



## H-Gram 068: Two U.S. Navy Heroes—Captain Albert Rooks and AMM1c Bruno Gaido

3 March 2022

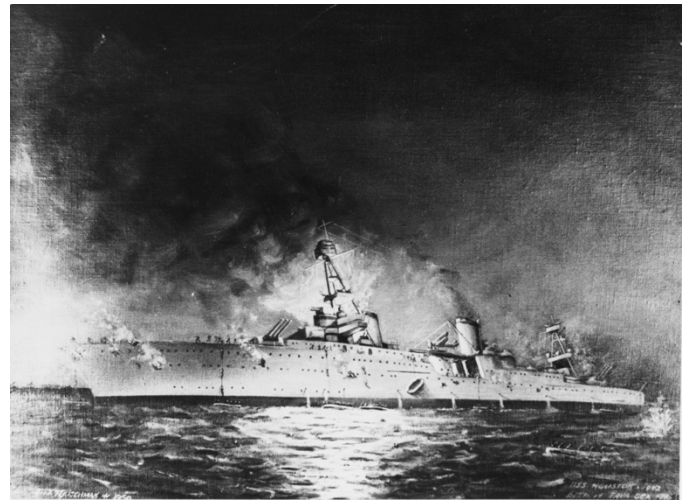
### Overview

*This H-gram covers two U.S. Navy heroes: Captain Albert Rooks, commanding officer of the heavy cruiser USS Houston (CA-30), lost in a valiant action against an overwhelming Japanese force in the Battle of Sunda Strait on 28 February/1 March 1942; and Aviation Machinist's Mate First Class Bruno Gaido, of Scouting Squadron 6 (VS-6) embarked on USS Enterprise (CV-6), decorated for actions during the carrier raids on the Marshall Islands on 1 February 1942 and the Battle of Midway on 4 June 1942.*

### 80th Anniversary of World War II

#### **Captain Albert H. Rooks and USS Houston's Last Stand**

*"They Sold Their Lives Dearly" is the title of a Tom Freeman painting that hangs in the entrance to my office at Naval History and Heritage Command. The painting shows USS Houston under a deluge of shellfire, her own*



Sinking of USS *Houston* (CA-30) in the battle of Sunda Strait, 1 March 1942. Painting by Joe T. Fleischman, 1950 (NH 93153).

*guns are blazing away as she is surrounded by an overwhelming Japanese force while attacking the Japanese invasion fleet off Java on the night of 28 February/1 March 1942. It took 87 Japanese torpedoes to put Houston and her consort, Australian light cruiser HMAS Perth, under, and in the chaotic melee, Japanese torpedoes sank four of their own troop transports.*

*The skipper of Houston, Captain Albert H. Rooks, was a hero of mine long before I joined the U.S. Navy, when I first started reading naval history, on par with Commander Ernest Evans. A brilliant officer, strategic thinker, and exceptional ship handler, Rooks was destined for high flag rank, greatly respected by*

superiors, and most tellingly, revered by his crew for his no-nonsense leadership, and most importantly, his handling of the ship in combat. Although the odds of running the Japanese gauntlet in Sunda Strait that night were very slim, Captain Rooks had to choose whether to flee or to fight. Along with Captain Hec Waller on Perth, Captain Rooks chose to fight.

The battle lasted a couple hours. Critically low on ammunition before the battle even began, both Allied ships fought with unbelievable valor. However, without escorting destroyers, they were at a severe disadvantage to Japanese "Long Lance" torpedoes from about a dozen destroyers and the 8-inch guns of two Japanese heavy cruisers hidden in the darkness.

Despite amazing ship handling in avoiding many torpedoes, both Allied ships were finally hit and disabled. Still, both ships kept fighting until they were out of gun ammunition, and even then kept fighting as a swarm of Japanese vessels closed within machine-gun range. Both Waller and Rooks were killed by Japanese shellfire shortly after giving the order to abandon their sinking ships.

Houston finally went down with a machine gun still firing and her national ensign still flying high, bathed in the light of star shells and searchlights. The fighting was so ferocious that one of Houston's few survivors may have summed it up best: "We didn't have a problem with sharks that night. Even they were dead." Of Houston's 1,168 men, only 368 survived the battle, and until the 291 survivors emerged from Japanese captivity at the end of the war, no one in the United States really knew what had happened in the Sunda Strait. Captain Rooks was awarded a Medal of

Honor while in missing-in-action status for his actions before the Battle of Sunda Strait even began.

For more on Captain Rooks and USS Houston, please see attachment H-068-1.

