

# German WWI Naval Raiders

## Their Amazing But Little-Known Story

A KEY PART OF THE GERMAN WAR EFFORT IN WORLD WAR I, little remembered today, was the role of so-called light or auxiliary raiding ships. For example, the *Wolf*, commanded by Capt. Karl August Nerger, destroyed 35 enemy trading vessels and two warships, for a total of some 110,000 tons of shipping. Nerger was rewarded with the Pour le Mérite, the highest German decoration. Another notable raider was the *Moewe*, under Nikolaus Dohna-Schlieden. They were, in some respects, the last of the great privateers. But their time was short. When World War II rolled around, the duties of the raiders had already been taken over by a new, even more deadly vessel: the submarine.

BY GENE FLINTER

Shortly after World War I began, Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz and his staff devised a strategy to keep the Royal Navy busy, even if the High Seas fleet was blockaded and confined to the Baltic. The focus of this effort would be Germany's light and auxiliary cruisers augmented by the submarine fleet. Their primary mission was to destroy and wreak havoc on enemy ocean commerce.

Unfortunately, in the first few weeks of the war, three German cruisers were sunk off Heligoland Bight. This brought out the Zeppelin fleet, which failed primarily due to adverse weather, inadequate armament, anti-aircraft fire and other deficiencies. Warships and mine fields blockaded Germany at the end of 1914. There were successful voyages. The *Emden* (a light cruiser) became a fierce merchant raider and Adm. Graf von Spee's East Asia squadron sank two British cruisers and damaged another at the Battle of Coronel off Chile in November 1914. One month later von Spee's cruisers were destroyed by Adm. Frederick Sturdee's superior squadron at the Battle of the Falkland Islands.

To its credit, the Kaiser's sub fleet had victories. U-9 sank three Royal Navy heavy cruisers on September 22, 1914.



ALFRED VON TIRPITZ

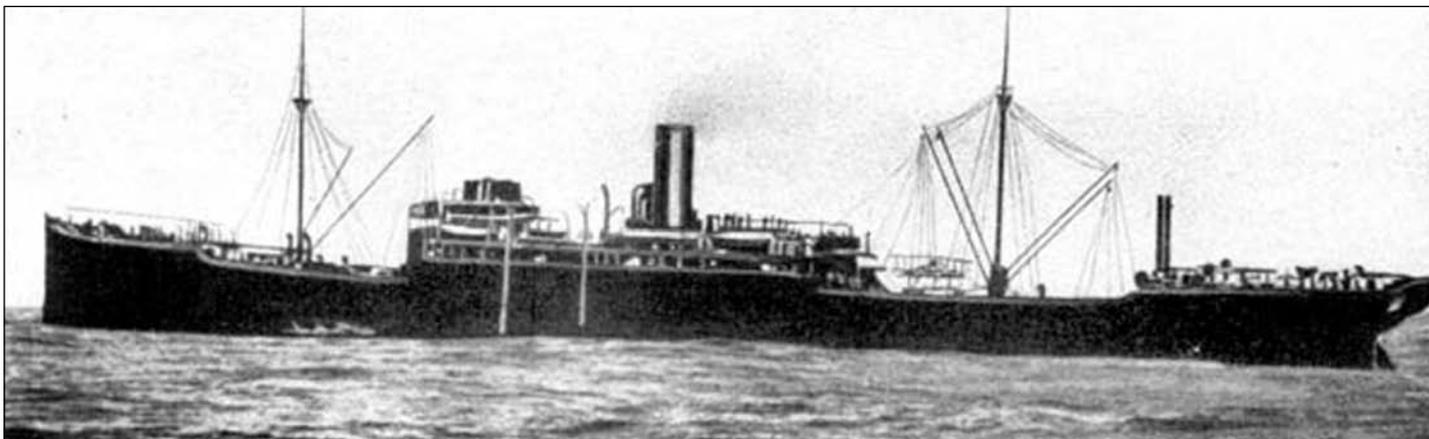
In 1915, after the famous sinking of the *Lusitania*,<sup>1</sup> there was an overwhelming German fear that America might declare war. This caused adjustments in commerce warfare. With only 46 submarines, multi-ocean submarine warfare was nearly impossible. The High Seas Fleet was bottled up and the potentially armed passenger fleet was either captured, interned or destroyed.

