

Extracts from a microfilm AWM361 (ORMF0070) from the Australian War Memorial Research section - subject daily records German commerce raider Orion (AKA Raider A or Ship 36) 1940 - 41 (as yet I am not sure where the microfilm ends). Copies can not be made on the AWM MF reader so I took photos of the screen hence reflections etc.

Orion rounded Cape Horn ~late May or early June 1940 with orders to lay all her 228 mines at the entrance to Auckland harbour and she mined the entrance to the Hauraki Gulf on 13th June. On the 19th Orion captured the Norwegian Tropic Sea and the steamer Niagara was sunk by one of her mines off Whangarei that day. On the 16th August she sunk the French steamer Notou carrying coal Newcastle to Noumea. On 20th August Orion sunk the steamer Turakina on track Sydney -Wellington - radio signals were sent from Turakina and there was an unequal gun battle killing 33 of the her crew of 53. With the danger increasing that a Navy ship could loom on her horizon the Orion departed for regions south of Tasmania and points west. The general plan was to look for Capetown to Australia - NZ shipping in the Great Australian Bight (Bay of Australia below).

The ships emergency signals caused intensive radio activity between land stations and aircraft and naval vessels. This continued through the following day. The Captain therefore decided to transfer the field of operations into the Bay of Australia even though bad weather could be expected there. Here the war diary recorded, "The fact that at this season in southern latitudes persistently bad weather has to be operated in involves certain limitations in the employment of weapons and measures to secure prizes. These difficulties will have to be put up with. In that area, at least according to our maps there is considerable traffic (50 vessels monthly) out of Melbourne and Adelaide to the West over an area of sea open as far as Cape Leeuwin".

The hopes of the Captain for success in these waters were not however realized. Again and again the shipping lanes from Capetown to South Australian ports and from Aden and Colombo via Cape Leeuwin to South Australia were crossed without sighting a vessel. The weather was - as expected - generally very bad. The vessel rolled as much as 34° so the use of the guns was limited.

Assuming that shipping was hugging the coast Captain Weyher on the nights of 2nd and 3rd September approached to within 20 and 30 nautical miles of the south west coast of Australia. During the night of the 3rd of September, dummy mines were laid in view of the beacon on Eclipse Island (outside Albany harbour).

Here the War Diary remarked:-

So the night of 2nd 3rd September 1940 finds Orion off Albany cooking up this risky plan to lay dummy mines (some of which were booby trapped) for reasons given below.

"According to information gained so far from wireless reports the appearance of any type of drifting container in busy waters disturb normal shipping traffic and this can be effected by dummy drifting mines. With this object dummy mines are being prepared which as opportunity offers will be set drifting close to the coast. Some of these dummy mines are equipped with a fitting which destroys them when they are examined". When one of these dummy mines was being fused on the 2nd. of September the fuse went off and two men were seriously injured, one of the men, Harders, succumbed to his injuries and was buried at sea on the following day.

We do not know if observers on land saw Orion stooging around with the dummy mines but some report caused a RAAF Hudson to find and circle the ship at 8.14am on the 3rd 130km south of land - details on the next page.



So as to get as far as possible out of the range of aerial reconnaissance before day break the auxiliary cruiser headed out to sea at full speed. When 130 nautical miles from the coast - at 0814 hrs. - a Lockheed 14 "Hudson" Bomber appeared and circled the vessel twice at an altitude of 600 - 800 m.

To avoid suspicion, course was kept unaltered (290°). The crew except for a few men dressed in civilian clothes remained below decks.

While it was flying away an R/T report made by the bomber was picked up. From 1000 hrs. onwards at least six aircraft which had just taken off from Busselton were located by radar. They were flying in VIC formation from south - west north west towards the auxiliary cruiser, judging by their base one could conclude their their radius of action to be about 180 nautical miles.

Meanwhile the sky had become overcast and rain and bad weather could be hoped for. About 1130 when the enemy bombers would have reached the auxiliary cruiser a dense rain cloud developed into which the ship steering on a 220° course disappeared.

At 1200 hrs. and 1435 hrs. two aircraft of the Busselton squadron were clearly heard but the ship remained out of sight in the continuing rain squall all the while.

So something of a hornets nest of RAAF Hudson's was raised but the Orion had luck on her side.

A group of five aircraft on a reconnaissance flight from Perth in a westerly and south westerly direction since 1430 hrs. which overtook the formation which had taken off from Busselton allowed one to assume a reconnaissance range of 250 nautical miles.

By 1700 hrs. and 1800 hrs. the groups of aircraft which had taken off from Busselton and Perth at 1000 hrs. and 1430 hrs. respectively and had flown for four or five hours could be regarded as having landed. Also the additional aircraft which from 1600 hrs. had reconnoitered from Perth in a western and north - western direction would have returned by dusk.

