

THE *KOMET* RAIDER

On 3 July 1940, a strange vessel departed from the German port of Gotenhafen. At first glance she appeared to be an ordinary cargo-passenger ship, but an experienced seaman would have noticed the unusually large crates, the numerous deck installations concealed beneath tarpaulins, and what looked like gunport covers along the upper part of her hull. The ship soon headed north and, after passing the Scandinavian Peninsula, entered Soviet territorial waters. She refuelled in Western Litsa Bay, at a naval base that the Soviet Union had leased to Nazi Germany. She then crossed the ice-free Barents Sea without incident and entered the Matochkin Shar Strait, which separates the northern and southern islands of the Novaya Zemlya archipelago. Before long, the vessel approached a small settlement on the shore of the strait, where several ships lay at anchor. She slowed to a stop and lowered a motorboat. When it returned, two tall men wearing fur-lined leather coats and felt jackboots came aboard. They were Soviet marine pilots — Captain D. N. Sergievskiy, a master mariner, and his colleague A. G. Karelskikh. After receiving information from the ship's captain about her displacement, maneuverability, propellers, and hull strengthening for navigation in ice, the Soviet pilots assumed responsibility for her navigation and guided her into the Kara Sea.



A modest cargo-passenger ship Ems



Komet is ready for action. Open gun port lids are seen in the upper part of the port side

The Soviet pilots were guiding the German raider *Komet*. Originally, she had been built in 1936 as the cargo ship *Ems*. At the outbreak of the Second World War, the *Kriegsmarine* (German Navy), as it had done during the First World War, once again decided to employ merchant ships converted into auxiliary cruisers to attack the maritime trade routes of its principal enemy, Great Britain. A few merchant vessels disguised as ships of various nationalities were converted into auxiliary cruisers. Among them was *Komet*, a 7,500-ton vessel armed with six 5.9-inch guns, six anti-aircraft guns and six torpedo tubes. She also carried two seaplanes, a motor torpedo boat and 270 naval mines. Her complement consisted of 270 officers and men. Large stocks of provisions and equipment, together with desalination plants capable of producing fresh water from seawater, enabled *Komet* to remain at sea independently for at least a year. She was also equipped to operate in virtually every climate and environment. Her stores included a sledge, Arctic clothing, tropical uniforms, mosquito nets, and even toys intended as gifts for the inhabitants of remote Pacific islands.



An experienced naval officer, hydrographer and polar explorer, [Kapitän zur See Robert Eyssen](#) (photo left), was appointed commander of the ship. It was Eyssen who had proposed to the *Kriegsmarine* High Command that the Northern Sea Route should be used as the quickest and safest passage into the Pacific.

A request submitted by the German Naval Attaché in Moscow was approved by Stalin. He authorized a commercial agreement worth 970,000 Reichsmarks and instructed the head of [Glavsevmorput](#) (the Northern Sea Route Administration), I. D. Papanin, to include the escort of a German vessel in the 1940 navigation schedule. At that time, Stalin regarded Great Britain as the Soviet Union's principal enemy. The Soviet press was filled with

anti-British propaganda, and the agreement was therefore entirely consistent with Soviet foreign policy.

After passing through the Matochkin Shar Strait, *Komet* entered the Kara Sea. The sea was free of ice, and the ship proceeded eastward to 65° E longitude. There Eyssen requested icebreaker *Stalin* to escort *Komet* through the ice fields. The reply was that *Stalin* was too far away, but that the icebreaker *Lenin*, escorting a convoy, was approaching Dikson. *Komet* was therefore instructed to return to Matochkin Shar, where she was to await further orders before beginning the passage through the ice. Eyssen was deeply disappointed, but he had little choice except to comply. After returning to the strait, he decided to allow his crew to go ashore, stretch their legs, take photographs, and collect souvenirs. Permission, however, was not granted immediately. It was obtained only after the Soviet pilots aboard *Komet* had submitted a formal request by radio.