Finally, in the fall of 1915, a strategic paper was acted upon, and the German fleet began to arm freighters as auxiliary commerce warships. The immediate objectives were to select only freighters that could outpace the Allied merchant fleet, as well as allow for extension of coal-bunkers for increased range. They would

be armed with hidden guns, torpedoes and mine-laying equipment.

### SUCCESSFUL SHIPS

Two of the most successful (of the eight or so raiders of this type) were the *Moewe* (formerly the banana-carrying ship *Pungo*) and the *Wolf II* (formerly the Hansa Line freighter *Wachtfels*). The *Moewe* was commanded by Nikolaus Dohna-Schlieden and the *Wolf* by Karl Nerger. Both of these officers were *korvetten* captains (equivalent to the rank of commander



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in the Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy).

The *Moewe* made two outstanding voyages. The first mission took place between December 29, 1915 and March 4, 1916. The second voyage began November 22, 1916 and ended March 22, 1917. Both missions, covering both the North and South Atlantic, resulted in the capture or destruction of 38 ships totaling 175,000 tons.

The *Wolf's* single mission began November 24, 1916 and ended February 24, 1918—about 15 months at sea. She covered about 65,000 miles of the world's oceans. More heavily armed than the *Moewe*, the *Wolf* also had a very valuable asset. This was a light two-person seaplane dubbed the "*Wolfchen*," which could be quickly assembled and disassembled as the need arose. Its purpose was reconnaissance and occasional shipping harassment. The *Wolf* accounted for over 110,000 tons consisting of 35 ships either captured, sunk by mines or destroyed by gunfire and internal charges.

During World War I, auxiliary cruisers depended upon sufficient coal stores for their long-range missions to be supplemented by refueling from their captured prizes. The *Moewe* had a top speed of 14 knots with a range of 12,000 miles or so on full bunkers. Although the *Wolf* could sail 32,000 miles or so when fully loaded at eight knots, her top speed was limited to 11 knots.

As in World War II, German raiders of World War I had the additional problem of overloading their ships with prison-

**At the top is a photo of *Wolf***, which looks less than formidable, her armaments being well camouflaged. Nevertheless, *Wolf* and her crew made a journey nearly around the world, destroying 35 enemy trade vessels and two warships. *Wolf* had been gone so long, and sightings had been so rare, most thought the ship and crew (above left) were lost at sea. But *Wolf* made it home and, in appreciation, Capt. Nerger and his crew were honored with a reception at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, to the delight of throngs of elated German well-wishers.

ers—enemy survivors plucked from the seas, rescued from ships sent to the bottom by the raiders. Extensive secrecy was required for their mission. If captives were set free, Allied naval intelligence could be notified as to the auxiliary cruisers' location and mission. On board the raider, prisoners required food and accommodations. Both the *Moewe* and *Wolf* were overloaded at the end of their missions requiring rationing and other measures (i.e., prisoners could not come on deck nor leave the ship's hold during engagements or blockade running).

For nearly two months in late 1915, Capt. Dohna-Schlieden drilled the *Moewe's* crew mercilessly. They not only became crack shots with ship's armament, but also at a

moment's notice could drop the gun masks, ready torpedoes, prepare the radio and engage in damage control and other combat preparations. All of their lives depended upon precision and flawlessness. At the end of December 1915, the raider slipped the blockade during a gale and entered the North Atlantic. Dohna-Schlieden had a good start.

Under very foul weather his crew laid an extensive minefield near the RN home fleet base at Scapa Flow in Scotland. A few days later, the powerful battleship *King Edward VII* struck one of these mines and sunk.

In the meantime *Moewe* continued her mission in the Gulf of Gascony off France.

Extensive mine laying continued. Two ships were sunk as a result. The first prize was an English ship, the *Farrington*, with 150 passengers. Upon capture, the crew and passengers were taken aboard the raider and the ship was sunk by gunfire.

Other victims followed. One of these, the *Corbridge*, had a large cargo of coal. It was staffed with a prize crew and ordered to meet the raider later for refueling. Another, the *Appam*, kept its crew and passengers under a prize crew from *Moewe*. She was ordered to follow *Moewe* to retain the mission's secrecy. The *Clan MacTavish*, another victim, proved to be more trouble. The ship failed to stop radio transmission, tried to escape, and then fired at *Moewe* with a 57 mm gun. The raider replied with devastating fire, killing 18 and wounding five of the freighter's crew. After the damaged ship was sunk with internal charges, *Moewe* sailed southwest to northern South America. After one further rendezvous and transfer of the prize crew back to *Moewe*, the *Appam* was released and finally interned at Newport News (a U.S. neutral port).

