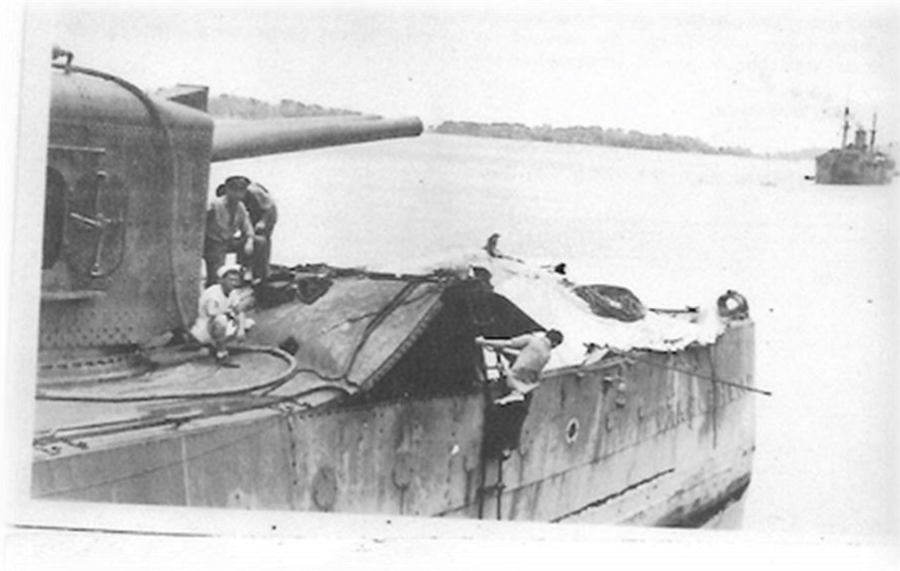


The Bombing Attacks of February 4th

On February 4, 1942, during an ABDA naval operation to intercept a Japanese invasion convoy believed to be forming off Makassar, *Houston* got her first real taste of combat. Unfortunately for the ABDA Striking Force ships, the Japanese had already spotted them a day earlier. That was the date of the initial large-scale IJN bombings of eastern Java and Surabaya. When Striking Force Commander RADM Karel Doorman of the Royal Netherlands Navy took his ships to sea early on the 4th, he was quickly detected by Japanese air patrols. These notified the new IJN air units near Kendari, Celebes, where the Japanese had seized one of the best airfields in the East Indies just a fortnight before. As they had in the missions against Britain's Force Z in early December, the IJN air commanders reacted aggressively; they threw as many air units against the allies as they could muster.

North of the Kangean Islands east of Java, a large flight of some sixty Imperial Japanese Navy medium attack bombers from the 1st, *Takao*, and *Kanoya* Air Groups flying out of the big Kendari II airfield found and attacked the allied ships from altitude. For the crew of *Houston*, this would prove to be a nerve-wracking and bloody introduction to the realities of modern sea warfare.

During most of the encounter CAPT Rooks handled his sleek 600 ft-long cruiser 'like a motorboat' and avoided the bombs. But the elderly *Marblehead* was not so fortunate. She was seriously damaged by hits and near-misses; these put her out of the war for many months. But they also preserved the old cruiser from the fate of so many other allied warships caught in the East Indies meatgrinder.

