TRACING SINGAPORE HARBOUR'S BREAKWATER, QUARANTINE, COAL AND OIL HULKS

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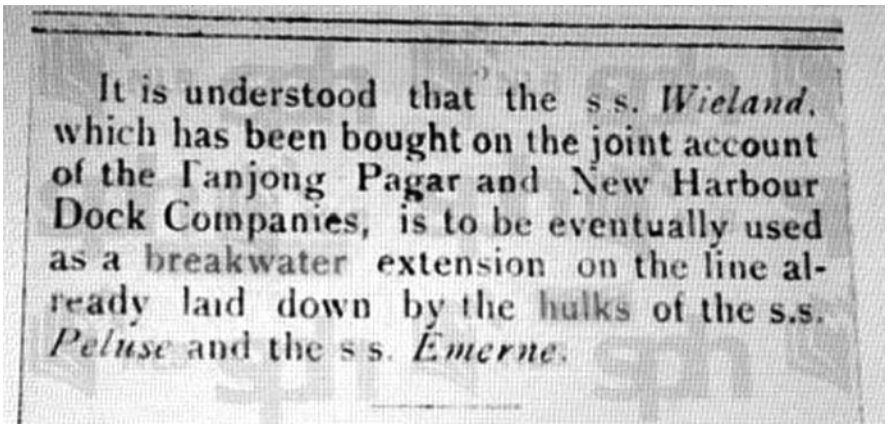
Posted 23 August 2021

Breakwater Hulks

Despite numerous references to these hulks in the Singapore press over the years, it is hard to trace names. The following snippet in the Singapore Free Press of 6 January 1896 provided the first key piece of the jigsaw:

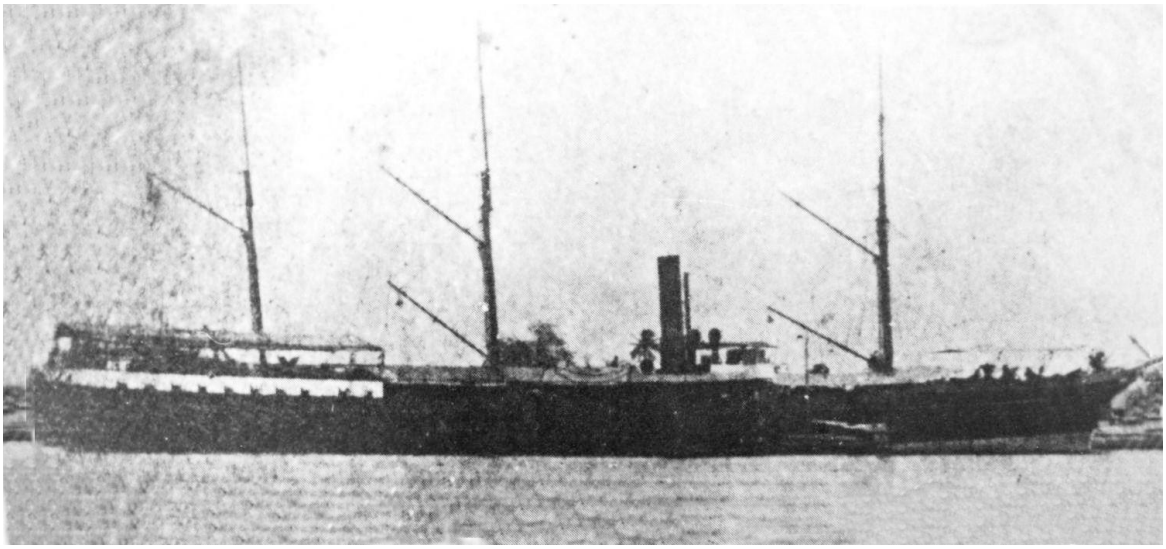


It is understood that the s s. *Wieland*, which has been bought on the joint account of the Tanjong Pagar and New Harbour Dock Companies, is to be eventually used as a breakwater extension on the line already laid down by the hulks of the s.s. *Peluse* and the s s. *Emerne*.

WIELAND and PELUSE were easily identified, not so EMERNE. But there was a Messageries EMIRNE and the details fitted. From there it was possible to work back.

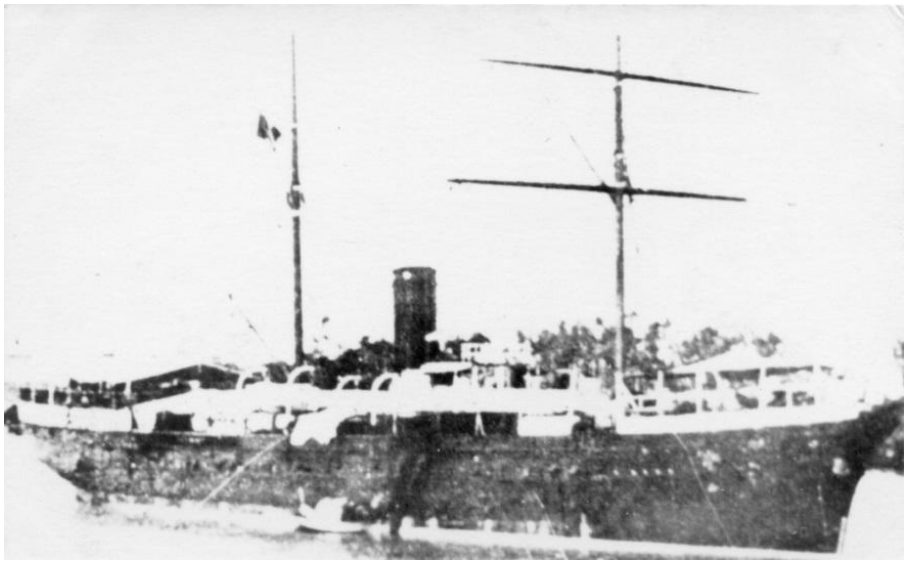
EMIRNE (1154/1864). Built for Messageries, from January 1875 used as the connecting mail ship between Singapore and Batavia. On 18/6/84 she arrived at Singapore and laid up for sale. Straits Times Weekly (STW) of 17/9/84 reported her sold for S$14,000 to the Tanjong Pagar Dock Co. Ltd to be

broken up. Miramar records her as converted to a pontoon, which implies afloat, and this is also reported by the MM site, which add ‘sank in 1891’. Actually she was scuttled.



EMIRNE (1864), probably in early career.
http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/emirne.html.

PELUSE (1829/63-L’d 1869), also owned by Messageries and at first used mainly in the Mediterranean, then in 1886 refitted (now 2 masts) and sent East to run between Singapore and Saigon. On 18/5/1891 she arrived at Singapore and was laid up. The MM site records here as broken up in Aug. 1891 but obviously she was dismantled and, with EMIRNE, scuttled to extend the breakwater at Tanjong Pagar. The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company’s half-yearly meeting was advised at the end of August 1891 that reclamation work was being stepped up.