#### AT THE AMAZON

Arriving at the mouth of the Amazon, *Moewe* met the *Corbridge* and then spent three days refueling. The Royal Navy mounted a large presence in the area to find and destroy *Moewe*. After a few more merchant victims, Dohna-Schlieden pulled out of the South Atlantic and headed north. The return trip to Germany was uneventful. From Africa through the Spanish Atlantic coast there was a dearth of victims. However, two more merchant freighters were destroyed due west of the French coast in February 1916. Dohna-Schlieden headed home between Iceland and the Faeroe (Malvina) Islands, after accounting for 15 enemy ships. *Moewe* returned to Wilhelmshaven in early March 1916 after narrowly missing a British cruiser task force off Norway.

The captain and crew were hailed as heroes. Dohna-Schlieden received the Iron Cross, first class and in short

order was awarded the coveted "Blue Cross and Gold Eagle" (or the Blue Max). The award was received directly from the Kaiser at his court in Berlin. All of the crew received the iron cross, second class. The *Moewe* was overhauled and received extensive refitting over the next few months. The ship was temporarily renamed *Vineta* for security reasons and conducted a few raids in the Baltic, capturing a Russian mail steamer.

Dohna-Schlieden continued planning for another mission and with the help of intelligence and submarine reports, *Moewe* re-embarked on November 22, 1916, under stormy conditions. Bad weather was the raider's best protection. Mines were not carried on the second mission, ensuring a true commerce raider mission.

The first victim, the *Voltaire*, was a large carrier of 8,600 tons. The ship was sunk by charges, after transference of her crew to *Moewe*. By straddling American and British Atlantic trade routes, Dohna-Schlieden hoped for a full season of engagement.

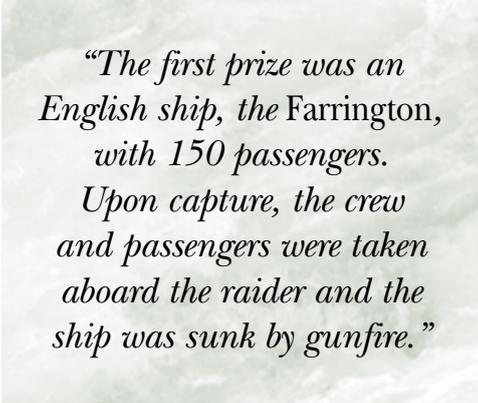
He had to let a second prize, the *Samland*, pass by, since the freighter was carrying refrigerated meat and war relief supplies for starving Belgian citizens. However, his second victim was a Norwegian ship carrying war materiel. German policy considered "neutral" ships fare game if they supported the Allied effort.

The *Mount Temple* at 9,800 tons (twice *Moewe*'s size) put up a short fight with its 75 mm gun when accosted by the raider. She was carrying 700 horses, wheat and eggs to Brest. After silencing the ship, her crew, with numerous casualties, was transferred to *Moewe*. Irritated at both the captain's resistance and the length of time to complete the transfer, Dohna-Schlieden severely lectured the opposing captain. The ship was sunk with all of its horses.

#### OFF THE COAST OF NEWFOUNDLAND

Two more ships were sunk off the coast of Newfoundland. Next on the victim list was the *Georgic*, carrying horses, oil and wheat. The *Yarrowdale* was captured on December 16, 1916, and manned by a prize crew. It carried 100 motor vehicles, coal and steel, all vital to Germany. Dohna-Schlieden ordered his trusted prize captain, Lt. Badewitz, to take the *Yarrowdale* north of Scotland and bypass the blockade to a German homeport. (Later the *Moewe* received a most welcome message on December 31, that Badewitz completed the voyage as planned). Before parting ways with the *Yarrowdale*, the *St. Theodore* was captured with its much-needed 7,000 tons of coal.

Its crew, provisions and other prisoners on the *Moewe* were also transferred to *Yarrowdale* before the captured ship



*"The first prize was an English ship, the Farrington, with 150 passengers. Upon capture, the crew and passengers were taken aboard the raider and the ship was sunk by gunfire."*

At right is a photo of Captain Nerger's *Wolfchen*, a light two-person seaplane powered by gasoline and any other fuel Nerger's crew could acquire to make her engine run. *Wolfchen* could be quickly assembled and taken apart as the need arose. Its purpose was reconnaissance and occasional harassment of shipping. Two pilots were kept onboard to fly her. After many successful missions in which *Wolfchen* spotted enemy targets, the little seaplane's fabric exterior tore. Attempts to fix her with captured silk failed and she was disassembled and not used again.



