

The Empire Star

*This is an excerpt from Cachalot Roy Martin's book: **Ebb and Flow: Evacuations and Landings by Merchant Ships in World War Two**, and details the evacuation of Singapore in early February, 1942.*

The *Empire Star* had arrived in Singapore on 29 January as part of convoy BM11. The ship's crew worked all day and through the night unloading guns, lorries, tanks and the 2,000 tons of ammunition that she carried. On 11 February a team of Australian nurses were chosen by their matron to board the *Empire Star*. The women objected as they did not want to leave their patients, but Matron Drummond gave them an hour to prepare. Each was allowed to take a small case. They were joined by their British colleagues from Singapore; their matron, a Miss Jones, had picked those who were to go. At the wharf their boarding was delayed by an air raid. When the 63 nurses and three physiotherapists did board they were told to go down the cargo hold, as the ship only had a few passenger cabins. Conditions in the hold would have been unpleasant, but this was the safest place to be. Miss Jones, and several other British matrons, lost their lives a few days later, while on the s.s. *Kuala*.



Blue Star Line's *Empire Star*

some of the reports they were alone, but other records say that they sailed with the *Gorgon* and the *Kedah*, and were escorted by HM ships *Durban*, *Jupiter* and *Stronghold*. The naval ships had embarked 232 evacuees between them; the other two merchant ships had over 300 each.

The *Empire Star* was attacked repeatedly and as many as fifty seven enemy aircraft were counted. On the first day she received three direct hits. Thirteen men were killed and thirty-seven others were badly wounded. The nurses set up a camp hospital, and, though they had little equipment, they tended the wounded as best they could. The Second Officer, Mr J. D. Golightly, sustained a severe injury to his left arm and Able Seaman Charles P. Barber was wounded in the right thigh. The vessel, to use Captain Capon's own words, 'miraculously escaped with a series of extremely near misses on both sides.' Captain Capon took violent evasive action. He mentioned the 'invaluable assistance' rendered by the Singapore Pilot, Captain G. Wright and his Third Officer, Mr J. P. Smith:

both of whom all through coolly kept the attacking aircraft under close observation . . . throughout this long and sustained attack the ship's company, one and all, behaved magnificently, each going about his allocated duty with a coolness and spirit of courage unquestionably deserving of the highest praise. It was fortunate that the three direct hits did not seriously damage the ship's fire service, and prompt action and yeoman service by the fire parties under the direction of the Chief Officer, Mr J. L. Dawson, prevented any serious fire developing in the initial critical stage of the attack.

Sister Margaret Hamilton recalled:

During the bombing there was absolutely no sense of panic or anything. In fact we sang, and sang, and sang, and sang. A lot of wartime songs but mostly "Waltzing Matilda" which is more or less an Australian national song.

When they said goodbye to Captain Capon and thanked him, he told the nurses that his ship had been in the evacuation of Crete and Greece, but that he had never been in such a tight spot as coming from Singapore. Captain Capon asked us to do two things every day of our lives: 'we were to thank God we were alive, and never to forget the Merchant Navy – as if we could!' Margaret Hamilton said 'We knew that it was only by the mercy of God and the good seamanship of the ship's master that we managed to get home'. Captain Capon, who had been made an OBE in World War I, was made a CBE. Others among his crew received two OBEs, three MBEs; two BEMs and nine Commendations.

Several Holt ships were in Singapore when it fell. Their *Gorgon* had arrived with convoy MS1. From 1 February the ship was continuously bombed as her crew attempted to discharge her cargo. By 11 February it became obvious that there was no point in continuing and Captain Marriott was ordered to sail. He then had 358 passengers on board and the Asian crew had deserted. The remaining crew got their vessel to sea, and, though they were attacked by Japanese bombers six times on 12 February and hit three times, they reached Fremantle safely in early March. Two of the bombs caused serious fires, one adjacent to the ammunition store. These were brought under control by the ship's fire parties. The third bomb did not explode and the ship's Chief Officer, J. Bruce, and two soldiers, manhandled it onto the deck and dumped it over the side. In his 'brief, even laconic report' the Master said 'only the extreme manoeuvrability of the vessel saved her.' Captain Roskill RN, says 'she was saved by the skill and coolness of the man who handled her.'

A letter written by the Master, Captain Selwyn Capon, says there were 2,161 people on the *Empire Star*, but he said later that he believed that the number was more like 2,400. There were 1,845 service personnel (including the nurses), 228 civilians, mostly women and children, and 88 crew. The service personnel included a group of 139 Australian troops, who were later arrested as deserters. At the time of boarding it was impossible to decide who were escapees, and who were deserters. The case against the Australian men was that they had killed a Royal Naval Captain who tried to prevent them boarding.

