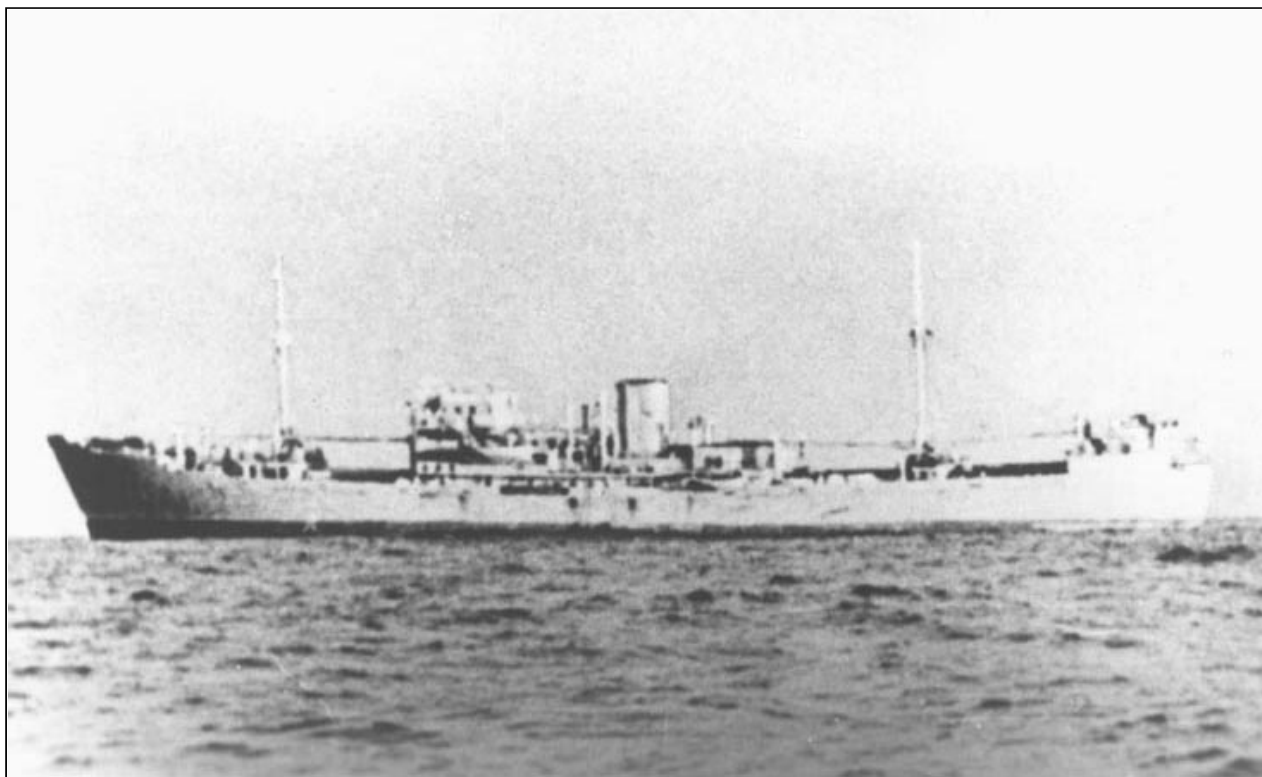


See Patella below

Hilfskreuzer

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HK Michel

Hilfskreuzer (Auxiliary Cruiser) Michel	
General Details	
Nationality	German
Type	Hilfskreuzer (Raider)
Ship Number	28
HSK Number	IX
British Admiralty Letter	H
Builder	<i>Danziger Werft.</i>
Launched	1939
Previous Owner	<i>Gdynia-America Shipping Line, Poland.</i>
Previous Name	<i>Bielsko</i>
Conversion	<i>Deutsche Werft Schichau, Danzig.</i>
Additional Information	The ship was seized by the Germans in 1939 before she was launched.
General Cruise Details (1. Cruise)	
Commander	Kapitän zur See Hellmuth von Ruckteschell - winner of the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves.
Sail date	9 March 1942
End Date	31 July 1942 – extended to 2 March 1943
Fate	Docked for refit at Kobe, Japan.
Performance (1. Cruise)	
Ships Sunk / Captured	14 Sunk
Tonnage Sunk	99.386
Days at Sea	373
Tons per Day	266,40
General Cruise Details (2. Cruise)	
Commander	Kapitän zur See Günther Gumprich – winner of the Knight's Cross.

Sail date	1 May 1943
End date	17 October 1943
Fate	Sunk by the American submarine <i>USS Tarpon</i> , east of Yokohama.
Performance (2. Cruise)	
Ships Sunk / Captured	3 Sunk
Tonnage Sunk	27.632
Days at Sea	149
Tons per Day	185,44
Displacement	
Displacement	4.740
Dimensions	
Length	132 metres
Beam	16.8 metres
Weapons	
Main Armament	6 x 150 mm - taken from <i>HK Widder</i>
Secondary Armament	1 x 105 mm Flak, 4 x 37 mm Flak (Two from <i>HK Widder</i>) 4 x 20 mm Flak (All four from <i>HK Widder</i>)
Torpedo Tubes	6 x 53,3cm (24 torpedoes)
Mines	None
Aircraft	
Aircraft	2 x Arado Ar-196 A-2
Small boats	
Light Speedboat	LS-4, named <i>Esau</i> by <i>Ruckteschell</i>
Propulsion	
Engine Type	Two 8-cylinder two-stroke MAN diesels.
Horsepower	6.650
Endurance	34.000 sea miles at 10 knots
Speed	16 knots
Fuel Type	Oil
Complement	
Wartime	400

Hilfskreuzer (Auxiliary Cruiser / Raider) Michel

The History

Launched in April 1939 at the *Danziger Werft* for the Polish *Gdynia-America* line, the 4,740-ton motor-ship *Bielsko* was seized, with her sister-ship *Lodz*, by the invading Germans before she was completed, and re-named *Bonn*.

Both were assigned to the *Nord-Deutsche-Lloyd* line in Bremen.

132 metres long with a beam of 16.8 metres, and powered by two 8-cylinder two-stroke MAN diesels, producing 6,650 horsepower, driving a single shaft, giving her a top speed of 16 knots, and a range of 34,000 miles at 10 knots.

Earmarked for refurbishment as the hospital ship *Schiff 26*, she was converted as *Schiff 28*, *HSK 9*, at the *Deutsche Werft, Schichau* in Danzig.

With only the 105mm L/45 and two 37mm anti-aircraft guns being supplied from elsewhere, all six 150mm L/45 guns, two of her four 37mm flak guns and all four of her 20mm flak guns were taken from the de-commissioned raider *Widder*.

Fitted with six 53.3cm torpedo tubes, two below the waterline, with 24 torpedoes, and carrying two Arado Ar-196 A-2 seaplanes, the *Michel* also had a 12-ton motor-boat, armed with two 45cm torpedo tubes, that was capable of 42 knots.

Taking command of *Schiff 26* less than two months after his return with the *Widder*, Korvettenkapitän Helmuth von Ruckteschell was given wide control over her conversion into the Auxiliary Cruiser *Schiff 28*, and hand-picked the officers and men who would sail on her, retaining several key personnel from the *Widder*.

Those who had served under his command on the earlier cruise had confidence in his abilities as a raider captain, and looked forward to further success.

Travelling to Danzig in early December 1940 to join their new ship, many of the crew were sent on training courses by Ruckteschell, who was keenly aware of the difficulties involved in maintaining the morale of a large number of men at sea.

While some were sent on conventional naval training courses, others, reflecting their captain's artistic background and leanings, were sent to study painting, sculpture, drawing, theatre, music and even puppetry!

As part of his desire to create an artistic ambiance on board his ship, he recruited a sculptor and a painter, as well as a former director of a school of music, who would be choirmaster and director of the ship's orchestra!

Under the stern and fastidious eye of her new captain, work on the conversion of *Schiff 28* began in earnest in the new year, and progressed well for eight months.

As the time approached for the commissioning of *Schiff 28*, Admiral Raeder sent a signal to Ruckteschell, enquiring as to what name he had chosen for her.

Entrusted with the naming of his ship, as were all raider captains, the religious, highly-cultured and mischievous Ruckteschell, much to the surprise of almost everyone concerned, chose Michel, a name which suggests to most Germans '*Der Deutsche Michel*', a sometimes caricature, sometimes hero figure, usually pictured wearing a stocking cap and often the brunt of unkind jokes.

Michel was a symbol of the common man, oppressed by 'the system', who more often than not embodied the negative rather than the positive qualities of the stereotypical German national character, but challenged the nation's self-image.

Ruckteschell's reasons for choosing this name were, like himself, no doubt complex and multi-dimensional, and were most probably also a reference to the Archangel Michael, often portrayed slaying a dragon, militant of Christendom, patron saint of soldiers, fighter against Satan, victor over evil, protector of the Jewish nation, and whom many felt was the patron saint of Germany.

By choosing this name he was in a way selecting a name that would be an embodiment of himself, as he had in selecting *Widder*, the Ram, making him, born under the astrological sign of *Aries*, at one with his ship.

It could also have been that he identified with the common man, *Der Deutscher Michel*, and was again selecting a name that would be an embodiment of himself, but on this occasion, perhaps deliberately, the name of a national figure who, despite having been exploited for propagandist purposes by just about every shade of political opinion, *including* the fledgling Nazi Party, during the inter-war years, was a figure for whom the Third Reich, predictably, had little time!

While serving to endear the captain to his crew, this created quite a stir in official circles in Berlin, where Admiral Erich Raeder, Supreme Commander of the German Navy, with whom Ruckteschell had a good rapport, and who had already interceded on his behalf when he had considered resigning because of the Nazi persecution of the Christian Churches, informed him that in his view Michel was not a suitable name for a ship, and instructed him to choose another.

Rather than disobey an order and risk antagonising the Admiral, who had always seemed friendly towards him, Ruckteschell provocatively suggested a truly outrageous alternative, Goetz von Berlichingen, after the sixteenth-century Swabian knight, 'Goetz von Berlichingen with the Iron Hand'.

The central character in Goethe's eighteenth-century play, '*Sturm und Drang*', Goetz, who had an iron prosthesis in place of his right hand, when addressing an emissary from the Bishop of Bamberg, said, in what is probably the best known line in all German literature, "*Tell him he can lick my arse!*"

In Germany to this day, the mere use of his name expresses that specific sentiment, and is often employed as an expression of defiance.

When ordered to send this alternative proposal to Naval Headquarters in Berlin, Ruckteschell's shocked Radio Operator at first refused, fearful of what the Admiral's response might be to what appeared to be a thinly-disguised insult.

Ruckteschell insisted, and could no doubt innocently claim that he simply wished to name his ship after the Iron-Fisted Knight, but was probably not too hopeful that this excuse would be accepted!

The Admiral's response ... was silence.