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departed. Dohna-Schlieden placed a prize crew on the *St. Theodore* and set a refueling rendezvous for December 23. Once refueling was completed the *St. Theodore* was renamed the *Geier*, armed with two 5.2 cm guns, a wireless and other supplies to operate as a coaler for *Moewe* and as an independent raider. Two more victims were destroyed by the end of 1916, including the saltpeter-laden *Nantes* bound for London from Chile.

Another victim was captured on January 3, 1917. Under pressure from nearby British cruiser squadrons and with some luck, Dohna-Schlieden sailed south and captured the *Hudson Maru*. This carrier was converted to an oceangoing jail for raider prisoners.

The steamer *Radnorshire* was sunk with 6,500 tons of coffee and cocoa, after transferring 100 tons to the delight of *Moewe's* crew, who had existed on acorn coffee and beet tea. The steamer also provided 60 or so Indian hands who were willing to work some of the dirty jobs on *Moewe* (such as coal reloading and boiler restocking).

Since the *Hudson Maru* could not exceed 7.5 knots, she became a liability.

### PARTING COMPANY

Dohna-Schlieden parted company after warning the *Maru's* captain to sail east to avoid contact and not west. Once out of range of *Moewe's* guns, the Japanese captain of course headed west. *Moewe* then laid smoke and headed northeast, knowing full well the other ship would head west to warn the British about the raider's location.

On January 17, 1917, *Moewe* completed refueling via a pre-arranged rendezvous with *Geier*. *Geier* had captured only one small ship. Once parted, *Moewe* began plying the Cape of Good Hope trade routes. But after three unfruitful weeks, she sailed west to the Brazilian coast to meet with *Geier* once again. After final refueling, on February 14 the *Geier* was scut-

ted. The raider then headed north toward home. Along her route, she destroyed the *Brecknockshire*, *French Prince*, the *Eddie*, the *Rhodante*, the *Catherine* and the *Esmeraldas* by March 10, 1917. Shortly after sinking the *Esmeraldas*, a larger British merchantman tried to outrun *Moewe*.

Coaxing maximum boiler pressure from the engine, the distance between the ships was finally overcome. Dohna-Schlieden fired a shot across the opponent's bow, but unexpectedly fire was returned from the other ship's stern gun. Although, the other ship was hit repeatedly by the raider's salvos, an unexpected shot landed in the firemen's mess, causing an uncontrolled conflagration. After 20 minutes of continuous fire the merchant ship, the *Otaki* at 9,575 tons, began to sink. After a cease-fire order, *Moewe* rescued its crew. Five Germans were killed and 40 wounded. Capt. A.B. Smith with several crewmembers went down with his ship and received the Victoria Cross posthumously for his valor in engaging the more heavily armed auxiliary cruiser. It took three days to bring *Moewe's* fires and damage under control.

*Moewe* finally headed home on March 13, 1917. The ship now carried over 500 prisoners. Food supplies were very low. Two more ships were sunk, the *Demerteton* and the *Governor* (after another short battle on March 14). With 500 prisoners on board plus a crew of 250 and 100 Indian workers, respectively, the captain had to ration food and not allow prisoners on deck while running the blockade. Air pollution in the hold was horrible. A revolt almost occurred on March 16, but was squelched after an armed party of crew gave a severe warning. The *Moewe* broached latitude of 69 degrees north, skirted Iceland and skimmed through Norwegian coastal waters. She entered the Skagerrak on March 20 and was welcomed home at Kiel on the 22nd. Nearly 120,000 tons of shipping was captured or destroyed on the very successful second mission.

Under a new commander *Moewe* served out the remainder

of the war in the Baltic as a training ship, submarine tender for the U boats and as an auxiliary mine layer. After the war, Britain confiscated the ship as spoils and renamed her the *Greenbrier* for East Indian routing as a banana freighter. She was repurchased in 1933 by German shipping merchants and renamed *Oldenburg*. She served in World War II as a transport ship. On April 7, 1945 she was severely bombed in Norway by the Royal Air Force. The remains of *Moewe* were finally broken up as a shipping hazard in 1953.

