



***“UNDERPOWERED,  
UNDERARMED & UNSAFE”***

These less-than-flattering adjectives were voiced by her Australian Navy crew during World War II...and probably some unprintable ones, as well. This ungainly vessel, pressed into naval service in a time of desperate need, performed in a manner that can only be classified as ‘above and beyond’ anything ever contemplated by her designers.

The PING WO was built in Shanghai in 1922 as a 3,105-ton shallow-draft steamer for the Indo-China Steam Navigation Company. Configured for service in the rivers and coastal waters of China and neighboring nations, she measured 300 feet long, with a beam of 48 feet and a maximum draft of 13 feet-six inches. Coal-fired boilers and triple expansion reciprocating engines provided for a maximum speed of 14 knots [16.1 miles per hour].

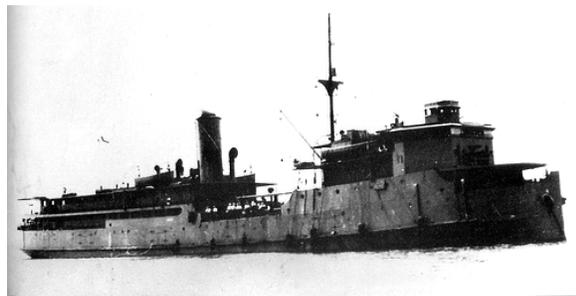
For almost two decades, the PING WO, and three other similarly sized vessels served this Chinese subsidiary of a world-famous British shipping firm. When World War II reached the Malay Peninsula in late 1941, the British Admiralty began to requisition British-owned vessels of all sizes and capabilities in order to augment their meager floating resources in the Far East.



PING WO was in Singapore Harbor when the Japanese started bombing military facilities there, as well as the city itself. She was quickly taken over by the Royal Navy. Some of the members of her civilian crew were replaced by two Royal Navy officers and a mixed crew of Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy Reservist ratings. But sixteen Chinese seamen, familiar with the vessel's handling characteristics, were retained.

As the Japanese repeatedly bombed military and civilian facilities in Singapore, what little armament that could be found that her thinly plated decks would support were installed. They were intended for use solely as defensive weapons, but her crew was probably not overly impressed or very much comforted by these inadequate additions.

Before slipping out of port on the night of February 11, 1942, the PING WO embarked nearly two hundred European and Eurasian civilian refugees. Incredibly, of all the dozens of warships and larger commercial vessels leaving Singapore, this flat-bottomed, top-heavy, rust-streaked coastal vessel was entrusted with a multimillion dollar shipment of gold!



Twenty-one boxes of bullion were covertly placed in the ship's cargo hold. A total of 10,635 fine ounces of pure gold [current value: \$18.3 million] were entrusted to the PING WO's skipper for delivery to Australian authorities. Reportedly, the gold had been removed from the Straits Settlement Bank to prevent its capture by the invading Japanese army. The move came just in time. Four days later, Singapore capitulated to the enemy.

It was a risky endeavour, to say the least. During World War II, the British had strict rules regarding the movement of gold bullion by sea. Vessels assigned such duty were required to have redundant communications' gear, heavy armament and the capability to operate at high speed in the open ocean. The PING WO met none of these criteria. Nevertheless, during those desperate times, desperate measures became necessary.

The PING WO eluded bombing attacks by Japanese aircraft and reached Batavia, Java a few days later. Many of the vessels that had sailed in her company were not so lucky. Some were sunk, others captured, along with their passengers and crews. The evacuees were disembarked, and fuel and provisions were taken on for the journey to Australia.

While still in Java, the PING WO was ordered to take under tow a disabled Australian destroyer. HMAS VENDETTA had been hastily towed there from Singapore by another coastal vessel to prevent the warship's capture by the onrushing Japanese. VENDETTA had been undergoing a major refit at the Singapore Navy Base. Her main engines had been dismantled and could not be reassembled in time to allow her to escape under her own power.

