

THE MATI HARI

The MATI HARI left Singapore on the 12th February 1942. She was captured 10 miles S.E. of Muntok by the Japanese. The captain surrendered because the passengers were mostly women, children and nurses, there was also a few Argylls and Royal Marines on board. They were taken ashore at Muntok on Banka Island. There were no casualties, but this is the story of the fate of those on board.

An Account by H. WALKER, M.B.E., a Civilian Engineer at the Naval Dockyard, Singapore, who stayed behind to destroy the Naval Fuelling Installations.

We were to make our escape in the Mata Hari and embarked in a small launch that was to take us out to the ship. In the boat was the Assistant Dockyard Cashier and I remember him opening a large cash-box and throwing a fabulous sum of ten dollar bills into the harbour and the frantic, unsuccessful attempts of the locals to salvage the packets. This incident was well remembered later when we were suffering from starvation, as the money would have saved many lives.

Eventually the Mata Hari sailed, preceded by the Vyner Brooke, not without several incidents which would probably cause international repercussions if I were to put them in print. It was an eventful voyage; we were bombed by about 80 Jap planes and we picked up five sailors, survivors from the gunboat HMS Scorpion, who had been swimming about in the dark for five hours and had almost given up hope of rescue. Later that night we reached the mouth of the Moesi river which runs into Palembang but a hitch occurred - a pilot was required and there wasn't one. So we anchored.

It was a very dark night. Some of the passengers were dozing, others whispering, when suddenly shells began to 'zip' overhead. One could actually feel the air disturbance as they passed close to us. A pom-pom could be heard, apparently from the mangrove a short distance away. The firing ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

Some time later there was an uneasy stir among the passengers. A whisper was heard, "Look - over there!". I looked and, sure enough there were two black shapes gliding slowly round us. A voice alongside me said "They're Japs", but some seemed to think the ships might be Dutch. Suddenly, after what seemed a lifetime, signals began to pass back and forth; it seemed that each could not understand the other's code. However, after some delay, our Captain told us that they were Japanese and instructed all the women and children to stand up and the men to lie low. A searchlight was put on us. It was a horrible moment; we didn't know whether they would fire or not.

The Captain then announced our surrender, because of the large number of women and children on board - a wise decision I think and borne out later when we saw many bodies of men, women and children.

We were to remain at anchor until daybreak when the Japs would come aboard. As the day began to dawn, there they were, a big four-funnelled Japanese cruiser and a destroyer. There was great

activity on the cruiser before two boats put off and came over - we were being honoured by a visit from a Japanese admiral. His sailors looked very smart in khaki drill and peaked caps; their gleaming bayonets which were pointed at the stomachs of some of us as we lined the decks, did not look so nice. After a long pow-wow we were instructed to lift anchor and follow them to Muntok Bay, Banka Island.

As we approached the bay, we passed a number of unfortunate people swimming in the sea, survivors of ships which had been sunk, but we were not allowed to pick anyone up. We could see the wrecks of other ships scattered about. Forty-seven ships left Singapore and forty-two were sunk.

There were several incidents while the Japs were on our ship. Three Hudson bombers came over very low, and bombed the Japanese supply ship. Ack-ack shells were bursting all around them and a Japanese seaplane sneaked out of the clouds and dived on a Hudson. The rear gunner had him sighted though and one short burst caused the seaplane to dive into the sea only fifteen yards from our ship. The Japanese admiral and sailors never once looked to see what was happening. Shortly afterwards, a fast launch appeared round the headland but didn't realise the warships were Japs until too late and although she made a quick about turn ten salvos from the warships blew her to pieces. I often wondered who had been aboard.

After all this excitement and tragedy, we were ordered to get into boats with one case each only, and were rowed to Muntok Pier. We passed a poor fellow swimming; he was at the end of his tether and pleading to be picked up but we were forbidden to do so in spite of our protests.

Ashore at Muntok, we were herded into various buildings. With other Admiralty civilians and a number of Australians, I was put into a store shed but soon after Jap soldiers arrived and lined us up outside to be moved to some unknown destination. I wasn't keen on this and took an opportunity to slip over to another party which was being shepherded into a large corrugated iron cinema. This, I found out later was a mistake. The original party had gone off to the Muntok landing ground to work, while we were jammed like sardines in the cinema and the Jap soldiers were brutal.

Mr. Bowden, the Trade Commissioner for Australia, could speak Japanese. This was unfortunate, as when two Japs were tearing off his wristwatch, he said something to them. They became very angry, dragged him out, made him gather a small bunch of flowers and dig his own grave. Then they shot him and he died like a brave man with arms folded. There were so many of us in the cinema that the Japs hadn't time to deal with us all before morning came when we were marched out to the landing ground to join up with the other party.