PELUSE post-1886 as 2-master and refitted for tropical conditions

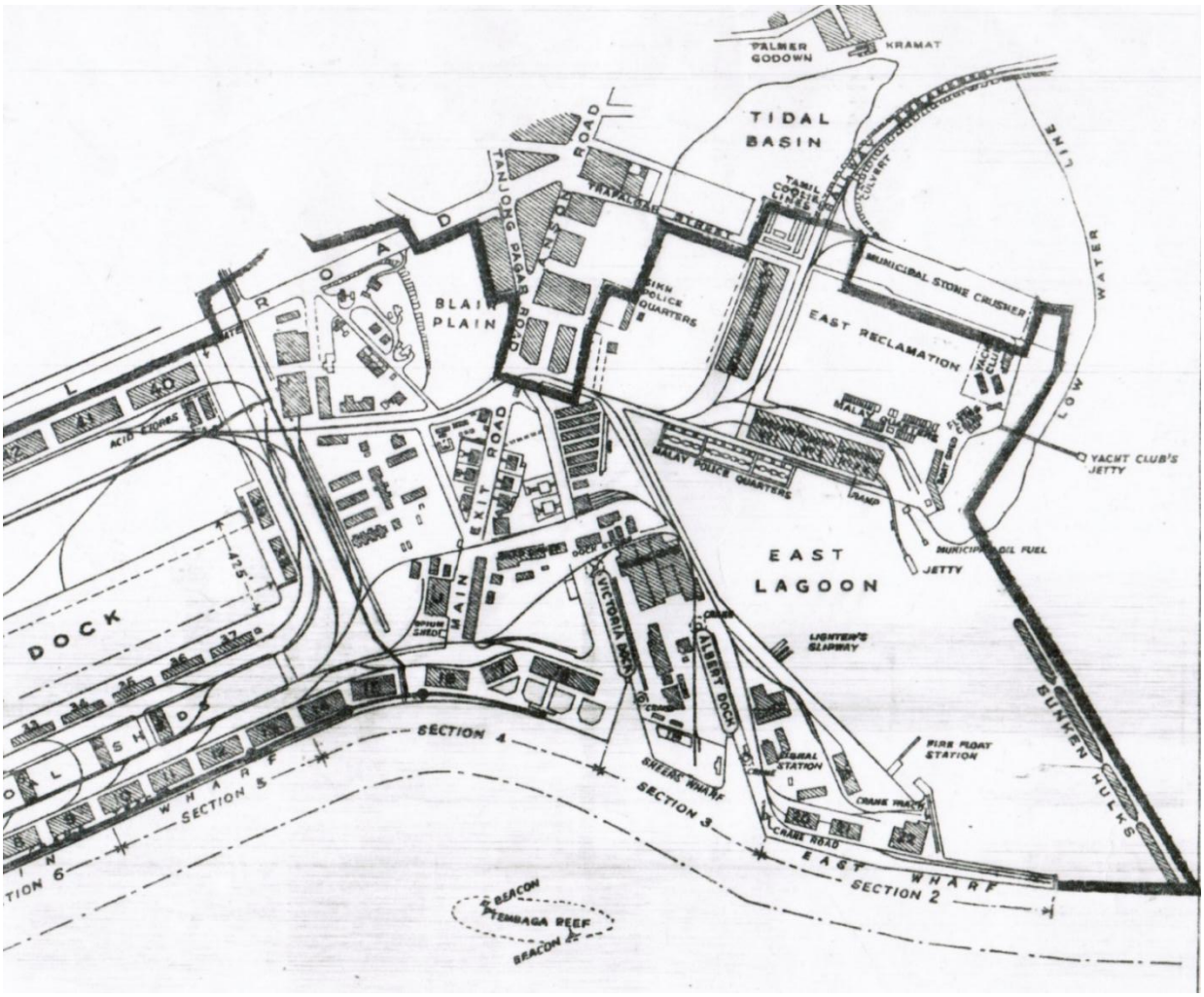
http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/peluse3.jpg

WIELAND (3587/1874) was a larger Hapag vessel that on 16 October 1895 while berthed at Tanjong Pagar en route from Manila to Liverpool with hemp and sugar caught fire and capsized from the weight of free water. The ship was refloated on the 26th and drydocked on 11 November. Four days later tenders were called for repair but instead the owners put the ship to auction on 20 December. After being passed in, it went to a second auction on the 24th, then on 6 January 1896 (see Image 1 above) was reported sold jointly to the Tanjong Pagar and New Harbour dock companies for use as part of the breakwater extension.

The 'Singapore Free Press' of 2 October 1897 carried an excerpt of a travelogue 'From Moscow to Vladivostok' by John Dill Ross that refers to the breakwater: 'The eastern end of the ahrves is made remarkable by a sort of marine graveyard, which was started, I believe, by Captain Blair, the well-known ex-Manager of Tanjong Pagar. Here lie the semi-submerged hulls of the *Emirne* and the *Illisus* [in error], filled with stone and sunk at their moorings, whilst the remains of the *Wieland*, still afloat, bear them some company in this sad spot…' This excerpt suggests that *Wieland* was not immediately scuttled but simply moored in position.

