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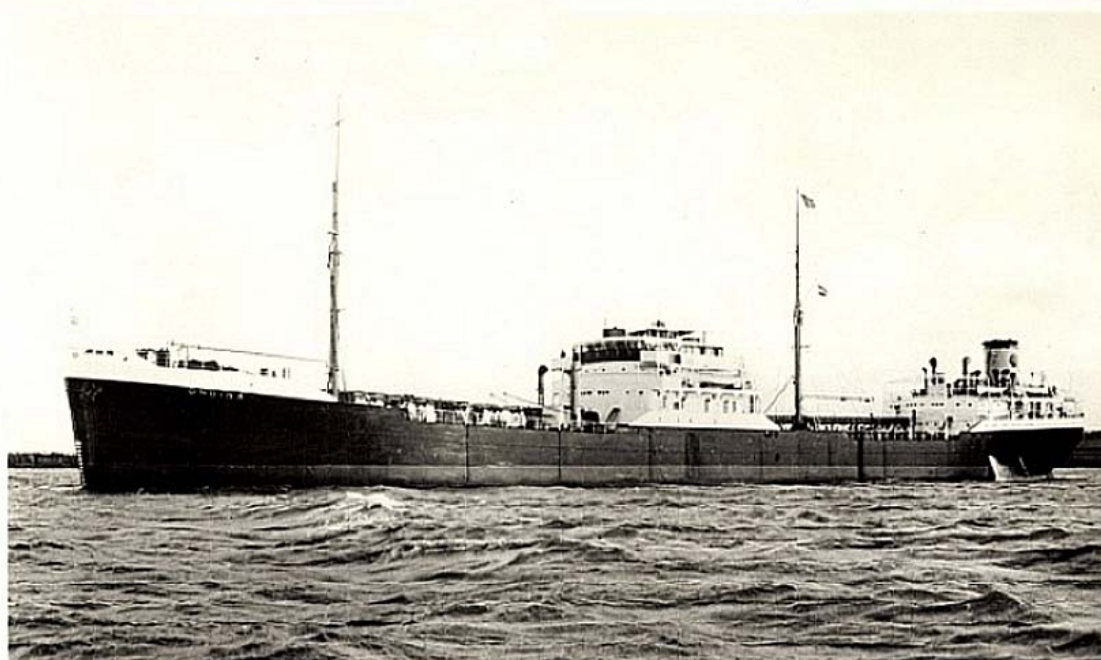
With Reuben Goossens

Maritime Historian, Cruise'n'Ship Reviewer, Author & Maritime Lecturer

Royal Dutch Shell Tanker

The MS Ondina Story

1942 WWII encounter off the Western Australian Coast



m.s. „ONDINA“

Draagvermogen 9.070 ton

A postcard of the Royal Dutch Shell tanker MS Ondina released just after she was completed
From the Author's private collection

Please Note:

DUTCH: "Helden van de Nederlandse Koopvaardij tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog - Het relaas van de Shell-tanker Ondina" tentoonstelling!

Kijk voor het officieel bericht op zijn eigen pagina - [KLIK HIER](#).

ENGLISH: "Heroes of the Dutch Merchant Marines during the Second World War - The Account of the Shell-tanker Ondina" Exhibition!

I received the following information from Mr. Willem Geluk, who is the guest relations person for the Ondina Collection working with Mr. Cees de Keijzer, Chairman of the World Ship Society in Rotterdam. The full details of the notice received regarding this very special Ondina event is available on its own page; [CLICK HERE](#).

After you have read the details, please use the link at the bottom of the page to return to this page, however there is also a link at the bottom of this page if you prefer to use that!

Updated February 30, 2013:

Introduction:

This story came about due to the MS Ondina ship's bell came into my hands years ago, all the way from the United States. As this page obviously makes very clear, although this ship was certainly not a passenger ship, but this bell did come from a very special and what has become an historic ship indeed with a very special war history, one that is both significant to the land of my residence and nationality "Australia", as well as the land of my birth "The Netherlands."



