

RAY
PARKIN'S
ODYSSEY



PATTIE WRIGHT



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Images on endpapers – 'Lifeboat Becalmed' (front), 'Wild Banana Flower,
Siam Jungle' (back left) and 'Hibiscus and Sunflower' (back right) – and on page iii,
'Junk, Inland Sea, Japan', courtesy of the State Library of Victoria, slv.vic.gov.au.



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*To my sweet-singing 'Uncle Bert' from Dry Creek near
Scone in New South Wales.*

In another life, away from the orchard, he was –

Corporal Herbert John Fuller

NX47256

6 REINFTS 2/1st Battalion

He went to war and came back. Thank you from me.

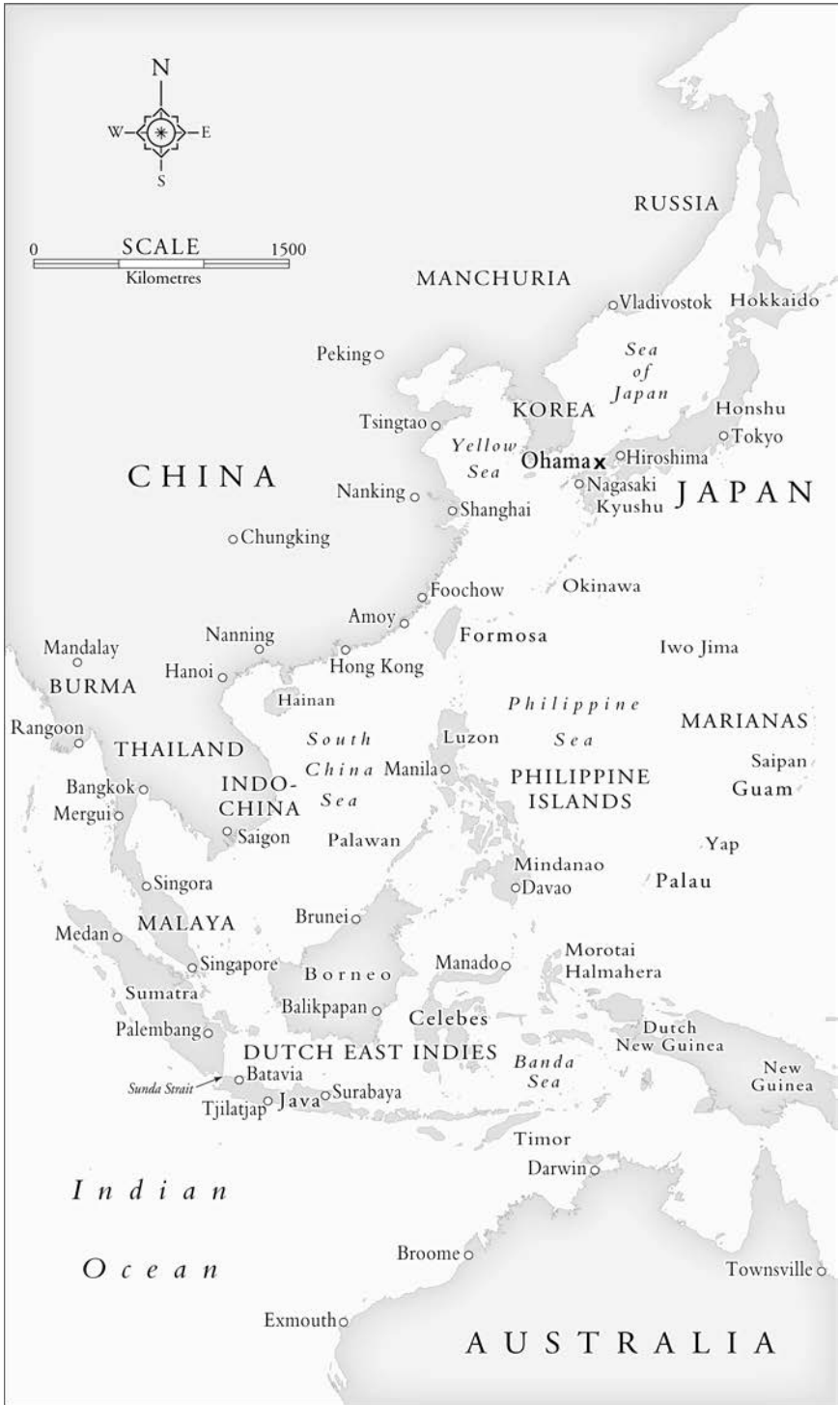
And to Weary, Laurens and Thelma from Ray.

