

# Ambush in Indonesia

## *The first (and only?) United Nations' casualties in its involvement in the Indonesian war of independence 1945-50.*

**Graham Rayner**

At about ten o'clock on the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> March 1949 a Dutch military jeep, painted white and clearly marked as "UNITED NATIONS" was ambushed by what were presumed to be militant Indonesian republicans on a lonely stretch of road 14 kilometres from their destination. They had been travelling from Medan, near the north-east coast of Sumatra, to Kabanjahe in the central highlands and were attacked near the village of Berastagi (in all contemporary documentation the village was spelt as Brastagi). The attackers had waited until the vehicle had passed their location on a hair-pin bend before opening fire into the back of the jeep. 25 bullet holes were later counted in the jeep.

Driving the jeep was British Lieutenant Colonel Howard Douglas Chaplin with Major John Albert Simmons Junior of the US Air Force sitting in the passenger seat. Both were unarmed as they were part of the international military observer team in country supporting the work of the **United Nations Commission for Indonesia** (UNCI), the new name for the Security Council's Committee of Good Offices (UNGOC) formed in

*On 17<sup>th</sup> August 1945 Sukarno declared the independence of Indonesia, a previous colony of The Netherlands. The ensuing conflict between Indonesian republicans and Dutch authorities eventually resulted in the involvement of the United Nations in 1947. The United Nations' Security Council called on both parties to end the fighting and work towards a settlement. The Security Council also established a **Consular Commission at Batavia** to monitor and report on the situation, and a **Committee of Good Offices** (UNGOC) to help the parties resolve the conflict. The Consular Commission sought the help of military officers from the UN member states represented on the Commission – Australia, USA, UK, Belgium, France and the Republic of China. These military "observers" supported the work of both the Consular Commission and the UNGOC. On 28<sup>th</sup> January 1949 the UN changed the name of the UNGOC to the **UN Commission for Indonesia** (UNCI) with increased authority and role.*

September 1947 to help resolve the conflict between The Netherlands and the self-declared Republic of Indonesia.

Sitting in the back of the jeep was their Dutch liaison officer, army Reserve First Lieutenant Roderic Paul Marie baron van Voorst Tot Voorst, a member of the Royal Netherlands Army and Dutch nobility. He had been deployed to the East Indies immediately after he had completed officer training in the UK in January 1946; he had joined the Dutch Army in 1939 but spent the war in the Belgian resistance. After Germany had occupied The Netherlands, Roderic had been sent as forced labour to the German area of Limburg, where he escaped and joined the Secret Army of Belgium. He had

been seriously wounded in action against the enemy. By the time he was sitting in the back of the UN jeep in Sumatra he had served for three years in the East Indies with the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Car Squadron (of Willem van Boreel). LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst was

armed with an Australian Owen gun with about 8 spare magazines (as given in his post incident report).

All occupants of the jeep were wounded and in the ensuing confusion the jeep ran off the road, hit the soft kerb and came to a stop leaning on an embankment. The only mention of the state or situation of the vehicle made in reports of the incident were in a note from the Principal Secretary to the UNCI, dated 29<sup>th</sup> March, which refers to “*where the jeep fell against the embankment*”; and the version of events from Indonesian sources which state that the vehicle “*tipped over*”. LTCOL Chaplin had been seriously wounded, hit by six bullets or fragments in the chest and back as well as being injured in the foot. Both MAJ Simmons and LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst received bullet and shrapnel wounds as well, but the wounds were less serious. MAJ Simmons was hit in his left leg as he got out of the jeep, and later received lacerating wounds from shrapnel across his chest and back. LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst was initially shot in the leg, but was later wounded in his left shoulder, his ankle, other leg and left hand.



*A French observer indicates one of the 25 bullet holes in the jeep.*

LEUT van Voorst to Voorst shouted “**Komisi Tiga Negara!!**” to try and get the attackers to stop, but was rewarded with the reply “Mati, Mati” – “Kill, Kill!”. He returned fire, initially from within the jeep, but later from behind the jeep, managing to keep up the fire even after he was wounded in the left hand. He kept the machine gun stabilised on one of the wheels of the jeep and was fed magazines by MAJ Simmons. After they had been under attack for about 30 minutes they made a dash for cover in the undergrowth some way up the road, but they got separated from each other.

