

The Auxiliary Cruiser Michel

By Geoff Walker

To the Allied Merchant Fleets of WW2, it goes without saying that the scourge of the oceans was the U-Boat, but often the dangers imposed by Axis Auxiliary Cruisers is overlooked. Both types of ships were equally as stealthy. In the case of the U-Boat, obviously, invisibility was its greatest asset, but for the Auxiliary Cruiser its stealth lay in the vastness of the world's oceans, not knowing where and when it would manifest itself, and cause havoc.

Built by Danziger Werft in Danzig, she was commissioned in 1939 as the cargo ship "**Bielsko**" for the Polish Gdynia-America-Line (GAL). Seized in 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland, she had a GRT of 4,740 tons and a Displacement of 10,900 tons, had a LOA of 132m, Beam of 17m and a draft of 7.4m. Her main propulsion consisted of 2 MAN – 8 Cylinder Diesels, geared to a single shaft, developing 6680 SHP and giving a maximum service speed of 16 knots. At an economic speed of 10 knots, she had a cruising range of 34,000 nautical miles.

She was requisitioned by the Kriegsmarine at the outbreak of World War II and converted into the hospital ship "**Bonn**". However, during 1941, she underwent another conversion to become the auxiliary cruiser "**Michel**" and was commissioned in September 1941, with the designation "Shiff 28". Her armament consisted of 6 x 5.9-inch guns, 1 x 4.1-inch gun, 2 Twin 0.79-inch Anti-aircraft guns, 6 Torpedo Tubes (2 overside launching and 2 underwater launching), 1 Torpedo Boat-"**Esau**", and 2 Arado AR 196 float planes, used for reconnaissance purposes.

Under her Royal Navy designation, she was known as "**Raider H**". The "**Michel**" was to become the last Commerce Raider to be operated by Germany, during WW2.



A rather old image of the "**MV Michel**". Whilst not one of the better-known German Commerce Raiders, she was none the less, just as lethal as others with a total of 18 sinkings to her wartime credit, between 1941-1945.

A Raider's main task was to disrupt commerce, sink merchant ships, and capture valuable cargo and/or the vessel under attack, whenever the opportunity arose. Some were equipped for minelaying, and often their ships were disguised by the crews to masquerade as allied or as neutral merchant ships.

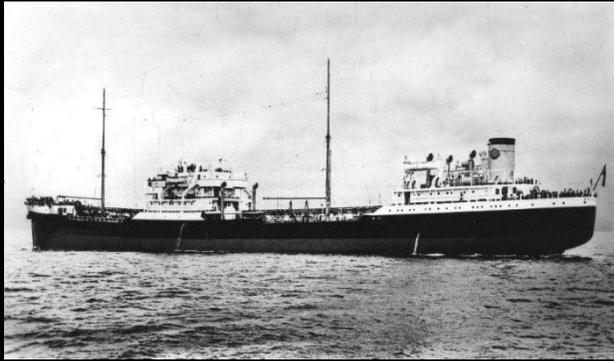
(Unknown photographer)



An Arado AR 196 float plane, two of which used aboard the "**Michel**", the main purpose being for reconnaissance.

(Unknown photographer)

The Raider "**Michel**" was placed under the command of Kapitän-zur-See Helmuth Von Ruckteschell. She departed Kiel in March 1942 but was attacked by British patrol vessels during her attempt to break out through the English Channel. She suffered some minor damage and the death of one officer as a result of the attack, but the raider nevertheless managed to safely arrive at La Pallice. After repair and replenishing necessary stores and equipment, three days later she departed and broke out into the North Atlantic. The "**Michel**" was to be assigned the South Atlantic area which had been vacated by the the German Commerce Raider "**Thor**", which had relocated her main sphere of operation to the Indian Ocean. In due course, "**Michel**" was to follow her predecessor to more eastern waters, however, the "**Michel**" had a successful cruise, sinking nine ships in the Atlantic over the next few months.



The British tanker "**Patella**".

(Unknown photographer)

The first victim, in April, was the British tanker **Patella**, whose crew was taken off before the ship was sunk using demolition charges. Three days later the American tanker **Connecticut** was dispatched to the ocean depths. In early May, however, one potential victim had managed to escape. Having then headed south, and once

passed St Helena, the "**Michel**" came across the British merchantman **Menelaus**. With the "**Michel's**" crew disguised as British sailors, she ordered the **Menelaus** to stop. Suspicious, the captain of the **Menelaus** refused and made off at maximum speed in an attempt to escape. The 16-knot "**Michel**" failed to keep up with the merchantman and sent her torpedo boat "**Esau**" in pursuit to intercept, but the liner dodged a subsequent torpedo attack, and eventually made good her escape – the **Menelaus** was the only ship ever to escape from a raider once an attack had commenced.



