The Venomous Little Krait

By Geoff Walker



Ah! some may say a venomous little snake, common to the tropics. Well yes, in more ways than one.

The Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD), also known as **Special Operations Australia (SOA)** and previously known as Inter-Allied Services Department (ISD), was an Australian military intelligence and special reconnaissance unit, during World War 2.

Authorized by Prime Minister John Curtin in March 1942, following the outbreak of war with Japan, the Inter-Allied Services Department was formed on 17 April 1942 having been given approval by General Thomas Blamey. In the beginning it was fashioned on the British **Special Operations Executive (SOE),** and it was organized initially by SOE British Army officer, Lieutenant Colonel G. Egerton Mott. For security reasons it was named **ISD**, and its existence was to be known only by the Prime Minister and the High Command.

SOA operated under the cover name Inter-Allied Services Department (IASD). It contained several British SOE officers who had escaped from Japanese occupied Singapore, and they formed the nucleus of the IASD, which was based in Melbourne. In June 1942, a commando arm was organized and designated **"Z Special Unit"** (which was later commonly known as **"Z Force"**). It drew its personnel primarily from the Australian Army and Royal Australian Navy.

In 1943, a 28-year-old British officer, Captain (later Major) **Ivan Lyon**, and a 51-year-old Australian civilian, **Bill Reynolds**, devised a plan to attack Japanese shipping in Singapore Harbor. Commandos would travel to the harbor in a vessel disguised as an Asian fishing boat. They would then use Folboats (collapsible canoes) to attach limpet mines to Japanese ships in Singapore harbor, before making good their escape.

Initial training for the raid was organized and carried out by Major Lyon and Captain Davidson at Refuge Bay. The site selected was a remote, inaccessible area along the Hawkesbury River, New South Wales and named **"Camp X"** for the purpose.

Folboats were essential for training the prospective operatives, however only two, a one-man and a two-man, were found to be suitable after a thorough search in Australia by Military personnel. These were immediately procured from the Folboat builder Walter Hoehn after a test run on the Yarra River, at Alphington, by the head of the Inter Allied Services Department Colonel Mott and Major Moneypenny. A wooden rigid canoe was also built for **Camp-X** by trainees under the supervision of Davidson.

Bill Reynolds was in custody of a 21 meter (70 ft) Japanese coastal fishing boat, **"Kofuku Maru"** which he had used to evacuate refugees from Singapore, prior to its capitulation to the Japanese. **Reynolds**

was an Australian who had served I the Navy during World War I and had lived in Burma, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies for more than 20 years. Nearly 50 years old, he volunteered his services at British naval headquarters in Singapore and was put in charge of the **Kofuku Maru**, a narrow-beamed 70-foot-long Japanese fishing boat seized by the British when the war began. He cobbled together half a dozen local Chinese willing to act as his crew, and began picking up refugees—British, Chinese, Malays, and others—from the islands around Singapore where they had been stranded when the ships in which they had been attempting to escape had been bombed and strafed by Japanese aircraft. Single handedly, Reynolds had, with evacuees on board, successfully sailed the **Kofuku Maru** to India.

Lyon ordered that the boat be requisitioned and shipped from India to Australia. Upon its arrival, he renamed the vessel "**Krait"**, after the small but deadly Asian snake.



Krait, the vessel which carried the men of **"Z Special Unit"** on Operation **Jaywick**, the successful raid on Singapore Harbor on the night of 26 September 1943, which resulted in the serious damage or sinking of 6 Japanese ships, three tankers and three general cargo ships, namely, the **Shosei Maru** 5698 GRT, **Nichiren Maru** 5460 GRT, **Arare Maru** 2770 GRT, **Hakusan Maru** 2197 GRT, **Nasusan Maru** 4399 GRT and **Kizan Maru** 5071 GRT. A seventh vessel was claimed to have been damaged but Japanese war records place this claim in doubt. (Australian War Museum)

In mid-1943, **Krait** transited the coastal route from a training camp at Broken Bay, New South Wales, to Thursday Island in the Torres Straits, but during the passage she developed serious engine problems, which eventually necessitated a new engine being procured and installed. Aboard was a complement from **Z Special Unit** of three British and eleven Australian personnel, comprising the mission commander Major Ivan Lyon, Lieutenant Hubert Edward Carse (Krait's captain), Lieutenant Donald Montague Noel Davidson, Lieutenant Robert Charles Page and a selected team of specialist Australian Army and Navy volunteers, all eager to carry out what had been designated **"Operation Jaywick"**.

