

# 'HMS Fuh Wo'

- Beached at Banka island and destroyed by its crew on 15 February 1942.

[Version 1.1.0; October 2017]

The 'SS. Fuh Wo' was built in 1922 by shipbuilders Yarrow and Company, Glasgow for the specific purpose of providing a river shipping service in China. Owned by the **Indo-China Steamship Navigation Company (ICSN)**

– Jardine Matheson & Co., - and registered in Shanghai, it plied the Yangtse river with passengers and cargo from 1922 until 1940. There had been an earlier ship with the same name owned by Indo china Steam, but it was scrapped in 1924.

This 'second' ship with the name 'SS. Fuh Wo' was a coal burning steam driven ship, originally with a length of 204 feet (64m) it was reassembled and extended in 1938 to 211 feet and 955 grt.

In May 1940 it was requisitioned – probably at the same time as other Yangtse river steamers such as the 'Li Wo' and 'Kung Wo' – by British Royal Navy, Admiralty (clydeships.co) and became the 'HMS Fuh Wo'..

It appears to have patrolled the waters around Singapore during the latter part of 1941 and early 1942 – either as a patrol boat or auxiliary minesweeper.

The Captain at that time appears to have been Lt. Norman Cook (Sellwood).

Many sources erroneously record that the 'Fuh Wo' was destroyed at or near Singapore to prevent it falling into Japanese hands – in reality, the ship escaped Singapore just prior to the surrender to the Japanese and was beached on the northern shores of Banka Island off the west coast of Sumatra and blown up by its crew.

The story of its last few days after escaping Singapore is told in the book "HMS Li Wo – The Most Decorated Small Ship in the Navy", and drawing on a few passages from that book we find the story that "*... At 0220 hrs on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> – in the absence of any responding signals from Fort Canning – the little convoy [comprising 'Fuh Wo', Li Wo' – also previously a passenger steamer on the Upper Yangtse - and one other small patrol ship] got underway from Singapore. The harbour was covered in thick black smoke from the burning shore. The 'Fuh Wo' – although the 'senior' ship in the group had not been supplied with charts of the escape route and 'Li Wo' had to act as guide as they worked their way through the 10 miles of minefields defending Singapore with only a narrow channel for exit. Soon the 'Li Wo' and the 'Fuh Wo' were on their own - an accompanying minesweeper had been ordered to proceed on a separate course..... At 1.30 pm, 26 planes attacked the two ships which separated in a defensive manoeuvre - after the attack lasting several hours the battered 'Fuh Wo' was in a bay close to a beach. They decided later in the afternoon of 13<sup>th</sup> 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 0.300 hrs on 14th February. For some reason they did not leave and were spotted by Jap recce planes about 10.00 hrs on 14<sup>th</sup> February whilst still at anchor and bombs soon began to fall around them.*

The ships must have raised anchor and headed for the Banka Straits – little did they know that they were about to cross paths with the Japanese invasion fleet heading for Sumatra and Banka Island. The 'Li Wo' engaged the leading transport ship but was soon attacked by the light cruiser 'Yura' and the destroyers 'Fubuki' and 'Asagiri'. The 'Li wo' rammed the transport ship – sinking her but was hit by shells from the warships and sank. The destroyer attempted to run over the 'Li Wo' survivors in the sea. Of the 84 crew, only 11 survived to reach Banka Island and be taken prisoner. The Captain of the 'Li Wo' was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross and his First Officer was awarded the DSO. Many of the crew also received high decorations.

What the next movements and actions involving the 'Fuh Wo' were before it reached Banka island are unknown but (as recorded by one of the ship's officers, Lt. Edward Partridge, below) it is known that the ship reached Banka Island and was driven ashore – suggesting that it was damaged, and its Captain, Lt. Norman Cook, was concerned to save his crew because there was no other escape.

The presumption is that the ship was beached on the north-western coast of Banka Island because one of the ship's officers, Lt Partridge (in a report he must have compiled in POW camp before he died) recorded that the ship's company slept the first night ashore in a building of the 'Parit 9 tin mine' and also that a few days later he came across Lt Basil Shaw (the captain of another small evacuation ship named the 'SS Tandjong Pinang' which had been sunk some thirty miles from Banka Island) close to the Tanjong Ular/ Muntok lighthouse. Apparently the 'Parit 9' tin mine is also near the little village of Rambat/Rambut on the north-west coast of Banka island ("The story of the Tandjong Pinang' by David Wingate, see website 'Malayan Volunteers Group') - this village is several miles north-east of the Tanjong Ular lighthouse.

