

Aussie Submarine Bases and Sinking Tragedies.

“Hell Ships” of WW2

By Geoff Walker

USN Submarines had an impressive history of sinkings in the Asia Pacific region after they entered WW2 following the raid on Pearl Harbor by Japan. The main reasons for this was twofold, firstly their submarines had an excellent range, and heavier armaments, when compared to other Allied submarines, and secondly, partly because they were operating in “Virgin Territory”. The U.S. Navy built large submarines which provided for a long patrol range, a relatively fast service speed, and the capacity to carry more torpedoes. United States submarines were better suited for long patrols in the tropics than those of the other Allies, due to amenities such as air conditioning and onboard freshwater distillation machinery.

Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the US Navy's Asia Pacific Submarine fleet, consisting of 29 submarines, had been traditionally based in the Philippines, at Manila, along with other surface units of the fleet, but soon after the war started the Japanese bombed the Navy Base at Cavite quite extensively, causing considerable damage to the base facilities.

Hence, another base was urgently needed for the USN submarines. It was initially thought Surabaya in Java would be ideal, but it was soon discovered it was unsuitable, so the Americans looked at Darwin in Northern Australia as an alternative. However, despite being an ideal location, they soon realized that the tidal range at Darwin was too great to make the base operationally feasible, also it was relatively unprotected and could easily be mined by Japanese raiders.

The American focus then turned towards the Island of Java, in Indonesia, this time Tjilajap, but it too proved unsuitable for submarine operations. All three locations were often bombed by the Japanese. Java was soon thereafter occupied by the Japanese, leaving the Asiatic Submarine Force without a suitable base. The **Exmouth Gulf** in Western Australia was also considered as a likely contender for a new Submarine Base. In late 1942, the US Navy had asked the Australian Government to build an airfield near a future submarine base at **Exmouth Gulf**. The site for the airfield was selected at Yanrey and the Australian War Cabinet approved its construction, without hesitation.

The submarine tender **USS Pelius** spent some time at **Exmouth Gulf** tending submarines that used it as a temporary base, but after two Japanese raids on the **Exmouth Gulf** on 20 and 21 May 1943, the US Navy decided to abandon their submarine base there and move it south to **Fremantle**. Another disadvantage of the **Exmouth Gulf** Base was that it was subject to cyclonic activity, between November and April, that ravaged the coast. However, the RAAF maintained their airfields at Learmouth and Yanrey, following the USN's departure from the **Exmouth Gulf** area.

Finally, on the 3 March 1942, the **USS Holland** (AS3) arrived in **Fremantle** to institute their new **Fremantle** Submarine Base, as home for 8 submarines of the Asiatic Fleet. Good undercover wharf facilities were available for use as workshops and the area was also serviced by a railway line which was ideal for their operational and transportation requirements. During the process, they also established an

Auxiliary Submarine Base at **Albany** about 240 miles further south, on the Western Australian coast, at the southwestern end of the Great Australian Bight.

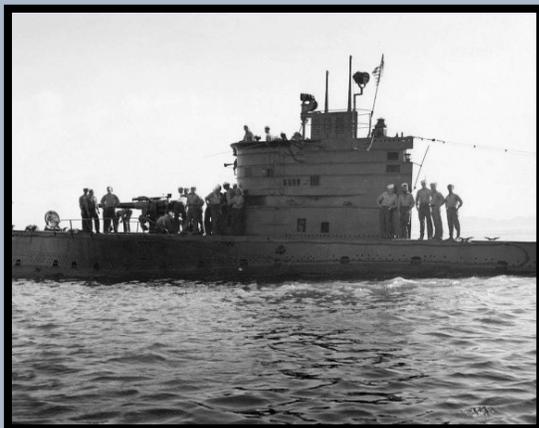
The bases at **Fremantle** and **Albany** were distant enough to prevent air-attacks by the Japanese and were suitable for their submarines' scope of operating, particularly in the Indian Ocean, at that time. From 1942 to 1945, submarines based at **Fremantle** sank 377 ships, 340 of those sunk by American boats. The combined tonnage of these 377 ships was 1,519,322 tons.

