

## *A Death So Valiant and True: The Battle of Sunda Strait*

In the early evening of February 28, 1942, with *Perth* in the lead (due to Waller's seniority), the two allied cruisers departed Batavia—without the reluctant *Evertsen*. After clearing the minefields, they began to head west at 22 knots toward Sunda Strait. Intelligence given to the two skippers at Priok had indicated that no enemy surface forces were likely to intercept them. Believing the western end of Java to be free of Japanese warships, the exhausted crews had a couple of hours in which relaxation was at last possible. Some believed they were on their way out of the East Indies meatgrinder and heading home. Ironically, this was to prove a deceptive respite. Unknown to the allies, a major element of the Japanese Western Invasion Convoy, transporting troops of LT GEN Imamura Hitoshi's 16<sup>th</sup> Army, had reached its Bantam Bay anchorage before midnight. Another, lesser, IJA contingent had steamed to Merak, about 40 miles down Sunda Strait, and was disembarking troops there.



*The ungainly IJA command vessel, **Shinshu Maru**, her name disguised in the war as **Ryujo Maru**. She capsized at Bantam Bay after being torpedoed, dumping men and equipment into the sea, including Lt-Gen Imamura himself, "...with a terrible sound."*

That night, three dozen IJA transports off Bantam Bay were almost finished with their first phase of landing operations. On board LT GEN Imamura's command vessel, the Army's purpose-built landing ship *Shinshu Maru*, officers and journalists traveling with the troops noted the fine weather and absence of enemy opposition on that bright moonlit night. *Their* relaxed attitudes would end up being as misleading as the relaxation of the allied sailors on the two approaching cruisers. Soon enough, events began to unfold with terrifying rapidity...



Japanese

*propaganda postcard depicting IJA landings at Bantam Bay as the sea battle rages in the distance.*

Alerted that they might encounter Dutch patrol boats near Sunda Strait, it was around midnight (Japanese time) when **HMAS Perth** spotted and signaled a small ship some 8,000 yards away as she approached Bantam Bay. Moving too quickly for a patrol boat, this stranger sent out a pale green reply that was incomprehensible to the Australians. The mysterious ship turned out to be the old Japanese destroyer **Harukaze**, which was acting as a sentry for the large Japanese invasion convoy. For an hour or more, the three dozen transports had already been offloading thousands of Imperial Japanese Army troops onto the shores of Java just above Bantam Bay. **Harukaze** then fired up a red flare as she turned away, making smoke. Recognizing the Japanese destroyer's distinctive silhouette, **Perth** replied with gunfire. **Perth**'s salvo became the opening to the Battle of Sunda Strait—a ferocious, lopsided, nighttime brawl off the coast of Java in which **Houston** and **Perth** fought at point-blank range against an enemy covering force which vastly outnumbered them. It included two Imperial Japanese Navy heavy cruisers, **Mikuma** and **Mogami**, one light cruiser **Natori**, and no less than nine destroyers: **Fubuki**,

*Shirayuki, Hatsuyuki, Asakaze, Harukaze, Hatakaze, Shirakumo, Murakumo, and Shikinami,* plus miscellaneous smaller vessels including the minelayer *Shirataka*.

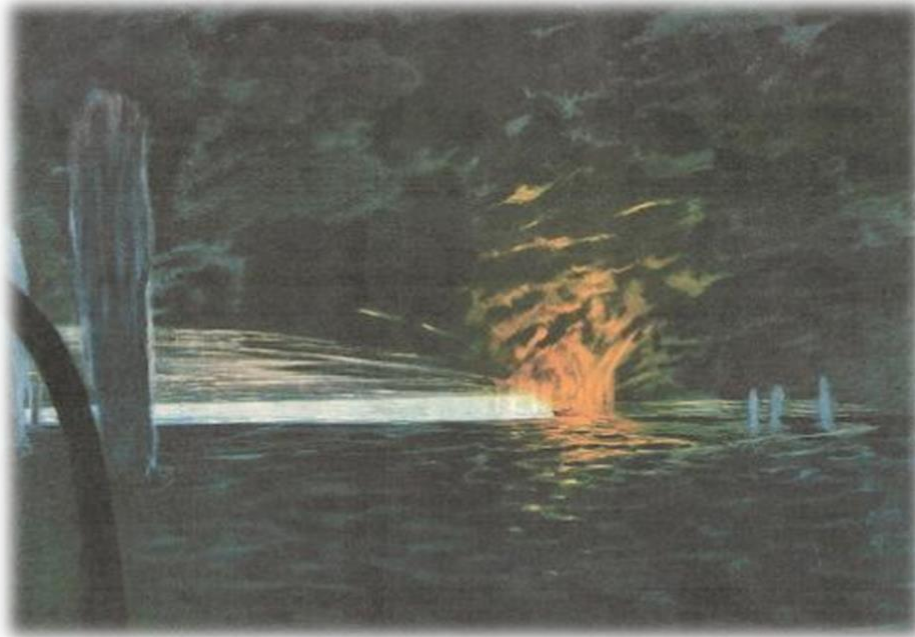
These IJN warships—which were as surprised by the sudden appearance of *Perth* and *Houston* as the allied ships were by them—ended up launching some 87 torpedoes within the narrow waters off Bantam Bay during this chaotic and deadly sea battle.