### **AMM1c Bruno Gaido Versus a Japanese Nell Bomber**

Aviation Machinist Mate First Class (then Third Class) Bruno Peter Gaido distinguished himself as a member of Scouting Squadron 6 (VS-6) during the raid on the Japanese-held Marshall Islands by the carrier USS Enterprise (CV-6) on 1 February 1942. During an attack by Japanese land-based bombers, the lead bomber was hit and commenced a suicide dive on Enterprise. Gaido jumped into the gunner's seat of a parked SBD Dauntless dive bomber on the flight deck and used the aircraft's rear guns to pour accurate fire into the cockpit of the Japanese bomber intent on crashing into the carrier. Finally out of control, the bomber barely missed a direct hit. The wing of the cripple bomber dragged across the flight deck and cut the tail off Gaido's plane, yet Gaido continued to fire until the plane crashed alongside the ship. Gaido then calmly extinguished a gasoline fire left by the bomber remnants.

Spot-promoted from petty officer third class to first class by Vice Admiral William Halsey for his actions, Gaido was later captured and tortured by the Japanese at the Battle of Midway and, after revealing nothing of value, was thrown over the side to drown. Gaido was awarded a Secretary of the Navy Commendation for his actions on 1 February 1942 and a posthumous Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions at the Battle of Midway.

*For more on Bruno Gaido, please see attachment H-068-2.*

*As always, you are welcome to disseminate H-grams widely. A complete listing may be found here.[ <https://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/hgrams.html>]*



USS *Houston* (CA-30) at anchor off San Pedro, California, 18 April 1935. A *New Orleans*-class heavy cruiser is in the right background (80-CF-21337-1).

## **H-Gram 068-1: Captain Albert Rooks and USS *Houston's* Last Stand**

*H-Gram 068, Attachment 1*  
(Adapted from *H-Gram 003 of February 2017*)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
March 2022

According to one witness, when the heavy cruiser USS *Houston* (CA-30) pulled into Tanjung Priok (the port for Batavia—now Jakarta), Dutch East Indies, on 28 February 1942, having barely survived the hours-long gunnery duel of the disastrous Battle of the

Java Sea the day and night before, the ship's cat deserted. The story is possibly apocryphal, although what is more certain is that the Australian light cruiser HMAS *Perth's* black cat (named Red Lead) attempted to desert in the same way in the same port at the same time. Along with the cat went *Houston's* luck. The ship had survived over 80 days as the largest Allied warship in the Far East, with no air cover and under multiple bombing attacks and the constant threat from the same kind of aircraft that had made short work of the British battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser HMS *Repulse* on 10 December 1941.

Seriously damaged in one air attack, and having survived the Battle of Java Sea, *Houston*, in company with *Perth*, would go

into battle that night near the Sunda Strait against overwhelming odds from which neither ship nor most of their crews would survive. Within the next several days, other remaining ships of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet would meet the same fate, in a number of cases alone, against insurmountable odds, with no survivors, but in every case with incredible valor.

*Houston* (CA-30) was a *Northampton*-class cruiser, commissioned on 17 June 1930. She was initially classed as a light cruiser (CL-30) due to her limited armor protection, which was necessary to keep her under the 10,000-ton Washington Naval Treaty limit. This led to the *Northampton* class (and preceding *Pensacola* class) being derisively known in the U.S. Navy as “tin-clads,” although they were very fast. However, the London Naval Treaty of 1930 defined all cruisers with 8-inch guns as heavy cruisers, and *Houston* was redesignated as heavy cruiser CA-30.

*Houston* was 600 feet long, with a standard displacement of 9,200 tons. Her main armament consisted of nine 8-inch guns in three triple turrets, two forward and one aft. Her initial fit of four 5-inch guns was increased to eight before the war (four single mounts per side). At Cavite Navy Yard, just prior to the outbreak of hostilities, *Houston* was fitted with four quad 1.1-inch anti-aircraft guns, which proved to be jam-prone. Her initial fit of six 21-inch torpedo tubes was removed early on to save weight. She also carried four SOC Seagull catapult-launched float/scout planes. The aviation section was amidships, which would prove to be a very bad design later in the war in other cruisers.

After her commissioning, *Houston* assumed duty in February 1931 as the flagship of the

U.S. Asiatic Fleet, operating mostly in Chinese waters due to the crisis following the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. *Houston* made one goodwill visit to Japan in May 1933 before being relieved as flagship in November 1933 and returning to the U.S. West Coast as part of the Scouting Force and subsequently participating in Fleet Battle Problems in the Pacific and Caribbean.

