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'Eenige wakkere jongens': Nederlandse oorlogsvliegers in de Britse luchtmacht 1940-1945

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Summary

Introduction

During the Second World War the Netherlands participated with a small contingent of flying personnel in the air war over Europe. The Dutch pilots, observers, wireless operators and air gunners of the Royal Netherlands Naval Air Service and the Royal Netherlands Army Aviation Branch operated from the summer of 1940 under operational (and partly administrative) control of the *Royal Air Force* (RAF) and the *Fleet Air Arm* (FAA). As members of Dutch squadrons and seconded to British RAF- and FAA-units, they took part in all sorts of operations. *'Eenige Wakkere Jongens'* focuses on the organization of the Dutch contingent. Furthermore, it studies the background of the Dutch flying personnel that served under British command and researches extensively their experiences in the air war over Western Europe and in wartime Britain. Finally, it inquires about their whereabouts after the war and the influence they exercised in rebuilding the Dutch Air Forces after 1945.

The RAF at war

In April 1918, Great Britain was the first country in the world to establish an independent air force, the Royal Air Force (RAF). Initially, the new Service expanded substantially, but the end of the First World War in November 1918 was the prelude to a significant reduction in size. Most squadrons were disbanded immediately after the Armistice and the majority of the personnel was discharged and returned to civilian life. The RAF had to struggle to remain independent as the Army and Navy were eager to restore their authority over the RAF. Things did not get that far. In the post-war years, the RAF retained its independence mainly on account of aircraft being a cheap and effective means of suppressing uprisings and restoring public order in all corners of the British Empire. This method of operating was known as “air policing”. Senior levels of the RAF, with Chief of the Air Staff Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard prominent among them, did not see air policing as the RAF’s primary task. Instead, Trenchard and the Air Staff favored the execution of strategic bombing. The enemy was supposed to be dealt a “knock out blow” by flying deep into hostile territory to disable the enemy’s industrial heartland and administrative centre. A war could thus be fought and settled in a short period of time, without lengthy confrontations on land or at sea. Trenchard and other senior air force officers had blind faith in the offensive capabilities of the air arm, thereby neglecting to take into account the countless problems inherent to air operations. In the years between the world wars, the RAF was in technical and operational terms wholly incapable of carrying out the task of strategic bombing. In addition to having insufficient modern materiel at its disposal, its weaponry and equipment were inferior. Moreover, the focus on strategic bombing resulted in neglect of the deployment of the air arm at sea and over the battlefield. Both the capabilities and the experience built up in these areas during the First World War were all but lost.

During the reconstruction of the air arm after the First World War, Trenchard stressed the creation of an individual identity, instilling an *esprit de corps* and holding on to the traditions formed during the war. This was to put the air force on an equal footing with the Army and the Navy. The RAF set up its own training organisations and further emphasized its exclusive character by appointing only young men from the upper class to most of the positions available. This was particularly the case for the officer corps, which was only open to volunteers from the more privileged social milieus. There was hardly a professional work ethic in the years between the world wars. In many ways, right up into the late thirties, the RAF bore more resemblance to a luxury and elitist flying club than to a professional military organisation fully focused on carrying out its operational tasks.

It was only in the second half of the 1930s that, under pressure from increasing international threats, the RAF started to expand and modernise. On top of that, all units with sea planes and carrier borne aircraft returned in 1937 under the command of the Navy. For this reason the *Fleet Air Arm* (FAA) was created. A further important consequence of the reforms was that volunteers from the lower classes of society were also given a chance to enter the ranks of the flying personnel. This tendency towards social equality accelerated after the start of the Second World War. Although the RAF would rather have had things differently, after 1939 large numbers of volunteers from the lower social classes entered the organisation in order to replace losses and increase the number of personnel within the RAF. Thousands of conscripts and female personnel as well as many foreign nationals – from the Commonwealth, neutral and occupied European countries – also poured in to strengthen the RAF. The junior service was rapidly transformed into a modern multi-functional wartime air force in which almost all social classes, as well as both sexes, were represented. Nevertheless, the expansion was far from complete upon the outbreak of war in September 1939. Therefore, the RAF was during the first years of the war, in spite of the performance during the Battle of Britain, only of minor value for the war deployment. It was not before 1943 that it began to play a key role in the theatres of battle by neutralising the threat of German submarines, carrying out strategic bombing raids, and lending support to British ground troops.

