

# Prelude to Pearl

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*Early on December 7, 1941, an American merchantman, fatally attacked by a Japanese sub in the Pacific, radioed its fate to the world. Was anyone listening?*

Six days before the United States entered World War II, Capt. Berthel Carlsen leaned over the bridge wing of the steamship ordered deck hands to let go the mooring lines holding the small freighter to a pier in Seattle, Washington. Carlsen, a 64-year-old master mariner, then ordered “slow ahead” on the engine- *Cynthia Olson* and order telegraph. Minutes later, its single screw churning the waters of Elliott Bay, the ship set out on the 135-mile passage up Puget Sound, bound for the Pacific Ocean.

It was a familiar route for both Carlsen and his vessel. In the first seven months of the year, the *Cynthia Olson* had made some 20 roundtrips through the waters of the West Coast as a lumber carrier, making regular calls at Olympia, Tacoma, and other ports in the Pacific Northwest from its home port in San Francisco, often with Carlsen in command. Once its decks were covered with stacks of freshly sawn timber and its holds filled with rolls of newsprint, the freighter would sail for Oakland, Los Angeles, or San Diego.

In early August, while the routine remained much the same, the ship’s final destination had changed abruptly when its owners, San Francisco’s Olson & Company, signed a contract with the U.S. Army. With war in the Pacific looming, the *Cynthia Olson* and ships like it were needed to haul the timber that would become the barracks, warehouses, and aircraft hangars of what the War Department hoped would be a newly invigorated defense force in Hawaii. Later that month, the *Cynthia Olson* embarked on its first timber-hauling passage to Pearl Harbor, completing each leg of the trip in nine and a half days under the command of Capt. P. C. Johnson. A second trip, in late September and early October, worked out equally well, and on November 18, the army chartered the vessel outright.

Now, on the first day of December, the ship was setting out again, with Carlsen as a substitute for an ailing Johnson. Sharing the bridge was first mate William Buchtele, himself a last minute replacement, and together the two men hoped to better the previous total passage time by at least a day. What neither mariner could know was that their ship and the 35 men aboard it were embarking on their final voyage. Even as the *Cynthia Olson* chugged slowly toward the sea, events were unfolding that would pit the ship and its crew against a deadly foe, mark the beginning of a new front in a global conflict, and spark one of the most enduring nautical mysteries of World War II.

The vessel destined to assume the central role in that mystery was a product of Wisconsin’s Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company. Laid down in 1918 as *Coquina*, it was one of some 330 ocean-going freighters built for the United States Shipping Board by firms throughout the Great Lakes. Of essentially identical design, these steel-hulled ships were known as Laker class vessels

and were intended for wartime cargo duty on behalf of the United States and its allies. At 251 feet and 2,140 gross tons, the *Coquina* was a solidly built and dependable craft. Its triple-expansion reciprocating engine could turn out 1,250 hp and push it to a service speed of about 10 knots, while its holds could handle an impressive amount of dry cargo.

Changes in owners and home ports were common with the utilitarian Lakers; the *Coquina* had undergone several by April 1940, when Olson & Company bought it from Los Angeles's Matson Navigation for \$150,000. Its new owners shifted the ship to San Francisco, changed its name to *Cynthia Olson* (in honor of the company president's granddaughter), fitted it with two additional masts supporting lumber-handling booms, and quickly put it to work.

On each of its roundtrips to the Pacific Northwest, the freighter was crewed by licensed union seamen—men with vast experience and particular knowledge of the challenging conditions often encountered off the West Coast. But when the army chartered the vessel, the manning policy changed radically. By the time the *Cynthia Olson* sailed from its home port in late 1941, 23 of its 33 crewmembers were nonunion Filipinos, many of whom had previously served on army transport vessels. The remaining 10 seamen included several of Scandinavian heritage—Carlsen was from Norway, chief engineer Konrad “Harry” Löfving was Swedish-born, and Buchtele hailed from Denmark—as well as Scottish, English, and a few native-born American sailors.

