

The Battle of the Java Sea



*RADM Karel Doorman's flagship in the Java Campaign, the Dutch light cruiser **De Ruyter**. (AWM 305837)*

On February 27, 1942, the *Houston* was among the Allied cruisers and destroyers under the command of RADM Karel Doorman of the Royal Netherlands Navy, which steamed north from Java to destroy an approaching Japanese invasion fleet. The Battle of the Java Sea, which followed, went on for approximately 7 hours and was a disaster for Doorman's Combined Striking Force (CSF). Although the Dutch, under LT ADM Conrad E. L. Helfrich, by then commanded all naval forces, communications and coordination were rudimentary at best.

While they nominally matched the IJN forces in gunpower, they did not measure up in terms of combat training experience or in joint operations. Of equal trouble, they had no common language for communications. In addition, the Imperial Navy had fearsome new weapons that no one knew much about--not even the Japanese themselves. These were the big 24" (diameter) torpedoes, some of which were the massive Type 93 'oxygen torpedoes.' These huge fish--later nicknamed "Long Lance" after the war--were capable of vastly higher speeds (almost 50 knots) at far greater range (40,000+ yds) and with a much larger warhead (1,000 lb.) than any torpedoes in the Allied navies. What is more, their oxygen fuel allowed them to travel in the water without leaving an obvious telltale wake of bubbles.

The IJN had predicated a good deal of prewar surface combat doctrine on these 'long range oxygen torpedoes'. They also favored what was called 'out-ranging' gunfire or attempting to hit

the enemy ships at a greater range first. As it unfolded, the Battle of the Java Sea would prove a tailor-made opportunity to test both doctrines in theory and practice.

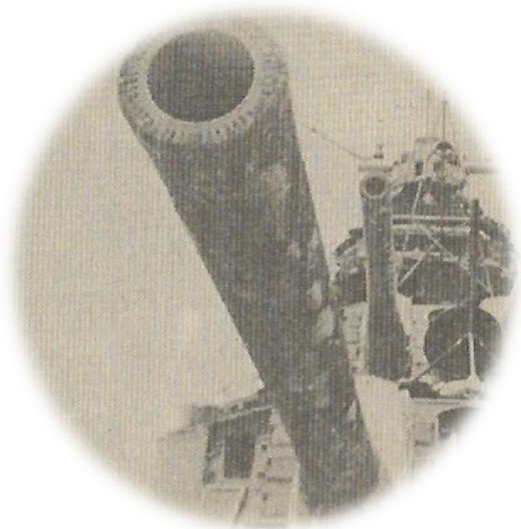


Deceptive pre-combat smiles: IJN personnel on the bridge of a heavy cruiser from RADM Takagi's Sentai 5 scour the Java Sea as they approach RADM Doorman's Striking Force on the afternoon of Feb. 27. Their smiles would not last. (MARU Special 95)

The Imperial Navy ships would expend thousands of projectiles and scores of their potent

torpedoes, but the outcome was still "*a near-run thing.*"

The vaunted 'Long Lance' torpedoes had repeated malfunctions, which caused premature detonations. Some of these explosions were mistaken by the Japanese for enemy mines and by the Allies for submarine torpedoes. Their long-range gunfire was equally imprecise; very few direct hits were made. And only one had significant consequences.

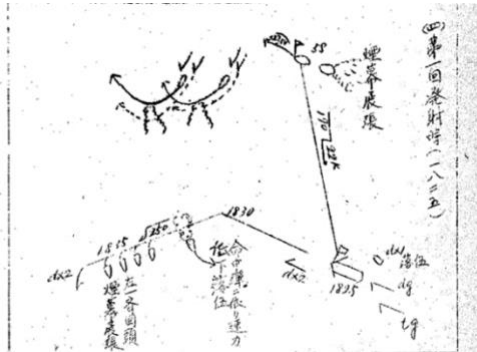


*The blistered forward 8" guns of **Haguro** just after the Battle of the Java Sea, a testament to the immense number of shells she fired. (MARU. 1988)*

A single 8" shell hit on **Exeter** in the first hour threw Doorman's entire column into disorder, and the confusion resulted in fatal results for the Dutch destroyer **Kortenaer**. Maneuvering near **Houston** as the CSF ships attempted to resume their formation, she met a Type 93 torpedo—

fired from a great distance by one of the IJN heavy cruisers—and had her hull shattered "like a biscuit..." It was the sole torpedo hit during the daytime battle.