As he arrived by special train on September 7 1941, to honour the day of the ship's commissioning with his presence, no one dared predict how the rather conservative and formal head of the German Navy would react to this typical example of Ruckteschell's complex wit, and the tension on board was palpable!

The Admiral was clearly very impressed by what he saw on his tour of inspection, and, far from having the by now popular and highly-respected Captain removed, as some on board felt would be the inevitable result of the suggested name, rather laconically said, "I am happy with everything I've seen! ... You've got a good ship Rucki! ... So set sail! ... and Good Luck ... in your *Michel!*"

* Thanks to Ulrich Rudofsky and to J. Revell Carr's excellent book on the sinking of the *Anglo-Saxon* and Hellmuth Von Ruckteschell – *All Brave Sailors*

Commissioned into the German Navy on September 7 1941, and scheduled to sail at the end of November 1941, the *Michel* did not do so until March 9 1942.

Leaving Kiel still disguised as Naval Auxiliary *Schiff 26*, and proceeding through the Kaiser Wilhelm-Kanal to Brunsbüttel and Cuxhaven, she waited overnight off Heligoland, and then headed for Vlissingen.

On the night of March 12, in an attempt to slip unobserved through the Ärmelkanal, she ran aground off Ostende, but was refloated on the high tide, and had to return to Vlissingen.

On the evening of March 13, she left Vlissingen, escorted by nine minesweepers and five torpedo boats, the 933-ton *Illtis* and *Jaguar* and the 924-ton *Seeadler*, *Falke* and *Kondor*, of the Fifth Torpedo-Boat Flotilla.

Following the daring dash up the Channel by the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, in *Operation Cerberus*, the British were extra vigilant, and shortly after 0300 hours, the German convoy was attacked off Dover by six motor torpedo-boats and three motor-gunboats.

With these relatively light forces successfully driven off by the raider's lighter anti-aircraft weapons and several salvos from nearby coastal batteries, the convoy was attacked so fiercely just after dawn on March 14 by torpedo boats and destroyers, that Ruckteschell was forced to employ his main armament, and thereby reveal the true nature of his ship, in order to repel them.

Although sustaining slight damage, and with one officer killed, he reached Le Havre later on March 14, and St. Malo on the following day, where she topped up her fuel tanks and took on fresh supplies of ammunition.

Arriving at La Pallice on March 17, the raider *Michel* finally departed for the wide open waters of the Atlantic on March 20, with instructions to operate just south of the Equator, but to the north of the zone covered by the raider *Thor*, and then to await further orders to follow her into the Indian Ocean.

Crossing the Equator on April 5, eleven days later on April 16, she rendezvoused with the 7,747-ton tanker *Charlotte Schliemann*, which had been detained at Las Palmas since the outbreak of war, and once again topped up her fuel tanks.

On April 19, the *Michel's* lookouts spotted a tanker.

Approaching at speed from directly astern, with his ship disguised as a Norwegian freighter, Ruckteschell ordered his gunners to fire a warning shot.

The stranger immediately increased speed and commenced radioing for help, but several further shots, which knocked out the bridge and the radio shack, put a stop to the signals and finally brought the vessel itself to a halt.

The boarding party identified her as the 7,469-ton British tanker, *Patella*, owned by the *Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co. (Shell Oil)* en route for the Cape from Trinidad, carrying almost 10,000 tons of British Admiralty oil and a crew of sixty-three.

Sixty survivors were picked up, and she was dispatched with demolition charges.

Three nights later, on April 22, Ruckteschell's lookouts sighted another tanker, and he decided to try out his Light Speedboat, carrying two 45cm torpedoes.

Following the vessel unseen until nightfall to accurately determine her course and speed, he brought the *Michel* to a halt and had the *LS-4*, named *Esau*, and under the command of Lieutenant Malte Von Schack, lowered overboard.

Getting ahead of the enemy ship in a great arc so that he would neither be heard or seen, Von Schack lay in wait, torpedoes at the ready, to attack from the opposite direction to the approaching raider.

The first the enemy knew of their presence was when the *Esau* put a torpedo into them in the early hours of the morning of April 23.

Briefly detected radioing their position, most of her crew were seen to be frantically lowering their boats to abandon a ship carrying a cargo of 100-octane gasoline, which was in effect a giant floating bomb.

As her radio operator continued to send distress signals, a second torpedo was fired which ignited the gasoline and blew the ship apart in a gigantic fireball that shot hundreds of feet into the air.

The burning fuel swept rapidly across the surface of the water, engulfing the last two lifeboats which were attempting to get away to windward around the tanker's stern, and all the men in them.

At dawn, the thirteen surviving members of her crew were picked up, identifying their ship as the 8,684-ton *Texas Company* (Texaco) owned American tanker, *Connecticut*, with a crew of fifty-four, and like the *Patella*, bound for the Cape.

One of those rescued died later on board the raider.

Early on the morning of May 1, southwest of St Helena, Ruckteschell had a very frustrating experience that only served to confirm his view that despite her superior technology and diesel engines, the *Michel*, with a top speed of only 16 knots and armed with obsolete pre-1914 guns with a maximum effective range of only five miles, was little better than the *Widder* in terms of being a suitable vessel for commerce raiding.

On sighting a large '*Blue Funnel*' liner, which turned out to be the 10,307-ton *Alfred Holt & Company* vessel *Menelaus*, Ruckteschell posed as a British naval patrol vessel, and signalled to her to stop and to refrain from using her wireless, while at the same time lowering the *LS-4 Esau* into the water.

When the liner's master Captain J.H. Blyth, refused to comply with Ruckteschell's commands, and signalled to the him to identify his ship with the appropriate secret call sign, which he was unable to do, Ruckteschell was left with no alternative but to order his gunners to open fire.

The liner's radio operators immediately began transmitting distress signals giving their position, while the *Michel's* operators tried desperately to 'jam' them.

Showing his stern to the raider, Blyth immediately piled on the steam and turned away at fifteen and a half knots, a knot and a half above his ship's official top speed, and gradually drew further and further away, with his radio operator sending a non-stop

stream of QQQQ signals on different wavelengths.

Fifteen and a half knots was nothing compared to the forty knots speed capability of the *LS-4*, which shot off in pursuit, and quickly caught up with the fleeing liner.

Meanwhile Ruckteschell had the *Michel* turn to make it seem as if she was moving away, but was in fact still following, at full speed astern.

With his crew dressed in duffel coats and British life-jackets, posing as British naval officers, the *Esau's* commander, Von Schack, signalled to the enemy vessel to stop her engines and heave to.

When Blyth refused to do either, the speedboat moved up ahead of his ship and fired a torpedo, which he skillfully avoided, after which the boat returned to the raider, which was clearly not fast enough to keep up the chase, or to bring the enemy ship within range of her guns.

The wearing of duffel coats in such warm weather and the fact that the life jackets worn by the crew of the *Esau* were Merchant Navy issue rather than the Royal Navy type, not to mention Ruckteschell's decision to reveal the true identity of his ship by opening fire while the enemy was still out of range, were basic and frustrating errors of judgement on the part of the Germans.

Aware that the distress signals had been picked up all over the place and that Allied warships would be rapidly converging on his position, Ruckteschell had no alternative but to break off and depart the area as quickly as possible.

* The *Menelaus* was the only ship ever to escape from a German auxiliary cruiser once an attack had commenced.

Heading due south to the zone previously patrolled by the raider *Thor*, which had now moved into the Indian Ocean, to rendezvous with the *Charlotte Schliemann*, Ruckteschell had to deploy his seaplane to find the tanker, after several attempts to meet up with her had been unsuccessful.

Finally doing so, the *Michel* re-fueled on May 8, while transferring her prisoners to her, before both ships parted and quickly went their separate ways in order to avoid being detected by the British warships alerted by the two recently dispatched tankers and by the *Menelaus*, and sent out to hunt him down.

The *Michel* spent the next two weeks cruising unsuccessfully back and forth across the normally busy Montevideo to Cape Town shipping lanes, until on the afternoon of May 20, a freighter, clearly sailing empty, was sighted heading west.

Stalking her until after dark, Ruckteschell then ordered his gunnery-officer Leutnant Schwinn, to open fire on the unsuspecting vessel, scoring direct hits on her bridge, radio shack and engine-room with the first salvos.

Given no time to man their gun or even send a distress call, the startled crew of the freighter signalled that they were about to abandon ship, at which point Ruckteschell ordered his gunners to cease firing.

Identified as the 4,245-ton Norwegian *Olaf Ditlev-Simonsen* freighter, *Kattegat*, running in ballast for La Plata, amazingly, there were no casualties among her crew, all of whom were taken on board the raider, after which their ship was scuttled with demolition charges.

Sailing northward the *Michel* endured a further two weeks without success until her radio room picked up an SOS signal from an American 'Liberty Ship' which was drifting with engine trouble 900 miles to the north.

Unable to decipher the ship's name, and realising that it would take him about three days to reach her, Ruckteschell nevertheless decided to investigate, and found her, just as she got her engines going again, on June 5.

Conscious of the possibility that it might all still be a trap, he sent the *Esau* ahead to stalk her, attack with torpedoes after nightfall and then withdraw.

At two o'clock in the morning on June 6, the tiny speedboat's two torpedoes slammed into the freighter, but did not sink her.

As some of the panic-stricken crew hastily abandoned their listing ship, leaving two of their shipmates trapped below decks and the Naval Armed Guard gunners to man her single gun, her radio operators urgently called for assistance.

Identifying her as the 6,800-ton *George Clymer*, en route from Portland to the Cape with a mixed cargo and twenty-four aircraft on board, their appeals were picked up and answered by the radio station at Cape Town, telling them that 'a cruiser' was coming to pick them up.

Upon hearing this, Ruckteschell decided to lie in wait and ambush what he believed would be either an obsolete 'C' class cruiser or an Armed Merchant Cruiser of the type so severely dealt with by *HK Thor* in July 1940.

With the stricken freighter remaining afloat overnight, and her crew, considered by their captain to be 'a bad lot', re-boarded, a British plane flew over her the next day signalling that *Thor's* old adversary, the British Armed Merchant Cruiser *HMS Alcantara*, was on her way.

Taking the freighter's crew on board and realising that she was beyond salvaging, the *Alcantara* presided over her scuttling, after which, assuming that the vessel had been attacked by a U-Boat, she quickly departed the scene.

Waiting below the horizon, but unable to use her seaplane, the *Michel*, disguised as a British merchantman coming to the rescue, returned to where she'd last seen the sinking ship, to see the cruiser's masts disappearing over the horizon.

Given how severely battered the *Alcantara* had been in her encounter with *Thor*, one can only assume that, taken by surprise by Ruckteschell in the *Michel*, she would have most likely suffered an even worse fate.

This time Von Schack received his captain's congratulations for a job well done.

In the early evening of June 11, the *Michel's* lookouts sighted another freighter, which, a short time later, was summarily shot to pieces without any warning.

