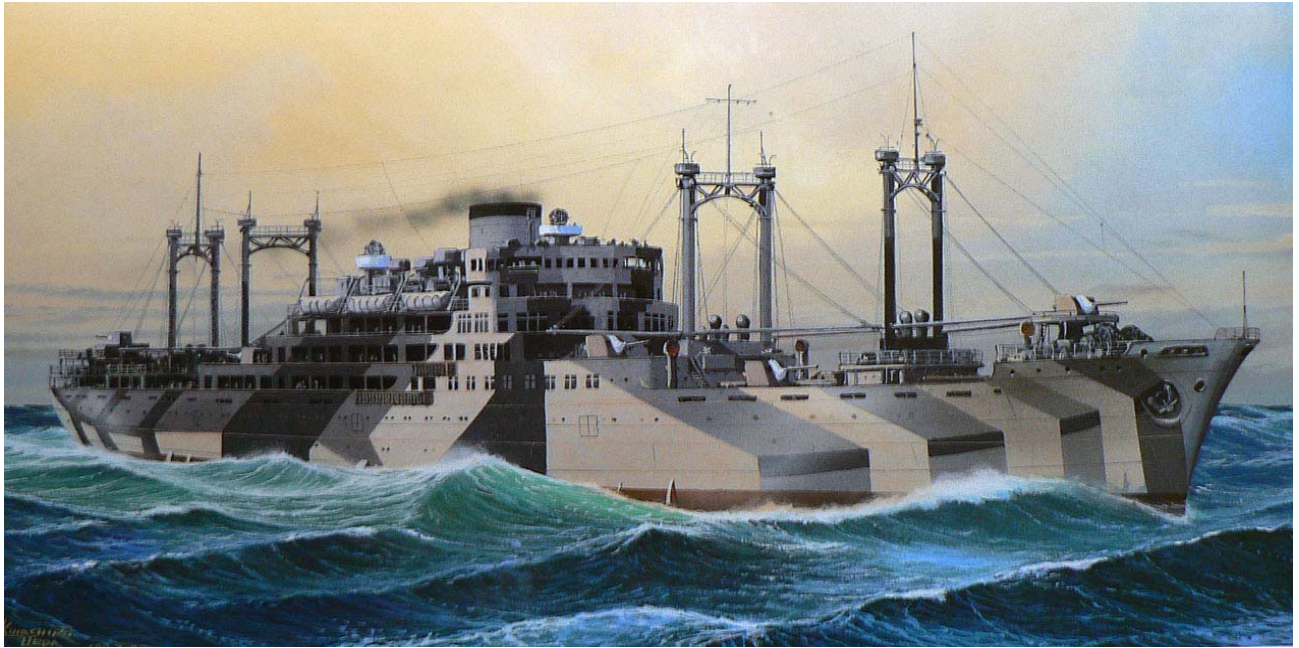


TOKUSETSU JUNYOKAN!



(HOKOKU MARU by Ueda Kihachiro)

IJN HOKOKU MARU: Tabular Record of Movement

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Revision 6

18 August 1938:

Laid down at the Tama Zosenso K. K. shipyard as a high-capacity passenger-cargo ship for the Osaka Shosen Kaisha (OSK) Line's South America and around-the-world service.

5 July 1939:

Launched and named [HOKOKU MARU](#).

22 June 1940:

Completed.

2 July 1940:

Departs Kobe. Arrives at Moji.

3 July 1940:

Departs Moji.

5 July 1940:

Arrives at Dairen, Manchukuo.

9 July 1940:

Departs Dairen.

11 July 1940:

Arrives at Moji. Departs that same day.

**12 July 1940:
Arrives at Kobe.**

**17 July 1940:
Departs Kobe.**

**18 July 1940:
Arrives at Yokohama.**

**19 July 1940:
Departs Yokohama for Nagoya.**

**20 July 1940:
Departs Nagoya for Osaka.**

**23 July 1940:
Departs Osaka and later the same day arrives at Kobe.**

**26 July 1940:
Departs Kobe and later the same day arrives at Moji.**

**27 July 1940:
Departs Moji on Osaka Shosen K. K. Line's South American route.**

**16 December 1940:
Departs Moji on Osaka Shosen K. K. Line's Dairen route.**

**6 February 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.**

**18 February 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.**

**1 March 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.**

**13 March 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.**

**24 March 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.**

**4 April 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.**

**11 April 1941:
Departs Kobe.**

**12 April 1941:
Arrives Moji and departs later the same day.**

**14 April 1941:
Arrives Dairen.**

**16 April 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.**

28 April 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.

10 May 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.

22 May 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.

2 June 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.

14 June 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.

26 June 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.

8 July 1941:
Departs Dairen for Kobe.

4 August 1941:
Docked.

29 August 1941:
Requisitioned by the IJN.

30 August 1941:
Kobe. Begins installation of four 152-mm (6-inch) guns, two 76-mm/40 cal (3-inch) AA guns, type 93 type 13.2-mm MGs and two 533-mm torpedo tubes at the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries shipyard.

20 September 1941:
Registered (commissioned) in the IJN at the Kure Naval District. Recalled Captain-Retired (later Rear Admiral) Aihara Aritaka (38th)(former CO of KAKO) is the Commanding Officer.

15 October 1941:
Fitted with one 1100-mm and one 900-mm search light and special heavy-duty booms for handling floatplanes. Carries one [Type 94 Kawanishi E7K2 "Alf"](#) floatplane and one spare plane. Equipment installation is completed.

That same day, the 24th Squadron (Raider) is established officially under Rear Admiral Takeda Moriji (former CO of ASHIGARA) and attached directly to the Combined Fleet. HOKOKU, AIKOKU and KIYOSUMI MARUs are assigned to CruDiv 24.

13 November 1941:
Departs Kure. Arrives at Iwakuni.

15 November 1941:
At 1735, HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs depart Iwakuni.

24 November 1941: Operation "Z":
Arrive at the standby position at Jaluit Atoll, Marshall Islands. They replenish from the naval supply base on Emidj Island.

26 November 1941:
Departs Jaluit.

8 December 1941: The Opening of Hostilities:
S Pacific, NE of the Tuamotu islands. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs head SE.

13 December 1941:

S Pacific, N of Pitcairn Island. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs overtake and attack 6,210-ton American merchant SS VINCENT, bound from Sydney, Australia, for Panama, carrying a cargo of rice. Prior to her sinking, VINCENT is briefly inspected by a prize crew from HOKOKU MARU led by her torpedo officer. At 1907, the AMCs start shelling the freighter and fire a total of eight shells. About 1935, as a fire breaks out aboard VINCENT, her crew begins abandoning ship in three life boats. Later, the Japanese fire a single torpedo that sends her to the bottom at 22-41S, 118-19E. All nine officers and twenty-seven crewmen survive and are picked up by HOKOKU MARU.

31 December 1941:

AIKOKU MARU launches her E7K2 on a reconnaissance mission. That afternoon, the floatplane approaches from the west and circles the unarmed 3,275-ton American freighter MALAMA, that is en route from San Francisco via Honolulu to Manila. After circling the ship several times, the plane flies off to the east. Soon, the same plane returns and again circles the ship twice before flying off to the west. The Alf fails to return to AIKOKU MARU. Despite long searching by both ships and the second Alf, no trace is found of the missing aircraft.

1 January 1942:

Tuamotu Archipelago. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs rescue several American airmen from lifeboats near Tahiti in the Society Islands.

2 January 1942:

S of the Cook and Society Islands. At 0910, an E7K2 from AIKOKU MARU circles and begins strafing MALAMA. Using international code, the plane orders the ship to stop. At 1415, the plane returns armed with bombs. At 1430, the crew scuttles the ship and they and their passengers leave in two lifeboats. After all hands escape, the plane drops four bombs that set the ship afire. MALAMA sinks at 26-39S, 151-24W. At 1530, HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs arrive and pick up all hands. [1]

January 1942:

Pacific. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs nearly encounter Vice Admiral (later Fleet Admiral) William F. Halsey's (former CO of SARATOGA, CV-2) Task Forces 17 and 18 that are enroute to raid the Gilberts and Eastern Marshalls. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs leave their assigned area, terminating the sortie.

30 January 1942:

Off the Gilberts. False markings on CruDiv 24's ships and aircraft are removed.

4 February 1942:

The 24th Squadron arrives at Truk.

5 February 1942:

Departs Truk for Hashirajima. While enroute, HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs are redirected to proceed to Oita Bay to disembark their prisoners.

