

BALIKPAPEN

24 January 1942

Walter has done everything short of a bribe to get me to sit down, to put fingers to keyboard and to write about Balikpapan. Whew, that was a long time ago. Memory is blurred. No diary was kept, not because it was discouraged, but because I never did write them. However, there were ship's logs, battle reports, naval history and yes some letters I wrote. With tongue in cheek and not a chance to upstage the marvelous report of Otto Schwartz, I undertake to give something to Walter.

We know "our" fleet had the finest and most capable and best trained sailors in the world manning antiquated ships, a couple exceptions, well equipped to fight a WW I type battle. For those of us who served on the "China Station" it is not necessary to put this in perspective, but as this may have a somewhat larger audience, I will start with a quick review of the U.S.Navy history of events in or affecting the Western Pacific Theater commencing with the attack on Pearl Harbor.

- Unexpectedly on Sunday morning 7 December 1941 Honolulu time 360 aircraft from a Japanese Naval Striking Force played havoc on the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor.
- 8 December: U.S. declares war on Japan. Asiatic Fleet Striking Force departs Iloilo, PI for Borneo. After a failed attempt to scuttle, the USS WAKE (PR3) surrenders to the Japanese in Shanghai. Japanese aircraft bomb Guam, Wake, Hongkong, Singapore and the Philippines. Extensive damage inflicted on army aircraft at Clark Field. SS PRESIDENT HARRISON en route to evacuate marines from Chingwangtau runs aground and is captured.
- 9 December: Japanese occupy Bangkok, Thailand.
- 10 December: Cavite Navy Yard heavily damaged by Japanese air attack. One U.S. destroyer, two submarines and a minesweeper damaged. British ships PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE sunk by Japanese air attacks. Japanese make first of many landings on Luzon, PI
- 15 December: Patrol Wing 10 departs Philippines for the Netherlands East Indies (NEI).
- 20 December: Japanese land on Mindanao, PI.
- 21 December: Naval Defense Forces in Philippines move to Corregidor.
- 23 December: Japanese land on Borneo.
- 25 December: Admiral Hart, Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet transfers by submarine from Philippines to NEI. British in Hongkong surrender.

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- 26 December: Manila declared an open city but Japanese continue to bomb.
- 2 January: Manila and Cavite fall to the Japanese.
- 11 January: Japanese begin invasion of NEI.
- 20 January: EDSALL and three Australian Corvettes sink Japanese submarine I-124 off Port Darwin, Australia.
- 21 January: BOISE damaged by submerged reef North of Java in the NEI.
- 23 January: Japanese land at Balikpapan 24 January: Japanese Borneo invasion convoy undergoes night torpedo attack off Balikpapan by four U.S. destroyers: PARROTT, POPE, JOHN D. FORD & PAUL JONES. Four Japanese transport and a patrol vessel are sunk.

This sets the stage. Even though the Japanese had a sizable portion of their naval forces involved in the Pearl Harbor attack they still possessed a combined air sea and land force for their campaign in Southeast Asia.. The meager U.S. and allied forces in this area were no match.

The above extracts essentially cover the area of operation for the Asiatic Fleet. Nowhere in the Navy History after the commencement of hostilities by the United States in the Second World War up to 24 January 1942 is there any mention of any offensive action initiated by U.S. naval forces in any theater. There were, however, encounters such as the one on 20 January in both the Atlantic and Pacific

When the war started I was a lieutenant, junior grade, Lt(jg), and the communication and torpedo officer aboard the JOHN D. FORD. The ship was in Manila on that "Day of Infamy", and we on board were not necessarily surprised at the commencement of hostilities, just the timing and where it started. We thought we would be the sacrificial lamb having an inkling that one of our ships was to place herself in harms way as the Japanese dashed madly toward the oil rich NEI..