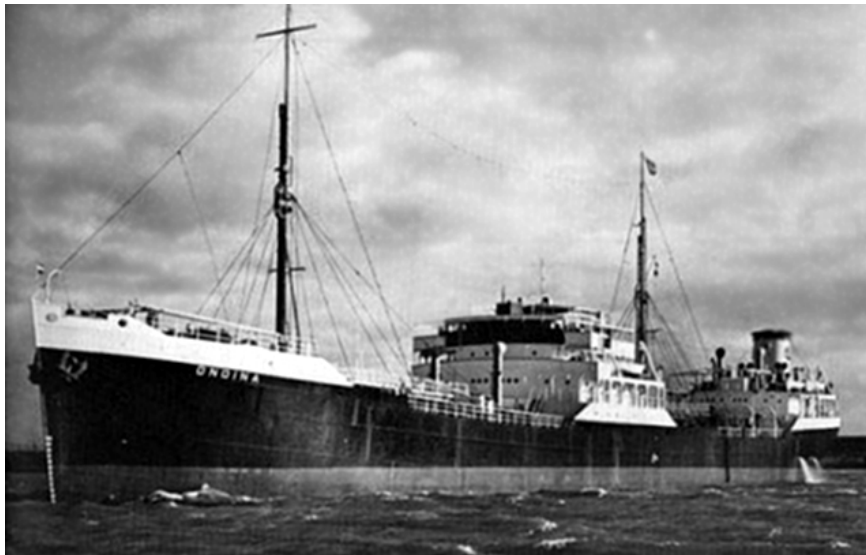
The ship's bell

The bell is now the property of the author and this image is © copyright Reuben Goossens

This wonderful bell, being a great piece of history, as you will discover as you read this page, is either displayed at my own small museum at my home, or it is loaned out to be displayed at any Maritime Museum in Australia as requested. But let us get to the story of the amazing MS Ondina!

As I commence, the details of this amazing story has in part sourced from several sources, but it has been extensively rewritten in my own words. And as my readers will know, my specialty lies mainly with Passengers Liners; however, you will find that this amazing tale will make for interesting reading indeed!

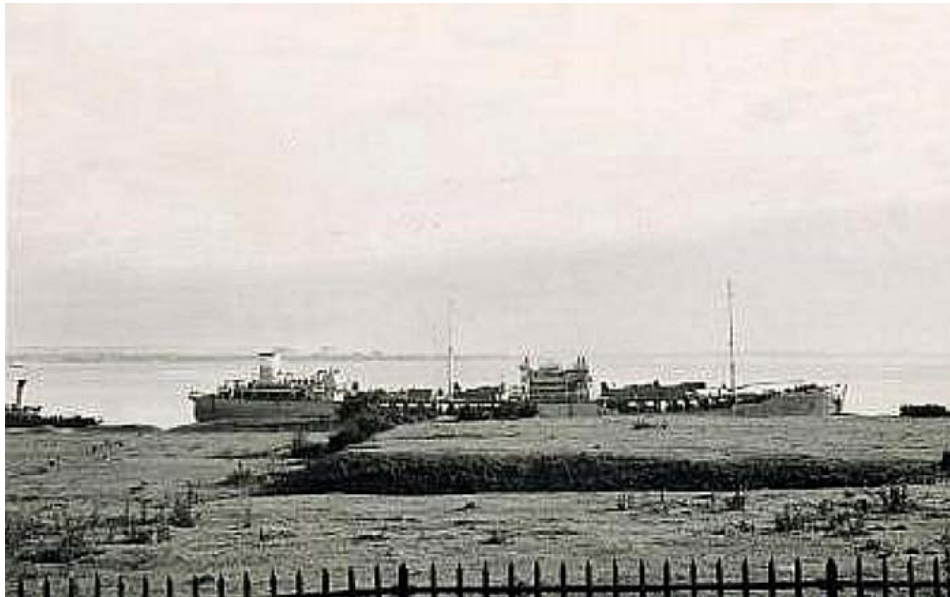
MS Ondina



MS Ondina looking her best during peacetime

From the Shell Collection

MS Ondina was built by the Netherlands Dry-dock Company in Amsterdam. She was officially named and launched on April 29, 1939. Upon completion in 1940 she was managed by one of the group of Shell companies, "La Corona", however, with the outbreak of World War II MS Ondina was temporarily laid up in Curacao.



MS Ondina seen laid up in Curacao
Source unknown

MS Ondina Specifications - Imo Nr 5613986

Tonnage	9,070-ton
Builder	Nederlandse Dok & Scheepsbouw Mij, Amsterdam Construction Nr 71
Dimensions	130,49 x 16,62 x 6,40 m
Completed	August 1, 1939
Armament	1 x 102 mm USN QF some MG
Propulsion	One Werkspoor 6-cyl 4-stroke diesel
Performance	2,800 hp
Max. speed	12 knots

Activities in the Indian Ocean:

In late 1942, enemy 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 sink them since their successful sortie to Ceylon in April 1942. But unknown to the allies, the Japanese Navy had decided to keep the pressure on the shipping lanes, mostly because of their ever growing importance in the war. 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 cargo ships 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:

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 organized with Kiyozumi Maru in 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 acted 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 score. With these successes, they had sunk or captured 5 merchant ships within a year, totalling 31.303 tons. They left Singapore on November 5 on their fourth sortie, under overall command of Captain Imazato Hiroshi.