It took the PING WO, plus four other ships a total of 72 days to slowly drag the disabled destroyer, shown below in profile, from Singapore to Melbourne, Australia. That epic voyage, which covered a distance nearly 5,000 miles, was the longest sea-going tow in Australian naval history. At least half of the distance traveled was in enemy-dominated waters, where warships far bigger and more protected succumbed to Japanese attacks during the early months of 1942.

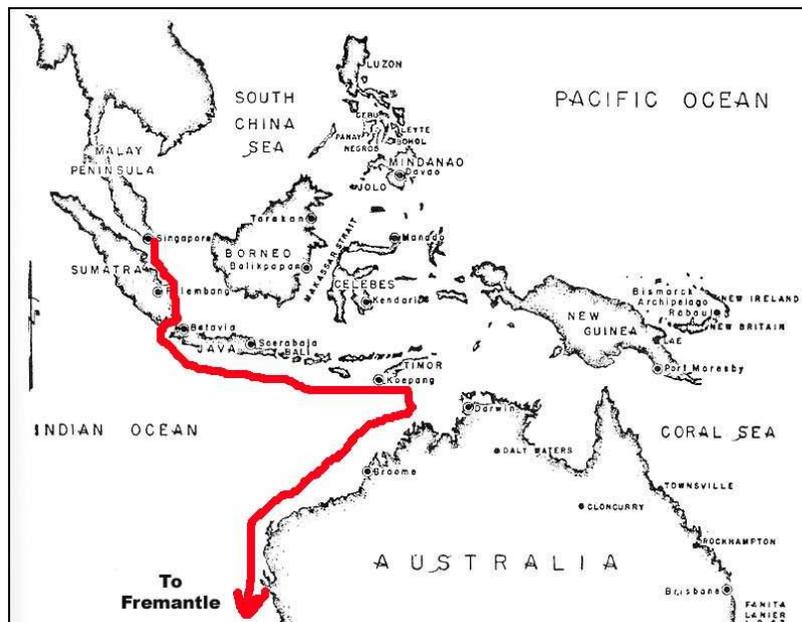


The VENDETTA's crew was no doubt shocked when they first spied their benefactor. The prospect of venturing out into unsheltered, hostile waters, totally dependent on such a strange vessel as the PING WO had to have been unnerving. After all, she resembled a combination top heavy, rusty houseboat...like something out of the comic opera HMS PINAFORE...but with a dash of oriental whimsy.

Between mid-February and March 24<sup>th</sup>, the shallow draft PING WO wallowed in the open sea, struggling to keep her heavy tow under control. Their rate of advancement averaged only three knots [less than 3.5 miles per hour]. Successfully dodging danger from Japanese surface, air and underwater forces, she hugged the coastlines of Sumatra, Java and Timor before crossing open water to the northwest shore of Australia. Her exact escape route is not known, but a likely path is reflected on the following map.

Once out of immediate danger, they continued slowly southward, along Australia's west coast until the two vessels reached Fremantle in southwest Australia.

There, the bullion was transferred to a train, which conveyed the gold to Melbourne where it was assayed. Then it was moved far inland, to Broken Hill in New South Wales, where all gold entrusted to the Aussies' care was stored.



Meanwhile, the twenty year old river steamer was showing serious signs of fatigue from her unprecedented ocean travels. Naval authorities seriously doubted she could survive the rest of the trip to Melbourne with the destroyer in tow, which meant crossing the Great Australian Blight, south of the continent. Another vessel took up the tow, and PING WO sailed for Melbourne in their company, as much for her protection as theirs.

The PING WO almost fell victim to the rough waters they had to transit. The VENDETTA's commanding officer noted in his log at one point in the passage:

*"PING WO has disappeared. We last saw her running before a gale like a surfboard."*

But against all odds, the crew of the PING WO managed to keep her afloat and safely make port, no doubt to many an observer's surprise. After a refit in Melbourne, she moved on to the east coast of Australia where she picked up a new, all-navy crew and became an official part of the Royal Australian Navy,

On May 22, 1942, she officially became a commissioned naval vessel in the Royal Australian Navy. Curiously, her original name, which translates as 'Equitable Harmony' from the Chinese, was retained for throughout her naval career.