In Seattle, two young soldiers joined the mix: 24-year old medic Pvt. Ernest J. Davenport and 25-year-old radio operator Pvt. Samuel J. Ziskind. The former would have dominion over the ship's four-bed sickbay, while the latter would be responsible for keeping the vessel in touch with the world at large. It was to be the first time at sea for both young men and, therefore, certain to be memorable.

As the *Cynthia Olson* plowed its way through the waters of the Pacific Northwest, a far more lethal vessel was sliding through heavy seas in the Gulf of Alaska. Completed at Japan's Kure Naval Dockyard only weeks earlier, the Imperial Japanese Navy B1- type fleet submarine *I-26* was a true ocean-going predator. Just over 365 feet long and displacing more than 3,600 tons when submerged, it was fast, long-ranged, and could carry a small seaplane in the watertight hangar just forward of its conning tower. Like the other vessels of its class, it had been designed for worldwide operations and was among the largest and most advanced submarines in the world. And it had been tapped to play a vital part in what Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto called “Operation Hawaii”—the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The *I-26*'s role was initially to be a supporting one. Assigned to Submarine Squadron 1 of the Japanese navy's Sixth Fleet, the boat was to reconnoiter American naval forces in and around the Aleutian Islands, with its skipper, Cmdr. Minoru Yokota, radioing his findings to headquarters no later than December 5. Then it was to sail for a point midway between San Francisco and Honolulu to locate and report on any American warships steaming for Hawaii in the wake of Japan's attack. Given the distance the submarine was expected to cover, its hangar carried food and extra fuel rather than a seaplane.

Yokota's assignment as the *I-26*'s captain was an indication of the importance of the mission. The 38-year-old officer was a rising star: a graduate of Japan's naval academy and one of its

most seasoned submariners, he was a man with a reputation for intelligence, skill, and dogged determination. He was known as a fair and relatively humane officer in a service whose unyielding Bushido code fostered strict discipline and harsh punishment for even minor infractions.

From the moment he took his vessel to sea from its base in Yokosuka on November 19, Yokota's skill as a submariner had been sorely tested. To make the best speed, the sub traveled on the surface for much of the 2,000-mile voyage to the Aleutians, during which it was pounded by mountainous waves. While the crew's comfort level improved dramatically when the sub submerged to begin its reconnaissance mission, Yokota's anxiety can only be imagined as he carried out periscope observations of the anchorages at Attu, Kiska, Adak, and Dutch Harbor, starting November 26. He didn't detect any significant American naval presence in any of the ports, however, and on November 29 reported his findings by radio before turning his vessel southeast to begin the second part of his mission.

By December 2, the day after the *Cynthia Olson* had cleared Washington's Cape Flattery and started out across the Pacific, the *I-26* was some 1,520 miles west of Seattle. That afternoon the Japanese navy's main radio center on Kyushu broadcast the coded message "Climb Mount Niitaka" to all vessels slated to participate in the Pearl Harbor attack, indicating that the strike would begin as planned at precisely 3:30 a.m. on Monday, December 8, Tokyo time—8:00 a.m. on Sunday, December 7, Honolulu time.

Though the message generated intense excitement for Yokota and his 94-man crew—who hoped to get a shot at some of the enemy warships and supply vessels they expected to encounter between the West Coast and Hawaii—chief torpedoman Takaji Komamba was concerned. While the submarine was capable of carrying up to 17 deadly Type 95 torpedoes, its reconnaissance assignment had led navy planners to allocate only 10 of an older and less reliable type instead. Komamba worried that the weapons wouldn't sink heavily laden American cargo ships and their nimble escorts. He shared his concerns with chief gunner Saburo Hayashi, who assured him that if the torpedoes couldn't dispatch an enemy vessel, the 140mm deck gun's high explosive shells would.

