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## **The Importance of the Muara Coast Sites for Bruneian World War II Heritage: the Muara Beach Memorial, the American Wreck and the Australian Wreck \* \***

### *Abstract*

*The area of Muara experienced intense fighting in World War II. This was the area from where the Japanese troops made their approach to Bandar Seri Begawan and also the area where the Australians fought their way ashore to liberate Brunei. As such the site of Muara Beach is now home to a yearly commemorative ceremony in Brunei and a war memorial erected on the beach itself. The sea off the Muara Coast holds important additional remnants testifying of World War II in Brunei. Two frequently visited diving wrecks originate from World War II and can be accessed by regular divers. These wrecks are called the 'Australian Wreck' and the 'American Wreck'. Both have an interesting and particular history connected specifically to World War II in the area. The paper will discuss how all these sites now serve as reminders of Bruneian World War II heritage and make the Muara Coast area important for this heritage. The paper will argue that the preservation of the wrecks and the Muara Beach memorial is imperative as sites of Bruneian World War II heritage and memory but also for the potential they hold for visitors from Brunei as well as abroad.*

**Keywords:** *World War II, Japanese Occupation of Brunei, Memorials, Wrecks.*

### **1. Introduction**

The appeal and attraction of an area is determined by the wealth of landmarks it contains. Some of these landmarks are made up of elements of natural beauty. Others are the result of cultural elements. War is not a manifestation of noble human culture but it is a human cultural element in the sense that it is man-made. Similar to most countries in the world Brunei was also touched by World War II. These events now already lie many decades and several generations of Bruneians behind us but their heritage can still be observed in Brunei. The Muara Beach as well as the wrecks<sup>1</sup> that lie in Brunei Bay, all hold special significance as silent witnesses of the horrors of war in the so peaceful Brunei of today.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many wrecks in the Bay of Brunei area but only two are accessible by regular divers. Interestingly enough at least two more World War II wrecks have been identified and are known to but these need high technical skill to be accessed because of the depth these wrecks sank to. See "Dive Sites in Brunei, Technical Wrecks", *Poni Divers Website*, Available at: <https://ponidivers.com/dive-sites-in-brunei/>; The Yuho Maru and Baiei Maru were oil tankers used by the Japanese but are inaccessible to the public and therefore not part of this essay.

It is these sites that embody the events that took place there during World War II and function as witnesses of this era. These landmarks through their nature and function form the only physical testimony of the War that changed the balance of power throughout the whole world and all are to be found on the Muara Coast area. There are also still human witnesses to this era but statistical data tells us that in 2015 there were only 1100 people in Brunei who were 85 years old or above.<sup>2</sup> These people were statistically 15 years old and older in 1945 and would have been only 12 years old since 1942 at the time the Japanese occupation became a daily reality for Bruneian society.<sup>3</sup> This abstract number of 1100 people of an age able to remember the events and bear witness to the events also does not mean that all of these were even present in Brunei when the war came to Brunei. As the historical memory of the event is fading the memory of the war becomes more and more explored in the fields of historical and literary studies.<sup>4</sup>

Very few people remain to bear witness to the war in Brunei provided they were in already residing in Brunei during that time and their health still allows this today. As the human memory is fading, the appeal and memory of World War II in general remains very important to society and future generations in many ways, both individuals and families who were in the war as well as communities and nations affected by it.

Every year the Anzac Day memorial service is conducted at the location of Muara Beach and for Bruneian society this is an important yearly returning event. The location is home to a small Australia-Brunei Memorial that bears witness to the Australians soldiers that died on Muara Beach during the liberation of Brunei. The site is now used as location of the yearly Anzac Day memorial. As recently as 2017 the Australian High Commissioner to Brunei Darussalam Nicola Rosenblum unveiled a new commemorative plaque for the monument.<sup>5</sup> The area of Muara also contains two important World War II shipwrecks in the Bay of Brunei. The 'Australian Wreck' and the 'American Wreck' as these are now known to Bruneian divers are because of their location in the sea hard to access by the general public but have also recently become the site of memorial ceremonies. A small memorial was erected in the American Embassy in Brunei Darussalam in 2016 for the American sailors who died on the American ship that sank in the Bay of Brunei.<sup>6</sup>

The whole area of the Muara Coast as home to these physical remnants of World War II in Brunei forms a unique area of Bruneian history and cultural heritage that touches the history

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2 Brunei Darussalam Statistical Yearbook 2015, Department of Statistics Brunei Darussalam, Department of Economic Planning and Development Prime Minister's Office, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, 2016, p. 16.