Captain D.N. Sergievskiy. Died 13/09/1942 in the Barents Sea along with the Stalingrad ship on his way back from England with the PQ-18 convoy

The Soviet pilots did their utmost to conceal the fact that they had recognized the military nature of the German vessel. In this they succeeded in deceiving Eyssen, who later wrote in his memoirs: "We made no attempt to conceal the fact that our crew was composed of naval personnel. Our only concern was to prevent the Russians from discovering the strength of our armament. Only after the Russians had left the ship did I begin to conduct battle stations drills and emergency exercises in order to raise the ship's combat readiness."

The experienced sea captain clearly underestimated the professional knowledge of the Soviet mariners. They had correctly identified *Komet* as a disguised auxiliary cruiser and reported their conclusions in detail to *Glavsevmorput*. Moreover, modern historians generally agree that *Komet's* true mission was no secret to the Soviet intelligence services. Only on 19 August did *Komet* put to sea again after receiving a radiogram from the icebreaker *Stalin*. On 22 August she anchored in the Nordenskiöld Archipelago, north of the Taimyr Peninsula, where she remained for three days awaiting the arrival of *Stalin*. Meanwhile, the icebreaker was engaged in a task of greater strategic importance: escorting the submarine *Sh-423*, which was being transferred from Murmansk to reinforce the Pacific Fleet. Naturally, Eyssen knew nothing of this. Having received no explanation for the delay, he began to suspect that something was amiss.

On 25 August the icebreaker *Lenin* arrived, and *Komet* fell in behind her. After passing through the Vilkitsky Strait, which separates the mainland from the Severnaya Zemlya archipelago, the two vessels were joined in the Laptev Sea by the more powerful icebreaker *Stalin*. As the convoy approached the edge of the heavy pack ice, Eyssen was invited aboard *Stalin*. Her captain, Belousov, questioned him about *Komet's* technical characteristics and her condition before inviting Eyssen and his interpreter to breakfast. In keeping with traditional Russian hospitality, breakfast was accompanied by numerous toasts. Although the Germans were unaccustomed to drinking heavily at six o'clock in the morning, protocol left them little choice. Eyssen also noticed that the Soviet pilots, Sergievskiy and Karelskikh, who had refrained from drinking any alcohol while aboard *Komet*, readily joined the toasts aboard *Stalin*.

At 10.00 a.m. on 26 August, *Stalin* resumed the voyage eastward with *Komet* in her wake. Before long, the small convoy entered dense pack ice almost completely shrouded in fog. On several occasions the icebreaker had to free *Komet*, which became trapped in the narrow channel cut through the ice. The ice was so thick that *Stalin* could advance only at a crawl, smashing a passage with the weight of her hull. The following day the ships reached open water once again. *Stalin* informed Eyssen that the route remained clear as far as Sannikov Strait, between Koteln'y Island and the Lyakhovsky Islands, and then turned back, leaving *Komet* to continue alone. The crossing of the East Siberian Sea was initially uneventful. An experienced Arctic navigator, Eyssen steered *Komet* between the Medvezhyi Islands, relying solely on echo-sounder readings. He correctly anticipated that warmer river water flowing from the Kolyma would keep the ice conditions near its mouth relatively favorable. East of the Medvezhyi Islands, *Komet* was met by the icebreaker *Kaganovich*, commanded by the renowned polar captain A. P. Melekhov, Chief of Marine Operations for the Eastern Arctic Sector. Ahead lay the most difficult section of the voyage, where exceptionally heavy pack ice blocked the route. *Komet* advanced only slowly through a narrow channel that repeatedly closed behind her. During the night of 31 August–1 September, the ice began to shift under the combined force of violent blizzards and hurricane-force winds. Several times *Kaganovich* had to return to free *Komet* from the closing ice. Eyssen vividly recalled that night many years later: "I shall never forget that night. Ice concentration nine-tenths. Blizzards. Constant anxiety for the rudder and propellers. The steering gear failed. We drifted helplessly. I had already been on the bridge for twenty-two hours. Darkness again—and all of it in such ice."