Captain Capon waited until first light on the 12 February then set course for the Banka Strait and Java. From



Troops on the deck of the *Empire Star*

Though he was known to have sailed overloaded with refugees (which he safely delivered), Captain J. H. Hendriks-Jansen of Holt's Dutch *'Blauw Pijper' Phrontis*, did not even submit a report! *Phrontis* had arrived on 4 February with a cargo of war materiel, and four Fairy Fulmar aircraft on deck. Her Master requested permission to go to Batavia to unload the balance of the cargo, but this was refused. On Monday the ninth the Master was given permission to leave, but 'without hesitation', he berthed and reloaded part of the cargo, including the four aircraft – plus one more – and (another?) 80 passengers. The ship was camouflaged with nets, and, after a stressful and exciting voyage, arrived safely at Tanjong Priok.

The third Blue Funnel liner, the *Talhythius* was less fortunate. Her European crew, helped by members of the New Zealand Air Force, discharged her cargo of tanks and lorries. On 3 February, as the last lorry was going over the side, the ship was hit by two bombs. The Chinese crew left, leaving the Europeans to fight the fires. As they were brought under control another salvo punctured the ship's hull in many places. The Master, Captain Kent, wrote 'The European crew worked together cheerfully, and with a will, and I have nothing but praise for their endeavours.' They were helped by members of the Observer Corps. With the help of two harbour tugs, crewed by Europeans, the vessel was moved back alongside, but the ship was not repairable and was abandoned.



It was not the end of the *Talhythius* however. Although scuttled and abandoned on the 12 February, she was raised by the Japanese forces and renamed *Taruyaso Maru*. In June '45 she exploded a mine off Sado Island, Japan, sank and was abandoned but subsequently salvaged once more. After repair she was returned to Holts again, under the name *Empire Evenlode*. She was finally broken up in the UK in 1949.



HMAS Ping Wo

On 11 or 12 February Captain Kent and his crew were allocated the *Ping Wo*, an ex-Yangtze river steamer, to make their escape. Again the crew were supplemented by Royal Navy, Royal Australian Navy and Royal New Zealand Navy sailors. They set about coaling and storing ship, using what they could find in the burning godowns. When this was completed, they sailed, picking up about 195 refugees, of several nationalities, from the water. After surviving several bombing attacks and arrived safely at Batavia on 14 February.

At Batavia they again fuelled and stored, before setting off for Fremantle in convoy, with the disabled Australian destroyer HMAS *Vendetta* in tow. The other ships in the convoy were the *Darvel* (+ *Kinta*?) and the *Giang Ann* (built in 1888, and almost certainly the oldest ship involved in the evacuation). The HMAS *Yarra* (under the command of Lieutenant Commodore R. W. Rankin) escorted the convoy part of the way. Because of the *Ping Wo*'s tow, the convoy's speed was limited to four to five knots, at best. HMAS *Adelaide* took over the escort south of Christmas Island. When the ships encountered bad weather, the tow line parted, but they nonetheless arrived safely at

Fremantle on 4 March. There 'without any fanfare Captain Kent handed over 10,635 troy ounces of gold that he had carried from Singapore.'

The Nurses Story

On Tuesday 10 February 1942 six Australian nurses were told to be ready within fifteen minutes to board the *Wah Sui*, a small Yangtze river steamer, in Singapore harbour. Captain A. C. Benfield, who had recently retired from the Sarawak Steamship Company, was called up in the Royal Naval Reserve and given command. Their matron told them to take as many wounded men as they could and get them to safety. Matron Paschke was destined to die at sea only a few days later, one of the victims of the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, but those of her nurses who survived continued to obey her orders. There were about twenty nurses altogether on the *Wah Sui*, British (and Indian?) civilian nurses and nurses from Queen Alexandria's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS), as well as the six from Australia.

The ship stayed alongside for two days, waiting for civilians who boarded with their personal belongings. The civilians occupied the accommodation and as a result there was no room to take on any more nurses or any more of the wounded. This memory still angered the Australian nurses, years later. The recollections of the Australian and the British nurses differ, but between them they got over 400 wounded servicemen on to this small vessel; which had never been designed for a sea voyage, much less the long trip she was to undertake. They sailed at sunset on 12 February.

Reporting to the Principal Matron of the QAIMNS, Sister Catherine Maudsley said of a voyage on an unnamed rescue vessel:

The ship that we boarded had many hundreds on board, including Air Force, Australians, some civilians, even babies twelve days' old. We were allocated one of the holds and shared it with Australian sisters. We slept on bare boards, using gas capes, tin hats or gas masks as pillows. We only possessed what we stood up in and could carry. The Australian Sisters who had been on board for a day or so before we arrived, had all their kit and food enough for a week, but at no time did they offer us anything, not even food; it was our men who shared their rations with us. . . . The ship itself received four direct hits and had a fire in the stern, but it still sailed on; had it not been for the Captain and staff of that Merchant ship, we should never have reached Batavia.

