

the ghosts of Sunda Strait

THE WRECKS OF HMAS PERTH AND USS HOUSTON



- Looking aft over the soft-coral encrusted bridge windows on USS *Houston's* forward superstructure. The faint outline of an anti-aircraft gun 'tub' or enclosure can be seen in background upper right.
- A 'sports' or recreationally equipped diver descends past one of the now skyward pointing aft dual 6" mounts on HMAS *Perth*.
- A rebreather equipped diver inspects loose barbette swivel gear rings as he swims around the side of the upside down #2 8" turret of USS *Houston*.

On the night of 28 February/1 March 1942, the light cruiser HMAS *Perth*, accompanied by the heavy cruiser USS *Houston* were trying to escape the Japanese controlled Java Sea through Sunda Strait - into the relative safety of the Indian Ocean. Approaching that narrow body of water separating the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra they ran headlong into one of the Japanese invasion forces they'd been trying unsuccessfully to engage for the last several days. However during the preceding days the ABDA (American, British, Dutch, Australian) Fleet had been decimated and the remaining ships scattered due to encounters with an eastern Japanese task force. The two cruisers were now on their own and facing the full might of this western Japanese task force. Hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned the

outcome of this one-sided night battle wasn't in doubt. Still both cruisers fought on valiantly, only succumbing after taking multiple torpedo and gunfire hits from the numerous Japanese cruisers and destroyers patrolling offshore, protecting their own invasion fleet transports which were disembarking troops ashore at the very same time!

Perth sank first after a wild melee lasting almost one and a half hours, going down at approximately 12.30am and was soon followed by *Houston*. Although several Japanese transports and a minesweeper were also sunk in the engagement, it's now believed they were actually sunk by errant running Japanese 'Long Lance' torpedoes aimed at, but overshooting, the two allied warships. For her part in the action the United States Ship *Houston* was awarded the Presidential Unit

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Clockwise from top left -

- The collapsed remains of *Perth's* starboard quad torpedo tubes lay in disarray just aft of amidships. A divers light beam can be seen upper center.

- The 'spotting top' enclosure near the very top of *Houston's* foremast was a carry over from the days before radar, where lookouts were stationed behind these windows with high powered binoculars or telescopes to 'spot' enemy vessels.

- Two of the huge triple barrels from USS *Houston's* forward or #1 8" turret can be seen here on the seabed. Notice the fine silt swirling around.



Citation and her skipper Captain Albert Rooks was posthumously awarded the prestigious Congressional Medal of Honor. The Australian government was not quite so generous, awarding the heroic Captain Hec Waller of His Majesty's Australian Ship *Perth* a posthumous 'Mentioned In Dispatches'.

The wrecks now lay a few miles apart in relatively shallow water near the northern entrance to Sunda Strait, just off Banten Bay at the northwestern-most tip of Java. Although only in 36 metres (120ft) they aren't regularly dived and when dived its more often by 'recreationally' equipped divers rather than by technical diver groups intent on serious exploration, though both wrecks can be very

challenging due to strong currents and poor visibility – in fact tidal currents flowing into and out of the Strait can be undividable at times. And diving them – especially for international divers - can be logistically challenging because though they're close to shore, they're not regularly serviced by dive charter vessels.

I first dived both wrecks on a long range liveaboard charter out of Singapore on *MV Empress* in November 2002 – when she went on to discover the wrecks of the Dutch cruisers *Java* and *De Ruyter*. On that trip visibility was low and currents strong with choppy surface conditions, while the weather in the area was poor with rain and strong winds. I then returned in January 2006 for a weekend

of diving them off the Jakarta based liveaboard motor sailing vessel *Cecilia Ann*. During my second visit the weather was good, if overcast, visibility reasonable, very little current and glassy surface conditions.

On my recent visit we left the suburbs of Jakarta around four o'clock on a Friday afternoon on what was to be a two and a half to three hour drive to the marina. Over four hours later, thanks to the infamous Jakarta traffic and getting lost, we finally pulled up to the marina at Anyer where *Cecilia Ann* was berthed. A small seaside town in the mouth of the Indian Ocean 'side' of Sunda Strait, its not far from the legendary volcanic island of Krakatoa. The plan was to make an overnight transit through the narrows of

Sunda Strait – timed to take advantage of the following tidal flow – for a dawn arrival at the wrecks. However the first thing I noticed as I loaded my dive and camera gear onto the *Cecilia Ann* was how strong the wind was; it was really blowing, not a good sign! As a matter of fact, as I was later informed, the trip had almost been cancelled earlier that day because of the very strong winds and rough seas.

