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The battles of the Java Sea: Allied naval defeat, December 1941 – March 1942

Popular history – wrongly – has it that the Allies in Southeast Asia were surprised by the Japanese assault commencing on 8 December 1941. The protracted development of the Singapore base to deter Japanese adventurism began in 1923. A series of 'Singapore Conferences' in the late 1930s involving the British, Australians and Dutch, with American observers, developed a strategy to deal with Japanese attacks in the region from the Philippines to Burma and south to Java. This envisaged the pooling of resources of ships and aircraft to forestall Japanese amphibious assaults on Allied territory.

This sound plan had two drawbacks. The first was that the combined air and naval forces of the four nations were inadequate for the task. Why that should have been is another story. The second drawback was that only Australia and the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) responded as required when the plan was activated. Australian popular history is fixated on the fate of the 8th Division, but there is little recognition or acknowledgment of the hard fighting done by both the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Royal Australian Air Force in this campaign, and its costs in material and blood.

At sea, the opening round saw the 'Main Fleet to Singapore' strategy, which had sustained British and Australian defence planning for more than 15 years, annihilated when Japanese aircraft sank HM Ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. The puny United States Asiatic Fleet was heavily interdicted from the air in the Philippines, forcing it to withdraw southwards. Instead of regrouping to oppose the Japanese in strength, the Allies went their own ways. The surviving British ships, with the RAN, were directed to support the flow of men and material into Singapore, a task increasingly difficult and costly as the Japanese advanced southward in Malaya and took command of

the air. The sloop HMAS *Yarra* did particularly valuable work in saving 1344 troops from the bombed and burning *Empress of Asia*, while no fewer than seven RAN corvettes were engaged in escorting troop ships, and then rescuing civilians and withdrawing forces from threatened positions.

Allied Command shifted to Java, while well-planned Japanese attacks rolled-up Allied forces from outlying parts of the NEI. An Allied striking force of cruisers and destroyers, including HMAS *Hobart*, attempted to stop an invasion force attacking Sumatra, but was repulsed from the air. Losses mounted, Singapore fell and the naval task changed to getting survivors away to Australia while attempting to delay the inevitable. The less capable warships were also got clear of the theatre as the situation deteriorated. *Hobart* escorted the last of them to Colombo on 28 February, narrowly missing being ambushed by the Japanese.



HMAS *Perth*

[Photo: Department of Defence]

The last significant naval battle was fought off eastern Java on 27-28 February 1942 where a combined Allied force attempted to attack a 40-ship troop convoy. This was the first engagement fought by the cruiser HMAS *Perth* against the Japanese after she was rushed in to bolster the strength of the naval forces and she acquitted herself well. However, through a combination of factors that could not be resolved in

the increasingly dysfunctional command structure, the Japanese escort force prevailed, with one British cruiser damaged and two Dutch cruisers sunk, taking the force commander with them. Allied naval strength in the theatre had been reduced to three large ships, a handful of destroyers and a number of smaller vessels. *Perth* took command of the remnants and retired to Djakarta to refuel and rearm, with only limited success. In company with the damaged heavy cruiser USS *Houston* she was ordered to Cilicap on the south coast of Java where the Allies were attempting to regroup, but they were lost when they encountered another Japanese invasion force in Sunda Strait that night. The damaged British cruiser, HMS *Exeter*, was destroyed. Effective naval resistance to the Japanese was over, but Japanese cruisers patrolling south of Java destroyed several of the Allied convoys escaping to Australia and their escorts, including *Yarra* which was sunk with heavy loss of life while attempting to protect her convoy against three heavy cruisers. By 4 March, it was all over.

In these desperate sea battles Japanese losses were minimal, with no ships sunk. However, they claimed around 50 Allied warships and the lives of almost 4000 Allied sailors, including 500 Australians: the survivors shared the fate of the Australian 8th Division in Japanese captivity. Why is it then that we Australians remember the soldiers but not the sailors who fought so gallantly and so long in a losing cause?

Ian Pfennigwerth¹

¹Captain Ian Pfennigwerth, RAN (Ret'd), is a naval historian who has published six books on Australian naval history, the latest being *In good hands: the life of Dr Sam Stening, POW* (Longueville Publishing: Woollahra, NSW) 2012. It is reviewed on page 29. He is a member of this journal's editorial advisory committee.