

Moments in Time # 3

Acclaimed Ship Owners and Traders of Oceania

By

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Any mariner visiting a port in Oceania during the post WW2 years would undoubtedly have come across one of those distinguished little ships with black funnels, bearing an eye catching black and white, checkered band. These vessels were shipping and Trading icons of Australia and Oceania, and belonged of course to Burns, Philp and Co. Limited. Their ships formed the mainstay of the then, busy passenger cargo trade between Australia, New Guinea, the south west Pacific Islands, and south east Asian destinations.

The company was formed as a partnership between James Burns and Robert Philp in 1876 and later as a company incorporated in 1883. The firm developed into a major provider for Plantation Managers, Ship Owners and Operators, Insurance Brokers, and Agricultural Traders; later years saw them expand activities into Travel Agency, Retailing and Trading Stores. Their main sphere of influence and involvement was Australia wide, New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, with additional regular services to south east Asian ports. Initially, their vessels were used as floating trading stores, where goods were exchanged with plantation owners in remote areas in return for Copra, which was then loaded aboard their ships. Their vessels were also used to carry Pacific Islander laborers to various locations In New Guinea, primarily to work on the Copra plantations.

With a head office located in Sydney, by 1880, Burns, Philp had already developed a comprehensive network of branch offices throughout Australia, such as in Townsville, Thursday Island, Cairns, Sydney, Brisbane, and London in the United Kingdom. By this date the interests of the company had grown to include merchandising, shipping with its own coastal vessels, and as an agent for the Australasian United Steam Navigation Company (AUSN), and insurance interests, with the establishment of the North Queensland Insurance Company as a subsidiary in 1886.

In 1886 Messrs. Burns and Philp agreed to operate a small mail steamer from Thursday Island to Port Moresby where a branch was subsequently established in 1890. At that point in time the northeastern sector of New Guinea had become part of the German Colonial Empire, being designated a German protectorate in 1884, with the British administering the southeastern parts of the country. However, during WWI, German New Guinea together with the nearby Bismarck Archipelago was occupied by Australia, which then assumed the administration. The southern part, British New Guinea, was later re-named Papua in 1904. After World War I, Australia was given a mandate to administer the former

German sector of New Guinea by the then League of Nations with combined north and south provinces being designated as Papua New Guinea.

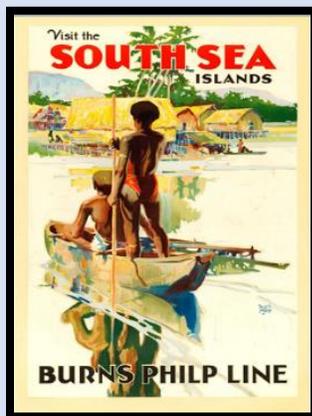
In the late 19th century and early 20th century the company extended its area of interest from Melanesia to encompass the Central Pacific, Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa. In 1908 a branch was established in Indonesia at Samarang, and in 1915 a branch was opened in New Zealand at Wellington.

Prior to the outbreak of WW1, the company had become a major shipping and trading link between Australia, New Guinea, and the Pacific Islands, and dominated these routes. The ships with their familiar black funnels, with a checkered band encircling the funnel, and house flag bearing a Scottish Thistle became a familiar sight throughout the shipping network, but at the outset of WW1 most of the Burns Philp fleet was requisitioned by the Admiralty. However, one of the most notable wartime incidents during the hostile years was its steamship **S.S. Matunga** which, whilst on a passage from Sydney to Rabaul, was captured by the German Commerce Raider "**Wolf**" on August 6, 1917. The raider later sank the Matunga, taking the crew and passengers as prisoners, eventually to Europe, where they remained until the end of the war

By the onset of the 1930s the company had already set up subsidiaries to facilitate geographic areas of operations, the largest being Burns Philp (South Sea) Company Limited which was incorporated in March 1920. The company continued its prosperity until the outbreak of WW2.