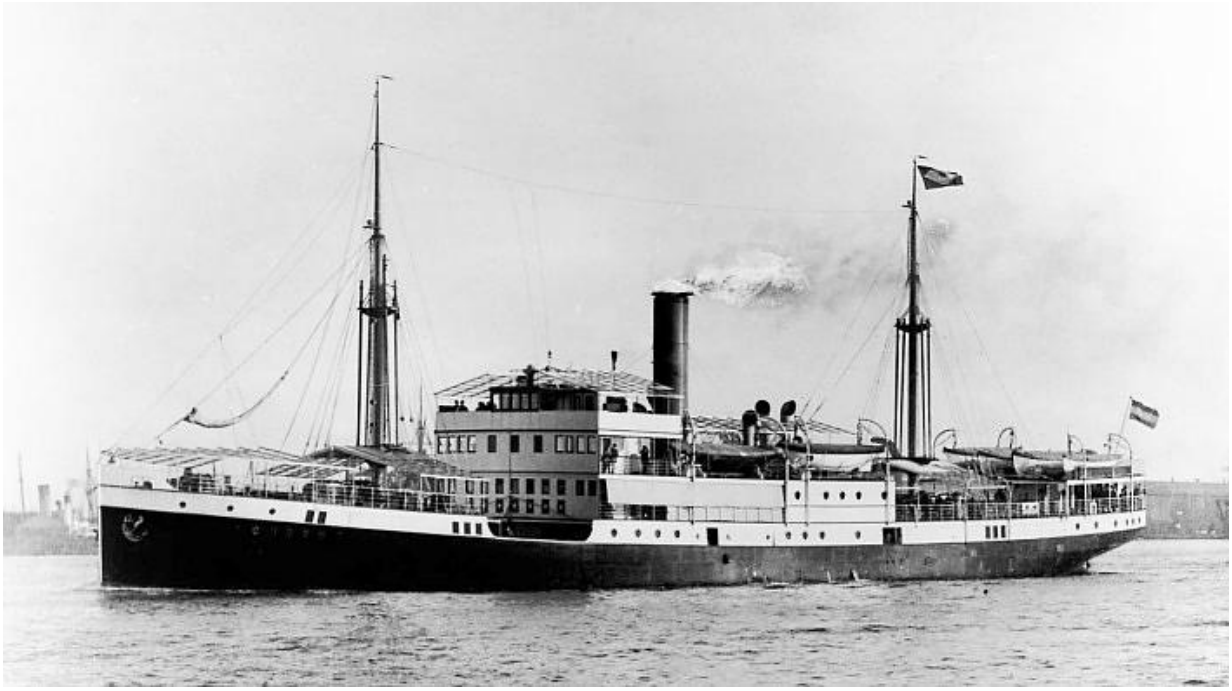
Next mention of the breakwater is 20 November 1903, when the German sailer *C.H. Wätjen* (1833/1889) was reported sold for $24,500 to the Tanjong Pagar Dock Co. for use in extending the breakwater. Owned by D.H. Wätjen & Co. of Bremen, the steel ship had arrived at Singapore in August 1903 after being towed by the steamer *Moresby* 3,000 miles from Yule Island, New Guinea, to where she had drifted some 900 miles over 11 weeks after being completely dismasted in a cyclone on voyage New York to Yokohama with 100,000 cases of kerosene. The cargo was sold in Singapore and the ship put up for auction on 16 November 1903, passing to the Tanjong Pagar Dock Co. She lay alongside at Keppel Harbour accumulating barnacles until put in the Victoria and Albert Dock in May 1905. Soon thereafter she was moved the short distance across and positioned as the fourth ship in the line of the breakwater *(see map below*). Between perpendiculars the four ships in above order measured 289', 349', 375' and 242' to make a total of 955', thus allowing for their somewhat greater length overall and the gaps between them, forming a breakwater of more than a kilometre.

'Straits Times' of 22 January 1937 carried an article 'Yacht Club Hulks' describing the breakwater around what had begun as a safe anchorage for cargo lighters (twakow) but become the Royal Singapore Yacht Club basin. Closest inshore, sunk there to plug the gap between the land and the first hulk [*see map below*], was said to be the old iron paddle tug BANGKOK (149/1877). Built for the Borneo Company before passing to the Dock Company, the tug had been condemned and broken up according to the notation when its register was closed in November 1913. Further along was the former Dock Company tug SUNDA. This was probably not the old iron screw tug SUNDA (149/1865), whose register was closed in February 1900 on advice that the vessel would be broken up, but the newer steel screw tug SUNDA (120/1899) built by and for the New Harbour Dock Co. Ltd. Although the tug was said to have been placed on the breakwater in 1932 and the latter's register was not closed until October 1939, the fact that the entry was closed on the same day as the Harbour Board's SHRIMP (355/1902) suggests that the action was retrospective. The article mentions that several hoppers and lighters were added to the breakwater after 1932. The three steamers and a sailing vessel are mentioned, though not properly identified, but may be taken to be ERMINE, PELUSE, WIELAND and C.H. WATJEN. The relevant description of the breakwater reads as follows:



Singapore Harbour, May 1934. Top right Singapore Yacht Club, bottom right the line of four wrecks forming the eastern side of the artificial East Lagoon at Tanjong Pagar. Bottom from right to left: short East Wharf used mainly for repair, Albert and Victoria Docks with Sheelegs Wharf, and the long commercial wharf with Empire Dock behind, entry bottom left off map (Singapore Harbour Board).

Later sunk off the end of the breakwater and not shown on this 1934 map was the 278-feet LOUDON (1874/1913), a former Dutch-flag Koninklijke Paketvaart Maats. (KPM) steamer that had been laid up at Tanjung Priok in June 1934. After dismantling began some six months later, on 6 December 1935 the hulk was towed away to Singapore and there on 1 April 1936 sold to the Singapore Harbour Board for scuttling off what the East Lagoon. This completed the rather haphazard structure.



KPM's LOUDON on trials at Rotterdam, November 1913 (marhisdata.nl).

A RAF aerial photo dated 1946 shows the line of the breakwater corresponding to the 1934 map. The original four hulks are now vegetated, probably by mangroves, and only the outermost hulk of LOUDON is still recognizable.

Section of c.1946 aerial view. From bottom right: small vessel in the shipping channel, beacon, LOUDON hulk, vegetated hulks of C.H. WATJEN, WIELAND, PELUSE and EMIRNE, gap, minor hulks, Singapore Yacht Club. Far left Victoria and Albert Dock (RAF Changi Association).

'Singapore Free Press' (20/1/1960) reported an interview with SHB's Chief Engineer, who stated that the wrecks had been removed as part of the dredging for extension of the SHB wharves eastwards into the area of the East Lagoon. It may therefore be taken that removal occurred in the course of 1959.

Hulks of sunken ships removed
The Singapore Free Press, 20 January 1960, Page 5
Article also available on Microfilm Reel NL2459
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Hulks of sunken ships removed

PROGRESS IN S.H.B. PROJECT

HUGE rotted hulks of sunken ships which obstructed work on the $50 million Singapore harbour project have been removed.

Three hulks had been refloated and towed away from the East Lagoon and sunk in deep water, the Chief Civil Engineer, Singapore Harbour Board, Mr. F. B. Pickles, told the Free Press.

Experts under Mr. Pickles are now working on the first phase of the project—construction of three deep-water berths in the East Lagoon.

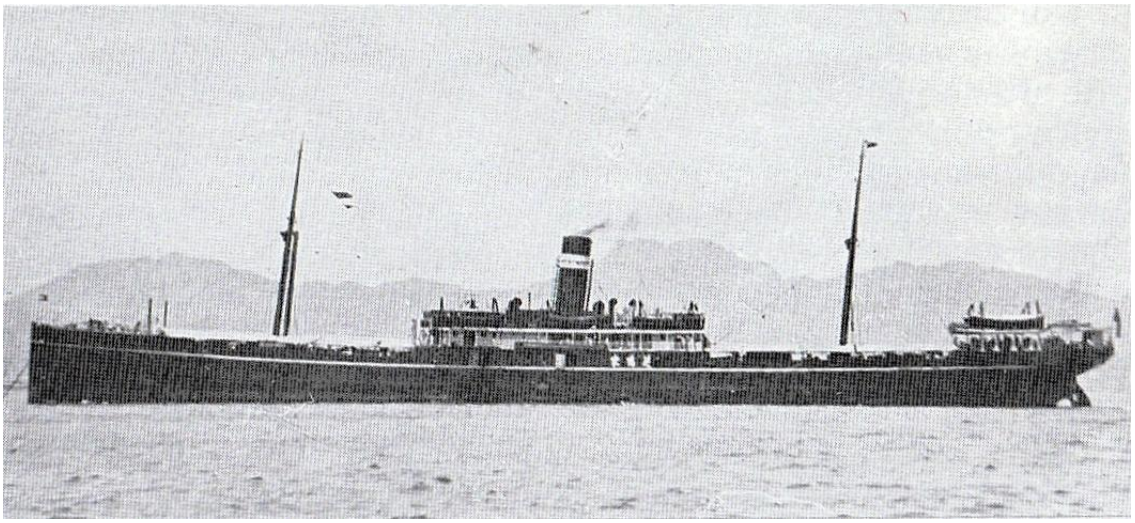
HOSPITALS

He said that dredging of the lagoon was going on. Half the work had been completed.

