelligence of the situation in the Netherlands East Indies, and in particular in Java, it was appreciated that here, as elsewhere, in the territories now awaiting liberation, chaos, looting, rioting and disorganisation would inevitably ensue unless some form of control was swiftly imposed. In view of the physical impossibility to product Allied troops at this stage, there was only one answer - to make use of Japanese forces. Field Marshal Count Tehruchi was therefore informed that he would be held responsible for maintaining law and order in the Netherlands East Indies until Allied troops could take over.

On 10th September Rear Admiral Patterson arrived off Batavia in H.M.S. Cumberland and summoned the Japanese to receive the Supreme Allied Commander's orders. Following H.M.S. Cumberland came two merchant ships carrying relief supplies which were quickly distributed. The evacuation of APWI from camps within reach was also begun. At the same time the teams which had been organised to gain contact at once with APWI camps were dropped from the air by parachute into other parts of the islands.

The situation in Sumatra, which had always been within the area of South East Asia Command boundaries, was much more settled and the Nationalist Movement had not developed to the same extent as in Java. This was also the case in the outer islands, which were occupied originally by Australian Forces, who were not relieved of this commitment until January 1946, when it became possible to release South East Asia Command Forces from French Indo China.

PART II.

On 29th September Allied forces under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Philip Christison began landing in Java. The initial landings were made at Batavia, by the end of October the key areas of Batavia, Buitenzorg, Bandoeng and Ambarawa, Sourabaya and Semarang in Java and Medan, Padang and Palembang in Sumatra had been occupied. The build-up of the Allied Forces comprising mainly of 15th Indian Corps (23 Indian Division in Java and 26 Indian Division in Sumatra) was delayed through inadequate shipping resources, this together with complete lack of reliable information of the true political situation proved a severe handicap to General Christison and his Divisional Commanders.

The directive to the Allied Commander laid down the following tasks:-

- (a) Disarmament, concentration and control of all Japanese Forces.
- (b) Protection of APFI and all Netherlands East Indies islands and the evacuation of those requiring it.
- (c) Establishment, within the areas occupied by Allied forces of Allied civil administration and the maintenance of law and safety.
- (d) Introduction of food, medical, Red Cross and other supplies.

The situation on the arrival of the Allied forces was confused. The proclamation of the "Republic of Indonesia" conveyed little of the true facts to the outside world.

The Indonesians were found to be in control of most utilities and public works. Hundreds of thousands of Dutch were confined under Indonesian orders in internment camps. These internees were enduring terrible hardships and were in need of immediate succour and medical assistance. With the exception of 25th Japanese Army in Sumatra(?) and certain garrisons in Java, considerable portion of the Japanese Forces had completely lost their morale and all effective control and were incapable of maintaining law and order, whilst others had taken advantage of the situation to ferment European/Asiatic disagreement. As there were only sufficient British/Indian Forces to control the bridgehead areas, and as the Dutch were in no position to take over administration, the existing unstable situation had to be accepted.

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From the outset the policy adopted by the British Indian Forces was that of impartiality, to avoid becoming involved in Dutch/Indonesian political difficulties and to adhere strictly to the terms of the Chiefs of Staff directive.

During these weeks many thousands of APWI had been successfully evacuated, mainly by air, from the areas under Allied control, the Japanese in these areas disarmed and concentrated, but the bulk of both APWI and Japanese remained in the interior under Indonesian control.

Towards the end of October the situation in Java deteriorated and sustained unprovoked attacks were made by Indonesian Forces on British/Indian troops. At the beginning of November serious fighting was in progress in most of the Allied bridgeheads. Sourabaya in particular was the centre of serious unrest and violent Anti-European feeling. In this sector the Indonesian Forces consisted of some 20,000 I.R.I. well armed and trained, and an armed fanatical mob of about 120,000. Here 49 Indian Brigade were involved in heavy fighting. From the military point of view our position was now insecure and it became necessary to re-inforce Sourabaya with 5 Indian Division, later 5 Paratroop Brigade was also landed at Semarang.