11 February 1942:

During the night, the AMCs intercept and inspect a suspicious vessel that turns out to be 5,114-ton Soviet transport KIM.

12 February 1942:

Arrives at Oita.

13 February 1942:

Departs Oita and later that day arrives at Hiroshima Bay.

14 February 1942:

Departs Hiroshima Bay and later that day arrives at Kure. Begins refit and armament modernization. HOKOKU MARU's four 152-mm guns installed the previous autumn are removed and replaced by eight 3rd Year Type 140- mm/50 cal guns.

March 1942:

HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs are converted to carry a supply of submarine torpedoes in one of their holds.

10 March 1942:

Departs Kure for Hashirajima. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs are attached to Vice Admiral Komatsu Teruhisa's Sixth Fleet (Submarines) with the dual responsibility of resupplying SubRon 1 and commerce raiding. They are to carry torpedoes, spares and stores for submarines, including 1,300 tons of diesel fuel, and go with the new SubRon 8 to the East Coast of Africa and the Mozambique.

26 March 1942:

Departs Kure.

27 March 1942:

Arrives at Kure.

29 March 1942:

The 24th Squadron is disbanded. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs are temporarily attached to SubRon 8.

1 April 1942:

Departs Kure.

2 April 1942:

Arrives at Kure.

6 April 1942:

Departs Kure.

9 April 1942:

Arrives at Kure.

14 April 1942:

Departs Kure.

30 April 1942:

Arrives at Penang.

5 May 1942:

Departs Penang with AIKOKU MARU.

9 May 1942:

480 miles SSE of Diego Suarez, Madagascar. Captures 7,987-ton Dutch tanker GENOTA at 17-40S, 76.20E. [2]

5 June 1942:

Indian Ocean, S of the Mozambique Strait. In the early morning, AIKOKU MARU shells and sinks 6,757-ton British merchant ELYSIA, carrying some Allied troops, at 27-19S, 37-01E.

17 June 1942:

HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARU again rendezvous with the submarines of SubRon 8's Ko Detachment.

12 July 1942:

Indian Ocean, near Ceylon. HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs capture 7,113-ton New Zealand merchant HAURAKI at 17-36S, 80-27S. After capture a Japanese prize crew is put on board HAURAKI. The deck crew are locked below, but the engine crew are engaged under guard to run the ship's machinery. In the course of the voyage back to Japan the engine crew manages to pitch most of the spare machinery parts over the side. As a result, the Japanese never obtain much use from the ship.

[3]

Summer 1942:

AIKOKU MARU's floatplanes are changed to two AICHI E-13A "Jakes".

26 July 1942:

Departs Penang.

27 July 1942:

Arrives at Singapore.

10 August 1942:

Arrives at Seletar Naval Base, Singapore.

25 August 1942:

Penang. Captain Imazato Hiroshi assumes command. Captain Aihara is appointed the CO of FUJIKAWA MARU in Sep '42.

Late August 1942:

Temporarily attached to the Southeast Area Fleet to ferry troops from Singapore to Rabaul.

September 1942:

Singapore. The dazzle camouflage painting previously painted at Kure is replaced by a new experimental design devised by LtCdr Fukui. The new dazzle camouflage is painted in light and dark grey (as depicted above in Yuki Takeshi's painting). AIKOKU MARU is similarly camouflaged in three colours: black, dark grey and light grey.

September 1942:

Departs Singapore to Brown Island.

20 September 1942:

AIKOKU MARU is assigned to the Southwest Area Fleet (Eighth Fleet). She is tasked to transport elements of LtGen Sano Tadayoshi's 38th Infantry "Hiroshima" Division to Rabaul for the reinforcement of Guadalcanal. HOKOKU MARU remains at Singapore.

24 September 1942:

Departs Brown Island.

6 October 1942:

Arrives at Rabaul.

9 October 1942:

Departs Rabaul with AIKOKU MARU.

10 October 1942:

Assigned to an Attack Force to intercept enemy merchant shipping.

12 October 1942:

Arrives at Truk.

13 October 1942:

Departs Truk with AIKOKU MARU.

23 October 1942:

Arrives Singapore.

24 October 1942:

Departs Penang.

1 November 1942:

Depart Singapore for a raiding mission in the Indian Ocean.

7 November 1942:

HOKOKU and AIKOKU MARUs negotiate the Sunda Strait and enter the Indian Ocean.

11 November 1942:

Indian Ocean. SW of the Cocos Islands. HOKOKU MARU attacks Captain Willem Horsman's 6, 341-ton Royal Dutch Shell tanker ONDINA and her escort, LtCdr William J. Wilson's, RINR, Australian-built minesweeper HMIS BENGAL at 19-45S, 92-40E. BENGAL closes the range with HOKOKU MARU to protect the tanker.

At 1545 (JST), HOKOKU MARU opens fire. Both ships are damaged in the ensuing action. AIKOKU MARU is 6 miles NW of the scene and closing. A lucky shot from ONDINA's 4-inch gun hits HOKOKU MARU's starboard torpedo tube which had just been loaded. After the ensuing explosion, a fire breaks out that rages out of control and reaches the aft magazine. More explosions follow that blow out her sides. At 1752, HOKOKU MARU sinks. [4]

AIKOKU MARU arrives and hits BENGAL. LtCdr Wilson, confident the ONDINA can outrun the AMC, disengages at best possible speed. AIKOKU MARU scores six hits on ONDINA and virtually disables her. Captain Horsman is killed. AIKOKU MARU fires two torpedoes at the tanker, but both miss. With her ammunition expended, ONDINA's crew Abandons Ship.

AIKOKU MARU rescues 278 of HOKOKU MARU's crew. She fires a last torpedo at ONDINA and departs. Later, AIKOKU MARU departs the Indian Ocean for Penang, then proceeds via Singapore to Rabaul.

ONDINA's crew reenters the ship, effects temporary repairs and departs the area for Fremantle, Australia.

17 November 1942:

BENGAL makes port at East Point, Diego Garcia for repairs. LtCdr Wilson reports ONDINA as lost.

18 November 1942:

ONDINA arrives at Fremantle.

15 December 1942:

Removed from the Navy List.

Authors' Notes:

[1] Japanese sources claim MALAMA was also torpedoed.

[2] On 20 July 1942, GENOTA is commissioned in the IJN as the oiler "OSE".

[3] This story was given first hand to Peter Cundall by HAURAKI's 3rd Engineer. HAURAKI is sent back to Japan, renamed HOKI MARU, and enters IJN service as a transport serving in the South Seas. HOKI MARU is sunk in Truk in Feb '44.

[4] Dutch and Japanese accounts of the battle are generally consistent, but the BENGAL's account does not match either one. Uncertainty also exists as to which ship scored the fatal hit on HOKOKU MARU. Dutch and Japanese sources credit ONDINA. In Singapore Naval circles, there were strong rumours that HOKOKU MARU was accidentally sunk by a hit from AIKOKU MARU.

Special thanks for assistance in developing this TROM go to go to Mssrs. Peter Cundall of Australia, Jean-Francois Masson of Canada, Andrew Obluski of Poland and Jan Visser of the Netherlands.

Thanks go to Toda Gengoro of Japan for information in Revision 4.

The story of the *Aikoku Maru* is one of the saddest and most frightening of World War II. The final moments of this majestic ship were captured on photograph and truly present an impressive case for the utter stupidity of war.

The *Aikoku Maru* was a very beautiful ship. She looked a lot like a smaller version of the famous P&O vessel, SS *Oriana*. The *Aikoku Maru* was laid down on 29 December 1938 and launched on 23 or 25 April 1940 for the Osaka Syosen KK (Osaka Merchant Marine). Note the length of time to build. Designed as a passenger-cargo vessel, she was planned to be used on the Japan to Africa run with two sister ships, the *Gokoku Maru* and the *Hokoku Maru* but in fact never entered this service (see later). There was to be accommodation for 48 First Class passengers, 48 "Special" Third Class, 304 "Regular" Third Class.

She was built by Tama Shipbuilding, Tama, Japan. The *Aikoku* was 10,438 tons gross, 150 metres (492.1 feet) long, 20 metres (66.3 feet) wide and powered by two Mitsubishi B&W diesels (total horsepower of 15,833hp) giving a maximum speed of 20.9 knots. Lloyds Register reports that the engines were 12 cylinders each built by the Tama Shipbuilding Company. She was not completed till 31 August 1941, a very long time indeed considering most vessels around this time only took a few months to be fitted out. She was supposed to be used exclusively in domestic waters, including Japanese occupied areas.



