

The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies

An Impressive Japanese Source

Petra Groen

Netherlands Institute of Military History (NIMH)

PMH.Groen@mindef.nl

The Pacific War had a major impact on the Netherlands. It was the beginning of the end for the Dutch colonial empire in Southeast Asia. It was also the beginning of a war in the Indonesian archipelago that was to last for ten years. For many Dutch and Indo-Europeans, the war years were a watershed in their lives. In the past few decades, the successive wars the Dutch fought at that time, first against Japan and then against the Republic of Indonesia, have generated but intermittent interest. As far as the war against Japan is concerned, the rapid defeat of the Royal Netherlands Indies Army (KNIL) was a particular subject for discussion, just as the shock of the swift surrender of the Dutch army in May 1940 was discussed for a long time after the event.¹ Unlike the latter case, where German sources were also available for consultation, research into the war against Japan was often frustrated by the language barrier between most western researchers and Japanese sources. Researchers had to make do with rare translations of Japanese studies and Japanese monographs – a series of operations summaries written by Japanese officers after the war, subsequently translated and published by the U.S. military history service.²

* Prof. Dr. Petra M.H. Groen is a Senior Researcher at the Netherlands Institute of Military History (NIMH) in The Hague. From 1994 till 2009 she also lectured military history at Leiden University. She has published extensively on Dutch colonial military history.

- 1 Joop J. Nortier, Pieter Kuijt and Petra M.H. Groen, *De Japanse aanval op Java, Maart 1942* (Amsterdam, 1994) 9–15, 248, 249. After 1994, two studies were published which tried to breathe new life into an old debate: Herman T. Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril: Western colonial power and Japanese expansion in South-East Asia, 1905–1941* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Amsterdam, 2001); Peter C. Boer, *Het verlies van Java: Een kwestie van Air Power: De eindstrijd om Nederlands-Indië van de geallieerde lucht-, zee- en landstrijdkrachten in de periode van 18 februari t/m 7 maart 1942* [The loss of Java. The final battle for the Dutch East Indies and the Allied air, sea and land forces between 18 February and 7 March 1942] (Amsterdam, 2006).
- 2 Japanese monographs can be consulted at the Netherlands Institute of Military History, among other places: Collection 508 Netherlands-Indies against Japan (1940–1946), inv. no. 168–258.

This situation changed with this autumn's publication of *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, the translation of the third part of the Senshi Sōsho series of 102 studies on the Pacific War.³ This was somewhat of a European premiere for the Netherlands; until now, only fragments of this series had been translated and published in Australia.⁴ The publication of this 600-pages long work owes much to the financial support of the Corts Foundation, but particularly to translator and editor Willem Remmelink, who for years was director of the Japan-Netherlands Institute in Tokyo. What then is the importance of this publication, what can the reader and the researcher expect, what should he/she look for, and precisely how did this study come about?

The War History Office of the National Defence College of Japan (currently known as the *National Institute for Defence Studies* – a counterpart of the Netherlands Institute of Military History) compiled the Senshi Sōsho series between 1966 and 1980. At first glance, the series appears to be another one of the official histories of the Second World War, which many western governments commissioned the military history services of their armed forces to write after the war. In the Netherlands, for example, the seven-part series *Nederlands-Indië contra Japan* [the Dutch East Indies against Japan], compiled by the military history section of the General Staff (KNIL, later Royal Netherlands Army), was published after being commissioned by General S.H. Spoor. However, although the Senshi Sōsho was compiled by a government body, the Japanese government did not officially either commission or approve the publication. The controversies in Japan about its role in Asia during the Second World War were, and still are, too great. There is not even agreement on what the official name of the war should be.⁵

The preparations for the Senshi Sōsho series began in 1955, when the Japanese War History Office was established. Scores of veterans working at the institute collected thousands of documents (operations plans, orders and

3 W.G.J. Remmelink (ed.), *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies. Compiled by The War History Office of the National Defense College of Japan*. Leiden University Press, 2015. The translation can be viewed at: <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/35184>.

4 See the Australian War Memorial's website, where translations of fragments of this series, made under the umbrella of the Australia-Japan Research Project, can be consulted. <http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/ajrp2.nsf/Web-Pages?Japanese.Operations?OpenDocument>.