*The 'Special Type' destroyer **Fubuki** shadowed **Perth** & **Houston** undetected for half an hour before firing 9 torpedoes at a range of less than 3,000 yards. They all missed, hitting nothing.*

Low on ammunition due to their participation the day before in the lengthy Java Sea battle, the gunners of *Houston* fired nearly all their remaining projectiles. Turret two was destroyed by a direct hit late in the battle, and to avoid calamitous fires the cruiser's forward magazines were partially flooded. On *Houston*, as more men were wounded or killed, the 5" ammo parties—the manual sequence of getting shells from magazines to hoists to guns—at length broke down. In the end only ready-locker star shells were accessible for the secondary battery gun crews. Some of these were also expended at the enemy before the ship's list made operating the aft MK19 director and firing its guns impossible.

After almost 90 minutes of violent combat against heavy odds, the luck of *Perth* at last ran out. The Australian cruiser was struck by a number of heavy shells followed by four torpedoes in quick succession. CAPT Waller knew it was the end and ordered his crew to get off the ship while they could. One of the great fighting ships of WWII, **HMAS Perth** sank just outside of the northern entrance to Sunda Strait at 0142 hrs (JST).

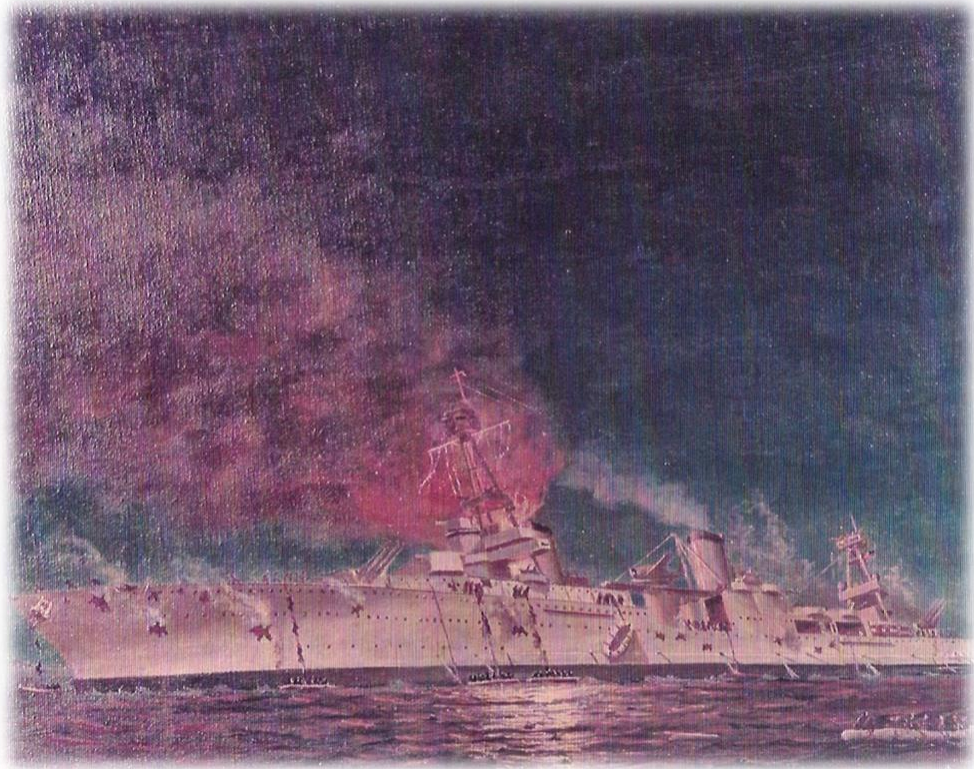


*Japanese wartime propaganda illustration showing the burning **Houston** at Sunda Strait..*

