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Marauders of the Sea, German Armed Merchant Raiders During World War I

*Wolf*

(See "[The Wolf](#)" a website and book by Richard Guillatt and Peter Hohnen)

The second ship to carry this name was a Hansa Line Freighter, having a gross tonnage of 5,809 tons, she had launched as *Watchfels*, but now was to be fitted out as a Raider, renamed *Wolf*.

*Wolf I* has already been covered in this work.

The new *Wolf* became one of the most successful German Armed Merchant Ships of WW1.

The aim of ships of the Royal Navy was to bottle up the exit and return points that had to be negotiated by Raiders in breaking out of their home port, and then trying to return home after a long, arduous and often boring raiding cruise.

*Wolf* eluded RN patrols on exiting from Germany, and then managed to do it again by sailing safely home, no mean achievement.

She was fitted out for her role as an Armed Merchant Ship with a formidable armament, 6 by 15cm. guns, 1 by 10.5 cm. weapon, and some lesser calibre guns, 4 torpedo tubes were added, and then some 400 mines were loaded onboard.

For a WW1 Armed Merchant Ship the provision of a Freidrichshafen FF.33e two seater seaplane named *Wolfchen* (Wolfcub) by the crew, was an innovation, it was designed to provide *Wolf's* Captain with a broader horizon over which to locate potential victims, so he might place his ship in a favourable position to intercept. Two seaplane pilots, Leutnant z.S.d.R. Matthaus Stein, and Oberflugmeister Paul Fabeck were added to the Raider's crew list.

This plane after being hoisted onboard, was dismantled, and then hidden on deck beneath a tarpaulin, but disaster struck when *Wolf's* guns were test fired, blast crushing the seaplane's wings, forcing the crew to unload them and despatch them to a local airfield for emergency repairs.

When these wings arrived back onboard the Raider, for safety they were stowed in No. 4 hold, whilst the body of this seaplane was stowed on the poop in a deck house, constructed for that special role.

*Wolf* was a relatively slow ship with a top speed of only 11 knots, but she did have the advantage of a huge cruising range at her economical speed of 8 knots. Her bunkers carried 6,000 of coal, and she burned only 35 tons daily at 8 knots. *Wolf's* range was thus an incredible 32,000 nautical miles, almost 1.3 times around the globe.

Korvettenkapitan (equivalent to a Commander in our Navy) Karl Neger was given command of this ship, he had seen previous service in the cruiser *Stettin*.

*Wolf* now sailed from Germany, at first on the 24th of November 1916, but a fire broke out in a coal bunker forcing the ship to return to Kiel. After further delay, caused by fog, *Wolf* once ore tried to commence her voyage on the evening of the 30th of November, and by the 2nd of December she had slipped past any Royal Navy patrols and had broken out into the North Sea, at last she was away.

The intrepid ship was to be free for 15 months before returning to Kiel on the 24th of February 1918. During that time she journeyed 100,000 kilometers, relentlessly nibbling away at a daily quota of distance, just as a mouse finding a chunk of cheese, will keep nibbling away at it, until at last it is all demolished.

January the 27th found *Wolf* as far south as the Cape of Good Hope, she almost ran into a convoy escorted by an Armed Merchant Cruiser, but then laid a course to avoid detection.

Some of her mines were now laid off the Cape, and *Wolf* made ofr to the North East, and by mid February further mines were sown off both Bombay and Colombo.

Two British ships, the 7,175 gross registered tonnage, *Worcestershire*, and *Perseus* of 6,729 grt. both came to grief on these mines.

*Wolf* now placed herself to the south, so that she might sit astride the route taken by ships sailing from South Africa to India, and other vessels taking the route from the Red Sea in the Dutch East Indies.

Just prior to the end of February, the seaplane was assembled and tested, its engine running quite successfully.

Early on the morning of the 27th of February, 1917 a British ship of over 5,000 tons was sighted, a shot across her bows soon convinced her Captain to stop!

