

Sailing under False Colors

It must be assumed that blockade runners will attempt to scuttle. Ensure that boarding party includes someone who will be able to recognize and know where to search for data concerning or evidence of navigation routes taken by runners. This information [is] highly important and will require quick action to obtain.

—Commander Task Group 23.1 report of the interception and destruction of the German blockade runner *Karin*.¹

Photo 1-1



German blockade runner MV *Karin* aflame from fires, set by her crew before they abandoned ship, after being stopped in the South Atlantic by two units of the United States Fourth Fleet—the light cruiser USS *Savannah* (CL-42) and the destroyer *Eberle* (DD-430). A short time later, delayed-detonation scuttling charges exploded, killing all but three members of a boarding party from the *Eberle* attempting to salvage the vessel. The painting is by Richard DeRosset.

Adolf Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, following which Britain and France declared war on Germany, and established a sea blockade of that country. Because the German Navy initially lacked

the strength to challenge the combined British Royal Navy and French Navy for command of the sea, it adopted a strategy relying on commerce raiding using capital ships, armed merchant cruisers, submarines and aircraft. The German ships used to prey on merchant shipping became known as “raiders.” These ships interdicted Allied commerce and denuded the British and French fleets of the many warships needed to try to locate and destroy them on the world’s oceans.

As the sea blockade continued, Germany became increasingly desperate to obtain badly needed raw materials, such as rubber, tin, tungsten, molybdenum, hemp, animal hides and vegetable oils. These resources were possessed in abundance by Japan and her newly conquered territories. Conversely, Japan was deficit in certain metals, manufactured goods, and technical processes, which Germany and, to a much lesser degree, Italy enjoyed. To help meet their mutual needs, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed a Tripartite Pact on 27 September 1940, which required military and technical cooperation, including reciprocal exchanges of raw materials, equipment and personnel.²

This exchange program was dependent upon a sizable fleet of merchant ships which only Germany had available. Accordingly, she assumed the initiative in developing collaboration between the Axis powers—and in particular, between Japan and herself—via the use of blockade runners. Ships of German registry and German prizes of war, as well as a few Italian ships pressed into service under German control, made runs between Germany and the Far East. These ships were referred to as “runners” by Allied navies.

During the first two years of the war as the Royal, French, and German navies battled in the South Atlantic, German U-boats and commerce raiders tried to stop the flow of raw materials to Britain and the United States by attacking Allied merchant shipping. At the same time, Britain and France endeavored to destroy German raiders, runners and submarines. The U.S. Navy assisted in this effort on 6 November 1941, when the cruiser *Omaha* (CL-4) and destroyer *Somers* (DD-381) captured the blockade runner *Odenwald*.

Photo 1-2



Crewmembers of the cruiser *Omaha* (CL-4) pose with U.S. and German flags, on board the German blockade runner MV *Odenwald*. The runner was disguised as the American merchant ship SS *Willmote* when she was captured by the cruiser *Omaha* and the destroyer *Somers* (DD-381) on 6 November 1941.

U.S. Navy Photograph #80-G-464023, now in the collection of the National Archives

On the German side, blockade runners strove, for the most part unsuccessfully, to dodge the ubiquitous presence of United States and Royal Navy ships in the South Atlantic, and elsewhere in the world. As a part of the desperate cat and mouse contest, runners in port tried to avoid prematurely disclosing their movements to Allied spies ashore by leaving port only under the cloak of darkness during the period of a new moon. Once clear of their berth, another German ship would often shift into it, so that when morning dawned, it would appear to observers that the runner was still present. Runners needed to be both clever and resourceful, because one caught by a warship out at sea was unlikely to survive. Napoléon Bonaparte once stated that he could make men die for the multicolored bits of ribbon he pinned on their chest. Along these same lines, Germany began awarding Blockade Runner badges on 1 April 1941 to the crewmembers of ships that attempted or successfully managed to break the Allied sea blockade.⁴



SEARCH FOR GERMAN RUNNERS AND RAIDERS

On 10 March 1943, Cruiser Division Two, under Rear Adm. Oliver Middleton Read Jr., USN, was at sea in the South Atlantic with orders to patrol in the area bounded by the Equator and fifteen degrees south Latitude, between eighteen and twenty-four degrees west Longitude. Read's primary mission was to search for and capture or destroy enemy raiders and blockade runners. Task Group 23.1 was comprised of a cruiser, two destroyers, and an auxiliary aircraft carrier.