The Burns, Philp fleet had grown significantly over the years since having acquired shipping interests, and it was during the inter-war years Burns, Philp decided that new and a larger ships were required to enable them to operate more efficiently in providing their established, mail, cargo, and passenger services. Thus, Burns, Philp ordered two larger cargo passenger ships.

The first new ship to be built was the Malaita (following on after the first Malaita), a passenger cargo liner. She was a motor ship built in 1933 by BP's favored builders, Barclay, Curle & Co., in Glasgow, Scotland. She was 3,310 GRT, a length of 328 ft with a beam of 47.1 ft. She had B&W type diesel engine. She was single screw with a service speed of 12 knots (max 14.5). Malaita carried only 48 First Class passengers, all in a superior standard of comfortable accommodation. Her regular round trip ports of call were Sydney, Brisbane, Port Moresby, Samarai, Rabaul, Lorengau, Lombrun, Madang, Lae, then returning to Sydney. She operated this schedule every 6 weeks, resulting in her becoming extremely popular and much loved by passengers on the routes she serviced.



A Burns, Philp poster of the era. Promoting their South Sea Island services.

Burns, Philp became the first company to advertise tourism to Papua New Guinea. In 1884 they offered a 5 weeks Excursion Tour of New Guinea, New Hebrides, and the Solomon Islands using their steamships, originating from their facility at Thursday Island. This can be construed as the forerunner to modern day South Pacific cruising. In 1914 the company established a travel Department and promoted tours to Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island. Burns Philp dominated passenger services to Melanesia until the outbreak of war in the Pacific Region.

It was during this period that they branched out into Hotel ownership, in New Guinea, with several hotel acquisitions in Port Moresby.

Stemming from its modest beginnings with a single general store in Townsville, to supply the north Queensland gold mining boom, in the mines and fields stretching from the frontier coastal town inland to Charters Towers and the Gulf of Carpentaria to the west and Cooktown to the north. Frustrated by inadequate shipping services to supply the sales of this increasingly vibrant trade, the company chartered a small steamship named “**Isabelle**” to transport their goods from Sydney to the northern ports.

it was also during this era they expanded their interests into Copra Plantation ownership using several of their subsidiaries to manage these assets. By 1916 they had acquired some 7 plantations, in what was then known as the British Solomon Islands. The dried coconut kernels were loaded into their ships and transported to Australia for processing and the extraction of Palm Oil, an important agricultural commodity. Copra and Palm Oil was a big player in their supplementary role as agricultural traders, as shipping in the Pacific could be unprofitable unless it included copra. Burns, Philp had by default, become a de facto arm of Australian influence and diplomacy in the regional ambitions between the colonial powers of Germany, France, The Netherlands, and the Imperial Empire of Japan, all vying for regional influence.

Throughout WW2, Burns, Philp mariners were indispensable to the allied forces in their Pacific campaign, with their vast knowledge and pilotage skills to safely navigate ships around the channels, reefs and shoals that were peppered about the various Pacific Islands.



The second vessel to bear the name Malaita – built 1933 and sold to Hong Kong interests in 1965. Photographed in a tropical and tranquil setting, whilst alongside a wooden jetty somewhere in New Guinea or the Pacific Islands, prior to being sold by Burns, Philp

(unknown source)

The second vessel to bear the name Malaita – built 1933 and sold to Hong Kong interests in 1965. Photographed in a tropical and tranquil setting, whilst alongside a wooden jetty somewhere in New Guinea or the Pacific Islands, prior to being sold by Burns, Philp.

During WW2, the Malaita was requisitioned by the Admiralty and was engaged in carrying troops and stores between Australia and New Guinea. The vessel was torpedoed but survived the attack, and

following makeshift repairs set sail for Australia under her own power. Having eventually arrived in Sydney, inspections revealed the damage was too severe for repairs to be undertaken at that time, and nothing was done until October 1945. Repairs were then commenced and completed in April 1947 when she was again ready to enter commercial service, and returned to Burns, Philp and resumed trade between Australia and New Guinea.