The *Aikoku Maru*

However, she had already been acquired by the Japanese Navy and converted for use as an armed merchant raider. Perhaps this was the reason it took so long to build and fit out the ship.

On 5 September 1941 she was registered (commissioned) in the Imperial Japanese Navy and attached to the Kure Naval District. Rear Admiral-Retired Okamura Masao (38) is the Commanding Officer. Okamura simultaneously assumes joint command of *Kiyosumi Maru*.

On the same day, installation of four 41st Year Type single mount 152-mm guns, two 76-mm/40 cal AA guns, Type 93 13.2-mm MGs and two 533-mm torpedo tubes started at Mitsui Engineering & Shipbuilding. On 15 October 1941 the fitting of one 1100-mm and one 900-mm search light and special heavy-duty booms for handling floatplanes was completed. The *Aikoku Maru* carried one Type 94 Kawanishi E7K2 "Alf" floatplane and another one as a spare. The seaplanes were located on the hatches of holds 4 and 5.

Another source says that the *Aikoku Maru* had guns placed on the bow and stern as well as four guns put adjacent to or near holds 2 and 3. Another two are believed to have been placed aft of the superstructure. There may have also been two twin torpedo launchers on the main deck behind the superstructure. Machine guns were installed on top of the bridge and behind the funnel and anti-aircraft guns were placed on the rear corners of the superstructure. These appear to be more numerous than what I have detailed in the previous paragraph.



A colour painting of the *Hokoku Maru*, identical to the *Aikoku Maru*

Also on 15 October 1941, the 24th Squadron (Raider) was officially established under Rear Admiral Takeda Moriji and attached directly to the Combined Fleet. *Aikoku Maru*, *Hokoku Maru* and *Kiyosumi Maru* were assigned to CruDiv 24.

On 31 October 1941 the *Aikoku Maru* departed Tamano and arrived at Kure. On 13 November 1941 she departed Kure and arrived at Iwakuni. On 15 November 1941 at 5.35 pm the *Aikoku Maru* and *Hokoku Maru* departed Iwakuni. On 24 November 1941 they arrived at the standby position at Jaluit Atoll, Marshall Islands during Operation "Z" (this was the code name for the attack on Pearl Harbor). They refueled and replenished from the naval supply base on Emidj Island.

On 26 November 1941 they departed Jaluit. At the outbreak of the Pacific War (when Pearl Harbor was attacked) on 8 December 1941, they were north-east of the Tuamotu Islands (French Polynesia). They then headed south-east. On 12 or 13 December 1941 (not sure if this was the

Japanese or the local date) the two ships overtook and attacked the 6,210-ton American merchant ship SS *Vincent*. The *Vincent* was a fair distance north of Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific Ocean and steaming in convoy from Sydney to New York via the Panama Canal.

At 7.07 pm, the *Hokoku Maru* started shelling the freighter and fired a total of eight shells. About 7.35 pm, as a fire broke out aboard the *Vincent*, her crew abandoned ship in three life boats. Later, the Japanese fired a single torpedo that sent her to the bottom at S22° 41' E118° 19'. All nine officers and 27 crewmen survived and were picked up by *Hokoku Maru*.

On 31 December 1941 the *Aikoku Maru* launched one of her E7K2 float planes on a reconnaissance mission. In the afternoon the floatplane found and circled the unarmed 3,275-ton American freighter *Malama*. This vessel was on her way from San Francisco via Honolulu to Manila. After circling the ship several times, the plane flew off to the east. Soon after, the same plane returned and again circled the ship twice before it flew off to the west. The E7K2 failed to return to the *Aikoku Maru*. Despite a long search by both ships and the second E7K2, no trace was ever found of the missing aircraft.

On 2 January 1942 the two ships were south of the Cook and Society Islands. At 9.10 am, the remaining E7K2 from the *Aikoku Maru* found the *Malama* II circled and the started strafing the ship. Using international code, the plane ordered the ship to stop. At 2.15 pm, the plane returned armed with bombs. At 2.30 pm, the crew scuttled the ship and they and the passengers leave in two lifeboats. They scuttled the ship rather than let the Japanese capture her (she was bombed by the plane anyway) and the cargo of trucks, trailers and plane spares went to the bottom. After all the crew had escaped, the plane dropped four bombs that set the ship on fire. The *Malama* sank at S26° 39' W151° 24'. At 3.30 pm, the *Aikoku Maru* and *Hokoku Maru* arrived and picked up all hands.

In January 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* and *Hokoku Maru* nearly encountered Vice Admiral William F. Halsey's Task Forces 17 and 18 that were enroute to raid the Gilbert Islands and Eastern Marshall Islands. On 20 January 1942 they left their assigned area and terminated the sortie. On 30 January 1942 they were off the Gilbert Islands and the false markings on the ships and aircraft were removed.

On 4 February 1942 they arrived at Truk and left the next day for Hashirajima. While enroute they were told to proceed to Oita Bay to disembark their prisoners. During the night of 11 February 1942 they intercepted and inspected a suspicious vessel that turned out to be the 5,114-ton Soviet transport *Kym*. On 13 February 1942 they arrived at Oita Bay where the 76 POWs rescued from SS *Vincent* and *Malama* were off-loaded. They departed the same day and arrived at Hashirajima in the evening.

On 14 February 1942 they arrived at Kure. The *Aikoku Maru* began a refit and armament modernisation at the Kure Naval Yard. The *Aikoku Maru*'s four 152-mm were removed and replaced by eight 3rd Year Type 140-mm/50 cal guns. The 140 mm guns were newer but still quite old. New Rufe sea planes were acquired.

During March 1942 *Aikoku Maru* and *Hokoku Maru* were converted to carry a supply of submarine torpedoes in one of their holds. On 10 March 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* and *Hokoku Maru* departed Kure for Hashirajima. They were now attached to Vice Admiral Komatsu Teruhisa's Sixth Fleet (Submarines). They were to carry torpedoes and stores for submarines, including 1,300 tons of diesel fuel, and supposed to go with the new SubRon 8 to the East Coast of Africa and Mozambique. However, it appears they stayed in Japan as on 12 April 1942 they departed Kure and on the evening of 15 April 1942 they arrived at the Hashirajima fleet anchorage. The commander of *Aikoku Maru* is Captain Okamura.

At 11 am on 16 April 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* departed Hashirajima with training cruiser IJN *Katori* for the Indian Ocean via Singapore and Penang, Malaya. Their mission was to support SubRon 8s, SubDiv 1s submarines I-10, I-16, I-18, I-20, and I-30 in the Western Indian Ocean. On the way the *Aikoku Maru* refueled a number of the submarines. On 30 April 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* arrived at Penang. On 5 May 1942 she departed Penang with *Hokoku Maru*.

On 9 May 1942 they were 480 miles south-south-east of Diego Suarez, Madagascar. Here they captured the 7,987-ton Dutch tanker *Genota* at S17° 40' E76° 20E'. Over the next week the *Aikoku Maru* refueled a number of submarines.

On 5 June 1942 near Durban in South Africa the *Aikoku Maru* shelled and sank the 6,757-ton British merchant *Elysia*, carrying some Allied troops, at S27° 19' E37° 1'.

On 17 June 1942 they again rendezvoused with the submarines of SubRon 8's Ko Detachment.

On 12 July 1942 the 7,113-ton New Zealand ship SS *Hauraka* was sailing from Fremantle in Western Australia to Colombo in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The SS *Hauraka* was captured. After her capture, a Japanese crew was put aboard and the deck crew were locked below. The engine crew were engaged under guard to run the ship's machinery. In the course of the voyage back to Japan the engine crew managed to throw most of the spare machinery parts over the side. As a result, the Japanese never obtained much use from the ship. It was later renamed *Hoki Maru* and now is one of the wrecks of Chuuk Lagoon, only just over a kilometre from the *Aikoku Maru*.

On 10 August 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* arrived at Seletar Naval Base, Singapore. A reserve aircraft was taken aboard. *Aikoku Maru*'s submarine torpedo supply was increased to 70 for replenishment of SubDiv 1's subs. Two Type 96 dual 25-mm (2x2) AA were fitted.

On 25 August 1942 she arrived at Penang. About now Commander Oishi Tamotsu assumed command. In late August 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* was temporarily attached to the Southeast Area Fleet to ferry troops from Singapore to Rabaul.

