

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATION EVENTS

A SECRET GERMAN FLIGHT OVER SOUTH AUSTRALIA IN 1940?¹

Prior to the start of the Pacific War, Australia was the target of a German maritime war. The wellbeing of the British Empire, spread widely across the globe, depended on seaborne trade. Britain in particular was dependent on imports of food and raw materials from other members of the Commonwealth, such as Australia. These maritime links were Britain's soft underbelly, being difficult to defend. If they could be disrupted then Britain's war-making capacity would diminish.

However without a global empire of her own, Germany lacked bases from which to attack Britain's maritime lifelines. Instead three main weapons were devised early in the war: submarines, pocket battleships and raiders. The former two weapons were relatively expensive and required much fuel and supplies. They initially operated mainly in the Atlantic. It was the latter weapon that was relatively cost-effective and could operate in extremely far flung parts of the globe for long periods. It was also these raiders that brought the maritime war to the unlikely location of South Australia in late 1940.

Known as *Hilfskreuzers*, the German Navy employed raiders on very long range trade warfare missions. To ensure such long range, generally large, modern, diesel-powered freighters were chosen for the role. Their voluminous holds were packed with stores, arms and fuel enabling them to remain at sea for many months. A respectable armament was carried, being concealed while in normal cruising mode. The ships were masters of disguise, often painted and altered to appear as harmless merchant ships from neutral countries.

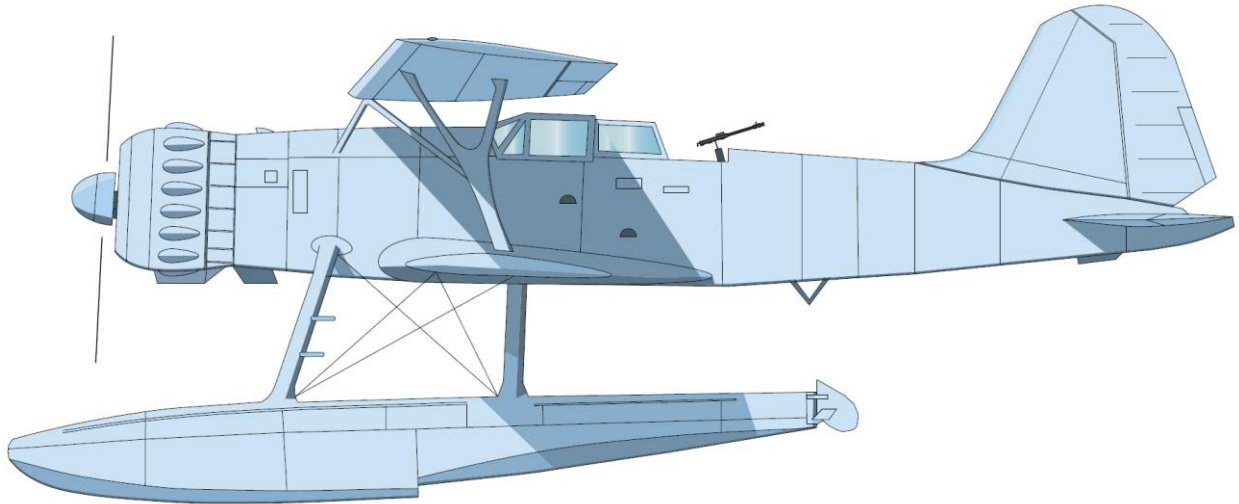
Usually the raiders would operate far from land, far outside of the range of patrol aircraft. They would try and capture merchant ships, the best of which were sent with prize crews back to occupied Europe. Older or less valuable vessels were sunk. While heavily armed, the commercial construction of the raiders meant they were highly vulnerable to any gun duel. The well documented sinking of *Kormoran* is a case in point – although surprising and disabling HMAS *Sydney*, the raider herself was subsequently abandoned after being hit by just a few shells. Thus raiders would avoid battles with warships at all costs.

