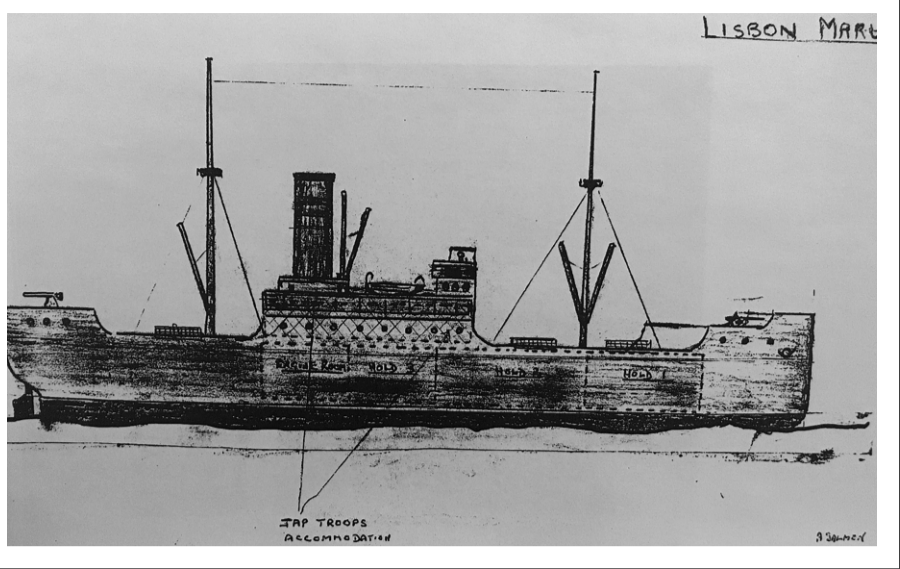


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Above: A sketch of the *Lisbon Maru* by one of the survivors.

Right: Briton Dennis Morley recounts his survival story to Fang Li at his home in Gloucestershire, England, in 2018.

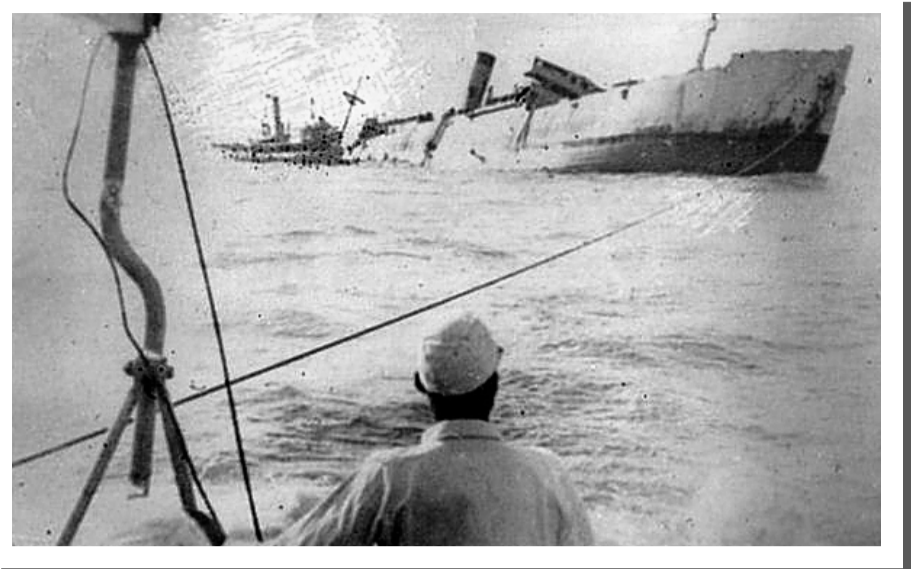
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A poster of the documentary *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru*

“The real long-term impact of war is on the families of those who were killed and those who survive.”

Tony Banham, British historian



Above: One of the last photos of the foundering *Lisbon Maru*.

Left: Relatives of *Lisbon Maru* survivors throw flower petals at the coordinates of the shipwreck off the coast of Zhoushan, Zhejiang province, in memory of their fathers in 2019.



From page 1

Filmmaker Fang Li spent eight years making the film. With rare footage and historical archives, the documentary tells the heroic and tragic story of both the lost and the saved.

Finding the wreck

Fang first heard about the tragedy in 2013 when he was on a boat heading from Zhoushan, Zhejiang province, toward Dongji Island while working on another film.