During September 1942 she was in Singapore and the dazzle camouflage paint previously painted at Kure was replaced by a new experimental design devised by Lieutenant Commander Fukui. The new dazzle camouflage was painted in three colours: black, dark grey and light grey. The *Hokoku Maru* was similarly camouflaged in light and dark grey (as depicted above in the painting).

On 20 September 1942 *Aikoku Maru* was assigned to the Southwest Area Fleet (Eighth Fleet). She was tasked to transport elements of Lieutenant General Sano Tadayoshi's 38th Infantry "Hiroshima" Division to Rabaul, New Guinea for the reinforcement of Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. On 24 September 1942 she arrived at Brown Island, Eniwetok, loaded some provisions, and then departed for Rabaul. On 6 October 1942 she left Rabaul for Singapore via Penang.

On 10 October 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* was reattached to the Commerce Raiding Unit and on 24 October 1942 she left Penang.

On 1 November 1942 Commander Oishi was promoted to Captain and the ship departed Singapore with the *Hokoku Maru* for a raiding mission in the Indian Ocean. On 7 November 1942 they passed through the Sunda Strait and entered the Indian Ocean.

On 11 November 1942 south-west of the Cocos Islands the *Hokoku Maru* approached the 6,341-ton Royal Dutch Shell tanker *Ondina* and her escort, the Australian-built Royal Indian Navy minesweeper HMS *Bengal*. This was at S19° 45' E92° 40'. The *Bengal*'s Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander William J. Wilson, RNR, moved towards the *Hokoku Maru* in an attempt to protect the tanker.

At 3.45 pm (Japan time), the *Hokoku Maru* opened fire. Both ships were damaged. The *Aikoku Maru* was six miles north-west of the scene and getting closer. A shot from *Ondina*'s 4-inch gun hit *Hokoku Maru*'s starboard torpedo tube. The torpedo inside detonated and a fire broke out which raged out of control and reached the aft magazine. Numerous explosions blew out the sides of the hull. At 5.52 pm (Japan), the *Hokoku Maru* sank by the stern.

The *Aikoku Maru* arrived on the scene and hit *Bengal*. Lieutenant Commander Wilson, confident that *Ondina* could outrun the *Aikoku Maru*, disengaged his attack. The *Aikoku Maru* scored six hits on *Ondina* and virtually disabled her. The *Aikoku Maru* then fired two torpedoes at the tanker but both missed. With her ammunition used up, *Ondina*'s crew abandoned the ship.

The *Aikoku Maru* rescued 278 of the *Hokoku Maru*'s crew and then fired a last torpedo at the *Ondina* before departing for Penang. After the *Aikoku Maru* left the scene, the crew of the *Ondina* reboarded her and temporary repairs were effected. She limped back to Fremantle, Australia.

The idea of using merchant raiders soon lost support and the *Aikoku Maru* was moved to a role of transport.

On 16 December 1942 the *Aikoku Maru* is at Rabaul. She was assigned to Vice Admiral Mikawa Gunichi's Eighth Fleet. She departed for Madang, New Guinea in an Attack Force with her sistership *Gokoku Maru*, light cruiser IJNS *Tenryu* and destroyers IJNS *Isonami*, IJNS *Inazuma*, IJNS *Suzukaze* and IJNS *Arashio*.

On 17 December 1942 the aircraft carried by the *Aikoku Maru* were transferred to the 9th Base Unit and on 18 December 1942 she arrived at Madang and unloaded her cargo. At 7.32 am, the Attack Force was bombed unsuccessfully. At 5.44 pm, *Gokoku Maru* was hit by a bomb from B-17s of the 43rd Bomb Group, Fifth Air Force. The *Aikoku Maru* was not damaged.

On 19 December 1942 she arrived back at Rabaul. The next day she departed with *Gokoku Maru*. On 29 December 1942 they arrived at Kure. On 4 January 1943 she departed Kure and arrived at Pusan, (South) Korea.

At 3.30 pm on 6 January 1943 as part of Operation C (HINOE-GO) - The Reinforcement of New Guinea - *Aikoku Maru* and *Gokoku Maru* departed Pusan for Wewak, New Guinea, on a troop transport mission with numerous warships and transports.

The *Aikoku Maru* was carrying the IJAAF 209th Airfield Construction Unit and 14th Airfield Service Unit, a total of 691 men plus 34 vehicles. This was a very small passenger and cargo load for such a large ship. At 10.30 am on 14 January 1943 they arrived at Rabaul where the *Aikoku Maru* landed troops and 18 vehicles.

At 5 pm on 15 January 1943 the *Aikoku Maru* departed Rabaul. The next day when east-north-east of the Admiralty Islands, the *Aikoku Maru* was attacked by a submarine that fired two torpedoes at her. Both missed. On 17 January 1943 she arrived at Palau. On 19 January 1943 she departed Palau. On 21 January 1943 the *Aikoku Maru* disembarked troops at Wewak, New Guinea. She departed the same day. On 24 January 1943 she arrived at Tsingtao.

On 29 January 1943 the *Aikoku Maru* was part of Operation HINOE-GO No. 3 ("C-3"). She departed Tsingtao at 9 am (Japan time), carrying 1,602 soldiers of the IJA's 20th Division, 18 vehicles and 21,171-tons of general cargo. On 7 February 1943 an additional 133 soldiers, 4 vehicles and 133-tons of general cargo were collected from Palau. She left Palau with the *Kiyosumi Maru* as the second element of HINOE-GO No. 3.

On 19 February 1943 *Aikoku Maru* departed Palau again after embarking additional soldiers and general cargo (this may be the same action as above). On 19 February 1943 when off Palau, the submarine USS *Runner* skippered by Lieutenant Commander Frank Fenno attempted to intercept the second group of C-3 but was bombed by an E13A1 "Jake" of the 902nd NAG based at Palau. The Jake dropped a single 250-kg bomb that destroyed the *Runner's* periscopes and sound gear and forced Fenno to return to Pearl Harbor.

On 23 February 1943 the *Aikoku Maru* arrived at Wewak where she unloaded her cargo. In late February 1943 she departed Wewak for Takao, Formosa (now Taiwan). On 31 March 1943 she arrived at Takao. She left on 2 April 1943 and on 5 April 1943 she arrived at Kure. Captain-Retired Mizusaki Shojiro (38) assumed command around now.

Over the next couple of months she departed and returned to Kure a number of times, never travelling too far. It is reported that the *Aikoku Maru* was again modified in June 1943 at the Kure Naval Yard, but this may have been the work previously mentioned.

On 6 July 1943 the *Aikoku Maru* departed Kisarazu, carrying ground personnel and equipment of the 201st NAG. On 10 July 1943 while on her way to Truk (now Chuuk - although another report says she was on her way to Rabaul from Truk), she was attacked by the submarine USS *Hailbut* at about 9 pm. The *Hailbut* was skippered by Lieutenant Commander Phillip H. Ross and 170 miles north of Truk he fired six torpedoes by periscope and claimed three hits. Only one torpedo actually hit, but this killed 21 people. On 11 July 1943 she arrived at Truk. The *Aikoku Maru* appears to have left Truk fairly soon after as on 15 July 1943 at about 3 pm, she was attacked by the submarine USS *Tinosa* (SS-283) skippered by Lieutenant Commander Lawrence R. Dasplit. Dasplit fired four Mark-14 stern torpedoes at her, but they all missed.

When repairs were made at the Kure Naval Yard in August 1943, the main guns were then removed and two 8cm guns were placed in the stern and bow platforms.

Around this time the *Aikoku Maru* started being used to transport soldiers (normally "rikusentai" - navy sailors trained as infantry) and supplies from Japan to Rabaul in Papua New Guinea. She may have even been used for this when she was torpedoed. The ship made at least four trips to and from Rabaul.

On 1 October 1943 she was rerated as a special (miscellaneous) transport and assigned to the Kure Naval District. She departed Kure that same day.

On 6 October 1943 the *Aikoku Maru* was in the Mitsui Engineering and Shipbuilding Tamano shipyard for a refit (I am pretty sure this is not the repairs mentioned above which happened in August). Additional armament was also installed. On 20 October 1943 the *Aikoku Maru* received a new commander, Captain-Retired Nakamaruo Yoshizo (36).

On 31 December 1943 the installation of two 152-mm guns and four twin Type 96 25mm (4x2) AA machine guns was completed.

On 16 January 1944 she departed Kure for the last time. The next day she arrived at Tokyo Bay. On 21 January 1944 the *Aikoku Maru* departed Tokyo Bay and arrived at Yokosuka the same day. Here she embarked personnel of the 66th Naval Guard Unit (629 men), 1,200 mines, dynamite, artillery shells, food and construction materials. These were all originally destined for Brown Island, Eniwetok, Marshall Islands.

