

# THE KÖNIGSBERG INCIDENT

## AND THE GREAT WAR IN EAST AFRICA

On the evening of August 6, 1914, the lone cargo ship S.S. *City of Winchester* was steaming southwest through the Gulf of Aden en route to London. With her load of general cargo and the first of India's seasonal tea crop, the *City of Winchester* represented a humble fraction of Great Britain's merchant power. But on this particular evening, she entered the history books both as the first merchant shipping loss of the First World War, and as the first war time target of the German light cruiser S.M.S. *Königsberg*. For as the *City of Winchester's* Captain George Boyck was called upon by one of his officers to investigate an unidentified vessel approaching their ship, searchlights stabbed out of the evening haze followed by a rapid signal lamp query: 'what ship and nationality.' Captain Boyck believed the approaching vessel to be a British cruiser and so he dutifully replied to the inquiry with the ship's name and port of registry. He was immediately ordered to stop his ship. It was only when a German naval officer accompanied by an armed party of sailors climbed aboard that Captain Boyck realized all was not right. His ship was commandeered by a 'prize crew' from *Königsberg* and taken to the east coast of Oman, where she was partially stripped of her cargo and scuttled. Thus began the war time portion of the *Königsberg* Incident that had begun in Kiel five months before, and which did not end until 1918. During the course of the Great War this particular chapter in military history resulted in the loss of over a dozen vessels, the deaths of hundreds of men and littering of the East African plains, rivers and bays with relics of the fighting.



Figure 1 : *Königsberg* at Dar es Salaam

The story began before the war when the German government decided to post a modern cruiser to their East African colony. In 1913 this area of the continent, which today is the country of Tanzania, was controlled by a surprisingly enlightened civilian administration. They did not view the Africans as inherently inferior, and this not-so-subtle distinction dramatically affected the course of war time events within the colony. As a key component of colonial policy, *Königsberg* helped to enhance the status of German East Africa with its capital of Dar es Salaam, and reinforced the German Navy's ability to conduct commerce warfare in the case of war. This last item was not lost on Great Britain, which was keenly aware of the German colony's proximity to major shipping routes.

So it was that Captain Max Looff was assigned command of *Königsberg* in April, 1914. There was a great deal of excitement stirred up by the new mission, and by the time *Königsberg* departed Kiel on April 25, Looff had even purchased a new 9mm rifle to use for big game hunting. But hunting prospects aside, the seriousness of the assignment was clear. The ship's crew was hand-picked for their stability and temperament, the journey would be long, and tropical station required unusual stamina. With such a carefully selected team it is not surprising that the Captain and crew departed for the Indian Ocean in high spirits, ready for whatever adventure and travel awaited them. By the middle of May, 1914, *Königsberg* stopped at Alexandria Harbor in Egypt, and then passed through the Suez Canal on the way to Aden where Looff dined with the British governor. The hostile events which would soon overtake them were as yet unknown. Certainly Europe had been dancing along the brink of war for several years. But when Captain Looff and his light cruiser made landfall at Makatumba, outside the port of Dar es Salaam on June 6, the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand still had three weeks to live.

After arriving, *Königsberg* had the easy job of playing host to the innumerable Germans, Africans and other visitors curious to see her. The German East African capital was a world away from the clammy North Sea coast and the dusty red soil and sun-scorched docks packed with locals were overwhelming reminders of this. East Africa was to be, for most of *Königsberg's* crew, home and headquarters for what remained of their lives.

On June 28, 1914, Austrian Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Serbia, and as the political situation in Europe slid toward open war, the authorities in German East Africa began to discuss their own options. The civilian governor, Dr. Heinrich Schnee, stood against military action which would certainly endanger his civilian projects. He was already negotiating a neutrality agreement with the British. General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, commander of the German Colonial Army, had no intention of allowing the British in Africa to be used elsewhere and he was already taking steps to prepare for war. Captain Looff's immediate and less controversial goal was to make sure his light cruiser was at sea if war came. He knew that the British were sensitive to his cruiser's presence on the East African coast, and in case of war they would quickly blockade Dar es Salaam. So as the last half of July passed, *Königsberg* finished a series of gunnery and torpedo training exercises and steamed back into harbor for an overhaul to wartime readiness. All wood furnishings were removed, lacquered paneling stripped away and supplies poured into every empty space.