**Houston** fought on alone, firing against any and all targets until her ammunition ran out, guns became disabled, or her gunners were killed. Then she, too, succumbed to the concentrated shellfire of IJN cruisers and destroyers in addition to hits by three or four enemy torpedoes. With her Stars & Stripes still waving and the resolute USMC gunnery Sergeant Walter Standish defiantly firing his .50cal MG from her foremast, the *Galloping Ghost of the Java Coast* slowly capsized and sank at approximately 0206 hrs (JST).



*Dramatized Japanese propaganda postcard showing the death of **Houston**.*



*Painting by Joe T. Fleischman of the crew abandoning **Houston** as she slowly sank.*



*This crude hand-drawn sketch of **Perth** was carried throughout captivity by an American survivor along with a drawing of **Houston**, emblematic of the close relationship between these ships and their crews.*

Following too late to help came the tardy RNN destroyer **Evertsen**. Skirting the spectacular sea battle off St. Nicolas Point while watching the colorful tracers, starshells and flares, **Evertsen**

passed north of the fighting and made for Sunda Strait. She was shielded by changeable weather as well as a distracted enemy and escaped down into the narrow waterway between Java and Sumatra. Her good fortune was not to last. After passing Dwars en de Weg (Sangiang) Island she soon attracted the attention of two big Japanese destroyers from the 12th Destroyer Division who had just fought in the engagement against *Perth* and *Houston*. *Shirakumo* and *Murakumo* were covering the landings at Merak, and by then fully alert and in no mood for hesitation. Realizing the intruder was an enemy ship, they opened an accurate, searchlight-directed shellfire on *Evertsen*, hitting her at least half a dozen times. Alone and unaided, the Dutch tincan attempted to elude her larger, swifter pursuers, but with no success. Hoping to save as many crew as possible, her skipper, LTCDR deVries, decided to run his damaged tincan aground on one of southern islands in the Strait closer to Sumatra. Even this turned into a bit of an ordeal, but de Vries finally rammed *Evertsen* upon the rocks of Sebuku Island, not far from volatile Krakatoa. Internal fires led to the detonation of *Evertsen's* magazines sometime afterward, well after her survivors had abandoned their grounded ship. One of her surviving officers (LT CDR H. Volten) later ended up as a POW alongside captured officers from *Houston* and wrote an account of *Evertsen's* end.

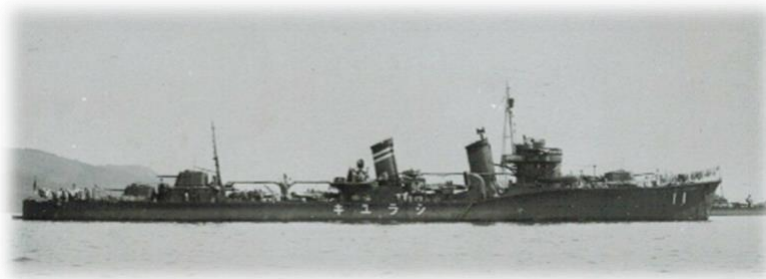
Neither the captain of *Houston* (Rooks) nor of *Perth* (Waller) would survive the confused engagement off Bantam Bay. As he was leaving the bridge area, CAPT Albert H. Rooks died when he was hit by multiple fragments from a Japanese shell that struck the cruiser's No. 1 (starboard) quad 1.1" mount. On *Perth* CAPT Hec Waller, the skipper who had fought his ships throughout the war so well from the Med against the Italians to the Far East against the Japanese, steadfastly refused to leave the bridge and went down with the cruiser.

Of the more than 1060 sailors and Marines aboard the *Houston*, only 368 survived the sinking of the ship. Out of a crew of 681 sailors aboard **HMAS Perth**, only 328 survived. Enemy losses were largely self-inflicted due to their own torpedoes, but without any doubt, there were hits, both large and small, on Japanese ships by the two allied cruisers.



