

# Y T O R R A M!

In one of the most unequal and unlikely naval encounters of the Second World War, a converted riverboat took on a Japanese convoy. **Steve Snelling** charts the last remarkable voyage of HMS *Li Wo* and her gallant captain, 'Tam' Wilkinson.



# STAND BY TO RAM!

Riverboat ver



### TOP INSET:

An early portrait of 'Tam' Wilkinson in his Merchant Navy papers while serving with Alfred Holt's Blue Funnel Line.

### TOP: HMS

*Repulse*. She sank off Malaya on 10 December 1941.

### RIGHT:

Wilkinson proved to be a 'superb ship handler' navigating the Upper Yangtze between the wars.

### BELOW RIGHT:

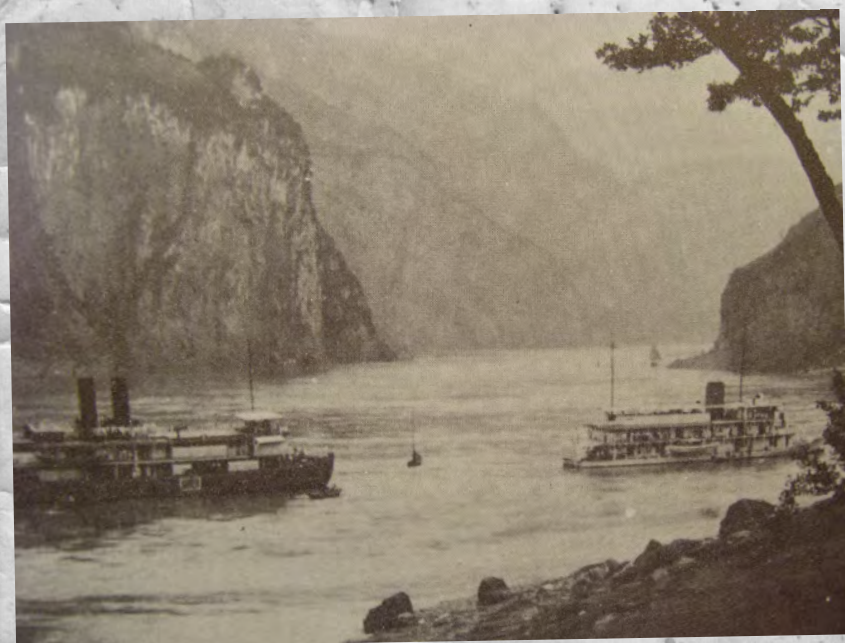
Tom 'Tam', Wilkinson VC (1898-1942) served in the Merchant Navy during the Great War before rising to captain in the Indo-China Steam Navigation Company. Commissioned into the Royal Naval Reserve in 1940 after returning from leave, his last words to his brother proved prophetic: 'If I get in a tight spot you won't see me again - I shall go down fighting.'

Company, known as 'Jardines', although there is no record of them having served together before teaming up on *Li Wo*.

Thomas Wilkinson, or 'Tam' as he was known, was senior in age and rank. Born in Widnes on 1 August 1898, the youngest of five brothers, he left school at 14 and served as cabin boy and deckhand aboard the sailing sloop *Irene*, captained and part-owned by his father.

From there he progressed to the Merchant Navy and Alfred Holt's Blue Funnel Line during the First World War. His career prospered, and by 20 he was quartermaster of a 6,000-ton troopship and survivor of at least two U-boat attacks.

He remained in the merchant service after the war, rising to second mate and joining 'Jardines', operating passenger and trading steamers along the coast and waterways of China and the East Indies.



Over the next 17 years he rose steadily through the ranks, earning his master's certificate in 1925, captaining a variety of ships and acquiring an enviable reputation as a superb ship handler whose abilities had been tested in the most adverse circumstances.

One of his former chief officers, John Littler, who served under him aboard the *SS Hang Sang*, remembered him as being typical of the "many other China coast captains who displayed valour in the face of insuperable odds, long before we were at war".

He described 'Tam' Wilkinson as an abstemious, non-smoking "ruddy-faced man of Lancashire" who "enjoyed life immensely, read widely, was fond of music and liked to play the 'market' when it appeared sensible to do so".

