

HMS Li Wo

By Roy Martin

We British prefer not to talk about our defeats, and the fall of Singapore is no exception. Troops and civilians did escape, though many who left in the first two weeks of February 1942 did not survive the journey. The Royal Navy were desperately short of ships and five of those that were in Singapore were under repair, only two got away. This fleet was supplemented with a number of merchant ships, whose officers were hastily given 'Temporary Acting' ranks in the RNR.

One such ship was *HMS Li Wo*, a Yangtze river steamer. Her Master, Captain Thomas Wilkinson, remained in command, as a Temporary Acting Lieutenant. His Chief Officer Ronald George Gladstone Stanton, became the 1st Lieutenant. A number of survivors from *HMS Repulse* and *HMS Prince of Wales* joined the ship and members of her peacetime crew volunteered to remain. She also embarked a considerable number of civilians.

Li Wo was one of about a dozen ships that sailed on 'Black Friday' 13 February, two days before the colony fell. She spent the first night among the outlying islands, as most of the channel buoys were missing. At dawn the gun crews were closed up and the ship got underway. In the afternoon they were bombed, but no hits were scored. At sunset the CO anchored the ship in a small bay on one of the islands.

On the following morning they were bombed again. 'The Captain decided that we would make a dash through ...the Banka Straits.' At about 1630 they sighted smoke off the port bow, this turned out to be a Japanese convoy, with an escort that included a cruiser and two destroyers. Captain Wilkinson mustered his scratch crew and was much later quoted as saying 'A Jap convoy is ahead. I am going to attack it and we will take as many of those Jap bastards as possible with us.' Others said that he 'consulted the crew.'

Leading Seaman Parsons, who had survived the sinking of the *Prince of Wales*, became the gunlayer (this is contradicted in another report). He checked the ammunition and reported to the Captain that he had 'Six Sem(?) - Armour Piercing Shells, Four Graze Fuse Shells and Three A.A. Shells. The Captain replied - Gunlayer, is that all the ammunition you have'? I answered :- Yes Sir, thirteen shells in all, plus three practice shell(s).'

Battle ensigns were hoisted at the gaff and the masthead and *Li Wo* closed in on her target, a transport of between 4,000 and 5,000 tons. There was no sign of fire from the enemy and the little ship closed to 2,000 yards before opening fire. The third salvo scored a direct hit, just under the bridge and fire broke out immediately. The Japanese ship was soon blazing furiously, but *Li Wo*'s ammunition was expended.

Captain Wilkinson then gave the order to ram; there is some disagreement whether the target was the blazing transport or another ship. They hit at full speed, striking the enemy amidships, and became interlocked. *Li Wo*'s bows were buckled back. Now at close quarters the gunners opened fire with the machine guns. The unsung hero of this part of the engagement was one of the two RAF Sergeants. He manned the Lewis gun, as he had done throughout the passage. He wiped out the four man gun's crew, then swept the decks of the first target and a second, killing many.

The rest of the convoy steamed away, this allowed the warships to concentrate their fire on *Li Wo*. The enemy gunnery 'was lousy' at first, but many men were injured by shrapnel. After about ten minutes, the Japanese warships found the range and the Captain gave the order to abandon ship. The few survivors had their last sight of their ship as she listed and sank, with her Captain on the bridge. Only about a dozen men survived the battle, the sinking, and the vicious attacks that followed. More were to die in the following days, and later in the POW camp.

In 1945 the seven who remained returned to Britain and told their story. At first Temporary Lieutenant Wilkinson RNR was Mentioned in Despatches; but, when the full extent of the action was realised, he was awarded the Victoria Cross. The Victoria Cross, or the George Cross, and a Mention in Despatches, are the only awards for bravery that can be made posthumously.



'Ever since 5-30 P.M. Saturday 14th 1942. I have honoured and admired the memory of the Bravest Man I ever knew: Lt. Wilkinson V.C. R.N.' - Leading Seaman T H Parsons RN.

The following appeared in a Supplement to the London Gazette 17 December 1946:

His Majesty has approved the following awards to officers and men of HMS Li Wo:

1. Victoria Cross - Temporary Lieutenant Thomas Wilkinson, RNR
2. Distinguished Service Order - Temporary Sub Lieutenant Ronald George Gladstone Stanton RNR
3. Conspicuous Gallantry Medal - Acting Petty Officer Arthur William Thompson
4. Distinguished Service Medal - Leading Seaman Victor Spencer
5. Distinguished Service Medal - Able Seaman Albert Spendlove
6. Mentioned in Despatches (Posthumously) - Temporary Lieutenant Edgar Neil Derbridge, RNZN
7. Mentioned in Despatches (Posthumously) - Temporary Sub Lieut. J.G.Petherbridge, Malaya RNVR
8. Mentioned in Despatches (Posthumously) - Able Seaman Desmond Palmer
9. Mentioned in Despatches - Acting Chief Petty Officer Charles Halme Rogers
10. Mentioned in Despatches - Leading Seaman William Dick Wilding
11. Mentioned in Despatches - Able Seaman John Smith

Some sources give the total crew as 84, but the best breakdown I can find is: 19 Royal Navy, including Temporary RNR and RNVR; 5 Army, other ranks; 2 RAF sergeants; 34 Europeans, mostly civilians; 10 Malaysian, (crew?) and 6 Chinese crew.

The Royal Navy proudly claims HMS Li Wo to be their most decorated small ship..

Thomas Wilkinson, V C, Master Mariner, was the youngest of the five children of William and Ester Wilkinson of Widnes. His father was the Master of a schooner.

I have written this article mainly using the reports of: Chief Petty Officer C. H. Rogers D/JX 125387 and Leading Seaman T. H. Parsons D/JX.143539

Roy Martin