***Komisi Tiga Negara** - Committee of Three States – a term widely communicated across Java and Sumatra to announce the arrival and work of the UNGOC/UNCI. The UN jeep had ‘KTN’ on its bumper bars.*

The attackers got to the jeep and attempted to set fire to it by lighting rags stuffed into the petrol filler tube. Apart from scorching, this was unsuccessful and after failing to find the jeep’s occupants, they broke off the attack and disappeared. None too soon, as the Dutch officer’s ammunition was almost exhausted, and the consequences would have been dire.

About 90 minutes after the attack began a civilian bus came onto the scene from the direction of Berastagi. After some attempt by LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst to describe where the other two were, without success, he took the decision to board the bus and make his way to Berastagi to raise the alarm himself. As it was, the bus had only travelled a short distance before it was met by two Dutch army trucks sent to investigate the sound of gunfire. One truck took the Dutch lieutenant to Berastagi whilst the other went to the attack scene and recovered the two UN observers.

All three officers were initially treated at Berastagi by a Dutch civilian doctor from Kabanjahe, the action probably saving the life of LTCOL Chaplin, before being stabilised and transferred to the military hospital at Medan.

The UNCI immediately appointed a 5-man team of investigators from the UN observers group: COL Morizon (France), COL Rose (UK), LTCOL Meuleman (Belgium), MAJ McLeod (Australia) and MAJ Montana (USA), who all travelled to the scene the following day.

As well as determining the facts of the incident, the investigation team concluded that there were about ten well-armed attackers from the TNI (Indonesian army) involved in the ambush and that LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst had saved the lives of the two observers.



*MILEX Investigation team at the site of the incident. Colonel Rose ('white' shorts) is standing at the point where the jeep hit the embankment.*

The investigation report was supported by the full Military Executive Board (the senior officers from each of the five countries which had despatched observers to Indonesia), however the members from Australia (BRIG Prior) and the US (COL Carlock) considered that there was insufficient evidence to conclude that the perpetrators of the attack had been members of the TNI, as the investigators had surmised. The essence of the investigation report was reflected in the report to the Security Council made by the Chairman of the UNCI, Mr Thomas Critchley (an Australian diplomat).

The investigation report was poor by today's standards. It lacked any description of the attack, relying upon the information contained in the statements made to a member of the investigation team (Australian Major Norman McLeod) by MAJ Simmons and LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst to convey the story of the incident. The report did not indicate any effort to question others, including local Dutch commanders or the operators of the bus which had arrived on scene. The focus of the report was to call for observers to be armed and to travel in armoured vehicles; to call for LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst to be praised; and to recognise the support given by the Dutch army.

A few weeks later, in April 1949, The Netherlands presented to the investigators its translation of transcripts of messages that they had had intercepted, purportedly sent by the TNI, which clearly indicated the TNI's involvement. However, there are some inconsistencies about the contents of the messages which bring into question their veracity. Either the TNI was reporting an embellished version of events or claiming credit for the attack which had been perpetrated by others; or The Netherlands had concocted the transcripts to lay blame at the feet of the TNI.

The TNI report of the incident states that the jeep in which Chaplin, Simmons and van Voorst tot Voorst were travelling was at the tail end of a fast-moving convoy of a tank, an armoured car, a truck and the jeep. The TNI group attempted to stop the jeep but it

would not do so, with someone aboard the jeep (presumably van Voorst tot Voorst) shouting “*We are the Komisi Tiga Negara*”. The report stated that the TNI commander then re-assured the occupants that they would be “*given safe passage*”. The TNI commander then waited “*one minute*” before “*stengunfire (sic) was given by one of the occupants of the said motorcar*”, after which the TNI responded in kind.

This suggests that although the jeep would not stop, and was travelling at speed, after a short exchange of words followed by a full 60 seconds, the jeep was still in the vicinity of the incident. This is simply not credible. And why would LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst open fire unprovoked without any backup from the men in the other convoy vehicles. Why did the other vehicles not hear and respond to the ensuing gunfire but continue on seemingly unaware of the absence of the jeep? Again, not credible. Furthermore, there is no mention of a convoy in either the UNCI investigation report or the statements of LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst or MAJ Simmons taken a couple of days after the event. That said, a convoy was mentioned in one newspaper article published in the UK the day after the attack, but that was the only mention other than in the translated transcripts provided by the Dutch.