However, to reduce transit time to patrol areas in the North and Southwest Pacific, China Sea and areas around Japan, a base in Eastern Australia was deemed necessary. **Brisbane** was finally selected, and steps taken to establish a submarine base at Capricorn Wharf. **Brisbane** proved highly suitable, with well-established port facilities and a dry dock capable of handling most US submarines then in service. It was also outside the striking range of Japanese aircraft based in New Guinea.

The first of eleven S Class submarines arrived on the **Brisbane River**, in company with the tender **USS Griffin**, on 15 April 1942. By the end of the month four submarines were already on active war patrols. By the war's end patrols under Brisbane's submarine command resulted in the sinking of 117 enemy ships, totaling 515,000 tons. This number included three heavy and two light Japanese cruisers. Seven of the Brisbane based submarines were lost.

A total of 122 United States Navy, 31 Royal Navy, and 11 Royal Netherlands Navy submarines conducted patrols from Australian bases between 1942 and 1945. The submarine bases at **Fremantle** and **Brisbane** played an important part in the Allied war effort. When it was fully active the **Fremantle** base saw 164 Dutch, American and British submarines pass through the harbor. The base was tied in with the Indian Ocean campaign of 1942–45 and the facility of the **Fremantle** base was integral to successes from 1943 onward.

During the war, 127 US submarines operated from Fremantle, carrying out 353 patrols. Additionally, ten Dutch submarines also operated out of **Fremantle**, and, from August 1944, British submarines also started operating from the base. Altogether, submarines based in **Fremantle** accounted for 416 patrols during the war. Of the US submarines operating from **Fremantle**, eight were lost on patrol while a further ten formerly based at **Fremantle** subsequently were lost, while on patrol from another base. One Dutch and one British submarine were also lost while operating out of **Fremantle**.



Left, the US submarines were soon involved in the Solomon Islands campaign, and one of them, **S44** (Lieutenant Commander JR 'Dinty' Moore, USN), became the first US submarine to sink a major enemy warship when it torpedoed the Japanese cruiser **Kako** off Kavieng, on 10 August 1942. Lt. Cdr. Moore was subsequently awarded the US Navy Cross for this bravery in action.

(US Navy)



Six American submarines berthed at Capricorn Wharf at New Farm on the **Brisbane River**, outboard of their USN Submarine Tender.

(US Navy)



US Navy submarine **USS Bowfin** (SS-287), under the command of Cdr. Joseph Harris Willingham, USN, arrived in Brisbane on 10 August 1943 and was tied up alongside **USS Fulton** (AS-11) for post-voyage repairs and fitting out. The crew also underwent more gunnery training and fast deep-submergence practice dives off Brisbane before proceeding on war patrols.

(US Navy)

The **British submarine force** in the Far East was greatly expanded from August 1943 onward. The British Eastern Fleet was responsible for submarine operations in the **Bay of Bengal, Strait of Malacca** as far as **Singapore**, and the western coast of **Sumatra to the Equator**. Few large Japanese cargo ships operated in this area, and the British submarines' main targets were smaller craft operating in inshore or coastal waters, but targets of equal importance. The submarines were deployed to conduct reconnaissance, interdict Japanese supplies travelling to Burma, and attack U-boats operating from Penang. The Eastern Fleet's submarine force continued to expand during 1944, and by October 1944 had sunk a cruiser, three submarines, six small naval vessels, 41,000 tons of merchant ships, and nearly 100 coastal vessels.

The British submarine force expanded its areas of operation in the last months of the war. In late 1944, the 8th Flotilla—with 11 British and Dutch submarines—was transferred to **Fremantle** and operated in the Java Sea and surrounding areas under the command of the US 7th Fleet. The 4th Flotilla and the newly formed 2nd Flotilla remained at **Ceylon**.

