

WWII Juno Mayru Sinking

Torpedoed By British Submarine HMS *Tradewind*



During World War II, 70,000 or more Allied prisoners of war and conscripted Asian laborers were moved in Japanese merchant ships across the vast expanse of the occupied East. These vessels were called ‘hell ships, and with good reason. POWs and slave laborers were crammed into stinking holds, filthy with coal dust, congealed sugar syrup and horse manure left over from previous voyages. Without water, or nearly so, sick, abused and neglected, they baked in unimaginable heat inside their steel prisons.

Many died. Some went mad. Others were murdered. Some of the cruelty they experienced was extraordinary even for prisoners of the Japanese. On one ship jammed with prisoners in blazing heat, the water lowered into the holds was far too little and, one POW remembered, foul and polluted, covered with a thick, greenish scum. Two more containers sent down from the deck contained only seawater and urine. You are bred like rats, the ship’s interpreter sneered, and you will die like rats.

Something on the order of 62,000 prisoners were moved by 56 ships. As many as 22,000 perished from murder, starvation, sickness and neglect—or were killed unknowingly by their friends, since Japanese prison ships did not display the red cross required by the Geneva Convention when prisoners were being transported. That callous act made the jammed freighters targets for any Allied aircraft or submarine, and no pilot or sub skipper could know that his quarry carried men of his own or Allied nations. For example:

- *Arisan Maru*, was torpedoed east of Hong Kong in October 1944 by an American submarine—either *Snook* or *Shark* (neither boat returned from that patrol). Of about 1,800 POWs on board *Arisan Maru*, only eight survived, five of whom, naked and emaciated, managed to find their way to freedom in China.

- *Oryoku Maru* was bombed and sunk by American aircraft off the Philippines' Bataan Peninsula in mid-December 1944. On board were more than 1,600 American POWs, about 1,340 of whom lived through the ordeal. The survivors were then split up between *Brazil Maru* and *Enoura Maru*, which carried about 1,000. Both ships sailed for Japan via Takao Harbor, Formosa, where they were attacked again by U.S. planes. *Enoura Maru* went down, taking with her a large, undetermined number of prisoners.
- *Fuku Maru* was sunk by U.S. Navy aircraft in Subic Bay, in the Philippines, during September 1944, killing more than 1,200 British and Dutch prisoners. Sixty-three men survived, but for them there was more horror to come: They were transferred to the ill-fated *Oryoku Maru*. Two more prison ships, known to history only as PS 3 and PS 4, were sunk by Allied forces, the first bombed in Manila Bay, the second torpedoed between Hong Kong and Formosa. Between them, some 2,700 prisoners were killed.
- *Kachidoki Maru*, torpedoed by USS *Pampanito* off Hainan Island, took about 400 British POWs to the bottom with her, and an unknown number more died when HMS *Truculent* sank *Harukiku Maru* in the Strait of Malacca.
- A total of 1,159 American and British prisoners perished when USS *Sealion* sent *Rokyo Maru* to the bottom near Hainan Island in September 1944, and USS *Paddlefish* sank *Shiniyo Maru* off Mindanao in the same month, killing nearly 700 more Americans. Prisoners trying to escape from the sinking *Shiniyo Maru* were shot by the Japanese guards as the Americans struggled from the holds or in the water.
- *Lisbon Maru*, torpedoed by USS *Grouper* in October 1944, went down with another 846 POWs, the only bright memory being an unarmed rush by men of the Middlesex Regiment, who overran and killed several Japanese sentries assigned to keep the prisoners cooped up in the holds of the sinking ship.

As tragic as the losses were on board *Arisan Maru*, *Shiniyo Maru* and the others, as ugly as Japanese indifference and cruelty were on those vessels, they were not the worst tragedy among the thousands of POW deaths from friendly fire. That distinction belongs to the sinking, in October 1944, of *Junyo Maru*.

Junyo Maru was an old three-island, single-stack merchantman, displacing about 5,000 tons and sailing under the orders of the Japanese government. She was reportedly built in Glasgow in 1913, although one prisoner on her last run later said that somebody had seen a plaque on board bearing the legend Liverpool, 1908. She had been owned by three British lines at various times, then passed through three Japanese owners. She had gone through five name changes. Her last—

Junyo—means hawk in Japanese. *Maru* is simply the standard Japanese designation for merchant ship.