Approaching at speed on an aggressive collision course, the raider's first two salvos registered devastating direct hits, destroying the freighter's charthouse and starting fires amidships and on the boat deck.

The *Michel* continued firing while the burning freighter was being abandoned, and while her master, Captain C.S. Low, and his First Officer escaped, twenty-two members of his crew were picked up and taken on board the raider.

Identified as the 5,186-ton British *J & J Denholm*, freighter *Lylepark*, on her way to the Cape from New York with 8,000 tons of aircraft parts, petrol and military supplies on board, by dawn the burnt-out vessel had sunk.

Of the remaining twenty-five crew members, a few, including First Officer Read, who had become separated from his captain, Third Officer Coysh, and a DEMS* gunner, were picked up by the *Blue Star* liner *Avila Star*, and landed at Freetown, only to lose their lives three weeks later on July 5, north-east of the Azores, when the liner was torpedoed and sunk by the *U-201* (Kptlt. Adalbert Schnee) while on her way back to the UK.

*Defensively-Equipped Merchant Ship gunner.

*Captain Low, spotted by an aircraft from the Escort Carrier *HMS Archer*, was picked up by that ship and also taken to Freetown, where he arranged passage for himself and his officers on the *Avila Star*. He miraculously survived her sinking, including having his lifeboat blown out from under him by a torpedo intended to finish off the sinking ship, and was later picked up by a Portuguese destroyer.

On June 21, the *Michel* rendezvoused with the blockade-runner *Doggerbank*, formerly the *Speybank*, which had been captured by the *Atlantis* in January 1941, and which was on its way to Japan.

With both ships meeting up with the *Charlotte Schliemann* the following day to re-fuel, Ruckteschell had the *Michel's* one hundred and seventy-seven prisoners, transferred to the *Doggerbank*, after which he headed for South-West Africa.

Finding nothing there, he returned northeastward into the Gulf Of Guinea, onto a shipping route to which Allied merchant ships had been diverted to avoid U-Boats.

On the night of July 15, in pitch black conditions off Portuguese Angola, *Michel's* lookouts somehow spotted a large blacked-out vessel steaming south.

Approaching at speed with all her lights off, the *Michel* closed with the stranger until at about 7.00, Ruckteschell opened fire without warning from close range.

The first salvo scored hits below the bridge and amidships, destroying the radio room and setting fire to gasoline canisters stowed on the foredeck, spreading flames rapidly throughout the superstructure of the ship.

As her radio officers had been either killed or wounded, no signals were sent.

Within minutes, to the horror of the watching German crew, the vessel, a large elderly-looking passenger liner, rolled first to starboard, then to port, and sank.

Identified as the thirty-year-old 8,006-ton *Union Castle Mail Steamship Company* liner *Gloucester Castle*, the oldest and smallest *Union Castle* ship, which had been retired from service before the war, bound for Cape Town from Birkenhead with one hundred and fifty-four people on board, including twelve passengers, all women and children, carrying a cargo of military equipment, aircraft, machinery and gasoline, and armed with one 4.7-inch and several machine guns.

As only one lifeboat was seen to get away, Ruckteschell launched the *Michel's* motorboat to rescue fifty-seven crewmen and four passengers, two women and two children, many of whom were hauled out of the water by German sailors.

The rest, eighty-five crew, six women and two children, died, victims of a war in which it was supposed to be strictly forbidden to transport innocent passengers and a cargo of war materiel in the same ship.

Less than twenty-four hours later, on the morning of July 16, about eight hundred miles off the west coast of Africa, Ruckteschell's eagle-eyed lookouts spotted two tankers, sailing on parallel courses, and their commander decided to attack both of them, at night, and at the same time.

Just after nine that evening, the *Esau* was launched and raced away towards the further of the two targets, armed with her usual two small torpedoes, while the *Michel*, coming out of the darkness, opened up from point blank range with all the weapons she could bring to bear, hitting the nearer vessel with sixty 155mm shells in salvos timed at thirty second intervals, and hundreds of rounds of 37mm and 20mm, smashing her topsides, deckhouse and starboard lifeboats to pieces.

As the salvos rained down upon the ship that had had no warning whatsoever, and her decks were raked with automatic fire, her gunners bravely but hopelessly tried to return fire with their 5-inch gun, until she was staggered by one of three torpedoes launched by the *Michel* hitting her at the stern, starting a fire, quickly followed by two more, which sealed her fate.

Within minutes she was going down, and her surviving crew took to their boats.

Identified as the 7,983-ton American *Tide Water Associated Oil Company* tanker *William F. Humphrey*, en route to Trinidad from Cape Town with a crew of forty-eight, twenty-nine of whom managed to get away in the two port side life boats, and were picked up by the raider.

A further ten men, including the captain, drifting off on rafts, managed to avoid capture and decided to take their chances on the open sea.

Early on the following morning, July 17, led by their Second Officer, Fritz Borner, they found the two empty lifeboats, and proceeded to sail four hundred and fifty miles, in five and a half days, in one of them, before being picked up by the Norwegian *Wilhelmsen Line* freighter *Triton*, which took them to Freetown.

Meanwhile Von Schack, speeding towards the second tanker in the *Esau*, let fly with his two aerial torpedoes, and saw two fountains of water erupt against her side as they struck home.

The tanker briefly listed, then, having righted herself, continued on her way at the best speed she could manage, almost as if nothing had happened.

With her radio equipment destroyed, she was unable to signal her position.

Located by the *Michel* again next morning, July 17, as she zig-zagged westwards, she was followed until nightfall, at which time a further torpedo, and a few salvos from Ruckteschell's 155mm guns, finished her off.

Identified as the 7,984-ton Norwegian, *Bernhard Hanssen* line tanker *Aramis*, twenty-three of her crew of forty-three, were picked up, the remaining twenty having gone down with their ship.

Among the items found on board were charts, routing instructions, merchant codes and secret materials ... the latter warning of German raiders operating in the area with torpedo boats.

Deciding that three ships sunk in three days was good enough, Ruckteschell departed the scene immediately, heading west between the islands of St. Helena and Ascension, for a pre-arranged rendezvous near the island of Trinitade off the coast of Brazil with the raider *Stier* on July 29.

Ruckteschell, convinced that two raiders could be more successful than one, suggested to the commander of the *Stier*, Kapitän zur See Horst Gerlach, that they should consider hunting together.

Having briefly done so, Gerlach eventually rejected the idea on August 2, as he had been doing quite well alone.

Arranging to meet up again on August 9, they agreed to go their separate ways.

A week later, the *Michel* arrived at the rendezvous just in time to watch the *Stier's* latest victim, the 7,072-ton *Dalhousie*, go down by the stern, bottom up.

Reluctant to remain in a compromised area, Ruckteschell bid Gerlach farewell and quickly departed, heading south.

* As he did so he made some critical notes about his fellow commander, expressing the view that he was somehow too decent a man to effectively command a raider, and that as he didn't appear to discuss his plans and strategies sufficiently with his officers there would be no one to take over should anything happen to him. He later sent these notes on to the *SKL*.

Shortly before nine o'clock in the evening of August 14, to the south of St Helena, the crew of the *Michel* were called to their battle stations as a ship was sighted by the lookouts, and the *Esau* was launched.

They approached so rapidly and came in so close to the target that she flashed her white 'Collision Warning' light at them.

Opening fire from point-blank range, the vessel was literally shot to pieces.

Searching all night for survivors but finding none, her chief engineer was picked up from a sinking lifeboat the following morning, confirming that only one of her crew of sixty, which included ten DEMS gunners, had managed to get away alive.

Identified as the 5,874-ton British *Strick Line* freighter *Arabistan*, in ballast from Cape Town to Trinidad, she had gone down in a matter of minutes.

* On August 20, Horst Gerlach on *Stier* heard that ten survivors from the *Arabistan* had been rescued.
(*The Secret Raiders* by David Woodward)

* Other reports have all but two *Arabistan* survivors ending their lives in Japanese prison camps.

On August 17, the *Michel's* lookouts spotted a large passenger ship that turned out to be the Dutch *Neederland Line* vessel *Marnix Van Sint Aldegonde*, under charter to the British as a troopship, but as she looked suspiciously like an Armed Merchant Cruiser, Ruckteschell decided not to risk approaching her.

After a final rendezvous with *Charlotte Schliemann*, to the east of the island of Tristan da Cunha on August 23, Ruckteschell took the *Michel* around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean.

On the night of September 10, a freighter was attacked without warning, from a range of 500 metres, with all fire concentrating on her gun positions.

On fire, her radio destroyed, and her lifeboats splintered, two torpedoes tore open her sides, sending her down stern first.

Forty-seven members of her crew of fifty-eight were picked up.

Identified as the brand new 6,778-ton C-1-type *United States Line* freighter, *American Leader*, she was on her way from the Cape to Punta Arenas.

Her cargo had included 2,000 tons of rubber, 850 tons of coconut oil, stored in large tanks on deck, 400 tons of copra, 100 tons of spices, 200 tons of grease, hides, and assorted goods plus 20 tons of opium for Newport News and New York.

The following evening, September 11, while returning to the Atlantic to meet a tanker and a supply-ship, the *Michel* stalked the brand new 7,241-ton *Runciman Shipping Company*, motorship *Empire Dawn*, with a crew of forty-four, bound from Durban to Trinidad in ballast, to load bauxite for New York.

Despite the fact that she signalled that she was stopped and that her crew was abandoning ship, Ruckteschell kept up the non-stop barrage of fire similar to his earlier attack on the *Lylepark*, raking the freighter's bridge with 37mm tracer, killing her Third Officer, and half of her crew.

* This was the subject of the third charge of which he was found guilty on his subsequent appearance before a War Crimes Tribunal.

Receiving supplies from the passing blockade-runner *Tannenfels* and transferring his prisoners on September 21, three days later, on September 24, Ruckteschell again rendezvoused with the *Stier*, and the tanker *Uckermark*, and then returned to the Indian Ocean.

The *SKL*, anxious to prevent the *Michel's* activities from interfering with the imminent deployment of the new IXC-type U-boats in the south Atlantic off South Africa, ordered the raider to range south to seek out the Allied whaling fleets operating in Antarctic waters.

Ruckteschell was irritated by this, but, appreciative of the broader strategic priorities, and having learned that the *Stier*, had been so badly damaged in her fight with the *Stephen Hopkins*, on September 27, that she had been scuttled, refused, requesting that he be permitted to remain in the Indian Ocean.

He maintained that it was a waste of time, men and materiel to aimlessly move a ship like his about with a good chance that it would end up like the *Stier*.

He had long been of the opinion that U-Boats were a more effective weapon than raiders, and that his 400 men would be better employed manning eight of them!

As he considered the timing poor and the distances too great, he had no intention of going to the Antarctic, and so, much to the discomfort of his radio operators and the delight of those in the know, he sent the following reply to the *SKL* Chief of Staff, Admiral Fricke: "*Antarktik Ohne Mich*" ... Antarctic without me!