As China descended into full-

scale war, Wilkinson found himself confronting not just bands of pirates but ever more threatening Japanese forces. When Tsingtao came under attack in 1938, he braved Japanese bombs to help evacuate thousands of people from the endangered city. "For a time I feared that he might have lost his life in the city," wrote Littler, "but not a bit of it. I can see his grinning face now, as he returned in the dusk from the shore."

### LAST COMMAND

Wilkinson was on leave in Widnes when war broke out in 1939 and it was not until January 1940 that he travelled back to Shanghai. Not long after, the newly-commissioned Lt Thomas Wilkinson, RNR, was posted to what proved to be his last command: the

## STAND BY TO RAM! Riverboat versus Jap Convoy: 1942

auxiliary patrol vessel HMS *Li Wo*.

Built in Hong Kong in 1938 for service on the upper Yangtze River, the 707-ton, flat-bottomed, twin screw craft was the very model of a 'Jardines' river steamer. And not even the addition of a 4-inch gun on its fo'c'stle, a Holman Projector, a couple of Lewis guns and an array of anti-submarine equipment altered that.

From requisition in March 1940 through to refit in Singapore and commissioning in June, her overall appearance, with double-stacked cabins running along two-thirds of her 170 feet length, never really changed. She looked precisely what she was, a peacetime leisure boat masquerading as a man o' war.

The presence among her crew of so many 'Jardines' men served only to foster the impression. As well as Wilkinson, many of the officers and crew were pre-war members of the

Indo-China Steamship Navigation Company.

Yet, for all that, life aboard the *Li Wo* in the months leading up to the Japanese invasion of Malaya was less than harmonious. In stark contrast to John Littler's appraisal, Stanton thought Wilkinson "a rough and ready individual... with very pronounced views, bad grammar and the record of being the most inconsistent human being alive".

Quite what Wilkinson made of his second-in-command is not known. Nor, it must be said, are there any other accounts to support Stanton's scathing criticism. But for all their differences, they evidently found a way of working together through the mostly uneventful patrols out of Singapore.

Part of the 51<sup>st</sup> Anti-Submarine Flotilla, their work took on a new intensity in December 1941 when



Japan launched its attack in the Far East and began a remorseless advance down the Malayan peninsula. From then until February, action came thick and fast but the biggest threat came from the growing number of air raids.

During January, *Li Wo* narrowly escaped destruction while riding at anchor, and on another occasion was shaken by near misses.

By the second week of February, the Malayan mainland was in Japanese hands and there was fighting on Singapore. The sight of fires raging out of control and smoke billowing above the city were enough to convince Stanton that the garrison's days were numbered. And he was not alone. >>

**ABOVE:** A destroyer rescues crew from HMS *Prince of Wales*. For some, they would leap from 'the frying pan into the fire', as they crewed HMS *Li Wo* during her 'Black Friday'.

**ABOVE LEFT:** A riverboat flying the Union Jack caught up in the Sino-Japanese war. During the 1938 evacuation of Tsingtao, 'Tam' Wilkinson showed courage.



**ABOVE:** The 707-ton *Li Wo* in all her pre-war glory. Built in Hong Kong in 1938 for the Indo-China Steam Navigation Company's Yangtze passenger service, she was requisitioned in 1940 and refit as an auxiliary anti-submarine vessel. Serving as part of the 51<sup>st</sup> Anti-Submarine Flotilla, she was armed with a single 4-inch gun, a Holman Projector and a pair of Lewis Guns.

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Riverboat versus Jap Convoy: 1942



**ABOVE & BELOW RIGHT:** Large evacuations of European women and children took place as the Japanese closed on Singapore. The last organised convoy left after the island was invaded.

**MIDDLE:** Comic-strip heroism: The epic story of the *Li Wo* was the cover story in the July 15, 1961 edition of *The Victor*. It repeated the erroneous reference to the ship being armed only with 13 practice shells which first appeared in a hearsay record of the action that found its way into the citation for Wilkinson's posthumous VC.

As resistance crumbled, plans were made for a last desperate effort to save as many men as possible from impending disaster. A rag-tag armada of little ships was gathered to stage a final evacuation. Among them the *Li Wo*.

## 'COOLNESS AND COURAGE'

Wilkinson spent the last few days on patrol, rescuing survivors from sunken ships and trying to dodge the hail of bombs that had become a daily hazard.