The Norwegian cargo ship "**Kattegat**"

(Unknown photographer)

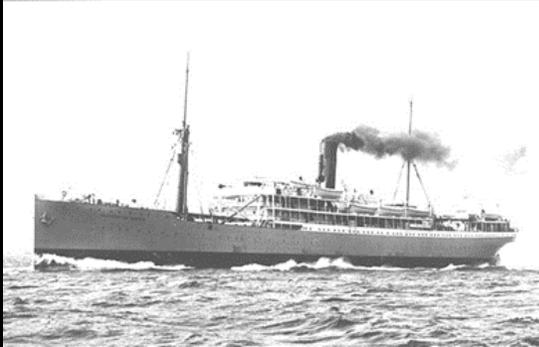
The search for suitable victims continued and in May, she came across the Norwegian freighter **Kattegat**, which was stopped and scuttled. Then in early June "**Michel**" located the disabled Liberty ship **George Clymer** after having received her radio distress signals. The "**Michel's**" torpedo boat "**Esau**" inflicted her with two torpedo hits, but she

remained afloat, eventually being finished off by a British ship. Six days later "**Michel**" fired without warning on the British freighter **Lylepark**, which soon caught fire. Survivors were taken off, and the burnt-out wreck quickly sank.



The ill-fated British steamer **Lylepark** which became a burning inferno and subsequently sank.

(Unknown photographer)



The aging British cargo-passenger liner **Gloucester Castle** was dispatched to the bottom on July 15th by the "**Michel**", before finding another two tankers on a parallel course the next day. The "**Michel's**" torpedo boat "**Esau**" was sent after the tanker **Aramis**, whilst "**Michel**" gave chase to the **William F. Humphrey**. This ship was hit several times by gun fire and at least one torpedo fired by the "**Michel**". Some 29-crew escaped into lifeboats and were picked up by "**Michel**", who later caught up with their torpedo boat "**Esau**",

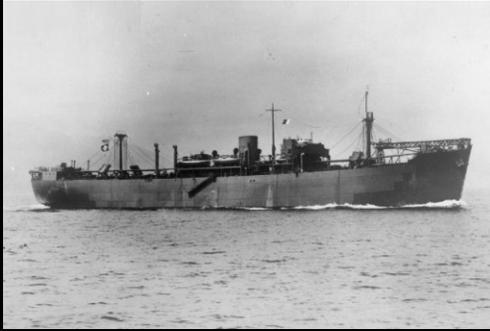
recovered it back on board, then finished off the **Aramis**. Heading south again, "**Michel**" met with the fellow German raider "**Stier**", and the pair briefly hunted as a duo, but to no avail, then split up again.

(Unknown photographer)

One night in September, "**Michel**" came across and quickly sank the American freighter **American Leader**. The following evening, "**Michel**" found the motorship **Empire Dawn** and shelled her before she came to a stop. Despite the crew signaling their surrender, Ruckteschell ordered more gun fire to be brought down on the ship, which killed several of the crew. After the war, he would be tried for this action and others, whilst in command of the raider "**Widder**". He was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison, however he died in prison in 1948.

The Commerce Raider "**Michel**" then proceeded into the Indian Ocean, after Ruckteschell had consultations with his commander in Germany, to ascertain the lucrative patrol areas for his ship. The raider refueled from the German supply tanker **Brake** in mid-November, and then resumed her search for victims. Two weeks later "**Michel**" encountered a freighter in the dark of night, and closed quickly to short range, before opening up with a devastating salvo that hit the target's bridge, defensive guns, and lifeboats, as well as setting her ablaze. Torpedoes from the "**Esau**" soon followed and the freighter, the American flagged **Sawolka**, sank. 39 survivors were recovered from the sea.

On the 9th December, a storm had forced the "**Michel**" to temporarily cease her search for gullible Allied merchant ships, whilst riding out the heavy weather, but surprisingly another ship emerged from the gloom. This was the Greek freighter **Eugenie Livanos**, whose crew was busy celebrating St. Stephen's Day. A Torpedo attack by the raider soon fatally damaged the ship, and more survivors were recovered from the sea.



