

# 'His Majesty's Tug St Breock'

[ British Admiralty Saint Class Tug – Pennant # W56]

Bombed and sunk on 14 February 1942 near Pulau Sempeng (north west of Pulau Singkep).

Version 1.0.0; January 2021

[ It is recommended that - because all three vessels were attacked and sunk within the space of a couple of hours and within sight of each other and many survivors landed on the same small uninhabited island- to gain a full understanding of the events of 14<sup>th</sup> February 1942 near the Posik island group the memorial documents on 'HMS Grasshopper' and 'HMS Dragonfly' be read in conjunction with this account of the 'St Breock'.]



**A 'Saint Class' Tug, possibly 'St Breock'**

In April 1916, the British Admiralty placed orders for 64 tugs from shipyards around the United Kingdom and in Hong Kong. When the First World War ended in 1918 many of them were not yet completed. Eventually 18 were cancelled, 46 were completed and most were laid up as soon as they were delivered. The decision was made to sell surplus tugs to commercial operators who prized them as high-quality vessels. They were the first tugs to have a raised forecastle deck that extended to the aft end of the boat deck. All the tugs were single screw and fitted with a coal fired triple-expansion steam engine with an output of 1,250 ihp and were capable of a speed of 12 knots. With a large coal capacity, they could steam at full power for 15 days.

These were the 'Saint Class' tugs.

The triple-expansion reciprocating steam engines had cylinders of 18 1/4", 28 1/2" and 48 1/4" diameters and a 28" stroke at 125rpm the engine developed 1250 ihp. The two single-ended scotch boilers were coal fired along with the usual auxiliaries and fitted with a ten ton per day capacity evaporating and distilling plant for de-salination of sea water. They were also equipped with electric lighting power derived from a 12kw generator driven by a 20hp turbine ([www.nautipedia](http://www.nautipedia)).

'St Breock' was built in 1920 as a 451 grt tug of 43.6 metres (145 feet) length and by the time of the Japanese invasion of Malaya may have been armed with a 12-pounder gun like other tugs in that Class – although the Engineering Officer William Johnson in his oral history 40 years later stated that it had no gun of any sort except for a rifle brought on board by one soldier.

It is not known when it steamed all the way to South East Asia but in 1924 it is recorded as being used in Singapore to transport Boy Scouts and Girl Guides to visit the 'HMS Hood' (SFPMA 11.2.24).

The engineering officer, Sub Lt William Johnson, SSRNVR, placed on 'St Breock' for the evacuation in February 1942 stated in a post war interview for oral history purposes that the tug had towed the Singapore Naval Base Floating Dock out from England (it arrived in 1928), but this does not appear to be correct since the towing contract from Tyne to Singapore was secured by a Dutch firm with their own tugs. By 1931 the 'St Breock' seems to have relocated to Hong Kong where it assisted in raising the sunken submarine 'Poseidon' (Malay Tribune 15.6.31). In October 1932 it was sent with " ... *divers and carpenters with hawsers, timber and other needed appliances...* "to assist in the salvage operations of the 'SS Chusan' which had run aground on rocks at Weihaiwei (now Weihai) near Half Moon Bay in Hong Kong.

It is not known when 'St Breock' moved back down to Singapore, but it would have been by at least December 1941 which is when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong.

### **Singapore under Siege:**

The invasion of Malaya and Singapore, from the time of the first landings in Northern Malaya on 8th December 1941, was swift and brutal. Within eight weeks the Japanese had taken Malaya and landed on the island of Singapore which had become intensely overcrowded by tens of thousands of fleeing civilians of all races from Malaya plus almost 100,000 servicemen.

By the second week of February 1942 the Japanese army was advancing across Singapore Island and a chaotic evacuation of civilians - mainly Europeans, Eurasians, and a small number of influential Chinese – and selected skilled servicemen, was underway from the port in front of what is today's CBD.

Literally any ocean-going vessel of any size remaining in Singapore harbour was ultimately enlisted by the authorities to evacuate people, under what had become almost constant bombing and machine gunning by Japanese planes. Singapore itself was ablaze, columns of black smoke rose thousands of feet in the air and the streets were littered with the dead and dying.

People desperately clamoured for departure passes from the Colonial government authorities (men under 40 years of age had been banned from leaving the Island for months and women had not been publicly encouraged to leave because it would '... adversely affect morale ...'!) to board any ship leaving the Island. By 11 January 1942 even the rather hidebound men in authority saw the absurdity of their bureaucratic incompetence and more passes were issued for civilian men and women to leave, so finally some real urgency entered the situation.

About 50 ships of all sizes - from the quite large, refrigerated cargo ship 'SS. Empire Star' (525 feet and 12,656 tons) through a range of mid-sized merchant vessels down to some small craft like the "SS. Tandjong Pinang" (which at 97 feet only just qualified in the definition for a 'ship') and even smaller patrol vessels – were assembled to leave as a convoy during the 48-hour period of 11 – 13 February 1942. There were also several Naval ships of varying sizes identified as evacuation vessels. In addition, there were another at least 50 small launches, junks and yachts commandeered to carry smaller groups of civilians and servicemen.

The naval ships, apart from a couple of destroyers, which briefly escorted the bigger merchant ships like the 'SS Empire Star' and 'SS Gorgon' after leaving Singapore, included auxiliary (i.e., merchant ships which had been requisitioned) patrol ships, auxiliary minesweepers, flat bottomed ex-Yangste River gunboats ('HMS Dragonfly', 'HMS Scorpion' and 'HMS Grasshopper') and ex Yangste river passenger ships, RAF fast launches and even a large ex-Yangste river tug like the 'HMS Yin Ping'. Some of these Naval ships had almost exclusively a complement of service personnel on board – but also a few civilians.

Of the 100 or so vessels, of all descriptions, leaving in the last window of opportunity (as many thought) only a dozen or so would make it to safety. The other vessels would be sunk, run aground, or captured at sea by the Japanese navy with almost two thousand of their passengers and crew killed, or taken prisoner to face three and a half years of extremely harsh treatment, malnutrition, and virtually no medicine in Internment or POW camps in Sumatra and elsewhere. Many of these women, children and men would die during the remainder of the War in these cruel camps.