Junyo Maru was a little over 400 feet long, with a beam of 53 feet, and was accurately characterized by one prisoner as a rustbucket. On September 18, 1944, she was underway from Batavia (now Jakarta), Java, crammed with about 2,300 POWs—Dutch, British, Australians, Indonesians and a few Americans—and some 4,200 Javanese slave laborers, called *romushas*. She was bound for Padang, up the west coast of Sumatra. Her human cargo was to labor on the infamous Sumatran railway that was being built to transport coal from the west to the east coast of Sumatra, from where it would be shipped on to Singapore.

As was common on the hell ships, conditions on *Junyo Maru* were appalling. Between decks, the Japanese had inserted a layer of bamboo scaffolding to make extra decks, and the holds were crammed with bunks, three or four deep. Every level was jammed with prisoners, many of them sick, weak and emaciated. The bunks filled up quickly. Many men could only stand; the others sat with their legs pulled up or squatted in holds coated with a glutinous black substance, probably the melted remains of a cargo of sugar cane mixed with remnants of later loads of coal or iron ore. Both forward holds—numbers one and two—and the forward deck were crammed with the miserable *romushas*. Aft, holds three and four held the POWs.

There was not enough water, and there were no latrine facilities, save for a few boxes suspended outboard on the upper deck. Some prisoners were too weak even to reach these primitive privies, and human excrement accumulated in the holds and dripped down from the hatch covers. Some prisoners remained on the upper deck, exposed to wind and chilly rain at night and brutal tropical sun throughout the day; the rest baked in the iron ovens below. Men sat on cargo derricks and on the hatch covers, from which every other plank had been removed to admit a vestige of air. Before the ship ever sailed, the stench of human bodies and human waste was overpowering. Many prisoners suffered from malaria or dysentery or both. Some died; others went mad. The sick and the weak sank further toward death.

There was virtually no lifesaving gear on board. A lifeboat hung outboard on either side of the center island; some life rafts were piled on deck. That was all, and all that the prisoners could hope for. One account says the Japanese donned their own life vests as soon as the ship put to sea, but there were no vests for the prisoners. Before *Junyo Maru* departed, one English prisoner made a desperate attempt to escape by diving overboard and swimming for shore. He was cut off by some of the Japanese crew in a small boat, beaten up, returned to the hell ship and locked up. If anybody else tried to escape, the prisoners were told, the penalty would be death.

Junyo Maru sailed from Batavia on September 16. Turning west through Sunda Strait, she passed the volcanic island of Krakatoa and set a course northwest, parallel to the western seaboard

of Sumatra. On the 17th, she headed on toward the port of Padang, about halfway up the coast of that long island. On that night came a torrential rain, drenching the men on deck and streaming into the hold to mix with the sticky mess in which the prisoners already sat or squatted. The prisoners on deck, unprotected, shook with cold, but there was no shelter.

The ship steamed some 15 or 20 miles from the coast, escorted by two vessels that one prisoner described as a Japanese corvette and a gunboat, and for most of the day also covered by one or two aircraft. While the escorts sometimes circled the freighter, they spent most of the voyage trailing her, one on each beam. The escort commander may have been careless, lazy or both, or maybe he was convinced that this voyage was a milk run. If so, he would soon find out just how wrong he was.

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Out in the blue water of the Indian Ocean a sleek steel shark waited, haunting the Japanese shipping lanes along the Sumatran coast. No escorts were going to get between her and her prey. She was the submarine *Tradewind*, a twin-screw Triton-class boat of the Royal Navy, commanded by Lt. Cmdr. S.L.C. Maydon. A new boat, commissioned just a year before at Chatham, England, *Tradewind* displaced over 1,300 tons. She could do more than 15 knots on the surface and almost 9 submerged. And she packed a real punch: She was armed with eleven 21-inch torpedo tubes with 17 reloads, and boasted surface armament of a 4-inch gun, a 20mm Oerlikon AA cannon and three machine guns. Her range extended to 8,000 miles at 8 knots.

