

KONINKLYKE PAKETVAART MAATSCHAPPY

(Royal Packet Navigation Company)

A Brief History

4/9/1888	Incorporated in Amsterdam.
1/1/1891	Commenced operations in NEI with 28 small ships, totalling 29,000 GRT.
1908	Started monthly service to Australia with two 3,000 tonners – “ <i>Le Maire</i> ” and “ <i>van Spilbergen</i> ”
1914-1918	<u>WORLD WAR I.</u> Holland remained neutral. Existing services maintained and two new services started – Java/Bengal Line and Deli/Straits/China Line.
1923	New KPM Head Office opened Batavia.
1928	“ <i>Nieuw Holland</i> ” and “ <i>Nieuw Zeeland</i> ” KPM’s 11,000 GRT “Great White Yachts”, took over Java/Australia Line services.
1929-1933	<u>GREAT DEPRESSION.</u> Up to 17 ships – 13% of the fleet – laid up.
1937	New 14,150 GRT Liners, “ <i>Boissevain</i> ”, “ <i>Ruys</i> ”, and “ <i>Tegelberg</i> ” took over Far East / South America shuttle service via Singapore, Batavia and South Africa.

WORLD WAR II (1939-1945)

Initially Holland was again neutral, until invaded by Germany on the 10th May 1940.

- A week later, Holland was lost. The Dutch Royal Family was evacuated to England, as was a Dutch Government-in-exile.
- The first KPM wartime loss was the 3,000 ton “*Rantaupandjang*”, sunk on the 22nd February 1941, by the German Pocket Battleship “*Admiral Scheer*” north of Madagascar, homeward bound from South Africa with a full cargo of coal.
- On the 7th December 1941, Japan entered the war with the attack on Pearl Harbour.
- Three days later, the British battleships “*Repulse*” and “*Prince of Wales*” were lost off the east coast of Malaya.
- On the 12th December 1941, “*Patras*” and four other KPM ships embarked Australian troops at Darwin and landed them safely several days later at Ambon, escorted by HMAS “*Adelaide*”.
- During January and February 1942, the unarmed and unescorted Allied ships were at the mercy of the Japanese Navy and Air Force and losses came thick and fast.

- On the 15th February 1942, Singapore, the cornerstone of the Allied defence of South East Asia, fell to the Japanese and all Allied resistance in the area, except the small Allied Naval Force, had been snuffed out.
- Fifteen days later, that too, was obliterated in the Battle of the Java Sea.
- That was just about it!
- For the Allied ships, there was then nowhere to go in the whole of the Far East, South East Asia and a large slice of the Pacific, but Tjilatjap, the small port on the mid-south coast of Java.
- On the 4th and 5th March 1942, came the first heavy air raids on Tjilatjap and the end was nigh. The KPM supply and repair ship “*Barentsz*” was totally destroyed, as well as a number of other KPM ships and the floating dock and floating crane, which had been towed from Batavia.
- Finally, on the 7th March 1942 – exactly 3 months after Pearl Harbour – Japanese land forces reached Tjilatjap and it was all over!
- The Netherlands East Indies had held out just three more weeks after Singapore fell on the 15th February 1942. It had cost the Allies dearly. But it had bought that much priceless time, when the scales were tipped so heavily against us.

Did those three weeks delay the Japanese advances just long enough to enable the heroic handful of Australian Diggers to stop them a little later on the Kokoda Trail? Or give the Americans just enough time to regroup their shattered Pacific Fleet and win the “Battle of the Coral Sea” and “Midway”?

Who knows!

- KPM had lost a staggering 79 ships – over half its fleet!
- Of the surviving KPM ships, the five liners were already operating worldwide as troopships, based in the UK; as were “*Straat Malakka*” and “*Straat Soenda*”.
- Some 24 KPM ships were based in Bombay, while another 30 made it to Australia.
- All were chartered to the British Ministry of War Transport and allocated to various services – the 30 in Australia to the Allied Forces under General Mac Arthur. But all KPM ships, in all areas, operated through the war under the Dutch Flag and their Dutch officers in their KPM uniforms.
- Needless to say, DEMS could not immediately fit out the 30 unarmed KPM ships, no matter how urgently they were needed. So several made their first voyages to New Guinea unarmed, carrying the first US Troops, who had arrived in Sydney in the “*Queen Elizabeth*”.
- The ensuing delays took their toll on the Javanese KPM crews, who refused further duty en masse – some 1500 of them – and were eventually interned in a camp in Cowra. To replace them Lascar crews were ordered from India, but

would not arrive in Sydney for some time. Until then, as each KPM ship completed fitting out, it was manned by an interim scratch crew – Australian Naval Ratings for one – Australian Merchant Seamen for another - the Philippino crew of the “*Mactan*” for yet another.