MV Pilar Regidor (ex-Malaita), operated by a subsidiary company of John Manners – Hong Kong. Photographed at Adelaide, sometime between 1965-68, before being on-sold for further trading and renamed **Linda JR**. She was finally broken-up at Kaohsiung in 1971 after 38 years of service.

(unknown source)

The next new building was in 1938, a twin Screw, 6,397 GRT, 240 Passenger-Cargo Liner, which, following in the owner's tradition was also built by Barclay Curle & Co, in Glasgow. This new acquisition was to be named "**Bulolo**", so named after New Guinea's Bulolo River.



The **MV. Bulolo** under construction at Barclay Curle and Company, Glasgow, ca 1938.

(Image originally circulated by Barclay Curle & Co).



The elegant **MV Bulolo** depicted at sea.

When completed she made her delivery voyage to Australia and soon thereafter her maiden voyage in Burns, Philp colors on November 19, 1938, between Australia and Papua New Guinea ports, which was the traditional Burns, Philp route.

(Burns, Philp archives)

The **MV Bulolo** could only complete eight round voyages before the outbreak of WW2. From 1939 her next six years she would become a different ship, eventually becoming one of the most famous wartime ships in the Australian/British war time fleet!

Upon the commencement of WW2 M.V. Bulolo was taken over by the British Ministry of War Transport on behalf of the Royal Navy. She returned to the United Kingdom for wartime refit and conversion to become an “**Armed Merchant Cruiser**” (**A.M.C.**). Once the refitting was completed, the vessel was officially commissioned on January 4, 1940 as the **H.M.A.M.C. Bulolo (designated F82)**.

However, in 1942 she underwent a further conversion to become one of the most important ships of the war, a “Landing Ship and Headquarters” (L.S.H.), and it is during this time she reached the peak of her fame with General Montgomery nominating her as the official “Logistics and HQ” ship for the D-Day Normandy invasion, even King George VI stood on the **H.M.S. Bulolo’s** Bridge observing the invasion fleet bound for the Normandy beaches.

Her Naval service was terminated on December 5, 1946, and she was handed back to Burns, Philp; whereupon she was given a comprehensive refit. The M.V. Bulolo resumed her traditional service during 1948. The result of her refit was that she became a superior passenger ship with some fine additional new facilities which necessitated her passenger capacity being reduced, to just 180 First Class passengers. The ship remained in service until 1968 when sold for demolition at Kaohsiung, in Taiwan.

Over almost 8 decades, Burns Philp ships had developed into a household name amongst expatriates and traders in New Guinea and South Pacific Islands—with their iconic ships which had all become a frequent sight in Oceania and the remote Pacific Island ports. The ships of Burns, Philp were also household names within Australia and South East Asia, as they provided a vital link with the Pacific Islands. Their passenger ships became the preferred mode of transport, for many expatriate families and residents traveling to and from Australia, and other locations throughout Oceania.

With the introduction of regular air travel during the 1960s and the transition to containerization during the 1970s, the company's shipping activities progressively declined. This was also aided by the withdrawal of the Commonwealth Government's shipping subsidy. Fleet activities were reduced, from a very respectable 38 vessels at its peak, and the company changed focus to the manufacture of food and beverages, and distribution of a wide range of other goods and services. The company was finally delisted from the Australian Stock Exchange in 2006 following acquisition by the Rank Group Australia Pty Limited.



The 3,175 deadweight tons **MV Moresby**, was built at the State Dockyard in Newcastle in 1965. Her sale in June 1970 marked the end of an era for Australian shipping that over its many years had developed into an Australian shipping icon, which had employed many colorful characters during its time, with them sometimes being referred to affectionately as the “Pirates of the Pacific”

(Burns, Philp archives)

A brief history relating to some of the ships owned and operated by Burns, Philp during their active years.