#### **Manoari wa bomba tatu**

During her peacetime stay on the African coast, *Königsberg* was known as *Manoari wa bomba tatu* by the Africans who believed a ship with three funnels to be more powerful than a ship with two funnels. Within weeks *Königsberg* had sunk the two funneled British cruiser *Pegasus*, but was later sunk by two single funneled river monitors at her mooring in the Rufiji River Delta.

By July 30, all was nearly ready and Captain Looff spent time ashore coordinating his plans with General von Lettow-Vorbeck's deputy, Major Kepler. German freighters in the area had been ordered to bring in their spare coal, and two were now in harbor. One of them, the 2,500 ton *Somali*, was pressed into service as *Königsberg's* seagoing supply depot. On July 31, the Deutsche Ost Afrika steamer *Tabora* arrived with news that three cruisers of the British Cape Squadron were due to coal at Zanzibar the next day. There was now no more time for planning if *Königsberg* was to avoid being trapped in the harbor. By 4:30 in the afternoon, she cast off and slowly made her way out into the Indian Ocean twilight.

*Königsberg* was ten miles out to sea and the night was already beginning when the officer in

the foremast called down "three ships approaching." The Cape Squadron had arrived, only to discover *Königsberg* steaming out to sea. All three British cruisers, HMS *Hyacinth*, HMS *Pegasus* and HMS *Astrea* converged their courses on the *Königsberg* and took up station around her. If word of war came now, *Königsberg* would be in serious trouble. Captain Looff could only order steam for 22 knots and wait. Not long after, a squall blew in from the southwest and blanketed *Königsberg* with a driving warm rain, hiding all three of her unwanted escorts from view. The German cruiser whipped into a 180 degree turn and sped back toward the British ships. As she cleared the squall, *Königsberg* passed the *Hyacinth*, which was already making heavy smoke as she tried to bring up steam for full speed. Captain Looff turned south for one hour and then headed at full speed out to sea for the rest of the night, burning tons of valuable coal in the process. British Admiral King-Hall was left to his own fury at letting the cruiser escape from under his very nose, and Captain Looff waited for war in a cruiser already looking for more coal to fill her bunkers.



Figure 2 : Somali in heavy seas

Six nights later, *Königsberg* was pushing her way through heavy seas off Cape Guardafui when she received the long anticipated order: EGIMA, the code word meaning that Germany was now at war with England, France and Russia. In all the long miles of the Indian Ocean, *Königsberg* was now alone and hunted. But she herself was a hunter, and hunt she would, with British shipping as her prey. After contacting several German merchant ships, *Königsberg* headed for the main shipping lane which ran through the Gulf of Aden. Within several hours of daylight she encountered three German steamers, the last of whom tried to evade the cruiser thinking her to be British. This short pursuit wasted more of the cruiser's coal, and none of the German steamers had any to spare. After passing a Japanese freighter *Königsberg* captured her first prize when she came upon the British steamer *City of Winchester*.

By now *Königsberg's* coal situation was becoming a concern. She headed for a rendezvous with her supply ship *Somali*, bringing with her the *City of Winchester*, and the German freighters *Zieten*, *Goldenfels* and *Ostmark*. Eventually all five ships lay at anchor off the island of Hallaniya, the largest of the Kuria Muria group on the Oman coast. *Königsberg* transferred four hundred tons of supplies from *City of Winchester* and then scuttled her. Looff then arranged for a second rendezvous with *Somali* at Ras Hafun on the African coast as the Hallaniya anchorage was obviously unsafe in the aftermath of *City of Winchester's* disappearance. All of the German ships headed on their independent ways, with only *Königsberg* and *Somali* remaining in the Gulf area.

For several more days *Königsberg* searched in the main east-west shipping lanes and found nothing. It was as if the desert had extended out into the ocean, swallowing up everything. The British had reacted swiftly to the disappearance of the *City of Winchester* by diverting all ships away from the area. Also, the Japanese freighter of a few days before had recognized the *Königsberg* for what she was and radioed British authorities. So Captain Looff steamed up and down one of the most congested shipping lanes in the world, unable to find a single enemy ship. While the upheaval caused by his cruiser might have given him some comfort, his concerns were increasingly focused on finding more coal and fresh water. Fortunately, the second rendezvous with the *Somali* went mostly as planned, and by August 24 the *Königsberg* was underway again with full coal bunkers.