The next day, to his immense amusement, he received the following reply:

'Einverstanden, Ruckteschell, Dann auch ohne SKL. Weiterhin nun gute fahrt, Nach alter 28 art'

Roughly translated this said: *Understood, Ruckteschell, Then also without SKL. So on your way and fare you well, In the style of 'Old 28' (Schiff 28)*

Reading between the lines, this response could be saying, '*All right Ruckteschell! You're on your own! Do your own thing!*' but Ruckteschell was delighted with it, saying, "*This message is refreshing, and eases the tension of the last few days*".

* Some sources credit the *Michel* with the sinking of the 5,115-ton British freighter *Reynolds* on November 2 1942. The ship was in fact sunk on October 31, by the U-504 (Krvkpt. Fritz Poske).

Receiving supplies and oil from the 9,925-ton tanker *Brake* on November 14, four days later he met the 6,753-ton blockade-runner *Rhakotis*, which was on her way to France, and delivered the *Michel's* war diaries to her.

When the *Rhakotis* was intercepted off the coast of France on January 1 by the British light cruiser *HMS Scylla* and scuttled by her crew, the diary was lost.

On the night of November 29, the *Michel* approached a freighter on a collision course and opened fire from 2,500 metres, destroying the vessel's bridge, knocking out her 6-inch gun, shredding the lifeboats and setting her on fire.

Two torpedoes from the *Esau* followed, one striking her amidships, the other missing, and despite one gunner firing some 20mm shells, and a feeble radio signal being sent, the ship was soon sent blazing to the bottom.

After three hours, thirty-five survivors were fished out of the drifting wreckage, with four of her gunners being rescued the following day when Ruckteschell returned to see if anyone might have been missed.

Identified as the 5,882-ton *American Export* line motor freighter *Sawokla*, en route from Colombo to Cape Town with a cargo of jute and rough linen, she was carrying a crew of forty-one, thirteen naval gunners and five passengers.

On December 8, the *Michel* was stopped, riding out a storm, when a freighter suddenly appeared out of a rain squall close to her recalling for full speed, Ruckteschell turned sharply away and launched the *Esau*.

With the two ships circling and very close to one another he launched two torpedoes one of which struck home in front of the vessel's bridge, after which she was finished off by gunfire, and nineteen multi-national survivors, thirteen of whom had tried to escape in a boat, were picked up.

'The most colourful lot' Ruckteschell had ever seen, who had been sampling their cargo of drink, and had been celebrating the feast of St. Nicholas when attacked, identified her as the 4,816-ton Greek *N.G. Livanos* freighter, *Eugenie Livanos*.

Instructed to return to European waters by early February to coincide with the breakout of *Schiff 14*, the raider *Coronel*, Ruckteschell was concerned that the *Michel* would get caught up in the firestorm as the British tried to stop her.

Christmas celebrations on board the *Michel* for both the German crew and their many prisoners were elaborate and peaceful with the former receiving a selection of Handel's *Festmusik*, *Silent Night* and readings from the bible.

* Dennis A. Roland, the Second Officer of the *Sawokla* who said that he always found Ruckteschell to be 'a perfect gentleman', described how the prisoners had Christmas trees decorated with cigarette-box tin foil and tiny candles supplied by their captors, who also treated them to cakes, strawberries and cherries, and how he had 'Personally one of the best Christmas Days I could recall, and it had to be on a German raider'.

Given five bottles of beer each, plus two bottles of cognac to share between them, two decks of cards, four harmonicas and the use of a record-player, each man was also given a 'gift bag', containing a two-pound raisin-nut cake, one pound of dates, a pack of cigarettes, one pound of Dutch chocolate, a can of Italian peaches, a dozen large chocolate balls and a quart of hair tonic!

(From *German Raiders of World War II* by August Karl Muggenthaler – P254/5)

Safely out of the way, off Gough Island, one thousand miles to the south-east of Cape Town, the festivities on board were unlikely to be disturbed by anyone.

While awarding Iron Crosses on December 26, Ruckteschell was pleasantly surprised to learn that a signal had been received announcing that he had been awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross.

His gift to them was a musical play he had written himself, repeatedly performed by two seamen who had been sent to a special school before leaving Germany just to learn how to operate the *Punch and Judy* theatre!

* On December 27, actively encouraged by Ruckteschell, the prisoners held a memorial ceremony to honour their dead.

While a German honour guard stood to attention in full dress uniform, and the ship's band played appropriate music, the prisoners saluted their fallen comrades. With her ensign at half-mast, the *Michel* swung around in a broad circle while a wreath was thrown onto the surface of the sea.

Ordered to return to Germany, on January 3, Ruckteschell headed south of the Cape, and back towards the South Atlantic, where, to the acute embarrassment of his pilot Konrad Hoppe, who had spotted only one ship during forty-one flights, covering 12,000 miles, while in the Indian Ocean, his eagle-eyed lookouts spotted the raider's next victim, despite the seaplane being already airborne.

Clearly seen by the enemy, Hoppe deceived them by flying away towards the British bases to the East, before circling back to the ship.

With the *Esau* in the water, the *Michel* opened fire later that evening, knocking out the bridge and the radio room and turned her into 'an inferno from stem to stern', after which Ruckteschell fired two torpedoes, one of which missed, and the *Esau* did likewise, sending the blazing ship down.

Twenty-six survivors were picked up, with another man being found the next day when the *Michel* returned to search for anyone who might have been missed.

Identified as the 7,040-ton British freighter *Empire March*, bound for Trinidad from Durban, she had been carrying a cargo of iron, tea, peanuts and jute, and a crew of twenty-nine.

Six days later Ruckteschell received instructions that he was not to attempt to break through the Allied blockade of Europe, but was to turn back into the Indian Ocean, and head for Japan.

Neither the crew, who had been looking forward to going home after almost a year at sea, nor the prisoners, who dared not think about what lay ahead of them as prisoners of the Japanese, were happy with this turn of events.

Rounding the Cape of Good Hope again on January 18, by February 7 he was off the island of Bali, the first land the crew had laid eyes on in 324 days.

Following brief stops at Japanese-controlled Batavia (Jakarta) on February 10, and Singapore, from February 18 to 20, where the prisoners were, according to instructions, entrusted to the tender mercies of the Japanese Army, the *Michel* finally tied up in Kobe Harbour on March 2.

Having spent 358 days at sea, during which she sank fourteen ships, for a total of 99,386 tons, the *Michel* was officially welcomed by the German Naval Attaché, Admiral Paul Wenneker, and Kapitän zur See Günther Gumprich, the former commander of the raider *Thor*, which was now a burnt-out wreck in Yokohama.

Describing the freak accident that had destroyed his ship, Gumprich informed Ruckteschell that the *Michel* was now the only remaining operational raider.

The *Michel* was taken by tugs to the Mitsubishi shipyard, which was contracted to carry out a much-needed refit, before she would be ready to put to sea again.

Ruckteschell, who had long suffered from migraines and stomach problems, and was now suffering from a heart condition, chose his birthday, March 23, to put in a request that he be permitted to stand down on medical grounds.

Granted his wish and relieved of command, he was glad to be ashore, rather than being alone at sea 'Stealing geese like a fox' on a raiding operation that he found was 'An enormous psychological strain', he was kept busy tending to official business which included receiving a medal from the Emperor Hirohito.

* Hellmuth von Ruckteschell spent the rest of the war in and out of hospitals in Tokyo, Shanghai and Peking, before being repatriated as a prisoner of war, being made to work in the mess line of United States C-4 Transport *Marine Robin*.

On August 20 1946, at the British Interrogation Centre at Minden in Germany, he was formally listed as a War Criminal.

The examination he was about to face was not one he could prepare for, and its results were legally, technically and ethically debatable.

Confiding in his family that the thought of being executed was not nearly as hard to bear as the thought of "Being condemned on false evidence", he said to his wife, "I want you to know that my conscience as a human being is clear, so please pray for us".

As an officer, he refused to ask for mercy, saying that he simply wanted justice.

He conceded that, "I may have erred, and now it is they. We both did it on orders, and in the belief that we were right, and now, we are both wrong".

Held in the *Curio Haus* in Hamburg, the trial lasted from May 5 to May 21 1947, and the judgement passed down by the British Military Court opened up one of the many cancerous and acrimonious post-war disputes, the issues of which are clouded by personalities, prejudice and vindictiveness.

Kapitän zur See Helmuth Von Ruckteschell, winner of The Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, faced the following charges:

* That the *HK Widder* had continued to shell the British freighter *Davisian*, after her radio had been knocked out, and she had acknowledged the order to maintain radio silence, on July 10 1940.

* That the *HK Widder* had failed to assure the safety of the survivors of the Norwegian tanker *Beaulieu*, on August 4 1940.

* That the *HK Widder* had fired on the lifeboats of the British freighter *Anglo Saxon*, and failed to assure the safety of the men in them, on August 21 1940.

* That the *HK Michel* had continued to shell the American freighter *Empire Dawn* after she had surrendered, on September 11 1942.

On May 21, he was found guilty on three charges and sentenced to ten years in Hamburg-Fuhlbüttel prison, the sentence subsequently reduced to seven years, due to the fact that the charges concerning the *Beaulieu* could not be upheld.

On 24 June 1948, shortly after hearing that he was to be released due to his deteriorating heart condition, Hellmuth Von Ruckteschell died.

While the British held to their contention that his methods were brutal, there were those on the German side who, while possibly feeling that Ruckteschell was emotionally somewhat unsuitable to command a raider, still believed that the court had acted in vengeance for his escape from prosecution as a World War One U-Boat commander, who had applied himself so aggressively to his service during that war, that the Allies had hoped to finally bring him to trial for war crimes.

A British officer who had spent eighty days as a captive in the raider *Michel* said, "War is a systematic way of killing one another ... lawful on both sides ... to us ... at least, Ruckteschell was a Christian and a gentleman".

THE SECOND CRUISE OF THE RAIDER MICHEL

Kapitän zur See Günther Gumprich assumed command of the *Michel* for her second cruise, during which she was not only the last of the raiders, but also Germany's *only* operational warship active on the high seas.

On May 1, under his command, the *Michel* left Japanese waters and headed out into the Indian Ocean, where on June 14, in a violent storm on the edge of the Roaring Forties, three hundred miles to the west of Australia, her seaplane reported a ship heading west, which by evening was visible to the raider's lookouts, and followed.

Accustomed to fast daylight attacks with *Thor*, equipped as she had been with modern long-range guns, and reluctant to accept

the 'Ruckteschellian' tactics now being pressed upon him, Gumprich nonetheless agreed to launch a surprise night attack, and duly closed with the ship after dark and opened fire without warning.

Approaching at speed, from astern, his first broadside salvo, registered hits amidships, destroyed the radio room and set the bridge on fire.

Following up with two torpedoes, 37mm tracer and machine-gun fire, he continued firing under star-shell, until the crew were seen to be abandoning ship.