In one of the worst episodes, *Li Wo* came under attack from four Japanese aircraft. "We were going flat-out, and bombs were dropping from about 200 feet," wrote Stanton.

What followed would lead Stanton to view his captain in a new light. "The

CO was on the top bridge conning the ship and watching each bomb as it was released," he added. "He would shout the helm order and hard over the wheel would go. The ship would lie right over on its side and would turn away."

In this way, *Li Wo* successfully ran the gauntlet, though the blast from the bombs blew the helmsman away from the wheel and red-hot shards of shrapnel started small fires on the decks.

A fragment from the last bomb struck close to where Wilkinson was standing. It was an extraordinary exhibition of leadership and seamanship during which, thought Stanton, "...he showed great coolness and courage".



Returning to Singapore, Wilkinson was given a new mission: to join a hastily arranged exodus sanctioned by Rear-Admiral Ernest Spooner, tasked with preventing the navy's last remaining ships falling into enemy hands and evacuating 3,000 military and civilian personnel to Batavia. Departure was set for Friday 13 February and followed in the wake of the final organised convoy of transports to leave Singapore two nights earlier.

Before then, however, there were significant changes in personnel. Plans were made for a draft of seamen, many of them survivors of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, to replace *Li Wo*'s mostly Malay crew. Some 84 men, led by Chief Petty Officer Charlie Rogers, a range-finder aboard *Repulse*, were ferried out to their new ship.

How many were aboard the vessel is unclear, but one estimate gave as many as 138 passengers and crew, including RAF and RAAF personnel and around half the ship's Malay complement who were still aboard.

They joined an already disparate crew made up of originals and additions, including another 'Jardines' captain, Andrew Robertson, New Zealander Sub Lt Edgar Neil Derbridge, Ldg Seaman Arthur Thompson, late of the patrol launch HMS *Simit*, Able Seaman Billy Snow, already holder of a BEM, and a 34-year-old Australian mining engineer, Richard McCann, who helped 'bunker' the ship and was allowed to remain "for general utility purposes".



**LEFT:** Rear-Admiral Ernest Spooner, DSO, senior naval officer Malaya, seen here behind Sir Shenton Thomas, Governor of Singapore, issued orders for the Black Friday evacuation conducted by the Navy's last remaining ships, including *Li Wo*. Spooner's fate was tragic, escaping on a motor launch but running aground on a coral reef, leaving passengers and crew marooned on a nearby island where most, including the admiral, succumbed to disease and starvation.

All would figure in the story of *Li Wo's* last voyage which began around 0300 on 13 February when she headed out of Singapore, anchoring south of Raffles Lighthouse till daylight before passing through the Durian Strait minefield.

It was a passage fraught with danger. As well as narrowly avoiding collision with another vessel, the presence of enemy aircraft was constant cause for concern. "We were all pretty well keyed up," wrote Stanton, "mines a few feet away from us on either side and possible bombs from overhead. I had a rather sick feeling in the pit of my stomach"

**'GO DOWN FIGHTING'**  
The fate of the last-gasp evacuation armada would fully justify his anxiety. Over the course of the next few days, the waters between Singapore and Sumatra became a veritable ships' graveyard.

The record of *Li Wo's* perilous journey is a confused one. Survivors' accounts vary markedly and gave rise to rancorous post-war disputes that subsequently prompted investigation by the Naval Historical Branch.

In his official report, Stanton stated that the ship suffered damage to its superstructure after coming under sustained aerial bombardment from "approximately 52 bombers" in two waves over a period of 1¾ hours on the afternoon of 13 February. But others spoke only of "spasmodic" attacks by small numbers of aircraft.

Ldg Seaman Tom Parsons, formerly of the *Prince of Wales* and gun-layer of *Li Wo's* solitary 4-inch gun, reckoned the ship was attacked four times by fighter-bombers on the first day out of Singapore. "Thanks to the skill of Lieutenant Wilkinson," he related, "all the bombs missed." >>

**BELOW:** Fires rage in the Singapore Naval Yards. By the second week of February 1942 air raids on the island were almost a daily occurrence.



