

Dr. Corydon Wassell's selfless effort to aid wounded sailors on Java earned him undying gratitude and a Navy Cross.

BY MICHAEL D. HULL



During the early months of 1942, the Allied forces in the Pacific suffered numerous setbacks at the hands of marauding Japanese. Here, a Japanese soldier watches several oil storage tanks go up in flames.

ALLIED FORTUNES WERE AT A LOW EBB AS STRATEGIC BRITISH AND AMERICAN BASES FELL like ninepins to the Japanese across the Far East in the early months of 1942.

At anchor in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the U.S. Pacific Fleet had been crippled by carrier planes of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The “impregnable” British base at Singapore had fallen. Valiant but poorly trained and equipped American and Filipino troops were falling back in the Philippine Islands, and the Royal Navy battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser HMS *Repulse* had been sunk by airplanes off Malaya.

In the Dutch East Indies in early February 1942, under-strength Allied naval forces were mauled by the Japanese navy, while ground units of the empire advanced to Sumatra and invaded Bali. Between the two islands lay the Dutch colony of Java, its wealth of rice, rubber, and oil resources a magnet to the Japanese. The

gallant Dutch had vowed never to surrender the sprawling, lush island, but the enemy was getting close, and the Dutch, American, British, and Australian military and diplomatic authorities there were anxious.

The U.S. Asiatic Fleet shifted its headquarters from Surabaya on the northern coast of Java to Tjilatjap on the southern coast. Rumors swept the island during the week after Singapore fell.

Reportedly, the Japanese had landed on the northern coast. Paratroops had supposedly dropped and were hiding in the hills. Dutch officials, some said, were preparing to evacuate.

Among the Allied servicemen in Java that tense month of February 1942 were 41 American sailors at a small Dutch hospital in the thick jungle of the Javanese interior. They were wounded survivors of the light cruiser USS *Marblehead* and the heavy cruiser USS *Houston*, severely damaged on February 4 by a Japanese armada in the Makassar Strait off Balikpapan, Borneo. As part of the American-British-Dutch-Australian Fleet under Dutch Rear Admiral Karel W. Doorman based at Surabaya, the *Marblehead* and *Houston* had been attacked that morning by 54 enemy bombers. The two damaged ships had been forced to retire from the battle area, the *Houston* limping south to Australia and the *Marblehead* putting in at Tjilatjap on February 6.

Lying in their cots and being tended by caring, efficient Dutch doctors and nurses, the bluejackets from the two cruisers were not told of the rumors rife in Java. But they knew the enemy was not far away and that the Red Cross was no guarantee against Japanese butchery. Wounded British soldiers had told them grim stories of what happened after the fall of Singapore.

There was another American in that hospital who was also uneasy. He was 58-year-old Navy Lt. Cmdr. Corydon McAlmont Wassell, a former Arkansas country doctor and medical missionary who had been the chief naval medical officer at Surabaya until ordered to come to the up-country hospital to act as liaison officer between the wounded sailors and the Dutch doctors. This assignment was to prove the toughest—and most rewarding—in his long career of medical practice and research in Arkansas and China. An unassuming man with a slow drawl, Dr. Wassell knew that somehow he had to move the men in his care to safety, hopefully in Australia.

He tried several times to telephone the navy headquarters in Tjilatjap but was unable to get