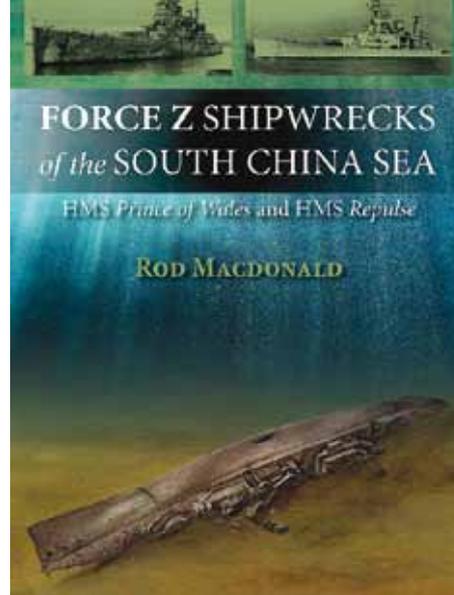


Remembering Force Z

Jack Morrison reviews Rod MacDonal's latest offering, and this time it's personal ...



Force Z
Shipwrecks of the South China Sea
HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse
Rod Macdonald
Whittles Publishing £18.95
ISBN 978-1-84995-095-4

I HAVE BEEN looking forward to reading this book since Rod announced it at the ScotSAC conference in 2012. I have enjoyed all of Rod's books but the subject of this one was something I was aware of but really knew very little about. He has with every book honed his skills as a writer and storyteller.

Rod's earlier books were guides to what he considered the best wrecks to be found round our coast. Latterly his books have taken on a more personal nature in that they were more about his development as a diver and described some of his more serious but enjoyable adventures. Here he has combined the telling of a remarkable story with a personal family involvement.

In a statement at the start of the book he tells us of his grandfather who was a policeman in Singapore during the war and subsequently became a prisoner of the Japanese. That may have sparked his initial interest in the events around Singapore during that period but as a diver he must have been drawn to the fate of the two magnificent ships (*HMS Repulse and Prince of Wales*) lying in the South China Sea.

In 2001 the author was invited as a civilian expert to take part in a military expedition to survey the wrecks which were filmed as a Timewatch documentary - 'The Death of a Battleship'. However this book is not just a commentary on that expedition it is a history of both ships and the background to how and why they came to be there at that time.

There are three sections to the book. The first sec-

tion starts with the building of the ships, their specifications details of refits and additions to bring them up-to-date with then current technology and their role in WW1. A rather tenuous personal link for me comes from the fact that I am writing this at work in Clydebank looking directly into the site of what was John Brown's shipyard. Had I been sitting here on the morning of Saturday 8 January 1916 I might just have caught sight of the bow of *HMS Repulse* glide down the slipway as she took to the water for the first time.

The second section tells the background story of Singapore and the British forces stationed there, and throughout the region. There is much detail here about the defences airfields and deployment of troops. The author deliberately chooses not to make a judgement of decisions made and just states the facts.

This was a time when British diplomacy meant gunship diplomacy. In other words if the natives were restless, send a warship to show them Britain ruled the waves and they had better get back in line pretty quick. So Force Z was formed around *HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse* with the aircraft carrier *HMS Indomitable* set to provide air cover. Unfortunately *Indomitable* had run aground in the Caribbean and after repairs was too far away to be deployed to the Far East.

So Force Z had no air support however I'm sure the powers that be in the Admiralty were convinced the threat posed by the capital ships of the force would be enough to defeat the enemy. Although

warnings had been made it was the received wisdom that capital ships like battleships and cruisers could not be sunk from the air. The main threat came from other capital ships and torpedoes from submarines. I found the description of the battle quite compelling and gripping, to use a well worn cliché I could not put it down and read into the wee hours even though I knew the ending.

The final section covers what to divers should be the most interesting part. Detailed descriptions of how the ships are lying and the condition they are in. Rod uses comparisons with the WW1 wrecks in Scapa Flow to give a sense of scale - the Force Z ship are much bigger. The wrecks are of course protected and throughout the book the author emphasises the human involvement and tragic loss. There are many references to the Force Z survivors association who were consulted and approved every step they took during the surveys of the wrecks.

There are also lots of images of the events including the invading troops entering Singapore. The wrecks have been illustrated to Rod's usual high standard by Rob Ward and particularly moving is the picture of a survivor hanging from the hands of his shipmates before dropping we hope to safety.

In his personal statement at the start of this book the author states: "To understand a shipwreck you need to know about the ship itself: its life and the historical context in which it existed. Without that knowledge, the wreck is simply a collection of metal at the bottom of the sea." One could add to that it is also necessary

to care for and have respect for those who sailed in her and who tragically lost their lives in the line of duty. The author shows that respect and sensitivity in this well written account of the tragic loss of these magnificent ships and so many of their crew.



H.M.S. Repulse in Haifa harbour