Twice we and the POPE escorted ships from Manila. We were there when the enemy first bombed the city and Cavite. Our 3" "pop gun" and 50 caliber machine were useless but fortunately for us their targets were bigger game. By the middle of the month the Philippines were behind, we made Borneo and by Christmas were, we thought safely in Surabaya on Java. Having no concept of the extensive damage done to the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, we were sure that it was just a matter of days until we would see it steaming over the horizon. We relaxed somewhat, accomplished some much needed repair and upkeep, picked up some fresh fruit and vegetables and enjoyed the hospitality of the Dutch. The heat of the tropics was stifling, up to 130° below decks: all slept top side, the Javanese barefoot oil hose handlers could not walk on the steel decks.

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The JDF with other destroyers made a number of sorties to investigate possible enemy subs which were never found. On one occasion after ferociously attacking a bona-fide sound contact which turned out to be a wreck we discovered a school of fish were the casualty of our depth charges. We took advantage of the opportunity and enjoyed fresh fish. We never did figure out what kind, but so what: they were delicious and no one got sick.

The first indication we had of an approaching offensive operation was on the 15th of January, 1942. We were ordered alongside the MARBLEHEAD for fuel. I was told to put all, except for a few essential code books, of the ship's classified documents for which I was strictly accountable and required someone's signature anytime it left my custody in a sack and turn them over without an inventory or a receipt. This violated all the training I had had and concerned me to no end. After the Captain gave his approval, I complied.

We steamed North at 18 knots toward a point on Celebes. While confident of good luck, there was a feeling we might not return. Not wanting the Japanese to be the beneficiaries of all our good food the commissary officer, Bill Mack, splurged. This run however turned out to be a dummy one as reconnaissance of our target area was negative.

After refueling in Koepang, Timor we left in company with the BOISE, POPE, PAUL JONES & PARROTT heading North again. In the wide open sea with no land in sight and the charts showing nothing but deep water, misfortune in the form of a reef struck the BOISE, opening a large wound forcing her turn back for major repairs. The remaining four "cans" circled in the vicinity of the Postillion Islands waiting for just that right moment to strike. Finally on the 23rd word arrived of the enemy landings at Balikpapan. Commander Talbot, the division and task force commander read "two cruisers, eight destroyers and possibly more plus transports" and uttered two words "My God". The message also said "Good luck going in and God's speed coming out".

We cranked her up to 24 knots, only two of the four boilers required, and on we charged. As the task force commander was riding us, we were the lead ship. In peace time we seldom had the "commander" aboard and were usually tacked on as the last in the column. This meant we were the last to anchor, always the farthest one out and the last to get ashore. What luck, the first one in battle with the best chance of being hit. En route each division officer explained to all his men the disposition of the enemy and our plan of attack.

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Was I scared? Were we scared? I sure was and everyone I talked to was too. We knew the estimates on the size of the enemy and us old four tin cans with the best of men were up against a much larger force that completely out gunned us. I can remember wondering what I would do when and if we were sunk: go down with the ship, try to escape or be taken as a prisoner. In addition to my life jacket, helmet and pistol most of us carried an abandon ship kit consisting of matches, quinine a few vitamin pills all encased in one of those rubber “gadgets” designed to prevent disease.

The only advantage we had was “surprise”. To minimize the chance of being seen we needed to stay as far away as possible during daylight, hit them well after nightfall but be finished with the attack with sufficient night left to get far enough away before daybreak. I was O.O.D. in condition TWO (four hour on, four off - but those four off were mostly spent decoding messages) all day on the 23rd and until we went to GQ for the attack. Several times on the bridge we thought our goose was cooked when we “just knew” we sighted Japanese Reconnaissance planes. At times like this, imagination does play tricks.

At 2100 two more boilers were cut in and speed increased to 27 knots, by midnight there was evidence of enemy activity ahead. Searchlights were shining, a mass of flames would shoot up. About 0245 contact! The sequence of our action from this time on is hazy. Any fear any of us had felt as we sped into action vanished, adrenalin cut in and every man was at his best, doing his job in a superb manner. Two sweeps were made. Our three other “cans” were right behind and were also having a hey day. The navigator, Lt. Norm Smith, performed outstandingly when all the shore navigational lights were doused he managed to recall our having been in that port and accurately plotted our position from the hill tops. Helmsman Petefish superbly steered around wreckage and other un-plotted obstacles.

