



SUKANI

HEARTS
OF
OAK



a 300m thinkbook from Katha 

1

The year was 1942. The sun was slowly setting over the harbour at Freemantle. The city sighed in relief as twilight shadows stretched their cool fingers at the end of a hot, trying November day.

Many of the steamships anchored in the harbour were lowering derricks and stowing away gear. They were part of a merchantman convoy leaving for distant horizons, early next morning, under an escort of men-of-war. Code flags denoting their positions in the convoy fluttered prominently on each vessel.

As the bells rang out the second dog watch, the clock struck six on the top floor of the Operations building overlooking the harbour. A hush fell over the forty Allied captains gathered in the briefing room. An officer from the Admiralty walked in and went straight up to the map on the wall. Without any preamble he addressed the silent, watchful men.

He explained their convoy orders, speed and course in detail, then tapping his left palm rhythmically with his baton asked, “Any questions, gentlemen?” He looked slowly around the room. Questions were raised and answered. The briefing came to an end. The men got up to leave. In the overawed silence only the scraping of chairs could be heard.

Captain Benjohrsson of the Ondina was the last to leave. As he reached the door the Admiralty man stopped him with, “One moment, Captain.” Captain Benjohrsson was all attention.

“I have special orders for you, Captain. You will remain with the convoy for only a few hours. Keep a sharp look out for signals from your escort commander. On instructions from him, you are to proceed to an undisclosed destination. Good luck.” With a firm handshake they parted.

The convoy weighed anchor and put out to sea before the blackness of the night was dispelled. Eighteen ships in one direction, twenty three in another. Destroyers, sloops, frigates and other men-of-war escorted the contingents.

Once they had left Freemantle, Captain Benjohrsson, and the whole convoy accompanying the Ondina brought their heads to bear northward. As they approached Perth they executed helm orders 90° port and burrowed into the west.

The 8th of November dawned and set uneventfully. All day the escort destroyers had increased speed and scouted ahead of the convoy

or had nosed between the columns. In this manner, they, worthy custodians of the convoy's safety, kept a vigilant eye on their charges.

Gradually the convoy was enveloped by an opaque war-time night. It was a little short of 2200 hours. Aboard the Ondina an officer and a cadet focused their binoculars, alert for any orders from the escort vessel. Suddenly the shaded light of an aldis lamp speckled the night – Stand by for message. The escort commander was calling the Ondina.

The officer's hands tightened around the binoculars. He stared hard at the flashes. When the message was over, he acknowledged it, bounded down the ladder and read out the decoded message to Captain Benjohrsson. "The Ondina shall now leave the convoy. Proceed on course 36 red, speed 12 knots. At approximately 2330

hours you will be met by the naval vessel VTMS 56. Proceed on her orders. Message complete. Good-bye.

Good luck."

2

Once again darkness engulfed the convoy.

The Ondina slowly edged her way out of the convoy. The quartermaster spun the wheel 36 red and steadied her on course. Captain Benjohrsson ordered the engine room to increase speed. “Revolutions 80,” the message was called down the pipe. It was then 2020 hours.

“Keep a sharp look out there!” the officer on watch called to the look-out at the fo’c’sle head.

At exactly 2300 hours the look-out forward and the officer on watch reported sighting a vague shape. At that moment a dot of light flashed through the dark.

“Dot dash, dot dash, dot dash, What ship? Where bound?” challenged the stranger. The Ondina identified herself, then asked, “Who are you?”

Back flashed the answer, “VTMS 56. Continue on course, speed 12 knots.”

Captain Benjohrsson looked at his chief mate. “What ship is that, Newton? Do you know it?”

“Yes, sir. I looked her up in the Command Orders. She is the Indian Navy’s minesweeper, RINS Bengal.” After a pause he added, “She

is a mere 620 tonner, sir, with four small guns – one 3 inch, one 40 mm and two 20mm guns. I made the acquaintance of two of her officers when I was in Perth last week. Her commander, Mr Wilson, was a captain in the merchant navy before the war and is the only British officer on board. His second-in-command, Lt Mehra, hasn’t sprouted a moustache yet, sir.”