As his ship steamed down the African coast, Captain Looff wondered what was going on at Dar-es-Salaam. Her radio had been silent since war began, and he worried for news of events. He did not know that the German land transmitter had been shelled and destroyed by the British on the first day of war. Looff decided to steam south to Madagascar, where he hoped to catch French shipping unawares. But early on the morning of August 29, the German cruiser coasted gently into the bay at Majunga, only to find a Red Cross station and no ships. As had happened before, the locals believed *Königsberg* to be British, and only when she was steaming back out of the bay without anchoring did the local radio send out alerts that the Germans were in their harbor.

By now *Königsberg's* coal supply was down to 200 tons, only a quarter of her normal full load. Careful planning allowed her to meet *Somali*, this time off the Aldabra Island. But the seas were too heavy, and the coaling effort was called off. Now the situation was critical because *Königsberg* had to have her coal if she was to avoid losing all power. It was finally decided that both ships would head for the Rufiji River delta, which had recently been charted by survey crews who had discovered this "unnavigable" river to have several deep-water channels. So on the afternoon of September 3, 1914, *Königsberg* and *Somali* passed the bar at the mouth of the Rufiji River and steamed quietly up the Simba Uranga channel.

Once the German authorities at the Salale customs station recovered from the shock at *Königsberg's* unexpected arrival, messages were sent off to Dar-es-Salaam notifying them that *Königsberg* was not sunk as the British had claimed, and that she required coal and supplies. Captain Looff was also able to gather the latest news on world and local events, the most important of which came on September 19. A coast watcher personally reported that he had seen a British cruiser steam into Zanzibar Harbor. There was only one possible course to follow; head immediately to Zanzibar and destroy the lone British cruiser. Judging by the watcher's description of the British ship, Captain Looff and his officers decided that it must be the *Pegasus* or the *Astrea*. In reality, it was the *Pegasus* which had returned to Zanzibar for minor boiler work.

Captain Looff took *Königsberg* back out to sea on the afternoon tide. By evening, the German cruiser was steaming for Zanzibar at her safe cruising speed of 10 knots. At five o'clock in the morning she fired on and disabled the channel pilot boat and approached the harbor mouth from the south. Soon *Pegasus* was clearly in view and *Königsberg* opened fire at 9,000 yards range. Within twenty minutes, the British cruiser was giving off heavy smoke

and going down slowly by the bows. *Königsberg* swung around and headed out of the harbor, firing three rounds at the British radio station which was sending frantic requests for help. As the German cruiser left the harbor several zinc cordite casings were thrown into the water to give the effect of minelaying.

Unfortunately for *Königsberg*, one of her main engines had broken a piston-rod crosshead and Looff's plans for a raid along the South African coast were shelved. Only the machine shops at Dar-es-Salaam could manufacture the spare parts needed. So twenty-four hours after her departure *Königsberg* was back in the Rufiji delta, the only safe place on the coast for her to moor. The delta was separated into numerous channels, and the Germans were the only ones who knew that several of these were navigable by medium draft ships. In case of an emergency, *Königsberg* would have several escape routes.

Both *Königsberg* and *Somali* were camouflaged and many of *Königsberg's* light weapons were moved ashore to keep out curious British landing parties. Soon, they were joined by forces from the land army who garrisoned the local islands and dug entrenchments and spotting posts throughout the seaward edge of the delta.