Quarantine hulks

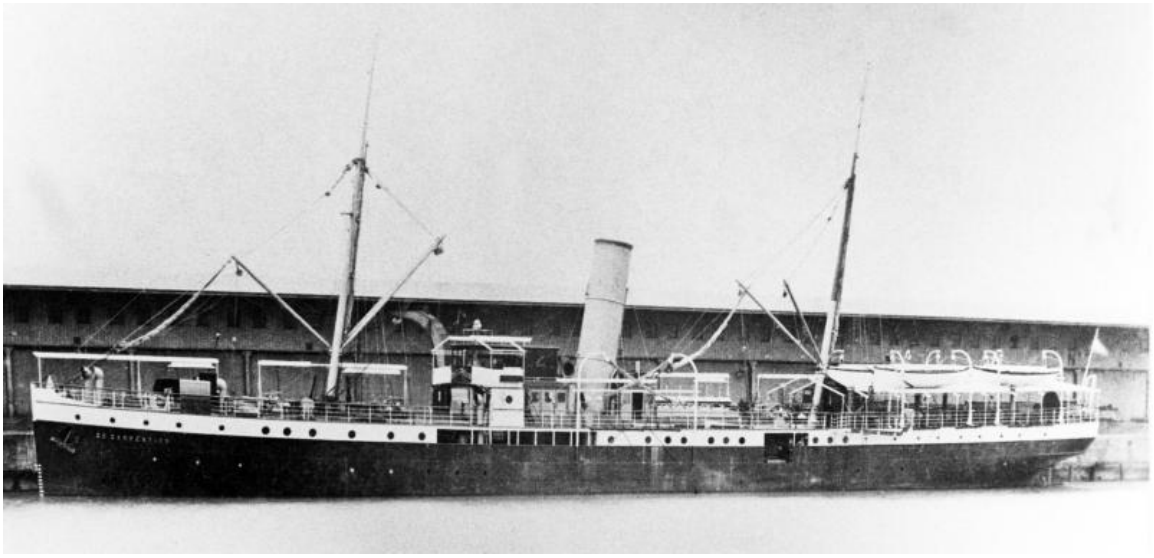
Singapore harbour had moored quarantine hulks from early days. By the 1920s two quarantine vessels were moored in the Quarantine Anchorage off the quarantine station of St. John's Island. These served as supplementary accommodation to allow disembarkation from infected ships that might arrive from South China or India with a thousand passengers or more in the tweendecks. By the mid-1920s unrest in China and rising rates of smallpox meant that almost half the immigrant ships arriving in Singapore from China were infected, thus two out of every four per week, and the resources of St John's were stretched to the limit. 'The Straits Times' (20/4/26) reported that in the first 3½ months of 1926 some 40,000 Chinese immigrants had passed through the Station, more than the whole of the previous year. At the record peak, around 6,000 were housed on the island and another 2,000 on the off-lying hulks. By the early 1930s, however, the Depression and more settled conditions in China had greatly slowed the rate of immigration and the extra floating accommodation was no longer required. A Notice to Mariners in May 1932 advised that the last two quarantine vessels, ARRATOON APCAR and DE CARPENTIER, had been withdrawn.

ARRATOON APCAR (4510/1896) had been built for China Mutual S.N. Co. Ltd of London as HYSON before passing in 1899 to Apcar & Co. for their India-China-Japan line and in February 1912 being taken over with Apcar by British India S.N. Co. Ltd. P&O Heritage gives her passenger complement as 14 first, 27 second and 1618 third-class. In mid-1922 she was laid up at Singapore and reported to be for sale but in fact was decommissioned at Singapore and set aside for quarantine use as required by Apcar Line vessels. At around 01.30 hours on 15 January 1931 she was rammed amidships by the Silver Line's motorship *Silvermaple* (5313/1927) outbound for Rangoon. At the inquiry it transpired that the stern light ran on coconut oil that had solidified on that rainy night causing the light to extinguish (Malaya Tribune, 11/3/31). The hulk was docked for repair. April 1932 she was advertised for sale 'for breaking up purposes only' as lying in the Quarantine Anchorage. Laxon & Perry's BI history records that she was sold on 6 May 1932 for S$10,000 to Chinese shipbreakers and towed to Shanghai for demolition.



ARRATOON APCAR at Hong Kong in BI colours (Capt. F. Poole in Laxon & Perry, BI (1994)).

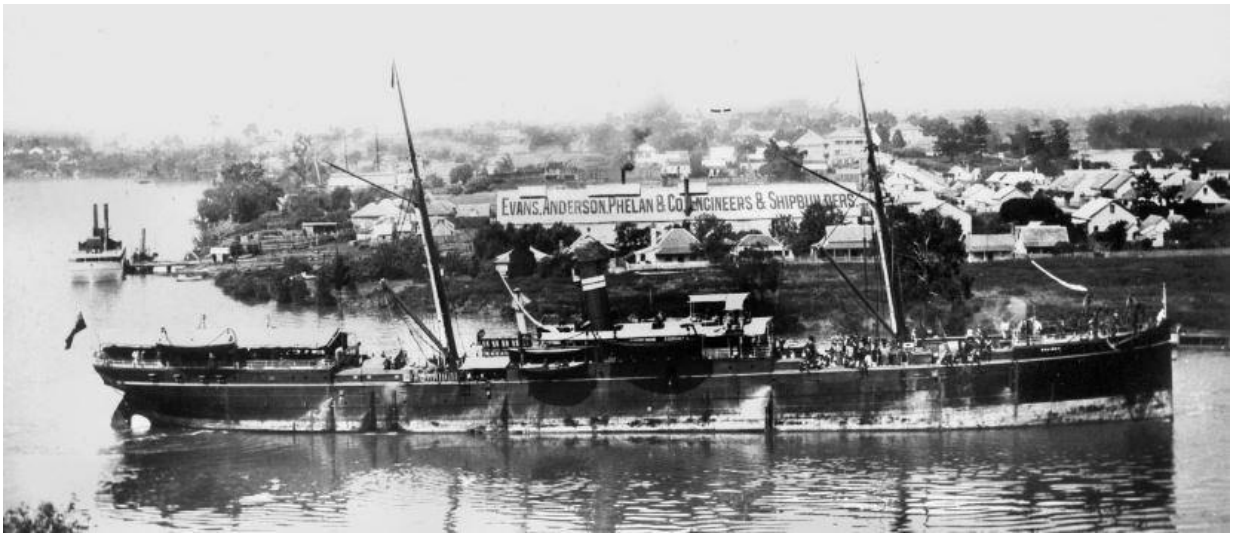
The second quarantine hulk was a much smaller vessel DE CARPENTIER (1244/1890), one of the original fleet of the Dutch-flag Kon. Paketvaart Maatschappij. Marhisdata.nl records that she was decommissioned at Singapore in February 1924 and on 27 April 1932 sold for S$4685 to Kim Ik Hong for demolition.



