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CRUISERS

FOR BREAKFAST

WHAT MADE US **CHANGE** COURSE THAT MORNING I'LL NEVER KNOW. WE'D BEEN **STEAMING** DUE SOUTH THROUGH THE JAVA SEA ON A SET COURSE WEST OF **BAWEAN** ISLAND SINCE LATE THE PREVIOUS EVENING, HEADING FOR A KNOWN DIVE SITE. HAVING JUST SPENT A COUPLE OF DAYS SIDE-SCAN SONAR **SEARCHING** – WITHOUT LUCK – FOR THE **FAMOUS** BRITISH HEAVY CRUISER HMS *EXETER*, WE WANTED TO GET IN THE WATER.



Above: The remains of a massive 120cm (47") searchlight, collapsed on the upper wings of *De Ruyter's* superstructure

The barnacle encrusted barrels of the dual guns of *De Ruyter's* forward 15cm (5.9") turret now point towards the seabed

Right: The unique 'baffled' base of the funnel that helped quickly identify *Java*. Sticks of cordite can still be seen protruding from the 15cm (5.9") shells.

The helm stand on the open bridge of *Java*



Our group consisted of a mixed bunch of divers from Singapore, Australia, USA and the United Kingdom and our plan was to steam directly south almost to the coast of the island of Java, turn to port (left) and proceed east until we arrived at what remains of the destroyer HMS *Jupiter*. After diving *Jupiter* we planned a few more dives on the way to Bali, as our expedition only had three days before we had to disembark. However - on a whim - we turned to port much sooner so as to cut across at a slight angle and save some time getting to the dive site. As usual on our transits we were towing a side scan sonar 'fish' and within half an hour of changing course we'd imaged a very large wreck in about 69 metres of water! Changing course had been a completely random decision; had we waited just another minute before altering course we'd have missed the wreck completely. Sometimes you just get lucky. It was 1 December 2002.

We were on board MV *Empress*, the renowned South East Asian wreck diving vessel, with the very experienced skipper Vidar Skoglie at the helm. He now spent about half an hour slowly going back and forth over the site until he was happy with the lay of the wreck and the prevailing current before dropping anchor and letting the current align *Empress* directly over the top of the wreck. Breakfast would just have to wait, and an air of anticipation permeated the dive deck as divers excitedly readied their gear and a down line was hooked into the wreck. Vidar was first in as usual, going ahead to make sure the line was set. I followed soon after. What were we going to find???

Dropping through the water column anticipation mounted even further until suddenly at around 60 metres I came to a massive jagged hole on the now upturned side of the ship which had that familiar look of torpedo damage. Visibility was only about six metres so Vidar had laid line from the tie off point and I followed this over to the now vertical deck side of the

ship. Within moments I'd swam by a large gun mount, a single barrel pointing defiantly upwards with huge shell casings scattered beneath it. This was a warship! Swimming further I passed a funnel with a very unusual 'baffled' base and another large gun mount, identical to the previous one with even more shell casings scattered about. Not only was this a warship but a large one and she'd gone down fighting. After spending some time in this general area I slowly headed back towards the down line videoing as I went, marveling at what I was seeing and our good fortune. Venturing beyond our down line, the wreck appeared to end abruptly in a jagged mess; it must have been a terrific explosion. (As it turns out almost 40 metres of the wreck's stern was sheared off by the torpedo that sank her.)

Returning along what was once the centre line of the ship, slightly deeper than before, I passed several twin mounted 40mm Bofors guns, much smaller than the single main guns I'd seen earlier, all fairly close together. My bottom time was up; with some lengthy deco ahead of me I headed for the down line and the inevitable slow ascent to the surface. Large schools of batfish and trevally circled the line as I ascended. Numerous remoras were circling the deco station – much to the consternation of several divers, they were darting in and attaching themselves to legs or fins whenever they could!