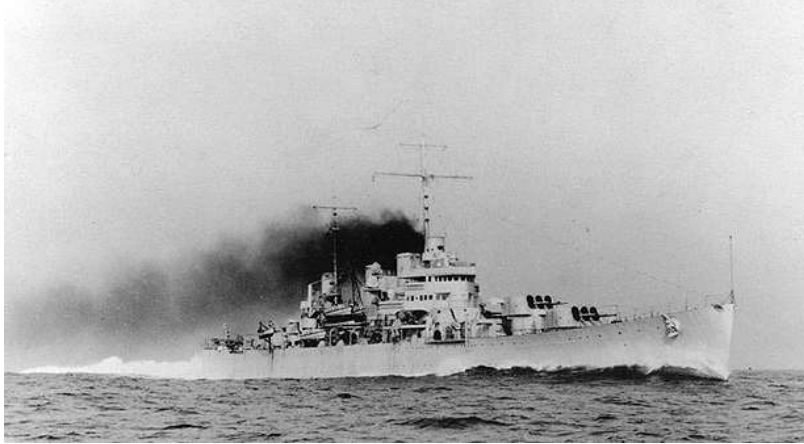
Task Group 23.1 (Cruiser Division Two)

| Ship | Commissioned | Commanding Officer |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|
| <i>Savannah</i> (CL-42) | 10 Mar 1938 | Capt. Robert W. Cary, USN |
| <i>Santee</i> (ACV-29) | 30 Oct 1940 | Capt. William D. Sample, USN |
| <i>Eberle</i> (DD-430) | 4 Dec 1940 | Comdr. Karl F. Pochlmann, USN |
| <i>Livermore</i> (DD-429) | 7 Oct 1940 | Lt. Comdr. H. E. Seidel Jr., USN ⁵ |

As the formation proceeded east on course 087°T, aircraft launched from the carrier conducted search operations for a distance of 180 miles on either side of, and 200 miles along, the base course. In mid-afternoon, *Santee* reported at 1545 that a plane had sighted a solitary ship to the northeast of the "Peter and Paul Rocks" (St. Peter and St. Paul Archipelago) on a north-northwest course at 12 knots. The unidentified vessel was flying Dutch colors aft and another Dutch flag was laid out on deck.⁶

The flagship *Savannah* with Admiral Read, accompanied by *Eberle*, left the formation ten minutes later, turned north and proceeded at 27 knots to intercept the vessel, seventeen miles distant. The warships altered course at 1605 to 027° true. Nine minutes later, a ship "hull-down" came into view broad on their starboard bow at a distance of fifteen miles. The term hull-down means that the upper portion of a ship (its masts) is visible on the horizon, but its lower body (hull) is not.⁷

Photo 1-3



Light cruiser *Savannah* (CL-42) making a full power run off Rockland, Maine, in February 1938.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph #NH 82110

Photo 1-4



Destroyer *Eberle* (DD-430) underway at sea, circa 1940-1941.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph #NH 73451

At 1617, Read ordered the *Eberle* to “Fly WBA, close ship close aboard at high speed, fire across bow and stern. Board quickly, this may be a runner.” (The meaning of the International Code flag hoist

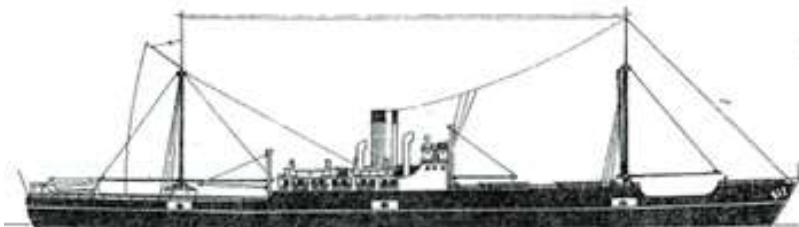
signal WBA was, “DO NOT LOWER BOATS. DO NOT SCUTTLE. DO NOT USE RADIO. IF YOU DISOBEY, I SHALL OPEN FIRE.”) With the crews of the *Savannah* and *Eberle* at battle stations, and two *Savannah* planes in the air for scouting, the ships came right to course 030°T and increased speed to 31 knots. Several minutes later, it was possible with binoculars to clearly see the ship’s masts, painted in a spiral camouflage pattern, suggesting the vessel was likely a blockade runner.⁸