After some dinner and a 'few' medicinal drinks at a local bar to fortify our sea legs we set out into choppy seas, with the wind *still* blowing. Thankfully, within a couple of hours, just as we reached the narrows of Sunda Strait proper, the winds eased and in the morning when we awoke over the first wreck site it was calm and glassy with a light overcast. And it stayed that way the whole weekend! When we left the wrecks on Sunday afternoon, rather than fight back to Anyer against the strong currents then sweeping through Sunda Strait, we stayed in the Java Sea and sailed east along Java's north coast to the port of Tanjung Priok (Jakarta). What we had effectively done with this last transit was to trace in reverse the final tracks of the



two gallant allied warships, as they had left for Sunda Strait from Tanjung Priok several hours before being sunk that fateful night. Without doubt diving these two wrecks gives one a real sense of history and sacrifice, and their decaying hulks remain as ghostly memorials to the brave men that once served on them. They were so close, yet so far. History

now records the naval engagement that resulted in the sinking of the two cruisers as the Battle of Sunda Strait.

HMAS PERTH

The wreck of the Australian light cruiser *Perth*, the lead ship at the time of the action, now rests on her port side just east of – and the closer of the two wrecks

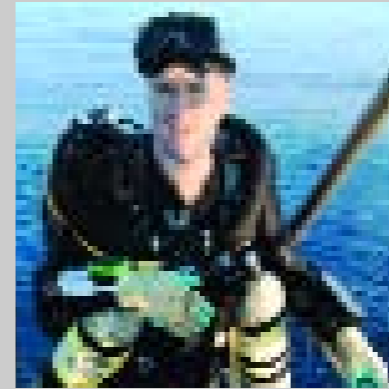
- HMAS *Perth* was a modified Leander Class light cruiser with an overall length of 562ft/171m. (Photo credit – Naval Historical Society of Australia)

- A prewar photo of USS *Houston*, a Northampton Class heavy cruiser with an overall length of 600ft/183m. (Photo credit – US National Archives)



- Divers enter the water from the Jakarta-based dive vessel *Cecilia Ann* onto the buoyed downline over the wreck of HMAS *Perth*.

- Liveaboard life is always tough, as can be seen by these divers sunning themselves on the deck of *Cecilia Ann*! To the right is Sunda Strait and in the left background the Java mainland, which shows just how close to shore these wrecks are.



IN MEMORIAM. Tragically, the closed circuit rebreather equipped diver depicted in several of the photographs in this article, my good friend and avid wreck diver Fred Evans, died not long after these photos were taken, in fact while on his very next dive in the Gulf of Thailand. Sadly he leaves a wife and three children and will be fondly remembered by those that knew him and had the privilege to dive with him. Without his assistance and hospitality while in Jakarta my recent dives on *Perth* and *Houston* wouldn't have been possible. RIP Fred!

surrounded by schooling fish and barracuda, and as with *Perth*, the uppermost propellers have been removed/salvaged.

USS *Houston* was reportedly first discovered in 1973 by an Indonesian dive team led by retired Marine Major General R Soehadi. The ship's bell was recovered at the time and subsequently handed over to the US government and now rests on top of the USS *Houston* Memorial in a park in Houston, Texas. From a total compliment of almost 1070 crewmen, approximately 700 including her skipper lost their lives in action; many survivors later died in Japanese POW camps.

FOOTNOTE – It would be remiss not to mention the loss of the Dutch destroyer Hr Ms *Evertsen* several hours after *Perth* and *Houston*. Late leaving Tanjung Priok, she was unable to accompany the cruisers and skirted wide of the area of the action. Nevertheless, she was caught and shelled to a wreck by two Japanese destroyers just as she entered Sunda Strait. She was eventually beached on Sebuk Island off the south coast of Sumatra, where what little remains of her today can still be dived when the conditions are right. Also lost later the same day in a separate action well to the northeast were HMS *Exeter*, HMS *Encounter* and USS *Pope* (whose wrecks as of this writing are yet to be discovered, though not from lack of trying), giving Japan's naval juggernaut complete control of Asian waters with the war not three months old.