The British destroyer **HMS *Electra*** (a veteran of the Force Z debacle off Kuantan, Malaya) was also lost in the chaos following *Exeter's* damage. Emerging from a protective smokescreen shielding the cruiser, she went down in a valiant but unequal gun duel with several Japanese destroyers and cruisers.

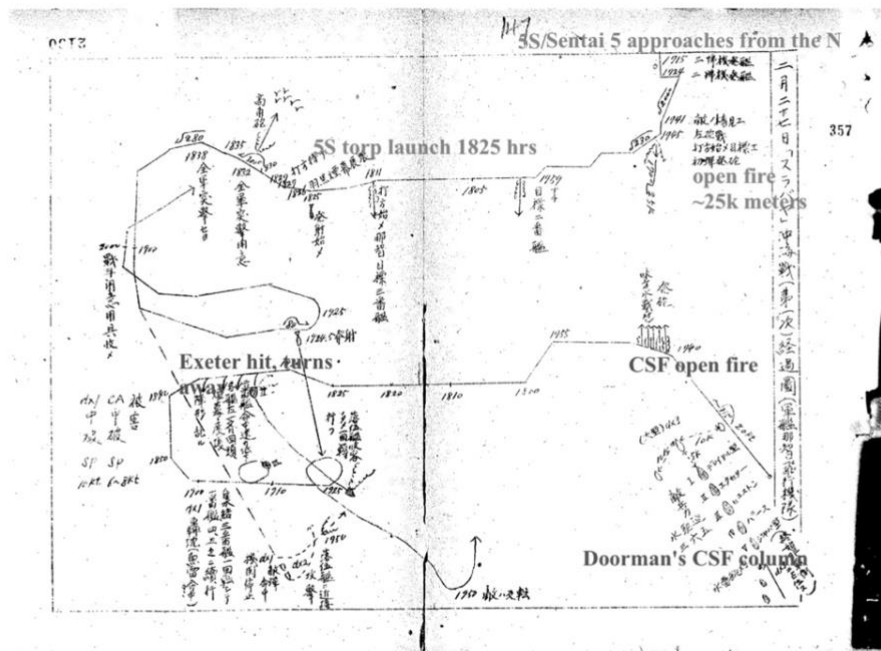


IJN track chart showing the first torpedo attacks by Sentai 5 and DesRon 4 against Doorman's CSF. (JACAR)



*The British destroyer **HMS *Encounter***, sister to **HMS *Electra***, survived for a couple of days longer before being sunk on 1 March 1942 in the sea battle off Cape Puting along with **HMS *Exeter*** and **USS *Pope* (DD-225)**.*

CA-30 received three hits in the battle: one to her hull, which opened fuel tanks and caused a loss of oil; another through her forecandle from great range, which caused minor flooding to stores and paint lockers; the third hit clipped the foremast over the bridge and sent metal debris crashing down onto the open 'flying bridge', startling the men there—including CAPT Rooks—and hurrying them to the relative safety of the conning tower.



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The IJN track chart from Sentai 5 shows the opening 2 hours of the Battle of the Java Sea. (JACAR)

Doorman gradually lost his destroyers; *Kortenaer* and *Electra* were sunk in combat; *Encounter* and *Witte de With* screened the damaged *Exeter* as she slowly made her way back to Surabaya; *Jupiter* ran onto a badly laid Dutch minefield off Toeban and detonated a mine which led to her sinking; the four American flushdeckers under CDR Thomas Binford fired all their torpedoes in a futile attempt to stave off the enemy force, then withdrew to Surabaya, low on fuel and out of torpedoes. But Doorman, urged on by the adamant Helfrich, continued to seek out the Japanese invasion convoy.