3 Brunei was actually already attacked in late December 1941 by the Japanese.

4 As example of the importance of literature in Bruneian memory see H. Hannah and F. Dhont. "Bombs as potent reminders of war: A literary-historical study of Negara Brunei Darussalam", *South East Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 16, pp. 138-150; Also see the original literary work by M. Burmat, *Permainan Laut*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Bandar Seri Begawan, 2008; As example of the memory of the war in Brunei historically studied see: J. Maslin, J. Marles and F. Dhont, *Kisah-kisah dalam kenangan: Stories through memories*, Syarikat Haji Jukim/Jukim Bin Haji Lamit & Anak-Anak, Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, 2017; Also see F. Dhont, J. E. Marles, J. Maslin, "Memories of World War II: Oral Histories of Brunei Darussalam (December 1941-June 1945)", In Jarosław Suchoples, Stephanie James, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (eds.) *World War II Re-explored: Some New Millennium Studies in the History of the Global Conflict*, Peter Lang, Berlin, 2019, pp. 131-149.

5 I. Groves HA, "Panel Maklumat baru dilancarkan", *Media Permata Newspaper*, April 25, 2017, Available at: <https://mediapermata.com.bn/panel-maklumat-baru-dilancarkan/>

6 C. B. Allen, "Year's End Holiday Message by U.S. Ambassador to Brunei Darussalam", *U.S. Embassy in Brunei Darussalam*, December 20, 2016, Available at: <https://bn.usembassy.gov/years-end-holiday-message-u-s-ambassador-brunei-darussalam-craig-b-allen/>

of both Brunei but also other countries. This is embodied by the memorial Australia-Brunei Memorial at Muara Beach on land as well as the World War II shipwrecks on land. It is argued in this paper that these sites must be preserved as they embody and physically represent Bruneian World War II heritage and memory but also for the potential attraction and importance they hold for visitors and future generations from Brunei as well as abroad. It is argued that the potential of the Muara Coast to attract and educate visitors interested in the history of Brunei is very significant because of these sites. To demonstrate these points the paper will discuss the background of the war and how these sites of the Muara coast came to serve and function as reminders of Bruneian World War II heritage.

## 2. Historical Background

World War II has been extensively documented but a short sketch is necessary to explain how these events touched Brunei and how Muara beach and the World War II wrecks in the Bay of Brunei became significant during World War II.

The strategic importance of Brunei and the presence of oil caused it to be a top target for the Japanese. As soon as bombs fell on Pearl Harbour on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1941 the British denied the Japanese access to the oil installations by burning all these resources in Lutong and Seria.<sup>7</sup> In fact the British had already begun since September 1941 to fill up the naturally flowing oilwells with cement in Seria in order to stop these from flowing.<sup>8</sup> The Japanese immediately captured these coveted resources on 16 December 1941.<sup>9</sup> On 22 December the Japanese had marched all the way to Bandar Seri Begawan where they met Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin and various Bruneian officials.<sup>10</sup> Brunei had fallen into Japanese hands and would be governed by the Japanese for the duration of the war but Japan was careful in the way the Bruneian Sultan was initially treated. When Marquis Maeda was appointed as head of the administration of the Borneo Defense Force in charge of all the former British territories on Borneo Island, he visited Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin to legitimize his presence and assured him of both financial support as well as his ability to maintain his religious authority in Bruneian society.<sup>11</sup>

The Japanese were able to exploit Bruneian oil resources during the war and put heavy pressure on Seria in this process but the sparse population of Brunei created a need to import foreign labor. This colored the way the Bruneian population would come to remember the Japanese occupation.<sup>12</sup> There were for instance comfort women stations in Kuala Belait where large numbers of the Japanese soldiers were stationed and Taiwanese and Korean women were sent to the Miri and Seria area.<sup>13</sup> Historical research has been able to confirm that many more stations were set up in Sarawak and Sandakan but not in Bandar Seri Be-

7 B. Reece, *Masa Jepun: Sarawak Under the Japanese 1941-1945*, Sarawak Literary Society, Kuching, 1998, p. 27.

8 M. Mohamed, *Zaman Jepun di Brunei, 1941-1945*, Pusat Sejarah Brunei, Bandar Seri Begawan, 2017, p. 53.

9 O. K. Gin, *The Japanese Occupation of Borneo, 1941-1945*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p. 37.

10 M. Mohamed, *Zaman Jepun di Brunei, 1941-1945*, Pusat Sejarah Brunei, Bandar Seri Begawan, 2017, p. 66.

11 B. Reece, *Masa Jepun: Sarawak Under the Japanese 1941-1945*, Sarawak Literary Society, Kuching, 1998, p. 58.

12 F. Dhont, "The Japanese Occupation of Insular Southeast Asia: Japanese Homogenizing Policies and Local National Identities in British Borneo, the Philippines and the Netherlands Indies", *Asian Issues*, No. 1/2017, vol. 3, Institute for Asian Studies, Belgrade, 2017, p. 32.