5 *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), xiii, xvii; S. Daito and Hisashi Takahashi, "Post-war trends and developments in the study of military history in Japan", in *Mededelingen van de Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis* [Announcements by the Military History Section] 14 (1991) 74–81, 75–76.

reports, war diaries, post-war memoirs etc.), conducted thousands of interviews and discussed these sources and raw manuscripts during innumerable meetings. With this basic material as its foundation, the 135 authors and researchers, all veterans, began to compile the series from 1965 onwards.⁶ For the now translated third part of the series concerning the invasion of the Dutch East Indies, this working method resulted in a different and more hybrid type of study than western readers are familiar with. The reader is not presented with an analytical narrative of a military campaign, but a compilation of primary sources – original documents, such as operations plans and operations reports – punctuated and linked by concise analyses by the author Matsuki Hidemitsu. However, the abovementioned working method ensured that the series is not a one-man-show, but rather a collective product and shared vision of veterans connected to the Japanese War History Office.⁷ Japanese military operations are central, controversial issues or historical debates (about, for example, Japanese military objectives or the role of the emperor) are avoided, while the darker sides of the story, such as the execution of Dutch-Indies prisoners of war at Tarakan or on the Tjiater Pass, are given no exposure.⁸ On the latter point, the same can, however, be said of official western war histories, which seldom drew attention to their ‘own side’s’ atrocities. A further limitation to this third part of the series is the fact that the focus is on land operations, with fleet operations being discussed separately in a following, yet to be translated, part. Moreover, this study does not extend any further than the surrender of the KNIL on 9 March 1942, meaning that there is no mention of the Japanese operations that took place in central and northern Sumatra later that month.

Despite these limitations, the unofficial status of the Senshi Sōsho series, the silence regarding controversial issues and the lack of a critique of the sources, this part of the series, *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, has much to offer to western, particularly Dutch readers. It paints an extremely detailed picture of plans and planning (from the highest to the lowest levels) and of operations in the archipelago. It is as if a curtain had been drawn aside and light was now illuminating the innumerable details that were, until now, hidden. For the first time, we can now examine in detail the thinking behind Japanese operations and compare Japanese and Dutch operations reports. This seems

6 *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), xvii–xviii.

7 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), xvii–xviii, xxix.

8 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), xiv.

to open up possibilities for a comparative analysis of the battle for the Dutch East Indies.

Apart from the opportunity to carry out a detailed, comparative analysis at the tactical level, this study also gives us more of an idea of the general characteristics of Japanese operations. I would like to draw attention to a number of these characteristics. First, it is striking to note how risky the Japanese plans for the conquest of Southeast Asia actually were. According to the original plans, this immense area was meant to fall into Japanese hands in just 150 days, in an operation to be carried out in two phases.⁹ In the first phase, lasting approximately one month, the 14th and 25th armies had the task of capturing the Philippines, British Borneo and Malaya. Those were the stepping stones to the second phase, the capture of the Dutch East Indies. In that second phase, first the airfields in South Sumatra, South Borneo and Celebes had to be captured; from there, air supremacy over the Java Sea and Java itself was to be gained. Subsequently, Java should be captured within an estimated two months.¹⁰ However, two of the three divisions initially considered necessary for the invasion of Java in the second phase were also to be deployed during the first phase. How quickly these troops would actually be ready for renewed deployment and what condition they would be in remained to be seen.¹¹ A second hazardous aspect of the plan concerned the fact that the tempo of land operations was dictated by the time required for the capture of enemy airfields. Air dominance and air support of Japanese army units, often inferior numerically, was a leading principle in Japanese doctrine. The destruction of the airfields would therefore have put an end to the Japanese plan. Finally, the rotation of units demanded meticulous preparation in terms of logistics, or as this study puts it: 'The units concerned had to move as a clockwork of gears and cogwheels.'¹²

As if this was not enough, the risks were amplified to a considerable degree by substantially speeding up the operation. The invasion of Java, originally to be achieved within 103 days, was first cut by over 30 days, later adjusted to 20 days.¹³ These repeated changes to the already tight schedule caused logistic chaos, which seriously jeopardised the Java operation.¹⁴ Estimates regarding the capture of the airfields on Borneo and South Sumatra had also been much too optimistic. They had either been thoroughly destroyed or had to be

9 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 59.