Late that night, having been shorn of their destroyer screen, the cruiser column under Doorman plodded on in search of the convoy. They never reached those vulnerable ships even though they were closer than many realized, but they did encounter RADM Takagi's *Sentai 5* (5th Squadron) cruisers again. First, they chanced across his two cruisers as they were stopped and recovering floatplanes at 2052 hours (JST). In this vulnerable position, *Nachi* and *Haguro* could have easily been trapped and sunk or at least badly damaged. However, the exhausted ships of Doorman were not able to capitalize on this golden opportunity, and the two IJN cruisers escaped, making smoke as they went. Within twenty minutes, Takagi's cruisers lost sight of their

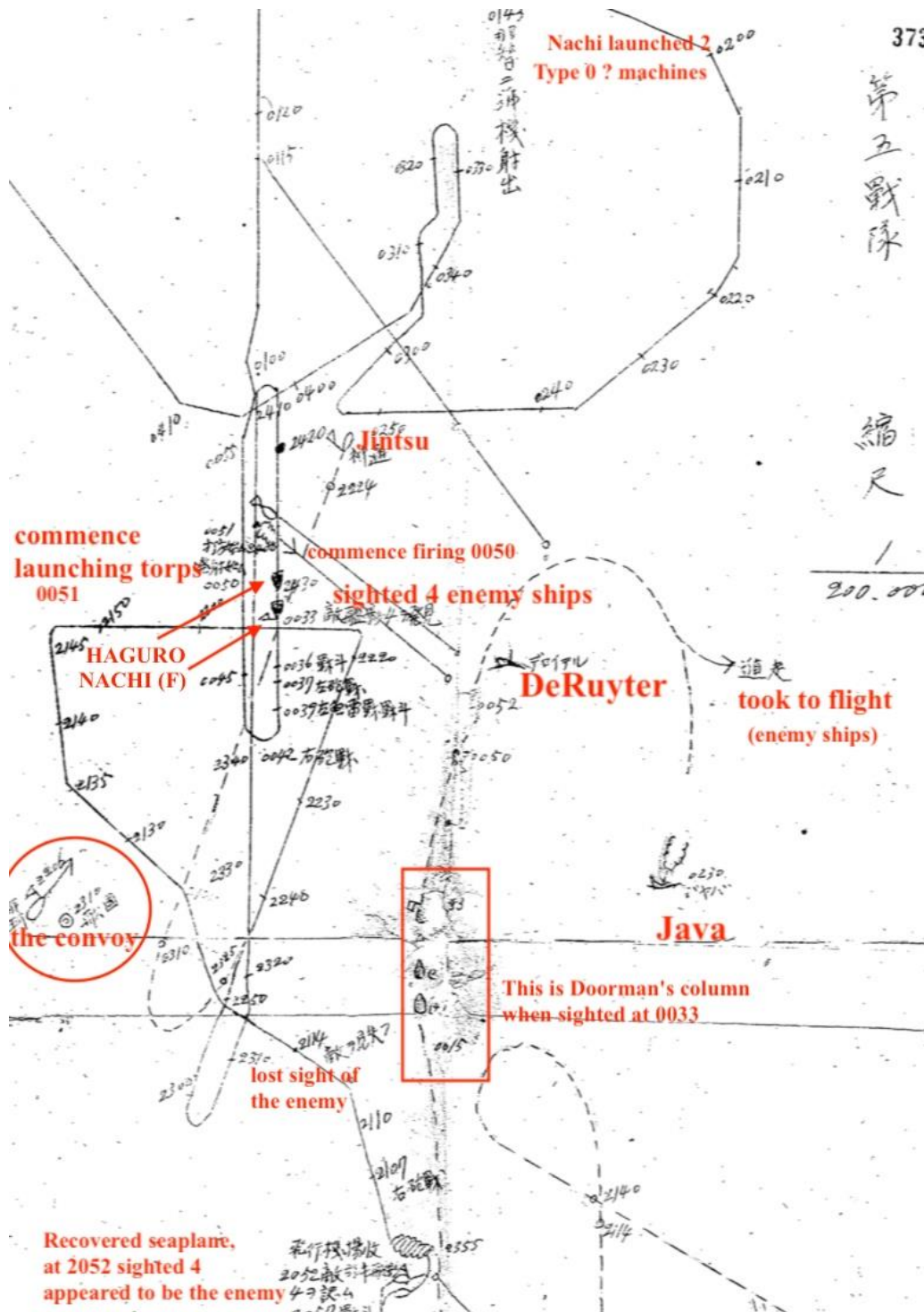
pursuers as Doorman turned his column away, perhaps fearing a torpedo spread. Regardless of whether it spared his ships from a salvo of 'Long Lances' or not, it was in the wrong direction. For the next three-and-a-half hours, he drove his weary cruisers through the darkness, blindly struggling to find the convoy's transports. Yet, in this "forlorn battle" (as it was termed by Winston Churchill), it was just a matter of time before the opposing forces blundered across one another again.