Back on board everyone was elated, stories were swapped and reference books pulled out. It was soon obvious, from her unusual gun layout and 'baffled' funnel bases, that we'd discovered HNMS *Java*, a Dutch light cruiser that was sunk in the Battle of the Java Sea. Another dive that afternoon had us exploring the intact open bridge – with the helm and telegraphs still in place – and the surrounding forward area. Large searchlights that had festooned the foremast lay collapsed beneath it on the seabed

THE DISCOVERY OF THE DUTCH CRUISERS *JAVA* AND *DE RUYTER*



and her main fore guns were still trained menacingly to port. (*Java* lies on her starboard side, her shallowest spot about 57 metres.) Doorways beneath the bridge lay open and rows of portholes were evident, some of them also open. All too soon it was again time to ascend.

Now came the quandary, we had only one day left to dive before having to make haste for Bali – what should we do? From the historical records we knew that lost nearby at the same time was another Dutch cruiser HNMS *De Ruyter*. Should we stay and explore *Java* further or initiate a search for *De Ruyter*? Our answer came from an unexpected quarter. All day a group of Javanese fishing boats had sat in one spot on the horizon, so on a hunch Vidar decided to go over and use the side scan to 'see' what they were fishing on. If it was nothing we'd continue searching through the night and, at worst, come back and dive *Java* in the morning. Arriving at dusk and making a close pass by the anchored fishing boats we were astounded to see another large wreck in around 67 metres, but from the shape of the side scan image possibly sitting upright! Could we really be so lucky? It was almost dark and too late to dive so we anchored up and, straining to contain the excitement, settled in for the evening already quite pleased with ourselves.

In the morning *Empress* was quickly positioned over the wreck and a down line secured. Surface conditions were ideal, glassy calm with a slight current. Vidar was in first as usual and we followed quickly. Visibility seemed superb, but at about 40 metres a strange sight confronted us – a thermocline started about 10 metres further down like a layer of dense milky fog. Protruding through this was a large rangefinder looking for all the world like a submarine conning tower above the surface.

Another warship! Beneath the thermocline visibility again gradually fell to around eight metres and the temperature



dropped almost six degrees also! It was *De Ruyter*, recognizable by her unique bridge superstructure and the large searchlights surrounding it. She'd settled on an angle with her deck at about 60 degrees to starboard. We'd snagged the grapple into the upper part of the superstructure at about 50 metres just below the rangefinder, the shallowest point! As I was unfamiliar with the layout and condition of the wreck I decided to spend this first dive exploring the bridge and surrounding area to get my bearings.

Many doorways lay open and swimming through one I came to the helm and telegraphs, obviously the wheelhouse. Exiting through the lower (starboard) door at around 60 metres I turned left and swam around the front of the bridge, coming almost



THE SINKING OF DE RUYTER AND JAVA

The Battle of the Java Sea had waxed and waned since mid afternoon and it was now late in the evening of 27 February 1942. Admiral Karel Doorman, the Dutch commander of the allied fleet, had already lost three destroyers and had been forced to dispatch his remaining ones for refueling, along with the



HNMS *Java*. Australian War Memorial photo 305839



HNMS *De Ruyter*. Australian War Memorial Photo 305837

damaged heavy cruiser HMS *Exeter* which had also limped off into the darkness. What was left of the Allied Striking Force or 'ABDAFLOAT' was a single all cruiser column now lead by the flagship HNMS *De Ruyter*, followed in line by HMAS *Perth*, USS *Houston* and HNMS *Java*. These ships were also low on fuel and ammunition and their sailors exhausted from being at their battle stations for much of the previous 24 hours. However, Doorman's orders were unequivocal; to stop the Japanese invasion of Java at all costs. He intended to carry out those orders or die trying. This would soon come to pass.