13 B. Reece, *Masa Jepun: Sarawak Under the Japanese 1941-1945*, Sarawak Literary Society, Kuching, 1998, p. 58.

gawan town.<sup>14</sup> The Japanese put their center of presence in the Miri area and not the Bandar Seri Begawan area. This indirectly lessened the impact of the Japanese occupation on Bandar Seri Begawan. Where there were Japanese troops there was a need for comfort women stations. The Japanese also put women from Southeast Asia in the comfort stations and there were also individual cases of Bruneian women raped by the Japanese.<sup>15</sup> The Japanese occupation took its toll on Brunei and the Bruneian population was traumatized, experienced shortages and lived in fear during the war. As the war situation began to turn against the Japanese, conditions in Brunei also became increasingly harsher. Towards the end of 1944 conditions had worsened considerably. During the war imported Javanese Romusha were used for heavy labor as procurement of resources became increasingly difficult in Northern Borneo.<sup>16</sup> One of the ships used by the Japanese to transport resources in Southeast Asia was the Japanese epts. Imabari Maru that is now known as the 'Australian Wreck'. During its mission to transport laborers and comfort women, the ship hit a Japanese mine in Brunei Bay and many laborers and comfort women were killed when it sank in September 1944. As supplies became increasingly scarce the Brunei population became increasingly touched by the war.<sup>17</sup> The Japanese themselves came more and more tense and under pressure as the war conditions worsened. Fearful of eradication of the Bruneian leadership by the Japanese near the end of the war, the Sultan had to flee Brunei to hide in the jungle.<sup>18</sup>

During the second half of 1944 the Japanese decided to base the Southeast Area Fleet in Brunei Bay and they proceeded to put mines in Brunei Bay to protect the area.<sup>19</sup> The Allied bombing campaign started in early June 1945 and the mines in Brunei Bay were swept.<sup>20</sup> It was again one of those mines that hit the American vessel 'USS Salute' in June 1945 when it had begun to clear the minefield. The wreck of the ship can now still be found in Brunei Bay as the 'American Wreck'. The sweeping of the mines cleared the way for the Australian army to liberate Brunei. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1945 the Australians in *Operation Oboe 6* landed on Muara beach and overwhelmed Japanese resistance before advancing to the oilfields.<sup>21</sup> On the early morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1945 the Japanese in a final act of resistance also similarly to the British in 1942 destroyed these oil resources to prevent the Allied forces from capturing these.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to the Japanese however the Australians first marched into Bandar Seri Begawan before marching to the oilfields.<sup>23</sup> The importance of the oil resources was now less paramount compared to the establishment of Allied authority in the area. When the Australians took control of Bandar Seri Begawan it was safe for the sultan to return to Bandar Seri Begawan. Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin expressed his happiness

14 O. K. Gin, *The Japanese Occupation of Borneo, 1941-1945*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p. 68.

15 M. Mohamed, *Zaman Jepun di Brunei, 1941-1945*, Pusat Sejarah Brunei, Bandar Seri Begawan, 2017, p. 122.

16 O. K. Gin, *The Japanese Occupation of Borneo, 1941-1945*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p. 130.

17 See J. Maslin, J. Marles and F. Dhont, *Kisah-kisah dalam kenangan; Stories through memories*, Syarikat Haji Jukim/Jukin Bin Haji Lamit & Anak-Anak, Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, 2017.

18 M. Mohamed, *Zaman Jepun di Brunei, 1941-1945*, Pusat Sejarah Brunei, Bandar Seri Begawan 2017, p. 149.

19 O. K. Gin, *The Japanese Occupation of Borneo, 1941-1945*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p. 130.

20 Ibidem, p. 137.

21 P. Stanley, *Borneo 1942-1945: Australians in the Pacific War*, Department of Veteran's Affairs, Canberra, 2005, p. 10.

22 M. Mohamed, *Zaman Jepun di Brunei, 1941-1945*, Pusat Sejarah Brunei, Bandar Seri Begawan 2017, p. 56.

23 P. Stanley, *Borneo 1942-1945: Australians in the Pacific War*, Department of Veteran's Affairs, Canberra, 2005, p. 12.

at the return of the British to Brunei.<sup>24</sup> The rebuilding process subsequently began and the war became part of the history of Brunei.

In all these events the Muara coast area held a particular importance as this was the site where the Australians landed to begin the liberation of Brunei. Additionally it was also in front of this coast that ships plied off and on, shipping all types of cargo from people used as slave labor to oil in this very busy shipping lane in front of the Muara Coast. Finally the strategic importance of the anchorage provided by Brunei Bay area compelled the Japanese to protect this with mines. These same mines were the ones that caused the demise of both the Japanese transport ship *Imabari Maru* and also the American minesweeper *USS Salute* creating the 'Australian Wreck' and the 'American Wreck' of today.

