

Legendary Flotillas and the Last Moments of Empire

The telling account of the small ships' evacuation of Singapore February 1942.

Commentary by Geoff Walker

There have been many accounts of the loss of Singapore during WW2, each depicting acts' of heroism, courage, and gallantry, notwithstanding the military blunders which led to the rapid downfall of Singapore and the capitulation of Allied forces, on 15 February 1942, to the forces of Japan.

However, despite the volumes of dialogue written on the subject, often the part played by the Merchant Ships of the British colonial era, in connection with the evacuation of civilians and troops from the island bastion are not given the full credit they deserve. Hence, this short article is in recognition of the very important role they played. Whilst it is not possible to include all those gallant little ships, this is a tribute to all those brave people who lost their lives during the campaign of evacuation. It is therefore important to remember several of the more notable actions, which may be considered as representative of many.

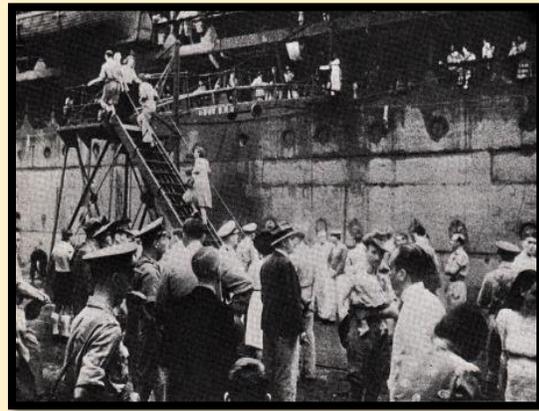
During the years leading up to WW2 there was a significant fleet of small cargo and passenger ships under British and Dutch Flags that acted as the main conduit for trade and passenger movements around the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, and the Straits Settlements, Singapore, including British Borneo and Sarawak. Predominantly, these were smaller types of ships, mainly due to the requirement to navigate up meandering rivers of limited depth and serving the rather underdeveloped ports of the times. Typically, they were beautiful little ships, built for operating in the tropics and specifically for the trades in which they were engaged, mainly manned by European Officers and local Malay, Singaporean, or Dutch East Indies crew. Many of the Europeans who sailed these vessels had become permanent residents in S. E. Asia, and therefore had become familiar with the region in which they had worked for many years.

The build-up of Japanese forces throughout Asia in the months leading up to December 1941 had led many to anticipate conflict and plans were made to evacuate large numbers of the families of servicemen, and civilians were encouraged to leave Singapore, which resulted in torrents of people desperately seeking passage out, on the next available ship. Many European and Eurasian women and children were evacuated before the end of December. A further 1500 women and children left early in the New Year and a final large contingent of 4000 departed in four passenger ships in late January 1942. By early January the land exit via Malaya no longer existed, and therefore the only remaining means of escape to safety was by ship.

The last evacuations from Singapore were between 12-14th February 1942 and to enable such a rapid evacuation, the Admiralty had earlier requisitioned many of the small steamers that had been trading around the Far East, to assist in the campaign. Amongst those ships requisitioned were many of the vessels belonging to the Straits Steamship Company and Sarawak Steamship Company, but literally any ship with ocean-going capability, irrespective of size remaining in Singapore harbor at that time, was ultimately commandeered by the authorities to evacuate people, mostly civilians, women, and children.

A Plan of evacuation had been devised and those vessels carrying military and civilians were directed to proceed towards safety via the Durian Straits, Berhala Straits, and the Banka Straits to points of refuge in Java. The small ships departed in loose convoys, perhaps the last known being on 13th and 14th February in the afternoon, or early evening, to allow all ships to clear Singapore and its approaches before daylight, the following morning.

It is claimed that around 44 ships carrying evacuees left Singapore in those convoy formations between February 12 to 14, 1942 and that of these vessels, all but 4 were bombed and sunk as they passed down the Bangka Straits from Singapore to Java. Consequently, thousands of men, women, and children were killed before any could reach land, or be rescued from drowning at sea.