Amidst the turmoil of the storm and the viciousness of the non-stop assault, it seemed to the people on board the vessel as if the Michel's gunners were deliberately trying to destroy their lifeboats.

Identified as the 7,715-ton Norwegian Leif Høegh & Company freighter, Høegh Silverdawn, she was on her way from Fremantle to Basra with a general cargo including frozen meat, military equipment and vehicles, aviation fuel, a crew of forty-seven and eleven passengers, six of whom lost their lives.

Six survivors were picked up by the torpedo-boat Esau.

Although damaged by machine-gun fire, one lifeboat, which had survived the onslaught, slipped away in the darkness, containing twenty-two survivors.

Under the command of the ship's captain, this boat sailed 2,865 miles across the Indian Ocean, coming ashore in the Bay of Bengal, 130 miles south of the Calcutta Lightship, thirty-one days after their ship had been sunk.

Another three crewmen survived a week adrift on a raft before being rescued by the American motorship Franklyn P.Mull.

Among them was John Bakkemyr, who had survived forty-nine days adrift on a life-raft having had the 6,837-ton motorship Moldanger torpedoed and sunk from under him by the U-404 (Krvkpt Otto von Bulow) on June 27 1942.

He and eight other survivors were picked up by the Norwegian ship Washington Express on August 14. He died in 1994, aged 83. On June 17, two days after sinking the Silverdawn, the Michel's lookouts spotted a large tanker, which was shadowed all day on a parallel course until nightfall.

Closing in on her after dark, Gumprich launched the Esau which attacked the vessel with two torpedoes, causing her to list to port.

Initially thinking he was under attack by a U-Boat, her captain altered course, had his ballast shifted to compensate for the list, and manned his guns, but when the Michel appeared he realised his position was hopeless, stopped his engines and ordered his crew to abandon ship.

With five men losing their lives in the attack, again there was the suspicion that Gumprich had deliberately tried to destroy them, but with nineteen escaping in a boat, under the command of their captain, thirteen others were rescued.

Identified as the 9,940-ton Norwegian Fearnley & Eger motor-tanker Ferncastle, carrying a crew of thirty-seven, the boat turned up thirty days later, almost 3,000 miles away, on the east coast of Madagascar.

Only thirteen of the nineteen had survived to drag themselves ashore.

Conscious that the *Ferncastle's* signal had been acknowledged, and that a large number of survivors were at large, Gumprich decided to leave the Indian Ocean.

Setting course to the south of Australia, Gumprich headed into the Pacific, where the *Michel* spent a fruitless month until spotting a large freighter on August 1 which he avoided, suspecting that it might be a British Armed Merchant Cruiser.

On August 29, off the coast of Chile, her lookouts recognised the silhouette of a United States light cruiser which they mistakenly reported as belonging to the Pensacola-class, but was in fact the 7,050-ton *Omaha*-class cruiser *USS Trenton*, causing Gumprich to take the *Michel* rapidly away to the north.

On September 10, west of Easter Island, the lookouts spotted a large tanker, which was carefully shadowed until nightfall.

As he was still out of range, Gumprich launched the *Esau* in case the vessel spotted the raider and made off.

Closing with her after midnight and opening fire, the stricken ship was a roaring wall of fire within seconds of the first salvo as her tanks burst open and the flames rapidly spread.

With the *Esau* going just close enough to the blazing vessel to identify her as the 9,977-ton *Texaco*-owned Norwegian motor-tanker *India*, the raider withdrew to a safe distance as Gumprich and his horrified crew knew that no one could possibly survive such an inferno.

* On her way from Peru to Sydney with a cargo of oil and a crew of forty-one, she had departed Talara on Sept 3, and was never heard from again. It wasn't until many years after the war that the details of her fate became known.

The *Michel* had an extraordinary experience on the night of September 29, during which she found herself caught up in the middle of an American convoy with destroyer escorts, on its way to Hawaii, and cautiously extricated herself.

More than aware that over fifty ships had already been sunk by American submarines off the coast of Japan that year, Gumprich approached Yokohama.

On the night of October 17 1943, mistaking her for a Japanese naval auxiliary, the American submarine *SS-175* the *USS Tarpon*, running on the surface, followed her until well placed to attack.

At 01.56 she fired a spread of four torpedoes, two of which were seen to hit.

The *Michel* stopped, listing to port, and then, getting under way again, headed straight for the submarine.

Going deep and passing under the raider, the *Tarpon* came up again to find her stopped and firing in all directions. Firing three more torpedoes, one of which blew the stern off the *Michel*, she then hit her with another, causing a huge explosion.

When the smoke cleared, the raider *Michel* had disappeared from view.

Of the three hundred and seventy-three officers and men on board, two hundred and sixty-three, including her captain Günther Gumprich, lost their lives.

It was several months later, with the sinking of the 7,320-ton blockade-runner *Burgenland* by the 7,050-ton cruiser *USS Omaha* and the destroyer *USS Jouett* on January 5 1944, that the Allies learned the identity of the ship sunk by the *Tarpon*, and realised that the last of the German auxiliary cruisers was gone.

Kapitän zur See Günther Gumprich
Commander *HK Thor* – 1941 to 1942
Commander *HK Michel* - 1943

Günther Gumprich was born on January 6 1900 in Stuttgart, and having served as a staff officer with the Admiralty in Berlin, was assigned to take over command of *HK Thor* in June 1941.

Between November 1941 and October 1942, during 268 days at sea as Commander of the *HK Thor*, he sank seven ships, totalling 34,670 tons, and sent three ships, totalling 20,917 tons, back to Japanese ports as prizes.

Following the catastrophic explosion on board the supply tanker *Uckermark*, tied up alongside her, that destroyed the raider in Yokohama in November 1942, he was assigned to the German Naval Attache's Office in Tokyo.

Taking command of *HK Michel*, after the illness-enforced retirement of Helmuth Von Ruckteschell, Gumprich sank three further ships, totalling 27,632 tons, during 150 days at sea, being awarded the Knight's Cross on December 31 1942.

He died on October 17 1943, going down with *HK Michel*, torpedoed by the American submarine *USS Tarpon* in the Yellow Sea east of Yokohama.

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Hilfskreuzer Michel

The Amusing Story of how she was "Christened"

As the time approached for *Schiff 28*'s commissioning, Admiral Raeder enquired of Ruckteschell, entrusted with the naming of his ship, as were all raider captains, as to what her name might be.

The deeply religious, highly-cultured and mischievous Ruckteschell, much to the surprise of almost everyone concerned, chose *Michel*, a name which suggested to most Germans the national sobriquet '*Der Deutsche Michel*'; a sometimes caricature, sometimes hero figure, usually pictured wearing a stocking cap and often the brunt of jokes.

Michel was a symbol of the common man, oppressed by 'the system', who more often than not embodied the negative rather than the positive qualities of the stereotypical German national character, but continually challenged the nation's self-image.

Ruckteschell's reasons for choosing this name were, like himself, complex and multi-dimensional, and were most probably also a reference to the Archangel Michael, often portrayed slaying a dragon, militant of Christendom, patron saint of soldiers, fighter against Satan, victor over evil, protector of the Jewish nation, and whom many felt was the patron saint of Germany.

By choosing this name he was in a way selecting a name that would be an embodiment of himself, as he had in selecting *Widder*, the Ram, making him, born under the astrological sign of *Aries*, once again at one with his ship.

It could also have been the fact that he identified with the common man – *Der Deutsche Michel* – and selecting a name that would be an embodiment of himself, but on this occasion, and perhaps deliberately, the name of a national figure who, despite having been exploited for propagandist purposes by just about every shade of political opinion, *including* the Nazi Party, during the inter-war years, was a figure for whom the Third Reich, predictably, had little time!

Needless to say, while serving to endear the captain to his crew, this created quite a stir in official circles in Berlin, where Admiral Raeder, with whom Ruckteschell had a good rapport, and who had already interceded on his behalf when he had considered resigning because of the Nazi persecution of the Christian Churches, politely informed him that it was 'unsuitable', and politely asked him to choose another name for his ship!

Rather than disobey an order and risk antagonising the Admiral, who had always seemed friendly towards him, Ruckteschell provocatively suggested a truly outrageous alternative - *Goetz von Berlichingen* – after the 16th century Swabian knight "Goetz von Berlichingen mit der Eisernen Hand" (Goetz von Berlichingen with the Iron Hand). The central character in the 18th century play by Goethe, '*Sturm und Drang*', Goetz, who had an iron prosthesis in place of his right hand, had said to an emissary from the Bishop of Bamberg, in what is probably the best known and most quoted line in all German literature, " *Tell him he can lick my arse!*"

In Germany to this day, the mere use of his name expresses that specific sentiment, and is often employed as an expression of defiance in the face of overwhelming odds.

When ordered to send this alternative proposal to Naval Headquarters in Berlin, Ruckteschell's shocked Radio Operator refused, fearful of what the Supreme Commander's response might be to what appeared to be a thinly disguised insult.

Ruckteschell insisted, and could no doubt innocently claim that he simply wished to name his ship after the Iron-Fisted knight, but was probably not too hopeful that this excuse would be accepted!

The Admiral's response ... was silence.

No one dared predict how the conservative and formal head of the German Navy would react to this typical example of Ruckteschell's complex wit, and as the Admiral arrived by special train on September 7 1941, to honour the day of the ship's commissioning with his presence, the tension on board was positively palpable!

But, far from having their now popular and highly-respected Captain removed, as some on board felt would be the inevitable result of the suggested name, Erich Raeder, clearly impressed by what he had seen on his tour of the ship, rather laconically said, "*I am happy with everything I've seen. You've got a good ship. So set sail ... and Good Luck in your ... Michel!*"

* Thanks to Ulrich Rudofsky (See Discussion Forum Postings under "Other German Warships") and J. Revell Carr's excellent book on von Ruckteschell and the sinking of the *Anglo-Saxon* – All Brave Sailors

Notes on Ships Captured or Sunk by Hilfskreuzer Michel - 1st Cruise - 13 March 1942 to 2 March 1943

1 - Patella

Having rendezvoused with his supply-ship *Charlotte Schliemann*, *Michel* opened her account on April 19, with this 7,469-ton Shell-owned British tanker en route for the Cape with 9,911 tons of Admiralty oil, which radioed for help, and increased speed when challenged.

Out of a crew of sixty-three, sixty were picked up, and she was dispatched with demolition charges.

Ruckteschell's practice was to follow his prey unseen to determine her course and speed, and then lower his *Leichter Schnellboot* Torpedo Boats. These 'light speedboats' would then get ahead of the enemy ship in a great arc so that they would neither be heard or seen, to lie in wait, their torpedoes at the ready, to attack from the opposite direction to the raider.

The first the enemy would know of their presence was when the torpedoes hit.