*He would think this too sentimental but, in his private
moments, he would smile.*

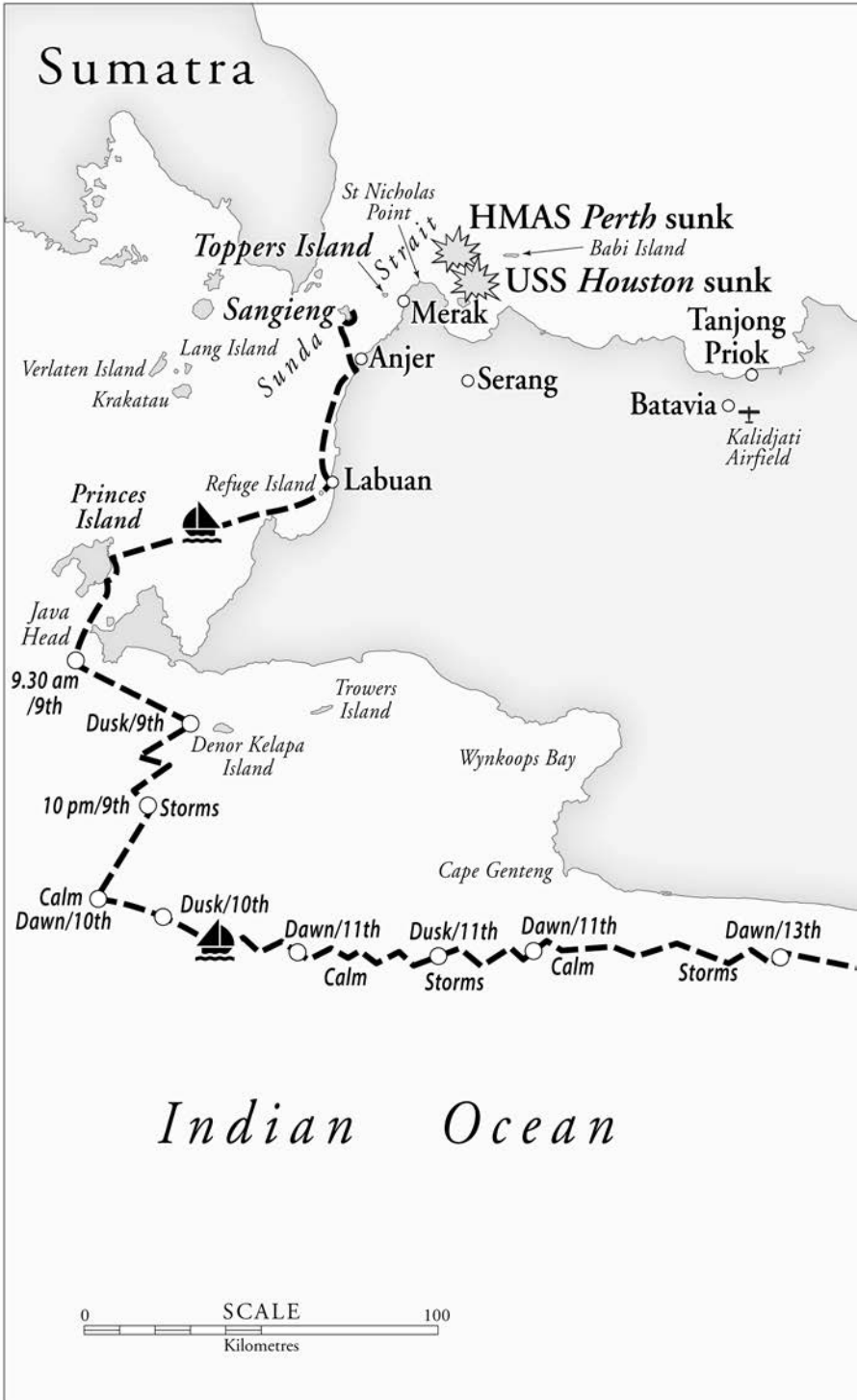
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The Asia-Pacific region