Whether the *I-26*'s torpedoes would work as advertised remained an academic question for most of the submarine's passage south from Alaskan waters: Yokota's orders forbade him from engaging any targets until after the Pearl Harbor strike had begun. More to the point, he had sighted no potential prey. The latter situation changed abruptly on the afternoon of December 6, when a lookout spotted a vessel coming over the horizon. The Japanese skipper took his sub down to periscope depth and charted an intercept course toward the ship we now know was the *Cynthia Olson*. Having identified the vessel as American and not wanting to give his presence away prematurely, Yokota moved his ship into position several miles astern of the heavily loaded freighter and settled in to follow it throughout the night.

Berthel Carlsen was no stranger to the threat of submarine attack. During World War I, he had captained merchant ships across the Atlantic as a member of the U.S. Naval Reserve Force. And although hostilities had not yet broken out in the Pacific, he and first mate Bill Buchtele knew that conflict was imminent. Before boarding ship both men had spoken to their wives about the

probable outbreak of war with Japan. Carlsen therefore had no difficulty in adhering to his army sailing orders, which called for extreme vigilance on the passage to Honolulu.

Yet, given that they raised no alarm by radio, it's likely that those aboard the *Cynthia Olson* had not seen the *I-26* before it submerged, and also didn't spot the periscope as the sub moved into position astern. And when the sun rose on the morning of December 7, it's also likely that all aboard the freighter heaved sighs of relief that they had made it safely through the night and were only three days' sail from Hawaii.

For the story of the *Cynthia Olson*'s last few hours, we must rely solely on the words of two of the men who sank it—Cmdr. Minoru Yokota and chief gunner Saburo Hayashi. Both men were extensively interviewed by letter and in person in the 1970s and 1980s by American author Bert Webber.

In his earliest communications with Webber, Yokota said he wasn't sure of the exact timing of his encounter with the *Cynthia Olson*; in a 1975 face-to-face interview in Tokyo, however, the former sub skipper was far more definite in his recollections. The *I-26*, Yokota said, trailed the *Cynthia Olson* until just after dawn on December 7. Deciding not to waste a torpedo on the merchantman, Yokota surfaced his boat and ordered the crew of the deck gun to fire a warning shot across the vessel's bow. By the Japanese captain's reckoning, it was five minutes before the scheduled commencement of the Pearl Harbor attack. His intention, he told Webber, was to force the *Cynthia Olson* to heave to and give those aboard it a chance to take to their lifeboats. The American vessel's crew did so with haste—but even as the boats were being lowered, Yokota's radioman noted that the freighter began broadcasting a distress signal.

Once the lifeboats were clear of the *Cynthia Olson*, Yokota gave his gunners the signal to begin pounding the freighter with high explosive rounds. Shooting from a range of 3,000 meters, the gunners landed about 10 solid hits out of some 20 rounds fired. In a testament both to the *Cynthia Olson*'s rugged construction and the added buoyancy provided by its cargo of lumber—and to the amazement of those on the sub's bridge—the doughty Laker remained afloat. Fearing that its SOS would bring American aircraft zooming over the horizon, Yokota submerged his vessel and moved off to await his prey's inevitable sinking.

Yet, when he surfaced some hours later, he found the *Cynthia Olson* not only still afloat but actually making a few knots of headway. Wanting to dispatch the freighter as quickly as possible so it wouldn't become a beacon for sub-hunting aircraft, Yokota launched a torpedo that should have blown the listing vessel out of the water. But there was no explosion; although the weapon had been fired from just 400 meters, it apparently missed, and an increasingly frustrated Yokota ordered his gun crew to pump still more rounds into the lumber carrier.

Hayashi meanwhile climbed to the highest point on the *I-26*'s conning tower and took a picture of the now-burning *Cynthia Olson*. His photograph depicts the battered vessel listing heavily to port, and Hayashi later told Webber that the freighter was in essentially the same condition when, after seven hours of effort and some 40 rounds of high explosive expended, Yokota ordered the sub submerged and left the scene to avoid detection by the American aircraft he was certain had been dispatched in response to the freighter's distress signal.