At 0033, the two Japanese cruisers returned to the area. They were heading south when their lookouts spotted Doorman's column steaming on an opposite course thirty degrees off their port bow at about 15,000 meters.



*The venerable Dutch light cruiser **Java** seen here at Batavia's port of Tandjong Priok earlier in the war, would be lost with heavy casualties on Feb. 28, 1942. (AWM 305838)*

第五戦隊



From the Japanese records of Sentai 5 in JACAR. This original chart shows the climax of the nighttime engagement, although the identities of **Java** & **DeRuyter** are reversed. (Contemporary notes in English added for clarity.)

Using the classic IJN maneuver of turning away while firing in brief, limited salvos in order to lure their enemies, Takagi had his adversaries in an ideal position for an ambush. The orders went out: "*Prepare for simultaneous gun and torpedo attacks!*" Once the two IJN cruisers reversed course, they sped up to 33 knots in order to stay ahead of the enemy column for a more favorable torpedo attack angle. The slow pace of their 8" firing (which commenced at 0050 hours) gave his torpedomen adequate time to set up their systems. In this period, *Nachi* fired a mere four salvos, expending only 19 rounds, from ~13,000 to 15,000 meters.

Then, at 0052 hours, *Nachi* and *Haguro* began launching 12 oxygen torpedoes from medium range in what would prove a killing spread. It appears Doorman realized his vulnerable position and was altering his column away, presumably to avoid torpedoes, but it was a turn too late. Thirteen minutes after being launched, the giant IJN weapons found their mark. *Java* was struck by at least one Type 93 and mortally damaged in an instant, her severed stern disappearing into the black night sea. Within moments, the flagship *De Ruyter* was also struck. Her fires were