The element of surprise now gone, the “gun boss” Bill Mack opened up with his guns. They made big flashes which temporarily blinded us, but it was so gratifying to see moments later the effect of those projectiles hitting their mark .

One of the essentials of successful night attack is to know the whereabouts of your own ships. Our three stayed with us for a long time but after an hour of wiggling around they became separated and, after telling us on the radio, pulled out. Now, alone, we spotted a transport about 30° on our bow and fired a torpedo. With the torpedo’s speed the same as our’s we essentially paralleled it and it hit just as we were abeam at 500 yards. The explosion knocked all of us top side down, but we quickly recovered and took all of 30 seconds admiring our handiwork.

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Time unknown but after having it all to ourselves, we were hit by gun fire. The shell penetrated the after deck house on which gun #4 was mounted and in which there was an auxiliary radio transmitter powered by a gasoline motor generator. The gasoline went up in flames which shot up twice as high as the ship. Looking back from the bridge, we wondered if our time was up. Even though determined to keep the ship fighting we sub-consciously tightened the strings on our life jackets, felt for our abandon ship kit and looked around just in case for the best place to go overboard. The after damage control party lead by our chief electrician mate whose name escapes me, sized up the damage correctly. Quickly the flames were doused, mount 4 continued to fire relentlessly at enemy ships and we safely continued. Four casualties, none fatal.

About 0400 with all torpedoes and umpteen shells expended, with the necessity to “get out” before dawn we departed. As we were beginning to think we just might make it, “eagle eye” Perkins, SM1/c in a calm voice announced “here it comes”. A couple of men claim they too saw a torpedo heading for and passing under us. Imagination or not, nothing happened.

Sunrise was calculated for 0551, but the Eastern sky became very bright before 0500. We imagined the Japanese would be hot on our trail and with us at times charging at 30 knots we were running low on fuel. Fortunately, they never pursued. We soon sighted our three sisters and a plane coming from the South. How did the Japs get down there? Were we cut off? No, it was a plane from the MARBLEHEAD. True or false we don't know, but the story is the pilot before returning to his ship sent a message “All coming”. To those on board, what did this mean? The Japanese or the four destroyers?

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As the day wore on and we felt safer, the Chief Engineer, Joe Spencer, announced that at the present speed of 20 knots we did not have sufficient fuel to return to Surabaya. Slow down. Incrementally we dropped speed by one knot finally settling on 14. By the time we reached port, we had burned 96.5% of our fuel.

Cogitating our accomplishments we were sure we had sunk or severely damaged over a half dozen ships (official report above says four transports and one patrol craft sunk, nothing on damage). I backed up by my torpedo men Canaday, Siegel and Shisler were certain “our” torpedoes did most of the work. My friend Bill with Mullin and other gunners, concurring in the assessment, says it was “their” guns. Then when we commiserated with our counterparts on our sister ships, they claimed it was theirs. As the bullets and torpedoes will never speak up we ended in agreement it was a team effort. Every man in the deck force, the black gang, did what was expected - it took all to make it possible. In addition, each ship was vital and each did its share. Yes, we were a team, and a damn good one.

Our success reached Surabaya prior to our return. This was first apparent when we passed a Dutch destroyer and they saluted us with enthusiasm. By contrast when we had entered a month earlier their salute seemed more like a “birdie”, we had abandoned our friends in the Philippines. Then our boss, Admiral Hart was waiting on the dock. This was the first time we had ever seen him; the ship was, well maybe not dirty, but it wasn’t clean, the bright work did not glisten, there was still debris and charred paint from the hit at the afterdeck house and all hands were dead tired after a maximum of six hours sleep in the previous forty eight. But we were proud, he was proud.

John S. Slaughter
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