

American – Dutch – British Conversations
(ADB Talks, 21-27 April 1941)

Two Dutch Submarines placed under British
control “for a specific purpose”

Those that have read the paper *HMAS Sydney II and Operation Fish 1941*, will recall that there was mention of two Dutch submarines which met with *HMAS Sydney* on 17 November 1941. This then is further research into the Dutch submarines and their use at that time. If they had been elsewhere, involved in other operations or under other control at the time it would, of course, meant that the entire theory was wrong. That is not the case.

Following several other meetings and talks during 1940, “Brooke-Popham had urged the War Office to agree to the setting up of an independent office of the Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW) in Singapore, to control and co-ordinate anti-Axis measures between the Dutch, Americans and ourselves” and in 1941, the ‘Conversations’ held in April of that year, are of some significance to the situation portrayed in the book *HMAS Sydney II and Operation Fish 1941*. Here are some extracts from a report of those conversations issued from the Office of the Commander-in-Chief, China Station and classified Most Secret at the time, which are of considerable interest. It must not be overlooked of course, that MEW came under the direction of the Foreign Office and was part of SOE and were also in Singapore at that time.

First, however, an Australian Advisory War Council ‘Minute’ [560] dated 7 November 1941 and classified MOST SECRET stated;

“... it was decided to send Mr Duff Cooper to the Far East to enquire and report as to the arrangements for improvements of the machinery for inter-Governmental consultations and co-operation in the Far East.”

This decision to send Duff Cooper was made personally by Churchill. Duff Cooper was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster so that he carried Cabinet rank while he was in Singapore. He was appointed in July 1941 but only arrived in Singapore on September 10 and was appointed the UK Minister of State for Far East Affairs Singapore. This appointment provided Duff Cooper with considerable local power to make very important decisions without recourse to Whitehall, the Foreign Office or anyone else. He makes it very clear, however, in his autobiography that he was carrying out duties for the Foreign Office. [*Old Men Forget*, Duff Cooper, p289].

The War Council Minute cited above also stated

“In addition to the four United Kingdom Departments indicated above (i.e. Foreign Office, Colonial Office, India Office and Dominions Office), there were also the following;

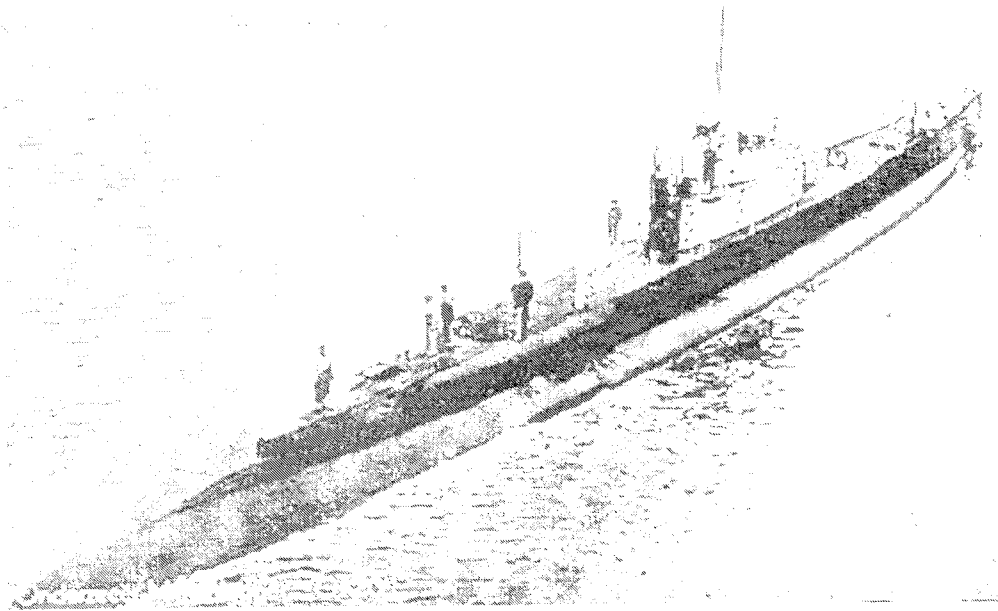
The Ministry of Information had set up an office in the Far East;

The Ministry of War Transport had a representative at Hong Kong;

The Treasury have appointed a Financial Commissioner to the Far East who is located in Shanghai.
All have separate channels of communications to Whitehall.
There is no representative of the Foreign Office at Singapore”

Duff Cooper departed Singapore to return to the UK on 13 January 1942. The above statement is interesting because there was a Ministry of Information representative in Singapore at that time. His name was Ian Morrison. He was the son of the famous Australian journalist Dr George Morrison (‘Chinese’ Morrison) and who had been an adviser to the Chinese government. Ian Morrison was also a journalist in China, he had been educated in England at Winchester and Trinity College, Cambridge. He became Professor of English at Hokkaido Imperial University, Sapporo, Japan until 1937. He took up a position as private secretary to Sir Robert Craigie, the British Ambassador in Tokyo which he held until 1939. He then became a representative to the British and Chinese Corporation in Shanghai until October 1941.