The *Cynthia Olson*'s first call, sent by army radioman Pvt. Samuel J. Ziskind, went out almost as soon as the *I-26* fired across the freighter's bow. About 320 miles to the south, Leslie Grogan, assistant radio operator of the 18,000-ton Matson Line passenger steamer *Lurline*, heard what he recorded as a "strong" transmission "making the 'SSS' signal, meaning in the International Code that a submarine has been sighted or 'we are being attacked by a submarine.'" He immediately asked for the freighter's position. Ziskind replied in what Grogan later called a "steady hand," reporting that his vessel was being attacked by a surfaced sub and, a few minutes later, giving the *Cynthia Olson*'s position as 33°42'N by 145°29'W, or about 1,120 miles northeast of Honolulu. Immediately after giving the position data, Ziskind abruptly went off the air, prompting Grogan to record that the freighter's transmitter had "sparked out like if a power failure took place."

Grogan and his supervisor, chief radio operator Rudy Asplund, attempted to contact vessels and aircraft in the vicinity and the navy radio stations at Pearl Harbor and San Francisco, but got no response. Contact with the Coast Guard radio facility at San Francisco faded out halfway through the liner's transmission, so the *Lurline* operators switched to their high frequency radio and were finally able to pass the *Cynthia Olson*'s position and message to the commercial Globe Wireless station south of San Francisco. That facility recorded receipt of the *Lurline*'s message at 9:30 a.m. Pacific Standard Time, which in December 1941 would have been 7:00 a.m. Honolulu time—or roughly 55 minutes before the first Japanese aircraft appeared over Pearl Harbor.

The timing of Yokota's initial attack on the *Cynthia Olson* before or after the raid on Pearl Harbor commenced—has been the subject of heated debate virtually from the minute Private Ziskind pounded out that first, hurried SOS. It's an important question, for two reasons. —and whether it took place

First, if Yokota fired on the freighter before the beginning of the Pearl Harbor raid, the *Cynthia Olson* would hold the dubious historical distinction of being the first American vessel attacked by Japan in the Pacific war. Second, and perhaps more important, if the attack on the *Cynthia Olson* occurred almost an hour before the Pearl Harbor raid, some historians have argued that the timely transmission of a warning to Hawaii might have allowed American forces to put up a more vigorous defense that could possibly have changed the course of the war. As noted earlier, in Yokota's earliest correspondence with writer Bert Webber, the former sub skipper said he was unsure of the exact time of his attack, although several years later (at a time when he was certainly aware of the controversy) he emphatically stated that he did not surface to begin the assault until just before the first Japanese aircraft arrived over Pearl Harbor.

The radio operator aboard the *Lurline*, Leslie Grogan, had logged his receipt of the *Cynthia Olson*'s first message at 9:12 a.m. ship time, which would have placed the call at 8:12 in Honolulu, about 15 minutes after the raid on Pearl Harbor began. However, two of his superiors—including chief mate Edward Collins—later said that the message actually arrived at about 8:00 a.m. ship's time—well before the commencement of the Pearl Harbor raid.

As too often happens with historical mysteries, we will probably never know for sure what happened. All the principal players are long since dead, and agents from the Office of Naval Intelligence confiscated the *Lurline*'s radio logs from the voyage just minutes after the liner's December 10 arrival in San Francisco. While this was apparently done to analyze information

Grogan and Asplund had amassed about Japanese military transmissions they had intercepted during the voyage to Honolulu, the confiscation of the logs—and their postwar destruction—means that no firsthand written account remains of the *Cynthia Olson*'s last transmission.

But there is another mystery surrounding the loss of the *Cynthia Olson*: What happened to its crew?

At the time of its sinking, the *Cynthia Olson* was equipped with two 35-foot-long steel lifeboats, both of which had been examined by inspectors from the Commerce Department's Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation the day before the ship left Seattle on its first passage to Hawaii. Each of the nonmotorized boats was capable of carrying up to 25 people, and each was fitted with oars, fresh water casks, and watertight containers of emergency rations.

