



# H-Gram 003: The Valor of the Asiatic Fleet

February 2017

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*Even in defeat there is often extraordinary sacrifice and courage that deserves to be remembered. This H-Gram is dedicated to the hundreds of Sailors of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, who gave the last full measure of devotion, fighting until the end, even when they knew the odds were hopeless. They were an inspiration to the rest of the Navy during WWII, but have been largely forgotten since.*

## 1. The Last Ship to Die: USS Asheville (PG-21)

*I found the painting "Asheville's Defiance" by the late Tom Freeman (attachment H-003-1) stashed deep in the back room of the USNA museum, which regrettably, is typical of history's treatment of the demise of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet in the opening months of WWII. Depicted in the painting are the final minutes of the WWI-vintage China coastal patrol boat, USS Asheville (PG-21) under the command of Lieutenant Commander Jacob W. Britt (USNA '29). One of the last ships to evacuate Java, she has been*



*Admiral Thomas C. Hart assumes command of the Asiatic Fleet at Shanghai, China, 25 July 1939. Admiral Hart commanded the fleet from July 1939 to February 1942. His command had done its utmost to prepare for a Japanese attack on the Philippines. However, this very capable and popular officer was never able to overcome subsequent perceptions of failure (NH 81641).*

*left behind due to an engine casualty reducing speed to 10kts. Unbeknownst to Britt, between Asheville and the relative safety of Australia are four Japanese Pearl Harbor-veteran carriers, four battleships, numerous cruisers, destroyers, submarines and hundreds of land-based bombers; and the Japanese know the compromised allied rendezvous point (COMSEC violation). Sighting the Asheville alone at dawn on 3 Mar 1942, the Japanese destroyers Arashi and Nowaki, backed up by a heavy cruiser, close for the kill with a 20kt speed advantage and combined 12x 5" guns and 16x 24" torpedoes to Asheville's 3x 4" guns. Asheville does not strike her colors, raise a white flag, jump into the lifeboats or scuttle the ship. Instead, Asheville opens*

fire, and she keeps firing as long as she is able to fire. It takes the two top-of-the-line Japanese destroyers over 30 minutes and 300 rounds to put the archaic China gunboat under; an action viewed by the Japanese as a total fiasco but was typical of the prodigious expenditure of surface ammunition to little effect, by both sides, during the course of the campaign. The Japanese rescued one Sailor and left the rest to perish as they hurried to massacre an Allied convoy just over the horizon. Engineman Fred L. Brown died in Japanese captivity in March 1945 from the combined untreated effects of disease and beatings, and the story of the Asheville is known only via another POW from the sunken USS Pope (DD-225) and fragmentary Japanese reports. Because no witnesses survived the war, there are no Medals of Honor, no Navy Crosses, no unit citations, just the dim memory of a brave crew of 166 men who fought valiantly without hope, lost somewhere about 160 NM SW of Bali. All RADM Morison's seminal History of U.S. Naval Operations in WWII has to say about Asheville is that she was sunk.

(\*Post-script. The IJN Arashi was the lone destroyer transiting at high speed sighted at the critical moment of the Battle of Midway by LCDR Wade McClusky, leading USS Enterprise (CV-6) dive bombing squadrons and running low on fuel, that led the way to the Japanese carriers, and disaster for the Japanese.)

## **2. The Sacrifice of the Asiatic Fleet: The Battle of Java Sea**

The 26-episode, Emmy-award-winning television documentary from the early 1950's, "Victory at Sea" does not even mention the Battle of the Java Sea, the loss of the USS Houston (CA-30) and the demise of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, in what ADM Ernest J. King described as "a magnificent display of very bad strategy," that cost over 20 U.S. Navy vessels and over 2,000 Sailors killed. Even the naval historian Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison in his History of U.S. Naval Operations in WWII, addressed the subject reluctantly, stating that he had to write about it because, "I owe it to the brave men who held this successor of Thermopylae" (300 Spartan stand against Persian Empire) and then proceeded to miss

many of the instances of extraordinary valor and duty displayed the Sailors of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet. It has always been my view that it is when the chips are down, and everything is going to hell, that you take the full measure of those you serve with. The outcome may have been a disaster, but the Sailors of the Asiatic Fleet did not let the Navy or their shipmates down; in case after case (more than I can recount here) they fought on against overwhelming odds, with extreme valor and ingenuity, refusing to surrender (despite the collapse and defeatism all around them) in some cases to the last man. They fought in the finest traditions of the U.S. Navy and they deserve to be remembered. If you are looking for examples of the core attributes listed in the CNO's Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority (integrity, accountability, initiative and toughness) you will find examples aplenty in the U.S. Asiatic Fleet.

In attachment H-003-2 I provide an overview of the key points of the Japanese offensive in the Far East from December 1941 to March 1942 and the U.S. Navy's response. I discuss how the U.S. Navy strategy to rely on a potent force of submarines (29) to defend the Philippines failed because of Japanese air superiority and because of defective U.S. torpedoes. I also discuss how the first U.S. involvement in establishing a coalition headquarters during WWII (ABDA Command - American, British, Dutch, Australian) was an abject failure, and is a case study in almost everything that can go wrong in coalition warfare, especially when the enemy has the initiative (and air superiority.) The first U.S. surface action since the Spanish American War at Balikpapan, Borneo in Jan 42 was a victory, marred by faulty torpedoes. The culminating Battle of the Java Sea, the largest surface action since Jutland to that time, was an unmitigated disaster, and exemplifies what can happen to a coalition/allied force that has never trained or operated together; where lack of a common signaling regime proved fatal, along with Japanese air superiority. The lessons of ABDA Command and the Battle of the Java Sea provide a ringing endorsement of the need for exercises like RIMPAC, or standing alliances like NATO (with standardized SOP) because after the war starts is too late to figure that out. A major lesson, that all the navies in the Far East learned the hard

way (or by happy surprise in the case of the Japanese) was that you command the sea by commanding the air over the sea.

