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BOOK REVIEW

Cruiser: the life and loss of HMAS Perth and her crew

by Mike Carlton

Random House Australia: North Sydney; 706 pp.; ISBN 9781741668391; RRP \$54.95 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library call no. 740 CARL 2010

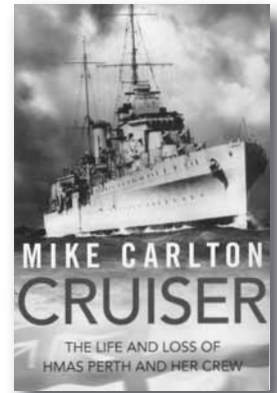
Cruiser is an heroic work of over 700 pages which tracks the two-and-a-half years' service of the light cruiser, HMAS *Perth*, and all who sailed in her from July 1939 until her sinking in the Sunda Strait on 1 March 1942. Over this period, *Perth* did battle with the forces of all the King's enemies – Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, the Vichy French and the Japanese. *Cruiser's* author, Michael Carlton, is a member of the Institute and is a well-known and respected Sydney journalist and broadcaster. He served as a war correspondent during the Vietnam War and has had an interest in naval history for many years.

The book was launched on 28 August 2010 onboard HMAS *Sydney* at Garden Island dockyard by Her Excellency the Governor of New South Wales, Professor Marie Bashir, AC, CVO, who spoke in glowing terms about the book and suggested it should be held in all libraries and schools. Of the author, she said: "There is no doubt that Mike Carlton is one of Australia's finest journalists and broadcasters, and having just read this extraordinary and beautifully written account of *Cruiser: the life and loss of HMAS Perth and her crew*, I would add, one of our finest contemporary writers."

Carlton begins his narrative with the 500 crew of *Perth* leaving Sydney on 13 May 1939 in the Blue Funnel ship, *Autolytus*, bound for Portsmouth, England, to commission the ship. *Perth*, previously known as HMS *Amphion*, left Portsmouth on 26 July 1939 for New York and service in the Caribbean followed under Royal Navy command. Following the declaration of war against Germany on 3 September 1939, *Perth*, under the command of Captain H. B. Farncomb, DSO, MVO, RAN, spent her time blockading German merchant ships in harbour and acting as a convoy escort.

On arrival in Sydney on 31 March 1940 to a tumultuous welcome, Farncomb¹ was relieved by Captain Sir Philip Bowyer-Smyth, RN. The ship was constantly at sea towards the end of 1940, escorting troop convoys and dealing with reports of German raiders operating against Allied shipping. Service in the Mediterranean followed in 1941, involving incessant air raids by the Luftwaffe and the Italian Air Force, the Battle of Matapan, the evacuation of troops from Greece and Crete during which *Perth* took a direct hit and 13 crewmen were killed, and difficult times at Malta and Tobruk.

Perth's last captain was Captain H. M. L. Waller, DSO*, RAN, who assumed command on 24 October 1941. Known as "Hec", he had achieved legendary status as commander of the Scrap-Iron Flotilla in the



Mediterranean. Indeed, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, had introduced him to the prime minister saying: "and now you are going to meet one of the greatest captains who ever sailed the sea". Praise indeed from one who was regarded as the best fighting admiral of the Second World War.

After the fall of Singapore in February 1942, *Perth* was recalled to Australian waters. On 1 March 1942, she was part of a small Allied naval force that encountered the might of the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Java Sea. After firing until her ammunition was expended, she was sunk. Of her crew of 681, only 328 survived long enough to be picked up by the Japanese. Carlton's account of this disastrous battle and the final and fatal action of HMAS *Perth* and USS *Houston* in the Sunda Strait against overwhelming odds is splendidly told. Carlton is an accomplished naval historian with a great gift for descriptive writing. There are those who believe that, after the Battle of Sunda Strait, Waller should have been awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, particularly as the captain of USS *Houston*, Captain Albert Rooks, USN, was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor for his role in this action.

The final chapters record the fight for survival by the 328 *Perth* prisoners-of-war, who faced potential death by starvation, illness, beating and beheading. The narrative brings back the savagery of 70 years ago and the courage and spirit of those gallant men. Of the *Perth* prisoners employed on the Burma-Siam Railway, 58 would die. Slave labour in Japan followed for some. Only 218 lived to be repatriated to Australia in 1945. The end of the war with Japan and the homecoming and joyous reunions are covered well.

With *Perth* as its centrepiece, *Cruiser* is an extremely well-written account, both militarily and politically, of significant events of World War II. Carlton has based his narrative on meticulous research, including examination of diaries maintained by the ship's company and interviews with surviving members of the crew. Many interesting details have emerged from this research that give a compelling insight into life onboard ship, particularly in the Mediterranean, and in the harrowing years of Japanese cruelty to prisoners-of-war. It is a compelling read.

David Leach²

¹Farncomb later was promoted to rear admiral.

²Vice Admiral Leach is a former commanding officer of the guided missile destroyer HMAS *Perth* II.