## STAND BY TO RAM!

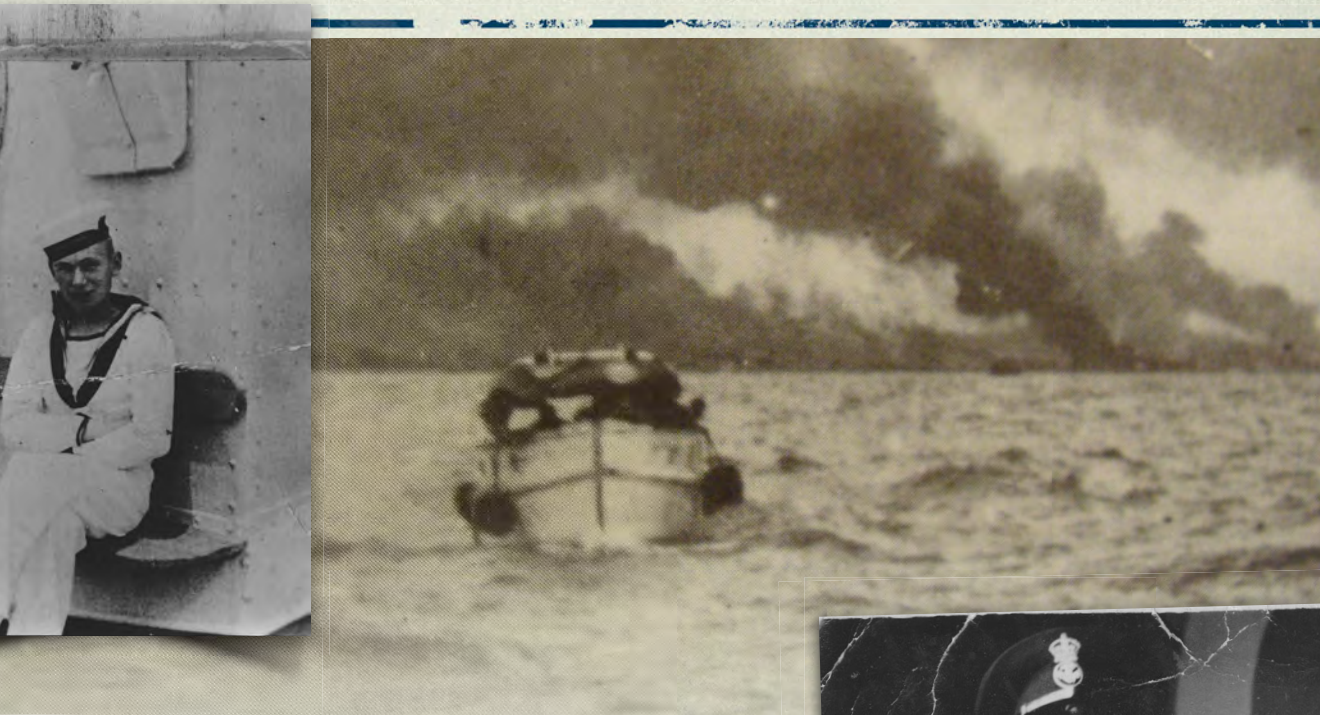
Riverboat versus Jap Convoy: 1942



**ABOVE:** A packed launch sails from a smoke-wreathed Keppel Harbour.

**ABOVE INSET:** Leading Seaman Tom Parsons, formerly of *Prince of Wales*, was gun-layer on *Li Wo*. He survived the action and captivity though official accounts listed him as dead. He was mentioned in Despatches in the London Gazette of 23rd July 1946, for "Good services whilst a Prisoner of War in the Far East".

**RIGHT:** Able Seaman Billy Snow, 19, died steering *Li Wo* on her ramming course. A former boy seaman, he had been awarded the British Empire Medal for gallantry after HMS *Glasgow* was torpedoed in December 1940.



Parsons, whose detailed testimony was considered the most credible, recalled two further air attacks the following day: first by a single aircraft, and then by two.

Wilkinson spent the early hours of 14 February off Singkep Island. He considered remaining there before making a dash at night across the Banka Straits, but ultimately decided against it, believing the consequences of being caught at anchor out-weighed the hazards of pressing on.

A few hours later *Li Wo* encountered another enemy aircraft. According to Stanton, the river steamer suffered further damage to its superstructure and hull above the waterline following a persistent attack by an enemy seaplane lasting 1½ hours. Parsons, however, remembered nothing as dramatic. "Lucky for us," he noted, "it was a Jap reconnaissance plane, with no bombs, as we were a sitting target."