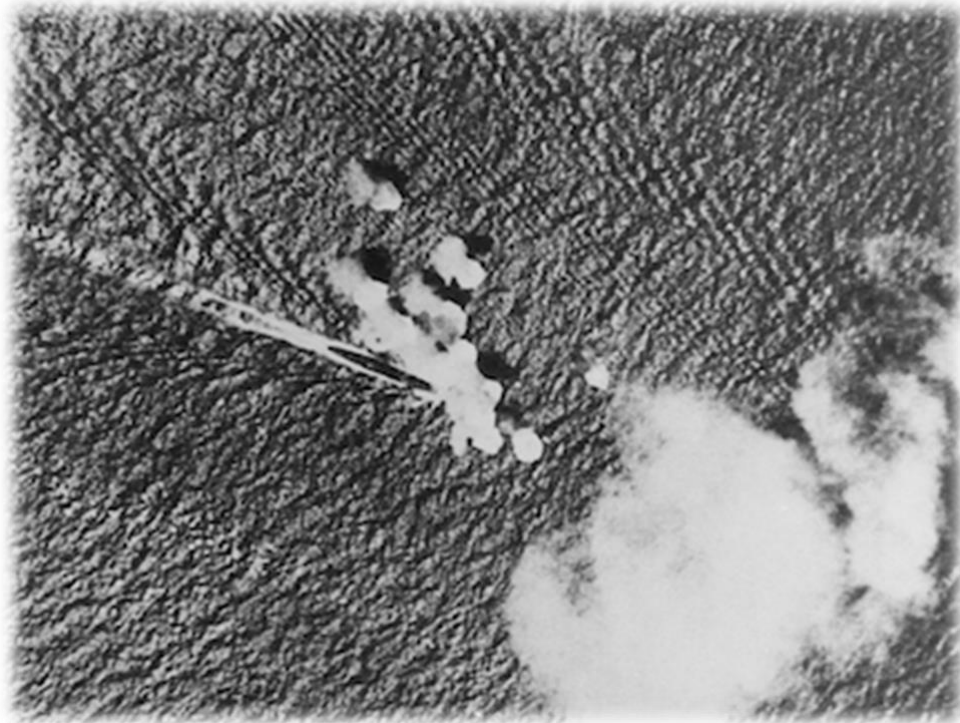


Marbly licks her wounds at Tjilatjap, Java, Feb. 1942

Finally, by a fluke of bad luck, a single 250kg (551 lb.) bomb dropped from a Japanese bomber of the 1st Air Group destroyed *Houston*'s Number 3 (aft) Turret, killing 46 crewmen and wounding dozens more.



A G3M ('NELL') medium attack bomber with a mixed load of 60kg & 250kg bombs.



Japan's air superiority was a critical factor in their successful East Indies campaign.



61. Entering Tjilatjap, Java, N.E.I., MARBLEHEAD passed close aboard HOUSTON, which had already made port following the same action. Damage abaft her mainmast was quite apparent. HOUSTON's colors are half-masted pending return of her funeral

*A late clear image of **Houston**. Dockside at Tjilatjap just after the bombings of Feb. 4, 1942. Her wrecked No. 3 turret still frozen in place by damage. Photo taken from **USS Marblehead** as she entered the tight confines of the port.*

Both *Marblehead* and *Houston* steamed back to the southern Javanese port of Tjilatjap to bury their dead and care for the wounded. The more seriously injured men were transported by train to the Dutch-run Petronella Hospital in Jogjakarta. There, they came under the care of an elderly Navy physician whose name would become synonymous with self-sacrifice and devotion: Doctor Corydon Wassell.

U.S.S. HOUSTON.
Bill Kohl U.S.N.
Vince Koenig SK 7c
Samuel J. March Sea 7c
K. B. George Cpl. U.S. M.C.
Thomas Berghetti Jr. F. C. 7c
R. E. Whaley EM 7c
E. J. Smith Sea 1c

*Postcard of **Marblehead** signed on the back by wounded sailors from CA-30 in Dutch hospital at Jogjakarta, Java. Vince Koenig and Kelton B. George, USMC, both perished a few weeks later in the sinking of USS Pecos (AO-6).*

Marblehead's damage was so serious that she was forced to leave for India, where it was hoped she could receive more substantial repairs. The battered light cruiser did not reach the States for another two months. Her return became a wartime sea epic and the stuff of legend, memorialized with journalistic alacrity in the book **Where Away**.



*Japanese wartime propaganda image of Feb. 4th aerial bombing attacks against **Houston**.*

Despite the loss of Turret 3, and after conferring at Tjilatjap with ADM Hart as well as his own gunnery specialists, CAPT Rooks decided rather than withdraw to safer waters for repairs, *Houston* would remain on station in the East Indies. He had been speaking in his cabin with ADM Hart when word arrived that *Houston*'s defective MK19 dual-purpose director had been repaired and was again operational. As it was believed that the ship's primary duties would still involve convoy escort, her anti-aircraft capabilities were of paramount importance. And it appears Rooks wanted to continue to support ABDA's efforts to defend Java against enemy invasion forces that were now massing to the east and west.

Before she left the East Indies, the damaged *Boise* had offloaded 1200 of her 5" projectiles at Tjilatjap. Several hundred of these were taken on by *Houston* at Tjilatjap a few days later. These shells were not from the same defective lot that had plagued *Houston* previously. In less than two weeks, they would confirm in dramatic fashion the wisdom of getting them onto the ship. This became apparent in mid-February when *Houston* was tasked with escorting an army relief convoy steaming from Port Darwin to the island of Timor.



