LAST VOYAGE OF THE *"WOO CHANG"*

by Lt Col Frank Rose

Chilachap, now Tjilatjap, on the south coast of Java, has a fine completely land locked deep water harbour, surrounded by low hills and with only a narrow winding outlet into the sea, which makes it a safe anchorage for even the largest ships. On this account it had been selected as a convoy forming rendezvous for Allied merchant vessels in the Dutch East Indies at the time of the fall of Singapore; from here they were to be escorted safely by units of the Allied Navies. Unfortunately, the rapidity of the Japanese advance and their naval superiority in the Battle of the Java Sea, in which action thirteen Allied Warships were lost on 1 March 1942 made it impossible for the Allied Navies to provide the necessary escorts. The story of at least one of the units actually assigned to this duty, the American destroyer *"Marblehead",* has already been graphically told in the "Story of Doctor Wassel" which has since been filmed.

The Japanese, in the meantime, made aware of the position by their constant and unchallenged air reconnaissance, had stationed a submarine at the seaward entrance of the harbour outlet and made it impossible for any ship to leave; four ships which had attempted to run the blockade had all been sunk. On 28 February 1942 the situation was that there were thirty two ships, including cargo and passenger liners of over 15,000 tons, such as the *"City* of *Manchester",* bottled up in the harbour. The Japanese had occupied Batavia, now Djakarta, two days previously and were advancing on Chilachap and were, in fact, only thirty miles away. Nothing but a miracle, such as perhaps a violent storm which would compel the submarine to seek the safety of the open sea, could give these ships a chance to escape. All on board the vessels had been for days past desperately hoping and anxiously watching the skies for signs of such a storm. That evening a "Sumatran", one of those terrifying coastal storms which blow up unexpectedly in the Indies and last anything from four to twenty four hours hit Chilachap and, now that the miracle had happened, not one of those on the *"Woo Chang"* would have hesitated to say that he was at least a little afraid. Of all the thirty two ships, she was the smallest and most decrepit, and she had on board four hundred men and Officers and one woman, all of whom had, separately or in groups, escaped from Singapore after the surrender and had made their way to Chilachap. Her name, which in Chinese means "Daring Beauty", belied her

appearance. She was an old river steamer with twin screws, an eight foot draught and a top speed of seven knots an hour. Her single mast was placed in the centre of the narrow for'ard well deck and her thin long funnel stuck out of the middle of her top works, which stretched in the form of passenger accommodation from the bridge to the stern shelter deck onto which the main saloon opened. This was a pleasant place to sit in for the twenty five or so upper class passengers which she was designed to carry when on her normal and lawful occasions. Now the red and blue of her paintwork was faded and blistered and stained with rust, and this added to her dirty and bedraggled appearance.

She had already escaped capture once by the Japanese when they had overrun China, and had moved in stages until she had eventually fetched up at Chilachap where, since 1941 she had served as Ammunition Ship to a Sunderland Flying Boat Squadron of the RAF Station there. Every available inch of space in her hatches was crammed full of high explosive bombs and ammunition which, as what little as was left of the Sunderland Squadron had been ordered to a new station, nobody wanted. The Dutch authorities however, very understandably, would not permit it to be jettisoned in the harbour; besides, as there was nothing else available with which to fill the holds as ballast, there was nothing that could be done to improve this situation.

Her crew were all volunteers from amongst those on board and, except for the Captain and Engineer, had never taken any active part in sailing such a vessel before. The Captain, an Englishman who had until recently been in charge of a water packet in Singapore but who had obviously known better days and bigger ships, was an extremely shrewd and experienced master mariner. He was referred to by all as the "Skipper" and the admiration and affection with which he was eventually regarded, for such things don't come easily, was testimony to his indomitable courage and seamanship. The Engineer was a Dutchman who spoke no English, so it was not possible to find out his history or where he came from, but he was a master of his profession and the perfect counterpart to the "Skipper". How he managed to get the rusty and neglected engines into working order in the few available days with only the unskilled willingness of soldiers, and a few Royal Air Force technicians to do it with, was nothing short of Herculean. Coaling her empty bunkers was the most easily accomplished part of his many problems but the capacity of these was only sufficient for seven days' sailing and, as this would not be sufficient, additional coal was stored in some of the lower cabins. The fresh water storage capacity was also very limited but there was nothing that could be done about this except to eke out supplies by imposing a rigid ration of eight ounces per head per day; even so, the supply was completely exhausted before the end of the voyage.

