The Ship that Grew Trees

Commentary by Geoff Walker



During WW2 the Battle of the Java Sea, was fought on February 27th, 1942. In this historic naval battle, the Allied fleet suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Navy. After the defeat only four Dutch naval ships survived in the Java Sea, and in the ensuing days, the Imperial Japanese Navy sunk another three of them.

The sole remaining ship was **HNLMS Abraham Crijnssen,** a Jan Van Amstel-class minesweeper. She was just 56 m long, with a beam of 7.6 m, a draught of 2.1 m, and a displacement of 525 tons. The minesweeper was fitted with two Stork triple expansion steam engines, which provided 1,690 IHP to two propeller shafts, giving the vessel a service speed of 15 knots. Her armament consisted of 1 × 3 in (76 mm) gun, 2 × twin Oerlikon 20 mm cannons and an array of anti-submarine Depth Charges. She had a complement of 45 in total.

The **HNLMS Abraham Crijnssen** had been commissioned on 26th May,1937 and stationed in the Dutch East Indies as part of the Netherlands Eastern Fleet. The ship was based at the Port of Surabaya in Java. when Japan invaded in 1941. After the Allied defeats at the Battles of the Java Sea and Sunda Strait, all Allied ships were ordered to withdraw to Australia. HNLMS **Abraham Crijnssen** had been instructed to sail in convoy with three other warships, but unfortunately found herself left to proceed alone since all the other Dutch warships had been sunk by the Imperial Japanese Navy. This proved problematical since the vessel was lightly armed and lacked the means to defend herself from marauding Japanese aircraft or surface vessels. Hence, some other means of avoiding detection was needed, if a successful escape to Australia was to be achieved.

The Java Sea around Malaysia and Indonesia is strewn with well over 18,000 islands, ranging from large ones the size of Borneo (Modern day Sabah and Kalimantan) to minuscule ones, each hosting barely more than a handful of trees. The vessel would somehow need to dodge the overwhelming Japanese fleet and aircraft, remaining undetected whilst making her way south, towards Australia.



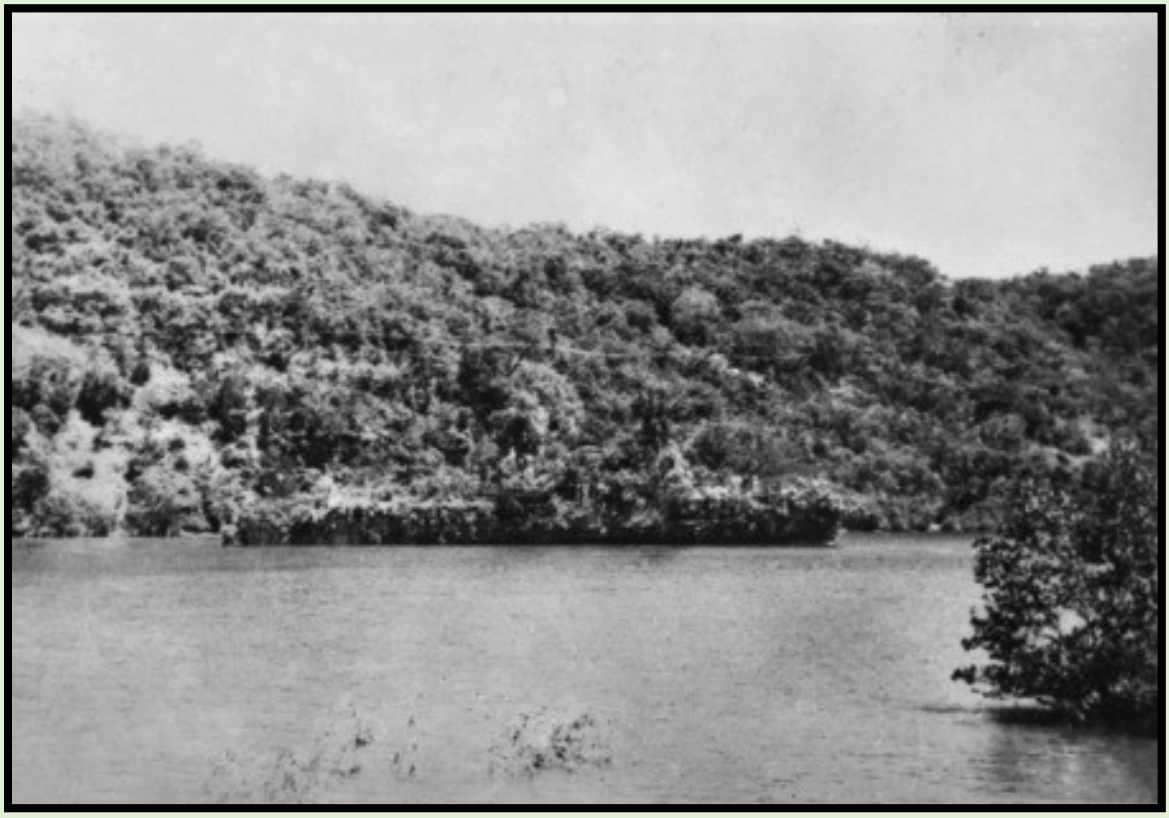
(unknown Photographer)

