

## *January 1942: Fateful month—the creation of ABDA*

In mid-January 1942, on orders from Washington, the U.S. Asiatic Fleet became part of the ABDA naval coalition—a combined allied force of American-British-Dutch-Australian warships formed to defend the Southwest Pacific from Japanese aggression. The story of ABDA is one of poor communications, petty rivalries, and inadequate assets overmatched by an enemy with specific planning, sufficient military resources, a common language, and most importantly, the will to fight *very hard*.



*The Royal Navy cruiser **HMS Exeter**, famed for her combat against the Nazi pocket-battleship **Graf Spee**, fought alongside **Houston** in the Battle of the Java Sea.*

Much to the chagrin of some crewmembers during the early months of the Pacific War, **Houston** was at first assigned almost exclusively to convoy escort duties. In the first half of January, a good deal of time was spent in Darwin. In this period, a number of sailors came out from the states and Hawaii on transports and went aboard **Houston** to flesh out her divisions. Several officers received promotions and moved up in rank. On January 11, 1942, CAPT Rooks deposited his 103-page "*Estimate of the Situation*," which he had laboriously composed in the previous two months. He left it for safekeeping with the U.S. Naval Observer in Darwin, CDR M. Collins, USN (Ret.). Two other copies of this secret document were thought to have been left in Manila and burned there on December 23-24.

In the second half of January, **Houston** sortied again with two destroyers (**Alden** and **Edsall**) and meandered about in the Timor Sea, baffling some of her crew at the time. Eventually, she made a rendezvous at Kebola Bay on the island of Alor, where she was fueled by the Asiatic

Fleet oiler, **USS *Trinity* (AO-13)**. It appears that ***Houston*** was being considered for a role in the striking force that Hart and Glassford were trying to mount to contest Japanese invasion convoys in the northern Celebes. Allied intelligence was both slow and imperfect, however, and this force did not then materialize—or at least did not require ***Houston***'s participation. Instead, she steamed back across the seas above northern Australia to the Torres Strait area to pick up another convoy. Destroyers ***Whipple*** and ***John D. Edwards*** screened her as they zigzagged east, reaching the anchorage in Normanby Sound on the morning of January 20. After topping off the two tincans with fuel oil, ***Houston*** and her destroyers got underway 24 hours later, escorting the transport ***S.S. President Polk***, destined for Surabaya. Along the way, they picked up the Asiatic Fleet oiler ***Pecos*** and another transport, the ***S.S. Hawaiian Planter***. All five ships then continued to Java, arriving on the 28th of January.

Thus, direct combat did not come to *'The Rambler'* until eight weeks into the war. But from that point forward, the cruiser and her men would have little rest and no real relaxation