Repairs to the steering gear took four hours, during which *Komet* drifted helplessly in the ice. After negotiating the most difficult section of the route—some 60 miles (110 km) in length—the ships reached almost ice-free waters near Ayon Island, in the eastern part of the East Siberian Sea, on 1 September. There *Kaganovich* hove to, and Melekhov came aboard *Komet* by boat. He informed Eyssen that he had received orders from [I. D. Papanin](#), head of [Glavsevmorput](#), to turn the German ship back. The official explanation was that warships belonging to countries hostile to Germany had appeared in the Bering Sea. Eyssen argued that, after overcoming such formidable obstacles, turning back was out of the question. Melekhov replied that he was not in a position to question orders from Moscow. Eyssen responded that he was under orders from Berlin and intended to proceed through the Bering Strait at his own risk. If necessary, he declared, he would navigate the remaining 300 miles without Soviet assistance.

What had actually happened? Eyssen concluded that the Soviet authorities had become uneasy and were seeking to withdraw from the operation for fear that news of Soviet assistance to a German commerce raider might reach the international press, damaging relations with Great Britain. He had also learned from intercepted radio traffic that the supposedly "hostile ships" in the Bering Sea were in fact nothing more than Japanese whaling vessels. Eyssen bluntly informed Melekhov of this and asked him to pass this "reassuring information from German radio intelligence" to Papanin. The following day Melekhov agreed to continue escorting *Komet* to the next anchorage while awaiting further instructions from Moscow. Eyssen agreed to wait exactly twenty-four hours. Many years later, people who had known Melekhov recalled that he feared Eyssen might simply ignore the Soviet order and continue eastward on his own. Had that happened, Melekhov believed Moscow would have made him the scapegoat for any resulting political consequences, and he was convinced that he could even face execution. He therefore

sent Papanin a coded radiogram reporting that the recall order had arrived too late and that he no longer had any practical means of stopping *Komet*.

On 2 September, Eyssen's twenty-four-hour ultimatum expired at 3.00 p.m. By 9.00 p.m., Melekhov and Sergievskiy returned to *Komet* to report that no reply had yet been received from Moscow. Eyssen immediately convened a meeting attended by the Soviet officers and announced that he could wait no longer. Fearing a deterioration in the weather — a forecast that later proved correct—he declared his intention to proceed eastward. The Soviet representatives were handed a memorandum explaining the German position and expressing gratitude for the assistance provided up to the last anchorage. Nevertheless, Eyssen agreed to grant Moscow one final extension, postponing his departure until 8.00 a.m. on 3 September.

Morning came, but Moscow remained silent. At about 6.00 a.m., Eyssen escorted the Soviet pilots, Sergievskiy and Karelskikh, to the gangway. They were accompanied by the interpreter, Krepsch, who was to deliver the commercial documents to Melekhov and obtain signed certificates confirming completion of the escort. Krepsch soon returned with the documents and a message from Melekhov: "Watch for signals from the icebreaker. Three long blasts will mean that *Kaganovich* is leaving you; two blasts mean that the interpreter is to come aboard the icebreaker; one blast means that you are to follow me eastward." Eyssen was furious and announced that *Komet* would sail at 8.30 a.m. However, twenty-one minutes before the scheduled departure, *Kaganovich* sounded two blasts. When Krepsch reached the icebreaker, he learned that Moscow had finally authorized Papanin to continue escorting *Komet* and, if necessary, to provide full icebreaker assistance. After weighing anchor, *Komet* followed the Soviet icebreaker eastward through completely ice-free waters. Twenty-five minutes later, the symbolic escort came to an end. The icebreaker hoisted the signal, "*I wish you a happy voyage!*", before turning west.