10 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 4–9, 44–48, 56–69, 76–81, 100, 155.

11 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 267.

12 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 6.

13 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 8, 9.

14 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 133, 151.

extended and resupplied after their capture, which involved further effort. Consequently, on 18 February 1942, the ship convoy carrying the invasion force had to set sail for Java before the air force had been able to strike the decisive blow in the air campaign for the island, as prescribed by Japanese doctrine.¹⁵ In the manuscript, each change to the schedule is given extensive attention. Readers can distil the rationale behind the changes from the views exchanged during the consultations held. The Southern Army had made it a matter of honour to carry out its operations earlier than scheduled in the original 150-day time frame presented to the Emperor.¹⁶ In addition, it wanted to prevent the Allies from sending timely reinforcements to Southeast Asia.¹⁷ Finally, one of the underlying politico-strategic arguments of the Imperial General Headquarters was that Japan was to have achieved an ‘undefeatable position’ in Southeast Asia, should the Allies manage to stay in the war longer than expected.¹⁸

The tempo in which the operation plan for the conquest of Southeast Asia was to be carried out meant that at the strategic, operational and tactical levels there was a great deal of emphasis on offensive and surprise operations, which were to culminate in a decisive blow. This had been one of the leading principles of the Japanese army combat doctrine since the turn of the century.¹⁹ In fact, the terms “surprise attack” and “surprise landing” occur over 83 times in this publication. The ultimate example of a surprise operation at the strategic level is, of course, the attack on Pearl Harbor. Incidentally, the plan for that particular attack originated from the Japanese navy, which was looking to repeat the feat of dealing a decisive blow such as the one at Tsushima in 1905.²⁰ The simultaneous attacks on the Philippines and Malaya were also intended to surprise the Allies and compel them to divide their forces. On the tactical level, a surprise offensive was to take the shape of nocturnal attacks, attacks on the rearguard of the opponent, involving several columns.²¹ A textbook example of such an attack involving all the aforementioned elements was the attack of the Sakaguchi Detachment on Tarakan.²²

15 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 428, 448–450.

16 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 25, 26, 59.

17 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 26, 42, 276, 420, 425, 456.

18 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 42.

19 Edward J. Drea, *Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet tactical Combat 1939* (Fort Leavenworth Papers, Jan. 1981), 17–18; see also Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor. Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln, 1998), 11–13.

20 William March, “Different shades of blue’: Interwar air power doctrine development. Part 2: Germany and Japan”, in: *The Canadian Air Force Journal*, 2–2 (spring 2009) 21–26.

21 *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), 408.

22 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 174–181.

Paratroop landings were a novelty in the realm of surprise offensives. These were planned for attacks on the oil refineries and oil supplies in Balikpapan and Palembang in order to guarantee these strategic objectives falling undamaged into Japanese hands.²³ Ultimately, the army only conducted paratroop landings at Palembang, with priority on the capture of the airfield. That was indeed taken by the Japanese with no damage, as was the largest of the two oil refineries. However, the Allied air force managed to destroy the still-functioning oil refinery a few days later.²⁴ The paratroop landing at Palembang airfield indicates just how important the capture of airfields was considered to be and how essential the element of surprise was to avoiding destruction of this objective.

This strategy failed completely when employed during the attack on Ledo airfield in Central Borneo. It was not until a month after the landing at Kuching in British Borneo that the Kawaguchi Detachment captured the totally destroyed airfield, which was considered to be of crucial importance to the air attacks on South Sumatra and West Java. The manuscript states that almost 8,100 men worked day and night to repair the airfield and bring in supplies. Just who those 8,100 men were is not clear; they were probably forced labourers from the native population. Despite their efforts, the airfield remained unusable during the further Japanese advance.²⁵

On the other hand, on 1 March, the Shōji Detachment managed to capture the important military airfield at Kalidjati on West Java in what is called a 'blitzkrieg-like' operation nine hours after the night landing at Eretan on the north coast of Java.²⁶ It was a strategic victory. The day after, the Japanese air force, which had immediately started operating from Kalidjati, made short work of the 'major counterattack' undertaken by the colonial army.²⁷ After that, there was only a single line of resistance, the one in the Tjiater Pass, between the Shōji Detachment and Bandung, the military capital of Java.

