

My Father and the capture of the Mata Hari in February 1942

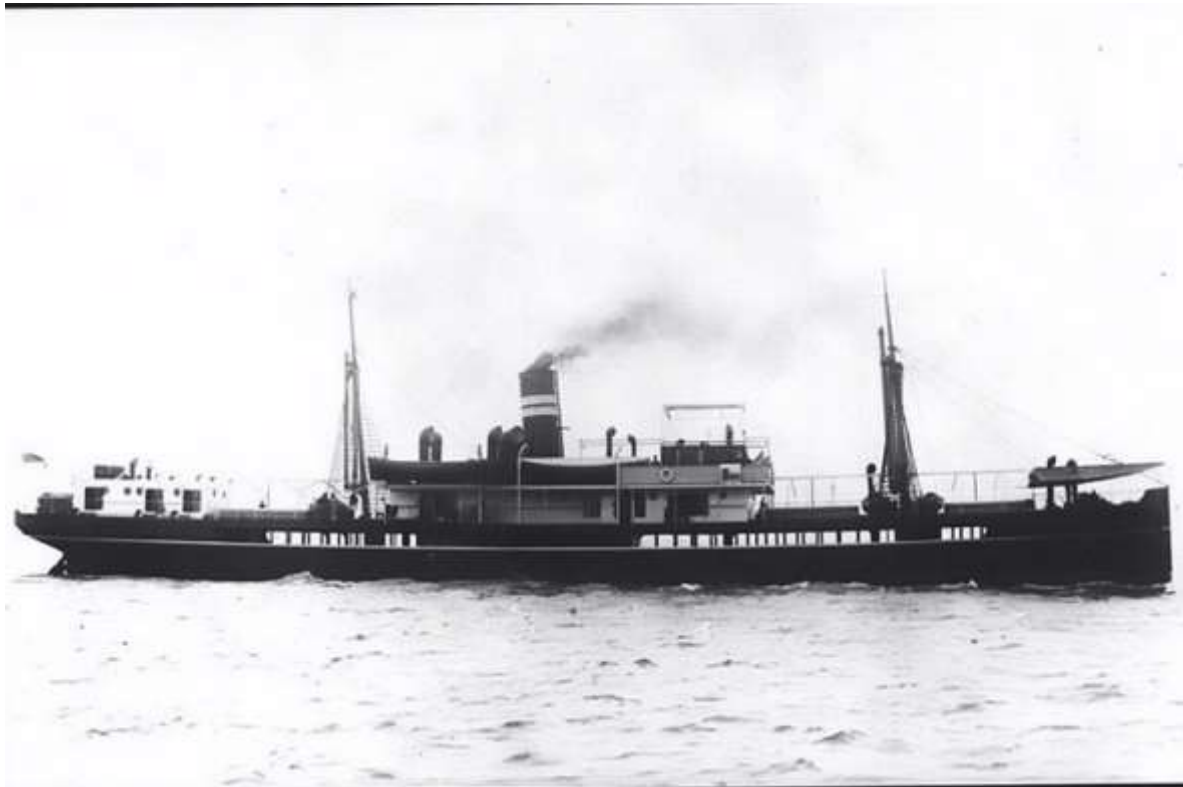
My father, Arthur Henry Hogge, was born in Manila in the Philippines where his father, Henry Sibley Hogge, was a superintendent in the Manila Railway Co. As was usual in those days, he was sent home to be educated in England where he stayed with his guardian, Miss Bouchier, in Bedford. He attended Bedford School from September 1915 until the end of the autumn term 1917 when the family moved – where to I do not know, most probably to The Cottage in Ferndown, Dorset, his father's house in England. Neither do I know whether he ever returned to the Philippines during his school holidays.

Initially, he wanted to join the Army but, as there were very few opportunities immediately after WW1, he went instead to *HMS Conway* from January 1919 to 1920 as a cadet before joining the British India Steam Navigation Co. (BI), probably in 1921. During his employment with BI, he was based mainly in Calcutta but also in Rangoon, Singapore and Penang. During this time, he must have sailed around most of the Indian Ocean, to Australia and to England. In the letters he wrote to my mother after we were evacuated from Singapore to Australia, he made suggestions as to where she might go to live and it is clear he knew the major cities, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, well. I know from my mother that he sailed frequently to and from London – she told me about going aboard his ship in Tilbury and my father asking the dockers to moderate their language as he was bringing his fiancée aboard, to which they replied, "If she be a lady she won't understand, if she baint it don't matter!"

But promotion was slow in BI (dead men's shoes) and, by the outbreak of WW2, he was the chief officer on one of the many small BI coastal steamers trading between Burma, Thailand, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. I am not sure he enjoyed his time at sea very much – too many months away from home and very little social life, he said. He also far preferred cargo ships to liners because passengers caused so much trouble. When, as a small boy, I suggested I might like to go to sea he said it was a mug's game, he would take me out in a small boat and make me so seasick that I would never entertain the idea again! Fortunately I discovered aeroplanes instead.

My mother, Margaret Julia Large, was his first cousin once removed. They had known each other for many years and met frequently on his long leaves when he stayed at The Cottage with his father and aunt, Rowena Walker. Eventually, they decided to marry and their wedding took place in Ferndown on 1 September 1939, the day before war was declared on Germany. After a brief honeymoon near Brockenhurst in the New Forest, he returned to Rangoon where he was then stationed. A little later that same year, my mother followed, sailing on her own via the Suez Canal.

My father's ship, the *Mata Hari*, was a small coastal steamer only 220 ft long, with a gross weight of 1020 tons, plying along the Malacca Strait between Sumatra, Thailand, Malaya and Borneo taking passengers and general cargo for transhipment to the big home-bound Far Eastern mailships in Singapore. However 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, as part of the Malayan Auxiliary Fleet.



The *SS Mata Hari* before she was converted into an armed patrol vessel

Towards the end of 1940, my parents moved from Rangoon to Penang where they acquired a flat at 45 Ho Kim Teik Mansions in Georgetown. They chose this apartment block because it had a good view of the harbour. They used to exchange personal signals: my mother would hang a dark coat out of one of the windows to show she was at home and all was well, and my father would answer by hanging a towel from the deck of the ship so that she would know he would soon be able to come ashore.

War comes to Penang – our evacuation to Singapore and Australia

I was born in the Maternity Hospital on Macalister Road in Georgetown on 2 September 1941, barely three months before the Japanese landed on the north east coast of Malaya in the early hours of 8 December 1941. From 10 September to 8 December, my father was mainly at sea patrolling along the west coast of Malaya but, on 9 December, the *Mata Hari* lay at anchor off Georgetown. On that day, Japanese aircraft bombed the oil installations and airfield at Butterworth on the mainland and also the airstrip on the south east tip of Penang Island in an attempt to neutralise the totally inadequate RAF Brewster Buffalo fighter aircraft. Georgetown itself escaped significant damage. However, they did bomb the shipping in Penang harbour, fortunately for my father, with little success.