Captain Benjohrsson took in the information. He pulled out a big wide-mouthed pipe, slowly stuffed in the tobacco and lit it carefully. Then he looked up and snorted. Newton understood. The Captain had said all he had to say.

The darkness thickened. Captain Benjohrsson paced the bridge. Again and again his eyes swept the water y expanse piercing the blackness around. Har rowing thoughts invaded his normal calm. A 620 ton Indian toy ... One English officer on board and he too a merchantman like me ... Lt Mehra, so young and raw ... And they are

to escort this 15,000 tonner, the Ondina, with its precious cargo of oil and petrol. Lord have mercy on us!

Captain Benjohrsson passed his hand over his beard. He looked feelingly at the 4 inch gun mounted on his afterdeck. And then at the thin apologetic streak of water speeding ahead. That was the Bengal.

On the bridge of the Bengal, Lt Mehra maintained a routine scrutiny of the sea through his binoculars. Sub Lt Nagaseshan kept the watch, his relaxed tread reassuring in the fierce silence of the night. In the control room veteran quartermaster, Budhiyo Jeevo was at the wheel. Petty Officer Kutty called out the revolutions and watched the telegraphs.

The little minesweeper sailed jauntily on her mission across the high seas. She had to see 7,000 tons of precious oil and petrol to a destination thousands of miles away. The enemy might, in an

odd moment of negligence, allow ammunition to pass. But oil and petrol! These were vital for steamships and aircraft. For them to pass through unmolested, the enemy would have to be asleep.

Suddenly, Nagaseshan gripped the bridge rails. At the same time the look-out called out, "Green 21, sir!" "There is something over there, sir," said Nagaseshan in a queer tone to Lt Mehra, "Green 21."

Lt Mehra looked to the right, eyed the spot for a moment, then immediately informed Commander Wilson. "Alter course," called the Commander, "Starboard 21."

"Starboard 21," called out Lt Mehra.

"Starboard 21 it is, sir," acknowledged helmsman Geega.

"Steady!" called Lt Mehra.

3

“Steady it is, sir.”

The Bengal rose like a cheetah and leapt for ward. The cutwater threw up little hills of foam as she dug in, trembling with the vibrations of her engines. In a short while she reached the spot. Lt Mehra’s worst fears were confirmed. A little wreckage, oil on the surface of the sea, and the silently rising waves.

“Poor beggars!” said Lt Mehra.

The Bengal turned her head and came alongside the Ondina. Through the loud-hailer the order was given, “For the next thirty minutes, course 15 red, 20 green, four times red, three times green. Message over. Repeat Message.” The message ordered the Ondina to follow a zigzag course, one usually taken to evade submarines. “But what was that?” asked the Ondina.

“Mind your own business! Carry on course, fifteen red, twenty green,” thundered the Bengal.

“These chaps are riding the high horse now, aren’t they!” muttered Captain Benjohrsson. But there was no delay in executing the orders.

“Fifteen port!” he bellowed.

“Fifteen port it is, sir,” replied the helmsman as he spun the wheel.

As the sun rose on the 9th of November, officers and men on the

Ondina stared open-mouthed at this determined Indian vessel. Her hull looked just big enough to house one of the Melbourne or Bombay harbour-launches. On her foreward and afterdecks were guns. But what guns! Mere Christmas pistols. One 3 inch gun as the main armament, with one Bauffer and two Oerlikons thrown in for good measure. While the ocean waves patted the Ondina a little cheekily, the same waves threatened to swallow the Bengal as they spilled on to her decks and tossed her like a coconut shell.

Captain Benjohrsson’s confidence had been shaken that night when Newton had described the Bengal to him. But when the light of day gave form to her, he was speechless. Turning to the officer standing beside him, he just threw up his hands and exclaimed, “Wonderful!” Nobody on board the Bengal spared a thought for Captain Benjohrsson and his problems. Commander Wilson was on the bridge, ready for any contingency. Other officers and men moved about the ship engrossed in their own tasks. Surgeon

Lt Menon and Engineer Lt Hassan were leaning over the rails, deep in an animated discussion. The gunner y officer, Lt Ranbir was taking the daily drill of the gunner y crew.