In July 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt embarked on *Houston* in Annapolis and transited the Panama Canal to Portland, Oregon, via Hawaii. Roosevelt embarked again in October 1934 for a “vacation” cruise via the Cedros Islands, Magdalena Bay, Mexico, and the Cocos Islands to Charleston, South Carolina, via the Panama Canal. In July 1938, Roosevelt embarked on *Houston* to observe the San Francisco Naval Review, then remained on board for a 24-day cruise to Pensacola, with ample time for deep-sea fishing. In September 1938, *Houston* assumed duty as the flagship of the United States Fleet. In January 1939, she embarked Roosevelt again, along with CNO William Leahy, to participate in Fleet Battle Problem XX in the Caribbean. *Houston* next assumed duty as flagship of the Hawaiian Department. On 19 November 1940, the ship returned to the Far East, serving as flagship for the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Thomas C. Hart.



Captain Albert H. Rooks, USN, commanding officer of USS *Houston* (CA-30), inspecting his ship's crew, 1941 (NH 93156).

On 30 August 1941, Captain Albert Harold Rooks assumed command of *Houston* from Captain Jesse B. Oldendorf. Born in Colville, Washington, on 29 December 1891, Albert Rooks entered the U.S. Naval Academy in July 1910. Known as "Rooksey" by his classmates, he was always ready to help anyone out, and was apparently quite a hit with the ladies. His "quiet military manner won for him on our first class cruise a recommendation for the highest cadet rank," which he did not get. He graduated on 6 June 1914.

Ensign Rooks reported to armored cruiser USS *West Virginia* (ACR-5) operating off Mexico during the Vera Cruz crisis. In January, Rooks assumed his first command, the 1903-vintage submarine USS *A-5*, used to defend the approaches to Manila Bay during World War I and which sank at the pier (and was

raised) at Cavite in April 1917. This apparently did not hurt his career, because in March 1918, he was assigned to armored cruiser USS *Brooklyn* (ACR-3), the flagship of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet. As a lieutenant at the end of World War I, he returned to submarine duty as commanding officer of USS *F-2* (SS-21) operating out of San Pedro, California. In January 1921, he assumed command of submarine USS *H-4* (SS-147), which had been originally built for the Imperial Russian Navy but not delivered after the 1917 Russian Revolution. In January 1922, he was assigned to the 12th Naval District staff in San Francisco and quickly became aide to the district commandant.

In September 1924, Rooks was assigned to the new battleship USS *New Mexico* (BB-40) and was promoted to lieutenant commander in October 1925. In April 1927, he was assigned as aide to the superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy. In April 1930, Rooks reported to the new-construction "light" cruiser *Northampton*, commissioned in May 1930, where he served as gunnery officer on her shakedown cruise to the Mediterranean and transfer to San Pedro, California. In July 1933, Lieutenant Commander Rooks returned to the U.S. Naval Academy for duty. In October 1935, he reported to the destroyer USS *Phelps* (DD-360), which was under construction, and upon commissioning became her first commanding officer. During this tour, *Phelps* escorted the heavy cruiser USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35), with President Franklin Roosevelt embarked, to Buenos Aires, Argentina, for the Inter-American Peace Conference. In July 1938, Commander Rooks reported to the Naval War College in Newport and was retained as faculty after graduation. He was promoted to captain on 1 June 1940.

Following the 27 November 1941 "War Warning" message from the CNO, Admiral Hart finalized plans to move *Houston*, light cruiser *Marblehead* (CL-12), all 13 destroyers, and most auxiliaries of the Asiatic Fleet to locations farther south out of range of Japanese land-based bombers, leaving the defense of the Philippines to the 29 submarines. Hart also had the advantage of access to the decoded Japanese diplomatic traffic (Purple code), that Admiral Husband Kimmel at Pearl Harbor did not have. As intelligence sources increasingly indicated that war in the Far East was imminent, Hart executed the plan just before hostilities commenced. As a result, the Asiatic Fleet was initially spared the debacle that befell the U.S. Army Air Forces in the Philippines and Royal Air Force in Malaya on 8 December (7 December Pearl Harbor time). However, the elimination of U.S. and Allied capability to oppose Japanese air operations would have a severely debilitating effect on Allied naval operations for the duration of the campaign. For practical purposes, the Japanese would have uncontested control of the air, with the ability to bomb anywhere at will.



USS *Houston* (CA-30) seen through the sight of an Australian 4-inch gun on the beach at Darwin, Australia, on 15 February 1942. *Houston* was then escorting a convoy from Darwin for the East Indies. This is possibly the last photograph taken of the cruiser before her loss (NH 94458).

*Houston* and most other ships of the Asiatic Fleet withdrew to Darwin, Australia. Admiral Hart would eventually have to come south from the Philippines to Java in the Dutch East Indies via submarine. *Houston* soon became engaged in escorting convoys of reinforcements and supplies from Australia to the Dutch East Indies, all of which fell into the category of "too little, too late," as the Japanese steadily advanced, taking airfields, port facilities, and oilfields on Borneo and other locations in the northern Dutch East Indies, extending the range of their bombers.

