

COMMEMORATING AND PROTECTING HMAS *PERTH* (I)

In recent years illegal salvaging of shipwrecks has become topical in light of revelations of a number of World War II era shipwrecks all but disappearing from the floor of the Java Sea as a result of this activity. This is not an isolated incident; shipwrecks are regularly targeted by looters, primarily for their scrap and precious metal value.

Shipwrecks located in Australian Commonwealth waters are protected from interference by the provisions of the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* (the Act). The Act aims to ensure that historic wrecks are protected for their heritage values and maintained for recreational, scientific and educational purposes, while controlling actions which may result in damage, interference, removal or destruction of a historic shipwreck or associated relics.

Shipwrecks located in foreign waters are generally subject to the laws of the state concerned, or conventions ratified by them such as the UNESCO 2001 *Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage*. In both cases, surveillance is central to the protection of historic shipwrecks, however, surveillance is both expensive and resource intensive, and, as the example of the Java Sea wrecks illustrates, is only effective as long as patrol vessels can remain on site.

There are a number of RAN shipwrecks resting in both Australian and foreign waters, many of which are the final resting places for Australian Servicemen who made the supreme sacrifice in their country's service. One such RAN wreck, for which concerns are held, is HMAS *Perth* (I), lying in Indonesian archipelagic waters along with USS *Houston*, both ships having been sunk during the Battle of the Sunda Strait on 1 March 1942.

During the night of 27 – 28 February 1942, a fourteen ship ABDA (American, British, Dutch and Australian) force engaged a superior Japanese naval force in the Battle of the Java Sea. Five Allied ships were lost during the engagement, and *Perth* and *Houston* were lucky to escape after putting up fierce resistance. The two cruisers arrived at Tandjung Priok on 28 February. The situation in the Dutch East Indies was desperate and a general evacuation was taking place. Preparations were being made to destroy all warehouses and harbour installations, so the opportunity was taken to embark any stores that might prove useful.

Orders were subsequently received for *Perth* to leave and proceed to Tjilatjap in company with *Houston* and the Dutch destroyer *Evertson* via the Sunda Strait. *Perth* and *Houston* cast off at 1900 hours, at the same time, making a signal to *Evertson* to precede them out of harbour. Having received no clearance to sail, she was directed to obtain the necessary orders and follow as soon as possible. The harbour entrance was soon passed and a course set for the Sunda Strait, *Houston* five cables astern of *Perth*.

Shortly after sailing, *Perth* received intelligence concerning an enemy force comprising ten transports escorted by two cruisers and three destroyers sighted that afternoon,

50nm north-east of Batavia and proceeding on an easterly course. According to Lieutenant John Harper, RN, *Perth's* Navigation Officer, Captain Hec Waller believed that the Japanese would make a landing east of Batavia during the night of 28 February/1 March and that the invasion convoy escort would not be likely to interfere with their passage through the Sunda Strait.

The two cruisers followed a course as close as possible to the Java coast with *Perth* leading. Babi Island was sighted on the starboard beam 1.5 miles distant at 2245. At that time the Japanese Western Invasion Convoy had already entered Bantam Bay escorted by two cruisers and seven destroyers. Close cover to seaward was provided by the 2nd Division of the Japanese 7th Cruiser Squadron consisting of two heavy cruisers screened by the destroyer *Shikinami*. Distant cover was provided by the 1st Division of the 7th Squadron consisting of two cruisers, several destroyers and the aircraft carrier *Ryujo*.



HMAS Perth (I) wearing her distinctive disruptive camouflage paint scheme

From available records it appears that *Perth* was first sighted by the destroyer *Fubuki* which was on patrol north-east of Bantam Bay some time before the Japanese were sighted by the Allied cruisers. At 2306 a lookout in *Perth* sighted a vessel about five miles off St Nicholas Point. When challenged she proved to be a Japanese destroyer, believed to be *Harukaze*, and was immediately engaged by both ships. Shortly afterwards, other destroyers were sighted to the north and the armament split so as to engage more than one target.

Perth received her first hit at 2326, her second at 2332 and a third at 2350. Shortly afterwards Lieutenant Peter Hancox, RAN, reported that ammunition was reduced to a few 6-inch practice shells and some star shells. At that juncture Captain Waller determined to attempt to force a passage through Sunda Strait. He ordered full speed and altered course for Toppers Island. *Perth* had barely steadied on course when she was struck on the starboard side by a torpedo at 0005. A few minutes later she received a second torpedo hit on the starboard side and Captain Waller gave the order to abandon ship. *Perth* sank at approximately 0025 having received two further torpedo hits, one on either side.

