

THE GALLOPING GHOST OF THE JAVA COAST: PRESERVING THE STORY OF WWII ERA HEAVY CRUISER USS HOUSTON (CA-30)

Alexis Catsambis (Underwater Archaeology Branch, Branch Head [Acting])

ABSTRACT

The topic of this abstract fits best within the Underwater Cultural Heritage of World War II in the Asia-Pacific Region: Discoveries, Opportunities & Challenges session of the conference as it is directly relevant to the session's theme. The paper presents a case study on the wreck site of USS Houston (CA-30), a heavy cruiser located in Banten Bay, Indonesia, sank in combat during the Battle of Sunda Strait in 1942. It is associated with one of the greatest losses of life tied to a single sinking event in U.S. Navy history. The wrecksite of USS *Houston* has been documented over the course of the last several years through the use of diving and remote-sensing based surveys. Collaborative management efforts between the Governments of Indonesia and the United States have recently focused on site preservation, a point of particular concern as nearby contemporary warships have suffered significantly at the hands of unauthorized salvage operations. The results presented will demonstrate what has been learned about the shipwreck over the course of the last decade, as well as highlight transnational approaches to the preservation of underwater cultural heritage sites.

KEYWORDS: World War II, Shipwreck, U.S. Navy, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

USS *Houston* (CA-30), a heavy cruiser measuring 600 feet (c.183 meters) in length, was launched in 1929 and was sunk in combat by Japanese forces during the Battle of Sunda Strait on 1 March 1942. In 2014, following a series of reports of unauthorized salvaging of World War II-era shipwrecks in the region, a joint dive exercise of the U.S. Navy (USN) and the Indonesian Navy (IND) was undertaken on the site now confirmed to be the wreck of USS *Houston* (CA-30). The 2014 operation aimed to verify the identity of the site and ascertain the ship's state of preservation. During the mission, a wreath-laying ceremony, presided over by the U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission to Indonesia, Ms. Kristen Bauer, commemorated the loss of life associated with the vessel's sinking, which was among the heaviest in USN history (c. 645 sailors and Marines). Captain Albert H. Rooks, USN, killed in action, posthumously received the Medal of Honor for extraordinary heroism, while USS *Houston* was awarded two battle stars, as well as the Presidential Unit Citation for its service. Since 2014, the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC) has engaged extensively with peers and counterparts to ensure the continuing preservation of the USS *Houston* site.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

History of USS *Houston* (CA-30)

On 7 September 1927, the second USN ship to carry the name of the city of Houston, TX, was launched by Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., in Newport News, VA. The 9,050-ton *Northampton*-class heavy cruiser was first commissioned as CL-30 on 17 June 1930, though the vessel's designation changed to CA-30 on 1 July 1931 (DON 2017). USS *Houston* traversed much of the world during the interwar period. After spending some time in the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, she joined the fleet at Hampton Roads. With the outbreak of war between Japan and China in 1932, *Houston* moved on to Shanghai to protect American citizens and interests in the region. The following year she joined the Scouting Force in San Francisco, in which she participated in Fleet Problems and maneuvers in the Pacific. During this time, *Houston* celebrated the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco on 28 May 1937. For brief periods, in 1938 and 1939, *Houston* became the flagship of both the U.S. Fleet

and the Hawaiian Detachment. President Franklin D. Roosevelt claimed *Houston* as his favorite ship, and she made several special cruises carrying the President on a number of occasions in 1934, 1935, 1938, and 1939 (DON 2017; Hornfischer 2006, 14-19).

As the fear of war began to spread around the world, *Houston* departed for the Philippine Islands on 3 November 1940 and arrived at Manila on 19 November. There she became the flagship of Admiral Hart, Commander of the Asiatic Fleet, and was readied for battle. *Houston* was undergoing some repairs at Cavite Naval Yard on 27 November 1941 in the Philippine Islands when her captain, Albert H. Rooks, received a Navy Department warning about an impending Japanese attack on the Asiatic Fleet (Winslow 1984, 37). In response, *Houston* set about anti-submarine patrols in the area (Winslow 1984, 38). On 8 December, the crew learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and *Houston* set out with fleet units for Darwin, Australia (DON 1943, 5). She traveled by way of Balikpapan and Surabaya and arrived on 28 December 1941. After completing patrol duty, she joined the multinational American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) naval force at Surabaya in January 1942.