Read directed *Eberle*, “Never mind Dutch flag, pile in there. This is a runner.” *Savannah*, in turn, having reached a point about 6,500 yards from the ship, began maneuvering on various courses to circle and inspect her from a distance.⁹

PEDIGREE OF THE BLOCKADE RUNNER

The as yet unidentified runner was the former Dutch motor vessel *Kota Nopan*, a 7,323-ton passenger/cargo ship built for Rotterdamsche Lloyd of the Netherlands in 1931. Ten years later, on Sunday, 17 August 1941, she had been en route from New Zealand to Panama, in the vicinity of the Galapagos Islands, when the First Officer on watch sighted an unidentified ship. The *Kota Nopan* was at prayer, and the officer did not want to interrupt the service to inform the captain. The German auxiliary cruiser (raider) *Komet* drew near and fired a warning shot. As *Kota Nopan* started to transmit an SOS message, the raider (commanded by Konteradmiral Robert Eyssen) opened fire. These shots were intended to cause intimidation but not damage the ship. They served their purpose; clearly outgunned, *Kota Nopan* surrendered to *Komet* after only firing two rounds herself.¹⁰

Photo 1-5



German auxiliary cruiser *Komet*, one of nine converted freighters which, heavily armed with hidden guns and torpedoes, prowled ocean waters and preyed on Allied shipping. Raider Supplement to the Weekly Intelligence Report No. 64, of 30 May 1941, issued by the Naval Intelligence Division, Navy Staff, Admiralty

The *Kota Nopan* then made passage to Bordeaux, France, with her Dutch crew under German officers. Following a decision to put her in service as a blockade runner, her new master Werner Gippe reported aboard in early 1942. By April, a majority of her new crew had arrived. Renamed *Karin*, she proceeded in early May to St. Nazaire for a thorough refit, including the overhaul of her engines, enlargement of her galley, renewal of her cook ranges, and installation of new reefers (refrigeration machinery).¹¹

In consideration of her new role as a runner—and if necessary, support ship for U-boats and raiders—shipyard workers built quarters for possible prisoners on the first “tween deck aft,” and fitted her with one 105mm gun and four 20mm guns. The large gun was mounted aft, and below, it two smaller guns protected by splinter shields. The remaining two 20mm guns were mounted forward, one on either side of the bridge. The ship was painted grey, with white spiral stripes on her masts the only camouflage scheme. Four drums of acid were carried aft to enable *Karin* to create a smoke screen. The most ominous additions to the ship were three 50-kilogram and one 25-kilogram explosive charges fitted in the most convenient places in the engine room; one being in the shaft alley. The charges utilized a fuse, with a delayed action of seven-to-nine minutes, activated by manual lanyards. As a safety measure, two separate lanyards had to be pulled to activate each demolition charge.¹²

Before *Karin* left Bordeaux to attempt to run the blockade off Germany, Konteradmiral Heinz-Eduard Menche, chief of the German Navy Service Office, Bordeaux, came aboard to address the composite crew of merchant seamen and naval personnel. He spoke about the importance of the ship’s mission—which singularly failed to impress the seamen—and stressed the necessity for keeping silent under interrogation if captured.¹³

Karin successfully reached the Far East on her first outbound voyage as a blockade runner, and spent a week alongside Swettenham Pier at Penang, loading 2,000 tons of tin and 2,000 tons of rubber. The island, located at the northern entry to the Straits of Malacca off the Malay Peninsula, was under Japanese occupation and would soon serve as a German Far-Eastern U-boat base. *Karin* was equipped to refuel U-boats in an emergency and to accommodate prisoners transferred to her by raiders—but would have no occasion to exercise these capabilities.¹⁴