DE CARPENTIER working ship at Tanjung Priok (marhisdata.nl).

It may be noted that ARRATOON APCAR had replaced a previous BI ship in that quarantine role, BULIMBA (2510/1882) had been built for the BI Group's London-Queensland Royal Mail Line, before being transferred in 1888 to the newly formed Australasian United S.N. Co Ltd (AUSN) for Australian coastal service. In December 1899 she was brought into the main B.I. fleet and used in Indian coastal and Persian Gulf service. In September 1912 she was stationed at Singapore as a 'quarantine hulk and storeship', refitted and then recommissioned in October 1914, then after arrival from Madras on 20

May 1921 was returned to service as a quarantine ship in position off St John's. After being replaced by ARRATOON APCAR, she was sold in January 1923 for S$11,200 to Eng Hup & Co. for further use as a hulk until sold to Shanghai breakers around 1925.

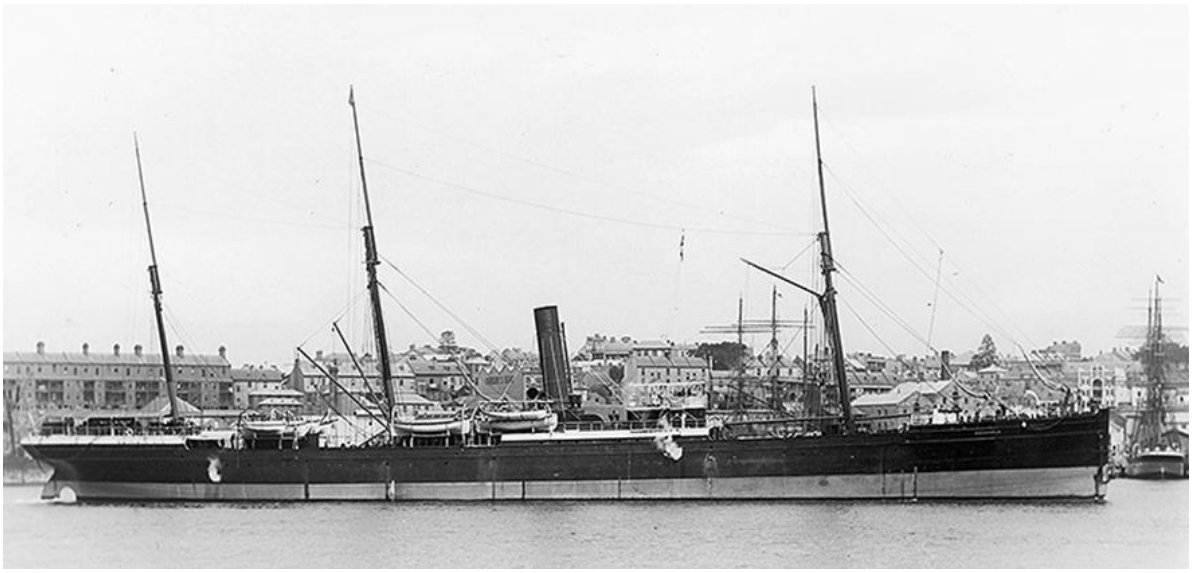


BULIMBA in the Brisbane River (State Library of Queensland).

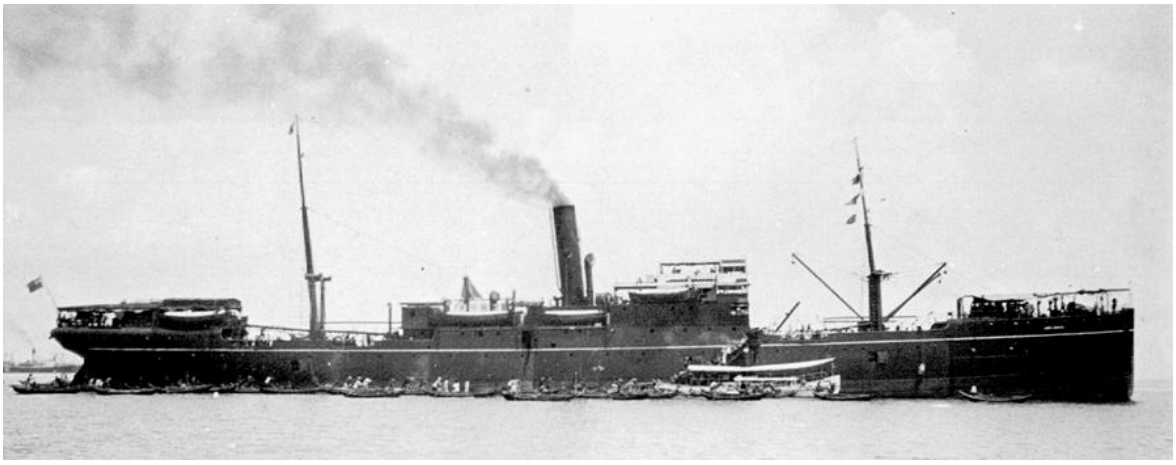
Obviously there were earlier quarantine hulks. For example, 'Straits Times' (11/5/20) noted briefly that the 80-year-old CHEANG HOCK KIAN, used the past five years as a quarantine hulk by Jardine Matheson & Co. for their immigrant ships, had been sold for breaking up at Tanjog Rhu.