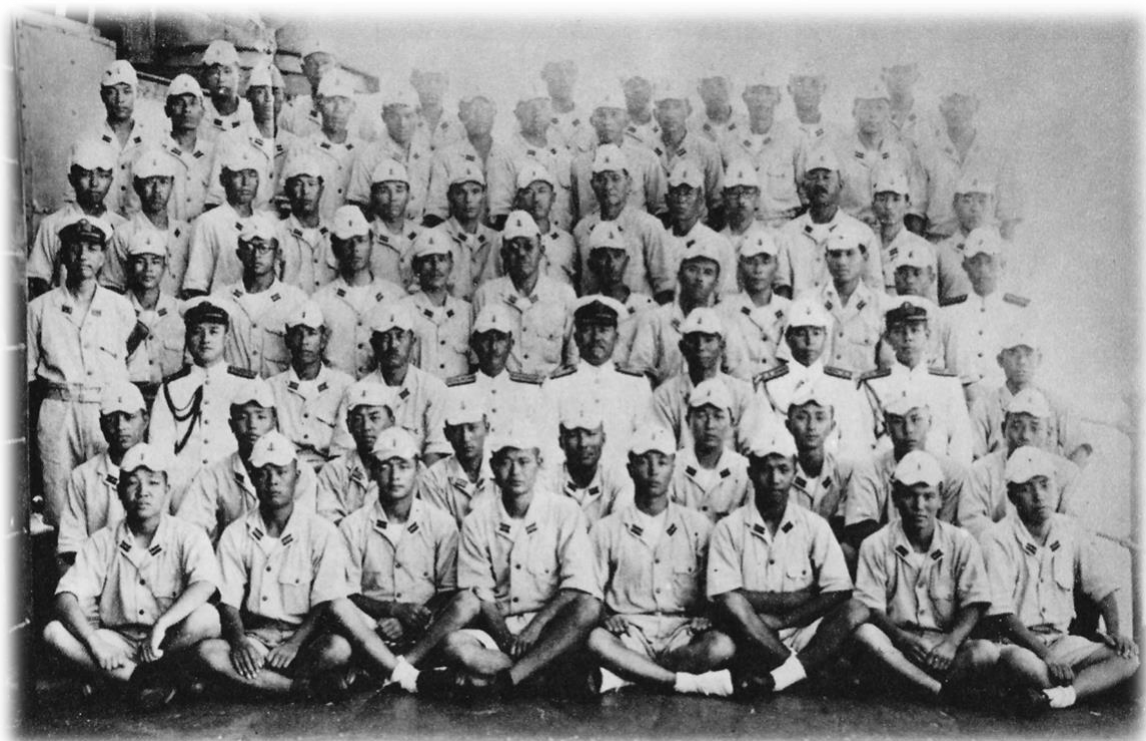


uncontrollable and fatal, but she did not sink as rapidly as *Java*. The older ship, built in an earlier period for another kind of war at sea, succumbed in about fifteen minutes. Consequently, her casualties were very heavy; indeed, 512 RNN men died. Doorman's cruiser remained afloat for over two hours, her beacon of flames and exploding munitions visible to IJN ships many thousands of meters away. *De Ruyter's* protracted sinking allowed more survivors to get clear, although her losses were still high; over 360 of her crew were lost. RADM Karel Doorman, a man thrust by fate into impossible circumstances, yet who embodied both duty and perseverance, perished with his ship.

In the end, only *USS Houston*, the Australian light cruiser *Perth*, damaged *Exeter*, and a few other allied destroyers that had retired to Surabaya remained afloat. *Houston* and *Perth* swung west to head for the naval port of Tandjong Priok at Batavia (present-day Djakarta) on the opposite end of Java. Steaming under cover of darkness and veiled by intermittent showers, the two cruisers evaded enemy surface warships although they were spotted by IJN cruisers' air

patrols as they approached Batavia. Luckily, they were misidentified (as a light cruiser and destroyer), and the Japanese—still protecting their invasion convoys and reeling from the lengthy and bewildering battles the day before—did not realize their actual identities.

The majority of Allied survivors who had escaped death in combat did not elude captivity. Some were quickly picked up by the Japanese at sea; others were captured later on Java. Unknown to many Western families, the names of Dutch naval survivors were published in a Javanese newspaper within days of the battles. Word on other POWs would not come for years, though, if it ever came at all.