On 4 February 1942, *Houston* was part of a task force of ships under the command of Dutch Rear Admiral Karel Doorman, with the mission to oppose Japanese landings along the Makassar Strait between Borneo and Celebes Island. The Allied force came under concerted air attack that focused on *Houston* and *Marblehead*. The ship's antiaircraft defenses were severely hampered as it was discovered that about 75 percent of U.S. 5-inch antiaircraft rounds were duds. Despite great ship handling, *Marblehead* was hit and severely damaged, which would force her to withdraw from the region.

In the intense air raid in the Flores Sea on 4 February 1942, lying on his back in the open to track Japanese aircraft so he could time maneuvers with bomb release, Rooks skillfully dodged dozens of accurately aimed bombs from about 50 bombers in multiple waves (some hitting within 10 feet of *Houston*). All missed, but the last bomb from the last plane was released at an errant angle and through sheer luck destroyed *Houston's* after 8-inch turret, killing 48 men initially (more would die of wounds or would be lost ashore in hospital when Java fell), and reducing the ship's main battery combat power by one third. *Houston*

pulled into the port of Tjilitjap on the south coast of Java for initial repair, and the ship was battle-worthy within three days, departing on 10 February to meet up with a convoy coming north from Darwin. Given the option by Admiral Hart to withdraw his ship from the region for more extensive repairs, Rooks declined, because even damaged, *Houston* was the most capable ship the Allies had.

After on-loading more ammunition, *Houston* departed Darwin with the convoy on 15 February en route East Timor, which was under imminent threat of Japanese landings. The convoy came under heavy air attack on 16 February. This time, the 5-inch ammunition worked and *Houston* downed as many as seven of 44 attacking aircraft, drove others off, and disrupted the aim of even more. *Houston* was described as a "curtain of fire" as she radically maneuvered among the convoy, with the result being almost no damage to any of the Allied ships. However, the Allied command in Java determined it was too late to save Timor and the convoy, minus *Houston*, returned to Darwin, where most of it was destroyed by the surprise air strike by the Japanese carrier force on 19 February.

Having narrowly avoided being caught and destroyed in port, *Houston* nevertheless operated under constant threat from both land-based bombers and Japanese carrier aircraft. As it became apparent that the Japanese were massing forces for the assault on Java, the last major Allied-held island, *Houston* was assigned to an Allied force intended to intercept and destroy the Japanese landing force, although it was uncertain whether the Japanese intended to land at the eastern or western end of Java (actually it was both). The Allied force was

again commanded by Rear Admiral Doorman and included *Houston*, British heavy cruiser HMS *Exeter*, Australian light cruiser HMAS *Perth*, and Dutch light cruisers HMNLS *De Ruyter* (flagship) and *Java*, accompanied by nine U.S., British, and Dutch destroyers.

The Allied force never had a real chance. With no air support, Doorman's force was continuously dogged by Japanese reconnaissance aircraft, which enabled the Japanese to keep their troop transports out of harm's way, and keep a blocking force of two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and 14 destroyers in between. Late in the afternoon of 27 February, the two forces engaged in what was the largest surface action since the Battle of Jutland in 1916. The initial phase consisted of a long-range gunnery duel in which both sides expended massive amounts of ordnance to little effect, and ineffective torpedo attacks by both sides. *Houston* claimed hits on a Japanese heavy cruiser, but Japanese records do not confirm this. *Houston*, in turn, was hit by two dud 8-inch rounds that did little damage. Finally, the Japanese scored a damaging hit on *Exeter* that caused her to veer out of formation, resulting in chaos due to the inability of the Allied ships to effectively communicate with each other.

At the end of the day, a Dutch and a British destroyer had been sunk. Damaged *Exeter* was escorted away by a Dutch destroyer, and the four U.S. destroyers were detached, as their torpedoes were expended. During the night, a British destroyer struck a "friendly" mine and sank, with the last destroyer detached to rescue survivors. The four remaining cruisers, with no escort, then resumed a northerly transit under cover of darkness in an attempt to reach the troop



transports. However, Japanese reconnaissance by floatplanes was just as effective at night as during the day. At about 2300 on 27 February, the two cruiser forces re-engaged. *De Ruyter* and *Java* were effectively blown out of the water by a salvo of Japanese "Long Lance" torpedoes, fired from a range the Allies did not think possible (hence the initial after-action reports blaming the hits on submarines). Rear Admiral Doorman went down with his ship. In accordance with standing orders from Doorman, *Houston* and *Perth* disengaged in order to exit the Java Sea and regroup south of Java. The Battle of the Java Sea had cost the Allies two light cruisers and three destroyers sunk, a heavy cruiser badly damaged, and about 2,300 crewmen killed in action. The Japanese lost about 36 sailors and suffered only minor damage in the debacle.