Negotiations to effect a truce failed and fierce attacks on our forces continued. It therefore became necessary, in the interests of the security of our own forces and for the safety of thousands of APWI and the large peaceful population Chinese, Indonesians, Ambonese, Indians, etc., to occupy the town by force to restore law and order. After repeated verbal and written warnings had been given, 5 Indian Division commenced operations to clear the town. Peaceful occupation was resisted and throughout November a fierce struggle for Sourabaya took place. The town was completely occupied by the end of November and an Allied administration was established and law and safety for the people set up. Over 17,000 Dutch men, women and children were rescued during these operations.

Fighting also started in Ambarawa, Magelang and Semarang. Attacked by overwhelming fanatical mobs our small garrisons at Ambarawa and Magelang had to be withdrawn but only (?) after 14,500 Dutch internees had been brought to safety.

This time throughout Java a virtual state of war existed. In spite of this the allied forces continued in the fulfilment of the tasks allotted them. By

January 1946 the Allied bridgeheads were secure and cleaning-up operations in those areas to round up terrorists had been successful. Normal life had returned to the towns, markets had reopened and trade with the interior restarted. Negotiations were also begun with the Indonesians for the evacuation of APWI and the Japanese still in the interior.

In February political negotiations were instituted under the auspices of Sir Archibald Clark-Kerr, and although a permanent settlement did not result from these negotiations, much was done to settle the political differences of the Dutch and Indonesians and by the end of April comparatively stable conditions had been established. By May it was possible to begin the phasing out of British/Indian Forces.

During their occupation British/Indian Forces in Netherlands East Indies, in spite of being almost continually on an active service footing, had achieved much. Between our entry in September 1945 and July 1946 some 86,000 APWI had been evacuated. Of these the R.A.F. alone had flown out 30,000 and had carried over 30,000 tons of stores, comforts and necessities; whilst some 15,000 APWI had been carried to places of safety by the Royal Navy and the remainder evacuated in merchant shipping. Organisations had been established for the repatriation to Holland and other parts of Indonesia for those people who wished to leave Java and Sumatra. The total number of those evacuated in this way reached 125,000. In this work the Red Cross Societies of Great Britain, Australia and India and the International Red Cross Society played a notable part in the provision of comforts and medical supplies, whilst the Services provided transport and accommodation. In addition some 300,000 Japanese had been disarmed, concentrated and repatriated.

The dock areas of Batavia, Semarang and Sourabaya all of which were completely out of commission, were re-established by British efforts. This entailed the clearing of acres of destroyed buildings and stores, rebuilding roads, railways and warehouses, and re-establishing electricity and other services. In addition huge stocks of Japanese war materials comprising many thousands of tons were collected of which all arms, ammunition, bombs, etc., were destroyed.

Throughout the period of re-occupation, the islands of Java and Sumatra have been rehabilitated to an extent only equalled in the devastated areas of Europe. Well over half a million persons were rescued or assisted in some other way. 700,000 tons of supplies, stores and other

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necessities were handled. All this, however, was not achieved without the loss of many gallant British and Indian lives. The forbearance shown by our forces under the most trying conditions was of the highest order and was only equalled by the success with which they carried out their difficult tasks; it also contributed in no small measure in creating sufficiently stable conditions for eventual political negotiations. On 30th November, their task having been successfully accomplished, the last British/Indian Forces were withdrawn from the Netherlands East Indies.

PART III.

1. British Forces engaged.

(a) Naval.

Ships detached as required from 5th Cruiser Squadron, 6th Destroyer Flotilla and supporting auxiliary craft.

(b) Army.

H.Q. 15 Indian Corps, consisting of 5 Indian Division, 28 Indian Division, 50 Indian Tank Brigade, 36 Indian Infantry Brigade and 5 British Parachute Brigade in Java and 26 Indian Division (less one brigade) in Sumatra and 80 Indian Infantry Brigade in the outer islands.

(c) R.A.F.

904(?) Wing 16(?) and 81 Thunderbolt Squadrons, 84 Mosquito Squadron, and one Wing and three Squadrons of R.A.F. Regiment in Java, and 155 Spitfire Squadron, one Wing and two Squadrons of R.A.F. Regiment in Sumatra.

By the end of May 1946, 5 Indian Division, 36 Indian Infantry Brigade and 5 British Parachute Brigades and one R.A.F. Squadron had been withdrawn from Java.

2. Dutch.

(a) Naval.