Doorman's determination showed as he tried again and again to break through to get at the Japanese transport fleet now to his north. Shortly before midnight HIJMS *Nachi* and HIJMS *Haguro*, the Japanese heavy cruisers protecting the transports, fired a brace of torpedoes at the luckless Allied column. Suddenly, astern of *Houston*, *Java* erupted in a terrifying explosion. A

torpedo had hit port side aft near an ammunition magazine, completely severing her stern. *Java's* bow immediately reared high in the air and she very quickly sank, taking almost all her crew with her. (Less than 50 of her crew of 560 were rescued by the Japanese!) Just moments later another deafening explosion erupted ahead of *Perth*. This time it was *De Ruyter*, also hit aft by a torpedo, and *Perth* had to veer off sharply to avoid a collision with the stricken flagship. Soon *De Ruyter* too was gone and with her Admiral Doorman and 344 of her crew of 435. *Perth* and *Houston* respectfully followed Doorman's last order "not to stop for survivors" and retired to Tanjong Priok (Jakarta) to refuel. Regrettably, 24 hours later they too would be sunk in a fierce battle at the mouth of Sunda Strait and, later the same day, *Exeter* would also be lost in another separate engagement. So ended the desperate naval defense of the Dutch East Indies. The island of Java, along with much of Asia, would soon be completely in the hands of the Japanese and the war in the Pacific was but three months old!

FOOTNOTE: Although his battle experience was limited the Dutch admiral had fought as gallantly as any in his country's history. However his 'Allied Striking Force', assembled of ships from several nations, had been hamstrung from the start – they had no common signal procedures, they had never operated together and they had no air reconnaissance. For this they paid the ultimate price.

REFERENCE

Battle of the Java Sea by David Thomas
The Battle of the Java Sea by F C Van Oosten
Hr Ms Kruiser De Ruyter by Legemaate, Mulder & Van Zeeland
Hr Ms Kruiser's Java & Sumatra by J Anten
The Ghost That Died at Sunda Straits by W Winslow

STATISTICS - HNMS DE RUYTER		STATISTICS - HNMS JAVA	
Launched	11/5/35	Launched	9/8/21
Length	171m	Length	155m
Width	15.7m	Width	16m
Weight	6962t	Weight	6670t
Guns	7 x 15cm (3 x 2, 1 x 1) 10 x 40mm (5 x 2) 8 x 12.7mm (4 x 2)	Guns	10 x 15cm (10 x 1) 8 x 40mm (4 x 2) 4 x 12.7mm (4 x 1)
Compliment	435	Compliment	560
Lives lost	345	Lives lost	510+

This page:

Inside the enclosed bridge of *De Ruyter*. In the foreground is the helm stand, the helm wheel itself having long ago rotted away, while in the background can be seen her dual telegraphs

A targeting device, its enclosure coral encrusted, on the port bridge wing of *De Ruyter*.

Clive Merfield prepares to deploy the side scan sonar 'fish'

Opposite page:

Live warheads from the 15cm (5.9") guns lay piled in a corner on *Java*





Looking down onto the turret face of one of the port side single 15cm (5.9") guns on *Java*

The MV *Empress*, skippered by Vidar Skoglie

The captain from a Javanese fishing boat talking 'shop' with Vidar Skoglie.

immediately to a single barreled gun turret. Its rear door was open and behind it lay a pile of large empty shell casings. One can just imagine the gun crew throwing the empty casings out in haste as they fired round after round during their final battle against the Japanese forces. Swimming further forward another turret came into view, this time with two barnacle-encrusted barrels pointing down and large optical rangefinders protruding out either side at the rear of the turret. This confirmed the wreck's identity – only *De Ruyter* had this unusual configuration of forward turrets.



(Because of political wrangling in Holland at the time of her design, *De Ruyter* was fitted with one single and one dual gun turret forward to save on construction costs.)

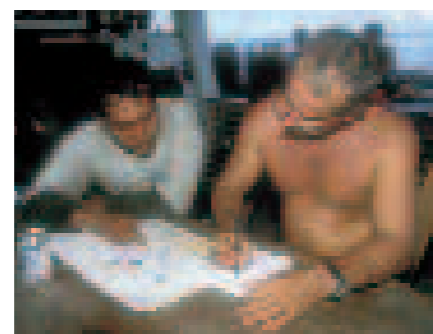
Returning past the single turret where the forward superstructure met the main deck I saw what looked like a small torpedo, but on closer inspection it was a paravane, a towed device used for sweeping moored mines. My Vr3 dive computer said it was time to go; I'd spent almost 30 minutes poking around videoing and my decompression penalty was steadily mounting. Time flies when you're having fun!

