

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAPTURE OF THE *KOMET*

It has been mentioned in a previous chapter that the Government steamer *Komet*, after evading the Australian fleet in St. George's Channel on the night of August 13th, landed the German Governor, Dr. Haber, near Rabaul in the early morning of August 14th, and then, with only thirty tons of coal left to take her to sea, sought refuge at a place on the north coast of New Britain. These facts were not known to the occupying force. An inspection of German official files and the Treasury books revealed the existence of the *Komet*, the Governor's new administrative yacht, of 977 tons displacement, the property of the Protectorate, and showed that she had been purchased out of the funds of the Territory. On taking over the administration Colonel Holmes demanded this vessel, in accordance with the terms of capitulation, as government property; Dr. Haber thereupon stated that, in accordance with instructions, he had transferred the vessel to the German East Asiatic Squadron on September 1st, and was consequently unaware of her whereabouts. Haber's official report shows that, shortly before the wireless station at Nauru was put out of action, a direction was received by radiogram from Admiral von Spee that the *Komet* was to take coal to a specified group of islands, and that the steamers *Sumatra* and *Meklong*, which were then lying in Buka Strait¹ loaded with coal and provisions for von Spee's cruisers, were to proceed to the same rendezvous. It is now known, from the *Komet's* log, that the "specified group of islands" was Angaur in the Pelew Group. The *Komet* was therefore at the end of August called up to Weber Harbour, but, before reaching that place, was intercepted at Massava Bay.² Her captain was given orders in accordance with von Spee's message, and she was placed entirely at the disposal of the German fleet. She reached Angaur on September 14th, went to sea again, and held on and off waiting for the auxiliary cruiser *Prinz Eitel Friedrich*, which she met on the following day off Malakal

¹ A narrow passage between Buka and Bougainville in the German Solomons.

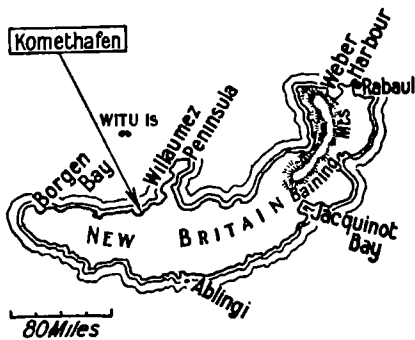
² Both Weber Harbour and Massava Bay are on the north coast of New Britain. The Pelews are shown in the map at p. 4

Harbour in the Pelews. She remained in that harbour in company with the cruiser until September 24th. On the 26th wireless messages, including signals of the British destroyer *Racoon*, disturbed the *Komet's* captain; he put to sea, and made a long détour to the east before shaping a course for Durour in the Western Islands. Here she took in provisions, and then made for the secluded Peterhaven in the Witu Islands off the north coast of New Britain. On September 29th her wireless picked up a message which gave her the first intimation that New Guinea had been occupied by Australian forces, so from Peterhaven she sent out warnings that Rabaul and Herbertshöhe had been captured and garrisoned by the British.