The Allied Air Forces

The majority of the earlier mentioned flying personnel from occupied European countries arrived in Great Britain in the spring and early summer of 1940. It was difficult for foreign aircrew to join owing to the fact that the governments set several conditions for inclusion of their men among the ranks of the RAF. For political reasons and for reasons of publicity, they wished their nation to be as visible as possible when taking part in the air war. They hoped their own air forces could operate from British territory *next* to the RAF as independent air arms. However, this was diametrically opposed to the view of the RAF's leadership, which initially harboured considerable doubts about the usefulness and reliability of foreign personnel. Nevertheless, from early summer of 1940 and under political pressure from Churchill, in particular, the foreign aircrew was absorbed into British operational units in ever-increasing numbers. They soon proved their value. During the Battle of Britain they forged an excellent reputation as uncompromising and highly motivated pilots, whose skills and experience left little to be desired. The initial doubts of the British soon disappeared. From the autumn of 1940, the foreign contingents

were allowed to spread their wings almost without restrictions. Nevertheless, even after the Battle of Britain, all foreign contingents remained under operational command of the British authorities throughout the war. Only a few countries were allowed to take administrative control of their personnel. Furthermore, if they wished to establish their own national units, foreign contingents had to have sufficient numbers of air and ground personnel available to them. Ultimately, 45 squadrons manned by personnel from occupied countries were established.

At first glance personnel from occupied countries bore many similarities to their British colleagues, but there were a number of differences between the two groups. The most striking difference was that many of the foreign aircrew – particularly Poles, Czechoslovaks and French – had only limited proficiency in English. The aircrews from occupied territory were undeniably important acquisitions for the RAF though. Owing to the fact that they had been driven out of their homelands and only victory would ensure that they could return to their families and loved ones, they were often more motivated than their Anglo-Saxon colleagues. However, due to their restricted numbers, their impact on the course of war was limited. The foreign contingents were hardly able to expand as they had no access to their populations. Therefore the total number of foreign aircrew never exceeded 30,000 men. As a consequence, they represented just a small percentage of the RAF in 1945, which had expanded enormously in the preceding years. The importance of their contribution to the air war was therefore at its peak during the early years, when the RAF was still relatively small and Great Britain had its back against the wall. From 1942, when the United States entered the war, the military and political importance of foreign aircrews began to wane. They remained useful to governments-in-exile for keeping the spirits up of their people at home in occupied European countries though. After the German surrender in 1945, foreign RAF aircrew continued to play a significant role; in contrast to Polish and Czechoslovakian flying personnel, who became *personae non gratae* in their home countries after the communists had seized power, French, Norwegian, Belgian, and Dutch air force personnel contributed substantially to the post-war rebuilding of the air forces in their home countries.

Under British command

Like other foreigners, Dutch flying personnel arrived in Great Britain in the wake of their exiled government. Other than Great Britain, the Netherlands did not yet have an independent air force in 1940: flying personnel came from both the Royal Netherlands Army Aviation and the Royal Netherlands Naval Air Service. Despite the exceptional circumstances of the time, the 'left-overs' of these two services were not brought together and combined in one air force staff, but continued to go their own way. There was therefore no cohesive Dutch 'air force organisation' operating under the British flag. Dutch naval flying personnel in Britain only flew under the British flag in an operational sense. In administrative terms, they were under their own command and continued to wear their own navy uniforms. In the early summer of 1940, Dutch naval flying personnel were assigned to two newly established RAF units: 320 Squadron and 321 Squadron. These units had been assigned to Coastal Command and were initially given the task of protecting convoys and carrying out anti-submarine operations in the Irish Sea using Fokker T-VIIIW seaplanes, which the Dutch had brought over from the Netherlands, and Anson patrol aircraft, loaned from the British. From 1941, 320 Squadron – 321 Squadron had been disbanded shortly before owing to personnel shortages – also started to carry out an offensive task, attack-

ing enemy shipping along the coast of mainland Europe with newly purchased Hudson bombers. In 1943 the unit was transferred to RAF Bomber Command and was assigned new tasks: carrying out tactical bombing in preparation of the Allied invasion and in support of ground troops on European territory after D-Day. These operations initially took place mainly over western France. From the late summer of 1944, with the front line edging towards Germany, the Dutch bombers – B-25 Mitchells – started to operate over Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany itself.