By March 1945, British boats had gained control of the Strait of Malacca, preventing any supplies from reaching the Japanese forces in Burma by sea. By this time, there were few large Japanese ships in the

region, and the submarines mainly operated against small ships which they attacked with their deck guns, yielding good results.

In April 1945, the 8th Flotilla (British and Dutch submarines) moved to Subic Bay in the Philippines and the 4th Flotilla relocated from **Ceylon** to replace it at **Fremantle**. At the time there were 38 British and Dutch submarines in the theater, and an additional five boats on their way from Europe.

Allied submarines served in a range of other duties during the Pacific War. U.S. Navy submarines were often used for surveillance. This included taking photos of areas of interest (such as potential beaches for amphibious landings) and reporting on the movements of IJN warships. U.S. submarines landed and supplied reconnaissance and guerrilla forces and played a role in sustaining the guerrilla movement in the Philippines, but at the cost of them being diverted from attacks on Japanese commercial shipping.

In late 1944 and 1945 several submarines were fitted with a newly developed FM (frequency modulated) sonar that was intended for detection of submerged mines, first **USS Tinosa** and **USS Spadefish**, and later **USS Flying Fish**, **USS Skate**, **USS Bonefish**, **USS Crevalle**, and **USS Sea Dog**. The **USS Tinosa** surveyed and charted the minefields around Okinawa prior to the US invasion, and other boats used the sonar to map and penetrate the minefields of La Perouse Strait prior to operating inside the Sea of Japan.

From early 1944 U.S. submarines were also used to rescue the crews of aircraft which had been forced down over the ocean. By the end of the war, submarines had rescued 504 airmen (including George H. W. Bush, who later became the 41st President of the United States). British and Dutch submarines also landed and supplied special forces troops, rescued airmen, and shelled shore installations on nine occasions.



A Midget (X-craft) of the British Royal Navy depicted in Sydney Harbor during WW2. Identical to those used in **Operation Sabre**.

Britain also deployed a flotilla of **midget submarines** to the Far East which were used to conduct sabotage raids. The Fourteenth Flotilla, which was equipped with six XE-class submarines, arrived in Australia in April 1945 but was almost disbanded in May as no suitable targets could be found. (Royal Navy)

However, the Flotilla's fortunes improved in early June, when undersea telegraph lines in the South China Sea were identified as being worthwhile targets along with a heavy cruiser in Singapore. On 31 July, **HMS XE4** cut the submerged Singapore-Saigon telegraph cable near Cape St. Jacques in French Indochina and **HMS XE5** cut the Hong Kong-Saigon cable close to Lamma Island, Hong Kong. At the same time, **HMS XE1** and **HMS XE3** penetrated the Straits of Johor where they severely damaged the Japanese heavy cruiser **Takao** using limpet mines. The reason for severing the undersea cables was to deny

communications, forcing the Axis to use the air waves for radio telegraphy, which was quicker and easier to decipher, and from which military intelligence could be gained.

Operation Sabre was a Royal Navy military operation in WW2, directed at the Hong Kong to Saigon telephone cable, and carried out by **HMS XE4** on 31 July 1945, which was towed to within 40 miles of the Mekong Delta by the submarine **HMS Spearhead** (Lt. Roy Edmund Youngman officer commanding).

HMS XE4 searched for the two telephone cables by using a towed grapnel. She eventually snagged the first cable and managed to haul it about 10 feet off the seabed. **HMS XE4's** diver, Sub-Lieutenant K.M. Briggs, used the net/cable cutter to sever it. The second cable was soon found as well, and was severed by the second diver, Sub-Lieutenant A. Bergius. Two divers were carried due to the operating rule that a diver should not spend more than 20 minutes in depths over 33 feet and no more than 10 minutes over 40 feet. **HMS XE4** and **HMS Spearhead** returned to Labuan on 3 August 1945. Lieutenant Maxwell H. Shean, DSO and bar, RANVR, was awarded the American Bronze Star Medal in March 1947 for meritorious achievement as the commanding officer of the midget submarine **HMS XE4**.



