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**IRRAWADDY FLOTILLA COMPANY, 1865 - 1950**

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**Retyped by  
Sarah Starkey, Curator of Maritime Archives  
October 2008**

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### **IRRAWADDY FLOTILLA COMPANY, 1865 - 1950**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Irrawaddy Flotilla and Burmese S.N. Co., Ltd., was formed in 1865 to implement a contract with the Government of India for the conveyance of HM troops and mails on the Irrawaddy, together with general traffic from Rangoon to Mandalay. The company is considered to be one of the most interesting of its kind that ever existed and has made a notable and major contribution to the development and prosperity of Burma.

The Managing Agents in Rangoon were Messrs. Todd, Findlay & Co., and with extended services to the main creeks of the Irrawaddy Delta, which services later employed some 100 steamers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By 1869 a service was established from Rangoon to Mandalay every 10 days, the subsidy for the mails being £100 per month per ship. Later this service became a weekly one and the Mandalay-Bhamo service monthly.

The year 1875 was an important one in that the services were incorporated as the Irrawaddy Flotilla Co., Ltd., and at that time the fleet consisted of 13 steamers and 29 flats.

From this time onwards progress was rapid and the fleet grew to very large proportions. Not only were existing services accelerated and rendered more frequent, but a great many new feeder and ferry services were instituted. One of the main commodities shipped up the Irrawaddy was rice which was milled for export.

Trade with Burma was potentially extremely rich, but moreover, there was also intense interest in the mid-nineteenth century in the prospect of opening up an active trade route from Rangoon right up to the Irrawaddy as far as Bhamo and across the mountains into China itself.

The company was beset with problems the principal being the state of the vessels taken over from the Government, the difficulties of navigation in the changing currents of the Irrawaddy, and of knowing the correct type of vessel to build for little known conditions. Replacement was the order of the day, and by the end of 1872, the fleet comprised eight new steamers and two buildings, and 12 flats and four buildings. The service was extended to Bhamo, almost 1,000 miles by river from Rangoon and within 130 miles of the Chinese frontier.

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In 1904 the author, V.C. Scott O'Connor of the Indian Civil Services, presented one of the best pictures of Burma under British rule, and aptly referred to the Irrawaddy Flotilla Co. as 'the great organisation to which Burma owes so much'.

Denny designed paddle-steamers, the first being over 300 feet in length with a 40 feet beam and nearly 900 gross tons. Powerful engines were required to give a good speed against the swift current and to save weight he adopted steel instead of iron which reduced hull resistance. The design of these mail steamers set a pattern for many years, carrying European crew, clerical staff and light cargo, first-class cabins, second-class cabins and the space between set aside for Burmese deck passengers whose colour and life were always one of the most individual and pleasant features of travel on the river.

In 1908 the Burmah Oil Co. built a pipeline from the oilfields to a refinery at Syriam just outside Rangoon. Although this made a considerable difference in the volume of business, a great deal of oil continued to be carried by river for other companies, and alternative activities were soon found to restore the balance.

The 1906 the present King and Queen, then Prince and Princess of Wales, graciously accepted the offer of a steamer from the company for their trip from Mandalay to Prome.

In 1908 the Burma River Transport Co., Ltd., was formed. In 1910 they had twenty-two steamers and twenty oil flats on the river, towing oil for the Rangoon Oil Co. Several of their vessels were built at Kamakasit, the majority being brought over from Calcutta and England.

Towards the end of 1911 the Burma River Transport Co., Ltd., went into liquidation, and most of their steamers and flats were bought by the Flotilla. A number of cargo steamers were built being added to the fleet in 1914.

During the First World War HSI *Sikkim* was one of the two Hospital ships running until the arrival of the new hospital craft from the U.K. in 1918. This vessel was towed over from Bombay, with Lieutenant Armstrong in command, and was immediately converted into a hospital ship. She ran in that capacity for the duration of the war.

She brought the first batch of sick and wounded back from Kut, after its capture in exchange for Turkish prisoners. From 16 February 1916 to 20 June 1918 she carried in all 21,625 patients, viz. British officers 927, British other ranks 11,841, Indian officers 97, Indian other ranks 8,496, and Turkish prisoners of war 264. She had accommodation for 144 cot cases.

In 1920 the Burma Steam Launch Co. of Moulmein went into liquidation and their vessels were bought and added to the company's service at Moulmein.

The conservation of the river from China Bakir to Bhamo was perhaps the most important department in the company's service, keeping the channels buoyed the whole year round, cleaning snags and rocks, and supplying pilots to all steamers. Up to 1919 there were 18 small launches, all called after rivers, used for buoying, which

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patrolled their own particular section of the river. At this time over eight million passengers were carried every year, accidents occurring very rarely, and then generally through no fault of the company.

In 1934 a separate company was incorporated as a subsidiary of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Co., to operate aircraft in Burma; it was known as the Irrawaddy Flotilla & Airways Ltd. Messrs. Bulloch Brothers Foundry at Pazundaung had been taken over by the Irrawaddy Flotilla Co., a short while before, and a hangar and slipways were constructed there to house the new aircraft.

By 1938 the fleet comprised some 600 vessels of all descriptions from the large paddle steamers to the small buoying launches, including a host of barges, flats and lighters. In a normal year prior to the Second World War, the company carried over 8 million passengers and 1¼ million tons of cargo. This gives an idea of the magnitude of its operations.

During the invasion of Burma by the Japanese in 1942, practically the whole fleet was deliberately scuttled and Captain H.J. Chubb writes in great detail of that fateful period in the company's history, culminating in the destruction of the fleet by the company's personnel, and the dreadful trek through the N.W. Burma jungle to India during May 1942.

On 1 June 1948 the company's fleet and other assets passed into the hands of the new Burmese Government and, with the passage of time, the prospects of the re-establishment of the fleet and services on anything approaching their former scale seems extremely remote.

The company continued to exist legally until 26 June 1950, when the final meeting of the stockholders was held and the company went into voluntary liquidation.

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Ref. Code.	Description	Date(s)
D/IR	<p><b><u>IRRAWADDY FLOTILLA COMPANY</u></b></p> <p><b>Box 1</b></p> <p>Large photograph album, containing photographs (1-206): The photographs consist of paddle steamers especially built for the Flotilla.</p> <p><b>Box 2</b></p> <p>Large photograph album, containing photographs (207-477): Flag of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Co.; Salvage Photographs; Engines of paddle steamers; Pilot steamers; Tug building; Rangoon senior staff; Rangoon office staff; Belmont House.</p> <p><b>Box 3</b></p> <p>Large photograph album, containing photographs (478-714): Design for the Handbook cover, issued for British Empire Exhibition, 1924; Capital £2160,000 Stock Certificates; Photographs of Dalla Dockyards and foundry; Dalla Dockyard staff; Buildings and store rooms of the Dalla Dockyard; Kho Kim's daughter who christened the steamer <i>Pekin</i>; Rangoon foundry; Agency houses, with workers; Baby Elephants landing at Plymouth from the SS <i>Arracan</i>; New Rangoon Office.</p>	<p><b><u>c.1880 - 1945</u></b></p> <p>c.1855 - 1925</p> <p>c.1885 - 1937</p> <p>c.1880 - 1945</p> <p>28 Dec 1945</p>