### **3. Commemorative Sites of Heritage**

The value of the Muara coastal area is clearly considerable to Bruneian War history. The natural beauty of the region and the development of the area for recreation both on land as well as in the water will remain outside the scope of this paper. Because of these historical events that played out during World War II, the area is also important for its place and role in the war history of Brunei. However, the three different sites of Muara Beach, the American Wreck and the Australian wreck each represent this history in a very different way.

The American Wreck is what its name proclaims to be. This is a wreck that sank in June 1945 when it was carrying out minesweeping missions in the bay of Brunei. It drifted to close to a Japanese mine and blew up. Several of the crew went down with the ship and lost their lives. The ship is now on the bay of Brunei and is a major site visited by local and international divers.

The site itself is in poor condition as the wreck itself is broken in half with one section of the wreck partially positioned on top of the other section.<sup>25</sup> Documentation on the wreck is steadily growing as both Poni Divers and Oceanic Quest Diving in Brunei have recently made efforts to document this site.<sup>26</sup> Like Poni Divers, Oceanic Quest also provides potentially interested divers a sketch of the wreck and even includes an extensive write-up on the history of the American Wreck including information on the American sailors who passed away there.<sup>27</sup>

The *USS Salute* was launched in February 1943 and came in 1944 to the Pacific Ocean in order to carry out convoy escort duty before being charged with patrolling and minesweeping around the islands of the Philippines. To help prepare for the Allied landing of Brunei, in June 1945 the ship was charged with minesweeping in Brunei Bay. Their work be-

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24 T. S. Monks, *Brunei Days*, The Book Guild, Sussex, 1992, p. 106.

25 Based on personal observations during dives. Originally depicted in M. Davidson, *Laut Brunei, The Brunei Sea*, Brunei Sub-Aqua Diving Club, Muara, 2000, p. 97.

26 Recent sketches were done by Poni Divers. See "Wrecks in Brunei", *Poni Divers Website*, Available at: <https://ponidivers.com/diving-in-brunei-poni-wrecks/>

27 "American Wreck", *Oceanic Quest Website*, Available at: <http://oceanicquest.com/american-wreck/>

gan on 7 June 1945 but on 8 June the ship hit a mine, fractured and could not be saved.<sup>28</sup>

Recently the ship received more attention. In 2016 the American and Bruneian Navy cooperated with the Bruneian Government to remove some items from the wreck.<sup>29</sup> The American Ambassador and the American commander paid tribute to the American Sailors during the event and stated: "Our remembrance ceremony and diving operations on Salute solemnly honor an important historical site, and pay rightful respects to the legacy of brave Americans who will never be forgotten."<sup>30</sup> In fact nine Americans died during the accident and in 2016 the US Embassy installed a small memorial on its premises.<sup>31</sup> The memorial contains a folded American flag, a picture of the USS Salute and the names of those who died. During the memorial service the American and Bruneian Divers also carried out activities on the actual wreck. They attached a plastic wreath to the wreck of the Salute.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. Ambassador to Brunei participated in the wreath laying ceremony on an American destroyer in the Bay of Brunei honoring the bravery and service of the sailors on the USS Salute that had passed away.<sup>33</sup> At the time the American Naval History and Heritage Command however also expressed their concerns for the safety of the wreck and a testimony left by a certain diver on 22 January 2017 on this website already alluded to some objects from the wreck being stolen by looters.<sup>34</sup>

Where this first historical site has recently received significant attention, the second shipwreck related to World War II that is accessible to divers has received far less attention despite its longer and more mysterious history. The accounts of its history seem to have become mixtures of local folklore and half-forgotten historical accounts. The ship was originally referred to as the 'Australian Wreck' and still carries this misnomer today for convenience's sake in the diving community although there is since recently a greater awareness on the actual ship's origin. It is unclear why this ship came to be called the Australian wreck but it is speculated that it was either sunk by Australian forces or an Australian ship. Perhaps there is a connection to the history of Australia landing troops in the area for the liberation of Brunei during World War II that caused people to remember this wreck as the Australian Wreck. The story of the ship being sunk by the Australian forces seems to have found its way on the internet by a group called Panaga Divers and is still on the website of Oceanic Quest.<sup>35</sup> In

28 J. L. Mooney (ed.), *The Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, Vol. 6, Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1959, p. 271.