Those off-duty caught up on lost rest. Some were busy patching up worn-out clothing, while others wrote letters.

4

The look-out men, perched high on the masts that swayed against the clouds, sharpened their vigil. The radio officer mounted earphones and watched the screen. Diligent aircraft spotters searched the skies from under powerful telescopes. In his cabin near the control room, the wireless operator listened to the rat-a-tat as he would to his fiancée's conversation over the telephone at home.

Except for Commander Wilson, all of the ship's company were Indians, from diverse communities and different cities. But they

were bound by a fierce sense of honour and duty that came from having lived for months as one family. From the Ondina, curious eyes watched every move of the coordinated teamwork on the Bengal and anxiously wondered how far they could rely on the help and initiative of these men.

The 9th and 10th of November passed without incident. The men were lulled into a sense of security that carried on well into the evening of the 11th. On the Ondina, conversation was relaxed and high-spirited. From the ease with which the last three days had passed, it was reasonably inferred that the enemy was prowling anywhere but there.

Suddenly, a muffled explosion from the Bengal destroyed the illusory peace. A small flare swished skywards in a blast of air and, showering a cluster of stars, descended on the waters. Immediately alert, Captain Benjohrsson watched the Bengal like a hawk.

At 1640 hours, the Bengal's wireless had caught a message from

the American heavy cruiser, Toledo, giving information of the presence of two Japanese cruisers in the vicinity of the Bengal. The next moment the minesweeper rang with the command, "Action Stations." The men ran on the double to their respective stations.

The gunner's officer, Lt Ranbir, positioned the Indian Navy's famed gunlayers Dhir Singh, Bapu Karmarkar and Nelundur Pillai by the three strategic cannons. A two-fold watch was maintained by the radar. Following instructions, the men bathed and stripped to shorts and singlets as a precaution against infecting a wound and also to remove the encumbrance of extra clothing when engaged in battle. Surgeon Lt Menon distributed a compulsory dose of sulphur to help counter any sepsis. Before 1700 hours everyone had dined and now awaited whatever was to befall them, in watchful and silent expectancy.

At exactly 1700 hours, the radio officer of the Bengal intercepted conversation in incomprehensible code. As it had a note distinct

from that of the British, it was surmised that two enemy ships were cruising a short distance away.

Suspense and excitement gripped the Bengal but months of discipline and naval exercises had given the men such self-control that they were still able to engage in sedate conversation.

At 1735 hours, it was still too bright to attract attention by releasing flares. The flashes of the aldis would stand out even in good light. Commander Wilson ordered Sub Lt Nagaseshan to go aft and release a flare. From the bridge of the Ondina Captain Benjohrsson saw it and ordered, "Action Stations."

His hoarse voice carried across the sea and was heard on the Bengal. At that very moment the whirr of a propeller was caught by the sound detector in the engine room. Engineer Lt Hassan informed Commander Wilson. The Bengal released another flare – Follow my course.

"30 red," Commander Wilson ordered the quartermaster. The

Ondina followed in the Bengal's wake.

A moment later Engineer Lt Hassan called the bridge, "Not one but two propellers are heard now, sir, and my calculations show that the enemy is to port, at about 10 cables. They are both heading our way, sir."

5

“Thank you, Hassan,” Comander Wilson said. He asked Lt Mehra and Lt Heef to join him for a discussion in the chartroom. For a 620 ton minesweeper to engage two armed cruisers, each of them ten times her size and with twenty times her fire power, was wanton suicide. Yet if the enemy ships challenged them, the Commander and his men were of one mind. They would fight to the last man and to the last round.

The discussion lasted only a few minutes. Calling signal officer Sakhpal,

Commander Wilson dictated a message to the Ondina. From the quarterdeck, Sakhpal signalled with a small battery-operated torch.