*The recovered jeep with members of the military observer team and Dutch personnel.*

The cautionary stance taken by BRIG Prior and COL Carlock over the identification of the attackers was probably the better conclusion, with the only other alternative being a group of militants who supported the nationalist cause.

There was never a suggestion that any fault could be laid at the feet of The Netherlands in any way. The investigation report and Critchley’s report to UN headquarters praised the support given by the Dutch military, and LEUT baron van Voorst tot Voorst in particular.

## **Was the ambush planned?**

An interesting article, unattributed to a particular newspaper and which has not been found published, is to be found on file 405/3/1/5 in the National Archives of Australia. It is dated 24<sup>th</sup> March 1949 and taken from ANETA – the Netherlands East Indies press agency considered at the time to be pro-Dutch. The article reported the arrest of a man named John Rasjmarra, the author of a document which directed Indonesian guerrillas to attack members of the UNCI “*to prove that Jogjakarta is not a quiet place as the Dutch claim.*” The article claimed that the document was handed to UNCI military observers at Jogjakarta. When questioned (presumably by the journalist who wrote the

article), a spokesman for UNCI admitted the existence of the document but could not comment as the UNCI's investigation had not yet ended.

There is no reference to this document in the investigation team's report or Critchley's report to UN headquarters, but if it did exist it may have contributed to BRIG Prior and COL Carlock's caution in attributing the ambush to the TNI.

## Aftermath

Apart from the investigation team attending the scene shortly after the ambush, the vice-chairman of the Dutch delegation to the UNCI, Mr Ton Elink Schuurman, visited the US representative on the Commission and the British Consul to express The Netherlands' sympathy over the incident. Mr Elink Schuurman had been the Netherlands' Consul-General in Australia between 1935 and 1942, before being posted as Consul-General in the US.

The ambush was reported in local media and abroad. Reuters and British United Press agencies picked up the story which was published in many newspapers across the UK and The Netherlands. Most of the articles were very short and follow-up articles were few. In Australia a simple 100-word item appeared in Brisbane's Courier-Mail on 21<sup>st</sup> March. On the same day, a much longer article, with images of the bullet-ridden jeep and of LEUT baron van Voorst tot Voorst, appeared in the Sumatran newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad Voor Sumatra* which reasonably described the events. Only one newspaper item, the UK's Daily Herald of 19<sup>th</sup> March, referred to the jeep travelling in a Dutch convoy.

Behind closed doors however, the attack raised the question of whether military observers with the UNCI should be armed. The Chairman of UNCI, Critchley, sent a request to UN headquarters in New York requesting advice on the policy of the UN in regard to the protection of observers, and whether they should be armed.

The UN's reply was extensive, but essentially advised that observers should, in general, not be armed but left the final decision in the hands of the head of the mission, and only then as sidearms for personal protection. This reflected the situation in Palestine the previous year (1948) when the UN Mediator for Palestine, Count Folke Bernadotte approved such arms in certain circumstances. The UN also stated the general principal that the UN considered "*military observers attached to the Commission as UN*

*During their 7 years in Australia, Mr Elink Schuurman's French-born wife, Adine, sat for a portrait by Nora Heysen which won the 1938 Archibald prize. This was the first time that a female artist had won the coveted prize and Heysen was the youngest winner to do so at the time, aged 27. It was controversial, many believing that the portrait was chosen because of the subject's exotic beauty (all of the judges were middle-aged men). This was unfair. Heysen was an accomplished Australian artist who only achieved her due recognition in later life.*



*officials*”, and that their protection was the responsibility of the party which controlled the territory in which the military observers were operating.

Based on the advice, the UNCI decided not to change its modus operandi.

## **The survivors**

LTCOL Chaplin was reported as “out of danger” within 24 hours of the ambush and on 25<sup>th</sup> March all three survivors were shown in their hospital beds in photographs on the front page of a Batavian newspaper, *Det Dagblad*, looking relaxed.