To put the research purpose of this document into historical context, the fate of only a small number of the ships sunk carrying evacuees from Singapore during these last few days before the Surrender to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 have been thoroughly researched and documented. This is one of the attempts to prevent the lives of those several thousand men, women, and children who did die because of their escape attempt being simply consigned, without proper tangible memory, into the dustbin of history.

#### **Preparation and Departure from Singapore.**

'St Breock' became one of the vessels of every description used to desperately evacuated civilians and servicemen from Singapore during the week prior to the surrender to the Japanese on 15 February 1942.

The Captain of 'St Breock' was said, according to a schedule prepared in Palembang POW camp, to be one Lt A. G. Clarke, RN., [Researcher Note: at least one website - uboat.net - has confused the 'St Breock' with the tug 'HMT Brock' which served at Dunkirk under the command of Skipper Joseph Jappy and thereby incorrectly placed Jappy under the command of 'St Breock'] and Sub Lt W.J.B. Johnson, SSRNVR was the officer in charge of the engine room. It has not been possible through research to confirm the identity of Lt A. G. Clarke, RN, anyone who is able to assist in this question please contact the author of this document.

In summary, various publications have since the war noted only briefly the last voyage of 'St. Breock' and the fate of those aboard – nothing substantive seems to have been published except for the account of Sub Lt Johnson's experiences in Joseph Kennedy's book 'When Singapore Fell' ('WSF');

- Commander Reid, RN and the Senior officer in Palembang POW camp recorded in a schedule with the reports of other evacuation vessels "...Sunk 14/2 'Beyaber Straits'... 24 survivors picked up by M/L 432. Landed on Singkep Island...".
- Captain David Nelson, SSVF, in his book "The Story of ChangI" – which book also drew on the information compiled by the 'Bureau of Record and Enquiry' operating in that POW camp – tells us in summary "... St Breock left Singapore 11.2.42. Sunk by bombs Sebayor Straits 14.2.42. 24 survivors picked up by ML432 and landed Singkep, proceeding to Padang. A few picked up by ML310...".
- "...Sunk between 14/2 and 17/2 near 'Blakan Outan' island..." (Book 'World War II Sea War' by Bertke, Smith and Don Kindell).

We are fortunate to have two good records of the last voyage of the 'St Breock' – one from **Mr B. Laurensen**, who was an employee of the Admiralty on the directing staff of the Royal Navy Armament Depot (RNAD) Singapore who wrote his account in the form of a report shortly after his arrival in Australia in 1942; and an oral history, created in a 1982 interview, held at the Imperial War Museum, London, from **Sub. Lt. William J. B. Johnson**, SSRNVR who was also a civilian employee of the Government Canning Research Dept., Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States. It has not been possible to access the personal papers of Sub. Lt Johnson held in the IWM for the research and compilation of this document.

**Laurensen's** record is important in our understanding of what was initially a major purpose of the evacuation voyage of the 'St Breock' – to tow lighters of Royal Navy Armament Stores Depot (R.N.A.D.) to Batavia. This attempt to deny ammunition stocks to the advancing Japanese forces turned out to be a complete failure, as described below. In his oral history held at the Imperial War Museum, Sub. Lt Johnson confirms this being a primary objective of the 'St Breock'..

The higher command in Singapore must have seen the writing on the wall as early as end January 1942 because **Laurensen** tells us that it was on 31 January that RNAD stores in the Western Depot were ordered to be moved into Singapore city, with only sufficient stores to replenish the armaments of ships left in Singapore to remain on the island. Over the next ten days the RNAD staff worked day and night to comply with this order – the local labour force called 'coolies' had largely (and wisely) vanished from the workforce and in fact by then the military authorities objected to local labour being taken to the front-line areas like the Naval Base because Japanese infiltrations were being made during the invasion by Japanese dressed like coolies. With only one reliable lorry and the assistance of small parties of Naval personnel plus briefly some 50 Ghurkhas, most of the stores were relocated to East Wharf and loaded onto lighters by 8<sup>th</sup> February.

During the days leading up to 8th February 1942 a lot of the armaments and mines were immobilised, and secret mine sprocket gear thrown into the sea at Keppel Harbour. By 8<sup>th</sup> February, the Harbour Board prohibited explosives being handled any longer at East Wharf so the RNAD staff relocated their work to Berlayer Creek Magazine (Berlayer Creek, now Berlayer Canal, was to the west of Keppel Harbour and today's Keppel Island).

On the night of 8<sup>th</sup> of February, the Japanese Army landed on the north west coast of Singapore.

As a result, on the 9th of February, the order was given by the Captain Superintendent to “...*flood the Magazines in the Armament depot...*” – but this was found to be impossible since no flooding apparatus was installed, and the magazines were not designed to be flooded – and to also pierce all the Cordite cases with a view to wetting all charges, but this was also found to be impossible because no power was available and the only lamps available were Hurricane lamps which would have ignited the Cordite and blown everyone sky high! At 4.00 am on 10 February the RNAD staff abandoned the RNAD at the Naval Base with the Japanese troops advancing well across Singapore Island.

Most Admiralty civilian staff, on the suggestion of the Captain Superintendent, were then evacuated on the 'RFA Francol' [RFA stands for Royal Fleet Auxiliary] a medium sized refuelling tanker which carried 75 Naval and Dockyard staff safely to the port of Tandjong Priok at Batavia.

Mr. Laurensen states in his report “... *RNAD staff left in Singapore were Mr Morris, ASO., incapacitated in hospital, Mr Laurensen Tempy. AASO, Mr Harrower DCO, Mr Selway, Storehouseman, Mr Day, Tempy Storehouseman...*”.

