

## The loss of HMAS Perth, 1 March 1942



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*HMAS Perth*

HMAS Perth was built at Portsmouth Naval Dockyard and commissioned into the Royal Navy as HMS Amphion on 15 June 1936. Purchased by the Australian Government, she was commissioned into the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) on 29 June 1939. The light cruiser displaced 6,830 tons, was 169 metres long, and had a beam of 17.3 metres. Her armament consisted of eight 6-inch guns, eight 4-inch dual purpose guns, a number of automatic anti-aircraft weapons and eight 21-inch torpedo tubes. She also carried a Seagull V aircraft for reconnaissance and spotting duties. Her speed was 32 knots and she carried a complement of 681.

Her early war service was in the Caribbean and the Pacific and she did not reach Australia until 31 March 1940. Until November 1940, the ship

was engaged on patrol and escort duties in Australian waters. She then departed for the Mediterranean where she played a minor part in the battle of Matapan. She was involved in the evacuations of Crete and Greece in April and May 1941, in the course of which she was badly damaged by bombing. After repairs, the cruiser was engaged in operations off the coast of Syria before proceeding to Australia for an extended refit. She arrived in Sydney on 12 August.

While the ship was refitting, Captain H. M. L. Waller, DSO and bar, RAN, took command on 24 October 1941. After completion of her refit, Perth operated off eastern Australia on patrol and escort work, visiting New Caledonia and New Guinea. On 14 February 1942 Perth sailed for the Netherlands East Indies, arriving at Batavia (now Jakarta) on 24 February, where she was attacked by Japanese aircraft that day and the next without sustaining any damage. The Perth sailed for Surabaya on 25 February, in company with four Royal Navy ships. On 26 February the ship departed Surabaya in company with the Dutch light cruisers De Ruyter and Java, the heavy cruisers USS Houston and HMS Exeter, and two Dutch, three British and four US destroyers. The squadron, under the command of the Dutch Rear Admiral Karel Doorman, proceeded along the north coast of Madura Island, searching for a Japanese invasion convoy.

The cruise was unsuccessful but, as the ships were preparing to enter Surabaya and refuel, Admiral Doorman received information that the Japanese forces had been sighted to the north. Accordingly, he steamed to intercept. In the ensuing battle of the Java Sea, fought over the night of 27-28 February the Allied force was soundly defeated by a Japanese force which was able to exploit its superiority over the four-nation Allied force in terms of long-range gunnery, torpedoes, night fighting, the freshness of its crews, and its homogeneity. The Dutch cruisers were sunk and Exeter badly damaged, while most of the destroyers were sunk or withdrew as their torpedoes were exhausted. Perth and Houston

were able to break off the action with the Japanese and sailed to Tandjung Priok, where they refuelled.

Orders were received for the cruisers to sail through the Sunda Strait for Tjilitjap on Java's south coast. They sailed at 7.00 pm on 28 February and set a course to the west for the Strait, Perth leading, with Houston five cables astern. At 11.06 a vessel was sighted at about five miles range, close to St Nicholas Point. When challenged she proved to be a Japanese destroyer and was immediately engaged. The two cruisers had met the Japanese invasion force assigned to western Java.

Shortly afterwards, other destroyers were sighted to the north and the armament shifted to divided control to allow more than one target to be engaged. Despite this, the enemy destroyers attacked from all directions during the action; it was impossible to engage all targets simultaneously, and so some were able to close to short range. Nevertheless, Perth was to suffer only superficial damage in this phase of the action.

At about midnight it was reported that the cruiser had little ammunition left, so Captain Waller decided to attempt to force a passage through Sunda Strait. He ordered full speed and turned the ship south for Toppers Island. Perth had barely steadied on her new course when a torpedo struck her in the starboard side. The captain ordered the crew to prepare to abandon ship. A few moments later, another torpedo struck just forward of the first hit and Captain Waller gave the order to abandon ship. After five or ten minutes, a third hit torpedo struck well aft on the starboard side, followed shortly after by another on the port. Perth, which had been heeling to starboard, righted herself, then heeled to port and sank at about 12.25 am on 1 March.

Houston, still fighting but ablaze, was also hit by torpedoes and sank shortly afterwards.

The Japanese losses were light with one transport and one minesweeper sunk and several vessels seriously damaged.

Perth's crew abandoned ship between the second and third torpedoes, but it is doubtful if any boats were successfully launched, although many rafts and Carley floats were. During the abandon ship operation the Perth was under fire from many destroyers at close range and many hits were sustained and casualties caused. Many were killed or wounded in the water by the explosion of the last two torpedoes and by shells exploding in the water.

Of the Perth's company of 686, which included four civilian canteen staff and six RAAF personnel for operating and servicing her aircraft, only 218 (including one civilian and two RAAF) were eventually repatriated; the remainder were killed during, or soon after, the action, or died as prisoners of war. Captain Waller was lost with the ship.

(AWM) Australian War Memorial; WW2 War History; Extracted Copy of "The Loss of HMAS Perth, 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1942.