On 6 September, *Komet* passed through the Bering Strait. Eyssen later recalled his feelings in a single sentence: "I've done it — and I'll never agree to do it again." Shortly afterwards, *Komet* anchored in Anadyr Bay, where she remained for several hours while divers inspected her propellers and rudder for damage and carried out minor repairs. The ship then assumed the disguise of the Soviet merchant steamer *Dezhnev* and once again put it to sea. After replenishing her supplies of fuel and provisions in Japan in November 1940, *Komet* headed south to begin commerce-raiding operations. Disguised as the Japanese merchant vessel *Manyo Maru*, she operated in company with the auxiliary cruiser *Orion*, masquerading as *Mayebashi Maru*, and the supply ship *Kulmerland*, disguised as *Tokyo Maru*.

On 25 November, in New Zealand waters near the Chatham Islands, the German raiders claimed their first victim, the small cargo steamer *Holmwood*. Two days later, on 27 November, they intercepted and sank the 16,000-ton passenger liner *Rangitane*, which was bound for Great Britain carrying thousands of tons of meat and other foodstuffs. Before the German boarding party succeeded in disabling the radio transmitter, the ship's captain managed to send out a distress signal. The New Zealand authorities immediately warned all shipping to avoid the area from which *Rangitane* had transmitted her final message. The following day the cruiser *Achilles* and the minesweeper *Puriri* reached the scene but found only floating wreckage, an empty lifeboat and patches of oil. Aircraft launched from *Achilles* likewise failed to locate the raiders.

On 6 December, *Komet* and *Orion* sank the passenger-cargo vessel *Triona* between the Solomon Islands and Nauru. The following day *Komet* sank the Norwegian merchant ship *Vinni*. On 8 December, *Orion* sank the phosphate carrier *Triadic* within sight of the inhabitants of Nauru, before overtaking and sinking the freighter *Triaster*. Smoke from the burning *Triadic* attracted the attention of the islanders. At the same time, the radio station on Nauru intercepted distress calls from another of *Komet*'s victims, *Komata*, together with powerful jamming transmissions from the German raiders intended to drown out the distress signals. The Nauru radio station immediately informed RAN Headquarters. Merchant vessels in the region were ordered to disperse and proceed independently to alternative ports. None responded. In the days that followed, wreckage from the sunken ships began washing ashore on Nauru.

Meanwhile, the Royal Australian Navy could do little to protect the shipping routes. At that time it had no warships deployed in the Pacific. The nearest available vessel was the auxiliary cruiser *Manoora*, based at Darwin, some four days' sailing away.

The RAN faced other problems as well. On 5 December, the freighter *Nimbin* struck a mine laid by the German auxiliary cruiser *Penguin* and sank off the coast of New South Wales. Two days later the British merchant ship *Hartford* suffered the same fate. The war had reached Australia's shores. Meanwhile, the Australian Communist Party continued to campaign against what it described as the "imperialist war" and opposed military enlistment.



Black circles – places where Komet sunk Allied ships

Debate over the adequacy of the protection afforded to Australia's sea lanes soon reached the Australian Parliament. Reports of the sinkings dominated newspapers and radio broadcasts, causing growing public concern. As a result, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) requested that the British Admiralty return a number of Australian warships from the Mediterranean to home waters.

On 21 December 1940, *Komet*, *Orion*, and *Kulmerland* anchored off Emirau Island, north of Kavieng. All civilian prisoners taken from the ships they had sunk—about 500 men, women and children, together with a small number of military personnel—were put ashore. They were provided with a small boat so that they could reach a larger island and seek assistance. The former prisoners later spoke highly of *Komet's* commander, Robert Eyssen, recalling that he had treated them with exemplary humanity. It is worth noting that the German commerce raiders normally opened fire only if a merchant vessel ignored an order to stop. Ships were scuttled only after all passengers and crew had been safely removed.

