

Gus Winckel, Master Pilot – Doug Hurst

Of the hundreds of Dutch airmen who served in Australia in WWII, Gus Winckel was the best known. He was a fine pilot, but the Australian public first heard of him for a feat on the ground – the shooting down of a Japanese *Zero* fighter with a hand-held machine gun.

When the Japanese attacked Broome on 3 March 1942 Gus was standing next to a *Lockheed Lodestar* he had flown in from Java. Grabbing a machine gun, he fired from the hip, achieved a most improbable hit on an attacking *Zero*, and made the papers for the first time.

Broome was the Australian hub of an allied air evacuation from Java. The attackers caught 15 allied flying boats in Roebuck Bay and a dozen or so land planes on the airfield nearby. More than 70 people were killed and many more wounded.

The wounded had to be evacuated and surviving allied transport aircraft were quickly put to use flying them south. Gus's *Lodestar* had survived, but the machine gun's hot barrel had burnt his hand and he could not fly until it was treated. That done, he flew medivacs around the clock for two days without rest.

Meanwhile, the Japanese now occupied most of Java and were nearing the hill town of Bandung and the allied HQ located there. On 5 March the Allies decided that five high ranking RAF and RAAF officers in Bandung had to be rescued that night and Gus was chosen for the job. He protested that with no sleep for two days he was in no condition to find Bandung at night without electronic aids and land there in the dark.

This was true. But it was also true his *Lodestar* was the only aircraft suitable for the task and he was the best qualified man to fly it. Many hours as a flying instructor in Bandung had given him intimate knowledge of the area, and recent *Lodestar* flights to and from Borneo as the Japanese approached had honed the necessary skills.

Flown at night to avoid enemy fighters, these Borneo flights carried key personnel and supplies like ammunition from Java to the front lines. Dirk Stellema flew as a wireless operator on the flights and recalls that the weather was even worse than usual for the wet season, adding to the problems of flying about a mountainous archipelago, at night, without electronic aids and with everything blacked out.

Crews nevertheless flew over 200 hours per month and Dirk gives high praise to Gus and the other pilots he flew with, stating that 'the best pilots were on *Lodestars*'. All of which made Gus Winckel the best man for the job and he was soon winging his way towards Java, lack of sleep notwithstanding.

The weather was not a problem, but navigation without the help of radio beacons and identifiable ground features proved nigh on impossible. He could just make out the looming presence of Java and fly along its southern coast, so avoiding the giant volcanoes that form its spine, but could not see enough to get a useful fix. In time, a red glow appeared ahead. Realising it was from the burning town of Cilacap on Java's mid south coast, he fixed his position and headed for Bandung.

On contacting Bandung radio they learned that all airfields were either occupied or unusable and they had to land on a road near the town's outskirts. Bandung was blacked out, but Gus managed to find the road, lit by jeep headlights at each end, and land successfully - even though the road was little wider than the distance between the aircraft's wheels.

While refuelling was underway, a large American car drove up and a Chinese man got out. He approached Gus and offered two cupped hands full of jewels - a fortune by any measure - to be flown to safety with his family. The Japanese army had ruthlessly killed millions in China during the past decade, and he was obviously prepared to pay a high price to avoid the same fate. But he had waited too long to escape; there was no room on the *Lodestar* and he was turned away.

Soon after, at 3:00 am, with a full load of fuel and 14 passengers on board, Gus set off for Broome and landed there seven hours later without incident. The five important officers left the aircraft without even saying 'thank you' and Gus, who had not slept for three full days, went to bed and slept for 22 hours, his extreme tiredness overcoming the Benzedrine he had been taking to keep him awake.

Once recovered, he went to Melbourne along with other evacuated Dutch aviators and began planning the future. In all, they had 110 aircraft - 50 from Indonesia and 60 just arrived from the US. Although they had aircrew in Australia, they lacked the ground crews, spares and facilities of all kinds to begin operations and their aircraft were sold to the Allies for immediate use against the Japanese still massing in Australia's north.

Fortunately, the Dutch had also bought 162 American Mitchell B-25 bombers, yet to arrive in Australia. But when the first B-25s arrived in Australia the under-resourced Dutch could not operate them and their aircraft again went to the USAAF. In response, the frustrated Dutch sought help from the Australian Government, which quickly agreed to contribute up to 700 RAAF personnel to help form Dutch squadrons.

The first, No 18 Squadron, would be in Canberra as part of the RAAF. The Dutch sent 143 Air Corp personnel, including Gus Winckel, from Melbourne to get things moving and on 4 April 1942 the squadron was officially formed. The first five aircraft were delayed, however, and by June only a handful of crews were converted to Mitchells.

Gus Winckel was among them and on 5 June 1942 - just five days after a midget submarine attack on Sydney - he and his crew were sent on anti-submarine patrols off the NSW coast. To the

surprise of many, they found a submarine on the surface making a strong wake, attacked it with bombs and sank it.

The result made the front page of many daily papers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporting that the submarine rose into a vertical position and then sank 'leaving an oil stain 400 yards square'(sic). Such good news in bad times was widely welcomed. Prime Minister Curtin personally congratulated Gus and his crew, and pictures and articles appeared in the national press.

The rest of 1942 was taken up with planning and training for northern operations, which began in late 1942 when 18 Squadron joined the RAAF's North West Area Command, operating from MacDonald airfield in the Northern Territory near Pine Creek.

MacDonald was barely adequate for operations, being little more than a strip and some parking areas bulldozed out of the scrub, but from it they flew their first northern sortie – an uneventful reconnaissance of the Tanimbar Islands – on 18 January 1943.

The widespread cloud, massive thunderstorms and intense heat made flying difficult, but in February 1943 they still flew 87 missions against Japanese shipping and airfields, usually drawing retaliatory action from fighters or anti-aircraft fire. A number of Mitchells were damaged, some so severely that they ditched nearby or on the return leg home.

This environment placed a heavy load on the squadron's experienced men, especially flying instructors like Gus who, in addition to flying as crew captains, had to develop and maintain specific operating procedures for the B-25s in this hostile world.

Things improved on transfer to Batchelor, a much better base closer to Darwin with a sealed tarmac area, better runways and good water supply - all very welcome. From there they operated until the last weeks of the war, flying mostly in the Timor and Arafura Sea against Japanese land targets and area shipping. Throughout that time, Gus flew either with the squadron on operations, or as an instructor in Canberra.

It was tough work. Enemy action, tropical illnesses, bad weather and stress all took their toll on the Dutch aviators in the harsh and demanding environment. 18 Squadron lost 20 aircraft during the war and 105 men (mostly Dutch, some Australian).

When the war against Japan ended in August 1945 the Dutch sought to restore colonial rule in Indonesia. Many Dutch aviators in Australia – Gus Winckel among them- were sent there to support that aim. Sporadic fighting ensued until the United Nations oversaw an end to the fighting and the creation of the new nation of Indonesia on 27 December 1949.

By then Gus Winckel had spent eight years at war. Glad to put the fighting behind him, Gus settled in New Zealand where he died just after his one hundredth birthday. Gone but not forgotten, his name lives on in Broome where the main road to the airfield is named in his honour.

This article, authored by Doug Hurst, was published in a 2012 booklet titled "Broome" that was issued by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Australia in honour of the 70th anniversary of the Japanese air raid on Broome.

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