(Royal Navy)

HMS Spearhead, an “S” Class submarine which towed **HMS XE4** to sever the submarine cable connecting Saigon with Hong Kong, as part of “**Operation Sabre**”.

Operation Foil was a British midget submarine attack on the underwater telephone and teleprinter lines in the Lamma Channel off Japanese-occupied Hong Kong on 31 July 1945. Operation Foil was entrusted to Lieutenant H. P. Westmacott’s crew in **HMS XE-5**, which was towed from the US Navy base at Subic Bay in the Philippine islands by the British submarine **HMS Selene**. Despite all the challenges, of operating well inshore, close to Lamma island, **HMS XE-5’s** divers (Lieutenant B. G. Clarke and Sub Lieutenant D. V. M. Jarvis) carried out a successful operation.

In May 1942, the Japanese began transferring its captured POWs by sea. These ships became known as “**Hell Ships**”. Prisoners were often crammed into cargo holds with little air, ventilation and food or water, for journeys that would last weeks. Many died due to asphyxia, starvation, or dysentery. These transports carried a mix of POWs and regular Japanese troops and cargo, and thus were not eligible to be marked as **non-combatants** and could be attacked by Allied submarines and aircraft meaning they were at risk of being sunk before they even reached their final port of destination.

Unfortunately, Allied submarines, sank a number of Japanese “**Hell Ships**”, which were transporting Allied POWs and Rōmusha (Asian slave laborers). It is estimated that upward of 20,000 Allied POWs could have died at sea when the transport ships carrying them were attacked by Allied submarines and aircraft. Allied submarines sank an estimated 44 Japanese troopships with more than 1,000 casualties in 33 of them. The threat of submarine attack seriously hampered the ability of the Japanese Army to move troops around within the Southeast Asia theater of operations.

There were many unfortunate sinkings with massive losses to POWs and slave laborers. It was impossible for Allied submarine commanders to identify or have prior knowledge of what these ships carried, and if POWs were amongst their human cargo. Below are a few of the recorded sinkings of some “**Hell Ships**”.

On October 24, 1944, the **Arisan Maru** was transporting 1,781 U.S. and Allied military and civilian POWs when she was hit by a torpedo from a U.S. submarine (either **USS Shark** or **USS Snook**), at about 5:00 p.m.; she finally sank about 7:00 p.m. No POWs were killed by the torpedo strikes and nearly all were able to leave the ship's holds, but the Japanese did not rescue any of the POWs that day. Only nine of the prisoners aboard survived the event. Five escaped and made their way to China in one of the ship's two lifeboats. They were reunited with U.S. forces and returned to the United States. The four others were later recaptured by Imperial Japanese naval vessels, where one died shortly after reaching land.

Survivors of the **Oryoku Maru**, which sank on 15 December 1944, were transferred to the **Enoura Maru** and the **Brazil Maru**. Both ships reached Takao (Kaohsiung) harbor in Taiwan on New Year's Day. On 6 January 1945, the smaller group of prisoners were transferred from **Brazil Maru** to **Enoura Maru**. **Brazil Maru** transported the last surviving Allied POWs to Moji, Japan, on 29 January 1945. There the Japanese medics were shocked at the wasted condition of the POWs and used triage to divide them. The 110 most severe cases were taken to a primitive military hospital in Kokura where 73 died within a month. Four other groups were sent to Fukuoka POW camps 1, 3, 4 and 17. Of 549 men alive when the ship docked, only 372 survived the war. Some eventually went to a POW camp in Jinsen, Korea, where they were given light duty, due to their emaciated state, mainly sewing garments for the Japanese Army.

Buyo Maru was a 5,446-ton **Yoshida Maru No.1-class** transport carrying mainly Indian POWs. It was torpedoed by **USS Wahoo** (SS-238), commanded by Cdr. Dudley W. Morton, on 26 January 1943. Morton then ordered the ship's lifeboats to be fired upon with small arms fire. The Hague Convention of 1907 bans the killing of shipwreck survivors under any circumstances.