On 13 August 1943, **Krait** departed from Thursday Island and headed for the Exmouth Gulf, Western Australia, where it was refueled, and final repairs were to be undertaken. Not only did the repairs cause delays in departure, but the Folboats, which had been specially ordered for the attack by Lyon from England, only arrived at the last minute. They were found to be faulty, lacked some important parts and were not according to the design that had been specified. They had to undergo many on-the-spot modifications simply to make each framework fit together and then fit correctly into the outer skins. This left the crew little time to get accustomed to them before being loaded onboard the **Krait**.

On 2 September 1943, **Krait** departed the Exmouth Gulf for Singapore. The team's safety depended on maintaining the disguise of a local fishing boat. The men stained their skin brown with dye to appear more Asiatic and were meticulous in what sort of rubbish they threw overboard, lest a trail of European garbage arouse suspicion. When passing through Lombok Strait on 6 September, apart from the dangers

posed by Japanese patrols, the strong currents in Lombok Strait posed significant navigational problems for **Krait**. Progress was agonizingly slow, at one stage the vicious adverse current forcing the fishing boat backwards for an hour. It was nearly 24 hours of constant battling the currents before **Krait** cleared the Lombok Strait and entered the Java Sea, at around 10:00 on 9 September. In these waters the crew and commandos flew a Japanese ensign, wore sarongs, and whenever possible the crew stayed out of sight below decks.

Negotiating her way through the Lingga Archipelago, **Krait** anchored off **Pulau Pompong** on the evening of 16 September. **Pompong** had been identified as a possible disembarkation point for the operatives but as dawn broke it was decided that the island was unsuitable. The next day was spent zigzagging through the numerous small islands in the area searching for an alternative hideout. That evening a great deal of enemy activity in the form of searchlights, seaplanes and transport aircraft made it evident that this was a hostile area for **Krait**. Eventually, after an uneventful trip, began disembarking the mission operatives and equipment who paddled 31 miles to **Pulau Panjang,** which by this time had been selected as their forward base. Three hours later, **Krait** was making her way back to Borneo with orders to rendezvous with the operatives on the night of 1-2 October at **Pompong Island**.



(Unknown copyright) Above, the heavily forest covered **Pompong Island**, in the Riau archipelago, originally planned as an operating base for **Operation Jaywick**, but discarded when found to be unsuitable for a disembarkation point. It was later used as a pick-up point after the mission had been completed.

Krait spent the next eleven days busily avoiding enemy contact off the south coast of Borneo, contending with heavy weather, and listening to the radio every night for any news about the operation. The six operatives spent the first two days after landing on **Pulau Panjang** observing Japanese movements in the approaches to Singapore Roads and preparing for the attack. At dusk on 20 September, they boarded their canoes, loaded with enough food and water for a week, and proceeded to the extreme north of the Riau Archipelago. For the next three nights the canoes 'island hopped' their way through the archipelago and, at midnight on the evening of 22 September, reached **Pulau Dongas** some eight miles south southeast of Singapore Harbor. **Subar island** served as the final launching point for the run-in as the Australian raiders hit shipping anchored in Singapore harbor.

On the night of 26 September 1943, with the greatest of stealth, under a dark and moonless sky, they paddled towards the lights of Singapore. In the harbor they twice lay forward and motionless in their canoes while searchlights scanned above their heads, but no alarm was raised. Then they separated, looking for shipping targets of opportunity. They silently paddled into the harbor and placed limpet mines on several Japanese ships before returning to their hideout. In the resulting explosions, the limpet mines allegedly sank or seriously damaged seven Japanese ships, comprising over 39,000 tons between them.



