

War in the South Atlantic and Southern Ocean 1939-42

by Aubrey Halpern

After the experience of the 1st World War, when German raiders were roaming the South Atlantic and Southern Ocean harassing shipping, the Admiralty were suspicious of Germany's motives when a German expedition was sent to the Antarctic in 1938/39.

The Germans had sent the "Schwabenland" a catapult ship of the Lufthansa Fleet, led by Captain Paul Ritscher. The ship left Hamburg, Germany, on the 17th December, 1938 and arrived in the Antarctic in January 1939.

On board the ship were 2 Dormier Wal ten ton flying boats, 2 photographers and a number of scientists, the expedition stayed in the Antarctic, while her planes flew a total of 8,000 miles and dropped Nazi flags on some of the territory flown over.

By February 5th, the weather had become so bad it was decided to return to Germany (After the II World War ended the Admiralty sent agents to Germany and they recovered the reports, files and photographs and brought them back to England).

When the II World War started 7 months later the Admiralty decided that Germany should not be allowed to have any bases in the Antarctic/Sub Antarctic waters. After the famous Battle of the River Plate, when the German pocket Battleship "Admiral Graf Spee" was chased into the neutral harbour of Montivideo Unuquay by British Warships of Force G, which included the Exeter, Ajax, Achilles, the destruction of the "Admiral Graf Spee" by her own captain, who sank her in the Montivideo Roads on the 17th December, 1939, the Admiralty sent the 10 year old 1,475 ton "Olympus" which was with the 4th Submarine Flotilla (China) to the Southern Ocean. She left in such a hurry that no cold weather gear was taken aboard for the crew, so they had to manage even through they left a temperature of 80°f to go to an area with freezing temperatures. Between December, 1939 and February 1940 she searched East Island, Possession Island, Penguin Island, Hog Island, all in the Crozet Group, then on to Marion and Prince Edward Islands and found no sign of the Germans, by then she was running low on fuel and supplies so she made for Durban South Africa, the voyage had lasted 66 days and the distance travelled 12,500 miles.

Meanwhile the German High Command were planning further moves which began in March 1940 and by July 6 Commerce Raiders were at sea and heading South.

Raider A "Orion" Schiff 36 (7,000 tons) left Germany in April, her voyage lasted 510 days steamed 112,000 miles and helped sink 57,000 tons of shipping.

Raider B "Komet" Schiff 45 left Bergen, Norway on 9th July, sank 43,000 tons shipping. She returned to Bordeaux after 15 months on her 1st voyage, she was sunk in the English Channel at the start of her 2nd voyage on 14th October, 1942.

Raider C "Atlantis" Schiff 16 was the former "Goldenfels" of the House Shipping Co of Bremen. She left Kiel in March and was the most successful of the raiders in sinking 145,000 tons of shipping, she was sunk herself by "HMS Devonshire" on 22nd November, 1941.

Raider E "Thor" Schiff 10 Left Germany in June she was the only raider to do 2 voyages, she sank 23,000 tons of shipping during the first six months of 1942.

Raider F "Pinguin" Schiff 33 Left Germany in June, sank 136,000 tons shipping was herself sunk by "HMS Cornwall" in May, 1941.

Raider G "Kormoran" Schiff - Sank 68,000 tons of shipping, was herself sunk by "HMS Sidney" in a battle during which the "Sidney" was set on fire and sank.

The raiders sank 54 ships in the area by the end of 1940, the "Atlantis" stayed at Kerguelen Island during December, 1940 to do repairs. Earlier she had laid mines off Cape Agulhas South Africa in the shipping lanes.

The British had sent the "Neptune" (Captain R.C. O'Connors) to search the Southern Ocean in October 1940. They landed at Marion and Prince Edward Islands found nothing, so carried on to the Crozets but due to fog could not land to search any of the Islands, it is believed that the raiders might have used the Crozets as an alternative rendezvous.

The supply ship "Alterster" met the "Pinguin" and "Komet" at Gazell basin Kerguelen Island in March 1941 to restock them with fuel, food and ammunitions, the supply ship was spotted in the South Atlantic by "HMS Marsdale" and 8th Flotilla of destroyers and after a chase was scuttled by her captain.

Another German supply ship was the "Regensburg". The Germans had numbers for their raiders such as "Pinguin" (Schiff 33) and the British called them by a letter of the alphabet (Raider F).

In November, 1941, "HMAS Australia" searched Kerguelen and Crozet Islands but found no evidence that the Germans were using the Islands but laid mines just in case. The Germans planned to set up a weather station on Kerguelen in June 1942 but the plan was cancelled.

See also SASAME New Sekky 7:5 & 23:1-2 (1982) (986) (a reference therein)