



Introduction

Johannes "Joop" Adriaan Deknatel



Thank you. I am flattered by your invitation to speak today.

A few years ago, while researching information for a book I am writing about my family's history, I inadvertently ran across a mention that my Father, **Joop Deknatel**, had escaped from Java in 1942 on the MS Abbekerk.

It made me realize how little I knew about my Father's life. He never talked about the war or growing up in the Far East. Most of what I knew about him, was what my mother told me as a youngster. Later, in the 1990's I learned a bit more about his war time experiences when I read the books written by **Otto Ward** and **René Wittert**.

I began to understand how important it was to discover who my Father was. I re-read the books several times, bought many others and researched Australian, Dutch, Indonesian and Mississippi archives. I came in possession of about 100 letters my **Grandparents** and Father had written to my **Uncle Ben** between 1937 and 1954 and discovered some war time pictures and a 1927 16 mm film documenting some of my Father's early life in South East Asia.

I learned what a complicated, courageous and lucky man he had been.

Sadly, it was not until years after he had died that I started to appreciate how difficult his life had been and how the war had shaped him. I realized I had to write a book just about him.

Allow me to share a little of what I discovered about my Father.



Growing up

Growing Up



Joop's Parents, Jo & Gerda Deknatel on leave in the Netherlands



Joop (right) with his father and brother Ben in Batavia, 1928

My Dad was born in 1916 in Shanghai where my grandfather, a Dutch banker, was posted. By the time he was six years old, Joop and his younger brother Ben, had lived in Hong Kong, Singapore, Surabaya and Batavia.



Returned to the Netherlands



In 1930, the family returned to the Netherlands, where Joop attended high school at "het VCL" in The Hague and studied Law at Leiden University.



Off to Canada 1939



Ottawa Journal on October 9, 1939

Early in the summer of 1939 he travelled to Ottawa, Canada to visit his girlfriend. At the last moment he decided not to return home as planned. That was a fortunate decision as the freighter he was scheduled to return on, struck a mine just south of Portsmouth, England.

It was the first of many times that **Lady Luck** was on my Father's side!



Dutch Army Stratford Ontario



In January 1941, while still living and working in Canada, Joop enlisted in the Dutch Army in exile. Several months later, he, along with four others, volunteered to join the **Air Force of the Royal Dutch Indies Army** in Kalijati, Java.



Travel to Java



His travel companions were:

Ernest Redelmeier, who had recently emigrated with his parents and siblings to Canada. Joop and Ernest became best friends. Ernest also flew with the 18th Squadron. After the war Ernest returned to Canada where he raised purebred Aberdeen Angus and Jersey cattle on Don Head Farms north of Toronto. One of his sons, Bill, and his wife Marilyn, are here today.

The others were: **Gerard Burgers** who also joined the 18th Squadron, **Ed Koekebacker**, who was captured and survived four years in a Japanese concentration camp and **Johan Neeleman**. I have not yet been able to discover what happened to Johan.

They travelled via Vancouver, Seattle and San Francisco to the Dutch East Indies. Others, including Coen and Joost Kiewiet de Jonge, travelled to Java via New York.



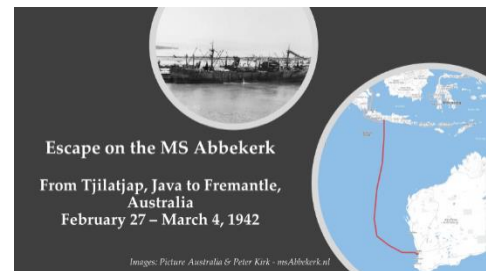
Training in Kalijati 1941



In Kalijati, the men signed up for four years with the **Air Force of the Royal Dutch Indies Army**, training on the Ryan STM and the Dutch built Koolhoven FK-51 aircraft.



Escape on the MS Abbekerk



Just before the Japanese forces completed their invasion of Java, Joop, along with about 40 other cadets and instructors, including **Otto Ward**, escaped from Tjilatjap to Australia on the MS Abbekerk.

Loaded with perhaps more than 2,000, mostly US Forces personnel, the Abbekerk and 24 other ships left Tjilatjap late afternoon on February 27th, 1942. 13 ships never made it to their destination.

The Abbekerk was also attacked by a Japanese plane. Eye witness reports of what happened that day differ considerably. However, all agree that they were attacked, and, if they were bombed, the bombs missed. The Abbekerk made it to Australia without any loss of life.