My Mother and Father with me in
Ho Kim Teik Mansions, Penang, 1941

Having witnessed these attacks, his main concern was for the safety of his wife and baby. After the all-clear, he writes in his letter of Monday 8 December, *“The all-clear was made as we were on our way out again and I was looking at the flat and saw no coat – half a minute later there was your coat out and I could just make out your figure standing above it. I breathed a prayer of thankfulness both at seeing you and to know the raid was not anywhere near you.”*¹ He adds, at the end of his letter, *“Out for six days from now.”* This is confirmed by Captain Carston’s report written after the war which says, *“8 December 1941 to 15 December 1941, Scheme ‘BETTY’ on West Coast of THAILAND.”*²

Scheme Betty involved inserting guerrillas into Thailand and capturing or destroying three Italian ships lying in Tonkah harbour. In the event, the Italian ships scuttled themselves and the *Mata Hari* went on to rescue British nationals from the coastal areas and take them to Singapore. Therefore, my father was in a very good position to know how desperate the situation was becoming.

My mother told me many years later that, as the Japanese advanced down the Malayan peninsula, the *Mata Hari* together with several other small ships, was used to shadow the army down the Malacca Strait inserting troops, rescuing refugees and destroying vessels and facilities that might be of use to the advancing enemy. This is confirmed by Lt. Col. Denis Russell-Roberts in his book *Spotlight on Singapore*³ where he describes how the *Mata Hari* was ordered to establish contact with the 3rd Indian Corps and to assist the Dutch defences in Sumatra. It also ties up with the entry in Carston’s report which says, *“17 December 1941 to 20 December 1941, covered left flank of Army in company with HM Ships RAUB, LARAT, PAHLAWAN & PANGLIMA. All ships were under my command.”*⁴

¹ My father’s letter was passed censor by the captain on 8 December but post-marked 9 December. There is a mis-match here between the dates in this letter and the events described by Andrew Barber in *Penang at War* in which he says the attack occurred on 9 December.

² Captain A.C. Carston, Detailed Report of Circumstances Attending Capture of HMS Mata Hari, p.1.

³ Russel-Roberts, p. 155-156, *Spotlight on Singapore*, Times Press & Anthony Gibbs & Phillips, 1965.

⁴ Carston p.1

At some stage prior to 11 December, my father managed to send a message to my mother telling her to leave Penang as quickly as possible. There was a ship coming down the coast and she was to catch it. He told her to travel as light as possible and he would try to arrange a passage out of Singapore. She left everything behind except a change of clothes and the minimum necessary to look after me, then aged 3 months. She drove down to the docks, together with my godmother Nancy MacGregor who lived in the same apartment block, abandoning the car on the quay side with a full tank of petrol – she always complained about that! Sometime between 12 and 14 December, the three of us arrived in Singapore, whether we went the whole way on that ship or were taken to Butterworth together with the 600 other evacuees to join the train to Singapore I do not know. But I seem to remember my mother saying we went the whole way by ship.

By a great stroke of luck, my father caught sight of my mother on a train in Singapore and was able to help us board the *SS Nellore* which was leaving for Java on or around the 15th. I have the eleven letters he wrote to her between 12 December and 28 January 1942. In the five written between 8 and 18 December, his heart-felt concern was for the safety of my mother and their baby. His overwhelming desire was for us to leave Malaya as soon as possible. In his letter of Friday 12 December he says, *“The last few days have been just pure hell wondering where you are and what has happened to you and wee Philip. We will hear tomorrow though I won’t be able to look at your window and see the old familiar coat hanging out – those happy days are over for the time being..... I hope to God they evacuated the town last Monday and got you all away to safety somewhere and that you dropped everything and went...”*

He continued, *“I love you so desperately, darling heart, that nothing must harm you. You are just the whole world to me and life has just no meaning without you – I never knew life could be so lovely and hold such happiness until our love for each other opened a new world.....we will meet again soon, no matter where ever you go, where ever I may be sent to I will always find you again to love and to cherish.”* This would have been written while he was still at sea on *Scheme Betty* and, for obvious reasons, he said nothing of what they were doing other than, *“...no news because of censoring, and our own stunt has been too uneventful to write about... there are two women sleeping in my cabin which I have given up to them...”* These would have been some of the evacuees they had rescued and were taking to Singapore.

I have quoted fairly extensively from this letter in which he poured out his heart – there is a lot more in the same vein. Remember – they had only been married two years, his love shines out from this and his other letters. Suddenly the world was collapsing around their ears – as of course it was for so many others – two capital ships of the Royal Navy, *HMS Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*, had just been sunk on 10 December and even Singapore no longer felt safe.

On 14 December he wrote again, *“Thank God – you are safely out of Penang. I’m just bursting with thankfulness – what a black cloud has lifted.....what a week it has been and why, why should it be you that had to go through it all – how I cursed our going and would give anything to be back. On Thursday we very nearly did and then came on down!”* He

then hoped, "...you were evacuated with the 600 and will be in Singapore tomorrow or even tonight..." and continued to talk about the possibility of meeting up, giving her advice on who to contact for funds and what arrangements might be made for somewhere to live. Later he said, "*We are quite alright, you may have heard what little errand we went on – everything went well which is why we are taking them to Singapore.*" This seems to confirm that we left Penang on Thursday 11 December and went by train to Singapore and that Scheme Betty had involved taking the other evacuees direct to Singapore.

On 16 December, he wrote, "*You will be safely away now – thank God. Oh sweetheart what a joy and relief to know you are out of Penang. And what luck to be able to meet you and see you aboard.*" Later in the same letter, he said, "*Scott came back and told us how you fared – the sleeping quarters sounded pretty grim, but it will only be for a couple of days and you will be allowed on deck I expect..... I cabled Auntie (Rowena Walker in Ferndown) 'All three safe, left Penang, Margaret has left Malaya' which should tell her all that we can say at present...*" At this stage, he was expecting us only to go as far as Batavia. He wrote again on 18 December wishing he had been able to stay with us until we sailed and wondering whether our hosts would be the Dutch or Australians. He was not to know that we were to spend four days over Christmas in Batavia and then continue to Perth. Nor did he know how horribly overcrowded and grim the conditions were to be. My mother told me that we were accommodated somewhere down below, that supplies were limited with very little water. Her milk dried up and I nearly died of dehydration.

We arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia, on 8 January 1942 and were taken to a school in Perth which was being used as a clearing station. There, we were teamed up with an Australian lady who had a baby daughter the same age as me – we still keep in touch after all these years. We stayed in Perth until January 1945 when we travelled by train to Sydney and then by ship, the *Athlone Castle*, to England, arriving by convoy in Liverpool in March 1945 – but that is yet another story.

Meanwhile, my father continued to serve on the *Mata Hari* sailing up and down the west coast of Malaya and in Singapore waters. As Captain Carston noted; "*17 December 1941 to 20 December 1941, covered left flank of Army in company with HM Ships RAUB, LARAT, PAHLAWAN & PANGLIMA. All ships were under my command.*" Then, "*23 December 1941 to 2 January 1942, Sebang Defences.*" And again, "*5 January 1942 to 8 February 1942 Singapore Patrols.*"⁵

I have six more letters my father wrote to my mother between 2 and 28 January. He made light of what was happening in Singapore, mainly because of the censor (his letter of 9 January is much cut up where whole sections have been removed) but I would also imagine he did not want to alarm my mother. These letters deal mainly with the mundane facts of arranging funds to be sent to Australia, sympathising with my mother's ordeal during the voyage to Fremantle, making suggestions as to which city might be best to live in, and thanking God we were safely away from Malaya.

⁵ Carston p.1

In particular, he railed against the conditions we were subjected to on the *Nellore*. The 186 evacuees were accommodated in hopelessly inadequate makeshift cabins in the 'tween decks and kept strictly segregated from the 74 first and 53 second class passengers. All this was made even more ghastly by rough seas causing most of the women and children to be seasick and constantly splashed by spray coming aboard. Was this a case of the class consciousness of the times or the fact that everything had happened so suddenly and the reality of war had not yet dawned upon those still well away from such events?

HMS Mata Hari leaves Singapore and is captured

The following account of the short voyage and capture of the *Mata Hari* is drawn from several sources; a small note book written by my father between 8 and 24 February 1942 (I have it still), Captain Carston's report written in 1945 after the war, and accounts by three of the passengers on board – Mr. Harry Walker, a Civilian Engineer at the Naval Dockyard in Singapore, Mr. Jock Brodie of Anglo-Oriental, a Tin Mining Company in Kuala Lumpur, and Surgeon Lieutenant Commander J. G. Reed.⁶ In addition to these, *Spotlight on Singapore*, written soon after the war by Lt. Col. Dennis Russell-Roberts, gives many more details. Russell-Roberts had fought in the rear-guard actions down the length of the Malay Peninsula, was captured when Singapore fell and interned in Changi. But what makes his book so relevant is the fact that his wife escaped on the *Mata Hari* only to be captured and interned in Sumatra. There, like so many others, she died. His book is a very moving account of those who bravely fought, suffered and died during those dark days.

The *Mata Hari* was one of the last of some 47 small ships to leave Singapore on Thursday 12 February 1942, all overloaded with evacuees. Carston's report gives some bald facts: 113 crew consisting of 9 Officers, 72 Ratings (some of whom were survivors from the *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*), 30 Marines and 2 Asiatics; 370 passengers – 60 Royal Navy, 60 Army, 118 civilian men and 132 women and children. Total on board 483, crowded together in a very small ship. Russell-Roberts wrote, "*As darkness fell more and more passengers flocked on board, and soon every inch of deck space was taken up.*"⁷ Jock Brodie described the scene, "*There was no accommodation on board worthy of mention, and the oldest passengers were rightly given preference of the few cabins that existed. Men and women were sleeping or accommodating themselves on hatch tops, on deck and below deck where possible....*"⁸ Russell-Roberts added, "*Every inch of deck space was occupied by passengers or by their baggage. Those who were on the boat and shelter decks were exposed to the*

⁶ Notebook of Sub-Lieutenant A. H. Hogge RNR (Chief Officer of *HMS Mata Hari*) written 8 February – 25 February 1942, before, during and after the capture of the ship.

Detailed Report of Circumstances Attending Capture of *HMS Mata Hari* written by Lieutenant A. C. Carston RNR (Captain of the *Mata Hari*) after his release from captivity in 1945.

The *Mata Hari*; An Account by Mr. H. Walker MBE <http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Harry-Walkers-Account-of-his-Escape.pdf>

The Diary of Mr. G. Brodie of Anglo-Oriental in Kuala Lumpur 1942-45 <http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Diary-of-Mr-G-Brodie-for-Web-with-OCR.pdf>

Letter on page 363 of the August 1951 edition *The Trident* magazine from Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander J. G. Reed MRNVR.

⁷ Russell-Roberts p. 153

⁸ Brodie sheet 8

open sky and would, of course, have to take the sun and the rain as they came. At least they had cool fresh air and escaped the fetid atmosphere of the main deck below.”⁹

Jock Brodie made this pertinent comment, *“It seemed to be a desperate last hour move on the part of the authorities at Singapore to embark so many women and children on these small ships with largely improvised crews, and flying the white ensign thereby exposing those ill-manned and poorly armed vessels to the full fury of Japanese brutality at sea. Naval intelligence had failed in this part of the world and it evidently was not known that the Japs were concentrating in great force at Muntok, and the Banka Straits the same week-end as Singapore fell, and also attacking Palembang by way of the Moesi River.”¹⁰*

At this point in the story, a little geography may help. The island of Singapore lies at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, separated from the mainland by the narrow Johor Strait. To the south of Singapore, there is a multitude of small islands, with Batam and Bintan 50 miles or so to the east and Sumatra a similar distance to the west. The Durian Strait passes through these small islands. 100 miles further south lie the islands of Lingga and Singkep and, further south again, Banka Island with the town of Muntok at its northern end. The passage south to Batavia (modern Jakarta) passes south through the Banka Straits separating Sumatra to the west and Banka Island to the east. At the northern end of these Straits, on the mainland of Sumatra, the shallow Moesi River winds its way up to the town of Palembang. Each of these places will feature prominently in the course of this narrative (see map at the end of this document).

As I said earlier, there was no warning of the dangers that lay ahead when *HMS Mata Hari* departed Singapore at 19.30 on Thursday evening, 12 February, leaving behind the chaos of the burning docks. She went out soon after *HMS Scorpion*, *Vyner Brooke* and *Giang Bee*, all of which were similarly overcrowded, with orders to proceed to Batavia via the Durian and Banka Straits. But first they had to find their way towards the minefield in the dark through thick smoke from the oil and petrol facilities burning on the numerous small islands. This made it almost impossible to identify the vital marks at the start of the swept channel through the Durian Strait.