The ship was displaying the Red Cross and, when a Japanese plane flew over; the pilot waved and then ignored them, respecting the insignia. On the night of Friday 13 February they saw two burning ships and stopped in the hope of picking up survivors. Next day the *Wah Sui* docked in Batavia. The Australian nurses got their patients ready to transfer to another hospital ship bound for Colombo. They packed their own gear and waited aboard the *Wah Sui* to be transferred. 'Gradually they realized that they had been abandoned.' The Straits Steamship website says:

after arriving there (Tg. Priok) he (Captain Benfield) was ordered to load 400 wounded and make for Colombo; he sailed in late February arriving in Ceylon early March, a brilliant feat of seamanship.

On Friday 20 February, when the Japanese had already landed on Java, the Australian nurses boarded the Orient Liner, the *Orcades*, bound for Colombo. On the voyage they continued to do their duty, nursing both soldiers and civilians. The *Orcades* was the only ship in convoy SJ6, she carried a total of 3,768 troops and evacuees.

Another ship that had been hastily pressed into naval service was the Sarawak Steamship's *Vyner Brooke*, still commanded by her peacetime Master Captain R. E. 'Tubby' Borton. The *Vyner Brooke* sailed on 'Black Friday' 13 February, with 200 aboard, mainly civilians, including 65 Australian nurses. The ship had insufficient food and water, but the Australian nurses shared what they had. While heading for the Banka Strait the vessel was attacked and three of the lifeboats were holed.

One of the nurses, Jessie Blanche, (Blanchie) recalled that the Captain:

was good. He zigzagged. They came over and bombed us, and missed... They came back and it is said that they dropped 27 bombs. And eventually one hit us. Right down the funnel. The boys down in the engine room were very badly burned. We were given orders to abandon ship.

Another bomb hit the bridge and the third hit the after part, injuring scores of civilians. The ship sank in 15 minutes, capsizing towards many of the survivors. More were lost when the enemy pilots strafed those in the water. With the remaining lifeboat overcrowded, many survivors, including the nurses, had to stay in the water hanging on the side of the boat. They were guided towards Muntok beach by a fire lit by earlier survivors, who included Matron Drummond.

Her colleague Matron Paschke, who was on one of the rafts, was presumed lost at sea, as were eleven of the Sisters.

Captain Burton and others were swept in a different direction and were captured. While in the water, Sister Jenny Greer was heard singing 'We're off to see the Wizard.' Sister Greer was among those who survived the horrors of imprisonment; in Picture Australia there is a photograph of her and Sister Jeffrey, showing them in hospital in 1945

In all 22 Australian nurses, plus women and children, ship's crew, naval ratings and about forty British soldiers – some badly wounded – gathered together on the beach.

Mr Sedgeman, the Chief Officer of the **VYNER BROOKE**, and five ratings from the **PRINCE OF WALES**, went to a nearby kampong to find food, but the villagers feared the Japanese and would not help. Then Mr Sedgeman and two of the Royal Naval ratings went further along the beach to contact the Japanese, so that the party could give themselves up. Matron Drummond decided that the civilian women and children should go with them, they were taken prisoner. The others sat on the beach and waited for Sedgeman's return. When he arrived he was with a Japanese officer and his troops. The Japanese separated the men from the women and then marched the men along the beach out of sight. They were lined up, facing out to sea and were machine-gunned and then bayoneted. Three who had swum out to sea were machine-gunned; only a naval stoker, Ernest Lloyd, survived, he was badly injured.

Vivian (Vivien?) Bullwinkel wrote:

The Japanese who had gone with the men came back wiping their bayonets. We just looked at each other. We didn't have any emotion about it. I think by this time we'd had shock added to everything else. The Japanese came and stood in front of us and indicated that we should go into the sea. And we walked into the sea with our backs to them. We knew what was going to happen to us.... we didn't talk among ourselves. It was quite silent. We were drained of emotion. There were no tears.the force of the bullet, together with the waves, knocked me off my feet.

An elderly civilian lady died with the nurses, her husband had been shot with the other men. It was said that only Vivian survived; Mr S.A. Anderson, Ritchie & Bisset said:

When she was brought into the 'tinwinnings' at Banka, Vivian was "unconscious and in a terrible mess from sun and sea exposure. Life was hardly there. Her chances of survival were very slim. Because of the sun, her mouth was completely closed by blisters and eventually the doctors fed her through a small opening at the corner of her mouth by means of a small glass.

However Dr B Angell, who was a friend of Vivian Bullwinkel, says that this account is totally incorrect. After the war Vivian Bullwinkel went on to have a distinguished career in the Australian Nursing Service.