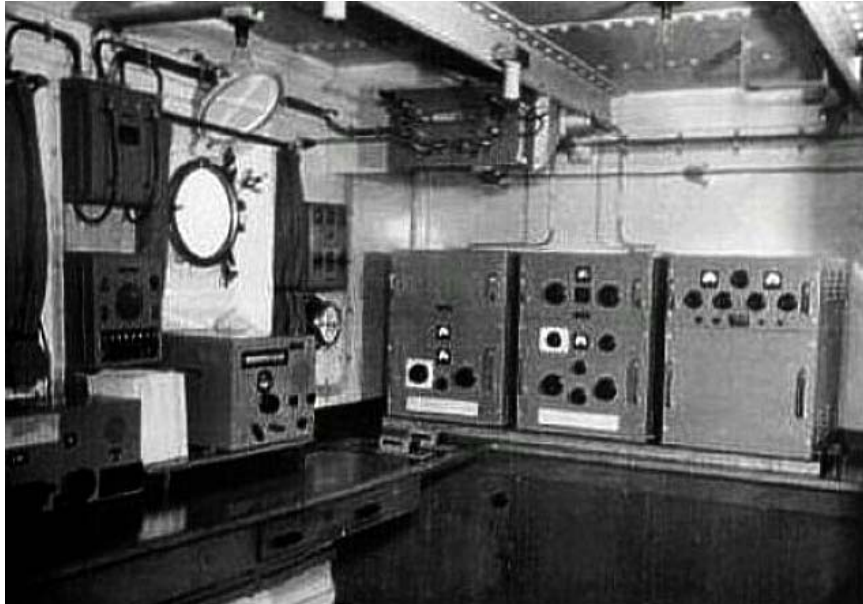
The Ondina:

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 not too lightly armed, with a 4 inch gun on her stern and several machine guns for AA-use. Under Captain W. Horsman, she was now deployed on a line between Fremantle in Australia and Abadan on the oil-rich

shores of the Persian Gulf. On her journey to Abadan, she would escorted and under the protection of the 650-ton corvette HMIS Bengal, which was under the command of Lt. Cdr. W.J. Wilson, RNR. The vessel was one of the Royal Australian Navy-type Bathurst Class corvettes and she and her three sister ships had all been allocated temporarily to the Indian Navy, but with an Australian crew. She only had one 3-inch gun instead the 4-inch gun that was not available at the time, which made her firepower certainly not enough to protect the MS Ondina from submarines, let alone from enemy surface raiders or the air.

The two ships departed Fremantle on November 4, 1942, expecting a long but uneventful trip.

The Ondina had additional supplies of fuel oil onboard, which was to refuel the Bengal at Diego Garcia before the tanker then proceeded to Abadan in the Persian Gulf and the corvette was to leave for Colombo. The Bengal was in fact the fourth and last of the Bathurst Class corvettes built in Australia for the Indian Navy. And with the Bengal only recently having completed her commissioning trials, she was certainly all very new at her job, but not her crew as they were well trained!



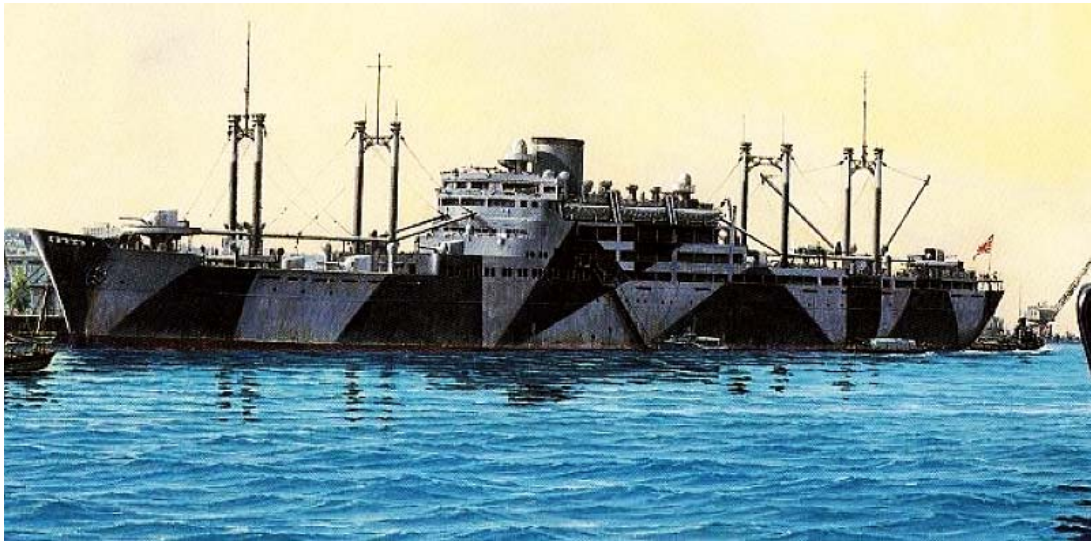
Ondina's radio room
From the Shell Collection