### CAPTAIN NERGER AND THE WOLF

Not as fast as *Moewe*, the *Wolf* was more heavily armed with six 5.9-inch guns, one 4.1-inch gun and four torpedo tubes. *Wolf* could easily make smoke and lay a much heavier roster of mines. But her most formidable assets were extended coal-bunkers and an onboard seaplane (nicknamed "*Wolfchen*"). This little seaplane would be useful for reconnaissance and harassment flights. Two pilots were kept on board to fly the plane.

It easily could be disassembled, stored below deck and rapidly re-assembled as needed.

The *Wolf* could steam at an average of eight knots per hour for 32,000 miles without refueling, an incredible range at the time.

After a few mishaps, Nерger finally departed Kiel on November 30, 1916, about a week after *Moewe* began her second mission. She appeared as an old collier named the *Jupiter* to deceive the British blockade. *Wolf* was crammed with 600 mines for a long mission to the southern India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) area. Upon completion of mine laying operations she would then become fully engaged in commerce raiding. After several days of strict gunnery practice, the raider broke out into the North Sea and by December 10 had reached 68 degrees north latitude, where she broke out to the Atlantic. Nерger halted the ship for several days to both change her appearance and for de-icing the guns and riggings. She then headed south for the Cape of Good Hope shipping lanes. His fear was that news of a second raider would cause a Royal Navy frenzy with *Moewe* already beginning its mission in the South Atlantic.

In late January, *Wolf* began laying mines off the Cape of Good Hope. As a result, two English freighters hit mines. The *Matheran* sank and the *Portugal* limped into port with a gaping hull hole. At first, naval authorities thought a U-boat torpedoed the ship. This relieved Nерger's concern that British counter raider measures would be immediate. Within a week the Indian and Asian fleets (55 warships in all, including 22 Japanese cruisers) were on the hunt for a second raider, whereabouts unknown.

The *Wolf* approached India and Ceylon and began mine laying operations off the coasts near Bombay and Colombo. Capt. Nерger received word later that the minefield had caused the sinking of two ships. Passengers and crew from the first ship, the *Worcestershire*, were rescued and sequestered in isolation to prevent mixing with any natives or British civilians. The loss of shipping in the area was kept secret to forestall a blow to English pride and morale.

*Wolf* made her first capture, the *Turritella*, off Aden at the end of February. *Turritella* was actually the sister ship of the *Wolf*. As the Hansa line's *Gunfels*, she was captured and renamed by the British off Port Said. Nерger converted the cargo carrier to an auxiliary cruiser as the *Illis*. She was armed with mines, a gun and a wireless station.

Under a prize crew, she was to serve as an auxiliary cruiser.

Continuing the mission, *Wolfchen*, the little seaplane, made daily reconnaissance flights. Unfortunately, there was a gun misfire accident causing four mortalities and approximately 24 wounded. During this crisis *Wolf* captured the *Junna*, which carried a goodly supply of coal. Several days were spent for burials of the deceased and transference of coal from the *Junna*. After imprisoning its crew, the carrier was sunk with charges.

*"But Capt. Nерger had other plans to continue raiding. The minefield claimed the freighter Port Kembla, damaged another cargo carrier and maimed a Japanese battleship."*

### ANOTHER VICTIM

*Wolfchen* sighted another victim, the *Wordsworth*, off the Seychelles. The freighter was captured and sunk by *Wolf*. After 14 flights, the seaplane was disassembled and stored below deck. Fearing discovery by the large opposing fleet, Nерger proceeded to Australia.

The raider sunk a small bark off Cape Leeuwin (Australia). *Wolf* steamed south of the continent, passed Tasmania and skirted the coast of New Zealand. Nерger and his crew now experienced a drought of victims, since most shipping in the area was scheduled to join a protected convoy. Moreover, the auxiliary cruiser needed an overhaul, supplies were short, morale was low in the colder climate and the U.S. Congress had declared war in April 1917.

On May 22, Nерger found a beautiful safe harbor on Sunday Island (north of New Zealand). On June 2, *Wolfchen* sighted the merchant ship *Wairuna*. The pilots dropped a packet ordering the ship to surrender or be bombed (a shot was fired across the bow). Capt. Saunders of the *Wairuna* would not believe a German raider was in the area. Nevertheless he surrendered the freighter, which carried a much-needed cargo of coal and other supplies. Recoaling began as soon as a prize crew boarded the ship, which was brought alongside the *Wolf*. Two weeks later, after cargo trans-

ferring was completed, the ship was sunk by gunfire.