The following account of the subsequent fate of the Empire Star can be found on Wikipedia.

Empire Star spent 23–27 February in Fremantle and then 4–23 March in Sydney. She crossed the Tasman Sea to New Zealand, reached New Plymouth on South Island on 27 March and Wellington on North Island on 2 April. She headed east across the Pacific, traversed the Panama Canal on 26–28 August and reached Liverpool on 11 September.

In October 1942 Empire Star loaded a mixed cargo including some ammunition and a deck cargo of aircraft. She embarked 12 British, five South African and two Polish passengers and on 20 October left Liverpool independently and unescorted, bound for Cape Town and East London.

On 23 October Empire Star was making 14 knots (26 km/h) in bad weather and had stopped zig-zagging in order to avoid damage to her deck cargo. About 1500 hrs the Type VIIC German submarine U-615 started following her, and about 40 minutes later fired a spread of four torpedoes at her. At 1543 hrs two of the torpedoes struck the ship's starboard side. The first was a dud but the second detonated amidships, flooding her engine room, killing four crew and stopping her engines and generators. Two men on the engine room control platform were wounded, one of her two starboard lifeboats was destroyed and the ship listed heavily to starboard.

Empire Star transmitted a distress signal and the order was given to abandon ship. The crew launched the remaining three lifeboats and five liferafts. The boats were fitted with skates, which enabled the port ones to be launched despite the heavy list. Despite a heavy sea, all passengers and crew were evacuated except the four killed in the engine room. The three boats then stood off as the ship righted herself and settled low in the water. The First Officer, Leslie Vernon, considered whether to reboard the ship to see if she could be saved.

About 25 minutes after the first explosion U-615 attempted a coup de grâce by firing a torpedo from one of her stern tubes. This missed, so the submarine reloaded her bow tubes and turned to fire again. The next torpedo struck Empire Star between her No. 4 and No. 5 holds about an hour and a half after the first explosion. The ship remained afloat, so U-615 hit her with another coup de grâce. Empire Star's bow rose from the sea and she sank by the stern, and about five minutes later a strong underwater explosion shook the lifeboats. The submarine did not surface to question the survivors.

One lifeboat contained 38 people and was commanded by Captain Capon. Chief Officer Vernon commanded a second, which with difficulty in the heavy sea collected nine survivors from five liferafts. Mr Vernon's boat transferred the Third Officer, Roland Moscrop-Young, to command the third boat, leaving Mr Vernon's boat with 34 people. Mr Moscrop-Young's boat contained 27 people and was the least crowded boat. Mr Moscrop-Young tried to get it alongside to take some people off Captain Capon's, but was prevented by the heavy sea. Capon ordered the three boats to keep together overnight and then sail for the Azores, which were about 570 miles to the south.



Captain Capon

Overnight there was a strong northwest wind and heavy sea, drenching everyone in the boats. At first light on 24 October the boats could not see each other. Mr Vernon's boat hoisted its sail and set off before the wind, until at 1010 hrs his crew sighted the Third Officer's boat several miles to the southwest. They tried to steer towards it, but the heavy weather prevented them. At 1230 hrs Vernon abandoned the attempt and altered course to the southeast. At 1700 hrs he ordered the sail lowered and the boat to heave to with her sea anchor. At 2300 hrs the rudder broke off at the top pintle, so two of Vernon's men used an oar as an improvised and unsatisfactory steering oar. On 25 October the weather was still wild so Mr Vernon's boat drifted before the wind with her sea anchor and sail.

On the afternoon of 25 October the Black Swan-class sloop HMS Black Swan found an upturned lifeboat surrounded by wreckage. Then at 1815 hrs the sloop found Mr Vernon's boat and rescued her 34 occupants. Black Swan then searched for 120 miles, and on the morning of 26 October discovered Mr Moscrop-Young's boat and rescued its 27 occupants. Captain Capon and his party were never found. His may have been the upturned boat that the sloop had seen on the afternoon of 25 October. Capon's boat included the Chief Engineer, all three radio officers and six passengers. Five of the passengers were South African: 63-year-old Julie Martiessen with her 27-year-old daughter Gisela, and 46-year-old Annie Philpott with her two boys Kenneth (12) and John (nine).

Surviving passengers wrote to Blue Star Line commending the ship's officers and men. One credited Leslie Vernon and Second Officer JP Smith with "unflinching courage" and tirelessness. Another commended Vernon for "seamanship, courage and tact". Seaman James Donaldson was called "outstanding" for his "energy and zeal". Roland Moscrop-Young was credited with "remarkable coolness, ability and seamanship" and Junior Engineer Hickman was thanked for "continuous and unending" help. Vernon and Moscrop-Young were awarded the MBE and Donaldson was awarded the BEM.

