

NOF 2/6/2023 P: 1

PIC COURTESY OF RICHARD SWANN



# MORE WRECKS AT RISK

THE detention of a barge and its crew for allegedly looting a sunken WW2 warship throws into sharp relief the threat to other wrecks in Malaysian waters. The National Heritage Department says protective measures have been taken, but experts believe more needs to be done to save the vessels and their precious artefacts.

» REPORT BY FUAD NIZAM ON PAGES 4 & 5

# SHIPWRECKS NEED MORE PROTECTION

An inter-agency task force should be set up to guard waters around shipwrecks, says expert

NST 2/6/2023 P: 4

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**T**HE looting of two World War 2 British warship wrecks underscores the need to protect and conserve other shipwrecks in Malaysian waters.

Checks online by the *New Straits Times* showed that there were no fewer than 15 other shipwrecks, ranging from World War 2-era vessels all the way back to those from the 15th century.

The HMS *Repulse* and the HMS *Prince of Wales* are among the more well known.

The two vessels sank on Dec 10, 1941, off Pulau Tioman when they attempted to intercept Japanese landings in Malaya.

Also located near the two vessels are two Dutch submarines, HNLMS *K17* and HNLMS *O16*, situated about 20 nautical miles off Pulau Tioman. The two submarines sank after hitting a naval mine in December 1941.

Going back further, the *Diana*, a merchant ship licensed by the East India Company, sank off Tanjung Bidara, Melaka, in March, 1817, after hitting a shoal.

Meanwhile, some 40 nautical miles off the coast of Kuantan lies the remains of the *Royal Nanhai*, a Siamese junk vessel that sank in 1460 with its large cargo of Chinese porcelains.

Discovered in 1992, its cargo reportedly had included more than 21,000 ceramics, most of which

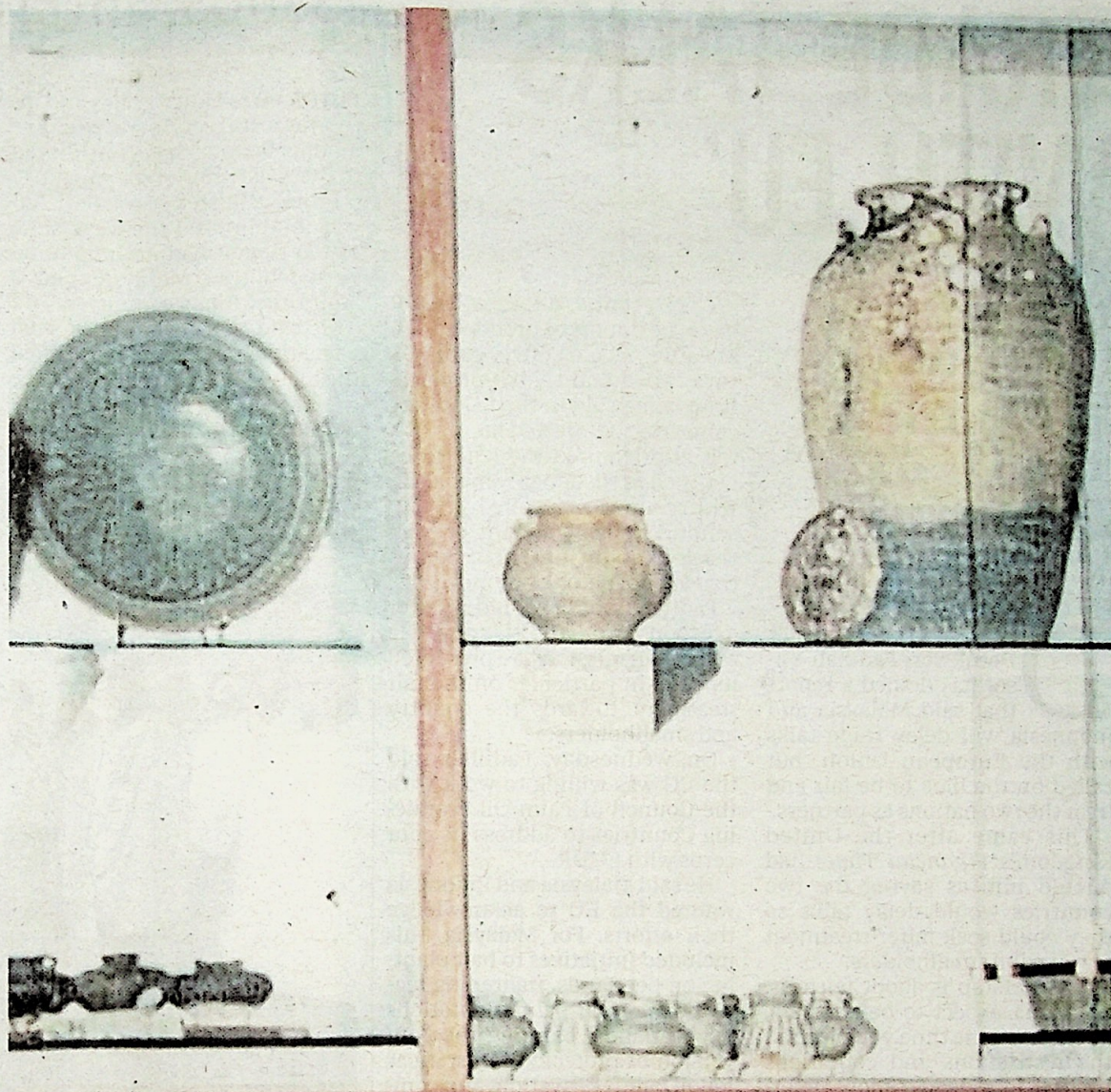
were Thai Sawankhalok celadon, along with Singburi storage jars and Chinese brown ware.