HMAS *Perth* in Gatun Lake, Panama Canal, 2 March 1940 (NH 57860).

After the brief stop in Tanjung Priok, *Houston* and *Perth* were underway on the night of 28 February/1 March to exit the Java Sea via the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra, executing the pre-planned orders. With *Perth* in the lead (her skipper, the legendary Captain Hec Waller, was senior), the two unescorted cruisers encountered a Japanese

blocking force, and in the initial exchange of gunfire discovered that they were unexpectedly in the midst of the main Japanese invasion force for Java. *Perth* opened fire first, followed immediately by *Houston*.

Although already critically low on ammunition, low on fuel, previously damaged, and with exhausted crews, both cruiser skippers chose to turn and attack toward the dozens of Japanese troop transports along the shore, which was the reason both ships had gone back into the Java Sea a week earlier. Although the chance of escape was slim, Captain Rooks placed duty over survival, and decided to sacrifice his ship dearly in an attempt to thwart the landing.

In the hours-long, close-quarters night melee that followed, both ships were surrounded on all sides by two Japanese heavy cruisers and numerous destroyers and smaller patrol craft, which fired 87 torpedoes at *Houston* and *Perth*. The Allied cruisers avoided numerous torpedoes, several of which hit and sank Japanese troop transports, including one with the Japanese commander of the invasion force embarked (Lieutenant General Hitoshi Imamura), who survived his swim ashore.

Both cruisers were ultimately hit by multiple torpedoes and countless shells, yet they still damaged numerous Japanese ships, fighting until they were out of ammunition, in the end firing star shells and exercise rounds directly at Japanese vessels until nothing was left. *Perth* went down first, and *Houston* fought on alone for 30 minutes as Japanese ships closed to within machine-gun range on all sides. Both Waller and Rooks were killed by enemy shellfire after finally giving the order to

abandon ship. A Marine in *Houston's* forward anti-aircraft platform fired his .50-caliber machine gun at the enemy until the ship slipped beneath the surface, her national ensign still flying high.

Of *Houston's* 1,168 men, only 368 survived the battle. About 150 others known to have made it into the water were lost at sea due to wounds, drowning, hypothermia, or being carried by the current into the Indian Ocean. All other survivors were eventually captured by the Japanese. One hero of the sinking was chaplain Commander George Rentz, the oldest man aboard, who gave his life jacket to a wounded sailor (who initially refused to take it). Rentz would be the only Navy chaplain to be awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. However, until 291 survivors emerged from the hell of Japanese captivity at the end of the war, no one in the United States really knew what had happened in the Sunda Strait.

Captain Rooks was awarded a Medal of Honor while in missing-in-action status for his actions in the Battle of the Flores Sea and Java Sea; the period of action did not cover the Battle of Sunda Strait. *Houston* was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation after the war.

Medal of Honor citation:

*The President of the United States, in the name of Congress, takes pride in presenting the Medal of Honor (deemed posthumously after the war) to Captain Albert Harold Rooks, United States Navy, for extraordinary heroism, outstanding courage, gallantry in action and distinguished service in the line of his profession, as Commanding Officer of the USS HOUSTON (CA-30), during*

*the period 4-27 February 1942, while in action with superior Japanese enemy aerial and surface forces in the Netherlands East Indies. While proceeding to attack an enemy amphibious expedition, as a unit of a mixed force, HOUSTON was heavily attacked by bombers; after evading four attacks, she was heavily hit in a fifth attack, lost 60 killed and had one turret wholly disabled. Captain Rooks made his ship again seaworthy and sailed within three days to escort an important reinforcing convoy from Darwin to Koepang, Timor, Netherlands East Indies. While so engaged, another powerful air attack developed which by HOUSTON's marked efficiency was fought off without much damage to the convoy. The commanding general of all forces in the area thereupon cancelled the movement and Captain Rooks escorted the convoy back to Darwin. Later, while in a considerable American-British-Dutch force engaged with an overwhelming force of Japanese surface ships, HOUSTON and HMS EXETER carried the brunt of the battles, and her fires alone heavily damaged one and possibly two heavy cruisers. Although heavily damaged in the actions, Captain Rooks succeeded in disengaging his ship when the flag commanding officer broke off the action and got her safely away from the vicinity, whereas one half of the cruisers were lost.*

Like many combat award citations, Rook's Medal of Honor citation is not completely historically accurate, which, however, does not detract from the valor of his action.)