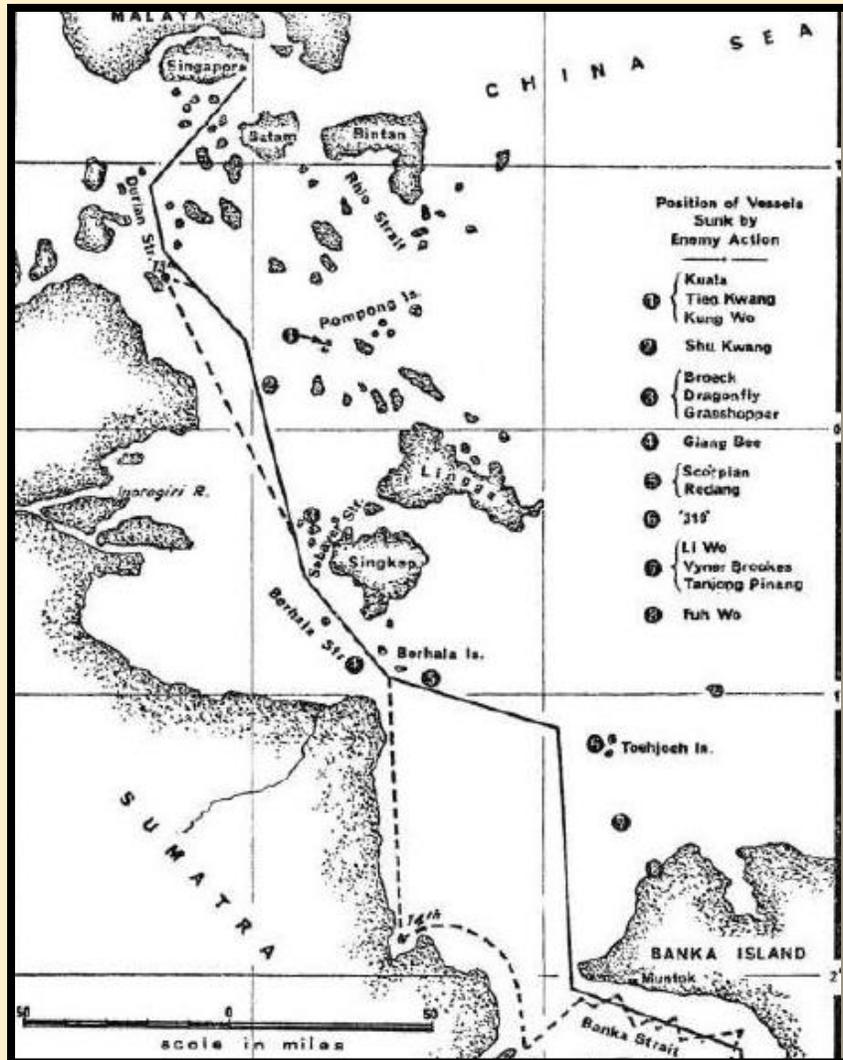


Organized chaos, as thousands of servicemen, civilians, women, and children queue and register for a berth on the next available ship leaving Singapore in the days leading up to the downfall. Singapore itself was ablaze, columns of black smoke rose thousands of feet in the air, it was an apocalyptic scene and nightmare to behold.

There were many courageous actions amongst those little ships attempting to get away from Singapore, with evacuees, during those last few days prior to the colony capitulating. Terrible battles were fought against overwhelming odds in their efforts to get as many women and children, away to safety, as was possible, whilst other ships attempted to take the fight to the enemy. Most of these actions remain unknown or are under reported, the witnesses having died in the fighting, or the survivors met their demise at sea, or at the hands of the enemy whilst in captivity.

So, as the first bombs fell on Singapore, after the invasion of northern Malaya on 8 December 1941, civilian families began to evacuate their women and children by ship back to England, India, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, and the safety (at that time) of Java in the Dutch East Indies. The convoys of little ships, that had been seconded by the British Admiralty, set sail for safer destinations. Each crammed to the gunwales with some servicemen, but mostly civilians, women, and children.

The map below shows the proposed route that the ships carrying evacuees from Singapore should adopt. The numbers on the chart, which can be matched by the numerical list on the right, indicate the position where many of those ships were sunk, during the course, of their escape. Most of those that were sunk are spotlighted in the short narrative that follows.



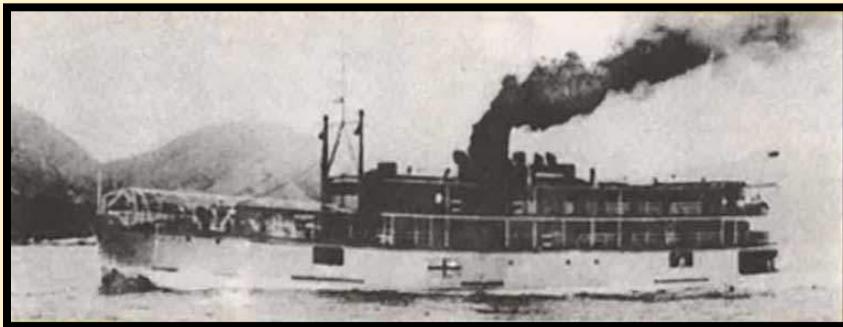
On 14th February 1942, "H.M.S. Li Wo", a patrol vessel of 1,000 tons, built in Hong Kong and formerly a passenger steamer on the Upper Yangtse River, operated by Jardines, and requisitioned by the Admiralty, was on passage from Singapore to Batavia. Her ship's company consisted of eighty-four officers and men, including one civilian; they were mainly survivors from His Majesty's Ships which had been sunk, and a few from units of the Army and Royal Air Force. Her armament was one 4-inch gun, for which she had only thirteen practice shells, and two machine guns.

Since leaving Singapore the previous day, the ship had beaten off four air attacks, in one of which, fifty-two aircraft took part, and she had sustained considerable damage. Late in the afternoon, she sighted two enemy convoys, the larger of which was escorted by naval units, including a light cruiser and some destroyers.

Knowing that his chances of escape were slim, the Commanding Officer, gathered his ship's company together and told them that, rather than try to escape, he had decided to fight to the last, in the hope that he might inflict damage upon the enemy. In making this decision, which drew overwhelming

support from the entire ship's company, the Captain knew that his ship faced certain destruction, and that his own chance of survival was minimal. During the engagement which lasted little over one hour **H.M.S. Li Wo** had been critically damaged and was sinking. The Captain then decided to ram his main target, which was the large transport ship which he had shelled earlier, and which had been abandoned by her crew. It is known that this ship burnt fiercely throughout the night following the action, and probably sank.

H.M.S. Li Wo's courageous fight ended when, her stock of shells exhausted, and under heavy fire from the enemy cruiser, her commanding officer Lieutenant Wilkinson, finally ordered abandon ship. He himself remained on board and went down with her. There were only ten survivors, who were later made prisoners of war by the Japanese. Lieutenant Wilkinson's valor was equaled only by the skill with which he fought his ship. He received the Victoria Cross posthumously in recognition both of his own heroism and self-sacrifice, and of all who fought and died with him on the **H.M.S. Li Wo**.



The small Steamship **H.M.S. Li Wo** during her days as a passenger steamer on the Yangtze River, hence the Union Flag painted on her side.

