In July 1944 the United States decided to liberate the Philippines, which had been under Japanese occupation since early 1942.

Success there would cut the Japanese Empire in Asia and the Pacific in two and provide staging bases for future Allied assaults on the islands closer to Japan. The effort to drive the Japanese from the Philippines began with a massive naval and amphibious assault near the island of Leyte.

The United States naval task force comprised more than 660 vessels, among them eleven Royal Australian Navy ships. On 18 October 1944 Australian sailors helped lay channel markers and shoal water buoys in San Pedro Bay at the head of Leyte Gulf. Two days later, three Australian ships helped land troops on the undefended Panaon Island to the south, while four Royal Australian Navy ships took part in the bombardment of the main landing beaches at Tacloban and Dulag on Leyte Gulf’s western shore. Japanese aircraft made sporadic attacks during the afternoon but opposition was light.

On the following morning, 21 October, a lone Japanese dive-bomber crashed into HMAS Australia, killing thirty crewmen, including the ship’s captain, Captain Emile Dechaineux DSC, and wounding sixty-four.

With the arrival of the Japanese fleet at Surigao Strait, three major naval battles were fought as the major actions in the Battle for Leyte Gulf. The Japanese surface fleet was crippled, giving the Allies a decisive victory, but the liberation of the Philippines was not complete until July 1945.

IMAGE: Captain Emile Dechaineux DSC, March 1944. (AWM 106692)