No evidence has yet been found of what became of either MAJ Simmons or LTCOL Chaplin immediately after they left hospital. The Dutch medical report on MAJ Simmons’ wounds and treatment at the time indicated that he was expected to make a full recovery and presumably this was the case as he went on to complete 20 years of service in the USAF then 15 as a civilian in the US Naval Ordnance Testing Unit at Cape Canaveral. MAJ Simmons, a decorated pilot and mechanical engineer, had only been in Indonesia a matter of weeks when the ambush occurred.

The medical report on LTCOL Chaplin however, indicated that the wound to his foot would likely affect his gait permanently. No evidence has been found of what became of LTCOL Chaplin other than his death in 1980. MAJ Simmons died in 1998.

## **And what became of 1<sup>st</sup> LEUT R.P.M. baron van Voorst tot Voorst?**

LEUT baron van Voorst tot Voorst spent seven weeks in hospital recovering from his wounds before returning to his operational unit with the temporary rank of Ritmeester (name of the rank of captain given to cavalry officers). After having spent nearly four years serving continuously in the East Indies, he was sent home in August 1949 and demobilised in October of that year. He returned to his civilian occupation in the insurance industry but continued to serve in the Dutch reserve force until 1963 when he was honourably discharged as a Ritmeester.



*Lieutenant Baron V van Voorst Tot Voorst in military hospital Medan receiving a visitor*

**Award for gallantry.** In its report into the attack, the UNCI investigation team requested that “*the UNCI express its gratitude in writing to Lieutenant baron van Voorst tot Voorst for his courageous action, by which fatal results may have been prevented*”. Major Simmons, in his statement to the investigation team felt “*that both LTCOL Chaplin and I owe our lives to LEUT Voorst who conducted himself in an exemplary manner in an emergency and was keeping our safety foremost in his mind*”.

The Dutch authorities took note of his actions and on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1949, just a week before he finished his full-time service, approved the award of the Bronze Lion, the second highest national award for gallantry. It was presented to him by His Royal Highness Prince Bernhard, the Prince Consort of the Netherlands at a ceremony at the Prince Willem III cavalry barracks in Amersfoort on 1 August 1950.

As well as the Bronze Lion for gallantry in the East Indies, he had been awarded the Belgium Croix de Guerre with palm (mentioned in despatches) and Belgian Resistance Medal for his service and actions in the Second World War. He was a modest man who never regarded himself as a hero. Reflecting on this, he expressed his sentiment as *“I happened to be there and apparently did the right things; you also have to be very lucky.”* (courtesy of his family)

Roderic baron van Voorst tot Voorst continued to serve his country and community in many capacities during his later life and did so with the same dedication as he applied to his military service. For 34 years of service to HM Queen Juliana as her Chamberlain in the province of Overijssel he was awarded the Cross of Honour of the Order of the House of Orange; and for services to the King of Spain during a state visit he was made a commander in the Spanish Order of Isabel the Catholic. He was also made a Grand Officer in the Maltese order *“Pro Merito Melitensi”* for his service to the Malta Association of the Netherlands. He died in 1988.

Reserve Ritmeester R.P.M. baron van Voorst tot Voorst was a professional and courageous officer of the Royal Netherlands Army who prevented the deaths of two of the United Nations’ military observers in Indonesia.

It is believed that Major Simmons and Lieutenant Colonel Chaplin were the only casualties suffered by the UN during its involvement in Indonesia.

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Images of the attack scene, jeep and hospital are courtesy of the photo collection of the National Archives of The Netherlands; of HRH Prince Bernhard courtesy of the van Voorst tot Voorst family; and of Nora Heysen taken from Sydney Morning Herald website article on Heysen by Jennifer Higgin, 01 April 2021.



*1<sup>st</sup> LEUT baron van Voorst tot Voorst receiving the Bronze Lion from HRH Prince Bernhard.*

**Sources:** Most of the primary source material used in preparing this article can be found in files held by the National Archives of Australia, the Netherlands and the United Nations. Additional information was provided by LEUT van Voorst tot Voorst's son and the National Library of The Netherlands.