HNLMS Abraham Crijnssen

After much deliberation, the crew came up with the concept of disguising their ship as an island, using the abundance of trees and foliage readily available from the jungle clad terrain that was everywhere. They could use the topography to their advantage. This plan was far more viable than it may at first

appear. Provided that all the decks were properly covered with trees and foliage, as well as ship's profile, there was every possibility the ship would remain undetected from the air, as well as from seaward. Therefore, the plan would be to hold-up during the daylight hours, hipped up close alongside an island or shoreline, blending in with the surrounds, and move as much as possible under the cover of darkness. If caught in the open by patrolling ships or aircraft she would anchor or lie "doggo" masquerading as an island, hopefully remaining unnoticed, until the threat had passed.

The ship was heavily camouflaged with trees, shrubs, and a variety of foliage by the crew, who are deserving of commendation for the excellent job they did. This is evidenced by the image below, and the level of difficulty in detecting the ship's presence.



(Originally Australian War Museum)

RNN Abraham Crijnssen pictured heavily camouflaged, as she lies close to a jungle covered shoreline. The camouflage was so effective the ship was almost invisible to the naked eye, not attracting a second glance, unless it was known what one was looking for. Any small sections of hull or deck not covered by foliage was painted to look like rocks or the shoreline. In this guise, she progressively headed for Fremantle, Western Australia, where she arrived on 20 March 1942. **HLNMS Abraham Crijnssen** was the last vessel to successfully escape from Java, and the only ship of her type in the region to survive.



Having escaped from Indonesia and after arriving in Australian waters, the ship underwent a refit, which included the installation of new Anti-submarine detection equipment, and on 28 September, the minesweeper was commissioned into the Royal Australian Navy as **HMAS Abraham Crijnssen**. She was reclassified as an anti-submarine convoy escort and was also used as a submarine tender for the Dutch submarines that relocated to Australia following the Japanese conquest of the Dutch East Indies.

The ship's complement consisted of a combination of Dutch sailors and survivors from the British destroyer **HMS Jupiter,** as well as Australian personnel. All were under the command of an Australian lieutenant.

While escorting a convoy to Sydney through Bass Strait on 26 January 1943, **HMAS Abraham Crijnssen** detected a submarine on ASDIC. The convoy was ordered to scatter, while **HMAS Abraham Crijnssen** and **HMAS Bundaberg** depth charged the submarine contact. No wreckage of the suspected submarine was found.

The **HMAS Abraham Crijnssen** remained in Australian waters for most of WW2. On 7 June 1945, the minesweeper left Sydney for Darwin, with the oil lighter (and former submarine) K9 in tow. But on 8 June, the towing cable parted, and K9 stranded at Seal Rocks, New South Wales. The **HMAS Abraham Crijnssen** was then used for mine-clearing sweeps of Kupang Harbor, prior to the arrival of Royal Australian Navy forces, to accept the Japanese surrender of Timor.

Following the end of WW2, the minesweeper once again reverted to Dutch control and was used on anti-revolution patrols of the Netherlands East Indies for several years, eventually departing for the return voyage to the Netherlands in August 1951. The minesweeper was finally converted into a boom defense vessel in March 1956.



The ship was removed from the Dutch Navy List in 1960 and after decommissioning she was used for the training of sea cadets. In 1972 the ship was moved to Rotterdam then in 1995, **"Abraham Crijnssen"** was marked for preservation by the Dutch Navy Museum at Den Helder. She was retrofitted to her wartime configuration and became a museum ship.

The ship as she was in 2011, as a museum ship at Den Helder. (Credit Nick – D)

She really was the ship that grew trees!

End

References: Australian War Museum, Netherlands Indies Government information services, War History Online, and various online data available in Public Domains, from which additional material has been sourced.

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