

THE REMARKABLE DEFENCE: SHELL TANKER *ONDINA*

Reginald Appleyard

Prior to Japan's entry into World War II, Nazi German raiders and warships had sunk many Allied warships and merchant vessels in the Indian Ocean. Japan's entry is most notably associated with its attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbour and the sinking of two British warships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* during December 1941, with the loss of nearly one thousand lives. Japanese raiders and submarines were equally effective in their attacks on merchant shipping from a network of bases that they had established in the Indian Ocean region.¹

A major step in Japan's harassment of Allied shipping was the departure from Penang during the autumn of 1942 of two so-called auxiliary cruisers — the *Hokoku Maru* and the *Aikoku Maru* — both bound for the central Indian Ocean. Shell oil tankers plying the route between oil-source countries in the Middle East and Australia were especially vulnerable to attack.

One such Shell tanker was the Netherlands motor vessel *Ondina*, 9070 dw tons, speed 10.5 knots. During November 1942 she left Fremantle for Abadan carrying a small consignment of wheat and 150 tons of oil to refuel the small corvette *Bengal* that accompanied her. The Australian-built *Bengal* was armed with only one 7.5 cm gun; her maximum speed was 15 knots.² *Ondina* had a modern quick-firing American four-inch gun, manned by ratings from the Royal Australian Navy's DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships) unit.³

When approximately 1400 miles north-west of Fremantle, both vessels encountered the two Japanese raiders. The *Aikoku Maru* had been launched in 1940 as a passenger cargo ship. However, with her smaller sister ship the *Hokoku Maru* she was later acquired by the Japanese navy and converted into an armed merchant raider. With maximum speeds of 21 knots, the two vessels had between them sixteen 5.5 inch guns as well as torpedo tubes and float planes. *Hokoku Maru* (hereafter referred to as Raider 1) initiated the attack on *Ondina* and *Bengal*.

Agreement has never been reached on the role and achievements of each Allied vessel in the short battle that ensued. The 'accepted version', prepared by Royal Australian Navy officers, was based on accounts given by Australian, Dutch and British participants aboard *Ondina*. In summary, it concluded that on recognising the two raiders, the master of *Bengal* ordered *Ondina* to turn away and proceed independently. He also gave her a rendezvous for 24 hours later. Raider 2 (*Aikoku Maru*) remained in the background, confident that her sister ship could 'handle' a small corvette and a cumbersome tanker. *Bengal* returned fire but the shots from her small gun fell well short of the target. Then, five minutes into the action, *Ondina*, yet to turn away, opened fire on Raider 1. Her fifth shot hit Raider 1's aft, causing a 'violent explosion'.

She continued firing, as did Raider 1, which shot away *Ondina's* topmast and main aerials, but *Ondina's* shots were more effective and Raider 1 began to sink.

Disagreement concerning the respective contributions of *Ondina* and *Bengal* in this remarkable action stems from reports made by officers of *Bengal* on their return to India, who claimed it was *Bengal's* sixth shot that hit Raider 1's ammunition store.⁴ However, Japanese archives, based on the final entry in Raider 1's log, record that a shot from *Ondina* striking its spare torpedo was the cause of her sinking.⁵ Dutch officials, whom I interviewed in 1971, were adamant that *Bengal* was simply not involved in the battle and that when the first shots were fired she 'ran for cover'. Norman Wilkinson's painting of the battle scene includes *Bengal* in the action (Figure 1), but the Shell official in whose office the painting hangs agreed that while it is a nice painting 'it would be accurate if *Bengal* wasn't in it'!

Wilkinson was a Lieutenant-Commander in the Royal Navy during World War I and a marine artist during World War II. His 'dazzle painting' technique was a new method of disguising ships at sea. The *Ondina* battle, painted c. 1945, is held at the Shell Company Office, The Hague, Netherlands.

There is less disagreement concerning the second phase of the battle. With her sister ship sinking Raider 2 came after *Ondina*. Her ammunition exhausted, *Ondina* surrendered by hoisting two white sheets. But Raider 2 continued the attack, one shot hitting the bridge and killing Captain Horsman (Figure 2).

The crew abandoned the vessel in lifeboats and Raider 2 fired two torpedos into *Ondina* at 400 yards, causing two large holes below the waterline. She listed 35 degrees and, as the official report notes, must have 'appeared to the raider to be doomed'. Raider 2 then opened fire with machine guns on survivors in the lifeboats, killing three and wounding another three, before rescuing crew from Raider 1, many of whom were alive in the water.⁶

With Raider 2 gone, the crew, some badly wounded in *Ondina's* lifeboats, which were leaking from gunfire, and hundreds of miles from the Australian coast, decided to try and board the burning, listing ship. They were surprised that, despite clouds of smoke streaming from the vessel, the fire was essentially superficial and, most importantly, the engine room had not been damaged. *Ondina's* list was rectified by flooding empty tanks opposite those through which the torpedos had entered. Severe damage to the bridge required the ship to be steered initially from the emergency wheel located aft above the rudder. Thus, by nightfall, *Ondina* was underway, headed for Fremantle which she reached on November 18, seven days after the battle.



Figure 1
Norman Wilkinson's oil painting illustrates the battle, mid-Indian Ocean during November 1942, between Shell Oil tanker *Ondina*, and the Royal Indian Navy corvette *Bengal*, and two Japanese raiders, *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru*. *Ondina* is seen firing at *Hokoku Maru*, already ablaze. *Aikoku Maru*, yet to engage in the battle, is on the horizon. *Bengal* is also engaged in battle. Courtesy: Royal Dutch Shell plc.



Figure 2
 “Near where the tanker’s captain was killed”.
 Courtesy: The Shell Company of Australia Limited, *Fifty Years in Western Australia 1908-1958*, written and edited by Frank A. Bird, WA Newspapers Periodical Division, 1958, p.42.