Another little fighting lady was the **SS Kedah**, built in 1926, for the Straits Steamship Company who had decided to build a ship designed especially for their premium passenger service, between Singapore and Penang. Up until this point the Straits Steamship company had operated various smaller vessels which were their main, if not their only connection, between the many small ports and plantations, known as the Straits Settlements. The specifications set down by the company were quite specific, and the tender for her construction was awarded to Vickers shipyards, of Barrow. She was launched on 16th July, 1927, and named **SS. Kedah** after the Malaysian province in which she was built to operate. She had a burden of 2,499 gross tons and two passenger decks, three holds and hatches and 6 steam-driven cranes, and was constructed with a double bottom that extended the entire length of the ship. She was powered by two single turbine steam engines, driving twin screws which gave her a service speed of 18 knots.

The **SS Kedah** commenced service in 1927 and she quickly became a popular ship in the region and was nicknamed the "**Little Queen of Malacca Straits,**" Painted all white, with just four varnished timber lifeboats, she was an impressive looking small steamer. She accommodated 80 first-class passengers, as well as up to 960 deck passengers.

In December 1939, **H.M.S. Kedah** was requisitioned by the Royal Navy as an armed auxiliary cruiser designated FY035. The Navy made various changes, which included the top section of the funnel being removed, also taller masts were installed, as well as being armed with two 4-inch guns and one 3-inch. Anti-aircraft gun. Depth charge launchers were placed on the aft deck. She served in the north of Borneo and was used as an evacuation ship, prior the fall of Singapore. On her final sailing out of Singapore she was under constant attack from the air, but remained undamaged, thanks to a demonstration of brilliant

seamanship by her Captain. However, with bombs falling close to her hull, which caused massive vibrations that severely damaged her engines, she could only manage a speed of 7 knots.

In Batavia, although in urgent need of overhaul, she was ordered to sail to Tjilatjap (Cilipap), Indonesia, to take aboard the staff of General Wavell, and some 400 refugees, and take them to Colombo in Ceylon. But she was once again attacked by air, after which her machinery failed completely. She was towed the rest of the way by **H.M.S. Dragon**, finally arriving in Colombo on March 9, where she was eventually fully refitted. Thereafter, she spent the next two years operating in the Bay of Bengal. But in 1945 she was selected to be the headquarters for the General Staff during the invasion of Malaya. For this purpose, she was fitted out with an array of the latest radio equipment. On September 5, 1945, "**H.M.S. Kedah**" was the first ships to re-enter Singapore, flying the flag of rear admiral J. A.V. Morse, and carrying the combined operations staff, senior officers of the British military and the chairman of the Singapore Harbor Board, a historic moment indeed for the ship.

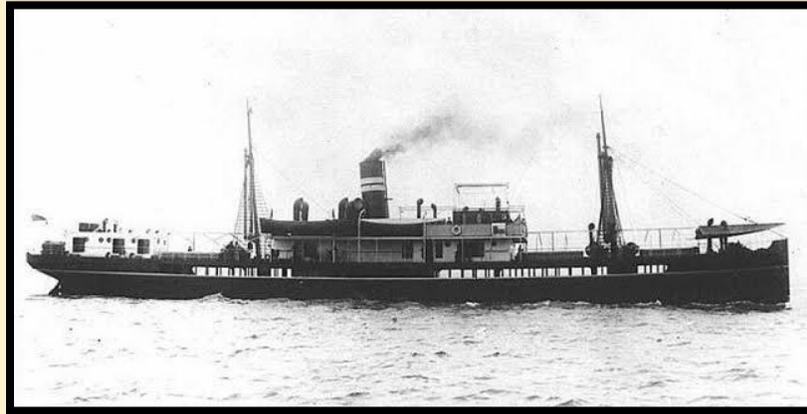
On her way back to England, she remained in Malta for a while serving as a Depot Ship. In 1946 she returned to Barrow for comprehensive repairs, and another refit. The Straits Steamship Company had by this time, no further need for the ship, having received suitable compensation from the Royal Navy. The vessel was subsequently sold to Zim Israel Lines and renamed **SS Kedmah** where she continued to operate, ferrying Jewish immigrants from France to Israel, returning with tourists. In 1952 ZIM and its partners terminated their association and on November 2, 1952 the ship **SS Kedmah**, was sold and placed under the British Flag once again, being renamed "**Golden Isles**", and operating Mediterranean cruises until being sold in 1957, for demolition in the UK.



The ex-Straits Steamship's **H.M.S. Kedah** fitted out as an armed merchant cruiser in her wartime livery.

The "**SS Mata Hari**" was a small passenger ship of 1020 gross tons and owned by the British India Steam Navigation Company. Having been requisitioned by the Admiralty at the outbreak of hostilities, she departed from Singapore for Batavia on 12 February 1942 with a ship's complement of 483, consisting of 9 officers, 72 European ratings, 2 Asian crew, 30 Royal Marines and 60 Royal Naval personnel from the **H.M.S. Prince of Wales** and **H.M.S. Repulse**, 60 Army personnel, 118 civilian men and 132 women and children. Three other ships **H.M.S. Scorpion**, **H.M.S. Vyner Brooke** and **H.M.S. Giang Bee** in company with her, were all lost.

The **H.M.S Mata Hari**, like the others, was bombed and strafed by over 80 enemy war planes but was able to keep going and sustained few casualties. She was captured by Japanese forces 15 miles off Muntok, on 15 February 1942. Her passengers and crew were landed the following day and the ship taken as a War Prize being renamed **Nitirin Maru**. She was finally sunk by Allied aircraft on 2nd March 1945.



The **SS Mata Hari** in her civilian guise before her conversion to an armed patrol vessel.