The Great and Famed Battle at Sea:

On November 11, 1942, at 11.45 AM the naval authorities in Fremantle received a SOS-signal sent out by the Bengal, reporting that she and the Ondina were under attack by two enemy raiders, identified as being Japanese, in position 19.38 N - 93.5 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 AMC's a few minutes later. The ships both made a quick 90 degrees turn to starboard away from the enemy to a north-north-west direction. Bengal then turned and headed straight for the enemy, thus hoping to buy enough time for the Ondina to escape. She opened fire at 1200 hours from 3200 metres away, soon followed by the Ondina at 1205 PM some 8,000 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 and being the most powerful of the two. In addition, the Ondina could only do 12 knots versus 21 of the Japanese ships.

The Aikoku Maru (Captain Oishi Tamotsu) and Hokoku Maru (Captain Imazato Hiroshi) commenced firing at 1200 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 by Ondina was a direct hit in the superstructure of Hokoku Maru, but apparently it did little to affect her speed or armament. Content with the hit, the gun captain 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".



A painting of the Imperial Japanese Navy Ship Hokoku Maru
From one of the sites credited at the bottom of the page

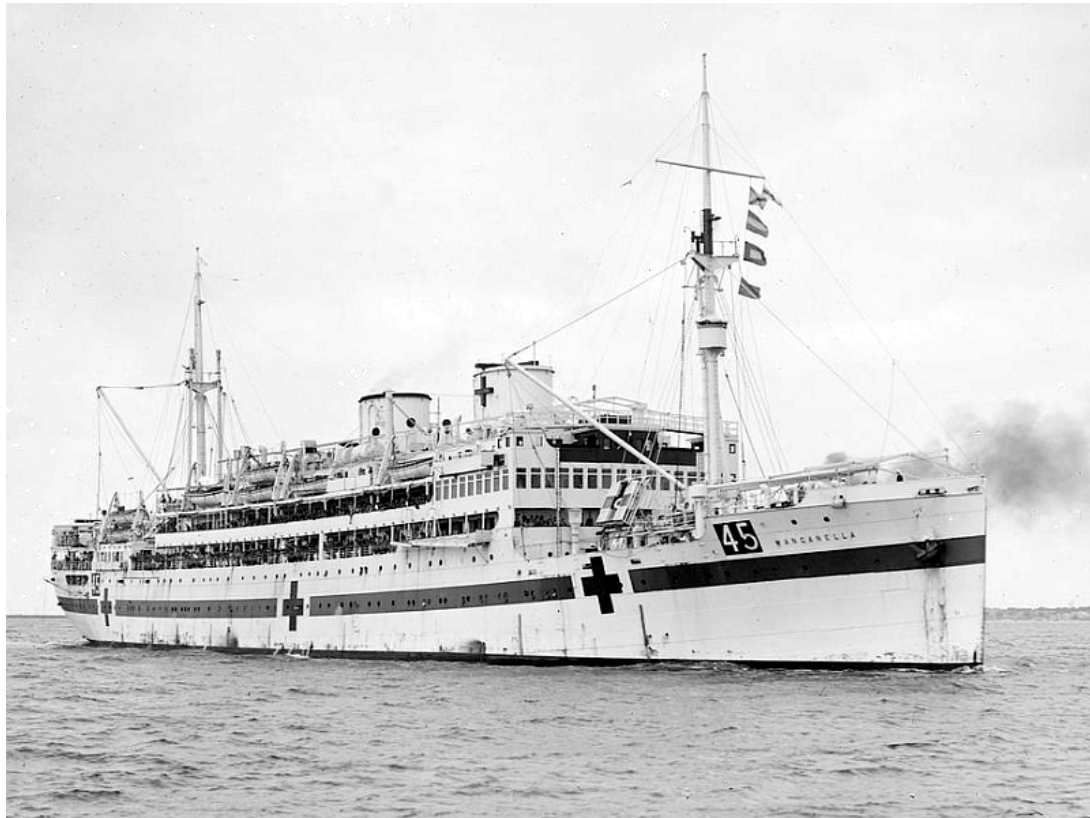
The Aikoku Maru soon avenged her sister ship, scoring several hits on Ondina. Fortunately, shells and torpedoes have little effect on empty tankers, as the large number of watertight tanks keeps them afloat under the most difficult circumstances. Aikoku Maru also fired at the Bengal, which had shortened the distance to about 2200 metres. One shell from the Japanese hit her in the forecabin, luckily doing little damage. Her gunners had been firing continuously at the Japanese, claiming several hits. Unfortunately, the ammo supply was soon depleted. At 1245, her last shell had been fired and her captain decided there was little he could do for the Ondina. He steamed away at full speed, chased by gun splashes. After laying a smokescreen, she took a hit in the stern which did little to hamper her escape. 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 abaft the bridge. Some time later, a second explosion was seen aboard Hokoku Maru, still burning and sinking. After leaving the scene, Bengal set course for Diego Garcia, where the captain reported the Ondina and one enemy AMC sunk.