29 E. Lockwood, "NHHHC Reviews U.S. Navy Wrecks in South Pacific Waters and Prepares to Bring New Life to Disturbed Artifacts", *The Sextant*, U.S. Navy, Naval History and Heritage Command, November 18, 2016, Available at: <http://usnhistory.navylive.dodlive.mil/2016/11/18/artifact-recovery-from-uss-salute/>

30 "US Navy Divers Conduct Inaugural Dive, Preserve Legacy of USS Salute", *Task Force 73 Public Affairs*, Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, November 17, 2016, Available at: <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1008155/us-navy-divers-conduct-inaugural-dive-preserve-legacy-of-uss-salute/>

31 C. B. Allen, "Year's End Holiday Message by U.S. Ambassador to Brunei Darussalam", *U.S. Embassy in Brunei Darussalam*, December 20, 2016, Available at: <https://bn.usembassy.gov/years-end-holiday-message-u-s-ambassador-brunei-darussalam-craig-b-allen/>

32 "US Navy Divers Conduct Inaugural Dive, Preserve Legacy of USS Salute", *Task Force 73 Public Affairs*, United States Navy Website, November 17, 2016, Available at: [https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=97720](https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=97720) (picture 2)

33 K. Chambers, "U.S., Brunei Conduct Closing Ceremony for Historic CARAT", *United States Navy Website*, 6 November 2016, Available at: [https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=91891](https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=91891)

34 E. Lockwood, "NHHHC Reviews U.S. Navy Wrecks in South Pacific Waters and Prepares to Bring New Life to Disturbed Artifacts", *The Sextant*, U.S. Navy, Naval History and Heritage Command, November 18, 2016, Available at: <http://usnhistory.navylive.dodlive.mil/2016/11/18/artifact-recovery-from-uss-salute/>

35 Oceanic Quest Website, Australian Wreck, Available at: <http://oceanicquest.com/australian-wreck/>; For the earlier story attributed to Panaga Divers see: A. Prins, "Amok op ss De Klerk", 2011, Available at: <http://blog.seniorennet.nl/lecercklercq/archief.php?startda>

fact it is very likely that the earlier account by a now disbanded group called Brunei Sub-Aqua Diving Club founded in 1981 was the cause of the misnomer as represented in what seems to be the earliest documented account of the discovery of the actual wreck in recent history. This group found the Australian Wreck on 22 July 1984 and speculated that the ship was British built but sold to the Dutch "as all the cabin names, first and second class, are all in Dutch!"<sup>36</sup> The group went on to describe how they found various items on the site: Japanese war goods, batteries, leather boots, beer bottles, bullet clips and a few 75 mm shells, lots of gas masks and on deck the engine, chassis and tires of Nissan trucks and jeeps. Finally they also went on to describe a large bomb blast near the starboard bow.<sup>37</sup> At the the wreck seemed to have been in very good condition when it was found but now decades later the upper deck has collapsed. The group at the time also speculated based on an account by a local fisherman. They assumed that this ship had been in the Brunei River close to Muara before it was boarded by desperate Japanese responsible for sacking the Bruneian palace and other buildings after the news of the Japanese surrender. The soldiers had plans to sail away to Japan but were bombed by the Australian Airforce according to the account.<sup>38</sup> This whole account is clearly historically complete wrong but the merit of the account is that it tells us where the name Australian Wreck comes from and how this wreck was discovered by local divers in 1984 with the wreck being in very good condition at the time. This allows us to conclude that the whole misnomer Australian Wreck was based on a historically false account with the Australian Airforce supposedly bombing this ship. Now completely disappeared Portholes each weighing 140 lb were at the time still mentioned to be very well fixed to the wreck.<sup>39</sup> The recent sketch by Poni Divers shows a great deal of decay to the ship now.<sup>40</sup> The merit of the Brunei Sub-Aqua Dive Club is considerable, not only for finding the wrecks in Brunei but also because this is the original group that also provided the first book on the Brunei diving sites.<sup>41</sup>

Years later, historical research and brass plaques on the Australian Wreck found by Borneo Divers Sabah and Mr. Randy Davis helped to identify the actual ship. Originally referred to as the Australian Wreck, this wreck turned out to be in fact a Dutch ship called S.S. De Klerk of the Royal Packet Navigation Company (*Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij*). The ship was renamed and used by the Japanese during World War II for the transportation of people.<sup>42</sup> The actual Dutch ship list of the *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* however stated that this ship was scuttled in 1942 by the Dutch Navy to prevent it from falling in Japanese hands, then raised and in 1944 hit by a mine at Labuan. The ship is clearly identified as the S.S. De Klerk built in 1900. Used by the Royal Packet Navigation Company, it was requisitioned by the Dutch Navy to house troops in January 1942. With the Japanese coming increasingly closer to Java, on 2 March 1942 it was sunk by the Dutch but then raised by

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36 Brochure: *Brunei Sub-Aqua Dive Club 1982-1992*, "Our Wrecks, The Australian Wreck", Brunei Sub-Aqua Dive Club.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 "Wrecks in Brunei", *Poni Divers Website*, Available at: <https://ponidivers.com/diving-in-brunei-poni-wrecks/>

41 M. Davidson, *Laut Brunei, The Brunei Sea*, Brunei Sub-Aqua Diving Club, Muara, 2000.

42 An original sketch can again be found in in M. Davidson, *Laut Brunei, The Brunei Sea*, Brunei Sub-Aqua Diving Club, Muara, 2000, p. 103.