The island is the home of the fishermen who saved the British soldiers. The captain of the boat Fang was on, pointed to the open sea and said the *Lisbon Maru* was lying underwater with hundreds of people trapped in the hold, but no one knew its exact location.

“From the moment I learned about this, out of curiosity, I was determined to find this shipwreck,” said Fang, who trained as a geophysicist in the 1980s and helped locate a plane’s black box in 2002 after it crashed into the Bohai Sea.

In 2016 and 2017, Fang carried out two surveys of the area and finally captured sonar images of a wreck 140-meters long and 40-meters wide, lying 30 meters below water. “We found it! I was quite proud about that,” Fang said.

The coordinates of the shipwreck — 30°13'44.42" N, 122°45'31.14" E — are printed on the film’s poster and also on the back of the T-shirts of Fang’s documentary team.

“After finding the ship, I wanted to find the survivors to understand their stories and what they went through 82 years ago. This is how the story was uncovered. Now, it’s time to share it with more people,” he said.

The story begins with the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in the winter of 1941.

At the time, Hong Kong was under British colonial rule with 15,000 troops stationed there. Hours after Japan’s strike on the Pearl Harbor US Navy base in Hawaii, on Dec 7, 1941, Hong Kong was also under attack.

The battle ended in 18 days with 8,500 Allied soldiers taken as prisoners. The next year, the Japanese army began transporting prisoners, including the Hong Kong POWs, in requisitioned civilian ships back to Japan as forced labor to repair roads, extend airports, and do other work to assist its military operations.

Hell ship

Because these transport ships were unmarked they became targets and some were hit by “friendly fire” from US submarines. Due to the cramped, inhumane living conditions onboard, they were referred to as “hell ships”.

Tony Banham, a British historian based in Hong Kong, has written



Relatives of *Lisbon Maru* survivors attend a remembrance ceremony on Dongji Island, Zhejiang province, in 2019. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Lisbon Maru: Epic quest to uncover story of fatal sinking

about the wartime defense of the city. While doing research in the 1990s, he came across records of the deaths of more than 700 British Commonwealth soldiers marked as “lost in the *Lisbon Maru*”.

After further research, Banham located and interviewed a dozen survivors of the tragedy. With the material he gathered, in 2006 he published *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru: Britain’s Forgotten Wartime Tragedy*.

He wrote that the number of those who perished on “this dirty little ship” was more than half the amount lost on the *Titanic* thirty years earlier, “but while the latter had spawned eternal interest and the world’s biggest box-office success, the former had been completely forgotten”.

When Fang made up his mind to make a documentary about the *Lisbon Maru* he recruited Banham as a historical adviser.

But time was running out. When Banham began writing his book in 2003, there were only nine surviving POWs from the ship. By 2018, when Fang began filming, the number had dwindled to two.

Fang also enlisted Brian Finch, a retired major, as the film’s military adviser. Finch had served with one of the survivors and became interested in the incident. He translated *A Faithful Record of the Lisbon Maru Incident*, which was compiled by the

Lisbon Maru Association of Hong Kong, from Chinese to English.

Last survivors

In April 2018, the documentary team embarked on its first trip to the UK, visiting 20 cities, and various museums and archives. They also interviewed the last survivor in the UK, Dennis Morley, who died in 2021 at the age of 101.

Morley was a 22-year-old in the Royal Scots regiment when he was put on the *Lisbon Maru*. After the war, he settled in Gloucestershire, England, and kept the horrific wartime story to himself.

But when he faced Fang’s camera, he recounted the horror that unfolded after the ship was torpedoed. The Japanese soldiers batted down the three holds the POWs were in, he confirmed.

“We were sealed in, we couldn’t get out anyway,” said Morley. “The water is pouring in. The bastards are going to drown us.”

In one hold, the ladder broke, trapping many of the Royal Artillery members. As the ship sank, survivors said they heard *It’s a Long Way to Tipperary*, an uplifting British marching song, being sung.

Some of the prisoners managed to escape and jumped into the water only to face a hail of machine-gun fire from other Japanese ships that had come to rescue their compatriots.

“The Japanese were shooting at them, and you swam among dead bodies,” said Morley. “Eventually, the Chinese fishermen came out and started picking up people, and then the Japs stopped shooting.”