The website wrecksite.eu states that the casualties from the bombing of the 'Fuh Wo' were "...max.9 ..." and from CWGC records these casualties appear to have been solely members of the Chinese crew indicating that damage occurred in the engine room during the bombing attacks. However, this same website erroneously records that the ship's fate was as a "... a British Royal Navy patrol boat that was scuttled in Singapore on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1942 to avoid capture by the Japanese. At the time according to most reports she was being used as a minesweeper ...".

Post War the sinking is confirmed in a newspaper - "... Those ships that went down in the vicinity of the Banka Straits were the Li Wo, Fuh Wo, Siang Wo, Tien Kuang, Shu Kwang, Kuala and Giang Bee...." (Sunday Tribune 4.4.46).

The story is further amplified in a written report by Lt. Partridge MRNVR, an officer on the 'Fuh Wo';

*"... My ship, FUH WO, was beached and blown up on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1942. Ship's company slept the night in a deserted house belonging to the Chinese owner of the "PARIT 9" Tin Mine. On the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> I was sent into the jungle by the Captain, to look for a place where we could hide up from the Japanese who were organising search parties all over the island. During my absence, the Japanese arrived at "PARIT 9" village and took the ship's Officers and European crew into custody. Upon my return to the village of "PARIT 9" I contacted No. A.B. LORIGAN, R.N. We slept in the village that night and on the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> proceeded to the North shore about 3 miles distant, where we met a party of Royal Airforce personnel under Flight Sergeant ANDERSON No. 565121 ... I organised this party and billeted all hands in a deserted Chinese hut. On the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> I was walking along the North coast when I met Lieutenant SHAW, NZRNVR, who had just come ashore in a damaged dinghy [Researcher note: see memorial document on 'SS Tandjong Pinang' for this story] ...*

*On the afternoon of the 21<sup>st</sup> February, I proceeded in company with Flight sergeant ANDERSON, No. 565721, to the village of "PARIT 9" for the purposes of obtaining medical supplies, as some of our party had been wounded. Among the wounded was No. 747890 Flight sergeant BAXTER. Upon arrival at the village we were attacked by some 12 Chinese bandits. Who beat us to the ground with thick (kandai) sticks. We were then robbed of all our monies and the valuables in our possession, afterwards we were bound hand and foot and tied to posts, where we remained for the whole of one night; the next day, in company with A.B. LORIGAN, we were marched to MUNTOK and handed over to the Japanese authorities.*

*In this connection, I would like to mention A.B. LORIGAN. Finding that I did not return to our camp, on the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup>, LORIGAN proceeded alone to the village of "PARIT 9" to look for me, he in turn being captured by the Chinese bandits and subsequently we were handed over to the Japanese. F/Sgt. BAXTER states that upon my non-return to the Camp on the North coast, the Navy and RAF decided to separate. Prior to this decision the Flight sergeant states that a party of Chinese bandits entered the hut and robbed them of money and valuables, during this operation Lieutenant SHAW was beaten up by the Chinese, but not badly. All inmates of the hut, including Lieutenant SHAW, 2 naval ratings and 3 RAF personnel were either sick or wounded ..." (signed E. Leg. PARTRIDGE, Sub Lieut. MRNVR – this appears to be a typo since his name was Edward Le Gresley Partridge.)*

So, it seems that no Officers or crew were lost in the beaching and blowing up of the ship on Banka island (naval-history.net) but it is assumed that there were losses during the bombings inflicted on the ship during the previous days – the results being the deaths of at least eight Chinese crewmen.

In the context of the often quite hostile reception – including beatings, robbery and murder - from local Indonesian people by survivors of ships sunk around Sumatra and Java, it is positive and notable that survivors from the 'SS Fuh Wo' and the 'SS Tandjong Pinang' reported being given accommodation and in fact 'hidden' in the village of Rambat (sometimes called 'Rambut') on the north east coast of Banka Island. This small village which appears to have been based around the 'Parit 9' tin mine would in 1942 have been relatively isolated from the main town of Muntok. Survivors reported being at Rambat for periods of a few days to seven weeks!

