

Ad Cavite redux: CA-30 becomes Asiatic Fleet flagship a second time



USS Augusta (CA-31), the 'sweet sister' of Houston, headed for Pearl Harbor in Nov. 1940 after being relieved as flagship by CA-30. She is trailing a 500 ft. long 'homeward bound' pennant from her mainmast.

CA-30 again became flagship of the U. S. Asiatic Fleet when she relieved **USS Augusta (CA-31)** at Manila in the third week of November 1940. Some joked that **Augusta** rode several feet higher in the water after all of the papers, files, and flag personnel transferred over to the 'Huey Maru' (another nickname for **CA-30**). For large warships like those sisters, the flag allowance—all of the personnel working with the Flag Commander to do the business of that Flag command—could be several dozen men. On **Houston**, for example, it included eighteen extra officers. Having them on board was not always pleasant for the ship's regular crew, as it meant more crowding as well as increased formality and attention to 'spit & polish' regulations. And Manila was notorious for its brutal and debilitating heat. An over-crowded steel warship with no air-conditioning and questionable ventilation usually made for a quite uncomfortable

situation. Even toughened Oldtimers had trouble sleeping in the cruiser's stifling interior at night.

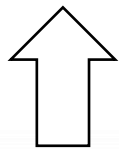


ADMIRAL THOMAS C. HART, US NAVY, CINC ASIATIC FLEET

Since late July 1939, the Asiatic Fleet had been under the command of ADM Thomas C. Hart (USNA 1897), one of the Navy's senior officers. Although based in Manila, much of Hart's time as CINCAF (Commander-in-Chief Asiatic Fleet) on his flagship *Augusta* in 1939-40 had been spent in Shanghai dealing with the international ramifications of Japanese aggression in the Far East. This was due not only to the long-established Asiatic Fleet routine (summer in Chinese ports where it was cooler, winters in the Philippines) but to the military conflict that had broken out in the summer of 1937 between Japan and China after the so-called *Marco Polo Bridge Incident* near Peking. Over the next few years, Japan became more deeply involved in China, winning numerous tactical victories but never really coming close to controlling that vast and complex country. Forewarnings from insightful Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) officers—rare characters such as COL Ishiwara Kanji—that China would become for Japan what the Peninsular Campaign in Spain had been for Napoleon—a wasting, ruinous quagmire—were ignored.

Meanwhile, once *Houston* arrived at Cavite to take over as flagship from *Augusta*, it was clear to Hart that the small Asiatic Fleet needed extensive training to prepare for a conflict that only the most delusional could deny was imminent. Tommy Hart was not one to sugar-coat his views. This applied to his own performance as well as that of the men in his command. For the rest of her prewar time in the Far East, *Houston* took many training cruises to southern Philippine waters, frequently in the Sulu Archipelago northwest of Borneo.

The United States was then paying the Sultan of Sulu a handsome sum annually for access to those waters—said to be as much as a quarter of a million dollars—and one of his daughters attended the University of Illinois before WWII. *Houston* needed attentive navigation as she steamed from Zamboanga to Jolo down to Tawitawi, along the Sibutu Passage up to the Balabac Strait and Palawan, through perilous seas studded with exotic names like Great Danger Bank, Monmouth Shoals, Marchesa Bank, Royalist Rock, Minna Reefs, Driftwood Point, York Breakers, Wedge Island, the Managree Great Reef...and dozens more. Even CAPT Jesse B. Oldendorf, a favorite *Houston* skipper, found himself in hot water with ADM Hart for poking his nose—and that of his big cruiser—into such poorly charted Sulu waters when he narrowly avoided a grounding on a tactical exercise before the war.



Marblehead off the Manila breakwater as seen from an Asiatic Fleet fourpiper.



