



Australian American Association Queensland Division – Brisbane



News Flash 57 – 4th March 2023

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



The Navy Week Celebrations held at City Hall, Brisbane on 24th February 2023. Also, the 81st Anniversary of the loss of the HMAS Perth and USS Houston during the Battle of the Sunda Strait in WW2, held at Navy Jacks Memorial, Southbank, Brisbane on 1st March 2023.



Royal Australian Navy Band, based at HMAS Moreton Brisbane, played at City Hall Brisbane for the 'Beat to Quarters Ceremonial' event.



Royal Australian Navy Colour Party.



From left – Mike Harris President of Australian American Association Brisbane, HMAS Moreton Commander Fiona Southwood RAN, Brisbane City Councillor David McLachlan Chair of Council & Teresa Pokoj Treasurer of Australian American Association Brisbane.



Lowering the flags prior to the holding of the service commemorating the loss of the HMAS Perth and USS Houston, during the Battle of the Sunda Strait, held at Navy Jacks Memorial at Southbank, Brisbane.



Honour Roll Call by Terry McLeod Secretary of HMAS Perth Association of Queensland.



Darryl Nield President of the HMAS Perth Association of Queensland, welcoming the guests to the Wreath-laying event.



Address by - Mike Harris President of Australian American Association, Brisbane.

Good morning everyone and a very special greeting to all of our honoured guests, including the ADF personnel and veterans present here today.

Before I commence my address, I would again like to acknowledge Mrs Sue Holt, for her generous gift of the painting of the USS Houston (shown displayed up front to my left) which she presented to my Association at last year's commemoration. Sue's father "Chilla Goodchap" was a survivor of the HMAS Perth, and he had become good friends with another survivor; an American from the USS Houston, in the Japanese POW Camp, and later when visiting his friend in the US in the 1980's, he purchased the painting, that we now have here today.

I also wish to thank the HMAS Perth Association of Queensland, for its kind invitations over the past 5 years, to attend its annual wreath-laying events, and also, to speak today. My Treasurer Teresa Pokoj and I, are most honoured to attend this 81st Anniversary of the loss of the HMAS Perth and USS Houston.

In fact, it was precisely on the evening of 28th February 1942, that one of the greatest battles “against-the-odds” in Naval History, was fought in the Sunda Strait. That narrow stretch of water, lying between Java and Sumatra, over 2,800 Kilometres north-west of Darwin.

The Royal Australian Navy Cruiser HMAS Perth, and the United States Cruiser USS Houston, fought a - “to-the-death battle” with a Japanese armada of nearly 60 ships, and according to a Japanese report at the time – these 2 ships smashed - 2 Cruisers, 9 Destroyers and other craft, before finally going down to the bottom.

The Perth, a Leander-Class Cruiser, was commanded by Captain Hector MacDonald Laws Waller, and his ships company included sailors, airmen and some civilians.

The Houston, a heavy-Cruiser, was commanded by Captain Albert Harold Rooks and his crew of sailors, marines and airmen. The Houston had left America for what would be the final time, to return to the US Asiatic Fleet.

And so, on that fateful evening of 28th February 1942, the Perth and Houston sailed on, to their final destiny, in the Sunda Strait.

Unfortunately, when arriving, they ran into most of the Japanese Western-Invasion Force. And, in the ensuing battle, both Perth and Houston were mercilessly and repeatedly bombarded, then struck by torpedoes and sunk.

Men abandoned ship as best they could, swimming for the distant shores of Java, but more than a thousand Perth and Houston men died on that terrible evening and next morning, including both their heroic Skippers Captain Waller and Captain Rooks.

A first-hand account of this battle was given by a crew-member survivor of the Houston (that’s his photo also shown displayed up front to my left) and his written account was published in the February 1949 Issue of the American Magazine entitled “Proceedings” published by the [US Naval Institute](#).

This Houston survivor’s name was Marvin Sizemore, and he turned 100 years old in March 2022. I will now read part of Marvin’s story, which I caution you, is quite graphic and intensely-cruel. This is how Marvin tells his story: -

“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 bombarded and, in her death throes, was about to go down. There was only one idea left in my mind (he said), 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, mixed with the shouts of others attempting to make contact with shipmates. 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. As much as I loved the Houston, I had no desire to join her in a watery grave.

A few hundred yards away I turned, gasping for breath, to watch the death of my ship. She lay well-over to starboard. Japanese destroyers had come in close and illuminated her 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, firing on the men in the water.

The concussions of shells bursting in the midst of swimming men sent shock waves through the water that slammed against my body with an evil force, making me wince with pain. Men closer to the exploding shells were killed by this concussion alone.

Dazed, and unable to believe that all this was real, I floated there, watching as though bewitched. The end had come. By the glare of Japanese searchlights I saw the Houston roll slowly over to starboard, and then, with her yardarms almost dipping into the sea, she paused momentarily.

