

04 May 2022 Netherlands National Remembrance Day

Speech by Emeritus Professor Ian Lilley FSA FAHA

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you all for joining us here on Ngunnawal country. I pay my respects to their elders, past, present, and emerging. We gather today for the Netherlands Day of Remembrance. May 4th is the day we commemorate those who lost their lives in conflicts and peacekeeping missions since the outbreak of the World War Two, including the passengers on the ill-fated MH17 at the start of the ongoing war in Ukraine. We also take the opportunity to remember those who liberated the Dutch from the Nazis on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1945, a momentous occasion by any measure.

You may wonder why an archaeologist has been asked to deliver this address. The short answer is that I lead an Australian-Dutch research team studying Camp Columbia, the headquarters of the WWII Netherlands East Indies Government in Exile during the final years of the war. Scientific archaeology has its Indiana Jones moments but is generally highly forensic. It is key in such contexts because it can capture information that written and oral sources forget, misrepresent, or deliberately leave out.

Camp Columbia was situated at Wacol near Brisbane. The Dutch took over the headquarters of the US 6<sup>th</sup> Army after the Americans returned to Southeast Asia with General MacArthur. Much of the vast Wacol base was occupied by the Australian Army following the war. I'm from an Army family and lived there as a toddler. I also served on the base myself, first as an Army Cadet at school and then as a member of the Queensland University Regiment. I even met my wife there, as she was also in the University Regiment.

I knew about the Americans at Wacol, which was just one element of their enormous footprint in Southeast Queensland during the war, but I never suspected there had been a Dutch presence in the area, much less one as important and fascinating as the East Indies Government in Exile. This is the only instance of a foreign government being established on Australian soil, demonstrating the close links between Australia and the Netherlands as part of the Allied effort in the Pacific. Most popular historical attention on these links focusses on Broome, to where large numbers of people from the East Indies fled by flying boat following the arrival of Japanese forces in that archipelago. They were attacked by the Japanese shortly after they arrived, when 68 Dutch people, nearly all civilians, were killed.

This was a tragic event that should never be forgotten, yet Camp Columbia, which played a much more important role in history, remains almost completely unknown here and in the Netherlands. Interestingly, Camp Columbia's place in history stems not only from its role in the later stages of the Allies' Pacific war effort but also because it was intimately tied up with the progress of the independence movement in what became Indonesia. This adds a complex dimension to the story that is even less known than the presence of the government in exile. Immediately after the war, the Indonesian Revolution led to significant

regional and indeed global political complications as the Australian Federal Government of the time was a strong supporter of Indonesian independence.

We are now some 80 years on from Australia's first formal defence alliance with the Netherlands, in the form of the short-lived American-British-Dutch-Australian Command in 1942. A very great deal of water has passed under the bridge since then. First there was the war itself, which as many of you know saw deep cooperation between Australia and the Netherlands. Most famously we collaborated in the Sparrow Force guerrilla campaign in Timor and in the storied No. 18 and No. 120 Dutch-Australian RAAF squadrons, but also for example in the less discussed operation of Dutch submarines from Australian bases and the extensive deployment of Dutch merchant ships to assist the war effort across the region. In this connection, I draw your attention to the Merchant Marine crest on the adjacent monument, alongside the military insignia. Our two countries had quite a standoff over the independence of Indonesia but immediately afterwards we worked closely together in an unsuccessful bid to keep Dutch New Guinea out of Indonesian hands. Subsequently we fought as allies in Korea, and more recently in the Gulf War, Afghanistan and Syria. Since 2014 we have been working together on the case against Russia regarding the downing of Flight MH17 and now we are both providing military support to Ukraine to counter expanding Russian aggression.

Our tight military ties are reinforced by close post-war civilian ties. Almost a quarter of million Dutch descendants live in Australia, nearly 100,000 of whom were born in the Netherlands. Plenty of Australians have gone the other way too. Even if they have not been personally involved in any of the conflicts in which Australia and the Netherlands have worked together, all of these people, like most if not all of us here today, have family who would have been affected by war, either as official combatants or as civilians.

Sometimes these connections come up as a surprise a very long time after the event, but they can still lead us to reflect on our personal history and indeed the human condition more generally. My maternal grandfather was in the RAAF during the war and escaped Singapore just before it fell. I was very close to him, but he never spoke about how he got back to Australia. I was always told that he had just appeared in the family shop unannounced and unrecognisable and asked my mother, then an 8-year-old girl, "where's your mother?". The other day, undoubtedly prompted by my work at Camp Columbia, my now 88-year-old Mum told me out of the blue that "your grandfather got back with help from the natives and the Dutch". I have no idea whether that's true, but even so it has led me to think more about the man, his experience during and after the war and what it meant for my mother's family, including me and my sisters.

In broadly similar vein, I was in Arnhem in the Netherlands last month, scene of the doomed Allied airborne assault on the bridge across the Lower Rhine in WWII. I was meeting with my Camp Columbia research partners at the Ministry of Defence Museum Bronbeek, which houses collections and archives of the Netherlands East Indies Army, or KNIL. Two things during my visit strongly brought to mind the matters we are commemorating here today. First, the museum displays are in the same building as an aged care facility for colonial army soldiers and NCOs, who live literally surrounded by physical reminders of their service

and sacrifice. To see the museum collections, one has to walk in the midst of these men to get to the exhibition halls and storage vaults. Thus so one must interact, even if only in passing, with veterans with direct personal ties to the material housed in the Museum. It is a very moving experience!

Second, a couple of days before my visit, someone walked in off the street with a stack of photo albums and – even more remarkably – a diary beautifully handwritten and illustrated by a teenager who had escaped the East Indies and ended up in Camp Columbia. One of the photos shows her standing at the door of a camp hut. Amazingly it is one of the handful of WWII structures whose foundations remain intact and visible in a small nature reserve after the rest of the camp was bulldozed during the construction of the Queensland state government prisons that unfortunately for our investigations now cover most of the site. For some reason the prison authorities don't want archaeologists digging holes around the place, so finding even a sliver of land with surviving evidence off prison property is wonderful. Sadly this remaining area has already been looted by metal detectorists who have kept the Dutch material they found, but we nonetheless hope to reveal something worthwhile when we excavate.

Even if the photographs and text of the diary don't add a great deal to what we already know, they are still a remarkable physical connection to the people who occupied Camp Columbia and to the historical events they endured and which we are commemorating today. It is an extraordinary privilege to have direct access to the thoughts of someone who was at the camp during its years of operation. It is also an honour to be working on a matter that the diarist's family thinks is important enough to remember that they donated the diary and photo albums to the Museum rather than throwing them away, as so often happens with personal memorabilia of this sort. We can't keep everything from the past of course, and we do need to move on with our lives as individuals and societies, but we also need tangible reminders of where we came from and of the positives and negatives of how we got to where we are now. As an archaeologist familiar with the long-term human past, I know the truth of the much-quoted observation that "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it".

Lest we forget.