In attachment H-003-3 I provide a short summary of some of the many truly heroic actions by the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, hopefully just to whet your appetite to want to read more. A theme that comes through is that it doesn't matter whether a Sailor is on a first-line warship, or the most unglamorous ancient auxiliary; when the war comes, none are spared the requirement for sacrifice and the full measure of duty. In the case of the Asiatic Fleet, the Sailors repeatedly rose to the occasion. Some of the greatest heroism in the history of the U.S. Navy was exhibited by the crews of vessels like the armed yacht USS Isabel (PY-10, the "Alternate" Asiatic Fleet Flagship) and her Presidentially ordered reconnaissance of Japanese shipping off Cam Ranh Bay days before the outbreak of war; the submarine rescue ship USS Pigeon (ASR-6) and minesweeper USS Whippoorwill (AM-35) that pulled a submarine and a destroyer clear of the raging inferno at Cavite at great risk; the submarine tender USS Canopus (AS-9) and her Naval Battalion on Bataan and her "Mickey Mouse Battle Fleet;" the archaic seaplane tender USS Heron (AVP-2) that survived hours of coordinated torpedo and bomb attacks and destroyed an attacking Japanese seaplane; the PT-boats of Motor Torpedo Squadron Three (MTB-3), who rescued General MacArthur, and Philippine President Quezon; Patrol Wing 10, which flew multiple bombing missions (after the B-17s had been withdrawn) at great cost; the seaplane tender USS Langley (AV-3, formerly CV-1), ordered on a suicidal daylight run to deliver US Army Air Force P-40 fighters to a port that didn't have an airfield; and the heroic last battles of the ancient destroyers Pope (DD-225), Pillsbury (DD-227) and Edsall (DD-219), who fought valiantly until the end, in Edsall's case against two Japanese battleships, two heavy cruisers, and aircraft from four Japanese carriers. [Attachment H-003-6 is a still from a film showing Edsall's last moments.] Amongst the lost ships and aircraft, come numerous epic stories of survival, including the crew of the sunken minesweeper USS Quail (AM-15) who were the last to escape from Corregidor, sailing a 21ft launch all the way to Australia, complete with an episode with New Guinea headhunters. Lastly, in an

observation that should give hope to every Sailor was a statement by a senior officer on USS Canopus, "it was the biggest troublemakers that truly rose to the occasion in combat," an observation echoed in CAPT Paul Rinn's book, "No Higher Honor" about the USS Samuel B. Roberts (FFG-58) mine strike in the Persian Gulf in 1988.

### 3. USS Houston (CA-30)

According to one witness, when the heavy cruiser, USS Houston (CA-30) pulled into Tanjung Priok (port for Batavia (now Jakarta)) Dutch East Indies on 28 Feb 1942, having barely survived the hours-long gunnery duel of the disastrous Battle of the Java Sea the day and night before, the ship's cat deserted.\* The story is possibly apocryphal, although what is more certain is that the Australian light cruiser, HMAS Perth's black cat (named Red Lead) attempted to desert in the same way in the same port at the same time. Along with the cat, went Houston's luck. Having survived over 80 days as the largest Allied warship in the Far East, with no air cover and under multiple bombing attacks and the constant threat from the same kind of Japanese aircraft that had made short work of the British battleship HMS Prince of Wales and battlecruiser HMS Repulse on 10 Dec 41, seriously damaged in one air attack, and having survived a major surface action, the Houston, in company with Perth, would go into battle that night near the Sunda Strait against overwhelming odds from which neither ship, nor most of their crews would survive. Within the next couple days, other remaining ships of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet would meet the same fate, in a number of cases, alone, against insurmountable odds, with no survivors.

The skipper of the Houston, Captain Albert C. Rooks, was a hero of mine, long before I joined the U.S. Navy, when I first started reading naval history. A brilliant officer, strategic thinker, and exceptional shiphandler, Rooks was destined for high flag rank, greatly respected by superiors, and most tellingly, revered by his crew for his no-nonsense leadership, and most importantly, his handling of the ship in combat. In an intense air-raid in the Flores Sea on 4 Feb 1942, Rooks skillfully dodged dozens of accurately aimed bombs from over 50 aircraft; all but

*the last bomb from the last plane that came off at an errant angle and through sheer luck destroyed Houston's after 8" turret, killing 48 men and reducing her combat power by one third. Given the option to withdraw his ship from the region for repairs, Rooks declined, because even damaged, Houston was the most capable ship the Allies had. In a second major air attack, with a new load of 5" anti-aircraft shells to replace the 75% dud rate of her original load, Houston brilliantly defended a troop ship convoy, downing multiple Japanese aircraft with no loss to the convoy.*

*On the night of 28 February-1 March 1942, while executing pre-planned orders to withdraw from the Java Sea, the Houston and the Perth attempted to exit through the Sunda Strait. With Perth in the lead (her skipper, the legendary Captain Hec Waller, was senior) the two unescorted cruisers encountered a Japanese blocking force, and in the initial exchange of gunfire discovered that they were unexpectedly in the midst of the main Japanese invasion force for Java. Although already critically low on ammunition, low on fuel, previously damaged, and with exhausted crews, both cruiser skippers chose to turn and attack towards the dozens of Japanese troop transports along the shore, which was the reason both ships had gone back into the Java Sea a week earlier. Although the chance of escape was slim, Captain Rooks placed duty over survival, and decided to sacrifice his ship dearly in an attempt to thwart the landing.*

*In the hours-long night close-quarters melee that followed, both ships were surrounded on all sides by two Japanese heavy cruisers and numerous destroyers and smaller patrol craft, which fired 87 torpedoes at Houston and Perth. The Allied cruisers avoided numerous torpedoes, several of which hit and sank Japanese troop transports, including the one with the Japanese commander of the invasion force embarked (LTG Imamura), who survived his swim ashore.*

*Both Allied cruisers were eventually hit by multiple torpedoes and countless shells, yet they still damaged numerous Japanese ships, fighting until they were out of ammunition. Perth went down first, and Houston fought on alone for over 30 minutes, as*

*Japanese ships closed to within machine gun range. Both Waller and Rooks were killed by enemy shellfire after finally giving the order to abandon ship. A Marine in Houston's forward anti-aircraft platform fired his .50 cal machine gun at the enemy until the ship slipped beneath the surface, her national ensign still flying high.*

*Of Houston's crew of 1,168 men, only 368 survived the battle, and until only 291 survivors emerged from Japanese captivity at the end of the war, no one in the U.S. really knew what happened in the Sunda Strait.*