Tradewind had left the port of Trincomalee, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), on September 8. By the 17th, she was cruising in her patrol area, though she was severely handicapped by the failure of both her radar and her high-power periscope. But her skipper was made of stern stuff, and he was determined to carry on with his patrol for another day.

‘He and *Tradewind’s* 61-man crew quickly scored a couple of small successes against the Japanese. On the 13th, *Tradewind* surfaced to board a sampan in Sungei Pinang Bay, took off her five man and one monkey crew—the monkey had earned his keep throwing coconuts down from palm trees—and sank her. Then, three days later off Indrapura Point, *Tradewind* stopped and boarded *Bintang Pasisir* (Star of the Shore), a large sailing prau, sending her on her way when a quick search revealed she was loaded only with nutmegs and cinnamon bark. Only the ship’s papers were taken.

An hour or so after leaving *Bintang Pasisir* behind, *Tradewind’s* crew boarded still another prau, and found this one loaded with cement for the Japanese. Seven of the eight-man crew were sent ashore in a small boat—the eighth said he’d rather be a British prisoner—and the British boarding party primed the prau with two demolition charges. She blew up, as Commander Maydon’s report said, with a most satisfactory scattering of Japanese cement. But now someone

on the submarine took a close look at *Bintang Pasisir's* papers, which revealed she was also carrying cement, iron and barrels of nails, in addition to her innocent cargo of nuts and bark. Like the cement *Tradewind* had just satisfactorily scattered, that cargo was also bound for the Japanese at Benkulen, on the coast of southern Sumatra.

So *Tradewind* turned back to find the prau, which she did a couple of hours later. The vessel's crew was sent ashore, and Maydon ordered *Bintang Pasisir* set afire, then riddled her with rounds from the sub's Oerlikon. As the prau settled beneath the waves, *Tradewind* went on to look for bigger game.

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Two days later, on the 18th, she found it. At about 3 p.m., the officer of the watch, reserve Sub-Lt. P.C. Daley, spotted a tiny plume of smoke through the secondary periscope, about 13,000 yards to the south. Maydon accordingly ordered full speed toward the target. Because, as Maydon's report stated, range taking and hence estimation of speed through a low-power periscope is very inaccurate over 4,000 yards, thus he had to close the range. As he did so, he found he was stalking an old fashioned merchantman, a 4,000 to 5,000-ton, three-island vessel with a single thin funnel and two masts. Maydon guessed she was about two-thirds fully loaded. At long range, without his high-power periscope, he could not guess what that load was.

Tradewind's skipper could see that the freighter had two escorts—one to her starboard, the other on her port quarter. They were identified in *Tradewind's* patrol report as motor launches—and his crew picked up their radar echoes. In spite of their presence, however, Maydon pressed his attack, guessing his target's speed at about 8 knots, estimated from the echoes of his asdic (sonar). His target was zig-zagging, but obligingly zig-zagged back to her original course. And so, a little before 4 p.m., *Tradewind* was in position at a right angle to the plodding merchant ship's course and about 1,800 yards away.

A few moments later, *Tradewind* fired four torpedoes at 15-second intervals, dived and turned away. About a minute and a half later, her crew heard an explosion, and 15 seconds later came a second blast. *Junyo Maru's* escorts put in a depth-charge attack, dropping three charges, but by then the submarine was deep beneath the surface and moving away. A little over a quarter of an hour after the strike of the last torpedo, *Tradewind's* asdic picked up the crackling sounds of the target breaking up.

Because her main periscope was out of commission, *Tradewind* could not closely search for hostile aircraft or get a good look at the armament carried by the little escorts. Had Maydon been able to judge the strength of their armament, as he said in his report, it might have been profitable to have waited until they were well laden with survivors and then to have surfaced and gunned them. Under the circumstances this was not considered prudent. And so Maydon reloaded his tubes

and wisely waited until just after 5 before he returned to periscope depth and risked a look through the secondary periscope. The sea was empty, except for the outline of one of the escorts about three miles away. The target was gone, and *Tradewind* turned away. As night fell, she surfaced, moving southeast through torrents of rain. Behind her in the darkness the sea was full of dying men.

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Junyo Maru had indeed gone to the bottom, and gone quickly. One torpedo had smashed into her forward, a second aft, the first hurling a shower of debris into the air—metal, wood and human beings. The stricken freighter soon began to go down by the stern, her siren screaming. There was panic in the crowded holds.