2 - Connecticut

On April 22, two nights after the sinking of the *Patella*, this 8,684-ton Texas Company-owned American tanker, with a crew of fifty-two, and a cargo of 100-octane gasoline, also bound for the Cape, likewise fell victim to this strategy, as the *LS-4*, which, with another typical Ruckteschell touch, had been named *Esau*, put a torpedo into her in the early hours of the morning.

She was heard to radio her position as her crew frantically lowered the boats and abandoned their floating bomb of a ship. But as her radio operator continued to send distress signals a second torpedo was fired which ignited the cargo and blew the ship apart in a gigantic fireball that shot hundreds of feet into the air.

The burning fuel swept rapidly across the surface of the water engulfing the last two boats which were attempting to get away to windward around the tanker's stern, and the men in them.

At dawn, the nineteen surviving members of the crew were picked up.

3 - Kattogat

On May 8, after the embarrassing and frustrating experience of 'The *Menelaus* Affair' on May 1, during which his strategy failed miserably, partly due to the skill of her master, Captain J.H. Blyth, and partly due to errors of judgement made by the *LS* boat's commander, the intended victim, the 10,000-ton *Blue Funnel* liner escaped, the *Michel* once more rendezvoused with the *Charlotte Schliemann*, to re-fuel and transfer prisoners.

Ruckteschell had had to deploy his Arado seaplane to find the tanker after several attempts to meet her had failed.

Nearly three weeks later, on May 20, the crew of this 4,245-ton Norwegian freighter, running in ballast for La Plata, was completely

unaware of the raider's presence until sixteen 150mm shells demolished their bridge, radio room and engine room, amazingly with no casualties, and surrendered, without manning their gun or sending out any signals.

They were all taken off, and their ship scuttled with demolition charges.

4 - George Clymer

Having picked up a distress call on June 2 from this 7,176-ton American Liberty Ship, en route for Cape Town from Portland, carrying a mixed cargo and twenty-four aircraft, which was drifting with engine trouble 900 miles to the north, Ruckteschell found her just as she got her engines going again on June 6.

Considering the possibility that it might be a trap, sent the *LS-4 Esau* ahead to follow her, attack her after nightfall and then withdraw to await events.

The Esau's two torpedoes slammed into the freighter, but did not sink her.

As some of her crew hastily began to abandon ship, leaving two of their shipmates trapped below decks and the naval gunners manning her single gun to sit it out, her radio operators frantically called for assistance, their appeals being picked up and answered by the radio station at Cape Town, telling them that 'a cruiser' was coming to pick them up.

Upon hearing this, Ruckteschell decided to lie in wait and ambush what he was convinced would either be an obsolete 'C' class cruiser or an Armed Merchant-Cruiser of the type so severely dealt with by *HK Thor*.

Remaining afloat overnight, and with the panicky crew re-boarded, a British plane flew over the freighter the next day signalling that the AMC *HMS Alcantara*, *Thor's* old adversary, was on her way.

Waiting just below the horizon, unable to use his spotter plane, Ruckteschell then steamed back to where she'd last seen the sinking American ship, disguised as a British merchantman coming to her rescue. He arrived in time to see the mast of the 'cruiser' *Alcantara* disappearing over the horizon having already supervised the *Clymer's* scuttling, and picked up her crew.

Given how severely damaged the *Alcantara* had been in her encounter with *Thor*, one can only assume that had she been taken by surprise by Ruckteschell and the *Michel*, she would probably have suffered an even worse fate.

5 - Lylepark

At dusk on June 11, this 5,186-ton British freighter on her way from New York to the Cape with 8,000 tons of military supplies on board was shot to pieces without warning.

Approaching on an aggressive collision course, the raider's first two salvoes registered devastating hits, destroying the charthouse and starting fires amidships and on the boat deck. The *Michel* continued firing while the burning freighter was being abandoned, and despite her Captain and First Officer escaping, twenty-two members of her crew were finally taken on board the raider.

These men, along with the *Michel's* other prisoners, were later transferred to the blockade-runner/minelayer *Doggerbank*, formerly the *Speybank*, which had been captured by *HK Atlantis* in January 1941.

Of the remaining twenty-five, a few, including the First Officer, the Third Officer, and a DEMS* gunner, were picked up by the *Blue Star* liner *Avila Star*, and landed at Freetown, only to lose their lives on July 5, north-east of the Azores, when that ship was torpedoed and sunk by the *U-201* (Kapitänleutnant Adalbert Schnee) while on her way back to the UK.

The *Lylepark's* skipper, Captain Low, having initially been separated from his First Officer, was spotted by an aircraft from the Escort Carrier *HMS Archer*, and eventually picked up by that ship and taken to Freetown.

Having arranged passage for himself and his officers on the ill-fated *Avila Star*, he miraculously survived her sinking, including having the lifeboat he was in blown out from under him by a torpedo fired to finish off the sinking ship, and was later picked up by a Portuguese destroyer.

* Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship

Thanks to Chris Smith of Nottingham - whose uncle lost his life on the *Lylepark* - for valuable additional information

6 - Gloucester Castle

Having once again re-fuelled from the *Charlotte Schliemann*, the *Michel* headed into the Gulf Of Guinea, onto a shipping route to which Allied merchant ships had been diverted to avoid prowling U-Boats.

Over three days, she sank three ships, the first, on July 12, off the coast of Portuguese Angola, being the elderly 8,006-ton *Union Castle* Liner bound for Cape Town from Birkenhead with one hundred and fifty-four people on board, including twelve passengers, all of whom were women and children, a cargo of aircraft, military equipment, machinery and gasoline, and armed with one 4.7-inch and several machine guns.

Attacking after dark, the raider's first 150mm salvo scored hits on the bridge and the dining room, and set fire to gasoline canisters on the foredeck, spreading flames rapidly throughout the superstructure of the old ship.

With her radio officers having been killed instantly, no distress signal was sent, and within minutes, to the horror of the watching Germans, having rolled first to starboard and then to port, the *Gloucester Castle* sank.

As only one lifeboat was seen to get away, Ruckteschell sent *Michel's* boats to rescue fifty-seven crewmen, two women and two children, many of whom were hauled out of the water by German swimmers.

The rest, eighty-five crew, six women and two children, died, victims of a war in which it was supposed to be forbidden to transport innocent passengers and cargoes of war materials in the same ships.

7 - William F. Humphrey

Four days later, on July 16, having spotted this 7,893-ton American tanker *en route* from Cape Town to Trinidad with a crew of sixty-four, sailing on a parallel course with *Aramis*, Ruckteschell decided that he would take them both, simultaneously, the *Michel* taking one, and the *Esau*, with her two torpedoes, the other.

While his torpedo-boat attacked the *Aramis*, Ruckteschell, coming out of the darkness, opened up with all the weapons he could bring to bear, hitting the tanker with sixty 150mm shells in salvos timed at 30 second intervals, as well as hundreds of rounds of 37mm and 20mm, smashing her topsides, her deckhouse and her starboard lifeboats to pieces.

Moments later, while returning fire with her 5-inch gun, the tanker was staggered by a torpedo hit at the stern, which started a fire, quickly followed by two more which sank her.

Michel picked up twenty-nine members of her crew from the port side boats, while another eleven, including her captain, drifting off on rafts, avoided capture.

The next morning, led by their Second Officer, Fritz Borner, they found the empty lifeboats and proceeded to sail 450 miles, in five and a half days, in one of them, before being picked up by the Norwegian freighter *Triton*, which took them to Freetown.

8 - Aramis

Early on the following morning, July 17, Von Schack, speeding towards this 7,984-ton Norwegian tanker in the *Esau*, let fly with two of his 45cm aerial torpedoes, and saw two fountains of water erupt against her side as they struck her.

The *Aramis* briefly listed, then, having righted herself, continued on her way at a reduced speed, as if nothing had happened.

Her radio equipment destroyed, she was unable to signal her position.

Located again the next morning, she was followed until nightfall, at which time another torpedo, and a few salvos from the *Michel's* guns, finished her. Twenty-three out of a crew of forty-three, were picked up, plus charts, routing instructions, merchant codes and secret materials, the latter warning of German raiders operating with torpedo-boats.

9 - Arabistan

Having again rendezvoused with, and re-fuelled from the *Charlotte Schliemann*, the *Michel* rendezvoused with *HK Stier*.

Ruckteschell, convinced that two raiders could be more successful than one, suggested to Gerlach that they hunt together.

Having briefly sailed together, Gerlach, who had been doing well alone, eventually rejected the idea, and having gone their separate ways and agreed to meet again a week later, the *Michel* arrived at the rendezvous just in time to watch *Stier's* latest victim, the *Dalhousie*, go down.

Two days later, on August 14, south of St Helena, this 5,874-ton British freighter in ballast from Cape Town to Trinidad, was shot to pieces so efficiently from point blank range, that only one of her crew of sixty survived, her chief engineer being picked up the following morning.

10 - American Leader

After a final rendezvous with *Charlotte Schliemann*, Ruckteschell took *Michel* into the Indian Ocean, where this brand new 6,778-ton C-1-type US Line freighter, on her way from the Cape to Punta Arenas, with a valuable cargo of 2,000 tons of rubber, 850 tons of coconut oil, stored in large tanks on deck, 400 tons of copra, 100 tons of spices, 200 tons of grease, hides, assorted other goods plus 20 tons of opium, and bound for Newport News and New York, was attacked without warning, from a range of about 500 metres in the dead of night, on September 10, with all fire concentrating on her gun positions.

On fire, her radio destroyed, and her lifeboats splintered, she was hit by two torpedoes, tearing open her sides, sending her down stern first. Forty-seven members of her crew of fifty-eight were picked up from rafts.

11 - Empire Dawn

The following evening, September 11, while returning to the Atlantic to meet a tanker and a supply ship, the *Michel* went into action again, stalking this brand new 7,241-ton motorship, with a crew of forty-four, bound from Durban to Trinidad in ballast, to load bauxite for New York.

Raking the freighter's bridge with 37mm tracer, killing her Third Officer, and despite the fact that her already wounded Captain signalled that he was stopped and was abandoning ship, Ruckteschell kept up the non-stop barrage of fire similar to his earlier attack on *Lylepark*, killing half of her crew.

This was the subject of the fifth and final charge Ruckteschell would have to face on his subsequent appearance before a War Crimes Tribunal, but it was a charge of which he was found Not Guilty.

The *Empire Dawn's* skipper, Captain Scott, testified that he had signalled his surrender to the *Michel* in Morse Code, using a flashlight, with Ruckteschell and other witnesses denying that they'd seen any such signal.

Producing an identical flashlight to one the Captain had used - ten inches long and with a lens that was a mere three inches in diameter - Ruckteschell's defence counsel, Dr Zippel, demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt that its weak light could not possibly have been seen in broad daylight amidst the chaos, gun flashes and flames from the burning ship.

Having received supplies from the passing blockade-runner *Tannenfels*, and again rendezvoused with the *Stier*, the *Michel* received fresh supplies of fuel and ammunition from tanker/supply ship *Uckermark* onto which he transferred his prisoners and returned to the Indian Ocean.