She had been built to service the small settlement ports along the Malacca Straits and between Sumatra, Thailand, Malaya, and Borneo, carrying passengers and general cargo for transshipment to Europe via Singapore. In August 1939, she was requisitioned by the Royal Navy and converted into a patrol vessel armed with one 4" gun, some Lewis guns, Asdic and two depth charge rails, and became part of the Malayan Auxiliary Fleet.

Another vessel to serve with distinction during the evacuation of Singapore was the **SS Vyner Brooke** which was built in 1928, a British-registered cargo vessel of 1,670 GRT. She was named after the Third Rajah of Sarawak – Sir Charles Vyner Brooke. Up until the outbreak of war, **SS Vyner Brooke** sailed the waters between Singapore and Kuching, under the ownership of the Sarawak Steamship Company. At the commencement of the war in the Far East, **SS Vyner Brooke** was requisitioned by the Admiralty, painted gray and armed with a four-inch deck gun forward, two Lewis guns aft and depth charges at her stern rail. The ship's Australian and British officers were mostly Malay Royal Navy Volunteer Reservists, who had been required to remain aboard the now **H.M.S Vyner Brooke**. The ship's company, under the command of her peacetime Captain, was augmented by the reservists, some surviving crew from **H.M.S Prince of Wales** and **H.M.S Repulse**, supported by a mix of European and Malay professional sailors.



H.M.S Vyner Brooke in her camouflage, as an armed merchant trader.

As **H.M.S. Vyner Brooke**, this vessel displayed serious determination and effort in the evacuation, and on the evening of 12 February 1942, **H.M.S Vyner Brooke** was one the last ships carrying evacuees to leave Singapore. Although she was built to accommodate only 12

passengers, in addition to her 47 crew, the **H.M.S Vyner Brooke** sailed south with 181 passengers on board, most of them women and children. Among the passengers were the last 65 Australian nurses in Singapore. The ship was equipped with wireless and carried lifeboats, rafts, and lifebelts for 650 people and could carry at least 200 deck passengers.

Throughout the daylight hours of 13 February **H.M.S Vyner Brooke** anchored in the lee of a small jungle-covered island, but she was spotted and attacked late in the afternoon by a Japanese aircraft, fortunately without receiving any serious casualties. As the sunset approached, she made a dash for the Banka Strait, heading for Palembang in Sumatra. Patrolling Japanese warships, however delayed her progress, and at sunrise the next day she was dangerously exposed on a flat calm sea just inside the Banka strait. Early in the afternoon the ship was savagely attacked by enemy aircraft and despite evasive action, she was crippled by several bombs and within half an hour rolled over and plunged bow first into the depths of the Banka Straits.

Passengers from the bombed and sinking ship were directed to the remaining undamaged lifeboats, most lifeboats had been riddled with bullets or holed with shrapnel. Otherwise, survivors of the fatal attack jumped overboard into the water, or, slid down ladders and ropes into the sea. Some reached rafts or held onto debris and flotsam, while others swam in their lifejackets for many hours which became, days, and nights, surrounded by the drifting wreckage from boats, the dead and the dying.

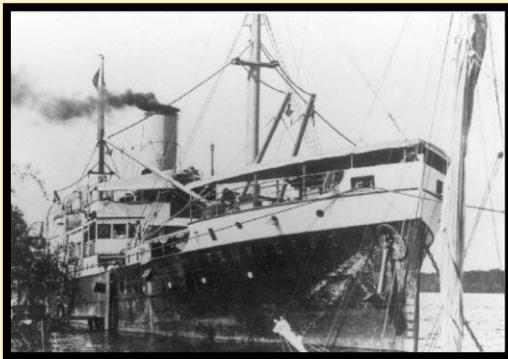
Through the darkness of the tropical night, they could see the flashing light from Bangka Island's Muntok lighthouse, sometimes near and sometimes further away as the tides flooded and ebbed, pulled them towards, then away, from the shoreline. One group of Australian nurses, seated on a raft, had been close to land but were pulled back by the tide and swept out to sea. They were never seen again.

Finally, parched by the blistering sun, dehydrated, and exhausted, some people reached land along the coastline of North-Western Bangka Island. Severely weakened, and seriously stricken by thirst, the survivors tried to find fresh water or split open coconuts to drink the coconut milk. Approximately 150 survivors eventually made it ashore at Banka Island, some having spent a period of up to 65 hours in the water. The island had already been occupied and most of the survivors were taken as captives and placed in Prisoner of War camps.



Some of the survivors from **H.M.S Vyner Brooke** that reached Bangka Island, in the Dutch East Indies, succumbed to the harsh treatment of their captors, and died. Others were imprisoned in Palembang and Muntok POW camps, the women experiencing the most brutal of conditions. Of the 65 Australian nurses on board, only 24 returned home to Australia at the war's end.

The **SS Giang Bee** of 1646 gross tons had been built in Rotterdam in 1908 and was originally named the "**Reijnierz**" and operated by the Dutch KPM Line. In 1939 she had been sold to the Heap Eng Moh SS Co and renamed **SS Giang Bee**. Having been constructed primarily as a cargo ship there was no passenger accommodations, little deck space, but ample room below decks in the cavernous cargo holds. She had four lifeboats – each with a capacity for 32 persons.



SS Giang Bee pictured whilst still in KPM colors, and under the name of "**Reijnierz**" prior to her sale and conversion to an armed trader by the British Admiralty just prior to hostilities in S. E. Asia.