the Japanese on 28 November 1942. They then renamed ship 'Imaji Maru' and it sank on 16 September 1944 when it hit a mine in Brunei Bay.<sup>43</sup> There is no historical mention of any Australian involvement whatsoever. Additionally the confusion around the Japanese name is an interesting issue in itself. Unfortunately the Dutch and English language sources use the term 'Imaji Maru'. This is caused by the fact that the Japanese characters can be read both as 'Imaji Maru' or as 'Imabari Maru' but it is Imabari Maru that is the more common reading in Japanese.<sup>44</sup>

Reliable Japanese sources state that the Imabari Maru sailed from Singapore on 5 September 1944 and hit a mine in Brunei Bay close to Muara where it sank on 16 September 1944.<sup>45</sup> The account also tells us that there were 26 lanfu (Comfort Women) and 308 Romusha (Slave Laborers) who died with only 1 soldier and 4 naval artillery operators perishing.<sup>46</sup> A total of 339 people are said to have died on this wreck. The Imabari Maru left Miri on 15 September and was in route in convoy to Manila.<sup>47</sup> The ship carried a total of 162 armed personnel, 956 Romusha, and 92 lanfu from the occupied territories.<sup>48</sup> 339 of these people died in Brunei Bay.

Now the site has received the local label of being haunted.<sup>49</sup> There were many laborers from Java active in Brunei but it cannot be absolutely proven today with the limitation of historical sources from the war what nationality these Romusha and lanfu all had. What is clear though is that these people died in a far greater proportion compared to the soldiers guarding them. When this site was visited in 2015 a memorial wreath was also found attached to this wreck. This seems to indicate that this wreck also is included in commemorations of the suffering in the war.

The final site on the Muara coast area is the Muara Beach itself where the Australians landed during the liberation of Brunei. No physical traces are visible on the beach itself of this event but a memorial was erected to indicate what happened there. This memorial was unveiled in 2008 by the Australian Minister for Veteran's Affairs. It consists of a circular Black granite stone with an inscription '1945 in Memory' in honor of the 114 Australians who were killed and the 221 wounded during the Oboe 6 Operation. The letters "Brunei-Australia Memorial" in English and Malay surround the stone.<sup>50</sup> An information panel was also placed next to the stone to explain the campaign.

During the dedication ceremony the Bruneian deputy defense minister was in attendance

43 A. J. J. Mulder, *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij: wel en wee van een Indische rederij*, De Alk, Alkmaar, 1991, pp. 72-73.

44 There is even an Imabari shipping company based in the Imabari region of Japan. See "A Brief History", *Imabari Shipbuilding Co, Ltd.*, Available at: [http://www.imazo.co.jp/english/e\\_comp/e\\_comp\\_history.html](http://www.imazo.co.jp/english/e_comp/e_comp_history.html)

45 I. Shinjiro, *Senjikanensoushitsuishi*, Genshuu, Tokyo, 2004, p. 290.

46 Ibid.

47 K. Shinshichiro, *Senjijusoudanshi*, Kyoudousha, Tokyo, 1987, p. 257.

48 Rikugun un'yubu zanmu seiribu, *Senpaku yusoukan ni okeru sounan butai shiryou* (rikugun), Japan Center for Asian Historical Records, Ref.C08050112500, pp. 32-33.

49 Oceanic Quest Website, Australian Wreck, Available at: <http://oceanicquest.com/australian-wreck/> For the earlier story attributed to Panaga Divers see: A. Prins, "Amok op ss De Klerk", 2011, Available at: <http://blog.seniorennet.nl/leccerlekerq/archief.php?startdatum=1320620400&stopdatum=1321225200>

50 Reedz, "Lest we Forget", *anakbrunei.org*, December 13, 2008, Available at: <https://www.anakbrunei.org/2008/12/13/lest-we-forget/>



to represent Brunei and an Australian veteran present remembered that the area had been bombed from the sea and air with little left when the troops actually arrived but also remarked how different it looked now.<sup>51</sup> Today the Muara beach area has been developed further and yearly Anzac ceremonies have been held at this site. As recently as 2017 the Australian government donated a new information panel to replace the old panel.<sup>52</sup> This information panel shows two pictures of Australian soldiers coming ashore and walking along the road of Brunei as it explains the role of 'Green Beach' as codename for Muara Beach in the Oboe operation. The panel also cites the words spoken by Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei during his speech to the Australian Parliament in Canberra where he emphasized the special relationship between Australia and Brunei because of the Australian landing in Brunei. Finally the panel also mentions how the Bruneians welcomed the Australians and helped in the liberation of Brunei. The panel helps visitors to understand the importance of the site but gives only very limited historical background.