The *Fletcher*-class destroyer DD-804 was named in honor of Captain Rooks. USS *Rooks* was commissioned in September 1944 and was awarded three battle stars in World War II for action at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. She was hit by shrapnel from a Japanese mortar at Iwo Jima, which killed one crewman. At Okinawa, *Rooks* fired 18,624 5-inch rounds in 87 consecutive days of shore bombardment, coming under direct kamikaze attack four times, and was credited with shooting down six Japanese aircraft and assisting in the destruction of many more. *Rooks* earned two battle stars during the Korean War, bombarding the North Korean ports of Songjin, Wonsan, and Chongjin. In 1962, she was transferred to the Chilean navy, serving as *Cochrane* until being scrapped in 1983.

Today, the Naval History and Heritage Command is working with the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta and the Indonesian government to protect the wreck of *Houston* from metal salvagers who have illegally removed the wrecks of almost every other Allied ship lost in the Java Sea. This has proved to be a protracted effort. (The Indonesian navy understands and is helpful, but it's not their jurisdiction.) NHHC, along with Allied partners, also created a museum exhibit on the battle in Indonesia's National Maritime Museum, which regrettably was subsequently destroyed in a fire.

In my opinion, Captain Rooks should have received a second Medal of Honor for his actions in the Battle of Sunda Strait. Although Albert Rooks faced a far tougher fight than John Paul Jones, Farragut, or Dewey, the U.S. Navy has no ship named after Rooks, although there is a water fountain at the Naval Academy dedicated in his honor.

Sources include: *Ship of Ghosts: The Story of USS Houston, FDR's Legendary Lost Cruiser, and the Epic Saga of Her Survivors*, by James Hornfischer, Bantam, 2007; *Rising Sun, Falling Skies: The Disastrous Java Sea Campaign of World War II*, by Jeffrey R. Cox: Osprey Publishing, 2014; *In the Highest Degree Tragic: The Sacrifice of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet during World War II*, by Donald M. Kehn, Jr., Potomac Books, 2017, *The Fleet the Gods Forgot: The Asiatic Fleet in World War II*, by Captain W.G. Winslow, USN (Ret.), Naval Institute Press, 1982; *The Lonely Ships: The Life and Death of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet*, by Edwin P. Hoyt, Jove Books, 1976; and *Java Sea 1942: Japan's Conquest of the Netherlands East Indies*, by Mark Stille, Osprey Publishing, 2019.



USS *Enterprise* (CV-6): Flight deck scene, 1 February 1942, during the raids against the Japanese-held Marshall Islands. Note belts of .50 caliber ammunition being carried around by the crewman in the foreground. The aircraft in the background are part of the carrier's air group Douglas SBD-3 Dauntlesses (NH 50941).

## **H-Gram 068-2: AMM1c Bruno Gaido**

*H-Gram 068, Attachment 2  
(Adapted from H-Gram 004 of April 2017)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHH  
March 2022*

Bruno Peter Gaido was born in Staunton, Illinois, in 1916 to parents who had immigrated from Italy via Germany to the United States in 1914. He graduated from high school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1934. He worked as a filterer in a brewery until his father finally relented and gave him permission to join the Navy. Gaido enlisted at

Naval Station Great Lakes on 11 October 1940. Upon graduation from boot camp, he was assigned to Naval Air Station Pearl Harbor on Ford Island. Gaido was temporarily assigned to Scouting Squadron 6 (VS-6) to learn to be an aviation machinist. After several more temporary duty stints with the squadron, he was assigned permanently.

Gaido quickly earned a reputation in VS-6 for his mental and physical toughness. When newly reported pilot Lieutenant (j.g.) Norman Jack "Dusty" Kleiss got into his SBD Dauntless dive bomber to make his first carrier landing, he expected to fly solo with a pile of sandbags in the gunner's seat, standard procedure for a carrier qualification flight. Instead, Kleiss found Gaido in the seat, who identified himself as Kleiss' radioman-gunner.

Kleiss tried to talk Gaido into getting out the aircraft for his own safety, but Gaido persisted, responding, "You got wings, don't ya?" Buoyed by Gaido's confidence, Kleiss made six perfect landings with Gaido as a passenger. (Kleiss would go on to be the only dive-bomber pilot to score a direct hit on three different Japanese ships at the Battle of Midway—carriers *Kaga* and *Hiryu*, and heavy cruiser *Mikuma*, all of which were sunk. Kleiss was subsequently awarded a Navy Cross.)

On Sunday morning, 1 February 1942, in the first offensive action by U.S. aircraft carriers in the Pacific war, planes from USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) and *Yorktown* (CV-5) caught the Japanese by surprise in the Marshall Islands. *Enterprise* aircraft bombed targets in the northern Marshalls: Kwajalein, Wotje, and Maloelap (Tararoa). *Yorktown* aircraft bombed targets in the southern Marshalls: Jaluit, Mili, and Makin. Despite extensive damage, a Japanese counter-attack force of five G3M Type 96 twin-engine bombers (later designated "Nell") led by Lieutenant Kazuo Nakai was able to locate *Enterprise*. Aided by cloud cover, and the repeated gun jams of U.S. fighters, all five bombers made it through the combat air patrol. Instead of a standard horizontal bombing run, Nakai led his bombers in a glide-bombing profile, pulling out at 1,500 feet over the carrier. Extraordinary ship handling by Captain George Murray caused the bombs to miss, the closest impacting 30 yards to port.