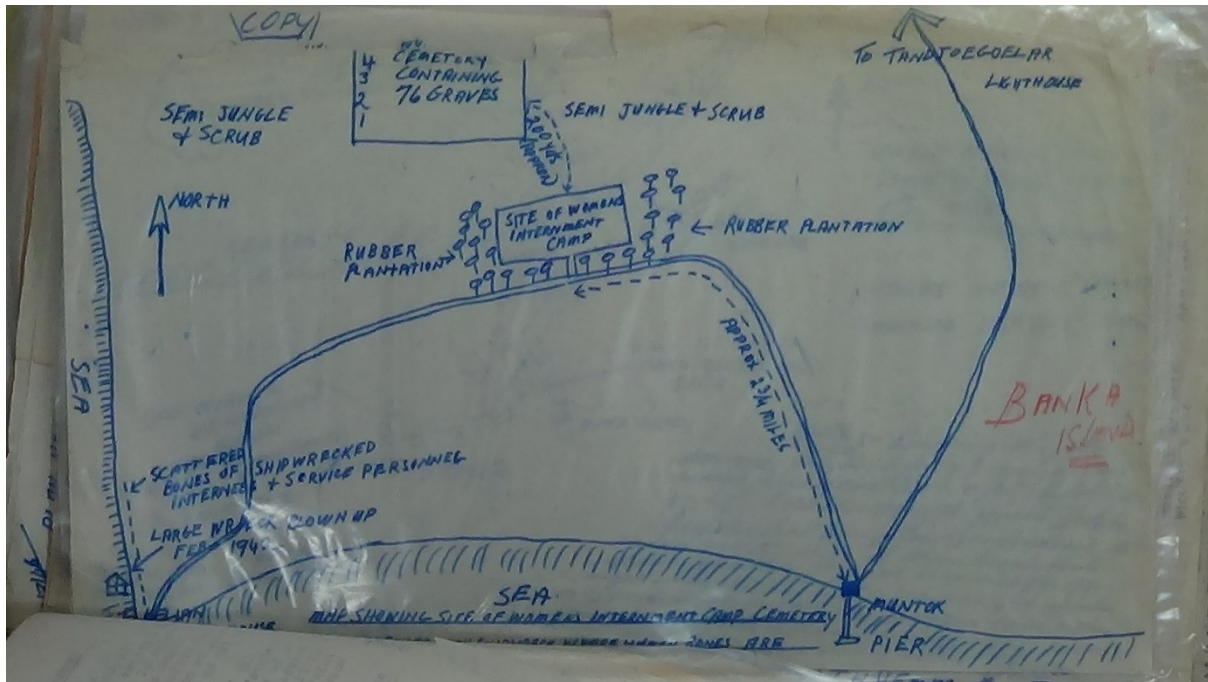
The remaining crew of the ship were eventually captured and became POWs firstly in Muntok on Banka Island and then Palembang in southern Sumatra. Some may have been transferred to POW camps elsewhere during the remainder of the War.

The ship's officers Lt. Norman Cook and Lt Edward Partridge, and Leading Seaman Frank Downing, later died whilst POWs in Palembang. It is possible that other crew members died as POWs but with many CWGC records simply stating that Royal Navy personnel had been either on the "HMS Prince of Wales" or "HMS Repulse" or only that they had been attached to the Singapore shore base 'HMS Sultan' it has not been possible to date to determine any other deaths of the crew of 'HMS Huh Wo'.

It is surmised that the records linking specific POWs with the crew of the 'Fuh Wo' will be in the files of Sumatra POWs held in the National Archives in London.



A photo taken at an unknown location on Banka Island – it is possibly the 'HMS Fuh Wo' (photo by M Ifran Nurdin) and may be located just north of the stone block construction Tanjong Kalian / Muntok lighthouse. See the next illustration map drawn by Allied Search parties in late 1945 looking for evidence of war crimes committed at Radji Beach.



A wreck is shown in the bottom left (south-west) hand corner of this map – Muntok is to the east (right) and the lighthouse is on the headland south -west ( below) the wreck.

## Sources;

- CWGC – the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and its website
- Sellwood – the book “HMS Li Wo – The Most Decorated Small Ship in the Navy” by A.V. Sellwood.

## Crew;

Using the perspective of the size of the crew of the ‘sister ship’ of the ‘Fuh Wo’, a ship by the name of the ‘Li Wo’, it is surmised that the ‘Fuh Wo’ must have had some 40 - 50 crew members on board.

To date only 8 deaths amongst the crew prior to reaching Banka Island have been identified.