One light cruiser, four destroyers, one sloop, two minesweepers, four submarines and several auxiliary vessels

(b) Army.

Initially the Dutch Forces comprised one ex-POI and seven Internal Security Companies. These were progressively built up and in May 1946 consisted of 6 brigades in Java and 36 native companies in the outer islands. In November 1946 the Dutch Forces in Java and Sumatra consisted of three divisions totalling 91,000 men.

(c) Air Force.

In May 1946, three Squadrons building up to 6 Army and 1 Naval Squadron in November 1946.

3. Indonesian.

It has been impossible to assess accurately the fighting strength of all Indonesian Armed Forces. Estimates put the number engaged by Allied Forces during the heavy fighting of November 1945 as between 150,000 and 300,000. It has also been difficult at times to differentiate between the organised forces with large uncontrolled armed bands and terrorists. For instance during the fighting at Sourabaya it was estimated there were some 100,000 possessing arms of sorts and some 20,000 well armed with Japanese equipment, including tanks and artillery. Later estimates put the strength of the regular Indonesian Forces in Java at some 7 divisions each varying in strength from 20,000 to 10,000, of which about 40 per cent were armed. Only certain elements of these divisions were engaged by our forces so the figures given by the Indonesians to the Truce Committee in November 1946(?) were:-

7 divisions totalling 140,000 in Java and 5 divisions totalling 80,000 in Sumatra.

4. APWI.

It is doubtful if accurate figures of APWI in the Netherlands East Indies can ever be produced. There were considerable discrepancies in the original figures made available from Dutch, Japanese and Indonesian sources, the figures for Java alone varied from 55,000 to 100,000. In addition the position was further confused by thousands of refugees who were not true Potsdam APWI, and apart from those rescued there were many who fell into the hands of, or were attacked by, the terrorist organisations and unfortunately lost their lives.

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Between October 1945 and April 1946, more than 50,000 (?) APWI were evacuated overseas from the Netherlands East Indies. In May 1946 agreement was reached with the Indonesians for the evacuation of the remaining APWI and refugees from the interior variously estimated at between 33,000 and 50,000. This evacuation continued satisfactorily the R.A.F. evacuating some 2,000 weekly by air, until it was suspended by the Indonesians on 24th July as a reprisal for an alleged aggression by Dutch Forces in Eastern Java. This left some 3,000 still to be brought out. By the end of July 46, some 219,000 persons had been evacuated from or granted refuge in N.E.I. Of this number 86,000 were evacuated overseas, whilst 133,000 became an Allied responsibility as refugees in Allied bridgeheads.

After negotiations in September 46, the evacuation recommenced and by 15th October 2635 personnel had arrived in Batavia. The evacuation of all genuine APWI was completed by 30th November.

5. JSP

Total in N.E.I. at 15th August 45 - 295,600.
Total remaining at 13th April 46 - 67,037 in Java, 30,059 in Sumatra and 159,272 in outer islands.

By 22nd June 46, the repatriation of all JSP in the outer islands was complete, and by 28th September those remaining in N.E.I. had been reduced to 22,000. This figure included 13,500 unarmed JSP which H.M.G. had agreed the Dutch should retain as a labour force after the British withdrawal. With the exception of this force the final evacuation was completed on 5th November 46. It is emphasised that throughout the speed of the repatriation of JSP depended almost entirely on shipping allocated to SEAC from General MacArthur's resources.

6. Casualties.

(a) British/Indian (from 1st October 45 to 19th October 46.

Killed Wounded Missing

(1) Royal Navy

Officers	-	-	2
Ratings	-	-	4

(10)

(2)	Army	Killed	Wounded	Missing
	British Officers	28	62	6
	N.C.Os	13	44	3
	E.O.Rs	22	57	14
	I.O.Rs	528	1239	297
(3)	R.A.F.			
	Officers	10	2	-
	Airmen	12	20	1
(b)	Dutch (12th January - 17th October 46)	187	564	22
(c)	Indonesians (by British/Indian troops)	5,808	17,183	-
	Indonesians (by Dutch Troops)	7,565	551 (?)	-
(d)	Japanese	717	387	205
(e)	RAPWI	399	612	736

(f) Wounded and captured. Numbers wounded and not captured not known. Dutch also captured 6958 unwounded Indonesians.

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