*Captain Rooks was awarded a Medal of Honor while in missing-in-action status during the war for his actions in the Battles of the Flores Sea and the Java Sea; the period of action did not cover the Battle of Sunda Strait. Houston was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation after the war.*

*Today, the Naval History and Heritage Command is working with the US Embassy in Jakarta and the Indonesian government to protect the wreck of the Houston from metal salvagers who have illegally removed the wrecks of almost every other Allied ship lost in the Java Sea. Although Albert Rooks faced a far tougher fight than John Paul Jones, Farragut, or Dewey, the U.S. Navy has no ship named after Rooks, although there is a water fountain at the Naval Academy dedicated in his honor. (\*James Hornfischer, "Ship of Ghosts.") For more on USS Houston, see Houston Memorial Service remarks from 5 March 2016 [included as H-gram attachment H-003-4].*

#### **4. Featured Artifact**

*USS Houston (CA-30) trumpet (attachment H-003-5)*





"Asheville's Defiance." Painting by Tom Freeman.

## H-003-1: *Asheville's* Defiance

H-Gram 003, *Attachment 1*  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
February 2017

## H-003- 2: Japanese Offensive and Navy Response

H-Gram 003, [Attachment 2](#)

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

20 February 2017

### ***The U.S. Asiatic Fleet - Background and Summary***

Although commanded by a four-star (Admiral Thomas C. Hart) for oriental “face” reasons, the U.S. Asiatic Fleet was deliberately kept very small, in keeping with the Mahanian principle in force at the time to never divide the Battle Fleet. (Only in early 1941 did the U.S. Navy begin to “violate” this principle by moving some battleships and aircraft carriers to the Atlantic from what has been the Battle Fleet (later renamed Battle Force) concentration area throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s at San Pedro and Long Beach.) Consisting of the flagship, the heavy cruiser USS *Houston* (CA-30), the early 1920’s vintage light cruiser USS *Marblehead* (CL-12), 13 WW-I vintage destroyers, and an assortment of China gunboats and other auxiliaries, the primary offensive punch of the Asiatic Fleet was envisioned to be the potent force of 29 submarines, recently augmented in anticipation of war with Japan during 1941.

Although U.S. war plans at the time assumed that the Philippines would be lost to the Japanese, and that the U.S. Navy would have to fight our way across the Pacific to the decisive battle between the Battle Fleets in Far Eastern waters, the U.S. did not plan to give up the Philippines without a fight, and the submarines were meant to make the Japanese Navy pay heavily to take the Philippines. The U.S. plan failed for several reasons, but the most significant was the unanticipated (by the U.S.) immediate loss of air superiority to the Japanese, and the fact that large numbers of U.S. torpedoes were defective. (I’ll cover the “Great Navy Torpedo Scandal” in a future H-gram, but



*Admiral Thomas C. Hart, 1939 (NH 95164).*

before the war, the U.S. Navy conducted no live-fire tests of torpedo warshots against actual targets because it was deemed too expensive. As a result, major flaws were not known and corrected until almost two years into the war, at incredible cost in lost target opportunities and American lives.)

The U.S. Navy Intelligence infrastructure in the Far East, centered around the signals intelligence and code-breaking center known as Station Cast in the Philippines (counterpart to Station Hypo in Hawaii,) worked reasonably well. Admiral Hart received intelligence from broken Japanese diplomatic codes (that Admiral Kimmel in Hawaii did not get) and had sufficient warning to disperse most of the Asiatic Fleet to safer locations prior to the Japanese attack. However, U.S. submarines were quickly deprived of key sources of reconnaissance of Japanese invasion

force movements, when most of the PBV Catalina flying boats were quickly shot down or destroyed at anchor. (Of 44 PBV's that were on station or reinforced Patrol Wing Ten, all but five were destroyed or shot down by March 1942, including one flown by LT Thomas H. Moorer, future CNO and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.)

Without air reconnaissance, or benefit of the ULTRA code-breaking intelligence that became available later in the war, U.S. submarines repeatedly missed intercept opportunities, consistently arriving at Japanese amphibious landing sites after the Japanese invasion ships had left, and were frequently attacked by Japanese aircraft whenever surfaced. In addition, even with ample warning, the complete lack of effective U.S. air defenses enabled 54 Japanese bombers on 10 Dec 41 to leisurely and accurately plaster Cavite, the only major U.S. Navy base in the region, destroying almost everything at the base, including 230 submarine torpedoes and the submarine USS *Sealion* (SS-195) (severely damaged and later scuttled.) Extremely vulnerable to air attack, the submarine tenders were withdrawn further south, except for USS *Canopus* (AS-9), whose Sailors would serve valiantly as infantry in the defense of Bataan and Corregidor. In those rare cases where U.S. submarines intercepted the Japanese, such as S-38's (LT Wreford G. "Moon" Chapple - future RADM - commanding) heroic foray into the treacherous waters of Lingayen Gulf to attack the main Japanese landing force in what was to that point the largest amphibious assault in history, U.S. torpedoes repeatedly failed to explode on target, leading immediately to the pounding of U.S. submarines by Japanese aircraft and depth charges; Despite the target-rich environment, S-38 only sank one large transport and survived, barely, repeated Japanese ASW attacks. The Japanese landing at Lingayen was actually a major fiasco, with the Japanese losing half their tanks and many men to sea state/weather conditions, far more than were lost as a result of

U.S. action, and even then the U.S. could not effectively oppose it.

## **ABDAFLOAT**

If there is anyone who questions the wisdom of RIMPAC exercises, other regional engagement exercises (or even NATO) the short and chaotic life of the American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) Command, and its Naval Component Command (ABDAFLOAT), and the culminating defeat in the Battle of the Java Sea in February 1942, represents a textbook case of everything that can go wrong in coalition warfare, and the disaster that can befall an Allied/Coalition Force that has never trained together. Although the stubborn U.S. and Filipino Army defense of the Bataan Peninsula inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese and greatly slowed Japan's timetable for completing the capture of the Philippines, the Japanese onslaught everywhere else in the Far East continued at an astonishing and unabated pace.