Whatever the truth, there was no doubting the seriousness of their plight as an even greater menace materialised. "Suddenly, on the horizon, dead ahead," wrote Chief Petty Officer Rogers, "we sighted the tops of three funnels, which turned out to be a Japanese cruiser carrying 6-inch guns. We also sighted off our port bow a Japanese destroyer heading the convoy which was in sections of four and six ships."

The second of two convoys spotted making for the Banka Strait, its very presence changed everything so far as Wilkinson was concerned. In that moment, he appeared to abandon all thought of escape in favour of one last, improbable action.

Perhaps he had always intended it so. Later, his brother, William, would recall his parting words to him as he headed back to the Far East. "If I get in a tight spot," he had said, "you won't see me again - I shall go down fighting."

Now, on the bridge of the *Li Wo*, he prepared to do just that. According to Stanton's official report, there was the briefest of consultations before they - or rather Wilkinson - concluded "that *Li Wo* was in a position to inflict considerable damage on the enemy, before she could be sunk herself, and if we had to go, we could take at least one ship with us".

### 'BLAZING FURIOUSLY'

Like much else to do with *Li Wo*'s last mission, her final action is mired in argument.

Most contentious was the dispute over the composition of the 4-inch gun crew commanded by Sub-Lt Derbridge. Ldg Seaman Thompson,



serving as ship's quartermaster, wrote of being senior rating in charge, a role that Parsons insisted was filled by CPO Rogers.

Stanton also claimed to have joined volunteers manning the gun, a move the Historical Branch found "somewhat unusual" given his duties as second-in-command.

As *Li Wo* closed on the enemy, Parsons recalled Wilkinson's words to the gun crew. "Ahead of us is a Jap convoy," he said. "I am going to take as many Jap bastards with us as possible."

Parsons made a swift check of available ammunition; just six semi-armour piercing shells, four graze fuze shells, three anti-aircraft shells and three practice shells.

Moments later, with battle ensigns hoisted, *Li Wo* opened fire. The range, according to Parsons, was about 4,000 yards and the first shot went too high. "I ordered fix sight, rapid salvos. I know that at least three of our five remaining shells hit our target, a troop transport. Soon it was blazing furiously."

The scene was a mayhem of fire, smoke and churning water. With range rapidly diminishing, it was clear the transport was in trouble. One shell carried away part of the bridge and its hull was holed. To Stanton it seemed as if she was being “abandoned en-masse”. Not long after, they were steaming through “a mass of struggling bodies”.

But then it was *Li Wo's* turn to suffer. She was now in the very midst of the convoy, barely 500 yds from the nearest ships, now recovering from the shock of audacious assault.

“A host of smaller transports were circling about getting shots in at us” wrote Stanton. “One got so close our machine-gunners had an exchange of shots with them from the bridge deck.”



**LEFT:** A graphic representation of *Li Wo's* encounter with the Japanese convoy which accompanied a newspaper account based on Ron Stanton's colourful recollection of the fight.

**MIDDLE RIGHT:** Chief Petty Officer Charlie Rogers (left) commanded more than 80 men, mostly survivors from *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, drafted to *Li Wo*. Rogers, who had been a range-finder on *Repulse*, was Mentioned in Despatches for his part in *Li Wo's* final action.

Despite such defiance, *Li Wo* was soon reeling. One shell ripped through the steamer's vulnerable superstructure, killing and wounding many. Another burst of fire tore along the starboard side.

The end was inevitable, but still the valiant riverboat fought on. “Our ammunition was expended,” recalled Parsons. “But I will always remember a RAF sergeant who manned the twin Vickers Lewis guns on the starboard side. His devastating fire wiped out the four-man gun's crew of the second target.”

Wilkinson had one final ace up his sleeve. Grabbing hold of one of the

bridge stanchions, he ordered Billy Snow, his redoubtable helmsman, to steer a collision course for the transport his gun had set afire.

### ‘PROUD AND HONOURED’

In those last moments, *Li Wo's* guns fell silent as the surviving crew awaited the crash. “It came in a couple of minutes,” wrote Stanton, “700 tons at 12 knots, right into the engine room (port side amidships) of a 2,300-ton transport”.