Lady Luck had once again smiled on my Dad.



The Mariposa 1942

The Mariposa arrives in San Francisco, May 3 1942

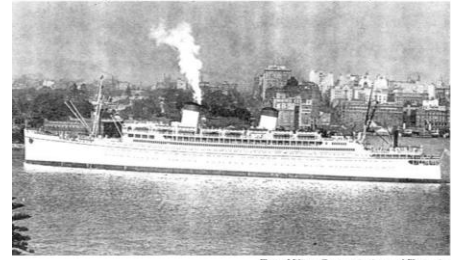


Photo: Military Communications and Electronics

From Australia, Joop and more than seven hundred other Dutch Nationals, travelled on the SS Mariposa, through Japanese controlled waters, to the United States to start flight training in Jackson, Mississippi. When the ship arrived in San Francisco, Joop immediately called **Mary Carthy**, his girlfriend in Toronto, and proposed to her. Mary, who had not heard from Joop for a long time and feared he had been killed, said YES.



Joop marries Marion "Mary" Irene Carthy
Toronto, May 14, 1942



**COMES FROM JAVA
TO MARRY TONIGHT**
Serg. Johannes Edmond, of
West Mission Carthy

Coming all the way from Java to be married here to Miss Marion Carthy of Toronto, Serg. Johannes Edmond, of the 488th Central Postal Directory, is to be married here tonight at 8 o'clock at the West Mission Church. The bride is a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Carthy, of Toronto. The groom is a sergeant in the 488th Central Postal Directory, and is a native of Java. He is a member of the Royal Netherlands Military Flying School, Jackson, Mississippi. The ceremony will be officiated by Rev. J. J. Carthy, pastor of the West Mission Church. A large attendance is expected.

Toronto 1942

Once the men arrived in Jackson, Joop managed to get permission to take a short leave to travel to Toronto to get married. **Ernest Redelmeier** came along as his best man. A few days after marrying they returned to Jackson where my Dad started training at the **Royal Netherlands Military Flying School**.



The Royal Netherlands Military Flying School

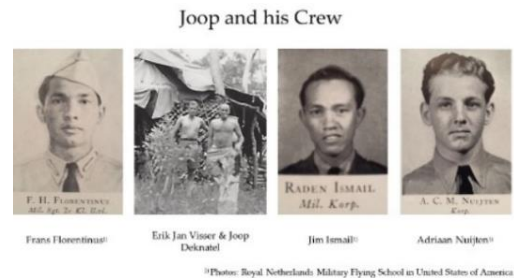


After obtaining his Dead Reckoning Navigation Diploma and completing Advanced Flight Training in February 1943, Joop was selected for Operational and Combat Flight Training on the B-25 Mitchell.

How incredibly imposing those Mitchells must have looked compared to the aircraft he had flown until then!



Joop's Crew



The crew Joop trained in Jackson and flew most missions at the 18th Squadron with, were:

Co-Pilot

Frans Florentinus,

Bombardier & Navigator

Erik Jan Visser,

Wireless Operator & Gunner

Jim Ismail, and

Tail Gunner

Adriaan Nuijten.



Princess Juliana Ottawa



The final training flight was a long eight-aircraft cross-country formation flight via Chicago to Ottawa, Canada, where he met **Princess Juliana** who spent the war years there. The crews were all invited to join **Princess Juliana** for tea at her home and, while there, they admired six-month-old **Princess Margriet**.

They returned to Jackson via Boston, Phoenix and Omaha to prepare for the long and dangerous Pacific Ocean crossing to Australia.



Australia August 1943

Banner of the 18th Squadron NEI-RAAF
Commissioned by Squadron Commander Lt. Col. Fiedeldij - 1942



In August, Joop was one of fourteen crews assigned to the 18th Squadron operating out of Batchelor Airfield in Australia.

I am not sure he was prepared for the realities of war.

It would change him, and shape the rest of his life.