Manila

Iloilo

Jolo

PHILIPPINES

LUZON

MINDORO

NEGROS

PANAY

SAMAR

MINDANAO

ALAWAN

SABAH

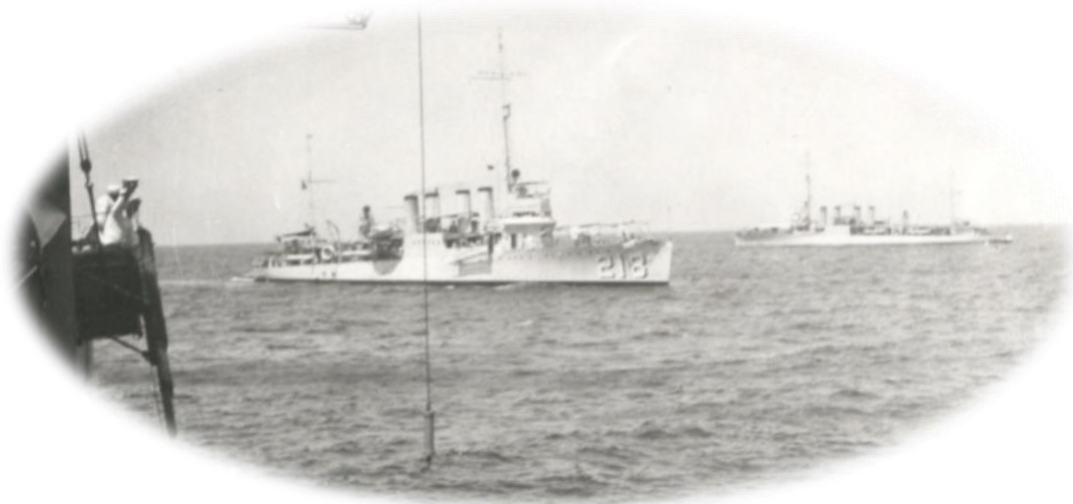
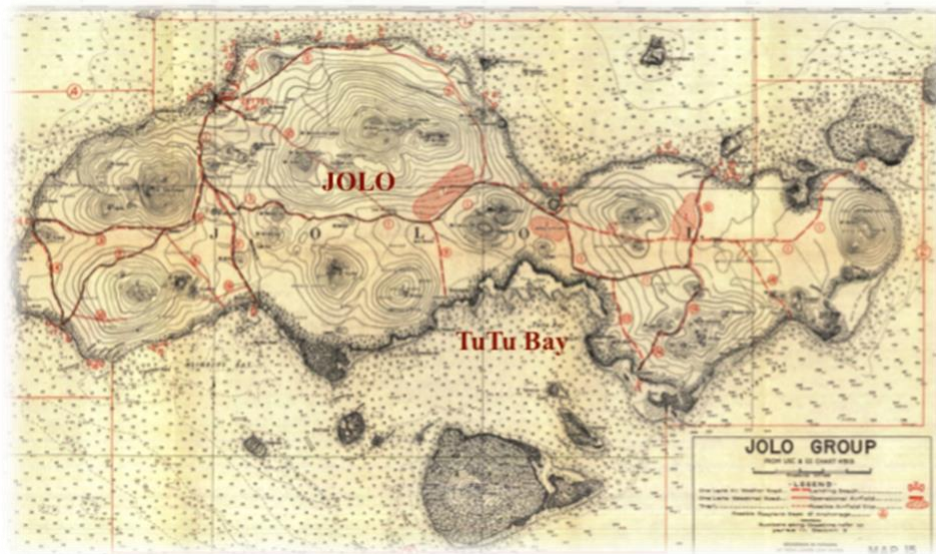
Borneo

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SEAS

In those obscure seas, away (it was hoped) from prying Japanese eyes, *Houston* conducted night and day gunnery exercises—main battery, secondaries, and tertiaries—often with the old light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* and a few WWI-era flushdecker destroyers from Destroyer Squadron (DesRon) 29, or with various Asiatic Fleet auxiliaries. Additionally, ADM Hart was tasked by the Navy to find a southern Philippines anchorage suitable for expansion into a full-fledged new naval base. He had selected TuTu Bay at Jolo Island in mid-1941, but events unfolded far too quickly for those plans to get into the official pipeline.



*Asiatic Fleet fourpipers including **USS Parrott (DD-218)** frequently operated with **Houston** on prewar exercises.*