Morley was picked up by one of the Japanese ships, but was grateful to the fishermen whose heroic actions prevented a complete massacre. “Those Chinese fishermen didn’t know that they saved a lot more people than they thought they saved,” he said.

Fang’s team also interviewed Lin A’gen, the last surviving fisherman, at the age of 95, on Dongji Island.

“Four men on a boat, (and) altogether some 20 to 30 boats went out,” said Lin, who has since passed away. “When people get in trouble at sea, we always go to help them, that’s very natural for us.”

The story of the *Lisbon Maru* has also been preserved by the local museum and studied by Chinese scholars. A document from the Zhejiang Provincial Archive declassified in 2005 detailed the rescue efforts.

After the fishermen saved 300 POWs, Japanese soldiers went to the village the next day and recaptured all but three who were hidden by the villagers in a cave.

Three Britons — J. C. Fallace, W. C. Johnstone, and A. J. W. Evans — escaped to Chongqing, China’s wartime capital. Through broadcasts, they disclosed the *Lisbon Maru* inci-

dent as well as the Japanese mistreatment of POWs, the first time this information was made public.

A record of that great rescue is kept in an exhibition hall in the Dongji History and Culture Museum. More than 400,000 visitors have visited the museum since it opened in 2009.

Full account

To find people connected to survivors of the sinking, Fang accepted interviews with the BBC, and bought full-page advertisements in *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *The Guardian* newspapers.

His team received 300 emails, mostly from the children and relatives of the survivors, saying that they had heard the stories about the tragedy and were eager to share them. From 2018 to 2019, the team flew to the UK four times and interviewed 100 families, filming hundreds of hours of footage.

In 2018, another survivor, 98-year-old William Beningfield was located in British Columbia, Canada. His memories were crystal clear, and the film documents his account of how the sinking unfolded.

Fang also interviewed the relatives of the US submarine engineer who fired the torpedo, and who lived with a sense of guilt after learning that POWs were onboard.

Striving for a full and fair account,

Fang’s team overcame difficulties to locate the archive of the incident in Japan. They interviewed the daughter of Shigeru Kyoda, the *Lisbon Maru*’s captain. Kyoda was imprisoned for seven years for his role in the incident following a post-war trial.

The team also interviewed Fumitaka Kurosawa, president of the Military History Society of Japan, who analyzed the intentions of the Japanese military commander Lieutenant Hideo Wada who gave the order to abandon the POWs.

In 2019, Fang organized for some of the relatives of the *Lisbon Maru* survivors to visit Dongji Island to meet the children of the fishermen. During the visit the families held a long-overdue memorial service at sea near the shipwreck.

In 2021, a memorial dedicated to the 828 POWs who perished and over 200 more who died in captivity, was unveiled at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, England.

Long-awaited premiere

In August last year, a special screening of the nearly finished documentary took place in the British Film Institute’s Southbank theater, in London, following delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The screening was for 400 relatives and friends of the *Lisbon Maru* POWs.

“When we filmed Morley, we promised that we would give him this documentary as his 100th birthday gift, but unfortunately we could not make it,” Fang said.

After the two-hour screening, applause erupted and many in the audience shed tears. Banham, the historian, said he could hear people sobbing from the moment the film started.

“The true story of war is grief,” Banham said. “It’s the impact on families. Many documentaries about war talk about the glamour of war, the aircraft, the tanks, the colorful explosions. But, the real long-term impact of war is on the families of those who were killed and those who survived.”

In June, the long-awaited documentary finally made its global debut at the 26th Shanghai International Film Festival. Of 450 films, *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* was chosen to open the festival.

Morley’s daughter Denise Wynne tearfully said after watching the film that “history should not be forgotten or distorted”.

Some family members of the fishermen were also present at the premiere, including Chen Xuelian, whose father steered a sampan to rescue several British POWs.

“I’m so excited to see my father’s image on the screen today. I’m so proud of his heroic acts,” said Chen.

Zhang Kun and Wang Xin in Shanghai contributed to the story.



Left: Lin A’gen (sitting), the last surviving fisherman, shakes hands with the relatives of the *Lisbon Maru* survivors, who came to visit Dongji Island in 2019. **Middle:** Fang Li (left) interviews Fumitaka Kurosawa, president of the Military History Society of Japan, in 2019. **Right:** A sonar image of the *Lisbon Maru* ship lying about 30 meters underwater off the coast of Dongji Island.