Muntok Landing Ground! This was where we began to know what hard work means. Up at 4 a.m., marched about a mile and a half to the airfield, commence work at 4.30 and finish at midnight - they even rigged lights so that work could continue in the dark. After the day's work, we were marched back to Muntok Gaol where we were supposed to sleep. It had been built by the British in days of old and had been badly bombed. There were no 'toilet facilities' and bomb-holes were used. The gaol had been built for 150 people. There were 600 of us crammed into this ghastly hole and on the second night 600 Chinese coolies were also pushed in. They had been

collected in Hong Kong by the simple method of closing so many streets and taking all the males therein to a ship; they were called a "labour battalion", but were in a shocking state, starved and disease-ridden; some died each day. Two of them apparently went mad, climbed out onto the roof dancing and shouting and refusing to come down. A Jap raised his rifle, shot one dead and the other then came down.

At this period civilians and Service personnel were all mixed together, irrespective of sex or rank. After a few days the Service officers were put in charge of the various working parties and they had a better time than the rank and file. One of the Japanese told us that we civilians should have committed hara-kiri, and I am sure that had there not been so many of us, they would have done away with us all,. Some of the civilians who had held high rank in Malaya took a poor view of being lined up and marched off by a one or two-ringer; they had my sympathy.

After a few weeks at Muntok, we were all moved. The military people went to a camp in Palembang and we went to Pladjo Oil Refinery on the Mosei River, a few miles from Palembang. Here we unloaded steel plates and pipes from a Jap ship; heavy, exhausting work; 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week. We were given rice and, sometimes, a one inch square piece of fish or meat. The heavy work, the food, and the beatings, soon began to tell. We had to bow low every time we passed a Jap or got a bashing. Our first deaths apart from those at Muntok began to occur and then the dreaded dysentery took over and two more of our party died and we had to burn their bodies on the Pladjo Golf course.

Some time later, when everyone was getting so weak that the Japs considered we were no further use for working, we were sent to Palembang Gaol. In comparison with the other camps and gaols we were in, this was not too bad and we stayed there for nine months before moving to a camp we had helped to build outside the town. There was no water here until some was found with a divining rod at 10ft. down. It was brown, dirty stuff and every pint had to be boiled; from then on we had no fresh water until reaching Singapore on our release.

Some months later we were moved back to the terrible Muntok Gaol again and here began our most dreadful period. Packed into the cells like sardines; 180 grm. rice a day and soon people began to die of starvation, dysentery, malaria or beri-beri. Six a day sometimes and out of 700 there were 500 of them very seriously ill and everybody had tropical ulcers. I had malaria bouts every two or three weeks for eighteen months and one attack lasted six days and nights, and I believe we only ever had one recover from wet beri-beri. A new batch of POWs then joined us; British, Dutch and Indonesian civilians and they were in a pitiable condition after suffering from conditions similar to our own for a long time.

With our numbers sadly depleted, we were packed into the hold of a ship and battened down for the voyage of one day and night, before being put on a train with windows boarded up and no toilet facilities. With the dysentery cases and so many sick we were lucky to have only one death during this journey. (The women, who moved a week after us, had seven deaths en route.) Our new camp was in real jungle. There were tigers, huge bears, deer and wild pig galore, and as by this time the Allies were getting closer, the Japs eased up a bit and an Indonesian doctor was allowed out to shoot, and came back one day after shooting with a 7 ft. high bear, which took eight men to drag in. By this time though, many of the chaps had gone too far to recover and I

remember one time in 'hospital' when I awakened four mornings running to find a new occupant on the next slab in place of one who had died during the night.

One day, the Jap Officer I.C. ordered everyone who could walk or crawl to a clearing. He made a speech saying that the Japs had decided to stop the cruel war but did not tell us who had won. Yet within five minutes Dutch flags were flying everywhere. How they had been hidden through all the Kempetai searches I never knew. Two weeks later two Dutch paratroopers arrived with radios. Messages were transmitted and the next day planes flew over and dropped food containers and we saw bread and other good things for the first time in over three years. They made several journeys but a month went by without any actual sign of release. The captivity had taken a heavy toll of the British and out of 230 captured only 80 survived. There were also tragic moments when some of the chaps were reunited with their families in the women's camp nearby. One Dutchman found that his wife and three children had all been dead for over two years, yet the Japs had never told him although the women's camps were never more than a few miles from ours.

As to the Vyner Brooke that led our 'escape flotilla' out of Singapore, she had been bombed and sunk. Twenty-three Australian nurses out of the sixty-three nurses on board, reached the beach only to be greeted by Jap soldiers, who shot and bayoneted them all. One fell into the sea after being shot but actually lived to tell the tale*. Another party of ten civilians met the same fate and one old man was clubbed to death. Eric German, an American, was bayoneted from the back and actually saw the blade end come through his chest, before being pushed into the sea. He survived, and with the nurse came to Muntok Gaol and later gave evidence at the Tokyo War Trials, which hanged the devils who had perpetrated these dreadful deeds.

N.B. * The Australian Nurse who was shot in the sea was Vivian Bullwinkle who not only survived being shot but was taken to Muntok and survived the war.

Several other Australian Nurses also survived the sinking of the Vyner Brooke, but came ashore at different places, several landing on the pier. They were all taken to Muntok, where some British nurses from the Kuala were also taken after that too was sunk by the Japanese. After several days in the Muntok jail, the nurses and civilians were taken across the Banka Straits to Palembang, Sumatra.