“Compliments of Commander Wilson to Captain Benjohrsson. Get away from here. Proceed east at your best speed. The Bengal will try to keep enemy engaged for as long as we can hold out. If overpowered or damaged, will inform by wireless. Increase the distance as much as possible and get the Ondina away to safety immediately. Farewell and good luck. Indicate if understood.”

On the Ondina, the signaller stood with his torch ready. Captain Benjohrsson snatched it from him and signalled back “Dot, dot, dot, dot, dot, Message not clear.”

Sakhpal picked up a brighter torch and repeated the whole message. Again the same answer flashed back from the Ondina. For the third time, Sakhpal sent the message slowly and carefully. Captain Benjohrsson signalled back slowly and carefully, Dot, dot, dot, dot, dot.

Sakhpal was perplexed. But Lt Mehra beside him burst out laughing, “Victory be yours, brave soldier! You and I together will rub the enemy into the dust!”

Lt Mehra ran up to inform Commander Wilson, “Sir the Ondina is denying orders to run. Captain Benjohrsson signals back the message is not clearly understood.”

Commander Wilson himself took the torch and flashed to Captain Benjohrsson, “Bravo! Decrease speed and stand by 7 cables away.”

The Ondina carried out the orders immediately. “This message she has seen and read correctly,” said Lt Mehra with a laugh. Commander Wilson grinned and said, “The Nelson touch, what?”

At 2312 hours much activity was sighted on the radar screen. “Enemy ships intercepting us, sir,” Lt Mehra called the bridge. Definite traces appeared on the screen now. Lt Mehra watched for two minutes and

whistled sharply. Racing across the deck he saluted and said, “Two Japanese armed cruisers bearing down on us, sir, not more than 8 cables away.”

6

“Can you identify them?”

“Yes sir, the Hokoku Maru and the Kiyosumi Maru.” Commander Wilson pondered aloud,

“Hokoku Maru ... 10,000 tons and Kiyosumi Maru ... 8,500 tons?”

“And, sir”, said Lt Mehra, “on each of them are mounted eight 6 inch guns.”

“If even one of the those 6 inch guns scores a hit, the Bengal ...”

“Yes sir, but a gun is one thing, marksmanship another and kismet something altogether different.”

“So let’s see whose kismet is stronger.”

Just then there was a blinding flash followed a moment later by a thunderous explosion. The enemy had opened fire.

“Well done, son! Just keep doing that, will you,” said Lt Mehra under his breath and lifted his binoculars to see where the next one was coming from. The enemy was still not close enough for the Bengal’s small guns to find their range, so the minesweeper pushed forward.

Both enemy vessels opened fire on the Bengal and the Ondina at the same time. The first answering salvo boomed from the Ondina. To get within range, the Bengal sped ahead, zigzagging on her course. Her engineers raised steam for maximum speed till it seemed her

boilers would burst. As she sped through the waters she looked like a cannon ball.

Dhir Singh, Karmarkar and Pillai, renowned for their marksmanship in the Indian Navy, looked through the range-finder, as if focusing through a camera in a studio.

As soon as the Bengal came close enough, her 12 pound gun opened fire, supported by the other two. The Hokoku Maru’s afterdeck received a direct hit.

“Well done, men!” Lt. Ranbir yelled, “Let her have it!” The next shot blew off the Hokoku Maru’s aftermast.

“Full steam ahead!” Commander Wilson bellowed. Clanging the telegraph, Nagaseshan acknowledged, “Full steam ahead it is, sir.”

“Steady her there!”

“Steady it is, sir,” helmsman Geega called back from the control

room. The next moment the Bengal slipped between the two raiders. At close range her starboard and port guns opened fire on both the Japanese ships simultaneously.

Captain Benjohrsson of the Ondina was horrified by this incredible manoeuvre. "The damned fools!" he exclaimed.

But by this manoeuvre the Bengal had placed the Japanese ships in a quandary. If either of them fired her long range guns at the Bengal, the shell would find a mark on her compatriot on the other side of the Bengal. Gunner ymen on both the enemy ships were stunned into inaction. Their nonplussed captains paused in indecision. In that moment the Bengal inflicted mortal wounds on both the raiders.