On 24 January 1944 she departed Yokosuka and arrived at Tateyama the same day. On 25 January 1944 she departed Tateyama for Truk in convoy with 11,930-ton submarine depot ship *Yasukuni Maru* and the *Akagi Maru* escorted by destroyers IJNS *Michishio* and IJNS *Shiratsuyu* and the minelayer IJNS *Nasami*.

At about 2 am on 31 January 1944 when 300 miles north-west of Truk, USS *Trigger* (SS-237), skippered by Lieutenant Commander Robert E. Dornin, attacked the convoy. Dornin fired three torpedoes by radar at the largest ship and the submarine's Executive Officer, Lieutenant Edward L. Beach, fired three other torpedoes from the bridge at the nearest destroyer using the Target Bearing Transmitter (TBT). The TBT's torpedoes ran erratically and missed. The three fired by radar also missed the big ships, but one hit and sank the *Nasami*.



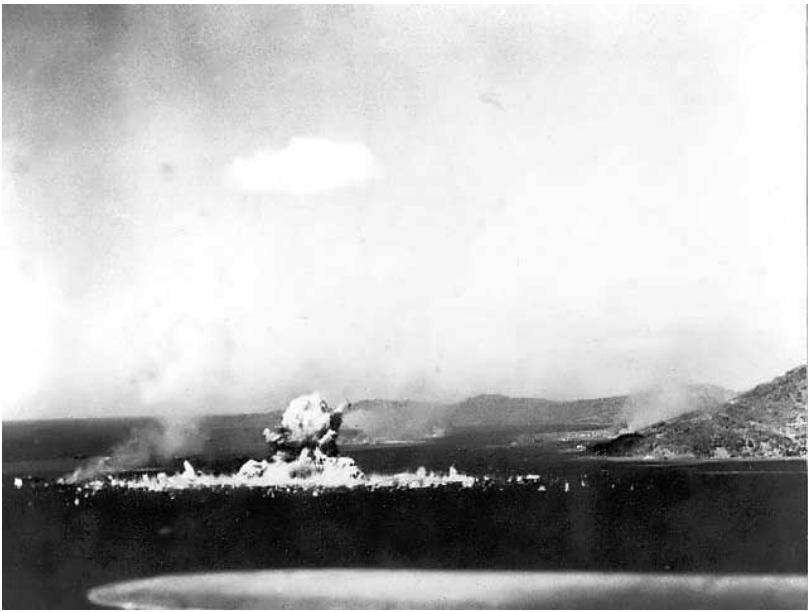
Aikoku Maru after being painted in camouflage colours

When still on the surface, the *Trigger* turned away from a destroyer in the convoy and fired four stern torpedoes at her. They all missed. Masked by her heavy diesel exhaust, the *Trigger* headed away on a reciprocal course to the destroyer. Unaware that her opponent was on the surface, the destroyer dropped depth charges.

Dornin soon made a high speed "end-around." At about 5 am he fired five torpedoes in a surface radar attack on the largest ship. The *Yasukuni Maru* was hit by two torpedoes and sank about 30 minutes later at N9° 15' E147° 13'. There were 43 survivors. The *Aikoku Maru* escaped undamaged.

On 1 February 1944 the remaining vessels in the convoy arrived at Truk. Soon after she departed Truk for Brown Island, Eniwetok, Marshall Islands (also reported as Wake Island) with troop reinforcements, but was forced to abort due to American aircraft activity. I believe that she arrived at Pohnpei instead on 14 February 1944 but could not discharge completely her cargo of soldiers and supplies. The next day she left for Truk, arriving in the lagoon late on 16 February 1944.

All of the Combined Fleet's capital ships based at Truk had departed in anticipation of an American air raid as there were some surveillance flights over Truk a few days earlier. The *Aikoku Maru* began loading ammunition almost immediately so she would be able to depart for Rabaul as soon as possible. Troops of the 1st Amphibious Brigade aboard her were apparently crammed into their makeshift billets.



The front hold of the *Aikoku Maru* explodes

On 17 February 1944, the first day of "Operation Hailstone", the *Aikoku Maru* was anchored off the channel between Eten and Dublin Islands. This was one of the main anchoring points in Chuuk Lagoon and was close to the *San Francisco Maru* and *Nippo Maru* as well as many others. A photograph taken very early shows the *Aikoku Maru* lying untouched facing the east.

At dawn, on the first day of the raids, planes from USS *Intrepid* (CV-11) attack the *Aikoku Maru*. The first bomb hit the officers' wardroom galley and started a fire that spread quickly. She took three more hits by bombs.

At about 0815 the *Aikoku Maru* was attacked by Avenger dive bombers from USS *Essex* and USS *Intrepid*. At the same time, an Avenger TBM-1C (serial number BN 25270) from the USS *Intrepid*, piloted by Lt James Erwin Bridges, with crew Robert Ellis Bruton and James Albert Green were approaching the ship from wave height. While the TBM-1C was attacking, the ship was hit in the front section of the ship by two bombs dropped from planes from the USS *Essex*. These bombs had a devastating impact, causing the *Aikoku Maru* to violently explode. Lt Bridges' (incorrectly referred to as Briggs in some reports) plane had just released its torpedo and was making good its escape, pulling up to clear the ship it had just attacked, when the other planes' bombs exploded. Lt Bridges, his plane and crew were destroyed. It is also possible that the plane was damaged by anti-aircraft fire and crashed into the bridge, falling into the hold causing the explosion. Whatever happened, it is known that Lt Bridges' Avenger did not return to her ship.

Another report says that a Mark 13 aerial torpedo hit her No. 1 hold and set off ordnance that sheared off the entire foreship. However, I do not believe that this report is correct.

To say that the resulting explosion was massive is to understate the situation. Two photographs taken by the attacking American aircraft show a huge "nuclear-bomb" type mushroom cloud rising over the wreck. Within a few seconds the cloud had risen thousands of feet in the air. Within 60 seconds of the fatal attack, the *Aikoku Maru* sank with the loss of not only all lives on board, but also the lives of some men on adjacent smaller boats and barges. It is not known how many died, but it is estimated that at least 450 men were lost. Another report says that virtually all of the ships' crew including Captain Nakamaruo and 945 sailors, passengers and men of the First Brigade, died in the explosion.

On 30 March 1944 the *Aikoku Maru* was removed from the Navy List.

The *Aikoku Maru* was discovered by Jacques Cousteau's expedition in 1969 and then refound by Sam Redford in 1972. In July 1980 the remains of about 400 crew were recovered by a Japanese group, cremated and the ashes returned to Japan.

Today the *Aikoku Maru* is located to the north of the gap between Eten and Dublin Islands. A GPS Reading of N7° 22' 22.0" E151° 54' 42.6" using WGS84 as a datum will put you on the rear of the superstructure. She lies upright on a sandy bottom which is about 62 metres deep, although as you will see later, it is a bit deeper on some parts of the wreck.



The stern gun of the *Aikoku Maru*
Photo by Kelly McFadyen



Phil Rose on the stern of the *Aikoku Maru*
Photo by Kelly McFadyen



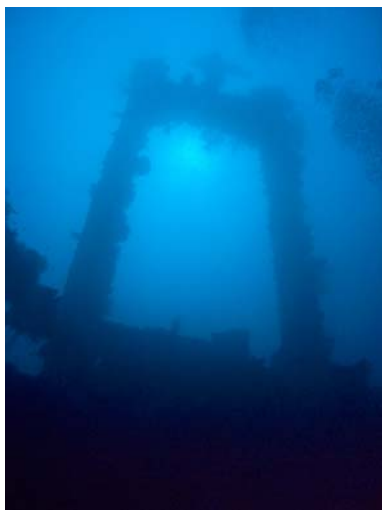
Another photograph of the stern gun



The stern helm of the *Aikoku Maru*

Dive boats generally anchor on the rear of the main superstructure. The depth here is about 33 metres. As this is a huge wreck and it is very deep, you will need two dives to see all the wreck in a bit of detail, although you could get a quick overview on one dive. The following is a description of the first dive as well as a bit of extra information you could do on a second dive.

To start the dive you can swim to the stern where there is a huge gun platform with a large gun, still pointing high towards the rear (depth 48 metres). Under the stern you can drop down to 62 metres to see the twin props and single rudder. Only the tips of a single blade on each prop show as well as the top of the rudder. From here, ascend to the stern house where you can easily enter the compartments and have a quick look around. They are very large and safe to explore as the deck of the poop deck was timber and has been totally eaten away.