Throughout the engagement, shipboard anti-aircraft fire consistently missed behind the Japanese aircraft. However, Nakai's plane had been damaged by Wildcat fighters before commencing its run. As the other four bombers made good their escape, Nakai's plane turned around and commenced a dive

on *Enterprise*, approaching from astern where the carrier's anti-aircraft defenses were weakest. There was no doubt that Nakai intended to crash his plane into *Enterprise*.



A crewman readies the rear cockpit twin .30-caliber machine-gun mount on a Douglas SBD-3 Dauntless onboard USS *Enterprise* (CV-6). Although this image was captured on 24 February 1942 prior to the launching of air strikes against Wake Island—more than three weeks after Bruno Gaido's exploit—it illustrates his "office" as an SBD radio-gunner well (80-G-66279)

As the Japanese bomber continued to close on *Enterprise* without taking any apparent damaging hits, AMM3c Bruno Gaido leaped out of his battle station in the catwalk. He climbed into the back seat of parked SBD Dauntless dive bomber "6-S-5" (his normal position as radioman-gunner when the plane was airborne), and swiveled the plane's aft twin .30-caliber machine guns and opened fire on the rapidly approaching bomber. He stood up, aiming his machine guns down into the low-flying plane, pouring accurate fire into the cockpit, finally causing the plane to lose control. The bomber barely missed the flight deck, its wingtip cutting off the tail of the SBD Gaido was in and spinning the parked aircraft. Gaido continued firing on the bomber throughout, until it crashed in the water on the opposite side of the ship.

Gaido then calmly grabbed the fire bottle from the SBD and extinguished a pool of flaming gasoline on the flight deck left over from the crashed bomber. Thereafter, he disappeared into the ship, worried he would get in trouble for leaving his battle station. Vice Admiral William F. Halsey, the task group commander, ordered that the unidentified gunner be found. A search party eventually located Gaido and brought him to the bridge, whereupon Halsey spot-promoted him to petty officer first class, as everyone who observed the event credited Gaido with keeping *Enterprise* from being hit in the extremely close call.



Battle of Midway: Charcoal and chalk drawing by C. B. Coal of the 4 June 1942 battle showing the Japanese aircraft carriers *Kaga* and *Akagi* under air attack (K-24233).

Besides the double-promotion from Halsey, Gaido was awarded a Secretary of the Navy Letter of Commendation for “extraordinary courage and disregard for his own safety” in

helping shoot down a Japanese plane “after it had been set afire and attempted to crash on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier.” (Of note, at this time neither the Navy Commendation Medal nor Bronze Star Medal existed, and the Silver Star was an Army-only award. Also at that time, the Navy Cross was third in order of precedence behind the Medal of Honor and Distinguished Service Medal.)

At the subsequent Battle of Midway on 4 June 1942, Gaido was gunner in a SBD piloted by Ensign Frank Woodrow O’Flaherty, one of 28 planes that dive-bombed the Japanese carrier *Kaga* (Flaherty’s bomb just missed, possibly because smoke and flames from four previous hits, one from Dusty Kleiss, obscured the target).

While returning to *Enterprise* in a group of six stragglers led by Lieutenant Charles Ware, the flight was jumped by six Japanese Zero fighters that broke away from Japanese carrier *Hiryu*’s dive-bomber counter-strike that was heading toward carrier *Yorktown*. Ware had earlier improvised a tactic of turning into the attacking Zeros, and did so again, creating an arc with the trailing SBDs that enabled all rear-seat gunners to concentrate their fire on the lead Zeros. Two Zeros were so badly shot up they had to break away to *Hiryu*—one ditched en route and the other barely made it to the carrier. Although it is impossible to tell which SBD gunners did the damage, given Gaido’s previous history of accuracy, it is possible he did his fair share.

The remaining four chastened Zeros broke off, but were unable to catch up with *Hiryu*’s dive bombers before they were intercepted by F4F Wildcat fighters from *Yorktown*. These had shot down most of the undefended Japanese dive bombers (the seven bombers

that got through scored three direct hits and two damaging near-misses on *Yorktown*, so every Japanese plane lost was critical to *Yorktown's* survival at that point in the battle).