* **Some sources incorrectly credit the *Michel* with the sinking of the freighter *Reynolds* on November 2 1942. This 5,113-ton British ship was in fact sunk on October 31 1942 - by the U-504 (Korvettenkapitän Fritz Poske)**

* The *SKL*, anxious to prevent *Michel's* activities from interfering with the imminent deployment of the new IX C-type U-boats in the south Atlantic off South Africa, ordered the raider to range south to seek out the Allied whaling fleets in Antarctic waters.

Ruckteschell was irritated by this, but, appreciative of the broader strategic priorities, and having since learned that *Stier* had been so badly damaged in her fight with the *Stephen Hopkins*, that she'd been scuttled, refused, requesting that he be permitted to remain in the Indian Ocean.

He maintained that it was a waste of time, men and materiel to aimlessly move a ship like his about with a good chance that it would end up like *Stier*.

He'd long been of the opinion that U-Boats were a more effective weapon than raiders, and that his four hundred men would be better employed manning eight of them.

He had no intention of going to the Antarctic, as he considered the timing poor and the distances too great, and so, much to the discomfort of his radio operators and the delight of those in the know, he sent the following reply to the *SKL* Chief of Staff, Admiral Fricke, "*Antarktik Ohne Mich*" ... *Antarctic without me!*

The very next day, to his immense amusement, he received the following reply,

*'Einverstanden, Ruckteschell, Dann auch ohne SKL.
Weiterhin nun gute fahrt, Nach alter 28 art'*

which, when roughly translated says,

Understood, Ruckteschell, Then also without SKL. So on your way and fare you well, In the style of 'Old 28' (Schiff 28)

Reading between the lines, this whimsical response could possibly be saying, *'OK, Good Luck! You're on your own mate! Carry on doing your own thing!'* but Ruckteschell was delighted with it, saying, *"This message is refreshing, and eases the tension of the last few days"*

12 - Sawokla

Having received supplies and oil from the tanker *Brake*, and met the blockade-runner *Rhatokis* a day later, the *Michel* sank this 5,882-ton American freighter, *en route* from Colombo to Cape Town with a cargo of jute and rough linen, a crew of forty-one, thirteen naval gunners and five passengers, on November 29.

Approaching on a collision course, the *Michel* opened fire from 2,500 metres, destroying the bridge, knocking out the 4.5-inch gun, shredding the lifeboats and setting the freighter on fire.

A torpedo strike amidships followed, a second one missed the target, and despite one brave gunner firing some 20mm at the raider, and a feeble radio signal being sent, *Sawokla* was sent blazing to the bottom.

After 3-hours, thirty-nine survivors were fished out of the drifting wreckage, with four of her gunners being rescued the next day when Ruckteschell returned to see if anyone might have been missed.

13 - Eugenie Livanos

This 4,816-ton Greek freighter, appearing suddenly out of a rain squall very close to the *Michel*, on December 8, was hit by one torpedo, as a second missed, and was finished off by gunfire.

Nineteen survivors, thirteen of whom had tried to escape in a boat, were picked up, eleven Greeks, three British, one Canadian, one Swede, one Argentinian, one Yugoslav and one Egyptian.

'The most colourful lot' Ruckteschell had seen, had been celebrating the feast of St Nicholas when attacked, and had helped themselves to a cargo of drink!

14 - Empire March

Four days later, on January 2, having been ordered to return to Germany, Ruckteschell, steaming far to the south of the Cape, found and sank this 7,040-ton British freighter bound for Trinidad from Durban, with a crew of twenty-nine and a cargo of iron, tea, peanuts and jute.

To the embarrassment of the *Michel's* pilot Hoppe, her lookouts had spotted the freighter first despite the plane being airborne. Having clearly been seen by the enemy, Hoppe flew away towards the British bases to the East, before circling back to his ship.

With torpedo boat *LS- 4 Esau* in the water, the *Michel* opened fire, knocking out the bridge and the radio room and turning the freighter into 'an inferno from stem to stern, but still moving'.

To dispatch the blazing wreck quickly, Ruckteschell fired two torpedoes, one of which missed, and the *Esau* did likewise.

Twenty-six survivors of her crew of twenty-nine were picked up, with another man being found the next day when the *Michel* returned to search for anyone who might have been missed.

Aftermath - Fate of Captain Helmuth von Ruckteschell

Six days later, January 8, 1943, Helmuth von Ruckteschell was instructed that he was not to attempt to break through the Allied blockade of Europe, but was to turn back into the Indian Ocean, and head for Japan.

Neither the crew, nor the many prisoners on board, were happy with this turn of events, the former having been looking forward to going home after almost a year at sea, and the latter not daring to think about what lay ahead of them as prisoners of the Japanese.

After brief stopovers at Japanese-controlled Batavia and Singapore, where the prisoners were, according to instructions, entrusted to the tender mercies of the Japanese Army, the raider *Michel* finally tied up in Kobe Harbour on March 2.

After 358 days at sea, during which she sank fifteen ships, totalling over 99,000 tons, the *Hilfskreuzer Michel* was welcomed by the German Naval Attaché, Admiral Paul Wenneker and Captain Günther Gumprich, former commander of the ill-fated *Thor*, which was now but a mass of burnt-out scrap in Yokohama harbour.

She was taken by tugs to the Mitsubishi shipyard, which had been contracted to carry out a badly needed refit, before she would be ready to put to sea again.

Ruckteschell, who had long suffered from migraine headaches, and had added stomach and heart problems to his condition, was, at his own request, relieved of his command on medical grounds, and spent the rest of the war in and out of hospitals in Tokyo, Shanghai and Peking, before being repatriated as a POW, working in the mess line of US C-4 Transport *Marine Robin*.

On August 20 1946, at the British Interrogation Centre at Minden in Germany, he was formally listed as a 'War Criminal'.

The examination he faced was not one he could prepare for, and its results were legally, technically and ethically debatable.

Heartbroken, he said to his wife, "*I want you to know that my conscience as a human being is clear, so please pray for us*".

He confided in his family that the thought of being executed was not nearly as hard to bear as the thought of "*... being condemned on false evidence*".

As an officer, he refused to ask for mercy, saying that he simply wanted justice.

He conceded that, "*... I may have erred, and now it is they. We both did it on orders, and in the belief that we were right, and now, we are both wrong*".

Held in the *Curio Haus* in Hamburg, the trial lasted from May 5 to May 21 1947, and the judgement passed down by the British Military Court opened up one of the many cancerous and acrimonious post-war disputes, the issues of which are clouded by personalities, prejudice and vindictiveness.

Captain Helmuth von Ruckteschell, winner of The Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, faced the following charges:

*That *HK Widder* had continued to shell the British freighter *Davisian*, after her radio had been knocked out, and she had acknowledged the order to maintain radio silence, on July 10 1940. *That *HK Widder* had failed to assure the safety of the survivors of the Norwegian tanker *Beaulieu*, on August 4 1940. *That *HK Widder* had fired on the lifeboats of the British freighter *Anglo Saxon*, and failed to assure the safety of the men in them, on August 21 1940. *That *HK Michel* had continued to shell the American freighter *Empire Dawn* after she had surrendered, on September 11 1942.

On May 21 1947, he was found guilty on three charges and sentenced to 10 years in Hamburg-Fuhlbüttel prison, the sentence subsequently reduced to 7 years, due to the fact that the charges concerning *Beaulieu* could not be upheld.

He died there on 24 June 1948, shortly after hearing that he was to be released due to his deteriorating heart condition.

While the British held to their contention that his methods were brutal, there were those on the German side who, while possibly feeling that von Ruckteschell was emotionally somewhat unsuitable to command a raider, still believed that the court had acted in vengeance for his escape from prosecution as a World War One U-Boat commander, who had applied himself so aggressively to his service during that war, that the Allies had hoped to finally bring him to trial for war crimes.

A British officer who had spent 80 days as a captive in the raider *Michel* said, "*War is a systematic way of killing one another ... lawful on both sides ... to us ... at least Ruckteschell was a Christian and a gentleman*".

Notes on Ships Captured or Sunk by Hilfskreuzer Michel - 2nd Cruise - 21 May 1943 to 18 October 1943

1 - Hoegh Silberdawn

On May 21, under the command of Captain Günther Gumprich, *Michel* headed out through the Indian Ocean to the west coast of Australia, where early on June 14, in a violent storm on the edge of the Roaring Forties, her plane found this 7,715-ton Norwegian freighter, with a crew of forty-seven and eleven passengers, on her way from Fremantle to Abadan.

Accustomed to fast daylight attacks with *Thor*, and reluctant to accept the tactics forced upon him now, Gumprich nonetheless agreed to launch a surprise attack that night, and duly opened fire without warning, first with gunfire and then with two torpedoes, and continued firing under starshell, killing twenty-seven men, until the surviving members of the freighter's crew hastily abandoned their burning ship.

Amidst the turmoil of the storm and the viciousness of the *Michel's* non-stop assault, it seemed to the Norwegians as if the Germans were deliberately trying to destroy their lifeboats.

Although damaged by machine-gun fire, one lifeboat survived, and in it, nineteen survivors, under the command of *Silverdawn's* captain, sailed 2,865 miles across the Indian Ocean, coming ashore in the Bay of Bengal, 130 miles south-west of Calcutta, a

month after their ship had been sunk.

Three other crewmen survived a week adrift on a raft before being rescued by an American ship.

2 - Ferncastle

On June 16, two days after sinking the *Silverdawn*, *Michel* attacked and sank this 9,940-ton Norwegian tanker with gunfire and four torpedoes from her *LS* boats, but not before she'd radioed her position.

With five dead, again there was suspicion that captain Gumprich deliberately tried to destroy the survivors, but with nineteen already escaped in a boat, under the command of their captain, the remaining thirteen were picked up.

The boat turned up thirty horrific days later, over 3,000 miles away, on the coast of Madagascar.

Only thirteen men dragged themselves ashore.

3 - India

Having left the Indian Ocean for the Pacific, and having narrowly missed a meeting the United States light cruiser *USS Trenton*, *Michel* spotted this 9,977-ton Texas Company-owned Norwegian motor tanker on her way from Peru to Australia with a crew of thirty-eight.

Followed by day and attacked at night on September 10, she was a roaring wall of fire within seconds of the first salvo as the flames rapidly spread. No one could possibly have survived such an inferno.

These notes were researched and compiled mainly from - *German Raiders of World War II* by August Karl Muggenthaler (1977) and *The Secret Raiders* by David Woodward (1955).