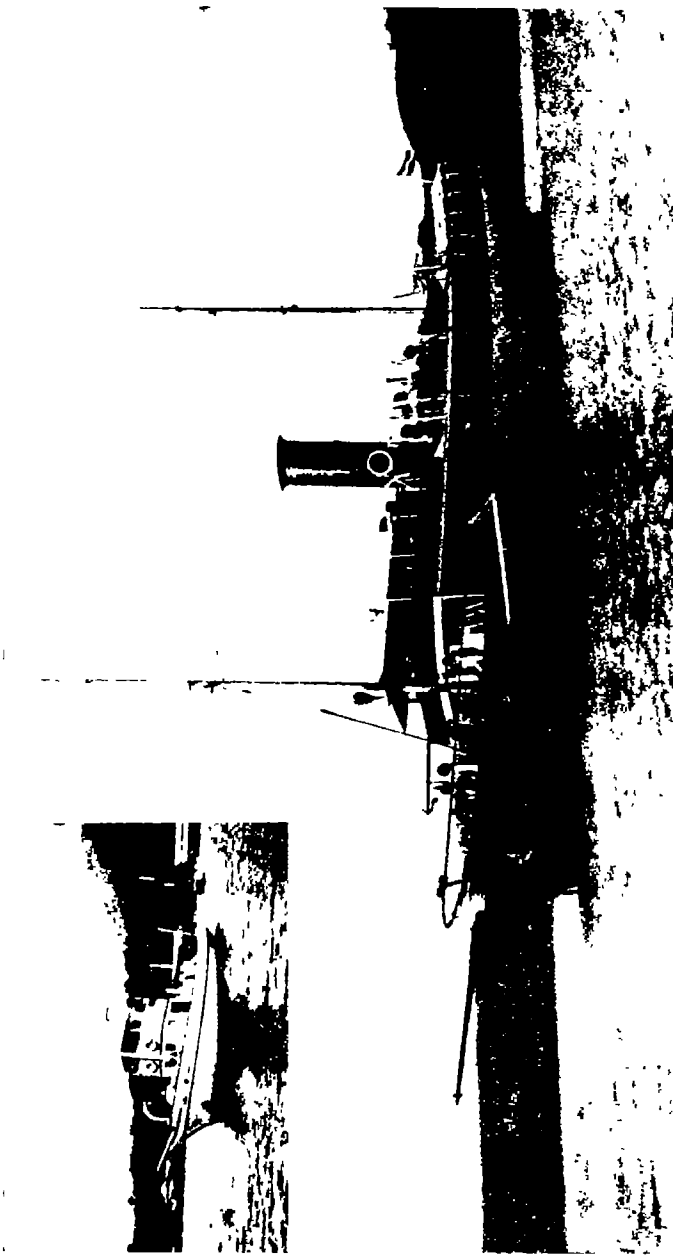


Then, leaving the Witu group on October 4th, she again sought her place of refuge in New Britain, and attempted without success to get into wireless communication with the seat of government by way of the Baining Mountains.

Thus in the early part of October, 1914, the *Komet* was lying concealed at a place on the north coast of New Britain which is now known to have been Komethafen, about 170 miles from Rabaul. It was here that she had received a cargo of coal from the *Siar* during August,² and her hiding-place was thus known to the *Siar's* native crew, who on their return to Rabaul had spread rumours about the *Komet* being at Talasea, the native name for the country round Komethafen. Haber had in fact advised the captain of the



² A detailed account of the movements of the *Komet* during the months of July, August, September, and October, 1914, will be found in *Vol. IX (ch. iv, sec. iii)*.



THE GERMAN NAVAL YACHT, *Kommet*

Afterwards, armed and commissioned as H.M.A.S. *Una*, and stationed in New Guinea waters. *Isa*! The *Nasa*, in which Commander J. M. Jackson captured the *Kommet*

Capt by T. J. McMahon, Esq. and (MSG) by Lady Pethbridge

Komet that it would be safer to seek another refuge, as the *Siar's* crew might betray the locality, but Möller brought his ship back to her usual place of concealment.

Haber's intimation that the *Komet* had been placed at the disposal of the German fleet as from September 1st was conveyed verbally to Rear-Admiral Patey immediately after the Governor's surrender, but up to the beginning of October her whereabouts had not been ascertained. On the night of October 3rd the *Australia* and the *Montcalm* left Rabaul for Suva, and the following day the rest of the Australian warships steamed out of Blanche Bay, proceeding either to Suva or to Sydney. Prior to the departure of the fleet, instructions from the admiral had been left with the harbour-master at Rabaul (Lieutenant-Commander Jackson)⁴ that the *Madang* was to be kept in commission for the use of the Administrator between Rabaul and Herbertshöhe; the crews of the *Nusa* and the *Sumatra* were to be paid off and the ships themselves laid up after removal of their eccentric straps. These steamers had, at the beginning of the military occupation, been captured by ships of the Australian Navy, and they were afterwards armed and employed in scouting for the fleet. On the night on which the *Australia* and *Montcalm* left Rabaul a wireless message in German was intercepted there, and could not be accounted for. On the following day Colonel Holmes received information that the *Komet* was concealed on the north coast of New Britain. He at once wrote to Captain Lewin⁵ of H.M.A.S. *Encounter* the following letter, which reached him as the cruiser was weighing anchor to proceed to Suva:—

“I have just received information from Captain Fry⁶ that he was informed by Mr. Whiteman at luncheon time to-day, that the Steamer *Komet* is at present in hiding on the North Coast about 100 miles from here; that the masts had been taken out of her and erected on shore to form a temporary Wireless Station, the vessel herself being screened from view by being surrounded by coconut palms.

⁴ Commr. J. M. Jackson; R.N. Commanded H.M.A.S. *Una*, 1914/16.