The enemy ship heeled over under the impact. For a few moments the two ships were “interlocked” before drifting apart to reveal *Li Wo's* smashed bows buckled back as far as the windlass. ➤

**BELOW:** A flat-bottomed river gunboat off *Malaya*, typical of the ragbag armada that took part in the exodus from Singapore to the Dutch East Indies.



# STAND BY TO RAM!'

Riverboat versus Jap Convoy: 1942

The author thanks Diane Snow and Irene Andrews for assistance with pictures and research for this article.



**Pte. THOMAS JONES (TODGER)**  
V.C. D.C.M.  
22nd Cheshire Regiment  
Awarded the Victoria Cross  
26th October 1916

**Sgt. THOMAS MOTTERSHEAD**  
V.C. D.C.M.  
Royal Flying Corps  
Posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross  
12th February 1917

**Lt. THOMAS WILKINSON**  
V.C.  
Royal Naval Reserve  
Posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross  
17th December 1946

**ABOVE:** A VC memorial in Widnes, honours three local heroes, including Tom Wilkinson, who executed one of the bravest actions of the war, having never had any naval training.

Peering up at the bridge, Stanton saw Wilkinson shouting orders to the helmsman, but nobody was there. As Wilkinson appeared in the wheelhouse, Snow came dashing back. Understandably, he had imagined his mission already accomplished.



**RIGHT:** Former Chief Petty Officer Charlie Rogers had veterans of Trafalgar and Jutland among his forebears. Having survived the loss of the *Repulse* and the *Li Wo*, Rogers, served 25 years in the Navy, and died aged 86 in 1997.

By the time Stanton made it into the water shells were bursting all around *Li Wo*. He swam about 100 yards before pausing to look back. He glimpsed Wilkinson through the smother of shells. "I waved. He waved back and stepped into his cabin. That is the last I saw of him."

Not long after, *Li Wo*, fires licking around her bridge, slid bows first beneath the waves, White Ensign still fluttering.

It was the end of the fight, but not of the story and *Li Wo*'s survivors faced another grim battle. For some, that meant more than three years as POWs. For others, it ended quickly and savagely, machine-gunned in the water, devoured by sharks, murdered by bandits or drowned from exhaustion.

Stanton, Rogers, Parsons, Thompson and McCann were among the lucky 11 men who lived to tell the epic story.

As a result of uncorroborated evidence gathered in captivity, recognition for Wilkinson and his crew

was sought in the aftermath of Japan's defeat. The result was a posthumous mention in despatches for *Li Wo*'s captain and admission that "had the story been more fully substantiated" the Admiralty "would have been disposed to recommend a posthumous VC".

A year later, on 17 December 1946, the possibility became reality after a claim by Thompson for a DSM for his part in the action sparked further inquiry.

The list of awards that followed proved contentious. As well as a DSO for Stanton, as the sole-surviving officer, two men received DSMs and Thompson had his original recommendation up-graded to a CGM, but other claims were ignored.

Yet, amid all the controversy, there was universal satisfaction at the VC which honoured 'Tam' Wilkinson's desperate defiance. Remembering his skipper, half a century later, Tom Parsons declared: "He was the bravest man I ever met and I feel proud and honoured that I served under such a gallant hero." ☉

**BELOW RIGHT:** Able Seaman Albert Spendlove was awarded one of only two DSM given to survivors of *Li Wo*. Recognised 'as a member of the 4-inch gun crew' which 'fought with courage and effect', his DSM group fetched £10,000 at a 2006 Dix Noonan Webb auction. (DIX NOONAN WEBB LTD)

There was, indeed, nothing more to be done. "Our steering gear was broken and it was no longer possible to manoeuvre" wrote Stanton.

With a rain of shots reducing *Li Wo* to matchwood, Wilkinson bowed to the inevitable and ordered "abandon ship". Parsons, who had been wounded in the chest, and Rogers, his leg cut by shrapnel, both made it into the water, where they were joined by a number of others, including Derbridge, Thompson and Stanton.

Before leaving Stanton tried to persuade Wilkinson to follow them, but he had no intention of going. According to Stanton, he had always maintained he would shoot himself rather than be taken prisoner - and he believed him.