Finding herself in the midst of war, *Houston* saw her first battle against the Japanese at the Battle of Makassar Strait on 4 February 1942. During this engagement, Rear Admiral Karel Doorman of the Royal Netherlands Navy led the Dutch and American forces to the Bali Sea. After evading serious damage for over two hours (Baldwin 1946, 5-7), *Houston* was the target of an enemy bomb that put turret 3 out of commission, killing nearly 50 crewmembers and injuring 20 (DON 1943, 28). *Houston* subsequently sought refuge at Tjilatjap to work on repairs and to tend to wounded sailors (Hornfischer 2006, 12). The ship departed Tjilatjap for Darwin, Australia, on 10 February to escort a convoy delivering reinforcement troops to Dutch Timor (Holbrook 1981, 51). *Houston*, said to be “twisting in and out of that convoy like a mother hen protecting her chicks” (Schultz 1985, 126), successfully defended herself and the rest of the convoy when Japanese aircraft attacked in two waves on 15 and 16 February, shooting down 7 of the second wave’s 44 planes (DON 1943, 37; Holbrook 1981, 53).

As the major Japanese invasion force approached Java, *Houston* was ordered to rejoin Rear Admiral Doorman’s strike force as soon as possible. At sunset on 26 February the fleet of the Combined Striking Force, consisting of 5 cruisers (USS *Houston*, HMAS *Perth*, HNMS *De Ruyter*, HMS *Exeter*, and HNMS *Java*) and 9 destroyers, set sail to engage the enemy (Hornfischer 2006, 69). Morning light the next day, 27 February, brought Japanese air raids and by that afternoon the Allied ships met the Japanese support force under Rear Admiral Takeo Takagi consisting of 4 cruisers and 13 destroyers. The resulting encounter became known as the Battle of the Java Sea. While Doorman’s advance had caught the Japanese off guard, the lack of air support, challenges in communication, and fatigue hindered the Combined Striking Force (van Oosten 1976, 42). As the battle got underway, cruisers of both fleets opened fire. *Houston* struck a Japanese cruiser and temporarily slowed it down, but was hit twice in return. The first shell passed through *Houston* without exploding, but the second exploded on the port side, rupturing an oil tank (DON 1945a, 2).

By 5:10 pm, *Exeter* was hit and severely damaged (DON 1943, 64), while amidst frantic maneuvering Dutch destroyer *Kortenaer* took a torpedo meant for *Houston* and was sunk (Schultz 1985, 142); British destroyer HMS *Electra* was lost shortly thereafter. Doorman broke off contact and headed north in an attempt to attack the Japanese transports but was unable to determine their location (DON 1943, 70). The American destroyers, low on fuel and out of torpedoes, were sent back to Surabaya. At 9:25 pm British destroyer HMS *Jupiter* was sunk, either by mine or internal explosion; another destroyer, HMS *Encounter*, was detached to pick up survivors from *Kortenaer*, leaving the remaining four cruisers without destroyer protection (DON 1943, 74-75). Later that same night, around 11:00, the cruisers again sighted the Japanese surface group, and the opposing units opened fire. The Japanese launched a devastating torpedo attack 30 minutes later. Twelve of these torpedoes found their targets in *De Ruyter* and *Java*, exploding and sinking them, and carrying their captains and Rear Admiral Doorman down with

the ships. Prior to sinking, Doorman managed to radio an order for the cruisers *Perth* and *Houston* to retire to Batavia (Jakarta) (Thomas 1968, 212-3). The Battle of the Java Sea marked the largest surface naval engagement since the Battle of Jutland in World War I (Weinberg 2005, 320).

The Battle of Sunda Strait

The following day, 28 February, the only two remaining Allied cruisers, *Perth* and *Houston*, departed from the port of Tanjung Priok, Batavia (Jakarta), with orders to report to Tjilatjap via Sunda Strait (DON 1945a, 3). The cruisers were to make their way out to the Java Sea, regroup, and then continue the resistance against the Japanese (DON 1943, 77). En route to Sunda Strait, *Perth* and *Houston* unexpectedly encountered the Japanese invasion force anchored vulnerably in Banten Bay (van Oosten 1976, 60). As the cruisers approached the bay, they swiftly evaded nine torpedoes launched by the destroyer *Fubuki* (Thomas 1968, 218). The cruisers returned fire, hitting four transports, one of which sank, leading the other three to beach themselves to avoid the same fate. Prospects were grim as Sunda Strait, the cruisers' means of retreat, was blocked by a Japanese destroyer squadron, and Japanese large cruisers *Mogami* and *Mikuma* closed in from the north. *Perth* was first to come under fire at 11:36 pm and just after midnight went up in flames and sank, leaving *Houston* alone to face overwhelming odds (DON 2017).