#### **4. Remembrance, Preservation and Education**

The nature of the sites creates a complexity of memory as these different sites hold different meaning to different groups involved in the conflict. The area of the Muara coast holds a special cultural, historical and educational significance because of these three sites and the historical connection between them. The site on the beach has specific significance especially to the Australians and the New Zealanders as it is the site where Anzac day is commemorated yearly in Brunei. For the Bruneians this is also the location that signaled the end of the long years of Japanese occupation. For an American audience there is clearly a stronger identification with the 'American wreck' in the bay. The plaque of remembrance that since 2016 hangs in the American Embassy in Brunei and holds the flag and names of the various people who were killed testifies to this. The issue with this site is of course the difficulty in accessibility as it is in the sea with the memorial relatively inaccessible in the American Embassy itself. The Australian Wreck is least recognized as of yet but holds a very special historical importance. Whereas 114 Australians were lost in the Oboe 6 operation and 9 Americans died on the USS Salute, the victims who died on the Imabari Maru numbered over three hundred of poor and helpless men and women. This is a site that as such represents countless *lanfu* and *Romusha* who have no name and no grave as the Imabari Maru or Australian Wreck is one of the rare physical locations where it can be said with certainty that these people died. As such the Imabari Maru forms an exceptionally rare commemorative location where their remains are still to be found.

Research is conducted in Brunei by local and international researchers in the history and background of these three sites on the Muara Coast. Attention and care are given to these actual locations as symbols of the war that claimed many lives from Allied soldiers, Japanese soldiers as well as Asian people caught up in this conflict. Because of all these el-

51 "Brunei commemorates Aussie WWII Veterans", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 2008, Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/brunei-commemorates-aussie-wwii-veterans-20081213-6xux.html>

52 I. Groves HA, "Panel Maklumat baru dilancarkan", *Media Permata Newspaper*, April 25, 2017, Available at: <https://mediapermata.com.bn/panel-maklumat-baru-dilancarkan/>

ements, the sites of the Muara Coast now can serve as educational and informative tool on Bruneian World War II heritage. The fact that the Muara Beach area and the American Wreck are both well documented helps them to become a specific site of mourning and memory for family members of the soldiers and sailors that perished there. This is an extremely important element to those individual families who suffered through this grief. But the sites also hold a major importance for the collective communities of these nations as this is where their troops perished carrying out their duties to their country.

The memorials have only recently been erected however. The memorial at Muara Beach dates back to 2008 and the American memorial dates back to 2016. Research in the history of the war also has been increasingly carried out now that the collective memory of the witnesses who experienced these events is disappearing and written documents will have to replace their oral stories. The Imabari Maru holds the potential to form a perfect site as focal point and memorial for the countless civilian Asian Romusha and lanfu who died during the conflict. This is a group of people not completely erased from history but largely ignored even today. The Bruneian local society commemorates their legacy in its own way by imbuing the site of their memory and deaths as being haunted. For the family members of presumably the mainly Javanese victims on the Imabari Maru as well as countless other Romusha and lanfu that disappeared in World War II, this site is of immense importance because it is one of the very few sites that is documented and testifies to their suffering.

For Bruneian society these sites matter and not just to attract interested members of the public to the sites. The importance of these sites and the monuments to Bruneian society is that they mark and represent a past that helped to shape Bruneian society and the region today. This gives each of these sites an important role and special character each highlighting different elements of the suffering of the war and the struggle that Brunei experienced during this time. The growing body of research helps to build and strengthen the memory of all the people who died in the war and this is very important for the future generations of people of all the nations involved in this conflict. In that sense the Muara coast area is an excellent site that holds the potential to be used as an educational case for further study and documentation to be visited, consulted and passed on to Bruneian youth as well as international visitors.

To visit the Muara beach itself is not difficult as this area is already regularly used by people who use the public recreational facilities there and enjoy its natural beauty. This is very positive as it makes the whole beach functional and provides a link to the Australia-Brunei memorial on Muara Beach where the information panel provides some information for visitors. More could be done however to highlight the importance of the nearby wrecks. The efforts of Poni Divers and Oceanic Quest also have contributed to the Australian Wreck and the American Wreck being known in the diving world. More needs to be done however to see the broader picture and the synthesis between these elements of the sites at the Muara Coast as they represent the Australian landing on Muara beach, the American Naval efforts and the Japanese shipping of Southeast Asians during World War II.