Incidentally, not all Dutch naval air service personnel became part of the RAF. In June 1943 a navy squadron manned by Dutch personnel, 860 Squadron, was established in the FAA. From early 1944 this unit was responsible for protecting Atlantic shipping routes and operated from merchant aircraft carriers (MACs) – merchant ships and oil tankers fitted with short flight decks – using Fairey Swordfish biplanes. Furthermore, in the second half of 1943, 30 Dutch naval air service fighter pilots were assigned to British FAA squadrons operating from aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. These squadrons mainly used Hellcat fighters.

Most of the Dutch army flying personnel who arrived in Great Britain in 1940 were still undergoing training. Because there were only scant possibilities for completing this in Great Britain, most of this personnel was assigned to the Dutch navy units. As a consequence, the Dutch Army's Aviation Branch disappeared and had to be rebuilt from scratch. Starting from the end of 1940 the first volunteers entered the RAF training programme. In contrast to the aircrew serving in the Dutch navy, the Dutch army aviation personnel fell under the RAF in both operational and administrative terms. They were assigned to the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) and wore British air force uniforms. At first, the only option open to the newly-trained Dutch pilots was to individually join regular RAF squadrons, as the Dutch Army Aviation Branch in Great Britain had not yet established its own unit. It was not until June 1943 that Dutch fighter pilots had the opportunity to serve in a 'home' unit. This unit, 322 Squadron equipped with Spitfires, at first carried out defensive tasks, such as defending southern England against German reconnaissance aircraft and V-1 flying bombs. At the end of the summer of 1944, the emphasis shifted to lending support to ground troops. Despite the establishment of a Dutch fighter squadron – and the fact that many newly-trained army bomber pilots and observers were detached to the Dutch naval air service's 320 Squadron for the duration of the war – a significant portion of Dutch flying personnel remained active in British units after 1943. Approximately 110 Dutch pilots flew for long or short periods of time with British squadrons. Between May 1940 and January 1945 a total of 900 Dutch flying personnel entered the service of the RAF. Of those, almost 650 took part in combat operations. They were assigned to all three of the RAF's operational commands – Fighter, Bomber and Coastal Command – and carried out a wide range of tasks.

Background

The background of the Dutch flying personnel differed on several points from volunteers that originated from Britain. The most striking difference with their British colleagues was that most Dutch volunteers first had to reach Great Britain. Dutch flying personnel that had evacuated to Great Britain in May 1940 received reinforcements in four ways. First; by transfer of non-flying Dutch military personnel from the army and navy; second by Dutch military personnel arriving in Great Britain from the Netherlands East Indies; third by arrival of newly recruited

Dutch personnel from non-occupied countries and fourth; by the arrival of the so-called *Engelandvaarders* [England-farers], Dutch nationals who had made their way to England by their own volition and at great personal risk. Reinforcement of the Dutch contingent therefore came from a mix of people. Despite this, in terms of social and geographical origins, the men who made up the aircrews differed but little from the pre-war military pilots of the *Luchtvaart Afdeeling* (LVA) or Army Aviation Branch. Prior to the outbreak of the war, the Army Aviation Branch had a large pool of potential recruits to choose from. Only the very best candidates had a chance at being admitted into the organization. In addition to being in tip-top physical condition, they also had to have completed a solid secondary education. Given this last requirement, most pre-war personnel originated from urban areas in the western region of the Netherlands, where the majority of good educational institutes were situated. Almost all pre-war pilots came from the middle or upper classes, as only children from these classes were able to enjoy secondary education.

