

Chosen Vessel: the Galloping Ghost at War

At Manila that day, ADM Hart ordered his second-in-command, RADM William Glassford, Jr., to fly from Cavite in a PBY to the *Houston* at Iloilo and take the ship down to the Netherlands East Indies. Once there, he was to await further orders.

For Glassford, the first week of December had been nothing if not an extraordinary adventure. He had only just arrived from Shanghai in his flat-bottomed *Yangtze Patrol* river gunboats *Luzon* and *Oahu* a few days earlier after a harrowing sea journey from the muddy Yangtze via the Straits of Formosa (Taiwan) in murderous weather. Two small ships sent out from Manila by Hart to escort (or help) them into the Philippines—minesweepers *Finch* and *Pigeon*—were themselves almost disabled by the tremendous storms. Both came home well behind the river gunboats.

Glassford at Pearl Harbor with other USN admirals after the Java Campaign (NH 62974)



On December 5, RADM Glassford's 2-star command, *ComYangPat*, was formally dissolved.

On the following day, he attended the plenary conferences between Hart and VADM Tom Phillips of the Royal Navy, and the U.S. Army generals MacArthur (and his chief factotum, Sutherland), Wainwright, Brereton (the air commander) and Hart's Chief-of-Staff, RADM William Purnell. Phillips and Hart haggled over whether or not two divisions of Asiatic Fleet destroyers would be put under British control as part of the Royal Navy's Force Z for the defense of Malaya. (Force Z was the 'deterrent' force built around the new battleship *HMS Prince of Wales* and the older battlecruiser, *HMS Repulse*, along with a handful of destroyers.) Hart was dead set against relinquishing *any* of his ships, and as Glassford later wrote, "*Admiral Phillips got nowhere at all with Admiral Hart...*" The conference came to naught, although MacArthur grandly proclaimed his ability to "*hold Luzon indefinitely.*" According to Glassford's *Supplementary Narrative*, there

was neither any talk "...of a supreme naval command in the area [nor] of joint operations including the Dutch." Before leaving the conference room, GEN MacArthur told Glassford that "he worked very closely with Admiral Hart...[and] that cooperation and exchange of information between them left nothing to be desired." But as Glassford exited the room with Hart, the admiral denied the accuracy of MacArthur's comments.

Fatefully that evening of the 6th, VADM Phillips received a British intelligence report via Singapore that a heavily escorted Japanese troop convoy had been sighted crossing the Gulf of Siam. Phillips was forced to cancel his dinner plans with RADM Francis Rockwell (16th Naval District commander) at Cavite and promptly flew back to Singapore and his flagship, the **HMS *Prince of Wales***. At virtually the last instant, Hart relented and gave Phillips assurances that his Division 57 (four destroyers then at Balikpapan, Borneo) would go to Singapore to work with the British forces. Ninety-six hours later, Tom Phillips of Force Z would be dead, and both ***Prince of Wales*** and ***Repulse*** resting on the bottom of the South China Sea...

Hart's four old flushdeckers (***Whipple***, ***Alden***, ***John D. Edwards***, and ***Edsall***) arrived at Singapore too late to join Force Z. It is not likely they would have added much in the way of firepower to Phillips' little force, and they could have lacked the endurance to keep up for the entire mission. Yet, as Glassford later noted rather sharply: "*Their presence might well have saved many allied lives in the PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE.*"

The next day (December 7), Glassford spent more time conferring with Purnell and Hart. They were then preoccupied with setting up Task Force 5 (TF 5), which Glassford was to command—determining where the ships of that command were disposed and where TF 5 would eventually operate. Glassford remembered that despite so much uncertainty, "...there pervaded no feeling of immediate emergency, or that an attack on us was imminent." He also recalled his surprise in learning that "...in due course I was to take command and operate to the Southward, not in support of MacArthur. Little did I think as I turned in that night (7th of December) I should be off, more or less catapulted into thin air the following day."