Come Friday, 13 February, my father wrote in his note book, *“Vis. Very bad with oil smoke. 04.30 proceeded down Durian Strait. Anchored W of the Brothers about 08.00. Frequent Air Alarums & planes passing close. ‘Hiding’ useless. About 12.20 nine bombers dropped together; missing ship all bombs falling close astern.”*

Jock Brodie continued, *“However, the Mata Hari had been spotted and suddenly 9 bombers appeared and dropped 12 bombs or thereabouts astern of the ship. It was bad aiming and providential for us. Only one man was injured with a piece of shrapnel. The Japs did not continue the attack, and the ship weighed anchor, and proceeded to steam south.”¹¹*

According to Carston, they anchored again close to an island near False Durian, within ten yards of the mangroves in sixteen feet of water. He went on to say, *“Throughout the day*

⁹ Russell-Roberts p. 158

¹⁰ Brodie sheet 9

¹¹ Brodie sheet 8

*the intervals between air alerts were never longer than twenty minutes. Planes came over in groups of from nine to twenty-seven machines.”*¹² But at 15.00, they decided hiding was useless and set off again. At 21.07, off the tiny islet of Berhala, south of Singkep, they saw gunfire to the south and again more gunfire and search lights at 23.15.

At 03.00 on 14 February, voices were heard hailing from the water. Jock Brodie in his diary said, *“I heard a voice from out of the darkness of the South China Sea and particularly intelligible to me calling, ‘Can ye no throw us a line we’ve been in the watter five hours.’ The ship hove to, and on getting the location, a line was sent overboard. The same voice yelled, ‘For heaven’s sake pit oot that licht, dae ye want tae get blawn oot the watter’.* Meanwhile a boat had been lowered, and the men from the sea were brought on board.”¹³ These six survivors were from *HMS Scorpion* which had been sunk by a Japanese cruiser at 21.15. Probably the gun fire and lights seen earlier had come from the sinking of the *Scorpion* and *Giang Bee*. This was the first information they received that Japanese surface craft were operating in the vicinity.

In view of this enemy activity, Carston decided to steer westerly to find and follow the 3 to 4 fathom line off the coast of Sumatra and make land at daylight. Here, they found a Dutch vessel proceeding south. A boat was sent across and they were advised to follow her to an anchorage in Sakanah Bay about 20 miles north of the Moesi River and to wait until nightfall before trying to make Palembang. On the way, a large formation of aircraft flew low overhead; Carston said in his report that 81 bombers and 20 fighters passed directly overhead at 2000 to 3000 feet without attacking.

In his description of these events on board the *Mata Hari*, Surgeon Lieutenant Commander J. G. Reed MRNVR said, *“Sub-lieutenant Hogge RNR, her first lieutenant, endeared himself to all by the cheerful and fearless way in which he leapt about, hour after hour, seeking and reporting the approach and direction of aircraft – and their passage was almost continuous – to those who were under some sort of cover and could not see them.”*¹⁴

According to Russell-Roberts¹⁵, while they lay at anchor, Carston invited the senior representatives of the passengers to a conference in his cabin. He told them all he knew and it was decided that their best course of action was to deliver the passengers safely into Dutch hands at Palembang. This would then allow the *Mata Hari* unrestricted freedom of action. However, as they approached the mouth of the Moesi River, none of the navigation marks were lit and they were unable to obtain a pilot for the tricky run up the shallow river towards the town. They also met the *Majang*, a Dutch ship, which had just come out of the river. She informed them that Palembang was closed to shipping, had been heavily bombed and Japanese paratroops had landed. This meant their only option was to try to slip south through the Banka Straits by night, despite the gunflashes that could be seen at the northern end. Carston wrote in his report, *“There were not sufficient boats to accommodate the women and children, and as their presence on the ship prevented me from fighting an action I decided that in the attempt (sic) of being intercepted by the enemy, I*

¹² Carston p.2

¹³ Brodie sheet 9 & 10

¹⁴ Reed p. 343

¹⁵ Russel-Roberts p. 171 - 172

would surrender the ship. The White Ensign was therefore struck, the gun's crew dismissed, and the Officers of the Watch instructed not to use the British or Allied challenges." ¹⁶

On 15 February, my father's notebook records, "00.20 On watch talking to Carston on the port side of bridge. Searchlight suddenly switched straight on to bridge from vessel close to. Electric searchlight; blueish tinge agreeing with Scorpion description of Japanese cruiser. Tense moment waiting for fire to open. Men stand firm, adjust their life belts & take cover on starboard side of bridge. Nothing happens and continue with search light trained on us. Stop Engine. Search light trained on stern (no ensign up). Burst of red tracer fired over stern. Rang off engine. No further fire & searchlight switched off. Proceeded down Banka Strait with nav. lights on towards two vessels sweeping with searchlights about 8 to 10 miles away. Held in search light several times but no signals exchanged. Off light buoy south of Muntok, what appeared to be a cruiser closed on us & ordered us to anchor immediately by International Code. Anchored at 01.15"

Captain Carston's report is similar, but bear in mind it was written in 1945 after the war and his long experience as a POW in Japan – he was lucky to have survived. He says, "At approximately 00.15 hours, searchlights accompanied by light gunfire, were focussed on H.M.S "MATA HARI". Stopped engines. Endeavoured to ascertain identity by Morse lamp. 00.30 hours, searchlights were switched off. 00.45 hours having received no reply to Morse lamp, I proceeded on voyage still uncertain as to whether H.M.S "MATA HARI" was amongst American, Dutch or Japanese craft. Approximately 03.00 hours in position, two miles south-east off first lighted buoy in BANKA STRAITS, the ship was again lit up by searchlights. Stopped engines. Received signal by Morse in International Code; (1) Anchor at once. (2) Do not attempt to lower boats. (3) Show a light. To these I complied. Tried again to establish identity, but received no reply. At dawn observed many warcraft and several transports in the Straits. The Japanese had made a landing at Muntok shortly after midnight." ¹⁷

According to Harry Walker, who had stayed behind to destroy the Naval Fuelling Installations in Singapore and was now a passenger on board, "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." ¹⁸

He continued, "Sometime 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.

¹⁶ Carston p.2

¹⁷ Carston p.2

¹⁸ Walker p.1

*“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.”*¹⁹

By now it was Monday morning, 16 February. My father wrote, *“Day light, recognised Japanese ensign on larger destroyer that had ordered us to anchor. All gear dumped. Boarding party arrived 09.30 & searched vessel for arms. Ordered 4” arm. to be dumped. Breech block had not been dumped by Commander’s Orders. All hands mustered, men searched for arms & ship searched for arms & ammo. Gun breech and W/T taken away. Ship ordered to anchor in Muntok Roads. Shifted about 11.00.”* It was fortunate that they also had time to dump the signals books and destroy all sensitive equipment.