Houston battled bravely, holding the paradoxical advantage over the enemy fleet of being able to consider all other vessels in the dark of night targets; this advantage was lost when a hit on *Houston*'s forecastle started a fire that singled her out (DON 1945a, 5). Shortly after midnight on 1 March, the aft engine room was hit on the port side, presumably by a torpedo (DON 1945a, 6). Despite losing headway due to the torpedo hit, the vessel carried on the fight, guns blazing in all directions. Fires erupting near turrets 1 and 2 helped the enemy get their range and bearing on her, and a second torpedo hit soon followed (DON 1945a, 8, 12). Just prior to the order to abandon ship, another torpedo hit the starboard side abreast the foremast, while severe shelling and machine gunning of the ship was taking place from both the port and starboard side at close range (DON 1945a, 9, 13). A final torpedo struck the forward engine room from the port side (DON 1945a, 13). At 12:30 am, Captain Rooks was killed by shrapnel from an exploding shell (DON 2017). A few minutes later, with her ensign still flying, *Houston* sank into the waters of Banten Bay taking 645 crew members with her. The number of enemy ships sunk and the extent of damage to others is unknown because of the darkness and the smoke that enveloped the engagement; later reports suggested that *Houston* sank seven ships, including cruisers, destroyers, and a seaplane carrier (DON 1945a, 14). In questioning by the Japanese after capture, *Houston* officers were accused of lying when they stated that only two Allied ships were present during the battle; it was the firm belief of all the American officers that the Japanese had shot at several of their own ships (DON 1945a, 5, 14).

The 367 *Houston* crew members who survived the sinking were taken by the Japanese as prisoners to the town of Serang. The prisoners were then moved to Batavia and placed in the "Bicycle Camp," named for the Tenth Battalion Bicycle Force of the Netherlands East Indies Army it had previously housed (Hornfischer 2006, 187). Conditions at the camp, though still challenging, were less deplorable than in Serang (Schultz 1985, 228). From there, the men of *Houston* were dispersed to various camps around Asia, most of them heading to Singapore, forced into rusty freighters for days on end where they could hardly move and were given very little to eat; many suffered from dysentery on this journey (Hornfischer 2006, 224-227). Upon arrival at Changi Camp the men were transported to Burma where they became slave laborers on the Burma-Thai Railway (Winslow 1984, 180).

When the war ended, after having spent three and a half years in captivity, the *Houston* prisoners were rescued by American OSS operatives and other Allied forces. The men were brought to Calcutta, India, and the Philippines before returning to the United States (DON 1945b). Of the 376 *Houston* survivors (including 9 who had been evacuated from the ship prior to her sinking), 299 sailors and Marines survived

captivity and were able to return home. It was not until after the war had ended and *Houston's* survivors were liberated from prison camps, that the full story of her courageous fight was told. Almost nine months passed after *Houston's* sinking before the world first heard of its fate. When news of the ship's sinking reached the citizens of the city of Houston, they raised money to build the light cruiser USS *Houston* (CL-81), as well as the light aircraft carrier USS *San Jacinto* (CVL-30). On Memorial Day 1942, one thousand men known as the "Houston Volunteers" were sworn in to the USN to symbolically replace *Houston's* crew, who were all presumed dead at that time, in an effort to carry on their legacy (Life Magazine 1942).

SITE DISCOVERY AND THE 2014 SURVEY

Identifying the location of the wreck of *Houston* was the objective of repeated efforts in the late 1960s, and the quest continued into the early 1970s. Earlier reports suggested the potential salvaging of the vessel by the Japanese, while in 1966 President Johnson was reportedly presented with a bell from *Houston* by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos. In June 1973, the Naval Historical Center (later the NHHC) was informed that an Indonesian SCUBA diving club sanctioned by the Government of Indonesia Department of Communications recovered the ship's bell from *Houston* and offered it to the U.S. Naval Attaché, indicating the first confirmed identification of the site's location. The bell was presented to U.S. Ambassador Francis Galbraith on 24 August 1973, along with a 30-caliber machine gun, a telescope, and other small items (DON n.d.). Since that time, the sites of both USS *Houston* and HMAS *Perth* have been repeatedly visited by divers and remain common fishing grounds. The 2014 mission represented the first formal site assessment by the USN of the remains of the vessel, producing baseline data that addressed the identity and state of preservation of the wreck.

The 2014 operation resulted in a total of 14 dives conducted by USN MDSU-1 Company 1-5, along with several dives conducted by the Indonesian Navy team during the course of five dive excursions. Given the observed depths of 90-120 ft (c. 27.5-36.5 m), dives were limited to 15 minutes in order to conform to standard dive safety practices. Additionally, as a result of the periodic current (up to 1.7 knots) and compromised visibility on site, not all dives permitted for the systematic and provenience-based assessment of site features. Furthermore, early dives did not yet benefit from the subsequent placement of buoys on the extremities and midships of the site, therefore compromising the accuracy of positioning of observed features.

