

THE RAN'S CHINESE COASTAL STEAMERS

With the onset of World War II in September 1939, the RAN began requisitioning merchant vessels to supplement the fleet and release warships for operational duties around the world. These vessels served as coastal patrol vessels, stores issuing ships, amphibious landing ships, in fact, they were employed in any activity where there was the greatest need. Hundreds of ships and small craft were requisitioned into war service throughout the Commonwealth with many of them retaining their original, often colourful, names. Amongst them were HMA Ships *Ping Wo*, *Poyang*, *Whang Pu* and *Yunnan*.

These four ships were coastal steamers owned by Chinese subsidiaries of British shipping companies and were all of a similar size, between 2600 and 3300 tons.

Ping Wo and *Whang Pu* had both been requisitioned by the RN in 1942 and were in various stages of refit in Singapore when it became apparent that the island would soon fall to the Japanese. On 2 February 1942 they joined a large number of Allied warships and merchant vessels which were evacuating the port up until the final surrender of the island on 15 February.

The two ships made their way to the Australian west coast with *Ping Wo* enduring the more eventful passage as she participated in the longest tow in Australian naval history. HMAS *Vendetta* was undergoing a refit in Singapore in 1942 and could not be made seaworthy in time to escape the Japanese advance. With only a skeleton crew onboard, the decision was made to tow *Vendetta* from Singapore to Melbourne, a journey of some 8000km that took 72 days. *Ping Wo* was one of five ships involved and handled the tow from Batavia to King George Sound from 17 February to 24 March. With doubts about the seaworthiness of *Ping Wo* in the rough waters of the Great Australian Bight, the tow was handed over to the smaller but more sturdy SS *Islander*. *Ping Wo* remained in company with *Vendetta* and *Islander* for a time as she continued on to Melbourne and, indeed, nearly fell victim to the waters of the Bight. *Vendetta's* Commanding Officer, Lieutenant WG Whitting noted at one point '*Ping Wo* has completely disappeared. We last saw her running before the gale like a surf board.'¹ But *Ping Wo* did make it across the Bight, and commissioned as HMAS *Ping Wo* on 22 May 1942.

Whang Pu, meanwhile, arrived safely in Fremantle on 1 March. She had been fitting out as a submarine depot ship for the RN before the fall of Singapore, and spent the next year and a half at Fremantle as an accommodation ship for Dutch submarine and minesweeper crews as the Australian and British naval authorities considered how best to use her.

Poyang and *Yunnan* did not have to escape the oncoming Japanese in Singapore as they were already in Australian waters. *Poyang* had arrived in Broome from southern China on 19 December 1941 while *Yunnan* had arrived in Fremantle from Singapore on 23 December. Both were requisitioned by the RAN in February 1942 and fitted out as Armoured Stores Issuing Ships in Melbourne before

heading to Sydney at the end of April. The two ships operated primarily off the Australian east coast for the remainder of 1942 and most of 1943 making occasional voyages to New Caledonia and New Guinea.

By mid-1942, all four ships were being used by the RAN in some capacity, but *Ping Wo* was the only one that had been commissioned into the RAN. After fitting out in Melbourne, *Ping Wo* departed for Sydney in June. In September she continued on to Port Stephens to operate as a support vessel to the Combined Operations Training Centre, HMAS *Assault*. She was used primarily to transport water and other stores to the Landing Ships Infantry but was also used as a training ship. Some 20,000 Americans and 2000 Australians received training in amphibious warfare at *Assault* over two years. When the Centre was closed down in October 1943, *Ping Wo* was converted to a repair ship and re-deployed to New Guinea.



HMAS *Ping Wo*

Ping Wo remained in New Guinea throughout 1944, based mainly at Milne Bay, conducting the unglamorous but essential work of a repair vessel and fulfilling other duties as required. In January 1945 she returned to Melbourne to refit as a works ship to carry out naval construction work at ports where civilian labour was not available. She was underway again that July bound for Morotai in the Moluccas with a directive in force that neither the crew nor the ship's equipment was to be disintegrated in any way without the prior approval of the Naval Board.² Such was the parlous state of naval bases in the Pacific that officers at Torokina and Rabaul made enquiries as to the availability of *Ping Wo* to assist in construction efforts there before the ship had even left Australian waters. As it happened, *Ping Wo* experienced engine difficulties and was delayed at Townsville, preventing her from reaching any of those destinations. She instead made for Madang in October where she once again acted a stores issuing ship until February 1946, assisting in the repatriation of Allied servicemen and former prisoners of war. She then sailed for Hong Kong

where she arrived on 8 June 1946, decommissioned on 24 June and was subsequently returned to her owners.