Local Shell officials who met *Ondina* as she entered the harbour accompanied by four (or five) navy vessels, could hardly believe what they saw: ‘... a gaping hole through which two buses could be driven’, said one of them. ‘God knows how she made it.’ ‘Everyone was surprised to actually see us’, said one of the crew. ‘They’d been told, in a message from *Bengal*, that we’d been sunk’.

Back in India similar celebrations as those held in Fremantle were arranged for the crew of *Bengal* ‘... which recently made history in the Indian Ocean by sinking a heavily armed Japanese raider nearly ten times her size’, declared the *Times of India*.

Though damaged but safe alongside North Wharf (Figure 3), the hardly-seaworthy *Ondina* was in need of extensive repairs. However, in 1942 Fremantle Port was not noted for its facilities to repair damaged vessels. The port had several small slipways but no dry dock, so repairs had to be done while the ship was tied up at the wharf. It was a huge job, recalled Alan Chalmers, then a young employee at Fremantle Foundry & Engineering Company, which had won the repair contract. McLarty’s boilermakers, according to Don Monteath and Norm Hugo, former employees, never stopped working on *Ondina*. The State Implement Works was also involved because it had the kind of equipment necessary to complete the job.

To the credit of these participating companies and their workers, *Ondina* was ready to sail by mid-1943. By then, the fortunes of war had moved slightly in favour of the Allies, and submarines based at Fremantle (located in pens close to the railway bridge), had to travel increasingly further northwards to confront Japanese vessels in south-east Asian waters. However, their limited capacity for fuel storage restricted the distance that they could travel from Fremantle. They needed a re-fuelling base en route. As the military base at Exmouth Gulf was an important cog in strategic plans to defeat the enemy, it was decided to send *Ondina* to the Gulf where, at anchor, she would refuel or ‘top-up’ submarines on their journeys from Fremantle to the war zone and also on their return journeys.

Accompanied by a small American XP boat, *Ondina*’s voyage to Exmouth Gulf was unduly long due to her condition. Anchored about three miles offshore (Figure 4⁷), she was protected by an anti-submarine net. When an



Figure 3
 Aerial starboard side view of the Dutch tanker *Ondina*, North Wharf, Fremantle.
 Courtesy: the Australian War Memorial, Neg: 303731.

allied submarine approached for fuel, one of the YP boats would take hold of the protective net and swing it away so that the submarine could enter and refuel. *Ondina* also had a supply of aviation fuel taken by smaller vessels to seaplanes.

In mid-1943 oil tankers were in very short supply and so it was decided to send *Ondina* to the United States. She took an incredibly long ninety-four days to reach the Panama Canal. Repairs and re-construction were made at Tampa, Florida, and for the remainder of the war *Ondina* transported aircraft across the Atlantic, an extra deck having been added to accommodate them⁸. At war's end she was repainted in peacetime colours and served Shell until broken up in 1960. On 12 February 1956 she returned to Fremantle. As she slipped quietly into the harbour, few Western Australians were there to recall her dramatic entry under vastly different circumstances during November 1942.

Of the battle itself, one can only applaud the courage and discipline of *Ondina's* gun crew, hopelessly outnumbered in terms of guns and ammunition, and also the skills of the officers who brought her back to Fremantle and, in particular, the Chinese quartermaster, Ah Kong, who remained on the bridge throughout the battle when the Master had been killed alongside him⁹. The Shell Company is understandably proud of its officers. Prominently displayed at the company's Rotterdam headquarters is *Ondina's* bell, mounted on an ornate stand. Fremantle's boilermakers worked incessantly for seven months to get the vessel seaworthy and play an important role at Exmouth Gulf. Not only did the loss of Raider 1 contribute to the Japanese government's decision to abandon raider warfare,¹⁰ but the outcome of the battle lifted to new heights the sagging morale of the Allies, at a time when almost every news item reported losses on land and sea.

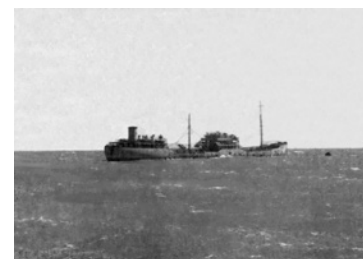


Figure 4
Ondina at anchor several miles off shore, Exmouth Gulf. From the personal album of Commander Dulm, The Hague, Netherlands.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper is essentially a summary of an article by the author titled, "The Ondina Saga, November 1942" in *Early days*, volume 12, part 2, 2002, pp.141-154.
- 2 Herman Gill, G., *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945*, Australia in the war of 1939-1945 series, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1968, pp.192-93.
- 3 Davies, Lloyd., "A remarkable victory", mimeo, 2002, p.3.
- 4 Australian National Archives, B614/3, 1644.
- 5 Australian War Memorial Archives, file 419/114/029
- 6 Stanton-Hope, I. W E., *Tanker Fleet. The war story of Shell tankers and the men who manned them*, London, Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, 1948, p.82.
- 7 Grateful thanks of appreciation to Barry Sullivan, Royal Western Australian Historical Society (RWHS), who digitally restored the plates presented in this article to a quality suitable for publication.
- 8 National Archives of Australia, Series B 6121/3, item 1644, folio 38f; Alex Marcus, DEMS, Boolarong Publications, Brisbane, 1986, p.120.
- 9 National Archives of Australia, Series MP11 85/8/0, item 1932/2/29. Handwritten note the letter from the Naval Officer in Charge, Fremantle, by Secretary of the Naval Board, 30 November 1942.
- 10 Visser, Jan., 'The Ondina story', <http://www/geocities.com/dutcheastindies/ondina.html> P4.