

Success and failure in the port of Singapore— Z Special Unit and the Jaywick and Rimau raids

There is a memorial at Garden Island at Rockingham, near Perth, which is at first glance very strange. It lists dozens of names from a variety of places and services. There are men from the Navy, Army and Air Force. There are civilians. There are people from Britain, New Zealand and Portugal. And there is the strange name binding them—the Services Reconnaissance Department, better known as Z Special Unit.

Z Special Unit

Z Special Unit was a top secret unit formed in 1942 to gather intelligence and carry out sabotage right at the heart of the enemy.

Its members were sworn to secrecy about their operations, and were highly trained as silent and effective killers.

Your task is to put together a report based on the two raids carried out by Z Special Unit, explaining why one was successful, but not the other. Elements to be considered in coming to your conclusions are:

- Training
- Special skills
- Planning
- Decision-making
- Equipment
- Luck
- Communication
- Other



The memorial at Rockingham. The names are listed on the other side of the structure.

Operation Jaywick

Code named Operation Jaywick (after Jay Wick, a powerful deodoriser that removed smells from Singapore homes), the aim of the raid was for a group of Australian and British Z Special Unit operatives to sneak in to the Japanese stronghold of Singapore Harbour, and attach time-delayed limpet mines to as many ships as possible. The raiders would try to escape before the ships exploded.

The Krait



Singapore was hundreds of kilometres inside Japanese-dominated territory. How to approach the port unseen? The key would be the small ship, the *Krait*. This was a former Singapore-based ship, named the *Kofuku Maru*, that had been seized and used to transport many refugees during the fall of Singapore. It was later sailed to India, where it was re-named after a deadly Malayan snake, the krait. The little fishing boat was a bit over 20 metres long, less than three metres wide, with a top speed of six-and-a-half knots, and a range of thirteen thousand kilometres. The *Krait* was stocked with necessary supplies for the trip and military equipment for the raid—including cyanide suicide pills for each man.

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Care was taken to make as many of the goods as possible Japanese made—sunglasses, for example, which might be recognised at a distance, pencils, paper, cooking pots, even toothbrushes. If any of these fell overboard they would not indicate anything suspicious.



The epic voyage of the *Krait*

The voyage

On 8 August 1943 the *Krait* set out on the 4000 kilometre trip from Cairns in Queensland to Exmouth Gulf in Western Australia. The crew of 14 ranged in age from 20 to 43, with most in their twenties. They included four soldiers and ten sailors—two Englishmen, a Welsh coalminer, a Northern Irishman, and ten Australians, from every State except Tasmania.

At Exmouth Gulf they took delivery of four special collapsible canoes flown out from England. The commandos would paddle these into Singapore Harbour at night, and attach the mines to the ships' sides.

They set out from Exmouth on 2 September, heading towards Singapore through enemy-controlled waters. They flew a Japanese flag as part of their disguise. The crew stained their bodies brown, dyed their hair, and dressed in sarongs so that they would appear to

any casual observer to be Malays or Japanese. None could speak the language, so the risk was that if any Japanese warship became curious and decided to take a close look the crew would have had to fight to the death.



Once in Japanese waters they took extraordinary care that there would only ever be one or two men on deck, and that no rubbish of any sort—even a match—would be thrown overboard.

On 18 September the *Krait* slipped into one of the small, heavily vegetated islands near Singapore Harbour, and unloaded the three teams of canoeists and their equipment. The commandos had twelve days to get to Singapore Harbour, sink as much shipping as they could, hide out until the expected furious search for them had eased, and get back to the waiting *Krait* nearly one hundred kilometres away.

The attack

On the night of 26 September the three two-man crews silently glided into the harbour at different points, and quietly selected their targets. After the physically arduous task of paddling into the harbour, their nerves were now strained by the closeness of the enemy—one noise in attaching the mines could have led to a curious sailor raising the alarm. Even if one person aboard a ship had idly looked over a railing or through a porthole in the right direction, the saboteurs could have been seen—which would have led to the failure of the mission, and their capture and certain death. Fortunately their training and luck held, and nobody saw them in the shadows of the hulls of the target ships.

The crews then silently paddled out of the harbour towards their chosen hiding spot, and, despite the exhaustion and tension of more than eighty kilometres of paddling in enemy waters, listened to hear the roar of their mines destroying the enemy ships early the next morning.

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The explosions came, nine of them, and the harbour erupted into uproar. Japanese planes and ships started searching for the saboteurs, but the Z Force men stayed hidden until they could move out secretly to rendezvous with the *Krait*—after another ninety kilometres of paddling. Once having finally boarded the *Krait* they now had to travel out of enemy waters, this time with the Japanese much more likely to be alert and suspicious.