The rear kingpost of the *Aikoku Maru*



Kelly McFadyen comes past the rear cabin area

The rear hold (Hold 6) appears to be empty as is the next hold forward (I did not explore Hold 5). The hold straight behind the superstructure (Hold 4) is elevated from the main deck and is not as big as normal holds. It contains hessian bags, possibly full of cement. The depth here is 57 metres.

After coming up out of the hold you can enter the superstructure either of two doors on the next level up. These take you inside the living area of the ship. It appears that there were cabin walls all along the port and starboard sides but these have been removed or perhaps eaten away by worms. In any case, there are numerous wash basins all along the now very open areas. In between the two areas, in the centre of the ship, there are a number of passageways that run from one side to the other. These give access to a dozen or more bathrooms. Each bathroom has a normal bath (as distinct from the Japanese baths in most other Chuuk wrecks) and toilets or bidets. Care needs to be taken as there are some wires hanging down in the passageways and open areas. The depth in here is about 42 metres.



Under the poop deck on the starboard side
Photo by Kelly McFadyen



Kelly on a section of the rear deck of

By this time you will need to start ascending a bit so exit out a door or window onto the top of the superstructure. Here you will see a number of very interesting things. The first and most obvious (and already seen on the way down) is the huge funnel (top 27 metres), still standing erect. On each of the two rear corners of the top deck there is a single twin barrelled anti-aircraft gun. The port gun is frozen in the firing mode, with one barrel fully extended and the other retracted. The gun is aimed low, possibly firing at the plane (or planes) that sank the *Aikoku Maru*. The starboard gun is aimed high but was probably not firing at the time she was destroyed.

There is a huge platform located between the two guns. It looks like a platform, possibly for a searchlight. In front of this there are three plaques. In 1997 when I last dived it there was only one to the Japanese who died on the ship. There are also a number of skulls and bones located on and/or around the plaque (see the photo at below left). In 2011 the right-hand plaque reads:

AIKOKU MARU
SUNK FEBRUARY 17 1944
DURING US NAVY'S
"OPERATION HAILSTONE"
THIS PLAQUE
PLACED FEBRUARY 1994
ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THIS ACTION
COMMENORATES THE BRAVERY
AND MANY LIVES LOST DURING
THE BATTLE AT TRUK LAGOON

The middle plaque is missing the metal wording and the left hand one was so small I could not read what it said when I reviewed my photograph.

This is normally the end of a single dive although you could quickly swim forward to see where the ship was blown in half.



The starboard side AA gun



The plaques on the rear of the superstructure

On a second dive I would swim forward to along the port side of the superstructure. All of a sudden, the ship just ends. This is dramatic. It is as if a giant guillotine has plummeted out of the sky and landed straight in front of the funnel. The ship comes to a complete end. In front of here there is nothing at all, just a hole in the sand bottom, caused by the massive explosion, and a couple of pieces of hull plating. No other traces appear to remain at all.

Where the ship has been split the port hull is bent back a little but the main part of the ship is just cleanly cut through. Once you have examined this frightening and amazing scene, drop to the sea floor in front of the middle of the wreck. This leads to the engine room. You will be at about 63 metres. As you approach the engine room, you can see a significant set of stairs that drop down into the engine room. Unless you are planning to just explore the engine room, there is only time to shine a torch down there and then start your ascent to an upper deck. As you go up you will see a door on the port side (the right side as you look at it).



Some of the bones of crew still found on the *Aikoku Maru*
Photo by Kelly McFadyen



Phil Rose at the front end of the *Aikoku Maru*
Photo by Kelly McFadyen

This door leads onto a main deck and you can explore through here. There is evidence of many more cabins having been originally been located here as there are wash basins galore. Swim towards the stern and then cross over to the starboard side and continue towards the rear. You can exit a number of places, but I went out the end most door. This puts you over the smaller hold referred to above (which has cement bags in it).

Depending on the time spent examining the deeper section at the break, this is about all you will have time for on this dive.

Subsequent dives could be done into the areas deeper under the superstructure or below the stern area.

On my two dives here I did about 17 to 19 minutes each dive. This requires decompression of about 2 minutes at 9 metres, 5 minutes at 6 metres and 11 minutes at 3 metres.

An awe inspiring wreck that really frightened me, not about the dive, but about the futility of war. The almost vertical, clean cut across the hull in front of the funnel is amazing to see, emphasising the strength of the explosion. A must do wreck for the more experienced diver.

VIDEO

Video taken by Kelly McFadyen during our 2012 trip to Chuuk.



Dives:

- 7 November 1997
- 15 November 1997
- 21 October 2011

References:

- *Hailstorm over Truk Lagoon* by Klaus Lindemann
- *WII wrecks of the Kwajalein and Truk Lagoon* by Dan E. Bailey
- *26 Principal Shipwrecks of Truk Lagoon* by Capt. Lance Higgs
- *Warships of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1869 - 1945* by Hansgeorg Jentschura et al page 235 incl drawing
- *Lloyds Register 1945-46*
- *Witness to War: Truk Lagoon's Master Diver Kimiuo Aisek* by (in preparation), chapter 1
- IJN AIKOKU MARU: Tabular Record of Movement

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The Ondina-battle



Introduction

In late 1942, enemy raider activities in the Indian Ocean had virtually come to an end. The German raiders, once disrupting the shipping lines in these waters had all (with the exception of a few) been destroyed by the Royal Navy or had begun the long way home to the homeland in Europe. The Japanese were strategically not interested in sinking merchants, and had done little to disrupt Allied supply lines since their successful carrier sortie to Ceylon in April 1942.

But unknown to the allies, the Japanese Navy had decided to keep the pressure on the shipping lanes. Large and valuable tankers maintained a continuous stream of oil and other products from the Middle East to Australia and surrounding islands. The continuous pleas by the Germans will undoubtedly have had a large influence on this decision, as the Japanese were afraid the Germans would send more of their successful disguised raiders to the Indian Ocean, which the first considered "their backyard". The bond between the Japanese and Germans never grew as strong as the one between the Allied forces, and they distrusted each other from the very start of their alliance. To satisfy the Germans, the staff of the Imperial Japanese Navy decided to send their own raiders to these waters. Although raider warfare was not entirely strange to them, they could not build on the vast amount of experience as the Germans did, and as a result, their ships were far less effective.

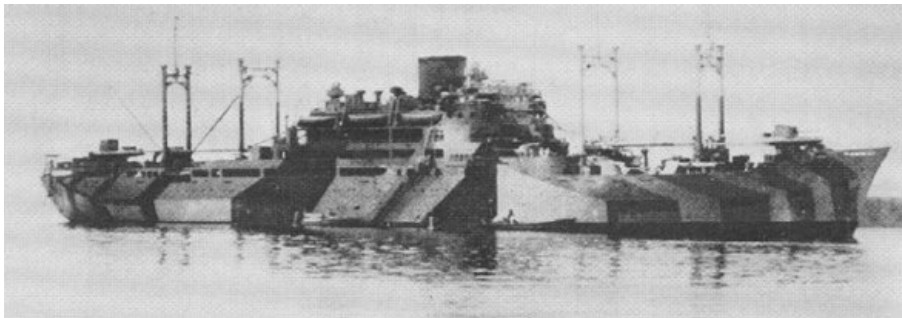
The key-players

In 1940, two passenger-cargovessels of the *Osaka Shipping Line* were requisitioned for conversion to Armed Merchant Cruisers, in anticipation of the likely thrust southward by the Japanese. The *Aikoku Maru* and *Hokoku Maru*, under construction for the route between Japan and South America, started their rebuilds in 1941, and by the time they were commissioned, they were armed to the teeth. Their specifications were as listed below:

Displacement	10437 tons gross weight
Dockyard	Tama Shipbuilding Corporation (<i>Tama Zosensho KK, Okajima</i>)
Owners	Osaka Shipping Line (<i>Osaka Shosen KK, Osaka</i>)
Dimensions	150 x 20 x 7,8 metres
Armament	8 x 140 mm/50 2 x 80 mm 4 x 25 mm 4 x 533 mm TT (2x2) 2 E13A "Jake" floatplanes
Propulsion	2 12-cylinder Mitsubishi - Burmeister & Wain diesels
Shafts	2

Performance	13.000 hp
Max. speed	21 knots

With their heavy armament, they could overpower any smaller combatant or merchant, and their speed enabled them (in combination with their floatplanes) to search large areas of ocean. In service, they were attached together with *Kiyozumi Maru* to the 24th Special Cruiser Squadron under Rear Admiral Moriyoshi Takeda. Even though these ships were slightly more powerful than their German counterparts, they were less effective for several reasons. First, the Japanese had little experience in operating surface raiders, and it seemed to them that letting these ships operate in a pair reduced the risk of losing them. Second, the ships spent far less days at sea. They had played a modest role since December 1941, and their first contribution to the war effort came when they overpowered the American freighter *Vincent* on December 12, 1941, soon followed by the *Malama*. Their last operation was by far the most successful: they doubled as supply ships for the Japanese submarines operating in Mozambique Channel. These I-boats sank over 100.000 tons of shipping, and the *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru* added additional ships to that tally. With these successes, they had sunk or captured 5 [1] merchants within a year, totalling 31.303 tons. They left Singapore on November 5 on their fourth sortie, under overall command of Captain Imazato Hiroshi, commanding officer of *Hokoku Maru*. [2].