⁵ Rear-Admiral C. La P. Lewin; R.N. Of Fraut, Sussex, Eng., b. Blackheath, Kent, Eng., 22 Aug., 1874.

⁶ Maj. (temp. Lieut.-Col.) W. A. Le R. Fry, O.B.E. Commanded 34th Bn., A.I.F., temply, 1918. Warehouseman; of Sydney; b. Bourke, N.S.W., 29 Nov., 1886.

“Mr. Whiteman is at present in Rabaul, and is prepared to take an expedition to the place.

“The erection of this temporary Wireless Station may account for the message that was intercepted last night.

“In view of this information, which seems pretty definite, would it not be well before you leave Rabaul, to send round and clear this matter up, as it seems to me so long as the *Komet* is free to molest any small ships conveying stores to this place our position here is precarious.”

Captain Lewin sent back a verbal message to the effect that he had orders to proceed to sea, and could not take any action. He explained that he was unable to reply in writing. On the following day Holmes received from Lewin a wireless message:—

“Regret I was unable to comply with your request, but did not consider there was any risk of molestation from the *Komet*. *Sumatra* and *Nusa* could prevent that if it is necessary.”

Lewin had overlooked the fact that according to the admiral's instructions the crews of the *Nusa* and *Sumatra* were to be paid off and the ships laid up.

Holmes did not regard the position as one to be accepted with equanimity; moreover he was anxious about the *Moresby*, which was daily expected to arrive at Rabaul with food supplies. He therefore sent for the harbour-master, and directed him to disregard the instructions as to paying off the crew of the *Nusa*. After a conference with Jackson as to the possibility of capturing the *Komet*, Holmes issued to him a commission in the following terms:—

“I hereby order you to take command of the Armed Yacht *Nusa*. She is to be known as H.M.A.S. *Nusa* and will, until further instructions, act under my orders only.

“You will have under your command such officers and men as may be required from the Naval Brigade attached to the Expeditionary Force under my command.”

The *Nusa* had been armed with two 3-pounder guns. Holmes directed that one of these should be replaced by a 12-pounder, which had been handed over to him by the

Navy and had been mounted on a field-carriage for land defence. Jackson was further directed to proceed to sea, search the north coast of New Britain, and capture the *Komet*. A small force of infantry, with a machine-gun, was placed under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Paton, and embarked in the *Nusa*, which left Simpson Harbour early on October 9th. On the following night Holmes received an enquiry by wireless from the Navy Office:—

“Thursday Island heard signals in German plain language 4.45 a.m. 7th October, reporting that *Australia* and all large men-o’-war had left Rabaul going eastward. Did you hear this signal, and can you estimate where it was made from?”

Holmes replied that the message had not been intercepted at Rabaul, but that a station was believed to be working at Tawanakus Bay⁷ and that an expedition had been despatched in that direction.

On October 13th a wireless message from Jackson to the Administrator announced the capture of the *Komet*, and a few hours later the two ships were reported as entering Blanche Bay. Making the passage up the harbour, Jackson transferred to the little *Nusa*, and led the way in, his prize following her captor. By noon the *Komet*, flying the British flag, lay off Rabaul.

The story of the capture is best told in the following reports by Lieutenant-Colonel Paton and Lieutenant-Commander Jackson:—

“S.S. *Komet*,

At Sea—13th October, 1914

The Administrator,
Rabaul.

Sir,

I have the honour to report that, pursuant to your instructions, I proceeded in the *Nusa* with Lieutenant-Commander Jackson and a party of Naval and Military members of the Expeditionary Force, at 4 a.m. on the 9th instant, for the purpose of (1) clearing up the situation in regard to the Wireless Station working on the Island, and (2) effecting the capture of the *Komet*.

⁷ On the north coast of New Britain.

"The *Komet* has been captured undamaged, and the wireless plant is aboard and in working order.

"The vessel was located at Talassia,⁸ a small plantation on the North Coast of the Island, about 160 miles S.W. of Rabaul. The *Nusa* anchored at dusk on Saturday, 10th October, close up to a small island near Talassia, and received there definite information of the *Komet's* hiding place. At a conference between Commander Jackson and myself that evening, the plan of attack for the next morning was decided upon. Meanwhile a strict watch was kept that no communication could reach the *Komet* from the Island or the steamer leave her position without being noticed and coming under the fire of our guns. As we steamed along at half speed in the haze at dawn on the 11th, the masts of the *Komet* were observed through the trees at a range of 1,500 yards. The *Nusa* went full speed ahead and rounded the point behind which the *Komet* was sheltering (until then unobserved) and stopped broadside on at a distance of 400 yards. I proceeded in a boat with Mr. Whiteman as Interpreter under a white flag. The Captain was dressing when I reached the *Komet* and surrendered the ship in response to my demand. The necessary steps were at once taken for the protection of the wireless room, engine room, and all on board disarmed. Commander Jackson then came on board and made all arrangements for the two vessels to leave for Rabaul, and this was accomplished at dawn next day—Monday 12th.

