

# THE KONIGSBERG INCIDENT

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CANADIANS flew in almost every operational theatre during World War I — from North Russia to East Africa, and from the North Sea to the Indian Ocean. One of the most intriguing early air-sea incidents involving a Canadian flyer was the destruction of the German light cruiser "Konigsberg" in July 1915. For his part in the battle, Flight Sub-Lieutenant Harwood James Arnold, whose hometown was Vancouver, B.C., was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

On the eve of the war the "Konigsberg" was lying at anchor at Dar-es-Salaam, capital of German East Africa, but she put to sea before the opening of hostilities in preparation for a raiding cruise. On 20 Sept. 1914 she surprised and sank the British light cruiser "Pegasus" off Zanzibar and later took refuge in the Rufiji delta. This is a 200-square-mile swamp area, covered with mangrove trees and dense vegetation and cut by innumerable intersecting channels of varying size. The British Admiralty knew that the enemy cruiser was in the delta but locating her was another matter.

With the help of a civilian flyer, H. D. Cutler, who had been giving exhibition flights with two *Curtiss* flying boats in South Africa before the outbreak of war, she was spotted in late Nov. 1914. The two flying boats soon gave out and it was not until late Feb. 1915, when a pair of *Sopwith* seaplanes arrived from Britain, that aerial reconnaissance of the enemy ship could be resumed.

In the meantime sea forces, with additional aircraft for reconnaissance and gunnery spotting, were being assembled. Two British 6-inch monitors, "Severn" and "Mersey", arrived in early June and additional aircraft and flying personnel arrived shortly afterwards. Early on 6 July two of these aircraft tackled the "Konigsberg". As the monitors worked their way slowly up one of the channels towards the enemy vessel, a *Caudron* attempted a rather ineffectual bombing of the cruiser. Shortly after 0600 hrs. the other machine, an *Henri Farman*, arrived over the monitors to spot their fire. The plane was flown by Flight Commander J. T. Cull and Arnold was the observer. The monitors opened fire 11,000 yards from the "Konigsberg" and could see nothing of the enemy ship, being completely dependent on directions from the air. Arnold reported by wireless that the first salvo was 200 yards short and to one side, and for 12 minutes the two shallow-draft vessels continued their shelling, although without any hits.

The "Konigsberg", however, was not without fangs, and she opened fire on the monitors. Her guns were directed from an observation post in a tree on a nearby island. The cruiser's crew who fought back with courage and skill, had strung a telephone line between the post and the ship — the amenities of the officers' wardroom having been utilized for this. The insulators were the tops of wine bottles from the Moselle and the Rhine, which thus served the Fatherland in an unexpected fashion. The German fire was accurate and the monitors were several times straddled. Then one of the cruiser's shells struck the forward 6-inch gun of the "Mersey", killing four of the crew and nearly exploding her magazine. The "Severn" continued her fire and at 0810 hrs. Arnold reported the first direct hit, which was followed by several more. The *Henri Farman* was replaced by the *Caudron*, and while Arnold was on the ground the "Konigsberg's" observation post was spotted. The German observers,

on a platform built in a mangrove tree only 400 yards from one of the monitors, were wiped out by half a dozen shells fired at point blank range. After this the cruiser's fire fell off, for although the Germans had an alternate spotting post, it was farther away and less effective.

Shortly before 1000 hrs. Arnold again took over the direction of the shelling, this time with Squadron Commander R. Gordon as the *Farman's* pilot. Wireless communication between the aircraft and the ships broke down and the other plane developed engine trouble, hampering the attack; but Arnold was up again early in the afternoon, tapping out on his key the fall of each shell from the monitors. Aerial observation was difficult, for the mud around the "Konigsberg", at rest in a narrow channel, was so soft that many of the British shells failed to explode, and thus were impossible to spot. The action was broken off at 1600 hrs., the two spotting planes having put in a total of 15 hours in the air, under fire almost the whole time from the German cruiser. Arnold had been in the air for nine hours.

The monitors again moved into position at noon the following day, with Cull and Arnold overhead to direct fire. This time they were spotting for only one of the British monitors, the "Severn", the other vessel being used as a moving decoy to draw the enemy's fire. The ruse failed, though, and the cruiser's fire, which at first was extremely accurate, was concentrated on the anchored "Severn". It was afterwards found out that a particularly daring German officer was in a tub buried in the mud, only 30 yards from the stationary "Severn", directing the "Konigsberg's" fire by telephone. Fortunately for the British, the telephone line was cut at the cruiser's end by a chance shot from the "Severn", rendering the observation post useless. The British fire opened at 1230 hrs. from 10,000 yards and 10 minutes later Arnold reported the first of several hits. While he was doing so the *Farman*, flying at 3,200 feet, was under heavy fire from the cruiser, and a few minutes later a well-aimed shell burst close to the aircraft. Fragments tore through the engine, blowing away two of its cylinders, and Cull had no choice but to glide down for a water landing, the jungle airfield being far beyond reach. Arnold continued to tap out the ranging directions that closed the "Konigsberg's" career.

Cull brought the *Farman* down 100 yards from the "Mersey" but it turned over on landing, and the pilot was caught in the wreckage and his seat belt. Arnold, who was thrown clear, swam to the remains of the *Farman* and aided the pilot in freeing himself. Both officers were picked up by a boat from the "Mersey".

Arnold's last message, correcting the "Severn's" fire, put an end to the "Konigsberg". As the *Farman* was going down the monitor had swung her guns farther aft, and as the aircraft hit the water the cruiser's decks were torn by an explosion. Although the monitor now was without her airborne eyes, she was able to continue accurate fire, for the cruiser was burning fiercely, and columns of black and yellow smoke betrayed her exact position to the "Severn's" guns. Firing from the monitor continued, and further explosions from the cruiser indicated that hits were being scored. An hour later the other aircraft went up and the *Caudron's* crew reported that the German ship was in flames aft, with her middle funnel blown away. Twenty-five salvos were poured at the battered cruiser, reducing her to a wreck blazing from stem to stern. The action was broken off shortly before 1430 hrs. and the monitors retired, returning the next day to Zanzibar. The RNAS personnel were put ashore later at Mombasa, in British East Africa, for flying service up country in the coming campaign against the enemy forces in German East Africa.

Later aerial reconnaissance, flown in early August, showed the "Konigsberg" to be lying with 15 degree list, obviously destined to remain forever in the mud of the Rufiji delta. Her crew, though, indefatigable even in defeat, was seen to be removing some of the guns, and a bombing attack was planned, which had to be cancelled because of more urgent requirements. As it turned out, the cruiser's crew salvaged ten 4.1 inch guns, with others of smaller calibre, including machine guns, and they served the Germans well in their stubborn defence of their East African territory.

Cull took part in flying operations which followed, in support of the ground campaign against the Germans in German East Africa. He was later to play a prominent part in Canadian aviation history. When, in late 1918, it was decided to form the Royal Canadian Naval Air Service, to combat the German U-boat threat off Canada's east coast, Cull was obtained from the British to serve as its commander.

Available records on Arnold's subsequent flying career are sketchy, although it appears as if he took pilot training in 1916. He was drowned as a result of a flying accident in March 1918.

At least two other Canadians are known to have flown with the RNAS during the East African campaign against the Germans which followed the destruction of the "Konigsberg". They were Flight Sub-Lieutenants Rudolf D. Delamere and John Robinson, both from Toronto. Each ended the war with the rank of captain in the RAF, Delamere with the Distinguished Service Cross and Robinson with the Distinguished Flying Cross.