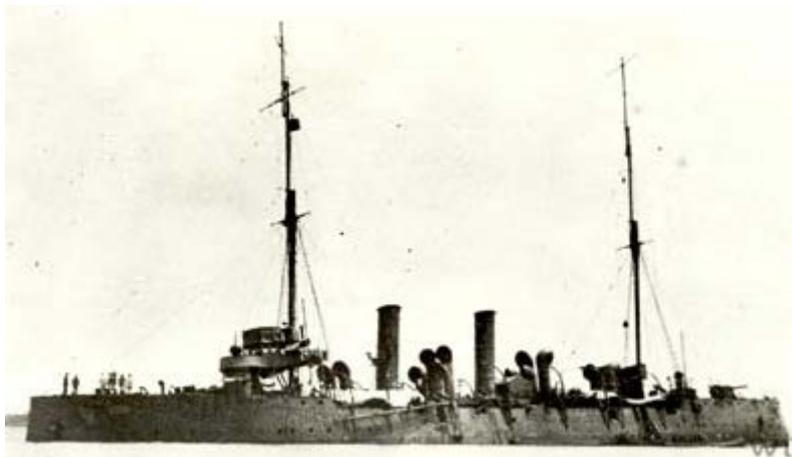


Figure 3 : HMS Pegasus sinking

Captain Looff was unaware of several events going on around him at this point. Two days after his attack at Zanzibar, the German cruiser *Emden* steamed into the British harbor at Madras, India, and bombarded it. This double blow to British interests was not to be stood for, not to mention the strangling effect the German attacks had on shipping. The 5,400 ton cruisers HMS *Chatham*, HMS *Weymouth* and HMS *Dartmouth* were all dispatched to find and destroy *Königsberg*. The first breakthrough for the British occurred when *Chatham* searched the German liner *Präsident* and discovered an order for shipments of coal to be delivered to the Rufiji delta. By the afternoon of October 20, *Chatham* anchored near a clear area of the delta and sent a landing party ashore. Soon, a British sailor had climbed a tree and could see the disguised masts of the *Königsberg* and *Somali* rising above the vivid green canopy of the river delta's forests. By the next morning, the British cruisers *Dartmouth* and *Weymouth* arrived offshore and the blockade had begun.



Figure 4 : Königsberg at low tide in the Rufiji

On November 2, the three British cruisers zeroed in on what they now knew to be the German ship's masts and fired throughout the day. No targets were hit but Looff moved his flotilla two miles further upstream as a precaution. Several days later *Chatham* scored several hits on *Somali* during the course of a general attack. *Somali* soon began to burn and eventually became a total loss. On November 9 the mouth of the Ssuninga Channel was blocked when the British sank the freighter *Newbridge* there in a daring raid. In reality this last action had little effect on events, as *Königsberg* never acquired adequate quantities of coal to make a run for the sea.

There now began an eight month long impasse, during which *Königsberg* was unable to escape from the Rufiji delta, and the British were unable to get close enough to bombard her. Her topmasts were removed, preventing the British from using their rangefinders, and more entrenchments were dug throughout the delta, creating a fortified zone which no British force could hope to secure. On the British side, there were several attempts to bring aircraft in for reconnaissance. This sometimes worked, causing alarm when the spotters inevitably reported *Königsberg* with steam up and ready to run for the open ocean. After a few encounters with the increasing numbers of British aircraft, Captain Looff arrayed a series of light cannon and machine gun positions as an anti-aircraft defense. These were very effective and brought down at least one of the British planes.

### The White Flag

Soon after the short battle at Zanzibar, a story reached the press that the naval ensign for *Pegasushad* had been shot away during the firing but was then held aloft by Royal Marines who heroically ran out into the rain of shell fire to keep their flag flying. In reality Captain Ingles of *Pegasushad* ordered the ensign struck

In April of 1915, a blockade running ship named *Rubens* bearing supplies for *Königsberg* and the land army arrived in the Indian Ocean after a long voyage from Germany. Disguised as a Danish freighter, she was bearing 1600 tons of high grade Westphalian coal for the *Königsberg*, as well as thousands of rounds of ammunition, machine tools, cutting torches, clothing, fresh and canned provisions and a universe of other supplies. She also carried millions of rounds of ammunition, rifles and machine guns for the land army. The British however, knew of her arrival in the area and when *Rubens* finally reached Manza Bay the British cruiser *Hyacinth* appeared from the south, kicking up a bow wave at flank speed. Captain Carl Christiansen, a reserve officer assigned to *Rubens* was mortified that he should experience such luck at the end of his long voyage. He brought his ship into the bay and grounded it in shallow water before sending an emergency radio message, evacuating the crew and ordering fires to be set. Little did he know that *Hyacinth* had suffered a major engine failure and was now only approaching at half speed. Had *Rubens* dashed to the open sea, the British vessel could not have followed him. *Hyacinth* hove to outside the bay and shelled the *Rubens*. Christiansen had also scuttled the ship before abandoning her, and little damage was done by the shelling. By the time the British returned a few weeks later, they discovered that the Germans had salvaged everything which had been on *Rubens*, except for the coal and some of the ammunition.

and a white flag raised in order to prevent further loss to his crew. The unpleasant fact that a British man of war had struck her colors was never endorsed during the war and the story of the brave marines continued to inspire accounts and paintings for years afterward.

The loss of *Rubens* meant that *Königsberg* was indefinitely confined to the Rufiji Delta. What the Captain did not know was that the British had begun systematically charting the location of the *Königsberg* and her complex web of defenses. The Admiralty dispatched two shallow-draft river monitors, *Mersey* and *Severn*, to the East African coast, where they arrived in June, 1915 after a long and difficult journey. The Royal Navy remained concerned that a supply ship would somehow reach *Königsberg*. If that were to happen, the embarrassment would be intolerable and so plans to destroy the German raider continued apace.