ABDA Command was conceived as a means by the Allies to defend Singapore and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia.) As U.S. and British leaders convened in Washington in late Dec 41 and grappled with the unexpected collapsing situation in the Far East, they pushed for a unified command structure. In a surprise to the British, the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, General George C. Marshal, supported even more surprisingly by ADM Ernest J. King (Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet,) pushed to have a British army general put in charge of ABDA, while British Prime Minister Winston Churchill pushed to have an American admiral put in charge (both sides most likely saw the whole thing as a loser, leading to the gracious offers to have the other put in charge.) Without consulting the Netherlands Government-in-Exile, the job was given to British Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell (most recently run out of Libya by German General Erwin Rommel) and the naval component command, termed ABDAFLOAT, to Admiral Hart.

ABDA almost immediately became dysfunctional, as the Allied interests quickly diverged and the Japanese racked up victory after victory. Wavell was focused on the defense and supply of India, and the defense of Singapore (whose garrison quickly surrendered on 15 Feb 42 to a Japanese force half its size in what is generally considered the most ignominious defeat in British military history). The Dutch Naval Forces Commander in the East Indies, VADM Conrad Helfrich was focused exclusively on the defense of Java (to the last Allied ship) and was so incensed that an American admiral had been put in charge of the naval defense of the Dutch East Indies that he actively worked through diplomatic and government channels to undercut ADM Hart and have him relieved. The Australians were focused on the defense of Timor and Australia (most of the Australian Army was in North Africa fighting the Germans.) The Americans kind of just hung out losing ships to fulfill political promises of moral support to the Dutch, brokered in Washington. Dutch political pressure in Washington became so intense, that Admiral King informed Admiral Hart that he should request to be relieved for "health reasons" (in his 60's, the Dutch and British claimed Hart was "too old" for his position - he lived to a vigorous 94.) Hart acceded to King's "recommendation" and command of U.S. Naval Forces in the region passed to newly-promoted VADM Glassford on 4 Feb, under the overall command of VADM Helfrich. The relief of Hart marked the official end of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet. In the end, with the fall of Singapore, Wavell recommended dissolution of ABDA, pulled up chocks and went to India.

### ***First Victory - Battle of Balikpapan - Pre-dawn 24 Jan 42***

The first surface action by the U.S. Navy since the Spanish-American War was a victory, and was about the only bright spot in the entire effort to counter the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies (and was played up by U.S. media into a

much greater victory than it actually was.) The great victory was marred by the fact that U.S. surface torpedoes didn't work any better than submarine torpedoes; the older MK10 warshots used at Balikpapan ran 10 or more feet deeper than their setting (the newer Mk14/15 torpedoes had even bigger problems.)

Four U.S. destroyers, USS *John D. Ford* (DD-228), USS *Pope* (DD-225), USS *Parrot* (DD-218), USS *Paul Jones* (DD-230), under the command of DESDIV 59 Commander Paul H. Talbot (future RADM), conducted a successful night infiltration of a Japanese invasion force at Balikpapan, on the east coast of Borneo. The U.S. destroyers withheld gunfire until after launching all their torpedoes (a tactically sound lesson that was not learned or passed on, resulting in many unnecessary U.S. ship losses later in the war, as the Japanese would fire their long-range torpedoes at U.S. gun flashes, with devastating effect.) The Japanese escorts, not expecting a night attack by the U.S. (they saw themselves as undisputed masters of the night) assumed they were under submarine attack and charged off into the Makassar Strait after a non-existent sub. This gave the U.S. destroyers almost three unmolested hours to shoot about 48 torpedoes at 12 anchored transports, backlit by a burning Dutch oil refinery, at point blank range, but sinking only 4 transports due to the defective torpedoes, and also sinking one Japanese patrol boat, which turned out to be the largest Japanese surface combatant sunk as a result of U.S. surface action in the entire campaign. All four U.S. destroyers escaped with only minor damage. The battle probably delayed the Japanese by a day or two.

### ***Battle of the Java Sea Disaster - 27 Feb 42***

On the 27 Feb, a combined Dutch, British, Australian and U.S. task force put to sea from Surabaya, Java, with no air cover, in a last-ditch effort to attack a large Japanese invasion force heading for eastern Java in what became the largest surface action since Jutland to that



date. Under the command of Dutch Rear Admiral Karel Doorman (Commander, Combined Striking Force), embarked in the Dutch light cruiser HMNLS *De Ruyter*, the force consisted of the U.S. heavy cruiser USS *Houston* (CA-30)(the largest, most capable ship in the Allied force, even with her after 8" turret destroyed by previous bomb damage), the British heavy cruiser HMS *Exeter* (victor over the German "pocket battleship" Graf Spee in the Battle of the River Platte in Dec 39), the Australian light cruiser, HMAS *Perth* (veteran of extensive action in the Mediterranean,) the Dutch light cruiser *Java*, and 9 destroyers (4 U.S., 3 British, and 2 Dutch.) Encountering a Japanese force of two heavy cruisers, two old light cruisers, and 14 destroyers, on paper it should have been at least a close match, with the Allied force having an advantage in light cruiser 6" gunfire, that was never effectively brought to bear as the Japanese repeatedly outmaneuvered the Allied force, courtesy of Japanese cruiser scout planes which constantly dogged the Allied force with impunity. Because of this air reconnaissance advantage, the Japanese were able to keep the laden troop and supply transports well away from the battle.

