

Finding Family History - Visit to Ambon and Haruku
Thursday 19 March – Friday 27 March 2026
Nick and Penny Hamilton searching for the war history of
Corporal Richard Hamilton RAFVR

We took the opportunity to travel for eight weeks with a British Airways around the world ticket. One of the two projects as part of this trip, the more difficult one, was to try and visit the island of Haruku and the old POW camp and airfield. Captured on 8th March 1942 in Java, Nick's father had been part of the draft of 2061 POWs, initially mostly RAF ground crew, with about 150 colonial Dutch POWs, known as "the Haruku draft". They had been shipped along with other POWs to the Southern Moluccan islands to be used as slaves to build airfields for the Japanese. They arrived first in Ambon then went, via Amahai on Ceram, to Haruku. To give some idea of the location of these islands, out of the 17,000 islands (around 6,000 occupied) of the Indonesian Archipelago, these are East of Jakarta. In modern day terms about 1,500 miles, 3.45 hours flying time, and a 2-hour different Time Zone from Jakarta. Our plan was to fly into Ambon and have eight nights there to give us ample time to try and find a local guide to come with us to Haruku, to interpret, help arrange a way to get there, and most importantly to find transport when there. It was not possible to fix that up in advance, but if an island has a population there is always a way to get there.

There is little other reason to visit Haruku unless you live or work there or want to do what we were doing. Tourism on Ambon seems to be limited mostly to Indonesians and a few other nationalities, mainly the occasional Australians and Dutch (from looking in the CWGC cemetery book). This is because of UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) travel warnings and bans for many years.

Nick had become interested in the detail of his father Richard's experiences as a FEPOW when helping him complete his compensation claim to the War office in 1998. This was for the £10,000 ex-gratia payment made by UK government as a "debt of honour," paid in November 2000 for those POWs who were still alive, who had been held in Japanese prison camps. As part of that exercise, Nick obtained a certain amount of information from him. If Nick had been able to access the sources of information we have today, he would have been able to obtain a lot more detail from his father by prompting him. It is a lesson to never delay in finding out family history. Richard died in March 2003 at the ripe old age of 95 years.

The idea of this trip had been in the planning since before 2013, but because of sectarian and tribal violence in the Southern Moluccas and particularly on Ambon and Haruku, which continues today, it was not possible to visit the region.

The UK FCDO travel bans against all travel to the Maluku Islands (also known as Moluccas), and specifically Ambon and Haruku islands, had been in force on and off for many years and was finally lifted on 11 October 2021. The FCDO is still advising against all but essential travel to the Maluku region unless for work or family reasons and still specifically mentions Ambon and Haruku as "trouble spots".

Currently the warning is "The Maluku Islands have experienced unrest and violence between different religious and tribal groups. Take particular care in Ambon Island, and also in Haruku Island (Pulauw Haruku)". Apparently travelling against a FCDO warning can affect your travel insurance, but we reckoned this was a family commitment to Nick's dad and his fellow POWs, to remember them and what they suffered, and decided to take the opportunity to go.

This FCDO advisory warning is due to civil and sectarian unrest in the area, meaning local tensions can escalate rapidly with little warning. This was evidenced during our visit when, on our day trip around Ambon to visit Liang POW camp and airfield among other sites, our driver would not go through part of the north of the island due to conflict between a Muslim and Christian village.

So, what happened on Haruku, and in Pulauw (now a town) that sits between the old POW camp across the river and the airfield? whose inhabitants tried a great risk to themselves and their lives to help the POWs by leaving food out for them, as well as selling it to them. Sadly, the Christians had been forced out of Pulauw by the Muslim population in 1999 during the vicious religious and sectarian fighting across the Southern Moluccas. Following an initial clash in Ambon on 19 January 1999, stoked by a Jihad group from immigrants from other parts of Indonesia, hostilities rapidly spread across the islands and in Ambon and Haruku in particular.

Throughout the year, brutal back-and-forth battles hit prominent settlements like the town of Pulauw, resulting in mass casualties and widespread arson. Troops deployed to both islands operated under strict shoot-on-sight orders. Many of the recorded casualties died from gunshot wounds as security forces struggled to separate the factions, resulting in hundreds of deaths on both sides. The violence effectively segregated the island's once-intermingled population which had paired Muslim and Christian villages and neighbourhoods under the centuries old "pela" system, supervised by local rajas (headmen), into polarized separate religious enclaves.

The Christians forced out of Pulauw had then extended the Christian village of Kariuw onto the site of the old POW camp on the other side of the river from the town. Four years ago, we were told, the houses in the Christian village had been mostly destroyed by an attack from the town. The attackers left the church and pastor's house untouched as they said it was a land dispute, not a religious one. The village is still being rebuilt.