In April 1941, the **SS Giang Bee** was requisitioned by the British Admiralty and converted as an armed merchantman. As **H.M.S Giang Bee** she was armed with a four-inch gun and depth charges, becoming part of the Malaya Volunteer Group. All her Malay crew had been disembarked in Singapore before she departed, so that

the crew consisted of a few Chinese crew members, a handful of RNVR personnel and some passengers who volunteered to act as stokers etc. She was bombed and suffered damage during the day of 13th February 1942, and in the evening, after a long stand-off with a Japanese destroyer, she was shelled, set ablaze and subsequently sunk in the Banka Strait. Many of the officers and crew perished as the ship slipped below the waves. There had never been enough lifeboats or lifesaving equipment for all those on board, and two of the four lifeboats had been seriously damaged earlier because of the bombing. Due to this and the speed with which the ship sank, a considerable number of lives were lost.

Whilst there appears to have initially been an attempt by the Japanese to handle the surrender of the ship in a somewhat civilized manner, in the final turn of events they abandoned the scene showing no humanity or mercy towards the survivors in the water, when they were fully aware that the ship was carrying civilians, with a high percentage of women and children.

It is believed, from available records, there were in fact two heavily armed Japanese destroyers, namely, the “**Fubuki**” and the “**Asagiri**” which were responsible for the sinking of many British and Dutch ships in the Indonesian Archipelago and the Banka Straits during this tragic one-week period.



The IJN Destroyer **Asagiri**, believed responsible for the sinking of the **H.M.S Giang Bee** along with many of the other ships of the evacuation fleet, in the vicinity of the Banka Straits, abandoning survivors in the water, to the elements of the sea.

The **SS Fuh Wo** was built in 1922 by Yarrow and Company, Glasgow for Jardine Matheson and Company with the specific purpose of providing a river shipping services along the Yangste River, in China. The ship remained in this service between 1922-1940. **SS Fuh Wo** was a coal burning steamship, originally with a length of 204 feet, it was later jumboized in 1938 to a length of 211 feet with a burden of 955 GRT.

In May 1940 it was requisitioned by the British Admiralty – probably at the same time as other Yangste River passenger steamers such as the ‘**SS Li Wo**’ and ‘**SS Kung Wo**’. Upon being requisitioned she became **H.M.S Fuh Wo**., after being converted to a Patrol Vessel and Auxiliary Minesweeper. During late 1941 and early 1942 she spent much of her time patrolling Singapore waters.

In the early hours of Friday 13th October 1942, **H.M.S Fuh Wo** escaped Singapore in the company of **H.M.S Li Wo** and one other small minesweeper patrol vessel. The **H.M.S Fuh Wo** – although the ‘senior ship’ of the small flotilla, had not been supplied with charts of the escape route, therefore **H.M.S Li Wo** assumed the role as a navigation guide, as they worked their way through the 10 miles of minefields defending Singapore, with only a single narrow channel for an exit. Soon the **H.M.S Li Wo** and the **H.M.S Fuh Wo** were clear of the mines and on their own - the accompanying minesweeper had been ordered to proceed on an independent course.

During the afternoon, 26 Japanese planes attacked the two ships which separated in a defensive maneuver. The attack lasting several hours at which time the severely damaged **H.M.S Fuh Wo**, found itself in a cove close to a beach at Singkep Island. They decided later in the afternoon of 13th February to lie up during daylight and steam under cover of darkness through the narrow, shallow passages of the Rhio archipelago. The ships remained in the shelter of Singkep island that afternoon, with the plan to leave at around midnight but for reasons unknown they did not leave and were spotted by Japanese reconnaissance plane and soon thereafter underwent another severe bombing attack. The two ships presumably weighed anchor and headed for the Banka Straits – but little did they know that they were about to clash with the Japanese invasion fleet heading for Sumatra and Banka Island.

The **H.M.S Li Wo** engaged the leading transport ship but was soon attacked by the light cruiser ‘Yura’ and the destroyers ‘Fubuki’ and ‘Asagiri’. The **H.M.S Li Wo** rammed the transport ship – sinking her but

was hit by shells from the warships and sank. **H.M.S Li Wo's** survivors were not rescued and left abandoned in the sea.



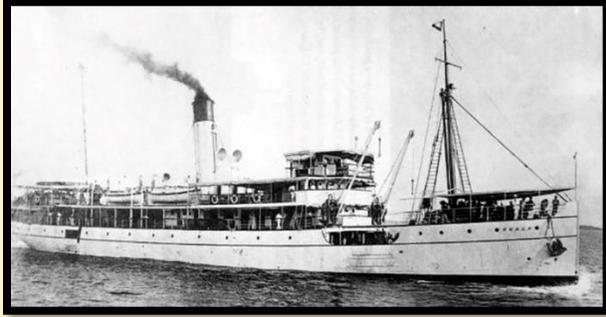
An unknown Artist's impression of the **H.M.S Li Wo** at the climax of the battle, depicted in the process of ramming the Japanese transport ship in the troop convoy.

H.M.S Fuh Wo's next actions after leaving the anchorage and before she reached Banka Island are uncertain but, as recorded by one of the ship's officers, it is understood that the ship reached Banka Island and was beached on the north-western coast of the Island, most likely being damaged due to the bombing. The ship's Captain was concerned to save his crew because there was no other means of escape and therefore decided to beach her. The ship subsequently being blown – up by its crew, to avoid being salvaged and used by the Japanese.



Image of a wreck on the coast of Banka Island, believed to be that of **H.M.S Fuh Wo** in the vicinity of Muntok Lighthouse.

Only 8 crew deaths were recorded on board **H.M.S Fuh Wo** from the bombings prior to her beaching, which is comparatively few when compared with the other ships sunk in the Banka Straits. Credit is due to the Captain for beaching his ship which was entirely justified considering the number of lives saved as a direct consequence. Records show that no lives were lost during the beaching and subsequent demolition.



The smart looking passenger ship **SS Kuala**, belonging to the Straits Steamship Company whilst engaged in pre-war commercial activities.

