

# SEMAPHORE

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## BLOCKADING GERMAN EAST AFRICA, 1915-16

The wardroom of the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) premier training establishment, HMAS *Cerberus*, is home to many fine treasures reflecting Australia's naval heritage. Perhaps the most curious of these is a dark blue enamelled iron postbox emblazoned in gold with the words *Post-Briefkasten*. This artefact was presented to the wardroom in 1916 by Lieutenant Commander R. C. Creer, RAN and has its origins in Bagomoyo, German East Africa.<sup>1</sup> The story of how it became one of the most recognisable artefacts in the *Cerberus* wardroom lies in the account of one of the RAN's lesser-known warships, HMAS *Pioneer*, and the operations in which it was involved during the blockade of German East Africa in World War I.

The Royal Navy commissioned the 3rd class cruiser HMS *Pioneer* on 10 July 1900. *Pioneer* displaced 2200 tons and was armed with eight 4-inch single mount guns, eight 3 pounder guns and several machine guns. The ship also mounted two 14-inch torpedo tubes above the waterline. *Pioneer* first arrived in Australian waters in October 1905 and continued in service as a unit of the Royal Navy on the Australia Station until 29 November 1912 when she paid off at Sydney for transfer to the RAN as a gift from the Admiralty. Commissioned as HMAS *Pioneer* into the RAN on 1 March 1913, she was subsequently used as a seagoing training ship for the Naval Reserve.

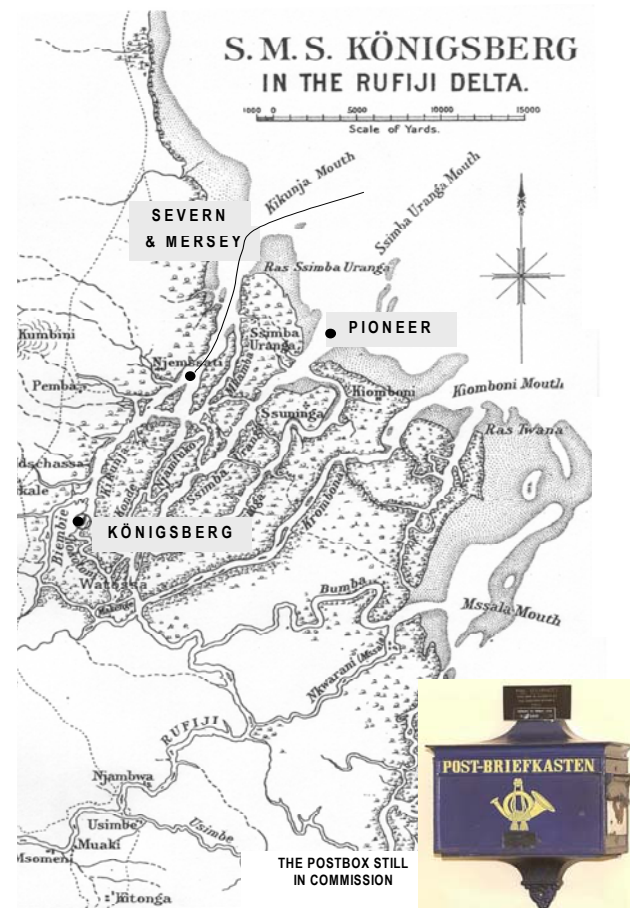
When war with Germany was declared on 4 August 1914, *Pioneer* was in dry dock at Williamstown, Melbourne. Within 24 hours of the declaration of war the ship was afloat, provisioned, coaled and ready for sea. The following day she sailed for Fremantle, from where she patrolled the waters off the West Australian coast.

On 16 August, eight miles west of Rottnest Island, *Pioneer* captured the German steamer *Neumünster* (4424 tons) and escorted her into Fremantle. On 26 August *Pioneer* captured a second ship, the Norddeuther-Lloyd vessel *Thüringen* (4994 tons), also off Rottnest Island. Neither of the German ships carried wireless equipment and it transpired that their masters were unaware of the outbreak of war.