In October 1941 he became the Deputy Director of the Far East Bureau of the Ministry of Information in Singapore and as such was a Foreign Office representative. In fact the Foreign Office was in overall control of the Ministry of Economic Warfare, Ministry of Information and SOE (and as such the Oriental Mission in Singapore as well). The Foreign Office, of course, was in turn responsible to MI6. So the statement in the War Council that there was no Foreign Office representative in Singapore in November 1941 is not true, as far as the Australian government were aware.



The submarines O19 and O 20 normally carried 40 Vickers T MK III contact mines which were 92 cm in diameter, 119 cm high and carried 220 Kg of TNT or Amatol high explosive.

It is true they all had separate lines of communication with the UK and Duff Cooper was there to co-ordinate all of these sectors. In *The Fall of Singapore* by Timothy Hall (p48) he states...."next to Duff Cooper in Singapore were two Foreign Office representatives, one from the Ministry of Information and the other from the Ministry of Economic Warfare each with their own staff."

By the time Duff Cooper arrived in Singapore, the British had already negotiated with the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies for two submarines to be placed at the disposal of CinC China in Singapore.

During the talks the British negotiated the use of two submarines to be placed under the control of CinC China, and to be based in Singapore, ostensibly for use in the South China Sea for offensive action against a possible Japanese threat.

Under paragraph 49.

"49. One cruiser, two destroyers and two submarines will be available initially to operate under British control."

Further to this was the added paragraph:

"52. The Dutch submarines will principally operate under the orders of Commander in Chief, Netherlands East Indies, for defence of the channels through the Netherlands East Indies to the Indian Ocean.... two initially..... will be allotted to general tasks at the direction of the Commander in Chief, China."

Most official sources state that the two submarines *O19* and *O20* of the 4th Submarine Division, came under CinC China's direction at the beginning of the war on December 7 1941. However, some sources state that they were already in Singapore on 1 December 1941. This is confirmed by the discussions between the Dutch government in exile in the UK and the CinC Netherlands asking why the submarines were still under British control on 30 November 1941. This would indicate that the use the British had for these two submarines had been completed and control should have reverted to the Netherlands East Indies navy by then. This is quite understandable, because the Netherlands East Indies had little enough forces to defend themselves.

The use of the submarines had been given to CinC China for a specific task and they were expected back in the Netherlands East Indies. The ABD talks never made further mention of the cruiser and the two destroyers – it was only the submarines that were discussed after the end of the talks. The separate talks held with the Dutch made further discussion at the ABD talks regarding the submarines unnecessary.

The governing body in the NEI saw their future tied to the interests of the British, Australians and the Americans, however, the ADB talks of April 1941 need to be ratified by the various governments and this was not done, although the general principles were finally adopted when the war broke out.

Because the Americans were full participants in the April talks, where they had previously been observers, no definite statement or information was forthcoming regarding the use to which the two submarines were to be used by the British. As Richard Aldrich wrote – information was fully shared with the Americans except for the most secret operations – those of SOE in Singapore (i.e Oriental Mission or Ministry of Economic Warfare or FESS, or all of them). (Richard Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War Against Japan*, p92).

While the talks were in progress in April 1941, there were other talks to which the America, Australia and New Zealand apparently were not invited. These were the British-Dutch talks and the topics discussed have not been disclosed, however, it is fairly obvious that the use of the Dutch submarines would have been one of the issues that were arranged and the reasons for their use put to the Dutch. It is interesting, however, that Admiral Colvin's report to the War Council included the results of this meeting between the British and the Dutch* (AA2671 135/1941, Supplement 1, Annex E). This file is not available through any archives that have been explored, but was referred to in a report by a member of parliament (Fadden) to parliament.