Of such necessary things as charts and chronometer there were none. The deficiency in the case of the former was made up by pages out of a Phillips' School Atlas and, in the latter, a time piece bought in the local bazaar served the purpose; fortunately the Skipper had his own sextant. There was a wireless set of sorts; it was, however, only a receiving set with limited range and no transmitting arrangement and would probably not have functioned at all but for expert operators from the RAF and the Royal Corps of Signals also from amongst those on board. They somehow managed to pick out the Morse from the incessant crackling of atmospherics and traced the tragic course of the disastrous Battle of the Java Sea and the merciless sinking by the Japanese main fleet of the remaining ships that left Chilachap.

There were neither boats nor rafts; this was probably just as well as, in any case, she could not have carried sufficient boats to accommodate all and, if there had been only a few it may have given rise to bitterness and affected morale. Also the necessity for boat drill that most annoying of all wartime forms of shipboard harassments, was completely eliminated. These precautions were replaced by a simple request to all to remain exactly where they were in case of an alarm so as not to jeopardize the stability of the ship. In the event this was carried out to the letter.

A Council of War had been held earlier at which the risks had been carefully evaluated but, however much each individual risk was depreciated, the aggregate invariably amounted to the same inescapable conclusion - the chance of success was very small, if it could at all be said to exist. Even now, years after the event, the same inescapable conclusion is the only possible one. The Skipper had carefully and in great detail explained that the engines and boilers were in extremely poor mechanical condition and were unlikely to stand up to hard and sustained running, the rusted state of her plates made her unseaworthy and she would be liable to spring more leaks than her worn out pumps could possibly cope with. To escape the submarine the only hope was to put out to sea in a storm sufficiently violent to force the submarine out to sea, such a storm would also almost certainly be sufficiently violent to sink the *"Woo Chang".* How very nearly correct he was! The bombs in the hold might shift and cause an explosion which would blow the ship to pieces; even if she managed to survive the storm and avoid the submarine the Japanese air reconnaissance would pick her up as it would be impossible to get more than 50 or 60 miles from the coast during the few hours of darkness and she would be sunk from the air.

The decision however that the attempt should be made was instant and unanimous, and all that remained was to decide where to make for and, on the suggestion of the Skipper, Ceylon was

decided upon instead of Australia. His reasons were sound. The other ships were, he had ascertained, ALL going to try to get to Australia and their Masters had by mutual arrangement formed themselves into convoys according to their speeds which, in the case of all of them were in excess of the "Woo *Chang"* , and there was no convoy therefore that she could join. He argued that these several convoys would unavoidably attract the attention of the Japanese and that this would give a slight chance of getting away if the "Woo *Chang"* sailed in the opposite direction. It was decided therefore to head South South West straight out to sea for 400 miles so as to get as far away as possible from the Japanese air and naval coastal patrols and then to set course for Ceylon. This would mean covering a distance almost exactly twice that to Australia, but it seemed the most feasible plan and was accordingly adopted. The Skipper explained that, with luck, it would take between ten and eleven days to reach Ceylon.

