



Australian American Association Queensland Division – Brisbane



News Flash 103 - 7th March 2025

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Patron: Her Excellency the Hon. Dr Jeannette Young AC PSM, Governor of Queensland.



The HMAS Perth Queensland Association's Annual Commemoration of the loss of the HMAS Perth and the USS Houston during the Battle of Sunda Strait in 1942.



The HMAS Perth



The USS Houston [CA 30]

The Epic Battle:

It was towards the late evening of 28th February 1942, that one of the greatest battles “against the odds” in Naval History, began in the Sunda Strait, that narrow stretch of water lying between the islands of Java and Sumatra, over two thousand seven hundred kilometres north-west of Darwin.

The Royal Australian Navy Cruiser “HMAS Perth” and the United States Navy Cruiser “USS Houston” fought a “to-the-death battle” with a Japanese Armada of nearly 60 vessels. According to a Japanese report from that time - these 2 Allied ships damaged or destroyed 3 Cruisers, 9 Destroyers, several Troop Ships and other Japanese vessels, before finally going down to the bottom of the Sunda Strait.

The HMAS Perth Qld Association's Commemoration Wreathlaying Service was held at the "Jack Tar" Naval Memorial at Southbank, Brisbane on Friday 28th February 2025.

The service was attended by some 40 guests which included family members and friends of the men who served on the HMAS Perth during World War 2, Veterans and ADF Personnel, as well as HMAS Moreton's Cenotaph Party and Chaplain Jenny Schleusener who gave the Call to Worship, the Reading of the Sailor's Psalm [Ps 107:23-32] and The Lord's Prayer and Commemoration Prayer.

Terry McLeod called the Honour Roll of HMAS Perth "Survivors" and "Killed in Action."

Official Guests were:

- Commander Andrew Hawk RAN [Retired] representing the CO HMAS Moreton Commander Rosemarie Apikotoa RAN.
- Chaplain Jenny Schleusener RAN.
- Warrant Officer Phillip Durnham RAN
- President Mike Harris and Treasurer Teresa Pokoj, Australian American Association, Brisbane.

The Welcome address was given by Don Churchwood, President of the HMAS Perth Qld. Association.

Invited speakers each gave an address on this epic battle, which can be viewed on the YouTube associated links below:-

- ✚ Address by Commander Andrew Hawk - Royal Australian Navy [Retired]:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LorQe1Vlfhl&t=120s>

- ✚ Address by Mike Harris - President of the Australian American Association, Brisbane:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbLMrtSs9NQ&list=PLvOV6xrurq2kiSO8ypPII3pu4afxTkX6&index=23>

- ✚ In addition to the above, is a movie produced by our Brisbane Australian American Association's Special Events Officer - Peter Rasey. The movie is of the Darwin Australian American Association's 83rd Anniversary of the Commemoration of the sinking of the USN Destroyer "USS Peary" during the First Bombing of Darwin" which occurred on the 19th February 1942. This movie can be viewed on the YouTube link below:-

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXqimbn5_bc&list=PLvOV6xrurq2kiSO8ypPII3pu4afxTkX6&index=22

The Sinking of the HMAS Perth and USS Houston:

Commanding the Perth was Captain Hector Waller, while the Houston was under the command of Captain Albert Rooks. Tragically, both ships sailed into the heart of the Japanese Western Invasion Force. And, after relentless bombardment and multiple torpedo hits, both ships were sunk – first the Perth and then the Houston. More than a thousand Perth and Houston men lost their lives on that fateful night, including both their captains.

Survivors of the sinkings faced un-imaginable horrors. Some swam to Java's shores and were captured by the Japanese.

A crew member from the Houston named Marvin Sizemore, later provided a most traumatic and harrowing first-hand account of that night, as he described the fury of the battle, and the relentless attack on both ships by the Japanese.

Part of Marvin Sizemore's Account of the Battle goes as follows:

"Suddenly, surrounded by enemy ships, the Perth and Houston immediately opened fire and turned sharply to starboard in an effort to break free.