The irony was that the *Mata Hari* had sailed through almost the entire Japanese invasion force which was putting troops ashore at Muntok and Palembang. They had managed to escape the whole armada only to be seen and trapped by the last ship.

The ordeal that followed

There is a list in Russell-Roberts’ book²⁰ showing that, of the 47 small ships which escaped from Singapore in the evening of 12 February, 25 had been sunk, beached or scuttled and 13 captured between the 13th and 17th. There is no information on the remainder. It is hard to ascertain exact numbers, but some sources indicate that at least 2000 men, women and children perished on these ships. For example, the *Scorpion* was bombed and sunk by gunfire with 36 survivors and 115 missing. The *Giang Bee* was sunk with 70 survivors and 223 missing. And so it goes on, ship after ship, with very little mercy shown to those on board, despite the majority being civilian evacuees. The worst example is what happened to the *Vyner Brooke* with 47 crew and 181 passengers aboard, most of whom were women and children.

Describing this event, the Australian War Memorial site says, *“Among the passengers were the last 65 Australian nurses in Singapore. Throughout the daylight hours of 13 February Vyner Brooke laid up in the lee of a small jungle-covered island, but she was attacked late in the afternoon by a Japanese aircraft, fortunately with no serious casualties. At sunset she made a run for the Banka Strait, heading for Palembang in Sumatra. Prowling Japanese warships, however, impeded her progress and daylight the next day found her dangerously exposed on a flat sea just inside the strait.*

“Not long after 2 pm Vyner Brooke was attacked by several Japanese aircraft. Despite evasive action, she was crippled by several bombs and within half an hour rolled over and sunk bow first. Approximately 150 survivors eventually made it ashore at Banka Island, after periods of between eight and 65 hours in the water. The island had already been occupied by the Japanese and most of the survivors were taken captive.

¹⁹ Walker p.1

²⁰ Russell-Roberts p. 184 & 185

“However, an awful fate awaited many of those that landed on Radji beach. There, the survivors from the Vyner Brooke joined up with another party of civilians and up to 60 Commonwealth servicemen and merchant sailors, who had made it ashore after their own vessels were sunk. After an unsuccessful effort to gain food and assistance from local villagers, a deputation was sent to contact the Japanese, with the aim of having the group taken prisoner. Anticipating this, all but one of the civilian women followed behind. A party of Japanese troops arrived at Radji Beach a few hours later. They shot and bayoneted the males and then forced the 22 Australian nurses and the one British civilian woman who had remained to wade into the sea, then shot them from behind. There were only two survivors - Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, and Private Cecil Kinsley, a British soldier. After hiding in the jungle for several days the pair eventually gave themselves up to the Japanese. Kinsley died a few days later from his wounds, and Bullwinkel spent the rest of the war as an internee.

“Of the 65 Australian nurses embarked upon the Vyner Brooke, 12 were killed during the air attack or drowned following the sinking, 21 were murdered on Radji Beach, and 32 became internees, 8 of whom subsequently died before the end of the war.”²¹

By those standards, the passengers and crew of the *Mata Hari* were very lucky. My father wrote about the events of 16 February, *“10.00 Boat off to order all men ashore & ships life boats to be put ready for towing. Men to land first, women later. Only one suitcase each allowed to be taken.*

“Landed with first party. Taken to Harbour Masters Office at end of jetty. Found case of stout on end of jetty & had a bottle. Given Coca Kola in Hbr. Master’s office. Men on grass space outside H.M. Office & some taken off to discharge cargo boats etc. While waiting in office survivors from sunken ships & boats arrived at intervals. Wilkinson & Capt. Chapman arrived from Yin Ping. Party of about 20 Australian nurses arrived, survivors from Vyner Brooke. Had walked about 10 miles along beach after landing. A pitiful sight, some with sarongs on, some with feet bound up in rags, most with chins bruised & chapped from life belts. Ship bombed & sunk. Survivors in boats & being towed through water in life belts.

“About 14.00 everybody taken to a nearby cinema & all herded in. Officers put into comfortable cane chairs men on benches on left side. Women, children and civilians on benches on right side. I managed to get four rows of cane chairs shifted for the nurses to sit on much to the guards’ objections. The guard prevented further shifting of chairs for the other women to sit on. At dusk two large pots of rice were brought in & all got a small helping of rice with a handful of sugar sprinkled over it.

“Wounded men grouped on & near stage on roughly made beds. No medical supplies given or attention paid to seriously wounded men or to the protests of the doctor. Found where the well was & helped a nurse bring in water & had the first good drink that day, parched before then. Lights out at 10.00. Slept on concrete floors. During night J. soldiers prowling round & stole all watches. Woke with mine being slipped over my wrist. Called the sentry

²¹ Australian War Museum <https://www.awm.gov.au/military-event/E302/>

dozing near the door – he merely laughed. Was roughly pushed down on the floor & grunted at. Thought it wiser to keep quiet.”

Harry Walker wrote, “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.”²²

But worse was to come. Walker went on, “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.”²³

The next three days were similar. Here are a few random extracts from my father's small notebook. “Only a very little rice to eat. Women, children and elderly civilians had their baggage searched & were then marched away up the road carrying their baggage. Our party, all combatants and younger civilians told to wait for lorries (sic). All this time wounded left out in the open on improvised stretchers – no medical supplies. When lorries arrived, all crammed in & driven up to airfield where we lined up for baggage search. Soldiers took away all razors, knives, scissors, cameras, food stuff and cigarettes. Men made to join gangs of prisoners working to fill trenches dug across the airfield and to clear jungle to enlarge it. About 17.00 all hands fell in & were marched back to the town carrying all their gear. Hell of a march with suitcases. All men & civilians billeted in the jail. A dreadful insanitary place with Chinese coolies suffering from open sores. A bomb hole in centre of the yard acting as a latrine. Slept soundly on a concrete platform with a cup as a pillow. Scrounged round the kampong and ate guavas, limes and berries, also a bit of coconut. Still no medical supplies. Armstrong, the worst wounded case with both legs shattered, had to have one foot amputated – not much hope for him without the necessary supplies.”

