

# The Battle of Penang

*Dr John Robertson*

**Date:** Saturday, 31 March 2012

**Time:** 6pm

**Place:** Badan Warisan Malaysia,  
2 Jalan Stonor, KL

The battle in Penang Harbour, in which the German cruiser *Emden* sank the Russian light cruiser *Zhemtchug*; followed shortly after by the sinking of the French destroyer *Mousquet* close by, off Muka-Head, signifies its importance of that part of the world as a shipping-hub in the Far East. The location of Penang and Singapore at either end of the Malacca Straits was of great importance for commerce.

In the days before aircraft, all trade had to go by sea or over-land, and at that time trade with China was supreme, and most of it passed through the Malacca Straits. The European powers, especially Britain and Germany, but also France, depended on China for much of their wealth. Besides the trade in finished good from China, such as silks, ceramics and tea, the Straits Settlements and the Federated as well as the Unfederated Malay States, provided much needed raw materials; in particular tin and rubber. There was also a vast "coolie" trade to supply the need for labourers. All this trade was carried in steam-ships which, 100 years ago, had a limited range and coaling-stations were needed to refuel. Ships also needed frequent servicing, so dockyard services were also vital. Penang and Singapore provided both of these things with all the back-up services that were needed to conduct business, trade and banking.

Warships of Germany, Britain and France were present in the Far East to protect their shipping from piracy, or attack in time of war. Thus when war broke out in 1914, Penang and Singapore held the key to the Malacca Straits, and many warships from the French and British navies were based there. They were joined by the Russians and the Japanese who came into the war on their side. Thus Penang and Singapore became vital bases for these warships, with Singapore serving as the British Admiral Jerram's headquarters. Sailors from all these countries soon became a familiar sight ashore.

Their enemy in World War One was Germany, with the German East Asiatic Squadron of warships based in Tsing Tao in China, close to the Po Hai Sea. It was a German warship from this squadron, *SMS Emden*, that made a daring attack on those two warships based in Penang. Both ships were sunk. Eventually, however, *Emden* was destroyed by the Australian cruiser *Sydney*. The survivors from *Zhemtchug* had to remain for some months in Penang before a ship could take them back to Vladivostok, and for many weeks they were cared for by the local Penang population.

Some weeks after the Battle of Penang, a mutiny of British sepoys broke out in Singapore. Admiral Jerram had to call upon the assistance of allied ships in the area to help quell the mutiny. First on the scene were the French, quickly joined by the Japanese and then the Russians. It took a week to round up all the mutineers, and during that time several Germans escaped from their prison camp. This included an officer from *Emden*, Lieutenant Julius Lauterbach. He got safely back to Germany.

**Dr. John Robertson** comes from a naval background; his father having been the gunnery officer in the famous British battle-cruiser *HMS Hood*. Dr Robertson joined the Royal Navy as a medical cadet and graduated from Edinburgh University in 1964, going on to serve a further six years as a doctor with the Royal Navy. Part of that time was spent as Staff Medical Officer to the Admiral of the British Western Fleet in his flagship *HMS London*, visiting many parts of the world.

Returning to civilian life, Dr Robertson specialised in Psychiatry working as a consultant in various London teaching hospitals where he took a special interest in post-graduate education. He also set up a trainee's exchange scheme with National University Hospital Singapore. He was made a Sub-Dean of the British Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1997.

Dr. Robertson retired in 2002 and spends the winter months in Penang, where he is a member of the Penang Heritage Trust. He is married with two sons.