Houston, meanwhile, was still fighting although badly on fire. She was hit by torpedoes and sank shortly afterwards rather closer inshore. Gunfire from *Perth* and *Houston* destroyed four Japanese transports including the headquarters ship *Ryujo Maru*.

During the action a large number of enemy destroyers attacked from all directions making it impossible for *Perth* and *Houston* to engage multiple targets at once. The Japanese warships were protecting an invasion convoy of approximately 50 ships bound for Bantam Bay, Java. According to Japanese reports 85 torpedoes were expended by its ships during the action.



Captain Ivan Ingham, Commanding Officer of HMAS Perth (III), addresses the ship's company during a memorial service over the site of the wreck of HMAS Perth (I) in 2015

Most of *Perth's* crew abandoned ship between the second and third torpedo strikes, but it is doubtful if any of the boats were successfully launched; though many Carley floats and wooden life rafts were released. As the crew abandoned ship, *Perth* remained under fire from several destroyers at close range suffering multiple hits. Many were killed or wounded in the water by the explosion of the last two torpedoes and by the concussive effect of shells exploding in the water.

At the time of her loss *Perth's* ship's company totalled 681, comprising 671 naval personnel, six RAAF personnel (for operating and servicing the aircraft) and four civilian canteen staff. Three hundred and fifty naval personnel (including Captain Waller) and three civilians were lost with the ship; those that survived the sinking numbered 328 (324 naval, three RAAF and one civilian). Of those, four naval personnel later died ashore.

The remaining 324 made it ashore where they were captured and became prisoners of war to be put to work as slave labor on the infamous Thai-Burma railway. A further 106 of them died in captivity (105 naval, one RAAF). Four sailors were recovered from captivity in September 1944 when they were among prisoners of war rescued after the sinking of a Japanese transport. At the end of hostilities 214 of *Perth's* men (211 RAN, two RAAF and one civilian) were repatriated to Australia.¹

The wrecks of *Perth* and *Houston* were positively identified in 1967 and *Perth's* bell, binnacle and a voice-pipe were recovered by an Indonesian diving team and presented to the Australian Government. They are now on permanent display in the Australian War Memorial where

they provide an enduring link and touch-stone for relatives of those who fought and died in *Perth*.

Perth and her crew are commemorated on the anniversary of her loss every year, and RAN warships conduct a commemorative ceremony over the location of the wreck whenever transiting the Sunda Strait.

Disturbingly there have been reports of illegal salvaging of the wrecks of *Perth* and *Houston* in recent years. In response, Indonesian authorities have deployed patrol vessels to the area in an effort to protect the wrecks from interference; and in August 2015 the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM) and the National Research Centre of Archaeology Indonesia/ Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional (ARKENAS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work together to research and, where possible, protect the remains of sovereign warships lost in Indonesian waters.

In March 2017 Maritime archaeologists from the ANMM and ARKENAS will conduct a joint dive on the wreck of *Perth*. The dive will be the first detailed survey of the wreck since 2014 and will provide important information on the extent of any removal of material from the vessel.

The joint dive was originally scheduled for October last year, however, the early onset of the monsoon season prevented it from taking place. In the interim, the ANMM and ARKENAS jointly commissioned a multi-beam sonar survey of the wreck in December 2016 which aimed to provide some information on the extent of any salvaging while gathering important information regarding the position of the wreck, necessary for securing Indonesian legislative protection of the wreck site. Unfortunately poor weather conditions rendered the results of the sonar survey inconclusive.

Information obtained in the dive will be used to confirm the condition of the wreck site, analyse the site's stability and ongoing corrosion processes, verify if it has been recently interfered with, and reinforce its historical and archaeological significance. This information will then be used to prepare, in consultation with ARKENAS, a Conservation Management Plan for the wreck site and a Case for Declaration under the Republic of Indonesia's Cultural Heritage Legislation.

The 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Sunda Strait will be commemorated this year. The exhibition *Guardians of Sunda Strait* will open at the Houston Public Library on 1 March 2017 before touring in Australia. The exhibition brings together accounts from survivors of the battle as well as significant objects from various international collections including items from the Australian War Memorial, the RAN Heritage Collection, the Sea Power Centre – Australia, the University of Houston and the USN's History and Heritage Command. In Indonesia, a graphic panel exhibition about the Battle of the Java Sea and the vessels involved including *Perth* and *Houston* will open at the Bahari Museum in Jakarta on 27 February.²

¹ The account of the Battle of the Sunda Strait is drawn primarily from *HMAS Perth (I)'s* ship history webpage; <http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-perth-1>.

² *Australian and Indonesian Maritime Archaeologists Lead Efforts to Protect Australian WWII wreck off Indonesian Coast*; http://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR17_013.html.