Of this man, Jock Brodie wrote, “One young RAF pilot officer, who had both feet shattered, when on one of the shelled ships had to have an amputation operation carried out with the aid of a saw made by one of the prisoners from ordinary hoop iron. With such equipment it was not surprising that the young man died. About 15 people died during the short stay at this depot.”²⁴

Brodie also mentioned their work at the airfield which involved clearing away the bush and wild shrubs to lengthen the runway, “At 9 a.m. plain boiled rice was issued, about a cupful, and the same happened about midday, and that was all the food until our return to the jail

²² Walker p. 2

²³ Walker p. 2

²⁴ Brodie sheet 13

when plain rice again was our exclusive menu. This 12 hour a day work continued for a fortnight and it was of course an infringement of international code to engage civilians on war work of this kind."²⁵

The Mata Hari returns to Singapore

On Friday 20 February, having been ordered to collect a skeleton crew the previous afternoon, my father was up at dawn, mustered with all the ships' crews returning to Singapore, and marched down to the pier to be taken out to the *Mata Hari* in the Harbour Master's launch with a Japanese doctor who spoke good English. The launch was well stocked with provisions, so they had a snack and looted what they could, including some beer and a bottle of gin, while going between the ships. On board the *Mata Hari*, they found a chaos of clothes everywhere – all decks and cabins were just one mass of churned-up clothing. Despite the mess in his cabin, my father was able to find my mother's letters in a drawer, which was a great joy to him. The provisions store had been looted, but a few odds and ends of tinned food were left. They sent some back ashore with the Japanese doctor but collected all the rest and, that evening, gorged themselves on sausages, bully beef, tinned fruit, biscuits, tea, milk and sugar – an enormous feed, he said.

Next day, 21 February, they were ordered to raise steam and ready the ship for the return to Singapore. On Sunday 22 February, they got under way and, with the Japanese cruiser *Sendi* in charge of the convoy, shaped a course northwards towards the Lingga Islands where they anchored at dusk between Lingga and Banka Island, almost in sight of Muntok Hill. At the entrance of the Banka Straits, they passed many bodies, including women, floating in the water.

On Monday, they were under way at dawn and proceeded slowly north outside the Lingga Islands. My father spent much of the time clearing out his cabin and looting sufficient clothes to fill a kit bag. On Tuesday, 24 February, he made his last entry in his notebook when they anchored for the night in a bight off the Bintang coast. The *Sendi* fired on and sunk a number of drifting mines. Meanwhile, he said, "*All hands looting gear & all have a fairly complete rig. Also gave quite a lot of clothes & blankets to our men on launches as they came alongside.*"

Wednesday 25 February – here the notebook ends.

The survivors go their separate ways

At this point, everyone had gone their separate ways. Ruth Russell-Roberts spent most of the war in Palembang and then Muntok, where she died of malnutrition and Banka fever. Harry Walker, after working on the airfield in Muntok, was sent to the Pladjoe Oil Refinery on the Moesi River near Palembang, where they were made to unload steel plates and pipes from a Japanese ship. "*Heavy, exhausting work,*" he wrote, "*From 6am to 6pm, seven days a week. We were given rice and, sometimes, a one inch square piece of fish or meat. The*

²⁵ Brodie sheer 15

heavy work, the food, and the beatings, soon began to tell.”²⁶ Many died of dysentery. When they were too tired to work, they were sent to Palembang gaol before being moved back to the terrible Muntok gaol. *“Here began our most dreadful period. Packed into the cells like sardines; 180 grams of 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.”*²⁷ But he survived and was released in 1945.

Jock Brodie was also interned in the Muntok gaol, then in Palembang at the same oil refinery and back to Muntok again. Towards the end of the war, he was moved to another camp further inland. He seems to have remained in relatively good health, but he describes in his lengthy diary how most of the other prisoners suffered. *“I had now joined as a ward attendant and I carried out these duties right up to the days of liberation. My experiences in this hospital I shall never forget. Many men had all three troubles together, and with Beri-Beri and Dysentery added to Malaria, the patients required a great deal of attention. Beri-Beri is usually caused by lack of Vitamin 'B' and the patient swells up to an enormous size. Normally it can be treated and cured 'if so desired', but under the conditions of our living, with the almost complete disregard by the Japs of the needs of the sufferers, there was never a great deal of hope. The body seems to rot away and terrible putrefying ulcers appear on the legs. When that did happen, the end was near.”*²⁸

He continued, after quoting some numbers, *“That was a very high mortality rate, and represented a rate of over 400 per thousand per annum.”* Later, his weight dropped to 6 stone 10lbs (94lbs – 42.6kgs). In the last camp in early 1945, he said, *“Over the whole period 109 British died out of a total of 196 which is 55.6%, an exceedingly high percentage, and represents the real truth of Jap methods and treatment.”*²⁹

*“All the foregoing is a simple sketch of my experiences 'under the occupying authorities' in Sumatra. There is perhaps much more I could write about, but that is better kept from print, and I dare not enlarge on such facts and details. I am but one of the thousands who endured hardships at the hands of the Japanese.”*³⁰

At the end, after he summed up his many impressions of his times as a prisoner, both good and terrible, he said, *“I was determined during the ordeal to keep alert, to work and keep fit enough to get out. To relinquish one's hold on one's self was a victory for the Japs. I brought to bear all the mental forces I could muster to defeat defeat. I thought so much of what it meant to get out, and see all at home, and hear from all in Bonnie Scotland and elsewhere. I felt I had something yet to live for, and my interest in living was not going to end.”*³¹ My mother told me that my father's thoughts were similar.

²⁶ Walker p. 3

²⁷ Walker p. 3

²⁸ Brodie sheet 34

²⁹ Brodie sheet 35

³⁰ Brodie sheet 52

³¹ Brodie sheet A

Captain Carston, in his detailed report after the war, described working on the airfield before being transferred with all the other prisoners to the Pladjoe Oil Refinery. He remained there until August 1942 when he was sent on the tanker *Yoyo Maru* to Singapore and may have met my father again on board the *Mata Hari*. In his report, he wrote of the days between 20 and 23 September, *“Aboard “MATA HARI” for passage to Japan. The First Lieutenant, all Engineer Officers and a few Ratings had been forced to remain in the ship; the ship had taken part in the capture of “RENGAT” and had carried troops to Borneo. All personnel had been transferred to work on oil-tanker prior to my boarding.”*³²

For whatever reason, Carston did not go to Japan on the *Mata Hari*, but on the *SS Tokyo Maru*. On his arrival, he was put into a transit camp near Sasebo where they worked on camp upkeep and road repair. On one occasion, he said, when no ox was available, they were hitched to a plough and made to tow it round the rice fields.

