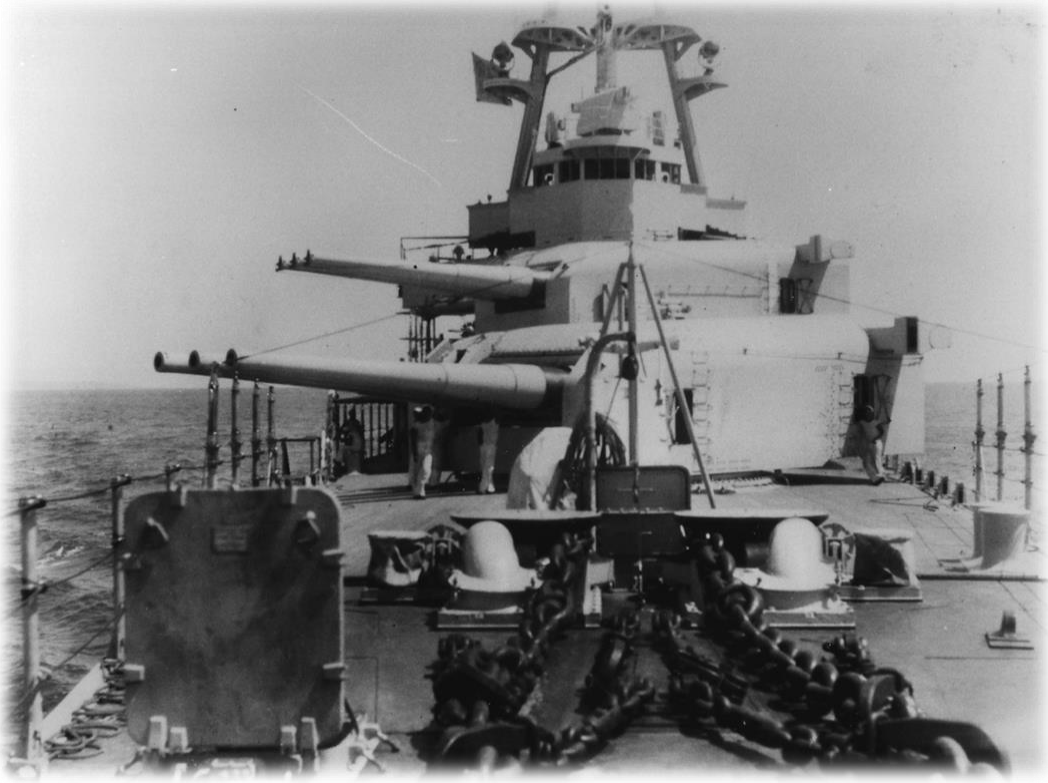


# *U.S.S. Houston (CA-30)*

## **Brief History of an American Fighting Ship**

*'The Galloping Ghost of the Java Coast'*



After an energetic and determined 3-year campaign by Houston city officials led by mayoral assistant William Bernrieder (head of the *Cruiser Houston Committee*), the U. S. Navy chose Houston as the namesake of one of the new scout cruisers then slated to be built. Navy Secretary Curtis Wilbur visited the city in person to make the official announcement. Accordingly, **USS *Houston* CL-30** was constructed by the *Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Co.* of Newport News, Virginia, as a light cruiser not to exceed 10,000 tons displacement. She was launched on September 7, 1929, christened with a bottle of water from the Houston Ship Channel wielded by 13-year-old Elizabeth Holcombe, daughter of ex-Mayor Oscar Holcombe. One of Elizabeth's accompanying chaperones was Charlotte Williams, the great grand-daughter

of Sam Houston himself. **Houston** was commissioned on June 17, 1930. The designation of the *Northampton*-class ship was later changed to **CA-30** (heavy cruiser) on July 1, 1931. The alteration in type designation was primarily due to provisions of international naval treaties between the wars which distinguished between light cruisers (armed with 6.1" guns, or smaller) and heavy cruisers (up to 8" guns).