Subar Island, just seven miles from Singapore, was a rocky island, the rocks too hot to touch in the afternoon sun, and so hot it was impossible to sleep during the day. The men lay on blankets on a cliff top where they could look down on the sea 60 feet below and watch the passing parade of junks, ketches, proas and sampans. The heat haze usually lifted in mid-afternoon, and through their telescope they examined the harbor, transferring what details they observed to their chart and planning their attack for that same night. (Unknown copyright)



(Unknown copyright)

Dark skinned Australian raiders on the **"Krait"**, made to appear like Asians, from a distance.

The raid took the Japanese authorities in Singapore completely by surprise. Never suspecting such an attack could be mounted from Australia, they assumed it had been carried out by local saboteurs, most likely pro-Communist Chinese guerillas. In their efforts to uncover the perpetrators, a raft of arrests, torture and executions began. Local Chinese and Malays, as well as interned POWs and European civilians were targeted in campaign launched by the Japanese. The incident became known as the **Double Tenth**, for 10 October, the day that Japanese secret police began the mass arrests.

Between 05:15 and 05:50, seven explosions were heard indicating that all the attacks had been successful. Seven Japanese ships had been sunk or severely damaged. **Krait**, meanwhile, made her way back to the rendezvous point on **Pompong**, arriving just after midnight on the morning of 2 October. The commandos waited until the commotion over the attack had subsided and then returned to **Krait**, which they also reached on 2 October. Shortly afterwards, the crew recovered Canoe 2. The other two canoes were in the area but could not locate the **Krait** in the pitch darkness of the night. **Krait** retired to the south of the Temiang Strait and returned to pick up the remaining canoes at around 21:00 on 3 October.

Krait made a quiet journey across the Java Sea, again under the pretense of being a Japanese fishing boat flying a Japanese flag and approached the Lombok Strait on the afternoon of 11 October. With the crew once again in disguise, she entered the strait later that evening. Shortly before midnight a

Japanese destroyer was sighted approaching rapidly on **Krait's** port beam. She approached to within 100 yards; however, **Krait's** disguise was apparently good enough to allay any suspicions and the ship turned away without even shining a searchlight in the direction of the fishing boat, the remainder of the return passage to Australia was mostly uneventful.

The venomous little **Krait** cleared the strait early the next morning and entered comparatively safe waters. She arrived at Exmouth on 19 October 1943 having covered some 4000 miles during her 48-day mission. There were no casualties, and all involved in the operation were either decorated or mentioned in dispatches for gallantry. **Krait** was not commissioned at the time of the operation but was later commissioned in 1944 and was based at Darwin for the remainder of hostilities. In 1957, **Z Force veterans** found the Krait, virtually a hulk, hauling timber on the Borneo coast. She was brought back to Australia, restored, and now sits in the National Maritime Museum in Sydney, as **HMAS Krait**.

The **Operation Jaywick** operatives returned to **Z Force**, not knowing that in Singapore the Japanese had blamed local saboteurs for the destruction of their ships and began an investigation that led to the imprisonment, torture and execution of many Chinese and Malays, and some of the Europeans interned on the island.

The quiet hero, **Bill Reynolds**, by now a middle-aged civilian, went to Melbourne, Victoria, where he joined the clandestine civilian **Bureau of Economic Warfare**. Fluent in Malay and Chinese, he was infiltrated by the American submarine **USS Tuna** in the Straits of Macassar to gather information from local Chinese secret agents but was betrayed to the Japanese by native people. After months in the notorious Surabaya prison on Java he was executed by the Japanese. Such a tragic demise for a man who gave so much to help so many others.

End

Bibliography: Public archives Krait and Operation Jaywick, Australian War Memorial, Australian Raiders, and the Assault on Singapore Harbor - Navy.gov.au, plus various online sources in the Public Domain.

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