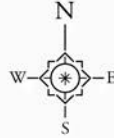


The sinking of HMAS Perth and the path of the Anzac

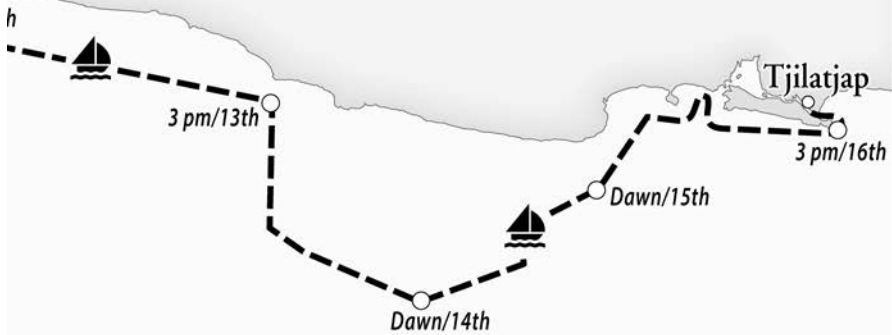
Map Legend

- Route of the Anzac
- Towns and villages

Java Sea



Java





The Thai-Burma Railway

Introduction

‘I jumped off here,’ was how Ray Parkin put it. He was standing in his home in Ivanhoe in suburban Melbourne, sharp as a whip, tall and reed-straight. On the wall behind him hung one of his own drawings – a large, detailed pen-and-ink sketch of HMAS *Perth*, his old ship. Running his finger across the work, Ray retraced the escape route he had taken as Japanese torpedoes breached her hull on the night of 1 March 1942, during the Battle of Sunda Strait in the waters between Sumatra and Java.

Ray spoke of how he had left the light cruiser’s lower steering position, some 60 feet below deck, to emerge on the upper deck with the battle raging all around him. He was amidships, he said, racing along in search of a safe place to jump, thus obeying Captain Hec Waller’s final order: ‘Abandon ship! Every man for himself!’ On board a warship in the middle of the night, surrounded by a far superior enemy force, it’s a bad order to hear. ‘It cancels all other drills. You have just got to look after yourself. It’s not often you get into a sticky situation like that . . . it’s the last resort to get out.’

He was calm as he related the story of *Perth*’s sinking, one he had told many times, but the men in the film crew I had taken to Ray’s home had never heard it before. You could have heard a pin drop. None of us in our wildest dreams could know what it would be like to leap from the deck of a cruiser into a black, oil-slicked sea, there to spend the next twelve hours fighting for your life.

Ray Parkin has been called the chronicler of *Perth*. He was also her helmsman. When he spoke to me of that night, he was past ninety years of age and thought it likely one of the last opportunities he'd have to put what he knew on record.

The story of HMAS *Perth* is an epic in its own right, of a ship and her crew that embody almost the entirety of Australia's experience in World War II – from the fighting in the Mediterranean against the Italians and then the Germans, to the doomed attempt to stop the Japanese advance south from Singapore that led to the ship's loss. Her finale and battle honours lay with the heartrending experiences of her few surviving crew, some of whom – including Ray – endured the full horror of the POW experience on the Thai–Burma railway and in the slave labour camps of Japan itself.

But it wasn't *Perth* that had brought me there to interview Ray that day. It was Ray himself, and what he had written. What I found was a self-educated man from a staunchly working-class and anti-intellectual background, yet also a man who had been a close friend and confidant of Laurens van der Post and Weary Dunlop, and a lifelong student of philosophy (Spinoza was a particular favourite). Ray had left school behind at fifteen, yet his three acclaimed books on his wartime experiences were published by Leonard Woolf at the Hogarth Press in London, and only a few years before our meeting he had swept Australia's literary prizes with an extraordinary account of Captain James Cook's voyage in the *Endeavour*. Ray was a modest man who surprised; he was also a man of enormous practicality. As a sailor he thrived within the discipline and structure of the Royal Australian Navy, yet he was also an artist of huge natural talent and sensibility, whether recording the everyday occurrences of shipboard life, the drama of a battle at sea, or the beauty of a butterfly or jungle flower sketched in moments stolen from the grim labour of building the Thai–Burma Railway. He was a man of fascinating contradictions, whose personal odyssey deserved to be brought to a wider audience.

Ray was why I was there that day, first with the idea of making a documentary about him, but later – when the full scope of his life

became clearer to me – with the idea of writing his biography. When the notion was first mooted, he said no, but within weeks I received an early morning phone call from Ray. Without more than a cursory hello, he launched into: ‘And when are you going to start work?’ Later, as we sat in his office, he looked me fiercely in the eyes before walking away, head down, talking more to himself than me. ‘It’s just too much . . . too much to tell. You’ll never do it!’

My reply to him now, some eight years later, is that I have had a good go at it. I hope that my book in some way adequately reflects this extraordinary man.

Author's note

When including extracts from Ray Parkin's memoirs, letters and diaries in this biography, my guiding principle was to present them as they were written wherever possible. However, in light of the conditions under which he wrote a number of these, some extracts required light editing for repetition, grammar and spelling.

Also, the dating of Ray's paintings, sketches and etchings is occasionally inaccurate or inconsistent. Some of the wartime artwork Ray created years later is dated as if it were made on the day he first experienced the scene (whether he based it on a contemporary thumbnail sketch or not), and some pieces are given the later completion date, according to Ray's fancy.

Naval Ode

*They have no grave but the cruel sea;
No flowers lay at their head,
a rusting hulk is their tombstone,
afast on the ocean bed.*