On the surface, while the others relaxed and we swapped stories of what we'd seen, I repacked my scrubber with carbon dioxide absorbent (I was diving a Mk15.5

closed circuit rebreather) and mixed up another batch of trimix 10/50 (10% oxygen, 50% helium, balance nitrogen). At a depth of 65 metres this mix would give me an equivalent nitrogen depth of only 28 metres (i.e. the equivalent narcosis effect to diving air at 28 metres), just right for exploring at depth with a clear head!

After a surface interval of several hours it was time to get back in the water. Dropping down abaft the bridge, the first thing to appear was the funnel, broken at the base and partly collapsed onto the seabed. Nearby was the large crane used for retrieving the two scout/observation float planes the ship normally carried. These two planes weren't on board when *De Ruyter* sank as they'd been taken off just prior to the battle. Slightly further aft, the tracks that the float planes were launched from were clearly visible and they terminated at the aft deckhouse. Atop this sat five sets of twin 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns arranged around a central fire control director - from which the upper rangefinder had fallen off - and which a massive school of trevally circled leisurely.

It was just aft of a similar Bofors station on *Java* where that wreck terminated abruptly in a tangled mess. Would it be the same on *De Ruyter*, as she'd also been hit aft by a torpedo? Dropping down deeper into the



gloom I came to the top of the third main turret, twin barrels pointing directly astern. Dropping down yet another level I encountered the fourth or last turret, its dual guns also pointing astern. Looking up I could just make out the silhouette of what looked like a split in the port deck edge, just aft of this last turret. Swimming up to it I could see that a large gash ran down the port side of the ship, possibly the result of the torpedo hit and/or magazine explosion. However, unlike *Java*, *De Ruyter*'s stern didn't appear to be completely severed, but the hull had been fatally holed.

I moved back along what was once the port deck, again passing empty 15cm shell casings, the odd 40mm shell and open doorways and hatches all leading to the bowels of the ship. As I neared the base of the bridge the flashes from my See Blitz strobe lit my path to the downline that led to the decompression station and surface supplied oxygen.

On board that night we reflected on how fortunate we had been to have discovered these two cruisers when we weren't even looking for them. It's not every day that you get to dive a virgin wreck before breakfast, let alone two! However, Lady Luck still had another surprise in store. During the day some local fisherman had come onboard and in return for some fuel they gave us the location of one of their fishing positions, supposedly another wreck about 100 nautical miles away. Although it wasn't directly on our course to Bali, we decided to do a small detour while traveling that night. Sure enough, the next morning found us over another wreck in almost 80 metres. We had only time for one dive and it turned out to be an armed Japanese merchant vessel, possibly the *Manyo Maru*, sitting upright with its stern missing, perhaps a victim of the relentless US submarine offensive against Japanese shipping in this area.

We now had to make haste for Bali. We'd dived three new uncharted wrecks in three days, two of them warships – it doesn't get much better than that! On our journey down from Singapore we'd actually found 12 uncharted wrecks with the side scan, but only had time to dive five of them. The others would just have to wait. Why is it so often the case, on so many expeditions, that it is not until the expedition is winding down that discoveries are made with little time to explore? You have no choice but to mount another expedition in the future to go back and explore them properly!

info

EXPEDITION MEMBERS

Vidar Skoglie, Alice Skoglie, Phil Yutter, Clive Merifield, Steve Merifield, Maurice McAuliffe, Mark Steele, Peter Daykin, Kevin Denlay. Vidar Skoglie/MV *Empress* can be contacted at vidar@octa4.net.au

2004 JAVA SEA EXPEDITION

Another MV *Empress* expedition to the Java Sea during November 2004 will revisit *De Ruyter* and *Java* and also HMAS *Perth*, USS *Houston*, a Soviet built destroyer and other recently discovered (2003) virgin wrecks.

At the time of writing a few spaces still remain and interested parties should contact the author at altdive@ozemail.com.au



The author has found Garuda Airways very helpful and uses them whenever his dive travels take him to Indonesia.