Raiders were an effective weapon not just because of the amount of tonnage they sunk or captured. The fact that they could operate for extremely long periods in distant areas, and usually in radio silence, meant they were very difficult to track. Often the first indication that a raider was present was a ship being overdue in port, and this could be days or even weeks after the raider had dealt with its victim. As a result both shipping risks and costs rose, and expensive naval resources were maintained in otherwise peaceful areas. More than anything the raider captains attempted to maintain secrecy. When a raider was approaching, merchant ships were expected to transmit an "RRRR" signal. However the raiders devised various means to combat this, such as approaching under the cover of darkness, shooting out radio transmitters or jamming the radio transmission. Merchant ship captains came to understand that transmitting the "RRRR" signal was akin to opening fire. If they remained silent they could expect fair treatment as prisoners.

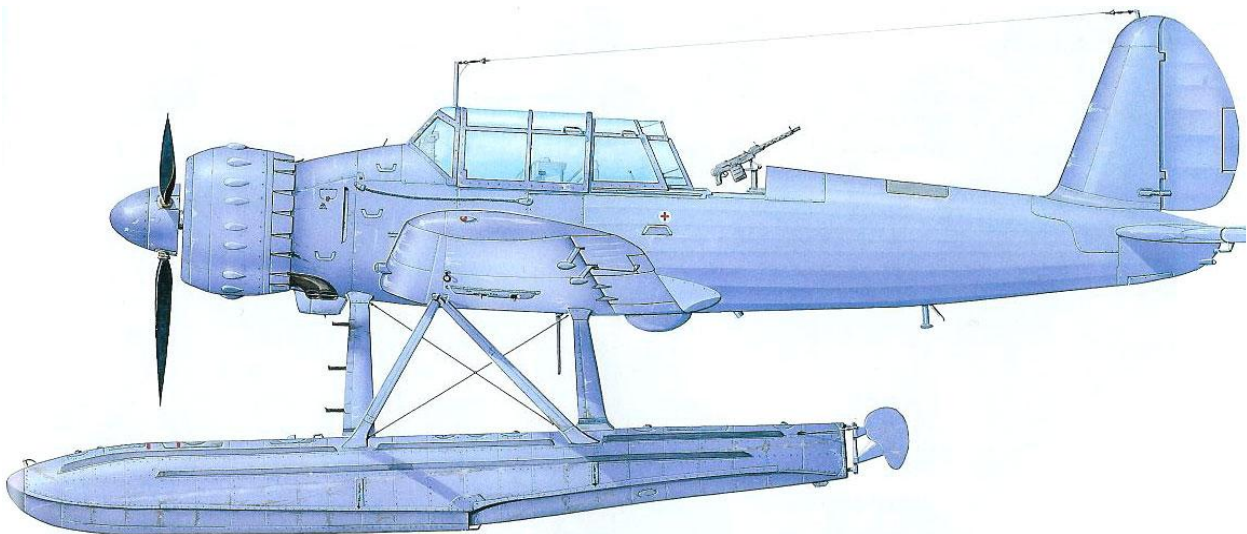
Another card that the raiders could play was mine warfare. Mines had a similar multiplier effect as did the raiders in imposing costs on the enemy. Usually a minefield might sink or damage a ship. But potentially more costly was the paralysis in shipping that would follow until the field could be properly swept. If large numbers of merchant ships were kept in port for a significant period this could have the same effect as destruction of shipping.

¹ This article was first published as *German Mine-laying Operations off South Australia 1940, including a German flight over Adelaide*, Journal of Australian Naval History, Naval Historical Society of Australia, Vol. 8, No.2, September 2011

One such raider was named *Penguin* ("Penguin") because she was expected to spend much time hiding out in Antarctic waters. Her main armament was six 150mm guns, 300 mines and two floatplanes. The latter could vastly extend the search range of the vessel. They were craned on and off the deck to land and take off in the sea. These were Heinkel He114s, a rather disappointing design made in small numbers in the late 1930s. While quickly replaced in mainstream service by the superior Arado Ar 196, in 1940 the few remaining He114s equipped some of the *Hilfskreuzers*.²



Heinkel 114A-2 Floatplane



Arado Ar196 Floatplane

Penguin departed Germany in June 1940, creeping up the Norwegian coast before successfully breaking out into the Atlantic. On 17th July *Penguin* sank her first victim, a British grain carrier, near Ascension Island. A month later she was in the Indian Ocean south of Madagascar. One of her Heinkels, painted in RAF markings, detected a Norwegian tanker. After strafing her bridge, the vessel surrendered. Further victims followed. However on 5th September the floatplane crashed on take-off and sank. Another Heinkel was in the ship's hold, but it had to be assembled.

² Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1922-1946, Conways Maritime Press, London, 1980, p.221.

Pinguin set out across the Indian Ocean towards Australia. Travelling at half speed in calm conditions the crew were able to assemble the second Heinkel. Off Christmas Island she captured the Norwegian tanker *Storstad*, which was retained as a prize. While lying in remote waters off north-western Australia, *Storstad* was transformed into an auxiliary minelayer. *Pinguin's* captain, Ernst-Felix Krüder, had devised a plan for both ships to lay minefields off eastern Australia in late October. While *Storstad* mined focal points east and west of Port Phillip, *Pinguin* mined the Sydney-Newcastle area, greatly aided by lighthouses functioning as in peacetime.³ *Pinguin* then mined Hobart, and on 1st November sailed for South Australian waters.

Theoretically the port of Adelaide, lying in a shallow gulf, was vulnerable to mining. But it was too risky for *Pinguin* to enter the restricted waters of St Vincent's Gulf. Instead either Backstairs Passage or Investigator Strait were suitable for mining, after which the mine-layer could vanish into the Southern Ocean. It was at this time, around 5th November 1940, that *Pinguin* was south of Kangaroo Island and launched her remaining Heinkel for a reconnaissance mission. This is the only known flight of a German aircraft over Australia during the war.⁴ *The Advertiser* records Adelaide's weather on 5th – 7th November as being "generally fine" which is consistent with the calm seas needed for floatplane operations.

Krüder would have been keen to confirm that there were no major naval vessels in Adelaide which might respond if he was detected while mine-laying. While German sources do not mention the flight, they provide very little detail about the mining mission.⁵ Indeed, the records describe the capture or sinking of ships, but in between these encounters information is scarce. However many civilians observed the flight, and some of these sightings survive as oral history.



The Cape Willoughby Light station

At the remote eastern tip of Kangaroo Island is the Cape Willoughby Lighthouse. The son of the lighthouse keeper, Ken Cain, was playing outside when he saw a floatplane overhead. He ran excitedly inside the house to alert his father, Percy Cain, who refused to believe such an unlikely event. However later on Percy Cain saw the aircraft himself, on its return flight. A record of the sighting was entered in the lighthouse log book.⁶

From the lighthouse, the Heinkel flew over the narrow waters of Backstairs Passage and northwards to Adelaide. The flying distance between Cape Willoughby and Adelaide is less than a 100 miles - a relatively short flight. After observing shipping in Port Adelaide, the Heinkel flew inland to observe Parafield Airport. It was here that the floatplane was seen by Gordon White, a farmer's son at work near the airport. White was a keen aircraft spotter and was familiar with the types operating from Parafield (he later became a Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineer). A floatplane of any

³ Gill, G. Hermon. Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942, Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series Two Navy, Volume I. Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957. P.270.

⁴ While Japanese submarine-borne aircraft later flew over Australian cities, no other German flights are known. However in August 1940 a floatplane from the raider *Orion* overflew Noumea. Thus the German raider captains were prepared to use their aircraft over land in certain situations. Gill p.261.

⁵ The main source for *Pinguin* is the site <http://www.bismarck-class.dk/hilfskreuzer/pinguin.html> (accessed 15/10/10). This describes her voyage, although only incidents involving the capture or sinking of her victims are described in detail. Some 11 secondary sources are listed. *Pinguin* was sunk in 1941 before returning to Germany so many of her records must have been lost.