The Kiyosumi Maru was the first to recover. She moved astern. Having understood her strategy, the Hokoku Maru moved forward unobtrusively.

Concentrating on the Bengal's antics the Japanese had forgotten the

Ondina. Only when one of the propellers of the Kiyosumi Maru was blown to pieces by a whistling shell did her captain realize that the Ondina was so close. Dropping her vendetta against the Bengal, she bore down on the Ondina. The Bengal turned and gave the Kiyosumi Maru chase. She discharged a volley of shells. The rudder of the Kiyosumi Maru was blown off. In reply, the Kiyosumi Maru emptied her guns into the Ondina. Soon, the Ondina was ablaze. Tongues of fire leapt up from her oil and petrol laden tanks and rose ferociously into the night.

The Bengal wirelessed the Ondina, "Get the hell out of here." And then in code, "Your destination Diego Garcia, longitude 750 East, latitude 60 South. Good luck."

7

The burning Ondina turned her head slowly. Captain Benjohrsson asked the radio officer to send coded message over the air to Naval Headquarters. After giving the vessel's identity, it said, "I have 7,000 tons of oil and petrol on my ship. In an engagement with two Japanese cruisers my ship has caught fire. I am making an effort to retreat from here and save my ship. The Indian Navy's valiant minesweeper, the Bengal, is giving battle single-handed to the two Japanese armed cruisers. Present position is longitude 72° 40' East,

latitude 190 45' South.” Seeing the Ondina gain distance in her bid for safety, the Bengal decided to make one last-ditch effort. She had received several gaping wounds. Many of her men lay injured on the deck, awaiting their turn on the stretchers. Seeing them, the men around were rekindled with the fire of sacrifice.

Lt Mehra turned to Commander Wilson and said, “Sir, you have served on merchantmen. Both the Japanese ships are merchantmen. If you were the captain of such a vessel, where would you place your magazine, sir?”

Commander Wilson was taken aback by Lt Mehra’s question. Placing a hand on his shoulder, he said, “Well done, son! Why didn’t it strike me? If I were the captain of the Hokoku Maru, I would most definitely place the magazine away from the engine room, at number 5 hold!” “Thank you, sir! Number 5 hold it is!” said Lt Mehra as he ran in search of Lt Ranbir. Commander Wilson looked up at the clock and his eyes widened in surprise. Only twenty minutes had

elapsed since the battle started! Commander Wilson gave it one long look and called softly, “20 green!”

“20 green it is, sir,” Geega called back. The engine room telegraph clanged – Half Ahead Starboard, Full Ahead Port.

The Bengal started to turn.

The captain of the Hokoku Maru saw the Bengal turning towards her and gave the order to train all four guns on her. “Take good aim and when she comes near, just blow her off, like that!” he said, with a flick of his fingers.

The Bengal kept her head pointing to the Hokoku Maru’s broadside making it difficult for the Japanese to find an easy target. The Japanese captain was forced to turn his ship’s broadside to bear on the Bengal’s. As she did so, all the guns on the Bengal spoke together, exploding with a vehemence belying their size. The Hokoku Maru was lifted off the water. She tried to right herself, but keeled over.

Number 5 hold had received a direct hit.

Thumping Nelundur Pillai on his back, Lt Ranbir yelled, “Magnificent job, Pillai! Jubilant cries rent the air from aboard the Bengal. In the midst of this uproar, Commander Wilson was horrified to see that the Kiyosumi Maru was intent on completing the destruction of the Ondina. A barrage of shells inflicted gaping wounds on her body. A heinous shot killed her valiant Captain, Benjohrsson.

The Ondina was soon reduced to a mass of smouldering steel. Surviving officers and men decided to abandon ship. Lifeboats were lowered into the sea.

Determined to sink the Ondina, the Kiyosumi Maru released a torpedo. It missed its mark. A second one too went astray. Cold-bloodedly, the Japanese aimed their machine guns at the defenceless men in the lifeboats.

At that precise moment a loud explosion was heard. It was the death cry of the Hokoku Maru. The Kiyosumi Maru rushed to her rescue but she folded up so quickly, there was no time to lower boats.