Her replacement crew mustered on the uppermost deck, aft of HMAS PING WO's tall smokestack, to pose for this picture. Upon learning of his assignment, one Aussie sailor reportedly proclaimed: *"If it's Ping Wo, then woe be us!"* Fortunately, that pitiful prediction never materialized.



Operating out of a training base in Port Stephens, a hundred miles north of Sydney on Australia's east coast, she served in a variety of non-combat assignments for over a year. PING WO was utilized to transport water and supplies to infantry units in training. She also served as a training ship, helping some 20,000 Americans and 2,000 Australians master techniques associated with amphibious warfare. When that training center was closed down in October of 1943, she was converted to a repair ship and forward deployed to Milne Bay, on the south side of New Guinea and closer to the shooting war.

Her 1943 retrofit work included providing PING WO with a modest increase in self-defense weapons. When she returned to service, she had a 12 pounder gun that had been installed on an open platform forward of her bridge, as seen in the following photo. Two 20 mm cannon and four .303 machine guns were distributed around her open decks.

She remained in New Guinea until the end of 1944. Based mainly at Milne Bay, her crew toiled under tropical conditions to provide repair services to units of several Allied navies. This picture was made sometime in 1944 at a primitive berth in Milne Bay. At the end of World War II the PING WO relocated to Madang, on the northern shore of New Guinea.



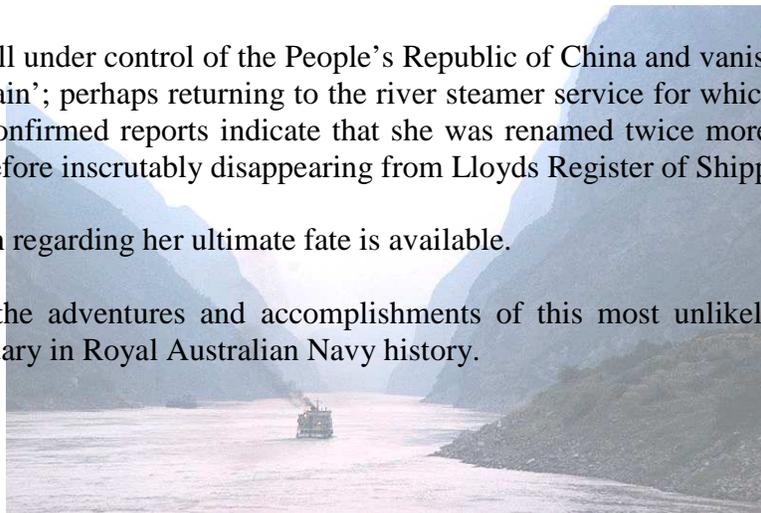
There she served as a stores issuing ship until late February, 1946, assisting in the repatriation of Allied prisoners of war. She was then sent to Hong Kong, where she was decommissioned on June 24, 1946. HMAS PING WO became just plain PING WO again when she was turned over to her original Chinese owners.

In September of 1947 this venerable vessel was sold to the Hoong On Steam Navigation Co., Ltd. Based in Shanghai, where she was built, the PING WO was given an even more curious name: THE ON.

In 1949, she fell under control of the People's Republic of China and vanished behind the 'Bamboo Curtain'; perhaps returning to the river steamer service for which she had been designed. Unconfirmed reports indicate that she was renamed twice more over the next two decades before inscrutably disappearing from Lloyds Register of Shipping.

No information regarding her ultimate fate is available.

Nevertheless, the adventures and accomplishments of this most unlikely naval vessel remains legendary in Royal Australian Navy history.



*Bill Lee*  
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