This implies that the death toll on the ‘Fuh Wo’ was not high in comparison with other ships sunk near Banka Island – and in which case credit must be given to the actions of Lt Cook for beaching his ship, which was eminently sensible given the lives saved.

The website naval – history .net records that no officers or crew members were lost in the beaching and blowing up of the ship on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1942.

To date only 11 crew members have been identified.

Note: Perhaps the paucity of records on identities of the crew has something to do with the fact that the officers of the ship died in POW camps.

- **CHAI** – Chai Ke K, Fireman, NAP, MPK (naval-history.net)
- **COOK** - Norman Cook, b.1889, Ferry, Scotland. Secretary, Goodyear Orient Co. Ltd, 2, East Reclamation, Tanjong Pagar. Lt MRNVR HMS Fuh Wo. POW Palembang, Sumatra. Died in captivity 21.10.43. (MM); Lt. Norman Cook was the Captain of the 'HMS Fuh Wo'. The official record is Lt. Norman Cook, RNR, HMS Fuh Wo, died 21.10.43 at Palembang and buried in grave 4. W.2. He was reinterred after the war in the Jakarta War cemetery in grave 1. F.13.
- **DOWNING** – Leading Seaman Frank H. Downing, D/J 81746, died in Palembang as a POW on 20.12.44 and originally buried there in grave 4.D.8, later transported and reinterred in grave number 8, Row F, Plot I, in Jakarta War Cemetery. (CWGC)
- **FANG** – Fang Ho A, Fitter, NAP, MPK (naval-history.net)
- **FOH** – Foh Chang P, Fireman, 124(NAP), MPK (naval-history.net)
- **PARTRIDGE** – PARTRIDGE E.L.G. [Edward Le Greshey], Assistant Planter, Segamat Estate, Johore [1935 Directory] then Bahau Estate, Malacca. Sub-Lt MRNVR HMS Fuh Wo.: ship beached and blown up 15.2.42 Bangka Island. Died in captivity 5.9.45 Sungei Geron Camp, Palembang. Grave at Jakarta (MM). Sub. Lt Partridge MRNVR was on the 'Fuh Wo' when it reached Banka Island where on the northern coast he came across Lt. Basil Shaw (Captain of the 'SS Tandjong Pinang') on 20 February. Partridge was at the time with Flight Serg. Anderson, RAF, and later that day whilst they were foraging on the Island were captured and beaten by Chinese who later handed them over to the Japanese. CWGC records for the Jakarta War Cemetery show Edward Le Greshey Partridge, died 5.9.45 in Palembang and was buried in grave I.D.2 at Palembang Cemetery. After the War he was reinterred in Jakarta War Cemetery in grave 3. F.6. Edward was the son of Eli and Donna partridge of La Rocque, Jersey, Channel Islands. Sadly, his father Eli Partridge had died in April 1943 whilst Jersey was under German Occupation (it was Occupied from June 1940 until the end of the War) and Edward was suffering the malnutrition, disease and hardship of Palembang POW camp. Tragically, Edward died several weeks after the Japanese Surrender which was on 24 August 1945 and after the formal signing of the Surrender on 2 September 1945, the first Allied military appearance in Palembang (by Major Jacobs) was not until 4 September 1945.
- **SHAW** - Lt. Basil Shaw, RNZNVR, is incorrectly recorded by the CWGC and other sources as having lost his life on the 'HMS Fuh Wo'. He had been on this ship in the months leading up to the evacuation of Singapore but at some point in the days of February 1942 he was transferred to the small coastal ship 'SS Tandjong Pinang' which was attacked and sunk after rescuing some 180 - 200 women, children and injured men from uninhabited Pom pong island . Basil Shaw made it to Banka Island in a small row boat with two crew members but was murdered by Japanese soldiers near Muntok lighthouse several days after meeting Lt Edward Partridge, with whom he had presumably served on the 'Fuh Wo' only weeks earlier.
- **SING** – Sing Yuen Ten, 2<sup>nd</sup> Engine Driver, NAP, MPK(naval-history.net)
- **SUNG** – Sung Ying S, Fitter, NAP, MPK (naval-history.net)
- **TSOONG** – Tsoong Tang L, Water tender, NAP, MPK (naval-history.net)
- **YUEN** – Yuen Ling S, Number two fireman, NAP, MPK (naval-history.net)
- **YUN** – Yun Chien T, Chief steward, NAP, MPK (naval-history.net)