British cargo ship **"Empire March"**.

(Unknown photographer)

The raider was then ordered back to Germany. She re-entered the Atlantic and on 2nd January her AR 196 reconnaissance aircraft spotted the British freighter **Empire March**. The **"Michel"** and **"Esau"** together shadowed the target, before the **"Michel"** opened fire with guns and torpedoes, and the torpedo boat added her own torpedoes

to the assault. The merchantman quickly sank, with 26 survivors taken aboard **"Michel"**. This was the first time on the entire cruise that the reconnaissance aircraft had located an enemy ship whilst patrolling.

Ruckteschell then received a change of orders, forbidding him from attempting to break through the Allied blockade and return to Germany. Instead, he was ordered to Japan. By February 7th lookouts spotted the islands of Indonesia, where the **"Michel"** briefly docked at Batavia (Jakarta). She then headed for Singapore, where her prisoners were landed and taken into captivity. In early March, **"Michel"** arrived at Kobe, Japan, some 358 days after she had departed from Germany. Ruckteschell took the opportunity to request his relief, due to ill health, and spent the rest of the war in various Japanese hospitals. He was replaced as commander of the **"Michel"** by **Kapitän-zur-See Günther Gumprich**, who had not had an active sea command of a Raider, since the destruction of the **"Thor"** in November 1942.

Following a comprehensive refit in Japan, **"Michel"** departed Japan in early May, and headed back to the Indian Ocean. By mid-June she was 300 miles west of Australia, where her AR 196 aircraft reported a ship heading west. The **"Michel"** closed and launched a night attack, in Gumprich's preferred manner. Fires broke out and the crew began abandoning ship. This was the Norwegian cargo ship **Höegh Silverdawn**, which was heading for the Persian Gulf. Two days later lookouts spotted a large tanker which was shadowed until nightfall. This was another Norwegian vessel, the **Ferncastle**. The **"Michel"** again closed in to attack. 2 torpedoes from the **"Esau"** caused damage and disabled the ship, but **Ferncastle's** captain thought the torpedoes were from a U-Boat. When **"Michel"** came into view, the crew realized that escape was impossible and surrendered, although several escaped under darkness, in lifeboats.

Captain Gumprich then took the **"Michel"** south of Australia into the Pacific, fearing that the location of his ship had been, not only discovered, but also reported to the Allies. Pickings were slim for the **"Michel"** and she crossed the entire ocean without encountering any shipping and was off the coast of Chile by late August. There she narrowly avoided destruction when she spotted the American light cruiser **Trenton**, but **"Michel"** managed to avoid the American cruiser, without being detected.

Heading back west, in the vicinity of Easter Island **"Michel"** identified an unwary tanker. Again, the tanker was shadowed until nightfall and then attacked. Almost on the first salvo the tanker, the Norwegian **India**, split open and a huge fire engulfed the vessel. There were no survivors. The **"Michel"** then had a miraculous escape when, in foul weather, she found herself coming across an American convoy with strong escort. Carefully moving away, she allowed the distance to open, and slipped into

the murk and gloom. With increasing Allied strength and limited opportunities, Gumprich elected to return to Japan.

On October 17th, as the raider was heading for Yokohama, she was detected by the American submarine **Tarpon**, which shadowed and attempted to gain an attack position. Once achieved, a spread of torpedoes was fired, two of which hit the "**Michel**". The ship stopped and began to list before the **Tarpon** fired a second salvo of torpedoes which caused "**Michel**" to disintegrate. Only 110 of the crew of 373 survived, captain Gumprich was not amongst them. "**Michel**" was the last of the Commerce Raiders, and with her demise one of the ocean's worst scourges, was eliminated, and her memories consigned to history.

Below is a list of ships sunk by "**Michel**" during her 1st and 2nd cruises:-

1st Cruise, March 9-1942/March 1-1943 (Atlantic and Indian Oceans): **Patella, Connecticut, Kattogat, George Clymer, Lylepark, Cloucester Castle, William F. Humphrey, Aramis, Arabistan, American Leader, Empire Dawn, Sawokla, Eugenie Livanos, Empire March.**

2nd Cruise, May 1-1943/Oct. 17-1943 (Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean, from Japan): **Høegh Silverdawn, Ferncastle and India.**

End

References: German Raider Michel Archives and History, Wrecksite, Military Historian, Merchant Raiders of WW2, German Raiders Thor and Michel, various publicly available information in the online Public Domain.

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