Weather in Batchelor

The Seasons in Batchelor



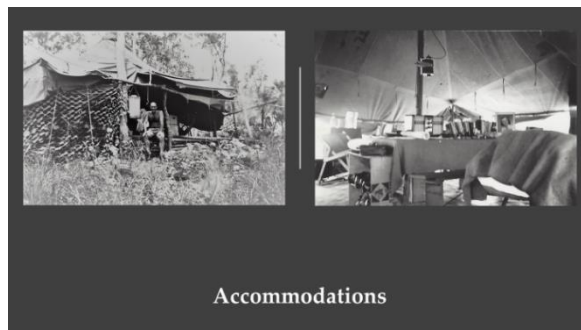
Credit: 18 Squadron NEI-RAAF Forces Association Newsletter – Artist unknown

When the men arrived in Batchelor there had been little rain since early May. Large clouds of dust were everywhere.

A few months later, when the wet season arrived, the pathways and roads turned into creeks and huge swarms of mosquitos, flies and other critters constantly harassed the men.



Accommodations



Joop shared a tent with his navigator **Erik Visser**. It had two field cots with mosquito netting, a bunch of rickety chairs and stools, and a homemade desk made from a piece of plywood stacked on a couple of crates.

Quite different from Joop and Mary's home in Jackson!



First Mission

Joop's first mission – Search "Giraffe"

Credit: National Archives of Australia

MS-148	IA. DEENIK	Spn ret "GIRAFFE" ZUL 44.	1383362400105 "BATCHelor"	Mr. DEENIK, Capt. GIBSON, P/Sgt. JAYNE, Sgt. B. BORTH. A 12 reconnaissance completed with all enemy sightings. WINDSOR HARBOUR was observed from 2000 ft. at distance of 5 to 4 miles. Visibility there was C-6 miles. Visibility for remainder of route was excellent with slight haze off the Australian coast. Bombard 2 x 500 bomb, 1,000 ft., 2,000 ft.
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Joop's first mission was as co-pilot on an eight-and-a-half-hour reconnaissance flight, code-named, "Search Giraffe." The captain on that flight was **Pieter Deenik** who was well known for having flown a C-47 underneath Sydney Harbour Bridge.



Reconnaissance Flight Patterns



These long reconnaissance flights were not without danger. If a lone B-25 was attacked by three or four Japanese fighters, the outcome was often disastrous.

A few weeks later, Joop flew his first combat mission with three other B-25 Mitchells, a successful night-time bombardment of targets on Timor Island.



Going on Leave



In November 1943 Joop and his crew qualified for a two-week leave. Favourite destinations were Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. All were about 3000 kilometers away. To get there they could either take the weekly transport flight or hitch a ride on one of the supply planes. Neither option was very comfortable



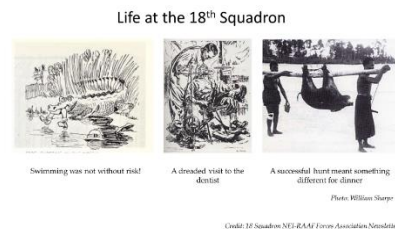
Joop's Leave



Joop went to Sydney, where Mary had rented an apartment. Prior to marrying, my Mother had never travelled outside of Ontario and every day in Sydney was a new adventure.



Life at the 18th Squadron



Back in Batchelor, life became somewhat routine: Training flights, standby flights and several missions every week. After flying a combat mission, the men were entitled to a full day off which meant that they could leave the base. Not that there was much to do. Some went swimming in a nearby creek. A hand grenade tossed in the water was enough to discourage alligators getting a little too interested. Others went hunting for wildlife.



Mississippi Dream



Early in December 1943 my Dad was assigned N5-161, “**Mississippi Dream**,” for a night time combat mission with five other B-25 bombers. The mission required a refuelling stop at Drysdale River Airfield, 500 kilometers to the west.

While landing at Drysdale, the nosewheel of the “Mississippi Dream” collapsed and it skid off the end of the runway coming to a rest on its nose.

Tom Johnson, who was stationed at Drysdale, wrote in part:

“When N5-161 stopped, the bomb bay doors were open, and the crew just seemed to fall out, and run like mad to the side of the strip. Our Armourer immediately went to the plane and checked the bombs to see if they were secure. A few days later personnel of the Rescue and Salvage Unit pulled the B-25 off the strip and began to remove parts and guns for salvage.”

Thankfully no one was seriously injured, but the poor “Mississippi Dream” was a complete write-off.

Lady Luck had once again smiled on Joop and his crew.



Recovery of the Mississippi Dream



Now I must take you to something that happened less than a year ago when I was contacted by **Ralph Duttson**, a retired farmer living in Western Australia. His uncle, Tail Gunner **Jeff Crosbie**, who had crewed on eight missions with my Dad, had been killed in a training accident in May of 1944.