It was about this point in the proceedings that pineapple canning specialist, **Sub Lt William Johnson**, SSRNVR, at a loss as to what he should be doing since his food canning responsibilities had vanished as a consequence of the Japanese invasion and even the planned evacuation of the canning machinery to Batavia had been thwarted by the shelling, bombing and then the actual landing of Japanese troops on Singapore Island, *“... was advised to report for duty with the Royal Navy Volunteer reserve, which he thought was ‘leaving it a bit late , as the Japanese were already on the island ...”* ( WSF , p.56). So, William Johnson confronted the naval authorities on how he could help and was ordered to assist taking the tug ‘St Breock’ from Singapore to Batavia. He promptly boarded ‘St Breock’ to find that all the crew had disappeared but was given the responsibility of selecting men who could carry out the stoking and other duties in the engine room from the dejected mass of sailors and soldiers clamouring for a passage out of Singapore. He later recalled that a crew was chosen from this group and amongst those who became crew were one or two survivors from ‘HMS Prince of Wales ‘, plus other sailors and some soldiers – he mentions in his oral history record that he did not recall any civilians (but there were non-military men from the Royal Navy Armaments Depot onboard – and possibly even one or more wife of these men). The sailors and soldiers were told they could have a passage out on the condition that they worked.

On the morning of 11th February at the Superintendent’s conference it was advised that all further Royal Navy base demolition had ceased so Laurenson, Harrower, Selway, Day from the RNAD proceeded to the Berlayer Creek Magazine but” *... with Japanese machine guns firing from points near the Gap Road... conditions were so bad that work was impossible on explosives and it was necessary to return to town. Constant air raids took place during the day and the Japanese had occupied the Racecourse, with infiltration as far south as Tanglin only three miles from the Union building...”*.

That afternoon the order was given for the remaining RNAD staff to board the tug ‘St Breock’ and tow lighters of Armament Stores to Batavia. By 2100 hrs Harrow, Selway and Laurenson were on board the tug – shelling and firing continued all night long. Large fires were burning from far west all along the waterfront to east past the Seaview Hotel.

The Captain of the ‘St Breock’ was ordered to take four lighters in tow – one was empty, one contained landmines, and two contained ‘QF’ Cartridges (‘QF’ simply means ‘Quick Firing’ and relates to the cartridges for smaller, repeating guns on naval ships). Johnson recalled that the lighters contained Magnetic Mines.



### **Who was aboard 'St Breock'?:**

Sub Lt William Johnson is quoted in 'WSF' (p.56) that there were " ... *about fifty souls...*" on board 'St Breock'.

Captain David Nelson left us with the information that "*...24 survivors were picked up by ML 423 and a ... few picked up by ML310...*".

In Palembang POW camp when they compiled a schedule of ships escaping Singapore, there was only recorded a mention of the 24 survivors being picked up.

Records for other comparable 'Saint Class' tugs show a normal crew complement of up to 30 men. Given that Sub Lt. William Johnson recalled that there were no crew on board when he arrived, and he had to select sailors and soldiers to man the vessel in Singapore we can reasonably estimate there would have been some 20 - 25 'crew' when the vessel left Singapore. This indicates that there were probably up to an equal number of 'passengers' on board if we accept Johnson's recall 'fifty souls.

No records of the crew complement have been found in the research for this document except for the names of Clarke and Johnson as officers – plus another reference to a naval officer also named Clarke. Insofar as crew we have only the name of Chief Petty Officer Verrion, RN., and Able Seaman Aitken, RN.

Passengers included the small band of four civilian men from the RNAD and we can speculate whether other Admiralty staff were on board – but many of those staff had left on 'RAFA Aquarius', 'SS Kung Wo' and 'RFA Franco'. The first of those was also sunk in the vicinity of Pulau Singkep with the loss of all lives on board, the 'Kung Wo' was sunk further north near Pom Pong island and the 'RFA Franco' with 75 naval and Dockyard staff on board safely reached Batavia but was sunk on 2

March 1942 in its attempt to reach Fremantle in Australia. It is not known who was on board on that later voyage - it is reasonable to suppose that many passengers transhipped at Batavia to vessels heading for Ceylon - but there were only 13 survivors from that sinking.

Since Selway and Day became internees in Padang it is again reasonable to assume that some other passengers and some crew also struggled to achieve a speedy journey from Pulau Singkep to Sumatra, and then to Padang on the west coast and were captured at Padang when the Japanese arrived on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1942.

No record has been found of any deaths occurring in the sinking of 'St Breock' and William Johnson in his oral history interview specifically states that there were no casualties because no bombs hit the vessel directly the ones that sank it exploded about one foot away from the hull.

### **Journey from Singapore:**

The journey from Singapore became one of the 'St Breock' travelling in a loose 'convoy' with two of the ex-Yangtze River gunboats 'HMS Grasshopper' and 'HMS Dragonfly' also escaping the impending fall of Singapore – with all three ships eventually meeting their fate within sight of each other amongst small islands near Pulau Singkep on the eastern side of Sumatra.

**Laurenson** tells us “... *The sea was running high and the tug with tow made about two knots. Steering was difficult and on the edge of the minefield N.A. Lighter 59 and N.A. Lighter 760 broke adrift. It was impossible to pick them up...The tug proceeded through the minefields and was underway all night...February 13<sup>th</sup>... During the day we anchored near the shore and proceeded again at night. During the night N.A. 60 [the Lighter with the mines] went adrift and was lost. A lighter N.A. 76 which had left Singapore towed by an unknown craft, was seen aground on the beach of an island. This lighter contained most important stores. All Fuzes, Primer, Tube and Detonators which were removed from the Armament depot in order to immobilize remaining stores were in N.A. 76. It was impossible to signal regarding this lighter, and it was the intention to report the matter on arrival in Batavia...”.*

He continues with his account that on Saturday, 14<sup>th</sup> February “...*During the morning N.A. 70 [the last of the lighters in tow by 'St Breock'] broke adrift and the tow rope wound around the propellor shaft. It took over two hours to clear this, and the tug was about to pick up N.A. 70 when two planes without markings circled overhead. After observing us for some time they disappeared. Before the master had time to come up again with[the] lighter the planes returned and dropped two bombs. Not wishing to be in the vicinity of the lighter during a raid 'St Breock' made for the nearest land. The planes attacked twice again and at the second attempt the starboard bow stove in and the vessel was sinking fast. Mr harrower went into the longboat, Mr Selway and Mr Day on one of the rafts. The Master of the 'St Breock' and myself went in the skiff. The tug sank in less than ten minutes, and in the meantime a Japanese float plane dived three times on the skiff, where the survivors, fearing machine gunning, were compelled to swim for it...”.*

**William Johnson** tells us in his oral archive that on 14<sup>th</sup> February there was only one lighter left under tow but when the first plane dropped two bombs, which missed the 'St Breock' let the last lighter go – then the plane came back with two more bombs.