In addition to diver reports, 15 of the 19 dives were also documented utilizing GoPro handheld video recorders producing the primary record subsequently analyzed by researchers. Furthermore, Remotely Operated Vehicle footage concentrating on a single feature in the vicinity of the bow, and moderate quality side-scan sonar data collected over the length of the hull enhanced the interpretation of the site and its identification. Finally, GPS coordinates obtained over the buoys affixed near the extremities of the site provided for a precise location and orientation. NHHC developed a comprehensive site plan based on features observed during review of video recordings and concurrent assessment of all other project-derived data such as diver logs and side-scan sonar records.

The data collected during the 2014 mission indicated that the hull's starboard side is lying on the seafloor, with the deck positioned perpendicular to the seafloor facing towards shore and the entire port side exposed. A notable break appears near the bow, approximately 40 ft (c. 12 m) aft of the damaged tip. Battle damage, damage associated with the wrecking event, and subsequent disturbance of the site appear to have severely disfigured the vessel. Fishing nets, strewn throughout the hull and particularly prominent in the vicinity of the stern and along amidships, obscure many of the vessel's features.

THE 2014 SURVEY FINDINGS

Pursuant to a thorough review of available data, confirmation of the identity of the wrecked vessel as USS *Houston* followed multiple lines of evidence, taking into account historical records, eyewitness statements, construction drawings, overall site dimensions, and identifiable features. Some of the most prominent areas of the ship, such as the bow rake, stacks, masts, and gun turrets, were significantly damaged and/or dislocated during the battle and the ensuing wrecking event. Neither the mainmast, nor the ship's one remaining scout observation seaplane were located during the dives. Furthermore, marine growth and an expansive array of various grades of fishing nets blanketed the site and concealed many of the finer identifying features. Complicating the assessment was the fact that the pressed operation timetable did not permit for the establishment of any form of reference grid that would allow for the precise positioning of identifying features. Nevertheless, a series of features proved consistent with the vessel's identification; while no observed features appeared inconsistent, assisting in the confirmation of the vessel's identity (Catsambis 2014).

Of particular interest was that the wrecked vessel showed evidence of battle damage in the form of areas of deformed hull, as well as penetrations of the hull and decks that exhibited both inward-facing and outward-facing impacts. Additionally, the vessel clearly suffered damage as a consequence of its wrecking event, which resulted in all three main gun turrets, the foremast, associated superstructure, and both stacks being displaced. There is particular evidence of battle damage that corresponds directly with the action report filed in 1945 by former gunnery officer Arthur Maher (DON 1945a), the senior survivor of USS *Houston*, which also correlates with eyewitness accounts presented elsewhere (e.g., Holbrook 1981, 83-102). At the same time, the elevated degree of association between reported hits and battle-related damage observed on site raised concern over expanses of significant hull deformation that could not be readily explained. This is particular the case near the aft port side of the hull where four adjacent but distinct areas appear impacted. Damage to this section of the hull could not be reasonably dismissed as related to the wrecking event, as is the case with the broken bow extremity, and raised the prospect of notable unauthorized recovery of portions of the hull. The concern over unauthorized and systematic disturbance of the site was confirmed by a series of additional observations. Rivets running along the edges of seams holding hull plates together had been methodically removed to allow for the plates to be maneuvered and lifted as part of unauthorized recovery operations. Elsewhere, what appears to be a water-dredge, used to remove sediment from an underwater environment, was protruding from a cavity resulting from a presumed torpedo hit, permitting access to the interior of the hull. A modern hollow hose, coiled near the stern on the exposed port side of the vessel, would have been used as part of a rudimentary surface-supplied diving system to support prolonged underwater operations. Of greatest perhaps concern was that divers observed an accumulation of shells and ordnance resting on the exposed port side of the hull alongside a secured bag, likely placed there in preparation for their recovery.

SITE MANAGEMENT

The 2014 survey of USS *Houston* was conducted as a joint exercise with the local Indonesian authorities, demonstrating the joint interest in the wreck's management as part of both nations' cultural heritage. The wreck, which serves as the final resting place for hundreds of sailors, contains potentially live ordnance, is seeping oil, and is suffering from unauthorized disturbance that could significantly impact public safety, the surrounding environment and the local fishing economy. Of great concern is that continuing unauthorized activities that intrude into or impact the integrity of the hull have the potential to disturb remains of those sailors who perished with the vessel. Since 2014, therefore, the USN has continuously engaged with Indonesian counterparts, local government authorities, along with partners from Australia and the United Kingdom, to enhance the preservation potential of USS *Houston*. These efforts have resulted in world-wide press, public exhibits, conferences, commemorative wreath-laying ceremonies, and additional site surveys. Most recently, a bilateral agreement is being negotiated that would lead the site of USS *Houston* to be deemed a marine protected area, helping to ensure its future preservation.

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