SS Titus was a 789 gross tons steam ship, built in 1878 by Alexander Stephen and Sons, purchased by Burns Philp in 1896. She served the the South Pacific Islands including the Solomon Islands, Papua, New Guinea and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. She was Laid up 1908.

SS Makambo was a 1,159 gross tons passenger-cargo ship built for Burns Philp in 1907 by the Clyde Shipbuilding & Engineering Co., Greenock, Scotland. Transferred to Burns Philp (South Seas) Ltd in 1933 and registered in Suva, Fiji. Sold in 1935.

SS Mataram was a 3,331 gross tons passenger-cargo ship built for Burns Philp in 1909 by the Clyde Shipbuilding. She operated the Sydney, Java, and Singapore service, then the New Guinea service, and finally the Solomon Islands service. Sold in 1935

SS Matunga was a 1,618 gross tons passenger-cargo ship, built by Napier and Miller, Glasgow and purchased by Burns Philp in 1910 for the Solomon Islands service. In August 1917, whilst on a voyage from Sydney to Rabaul, she was captured by the German Commerce Raider “**Wolf**”, then sunk.

SS Montoro was a 4,507 gross tons passenger-cargo ship, built in 1911 by Clyde Shipbuilding. Operated the Australia, Java and Singapore service until the mid-1920s, then the Australia to Papua, New Guinea and Darwin service. Requisitioned for war service 1939 to 1945. She remained under charter to the Australian Government from 1945 to 1948. Sold for demolition in 1948

SS Morinda was a 1,971 gross tons passenger-cargo ship built in 1913 by the Grangemouth Dockyard Company. Operated between Australia, Papua, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides, Lord Howe, and Norfolk Islands. Requisitioned for war service in December 1941. After 1945 she returned to the Australia, Papua, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands service until she was sold for demolition in 1952.

SS Marella was a 7,475 gross tons passenger-cargo vessel, built in 1914, she was a German steamer handed over to the British Government as WWI reparations. She was purchased by Burns Philp and renamed **Marella** in 1921. Operated on the Australia to Singapore service. Requisitioned for war service 1939 to 1945, then returning to the Australia - Singapore service until 1949, when she was sold and was broken up in 1954.

SS Mangola was a 3,350 gross tons passenger-cargo ship, built in 1920 by the Commonwealth Naval Dockyard, Sydney, and originally named **Eudunda**. She was purchased by Burns Philp and renamed **Mangola** in 1926. Operated on South East Asia and South Pacific routes, including Singapore, the Straits Settlements, Burma, Nauru, Papua, New Guinea, and Darwin. Requisitioned for war service 1941 to 1945. She was returned to the Australia - Singapore service. In 1949 she was transferred to the Australia to Papua and New Guinea service. She was sold in 1957 and went for demolition in 1964.

MV Merkur was a 5,952 gross tons passenger-cargo vessel, built in 1924. Sister ship to **MV Neptuna**. Purchased by Burns Philp in 1935. Operated on the Australia to Singapore service. Requisitioned for war service 1941 to 1945. From 1946 she remained under charter to the Australian Government. She was returned to Burns Philp in 1949 and was sold for breaking up in 1953.

MV Neptuna was a 5,952 gross tons passenger-cargo vessel, built in 1925. Sister ship to **MV Merkur**. Purchased by Burns Philp in 1935. Operated on the Australia, Papua, New Guinea, Philippines, Hong Kong and Saigon service. Requisitioned for war service in 1941. She was sunk in Darwin Harbor in February 1942 during a Japanese air raid

MV Malabar was a 4,512 gross tons passenger-cargo vessel, built in 1925 by Barclay Curle & Co. Operated the Melbourne, Sydney, Java and Singapore service. Wrecked on 2 April 1931 in fog at Miranda Point near Sydney

MV Macdhui was a 4,561 gross tons passenger-cargo vessel, built in 1930 by Barclay Curle & Co. Operated on the Australia to Papua and New Guinea service. Sunk in June 1942 during a Japanese air raid on Port Moresby. The wreck remains awash and visible.