To come back to the storm however, which was now rising in fury, it was imperative to get under way as early as possible so as to get the maximum distance before daylight. Other ships were already under way and not standing on the manner of their going which, in the inky darkness, made navigation of the narrow winding channel extremely hazardous. Bow to stern the "Woo *Chang"* nosed her way to sea, and nearly turned turtle as the full force of the gale hit her on leaving the shelter of the hills. She continued to repeat this performance at varying intervals for the next twenty hours, the intervals at first got shorter as the storm gained in intensity, till they reached a point where for a period of several hours the ship appeared to be continuously hovering on the brink of turning over when the storm was at the height of its fury, then the intervals grew perceptibly longer as the storm diminished and she finally ran out of it late the following evening. However, not only had the storm enabled her to escape the submarine but it had also saved her from being spotted by air reconnaissance during the hours of daylight, owing to the extremely poor visibility, and thereby added a day's respite, and the ensuing night would give her a further opportunity of getting a reasonable distance from the coast.

Understandably during the storm, due to one or both screws being frequently out of the water, the necessity of keeping her head-on to the gale, shortage of steam on account of the constant demand for the pumps and, particularly on account of the complete inexperience of the volunteer stokers and their consequent inability either to maintain their feet or to keep steam at anything like full pressure, not many sea miles were covered in those first twenty hours. However, the very fact that it had not been possible to work the engines at anything like the full revolutions did, in the opinion of the "Dutchie", the Engineer, prevent them from breaking down. From there

on, both stokers and engines performed magnificently and by noon the next day she had covered altogether 186 sea miles.

During that afternoon the radio receiving set picked up a series of SOS signals from which it became evident that the convoy groups of other ships which had left at the same time as the *"Woo Chang"* and had set course for Australia had, as anticipated by the Skipper, been spotted by air reconnaissance and reported to the Jap Fleet. From these signals it was not possible to tell how many ships were in distress but, even so, by carefully piecing the information together it became reasonably certain that all the various speed groups had come under fire, mostly at long range from the heavy units of the Jap navy. It was obvious that their chances of escape were small; in fact, only two did escape. There were also two alarms: the first when an aircraft was heard but not seen as, although surface visibility was good, the sky was still overcast and cloud layers fortunately hid the plane; the second alarm was even more disconcerting and was caused by the submarine watch mistaking a spouting whale for a submarine - fortunately it was sufficiently near to be clearly visible and both doubt and alarm were quickly and completely dispelled. In the meantime the four hundred people on board had begun sorting themselves out from where they had been lying almost touching each other, stretched out or huddled in groups or hanging on to whatever they could. There was very little or no seasickness but, at the same time, very little food was eaten which helped further to eke out the meagre ration - one tin of bully between four and four biscuits each, plus eight ounces of drinking water per day - the bully and half the drinking water in the morning and the other half, in the form of tea, with the biscuits in the evening. With no exercise it was just sufficient for healthy men for a short period, and all except those suffering from dysentery or malaria kept fit. The complete and enforced rest was very welcome to all and, on the two days immediately following the storm, men only moved from where they lay on the bare decks to collect and eat their rations. This had to be carefully organized, both so as not to upset the trim of the ship and also to make it possible for each one to collect his share.

To while away the time discussion groups were organized to exchange information, and the variety and extent of the information covered every phase and every day of the sixty days of the most unfortunate campaign. Every major unit of what had been the 3rd Indian Corps and the Garrisons of Penang and Singapore was represented to a lesser or greater extent. Also included were a handful from the even more unlucky 18th Northumbrian Division, most of the units of which only just managed to get ashore from the bombed and sinking *"Empress* of *Asia".* Each man represented some famous Regiment of either the

British or Indian Armies, and each and every one of them was proud of the part his unit had played. At the same time there was a definite realization that they had taken part in a gamble with Fate, a gamble which Britain had lost without ever having had a chance to win and as such, for those who came back, there would be no words of thanks but only blame! However, nothing can take away the satisfaction of having done one's best, and this feeling was very evident. The third day passed uneventfully and a magnificent lunar rainbow was seen just before midnight. This phenomenon was so striking that everyone on board who was asleep at the time was woken up by someone or other to witness it, and on the morning of the following day it was the exclusive topic of conversation. The suggestion that it was an omen of good fortune was readily agreed to and quickly spread through the ship. It was argued that the only break down of the engines had been of short duration, she had escaped the submarine as well as the surface vessels and aircraft, the bombs had not exploded and neither had the plates sprung their rivets. On all sides the opinion was confidently expressed that the day's run would be better than on the previous day, which had been 182 miles and the best up to then, and that by midday the Beautiful Bitch would already be over 100 miles on her new course to Ceylon. There was a feeling of hopeful expectation and cheerfulness apparent throughout the ship.