In 1944, he was transferred to Fukuoka camp No. 1, where the prisoners were employed in building an airfield, and at the end of the year sent to Fukuoka camp No. 5, where they worked in the coal mines. Of this latter camp, he wrote, *“Except for the extremely hard and wet work in the mine, this was a good camp, for we had two good Commandants.”*³³ In April 1945, he was moved to Hiroshima camp No. 5. Here, the prisoners were made to work longer hours doing heavy work in the shipyards on a diet of merely 360 grams of rice or beans per day.

He said nothing about the atom bomb, their camp was about 50 miles from Hiroshima on the other side of some hills. He was liberated by the US 8th Army on 13 September 1945 and repatriated to Calcutta. Eventually, he retired to his homeland of New Zealand where Russell-Roberts visited him to obtain the information for his book.

My father in Singapore

Meanwhile, my father, after being ordered under guard to take the *Mata Hari* back to Singapore, continued to work the ship with H. M. MacGregor, the second engineer. I have a thin folded blue airmail sheet, attached to his notebook by a rusty paperclip. It indicates, in the briefest possible way, the dates and movements of the ship. They seem to have spent most of their time either in the Seletar naval facility near the RAF base on the north shore of Singapore island or at the Keppel naval base in the Singapore dock area or sailing between Port Dickson on the west coast of Malaya and Sambas on the eastern tip of Borneo and several points in between. Exactly what they were doing, I cannot find out. On 25 August, he was painted by a Japanese artist who promised to try to get word out that he was a POW. I do not think he succeeded, but I have in my possession a drawing that appeared in a Japanese newspaper, presumably by the artist in question.

³² Carston p. 3

³³ Carston p. 4



The drawing of my father as a POW in 1942

Throughout my father's time on the *Mata Hari*, he and his crew must have been under considerable duress. On one occasion, on 7 September 1942, they were put in front of a firing squad and made to sign parole forms. Not long afterwards on 3 December 1942, he joined the *SS Dowgate* and was subsequently transferred to Changi POW camp.

I have no record of his time in Changi, and he told my mother very little about it. However, as Japanese prisoner of war camps went, Changi was not too bad. Certainly, not as bad as Muntok. He grew a white beard which made him look much older than he was – perhaps it was this that saved him from the Burma railway. So long as you were not sent there, the main problems were disease and malnutrition. They were fed on inadequate supplies of polished rice and, as a result, they all suffered badly from beri-beri and tropical ulcers. Most had dysentery and malaria as well. My mother told me they were given hardly any fish or meat and that rats were considered a delicacy. Apparently, he smoked cigarettes made of grass wrapped in the pages torn from his Bible! She also said that older married men with wives and families coped better than the younger men. And I have since read that those who had lived in the Far East before being captured understood the oriental way of thinking and fared better than those who were fresh out from England or Australia.

She said my father was a fairly phlegmatic man who did not anger easily. There were many occasions when he saved 'Mac' MacGregor, who was more volatile, from losing his temper and thus more likely to receive a beating. The main difficulty, apart from disease and malnutrition, was boredom. Books about life in Changi describe how the prisoners arranged entertainments, ran courses in various skills and educational subjects, but hardly ever tried to escape. The few who did were summarily executed. At great personal risk, some kept diaries (for which they too would have been executed) and some built and hid wireless sets, passing around news on the progress of the war, for which again the penalty was death. I believe that one man had built and concealed a wireless set in a secret compartment in a bamboo structure of some sort – apparently, the owner listened to it with a stethoscope.



A group of British POWs liberated from Palembang in 1945. My father would have looked much like this had he remained in the Sumatra camps

My mother in Australia

My mother was by now sharing a house in Perth with Nancy MacGregor, Mac's wife and my godmother; they stayed together throughout their time in Australia and the voyage back to England in 1945. After the fall of Singapore, neither of them received any news of their husbands until letters arrived from the Navy Office, dated 9 April 1942, stating, *"...I regret to inform you that your husband has not arrived at Colombo and he is believed to be missing."* The first news that their husbands were still alive came in letters from the Red Cross dated 11 October 1943, saying, *"We feel sure it will interest you to know that the Central Red Cross Bureau has been notified that the above named is a prisoner of war in Japanese hands."* One whole year and eight long months without knowing whether their husbands were alive or dead.

During the next two years, my mother received only four small postcards – I have them now. For the whole time he was a POW that was all she had. The first reads in capital letters, *"DARLING, I AM VERY FIT, VERY WELL, ALIVE AND HAPPY AND BEING WELL TREATED. PLEASE DON'T WORRY. GOD BLESS LITTLE PHILIP. ALL MY LOVE SWEETHEART."* Signed Arthur. The next three say little more, but acknowledge the receipt of some letters and photographs. How very little in three and half long years. During this time, she and Nancy

kept body and soul together, my mother taking in dressmaking and Nancy working as a secretary.

Towards the end of 1944, with the war beginning to be won, my mother's fear was that she would be stuck in Australia when my father was repatriated to England. It might be difficult to obtain a passage home and she did not want to risk yet more years of separation. They managed, through her uncle in London, to book berths on the *RMS Athlone Castle* for the voyage across the Pacific, through the Panama Canal and then by convoy across the Atlantic to Liverpool. We left Australia in February 1945 and arrived home on 29 March 1945, shortly before the end of the war in Europe – and that is yet another story!

I remember well the VE Day celebrations on 8 May 1945 (I was not quite 4 years old), when my mother said that we could not celebrate yet, as the war in the east was not over. Japan did not surrender until 15 August 1945, after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was not until 12 September that Singapore came back under British control. VJ Day passed almost unnoticed by most of the country, but we celebrated on 3 October when my mother received a cable saying; *"Arrived safely Colombo. Hope to be home soon."* And another on the 16th; *"Probably arriving Liverpool 22nd."*



My Father after his release from Changi, probably taken in Colombo in October 1945

I first remember seeing my father on the platform at West Moors railway station near Ferndown. It was fortunate that he had returned slowly by sea, because it had given him time to recover some of his strength, but he was still very thin. I can clearly remember

seeing him standing in the bath (I was not supposed to go in) and being shocked at how emaciated he was with his legs covered with the most horrible purple scars. I think he also spent some time in hospital, but I do not have any details.

My father buys a small farm in Devon

By now he was 42. He had been at sea since 1921 and spent three and half years as a POW. After all these experiences, he decided not to go back to sea again. He had had enough. We went down to Devon and stayed on a farm during the winter of 1946/7, the coldest winter for three centuries. I loved it because only tractors could get through to where we lived and I couldn't go to school for many weeks. My parents then found a house near Tiverton where my brother was born and two years later bought a small 20 acre farm. It consisted of four fields, some outbuildings and barns, and a very primitive Devon cottage; no electricity – we used oil lamps and candles; no mains water – only a well and a hand pump to fill the tank in the roof. We kept chickens, ducks and geese, selling the eggs and dressed poultry to the local butchers. I remember him in a small hut at the back of the house with clouds of feathers everywhere as he plucked the geese to be sent to market for Christmas. I also remember crawling under the hedgerows collecting eggs laid by the more scatty free-range hens. We grew our own vegetables and supplemented our meat ration with rabbits shot in the fields – he taught me how to shoot. I think it must have been a hard life for my parents, but I loved the freedom of living in the countryside.