Bengal's captain was right about one thing, the Hokoku Maru had indeed sunk, but 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 ammo supply. 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 was unsuccessful, 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 gun crew) 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 the ship off. Both slammed big 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 the 30 or 35 degrees list. Then Aikoku Maru changed course and the Japanese gunners opened fire on the drifting lifeboat. One sailor was killed, with three others heavily wounded. One of them 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. 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.

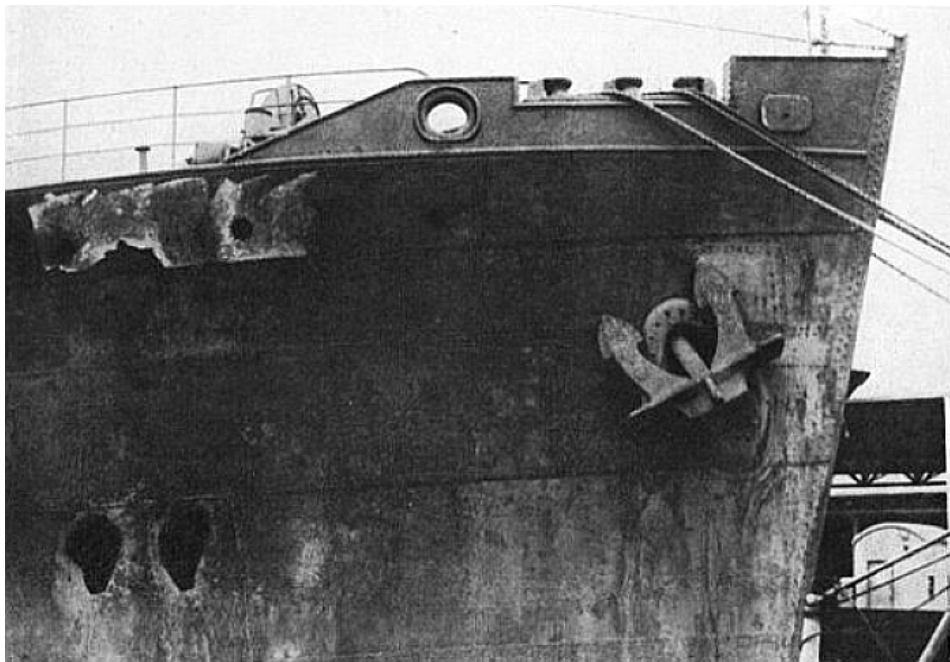
Meanwhile, the men in the lifeboats had given the deceased a seaman's burial, and then exchanged thoughts about what to do next. The first officer Rehwinkel wanted to return to the tanker, but only one man of the gun crew was willing to go with him. Most of the others were convinced the Ondina was about to go down. Not without trouble, Rehwinkel managed to assemble a small number of men and returned to the ship, where counter flooding 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 the latter were 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 in very bad shape. He had a crushed leg and after two days the first officer was forced to send out an un-coded signal for help. It could not be coded as the codebooks had all been thrown overboard when "abandon ship had been ordered. This unexpected signal caused a shock in Colombo, as the Ondina was reported sunk 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 trap by the Japanese, the Ondina didn't reply. Without medical attention the Ondina headed towards Fremantle, and six days later, on the 17th an Australian flying boat Catalina 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 being the Australian luxury passenger liner, currently in use as a Hospital Ship, **AHS Wanganella**. All the wounded were transferred to the Wanganella where doctors immediately began a series of blood transfusions to save Henry's life, and did so with success.