H.M.S Kuala was an auxiliary patrol boat of 954 GRT. Whilst on passage to Singapore on 12 Feb 1942 she had survived a heavy bombing attack by Japanese aircraft and upon arriving at the port safely on 13 Feb 1942, was immediately ordered to re-fuel and assist in the evacuation of civilians

from the city. **H.M.S KUALA** sailed from Singapore on Friday, 13th February 1942 with approximately 500 evacuees on board – men, women, and children. Embarkation took place whilst the ships in the harbor were being heavily bombed by the invading aircraft. By 5.15 p.m. many of the evacuees had been killed by bombs, and motor cars and cargo on the wharf was set on fire by incendiary bombs.

The ship's Master gave orders to weigh anchor at 6.15 p.m. with instructions to proceed to Batavia, Java via the straits of Rhio, Barbala, and Banka, but anchored at 5.45 a.m. on the morning of the 14th at Pompong Island in company with **H.M.S Tien Kwang**, an auxiliary anti-submarine vessel. Pompong Island is south of the southern exit of Rhio Strait, about 45 miles south east of Singapore.

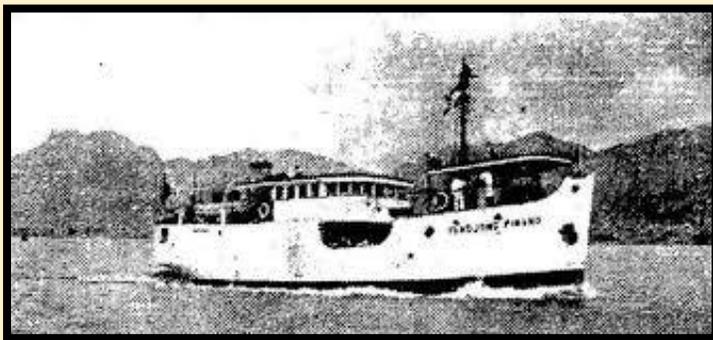
Upon anchoring, boats were lowered, and work parties sent ashore to collect tree branches and foliage with which to camouflage the ship. Within a few hours the camouflaging was progressing well. Soon thereafter, the ship again came under attack by Japanese aircraft, following the bombing of **H.M.S Kung Wo**, which was an auxiliary minelayer and had been abandoned the day previously and lay about 3 miles away.

The aircraft orbited above, sighting, and bombing **H.M.S Tien Kwang** and then made for **H.M.S Kuala**. Both vessels were at anchor only about 2 cables off Pompong Island. A stick of bombs was dropped by one of the aircraft, gaining a direct hit on **H.M.S Kuala**, one bomb hitting the bridge, a second the stokehold and the third the engine room. The ship at once burst into flames, with all the superstructure soon well ablaze. Fortunately, the lifeboats were on the Island with work parties collecting more tree branches for camouflage when the attack occurred, so casualties were not as bad as they could have been. Unfortunately, the ship's Master was severely injured but still made heroic attempts to free women and children that had become trapped inside cabins, then single handedly lowered the accommodation ladder so that the women and children could abandon the ship, into the sea whilst awaiting the ship's boats to return and pick - up survivors and ferry them ashore. The ship's Captain was a big heavy man and was unable to be lifted into the rescuing lifeboats but was secured to the boat and towed the short distance to the island.

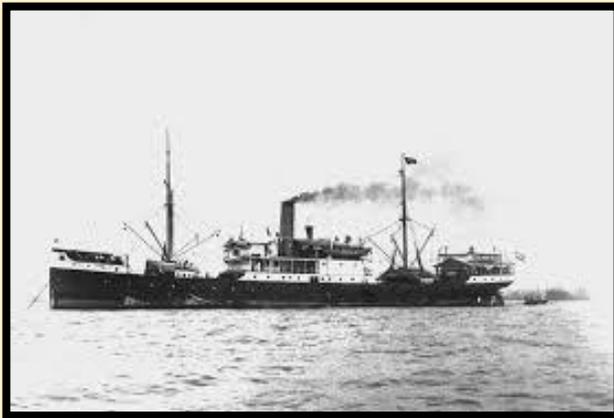
It so happened a group of British and Dutch Nurses on the ship had been one of the first groups ashore, so they were able to receive the wounded, and make a makeshift camp in which to try and treat them. Upon arrival ashore the Captain who was in agonizing pain and partially paralyzed, collapsed through sheer exhaustion. It was only through the dedication and medical expertise of the Nurses that the Captain survived and was eventually able to walk again, after only 4 days.

Ultimately, escape was made, some by Chinese junks, fishing boats and the tiny Dutch Freighter, named the **SS Tanjong Pinang**, a 97-foot converted cargo passenger vessel, which had previously traded on the

Singapore Straits to Rhio Archipelago service. Only a few days earlier and just prior to the Surrender of Singapore, the ship had been the “tail end Charlie” of the final convoy of evacuation vessels from Singapore and had evacuated a complement of nurses and Army personnel which were taken to safety at Tembilihan on the east coast of Sumatra. Evidently the ship was somewhat damaged by the time she arrived in the port. She then travelled upriver to the town of Rengat. Soon messages reached Rengat telling of the fate of the **H.M.S. Kuala** at Pompong Island and requesting assistance. Immediately responding, and on her way to Pompong Island from Rengat, she picked up several more survivors from other vessels found adrift at sea. The **SS Tanjong Pinang** carried about 170 women and children, plus about eight wounded men, from the uninhabited Pompong Island, and ill-fated **H.M.S Kuala**, which had previously been destroyed by Japanese bombers. Sadly, she was shelled and sunk 30 nautical miles south of Pulau Ubar by Imperial Japanese Navy vessels. Of 150 passengers and 17 crew there were only 3 survivors, 2 of them from **H.M.S Kuala**.