The *Aikoku Maru* in Singapore, July 1942

The *Ondina* was a modern tanker built for one of the shipping companies of Shell, *La Corona*. She was new, relatively fast and for contemporary standards well-armed with a 4-inch gun on her stern and several machine guns for use against aircraft. Under captain Willem Horsman, she was now ferried fuel between Australia and Abadan on the oil-rich shores of the Persian Gulf. On her journey to Abadan, she would only enjoy the protection of a small corvette. HMIS *Bengal* (Lt. Cdr. William Joseph Wilson, Royal Indian Navy Reserve, in command) was one of the R.A.N.-type *Ballarat* corvettes/minesweepers, with the exception that she and three sisterships were allocated to the Indian Navy. She only had one 3-inch gun (substituting a 4-inch gun which was in short supply), which made her firepower barely enough to protect the *Ondina* from submarines, let alone from enemy surface raiders. The two ships departed Fremantle on November 5, 1942, expecting a long but uneventful trip.

	Ondina	HMIS Bengal
Displacement	6341 gross weight	735 / 950 tons
Dockyard	Nederlandse Droogdok Mij, Amsterdam	Cockatoo Island Dockyard, Sydney
Dimensions	130,49 x 16,62 x 6,40 m	56 x 9,44 x 2,59 m

Completed	August 1 1939	May 5 1942
Armament	1 x 102 mm U.S. Navy issue some MG	1 x 75 mm (12-pounder) 1 x 40 mm 2 x 20 mm
Propulsion	1 Werkspoor 6-cyl 4-stroke diesel	2 boilers triple expansion engine
Performance	2800 hp	1800 hp
Max. speed	12 knots	15,5 knots

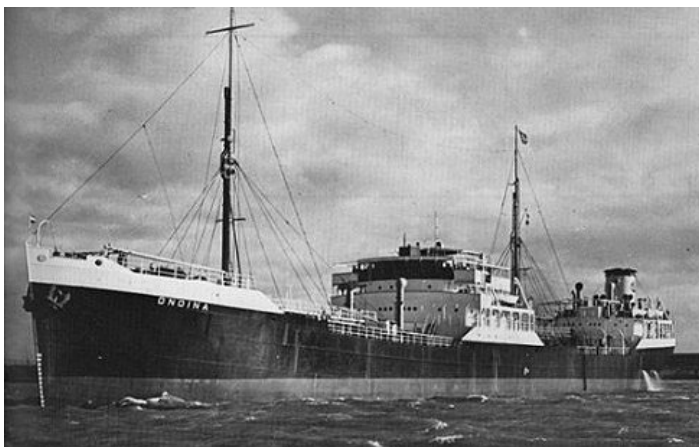
The Battle

On November 11 at 11.58 in the morning, the naval authorities in Fremantle received a S.O.S.-signal sent out by the *Bengal*, reporting that she and the *Ondina* were under attack by two enemy raiders, identified as Japanese, in position 19.45 S - 92.40 E. The battle started when a lookout aboard *Ondina* sighted an unknown vessel at about 12.000 metres away, bearing 270 degrees, followed by ship of similar size. As no allied ships were reported in the vicinity, they could only assume they were hostile and for some time these ships were even identified as Japanese carriers. On the *Bengal*, the lookouts saw the two warships a few minutes later, bearing 290. The ships both made a quick 90 degrees turn to starboard away from the enemy to a NNW course. *Bengal* then turned to engage, thus hoping to buy enough time for the *Ondina* to escape. She opened fire at 12.12 hours from 3200 metres away, soon followed by the *Ondina* 8000 metres away. The sensible thing to do for the *Ondina* was to follow the order to escape, but the captain decided to stay, as his ship, armed with a 4-inch gun, still carried a heavier punch than her smaller companion. In addition, the *Ondina* could only sustain a speed of 12 knots versus 21 of the Japanese ships.

The *Aikoku Maru* (Captain Oishi Tamotsu) and *Hokoku Maru* (Captain Imazato Hiroshi) commenced firing at 12.12 hours, and soon straddled the *Ondina* with their cruiser-armament. The first hit on *Ondina* ripped off a part of the main mast, leaving only a stump standing. The *Ondina* herself had her answer ready: the third shell fired was a hit in the superstructure of *Hokoku Maru*, but apparently did little to effect her speed or armament. Content with the hit, the officer in charge then ordered the gunners to concentrate their fire on the stern. Only a few moments later, a lucky hit on the starboard torpedo mount turned the *Hokoku Maru* in a ball of red and yellow flames, and as the ship emerged from the smoke, she was listing heavily to starboard, and simultaneously started to settle by the stern. The explosion ripped off the stern and threw her two floatplanes overboard, while massive fires raged in the superstructure. *Hokoku Maru* was not built as a warship, and therefore didn't have a sufficient number of watertight bulkheads. Shells fell from their lockers as a result of the increasing list and threw sailors overboard. Men, covered with burns and blood tried to fight the flames. Reports came in indicating large fires in the engine-room and the loss of all electricity. There was little hope of salvaging the *Hokoku Maru*, and Captain Imazato could do little else than to order "abandon ship". The raider finally sank in a massive explosion at 13.12

Meanwhile, the *Aikoku Maru* hotly engaged the *Bengal* and *Ondina*, scoring several hits on the latter. Fortunately, shells and torpedoes have little effect on empty tankers, as the large number of watertight tanks keeps them afloat under the most difficult circumstances. *Aikoku Maru* also fired at the *Bengal*, which had shortened the distance to about 2200 metres. One shell hit her in the forecastle at 1220, luckily doing little damage. After smoke floats failed to work and the supply of ammunition had almost been depleted ^[3], the *Bengal* turned away at 1240 and made smoke. During her retreat, the *Bengal* was hit in her stern at 12.41,

which caused a fire in the officers' baggage room. Last the men aboard *Bengal* saw was the *Ondina* trying to evade the shells, continuously straddled by the *Aikoku Maru*. A shell was seen hitting her aft of the bridge at 13.08. By 13.45, the sea was empty.



Post war photo of *Ondina*.

After *Bengal* had disappeared behind the horizon, *Ondina* was still steaming around at full speed. Not built as a warship, she had only a small stock of ammunition. *Aikoku Maru* closed the range to 3500 metres, and placed several hits in the following minutes, one of which was observed by the *Bengal*. *Ondina* herself had only 12 shells left, four of which she fired at the *Hokoku Maru*, the rest at *Aikoku Maru*, apparently without placing a hit. A last attempt to escape by dumping smoke-buoys overboard failed, and the captain ordered the crew to abandon ship to avoid further bloodshed. The engines were stopped, the lifeboats lowered and a white flag was hoisted, all under continuous fire from the *Aikoku Maru*. A few moments later, Captain Horsman was killed by a piece of shrapnel from a shell hitting the bridge. Two lifeboats and two rafts were lowered into the water and later, another lifeboat was in the water with the remainder of the crew. Most of the crew (with the exception of officers and guncrew) consisted of Chinese, and they had been troublesome during the whole action, refusing any assistance that might help save the ship.