In Sabah, 0.21 nautical miles off Tanjung Simpang Mengayau, the Tanjung Simpang wreck was unearthed in 2003.

The vessel, with its cargo of ceramics dating to the Northern Song dynasty, is believed to be one of the oldest Chinese vessels found in Malaysian waters.

Also of significance is the *Ranee* wreck, a vessel owned by the Straits Steamship Company that sank five nautical miles off Tanjung Sedili Kecil, Johor, in 1923 after colliding with another ship called the *Boribat*.

Going down with it were reportedly royal regalia wedding gifts that were to have been presented



Artefacts from the 'Royal Nanhai', which sank off the coast of Kuantan and was discovered in 1992.

to the royal family in Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

The National Heritage Department, when contacted by the *New Straits Times*, acknowledged that the wreck sites were at risk of being exposed to plundering and illegal relic-finding.

The department, however, said it had taken measures to deal with the illicit activities by instituting five important underwater heritage areas.

"In accordance with the provisions of Section 64, Act 645 on protected zones, we have established five underwater heritage areas over the waters off Pulau Upeh and Pulau Besar, Tanjung Tuan, Pulau Tioman, Labuan and Pulau Bidong.

"The existence of these areas is meant to protect, care, conserve and preserve the treasures of underwater heritage found in the area."

But experts believe that more must be done to beef up the legal framework to protect the country's underwater historical heritage.

Geostrategist Associate Professor Dr Azmi Hassan said Malaysia did not ratify the 2001 Unesco Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

"I believe the reason Malaysia did not ratify the convention is because the country places a low priority on protecting its underwater heritage."

He also believed that the reluctance to ratify it was because it would require the subsequent amendment of local laws.

"The National Heritage Act 2005 mentions only the coverage of shipwrecks in Malaysian waters, which extends to 12 nautical miles from the coast.

"The loophole is that some of these wrecks, in this case, the looting of the HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, took place in the country's exclusive economic zone, which is not covered."

Former Museums Department director-general Datuk Ibrahim Ismail said the remaining wrecks were at risk if the authorities did

not take action to boost conservation and protection.

"These wrecks are at risk of being looted. We are not the only ones with experts on these heritage artifacts.

"The looters also have their own experts who can identify the value of each shipwreck.

"The authorities need to initiate a plan to control and ensure these relics are not looted."

He said an inter-agency task force should enforce and monitor the waters around shipwrecks for illegal activities.

"The task of making sure that these wreck sites are free from looters should not just fall on the Heritage Department as each wreck site has different sets of logistic and manpower needs.

"An inter-agency task force should be established between the National Heritage Department, Marine Department, Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency, navy and police to ensure that these sites are secure."