On July 6, 1915, the British finally executed the plan which they had worked toward for months. *Severn* and *Mersey* headed up the Kikunja branch of the river delta against light small arms fire. As they closed within firing range one of the two operational planes in the Rufiji area dropped several bombs near *Königsberg*, mostly to act as a diversion. At 0645 the monitors opened fire at a range of 10,600 yards, and at 0700 *Königsberg* opened fire on the monitors. By 0740 *Mersey* had been hit twice, one of which nearly destroyed the ship. She retired a short distance, leaving *Severn* to continue the bombardment. Eventually both ships opened the range to over 11,000 yards before retiring. Immediately after *Severn* moved off, five shells from *Königsberg* landed exactly where she had been moored. The British counted their luck; they had fired 635 rounds from their six inch guns and scored three hits on *Königsberg*. *Mersey* had lost one of her two main guns and *Severn* missed being blown out of the water by what her captain called sheer good luck.

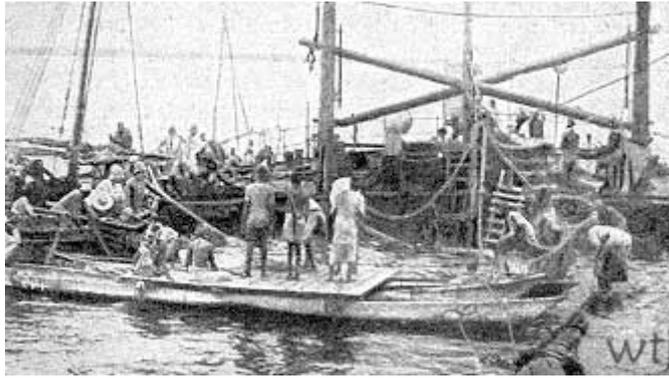


Figure 5 : Salvaging the Rubens

For four days all was quiet, but early on Sunday, July 11, British aircraft began circling *Königsberg*, announcing the renewal of some sort of British effort. By 1145 the monitors were in the entrance to the river and at 1215 *Königsberg* began firing with four of her main guns. The monitor's carefully rehearsed system for aerial observation and fire control worked perfectly the second time. *Königsberg* was so low on ammunition that she was unable to maintain the same rate of fire as the two monitors and soon numerous direct hits impacted along the length of the German cruiser. One of the first hits landed next to the conning tower, followed by others which brought down the middle funnel and started a fire near the forward magazine which cause the ship's hollow mast to smoke like a chimney. The land line to the Pemba Hill observation post was cut and by 1300 all was lost. *Königsberg* was firing blind, burning and under continuous accurate shell fire. The order was sent out to abandon ship and the remaining crew scrambled down the side of the ship, bringing with them what wounded they could.

As six inch shells continued to rain down, First Officer Koch placed torpedo heads to blow out the cruiser's keel, and at 1400 on the afternoon of July 11, 1915, SMS *Königsberg* heaved slightly as the torpedoes detonated. A roar and a blast tore open the cruiser's hull plating and she heeled to port, sinking into the mud of the Rufiji River. By 1500 the two British monitors had ceased firing and retired back down the river to Mafia Island, which was the British base during the Rufiji operations.

The Germans immediately salvaged the ten main guns from *Königsberg*, all of which were used during the course of the East African land campaign. The Dar-es-Salaam machine shops manufactured carriages for the big guns and for a long time they were the heaviest artillery present in the bitterly contested land battles which followed. Of the *Königsberg's* original crew of 350 men, only 15, including Captain Looff, survived the war and returned to Germany.

**SMS *Königsberg*:** The wreck of *Königsberg* remained at the site of her sinking in the Rufiji River Delta. It was in a remote location and after the war was only visited by the most determined travellers. By 1950 the ship had slid onto her side in the deep mud of the delta, and the last photo of any above-water portion was taken in 1965, when only a portion of the freeboard remained poking above the water level. The wreck is now completely buried in the mud of the river bottom, although the hull itself, including funnels and anchor chains is, as far as is known, still intact.



Figure 6 : Königsberg salvage crew 1915

Extraits de ce site :

[http://www.richthofen.com/konigsberg/summary/index\\_two.htm](http://www.richthofen.com/konigsberg/summary/index_two.htm)