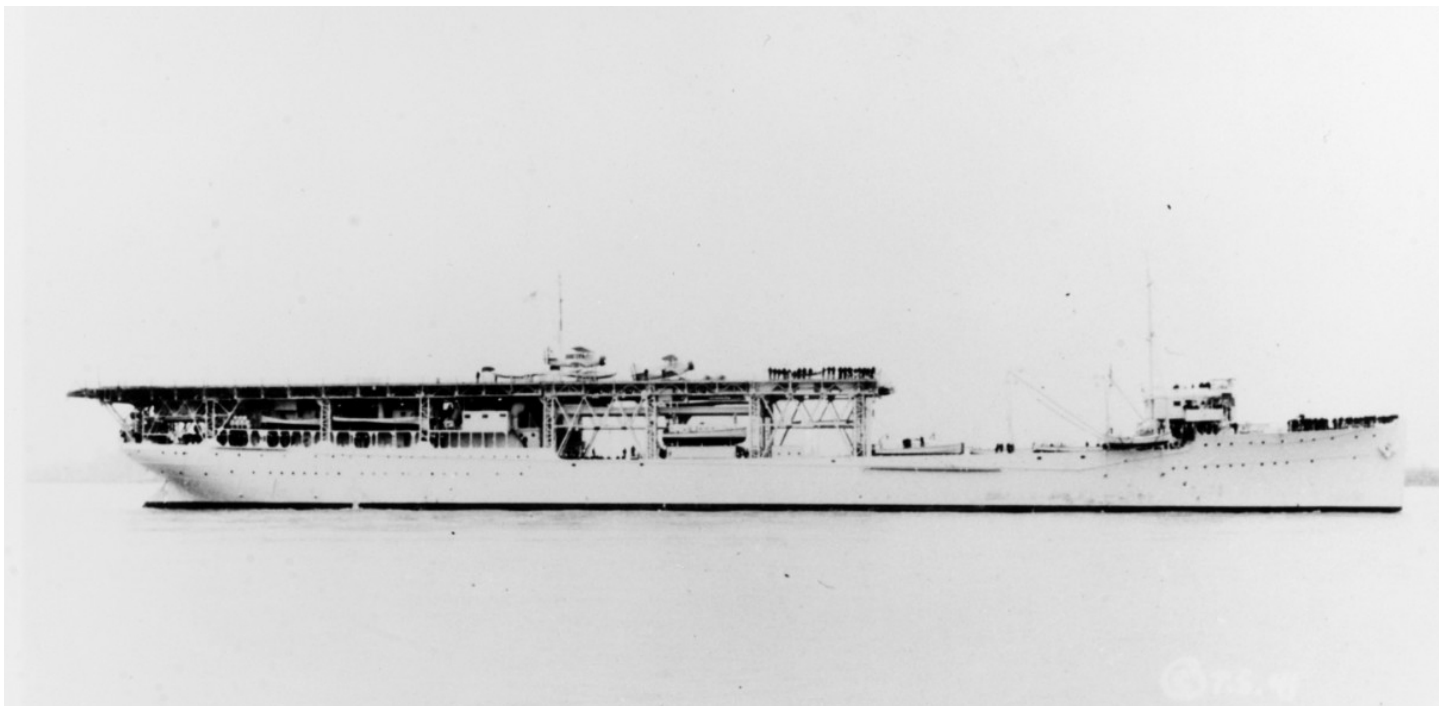
At the time, it was believed by the U.S. Navy and most navies of the world (including Japan) that the state of gunnery fire control had become so advanced that it was expected that surface actions would be decided in minutes. The Battle of the Java Sea turned into an hours-long late afternoon/twilight long-range gunnery duel in which the Allies and the Japanese both squandered hundreds of rounds per ship with limited result. (*Houston* emptied both her forward magazines, and Sailors humped 260 LB shells from the after magazine under the unusable after turret, the length of the ship during combat (no air-conditioning.)) Many accounts say *Houston* scored the first hit of the battle, on a Japanese heavy cruiser. Japanese records do not confirm this, although many Japanese records are on the bottom of the ocean. Eventually, *Houston* was hit with two dud Japanese 8" shells, before HMS

*Exeter* suffered a critical hit, that threw the entire Allied force into confusion, as all the lack of common training, doctrine, incompatible signals, tactics, and language issues manifested themselves. (British and U.S. ships could speak English, but their signal codes were incomprehensible to the other, for example.)

As HMS *Exeter* fell out of line, and the Allied ships behind her fell into disarray, the Japanese destroyers closed for a torpedo attack. In the melee that followed, the Dutch destroyer *Kortenaar* and the British destroyer *Electra* were sunk. The U.S. destroyers countered with a torpedo attack, with what by then had become the standard result - no hits. As night fell, the Allied force blundered into a recently laid minefield, and the British destroyer HMS *Jupiter*, hit one, blew up and sank. At this point the U.S. destroyers, low on fuel and with torpedoes expended, were detached to return to Surabaya along with the damaged HMS *Exeter*, and the Dutch destroyer *Witte de Witt*, which had survivors on board.

The remaining four Allied cruisers, with no destroyer escort, bravely (some accounts say recklessly) continued through the course of the night to try to get around the Japanese cruisers (low on ammunition themselves) but Japanese superiority in pyrotechnics, night optics, and dogged float plane reconnaissance stymied Doorman's force. In the end, the Japanese launched a devastating long-range torpedo attack that the Allied ships didn't see coming in the night. (Allied reports repeatedly state that they came under submarine attack, even though no Japanese subs were involved in the battle, because they did not know about the extended range (12-22NM) Japanese Type 93 "Oxygen" torpedo (later known as "Long Lance" coined after the war by historian RADM Samuel Eliot Morison.) Actually, the U.S. did receive intelligence about the Type 93 before the war, but refused to believe it, since we had no similar capability.) The Dutch light cruisers *De Ruyter* and *Java* were both hit,

exploded and sank, with heavy loss of life; RADM Doorman went down with his ship. Executing Doorman's standing orders to break off contact in the event of the loss of communications with the flagship and proceed to Tanjung Priok (port for Batavia - now Jakarta), the USS *Houston* and HMAS *Perth* disengaged, and the disastrous Battle of the Java Sea was over, to be followed by a Japanese sweep up of most every other Allied ship in the region.



*USS Langley (AV-3), circa 1940. The forward portion of her original flight deck was removed during her 1937–38 conversion to a seaplane tender (NH 88480).*

## H-003-3: The Valor of the Asiatic Fleet

*H-Gram 003, [Attachment 3](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
20 February 2017*

### ***Lest We Forget...***

The following is not meant to be a comprehensive discussion of every noteworthy act of valor by a ship of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet. There are too many to choose from. Among those I don't discuss include the light cruiser USS *Marblehead* (CL-12) and her extraordinary damage control after crippling bomb damage in the Flores Sea on 4 Feb 42, and her epic solo return voyage to New York City via the Indian Ocean. Another is the destroyer USS *Peary* (DD-226), which barely survived the bombing at Cavite, barely survived numerous other encounters with Japanese

aircraft, subs, and ships, but had the misfortune to be the largest warship in port Darwin, Australia when 188 Japanese planes from four carriers attacked, yet she went down with guns blazing. And then there was the USS *Stewart* (DD-224,) put into the drydock at Surabaya, Java to repair battle damage, only to topple off improperly set blocks and subsequently subject to destruction by demolition charge; however, the Japanese salvaged and repaired her and put her in their own service, leading to numerous mysterious sightings of a U.S. four-piper destroyer far behind Japanese lines during the war. Nor do I discuss the multiple U.S. submarines that endured incredible poundings by Japanese depth charges, for little result; some survived, but USS *Sealion* (SS-195) was lost at Cavite to bombs; USS *Shark* (SS-174) was lost with all hands, and USS *Perch* (SS-176) was lost, but all hands were rescued by the Japanese and taken prisoner. In particular, it is important to note that in numerous cases, acts of valor are unknown because there were few or no surviving witnesses.