The *Winslow*, a four-masted schooner, became the next victim. The sailing ship carried petrol (required by *Wolfchen*), more coal, firebrick and medical supplies, which were transferred. The schooner was sunk by gunfire on June 22. Mines were laid across the Australian/New Zealand shipping lanes to disrupt commerce around Cook's Strait.

Then *Wolf* sailed to the southern coast of Australia. Prisoners were usually allowed on deck, although any sign of smoke would activate the crew to battle stations and prisoners had to scurry below. Wolf laid more mines on July 3, 1917. This operation was terminated abruptly by a near brush with the cruiser *HMS Encounter*. Sensing a growing enemy search and destroy presence, Nерger headed back to open water in the Pacific.

A few days later the steamer *Cumberland*, carrying frozen meat from Sydney to Britain, hit a mine and was beached before she sank. Authorities could not explain the cause, never expecting a raider prowling the Australian shipping routes. U-boats were not present in the Pacific during World War I. After a few more victims, a German minelayer was suspected. The Japanese contributed 26 warships to the search. Moving farther north, the *Wolf* captured the American bark *Beluga* in route from San Francisco to Sydney. The sailing ship was carrying a cargo of benzene, a much needed fuel for *Wolfchen*. The captain, his wife, child and crew were transferred and the *Beluga* was destroyed by gunfire.

### AN ACCIDENT TO THE SEAPLANE

On or about July 14, *Wolfchen* had an accident. While flying near *Wolf*, its engine cut out at about a half-mile elevation. Then it nosedived into the sea from 200 feet, after nearly gliding to a landing. The pilots were rescued and the seaplane was barely salvaged. Nерger also reduced the *Wolf's* speed to four knots to conserve fuel. Coal, food and other supplies were scarce. Prisoners were also in a state of dissension, since 50% decided to work for the Germans on the ship, while the others remained loyal to their national interests. Eventually the seaplane was repaired and successfully flew on July 29.



CAPT. KARL AUGUST NERGER

Good luck continued.

A radio intercept indicated that the steamer *Matunga*, on a monthly route, was scheduled to depart from Sydney to Rabaul (New Britain Island). The ship carried a healthy quantity of coal, food, supplies, administrative passengers and some troops.

*Matunga* was captured off the New Guinea coast on August 5. She then followed *Wolf* under a prize crew to a small island anchorage where they lay side by side for cargo transfer. The steamer also carried an impressive array of beer, whiskey, gin, chocolate, sweets, cigarettes and fresh and canned fruit and vegetables. The raider was overhauled, resupplied and repainted. *Matunga* was sunk by internal charges after the prize crew returned to *Wolf*.

Then Capt. Nерger decided upon a new and very dangerous mission. He would use his remaining 110 mines by laying them across the main harbor approach at Singapore, the major commerce and British naval base in the Far East.

Only one other German raider had ever had the audacity to challenge an English base. Before its destruction by *HMAS Sydney*, the

*Emden* had raided Penang (now George Town or Tanjung), in Malaysia. The light cruiser destroyed a Russian cruiser and French destroyer as well as shelling shore installations. *Wolf* continued sailing through the Java Sea as a very well disguised merchantman. Many close encounters with the enemy occurred, but luck held out. Nерger began mine laying in the Malacca Strait on the night of September 3. The prisoners bet heavily that *Wolf* would be caught and destroyed trying to return to Germany.

But Capt. Nерger had other plans to continue raiding. The minefield claimed the freighter *Port Kembla*, damaged another cargo carrier and maimed a Japanese battleship. In the meantime, Count von Luckner, captain of the four-masted raider *Seeadler* ("Lake Eagle"), beat a British blockade, rounded Cape Horn and captured some prizes in the Pacific. Unfortunately he and his crew were captured in an open boat after an accident on the ship wrecked the *Seeadler*. For a time *Wolf's* victories were attributed to von Luckner and his crew.

## IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

The 200 or so prisoners were in a state of depression, as a result of their circumstance. They could either be destroyed in an engagement or interned in Germany or one of its allied nations, unless rescued by warship. This condition became more worrisome when *Wolfchen* was reassembled and sent aloft to search for more conquests.