Ralph assisted with lots of information. He made me aware of the "Children of the 18th Squadron" Website and Facebook group and put me in touch with **Eline Wessels** who added me to the membership list.

The first time I opened the group's Facebook page, there right in front of me was a story about the recovery of the "Mississippi Dream" by the Reeves Warbirds team of **Peter Smythe**.

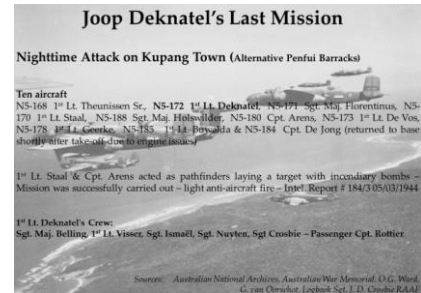
I was stunned.

It was exactly what I was researching and writing about at that time.

I sat quietly at my kitchen counter, goosebumps on my arms, a tear rolling down my cheek, convinced that a higher power had its hand in that unforgettable moment.



Last Mission



Early May 1944 my Dad flew his last combat mission. He had survived 43 missions, and God knows how many training, reposition, standby and test flights. For years I had a small leather wallet that he had carried with him on every flight. It had a sweat-stained picture of my Mother in it.

In the eight months Joop was stationed in Batchelor, twenty-seven men of the 18th Squadron lost their lives.

But **Lady Luck** had been good to my Father and his crew - all survived the war.



Transport Section



Joop was assigned to the 19th Transport Squadron in Brisbane, briefly returned to the 18th Squadron when it was based in Balikpapan in Borneo, before returning to the Netherlands in August 1946, where he and my Mother eventually settled in the town of Naarden.

Joop had left Jackson, eager, confident, ready and proud to fight for his country. He changed while serving with the 18th and 19th Squadrons.

Sure, he was still confident and proud to serve his country against evil. But he was mentally bruised. It haunted him for the rest of his life. Today we call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

He had crash landed and survived bullets whizzing by his head in the cockpit. He had experienced terror, witnessed and participated in unimaginable events causing the death of many whose names he did not know.

War had hardened him - it had made him both strong and vulnerable.

The son of a dozen generations of Mennonites, the gentle fun-loving man my mother had met on the slopes in Collingwood Ontario, had changed forever.



Decorations



In November 1944 Joop was awarded the “Oorlogsherinneringskruis” with two bars.

But it was not until six long years later, in September 1950, that he and many others who proudly flew for their country with the 18th Squadron, was awarded the Vliegerkruis.

It was Prince Bernhard who pinned the decoration on my Father and each one of his original crew members.



Life in Holland and KLM



Schiphol 1947

Back in Batavia

After the war, like many other 18th Squadron pilots, my Dad joined KLM and within a year was back flying the long routes to the Far East.

I was born in 1947, followed by Martha and Helen.

But Mary and Joop's marriage failed.

Joop married Alsa Elgersma, a KLM flight attendant, with whom he had three more children, Jeroen, Mark and Caroline.



The Family



We became one large family when my 48-year-old mother passed away in 1965.

My sisters Martha and Caroline, and their families, are also here today. Helen passed away two years ago and my brothers, who live in Phuket and Chicago, were unable to attend.

Joop's run with **Lady Luck** ran out in 1972 when he suffered a stroke while visiting me in Toronto. He passed away four years later, barely sixty years old.



Acknowledgements



I am honoured and proud to be part of the “Children of the 18th Squadron”, a foundation that is working so hard to keep the memories alive.

I would like to thank all those who have provided me with assistance, documentation, support and encouragement as I continue to discover the story of my Father’s life. In particular, I want to mention:

My wife **Donna**, who is also here today, and my **brothers** and **sisters**;

Guus van Oorschot;

Elmer Mesman;

Eline Wessels-Vinken, and;

Peter Smythe who so generously donated the **Radio Call Placard** and a piece of the main spar of the “**Mississippi Dream**” which I will share with my siblings.

I also hope to find the family members of my Dad’s crew so that I can share a small piece with each of them, as well as with the “Children of the 18th Squadron Foundation”.

These were just a few, of many words, I have written about my Father. There is so much more I would like to share about the complicated and interesting life of a very courageous man - my Dad, **Johannes Adriaan Deknatel**.

Thank you!