Nick did a lot of research, reading Leslie Audus's excellent book *"Spice Island Slaves"* and James Home's book *"Their last Tenko"*, which gives a lot of detail on life in the camp at Haruku and the transportation of POWs to and from Java. He found more information on the FEPOW website and used AI to locate other sources. Interestingly Audus and Home tell the POW experience from two different perspectives: Audus from an officer's and Home as an aircraftman with his POW pals.

We had spent quite an intensive 10 days on the East coast of India with a couple of days in and around Kuala Lumpur. We arrived on Ambon Thursday 19th March via an overnight stop in Jakarta, with the 2-hour time change it was early afternoon. The more traditional airport at Ambon was a contrast to the marble palaces which were the airports we had experienced so far. We also enjoyed being able to stroll to arrivals in the open air without a long route march. As we came out of air conditioning, we could almost chew the humidity.

The first impression on our drive to the hotel was the amount of vegetation. Anywhere not built on was a solid green mass of palm trees surrounded by thick jungle. The second impression was the quantity of Indonesian army bases we passed. We discovered the reason for these later in our stay.

We also wanted to have some time for some sun, snorkelling and R&R at a local beach resort hotel following the first couple of legs of the trip. The hotel, which had seen better days, had all we needed. The junior suite we had booked on Booking.com at The Natseapa Hotel at £45 per night B&B (Penny comments that Nick certainly knows how to give a girl a good time!) was easily twice the size of the Majestic Hotel's "Governor's Suite" in KL (which we were given because of a booking mix-up) and gave us the comfort and space we needed after the very full-on start to our trip. We soon made ourselves at home and settled in for our eight-night stay. The hotel was full of local Indonesian families for the last week of Ramadan and to celebrate Eid on the Saturday.

AMBON HOTEL & VIEW



On the first night we were rather looking forward to the large Indonesian buffet we had seen, which catered for all regional Indonesian tastes reflecting the diverse local guests. We went down to dinner at around 7.30pm, but when we got there, it looked as if it had been attacked by a plague of locusts on steroids. This, we realised, should have been no surprise, as most of our fellow guests had been fasting since around 4am. The hotel had thoughtfully provided the times for prayer and sunrise and sunset throughout Ramadan, so that guests knew when they could eat. They had started on the dot at 6.40pm.

Natseapa Hotel

As virtually all the other guests were Indonesian, the hotel served Indonesian food plus a couple of exotic occidental delicacies, like fish and chips, for the more adventurous local guests. Our only problems were persuading the lovely staff that we liked our food spicy and delays in bringing the food due to the large number of other guests. Food delay complaints were usually recompensed by being given Magnum ice cream bars, an excellent solution as far as we were concerned!



Originally, we had thought an overnight stay on Haruku might be necessary, depending on availability and timing of transport to and from Ambon. This would have had to have been with a local family as there were no hotels there. On the Friday we asked the hotel if they could find us a guide to go with us to Haruku and interpret and help us organise transport. There was also the weather to consider as it would be a 45/60-minute boat ride across a rough channel between the islands, so we had to leave days spare in case it was not possible to go on a particular day. We also organised a round Ambon trip with a driver on the Monday, as one of the places we wanted to visit was old Liang POW camp and Japanese airfield.

Early on Sunday we were contacted by a chap called Norris, who was to be our guide. We quickly realised we had struck gold as he became completely engaged with the trip planning after Nick told him the Haruku POW story, about which he had known nothing. He said it was feasible to do the visit in a day if we hired our own boat. Nick sent him a copy of the camp plan from Audus' book, and told him the camp location, with the river and town of Pelauw between camp and airfield. He contacted us later to say he had confirmed the site of the POW camp using Google Earth and that he had also contacted a friend on Haruku who would provide transport to what the locals apparently knew as "the old Japanese airfield".

His only note of caution was that our "chauffeurs" would be Muslim, and they may not wish to go to the Christian village of Kariuw which was on the old POW camp site because of the recent conflict. We decided we would play that by ear when we were there. He informed us specifically that he was Christian so there would not be a problem for him taking us there.