By the end of 1943, two more of the Chinese ships had commissioned into the RAN; *Whang Pu* on 1 October and *Poyang* on 6 December. *Whang Pu* had been causing some consternation since her arrival in Fremantle as neither Australian nor British naval authorities could decide what to do with her. When she finally did commission, the original intent was that she become a repair ship for the Fairmile motor launches based at Fremantle. This plan was abandoned and she instead made her way to Melbourne for fitting out as a mobile repair ship. As with *Ping Wo* before her, *Whang Pu* found crossing the Bight most difficult, encountering gale force winds which forced her crew to work round-the-clock to keep her afloat. In April 1944, following her refit, she made her way north to New Guinea.



Crew members from HMAS *Whang Pu* circa 1944

In July 1944, *Whang Pu* assisted in the construction of the base at Madang transporting equipment and stores as well as providing construction parties, and assisting in the clearing and levelling of that part of the base allocated for the RAN. This proved to be a very busy period for *Whang Pu* as, not only did she provide construction parties, but continued operations as a repair ship and a stores issuing ship. The crew's efforts in difficult conditions were commendable, particularly as they were struck by a number of ailments common to the tropics, including several cases of malaria. Their efforts were praised by the Naval Board who noted the less-than-ideal conditions that they were working in.³

Whang Pu continued to assist construction efforts at Madang until January 1945 when she began conversion to a Stores Issuing Ship, a role she had by then been performing for some time. She was underway again in June and was based at Morotai for the remainder of the year. In spite of officially being a Stores Issuing Ship, *Whang Pu* continued to offer repair assistance to Allied ships in the harbour. She departed Morotai for Hong Kong in February 1946 where she decommissioned on 22 April and was handed over to the British Ministry of War Transport before being returned to her owners.

Poyang, meanwhile, after commissioning in Sydney, departed for New Guinea, on New Years Day 1944. She operated off the north coast of New Guinea primarily supplying ammunition to Allied ships. She spent much

time in convoy during the year and, as part of the Service Force Seventh Fleet – Leyte Gulf Unit, provided ammunition and other supplies to ships involved in the Leyte Gulf landings of October 1944, in spite of engine defects which had plagued the ship since construction.⁴ Additionally, coal shortages in New Guinea made it difficult for *Poyang* to maintain operations prompting the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, Commander Gatacre, DSC, to question why the ship was sent to New Guinea in the first place.⁵

Following a brief period back in Australian waters in December 1944 and January 1945, *Poyang* returned north and spent the remainder of the war in the New Guinea and Morotai areas, and was in Morotai at the end of hostilities on 15 August. She was one of twelve RAN ships which made up the naval force at Ambon when the 33rd Australian Infantry Brigade was landed to occupy the island. She remained in northern waters until 7 January 1946 when she returned to Sydney and decommissioned on 6 March. She was handed over to the Ministry of War Transport in August before being returned to her owners.

Yunnan was the last of the quartet to commission. Having being requisitioned and spending most of 1942 and 1943 in Australian waters, she proceeded to New Guinea in August 1943 to act as a stores issuing ship and returned to Sydney in June 1944 to undergo a refit before commissioning. Upon her return to New Guinea at the end of October, she joined *Poyang* in the Service Force Seventh Fleet. *Yunnan* also suffered from the coal shortages which had affected *Poyang* during this period.

Yunnan sailed for Leyte Gulf in December where she remained from 26 December 1944 through to early May 1945 supporting Allied ships involved in the Lingayen Gulf landings of January 1945. For the next three months she operated in waters around New Guinea, the Admiralty Islands, Morotai and the Sulu Archipelago. She returned to the Philippines after the cessation of hostilities before sailing for Sydney in October where she decommissioned on 31 January 1946. She was handed over to the Ministry of War Transport on 9 May 1946 before being returned to her owners.

The four Chinese coastal steamers are often viewed as something of a novelty; just four strange names consigned to the history books of the RAN. However, their contribution to Allied operations in New Guinea and the Philippines, and their assistance in the successful landings at Leyte and Lingayen should not be so readily dismissed. The respective crews worked long hours under adverse conditions with remarkable camaraderie. Their service was, and remains, a credit to the RAN.

Petar Djokovic

¹ G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, p. 577.

² Memorandum from the Secretary of the Naval Board, 9/7/1945.

³ HMAS *Whang Pu* Report of Proceedings, September and October 1944.

⁴ HMAS *Poyang* Report of Proceedings, May 1944.

⁵ HMAS *Poyang* Report of Proceedings, August 1944.