⁶ This information was received from John Judd, a former curator of the SA Aviation Museum, and the son-in-law of Ken Cain. For many years John tried, unsuccessfully, to substantiate this sighting by recovering the lighthouse log, which was said to be held by relatives of Percy Cain on Kangaroo Island. The author located a Cape Willoughby lighthouse logbook in the South Australian Archives (see sources). Unfortunately, this contained only maintenance and work records. For example the entry for 5th November 1940 reads "employed setting up mantelpiece in no.2 cottage". There are no entries of shipping or aircraft sightings. Presumably such entries were made in a different logbook or diary.

kind would have been a highly unusual sight.⁷ There were no civilian floatplanes in use at the time, while single-hulled pusher-type Seagull amphibians were flown from RAN cruisers – quite distinct from a twin-hulled floatplane to even an inexperienced observer.

There is some indication that knowledge of the flight was quite widespread in Adelaide. It was apparently discussed on talkback radio, with one witness being a woman from Largs Bay (near Port Adelaide).⁸ Then while flying back south along the coast, the Heinkel was seen over Normanville by a young farm worker, Reg Lawrence. He remembers it as being grey coloured and flying at a low altitude of just a few hundred feet.⁹



After again passing over Cape Willoughby, the Heinkel was recovered by *Pinguin*. There was a belief by the lighthouse keeper that the floatplane flew to Vivonne Bay, on the very remote south coast of Kangaroo island. While this is possible, it is unlikely that the ship would have risked coming within sight of land. The Heinkels did not need sheltered water to operate, as they were often launched and recovered in the open ocean. Evidentially Krüder was satisfied with the report from the Heinkel crew as *Pinguin* proceeded to lay mines in Investigator Strait.¹⁰ Moored mines are vulnerable to strong tidal currents, and probably for this reason mines were not laid in the very narrow Backstairs Passage.

As *Pinguin* completed the Investigator Strait field on 7th November, the other fields claimed their first victims on both the eastern and western approaches to Melbourne. Onboard *Pinguin*, Krüder would have heard these reports and may have shortened his South Australian plans as he still retained many of his mines. Again, avoidance of risk of detection was the paramount rule for survival of the raiders. Within days air searches were made in the vicinity, but by then *Pinguin* was far away in the Indian Ocean.

By 20th November the Heinkel was in British markings and attacking the British steamship *Maimoa*.¹¹ German sources name the crew as Lieutenants Werner and Müller, so these were probably the men that made the flight over Adelaide. After *Maimoa* refused to obey orders from the Heinkel, it dropped 50kg bombs in front of the ship before attempting to bring down her wireless aerial and strafing the deck. But the floatplane itself took hits from small arms, forcing it to make an emergency landing. Although later hoisted back onboard *Pinguin*, this was the last flight of the crippled Heinkel.

⁷ Many years later White was being interviewed by Alan Killmier, of the SA Aviation Museum, about a famous aviator who had crashed at Parafield (Roy Gropler - White had been first at the crash site). White indicated an Arado Ar 196 floatplane in an aviation book, and mentioned that he had seen one of these aircraft over Parafield. Thus within SAAM circles, the incident became known as “the Arado flight”. Although different types, both the Heinkel and the Arado had similar twin-floats and identical BMW radial engines. Thus it is understandable that the types were confused. Also, the Heinkel He 114 was a minor type that probably did not appear in aircraft books as did the widely used Arado. NB confusingly, *Pinguin* later received an Arado via a supply ship, so is sometimes credited with one. To further confuse matters at least one source (Mason – see sources) mentions that the *Pinguin* carried Arados.

⁸ As recalled by Alan Killmier, who estimates that the broadcast was probably in the 1980s.

⁹ Reg was just 14 in Nov 1940 but was interested in aviation. He soon joined the Air Training Corps and the RAAF.

¹⁰ In the Official History (Gill), this is referred to as the “Spencer Gulf” field, probably because the mine victim, *Hertford*, was later salvaged near Thistle Is, Spencer Gulf. However this is some distance from where *Hertford* struck the mine.

¹¹ Gill, p.272.

Meanwhile *Penguin's* mines found some victims. On 5th December the coaster *Nimbin* (1,052 tons) hit a mine off NSW and sank with the loss of seven crewmen. Then in the evening of 7th December, the steamship *Hertford* (10,923 tons; Federal Steam Navigation Co) while en route from Fremantle to Adelaide, struck a mine 25 miles W.S.W. of Neptune Island while entering Investigator Strait. The mine blasted a large hole astride Numbers One and Two holds on the starboard side. These holds quickly filled with water, and the front of the ship nosed into the sea. Soon she was down so severely that the rudder and propellers were above the water, making her uncontrollable. The crew abandoned ship in boats.