The *Hitachi Maru*, a Japanese freighter, was sighted soon thereafter, 400 miles southwest of Ceylon near the Maldives. Disregarding Capt. Nerger's order to stop, the *Hitachi* made ready to open fire with a stern gun. Two quick salvos from *Wolf* silenced the gun. However, two additional salvos and two seaplane bombs were required to stop the merchantman. Thirty of the *Hitachi's* crew died during the attack and were buried at sea. The captured ship was repaired and anchored at one of the Maldives islands next to *Wolf*.

As a mail steamer the ship was bound from Yokohama to London and carried a mixed entourage of civilian and military passengers.

One of the *Hitachi's* British civil servant passengers related that he had left India for England the year before. A U-boat in the English Channel torpedoed his ship.

Although rescued and staying in London, he then experienced Zeppelin bombing raids. On the return trip to India, his steamer struck one of *Wolf's* mines and sunk. He survived on a lifeboat, was rescued and then set sail with the *Hitachi Maru*. Now he was a prisoner.

The *Hitachi* carried a remarkable cargo, which consisted of rubber, silk, rice, beans, flour, copper, brass and other items essential to Germany's war effort. Nerger made a decision to bring *Maru* back to Germany under a prize crew. *Wolf's* women, children and elderly prisoners were sent to the *Hitachi*, while that ship's crew and males were sent to *Wolf* to prevent a possible uprising. The raider slipped away in October 1917, leaving the prize crew to finish up work on the other ship, sail separately and catch up with *Wolf*.

By October 20, the authorities realized the mail steamer had missed her rendezvous with the battleship *Tsushima* and other ports of call. The battleship and 30 other warships began an intensified search in the Indian Ocean. Moving west, Capt. Nerger hoped to avoid the blockade and round the Cape of Good Hope. The *Hitachi's* Japanese crew brought typhus with them. Using severe measures, the sick were isolated and the rest of the raider was scoured and cleansed from bow to stern to kill fleas and lice. Nerger decided to scuttle the *Hitachi*, since she burned coal at a 35% higher rate than the *Wolf*. Her refrigeration machinery was damaged beyond repair by *Wolf's* salvos. Without refrigerated fresh fruit

and vegetables, the crew and prisoners suffered from scurvy. Both ships anchored off Coco Island and the retransfer of passengers began. Prisoners were sent back to *Wolf* after living quarters were built and expanded. The *Wolf* also loaded remaining coal from the *Maru*.

## JAPANESE SHIP SUNK

On November 7, the ships parted and the *Hitachi Maru* was sunk 16 miles offshore. The raider now carried about 800 persons including more than 400 prisoners.

Scurvy increased. Coal was also in short supply. Indian coal taken from the capture of the *Wordsworth* proved worthless and caused numerous bunker fires. So far the auxiliary cruiser avoided detection from the British and Japanese naval forces. Then another steamer was sighted. This proved to be the Spanish merchantman *Igotz Mendi* on its way to England with over 5,000 tons of hard coal. After the capture, both ships made their way back to Coco Island for cargo transfer. For the third time women, children and the elderly were shuttled over to the *Igotz Mendi*. Nerger and his prize captain, Lt. Rose, decided to make the carrier into a refueling collier. They set a rendezvous point in the mid-Atlantic and departed separately for the Cape of Good Hope.

In the meantime the two pilots for *Wolfchen* convinced the captain that the seaplane's fabric structure could be repaired with the silk taken from the *Maru*. Unfortunately, after a couple of successful flights, the little plane was ditched after a squall tore the fabric to pieces. *Wolfchen* was dismantled and would no longer be of service to the *Wolf*.

The raider rounded the cape successfully, which uplifted morale for the crew and prisoners alike. The colder water and climate also relieved some of the effects of scurvy.

*Wolf* had now been at sea over a year—an epic voyage. Enemy naval forces were still fruitlessly searching the Indian Ocean and Asiatic waters for a nonexistent raider. Nerger kept far from shore, mainly to steer clear of his own minefields strewn the year before. These mines had already accounted for five enemy ships. The captain would gladly have disembarked his prisoners at some shore location, but could not sacrifice the mission's secrecy.

## ON THE GREENLAND

The American bark *John H. Kirby* was captured and sunk with a cargo of 300 Model T Fords bound for Durban, South Africa. *Wolf* continued west to South America for a rendezvous with the *Igotz Mendi*. A French sailing bark loaded with wine and fresh fruit was captured, relieving the scurvy.