Later, Morton and his executive officer Richard O'Kane also reported that they had misidentified the survivors as Japanese. O'Kane further explained that the fire from **Wahoo** was intended to force the troops to abandon their boats and no troops were deliberately targeted. It was reported that many of lifeboat occupants were Indian POWs of the 2nd Battalion, 16th Punjab Regiment, plus escorts from the Japanese 26th Field Ordnance Depot. Of 1,126 men aboard **Buyo Maru**, 195 Indians and 87 Japanese died in all, between the shooting incident and the initial sinking, (the exact number of dead varied according to sources). On the next day, 27 January 1943, the **Choku Maru No. 2** rescued the remaining survivors and took them to Palau.

About 1,000 of the survivors of the **Oryoku Maru**, which sank on 15 December 1944, were loaded on the **Enoura Maru** while the rest boarded the smaller **Brazil Maru**. Both ships reached Takao (Kaohsiung) harbor in Taiwan on New Year's Day. On 6 January 1945, the smaller group of prisoners was transferred

from **Brazil Maru** to **Enoura Maru**, and 37 British and Dutch were taken ashore. However, on January 9, the **Enoura Maru** was bombed and disabled by aircraft from **USS Hornet** while in harbor, killing about 350 men

The **Hofuku Maru**, also known as **Hohuku Maru** was a Japanese cargo ship, sunk on September 21, 1944, by American aircraft, while carrying 1,289 British and Dutch prisoners of war; 1,047 of them died

The 5,065-ton tramp steamer **Junyo Maru** sailed from Tanjong Priok on 16 September 1944 with about 4,200 Romusha slave laborers and 2,300 POWs aboard. These Dutch POWs included 1,600 from the 10th Battalion camp and 700 from the Kampong Makassar camp. This 23rd transport of POWs from Java was called Java Party 23. Java Party 23 included about 6,500 men bound for Padang on the west coast of Sumatra to work on the Sumatra Railway. On 18 September 1944 the ship was 15 miles off the west coast of Sumatra near Benkoelen when the British submarine **HMS Tradewind** hit her with two torpedoes, one in the bow and one in the stern. About 4,000 Romushas and 1,626 POWs died when the

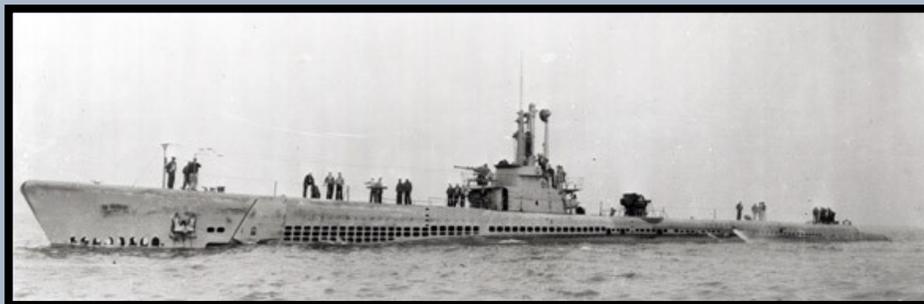


ship sank in 20 minutes. About 200 Romushas and 674 POWs were rescued by Japanese ships and taken to the Prison in Padang, where eight prisoners later died.

British submarine **HMS Tradewind**, P329. She spent most of her wartime career operating against the Japanese in the Far East, attacking enemy shipping, and laying mines. She sank nine Japanese sailing vessels, and two small unidentified Japanese vessels, a Japanese tug, and the Japanese merchant tanker **Takasago Maru**. (Royal Navy)

Her most infamous sinking was of the Japanese army cargo ship **Junyo Maru** which was headed for Sumatra, on 18 September 1944. Unbeknown to the Commanding Officer of **HMS Tradewind**, (Lt.Cdr. Lynch Maydon), the Japanese ship was carrying 4,200 Javanese slave laborers and 2,300 Allied prisoners of war from Batavia (Jakarta) to Padang. 5,626 lives were lost in the sinking.

