

A Goanese Affair

By Geoff Walker



In 1939, at the outbreak of WW2, three German cargo ships operated by **Deutsche Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft Hansa** (DDG Hansa - the world's largest heavy lift shipping company and the third largest shipping company in Germany) , the **Ehrenfels**, the **Braunfels** and the **Drachenfels**, all in the vicinity of the Indian Ocean at the time, discretely took refuge by slipping into in the harbor of Mormugao, Goa; a Portuguese enclave on the west coast of India. They did so because Portugal was neutral during the war, while the British territory of India was not. Later, in 1940, they were joined by an Italian vessel, the **Anfora**. All British citizens on board were permitted to disembark. However, the crew soon ran out of supplies. This led to some abandoning the ships to take on odd jobs in Goa for money. While the British were aware of the presence of these ships, they did not deem them to be a threat, since they were merchant ships, interned in a neutral port.



India in 1943, the location of Goa is signified by the red "Dot"

However, in 1942 the India Mission of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) at Meerut (near Dehli), intercepted coded radio messages to German Navy U-boats, relaying detailed information on the positions of Allied ships leaving Bombay Port in the Indian Ocean. Subsequently, in autumn of that year forty-six Allied merchant ships were attacked. The SOE then discovered that a Gestapo spy, **Robert Koch** (known under the codename as "**Trumpeta**") and his wife Grete, were living in Panaji, the capital of Goa. SOE agents **Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Pugh** and **Colonel Stewart** went to Goa in November 1942 and kidnapped Robert and Grete Koch, on 19 December. The couple was taken to Castle Rock, Karnataka, for questioning, after which all traces of the Kochs vanished from the records, with differing reports as to their ultimate fate.

The SOE now suspected a secret radio transmitter that was concealed aboard the **Ehrenfels**, was guiding German U-boat attacks against Allied shipping, on instructions from the German spy **Koch**. Attacks in the Indian Ocean continued, and in the first week of March 1943, German U-boats sank twelve American, Norwegian, British, and Dutch ships, totaling 80,000 tons. Obviously, drastic remedial action was needed to curtail these unsustainable Allied shipping losses.

British protests to the Portuguese had been received with disdain, and fallen on deaf ears. Officially, **Ehrenfels'** radio equipment had been dismantled and removed when she was interned, and the Portuguese colonial officials did not wish any confrontation with Germany or anybody else. Sometimes it was better not to know, such as the presence on **Ehrenfels** of a second concealed transmitter, with a very long range.

The British have always had a high reputation when it comes to mounting innovative and unusual operations during times of war, so, having considered an earlier successful action (**Operation Postmaster**) on the neutral Spanish Island of **Fernando Po**, located off the west coast of Africa, when a small raiding party of SOE controlled commandos, "captured" 3 vessels from within the island Port of **Santa Isabel**, right from under the noses of the neutral power, the SOE decided to mount a replicated covert operation, in an attempt to eliminate the **Ehrenfels** as an ongoing threat.

Since the British could not technically infringe on Portugal's neutrality by openly invading her territory, the SOE decided to try a clandestine operation without the involvement of regular British armed forces. To this end, they recruited members of the **Calcutta Light Horse**, based 1,400 miles away in Calcutta, who were a part time territorial unit of military reservists. The **Calcutta Light Horse** was a warm and social center for British civilians in Calcutta, more like a gentleman's club rather than a military establishment, and was made up of mainly middle-aged bankers, merchants, businessmen, civil servants, and other commercial executives. The 18 men in **Operation Creek** were the most unlikely ever to participate in a special operations mission – middle-aged, overweight, and decades removed from active military service. But, because they were legitimate civilians who had once served in the military, they were Special Operations Executive (SOE), India's only hope of pulling off **Operation Creek**. The SOE chose fourteen volunteers from the **Light Horse** and four more from the **Calcutta Scottish** to perform the covert operation, led by **Lt. Col. Pugh**; to capture or sink the **Ehrenfels**.