However, the fury of the Japanese was not to be denied, and the Perth was mortally wounded by torpedoes. Lying dead in the water she continued to fire with everything she had, until the enemy shells blasted her to pieces....and then, she sank.

When Captain Rooks realized that the Perth was finished, he turned the Houston back into the heart of the Japanese convoy, determined in the face of no escape.....to sell the Houston so very dearly.

Events were moving fast, and the Houston was also heavily bombarded and, in her death throes, was about to go down. There was only one idea left in my mind, and that was...to join the others, who were going over the side in increasing numbers.

Quickly, I made my way to the port side and climbed down the cargo nets that were hanging there. When I reached the water's edge I dropped into the warm Java Sea. When my head came to the surface I was aware that in the darkness, I was surrounded by many men, all swimming for their lives.

Frantic screams for help came from the wounded and drowning. The sea was an oily battleground of men pitted against the terrors of death. Desperately, I swam to get beyond reach of the sinking ship's suction.

Japanese destroyers had come in close and illuminated the Houston with searchlights, as they raked her decks with machine-gun fire.

Many men struggled in the water near the ship, others clung desperately to heavily-loaded life rafts, and then to my horror, I realized that the Japanese were coldly and deliberately, machine-gunning the men in the water.

Dazed, and unable to believe that all this was real, I floated there, watching as though bewitched.....the end had come".



Sinking of USS Houston (CA-30) in the Battle of Sunda Strait.

[Painting by Joseph Fleischman, 1950. Naval History and Heritage Command Photo.]



Marvin Sizemore - One of the Last-known Survivors of the U.S.S. Houston.
[passed away 25th June 2023].

Marvin Sizemore was born in Dryhill, Kentucky and served during WWII. He received numerous medals as a Chief Petty Officer in the United States Navy for 20 years (1940-1960). He was interned as a Japanese Prisoner of War for three and a half years and forced to work on the Burma-Thailand railway, also known as the "death railway". He also served as a police officer for the City of Oxford, Ohio for 20 years (1960-1980).

On February 28, 1942, the Japanese captured Sizemore after sinking the USS Houston. He was held as a prisoner of war until 1945 when he was returned to US military control. He received the Prisoner of War Medal.

Only 368 of the 1,061 on board the USS Houston survived. The remaining sailors and marines, including Sizemore, were captured by the Japanese and found themselves building the Burma - Thailand railway as prisoners of war. Sizemore was in a camp in Rangoon. "We had Americans, Australians, and English and a few Dutch," he said. "I've got a lot of respect for those Australians - they were tough". He is one of the last surviving POWs who built the railway.

Sizemore said during his captivity, the daily rations consisted primarily of rice three times a day with very little meat. And he recalls how the guards would kick the prisoners if they fell to the ground. Aside from the physical abuse, sickness ran rampant with prisoners suffering from malaria, cholera and dysentery. "I was a firm believer if you wanted to die you can lie down and die anytime you wanted to" Sizemore said. "Just give up, that's it. A lot of guys did."

While he said it was survival one day at a time, those days were often made a little better thanks to a couple of guys in the group who told jokes and did things to bring a little levity to the day.

He and his fellow surviving prisoners of war were liberated in September 1945. For some that would have been the end of their military service. However, it wasn't the end for Sizemore who went on to serve nearly twenty years in the US Navy. He retired as a Chief Petty Officer in August 1959.

Marvin Sizemore turned 100 in 2022 and passed another major milestone. He and his wife Helen celebrated 73 years of marriage. As for navigating life, he offers up this simple advice. "You should never take things too serious," he said. "Life's too short for that."

We extend our deepest sympathy to the family of Marvin Sizemore.

Sections adapted from a Story by Craig McKee Posted 28th June 2022.



Robert L. Hanley – The Last-known Survivor of the U.S.S. Houston.
[passed away 12th September 2024].