- As the KPM ships received their armament, they swung into action. They were the first Allied ships into Milne Bay (“Fall River”). They spearheaded the advance to Oro Bay, Buna, Finschhafen, Aitape, Saidor, Hollandia, Biak, Morotai, Manus and a few other ports. They also carried out special missions to Noumea, Darwin, Exmouth Gulf and Merauke.
- Towards the end of May 1942, Convoy ZK-8, consisting of “*Bantam*”, “*Bontekoe*”, “*van Heemskerk*” and “*van Heutsz*” escorted by HM “*Tromp*” and HMAS “*Arunta*”, landed 4,735 troops of the Australian 14th Brigade and their equipment at Port Moresby.
- An advance detachment of Australian and American troops, which had been landed at Milne Bay and had a precarious hold on the area, was re-enforced in the nick of time by the first Milne Bay Convoy (BOSTON) consisting of “*Karsik*” and “*Bontekoe*”, escorted by the corvettes “*Warrego*” and “*Ballarat*” on the 25th June 1942.
- Countless convoys followed. “*Lilliput*”, “*Accountant*” and other Allied operations!
- Probably the most hazardous and important of the many missions carried out by the KPM ships during this most critical period – 1942/43 – was the transport of B Squadron, 2/6 Australian Armoured Regiment with 15 Stuart Tanks from Milne Bay to Oro Bay in December 1942, when the Allied advance had stalled at Buna. With the Japanese planes and naval vessels right next door, “*Karsik*”, under Captain J. I. De Vos, landed four tanks and crews at Oro Bay on the 13th /14th December 1942 and “*Japara*”, under Captain W. G. van Zeggeren, landed another 11 on the 25th/26th December 1942, both ships escorted by the Corvette HMAS “*Lithgow*”.
- Nobody wasted too much time on paperwork or statistics during the war, but it is estimated that the KPM ships delivered about one million tons of military supplies to the front lines – tanks, trucks, lighters, explosives, munitions, avgas in drums, bombs and what have you. Also about 100,000 troops.
- “RAN” 1942-45 (p 276) states:-
 - “Almost without exception, the merchant ships of Lilliput were Dutch. Not until the final stage in June 1943, did the first American Liberty ship – “*Key Pittman*” (7181 tons) - enter Oro Bay”, and again (p 281),
 - “Lilliput itself remained a monument to the fine services of the Dutch ships, which almost without exception, constituted its transport side. Their contribution was invaluable and during the period of Lilliput, they were irreplaceable”.
- Some KPM ships like “*Tasman*” and “*Janssens*” also took part in the recapture of the Philippines.

- But undoubtedly their most valuable contribution to the Allied War Effort in the South West Pacific Area, was keeping the New Guinea supply line open during those darkest days, when there were not too many other ships around!

By the end of World War II, KPM had lost a further 16 ships:-

- The UK based troopship “*Nieuw Zeeland*”, sunk off Arzeu on the 11th November 1942 after landing troops during the Allied invasion of North Africa, and the freighter “*Ombilin*”, sunk in the South Atlantic on the 12th December 1942 by the Italian submarine “*Enrico Farroli*”;
- Nine Bombay-based ships, including three in the Bombay Explosion; and
- Five Sydney-based ships.

The lot of the Merchant Seaman has seldom been an easy one. What they achieved under such conditions is quite remarkable. For the KPM officers, it was particularly hard to bear, with their wives and children in Japanese camps and their parents mostly in German-occupied Holland.

During the Japanese occupation of Netherlands East Indies, 70,000 women and children were Prisoners of War. 13,120 – one in six – died in prison!

We thank Lieuwe Pronk of the KPM shore based staff Sydney 1942/43/44/45 for his co-operation and permission granted to use extracts from his book **KPM 1888 – 1967 A Most Remarkable Shipping Company**. Having been in convoy and involved with the KPM Co. during the New Guinea Campaign with Burns Philp & Co. seagoing, I can attest to the factual information written by the Author Lieuwe Pronk. KPM with ships of the Australian, United States, British, and other Nations manned by Merchant Marines from many countries can only be designated as the Fourth Ally in the “Battle For Australia”. Ron (Steve) Wylie.