*Contemporary photo by the diver/historian Kevin Denlay.*

Young LTJG Nakamura Kyozo, the Navigator on the destroyer *Shirayuki*, was severely wounded at his station. This was from a dud shell fired at a range of 3,000+ meters by *Houston*, which struck the destroyer's bridge and put Nakamura out of the war for almost two years. He was transferred the following day to an Army hospital ship, and only after a lengthy recuperation period was he able to rejoin the Imperial Navy in May 1944. Three more men on *Shirayuki*'s bridge were not as fortunate, losing their lives to *Houston*'s accurate shooting, while another five were injured.



*The Japanese 'Special Type' destroyer Shirayuki also suffered from her meeting with Houston at Sunda Strait.*

After her frightening close-range torpedo attacks, the destroyer *Harukaze* steamed through much of the battle with an unexploded 6" shell firmly embedded in her thin hull, courtesy of *HMAS Perth*, and carrying a handful of dead and wounded on board. *Harukaze*'s skipper, Commander Koeu Keiji, wrote an account of the battle after the war, freely admitting the nerve-racking nature of such combat, when he took his small and lightly armed old destroyer in at close range not once but twice to launch torpedo attacks. His postwar memoirs (translated by Kan Sugahara) offered details that are worth recounting:

*The enemy gunfire concentrated on us, and we had a hard time of it. The shells of the enemy main guns fell all around close to us, and we were even machine-gunned.*

*Soon, a fire broke out behind the bridge. MG tracers caused it. In addition, near-miss shells hitting the surface of the water exploded one after another, and their fragments scattered all around and rained on us. Those fragments flew into the bridge and bounced here and there. They were very dangerous, to say the least.*

*At that time, the Assistant Communications Officer who was on the bridge...was killed in action from loss of blood. In the meantime, we launched the torpedoes on the second run, but they did not hit the enemy ship.*

*(from **Kancho tachino Taiheiyo Senso**, Ed. by Satō Kazunmasa, Kojin-sha NF Bunko, 1993)*



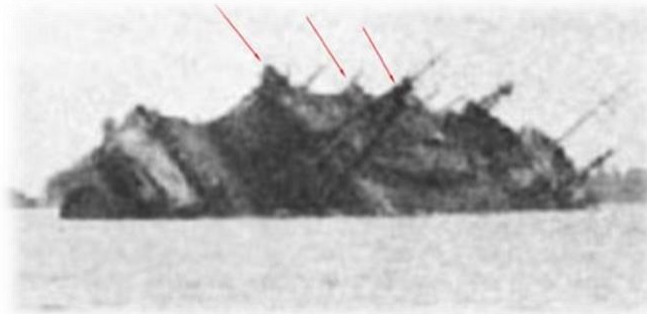
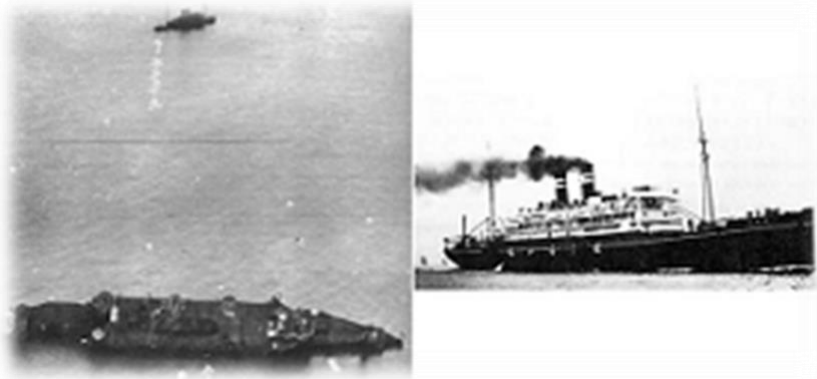
Other Japanese destroyer accounts specifically noted the ferocity of *Perth's* gunfire in that stage of the battle. The heavy cruiser *Mikuma* had had her electrical power knocked out for several minutes early in the fight by a salvo from *Houston*, and either shelling or violent maneuvering had jarred one of her floatplanes down atop a torpedo tube, blocking that weapon temporarily. Her commanding officer, CAPT Sakiyama Shakao—who would die a mere twelve weeks later in the Battle of Midway—wrote that he believed his ship was being hit by *Houston's* shells. *All* the surviving Japanese ship commanders noted the chaotic and terrifying nature of the battle, with enemy shellfire endangering them on one hand and their own wildly fired torpedoes on the other.