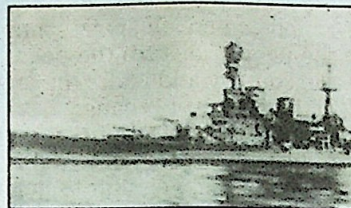
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# NOTABLE SHIPWRECKS IN MALAYSIA



## 1. HMS PRINCE OF WALES

■ 51nm off Pulau Tioman. This is a British warship assigned in November 1941 to Force Z. It was sunk by Japanese aircraft on Dec 10, 1941, when it attempted to intercept landings in Malaya.



## 2. HMS REPULSE

■ 46nm off Pulau Tioman. This is a British warship assigned in November 1941 to Force Z. It was sunk by Japanese aircraft on Dec 10, 1941, when it attempted to intercept landings in Malaya with HMS 'Prince of Wales'.



## 3. HNLMS K17

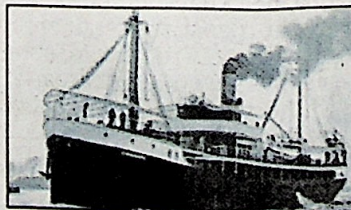
■ 20nm off Pulau Tioman. This is a Dutch submarine that patrolled in the South China Sea, off Malaya and in the Gulf of Siam. While leaving the Gulf of Siam in December 1941, it hit a Japanese mine and sank.



## 4. HNLMS O16

■ 22nm off Pulau Tioman. This is a Dutch submarine that hit a Japanese naval mine in December 1941 near Pulau

Tioman, while leaving the Gulf of Siam for to Singapore.



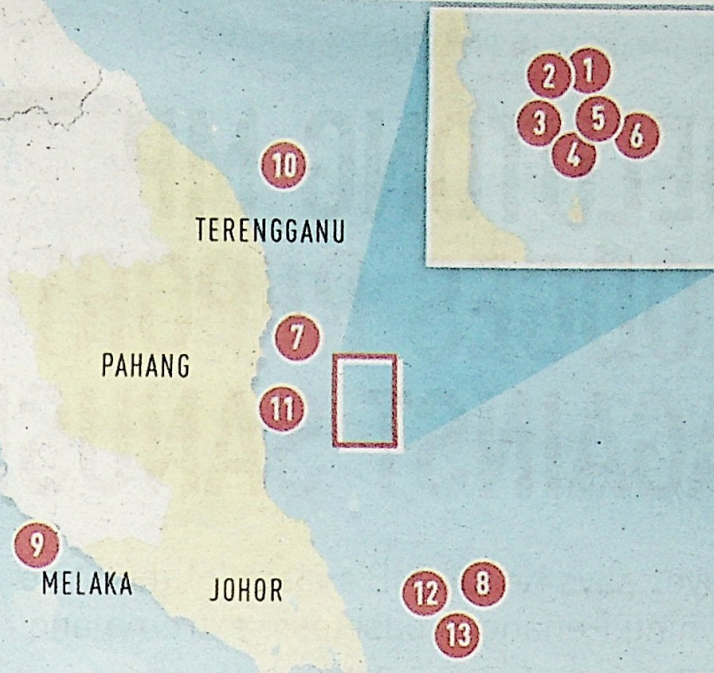
## 5. HMS BANKA

■ 21nm off Pulau Tioman. This is a British minesweeper vessel that hit naval mines on its way to stop Japanese invading forces in December 1941.



## 6. SEVEN SKIES SUPERTANKER

■ East of Pulau Tioman. This is a 1965 Swedish supertanker that sank following a fire.

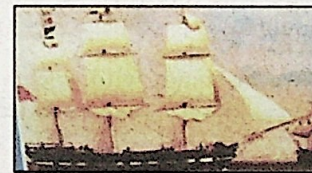


## 7. XUANDE

■ 60nm off Terengganu. This is a 16th century Chinese ship named after Emperor Xuande and carried porcelain for trade and is believed to have been carrying a task for the emperor before it sank. The wreck was found in 1996.

## 8. TURIANG

■ 100nm off Johor. This 14th century shipwreck was discovered in 1998 under 42m of water, 100 nautical miles from shore. The ship is likely to have been 26m long with a beam of 7.5m, built in the Chinese tradition, with axial rudder, and with frames and hull planks joined by iron nails.