Naval authorities in Port Adelaide co-ordinated a rescue effort involving nearby vessels and lighthouse keepers at Cape Borda and Neptune Island. With just one injury, the crew put ashore on Neptune Island. Meanwhile the tugs *Wato* and *Woonda* arrived on 8th December. They found *Hertford* drifting dangerously near Thistle Island, but were subsequently able to tow the crippled vessel to Port Lincoln.

Meanwhile *Penguin* found further victims in the Indian Ocean before heading for Antarctic waters. By Christmas, the raider was stalking a Norwegian whaling fleet. *Penguin* then completed the most successful single raider action of the war, capturing over 36,000 tons of shipping. A couple of months later, *Penguin* met a supply ship and took on an Arado Ar-196 floatplane. However the time was almost up for the raider. On 8th May she was found by the cruiser HMS *Cornwall*. Adopting the disguise of a Norwegian tanker, *Penguin* almost succeeded in fooling the British. But *Cornwall* was persistent and eventually forced the raider to drop her disguise and open fire. A salvo of four 8-inch shells mortally damaged *Penguin*, which soon sank, taking her captain with her.

Meanwhile *Penguin's* SA mines were either swept up or soon washed from their moorings. One of these mines was located off Beachport, SA, on 12th July 1941, some hundreds of miles from the original minefield. A Rendering Mines Safe party of two ratings under Lt-Cmdr Greening was sent in a truck from Port Adelaide, arriving the next day. Subsequent events read like a black comedy, as the deadly device was repeatedly moved and handled...

First, fishing boats towed the mine ashore with the intention of rendering it safe. However the only part of the beach without a heavy surf running was immediately in front of the town itself. In this location the mine was manhandled up the beach where the arming switch was inspected and found to be loose. In addition the mine had clearly been at sea for some time and was judged unsafe. But detonation in the current location would risk damage to the town. Thus a guard was placed overnight, with the intention of moving the mine elsewhere for detonation the following day.

At dawn the mine was refloated in shallow water and towed about a mile away. It was again manhandled up the beach to what appeared to be beyond the high water mark. If the mine rolled there was a risk of the horns breaking. However, even with a broken horn saltwater was needed to detonate the mine. The RMS truck was parked on a road parallel to the beach, but from there the mine was not visible as a steep dune ran along the beachfront. On the landward side and parallel to the dune was a railway line. The RMS party ran wires from the truck, over the railway lines, over the dune and to a tin containing a detonator placed alongside the mine. The truck's battery would detonate the mine.

On the first attempt nothing happened. A wave had washed the tin away from the wires. As the men were again setting it up a train went past, running over the wires. When detonation was again attempted nothing happened – possibly the train had damaged the wires. Both two ratings walked back to check the detonator assembly. After they had begun descending the dune towards the mine there was a massive explosion – both men were killed.¹² Possibly lapping waves had caused the mine to roll over in the newly wet sand and detonate. An investigation was later critical that the officer in charge was not fully schooled in RMS techniques.

¹² Both men were Able Seaman. William Danswan was a 23 and had entered the RAN in 1934. Married and from Temora, he was buried in nearby Junee, NSW. Thomas Todd was 30 and a member of the RANR. Also married, he was buried at Port Adelaide & Suburban Cemetery.

So ended the brief story of when war came to the shores of South Australia, demonstrating that no location can be regarded as safe in a modern maritime war. This is remembered today by at least one mine being preserved at Robe, in the south east of the state. The evidence for the flight of the Heinkel over Adelaide is strong, and this flight does not appear in any other sources such as the Official Histories. While the overall voyage of the raider *Pinguin* was highly successful, her mining activities along the Australian coast were a textbook naval operation designed to create maximum confusion among the enemy. Some valuable ships were sunk or damaged by the mines. But in addition to this was the cost in disruption to shipping as well as the maintenance of minesweeping fleets as each port. By the time that air searches were being organised for the raider she was far away in the Indian Ocean.

Sources

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