He also says most people got into the ships boat to head for shore and specifically states there were no casualties, because there was no direct hit – the bombs exploding “...one foot away...” from the hull of the vessel.

Following relatively closely behind the 'St Breock' from Singapore and attacked and damaged to such an extent that morning by Japanese bombers so that it had to be beached, was the ex Yangste river gunboat 'HMS Grasshopper'; on board of which was **Lt. I.D.S. Ian Forbes, RN.**, who gave this description of their joint positions "... *All three ships made for a small group of islands to the north of the island of Singkep. At 1130 (approx.) when only two miles from one of the islands we closed the wreckage of the tug, St Breock...*". The third vessel referred to by Forbes was 'HMS Dragonfly' which was also sunk in the vicinity with huge loss of life (some of the 'HMS Dragonfly' survivors landed on the same island as those from 'HMS Grasshopper' and 'St Breock').

The records left by those aboard 'St Breock' are not specific as to when the ship was actually sunk but from analysis of the records on the accompanying 'HMS Dragonfly' and 'HMS Grasshopper' the following appears to have been the sequence on the morning on **Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> February 1942** – 'HMS Dragonfly was leading this group of three vessels towards the islands known as the Posik Group.

- 100 hrs – 'HMS Dragonfly' bombed and sunk.
- 1115 hrs – 'St Breock' bombed and sunk.
- 1130 hrs – 'HMS Grasshopper' sighted "...*the wreckage of 'St Breock'..*"
- 1130 hrs – 'HMS Grasshopper' bombed, damaged and run aground near a beach.

#### **Where did 'St Breock' sink:**

As with survivor accounts from the accompanying 'HMS Grasshopper,' which came under bombing attack soon after 'St Breock' and within sight of the men who had reached shore from the tug, the identity of the island near which the ships sank is a little unclear.

William Johnson says the island on which the 'St Breock' survivors landed was 'Blakan Utan'; Commander Reid in Palembang POW camp recorded that the vessel was sunk in the 'Beyaber Straits'; the book 'World War II Sea War' says it was sunk near 'Blakan Outan' and Captain David Nelson in Changi POW camp recorded the sinking as in Sebayer Straits.

Identifying exactly where the vessel sunk and the island upon which the survivors landed is not an easy job because the events took place in a group of islands (some uninhabited at the time) north of the large Dutch controlled island of Pulau Singkep which is itself at the south west end of the Lingga Archipelago.





Specifically, it took place amongst the small group of islands north west of Singkep, which is 60 km directly to the east of the mouth of the Indragiri River on the east coast of Sumatra and 200km directly south of Singapore. These comprise the more readily identifiable islands of Pulau Bandahara, Pulau Posik, Pulau Rusukbuaya, Pulau Mas and Pulau Sempeng/Sempang/Sempiang and others with the names Pulau Nibung, Pajang/Pandjang and Pulau Noja/Nodja – but current maps show no island named Blakan Outan/Utan (of course it could have been a tiny islet not shown on maps).

There is also the possibility that the survivors were at a place on either Pulau Posik or Pulau Sempeng that they construed to be – phonetically – Blakan Outan/Utan because several survivors from ‘HMS Grasshopper’ who landed close by have recorded for history that they were on Pulau Belakan Ulu Hitam’ and/or Pulau Mas. Some of these islands are separated by narrow channels and some appear to be walkable at low tide. A map drawn in his memoirs by John Robins, a civilian passenger on ‘HMS Grasshopper’ is shown next.



The dotted line indicates the route we took in the whaler in our unsuccessful attempt to find the village that night. We were misled by the little island between the two larger ones which hid the village from our view. We rowed and rowed until 5am, when we finally pulled up on the little island stretched out on the sand to sleep the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Sunday 15th February. We were awake again with the dawn and with the aid of light had no difficulty in finding the village. We discovered that most of the inhabitants had evacuated the place and the few who remained were nervous and mistrustful. A Mr. Bennett, who spoke Malay fluently, negotiated with them to try and get word of our plight to the island of Singkep where there was a small colony. A boat left later with one of our party aboard bound for Singkep. The boat was also taken across to our main party telling them to make their way along the beach to Camp 2 where we would pick them up in the whaler after dark. It was deemed inadvisable to do anything during daylight as planes flew frequently overhead. The rest of the day was spent in an idle way. Water was plentiful but there was little to eat, a raw egg and some ubi kayu (tapioca tubers) being all we had for the day. We discovered the Chinese owner of a small shop from whom we arranged the purchase of a sack of rice. There was another little shop where we bought a few articles of clothing. I bought a sarong which proved a very useful article in the weeks to come, and which over three years later and after much use sold for forty times its original cost. We found the survivors of the St. Fairisle at the village and the Fairisle had also hidden herself somewhere along the

The 'Beybayer Strait' or 'Sebayor Strait' referred to by Cmdr Reid and Captain Nelson were naturally the name used for the Strait of sea identified in contemporary maps in 1942 – the body of water is in fact 'Sebajoer Strait' or 'Selat Sebayur' on current maps. It is the navigable stretch of sea that lies to the north west of Pulau Singkep between that island and the group of islands known as the Posik Islands (see top left corner of following map);



It is the opinion of the researcher that the men from 'St Breock' possibly went ashore on the same island, or an immediately adjacent island, in the Posik group as those from 'HMS Grasshopper' and also some of the survivors of the sinking of 'HMS Dragonfly' – namely Pulau Sempeng or Pulau . Lt Ian Forbes, RN is quoted on p.196 of the book 'Singapore's Dunkirk' saying "... survivors of the tug St Breock were ashore on one of the islands and told me later that they watched the 'Grasshopper's' last fight for two hours with bated breath..."