Australian Hospital Ship - AHS Wanganella seen at full speed ahead
From the author's private collection

On November 18, both the Ondina and the Wanganella 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 received emergency repairs and she remained in Australia for some time as yet.



Some of the damage done by the Hokoku Maru can be clearly seen on Ondina's bow
Photographer unknown - *Please see the Photo Notes at re bottom of the page!

In order to supply the Potshot base with marine fuel oil, marine distillate and aviation fuel, four a 2,000-ton welded steel tanks were being constructed at the port of Onslow (today's Exmouth). The tank would hold distillate for submarines in service mid 1943. After the Indian Ocean ordeal she served at Potshot marine depot as a temporary floating storage facility until the Onslow tanks was finally completed around October 1943. Thereafter, the US Navy provided a 500-ton barge to collect the distillate from tankers and pump it ashore into the newly completed shore tanks at Potshot.

For interest, "Potshot" was the codename for the spartan base and rest camp for submariners using the tender USS Pelias and an airfield was constructed there to provide fighter defence for the base. "Z Special Unit" used Potshot as a staging base for "Operation Jaywick" in September 1943. Today this small marine base is the Western Australian Town of Exmouth with a population of around 2,400. However, it is also a popular tourist center, but so far removed from major capitals, even from Perth the capital of Western Australia is 1,270 kilometres - 789 miles away, or Darwin in the Northern Territory is a mere 3,366 kilometres - 2,092 miles and that is the nearest neighbour state capital. Or from Brisbane the capital of

Queensland the distance is 5,778.45 kilometres – 3,590.41 miles.

In due course Ondina was finally repaired and both the HMIS Bengal and MS Ondina continued in their respective services. However, I should mention that even before she went to Potshot, the Ondina supplied fuel and water to the SRD vessel Krait that was heading for Singapore where she carried out a most successful attack on Japanese shipping. The refuelling occurred on September 1, 1943. Of course the Krait has become folklore and most famous!

By the end of 1943 oil tankers were obviously in short supply and thus it had been decided to have the Ondina sail the United States to undergo major repairs. However she first headed for Melbourne as work needed to be done to strengthen her hull sufficiently for the voyage across the South Pacific. On Board there was a crew of Dutch officers and a Chinese crew. But, just as the ship was about to depart Melbourne, all but two of the Chinese crew deserted ship. Shell decided to continue the voyage and have two of the DEMS gunners acting as helmsmen whilst the other six men would keep their watches on the guns. The ninety four day voyage was long and it seemed to be everlasting to all on board, as she headed for the Panama Canal. But once they had cleared the Canal she headed for Galveston where the repairs were to take place, but new order had arrived and they had to continue to Tampa Florida. There she received a full restoration as well as a considerable refit improving all crew quarters!

The MS Ondina was still operational in the late 1950s and she returned to Fremantle around 1956, which sadly was rather unnoticed by most!

Aftermath:

Very few questions remain concerning this clash, but the most important one is who fired the fatal shot? Answering this question is difficult only because as both the Ondina and Bengal claimed to have scored the fatal hit. The Japanese themselves have stated that it was without a doubt the Ondina. According to them, her shell hit the starboard torpedo launcher, causing the torpedo to explode. At the time, the Bengal was given the benefit of the doubt, according to the author from one of my sources as an attempt to use this battle for propaganda in India, where the British had a lot of trouble keeping the people under control. However, the gun on the Bengal, could not do enough damage to the Japanese ship, and the Australian Navy in reality knew this!

In retrospect, this battle was not only was a tactical success for the Allies, but it also offered implications for future strategies. The loss of the Hokoku Maru led to the abandoning of raider warfare by the Imperial Japanese Navy and never (with one exception) tried to break 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 (Knight of the) in de Militaire Willemsorder der 4de Klasse posthumously and was Mentioned in all Dispatches.

In addition Australian Able Bodied Seaman Bertram Albert George Hammond RAN (Royal Australian Navy) service number: PA1318, received the Distinguished Service Medal and the Bronzen Kruis (Bronze Cross) on May 22nd, 1943. However, this medal was replaced by a much higher honour, being "The Netherland's Bronze Lion" with an "Honourable Mention." The captain of the Bengal, Lieutenant-Commander Wilson, received the Distinguished Service Order, while others of his crew were also awarded.