Unfortunately, Gaido's plane had been holed in the wing during that or an earlier encounter with Zeros and was losing fuel. O'Flaherty had to ditch in the open sea. Of the other five SBDs, one was able to ditch near *Yorktown* for rescue, but the other four, including Ware's, missed the carriers and disappeared without a trace into the Pacific.

O'Flaherty and Gaido were picked up by Japanese destroyer *Makigumo*, interrogated, and possibly tortured. The Japanese claimed to have gotten useful information from them about the defenses of Midway Island, but the two provided nothing of value regarding the U.S. carriers. However, as neither had been to Midway, neither had any way of knowing what was on the island (even the skipper of USS *Hornet's* torpedo-bomber squadron did not know that a detachment of his own squadron, which had been left behind in Norfolk to transition to the new TBF Avenger torpedo bomber, had arrived on the island).

My assessment is that O'Flaherty and Gaido, possibly under torture, gave up plausible but phony information. Certainly everyone who knew Gaido adamantly believed (after the war) he would not have cracked. However, by 15 June 1942, the Japanese decided the two aircrewmembers were no longer of use and orders were received to dispose of them. According to Japanese accounts, the destroyer skipper asked for volunteers to execute the prisoners, but the crew initially refused. However, in the dead of night, weights were tied to both and they were thrown over the side to drown. Japanese accounts state that both met their

end with stoic and dignified defiance. Neither O'Flaherty's nor Gaido's fate was known by the United States until after the war. None of the responsible Japanese officers survived the war, so there was no war crime prosecution.

O'Flaherty and Gaido were declared missing in action on 4 July 1942 and presumed dead on 5 June 1943. O'Flaherty was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. Gaido was awarded a posthumous Distinguished Flying Cross. The award citation read:

*The President of the United States takes pride in presenting (posthumously) the Distinguished Flying Cross to Aviation Machinist Mate First Class Bruno P. Gaido, U.S. Navy for extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as Gunner in an airplane in a scouting squadron in action against enemy Japanese forces in the Battle of Midway, 4-6 June 1942. With heroic and meritorious devotion to duty, he rendered valuable assistance to his pilot by detailing continuous specific and comprehensive information concerning the disposition and movements of enemy Japanese units. His courage and cool determination in carrying out this vital task in the face of furious and repeated attacks were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.*

*General Orders, Bureau of Naval Personnel info Bulletin No. 313, April 1943.*

Besides the Distinguished Flying Cross, Gaido would posthumously receive the Purple Heart, Presidential Unit Citation, American Defense Medal, American Campaign Medal, the Asia-Pacific Campaign Medal with two bronze stars, and the World War II Victory Medal. The Presidential Unit Citation was presented to the crew of *Enterprise* and Air Group 6:

*...For consistently outstanding performance and distinguished achievement during repeated action against enemy Japanese forces in the Pacific war area, 7 December 1942 to 15 November 1942. Participating in nearly every major engagement in the first year of the war, ENTERPRISE and her Air Group, exclusive of far flung destruction of hostile shore installations throughout the battle area, did sink or damage on her own a total of 35 Japanese vessels and shot down a total of 185 Japanese aircraft. Her aggressive spirit and superb combat efficiency are fitting tribute to the officers and men who so gallantly established her as an ahead bulwark in the defense of the American nation.*

Gaido's father received a Presidential commemoration (his mother died while he was missing in action):

*In grateful memory of Bruno Peter Gaido, who died in the service of his country, SEA, Pacific Area, attached USS ENTERPRISE, 5 June 1943 (presumed). He stands in the unbroken line of patriots who have dared to die that freedom might live and grow and increase its blessings. Freedom lives,*

*and through it, he lives - in a way that humbles the undertakings of most men.*

*Signed, Franklin D. Roosevelt,  
President of the United States*

No ship has been named after Bruno Gaido. However, *John C. Butler*-class destroyer escort DE-340 was named in honor of O'Flaherty. Commissioned in April 1944, USS *O'flaherty* earned four battle stars in World War II (Guam, Lingayen Gulf, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa) and was mothballed in 1947. *Gearing*-class destroyer DD-865 was named in honor of Lieutenant Charles R. Ware (also awarded a posthumous Navy Cross). The ship was commissioned at the very end of World War II and served until 1974.

Bruno Gaido's actions on 1 February 1942 are depicted with reasonable accuracy in the 2019 movie *Midway*. However his demise did not occur on 4 June 1942 as depicted in the movie, and whether or not he told the Japanese destroyer skipper to "Go f\*\*\* yourself," is unknown to history, but it makes for a good Hollywood scene.

My thanks to Laura Orr, NHHC Hampton Roads Naval Museum deputy education director, for much of the research on Gaido. Sources also include *Never Call Me a Hero*, by N. Jack "Dusty" Kleiss, with Timothy and Laura Orr, William Morrow, 2017.