The civilian passenger on 'HMS Grasshopper', John Robins of Cable & Wireless Ltd, also confirmed how closely the sinkings of his vessel and that of 'St Breock' occurred on that day, with the following comment in his post War memoirs "...Survivors from a Government tug, St Briac [sic: St Breock] which had been sunk earlier, told us, when we met them months later, that it was incredible how we kept emerging from each attack unharmed and still steaming full speed....".





**Survivors reach land:**

For an understanding of the experiences of the men who reached land we start with **William Johnson** ( as per WSF, p.56-57) "... a near miss was effective enough to sink the vessel but all on board ( 'about fifty souls' in Johnson's account' got ashore on the island of Blakang Utang....".

In his oral history Johnson tells us that when on the island the morale of most of the survivors had sunk so low that "... most sat around crying...".

**Laurenson** recorded in his report "... Eventually land was reached, and all hands were saved. Mr. Harrower and myself were at one end of the island and Messrs. Selway and Day landed at a point some distance away on the same island. Having no shoes, it was impossible to walk along on the rocks to see Mr. Selway and Mr. Day, but I learnt that they were unharmed, having been picked up by "FAIRMILES" 1053, which had run aground with a hole in her plate. Within half an hour of reaching land the Gunboat "DRAGON-FLY" was observed some two miles away. Three waves of nine Japanese planes attacked her and secured a direct hit. She sank before the smoke had cleared away. Almost as she went down the Gunboat "GRASSHOPPER" came on the scene. She was bombed before us for two hours by over 100 Japanese planes in waves of 9 to 27. The bombing was timed with mathematical precision. As one wave dropped their bomb load, another on a different course would take its place. The bombing was almost continual - and on board of the "GRASSHOPPER" were 140 women and children evacuees from Singapore. She eventually was run aground on the island with smoke coming from the after magazine. The Japanese machine gunned the beach as the survivors were trying to get ashore. The "GRASSHOPPER" finished her career during the night, when the after magazine blew up. The position of the survivors to which Mr. Harrower and myself were attached was intolerable. No food was available in the evening, with the exception of coconuts and native roots. It was decided, in conjunction with **Lt. Clarke, R.N., Sub-Lt. Johnson** and **P.O. Vernon** to leave the island on the following morning. The Master of the "ST. BREOCK" was informed, and it was arranged that the authorities should be advised of the plight of the people left behind. On the following morning at dawn the five members of the party went into the jungle with the object of finding a native boat at a village in the vicinity. It was a painful experience for me - I had nothing on my feet. A native sampan was acquired, and the voyage started. Mr. Harrower developed sunstroke and was extremely ill for three days...".

This report raises one interesting point - Commander Reid in Palembang camp recorded that a Lt A.G. Clarke, RN was the captain of the 'St Breock' where as Laurenson is differentiating in his report between Lt Clarke, RN and the "...Master of the 'St Breock'...". Perhaps there were two Lt Clarkes on board the vessel – or Lt Ag. Clarke, RN was not the captain but merely an officer on board?

William Johnson ('WSF' p.56) gives a slightly different perspective in that he firstly tells us in his oral archive that on 'Blakan Utan' he, along with Lt Ian Forbes, RN., found nothing but an uninhabited fisherman's hut and then climbed to the top of the hill on the island whereupon they saw to their astonishment a Japanese seaplane anchored on the other side of the island. With only one rifle amongst the entire group of survivors gathered on the island they decided discretion was the better part of valour and returned to their camp on the beach where "... 35 souls were gathered...".

Apparently also at some stage Johnson, being a speaker of Malay, along with "...another Lieutenant and a chief petty officer... sought out people living on the island to discuss the situation of the shipwrecked group. They were told of another island 25 miles away where there was a Dutch administrator who would be in wireless contact with Batavia, so they set out in a Malay boat, of the dug-out canoe type, to try to establish this contact.

In his oral archive **Johnson** describes how he, plus Lt Ian Forbes, and a "...Chief Petty Officer from the 'HMS Prince of Wales' and a sailor set out in a 'kolek' with sails made of flour bags..." for Singkep to the south – no mention is made of Mr Laurenson or Mr Harrower. He says that on the way they picked up two soldiers they found lying exhausted on the beach of another island after having swum there to safety.



**A traditional Indonesian fishing 'kolek'.**

- "...they reached an intervening island safely by nightfall [ probably Pulau Bandahara] and were provided with boiled rice and a hut to sleep in by the island community. Only the mosquitoes were hostile. Although they had lost the boat's rudder and were steering with an oar, they reached the island of Singkep on the next day and duly found the Dutch administrator to whom they reported the location and plight of the rest of their party marooned on Blakang Utang..."

William Johnson also introduces a wild card into the story during his oral history when he claims he later learned that "... a Catalina flying boat landed at the uninhabited island and took all other survivors off the island..." – we will just have to leave that part of the story on the shelf until other information surfaces to corroborate this quite amazing development for the survivors.