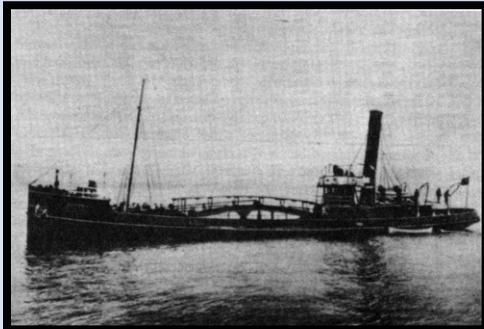
(Unknown copyright)

The German freighter **Ehrenfels**, 7752 GRT, built in 1936 for DDG-Hansa. In August 1939 she slipped into Mormugao, Portuguese India, and was interned at the outbreak of the war. On 9th March 1943 she

was attacked by a small raiding group of clandestine British forces, in violation of Portuguese neutrality, and subsequently sunk, rendering her radio transmitter useless, once and for all.

Once the basic plan for **“Operation Creek”** had been conceived, **Col. Bill Grice** the commanding officer of the Calcutta Light Horse, set about selecting 20 volunteers. then training of the participants began in earnest. The question then arose concerning the procurement of a suitable vessel. with which to stage the attack. Britain’s shipping resources were overstretched, and the use of any Royal Navy ships was out of the question due to the neutrality issues. But, after much searching the SOE discovered **Phoebe**, a rusting and unlikely ship of war. She was an uninspiring, 30-year-old, Glasgow-built motorized river hopper barge, designed for the job of dredging channels through the frequent shifting sands of India’s Hoogly River. The **Phoebe** was not built for deep sea service either, but she was willing and available, and considered suitable for the coastal voyage to Goa. There were few alternative options, so the **Phoebe** had to suffice. For the voyage from the Hoogly River to Goa, she was placed under the command of **Cmdr. Bernard Davis**, of the Royal Navy

The pre-mission plan called for the men to travel from Calcutta to the southwest Indian port city of Cochin (Kochi) where they would rendezvous with the ship that would take them on the remainder of their trip north, to Mormugao. After being armed and trained by the SOE, some of the eighteen member-assault team embarked on the hopper barge, **Phoebe**, at Calcutta and sailed around India to Goa; the rest took train from Calcutta to Cochin and joined the barge and its crew there. Hence, the plan was put into motion.



The hopper barge dredger **Phoebe** used in the SOE raid **“Operation Creek”** on the **Ehrenfels** at Mormugao in March 1943.

(Unknown copyright)

Meanwhile, a Light Horse member **Jock Cartwright** was in Mormugao using funds provided by SOE to secretly arrange a diversion for the night of the planned attack. To reduce the number of crewmembers aboard **Ehrenfels** on the designated night, a ruse was devised involving a lavish festival and free prostitutes. Officially the festival was for all the officers and sailors of ships in the harbor. Cartwright bribed key government officials and made the appropriate financial arrangements with the brothel owners. On the night of March 9, 1943, with the festival in full swing and the brothels bustling with sailors, everything was ready for the operation to proceed.

At the pre-arranged hour, **Phoebe** had moved silently, unseen, out of the pitch-black night into Mormugao harbor. She was blacked out, her only marking a handsewn Jolly Roger fluttering in a light breeze, at her stern. The boarders crowded her rail, with their Sten guns armed and at the ready, their pockets stuffed to the gills with assorted munitions, pistols, knives, and plastic explosives. One boarder reportedly wrapped up his glass eye in a piece of cloth and tucked it away in a pocket for safe keeping.

Soon the **Phoebe** was alongside the **Ehrenfels'** towering steel hull, before a crew member challenged her. Who were they, the German crewman asked? A Light Horseman answered in German that they were a harbor-barge. "Why are you sailing without lights?" enquired the German, but his only answer was a surge of well armed men with blackened faces pouring up and over **Ehrenfels'** steep steel sides, swarming up rickety bamboo ladders handmade aboard **Phoebe** while she was at sea.

Other Light Horsemen tossed grappling hooks over **Ehrenfels'** rail, securing the two ships tightly together. For just a moment, **Ehrenfels'** searchlight bathed **Phoebe** in a brilliant glare, until a burst of automatic fire put out its dazzling globe. Faces blackened with camouflage paint, **Phoebe's** boarding party spread out across the large German freighter, moving almost soundlessly in boots with half an inch of felt glued to their soles.