Coal hulks

Although ocean-going steamers were able to bunker alongside at Singapore, there was need for floating hulks to coal smaller vessels. One such was KALGOORLIE (2981/1880), built for Glen Line's China trade as GLENFRUIN but in 1897 sold to McIlwraith, McEacharn & Co. of Melbourne and refitted for trade between Sydney, Melbourne and Fremantle as the passenger ship KALGOORLIE. After a long lay-up, she arrived in Singapore in December 1906 consigned to McIlwraith's agents McAlister & Co. At some point she is said to have been put in use as a quarantine hulk. Then in November 1912 she was sold to McAlister, who were also coal merchants, and stationed off Tanjong Rhu as a coal hulk, until January 1916 still on Melbourne registry. The scarcity of shipping in the later years of the Great War led to her sale in September 1917 to the Ho Hong S.S. Co., who had her refitted in Singapore under the superintendence of Ritchie & Bissett for the immigrant trade, including the triple expansion engine from the Norwegian OSCAR II (3060/1893). he commissioned in January 1921 as HONG HWA with accommodation for 130 cabin class and over a thousand immigrants. As such she traded reliably for another eleven years, finally laying up at Singapore in October 1932 and remaining idle until sailing to Japan in December 1933 for demolition [details from Stevens & Dick, *Scottish House: A History of McIlwraith McEacharn*, 2021].



KALGOORLIE ex GLENFRUIN at Sydney, probably in 1890s (W. Livermore/coll. I.J. Farquhar).



KALGOORLIE rebuilt as HONG HWA, at Singapore (flipped image, KPM archive/Alg. Rijksarchief).

Named after King Oscar II (1829-1907) of Sweden and Norway, OSCAR II (3060/1893) was built for Jacob Christensen of Bergen before being sold in 1909 to Haakon Wallem of Shanghai. On the evening of 18 January 1910 in heavy weather on voyage from Saigon to Hamburg with rice, she had the misfortunate to strand on a reef off Bintan Island on the southern side of the passage past Singapore. Though refloated four day later and able to make Singapore under her own steam, she was declared a constructive total loss and on 18 April sold at auction to Paterson, Simons & Co. for use as a floating coal hulk. As mentioned, her engines were later installed in HONG HWA ex KALGOORLIE. A legal case cited in 'Straits Times' (20/9/1913) throws up the interesting detail that Paterson, Simons & Co. employed contracted 'coolie' labour to work the coal from the hulk moored well out in the harbour.

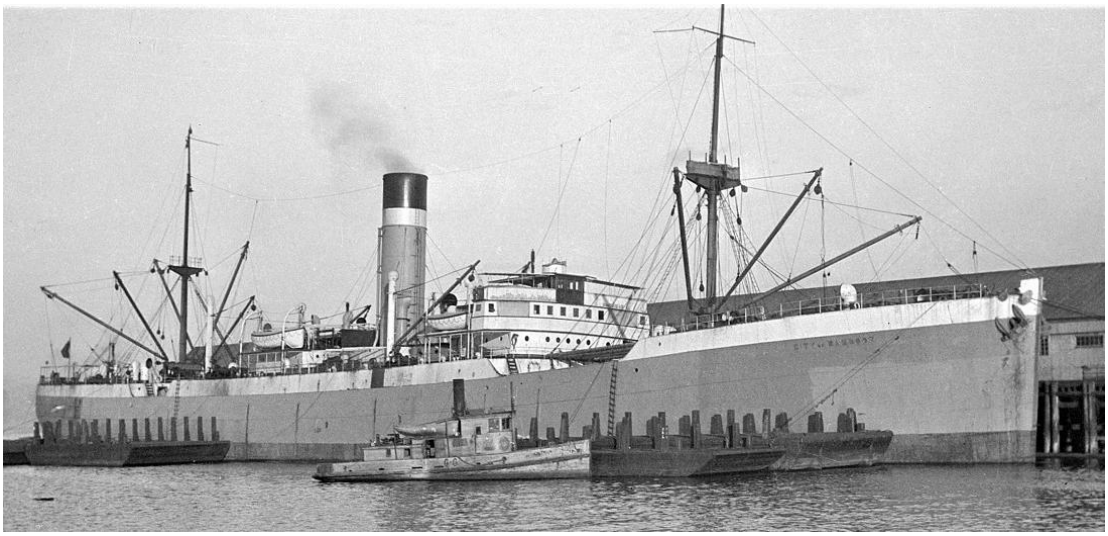
'Singapore Free Press' (30/9/30) reported that Paterson, Simons & Co. had bought the China Mutual S.N. Co. (Alfred Holt & Co.) steamer ASTYANAX (4872/1906) to be converted to a coal hulk to replace

OSCAR II. ASTYANAX was registered to OSCAR Ltd and, confusingly, renamed OSCAR II. The fate of OSCAR II (I) is unknown but most likely towed to Shanghai or Japan for demolition. According to an account of life aboard Oscar II (II) in the 'Straits Times' of 11 May 1935, no structural alterations had been made to the ship except that her permanent Master since 1930, Captain W.H. Palmer, had demolished a deck house and erected a bungalow for he and his family, who commuted to and from Singapore by launch. The ship was worked by an engine driver, fitter and four firemen, who were housed in the fo'c'sle, and a bo'sun, carpenter and five seamen, who were housed in the poop. There were other interesting details. The location 2½ miles offshore meant that ships could avoid pilots and harbour dues and as many as four vessels could be coaled at one time, working by day and at night under lights, from a capacity load of 7,500 tons. Only the auxiliary boiler was needed to power the winches. The ship was identified by the name in large lettering on the side and the Paterson, Simons & Co. funnel. OSCAR II (II) carried on in the role until scuttled by the Royal Navy on 15 February 1942 just prior to the fall of Singapore.

Blue Funnel ASTYANAX (1906) at Vancouver (Walter E. Frost collection/Vancouver Archives).

When the British Military Administration took back control of Singapore in late 1945, a new coal hulk was deemed necessary. Accordingly, the Ministry of War Transport purchased Ellerman's thirty-year-old freighter CITY OF RANGOON (6635/1914). Her capacity of 8,000 tons was slightly larger than that of OSCAR II. Around 1946 she was sold to Paterson, Simons & Co. (Oscar Ltd) and became OSCAR III (still registered in Liverpool). Nevertheless, as old coal-fired steamer were quickly being phased out, OSCAR III soon became redundant. 'The Malaya Tribune' (19 November 1949) reported that the vessel would shortly be towed by the big ex-German tug LENAMILL (ex ARNGAST, 729/1940) with the laid-up EMPIRE HAMBLE (ex THEPSATRI NAWA, 3260/1920) to Bombay for demolition. W.A. Schell records that she arrived at Bombay on 10 December and that Akbaralli Noorbhai began demolition in February

1950. The Malaya Tribune (5/8/49) showed the hulk dressed for the Queen's 49th birthday – the National Library watermarks are on the image, not the ship.