What we do know from several other sources is that 24 of the survivors from 'St Breock' were apparently picked up by a passing Royal Navy Launch – these were Fairmile design patrol boats of up to 112 feet in length. There were four of these larger fast patrol boats, with the classification 'His Majesty's Motor Launch' (HMML), involved in the evacuation of Singapore - HMML 310, 311, 432 and 433 plus two smaller (76 feet) vessels known as Harbour Defence Motor Launches - specifically HDML 1062 and 1063. Contemporary wartime sources state that HMML 432 picked up 24 survivors and dropped them off on Pulau Singkep and that several others were picked up by HMML 310. What we do also know is that HMML 310 was a day or so later attacked and beached on an isolated island north west of Banka Island with many of the passengers and crew dying on that island over the next month or so from disease; whilst HMML 311 and 433 were sunk by Japanese warships further south in the Banka Straits on 15<sup>th</sup> February with terrible loss of life amongst the passengers and crew on board, and HMML 432 was also attacked by warships but safely beached on Banka Island without loss of life on 17<sup>th</sup> February. In the known records for HMML 311 and 433 there is no mention of those vessels stopping in near Pulau Singkep to pick up and drop off survivors of any vessels - although the sparse records could well have omitted that action. The records for HMML 432 do include that in its escape journey "... On one of the islands we hid at during the day, we found the bodies of survivors above the high-water mark on the beach, with their wound covered in maggots and ants and the stench rising to high heaven. We did what we could for them, but we had to leave them as we were already overcrowded. The next day at dawn we ran into a Japanese cruiser..." which brings in to question whether if it was the vessel in the vicinity of Pulau Posik did it also carry survivors to Singkep, or beyond to Banka Island. Finally, we have Lt Ian Forbes, RN from 'HMS Dragonfly' stating that on 14<sup>th</sup> February he saw 'HDML 1062' nearby as the bombing started. In contrast, amongst the sparse records of HDML 1062 which was shelled and sunk two days later in the Banka Straits, a log by that vessel's First Officer, Lt G.K. Stein, MRNVR, specifically covering the



day of 14<sup>th</sup> February makes no mention of picking up any survivors amongst the Posik Island group (or anywhere) and dropping them off on Singkep. That leaves HDML 1063 as a possibility – that vessel did reach Batavia safely but was sunk soon after in the Sunda Strait.

**Laurenson** continues with his slightly different version – we will just have to live with the discrepancies since there is now no way of proving who was correct about the composition of escape party in the ‘kolek’ – saying” ... *On the 16th of February, Lieut. Forbes from the GRASSHOPPER and two Army Officers joined our party at the Dutch Island of Singkep in the Lingga Isles Group. A report of the survivors left behind was made to the Dutch resident and he promised to do all he could for them...”*.

#### **Pulau Singkep to Padang, Sumatra:**

Laurenson and Johnson appear to have then moved in the same group of men from ‘St Breock’ and other vessels from the town of Dabo on Pulau Singkep to the mainland of Sumatra with the objective of reaching the port town of Padang on the west coast of Sumatra and boarding one of the evacuation vessels which were occasionally calling in there before going on to either Java or Ceylon.

From **Laurenson** “... *It was decided to carry on and some of the Dutch inhabitants joined us, making the party up to 10. A motorboat was acquired, and on the 17th of February the Sumatra coast was sighted. Proceeded up the [Djanoi] [ sic: it would have been the Djambi] river for two days and arrived at the town of [Djazbi] [ sic: it would have been the town of Djambi – now Jambi]. By various means arrived at the port of Padang on the west coast of Sumatra. A full report and all details of the survivors left behind on the island was again made...”*.

**William Johnson** amplifies in his papers and oral history lodged with the IWM and which story is quoted here from ‘WSF’ (p.57-58) “...*On exploring the harbour area [at Dabo], Johnson and his colleagues found two open river-going motorboats, which Johnson’s engineering knowledge enabled them to get going. They left Singkep that night in the two boats, taking 12 Dutch volunteers [the local Dutch Controller had asked them to take Dutch civilians with them] with them, together with a supply of food contributed by these new companions. They had decided to make for the nearest point they could on the Sumatran coast, with the aid of a compass which they had salvaged from a crashed Hurricane plane on Singkep, and a school atlas, which one of them had picked up somewhere. It was a night crossing and not without some drama. One motorboat broke down and all aboard had to transfer to the remaining one. This left them very overloaded and, as there was a big sea running, the Dutchmen, whose role had so far been only that of passengers, had to work furiously, baling out water for much of the night. Two hours before dawn, they were off the Sumatran coast, but where? [They had travelled 40 miles in the dark across the open sea which that night was very rough] They waited anxiously offshore until daylight when they were able to locate themselves a few miles south of the estuary of the Djambi river, which would offer access inland and thence in the general direction of central and western Sumatra. In much more favourable circumstances, they could hardly have made a more advantageous crossing. They found the river estuary and proceeded up-river to the town of Djambi. The motorboat which completed the journey had run continuously for 72 hours, although there had been a warning back at Singkep that it would not go for more than an hour without stopping. Had it stopped; Lieutenant Johnson recorded’...it is pretty certain that we would all have been lost...’. The boat was abandoned at Djambi and the party teamed up with a Dutch armed military convoy, heading inland and expecting to meet Japanese troops along the road. But their luck held and with the help of another lorry, and then a train, they reached Padang, travelling via Mariteboe and Solok...”*.



### **Padang and evacuation:**

Laurenson tells us "... At Padang the party received 20 guilders each – the Straits dollar was of no value... On the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup> [of February] the naval party embarked on the Dutch steamer 'VAN TWIST' [ sic:'Dumayer van Twist'] for Java. The next six days were very bad. Half starved – living on boiled rice and herrings – in a ship packed to excess. Eventually the port of Tjilitchap was reached on the 1<sup>st</sup> March. No passengers were allowed ashore until 1600 when half of the Naval Party including Mr Harrower and myself, were detailed to go on board the 'Stronghold'. Just before she sailed it was decided to transfer the Admiralty Civil Staff to a Dutch liner 'Zaandam'. The 'Stronghold' went alongside and the transfer was effected ['HMS Stronghold' was attacked the following morning by Japanese warships and sunk with many lives lost]. On board 'Zaandam' were the RNAD Batavia party, in charge of Mr Stokes. They provided us with clothing etc., and so on to Fremantle. It was learned that the survivors originally left on the island were taken to Singkep and were being sent to Sumatra. It is possible that they reached Padang in good time before the Japanese invasion, but it is regretted that it cannot be definitely stated if Mr Selway and Mr Day are safe..."

It appears that Messrs Selway and Day sadly did not make it from the island north of Pulau Singkep to Sumatra, and then to Padang, in time to board an evacuation vessel to Java, Australia or Ceylon – records for internees in the Padang (and subsequently the Bankinang Camp in north Sumatra) internment camp show a Mr A.C.N. Day, mechanic, Naval Base plus Robert Henry Selway, Storeman, Naval Base also in both camps. It is reasonable to assume that a few others from the passengers and crew were also captured by the Japanese and imprisoned at Padang.

