**John Donald Corley**

John Donald Corley was born in Port Pirie on the 6th October 1920 to John and Dorothy Corley (nee Pickett).

He enlisted into the Royal Australian Naval Reserve (RANR) on the 30th June 1941 and passed through shore establishments Lonsdale, Cerberus, and Kuttabul before his sea posting to HMAS Perth on the 2nd January 1942. What a baptism of fire John was about to encounter.

Less than a month later on the 28th of February, HMAS Perth and the heavy cruiser USS Houston were ordered to make for the southern coast of Java after the fall of Singapore only two weeks earlier. Perth and Houston were the only large Allied ships to have survived the Battle of the Java Sea the day before.

With Perth leading Houston who was five cables astern, at 2306 a vessel was sighted at about five miles range, close to St Nicholas Point. When challenged she proved to be a Japanese destroyer and was immediately engaged. The two cruisers had met the Japanese invasion force assigned to Western Java.

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

At about midnight it was reported that the cruiser had little ammunition left, so Captain Waller decided to attempt to force a passage through Sunda Strait. He ordered full speed and turned the ship south for Toppers Island. Perth had barely steadied on her new course when a torpedo struck her in the starboard side. The captain ordered the crew to prepare to abandon ship. A few moments later, another torpedo struck just forward of the first hit and Captain Waller gave the order to abandon ship. After five or ten minutes, a third hit torpedo struck well aft on the starboard side, followed shortly after by another on the port. Perth, which had been heeling to starboard, righted herself, then heeled to port and sank at about 0025 hours on the 1st March.

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

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

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

Of the 686 men on board HMAS Perth, more than half—over 350 officers and ratings—perished in this, her last action.

Of the 320 survivors captured by the Japanese, one-third died during their long ordeal as prisoners of war.

Of the more than 1,000 American officers and men aboard USS Houston, less than 400 escaped their sinking ship. Only 266 of them survived the harsh regime of brutality and starvation in Japanese prisoner of war camps.

Stoker 2nd Class, John Corley was missing presumed Killed in Action on the 1st March 1942, aged 21 years. Lest We Forget.

**Sources:**

Australian War Memorial

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