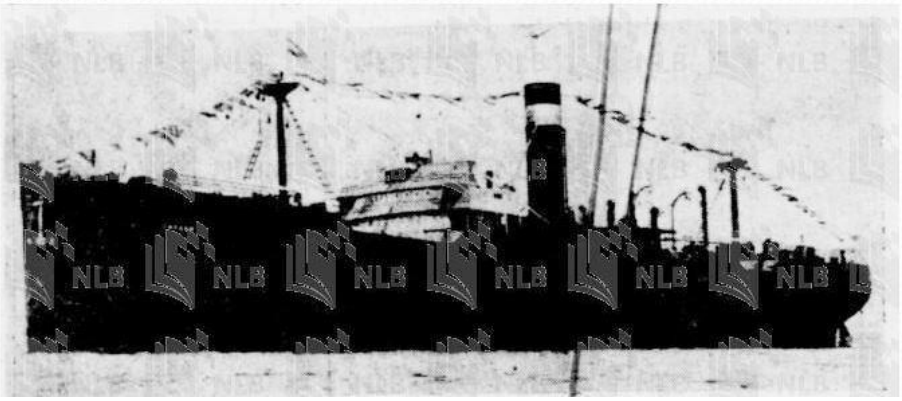
CITY OF RANGOON at Vancouver in Ellerman colours (Walter E. Frost/Vancouver Archives).

Malaya Tribune, 5 August 1949, Page 12

Article also available on Microfilm Reel NL3768

Previous Article Next Article

The 6,635-ton coal hulk, Oscar III, "dressed" like all the other ships in port yesterday on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's 49th birthday. She may be turned into scrap.—Tribune Picture.



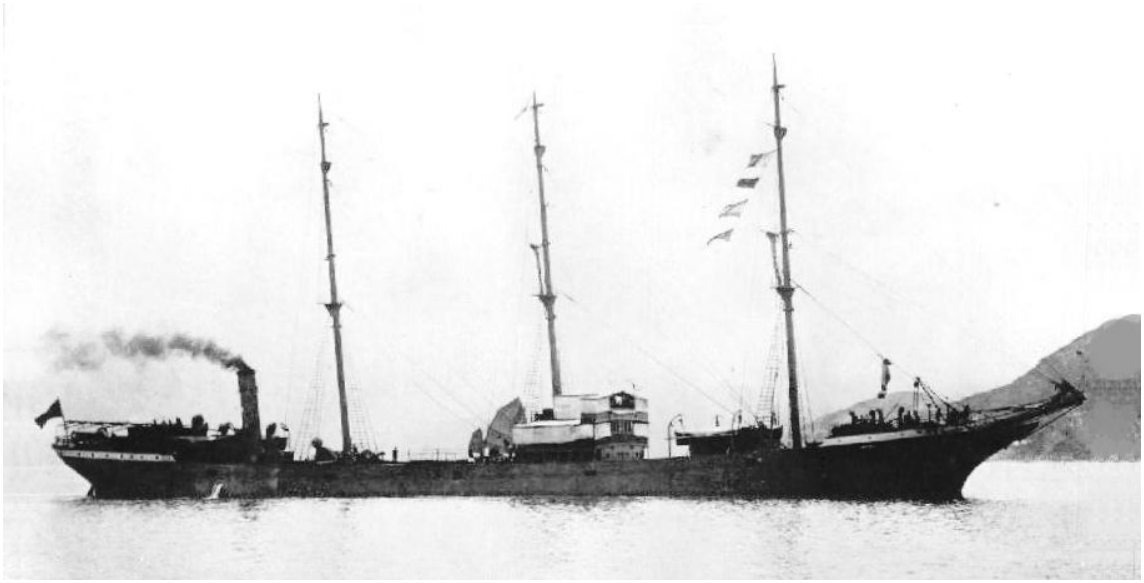
Meanwhile the hulk of OSCAR II (II) remained in Singapore Harbour close to the main breakwater. The wreck was removed from 1952 by the International Salvage Association (Malaya) Ltd but the method and exact timing are unknown.

Oil hulks

By the interwar years as motorships became more common, there was also need for stationary oil storage and bunkering hulks. During the interwar years MYR SHELL (2511/1902) was anchored in the Roads and, from mid-1937, the tanker SPIRILA (5695/1922) at Pulau Bukom. Around 1938, as the tempo of trade and shipping picked up, two other Anglo-Saxon tankers, PLEIODON (1922/5878) and SOLEN (1922/5693) were also deployed as temporary oil storage hulks. The trio were almost sisterships, except that SPIRILA and SOLEN were built by Swan Hunter at Newcastle while PLEIODON was built by Hongkong & Whampoa Dock. All three ships had traded mainly out of the Shell installation at Balikpapan, sometimes as far as Australia.

MYR SHELL had a curious history, having been completed in 1902 by A. McMillan, Dumbarton for Cia Naviera Sota Y Aznar of Bilbao as the 4-masted, 4,000-dwt barque and sail training ship AMA BEGONAKOA, registered under the Uruguayan flag to Cia Anon. de la Fragata Ama Begonakoa of Montevideo. After a period in lay-up, in mid-1910 the ship was sold to Devitt & Moore's Ocean Training Ships Ltd of London, a consortium that included Cunard, Shaw Savill, Union-Castle and Booth Line under the management of Devitt & Moore. Renamed MEDWAY, she took her first sailing to Sydney in August 1910 and quickly became well known in Australian ports. Sadly, in May 1918, because of the U-boat risk and the pressing shortage of tankers, the ship was sold to The Shipping Controller and placed under the management of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co. Ltd (Shell) for conversion to a twin-screw motor tanker (Vickers Oil engine). Anglo-Saxon completed the conversion at Hong Kong and bought the ship into service in March 1919 for trading in Eastern waters. In 1921 she was renamed MYRSHELL. From December 1923 she was trading mainly out of Singapore. Around 1926 she was relegated to a stationary harbour role as an oil depot and bunkering vessel until withdrawn in April 1931 and laid up. Finally, in April 1933 she was sold to breakers and departed on the 18th for Japan [Sydney Morning herald 8/8/10, Singapore Free Press 25/11/31, Malaya Tribune 19/4/33, Straits Times 25/4/33].