Robert L. Hanley was a Seaman 2nd Class at the time of USS Houston (CA-30)'s loss at the Battle of Sunda Strait on March 1, 1942. After his capture by Imperial Japanese forces on Java on March 1, 1942, Hanley and his 368 fellow USS Houston survivors were held on Java until October 1942 when most survivors were transported via Japanese “hell ships” to Burma to work on the infamous Burma-Thailand Railway construction project.

As a POW medical orderly in the railway’s POW camps, he assisted Dutch POW doctor Henry Hekking in saving many lives of their fellow POWs. In early 1944, he served as a medical orderly with Australian prisoners of war and was then transferred to Kanchanaburi POW Camp in Thailand where the Bridge on the River Kwai is located. There, he was a medical orderly under USS Houston (CA-30)’s medical officer, CDR William A. Epstein, USN. When the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, Hanley was liberated from a POW camp roughly 80Kms south of Bangkok, Thailand.

The USS Houston Survivors’ Association & Next Generations ® is very sad to report that USS *Houston* (CA-30) Survivor Robert “Bob” Leon Hanley passed away on September 12, 2024, at St. Therese Hospice, Shoreview, Minnesota

We extend our deepest sympathy to the family of Robert L. Hanley.

The Survivors of the Perth and Houston, following their Capture:

Some of the men captured by the Japanese were interrogated, and some were killed, and those who survived were subjected to extreme-brutal conditions.

Many were forced to work on the in-famous Burma -Thai Railway alongside 60,000 other Allied POWs. Others were sent to Japan to work in the coal mines and iron-ore mines.

Tragically, only about 25 percent of these brave men survived, to return home to their loved ones.

They endured the ordeal of filth, privation, sparse-rations, disease and brutal punishment, but in spite of this...they showed - a strength of mind, spirit, humour and camaraderie, that kept them alive, through the darkest period of their lives.

But what is vital to remember, are the enduring bonds, the Perth and Houston men formed through their shared sacrifice.

The HMAS Perth Qld Association’s Commemoration Service holds deep significance for both Australia and the United States of America, because it serves as a solemn reminder of the bravery of the captains and crews of these two ships— and their dreadful sacrifice must never, be forgotten.

Thus, we must forever honour and remember those who defended us, those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and those who endured un-imaginable suffering, so that we may have the freedom which we enjoy in our world today.

Lest we forget!

Many thanks to Peter Rasey - Special Events Officer of the Australian American Association, Brisbane, for taking the movies of events and also, providing the YouTube links, used in the production of this [Association News Flash No 103](#).

Yours fraternally,

Mike Harris, [President of Board of Directors & Life Member](#),
[Australian American Association, Brisbane](#).



Acknowledgement of the Gift to the Australian American Association Brisbane, of the Painting of the USS Houston:

On 1st March 2022, a painting of the USS Houston was presented to the Australian American Association, Brisbane, by Mrs Sue Holt, whose father “Chilla Goodchap” was an Australian survivor of the HMAS Perth. Chilla had become good friends with another survivor; an American from the USS Houston in the POW Camp, and when visiting his friend in the States in the 1980’s, he purchased the painting.

The Association’s President Mike Harris thanked Mrs Holt for the wonderful gift to the Australian American Association, Brisbane, and promised her that the painting of the USS Houston will be displayed at all relevant future commemoration events.



From left - Mrs Sue Holt, Australian American Association, Brisbane, President Mike Harris and Treasurer Teresa Pokoj, with the painting of the USS Houston.



Wreaths laid at the HMAS Perth Qld Association's Commemoration Wreathlaying Service, held at the "Jack Tar" Naval Memorial at Southbank, Brisbane.



AAA Brisbane Treasurer Teresa Pokoj laying a wreath at the Naval Memorial for the men of the Perth and the Houston.



AAA Brisbane President Mike Harris' second address of the battle, given at the "Lucinda Collection Display" located at the Qld Maritime Museum Southbank, Brisbane.

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