Perhaps, I only imagined it, but it seemed as though a sudden breeze picked up the "Stars and Stripes" still firmly on the mainmast, and waved them in one last defiant gesture. Then, with a tired shudder she vanished beneath the Java Sea.

The magnificent Houston and most of my shipmates were gone, but in the oily sea around me, lay evidence of the carnage wrought by their last battle. Hundreds of Japanese soldiers and sailors struggled amidst the flotsam of their sunken ships, and, as I watched them drown or swim for their lives, I smiled grimly and repeated over and over - Well done Houston!"

But of course.....for Marvin Sizemore and the remaining courageous survivors of these two ships, their battle to survive had only just begun. Many succumbed to their injuries; whilst others struggled in the water for endless hours.

Many made it to land, or were picked up by the Japanese. But...others, were swept along by the strong merciless-currents through the Sun-da Strait, and never to be seen again. Those men captured by the Japanese were interrogated, and some were killed.

However, over the next 3 years, many were put to work building the Thai-Burma Railway, along with 60,000 other Allied POWs. Some were also sent directly to Japan to work in coal mines and iron-ore mines.

These men endured the ordeal of filth, privation, sparse-rations, disease and brutal punishment. But they showed a strength of mind, spirit, humour and camaraderie that kept them alive, through the darkest periods of their lives.

Unfortunately, only about 25 percent of these men, who had fought in the Battle of Sun-da Strait, ever made it home to see their families and friends, which is very saddening indeed!

But, what is important is that these men had formed a close and enduring relationship, through the sharing of their common experiences of the harrowing sea battle and then later, by their cruel and harsh imprisonment.

It must also be realized - that this 81th Anniversary Service held today, has a special significance which is important to both Australia and the United States of America. Because it's a testament to the "Mateship between our two Great Nations" and to the bravery of the Captains and crews of these two ships, that must never, ever be forgotten.

Finally, and most importantly today, we must again remember and pay homage to the memory of those who paid the price that we may enjoy our present- day freedom.

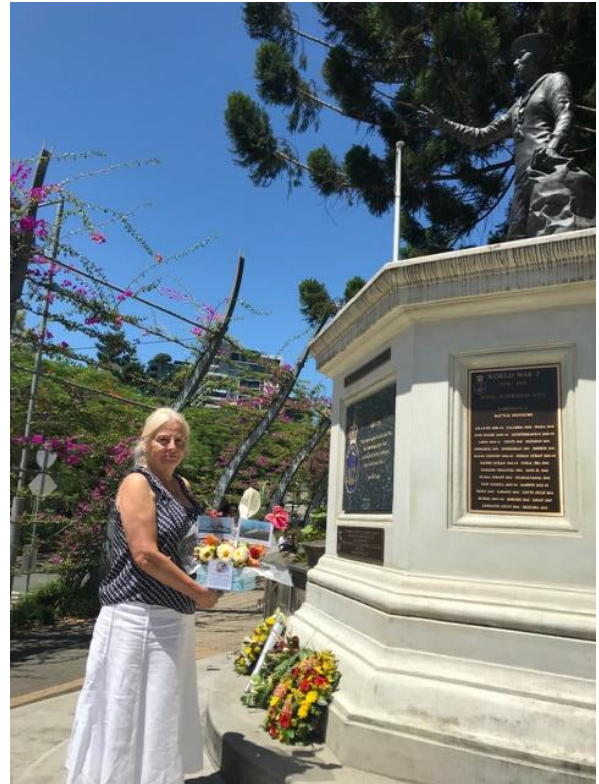
Lest we forget !



Floral Arrangement made by Australian American Association Brisbane Treasurer - Teresa Pokoj, picked from flowers grown in her garden.

The sign fixed on top of the Floral Arrangement gives the total number of crew of each ship, those lost during the Battle and those lost as POWs, and also, those who returned home after the war (see the enlargement of the sign, shown below).

Also note - the photo of the HMAS Perth is on the left side, and the photo of the USS Houston is on the right side, above the bunch of fresh flowers.



Teresa Pokoj lays her Floral Arrangement at the Navy Jacks Shrine, Southbank, Brisbane, in remembrance of the men of the HMAS Perth and the USS Houston.

Both Captain H.M.L Waller of HMAS Perth and Captain A.H. Rooks of USS Houston were killed in action.

	Total Crews	Lost in the Battle of Sunda Straits	Lost as Japanese prisoners of war	Return home after the war
HMAS Perth	674	350	106	218
USS Houston	1008	638	104	266

Mike Harris, President & Newsletter Editor, Australian American Association, Brisbane.



The Australian American relationship is linked across both sides of the Pacific Ocean, with a common heritage and many countless and cherished ties.

We also remember those who paid the price for our freedom.

Lest we forget.