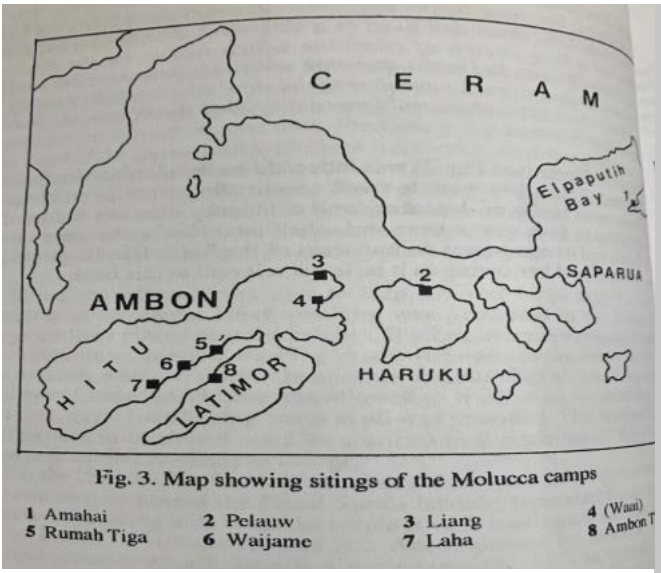
He confirmed on the Monday that we could go to Haruku on Wednesday, with a reserve day of Thursday in case rough weather and the sea state that might prevent us going. He also told us we should bring with us 3.5 million Indonesian Rupees to cover transport costs on Ambon and Haruku, hiring a boat, his fees, and an emergency reserve. We blinked a little at this until we worked out it represented about £160!

On the Monday our round island trip started by going further up the island to Liang, on the northern coast through several villages proclaiming themselves as Christian settlements.



Map of Ambon

Map of POW camps on Ambon



Christian villages are clearly marked



Sacred Eels of Waii

We had a short stop to see the freshwater Moray Eels at the Waii village sacred eel pond. The eel man had to be summoned to persuade them with eggs to come out of their hiding places under the edges of the pond. Persuading him to come and do this for us cost us rather more! These eels are tame and revered by the locals who believe they are the spirits of their ancestors.



Domestic activity continued in an area fenced off from the eels. There was no evidence or knowledge of the old POW camp there.



Our next stop was Liang, where there had been a notoriously dreadful POW camp, like the one on the island of Haruku. Both used POWs as slave labour, at Liang it was to build an airstrip next to the sea. This is where Nick's dad would have been after the camp on Haruku was wound down during 1944 and closed on 1 August 1944. It was also where severely ill Haruku POWs were sent. Liang camp closed in early August 1944 when the POWs there, and those who had come back from Haruku, were sent to Ambon town to unload ships, clear bomb damage, and then await transport back to Java.



A watchtower at old Liang airfield

On the beach were the remains of an old jetty and a very tall solid structure which could be nothing other than a watchtower. Although it thought it unlikely to have survived over 80 years, we could not think of any other reason for it to be there alongside the road next to the beach, which we thought was probably the old airstrip.



The old WW2 jetty at Liang airfield

Old WW2 structures



A few enquiries by Victor, our driver, confirmed that we were right, the road we had driven along, just behind the beach and parallel to the sea, had been built on the old airstrip. But no one could remember exactly where the dreadful POW camp had been, only that it had been up the hillside and had disappeared. It was a stark reminder that the beach, busy with lots of Muslim families having fun and enjoying seaside picnics (but not ideally dressed for sunbathing), had a darker history.

The airstrip beside the sea is now a road.



To the left is where the aircraft dispersal area was situated

We returned to Ambon Town to visit The CWGC WW2 cemetery. Our visit did not start well. According to its website, the cemetery should have been open, but the gates were firmly padlocked. Victor made a phone call or two and, eventually, someone turned up on a motorbike, discovered they had forgotten the keys, went away and came back and opened the gates. The cemetery had taken over 20 years to finish due to

conflict in Ambon and was finally officially opened on 2 April 1968.



CWGC Ambon War Cemetery



The Cross of Sacrifice, a feature of all CWGC cemeteries, had been destroyed in 1999 during the religious violence and not replaced because of local religious sensibility (there is a mosque across the road). But we came across the graves of Muslim soldiers of the 9th Punjab Regiment, and Hindus from the Army Service Corps, lying peacefully side by side and sharing the space peacefully with their Christian comrades, a stark difference to what had happened and was happening on the islands.



The cemetery started in 1946 when bodies started to be brought back from different locations (Haruku in the late 1940's) at the request of the Indonesian government. Due to conflict in the Molucca islands work had to be abandoned several times, and the final bodies were brought back from Makassar in 1961. As we walked around the cemetery, we remarked on the wide range of ages of those with family inscriptions, and those by their age or rank who had clearly been in the forces prewar and were in their 30's and 40's. From the inscriptions they were clearly family men, whereas the younger ages were mourned as lost sons. Some inscriptions reminded us that in this remote, and often troubled place, relatives had never had the chance to visit and say farewell.