To succeed, the emphasis on surprise offensives required a great deal of improvisation and drive on the part of the Japanese commanders. But these qualities were expected of them. Japanese combat doctrine demanded 'imaginative leadership and initiative'.²⁸ This suited a method of command and control

23 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 82, 355: On January 18 the oil reserves at Balikpapan were already destroyed.

24 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 272–273, 282, 333–344.

25 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 311, 312, 315, 451–453.

26 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 193, 507–508.

27 Nortier, Kuijt and Groen, *De Japanse aanval op Java* (fn. 1), 121–134.

28 Drea, *Nomonhan* (fn. 19), 19; Kyoichi Tachikawa, "General Yamashita and his style of leadership," in B. Bond and K. Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese military leadership in the*

that resembled the *'Auftragstaktik'* of the Prussian and German armies. This was 'a command method stressing decentralized initiative within an overall strategic design', as Gunther Rothenberg described it.²⁹ That is precisely what we see in the succession of operation plans and orders, from senior to lower levels, in this publication. The commanders at the highest level set the objectives and determined the means, the campaign design and the time-schedule. Their subordinate commanders then decided in a top-down fashion, but always in close consultation, how these objectives should be realized. The operation plans laid down by the army and division headquarters were seldom very detailed; so lower level commanders kept much freedom to act according to their own views.³⁰ The staff officers were the links in the chain of this structure. Just as in the German army, they had to ensure that the operation plans of sub-commanders fitted in with senior commanders' intentions. They sometimes designed operation plans themselves or even led the operations in question.³¹

This command structure, mission command as it is known today, was not without its drawbacks. Sometimes commanders were found to have misunderstood their objectives. For example, in 1941 Major General Kawaguchi appeared not to have understood the necessity of an immediate advance to Ledo airfield after the capture of Kuching on Christmas Day. Southern Army Headquarters in Saigon had to remind him several times of his objective. The Headquarters refused to accept his explanation for the delay, i.e. the monsoon, destroyed bridges and unnavigable roads owing to knee-deep mud. It was only after Kawaguchi had set course for Pemangkat, 400 kilometers further down the coast, with an improvised fleet of requisitioned sailing and motor boats that Saigon was placated.³²

Far Eastern War 1941-1945 (Abingdon, 2004), 78. 'Its conduct (of larger units PG) requires the skill to take advantage of the operational situation by especially brave and bold decisions and manoeuvre'.

29 Günther E. Rothenberg, "Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment", in: P. Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* Princeton NJ, 1986) 296.

30 For example *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), 69, 81-88, 95-98, 142-145, 155, 173-176, 198, 226-233, 237-240, 245, 259, 270-273, 282-284, 288-289, 316-319, 353, 392-393, 404-409, 434, 460-467, 538-540, 549, 551. Compare: Faris R. Kirkland, "Combat Leadership Styles: Empowerment versus Authoritarianism", in *Parameters* 20 (December, 1990) 62, 65-66.

31 *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), 102, 171, 194, 202, 205, 208, 240, 251, 272, 283, 345, 355, 369, 465; compare Rothenberg, "Moltke" (fn. 29), 301.

32 *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), 197-203, 220.