"I desire to specially bring under your notice the zeal, initiative, and indomitable energy of Commander Jackson, who is mainly responsible for bringing to a successful issue this expedition. His keenness is infectious and has been reflected in the whole of the small party. I need hardly add that the negotiation of the innumerable small reefs on the uncharted coast required all the care and skill of an experienced navigator. He has been ably assisted in this respect by Mr. Komine (Japanese), who volunteered his services *en route*.

⁸ An alternative spelling of Talasea.

"The preliminary information which enabled us to locate the appropriate position of the captured steamer was supplied by Mr. Whiteman, who accompanied the expedition as Intelligence Officer and has been very useful in many ways.

"I would also like to mention Lieutenant Marsden,⁹ who fixed the machine-gun in position on the *Nusa*, worked the range-finder, overhauled the Hotchkiss gun on the *Komet*, and acted as Executive Officer (Military) when the prize crew was placed aboard the *Komet*.

"I am sending under separate cover:—

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| (1) List of Prisoners (German) .. | 5 |
| (2) List of Crew | 5 ² |
| (3) List of engagement of crew,
shewing wages paid and owing. | |

J. PATON,
Lieutenant-Colonel."

"H.M.A.S. *Komet*,

At Sea,

Monday, 12th October, 1914.

Sir,

I beg to submit to you this my report on capture of *Komet*; undamaged and with wireless intact.

"Acting under your orders, and on information received, I proceeded in *Nusa* to Talassia, a district on North Coast of Neu Pommern, 170 miles S.W. b. W. from Rabaul, and anchored on the evening of Saturday 10th instant under the lee of a small island off Talassia. This Island has a native village on it, and some of the natives on board *Nusa* had relations in the village, which at once put matters on a good footing.

"*Nusa* approached this Island with great caution, keeping close into Neu Pommern coast and feeling her way among the off-lying reefs, thus making use of a line of approach which would never be guarded against by the *Komet* should she be where we expected.

⁹ Lieut-Col T R Marsden, DSO Commanded 5th M.G. Bn, A.I.F., 1918. Member of Aust. Permanent Forces; b. Kent, Eng., 13 Aug., 1887.

“Owing to a dense haze our approach was entirely unobserved by *Komet* (as will be seen later), and from very perfect native information obtained on the island we were able to lie all night with guns trained on spot where *Komet* must emerge should she leave her anchorage before morning.

“It was impossible to attack on Saturday evening owing to failing light and tortuous channel among reefs.

“At 5.45 a.m. on Sunday, October 11th, *Nusa* weighed and proceeded towards *Komet*, approaching in perfect silence, engines at half speed and with white flag at fore. The Native Chief from the Island was on the fore bridge with me and was of great assistance, as the reefs were barely visible at that early hour; also from his information we were able to keep *Nusa's* guns trained on *Komet* through trees, she herself being as yet screened from view.

“As *Komet's* masts appeared over the trees we obtained the exact range—thanks to Lieutenant Marsden's (machine-gun section) range-finder—and we at once increased to “full speed” and came right on to her, completely surprising her crew (Captain of *Komet* not dressed and shaving himself), Lieutenant-Colonel Paton then proceeding on board *Komet* in skiff with a white flag—Mr. Whiteman with him as interpreter—and the *Komet* surrendered.

“*Komet* carries one machine-gun (firing 1 lb. shells), which can fire at rate of 35-40 shells a minute, a large number of rifles for native crew and small arms for the officers, but thanks to the haze of Saturday evening and *Nusa's* inshore approach, *Komet* was absolutely unprepared and had no other course but to surrender. *Nusa's* plan of attack was carefully considered by Colonel Paton and myself on Saturday evening, and was decided on for following reasons:—

- (1) Should *Nusa* have kept off at 400 yards and shelled *Komet* it would have caused damage unnecessarily and loss of life; also *Nusa's* shell supply is limited.