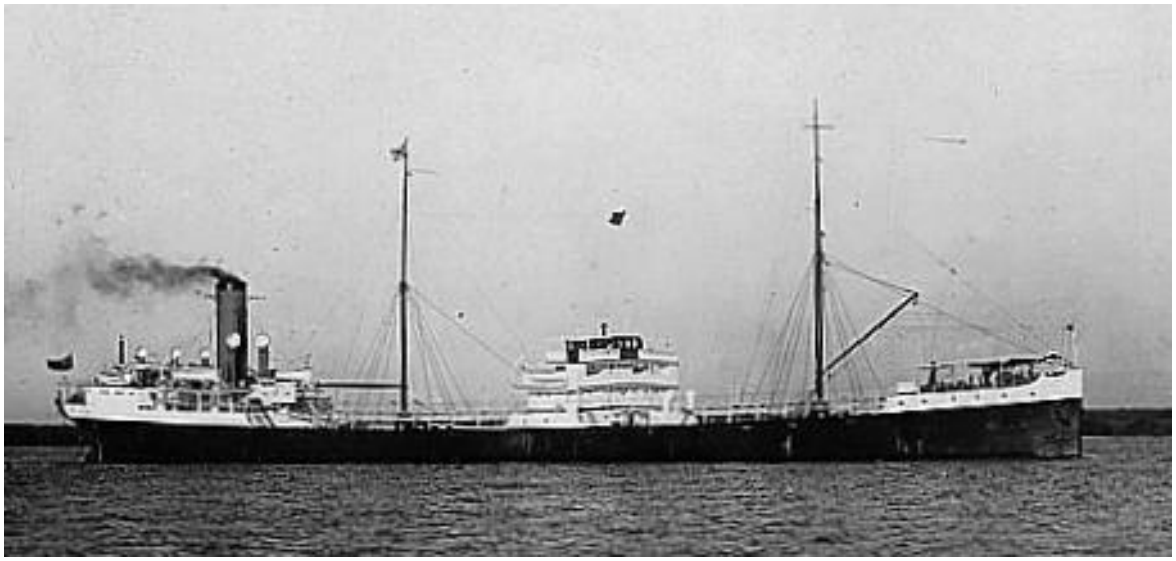
Cadet ship MEDWAY under almost full sail (flipped) (A.C. Green/State Library of Victoria).



MYR SHELL ex MEDWAY as a motor tanker (Helderline).

In 1933 SPIRILA returned to U.K. for refit, then in June 1937 docked in Singapore and presumably was relegated soon after. Lloyd's Register 1938/39 notes 'in storage use under Modified Survey'. There must have been technical defects because, although seized by the Japanese in February 1942, she was not returned to commercial service and at the war's end was found sunken off Pulau Bukom. In 1952 the International Salvage Association (Malaya) Ltd began work to raise the wreck, which led to legal dispute between the Association and salvor Captain W.A. Doust, who had bought the wreck in his own name while still a Director, then withdrawn from the syndicate and formed his own firm, Inter-Ocean

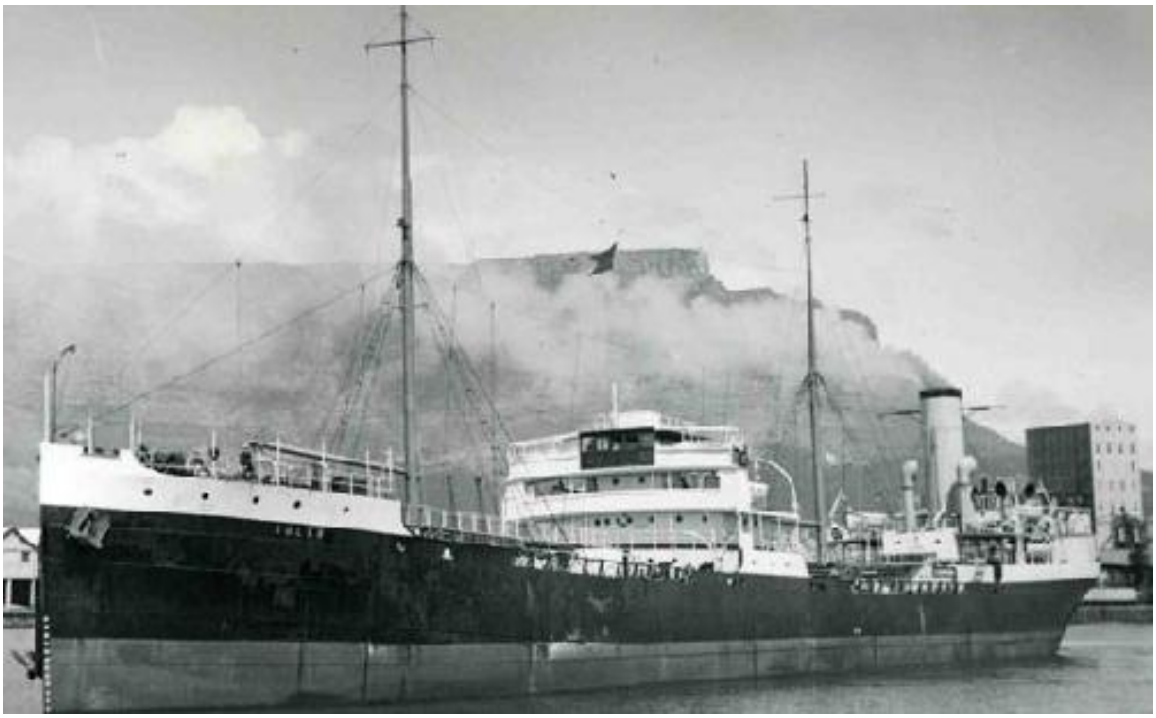
Salvage & Towage Ltd, but continued to use the Association's equipment and divers (Straits Times, 22/8/53). In January 1957 the Association's local Director J.SC. Lim reported that salvage was ongoing (Straits Times, 17/1/57).



SPIRILA in commercial service (Helderline).

At the time of the fall of Singapore, PLEIODON was reported as beached and abandoned on the seaward side of Blakang Mati (Sentosa Island), where she was strafed by Japanese aircraft on 12 February 1942. She was salvaged by the Japanese and after repair was recommissioned in June 1942 for regional operations as NANSEI MARU under management of Nitto Kogyo Kisen K.K. On 18 August 1944 on voyage from Miri to Manila she was sunk by the submarine USS *Ray* in Palawan Passage (08.39N, 116.39E).

SOLEN was also salvaged by the Japanese and in June 1942 recommissioned as SHOSEI MARU for use at Singapore as an examination vessel. Peter Cundall deduces that she was probably one of the ships damaged in the *Krait* raid by Australian commandos on 26/27 September 1943 because after arrival from Palembang on the 23rd she did not depart until 17 December, suggesting time spent under repair (see 'Operation Jaywick: A Reassessment of Results'). At the war's end SOLEN was recovered at Singapore and returned to service as a storage vessel, still registered in London. In November 1948 the local Shell office called tenders for sale as 'scrap metal', as lies in the Western Anchorage with delivery late December. Subsequent Lloyd's Registers identify her as 'Chinese' (owners blank) but further trading is highly unlikely – a large ship to be broken up in Singapore, more probably Hong Kong.



SOLEN departing Cape Town (A. Duncan).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Peter Cundall for directing my attention to this topic, identifying the oil hulks, and making the connection to the *Krait* raid (www.combinedfleet.com/Cundall_Jaywick.htm). My own research drew mainly on the excellent online resources of the National Library of Singapore [eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers] and especially reports in *Malaya Tribune*, *Singapore Free Press*, and *Straits Times*. Supplementary detail was gleaned from the Singapore Shipping Register, the annual registers of W.A. Schell, and the websites clydebuilt.com, herderline.com, marhisdata.nl, mirmarshipindex.nz, poheritage.com, teesships.co.uk, and trove.nla.gov.au.

Corrections and further detail would be appreciated.

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