A rather scratchy image of the tiny “**Tanjong Pinang**” which played such an important role in the rescue of stranded evacuees from the **H.M.S Kuala** at Pompong Island, unfortunately with a tragic ending. It is hard to imagine so many evacuees being crowded on board such a tiny coastal craft.



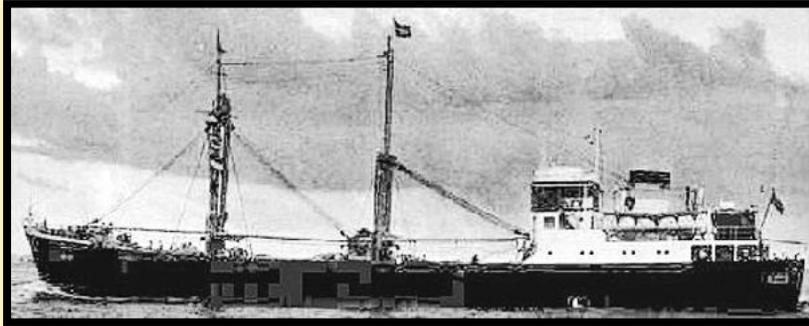
The **SS Ban Ho Guan** was a 270 foot, modest sized, cargo passenger ship of 1,693 GRT, built in 1908 at Feijnoord, Rotterdam, for the Dutch KPM Line, to operate in their Netherlands East Indies inter-Island service.

Originally named the “**De Haan**”, in 1935 she was reportedly sold to Chop Ek Liong Hin, of Singapore, but other sources claim it was owned by the largest trader in South East Asia at the time, Oei Tiong Ham, through his company Heap Eng Moh SS and was placed under the British flag.

This ship was one of the last ships to evacuate people from Padang and followed the earlier ill-fated **SS. Rooseboom** (which had been sunk by a Japanese submarine in the Indian Ocean on its way to Ceylon with only six survivors out of almost 500 souls on board), only days earlier.

There are conflicting accounts of the exact time this small vessel departed from Padang, as three vessels departed around the same time, but the best estimate available, is during the early hours of 27th February 1942. However, the **SS Ban Ho Guan** was reported to be carrying about 230 persons in total (more, or less equally divided between British and Australian nationals). The **SS Ban Ho Guan** also sometimes referred to “**Han Moh**” or “**Ban Moh**”, was assumed to have been sunk. It is possible survivors may have quite

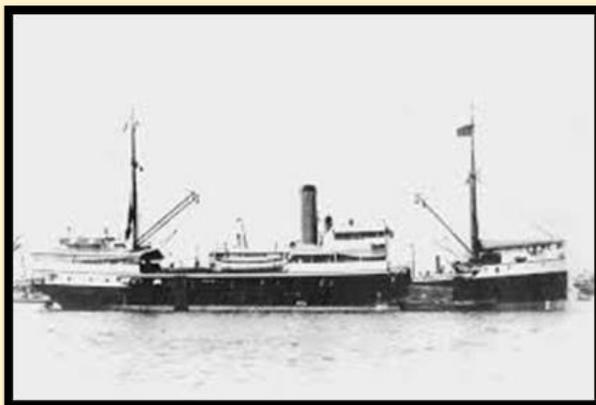
easily reached one of the numerous islands on the western coast of Sumatra, but none of the passengers who were on board were ever heard of again, so their fate remains a mystery. Japanese naval records revealed that the log of the Imperial Japanese submarine IJ-4, indicated it had torpedoed and sunk the **SS. Ban Ho Guan** somewhere towards Tjilatjap (modern day Cilicap) or south of Bali at 1745 hours on 28 February 1942. Although probable, uncertainty remains, and no further conclusions can be drawn at this time without scrutiny of more precise records.



MV Lipis prior to being requisitioned by the British Admiralty in 1939, and under the ownership of Straits Steamship Company. She was later to become **H.M.S Lipis** after conversion to an Armed trader and patrol vessel.

In 1942 she had been attacked by the Japanese at Miri, Sarawak, British North Borneo, but managed to evade capture and escaped to Singapore. She was again attacked on 11th February 1942 by Japanese aircraft off Sultan Shoal just west of Singapore, she was set ablaze and abandoned when her steering gear failed. In 1943, following the surrender of Singapore, the ship was salvaged and repaired, being commissioned by the Japanese as **Risui Maru**. She finally met her demise on 26.3.45 when sunk following a bombing attack by RAF aircraft in 10.35N-94.45E.

H.M.S Scott Harley was a coal burning steamship of 620 GRT and built in 1913 by Wilton's Scheepsbouw. & Machine Fabr., Amsterdam, and was originally owned by the Dutch Shipping Line, KPM under the name of "**Singaradja**". In 1935 it was sold to Heap Eng Moh Steam Ship Co., Singapore, and named the **SS Scott Harley**, and was the second vessel in the company to bear that name, the first having been scrapped some years earlier.



The old coal burning steamer **SS Scott Harley**, seen in her civilian guise, most likely when still under the ownership of the Dutch KPM Line as **Singaradja**.