MV Malaita was a 3,310 gross tons passenger-cargo vessel, build in 1933 by Barclay Curle & Co. Operated on the Australia to the Solomon Islands service and was involved in the evacuation of women and children following the outbreak of war with the Japanese. Requisitioned for war service in 1941,

Malaita survived a torpedo fired by the Japanese submarine RO-33, near the Port Moresby Harbor entrance in August 1942. Sold for continued trading to Hong Kong interests in 1965

MV Bulolo was a 6,267 gross tons passenger-cargo vessel, built in 1938 by Barclay Curle & Co. In addition to carrying cargo, she operated the mail service between Australia, Papua, New Guinea, Solomon Islands, New Hebrides, Norfolk, and Lord Howe Islands. Requisitioned for war service (1939-46). After a refit, she resumed her cargo and mail service in 1948. Scuttled on 29 March 1951, to extinguish a fire in her cargo of copra. Refloated and repaired in December that year and resumed service She was sold for demolition in 1968.

MV Lakatoi was a 341 gross tons cargo vessel, built in Hong Kong in 1938 by the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Company. Operated on the Australia to Papua, New Guinea and Solomon Islands service and was involved in the evacuation of women and children following the outbreak of war with the Japanese. Requisitioned for war service in 1941. She operated as a United States Navy ship during the South Pacific Campaign, she capsized and sank in a storm in the vicinity of New Caledonia during 1943.

MV Matafele was a 341 gross tons cargo vessel, built in Hong Kong in 1938 by the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Co. Operated on the Australia to Papua, New Guinea, and Solomon Islands service. Requisitioned for war service in 1941, she is believed to have been sunk by a Japanese submarine in the Coral Sea in July 1944.

MV Mamutu was a 300 gross tons cargo vessel, built in Hong Kong in 1938 by the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Co. Operated on the Australia to Papua, New Guinea and Solomon Islands service and was involved in the evacuation of women and children following the outbreak of war with the Japanese. Requisitioned for war service in 1941, she was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in the Gulf of Papua in August 1942.

MV Tulagi was a 2,281 gross tons cargo vessel, built in Hong Kong in 1939 by the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Co. Operated on the Australia to the Pacific Islands and the west coast ports of North America, then the Australia to Papua, New Guinea and Darwin service. Requisitioned for war service, she was torpedoed in March 1944 in the Indian Ocean by the German submarine U-532.

MV Muliama was a 689 gross tons cargo vessel, which could carry refrigerated cargo, built in Hong Kong in 1938 by the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Co. Operated on the Australia to Papua, New Guinea and Rabaul service. After the bombing of Darwin in February 1942, she participated in the cargo shuttle service from Cairns and Thursday Island to Darwin. Returned to Burns Philp in 1945, she serviced destinations in the South Pacific including Solomon Islands, Papua, New Guinea and the Gilbert Islands and Ellice Islands. She was sold in 1957.

SS Burnside was a 5,659 gross tons passenger-cargo ship that was under construction by Barclay, Curle & Co at the outbreak of World War II. Requisitioned for war service by the British Ministry of War Transport in 1940. In 1946, Burns Philp gained control of the ship and she operated on the Australia to Singapore and Malaysia service. Sold in 1964.

SS Braeside was a 5,659 gross tons passenger-cargo ship, built in 1949 by Barclay, Curle & Co. She operated on the Australia to Singapore service. Sold in 1970

Thus, signaled the passing of one of Australia's shipping giants. The absence of their ships within Oceania, and the West Pacific left a shipping void, which, realistically, has yet to be matched by any other player. Perhaps the closest participant would be that of the Swire Group's "Steamships" organization. Steamships which is prominent in the Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands region, currently provides shipping, agency, trading, and a wide range of retail/distribution services.

End

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