I remember my father as a kindly man, but a strict disciplinarian. He was a stickler for making me eat every last morsel of food on my plate, even when I hated brussel sprouts. At the time, I bitterly resented this but, looking back now, it must have been infuriating for him to see me toying with food and leaving it on the side of my plate. He knew what it was like to starve.

In 1951, he developed a bad cough, eventually diagnosed as lung cancer, and was given only six months to live. By this time, I had discovered aeroplanes and was madly building model aircraft of all kinds, built of balsa wood and tissue paper and powered by elastic bands and later by small diesel engines. I remember proudly showing them to him as he lay upstairs in bed and describing the many crashes and also my small successes. He died on 5 February 1952, aged only 49 – a result of heavy smoking during his life at sea, most likely exacerbated by the privations of war.

I dearly wish I had known him better. I think of my parents' very brief married life together (1939 - 41, and 1945 - 52), of their anxiety during the war years and his illness and death, and of my mother's struggle to keep the farm going, which she did. I also think of how he must have felt – surrendering on the *Mata Hari*, then being forced to work the ship for nearly 10 months before being interned in Changi. The humiliation and waves of doubt must have cut deep and been difficult to bear. And then those long, long years as a prisoner.

But I remember most of all an idyllic childhood in the wilds of the Devon countryside and the way my mother somehow managed to continue to run the poultry farm for many years and successfully bring up two children.

Some Links to other websites

What happened to the Mata Hari?

<http://singaporeevacuation1942.blogspot.fr/2007/02/what-finally-happened-to-mata-hari.html>

The Muntok Peace Museum

<http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/>

The Ships

http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/?page_id=27

Diary of Mr. G Brodie

<http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Diary-of-Mr-G-Brodie-for-Web-with-OCR.pdf>

Mr H. Walker's description of his escape on the Mata Hari

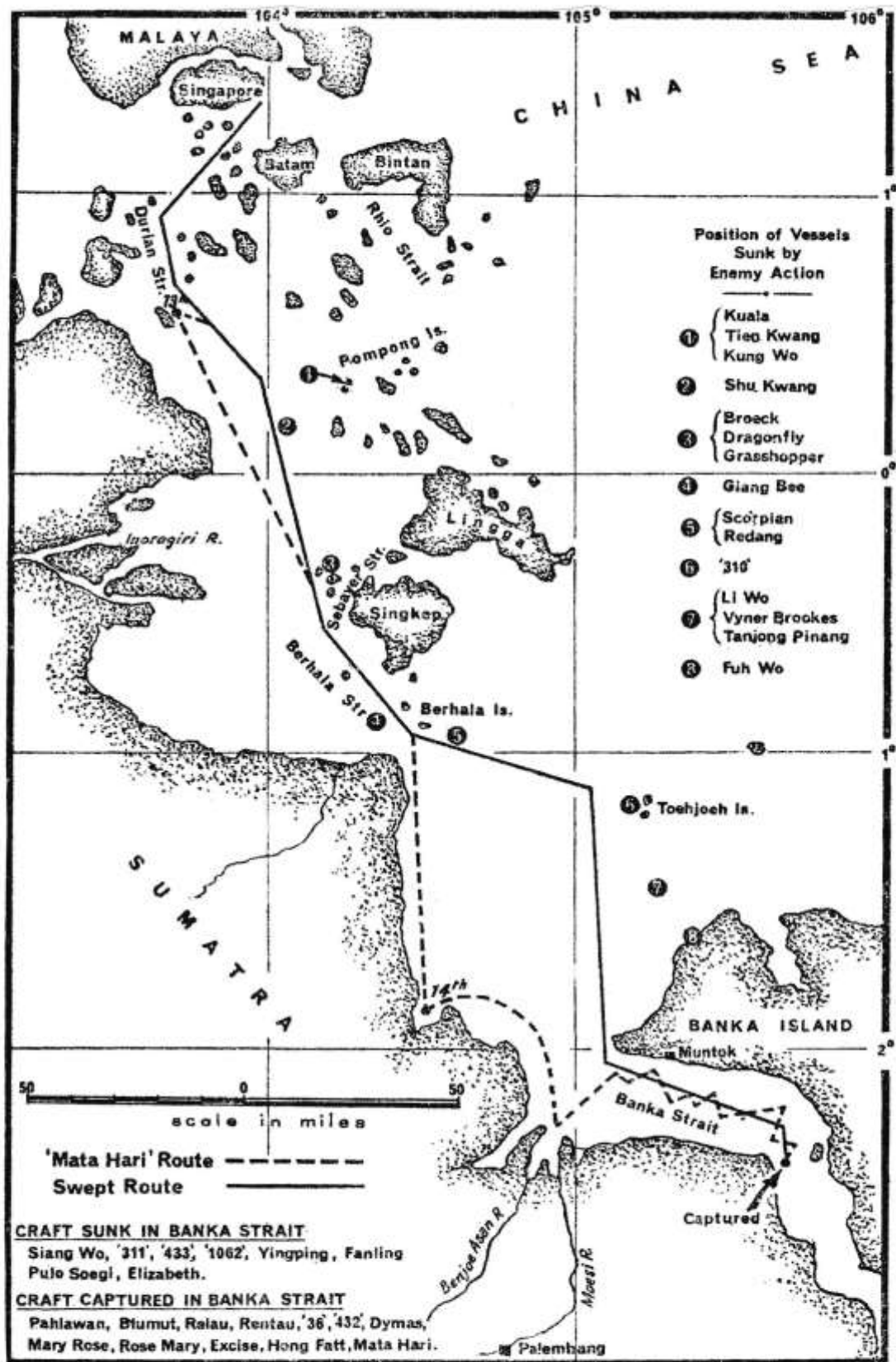
<http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Harry-Walkers-Account-of-his-Escape.pdf>

Generals at War – Battle of Singapore

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0U-BCzMRYY>

No Prisoners – The Fall of Singapore

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWHDHHOCI1Q>



Map of last voyage of the *Mata Hari*, through the Islands between Singapore and the Banka Strait
From Denis Russell-Roberts, *Spotlight on Singapore*