***USS Isabel (PY-10) - LT John W. Payne, commanding***

On 3 Dec 1941, ADM Hart received orders from President Roosevelt himself to dispatch the armed yacht *USS Isabel*, by name, to conduct a reconnaissance of Japanese shipping gathering off Cam Ranh Bay, Japanese-occupied French Indo-China (Vietnam) despite the fact that Hart's PBY reconnaissance aircraft had been accurately tracking the Japanese ships for days. Two other vessels were also ordered to conduct similar missions, but were not ready before the start of the war. The reason for Roosevelt's order remains a mystery, leading to years of conspiratorial speculation that the mission was intended to provoke the Japanese into "firing the first shot," which in this case might actually be true. The *Isabel* was recalled just as she came in sight of the Vietnamese coast.

For the next three months, the *Isabel* was assigned all manner of hazardous tasks, such as leading destroyers at night through poorly charted waters; leading destroyers at night through unfamiliar minefields; sent alone without air cover to deliver critical translators to the Dutch RADM Doorman's strike force; sent to rescue a large personnel transport under attack by a Japanese submarine, and sank the submarine; sent on numerous other wild-goose chases, and by accident, became the last ship of the Asiatic fleet to leave Java, evading a major Japanese force and surviving a tropical cyclone in a successful escape to Australia. Neither the skipper nor the ship received any kind of commendation whatsoever, except the one battle star awarded to all ships of the Asiatic Fleet.

***USS Whippoorwill (AM-23) -- LCDR Charles A. Ferriter, commanding; USS Pigeon (ASR-6) -- LT Richard E. Hawes, commanding***

During the devastating Japanese air raid on Cavite, the only major U.S. Navy base in the Far

East, lack of fighter cover and lack of AAA that could reach the altitude of the 54 Japanese bombers, enabled the Japanese to systematically destroy virtually the entire base on 10 Dec 41. The result was an immense conflagration along the entire waterfront. Although ADM Hart had dispersed most of the Asiatic Fleet, the destroyer *USS Peary* (DD-226) was in repair status, and was immobilized by bomb damage that killed or injured many of her crew, including the commanding officer. Braving the inferno (and that fact that somewhere in the inferno, the ammunition dump had not yet gone up; the ammo dump seemed to be the only thing the Japanese missed), the minesweeper *Whippoorwill* made repeated, and eventually successful, efforts to pull *Peary* away from the quay.

On the other side of the small peninsula, the submarine *USS Seadragon* (SS-194) was trapped between the raging fires and the outboard submarine *USS Sealion* (SS-195) sinking as result of Japanese bomb hits. Like the *Whippoorwill*, the *USS Pigeon* made numerous attempts to pull the *Seadragon* free, despite the danger, and succeeded. After a frustrating first patrol, due to faulty torpedoes, *Seadragon* evacuated the members of the Intelligence/Code-breaking center (Station Cast), including future VADM Rufus Taylor, from Corregidor to Australia.

***USS Canopus (AS-9) -- CDR Earl L. Sackett, commanding***

With the rapid achievement of Japanese air superiority, ADM Hart's plan to operate submarines from Manila Bay from the submarine tenders became untenable, and the tenders *USS Holland* (AS-3) and *USS Otus* (AS-20) were ordered withdrawn much further south. *USS Canopus* drew the short straw, and was ordered to the Bataan Peninsula where she provided extensive repair and machine shop capability to U.S. Army forces tenaciously defending the peninsula. After being damaged in an air attack, the *Canopus* was deliberately given a significant

list, with painted damage, and smoke pots; giving her the appearance of being sunk to forestall further bombing; the crew did their work afloat at night, and as much on shore as possible. For the most part, the ruse worked.

When a significant Japanese force made an amphibious landing behind U.S. lines, the Army counter-attacked and trapped the Japanese, who holed up in significant numbers in caves along the shore that could not be hit from landward. In response, the crew of *Canopus* created "Uncle Sam's Mickey Mouse Battle Fleet" consisting of several launches fitted with armor plate and field guns, to hit the Japanese from seaward, which worked, although the "Mickey Mouse Battleships" eventually succumbed to air attack.

About 150 of *Canopus*' crew, were combined with plane-less ground crews, and some Marines to form the Naval Battalion, which performed surprisingly effectively by spooking the Japanese into thinking it was some kind of suicide unit, because they thrashed about the jungle in brightly colored uniforms (whites boiled in coffee comes out as mustard yellow,) while drawing Japanese fire by talking loudly and smoking cigarettes at night. More importantly, the Navy battalion did not realize that it was supposed to withdraw when flanked, instead holding their ground and sweeping up infiltrators in the morning, confounding the Japanese. When Bataan was surrendered in April 42, the USS *Canopus* was scuttled, and her crew fought valiantly in the last-ditch defense of Corregidor Island.

### ***USS Heron (AVP-2) LT William L. Kabler, commanding***

On 31 Dec 41 in the Molucca Sea, the small (950 ton) WWI-vintage seaplane tender, USS *Heron* came under eight hours of near continuous Japanese air attacks, initially by one four-engine flying boat, then six four-engined flying boats (dropping as many as 12 100lb bombs each in

repeated runs), and then by five twin-engine land-based bombers. With a speed of only 11 kts, and only two obsolete 3" guns and 50 cal. machine guns for protection, the *Heron* managed to avoid all bombs, even damaging several Japanese aircraft, before a bomb finally hit on top of the mainmast, seriously damaging the ship, killing two and wounding 28, almost half her crew. Despite the damage and heavy casualties, the crew continued to fight valiantly as three more four-engined flying boats closed in for a textbook "Hammer and Anvil" torpedo attack (one plane attacking from the port bow, one from the starboard bow and one from the port quarter, so that no matter which way the ship turned to evade, she would bring her beam to at least one torpedo.) And yet, the *Heron* skillfully evaded all three torpedoes, and so damaged one of the flying boats that it was forced to land on the water. *Heron* then sank the massive flying boat with her guns, while being strafed by the other two, and even attempted to rescue eight surviving Japanese aircrewmembers, who refused to be rescued.