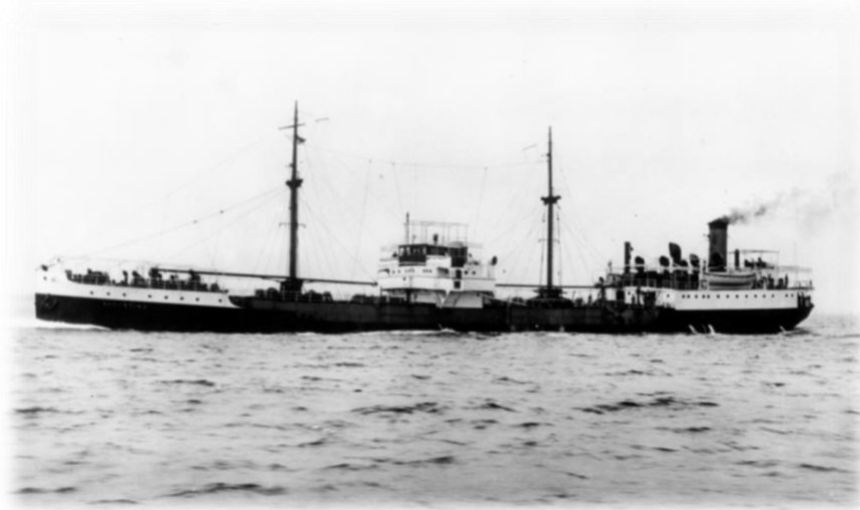


Victors in the Java Sea: RADM Takagi Takeo (C) and crew on board their flagship, Nachi, March 10, 1942

After docking at Priok, CAPT Rooks and the commanding officer of **HMAS Perth**, CAPT H.M.L. “Hec” Waller, RAN, went to the British Naval Liaison Office. They received orders from the Royal Navy's China Force Commander, Commodore John Collins, to steam via Sunda Strait to Tjilatjap on Java’s southern coast. Although intelligence indicating the passage to Sunda was unlikely to be contested by the Japanese seems fantastic now, at the time, it was accepted. That information was neither current nor accurate, though, and the degree of error would prove disastrous. Even with a day's delay in their operations, the Imperial Navy was

already bearing down on the western end of Java in significant force, intent on landing troops in three different locations that very night. Had *Perth* and *Houston* transited Sunda Strait successfully, it was generally believed both ships would then likely proceed on to the port of Fremantle on Australia's west coast. Attempts to replenish fuel at Tandjong Priok were limited, as oil stocks at Batavia were already low, and the Dutch were then keeping the last of their fuel oil for their own ships.

Recent days had seen a feverish odyssey of Western merchant ships departing the port. Many of these were doomed never to reach safe harbor. Most left Batavia for Tjilatjap via the Sunda Strait route, which was dangerous enough. Incredibly one, the Dutch tanker *Augustina*, sought escape northeast across the Java Sea. This route—similar to that of *Exeter*, *Encounter*, and *Pope* in reverse—which in retrospect appears almost suicidal, would lead to a bizarre end.



One of the most enigmatic stories in the Pacific War was that of the small (3110 tons) Dutch oil tanker Augustina. She departed Tandjong Priok on Feb. 27, before Houston and Perth arrived, leaving behind wives and children of her Dutch crew. On March 1 in the Java Sea not far from southern Borneo she met a grim fate when soldiers from a Japanese warship ruthlessly machine-gunned her crew of 42 in their lifeboats. One Dutch engineer alone escaped the massacre and survived the war as a POW to tell the story. Two Chinese crewmen also survived. Despite extensive research, the identity of the killers has never been determined.

Perth and *Houston* were not much better off. Under the circumstances, Captains Waller and Rooks had no alternative but to sortie as instructed. The *Evertsen*, the solitary Royal Netherlands Navy destroyer also at Tandjong Priok, was believed to have been ordered to go with the cruisers but failed to do so. The reasons for this have never been very clear—Helfrich's orders to her were nothing if not ambiguous—but in the end, it hardly mattered. Her wartime career was a catalog of errors and missteps, and her fate would be no different. However, two

RNN communications liaison sailors remained on board Houston and shared her fate: LT Jacobus C. Van Leur and Petrus J. A. Stoopman, MM. After the war, a surviving **CA-30** officer, LT Leon Rogers, would sign an affidavit confirming their presence on the ship during that final episode...