**William Johnson** had a vastly different experience because by the time that the party arrived in Padang the wound in his leg he had suffered during the bombing of 'St Breock' had become septic and he was admitted to the local hospital with a very high temperature. Despite his fever he was the



following day taken aboard a Dutch steamer – it is not clear whether it was the ‘Dumayer van twist’ – but there were no medical skills on board and his condition steadily worsened. In the end he pleaded to be put ashore at a place he recorded as ‘Endraboera’ [there are no towns on or near the west coast of Sumatra by that name so we will assume was probably meaning ‘Indrapoera’ and now named ‘Indrapura’] down the Sumatran coast, where contact was being made with the agent of a shipping company. Lowered into a small boat, he was taken ashore by the agent who took him to his own house.... a message went to the Dutch District Officer, who in turn sent transport to have Johnson brought up to his residence, three hours’ drive away. Finally, after more food and rest, there followed another journey to a hospital 4500feet up in the mountains, on a large tea estate at a place he called Kaju Aro, in west central Sumatra. There he was operated on to remove the gangrenous material on his leg (two stiff whiskies had to serve in the absence of any anaesthetics) and as a result his temperature went down and – with the Japanese believed to be on their way - he was driven 12 hours back to Padang. After another 24 hours in hospital, he was fortunate to be able to board a British cruiser and depart for Colombo where he underwent further recuperation.

----- 00000000 -----

Anyone who has corrections, amendments, clarifications or additional material on the events, the crew, or passengers of ‘St Breock’ is most welcome to contact the researcher and compiler of this document: Michael Pether, 2/23 Sanders Avenue, Takapuna, Auckland, 0622, New Zealand. Email is mncpether@gmail.com. Telephone number is New Zealand 09-4865754 or mobile New Zealand 0274543695.

This document may be shared freely, and the information contained within may be used for any non-commercial purpose. Anyone wishing to use the content of this document for commercial purposes, book publication, magazine, newspaper, or internet articles receiving payment or compensation is required to firstly obtain the agreement in writing of Michael Pether, Auckland, New Zealand who retains the copyright for the content of the document.

Thank you.

Michael Pether.

**Sources:**

- **CWGC** – Commonwealth War Graves Commission website
- **FEPOW**- www.fepow.family
- **IWM** - Imperial War Museum, oral history of William John Blois Johnson.
- **Pekanbaru Death railway** – website dedicated to the memory of the men who died and suffered as POWs and slave labourers on the Pekanbaru Railway construction in north Sumatra.
- **SD** – Book ‘Singapore’s Dunkirk’ by Geoffrey Brooke
- **SGNA** – Singapore Newspaper Archives, National Library of Singapore
- **Users.tpg.com.au** - RAN Armament depots – ‘A Singapore Story -1942’ account of Mr B. Laurenson.
- **WSF** - Book ‘When Singapore Fell’ by Joseph Kennedy

## Crew:

- **AITKEN – Able Seaman James Shaw Aitken**, D/JX190455, RN, born 24.6.15 in Aberdeen, Scotland to James s. Aitken and Anne Smith Aitken. He married Ella Aitken and they lived at 7 Girdlestone Place, Aberdeen. James Aitken had served on the ‘HMS Prince of Wales’, then presumably after the sinking of that vessel, was attached to Singapore shore base ‘HMS Sultan’ before boarding ‘ST Breock’(FEPOW) for the escape from Singapore. He was captured, presumably at Padang with many other shipwrecked survivors, by the Japanese on 17.3.42 and became a POW in Medan where he died on 26.6.45. To quote from the impressive website ‘Pekanbaru Death Railway’ (<https://www.pekanbarudeathrailway.com>) commemorating those men who worked and died in the truly awful slave labour camps established by the Japanese to build a railway in northern Sumatra “... *The prisoners were housed in camps along the railway with the first POW's arriving at camp 1 in Pekanbaru on the 19th of May 1944. As the railway progressed, the prisoners built bridges spanning wide rivers, embankments through the jungle and cuttings through hills and around cliffs. They did all of this while risking severe beatings or being killed by the guards, whilst also surviving on the meagre rations that were given to them by their Japanese captors. For example, they were given a cup of peeled rice a day which lacked the vitamin rich skins. If a prisoner was sick they were put on half rations which was around 800 calories a day. These rations were substituted with rats which were a constant companion in the camps, maggots that could be found in the latrines and anything else that looked edible along the railway. Prisoners who became unwell were transported to camp 2 on the outskirts of Pekanbaru where treatment was based. The few doctors worked in un-sterile environments with limited equipment, medicine and antibiotics. Tropical ulcers often led to amputations, done with no anaesthetic and maggots were used to help clean wounds by eating away dead tissue. The population of camp 2 during its operation was around 800. When the war ended on the 15th of August 1945, around 700 POW's had died with many prisoners dying from malnutrition, beriberi, malaria and dysentery....*”. Post war James Aitken’s remains were disinterred from the ‘Camp 2’ cemetery at Medan and reinterred in Grave 1.B.20 in Jakarta, Indonesia (FEPOW and CWGC)
- **CLARKE – Lt A.G. Clarke, RN** – named as Master of the ‘St Breock’, research has been unable to identify this man in internet searches amongst lists of Royal Navy and RNVR officers.
- **CLARKE – Lt Clarke??????** – a second person by this name and rank was noted by Mr B. Laurenson, RNAD employee as being on board and part of the first party to sail from the uninhabited island to Pulau Singkep. [NOTE: until it is possible to clarify who the two ‘Lt Clarkes’ are on ‘St Breock’ it is considered prudent to include a reference to **Lt Anthony ‘Tony’ Ruthven Clarke, RNZNVR** who somehow made his way from Singapore to Banka island but became missing after escaping from Muntok POW camp on Banka Island. Official RNZN sources record him as being on the ‘SS Hung Jao’ [ which he had been prior to the evacuation] but it now looks more likely like he was in fact escaping Singapore on a ship whose survivors reached the Posik island group or at least Pulau Singkep – this would include ‘HMT St Breock’, ‘HMS Grasshopper’ or ‘HMS Dragonfly’. As a less likely probability he could have been aboard either ‘SS Kuala’, SS kung Wo’ or HMS Tien Kwang’ which were all bombed and sunk near Pom Pong island - well north of Pulau Singkep – but from which number of survivors and wounded were moved to Pulau Singkep. Clarke was later recorded as going ‘Missing’ after escaping from Muntok POW camp on Banka Island on 28 February - this is a long way south from Pulau Posik and he must have made his way with others, firstly to Dabo on Singkep island and then somehow to Banka island where he would have been captured by the Japanese. On Banka Island there is the reference to Tony Clarke – as Lt. A.R. Clarke, RNZNVR, escaping from the ‘Gymnasium camp’ in Muntok on the night of 21 February 1942 in company with Acting Commander Robert George Fenton – Livingstone, RN (Fenton-Livingstone had been head of Drafting and Supplies at Singapore shore base ‘HMS Sultan’) at approximately midnight. The source of this information is the MI9 Liberation questionnaire of Lt David Fiennes – Wykenham, MRNVR who had escaped Singapore on the launch ‘Rosemary’ and been captured at Banka island – Fiennes made his own escape (with Commander H.B.F. Moorhead, RN) from the same POW camp six hours before Tony Clarke but was recaptured with Moorhead on Banka Island on 28 February. The date of death as 28 February 1942 is therefore unexplained.