In early November 1914, *Pioneer* sailed as part of the escort to the first Australian troop convoy bound for the Middle East. Unfortunately she suffered condenser failure and was consequently ordered to return to Fremantle to effect repairs. This twist of fate was to result in an adventure that would take *Pioneer* away from Australian waters for almost two years, where she participated in a classic example of sea control in the littoral environment.

On 24 December 1914, the Admiralty requested the urgent aid of *Pioneer* to take part in a blockade off the German East African coast. In September the German cruiser *Königsberg*, mounting ten 4.1-inch guns, had engaged and destroyed *Pioneer's* sister ship, HMS *Pegasus*, and had skilfully manoeuvred herself approximately 12 miles upstream in the shallow Rufiji

River delta, in German East Africa, beyond the range of effective fire from the sea. The British forces assembling off the African coast were now faced with a double duty: first, the maintenance of a blockade to prevent supplies reaching German land forces in East Africa; and, second, the neutralisation of a dangerous German raider.



*Pioneer* sailed from Fremantle on 9 January 1915 and joined the British force off Zanzibar on 6 February. The force consisted of the light cruisers HMS *Weymouth* and *Hyacinth*, HMS *Pyramus* (another of *Pioneer's* sister ships), the armed merchant cruiser *Kinfauns Castle* and six smaller vessels. Formal blockade was proclaimed on 1 March 1915, and five days later Vice Admiral Sir H. G. King-Hall arrived in the old battleship HMS *Goliath* to take charge.

For the purpose of blockade operations, the East African coastline was divided into three sections. *Pioneer* was ordered to patrol the northernmost of these and was appointed in charge of the *Kinfauns Castle*, the armed steamer *Duplex* and the whaler *Pickle*. There was little traffic to be watched, except for native dhows creeping along the coast, but signal activity by the enemy gave the impression that the *Königsberg* would soon make her bid to break through the blockade.



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After several attempts to drive *Königsberg* from her lair, it was decided to tow to the scene the 6-inch gun monitors, HM Ships *Severn* and *Mersey* that had been specially designed for river work. By taking advantage of their shallow draught it was planned to manoeuvre them upstream within range of the raider.

The attack began early on the morning of 6 July 1915, with the two monitors creeping silently into the northerly Kikunya mouth of the river under the cover of darkness. *Pioneer's* orders were to proceed with *Hyacinth* to the southerly Simba-Uranga mouth and bombard its shore defences, as shown on the map overleaf.<sup>2</sup>

Serving in *Pioneer* was Surgeon Lieutenant G. A. Melville-Anderson who described the action as follows:

'On we went, very cautiously, and when we were about 5,000 yards from the river entrance, we dropped anchor and allowed the tide to swing us broadside on. Hence all our starboard guns bore on the entrance. Previous to anchoring, a shell burst in the water not far from the ship, and another in the air. No one knew from whence they came. Very soon we were firing salvos and then each gun rapidly independently. Our shells were bursting everywhere, throwing up great clouds of sand and earth. No sign of life was visible in the neighbourhood.

In the meantime, the monitors were steaming up the river under heavy fire from the banks, but they went on and soon were within range of the *Königsberg*. They then directed their fire on her, the range being five miles. Seaplanes assisted the monitors in locating the position, but they were not very successful. The *Königsberg* fired salvos of five guns, the accuracy of which was good. From firing salvos of five guns she dropped to four then to three and two and finally one. During the last hour-and-a-half of the engagement she ceased fire altogether. One of her shells hit the forward gun of *Mersey* and practically wiped out that gun's crew - four men were killed and four wounded'.<sup>3</sup>

At 3:30 pm after firing 600 6-inch shells, both monitors were withdrawn. The *Königsberg* although badly damaged had not been destroyed and she remained a threat. Consequently the operation was repeated on 12 July. This time *Königsberg* straddled the *Severn* as she prepared to drop anchor, but *Severn* quickly found the range and hit the German ship several times, setting her on fire and forcing the enemy to complete her destruction using demolition charges. While this was taking place, *Pioneer* was again engaged in bombardment against German shore defences from a range of 2000 yards.