Seeing the Bengal bearing down on her like a provoked tigress, the captain of the Kiyosumi Maru decided to make a dash for the north-eastern horizon. As she fled she released one last torpedo at the Ondina.

8

Once again it missed the target!

The Bengal now turned her attention to the Ondina. Commander Wilson and his men were determined to save her.

The sight of the approaching minesweeper put new hope into the men in the lifeboats. A damage-control team from the Bengal boarded the burning Ondina. After several hours the fire was brought under control. As the last flames died down, the dawn of 12th November finally broke.

Despite the damage it had suffered the Bengal's strength remained unimpaired. Of the one hundred and ten men on board, fifty lay wounded, but not a single life had been lost!

The RINS Bengal resumed the escort of the Ondina. In the minesweeper's magazine, five shots remained, unused.

“Hearts of Oak” was first published in Gujarati as Azad Armar.

Sukani has written a number of sea stories many of which are based on real life experiences. The popular long short story, “Dhudakiyo Bann,” is based on the tidal wave phenomenon. He died in 1958 at the age of sixty two.

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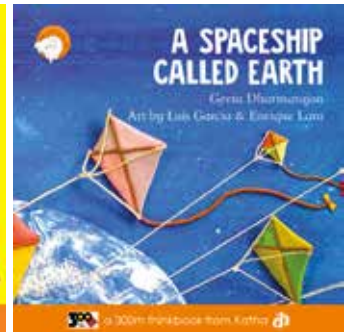
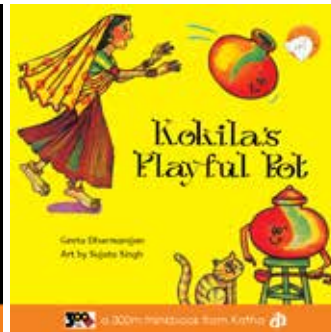
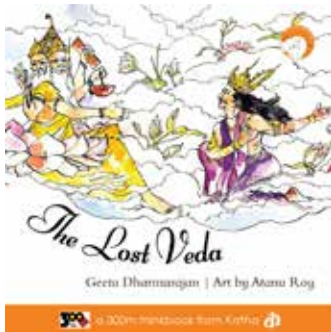
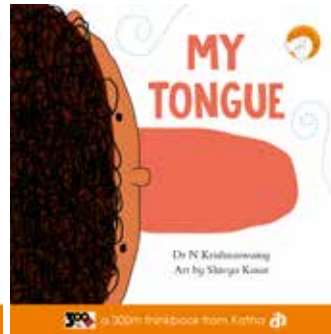
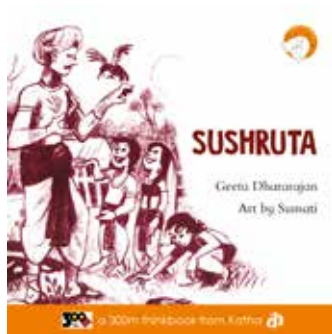
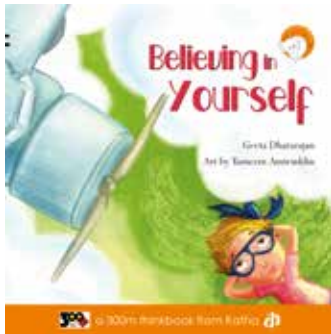
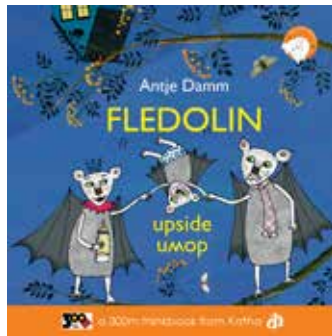
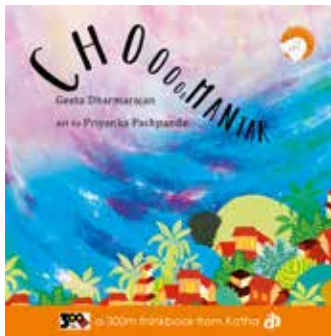
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