After calling at Emirau, *Kulmerland* returned to Japan, while *Orion* proceeded to Maug Island in the Mariana Archipelago for engine repairs. Eyssen, meanwhile, took *Komet* back to Nauru to

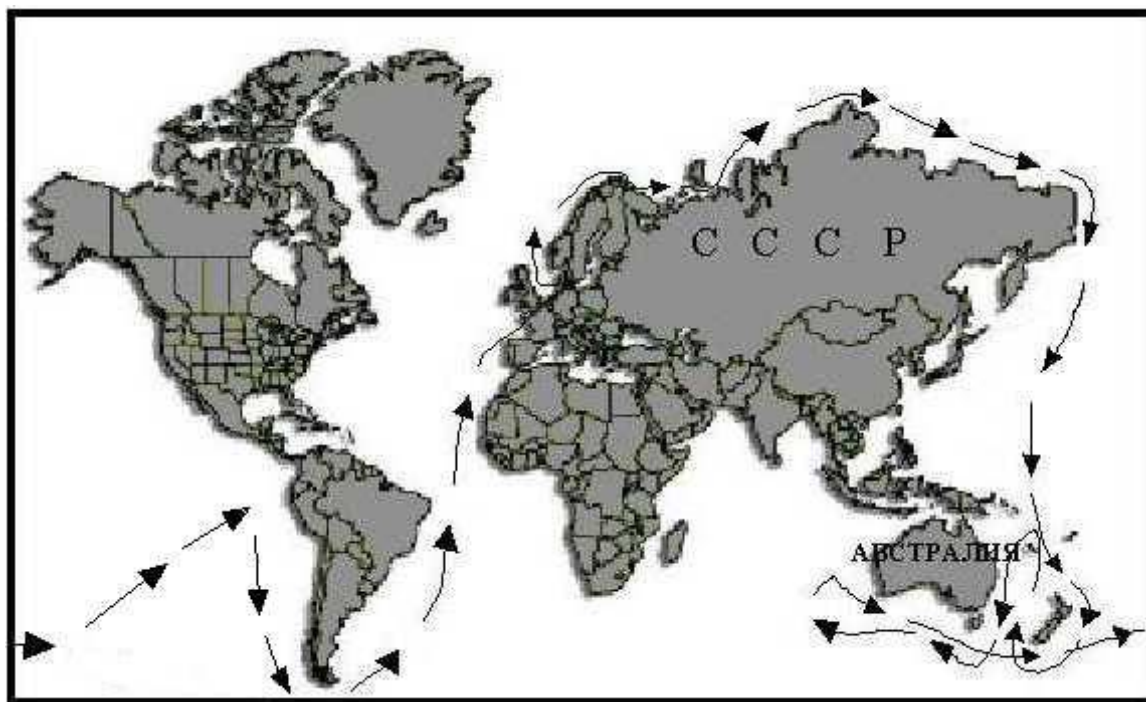
bombard the port facilities. After taking up position off the island, *Komet* hoisted the *Kriegsmarine* ensign and transmitted a radio message ordering the evacuation of the wharves and oil-storage facilities. When the crowd that had gathered onshore failed to disperse, Eyssen ordered a warning shot, which quickly cleared the area. The bombardment then began, causing extensive damage to the harbor installations. Ironically, the shelling also destroyed a large stockpile of phosphate that had been purchased by Japan—the very country whose cooperation had enabled the German raiders to use Japanese ports for refueling and replenishment. Having completed the bombardment, *Komet* headed south. The prisoners left on Emirau somehow learned of Eyssen's intention to attack Nauru. Those who succeeded in reaching Kavieng sent a warning to RAN Headquarters, but there were no warships available to intercept the raider. This proved to be the final straw. The [cruiser Sydney](#) and the auxiliary cruiser *Westralia* were recalled from the Mediterranean.

Early in January 1941, *Sydney*, which had distinguished herself in operations against the Italian Navy, began her voyage home. She arrived in Sydney on 9 February, where she received an enthusiastic public welcome. At almost the same time, on 3 December 1940, another German auxiliary cruiser, *Kormoran*, departed from Danzig (Gdańsk). On the second day of the voyage she assumed the disguise of the Soviet merchant ship *Vyacheslav Molotov* of Leningrad. Her deck fittings were painted brown, her funnel black with a red stripe, and a Soviet red flag was hoisted. For some time afterwards the crew amused themselves by addressing one another as "Comrade" and greeting each other with the communist salute—a half-raised right arm bent at the elbow with the fist clenched. The officers tolerated the joke, regarding it as a harmless indication of high morale. The destinies of *Sydney* and *Kormoran* would intersect less than a year later, on 19 November 1941. During a brief but fierce engagement off the coast of Western Australia, both ships were sunk. None of *Sydney*'s crew survived.