Following the destruction of *Königsberg*, *Pioneer* spent a period patrolling off the river mouth, and later, some time in the southern section of the blockade area. By the end of July she had been under way every day for more than six months with the exception of nine days spent in harbour. On 31 August she ceased patrol duties and proceeded to Simonstown, South Africa, for refit. Six weeks later routine patrol was resumed in the southern section with no enemy opposition encountered. It was uneventful and monotonous work.

On 20 December *Pioneer* anchored in Nazi Bay, south of the Rufiji River, and sent a cutter away to obtain fresh provisions from ashore. A hundred yards from the beach the cutter suddenly came under rapid fire from a small enemy force on the shore and two men were wounded

before the boat could be brought about. *Pioneer* retaliated with 50 rounds from her 4-inch guns and the boat and crew were recovered. The wounded were later transferred to the *Severn*. *Pioneer* remained in the southern patrol area until 13 January 1916, by which time she had spent an incredible 287 days underway, travelling 29,434 miles.

Early in February 1916, in fulfilment of a promise made to the Australian Government, the Admiralty ordered *Pioneer* back to Australian waters; however, on 13 February General J. C. Smuts assumed command of the Anglo-South African forces in East Africa and his plans demanded more naval cooperation than had previously been envisaged. As a result, on 23 February 1916, *Pioneer's* crew learnt that they were to resume blockade duties in the southern patrol area.

On 22 March 1916 *Pioneer* proceeded to rendezvous with *Hyacinth* and the flagship *Vengeance* off the capital of German East Africa, Dar-es-Salaam. A German 'hospital ship' named *Tabora* was suspected of being used for less honourable purposes and consent was requested from the Germans to inspect it. Permission was refused for an inspection party to board her, and *Pioneer* was ordered to close in and open fire if any movement was detected among the ships in harbour. She fired several 4-inch rounds before *Vengeance* ordered her to cease and await a response to a signal ordering the Germans to evacuate their sick from *Tabora*. With no answer forthcoming, all three ships opened fire and the suspect vessel was destroyed.

Following this action, *Pioneer* returned to blockade duties and participated in further bombardments of the ports of Tanga and Dar-es-Salaam in June and July 1916. The action in July was the last in which *Pioneer* participated, although parties from her crew were detached to relieve the garrison at Sadani during the capture of Bagamoyo on 15 August. It was during this raid that the German letterbox that now graces the wardroom of HMAS *Cerberus* was taken as a trophy by two of *Pioneer's* officers, Acting Commander W.B. Wilkinson and Lieutenant R.C. Creer, who were acting as Beach Master and Provost Marshal respectively.

By this time the naval situation in East Africa had stabilised, as the German forces were being driven inland, and contraband traffic by sea was not considered likely to do them much good.<sup>4</sup> It therefore became possible to send *Pioneer* home.

On 22 August 1916 she sailed from Zanzibar to Australia, flying her paying off pennant. Her arrival in Sydney on 22 October brought the career of this obsolete ship, dating from pre-federation years, to an end, yet she had probably seen more actual fighting and fired more rounds in the course of World War I than any other Australian ship.<sup>5</sup> *Pioneer's* hulk was scuttled off Sydney on 18 February 1931. The postbox souvenir by two of *Pioneer's* officers remains in commission.

<sup>1</sup> L. G. Wilson, *Cradle of the Navy*, Victoria, 1981, p. 27.1.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from J. S. Corbett, *History of the Great War, Naval Operations*, Vol. III, Longmans, London, 1923, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> M. A. Melville-Anderson, *An Account of the Movements of HMAS Pioneer during the Great War*, August 1919, (Navy Historical Section).

<sup>4</sup> For further reading see: H. Strachan, *The First World War*, Simon & Schuster, London, 2003, pp. 80-94.

<sup>5</sup> A. W. Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1928, p. 238.