Once on board, two of the raiders shot the lock off **Ehrenfels'** old radio room door, just seconds too late to prevent a German officer from throwing an incendiary grenade into the ship's codebooks. One Light Horse boarder tackled the German, the other clubbing him with the butt of a Sten. The blow put the German down, but the codes were past saving. The Light Horsemen forged forward, pausing only to fire a single revolver round, through der Fuhrer's picture on the bulkhead.

Meantime, on deck a German crewman fired a flare pistol into one of the incendiary traps, and **Ehrenfels'** whole afterdeck became an inferno of flame. A long burst from a Sten blew the German over the side, but now the raiders could not get to the stern anchor cable, to blow it apart, to release the ship. Worse, a party of raiders in the engine room discovered that the engines had been immobilized. There was no way to release **Ehrenfels** and sail her away under her own power. She would have to be scuttled.

First, however, the raiding party having been disappointed by the state of the engines, finally had some luck. They found a locked steel door marked, "Danger—High Voltage." They quickly ripped it open with plastic explosive revealing **Ehrenfels'** secret transmitter. The Light Horsemen tore a list of wavelengths from the front of the set, then smashed and shot the radio into useless scrap metal.

Whilst all this was happening, on shore, a group of German and Italian officers was milling about in confusion at the harbor's edge. Across the black water they could hear the clatter of automatic weapons and the dreaded boom of explosives being detonated. From **Ehrenfels'** deck the fire raged brilliantly into the gloom, flames leaping up almost to masthead height. Men were dying in the darkness, and ships too, and there was absolutely nothing the frustrated Axis officers could do about it. The **Drachenfels** and **Braunfels**, seeing what was happening scuttled their ships in Goa's harbor in the belief that they were denying their ships from capture by the British. The Italian ship **Anfora**, also in the harbor, was similarly destroyed.

The Axis crews had run all the way to the water for nothing, for small boats that were along the shore now lay on their sides in the mud of low tide. Nor were the Portuguese authorities at all eager to sail out to investigate. The police would make inquiries, they said, yes, assuredly, but there was no reason for haste. In fact, they were right; all need for haste was long past, for now **Ehrenfels** was nearing her demise: her Kingston valves had been opened to the sea by her own crew, part of the German plan to deny her to any British boarding expedition.

Meanwhile **Col. Bill Grice** was getting his raiders out of harm's way. The mission was accomplished; the radio was rendered completely useless, and **Ehrenfels** was going down. It was time to leave before help arrived from shore, or from the other Axis ships, and make good their escape.

Following the success of the raid, British intelligence immediately circulated pre-prepared press releases, which stated simply that low morale aboard the Axis ships had prompted their crews to fire and scuttle their own vessels. Indeed, a later release stated, the conflagration's instigation was a quarrel between Nazis and anti-Nazis among the crew members. Newspapers across the world eagerly printed the story. The Germans knew better; surely the Portuguese also suspected the British? But neither country had much interest in printing anything like the truth.



(Unknown copyright)

A dramatic image of the **Ehrenfels** well and truly ablaze and sinking, following **Operation Creek**.

The only decoration the Light Horse ever received was a curious one they designed themselves, a tiny seahorse wearing a sun helmet. The little creature appeared in Gallop, the regimental magazine, and was even made into jewelry broches, given to wives and girlfriends. For many long years, only the Light Horse knew the significance of the little mascot.

The **Calcutta Light Horse** was disbanded with the ending of the Raj in 1947. Quite aptly, it was dissolved with great respect and ceremony by its honorary colonel, the Last Viceroy, Earl Mountbatten of Burma.

End



The Calcutta Light Horse Tie.

Bibliography: SOE WW2 archives, Codenames, Various Public Domain sources on the operations made by the SOE during WW2, warefarehistorynetwork.com, Operation Creek, Going to War on a River Barge, Daring Calcutta Light Horse Raid.

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