At 11.39am, suddenly and without warning, rang out the dreaded alarm "Submarine on the starboard bow" and, to the horror of all, there she was just surfacing about six hundred yards away, a horrid greenish thing with the water pouring off her. The conning tower opened and two semi-naked creatures carefully examined the *"Woo Chang"* with binoculars. Then the conning tower closed and the sub submerged to periscope depth and there, suddenly the bubbly wakes of the torpedoes were clearly visible, three of them, streaking towards the old *"Woo Chang"* at about forty miles an hour. No word was spoken, there was no panic, only a deathly silence; everyone had the same thought – the bombs in the holds - and probably some of those on the starboard side closed their eyes. Then from port a shout "there they go" and, fantastically true, the bubbly wakes of all three torpedoes could be seen ever lengthening away into the distance from under the ship. It was estimated that one probably passed for'ard of the bows by a few feet but two definitely passed directly under the ship. Fear had scarcely had time to give way to relief when again from starboard came the warning "She's surfacing again", and there she was scarcely three hundred yards away and almost astern. Again the conning tower opened and figures with binoculars scanned the ship, while other figures jumped onto the gun platform, then in a flash the conning tower snapped shut and the sub crash dived at incredible speed. It was not seen again; and the reason for this strange behaviour - a piece of an old spar and four indomitable men. The ten foot length of spar had been tied to the stern railing of the saloon

shelter deck by the four, to make it appear like a gun on the second day when the alarm had been caused over the whale, and they had amused themselves at playing at being whalers firing imaginary harpoons at a real whale from their make believe gun. And they had, just as light-heartedly, aligned it on the conning tower of the sub and obviously given the bulging eyed Japanese Commander the fright of his life. While all eyes were still turned towards the stern, a disturbance was heard on the bridge where a gesticulating figure, almost unrecognisable with soot and oil, was trying to explain something to the Skipper the meaning of which, when it dawned on the Skipper, made him dash down to the engine room. The figure was the Engineer and what he had been saying was "For God's sake take those madmen out of the boiler room or the ship will blow up"! Apparently all the off-shift stokers, of whom there was a great number because a system of very short shifts had been arranged in view of the very large number of volunteers, had rushed down to the boiler room and, having screwed down the safety valves, and were feeding the boilers with a mixture of coal and wood from the furniture. As a result the old "Woo *Chang"* was careering along at a speed of about twenty knots with her shallow bows almost above the water like a speed boat, and was in fact in imminent danger of being blown up by her boilers exploding.

The air of light-hearted optimism which had been so evident throughout the ship before this incident had now given place to one of anxious foreboding as hundreds of anxious pairs of eyes scanned the ocean in all directions. It was obvious that the submarine Commander had overestimated the draught of the *"Woo Chang",* probably on account of her height above water and the great numbers of people visible on deck, as the last thing he expected to see was an over-crowded river steamer in the middle of the Indian Ocean. But, however small the error, the one thing which was certain was that it would not be repeated given another opportunity. Discussion therefore centred round the possible reasons for the Sub's apparently unaccountable crash dive after it had surfaced the second time with the obvious intention of sinking the *"Woo Chang"* by shell fire.