*Rare photo of **Houston** taken during the Timor Relief convoy, mid-Feb. 1942*

On that occasion, the ships had been spotted early and tracked by long-range Japanese Type 97 (MAVIS) flying boats. These planes bombed the convoy and then vectored in IJN land-based medium bombers for more attacks. It was only the fierce 5"/25 cal. anti-aircraft fire of *CA-30*'s secondary battery (which expended 933 projectiles, including *all* of those taken from *Boise*) that preserved the convoy from more serious damage. As it was, however, the ships were compelled to turn back—the escorting force apart from *Houston* was considered anemic even by peacetime

standards—and renewed Japanese air attacks could be expected. So they returned to Darwin. CAPT Rooks understood the implications of those attacks and the long-range IJN planes and, being unwilling to dawdle, left Darwin promptly on February 18 to return to Java. It was a wise move.



*One of the war's bravest but unluckiest ships, **USS Peary (DD-226)**, photographed during the ill-fated Timor Relief convoy. She still lacks proper masts and half of her torpedo battery due to the heavy damage she suffered in the bombings of Cavite Navy Yard on Dec. 10, 1941.*

The next day, Feb. 19, saw massive air raids on Darwin by carrier-based Japanese bombers and fighters by four of VADM Nagumo's *Kidō Butai* carriers, launched from a point between Timor and Tanimbar islands. These were unfamiliar and potentially treacherous waters, and Nagumo's staff navigated cautiously; as one IJN flier later recalled, "...as though sliding their feet along." Meanwhile, *Houston's* accompanying destroyer, the four-piper **USS Peary (DD-226)**, had decided to go back into the port for more fuel after chasing a submarine contact. This was a fatal decision. Caught at her moorings in Darwin, the little fourstacker was shattered by direct hits from enemy dive bombers and sank with heavy casualties beneath a colossal pall of black smoke.

Another converted four-piper, the small plane tender **USS William B. Preston (AVD-9)**, narrowly eluded a similar fate when she was near-missed and then struck by multiple bombs. These killed almost all of the gun crew at her aft 4" mount and left the ship partially flooded, with no steering control. Only by the resourcefulness and courage of her men was she able to escape the harbor and make for the open sea. By then, *Houston* was well to the west, moving at high speed, passing south of Timor. Little did she realize that on Feb. 20, the island would be

invaded by Japanese land and air forces. These had been covered by a small but powerful unit of IJN warships. That force included RADM Takagi Takeo's big *Sentai 5* cruisers *Nachi* (Flagship) and *Haguro*. A week later, *Houston*, along with other ABDA fighting ships, would have a lengthy and unforgettable introduction to these same ships in the Java Sea.



IJN heavy cruisers like Nachi & Haguro were large, fast, and powerfully armed. (MARU)

Although Hart never revealed much in specific detail about their talk that day after the Feb. 4th bombings, he did later state that the final decision was made by Rooks. However, crew-members after the war reported hearing news subsequently that a more modern cruiser, **USS Phoenix (CL-46)**, was supposed to arrive in Java to relieve *Houston*. According to another statement by Hart, CAPT Rooks made a comment using baseball lingo to the effect that even though **CA-30** had 'one strike against her' (having lost one-third of her main battery), she 'still had two strikes with which to break up the game' against the Japanese.



CA30's early MK19 Dual purpose directors were primitive & not very effective.

As February wore on, ABDA's naval and air forces suffered more reversals. On February 20 the Japanese seized the important airfield at Denpasar, Bali, after a wild but inconclusive battle in Badoeng Strait. *Houston* had not participated in those engagements, which was probably just as well. In those tight, confined waters, her 600' length might have made a good target for the aggressive IJN destroyers defending their troop transports. The Japanese were undeterred, and two ABDA warships lost: the plucky Dutch destroyer *Piet Hein* was sunk outright, and the old American fourpiper *Stewart* was damaged enough to require drydock time. *Stewart* was placed in a floating commercial drydock in Surabaya but improperly placed on her blocks. She rolled off as the dock filled and fell over at a 35° angle, causing some severe damage to her generators as well as hull. Attempts to repair the damage were unsuccessful due to the press of time and shortage of yardworkers. Two days later, she had to be written off, much to the grief of her crew, for she had been a faithful and well-handled ship throughout the campaign prior to that point.



*The skipper of USS **Houston** (CA-30), Capt. Albert H. Rooks*



*The **Houston's** 5"/25cal secondary battery was crucial to the ship's wartime survival prior to the Battle of the Java Sea.*