AMBON WAR CEMETERY
Nationality Split by War

	Army		Air Force	
	Known	Unknown	Known	Unknown
United Kingdom	93	39	493	
Australian	597	311	183	
Canadian	0	0	2	
Indian	30	0	0	
New Zealand	0	0	0	
South African	0	0	0	
Entirely Unidentified	0	3	0	
American	0	0	1	

Ambon war cemetery list of burials by nationality and forces

The register confirmed that graves of 493 RAF men, including the Haruku island POW draft, rested there. We located some of them who, like Richard, had been RAFVR. From the dates of death, these must have been men who had either died on Haruku and had been shipped back to Ambon at the request of the Indonesian government after the war or had been sent back to Ambon as too sick to work (even for the Japanese) and died there. These were men who would have been his fellow prisoners and, perhaps, his pals. Of the 415 graves of POWs transferred back from Haruku, 375 are unidentified due to the chaotic burial conditions and use of mass graves there.



Nick signing the book of remembrance

Nick and Penny's comments

Most of the 1091 Australian graves listed in the register were of Australian infantrymen who either died defending Ambon or in the camp. Over 300 of them defending Laha airfield (the site of the present airport) had been taken prisoner and then ritually killed over a couple of days, most had their hands tied behind their back, their captors using swords and clubs and tossing them into four mass graves. Post-war, the Japanese prisoners were made to work helping to disinter them.

Date	Signature	Name and address	Comments
26/03/66	[Signature]	Nick Hamilton Gray's Inn London WC1R 5AH UK	The men from Langkat who are buried here suffered with my father who in the end of God survived. God rest his soul.
25.10.20	Penny Hamilton	Penny Hamilton	He came to honour those who did not make it home.



There were also several crew from HMS Exeter, which had been sunk in 1942 in the Battle of the Java Sea, who had survived but had then died in the camp.

We were interested to see that the Visitors Book had no British entries, and we were proud to be able to acknowledge these men, forgotten by the world, remembered only by their families, and almost certainly never visited by them. The graves with dates after the Japanese announcement of surrender

on 15 August 1945 were a poignant reminder that peace did not prevent the death of those POWs who had been starved almost to death and afflicted with disease over three years.

The cemetery, like all CWGC cemeteries, was beautifully landscaped and kept.



Following our visit to the cemetery and lunch at a local restaurant. Victor told us he had found a route avoiding the two conflicted villages in the North of the island.

As we drove around the island, identifying which village supported which side of the religious conflict was never a problem. The Muslim areas displayed crescents hanging from the lampposts and the Christian ones, crosses, which lit up at night.



At the other end of the island from Liang is Fort Amsterdam and the “Old Church”. Fort Amsterdam had been constructed in 1637 and restored. The tiny and charming Dutch Reform church was the garrison church.

Fort Amsterdam



“The Old Garrison Church”



**Typical Dutch Reform Church style -
interiors have a central pulpit and no cross**



The other notable issue in the coastal villages was the enormous amount of plastic rubbish that was on the shoreline and swept into the villages during stormy weather. This was also evident on the beach at our hotel and other beaches. The culture of being able to throw away natural items that will biodegrade has not changed now that everything is plastic.

With a storm brewing and the Tsunami warning signs, they were a reminder of how nature can be violent in this part of the world. It also worried us that if the weather became too unsettled it might prevent us getting to Haruku on Wednesday.



A Tsunami is an ever-present threat



Joint faith Easter/ Eid billboard

Back in Ambon Town we saw lots of commercial large banners and posters, with pictures of the great and good, or those who wished to be thought so, under the words “Idul Fitri” (“Festival of Breaking the Fast”) in celebration of Eid, at the end of Ramadan. It obviously pays to advertise. Our favourite version had pictures of Christian clergy with the words “Idul Fitri” above “Happy Easter”. We thought this was an admirable sentiment in an island still riven by sectarian conflict.



Victor, our driver, had been very reticent about the history surrounding the number of army bases. But he revealed at the end of the trip, over a coffee back in Ambon town, the fact that he had been in Indonesian special forces and his family were all in the Netherlands. Later we learnt some more island history from Norris our Haruku guide.

There was a declaration of independence by the breakaway Southern Moluccan Republic in 1950, followed by invasion by the Indonesian army, and then guerilla warfare up until the early 1960s. As part of a peace deal, nearly 12,000 of the Ambonese ex-Dutch Colonial army soldiers, who had been the core of the guerilla campaign, and their families had been taken in by the Netherlands, where there is still a Southern Moluccan government in exile.