- (2) Should *Komet* observe *Nusa* carrying out active operations against her, her Captain would either have sunk *Komet* with dynamite or other means, and also would have destroyed wireless
- (3) A German Station was directly in line of fire behind *Komet*.
- (4) It would probably be necessary to shell trenches and gun-pits ashore after shelling *Komet*, which would have wasted large quantities of shrapnel.
- (5) The German Governor having already surrendered, presumably his yacht should be included in surrender and not be shelled.

“ I would point out the following additional points for your consideration :—

- (1) Mr. Komine (Japanese) of Rabaul was on board *Komet*,¹⁰ and thanks to his help and knowledge of natives *Komet* was exactly located. Mr. Komine showed great enterprise and an absolute indifference to the probability of *Nusa* receiving *Komet's* fire; he also showed his great anxiety to help us by abandoning his occupation of salving a wreck off the Talele Islands in order to accompany the expedition.
- (2) Mr. Whiteman of Rabaul accompanied the expedition, and it was due to information previously obtained by him that *Talassia* was made our objective.
- (3) The Military Officer in charge of native labour supplied us with natives from the exact locality where we hoped to find *Komet*, and the success of the expedition is very largely due to his discrimination.

Supplement to paragraph 3.

Since capture of *Komet* Mr. Whiteman has acted as Paymaster of *Komet* and also as Naval Intelligence Officer. Important information *re*

¹⁰ Undoubtedly this should read *Nusa*.

enemy's merchant cruisers is in *Komet's* log, and Colonel Paton, with the assistance of Mr. Whiteman, has collected such information.

Mr Whiteman has also made a complete list of stores on board *Komet*, and his business knowledge has saved me an immense amount of trouble, my time being fully occupied in navigating the two vessels under my command.

Lieutenant-Colonel Paton has taken charge of prisoners; two of *Komet's* officers were not on board *Komet*, but Lieutenant-Colonel Paton has taken steps to secure them.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

J. M. JACKSON,

Lieutenant-Commander, R.N.,

Commanding H.M.A.S. *Komet* and H.M.A.S. *Nusa*."

In telling the Minister for Defence, on October 14th, that the *Komet* had been captured Holmes suggested that the ship might be connected with the message from the Navy Office on October 9th concerning German signals heard by the station at Thursday Island. He also stated that he had placed the *Komet* in commission, and proposed to send her, with the Acting Governor and certain prisoners of war, to Sydney under Jackson's command; and expressed the desire that for urgent administrative reasons the *Komet* should be effectively armed and returned to New Guinea at the earliest possible date—with Jackson in command, as his local knowledge was essential.

In a despatch of October 14th Holmes further stated:

"My reasons for recommending that the *Komet* be armed are that it is necessary to send supplies from here to the principal places in other Islands of the Colony where food is short and natives in some cases almost starving, which may at any time give rise to serious trouble. The outbreak of war has interrupted the regular service. Although it is believed the larger



OFFICERS OF THE RAVALD GARRISON, 1914

Back row (left to right) Lieutenants H. W. Johnson, J. M. Maughan, I. B. Sherbon, V. H. B. Sampson, J. E. Westgarth, P. K. B. Quinn, A. F. Anderson, J. A. McDowell, R. Partridge, R. M. Sadler, H. L. Bruce, W. C. M. Penly *Front row:* Lieutenant L. B. Ravenscroft, Major A. W. Ralston, Lieutenant-Colonel J. Paton, Captain S. P. Goodsell, Captain C. E. Manning

Lent by Lieut. Col. I. J. Cummins. 4 V & V E F

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German war vessels have gone South-East, there are still some smaller vessels—possibly the *Geier* and *Planet*—in these waters; until they are accounted for, and in the absence of the Australian fleet, merchants will not risk the loss of shipments. When the *Komet* is effectively armed, she will be able to act with confidence in the protection of trade. Moreover it will be necessary for me to visit Friedrich Wilhelmshafen, Käwieng in New Ireland, Kieta in Bougainville, which I am unable to do at present for want of a suitable vessel. I ask therefore, that no time be lost in dealing with the *Komet* and returning her to me.

“I cannot speak too highly of the services rendered by Lieutenant-Commander Jackson, who has been most indefatigable and displayed qualities of seamanship of a high order in navigating dangerous waters without being in possession of accurate or reliable charts. It is on account of these capabilities that I ask that he be returned here in command of the *Komet*, and that consideration be given to the question of granting him the rank of Acting Commander as a reward for his services.”