The *Cynthia Olson*'s crew clambered into these two boats—presumably after Captain Carlsen, realizing Yokota intended to attack, gave the order to abandon ship. In Yokota and Hayashi's postwar correspondence with Bert Webber, both said they saw the freighter's crewmen leave the vessel, and that the lifeboats were intact and the crewmen unharmed when the *I-26* left the area. Yokota also told Webber that the day after the sinking, the submarine *I-19*—captained by Cmdr. Shogo Narahara—passed through the area and distributed fresh water and food to the still-healthy American mariners before departing.

While Yokota's reputation as a humane leader (who converted to Christianity in 1958 and eventually became president of a Bible college in Japan) would argue for accepting his account of the event, there are two factors standing squarely against accepting his version of the truth. First, Japanese submarine commanders were notorious for their brutality toward Allied merchant seamen. Though it wasn't until March 1943 that the Japanese navy officially ordered vessel commanders to "carry out the complete destruction of the crews" of merchant ships they sank, the killing of merchant seamen by Japanese submarine crews was well documented during the first months of the war. Narahara, *I-19*'s captain, was himself suspected by U.S. Naval Intelligence of encouraging such killings following his September 1943 appointment as commander of the Japanese navy's Submarine Division 33; indeed, had he not been killed in the 1944 sinking of the submarine *I-5* he might well have faced war crimes charges.

Second, and most telling, is that an Allied vessel searched the area of the attack within hours after it occurred and found no trace of the lifeboats. That ship, the Canadian armed merchant cruiser HMCS *Prince Robert*, was bound from Hong Kong to British Columbia. Four hours after the end of the Pearl Harbor raid it received a message from the Royal Canadian Navy reporting that the *Cynthia Olson* had been torpedoed in position 33°42'N by 145°29'W, the exact location given by Private Ziskind. The area was about 130 miles south of *Prince Robert*'s track and the converted passenger liner arrived in the area within five hours. That was no more than 10 hours after the *I-26*'s initial attack, yet the Canadians sighted no lifeboats. How, then, could the *I-19* have passed food and water to the boats in that same area a day later?

It is certainly possible that ocean currents spirited the *Cynthia Olson*'s lifeboats away from the scene of the attack before the *Prince Robert* arrived. Yet it stretches credulity to the breaking

point to assert that those same currents reversed direction and brought the boats back into the area in time for the *I-19*'s arrival.

Because all of the primary participants in these events are dead, and because most of the Imperial Japanese Navy's records regarding World War II submarine operations were destroyed in the last days of the war, the fate of the *Cynthia Olson*'s crew will likely remain unknown. Did they die aboard their sinking, shell-battered vessel, never even having made it into the lifeboats? Did they reach the boats, only to die in a hail of bullets and cannon shells? Or did Captain Carlsen and his crew drift away into the expanse of the vast Pacific, ultimately to become victims of exposure, dehydration, and starvation?

There is one other important question: if the *Cynthia Olson* did, in fact, broadcast its distress message up to an hour before the first Japanese aircraft appeared over Oahu, and if that hurried signal had been clearly received in Hawaii, would it have made any difference in the tragedy that befell the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor?

We know for a fact that a vastly closer event failed to do so. At 6:53 a.m.—almost a full hour before the first bombs fell—the destroyer USS *Ward* radioed that it had attacked an unidentified submarine operating just off the entrance to Pearl Harbor. (In 2002, the sunken Ko-Hyoteki Type A midget sub was found lying in 1,200 feet of water three miles offshore.) Simply put, if the report of an actual attack on a presumed Japanese submarine right outside the U.S. Navy's most important Pacific anchorage couldn't trigger the type of vigorous and proactive defense that might have changed the course of history, then a message from a small civilian freighter far at sea almost certainly wouldn't have either.

Would circumstances have been different if two messages regarding encounters with Japanese submarines had come into Pearl Harbor early the morning of December 7, 1941? It's easy to think they might have. But that clearly did not happen, and the *Cynthia Olson*'s last transmission, even as the crew contemplated their watery end, was for naught.

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