At around three-thirty in the morning of December 8 Glassford was awakened to receive word that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. He was informed he should proceed "at once" to Asiatic Fleet HQ in the Marsman Building to meet with Hart, and he did so. CINCAF confirmed the attacks on Pearl Harbor, but no further details were known. It was the start to what Hart called "*one very long, unhappy day*" for all concerned.

Feeling as if "*solid ground was blasted right from under us,*" Glassford was still getting his bearings when Hart gave him orders later that morning (December 8) to fly to **Houston** at Iloilo and begin assembling the dispersed Asiatic Fleet units as best he could. He noted, "*I was given no guidance as to the nature of joint allied action...I was to get our Task Force assembled as practicable, base and fuel at discretion, and in general, act at discretion.*" No destination was offered—or could be—at that time. "*Never in my experience had I felt so completely at loose ends.*" However, Glassford was more than happy "*to get away from pessimistic and uncongenial Manila, and on my own again, no matter what were the prospects and challenges of the future.*" Along with his Chief-of-Staff, CDR Jeffs, and Flag Lieutenant, LTJG Chennault, he reached **CA-30** by PBY *Catalina* at 1612 hours that afternoon. Within the hour CAPT Rooks had his big ship underway.

Naturally the chaos and confusion that followed the attacks at Pearl Harbor caused serious communications difficulties. As he headed south, Bill Glassford was compelled by circumstances to improvise plans and operations. Task Force 5 (TF5) consisted only of a small number of Asiatic Fleet surface units. Specific tasks, as well as actual operational intelligence, for those Asiatic Fleet units in the opening days of the war were often sketchy at best. **Houston** enjoyed only brief calls at Makassar, Celebes (for refueling and a short conference by Glassford with other ship commanders) and Surabaya, Java (where she helped set up new HQ and communications facilities to coordinate with the Dutch) before moving on.

She departed Surabaya at midday on December 20 to screen a convoy bound for Darwin in northern Australia. **Houston** and her three destroyers picked up the slow convoy (**Gold Star**, **Pecos**, and **Otus**) on the 23rd and proceeded east at a leisurely pace. The ships all reached Darwin around midday on December 28, 1941.

From the presumed safety of Darwin **Houston** would help escort U.S. convoys bringing men and materiel from the States to northern Australia and the East Indies via the Torres Straits. It was still believed then that such convoys *might* be able to make it safely up to the Philippines with reinforcements for MacArthur's beleaguered command. Such hopes were doomed to fail, however, and within a brief period, virtually all such attempts using surface vessels were discontinued. The task then fell to ADM Hart's submarine force, but they could never deliver enough supplies or armaments to give really meaningful aid to the troops on Bataan and



Corregidor. Precious intelligence personnel (codebreakers) were evacuated safely, however, and subsequently contributed more important work to the war effort--much of this from Australia. After the devastating Japanese air attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, **USS *Houston*** was one of the few major American ships left in the Southwest Pacific region still in fighting condition. ***Houston*** found herself in the unenviable position—as the largest allied remaining warship—scarcely two days after Pearl Harbor. At that time, another tremendous blow fell when the Royal Navy met disaster off the east coast of Malaya.

On December 10, 1941, off Kuantan Malaya, Japanese land-based navy bombers had destroyed the two most powerful warships in the allied surface forces—the British battlecruiser **HMS *Repulse*** and the new battleship, **HMS *Prince of Wales*** of VADM Tom Phillips' short-lived Force Z. Of this engagement, Bill Glassford wrote that he found it “*tactically ill-advised*” even though he believed Phillips' strategic concepts were sound. From that point on, the allied naval forces of Great Britain, the U.S., the Netherlands, and Australia were at a marked disadvantage against the cohesive, highly-trained, and well-equipped Imperial Japanese Navy.



*Japanese wartime propaganda postcard showing the sinking of **HMS Repulse**.*