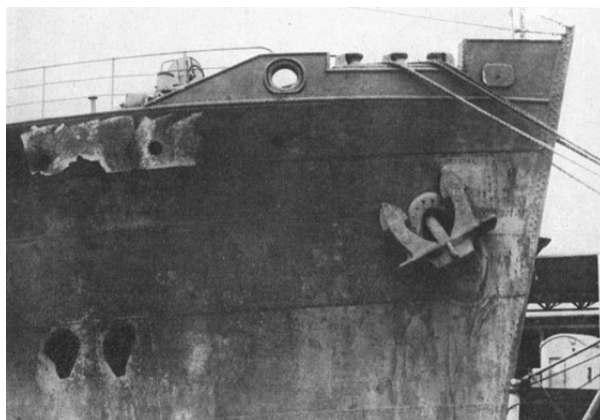
Aikoku Maru approached *Ondina* to about 400 metres, and fired two torpedoes to finish her off. Both blew large holes in the starboard side, but did little to sink the ship itself. These tanks had been empty and the ship remained afloat on the other, undamaged fuel tanks, despite a 30 degree list. Then *Aikoku Maru* changed course and the Japanese gunners opened fire on the drifting lifeboats [4], killing the 1st engineer and three Chinese stokers. One wounded was a young British sailor named Henry, originally assigned to the *Bengal*. Satisfied with the results, *Aikoku Maru* then steamed away to pick up survivors from *Hokoku Maru* [5]. Later, the *Aikoku Maru* came back one more time, firing a torpedo which missed the tanker. She paid little attention to the survivors and steamed further, convinced the *Ondina* was doomed. [6]

Meanwhile, the men in the lifeboats had given the deceased a seaman's burial, and then exchanged thoughts about what to do next. The first officer Rehwinkel wanted to return to the tanker, but only one man of the guncrew was willing to go with him. Most of the others were convinced the *Ondina* was about to go down. Not without trouble, Rehwinkel managed to assemble a small skeleton crew and returned to the ship, where counterflooding reduced the list. Inspection revealed that her engines were also still intact. The small fires were extinguished and the last crewmembers in the lifeboats were taken aboard, after they had been convinced there was no danger of sinking. Now the long leg back to Fremantle

began. The lifeboats were patched up as good as possible, in case the *Aikoku Maru* came back. The British sailor Henry was however in very bad shape. He had a crushed leg and after two days the first officer was forced to send out an uncoded signal for help. Uncoded, because the codebooks had all been thrown overboard when "abandon ship" was ordered. This unexpected signal caused a shock in Colombo, as the *Ondina* had been reported sunk by *Ondina* and logically, the British thought the Japanese were playing a trick on them. A signal went out from Fremantle to report her position. Expecting a Japanese trap, the *Ondina* naturally didn't reply. Without medical attention the *Ondina* steamed towards Fremantle. Fortunately, on the 17th an Australian Catalina flying boat was sighted, about 200 miles northwest of Fremantle. The lookouts had reported a ship some time earlier, and the Catalina was asked if that ship could provide the much needed help. The unknown ship proved to be a hospital-ship [7], where doctors immediately began a series of blood-transfusions which saved Henry's life.

On 18 November, the *Ondina* entered Fremantle after a journey only a few ships had experienced, let alone lived to tell about it. The corvette *Bengal* had entered Diego Garcia the day before. *Ondina* remained in Australia as depot-ship until 1943, when she was finally repaired. Both *Bengal* and *Ondina* survived the war.

Damage to the bow of *Ondina*.



Aftermath

Very few questions remain concerning this clash, but the most important is who fired the fatal shot? Answering this question is difficult, as both the *Ondina* and *Bengal* claimed to have scored the fatal hit and this mystery may never be solved. The Japanese themselves thought it was the *Ondina*. According to them, her shell hit the starboard torpedo mount, causing the torpedoes to explode. At the time, the *Bengal* was given the benefit of the doubt, according to the author of my main source as an attempt to use this battle for propoganda in India, where the British had a lot of trouble keeping the population under control. [8]. Apparently, the British themselves didn't know, as a footnote to the article in London Gazette mentions: "...*Ondina* also claimed this hit with the fifth round from her 4-inch gun at 8,000 yards range. It is not possible to adjudicate between these two claims...".

In retrospect, this battle not only was a tactical success for the Allies, but also it also had strategical implications. The loss of the *Hokoku Maru* led to the abandoning of raider warfare by the IJN, and never (with one exception) tried to sever the lifeline again.

Ondina was given a rare Dutch distinction, the *Koninklijke Vermelding by Dagorder*, issued on July 9 1948. Captain W. Horsman became *Ridder in de Militaire Willemsorde der 4de Klasse* posthumously and was Mentioned in Dispatches, while gunner Hammond received the Distinguished Service Medal and the *Bronzen Kruis*. The captain of the *Bengal*, Lieutenant-Commander Wilson, received the Distinguished Service Order, while others of his crew were also

awarded.^[9]

[1] Eiichi Nakajima "*Hokoku Maru - the unknown Q-ship*" lists the number of victims as 8. I have been unable to identify the other three, if there were any more. Their results were as follows:

Vincent (USA, 6210 tons), sunk December 12 1941

Malama (USA, 3275 tons), bombed and sunk by floatplane January 1 1942

Genota (Dutch, 7987 tons), captured on May 9 1942

Elysia (British, 6757 tons), shelled June 5 1942. Wreck was sunk by the submarine I-18 (Cdr. Otani) on the 9th.

Hauraki (New Zealand, 7112 tons), captured July 12 1942

[2] Captain Imazato Hiroshi was born in Nagasaki on September 24, 1896. He graduated from the Etajima Naval College in November 1917, and then took went to the Torpedo-school in Yokosuka, and later specialized in submarines, becoming commander of the 20th submarine division in November 1939. On August 11 1941, he became commander of the 1st submarine-division and switched to the 2nd division in February 1942. He eventually became commander of *Hokoku Maru* on August 25 1942. He was promoted rear-admiral posthumously.

[3] According to Warship International, she carried only 40 shells

[4] Captain Oishi Tamotsu of the *Aikoku Maru* was born in Kochi in 1900, and graduated from the Japanese Naval College in 1920. He then specialized in navigation, and had some ship assignments until his graduation from the advanced course of the Navigation Naval School in 1926. He received his first command in 1938 (gunboat *Saga*). In October 1940, he was appointed senior staff officer of the 1st carrier-division. From following April, he had the same function with the 1st Air Fleet. As staff officer, he participated in all carrier operations from Pearl Harbor to Midway, and then took command of the *Aikoku Maru* in August 1942. On April 3 1943, he was relieved from his command and held several positions until the end of the war. He died on February 13 1946, and was promoted to rear-admiral posthumously. Apparently, he was never tried for machinegunning the survivors of *Ondina*.

[5] The *Aikoku Maru* picked up a total of 278 survivors of a crew of 354. Captain Imazato was one of the 76 killed during the action. I haven't found any mention of damage or casualties aboard the *Aikoku Maru*

[6] *Aikoku Maru* became a high-speed transport and was sunk in February 1944 during operation Hailstone, the bombardment by American aircraft of the Japanese base at Truk. The wreck is still very popular with divers.

[7] This was probably the Australian hospitalship *Wanganella* (9576 gross tons, built 1932) with homeport Melbourne. It reportedly arrived in Fremantle on the 17th.

[8] In retrospect, political considerations may not have been the reason for crediting the *Hokoku Maru* to the *Bengal*. A report by a British naval officer at the Public Records Office, the content of which was forwarded to me by Mr. Chris Amano-Langtree, indicates the British authorities had the impression that *Ondina's* first mate exaggerated this ship's role in the action.

[9] The following men of the gun crew of *Ondina* received the Netherlands Bronze Cross (information from London Gazette, August 3, 1943):

Able Seaman Bertram Albert Hammond, D.S.M., PA.1318, Royal Australian Navy

Acting Able Seaman Raymond Henry Bayliss, C/JX.249728

Acting Able Seaman Henry Charles Boyce, C/JX.312193

Acting Able Seaman Henry Alfred Brooklyn, P/JX.313497

Bombardier William Nicol, 2882212, 1st Battery, Maritime Royal Artillery Regiment

Bombardier Frank Ryan, 4192090, 1st Battery, Maritime Royal Artillery Regiment

The following men were killed on board *Ondina* (Source: Daily Telegraph of November 26, 1942):

Master W. Horsman

1st engineer J.J.F. Niekerk

Chinese stoker Soo Fuiy

Chinese Stoker Fung Kam

Chinese stoker Ho Chung



Sources:

K.W.L. Bezemer "*Verdreven doch niet verslagen*"

Shiro Nakajima "*Hokoku Maru - the unknown Q-ship* (an extract was kindly provided by Mr. Sander Kingsepp)

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