### ***Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron THREE -- LT J.D. Bulkeley, commanding***

Although historian RADM Samuel Eliot Morison considered the performance of the six PT-Boats of MTB -3 to be over-rated, given the severe handicaps that they operated under, the crews of MTB-3 acquitted themselves with distinction. With virtually no maintenance capability, no spare parts, limited fuel that was frequently bad, lack of ammunition, operating regularly at night in poorly charted shallows, torpedoes that repeatedly ran hot in the tubes (often more a danger to themselves than the Japanese,) under constant air attack, and surrounded by fast Japanese destroyers that could run down a PT-Boat (as *PT-109* learned later) just surviving was a major accomplishment. Yet, the PT-Boats repeatedly harassed the Japanese.



By April 1942, all six boats had been lost to grounding or enemy action, but not before General MacArthur decided he would rather take his chances on a PT-Boat than a submarine, when he was ordered by President Roosevelt to leave the Philippines. In a harrowing journey beginning 11 Mar 42, two PT-Boats carried MacArthur, his wife, maid, senior staff, much luggage, and RADM Rockwell (senior Navy officer still in the Philippines) from Corregidor to Mindanao for further onward flight by plane. The two boats then went back to a different island, and evacuated Philippine President Manuel Quezon (Although the Philippines was not independent, it had already been granted substantial autonomy by the U.S., a factor that significantly affected MacArthur's decision-making on the first day of the war, although that is another story.)

### ***Patrol Wing TEN -- CAPT F.D. Wagner, commanding***

Patrol Wing TEN, suffered some of the highest casualties of any U.S. Navy unit in WWII. Initially starting with 28 PBY Flying Boats and ten utility aircraft of varying types, PATWING TEN was reinforced over the next three months; of the 44 PBY's that served in the squadron, all but five were lost, and all but one of the utility aircraft were lost. Many PBY's were shot down or destroyed at anchor in the opening days of the war, resulting in a critical loss of operational situational awareness by U.S. commanders. As a result of the PBY losses, ADM Hart was forced to evacuate from the Philippines to Java via a submarine, losing ten days of command and control in the process.

Despite severe losses, the PBY's repeatedly attempted reconnaissance flights, and after the surviving Army Air Force B-17 Flying Fortress bombers were withdrawn, the PBY's were pressed into service as bombers, with high losses. With a full bomb load, the PBY's could only fly about 85 Kts and could not climb above Japanese AAA. In one attempted raid against a Japanese shipping

concentration at Jolo, Philippines, on 26 Dec 41, four of six PBY's were lost.

Amongst numerous epic studies in survival by downed PBY crews was the one involving a PBY piloted by LT Thomas Moorer, future CNO and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Launching from Darwin on 19 Feb 42 on what was supposed to be a routine mission, Moorer was jumped by Japanese fighters escorting an inbound raid of 188 aircraft from four aircraft carriers. With his radio shot away, Moorer was unable to warn Darwin of the impending devastating attack. Although wounded, Moorer skillfully ditched the disabled aircraft, and his crew abandoned it before it was strafed and destroyed. Moorer and his crew were subsequently rescued by a Filipino freighter that had been chartered to take supplies to Corregidor (by then a suicide mission if there ever was one.) That ship was then bombed and sunk. One of Moorer's crew was killed in the water by a Japanese near miss. Moorer found himself in charge of the ship's lifeboats, navigated his way to an island off the Australian coast, attempted an aborted foot march across the island, before being rescued by an Australian patrol boat, which was also bombed, but fortunately not sunk.

### ***USS Langley (AV-3) -- CDR Robert P. McConnell, commanding***

In response to intense political pressure from the Netherlands Government-in-Exile, the U.S. agreed to send a shipment of P-40 fighter aircraft, with pilots and ground crew, to Java. The U.S. Navy's first aircraft carrier, by then converted to a seaplane tender with half her flight deck removed, the USS *Langley* was given the mission to carry 32 assembled P-40's from Australia to Java in late Feb 42. The mission was by then too little too late, but no one would call it off. By then the Japanese had complete mastery of the air over Java, and had even shot down 40 allied aircraft in a single day. But the situation was so desperate, that Dutch VADM Helfrich (in charge of

allied naval forces after ADM Hart's recall) ordered the Langley to make a daylight run into the south Java port of Tjilatjap on 27 Feb 42. VADM Glassford, commander of U.S. naval forces under Helfrich, concurred with the suicidal order. Tjilatjap did not even have an airfield, and would require bulldozing of buildings in the port city to widen the roads to get the aircraft to an open field, where they might be able to take off. Japanese bombers solved that problem.

Although not very maneuverable, and unstable due to the load of fighters, the Langley's CO adroitly avoided the first bomb runs, but the Japanese were skillful too, and the Langley was hit in quick succession by five bombs. Although the crew tried valiantly to save the ship, it became apparent that the Langley would never reach the port, so the ship was abandoned. Subsequent attempts to hasten its sinking with friendly torpedoes and gunfire failed, and the ship was left adrift to eventually sink on its own.

The great majority of Langley's crewmen, and the Army pilots, were rescued by U.S. destroyers, before being transferred to the oiler USS *Pecos*, which was then bombed and sunk by 36 aircraft from four different Japanese carriers. The destroyer USS *Whipple* (DD-217) attempted to rescue as many survivors as possible, in between attacks on a Japanese submarine, but was forced to break-off the effort during the night. Some 230 survivors were rescued, but over 400 were left behind in the water, of whom all ultimately perished.

After the events, VADM Glassford's report stated that CDR McConnell's actions in failing to save his ship were not in the best tradition of the U.S. Naval Service. ADM Ernest J. King, never known to be merciful, reviewed the report, non-concurred with Glassford's findings, and ordered that McConnell's record be expunged of any derogatory material.