*Rare photo of the commissioning ceremony on **Houston**, June 1930, and the first raising of Old Glory.*

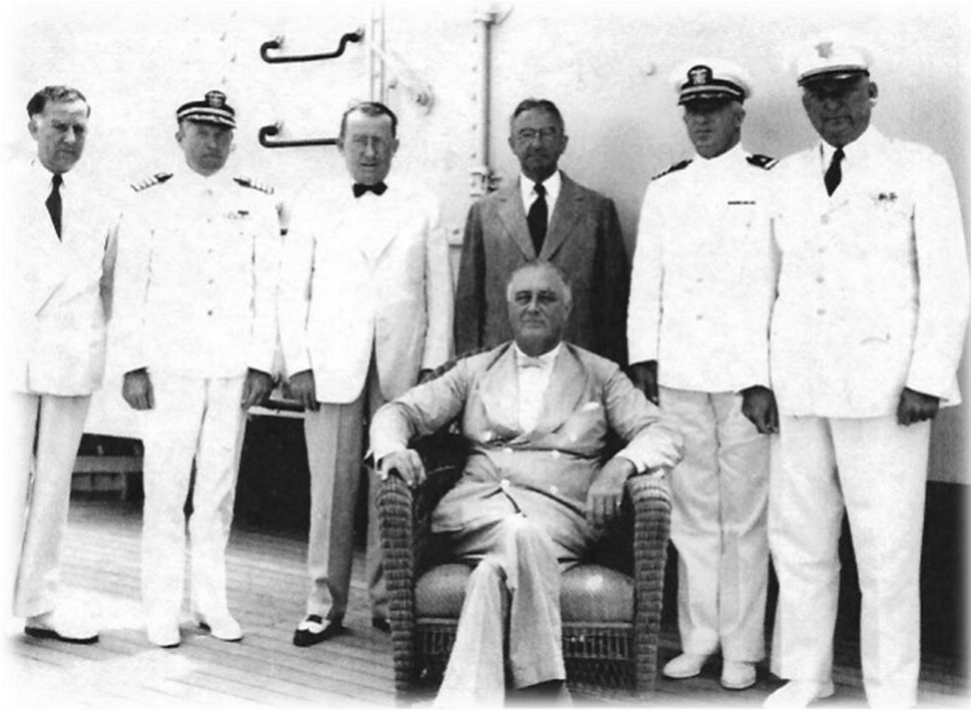
After working-up cruises, including a trip across the Atlantic to Europe and also a celebrated and uproarious visit to her namesake city (Oct. 1930), **Houston** was assigned as Asiatic Fleet flagship at the beginning of 1931. For the next two-and-a-half years she operated in Philippine waters and along the lengthy coastline of China. That vast country was then being torn by conflicts both internal (Nationalist/Communist) and external (Japan) which frequently jeopardized the lives of Westerners living and working there. Tension with the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was a daily fact of life in Shanghai. In early 1932 **CA-30** transported a contingent of USN and USMC ground forces to Shanghai to help protect American interests when fighting erupted between Chinese and Japanese troops.



*A nest of IJN destroyers (from 22nd Div) at Shanghai, ca. 1931-32; **Fumizuki** closest to camera.*



She returned to the Pacific Fleet's Scouting Force in November 1933 when her 'sweet sister' **USS Augusta (CA-31)** took over Asiatic Fleet flagship duties. Between 1934 and 1938 President Franklin D. Roosevelt took four cruises aboard **Houston**, which often acted as his 'Little White House'. In the national press she became well-known as a favored ship for FDR's getaways. In this period of her career she was referred to as '*The Rambler*' and '*The Wanderer*' in the ship's newspaper. In the fall of 1938 she became Pacific Fleet flagship temporarily after conveying FDR through the large fleet review in San Francisco Bay that August. This was prior to his fourth cruise on **CA-30** (to the Galapagos Islands and Canal Zone).