The reasons for the non-ratification of the talks by Britain were tied up with at least three main reasons. The first was connected with Britain's failure to secure the French gold reserves at Dakar – with that failure the French General de Gaulle was relegated to a minor player in the war by Churchill. Secondly, all during 1941 the British were endeavouring to purchase Dutch gold and the Dutch steadfastly refused to sell it, hoping, of course, to use it to pay America for arms and aircraft they had ordered from the U.S. These arms orders were continually being taken over by Britain for her own use and the Dutch orders diverted. The Dutch gold in the NEI was transferred to Australia and used to pay for their troops and arms in Australia. Thirdly, Britain was treating the Netherlands East Indies the same as they treated Australia in that they would not do anything themselves to provoke the Japanese while at the same time both Britain and the US were putting pressure on the NEI to deny exports of rubber, tin and petroleum products to Japan.

On 15 November, 1941 Batavia received a cable stating, in part "Objection to placing NEI Navy under strategic command of Singapore in so far as this was not intended for local defence. Reservation to this effect should be made." And then on 20 November 1941 in another cable Batavia sent "..... in principle naval units would operate under national Commander-in-Chief, unless transferred to the Allied Command for a specific purpose." The first date was just two days before the *Sydney* handover of the *Zealandia* to *HMS Durban* and the second date three days after, just time for the two submarines to have returned to Sourabaya and Dutch control.

Here again we see that the two submarines had been transferred only '**for a specific purpose**' and then on 26 November 1941 it was cabled that it was opposed to naval units of NEI operating under the 'strategic supreme command of Singapore, as defence of NEI was essential part of Allied strategy.' Once the specific purpose had been undertaken it

was expected that the submarines would revert to Dutch control prior to the outbreak of hostilities, but when this did not happen it was questioned in the strongest possible terms.

Then on 30 November 1941, two cables, one from Admiral Helfrich to Furstner at Surabaya "Opposed to the placing of two NEI submarines under the operational command of the CinC China, but would accept Gerbrandy's decision and make his own view known in Singapore." And on the same day the reply to Helfrich was "Gerbrandy persisting in decision to place two NEI submarines under the operational command of the Commander-in-Chief China at Singapore when these were placed at his disposal." In fact after this exchange, not two but several Dutch submarines were placed under British control.


No longer was there an argument about two submarines being transferred for 'a specific purpose'; - that had been taken care of by 20 November - now the argument was whether to let the British continue to take control of their naval forces. While the NEI was 'itself desperate for its own defence the two submarines and other naval vessels came under British control. It is obvious that arrangements had been made "politically" about the submarines, as Vice-Admiral Helfrich must have given way to allow the submarines to remain in Singapore.

What happened, is what nobody expected. The Japanese were not expected to attack the Netherlands East Indies because they would have had the British in Malaya on one flank and the Americans in the Philippines on the other. What no one expected was that the Japanese would attack everywhere, the Philippines, Malaya, Netherlands East Indies and at Pearl Harbour all at the same time.

The fact remains that from April 1941 it was already arranged between British forces in the Far East and the Dutch on a political level, that two submarines (*O19* and *O20* were two of the NEI's newest submarines) be made available to the British CinC China, based in Singapore for a specific purpose. After that, they were to be returned to Dutch control but eventually they remained with the British naval command. Although, like everything to do with *HMAS Sydney*, no concrete evidence can be found, it remains that these two submarines were allocated for a specific operation just before the outbreak of the war with Japan between 15 and 20 November 1941.

These two submarines were minelayers and without mines onboard would have been ideal for any operation that required secrecy and space to store items. Was it to transfer gold and other valuables loaded in ammunition boxes and exchanged for the 6" ammunition and depth charges (as ballast), with which *Sydney* had been heavily loaded, just prior to her departure Fremantle? In the information found regarding the 6" guns which were provided to the Dutch is a note i.e. [55]. This referred to a file in the Victorian archives (MP1185/8). When the file was located in the archives it came up with all of the *Sydney* files. It may have been just a co-incidence but all of these facts certainly fit.

James Eagles


15 December 2005

*Reference is made to this report in a War Cabinet Minute No 455 by Mr A W Fadden Acting Minister for Defence Co-ordination dated 14 May 1941 (Supplement 1 to Agendum 135/1941). The note 5. reads:

5. Not printed, See AA: A2671, 135/1941, Supplement 1, Annexes A-E.

The conversations reported in Annexes C, D and E were known as A.B.C.i, A.D.B. and B.D respectively. [An inquiry to the Archives has been made but so far the Annex E containing the agreement between the British and the Dutch has not been found even though it has been given an Archive file number and is referred to in other documents]

The British-Dutch conversations were known to be connected with the use of Dutch naval vessels but otherwise remain secret.

James Eagles, 2006.