In fact, six Type 93 oxygen torpedoes fired by *Mogami* at 'ship no. 2' (*Houston*) turned into one of the war's most effective salvos when these weapons hit and sank five targets...Ironically, all the victims were Japanese. Four transports were lost, and a very unlucky little minesweeper as well. The hapless *W-2* was struck amidships and split in half by one of *Mogami's* deadly *Long Lances*, sinking with a loss of 34 enlisted men and one officer.

On the coast of Java near Bantam Bay and St. Nicolas Point, hundreds of naked Imperial Army soldiers came ashore after swimming for their lives when their transports were sunk by the torpedoes fired by the heavy cruiser *Mogami* as she fought *Houston*. Among these were LT GEN Imamura Hitoshi himself and his 16th Army staff, forced to leap into the waters offshore



when their command vessel, *Shinshu Maru* was hit by a *Mogami* torpedo and capsized in the shallows.



*Capsized **Shinshu Maru** after the battle. She was mistaken by some allied survivors later for an aircraft carrier. The nearby transport also sunk was the **Horai Maru**.*

For Imamura and staff, it was not the loss of life that caused him the most trouble—casualties do not appear to have been great—but the destruction of his communications equipment. Once ashore, he knew that elements of his 2nd Division were advancing toward Serang, about 16-17 km away, but little else. As he wrote later, *"...no information was available on the state of the war in other areas because all radio facilities had been sunk at sea."*

*The commander of 16th Army, whose ship was sunk at Bantam Bay, LT GEN Imamura Hitoshi.*

More radio equipment (from the HQ of *Sogun*, the General Southern Army) then had to be specially flown in from Singapore. This period of being out of touch with his other commands was more vexing to Imamura than the time he had spent in the warm waters of Sunda Strait



before being rescued. In fact, his postwar memoir recalled that he actually slept very well that night because of the exercise he had during his swim after being dumped into the sea. Nonetheless, Imamura's mood was anything *but* pleasant.

It was in this interval of uncertainty and frustration that a captured **USS *Houston*** officer was brought before the exasperated general. That officer was LT Tommy Payne, **CA-30's** senior aviator.

Imamura, who had spent the night in a hut at a native *kampong*—which he described as a "*a coconut*

*plantation*"—then proceeded to vent his anger on the somewhat baffled pilot. The general turned beet red as he yelled and spit out angry questions one after the other. Imamura became further infuriated when Payne told him that there were no battleships present during the battle.

Incensed, the general threatened to have Payne executed the next morning, but this appears to have been a bluff. (Imamura was by all accounts one of the milder, and more rational, individuals in the upper echelons of the Imperial Army, and in fact, his military reputation in the IJA later suffered as a result of this lack of ferocity, it seems.) The upshot of this business was that LT Payne survived, and the Imperial Navy explained away their errant torpedoes by telling the Army that those sinkings were the results of enemy torpedo boats that had penetrated the anchorage in the confusion after the two cruisers' attacks. This friendly fire 'incident' was concealed from the public. One recent translation of the account as given in Japan's well-known War History series (BKS/*Senshi Sōsho*) states, "*It was because Commander Imamura graciously accepted the apology of the Navy side that this fact was kept from becoming publicly known.*"

Despite the informational darkness in which the allies were to operate for many years, the Japanese very soon made a 'Progress Report' to the Emperor in Tokyo on their campaign successes. Dated near the beginning of March, this one was detailed and of reasonable precision. It noted in *katakana* (the Japanese syllabary for foreign names) the identities of the ships which fought had against them, and in some instances the number of naval POWs taken.

〇 第五艦隊のシヤロ艦隊三十七隻、英艦H10、乗員古十七名	〇 敵機收着七機、シヤロ艦隊を襲撃、結果中三十七隻、乗員古十七名	〇 敵機七機、シヤロ艦隊を襲撃、結果中三十七隻、乗員古十七名	〇 敵機七機、シヤロ艦隊を襲撃、結果中三十七隻、乗員古十七名	〇 敵機七機、シヤロ艦隊を襲撃、結果中三十七隻、乗員古十七名	〇 敵機七機、シヤロ艦隊を襲撃、結果中三十七隻、乗員古十七名	〇 敵機七機、シヤロ艦隊を襲撃、結果中三十七隻、乗員古十七名	〇 敵機七機、シヤロ艦隊を襲撃、結果中三十七隻、乗員古十七名
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De Ruyter

Perth

Exeter

Houston

Java

H10

海軍 9

H-10 = HMS Encounter 1396

From 'Progress Report for the Emperor' 1 March 1942. (JACAR)