Sensing a hostile encounter at Trinity Island (Brazil),

*“Wolf had now been at sea over a year—an epic voyage. Enemy naval forces were still fruitlessly searching the Indian Ocean and Asiatic waters for a nonexistent raider.”*

Nerger withdrew from the preferred anchorage and met the *Igotz Mendi* in the open ocean. Disregarding inclement weather, recoaling began. But the two ships smashed into each other during the operation, causing significant damage to the *Wolf*. Four additional days were required for repairs. The *Igotz Mendi* would also return to Germany with *Wolf*. The plan was to broach the British cruiser blockade north of Scotland during the first two months of 1918. The raider was leaking badly, despite repairs to the ship. Nerger took one more victim, the Norwegian bark *Store Brone*, to protect his disguise and secrecy.

The collier refueled the raider one more time near the equator on January 10, 1918. Both ships caused more damage to each other during the 24-hour operation. The middle of the Atlantic is not a calm place. The ships headed for the Denmark Strait between the southern tips of Greenland and Iceland. Nerger had to fear attack from his own U-boats, since Naval Command had long ago given up on the raider.

As they approached Greenland on the Kaiser's birthday, January 27, they encountered a furious storm, which quickly evolved into a hurricane. Forty-foot waves engulfed the ships. *Wolf* began taking in 40 tons of seawater an hour, overpowering the pumps. To keep water away from the furnaces, the crew was organized into bucket- and sack-brigades to remove water and coal. The engineers began repairs. After 30 stressful hours, much of it in waist-high water, the bucket-brigade welcomed a weather change. The pumps began operations again. *Wolf* continued north at seven knots. She met her collier between southern Greenland and Iceland for the final time.

*Wolf* would run the blockade first.

Then the *Igotz Mendi* would make her run 48 hours later.

After a fruitless search for a far north channel through the ice pack, Nerger headed south to Iceland's eastern shores. Between February 10 and 14 the ship ran into a winter storm. Visibility ceased, providing excellent cover for the raider. The Norwegian coast was safely reached, but there was more to fear. Hostile warships, U-boats, E-boats and minefields from both sides were stationed in the Skagerrak (the entrance to the Baltic). Keeping close to shore, Nerger managed to steer the *Wolf* clear of these obstacles and bring her home after 451 days at sea. Under his command *Wolf* had traversed 64,000 miles of the world's oceans.

Nerger broke radio silence with the following radio message: "SMS *Wolf* has moored February 17 in the Aeroe Sound, mission accomplished. Ship is full of goods. Condition of crew, 30 men with scurvy. . . . Needing hospitalization for at least 100 men. Possible scurvy, most of the others. Please let us know what has become of our tender *Igotz Mendi*, Nerger."

## BLOCKADE BEATEN

On February 24, upon his arrival in Kiel, Nerger learned that the *Igotz Mendi* had run aground at Jutland Point in Denmark. She had also beaten the blockade. The Danes interned Lt. Rose and the prize crew until the end of the war. The ship was repaired and returned to the Spanish captain and crew. The passengers were sent back to their respective home nations.

In Kiel, *Wolf* anchored next to the famous raider *Moewe* and the imperial yacht *Hohenzollern*. The heroic mission was just what Germany needed to bolster the country's morale. Karl Nerger received the Pour le Mérite (the "Blue Max") from the Kaiser and was promoted to full captain in charge of auxiliary trawlers in the North Sea. Although to him this was a letdown, Nerger served stoically through the end of the war. His crew was honored in Kiel and Berlin, where each man was awarded the Iron Cross and then reassigned to other duties. Prisoners were interned and had to work in German war industry (if able) till the end of the war.

The *Wolf* was the last successful auxiliary raider. U-boats were more effective and only required a crew of 40 as

opposed to the nearly 400 who manned the surface raiders. She served in the Baltic and was then given to the French as part of reparations after the war. Her name was changed to the liner *Antinous*, where she serviced sea routes around the Marquesas, Tahiti, New Caledonia, New Zealand and Australia. In 1931, the former famous raider was broken up and scrapped in an Italian shipyard.

Auxiliary cruisers were used again in World War II. The most famous was the *HK Atlantis*, whose story was made into a movie, *Under Ten Flags*, with Van Heflin some years ago. The *USS Tarpon* torpedoed the last of the raiders, *HK Michel*, on October 18, 1943, to the east of Kobe, Japan. ❖

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## ENDNOTE:

<sup>1</sup>See "The Lusitania Sinking—German Outrage or British Provocation?" by George Fowler, TBR, May 1996.

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