Looked at from whatever angle, the only logical conclusion was that the Sub Commander had been fooled into believing that the men on the saloon deck were in fact training a real gun on his vessel. The torpedoes passing under, coupled with the unexpected burst of speed and the very apparent complete absence of panic or of any preparation to launch boats had probably caused the impression that the *"Woo Chang"* was some form of mystery ship probably equipped with some secret weapon in addition to what appeared to be a gun in her stern. He had probably read of the "Q" ships in the First World War and how they had lured submarines to certain

destruction. However, whatever the reason, the fact remains that, in spite of hundreds of pairs of eyes anxiously scanning the Ocean for the remainder of the day, not the slightest sign of anything that could even remotely be connected with the Sub was ever seen again. Nevertheless the night that followed was an anxious one as the opinion had taken hold that the Sub was almost certainly following at a safe distance out of sight, and would creep up and renew the attack either in the dark hours or, more probably, at first light. However, the dawn broke to light up a sea almost as still as the proverbial duck pond and, as the sun rose in the sky, the feelings of foreboding were completely dispelled and everyone set about their morning ablutions as best they could.

The succeeding five days passed without incident and with perfect weather and on the evening of the fifth, the ninth from the commencement of the voyage, excitement began to mount. Would the Skipper's promise materialize on the following and tenth day? Long before first light nearly everyone was up and impatiently waiting to see some sign of the land which they desperately hoped the light would reveal. Besides, both water and food were short and there was only sufficient for that day. Wishful thinking coupled with danger sharpened imaginations and led to false hopes being raised several times, but the day passed and the light faded without sign of land, and everyone's hopes were once again centred on the morrow. As on the previous morning all on board were up and eagerly waiting for first light long before dawn. Then, as the light improved, the cry "land in sight" rang out. What could be seen looked like palm trees growing out of the sea but, however hard they were looked at, instead of either fading away or taking on some other shape as on the previous day, they became more distinct and even the most sceptical had to admit that it must be land. Later in the morning more palm trees and land did come into sight which, it was finally confirmed, was the coast of Ceylon. However, Colombo was still a long way off and it was not till about 5.00pm that the town was sighted, and how welcome was that sight, magnificently lit up by the lowering rays of the westering sun.

A fussy little "Walrus" came and flew round the ship but, as the *"Woo Chang"* was not equipped for ship to plane communication and the roar of the noisy sputtering engine drowned all attempts at speech by megaphone, it flew back to the harbour without even being able to ascertain the name of the ship which was written in Chinese characters. The visit of the "Walrus" was followed by one from an armed patrol vessel which, after failing to get a reply to its wireless enquiry, fired across the bows of the *"Woo Chang"* and then closed on her after she had hove to. Then began a long cross-examination by megaphone which eventually concluded with a brusque order "proceed and anchor in the roadstead outside the harbour and await orders. Do not, on any

account, attempt to enter harbor as the boom has been fixed for the night and will NOT be removed till after sunrise".

The last of the rations had been consumed the previous night and the last of the water, two ounces per man, late that afternoon. However, the boom was in place and nothing could be done about getting those on board either food or water. The new experience of dropping anchor was carried out with due ceremony and, as the old ship came to rest, a cheer went up such as men give on occasions to express emotional relief. Then, as the brief twilight faded into the tropical night, the lights of Colombo came on and it was obvious that, as in the case of Singapore at the time of the first air raid, to those in Colombo the War was still a distant thing, against which anti-submarine precautions were a sufficient safeguard. Lighted cinema signs, of which the largest and most prominent advertised "The Major and the Minor", vied with equally large and brilliantly lit advertisements for well-known brands of tea, aerated waters, beer and spirits. These only helped to make those on board the *"Woo Chang"* thirstier as the hot still night wore on.