The prisoners down below had only a single iron ladder by which to escape their steel trap, and the men struggled and fought to reach their only way out. Others climbed high enough to pull themselves up by the braces supporting the planks covering the hatch. Some men already on deck helped others out of the struggling mass in the hold. Up on deck the senior POW officer, an English captain named Upton, was giving orders to clear prisoners' dunnage away from the stacks of life rafts and get them over the side. Many of the captives pitched in to follow his directions. Meanwhile, the Japanese guards ran aimlessly back and forth—some jumping into the sea, still carrying their rifles.

The crew struggled to release the two lifeboats slung outboard toward the rear of the center island, and POWs began to throw into the sea not only life rafts, but pieces of timber and anything else that would float. More and more of them began to jump overboard as the dying freighter settled deeper by the stern. The men in the water could see the torpedo holes in her sides, gaping gashes some 20 feet across. As the gunboat circled the area dropping depth charges, the corvette began to pick up survivors. Some prisoners were saved, but most of those rescued were Japanese, each of whom waved a small Japanese flag, apparently part of their equipment.

The terrified *romushas* huddled together toward the bow. Only a few of them tried to save themselves by jumping overboard, and a few tried to climb the foremast to escape the rising water. By now the Japanese had gotten one lifeboat overboard, but it flooded quickly because of a hole in the side. When swimming prisoners tried to grasp the sides of the swamped boat, the Japanese in the boat beat them off with an ax.

As *Junyo Maru* settled deeper in the water, her bow rose more sharply into the air and the cluster of *romushas* began to slide toward the stern and the remorseless rising water. As the angle of her deck rose, men began to lose their grip and fall into the sea. And then the freighter slid quickly beneath the surface, her bow rising almost to the vertical, and she was gone, leaving the surface of the Indian Ocean littered with struggling men.

Night fell and the stars came out. Survivors clung to rafts and debris while their strength held out. All around them other men were dying in the night, crying for help in the darkness, but there was no help to come. One group pulled their most exhausted comrades onto their almost submerged raft, then swam away from other desperate cries in the night, fearful that their raft would not support another human being. Some swimmers finally gave up, letting themselves slip beneath the water. One man bit another prisoner in the neck and drank his blood. At daybreak, the Japanese corvette returned, and some of those still living were pulled from the water. The rest were gone.

Of the 1,700 or so Western POWs and about 500 Indonesian prisoners, some 1,500 died. Of the *romushas*, more than 4,300 of them, only a couple of hundred survived. As closely as it is possible to estimate, 4,320 men went down with *Junyo Maru* or died in the water later. And that does not count the survivors who were worked to death, murdered or died of disease in 120-degree heat during the construction of the Sumatran railway. Of 680 saved from the sea and sent to build the railroad, one survivor wrote, only 96 of the POWs survived; there were no survivors among the miserable *romushas*.

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Tradewind and her captain survived the war. The submarine served until she was put into fleet reserve at Portsmouth in 1953. She was scrapped two years later. For a long time Maydon did not know about the cargo of the ship he had sunk off western Sumatra. It was not until many years after the sinking that he corresponded with a survivor, asking what the cargo of *Junyo Maru* had been. The submariners had always been afraid, he wrote, that we would scupper our own people. Only then did he learn, from the survivor, that his torpedoes had in fact killed thousands of his own, and Allied, troops. The effect of that knowledge on Maydon can only be imagined.

No blame attaches to *Tradewind's* skipper, a fighting sailor carrying out his orders, or to the other Western fighting men whose bombs and torpedoes took the lives of their own countrymen or allies. The real blame lies with the Japanese, not only for their callous and brutal treatment of prisoners and slave laborers but also because they neglected to display the Red Cross as a warning that the hell ships carried POWs. Displaying that respected talisman would have cost next to nothing. And it would have saved thousands of lives. Some things are hard to forgive.



The Junyo Maru Commemorative Plaque at Ereveld Leuwigadjah, Tjimah

[Source: <https://www.historynet.com/juno-mayru-torpedoed-by-british-submarine-hms-tradewind.htm> | Robert Barr Smith | March 2002/September 2021 ++]