In early morning on 4 February, the *Karin*, heavily laden (attesting to the critical importance of her cargo to Germany), put to sea. After passing through the Straits of Malacca, she crossed the Indian Ocean

and rounded the Cape of Good Hope. From there, *Karin* proceeded westward until roughly in the center of the South Atlantic and then turned northward. On 10 March, she was sailing under the Dutch flag with the signal flags for letters PFLX (those of the Dutch ship *Kota Tjandi*) hoisted aloft. As the *Santee* plane approached and challenged *Karin* by flashing signals, crewmen manned the ship's guns, but waved as the aircraft circled, to indicate friendly character.¹⁵

Photo 1-6



The German blockade runner *Karin*, sailing under false colors, is caught by the cruiser *Savannah* (CL-42) and destroyer *Eberle* (DD-430) on 10 March 1943.

CTIG 23.1 Report of Interception and Destruction of the German Blockade Runner “*Kota Nopan*” (ex-Dutch “*Kota Pinang*”). (The title of the report containing this photograph is incorrect; the *Kota Nopan* and the *Kota Pinang* were two different ships.)

POTENTIAL PRIZE SHIP SCUTTLED BY CREW

Blockade runner sank following explosion. Nine men of boarding party from Eberle lost in valiant attempt to obtain vital evidence. Further information to [be sent to task] group tomorrow.

—Message sent by Rear Adm. Oliver Middleton Read Jr., USN,
to the four ships comprising his Task Group 23.1,
on the evening of 10 March 1943.¹⁶

Closing on the suspect ship, *Eberle* and *Savannah* fired warning shots at 1633 and 1635, respectively, across the suspect blockade runner's bow as she had failed to stop for inspection. After the second shot, *Karin* backed her engines, coming to a stop, and almost immediately hoisted “FM,” meaning: “I am sinking, send boat to pick up crew and passengers.” Despite a warning by *Eberle* to not use her radio, she also transmitted a distress signal:

1708 RRR de KOTA TJANDI PFLX PSN 7.10 South 20.4 West
ordered to stop by warship unknown” on 500 kcs [khz].

Admiral Read, suspecting that *Karin’s* crew would try to scuttle the ship to prevent its capture and any intelligence aboard, signaled the *Eberle*: “Grab a lifeboat and personnel and board.”¹⁷

As soon as *Savannah* was sighted, the crew of the German vessel had made their way to “abandon ship” stations, and at 1638 began to enter and lower boats. There were four at the rail, two on each side of the vessel. The men carried suitcases, kept packed for such an eventually. Meanwhile, the chief and second engineers activated the scuttling charges and set fire to the engines. The master threw the confidential papers overboard, while the radio officers attempted to set fire to the radio shack with gasoline and incendiaries. Other sailors set fire to the cabins on the upper deck. In an effort to keep *Karin’s* crew on board and, by this action, hopefully prevent the activation of demolitions, the pilot of *Savannah’s* plane, Lt. C. A. Anderson, directed steady fire from his fixed machine gun at the water under the boats, until the gun jammed. He then continued to circle the ship at a very low altitude, and the gunner in the after cockpit was able to get a few rounds off in the direction of the boats with his unmounted gun.¹⁸

Photo 1-7



Curtiss SOC-3 scout observation floatplane similar to those carried aboard the *Savannah* (CL-42). Note the .30-cal. machine gun in the after cockpit. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph #NH 80523

At the same time, smoke began to issue from canvas-covered engine room spaces, located just aft of the stack, and a wisp from the poop-deck at the stern. Aboard the cruiser, Read ordered *Eberle* to, “Get in there at high speed, close aboard.” At 1643, *Karin*’s four lifeboats (carrying most of her crew) cast off, rapidly cleared the vessel, and proceeded initially in the direction of her stern.¹⁹