During the operations on Java, General Imamura, the Commander of the 16th Army, had difficulty keeping a grip on his sub-commanders after various ships had been hit, probably by 'friendly fire', during the landing in Bantam Bay.³³ Almost all communication equipment was lost and Imamura was without communication lines for days. The army commander had foreseen that, owing to the large distances between the landing locations and the widely dispersed objectives to be attacked, the four attacking groups would need to be given more autonomy. In order to prevent division and detachment commanders being too self-willed, they were issued with relatively detailed directives and assigned 'dedicated staff officers'.³⁴ Some commanders nevertheless drew up their own plans. On East Java, for example, the division commander had set his sights on dealing the decisive blow on the river Brantas. However, the detachment under Major General Abe had pushed forward so rapidly that the division commander only had to carry out rearguard skirmishes.³⁵ But the clearest example is of course the advance of the detachment under command of Colonel Shōji. Imamura had purposely selected him on the basis of the special bond between them, thinking that Shōji 'would be of one mind with him'.³⁶ Contrary to Imamura's operational directives, on 4 March, Shōji decided to independently launch an attack on Bandung with his two battalions. Up until then, the resistance he had encountered had made no impression on him and he wanted to at least emulate the success that his fellow regimental commanders had achieved at Palembang.³⁷ He disregarded the advice given by his more cautious staff officer, all the more because the air force commander was prepared to support him.³⁸ When Shōji informed General Imamura of his progress one day later, Imamura saw his move as a dangerous divergence from the operation plan. But to the Southern Army, he claimed that it was a rare opportunity, so that he would not be accused of cowardice.³⁹ This succession of events illustrates just how delicate the balance is between acting with initiative and acting recklessly. The result, victory or defeat, determines whether acting independently is applauded or maligned. Incidentally, this example shows the undiminished importance of traditional martial values such as honour, courage and determination in the Japanese army.⁴⁰

33 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 471.

34 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 460.

35 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 549, 558–563.

36 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 251.

37 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 512, 513, 516.

38 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 518, 521.

39 *Ibid.* (fn. 3), 498–500, 502–503.

40 Drea, *Nomonhan* (fn. 19), 90.

My last observation focuses on what is in some respects the advanced character of the Japanese army. In contrast, other historians have emphasised its relatively traditional nature,⁴¹ as it was indeed a light infantry army on plim-solls and bicycles, without heavy artillery and with few and only light tanks. The Japanese army retained indeed a doctrine which emphasised offensive operations, much the same as the Allied armies had before the First World War. But in other aspects, the Japanese army was surprisingly modern. During the inter-war years, Japan saw the value and possibilities of aircraft, both on land and at sea, as no other power did. The navy developed a doctrine which put the aircraft carrier instead of the battleship in a central role.⁴² Just as in Germany, the air arm of the army developed a successful doctrine for air dominance and tactical air support during land operations. The deployment of paratroops, following the example of the German successes of spring 1940, was also modern.⁴³ The fact that the paratroop landings at Palembang were by no means a complete success clearly illustrates that such landings, although modern, are also difficult to carry out and prone to failure. The final modernism I want to draw attention to is the employment of 'black clandestine broadcasts' made by the Southern Army in Saigon. These radio broadcasts, made between 1 and 9 March, created a great deal of disinformation, which disrupted the already chaotic defence by the Royal Netherlands Indies Army (KNIL) even further. The origin of the confusion over the KNIL's cease-fire – or capitulation – orders on 8 March can be found in these radio broadcasts.⁴⁴

This last detail illustrates once again what the strength of this impressive publication is: the large volume of detailed information on military operations about which we, up until now, literally only had a one-sided view. This important source can, as already mentioned, be used to compile a detailed comparison of information from both sides. This will allow anyone interested in this war in the Indonesian archipelago an opportunity to make a more balanced analysis of the fighting, more than was previously possible. The translation of this part of the *Senshi Sōsho* series therefore represents an important step in the historiography of the collective war experiences of Japan, the Netherlands and Indonesia.

In sum, this English translation of the unofficial Japanese study of the attack on the Dutch East Indies in 1942, with a particular focus on Japanese land operations, is a world premiere. To date, no part of the 102-part *Senshi Sōsho* series (war history series) had been published complete and unabridged in a

41 Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril* (fn. 1), 746; Drea, *Nomonhan* (fn. 19), 90.

42 March, "Different shades of blue" (fn. 20), 25–26.

43 *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), 23.

44 *The invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (fn. 3), 576–585.

western language. Although the study remains silent about a number of controversial issues and requires a critique of sources by readers, the translation has a great deal to offer, particularly the possibility of comparing Japanese and Dutch operations at the tactical level. It also reveals the main characteristics of Japanese operations: offensive and surprise operations were the tenets, major risks were not shunned, and considerable initiative was expected from lower-level commanders in Japanese command and control, which was set up along the same lines as the German *'Auftragstaktik'*. Ultimately, in some respects the Japanese army revealed itself to be an extremely modern force, particularly in the use of air power.