

REPORT OF A GALLANT ACTION BY
H.M.I.S. BENGAL AND M.V. ONDINA
WITH TWO JAPANESE RAIDERS

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 8th January, 1943, by Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet.

Admiralty Foreword.

This despatch deals with a gallant action by H.M.I.S. BENGAL and the Dutch M.V. ONDINA against two much superior Japanese raiders.

2. H.M.I.S. BENGAL* was escorting the tanker M.V. ONDINA† on passage from Fremantle to Diego Garcia. Early on 11th November, 1942, in Latitude 19° 45' S., Longitude 92° 40' E, BENGAL sighted two ships proceeding on a north easterly course at high speed. These were Japanese armed raiders, one of the Aikoku Maru Class and the other of the Kiyosumi Maru Class, of 10,439 and 8,631 tons respectively.

3. BENGAL promptly attacked the nearest, which was the larger raider, and soon after opening fire, succeeded in obtaining a hit aft, as a result of which this enemy caught fire and, after a large explosion on board an hour later, sank by the stern. BENGAL continued the action with both raiders to draw them away from ONDINA.

4. Meanwhile ONDINA, who, in spite of BENGAL'S order to make her escape by acting independently, had also been in action with the first raider, became separated from BENGAL. ONDINA was then engaged by the second raider who returned to her after having, as she evidently thought, disposed of BENGAL.

5. ONDINA, after being repeatedly hit, expending all her ammunition and having her Master killed, abandoned ship. This raider closed, machine-gunned the survivors in their boats and fired two torpedoes at ONDINA. These hit, and ONDINA, taking up a 30° list to starboard, must have been considered doomed by the second raider who then left the scene to search for survivors of her consort. The raider later returned to fire a third torpedo at ONDINA, which missed, but her principal concern seems to have been to make good her escape before the intervention of British warships, and she disappeared over the horizon in a north easterly direction.

6. ONDINA'S crew then reboarded their ship and brought her safely back to Fremantle.

7. A letter of appreciation of the part played by H.M.I.S. BENGAL in this action, which the Admiralty caused to be sent to the India Office, is attached as Appendix I.

Eastern Fleet.

8th January, 1943

Forwarded for Their Lordships' information.

(Signed) J. F. SOMERVILLE,

Admiral,

Commander-in-Chief.

Notes —

* BENGAL—a minesweeper, 650 tons, armed with one 12-pdr, one single Bofors and two Oerlikons.

† ONDINA—a Shell Company tanker, armed with one 4-inch gun whose crew was composed of four R.N. and one R.A.N.R. ratings, three Gunners R.A. and one Dutch merchant seaman.

‡ 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.

*H.M. Naval Office,
Colombo.*

30th November, 1942

The report of the Commanding Officer, H.M.I.S. BENGAL, which he rendered to me on his arrival at Colombo is forwarded herewith.

2. The Commanding Officer, BENGAL, informed me that his signal to ONDINA to "act independently" was made with the intention that she should make good her escape and that he was disappointed to observe that she altered course only 90° instead of 180°, but he had no time to make a further signal to her. His prompt decision to steer at full speed directly towards the larger of the two enemy ships in sight was made solely with a view to give the ONDINA time to get away; he had little hopes that his ship could survive against such odds. He was greatly encouraged on the run in that fire was not opened on him until he got to 3,500 yards, as at this range his 12-pdr. gun was effective. He states that at full speed steering is difficult so that the unsteady course he was making increased the difficulties of the enemy in getting hits on their tiny opponent. The BENGAL only carried 40 rounds L.A. ammunition.

(Signed) A. D. READ,

Rear Admiral,

Flag Officer, Ceylon.

H.M.I.S. BENGAL.

12th November, 1942

Submitted.

That the following is a true extract from this vessel's Log Book for 11th November, 1942.

- 1145 Unknown vessel sighted bearing 290°. Distance 8 miles. Course 110°. Action Stations.
- 1150 Altered course to 020°. Revs. reduced to 135. ONDINA instructed to take station on starboard beam. Vessel appeared to be Japanese.
- 1154 Second unknown vessel sighted bearing 310°. Distance 10 miles. Course 125°. Vessel appeared to be Japanese.
- 1155 Rendezvous signalled to ONDINA who was instructed to act independently by my 0517Z/11.
- 1156 Altered course to approx 260°, speed increased to full, straight for first vessel sighted.
- 1158 Original enemy report transmitted, frequent amplifying reports followed.
- 1212 First vessel opened fire at approximate range of 3,500 yards from position 10° on starboard bow. BENGAL returned fire forthwith. Second enemy raider altered course to intercept.
- 1215 Second raider opened fire. First raider hit aft and large explosion seen. Magazine presumed hit causing large fire. Mean course of 260° maintained with constant alterations to take avoiding action due to near misses, altering course to northward.
- 1220 BENGAL sustained a direct hit forward, fore provision store flooded.
- 1240 Raider proceeded abaft safety angle*. BENGAL ceased firing. Mean course altered to 200°. Smoke floats failed to function.

Admiralty footnote —

* The reference to "safety angle" is to the limit of training of the 12-pdr gun which was mounted forward in the ship.