The Muara Beach area is the easiest of the sites to visit and this area is also not under threat

or neglect but the wrecks despite their relative inaccessibility are ironically most in need of protection. These wrecks are much harder to access as these are on seafloor. Ironically however it also makes them less guarded. Both Brunei and Malaysia are party to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and responsible to protect these sites in the Bay of Brunei where both countries each have border claims. Yet both countries ratified the Convention in 1996.<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately the UNESCO 2001 Convention specific on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage was not ratified by Brunei or Malaysia.<sup>54</sup> This Convention would have provided an international layer of protection to the underwater cultural heritage that these wrecks form for the area. Recent examples of wrecks being destroyed in the region continue to cause concern and indicate a great need for protection of the wrecks. This problem is increasingly urgent as the wrecks all over the area are increasingly under pressure. The wrecks are clearly already in worse condition now through natural decay since they were first discovered and described by divers in the 1980s. It is clear that the increased accessibility of the sea because of the greater number of divers now caused increased looting. The Bruneian diving clubs however take great care to educate their members on the importance of these wrecks and very clearly promote responsible diving. There is however no control over who actually visits these wrecks and looting does take place to an extent.

The far biggest threat however is the commercial salvaging and activities of illegal scrap metal scavengers. This is going on in the region. In fact in 2016 British Wrecks and an American wreck were looted illegally in the Java Sea.<sup>55</sup> In 2017 in Sabah in a terrible case, three Japanese World War II wrecks including their human remains were destroyed for their scrap metal value.<sup>56</sup> Hopefully the Bruneian government together with the international community will take measures and continue to assure the safety of these sites as their value to Bruneian and world heritage cannot be replaced once lost.

## 5. Conclusion

The location of the Muara coast and the Bay of Brunei is historically very significant to Bruneian World War II heritage. It is clear from the historical research in this paper that this heritage of the Muara coast as embodied by the three sites: the Muara Beach and the Australia-Brunei Memorial, the American Wreck and the Imabari Maru/Australian Wreck each in its own right represents rich cultural war heritage uniquely situated in this area. Although each of those sites already stand out individually as sites of heritage and memory of World War II in Brunei, together they represent a unique heritage for visitors and future generations from Brunei and the whole world with Brunei acting as custodian of these sites.

53 *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, United Nations, Available at: [http://www.un.org/depts/los/reference\\_files/status2018.pdf](http://www.un.org/depts/los/reference_files/status2018.pdf)

54 *Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage*, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Paris, November 2, 2001, Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/eri/la/convention.asp?KO=13520&language=E&order=alpha>

55 O. Holmes and L. Harding, "British second world war shipwrecks in Java Sea destroyed by illegal scavenging", *The Guardian*, November 16 2016, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/16/british-second-world-war-ships-illegal-scavenging-java-sea>

56 O. Holmes, "Images reveal three more Japanese WWII shipwrecks torn apart for scrap", *The Guardian*, 9 February 2017, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/09/images-reveal-three-more-japanese-wwii-shipwrecks-torn-apart-for-scrap>

Bruneians as well as international visitors will come to these sites in the future to learn about the history of World War II in Brunei as the history of Brunei war heritage is intertwined with the history of other nations during this conflict.

Should these sites be lost because of neglect or even destroyed then this would be a terrible and irreplaceable loss for the world but also for Brunei both for the Brunei society today as well as for future generations. As the body of research on these sites grows, the sites have the potential to educate an increasing number of people visit on the history of Brunei in World War II. As such the whole area of Muara Coast forms an area that should be protected for its value to Bruneian World War II heritage. The diversity of the remembrance sites there appeal to a very varied local and international audience and it is imperative that these continue to be preserved, protected and developed further as educational sources of Bruneian World War II heritage.

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Франк Донт

## **Значај историјских локација на Муара обали за брунејско наслеђе из Другог светског рата: Спомен-обележје на обали Муара, америчка олупина брода и аустралијска олупина брода**

Апстракт

Подручје Муаре је током Другог светског рата доживело интензивне борбе. Ово је област одакле су јапанске трупе оствариле приступ Бандар Сери Бегавану, а такође и подручје где су Аустралијанци са обале изборили свој пут ка ослобађању Брунеја. Као такво, плажа Муара представља место где се данас одржава годишња комеморативна церемонија на Брунејима и где се налази ратно спомен-обележје подигнуто на самој плажи. Море уз обалу Муаре садржи и друге важне локације које сведоче о Другом светском рату на Брунејима. Две ронилачке олупине које се често посећују потичу из Другог светског рата и њима могу приступити и обични рониоци. Ове олупине називају се „аустралијска олупина“ и „америчка олупина“. Обе имају занимљиву и посебну историју која се специфично односи на Други светски рат на том подручју. Рад разматра како све ове локације сада служе као подсетници на брунејско наслеђе из Другог светског рата и чине подручје обале Муаре важним за ово наслеђе. У раду се аргументује да је очување олупина и спомен-обележја на плажи Муара императив, и то као места брунејског памћења и наслеђа из Другог светског рата, али и због потенцијала који поседују за посетиоце са Брунеја и из иностранства.

**Кључне речи:** Други светски рат, јапанска окупација Брунеја, спомен-обележја, бродске олупине