Initially as *Gutenfels*, this victim had been owned by the Hansa Line, who also owned *Wolf*, but in 1914 she had been interned in Port Said, then impressed by the British into service, and renamed *Polovan*, then in 1916 she was converted to a tanker role, given yet another name change ( many seafaring nations seem to enjoy this game of name changing) to call her *Turritella*, and be operated by Anglo Saxon Petroleum Company Ltd. on behalf of the Royal Navy.

A prize crew and a 5.2cm. gun, plus 25 mines were placed on board, and she was ordered off to the area around Aden, but given yet another name, *Iltis*.

The British Captain had indicated that *HMS Newcastle* was prowling in the area, so the seaplane was ordered aloft, the FF.33e, as reported named *Wolfchen*, was quite slow, a top speed of but

119 kilometers an hour, or about 74.5 miles per hour, and to climb to about 5,000 feet took half an hour.

But all appeared well, no sign of *HMS Newcastle*, but being very careful, and to ensure he was not taken by surprise by the British cruiser, the Captain ordered the seaplane to again check the surrounding ocean.

Thankfully for Captain Nerger, no Royal Navy ship was to be found in the vicinity, but two merchant ships were spotted, but proved to be outside the capability of *Wolf* to overtake them, it was also prudent not to alert any British warship to the whereabouts of a German Armed Raider on the loose in the Indian Ocean.

Course was now set for Australia, and on the 1st of March, *Wolf's* lookouts reported a merchant ship in the distant seascape, *Wolfchen* was hoisted out over the ship's side, and to mitigate any gun blast from the main armament, her pilot now took off to investigate, he circled this vessel which proved to be the British *Jumna* of 4,152 tons.

The usual warning shot brought her to an abrupt halt, however all was not well aboard *Wolf*, the port after gun had been prematurely fired before it was trained sea wards, and on deck, five seamen had been mowed down, they all died as a result of this tragic accident.

Suitable stores were removed from *Jumna*, prior to sinking her on the 4th of March.

But now back to *Illtis*, now off Aden where she laid her mines during the night of 4/5th of March, but she now ran into the British sloop *HMS Odin*, armed with 6 by 4 inch guns, so *Illtis* was scuttled to prevent her from returning once again to British ownership and control.

*Wolf*, on the evening of the 11th of March, whilst well east of the Seychelles Islands, sighted smoke on the horizon (in both world wars, the presence of smoke becoming being visible on the horizon was probably the greatest single reason a convoy or a single ship was discovered by the enemy at sea, whether the sighting was made by Allied ships or aircraft or Naval units/aircraft belonging to the German forces ) up went *Wolfchen* to investigate, she returned with the news that she had sighted a merchantship. The seaplane was hoisted inboard, and *Wolf* set off in pursuit, eventually *Wordsworth* of 3,509 tons with a full cargo of rice was overtaken and stopped, some of her cargo was retrieved and then, a combination of well laid explosive charges and opening up her sea cocks sent this ship to the floor of the Indian Ocean.

*Wolfchen* had now made 14 different flights in this part of the world, she was hoisted inboard, pulled apart, and restowed in No. 4 hold.

Right at the end of March, the three masted barque *Dee* of only 1,169 tons was over taken and then sunk about 400 miles south west of Cape Leeuwin, Australia.

The Raider now steamed well south of Australia skirted New Zealand on its eastern side, the lonely ocean yielding not a single victim, even the anticipated grain ships, by chance, managing to evade the watchful eyes aboard *Wolf*.

North east of New Zealand, on the 23rd of May, the seaplane was again assembled, but 4 flights proved to be completely barren, not a potential prize to be found.

Four days later, Nerger anchored *Wolf* off Sunday Island for some much needed boiler maintenance, then on the 2nd of June, smoke was in evidence in the distance, up aloft went *Wolfchen* to investigate, as Nerger needed to know if this smoke heralded the whereabouts of a Naval warship, or was it but a potential prize for him?