Whereas the RAF had greatly relaxed its entry requirements for British volunteers during the war, Dutch volunteers (still) had to meet a number of additional requirements set by their own government. For example, they had to speak reasonable or good English and to submit a secondary school diploma. Consequently, the great majority of the pilots and observers came – in contrary to their British colleagues who joined the RAF and FAA during the war – from privileged social environments, with a relatively high percentage from merchant families and a smaller percentage from families where the head of the family worked in the commercial sector or civil service. Even more than their prewar Army Aviation Branch colleagues, the wartime pilots had been born in the large cities in the western part of the Netherlands. As far as their religious backgrounds were concerned, by far most of them were Protestants, just as was the case before the war. A relatively small percentage was Catholic. The number of Dutch aircrew with Jewish backgrounds and those without religious backgrounds was relatively higher than the national average.

Danger, combat stress and guilt

In carrying out their duties, the life of the Dutch flying personnel was always at stake. The biggest risks came during the tour of operations, which consisted of a fixed number of operational flights. These ‘ops’ involved all sorts of dangers. There was, for example, the continuous danger of the aircraft crashing due to a fault or of being shot down over enemy territory by flak or enemy aircraft. In total, 206 – almost 32% – of the Dutch aircrew that served under operational circumstances, were killed in action. The chances of surviving a crash were relatively small. Of the 240 Dutch pilots, navigators, wireless operators and air gunners shot down over enemy territory, only 27 were taken prisoner, while just 7 were able to avoid capture and made it back their own lines. The small number of Dutchmen that ended up in POW camps was extremely active in escape activities. However, only Bob van der Stok, a Dutch fighter pilot, managed to flee successfully and return to England. He was one of the 76 POWs who took part in the famous ‘Great Escape’ from Stalag Luft III prisoner camp in March 1944. After a long and adventurous journey through Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Spain, he became one of only three Allied escapees of the ‘Great Escape’ who managed to return successfully to Great Britain.

In view of the foregoing it is not surprising that aircraft operations were very demanding, both physically and mentally. Dutch aircrew also experienced extreme tension. They tried to

protect themselves in two ways: by adopting a fatalistic approach to life and by grabbing hold of anything that might help them escape their fate. Like their British colleagues, Dutch aircrew tended to believe in the inevitable, ignored the realities of their situation, refused to surrender to their fears and played down the risks and dangers involved in their operations. Those that turned to anything that would help them survive relied on the detailed planning and execution of operations, on rituals and customs and on working in set patterns. They also found solace in religion and superstition. Despite dogged attempts to resist fear, operating for a prolonged period under extreme pressure inevitably led to some degree of combat stress. This could rise to the surface in various ways, one of the most obvious symptoms being insomnia. An estimated 30 Dutchmen out of 650 were discharged from the ranks with symptoms of battle fatigue.

A very small number of Dutch aircrew withdrew from flying operations for non-medical reasons. They were accused of cowardice – lack of moral fibre (LMF) – because they refused to carry on flying, without any medical grounds for doing so. These numbers were comparable with the percentage of British aircrew that couldn't cope with the dangers and risks. However, the great majority did not succumb to the extreme fears they experienced during combat operations through a combination of factors. The threat of heavy punishments, peer pressure and a strong *esprit de corps* were enough for most pilots to dutifully fulfill their tasks. For some the promise of winning a decoration was also a reason to carry on. The introduction in 1941 of the Dutch Flying Cross, a separate award for flying personnel, was a way of publicly recognising the actions of the Dutch flying personnel. In total 259 of the almost 650 Dutch aircrew were awarded this decoration.

Offensive operations by Dutch crews caused considerable loss of life among civilians. Although bomber and fighter pilots and aircrews were often quite a distance away from their targets, killing civilians – particularly in occupied Europe – could lead to major moral dilemmas. To a certain extent this was also the case for the killing of enemy military personnel. Flying personnel would try to put things in perspective by accentuating that they were following orders, by emphasising the justification for the war and by underlining that they were, from a moral point of view, on the 'right' side. Demonising the enemy and viewing the war as 'sport' were also ways of suppressing moral dilemmas and feelings of guilt. But these coping mechanisms were seldomly completely successful: sooner or later many aircrew felt remorse and even started experiencing psychological problems.