This is the Bronze Lion Medal, a high honour to an Australia Naval man indeed!
With thanks to: www.ww2awards.com for their excellent information



Here we see a Bronze Cross Medal presentation ceremony attended by HRH Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands (left) Who is seen with a number of recipients. I will add details as soon as I obtain them!
 Photographer unknown - *Please see the Photo Notes at re bottom of the page!

Lance Bombardier F. Ryan. No. 4192090. MRA:

Recently I received an email from Mr. Colin Jarry-Ryan in the United Kingdom, and he kindly provided the following interesting information regarding his Uncle. It reads as follows:

"... my Uncle, Patrick Francis-Ryan was on board as a gunner and (was) decorated by the Dutch Government with the Bronze Cross for his part in this battle. Please find attached his photo and (one of) the medal." **Please Note:** The words in (brackets) were added by the author.

This was followed up by another email from the son of Patrick Francis-Ryan and he advised me as follows"

"My name is Tony Ryan, and Patrick Francis Ryan was my father, who sadly deceased 20 years ago. He was known as Frank Ryan while he was in the forces, and he was presented with his medal either on November 7 or the 8th.1948 as I have entry and exit stamps for Holland in his passport for those dates."

Very soon there will be additional images added, such as two British Newspaper clippings and the official Dutch Citation from HRH Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, but presented by Prince Bernhard, husband of Princess Juliana, the future Queen.



Gunner Frank Ryan and his Dutch "Bronzen Kruis" (Bronze Cross) received for his bravery whilst in battle!
Provided by Colin Jarry-Ryan

I hereby wish to thank Mr. Colin Jarry-Ryan and for providing the information regarding his Uncles involvement as well as sending the relevant photographs. I am sure that the many readers of this page will greatly appreciate it!

I believe there is more to come of the Gunner Frank Ryan story!



This is a commemoration stamp issued Australia in those days was still called British, this the "British Indian Ocean" Today it is no longer so! Australia is an Independent, but part of the Commonwealth, and has its own National Anthem
From the author's private collection

Sister Ships and the Final days of the MS Ondina:

MS Ondina had quite an extensive fleet of sister ships such as the: Elusa, Ena, Erinna, Etrema, Eulota, Ocana, Olivia, Omala, Onoba, Oscilla, Ovula And Anglo Saxon Owned Elona, Ensis, Erodona, Eulima, Mactra, Opalia, Otina, Ovatella, Pellicula, Sepia, Simnia, Sitala, Solarium, Standella, and the Tricula.

After the World War II, MS Ondina sailed on sailing on a good number of services, but in due course having had a busy and certainly a tumultuous twenty year career, she was finally sold in 1959 to be broken up in Hong Kong.



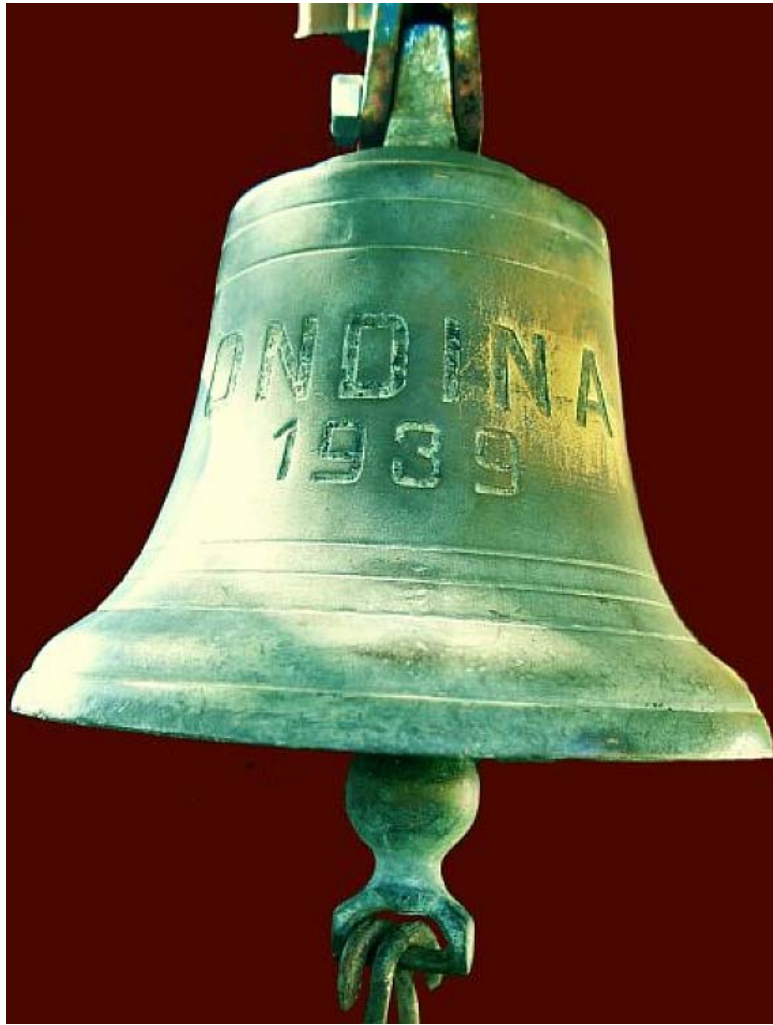
Here we see the Ondina in her later years
From the Shell Collection