The escape

There was one very dangerous moment, however. One night, still deep inside enemy waters, a Japanese war ship on patrol came right up to them and travelled alongside them for a distance, yet did not challenge them. Why not? The men later speculated on the reason. Was it because their disguise was so good? Or, more likely, that they had caught a tired officer at the end of his watch, and challenging the apparently innocent boat would have meant that he was delayed in going off duty for a rest?

On 19 October the *Krait* anchored safely off the American base in Exmouth Gulf. It had been 48 days and 8000 kilometres since the *Krait* had headed north for Singapore—and 33 of those days had been spent deep inside enemy waters.

The raid was a great success—both in physical destruction or severe damage to seven vessels representing nearly 40000 tonnes of Japanese shipping; and also psychologically for the raiders, and for the Allied prisoners of war in Changi. All 14 raiders returned home safely, though five were in a group chosen to try and repeat the raid in the 1944 Operation Rimau. Every Jaywick member is now commemorated in the names of the streets of Exmouth.

At the end of the war the *Krait* was used to carry timber on Borneo rivers, until it was bought as a war memorial and returned to Australia in 1964. The *Krait* is now permanently moored in Sydney Harbour, part of the National Maritime Museum collection at Darling Harbour.

Participants in Operation Jaywick

Lieutenant Colonel I. Lyon, the Gordon Highlanders
Lieutenant Commander D. Davidson, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve +
Captain R. Page, Australian Imperial Force *
Lieutenant H. Carse, Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve
Leading Stoker J. McDowell, Royal Naval Reserve
Leading Telegraphist H. Young, Royal Australian Naval Reserve
Acting Leading Seaman K. Cain, Royal Australian Naval Reserve
Able Seaman W. Falls, Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve *
Able Seaman A. Jones, Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve
Acting Able Seaman F. Marsh, Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve *
Acting Able Seaman F. Marsh, Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve +
Acting Able Seaman M. Berryman, Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve
Corporal Morris, Royal Army Medical Corps
Corporal A. Crilley, Australian Imperial Force.
+ Killed in action on Operation Rimau
* Captured and beheaded by Japanese on Operation Rimau

Operation Rimau

Inspired by the success of Operation Jaywick, Z Special Unit soon started preparing for Operation Rimau. 'Rimau' is the Malay word for 'tiger'—and the name was chosen for the large multi-coloured tiger head tattooed on the chest of the leader, Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Lyon (who had also led the Jaywick raid).

The aim of Operation Rimau, like that of Operation Jaywick, was to be the destruction of shipping in Singapore Harbour by commandos attaching limpet mines. But there the similarities ended. The means of delivery of the mines would be by special one-man motorised submersible canoes (called 'Sleeping Beauties', or SBs); there were far more men involved, 23, as opposed to Jaywick's 14; and the commandos would be delivered to the area by submarine where they would seize a small fishing boat, rather than sailing in one from Australia.

The men and their 15 submersibles left Garden Island naval base near Perth on 11 September 1944 aboard the British submarine HMS *Porpoise*. The submarine could only go a certain distance into enemy waters in safety, so to overcome the SBs' 50 kilometre range the plan was to capture a fishing vessel, load all the equipment aboard it, and approach Singapore Harbour undetected.

On 28 September the *Porpoise* stopped an Indonesian junk, the *Mustika*. The commandos took over the boat, and the nine Malay crewmen were taken aboard the submarine to be taken to Fremantle. (They were imprisoned for a time, then returned to Malaya after the war.) The plan was for the ship to sail close to Singapore, then the commandos would carry out their raid, and return to a rendezvous with the *Porpoise* on the night of 7/8 November at their base on Merapas Island. If the submarine failed to make contact with



them then it would stay in the area, returning to the designated point every night until 8 December.

The commandos now went through the same procedures that had helped make Jaywick successful—limiting the numbers of men visible on deck, staining their skins brown, wearing sarongs. The *Mustika*, however, had no engine, so the commandos were now at the mercy of the winds.

On 10 October, just sixty minutes before the Rimau raid was due to begin, the crew of a coastal patrol boat spotted the *Mustika*.

Something made them suspicious and they approached the boat. One of the Australian commandos aboard panicked and started firing at the approaching patrol boat. Three of the crew were killed, but two escaped—and would obviously report the incident.

The Rimau commandos now destroyed the *Mustika* and most of the supplies and equipment, and split up, to make their way back by canoes to the rendezvous point.

However, it is possible that at least one group did penetrate Singapore Harbour and set off a series of explosions on the night of 10 October, destroying three ships.