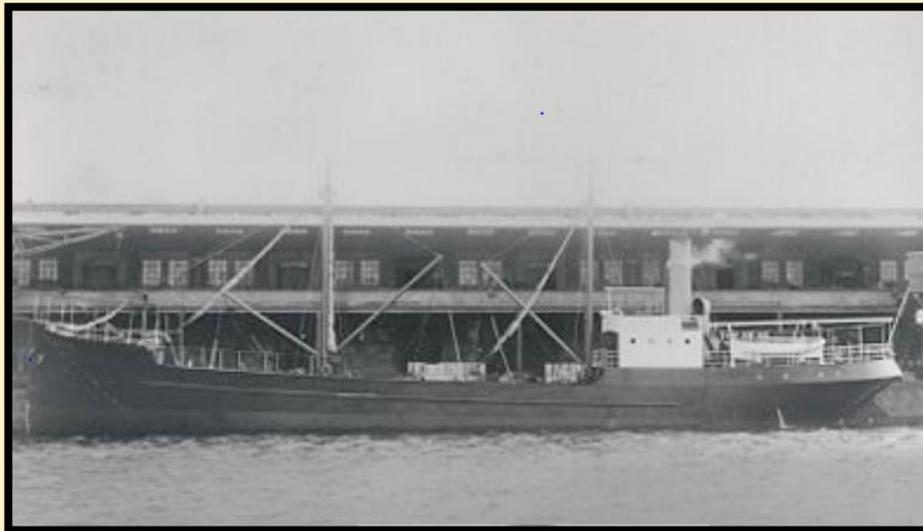
At the outbreak of WW2, the **SS Scott Harley** was requisitioned by the British Admiralty, and converted into a minesweeper which carried armaments, including depth charges for anti-submarine hunting. Now

as **H.M.S Scott Harley** she departed Singapore on the night 12 February 1942, only three days before the surrender to the Japanese, with approximately 170 women and children on board, and with shortages of food and fresh water. The Captain's orders were to make for Batavia.

On the 13th and 14th February, whilst in the vicinity of the notorious Banka Straits, she was bombed multiple times by Japanese aircraft and although sustaining no direct hits, nevertheless received several near misses, which damaged the ship, caused her to take on water and list. Contrary to his orders, the Captain seems to have disregarded instructions to anchor near land/islands by day - that might have saved the passengers from the tragedies that became the fate of many escape ships, seeking daylight safety close to land, each day.

Of the approximately 44 or more little ships which left Singapore during those last few days before the capitulation of the colony, the **H.M.S Scott Harley** was one of the few, incredibly lucky ships which, although damaged, and still taking in water, made it safely to Batavia. It appears that all the other ships in the small loose convoy with which she sailed, were much faster and soon left her behind to travel on her own. This may have been a factor in her making the voyage successfully, as the Japanese ships roaming the area did not anticipate stragglers, as the "**Scott Harley**" was soon classified.

On 15th February, about noon, the beleaguered ship arrived in Batavia. The passengers who were by now experiencing severe hunger and thirst were landed, and most directed to a large Dutch passenger ship about to depart for India. Sadly, after an hour or so following her arrival in Batavia the **H.M.S Scott Harley**, succumbed to her damage and sank alongside the wharf at which she had disembarked her passengers, with her Ensign still flying, in a final act of defiance to the enemy.



The **SS. Redang** sailed from Singapore at 7.00 am on the 12th February, 1942 carrying 108 evacuees including crew, naval and Eurasian armed guards and civilians.

At the time of the Japanese expansion in Asia the vessel was handed over to the Straits Steamship Co for operation on behalf of the Ministry of War Transport. Straits Steamships managed and operated her with a skeleton crew consisting of about three Officers, five crew in the engine room, plus five Royal Naval Ratings on deck. She was placed under the command of a Danish Captain.

SS Redang departed Singapore on the morning of 12th February. The naval authorities in Singapore had given the Captain a course to the entrance of the Banka Straits, which took the ship away from the coast. Previously, so far as is known, small vessels, especially those with slow speeds, usually hugged the coastline. About 10 am the next day a Japanese seaplane flew over the ship and dropped one stick of bombs which was a near miss. Suddenly several Japanese destroyers appeared on the seaward horizon, on the port bow, and after turning to starboard, they opened fire on the **SS Redang**. After firing a few salvos and within 5 minutes of opening fire the ship was ablaze. The majority of the people that were forward, where the third salvo landed. Most of the people on the deck who were left alive got into a lifeboat (which was the only lifeboat to get away from the ship) the rest of the people either jumping overboard from the bow of the ship or having been killed by shell fire.

The log of the IJN destroyer "**Asagiri**" shows that, from the 13th to the 15th February 1942 it assisted the Light Cruiser "**Yura**" and Destroyer "**Fubuki**" in attacking Allied shipping fleeing from Singapore and they sank four vessels (including, the auxiliary merchant ship **H.M.S. Giang Bee** on the evening of 13th February and the ex- Chinese river steamer **H.M.S Li Wo** on 14th February after both ships had escaped from Singapore) with great loss of civilian life

The gun fire engagement with the **SS Redang** was a no contest in the extreme – these destroyers of the '**Fubuki**' class in the Imperial Japanese Navy were, at the time, amongst the biggest, fastest, most technically advanced destroyers in the world. At 2090 tons, capable of 38 knots and armed with six five-inch guns, plus over thirty AA guns plus six powerful torpedo tubes, they were lethal. It leaves nothing to the imagination as to the havoc they caused when they got amongst these small "mercy" ships.

During the evacuation campaign over forty ships were bombed and sunk killing all the men, women, and children on board who either died as a direct result of the bombings or were machine gunned by the Axis pilots whilst they were in the water, subsequently being abandoned drifting in the sea, and just left to drown.

The evacuation of Singapore was a tragic episode of epic proportions with many ships and their crew distinguishing themselves, but the loss of life amongst those evacuees and ships' crews was horrendous and an indelible stain in the annals maritime history.

End

References: RN Naval Archives, Singapore Historical Archives, Naval Historical Soc of Australia, Malaya Volunteer Group, Various online data available on Public Domains, from which much material has been sourced.

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