### ***USS Pope (DD-225) -- LCDR Welford C. Blinn, commanding***

The USS *Pope* (DD-227) missed the Battle of the Java Sea due to an engineering casualty. Because *Pope* still had a full load of torpedoes, she was assigned to escort the damaged British heavy cruiser HMS *Exeter*. The four surviving U.S. destroyers from the Java Sea battle, their torpedoes expended, were ordered to leave the Java Sea via the Bali Strait (too shallow for *Exeter*) which they did after a brief firefight with several surprised Japanese destroyers.

The *Exeter*, *Pope*, and the British destroyer HMS *Encounter*, attempted to take a circuitous path just south of Borneo and then to the Sunda Strait in an effort to avoid Japanese surface combatants. Instead, at daybreak on 1 Mar 42, they ran into four Japanese heavy cruisers (including the two victors of the Java Sea Battle, which were low on ammunition) and several destroyers. In an hours-long chase, *Encounter* and *Pope* repeatedly attempted to keep the Japanese at bay with torpedoes and guns, until *Exeter* received a crippling mobility kill. The CO of *Exeter* ordered *Encounter* and *Pope* to try to escape. *Encounter* refused the order and stood by *Exeter* until the very end, and both ships went down together.

After several more hours, subject to repeated near misses from Japanese aircraft that put the *Pope* in sinking condition, coupled with a boiler casualty that greatly reduced her speed, and with all torpedoes expended, and all but 20 rounds of main gun ammo expended, the CO ordered the ship abandoned and scuttled; miraculously, *Pope's* only KIA of the battle was due to the demolition charge to destroy the ship's communications gear.

In what would become an increasingly rare display of chivalry, all of *Pope's* 151 survivors were picked up by a Japanese destroyer (as were almost all the survivors of *Exeter* and *Encounter*) and treated relatively well. Once ashore in the prison camps the hell began and only 124 of

*Pope's* crew survived captivity, including LT Richard "Bull" Antrim who was awarded a Medal of Honor for risking his life to save other prisoners.

### ***USS Edsall (DD-219) -- LCDR J.J. Nix, commanding***

On 1 Mar 42, the powerful force of Japanese aircraft carriers, battleships, and heavy cruisers operating south of Java to destroy Allied shipping attempting to flee from Java, received a report from a scout plane that the force was being "pursued" by a lone Allied ship. A Japanese force of two battleships, IJN *Hiei* and IJN *Kirishima*, and two heavy cruisers, IJN *Tone* and IJN *Chikuma* were sent to investigate, discovering that the pursuer was the destroyer USS *Edsall*, which had received orders to transit north toward Java in a vain effort to escort some allied ships. In the running battle that followed, *Edsall* returned Japanese fire and launched torpedoes, narrowly missing the *Tone*. The Japanese fired over 1,300 14" and 8" shells at the destroyer before calling in air support from 26 carrier-based Kate bombers, before the *Edsall* finally lost power and was smothered in an avalanche of shells and bombs.

A short film clip and later "still" from the film (attachment H-003-6), taken from *Tone*, shows *Edsall's* last moments as she is literally being blown out of the water. Misidentified in subsequent Japanese propaganda films as "HMS *Pope*," the famous picture has subsequently been misidentified in many other books as the "USS *Pope*," her sister, lost the same day. Eight of *Edsall's* survivors were rescued by the *Chikuma*, but all were subsequently executed while in Japanese prison camps. None of *Edsall's* 185 crewmen survived the war.

### ***USS Pillsbury (DD-227) -- LCDR Harold C. Pound, commanding***

On the night of 2 Mar, south of Java, a Japanese force of battleships and heavy cruisers was perplexed into indecision by the bizarre and

unexpected behavior of what they identified as a lone Omaha-class light cruiser (like the USS *Marblehead* (CL-12)) heading directly toward the vastly superior Japanese force, making no attempt to take evasive maneuvers. Like the U.S., the Japanese regularly over-estimated the size of opposing ships. The Japanese hesitated, awed by the "samurai" behavior of the lone ship, before opening fire at close to point-blank range. The unidentified ship returned fire before being smothered by 170 8" rounds. The ship was the USS *Pillsbury* (DD-227), heading toward a rendezvous with the U.S. light cruiser USS *Phoenix* (CL-46.) It's possible the *Pillsbury* mistook the lead Japanese heavy cruiser for the *Phoenix*, and Japanese sources state that *Pillsbury* immediately turned away when they opened fire, which would support that contention. It is also possible that the *Pillsbury*, realizing that she could not outrun such a force, attempted to close for a surreptitious night torpedo attack (holding gun fire as at the Battle of Balikpapan until after expending torpedoes - *Pillsbury* had previously severely damaged the Japanese destroyer IJN *Michishio*.) Given how other U.S. ships responded when faced with hopeless odds, I'd prefer to give the crew of the *Pillsbury* credit for an attack. But the answer will never be known, because there were no survivors.



## H-003-5: *Houston* Trumpet

*H-Gram 003, Attachment 5*  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
February 2017

This trumpet belonged to a crewman who played in the band on the USS *Houston* (CA-30), flagship of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet; it went down with the ship when she was lost in action in the Battle of Sunda Strait on 1 Mar 1942 under a fusillade of Japanese torpedo and shellfire. The damage to the trumpet is silent testimony to the ferocity of USS *Houston*'s last hour of weeks of combat. The trumpet was recovered illegally from the wreck site by an Australian sport diver in 2013, who subsequently voluntarily turned it over to the U.S. Naval Attache in Canberra. When removed from the ocean environment, metal artifacts undergo a greatly accelerated deterioration process. Since then, the trumpet has undergone an extensive and lengthy conservation process at NHHC (in a saline and chemical solution) to arrest the deterioration, remove the recent corrosion, and

stabilize the artifact so that it can be safely displayed without further degradation.

Although still in conservation, the trumpet has been shown to members of the USS *Houston* Survivors and Next Generations Association, who have expressed their gratitude for the care that the US Navy has taken in preserving this tangible link to the sacrifice and heroism of the crew of USS *Houston*.



*Still image from film showing last moments of USS Edsall (DD-219).*

## **H-003-6: USS *Edsall***

H-Gram 003, [Attachment 6](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
February 2017