About 9.00am the following morning a fussy little motor boat came alongside and put aboard a very young and dapper Captain from the Staff of the Adjutant General's Branch of Ceylon Command, who blandly suggested that "it was considered that it would be more convenient for the *"Woo Chang"* to take on board food and water and proceed to Bombay". It was pointed out that it would be a long drop from the saloon deck to the water if he continued to be unreasonable; on this he decided to return and see what could be done. A couple of hours later a signal was received to enter the harbour and tie up; this was eventually completed just before noon, between a tanker with most of her bows blown off and the battleship *"HMS Ramalies".* Finally at about 4.00pm orders were received to disembark and assemble on the pier. Here the officers were separated from the men, the former to be taken to one of the leading hotels and the latter to a transit camp which had just been prepared for a British Brigade which was due to arrive. It was well organized, clean and comfortable. NOT so the arrangements at the hotel. ALL available accommodation had already been taken over for the Staff of Ceylon Command, then in the process of being formed, and the only space available was the hotel swimming bath alongside the beach. The eighty odd Officers from the *"Woo Chang"* were given string beds, without any sort of mattress, pillow or other covering, in the covered area round the emptied bath and allowed the privilege of using the lavatories and the changing rooms. Also, as they were not in a position to turn themselves out as well dressed Officers should, they could not of course be permitted to use the public dining rooms and had to content themselves with "bully and potatoes" on tables set out in an out of the way veranda.

There was an amusing episode on that first night in the swimming bath; one of the sleepers awakened in the small hours with an uneasy feeling - he could clearly hear the roar of breakers and the complete absence of the familiar rolling and pitching could therefore only mean one thing, the ship was fast aground! He woke the man sleeping alongside and said to him in a panic-stricken whisper "We're aground!" The newly awakened leapt to his feet and began shouting wildly "We're aground! We're aground!" When the unfamiliar light switches had at last been found and switched on the resulting confusion subsided but, in spite of the most profuse apologies and abject protestations of sincerity, the shouter would not accept the other's word that he had not deliberately pulled his leg. It was an ironic anomaly indeed that, whereas the men from the *"Woo Chang"* were scarcely welcome, her cargo of bombs and in particular aircraft ammunition, which were in considerably short supply in Colombo, were looked upon almost as manna from heaven and were immediately unloaded for use by the incoming reinforcements of the RAF. This ammunition however almost certainly played a useful part in the defence of Ceylon in the two desperate attacks the Japanese naval air force made on Colombo and Trincomalee exactly a month later, in which the handful of Spitfires shot the Japs completely out of the sky and were themselves destroyed to the last plane. While, amongst the ships sunk at Colombo in the course of these attacks, was the old *"Woo Chang".*

This story has an unexpected and amusing sequel. In late February this year, almost twenty years after to the day, at a dinner party in Calcutta, experiences of amusing wartime incidents were being recounted and I happened to mention an occasion when I was waiting to have my hair cut in a Javanese coastal town when there was a sudden air raid, and the barber and the man whose hair he was cutting at the time ran out in the street. Four American servicemen were also waiting to have their hair cut and one of those remarked "Back in the States I used to be a hairdresser" and, looking at me as I was next in turn, said "If you like I will cut your hair". At this point in my story one of my fellow guests, an American, turned to me and said "Now isn't that strange! I can tell you exactly when and where that was. It was the morning of 28 February 1942 and the place was Chilachap" and, seeing the look of surprise on my face, he added "I was one of the four Americans, but not the one who cut your hair". He and his three companions had been lucky enough to get away on one of the other two ships which escaped the Japanese and reached Australia.

Lt Col Frank Rose, India 1962

Footnote

The footnote to this story is that the man who recalled the incident turned out to be the father of one of my close childhood friends…daughter of an American family working in Calcutta and my late Father had not known that for at least five years!

What my father was too modest to write was that having decided not to surrender to the Japanese as directed he and his Indian Soliders swam out of Singapore Harbour, commandeered the Sultan of Johore's yacht and sailed it to Sumatra where the yacht foundered and then they made their way to Java. He was then known as Sahib Bahadur…The Brave One.

Aline Dobbie (daughter of Lt Col Frank Rose, The Jat Regiment, Indian Army)