4.9.40 : In the early morning of 4th. September, the auxiliary cruiser was 350 nautical miles south-west of Cape Leeuwin. At dawn in spite of unfavourable weather six aircraft took off from Perth. They flew in VIC formation on a fixed course and seemed to be covering a certain area. From this it was established that they were flying a patrol over the area which had to be reached from the same base as the day before - forecasting from plotted speed and direction. The main force was observed over this area from 0800 hrs. onwards - and was reinforced twice - each time by three or four aircraft from Busselton. The maximum radius of action of this formation was found to be about 320 nautical miles.

5.9.40 : On the 5th. of September very intensive aerial reconnaissance was again observed. About 0700 hrs. six aircraft took off from Perth and four from Busselton and concentrated their operations on the suspected position of the ship to a limit of 320 nautical miles. The auxiliary cruiser steering a north-westerly course, kept 380 nautical miles from land and thus remained outside the range of enemy reconnaissance. The war diary here remarks:-



"Whether our ship was really the cause of this extensive reconnaissance remains unknown. At any rate whether it be a periodic search of the area or some other reason exists for such extensive utilization of aircraft while the weather is so unfavourable and conditions for observation so poor such reconnaissance has to be reckoned on. It can be seen now however, there is no doubt that the auxiliary cruiser had been the reason for the operation of the various Bomber units. The cruiser had obviously been recognized from its description by the Lockheed aircraft reconnoitering early on 3rd. September, (anyway by the "TURAKINA" on 20th. August?).

These extracts continue with Orion probing possibilities to the west - and eventually returning east to the south of Australia - crossing the Tasman again.

The presence, in these waters combined with its course alone would have been enough to cause the ship to be regarded as hostile or at least with suspicion. Thus the auxiliary cruiser was at once "suspected by the "TURAKINA" for" according to the then prevailing routing orders of the British Admiralty no unsuspecting vessel could have been in the position or on the course followed by the auxiliary cruiser". (Statement by the Paymaster of the "TURAKINA" extract from "War Diary" 23.9.40).

From midday on the 4th. of September the auxiliary cruiser steered a north westerly course outside the range of air reconnaissance so as to cruise for a time on the routes leading westwards from Fremantle before her impending rendezvous with "ship 33" which was to take place in these waters. Here the "War Diary" remarks:-

"Reckoning on a speed of 15 knots "ship 33" could only reach this area about the 6th. of December".

Calculated from the position south of Madagascar where the British steamer "British Commander" had been sunk by "ship 33" on 27th. August.

West of Fremantle turned out barren for the Orion and hey there were those pesky Hudsons.



The "War Diary" goes on to say:-

"Until this date it is therefore justifiable to operate "ship 36" off Fremantle as there is no danger of the two vessels meeting".

The arrival of "ship 33" off the western coast of Australia was in fact delayed till the middle of October by the capture of a further four vessels.

After a temporary improvement the weather again became bad: Head winds strength of 8 to 9, sea 7. The ship rolled as much as 30° in the heavy swell. Real speed amounted to only 5 or 6 knots so there was no time available to operate before the presumed arrival of "ship 33" on the west Australian sea routes.

On the night of the 7th of September therefore the course of the vessel was altered to a southerly direction. By now consideration had also to be given to a return to the South Sea, for according to orders replenishment and overhauling of machinery was to be carried out there at the end of September.

The strict dependence of steam driven auxiliary cruisers on replenishment is thus here obvious.

Well yes we would not want Ships 36 and 33 to risk opening fire on one another. (top sentence above)

On the 7th. of September detailed instructions were issued by the naval staff regarding how and where this replenishment was to be carried out. The supply ship - the motor vessel "Regensburg"-was to leave Japan at the end of September with fuel and provisions and proceed to the supply rendezvous at Ailinglap in the Marshall group and wait there from 7th. October for the auxiliary cruiser. Later a second supply ship was to be sent.

This was the motor ship "Weser" lying at Manzanillo (Mexico). It was to be transferred to Japan.

From the 8th. of September a south west and later a westerly course was steered along the Capetown route so that in case any fairly long radio message had to be sent to the supply base in Japan the cruiser could feign a westward course.

Leaving the lucky Orion for now with this last screen snap which indicates Adelaide shipping was fortunate to be spared.

This radio message which reported amongst other matters that the auxiliary cruiser would arrive in the Marshall Islands about the 8th. of October was transmitted on the 9th. of September.

Finally the return voyage to the Pacific was begun on an easterly course. The weather was consistently bad. The rolling of the ship up to as much as 34° made the use of her armament and any measure for capturing prizes impossible.

Under these conditions and in view of the limited time available the original plan to operate off Adelaide was again abandoned and the cruiser crossed the Tasman Sea by the shortest route.

Under conditions of bad visibility the sea routes leading from the east coast of Australia to New Zealand, Tahiti, New Caledonia and the Panama Canal were patrolled between the 21st and 25th. of September.

End for now 20Apr2018