Eberle’s motor whaleboat made *Karin*’s side at 1649, as heavy flames enveloped her amidships structure. The boat coxswain came alongside in this area, so that the boarding party could utilize a Jacob’s ladder hanging over the side at that location to board the ship. As the men reached the main deck, the last of the Germans dove over the stern, and were recovered by the ship’s lifeboats. At 1651, the boarding officer, Lt. (jg) Frederick Edwards—having made a hurried inspection of the bridge, where he found nothing of interest except for a chart of the Black Sea, and having thrown overboard several incendiaries—requested more men to fight the fire. Comdr. Karl Poehlmann, *Eberle*’s commanding officer, upon receiving this request, decided it prudent to get the boarding party off the ship instead. He requested permission from the flagship to recall the men, which was immediately granted.²⁰

The boarding and salvage party began leaving *Karin* at 1654. Two minutes later, there were two heavy explosions amidships and one aft on the vessel. The explosions, originating deep within the ship, blew out the port side of the vessel just aft of the bridge structure, and resultant smoke billowed about two hundred feet into the air from the bridge structure and after deckhouse. The force of the blast also destroyed *Eberle*’s boat, killing nine men in the boat, or on the ladder preparing to board it. *Karin* sank stern first, one minute later at 1657.²¹

Savannah had launched a whaleboat (with a boarding party aboard should it be needed) at 1653. The boat, which was nearby, found Seaman Second Louis J. Doll stretched out atop a floating wooden hatch. He was dazed and the bones in his left leg appeared to be broken. After crewmen carefully lifted Doll aboard over the gunnel, the boat made *Eberle*’s side and transferred the injured man to the ship. Leaving the destroyer’s side, the boat continued to search amidst floating debris (which included large numbers of bales of rubber and empty 50-gallon oil drums) and found Lt. (jg) Edwards and Seaman First Alexander Bisheimer clinging to a wooden locker. After taking them to the destroyer as well, *Savannah*’s boat joined *Eberle*’s remaining boat and planes from the cruiser in combing the area for any other survivors. Admiral Read ordered the search abandoned 1830, and directed that the flags of both ships be “half-masted” in reverence for

Eberle's dead and missing. After *Savannah* recovered her planes, the ships sank the German lifeboats with gunfire, and then left the area to rejoin *Santee* and *Livermore*.²²

Savannah had recovered the entire crew of *Karin* (11 officers and 61 men; made up of 21 regular navy and 40 merchant marine) from the four boats a short time earlier. As the cruiser had approached the lifeboats, men in them were seen to throw navigational instruments and weapons over the side. The prisoners and most of their luggage were taken from the boats, but an assortment of fine food, drink, and other articles was left behind. These items included Japanese rice beer, French champagne, canned salmon and sardines, oranges, bread still warm from the oven, and women's shoes with Hong Kong labels.²³

Orders from higher authority directed the *Savannah* to hold the prisoners incommunicado, separate the officers from the men, keep them under strict surveillance, and under no circumstances question or solicit any information from them. The Germans behaved well and were landed in the United States on 28 March. The naval prisoners, with the exception of the doctor and two pharmacists, were taken to an Interrogation Center (likely Fort Hunt in Washington, DC) for questioning. The merchant seamen were interrogated on Ellis Island.²⁴

AWARDS FOR VALOR; MOST POSTHUMOUSLY

Eleven of the twelve members of the boarding party received medals for valor, nine of them posthumously. The associated award citations may be found in Appendix A. (Louis Doll was recommended for the Silver Star and he likely received it. The author was, however, unable to verify this action.)

| Name | Medal |
|---|----------------------------|
| Lt. (jg) Frederick L. Edwards Jr., USNR | Navy Cross |
| Seaman First Alexander Joseph Bisheimer, USN | Navy Cross |
| Signalman Third William Joseph Pattison, USN | Navy Cross (posthumously) |
| Fireman First Dennis Joseph Buckley Jr., USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Seaman Second Wilbur Gaylord Davis, USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Watertender Second Alex M. Diachenko, USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Fireman First William J. Jones, USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Coxswain Joseph E. H. Metivier, USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Carpenter's Mate First Robert Merrill Shockley, USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Motor Machinist's Mate First Merton B. Myers, USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Seaman Second Carl Welby Tinsman, USN | Silver Star (posthumously) |
| Seaman Second Louis J. Doll, USN ²⁵ | |