*FDR on **Houston** during another Presidential Cruise, this time to the Galapagos Islands, summer 1938.*

**Houston's** position as a Presidential favorite, as well as her status as a flagship, meant over the years that she did not always receive the upgrades or battle practice that she should have. An Asiatic Fleet officer named Kemp Tolley later remarked wryly that gunnery practice might have messed up her gleaming brass and meticulous flagship paintwork. In any event, in April 1939 **Houston** made her last visit to her hometown of Houston, Texas, when she drew tens of thousands of visitors over several days in port.





*Houston passes the new San Jacinto Monument on her final hometown visit in April, 1939.*

After that, **CA-30** became part of the so-called *Hawaiian Detachment* of the Pacific Fleet's Scouting Force, often operating out of the LaHaina Roads anchorage at Maui.



*Houston departs LaHaina Roads anchorage for her last stateside refit in 1940.*

Following much-needed upgrades at Mare Island in the fall of 1940, the *Houston* was to head out once more to the Philippines and the U.S. Asiatic Fleet. Around the same time, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) ADM Harold “Betty” Stark sent a letter to his admirals in the Pacific laying out his estimate of the situation. Stark’s November 1940 message noted the likelihood of war by Japan against an alliance of the U.S., British, and Dutch. This was a prescient document, as it turned out, with Stark anticipating many of the initial operations undertaken by Imperial Japan’s military forces a little over a year later. In his assessment, these included Japan: occupying Guam and reinforcing the Mandates; establishing naval control of the Philippine waters by destroying U.S. naval and air forces; then invading and capturing Luzon; and finally, seizing Borneo, followed by “...a campaign against the Dutch directed East to West.” What CNO Stark and the various intelligence organizations had not foreseen or anticipated were the massive raids on Pearl Harbor, the lightning invasions of Hong Kong and Malaya, destructive bombings of Douglas MacArthur’s air forces on Luzon, and the attacks on Wake and Guam...all conducted more or less simultaneously. Fatefully, it was against this uncertain yet clearly ominous geopolitical backdrop that *Houston* steamed once more to the Far East.



*CA-30 leaves LaHaina, seen over the stern of a Brooklyn-class light cruiser.*

She conducted full-power runs on her way across the Pacific in late 1940, showing that despite her age, she could still reach at least 31 knots and that her main engines were sound. Her newly emplaced quad 1.1” ‘pom-pom’ mount was also tested—the three others would be installed after she reached Cavite—along with the temporary 3”/50cal guns, the expanded 5”/25cal dual purpose battery and her .50cal machine guns. Personnel of the U.S. Marine Detachment on

*Houston* (to be 74 men eventually) manned some 5” weapons as well as the entire foremast .50cal machine gun battery. These Leathernecks were known not to be shy about blasting away with their weapons during exercises. This even led to a veteran Gunnery Sergeant named Walter Standish (actually of Lithuanian ancestry, serving with an Anglicized name) being reprimanded for his too-liberal firings.

During refits, the ship received two reconstituted MK.19 secondary directors, but these were rarely considered altogether satisfactory. The location of the aft director, in particular, was problematic, and plans were in hand to re-site it. Some of the crew in the secondary battery also believed their scopes had never been properly calibrated, although the directors' design limitations may have been as much at fault as any human error. At the same time, a scandalous failure of 5” anti-aircraft (AA) projectiles in Pacific Fleet ships was emerging—which was by no means limited only to *Houston*—but this info was suppressed by senior officers and chiefs. As a result, and all too predictably, the cruiser’s 5” AA systems would prove to be something of an Achilles heel later when **CA-30** had to contend with enemy air attacks.

The skipper and staff went so far as to conduct exercises from inside the cramped and primitive Conning Tower (CT), but this was never a favored position. It was also prone to mechanical glitches. (During and after the Battle of the Java Sea, an Electrician Mate had to go to the CT to work on the steering, which had suffered an electrical malfunction.) Until real danger in combat grew too great, her skipper preferred fighting the ship out in the open from the so-called Flying Bridge, a narrow walkway that wrapped around the sides and front of the bridge structure.