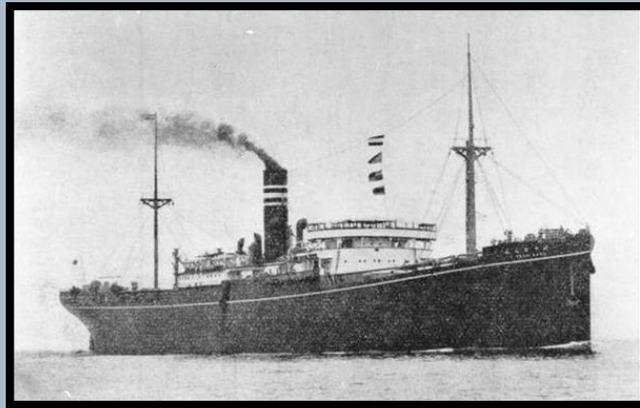
On 12 September 1944, **Kachidoki Maru** with 950 British POWs on board, was sunk by **USS Pampanito**. 431 of them were killed. **Kachidoki Maru**, was traveling in a convoy with **Rakuyo Maru** which was sunk the same day by **USS Sealion**.



(US Navy)

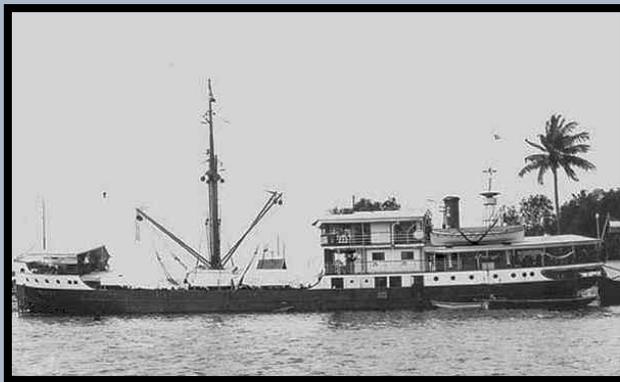
A full profile of the American Submarine **USS Pampanito**, which torpedoed the **Kachidoki Maru**

Lisbon Maru, 7053 GRT was carrying 2,000 British POWs from Hong Kong to Japan in appalling conditions when torpedoed by **USS Grouper** on 1 October 1942. 800 POWs died when the ship sank the following day. Many were shot or otherwise killed by the ship's Japanese guards.



(Unknown copyright)

The ill-fated **Lisbon Maru**, Japanese Troop Carrier, torpedoed by **USS Grouper**.



The 600-ton **Maros Maru** (The SS Maros was renamed **Haruyoshi Maru** by the Japanese) sailed from Ambon on 17 September 1944 routed along the south-coast of Celebes with about 500 British and Dutch POWs bound for Surabaya. On 21 September 1944 the ship arrived at Muna Island (south of Celebes) to embark 150 POWs. The ship required engine repairs upon arrival in Makassar. Here 159 POWs died in the holds in the 40 days required to complete repairs. They got a seaman's

grave in the harbor of Makassar. Only 327 POWs survived when the ship reached Surabaya on 26 November 1944. They were transported by train to the Kampong Makassar camp in Batavia (Jakarta) and arrived on 28 November 1944. (Unknown copyright)

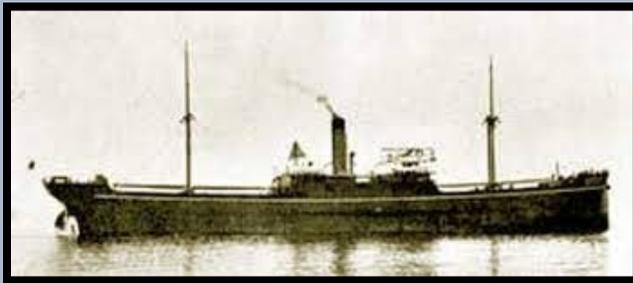
Montevideo Maru was a Japanese auxiliary troopship ship that was sunk in WW2, resulting in the drowning of a large number of Australian prisoners of war, and civilians being transported from Rabaul. Prior to the war, it operated as a passenger and cargo vessel, traveling mainly between Asia and South America. Prior to the war the ship operated as a passenger and cargo vessel traveling mainly between Asia and South America.