Returning to *Komet*, after bombarding Nauru Eyssen steered his raider towards New Zealand to attack shipping on the New Zealand–Panama route. During this cruise the ship reached the southernmost point of her voyage, and her crew caught sight of the Antarctic coast. At the end of February 1941, Eyssen received orders to proceed to the south-eastern sector of the Indian Ocean. He knew that the cruiser *Sydney* was based at Fremantle, near Perth, and therefore avoided the coast of Western Australia, realizing that *Komet* would have little chance against a modern light cruiser. For several months the raider searched unsuccessfully for merchant shipping far from the main trade routes. Fortune seemed to have deserted *Komet*. Finally, on 21 May, Eyssen received fresh orders directing him back into the Pacific.

In early August, Eyssen heard a radio broadcast claiming that RAAF patrol aircraft had driven German raiders away from Australian territorial waters, and he noted the report in his logbook. As an experienced seaman, however, he appreciated that Australia was far too vast for such a claim to be credible. Nevertheless, the broadcast may well have influenced his decision to move closer to New Zealand before turning east towards the coast of South America. On 14 August, *Komet* intercepted the British merchant ship *Australind* near the Galápagos Islands. Her radio operator managed to begin transmitting a distress signal before the ship came under fire. Several crewmen were killed. The survivors were taken aboard *Komet*, after which *Australind* was scuttled. Five days later, *Komet* captured the Dutch merchant ship *Kota Nopan* and sank the British vessel *Devon*. The prisoners were transferred to the captured Dutch ship, which was manned by a German prize crew and sent to Europe. Later, the auxiliary cruiser *Atlantis* transferred the prisoners from *Kota Nopan* near the coast of Sierra Leone. Afterwards *Komet* continued eastward without attacking further shipping. Rounding Cape Horn, she entered the Atlantic and reached Cherbourg on 26 November 1941.

The final stage of the voyage proved to be the most hazardous. *Komet* came under repeated attacks from British motor torpedo boats and aircraft. Once again, however, fortune favored Eyssen: one bomb struck the ship but failed to explode. On 30 November 1941, *Komet* arrived at Hamburg, bringing to a successful conclusion an extraordinary circumnavigation of the globe that had lasted 516 days.



Circumnavigation of Komet - July 1940 - November 1941

The world had changed dramatically during the eighteen months since *Komet* had embarked on her voyage. Only a few days remained before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and the outbreak of full-scale war in the Pacific. The German-Soviet War had already been raging for several months. The Arctic, whose waters Eyssen had explored so thoroughly during his transit of the Northern Sea Route, had become a theatre of bitter conflict in which the former partners in the icebreaker escort operation were now mortal enemies. The observations Eyssen made during his Arctic voyage later proved valuable to the Germans. In August 1942, the German "pocket battleship" *Admiral Scheer*, benefiting from detailed knowledge of Arctic ice conditions, reached the Taimyr coast, sank the icebreaker *Sibiryakov*, and bombarded the port of Dikson.

Komet's second and final voyage proved far shorter and far less fortunate than her first. On 7 October 1942, rearmed with new artillery and equipped with radar, *Komet* put to sea under the escort of four torpedo boats and several minesweepers. British intelligence had already learned of the planned attempt by the German auxiliary cruiser to break out through the English Channel into the Atlantic. While en route from Le Havre to Cherbourg, *Komet* was intercepted by Royal Navy forces. During the brief engagement that followed, she caught fire, exploded, and sank. Every member of her crew—351 officers and men—perished with the ship.

V.F. Vorobiev. *Krugosvetka reidera Komet. Sbornik Gangut. Vypusk 16 (1998) i 19 (1999)*

M. Montgomery. *Who Sank the Sydney?*, 1981