Life on the ground

To an outsider, wartime Allied flying personnel always seemed to constitute a reasonably homogenous group. However, there was in fact little sense of a uniform military brotherhood. There were big differences between sub-groups. The most important demarcation line was between officers and NCOs. There were also major differences in ethnicity – during the war the colour bar for flying personnel was lifted – and nationality and further sub-divisions on the basis of status as aircrew. Status in this respect depended on his/their job in the air and his/their amount of experience. But although the Dutch aircrew were not a uniform *corps d'élite*, they carried out the same tasks and all ran the same risk of being killed. They therefore all underwent, without exception, the same emotions, in the air and on the ground. There were four main work-related emotions: fear, release, loneliness and boredom. It was important for aircrews to

regularly be given time off for relaxation in order to keep levels of tension and fear under control. More often than not, evenings in the mess or the pub would get out of hand owing to excessive alcohol intake, singing obscene songs and playing quite risky games. Senior levels of the RAF, aware of aircrews' need for releasing tension, responded mildly to this type of masculine behaviour. Although evenings off and short periods of leave were important for relaxation, aircrew could only really recover their senses by going on extended leave. Many young and single aircrew used their longer vacations to travel to London, where the variety of entertainment on offer was almost unlimited.

From time to time, flight operations were interrupted by bad weather conditions, a lull in the fighting or other reasons. It was then that boredom and loneliness could surface, which could harm morale. Studies from RAF-psychologists showed that long periods of inactivity had a bigger negative effect on morale than heavy losses. The RAF endeavoured to prevent this by keeping their flying personnel on the ground as busy as possible. In addition to regular flight-related work activities, the RAF also organised recreational activities. Feelings of boredom and loneliness were not easily dispelled, however. Among the Dutch flying personnel these feelings were even stronger, owing to the fact that they were in a foreign country. Throughout the war, they had a strong longing to contact their loved ones in occupied territory. Some of them were successful in corresponding with their relatives during a large part of the war, albeit with some difficulty. On the other hand, from 1942 onwards, those with family in Netherlands East Indies remained wholly in the dark about the fate of their loved ones.

Continuously coping with fear and tension inevitably had consequences in their private lives. Of the almost 650 Dutch flying personnel taking part in combat operations, a minority – almost 18% – were already married upon their arrival in Great Britain. Those aircrew arriving in Great Britain as bachelors chose to follow one of two lines of behaviour. The majority of them – almost 64% – remained unattached. The altogether uncertain future convinced them that it would be better to avoid a serious relationship for the duration of the war. However, at least 175 Dutch aircrew – over 27% – did get married. They preferred the intimacy of a loving relationship over bachelorhood. Marriage offered them a foothold in uncertain times and allowed them to plan for a future after the war. Sadly, for more than 20% of the Dutch aircrew who got married during the war, these better times would never arrive owing to them being killed in action – sometimes just a few weeks after getting married.

After the war

Although May 1945 saw the end of the risk-laden existence of wartime flying personnel, they were not permitted to leave the service shortly after the German surrender. The majority of Dutch flying personnel were forced to honour their contracts and to continue to serve for a number of years. This resulted in much disgruntlement. Many of the Dutch RAF veterans felt that they had more than done their duty after five years of war. Ultimately, more than half of the veterans – 57% – left military service between 1946 and 1948. Despite this large loss of experienced personnel, the rebuilding of the Dutch air force was never in danger. About 16% went into regular service. Of this group, a relatively high number of Royal Netherlands Naval Air Service personnel retired as NCO or subaltern officer. The majority of those who had entered the Royal Netherlands Air Force eventually obtained the rank of senior officer (from major to colonel).

This was due to the fact that most wireless operators and air gunners were assigned to the Royal Netherlands Naval Air Service and ended the war in a relatively low rank, without many possibilities for career growth after 1945. In contrast, personnel from the Royal Netherlands Army Aviation Branch were mainly pilots, observers and did have considerable career opportunities after the war. This was not only on account of the status of their jobs, but also on account of many more opportunities for promotion being available in the much bigger Royal Netherlands Air Force that at that time was being established.

