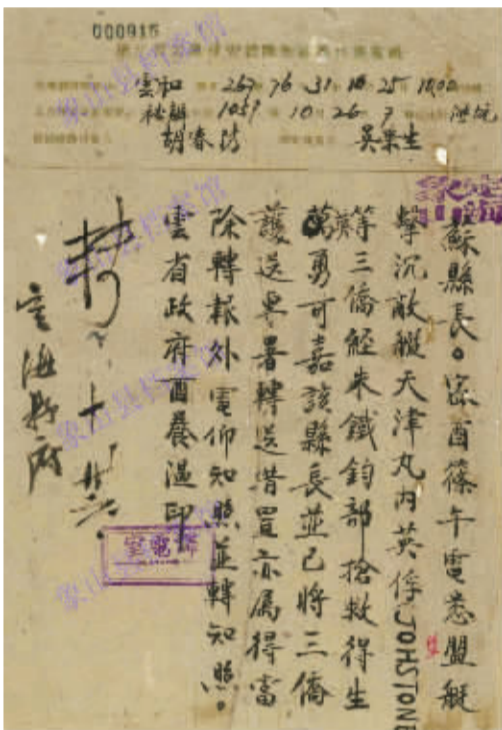


# Archival Telegram Unveiled in Behind Movie ‘Dongji Rescue’

*Editor’s Note: This year marks the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. In commemoration, this series of reports by Ningbo Evening News revisits some lesser-known wartime stories and friendships.*



The telegram from the Zhejiang Provincial Government to Su Benshan, mayor of Dinghai and Xiangshan Counties. Provided by the Xiangshan County Archives.

On August 15, *Dongji Rescue* held its European premiere in London. Back in China, the film has already been gaining momentum since its domestic release a week earlier, drawing audiences nationwide and sparking lively discussion on social media.

The film tells the story of courageous fishermen who risked their lives to rescue survivors after the Lisbon Maru—a Japanese cargo ship carrying more than 1,800 British prisoners of war—was torpedoed off the Zhoushan Islands in eastern China in 1942. As the vessel sank, the fishermen from nearby Dongji Island bravely rushed to rescue 384 men and shield them from Japanese search parties.

As the movie revives public memory of this 80-year-old event, a long-hidden telegram from the archives of Xiangshan County in Ningbo—near the site where the Lisbon Maru sank—has surfaced recently, revealing new details and shedding light on a forgotten chapter of the war.

In July 2025, the Xiangshan County Archives announced new findings about this event, thanks to a timeworn telegram unexpectedly dis-

covered when staff flipped through stacks of yellowed documents (Note: Some punctuation has been added by the reporter for ease of reading.):

*“To County Mayor Su of Dinghai and Xiangshan: Confidential. Received telegram at noon reporting that an allied vessel sank the enemy ship Tianjin Maru, which was carrying three British prisoners (JOHSTONE) [Johnstone] of war. They were all rescued by Zhu Tiejun’s troop, whose act demonstrates remarkable bravery. The county mayor has already escorted the three to the commissioner’s office with appropriate arrangements. It had been reported to a higher level, and you need to convey it to the relevant parties.*

*Zhejiang Provincial Government (seal), October 22.”*

The telegram was only 76 Chinese characters long, yet each struck like thunder: how could this account bear such a striking resemblance to the world-shocking sinking of the Lisbon Maru? Could the Tianjin Maru be the Lisbon Maru? And what hidden connection lay between the two?

## Telegram Mystery

### The Mystery of Connection Between the Tianjin Maru and the Lisbon Maru

This telegram was sent by the Zhejiang Provincial Government to Su Benshan, the mayor of Dinghai and Xiangshan counties. Preceding the main text were two lines that clearly explained its origins:

The first line gave the source, noting that at 10:00 a.m., October 25, 1942, the telegram was dispatched from Yunhe, which was then the seat of the Zhejiang Provincial Government.

The second line stated that it was delivered at 7:00 a.m., October 26 from Zhangkeng, a village that is now part of Dajiahe Town, Ninghai County.

In March 1942, Xiangshan fell to the enemy, prompting the relocation of the Kuomintang’s party, government, and military offices to western Xiangshan and nearby villages in Ninghai, where they operated in a dispersed manner. The county mayor’s residence then moved to Guanshan Village (now part of Xizhou Town, Xiangshan), while Ding Xiang Security Corps’ radio station was set up in Zhangkeng, about 18 kilometers away.

The telegram also mentioned two dates: “Youxiao” at the beginning and “Youyang” at the end.

According to Chen En’guang, a staff of Research and Publicity Section at the Xiangshan County Archives, these were date codes, corresponding to October 17 and October 22 respectively.

Thus, it can be inferred that at noon on October 17, Su sent a telegram to the Zhejiang Provincial Government regard-

ing the escort of three rescued British prisoners. The telegram preserved in the archives is the government’s reply to Su, likely drafted on October 22.

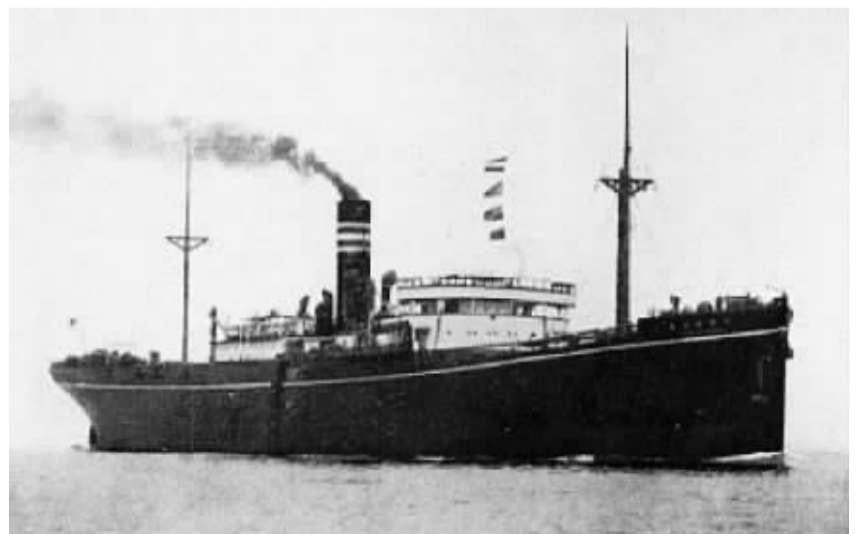
The dates of the telegram exchanges, the reference to “sank the enemy ship” and the name “JOHSTONE [Johnstone],” all reminded Chen of the sinking of the Lisbon Maru.

On September 27, 1942, the Japanese cargo ship Lisbon Maru departed Hong Kong, escorting more than 1,800 British POWs to Japan. On October 1, while passing through the waters near Qingbin Island in Dongji Township, Dinghai County, it was struck by a torpedo fired from an American submarine and sank in the following day.

During that time, the Japanese took no rescue measures. Instead, they nailed the holds shut with wooden planks and opened fire on British prisoners attempting to escape, killing more than 800. Another 384 were rescued by local fishermen.

On October 3, Japanese troops landed to search for survivors, capturing nearly all of the prisoners. Fortunately, three—J. C. Fallace, W. C. Johnstone, and A. J. W. Evans—escaped by hiding in a cave. They were later escorted through multiple locations to Chongqing, and eventually returned to Britain.

Was the connection between the Tianjin Maru and the Lisbon Maru merely a coincidence—or did they share a deeper link?



An old photo of Lisbon Maru.