

“THE CRUISER HOUSTON: OF PRIDE and PURPOSE” (w.t.)

“The Cruiser Houston: Of Pride and Purpose” is a HoustonPBS production that will air in September in conjunction with the premiere of the new Ken Burns series “The War”. The HoustonPBS program is intended to add a local perspective to the broader national series on World War II. In his preliminary research the program’s producer, Jim Fisher, identified over thirty regional topics on the war and home front for consideration, of those only two topics were selected for production. Although many of the other topics are significant, and may be produced at a later date, this story was selected because the Cruiser Houston and its crew is considered by many the single most noteworthy in terms of its connection to the community, its place in the history of the war, and the saga of the 368 men who survived the sinking of the ship in the Battle of the Sunda Strait in 1942.

The program will first explore the pre-war era of the USS Houston, CA-30, from its launch in September 1929 to the beginning of the World War II in 1941. During this period the ship served as the flagship of the Asian Fleet. In the 1930’s President Franklin Roosevelt made a number of voyages on the vessel, earning it the nickname of “The Rambler”. FDR, aboard the USS Houston, also visited Houston in 1936 as the city celebrated the Texas Centennial.

“The Cruiser Houston: Of Pride and Purpose” will then take the viewer on the journey of the historic ship and its crew in the early months of World War II. The Houston was an aging ship when the war ignited for Americans on December 7, 1941; however the ship and its crew was considered one of the foremost in the navy’s arsenal. It’s commander, Captain Albert Rooks used the ship and its crew to frustrate the Japanese military effort in the South Pacific at a time where they had superiority in the air and on the sea. Considering the devastation of the U. S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, this was critical to the disruption of Japan’s plan to dominate the seas in the early months of the war. Captain Rooks orders were simple, ‘find and engage’, and they took every opportunity to comply with that order. The success of the Houston at engaging enemy ships and surviving despite the enemy pronouncing it destroyed led to yet another nickname for the ship, the “Gallop Ghost of the Java Sea.” In late February, 1942, just three months into the war a damaged Houston and the Dutch Cruiser Perth made their final engagement near the Sunda Strait, attacking a vastly superior Japanese landing force as it approached the Java coast. Both ships now rest on the floor of the Java Sea as a silent testimonial to that memorable battle. This epic fight will be revealed in this program through first-hand accounts from some of the few remaining survivors.

The story of the USS Houston and its crew doesn’t stop with the sinking of the ship, as POWs many of the 368 survivors became part of a ambitious

Japanese plan to build a railroad from Bangkok, Thailand to Moulmein, Burma. Approximately 61,000 POWs and 250,000 conscripted inhabitants of the area were forced to work on what is now referred to as the Thai-Burma Death Railway. Over the next three and a half years their battle was not only with their captors but with malnutrition, malaria, cholera and tropical ulcers. Thousands upon thousands lost this battle, including 13,000 POWs, 79 of which were survivors of the sinking of the Cruiser Houston.

After the war, in the late 1940's Otto Schwarz, a Cruiser Houston survivor, starting with a list of six names began contacting the 290 plus other survivors that returned with him from the ordeal of war. He soon formed the Cruiser Houston Survivor Association, a group that continues to hold annual reunions in the city of Houston. In 2007 only seven of the thirty-one living survivors were able to attend the reunion. The program concludes with the memorial service held as part of this gathering. In this fitting tribute to all who have gone before; survivors, family and friends gather in Sam Houston Park, near a monument crowned by the recovered bell from the CA-30, the USS Houston. This occasion brings the story into the present, and as the association's "next generation" of family members celebrate, they also stand ready to carry the legacy of the Cruiser Houston into the future. **"The Cruiser Houston: Of Pride and Purpose"** will help document this legacy for the community.