Oryoku Maru was a 7,363-ton passenger cargo liner transporting 1,620 survivors of the Bataan Death March, Corregidor, and other battles, mostly American, crammed into the holds, and 1,900 Japanese civilians and military personnel in the cabins. She left Manila on 13 December 1944, and over the next two days was bombed and strafed by U.S. airplanes. As she neared the naval base at **Olongapo** in Subic Bay, U.S. Navy planes from **USS Hornet** attacked the unmarked ship, causing it to sink on December 15. About 270 died aboard ship. Some died from suffocation or dehydration. Others were killed in the

attack, drowned, or were shot while escaping the ship as it sank in Subic Bay, where the **“Hell Ship Memorial”** is situated.

Rakuyo Maru was torpedoed on 12 September 1944 by **USS Sealion** which later realized the ship carried 1,317 Australian and British prisoners of war (POWs) from Singapore to Formosa (Taiwan). A total of 1,159 POWs died. The 350 who were in lifeboats were bombarded and all killed by a Japanese navy vessel the next day when they were rowing towards land. On 15 September, **USS Sealion**, along with **USS Growler** and **USS Pampanito** returned to the area and rescued 63 surviving POWs who were on rafts. Four of them died before they could be landed at Tanapag Harbor, Saipan, in the Mariana Islands. **Rakuyo Maru** was travelling in a convoy with **SS Kachidoki Maru**, which was sunk the same day by the **USS Pampanito**.

Shinyo Maru was attacked by the submarine **USS Paddle** on 7 September 1944. Two torpedo hits sank the ship and killed several hundred US, Dutch, and Filipino servicemen. Japanese guarding the prisoners opened fire on them while they were trying to abandon ship or swim to the nearby island of Mindanao. 47 Japanese and 687 Allied POWs were killed.



Suez Maru was an old 4,645-ton freighter with passenger accommodation. She sailed on 25 November 1943 with 548 POWs (415 British and 133 Dutch) from Ambon bound for Surabaya. The POWs were all sick men from the work-camps on the Moluccas and Ambon. Twenty were stretcher cases. On 29 November 1943 the ship was torpedoed by **USS Bonefish** (SS-223) near Kangean Island

east of Madura Island. Most of the POWs drowned in the holds of the ship. The crew of **USS Bonefish** was unaware that **Suez Maru** was carrying POWs. Those who escaped from the holds and left the ship were shot by the Japanese. Minesweeper W-12 picked up the Japanese survivors although recently released documents state that W-12 machine-gunned the surviving POWs (a minimum of 250) in the water. There were no POW survivors. (Unknown copyright)

The loss of so many innocent captives, POWs, and civilians on the **“Hell Ships”** was one of many tragedies of the Pacific War. Many of the deaths were needless, had it not been for the actions of their ruthless Japanese captors. Much sorrow surrounds the catastrophic outcome of the loss of life sustained by the **“Hell Ships”**, and it will be forever recorded in infamy, and remain an indelible stain, on the consequences of the Pacific campaign of WW2.

End

Bibliography: USN Archives and Reports, RN Archives and Reports, Sydney Morning Herald, RAN Archives and Records, Maritime Disasters and More Maritime Disasters WW2 1939-1945, Roll of Honor, Britain at War, Codenames, various sources on Public Domain from which some information may have been sourced.

Disclaimer: This is a **“Not for Profit”** document. Unless otherwise specified, images are from various unknown sources on the Public Domain and used under the Fair Use category for review, commentary, and educational purposes only. Photographs of unknown copyright – All reasonable attempts made to source copyright holders have proved fruitless. Owners of these images should make themselves known by contacting me via oceanicsolutions@gmail.com and I will be pleased to give due accreditation or have them removed. No infringement of copyright is intended.