For the majority of the Dutch veterans, the prospect of remaining in service was not an attractive one. They had mainly taken up flying in order to play an active role for the Allies, without having a burning passion for flying in itself. Now the war was over, they preferred to return to civilian society. Their reintegration was often not an entirely smooth one, however. During the war they had led adventurous and varied lives and had been exposed to great danger, accompanied by extreme tension and fears; they therefore found it difficult to settle into a regulated and ordered society, which many former aircrew occasionally experienced as stifling. Their new working environments depended largely on the degree of education they had enjoyed. Quite a number of them had been at school or were just starting university upon the outbreak of war. They were therefore unable to submit diplomas and demonstrate work experience when applying for jobs after the war. Consequently, they began their working lives at a disadvantage. Most ex-aircrew took the logical step of looking for jobs in the aviation industry. Eventually, just over a third – 34% – found employment in this sector. The Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM) in particular was a popular employer in the post-war years. Almost two thirds of the Dutch RAF veterans took up jobs in a completely different sector. However, their status of war hero gave them few privileges and it was not easy to find employment in post-war society. This was not only due to the fact that The Netherlands was going through a deep recession but also because, as previously mentioned, many of them had problems adapting to civilian life, which was so different from what they had been used to.

It is therefore not surprising that a relatively large number of Dutch wartime flying personnel opted for emigration. They chose to do this not only because they hoped – just like the rest of the emigrants – to increase their chances on the labour market, but also because it was easier for them to leave the Netherlands than it was for the average Dutchman. After all, a number of Dutch aircrew had married a British woman and most spoke good English and were familiar with Anglo-Saxon customs and habits. Outside England, where the veterans and their wives had no social network to fall back on, building a new life as an emigrant was tough and many veterans had difficulty in keeping their heads above water, particularly during the first years in the new country. This was partly due to the economic conditions after the Second World War and to the red tape that many emigrants had to deal with.

In addition, after 1945 many aircrew struggled with the after-effects of the deep fears they had experienced during combat operations. While only a limited number of Dutch flying personnel came out of the war with physical ailments, a relatively high number of them went back to civilian life with psychological problems. This undoubtedly had a negative influence on their ability to function in normal everyday life. Among these psychological problems were sleeping disorders (nightmares) and a refusal to speak about their wartime experiences, which could lead to difficulties in finding a job and marital problems. They also felt that recognition and appreciation for their wartime efforts from society at large was a long time coming. Apart from a short burst of attention immediately after the liberation of the Netherlands, most Dutch war-

time flying personnel felt they received but little respect from the Dutch people, however much they had put into fighting a 'just war' for the Allies. It was only from the 1990s onwards, when the ranks of Dutch RAF aircrew were beginning to thin out due to old age, that recognition and appreciation for their efforts during the Second World War started to increase. Ultimately, the relatively short but dramatic and life-changing period of the war made its mark on the lives of many Dutch RAF veterans, both in the positive and negative senses. It was an important and unavoidable interruption in the lives of all of those involved.

Recapitulating it can be stated that the Dutch Air Forces in Britain were small and fragmented. Therefore Dutch pilots, observers, wireless operators and air gunners played only a marginal role in the air war over Europe. The high risks of not surviving the war didn't recoil approximately 900 Dutch aircrew to volunteer for flying duties. Patriotism, adventurism and a great urge to play an active role in the war were the main reasons to join. Their background did not differ that much from their prewar predecessors. Most of the flying personnel originated from middle class families or even higher. In the performance of their duties the danger of being killed was very high. For this reason fear was ubiquitous amongst the flying personnel. Furthermore, many of them were confronted with the moral dilemma of bombing civilians. Nevertheless, most of them pressed on at the height of battle until they were finally released from operations or, in many cases, lost their lives. In the end a third of all operational aircrew – almost 235 men – didn't survive. Alone for this reason it's been worth to write '*Eenige Wakkere Jongens*', a book about a small group of young, brave and determined Dutchmen.