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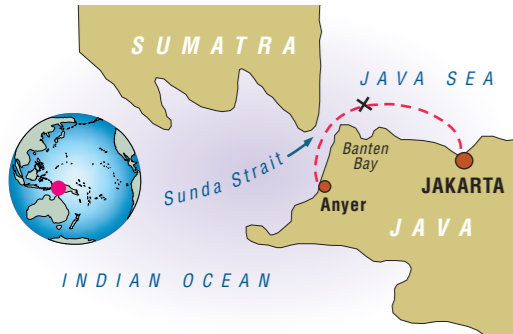
MV Empress / Vidar Skoglie - vidar@octa4.net.au

MSV Cecelia Ann / Cameron McClean - javasea@idola.net.id

USS Houston Association website – www.usshouston.org

HMAS Perth website – www.spruso.com/perth.htm

Garuda Airlines – www.garuda-indonesia.com



too – the northern entrance of Sunda Strait. A large break, no doubt from a torpedo hit, almost separates the very bow from the rest of the wreck. Her forward or #1 6" dual main guns point forward, barrels askew, while the next or #2 6" gun mount points off to port, the twin barrels buried deeply into the seabed, and penetration to the innards of the ship in this forward area is possible from the gash in the foredeck or under the gun mounts. Moving aft one passes the coral-encrusted open bridge and then comes to the remains of the fore funnel, aft of which the remains of the crane and aircraft catapult can be seen (*Perth* was equipped to carry one observation/scout plane). Disappointingly both her starboard dual 4" secondary gun mounts have been completely removed since her sinking – actually much salvage work is evident on *Perth* – though the remains of her collapsed starboard quad torpedo tubes can still be viewed just aft of amidships.

Further aft her #3 6" dual guns point defiantly off to starboard as do her aftermost or #4 6" guns. The coral covered remnants of lighter anti-aircraft weapons can be seen on her fantail, where pelagic fish often congregate above the wreck. Coming back along the hull its clear that her accessible propellers have been removed/salvaged, while the hull under the rear 6" guns is blown out,

presumably from a torpedo hit, allowing easy penetration. Another large lengthways gash just under the bridge is also evident, but much smaller than the others in her hull - either from an unexploded torpedo hit or a large caliber shell hit. Schooling pelagic fish are prolific at times on the wreck, as are smaller 'reef like' fish, while soft coral and barrel sponges can be seen in various locations.

HMAS *Perth* was discovered and first dived by an adventurous one-legged Australian named David Burchell in 1967. (His search and subsequent solo dive efforts are worth an article itself!) He recovered the ship's bell plus other artifacts and handed them over to the Australian Government/HMAS *Perth* Association.

Her skipper and some 357 *Perth* crewmen – from a compliment of 682 - were lost during the sinking; many others died in the tortuous Japanese prisoner-of-war camps.

USS HOUSTON - CA30

A few miles southeast of *Perth* is the wreck of the American heavy cruiser *Houston*, lying on her starboard side not far offshore from Panjang Island. As she's closer to land the visibility here is usually worse than on *Perth*, though the currents are often less. Swimming from the bow aft one comes to a large split in the foredeck and port hull, thought to have occurred as her bow submerged and ploughed into the bottom while still underway during her death-throes, rather than from a direct torpedo hit. Her #1 8" main triple gun turret has fallen out of its barbette enclosure and rests upside down on the bottom with the triple barrels still visible. Her #2 8" triple gun turret, which took a devastating direct hit during the action, also rests upside

down on the bottom, the barrels of this turret now well buried in the seabed. Both open circular barbettes where the turrets once stood allow easy penetration into the wreck, although this is ill advised except by very well trained and disciplined divers as her interiors are thickly caked in very fine silt.

Houston's bridge and forward superstructure area is relatively intact although the effects of the intense Japanese shelling are readily visible in parts, and the shallowest areas are now liberally adorned with soft coral. We also saw numerous large groupers darting into the shadows or poking their heads out of the nooks and crannies in this superstructure area, while smaller ornate lionfish stood their ground with poisonous spines arched out defensively. Just aft of the bridge beneath the foremast a large torpedo hole is evident in the lower port hull, while seemingly intact at the top of the foremast is the 'spotting top' or battle lookout, no doubt a hazardous place from where to have viewed the action! Moving further aft along her main deck one soon comes to the remains of the aircraft catapults and then the hangar deck itself (*Houston* was equipped to carry four observation/scout float planes). This whole rear superstructure area appears peppered with various sized shell and shrapnel holes, while snagged and abandoned fishing trawler net now drape parts of this area and the mainmast further aft, somewhat hazardous in the usually low visibility. The aftermost or #3 8" triple gun turret also rests upside down on the seabed, the open barbette clearly visible. Unfortunately, this main gun turret had been put out of action by a bomb hit several weeks previously and was inoperable during *Houston's* final action, seriously reducing her firepower. Swimming up over the stern hull one comes to the port propeller shafts, often