Michel - War Records from 09-03-1942 to 02-03-1943, and from 01-05-1943 to 18-10-1943

Number	Prize Name	Type	Flag	Date	Tonnage	Fate
1	Patella	Tanker	United Kingdom	19-04-1942	7.468	Sunk
2	Connecticut	Tanker	United States	22-04-1942	8.684	Sunk
3	Kattegat	Freighter	Norway	20-05-1942	4.245	Sunk
4	George Clymer	Freighter	United States	07-06-1942	7.176	Sunk
5	Lylepark	Freighter	United Kingdom	11-06-1942	5.186	Sunk
6	Gloucester Castle	Passenger Liner	United Kingdom	15-07-1942	8.006	Sunk
7	William F. Humphrey	Tanker	United States	16-07-1942	7.893	Sunk
8	Aramis	Tanker	Norway	17-07-1942	7.984	Sunk
9	Arabistan	Freighter	United Kingdom	14-08-1942	5.874	Sunk
10	American Leader	Freighter	United Kingdom	10-09-1942	7.241	Sunk
11	Empire Down	Freighter	United States	11-09-1942	6.778	Sunk
12	Sawokla	Freighter	United States	29-11-1942	5.882	Sunk
13	Eugenie Livanos	Freighter	Greece	08-12-1942	4.816	Sunk
14	Empire March	Freighter	United Kingdom	02-01-1943	7.040	Sunk
Subtotal (Ruckteschell)					99.386	
2nd Cruise						
1	Hoegh Silberdawn	Freighter	Norway	15-06-1943	7.715	Sunk
2	Ferncastle	Tanker	Norway	17-06-1943	9.940	Sunk
3	India	Freighter	Norway	11-09-1943	9.977	Sunk
Subtotal (Gumprich)					27.632	
Total					127.018	
Notes to:						
1	Sunk by explosive charges.					
2	Sunk by E-Boat torpedoes. Prisoners transferred to the tanker <i>Charlotte Schliemann</i> .					
3	Sunk by explosive charges.					
4	Sunk by E-Boat torpedoes. Survivors saved by <i>HMS Alcantara</i> . <i>Michel</i> narrowly misses the opportunity to attack her.					
5	Sunk by gunfire. 22 prisoners transferred to <i>Doggerbank</i> , formerly the <i>Speybank</i> , captured by <i>HK Atlantis</i> .					
6	Sunk by gunfire. 93 dead. 61 prisoners taken, including several women.					
7	Sunk by torpedoes.					
8	Prisoners transferred to the <i>Charlotte Schliemann</i> . Meeting with <i>HK Stier</i> . A proposal of joint operations is rejected by <i>Stier's</i> captain, Horst Gerlach.					
9	Sunk by gunfire.					
10	Sunk by torpedoes.					
11	Sunk by gunfire. Prisoners transferred to the supply ship and blockade runner <i>Tannenfels</i> , which later safely reaches Bordeaux. Meeting with the supply tanker <i>Uckermark</i> for refuelling.					

12	Sunk by torpedo and gunfire.
13	Sunk by torpedo and gunfire.
14	<i>Michel</i> get orders to head for Japan. She safely arrives in Kobe.
2nd Cruise	
1	Sunk by torpedoes. Survivors head for Calcutta in their boats.
2	Sunk by gunfire.
3	Sunk by gunfire. Later, <i>Michel</i> was torpedoed by <i>USS Tarpon</i> . 253 dead, including the captain. 117 survivors.

Hilfskreuzer Michel
The Sinking

After an extraordinary experience on September 29, in the dead of night, during which the raider found herself caught up in the middle of an American convoy with destroyer escorts, on its way to Hawaii, and cautiously extricated herself, and more than aware that over fifty ships had already been sunk by American submarines off the coast of Japan that year, the raider *Michel* cautiously approached Yokohama.

On the night of October 17 1943, mistaking her for a Japanese naval auxiliary, the American submarine *USS Tarpon*, running on the surface, followed the *Michel* until well placed to attack.

At 01.56 the submarine fired a spread of four torpedoes, two of which were seen to hit.

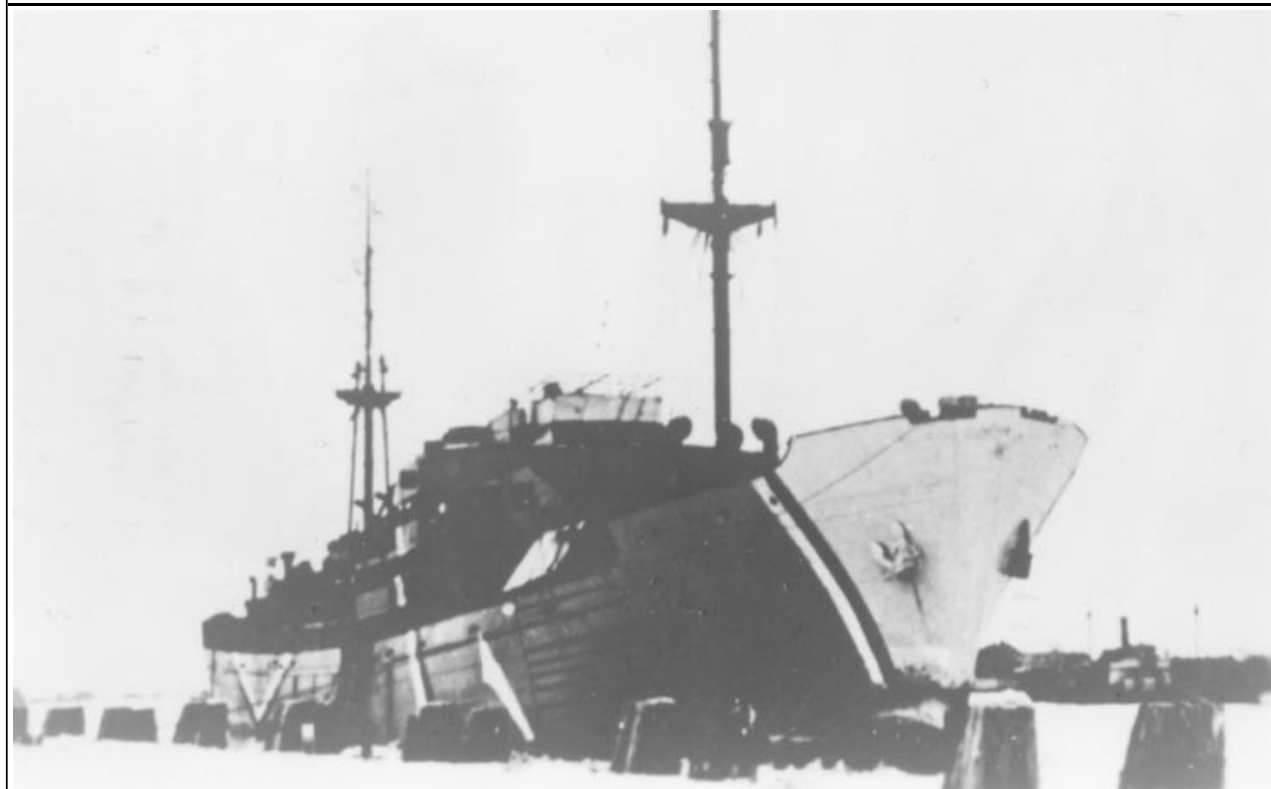
The *Michel* stopped, listing to port, and then, getting under way again, headed straight for the submarine.

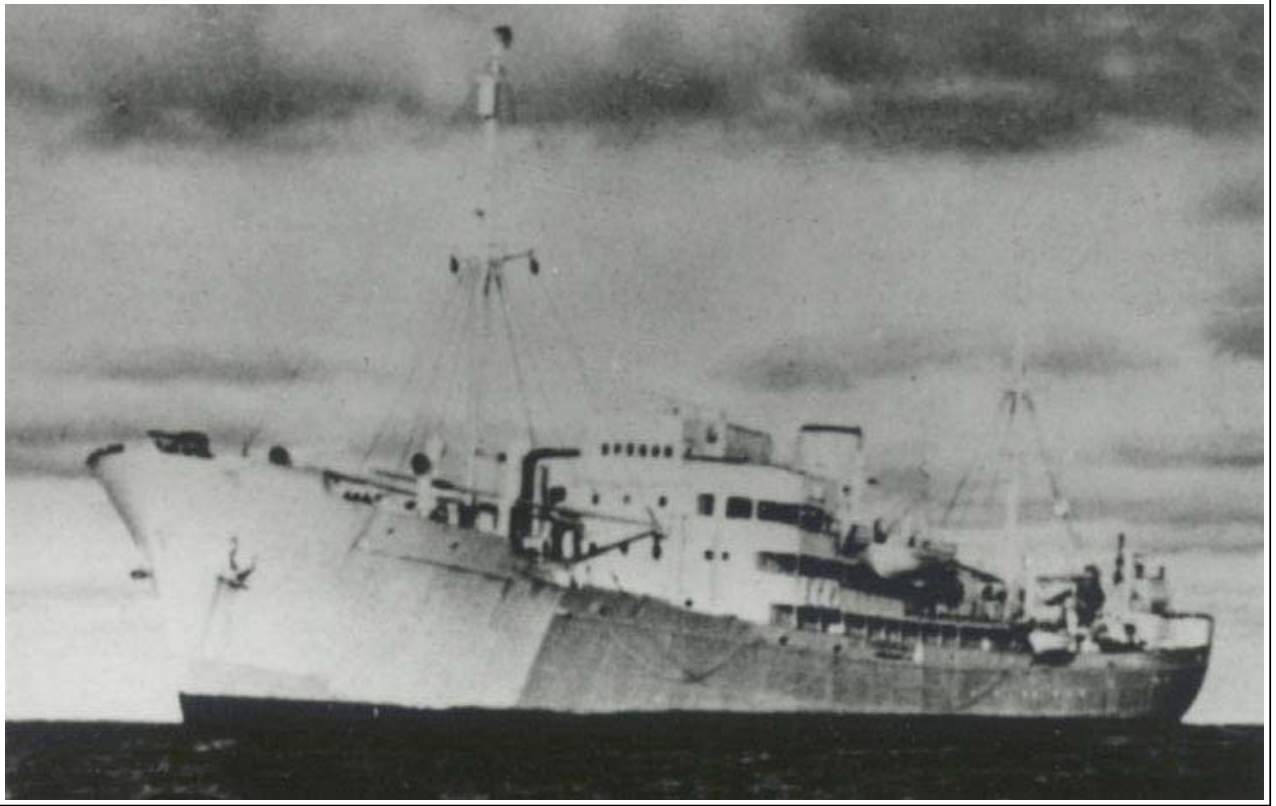
Going deep and passing under the raider, the *Tarpon* came up again to find her stopped and firing in all directions.

Firing three more torpedoes, one of which blew the stern off the *Michel*, she then hit her again, causing a massive explosion.

When the smoke cleared, the *Hilfskreuzer Michel* had disappeared, taking two hundred and sixty-three of the three hundred and seventy-three officers and men on board, including her captain, Günther Gumprich, with her.

Gallery





Credits	
Alfonso Arenas, Spain	Got the idea and founded the Hilfskreuzer section.
Jonathan Ryan, Ireland	Creator of the Hilfskreuzer section, as it is today, based on his knowledge and private archive.

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