A series of events that would lead to the death of the commandos now started to unfold.

The first was the interception in Australia of a Japanese coded message reporting activity by about twenty commandos in the attack area. However, if the Australians had responded, it would have shown that the Allies had broken the Japanese secret codes, leading them to create a new code—and eliminating a great Allied advantage. So the appointed rescue submarine was not told of the sudden urgency of the situation.

The second concerned the rescue submarine, HMS *Tantalus*. The orders to the commander of the submarine, Lieutenant Commander Hugh Mackenzie, were to go to the rescue rendezvous area of Merapas Island on 7 November, and to remain there until 7 December if necessary.

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On 4 November eighteen of the group were together on Merapas Island. A small Japanese force landed on the island, and was attacked by the commandos. Two of the Rimau commandos were killed in combat on the island, while the remainder now split into two groups and went to different islands. At least one of the groups, comprising ten of the men, was in place to meet the submarine on 7 November—but it did not appear, as its captain had instead chosen to hunt for enemy shipping in the area.

A third element in the developing tragedy was the role of one of the Z Special Unit officers, Major Chapman, aboard the *Tantalus*. Chapman's task was to provide the detailed knowledge of the raid and the rendezvous point to the submarine commander. He was in effect the Rimau representative on the rescue party. He did not argue with the submarine commander and insist that he kept to the rescue arrangements.

When the submarine did reach the area on 21 November, Chapman was worried by the surf, and tracked his landing canoe around the island to calmer waters. He and another commando, Corporal Croton, now had a difficult trek to the set position. Chapman, panicking in the tense situation, wanted to head back to the submarine, but Croton drew his pistol and forced Chapman on.

When they finally reached the designated meeting point after dawn on the next morning, they found evidence of commandos having been there. Chapman saw some local people, but did not try to question them about what might have happened. Nor did he try to persuade Mackenzie to stay in the area and be available for survivors each night—as he had been ordered. Instead, the submarine headed off on a hunt again, and did not return. Nor did any of the officials in Australia who knew that the Rimau commandos were in trouble try to contact the submarine and order them to remain in the area for any survivors.

Once the 7 December final deadline passed, the survivors realised that they would not be rescued. They now tried to make their way south by 'island-hopping' along the three thousand kilometres of

Participants in Operation Rimau

Killed in action or died during the raid:

Lt Col Ivan Lyon +
Lt Cmdr D. Davidson +
Lt. B. Reymond
Lt. H. Ross
Sub Lt J. Riggs
WO J. Willersdorf
Sgt C. Cameron
Cpl A. Campbell
Cpl C. Craft
Able Seaman F. Marsh +
Able Seaman A. Huston +
L/Cpl H. Pace
Pte D. Warne

Executed and buried at Kranji:

Lt W. Carey +
Able Seaman W. Falls +
Corporal R. Fletcher
Sergeant Gooley
Lance Corporal J. Hardy
Major R. Ingleton
Captain R. Page +
Lieutenant A. Sargent
Corporal C. Stewart
WOII A. Warren

+ Also a participant in the Jaywick raid)

enemy-held territory between Singapore and Australia. Over the next two weeks most were captured, killed in firefights, or drowned trying to move between islands. The last commando was captured in March.

The official Japanese record claims that the captured Rimau commandos were now treated well out of respect for their brave resistance to capture. The authors of the most recent detailed study of the situation claim that is a lie. The men, they say, were brutally tortured—several had now died of untreated disease, bashing and torture, and possibly as a result of medical experiments. The others lived on in a situation in which jailers regularly beat them, where their cells were crawling with vermin and contaminated with filth. Disease was rampant, with cases of beriberi, scabies, malaria and dysentery. Food consisted of a starvation diet of five hundred grams of rice per day, less for prisoners on the sick list.

The prisoners' best hope now became the state of the war—Japan was clearly being defeated everywhere, and it was only time before they would have to surrender or be defeated in the home islands of Japan itself.

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On 3 July 1945 the men were put on trial for 'perfidy and espionage' and found guilty.

On 7 July they were executed. The Japanese record stresses the 'honour' bestowed on the men by being beheaded—witnesses, however, later gave evidence that the executions were brutal and horribly mangled. It took guards more than half an hour to execute the ten men, and one of the guards had required 'two or three' blows each time to complete the beheading. The bodies were dumped in three unmarked graves, with nothing left to identify the men. On 6 August the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and on 9 August on Nagasaki, and on 15 August the Japanese surrendered.

Seventeen of the Rimau commandos are now in graves at Kranji War Cemetery, in Singapore.