- JOHNSON –Sub-Lt William John Blois Johnson, SSRNVR.,** was educated at Oakham School (founded 1584) in the county town of Rutland, East Midlands (just to the east of Leicester). Upon leaving school he was sent by his father to South Africa to spend a year on a citrus farm following which he returned to study at London University (City Guilds) and graduated with a degree in Civil Engineering. He joined the diversified engineering company Mather 7 Platt who were early manufacturers of food canning machinery and in January 1936 applied for the newly created position of Canning Officer with the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlement government. Malaya and Singapore at the time had a huge (130 million cans per annum) canning industry but there was much scope for increases in quality and hygiene. William established a Canning research station in Johore. He also continued his family interest in sailing and had a variety of sailboats in Malaya - which prompted him to join the SSRNVR where he was appointed as a Sub Lieutenant (a rank he held until promoted to Lieutenant after his later escape to India). He married and had two children - soon after the Japanese invasion on 8 December 1941 he arranged for his wife and children to be safely evacuated to India. As the Japanese advanced down Malay William arranged for the most important canning machinery in his Johore research station to be moved to Singapore prior to it being shipped to the Dutch east Indies to continue food production. Whilst in Singapore he organised a short-lived project to can meat from 10,000 Balinese cattle, which had been imported to feed the troops in Singapore. When he arrived in Singapore in January 1942 from Johore William was at a loss at what he should do, approached a senior naval officer he knew and was advised to join the 'St Breock' to tow ammunition lighters to Batavia. He selected a makeshift crew from the many sailors and soldiers clamouring for an escape passage, made them work in the stoking and engine room etc and got the engines going for the ill-fated journey. Injured in the leg during the bombing he was in the group of six or so men who sailed in a 'kolek' from the first island on which survivors landed and then made it via Pulau Singkep to the Jambi river in a motorboat, and thence to Padang. By the time that the party arrived in Padang the wound in his leg he had suffered during the bombing of 'St Breock' had become septic and he was admitted to the local hospital with a very high temperature. Despite his fever he was the following day taken aboard a Dutch steamer – it is not clear whether it was the 'Dumayer van twist' – but there were no medical skills on board and his condition steadily worsened. In the end he pleaded to be put ashore at a place he recorded as 'Endraboera' [there are no towns on or near the west coast of Sumatra by that name so we will assume was probably meaning 'Indrapoera' and now named 'Indrapura'] down the Sumatran coast, where contact was being made with the agent of a shipping company. Lowered into a small boat, he was taken ashore by the agent who took him to his own house.... a message went to the Dutch District Officer, who in turn sent transport to have Johnson brought up to his residence, three hours' drive away. Finally, after more food and rest, there followed another journey to a hospital 4500 feet up in the mountains, on a large tea estate at a place he called Kaju Aro, in west central Sumatra. There he was operated on to remove the gangrenous material on his leg (two stiff whiskies had to serve in the absence of any anaesthetics) and as a result his temperature went down and – with the Japanese believed to be on their way - he was driven 12 hours back to Padang. After another 24 hours in hospital, he was fortunate to be able to board a British cruiser and depart for Colombo where he underwent further recuperation. His service during the war was in the Engineering Corps of the Royal Fleet Air Arm.
- VERRION - Chief Petty Officer Walter John Verrion, P/J 109631, Royal Navy,** Mentioned in Despatches for great courage in swimming for help after the sinking and, later, on 'HMS

Stronghold' ('The London Gazette' 25.1.46); Walter Verrion was born 1908 to Henry Thomas Verrion and Laura Verrion at Brighton, Sussex. He married Violet Mary Pedley and they had one child. "... CPO Verrion (*Chief Gunners Mate at the Naval Base*) evacuated on the 'St Breock' and then [became] a valued ally of Forbes [Lt Ian Forbes, RN] since Dabo...". After reaching Padang with Lt Ian Forbes, RN., he travelled to Java and boarded 'HMS Stronghold'. ('SD', p.203).

**Passengers:**

- **DAY – Mr A.C.N. Day** records for internees in the Padang (and subsequently the Bankinang Camp in north Suamtra) interment camp show a Mr A.C.N. Day , mechanic, Naval Base. His wife Mrs Mary Louise Day died in internment at Muntok on Banka Island on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1942.
- **HARROWER – Mr S. Harrower**, DCO (Depot Commanding Officer/ Duty Commanding Officer/Demolitions Conducting Officer ???)
- **SELWAY - Robert Henry Selway**, Storeman, Naval Base in must have been captured in Padang when the Japanese arrived on 17 March 1942 and then became an internee in both the Padang and Bankinang internment camps.