The Ondina is seen here laid up just before heading for the breakers yards in Hong Kong in 1959



Here we see the MS Ondina departing and she is bound for Hong Kong, where she will be broken up
From the Shell Collection



MS Ondina's ships bell currently on show at my home – it is available to Maritime Museums
The bell is now the property of the author and this image is © copyright Reuben Goossens



This is another Ondina bell that was in the Lobby of the Royal Dutch Shell Building in Amsterdam
From the Shell Collection



Re Photograph Above: Mr D Erskine (right) and Mr J Browning of the Shell Oil Company inspect the bullet riddled mast of the Company's tanker Ondina which was found in a North Fremantle boilermaker's yard. On 1942-11-11 the tanker, escorted by a minesweeper, was attacked by the Japanese raider Kokoku Maru about 1400 miles from Fremantle and with

her one gun she sank the raider. A second Japanese raider, the Kunta Maru, appeared and blasted the escort into a hulk. The Ondina fought until her last round was fired and then the Captain stopped engines and ordered "Abandon Ship". Ignoring this, the raider continued shelling the vessel and finally torpedoed her. After the raider left the scene the tanker's surviving crew members boarded Ondina, extinguished the fires, righted her list and sailed her back to Fremantle. Six of her crew were decorated - including Captain W Horsman, posthumously. Photograph: "Australian War Memorial, Copyright expired - Public domain."

My Story:

This story takes place in Rotterdam, the Netherlands in 1953.

My family who had a long maritime background, and they had a good friend who was a captain of this tanker and my mother and I was invited to come on board in the afternoon. Unknown to me anyway was that the ship was still awaiting a berth and she was at anchor, thus the Captain, whose name I obviously have forgotten, had a lifeboat waiting for us, and off we went. It was such fun! We boarded by what seemed like a never ending staircase that moved, as I had not experienced this before! Once on board, I noticed the smell of oil a little and the vast decks. There was the aft deck house with Asian crew and the amidships deckhouse for the Dutch officers, which was very nice indeed. We had a look at the bridge, which to me seemed rather cramped for such a huge ship, well I thought it was then. We then went to the captain's quarters, which were rather fancy compared to the other areas we had seen, as he had several rooms such as a bedroom, lounge and dining area and a spacious office. We sat down were offered coffee and something to eat, and other drinks for the adults, such as mother and officers.

I felt quite happy with this visit, but I had no idea what the name of this ship was, so I asked the captain for the name, Reuben this a well know ship that became famous in the War, for it is the Ondina. One day you will learn all about her for she was far away in Australia on the other side of the world and she was badly hit by a number of Japanese ships, but she fought back and she eventually won, even though she was so badly wounded and she had to limp back to port!

Thus as you can see I have actually been on this ship and somehow feel a small connection to her, and it was meant to be that one of her three bell's would end up with me!

Sources to the main story:

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

Eiichi Nakajima: "Hokoku Maru" - the unknown Q-ship (an extract was kindly provided by Sander Kingsepp)

Warship International No 4, 1994

Thanks to Roel Zwama, Anne Niemantsverdriet, Bert Kossen, Jean-François Masson, Dan Muir and Ferry van Eewen for the additional details.

And also thank you - dutcheastindies/Ondina & AWM - www.awm.gov.au.

Remembering the Brave MS Ondina!



The Ondina at sea in her earlier days, it is a great way to remember this brave ship!
From the authors private collection

Read about the ... "Heroes of the Dutch Merchant Marines during the Second World War - The account of the Shell-tanker Ondina" Exhibition!

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[Who is the Author of ssMaritime?](#)

Commenced in the passenger Shipping Industry in May 1960