## 9. DIANA

■ This ship sank 8km off Tanjung Bidara, Melaka, on March 4, 1817. It was owned by Palmer and Co, a Calcutta agency house, and licensed by the East India Company to transport goods from Calcutta and Madras to China and back.

## 10. SINGTAI

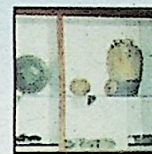
■ 12nm off Pulau Redang. The wreck was discovered in April 2001. The construction of the ship, which includes transverse bulkheads made from soft wood (joined by square iron nails) suggests that it may have been built in China.



## 11. ROYAL NANHAI

■ 40nm off the Kuantan coast. The shipwreck was discovered

in 1992 at a depth of 46m. The vessel appears to be 28m long and 7m wide, and is of a typical South China Sea design. This type of vessel, a hybrid that combines Chinese and Southeast Asian elements, has hull planks joined by wooden dowels, and transversal bulkheads.



## 12. NANYANG

■ 10nm off Pulau Pemanggil. This late 14th century shipwreck was located in 1995. The Nanyang was loaded with celadon wares from the famous Si Satchanalai kilns in northern Thailand. Many of the ship's features and the ceramics onboard are similar to that of the later 'Royal Nanhai' wreck.

## 13. RANEE

■ 5nm off Tanjung Sedili Kecil, Johor. This shipwreck is of a vessel owned by Straits Steamship Company that sank in 1923 after colliding with another ship called the Boribat. It was found in 2005. The ship was built in Lubeck, Germany in 1906 and was made of steel with twin propellers and a net weight of 317 tonnes. Also on board were royal regalia wedding gifts that were to have been presented to the royal family in Kuala Kangsar, Perak. Salvaged items include gold buttons and glass ceramics.

## 14. TANJUNG SIMPANG

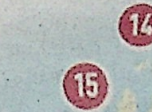
■ 400m off Tanjung Simpang Mengayau, Sabah, in 2003. It carried a cargo of Chinese ceramics dating to the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126 AD). The ship may have been travelling from China via the Philippines to Brunei or other locations in Borneo. This is the oldest loaded ship found in Malaysia.



## 15. USUKAN BAY WRECKS

■ In the Usukan Bay, Sabah. Three Japanese navy ships were sunk by

torpedoes from a United States submarine on Oct 1, 1944.



## SABAH

Source: shipwreckasia.org, malaysia-traveller.com and gotheborg.com



Metal sheets at the Upside Down shipwreck site off Kota Belud, Sabah.

>> From Page 4

Ibrahim said educating the public was also key.

"These wreck sites also present Malaysia's rich history, so their significance should be highlighted to the public.

"When people know about the sites' significance, they will also be the eyes and ears of the authorities should they see looting at the sites."

On May 28, the authorities had detained a Chinese barge, MV *Chuan Hong 68*, for anchoring illegally in Malaysian waters.

Checks on the vessel unearthed scores of artefacts as well as unexploded artillery, believed to be from the HMS *Repulse* and HMS *Prince of Wales*.

Sources had claimed that the Chinese vessel was also responsible for looting 90 per cent of other World War 2 shipwrecks in the region.

The barge, fitted with a grab dredger, is allegedly wanted by the Indonesian authorities for plundering the remains of Dutch warships HNLMS *De Ruyter*, HNLMS *Java* and HNLMS *Korte-*

naer in the Java Sea.

Its activities came to light when the operator of a scrapyards in Tanjung Belungkor shared a video allegedly showing the vessel unloading artefacts from looted warships, including a cannon. The video alerted the National Heritage Department, whose officers raided the private jetty and scrapyards.

There, they found relics and scrap metal believed to be from the HMS *Prince of Wales*.

The British government has condemned the salvaging, saying it desecrated the resting place of those who served on the warships.

The crew of 32, including its captain, have since been detained by the authorities.

The authorities are also probing the possible involvement of a Malaysian company in the activities following the discovery of a Malaysian shipping company employee, 67, on board the vessel.

Page 1 pic: A view of wreck diving sites in Usukan waters in Sabah.