The wardroom of the Royal Australian Navy’s (RAN) premier training establishment, HMAS _Cerberus_, is home to many fine treasures reflecting Australia’s naval heritage. Perhaps the most curious of these is a dark blue enamelled iron postbox emblazoned in gold with the words _Post-Briefkasten_. This artefact was presented to the wardroom in 1916 by Lieutenant Commander R. C. Creer, RAN and has its origins in Bagomoyo, German East Africa.1 The story of how it became one of the most recognisable artefacts in the _Cerberus_ wardroom lies in the account of one of the RAN’s lesser-known warships, HMAS _Pioneer_, and the operations in which it was involved during the blockade of German East Africa in World War I.

The Royal Navy commissioned the 3rd class cruiser HMS _Pioneer_ on 10 July 1900. _Pioneer_ displaced 2200 tons and was armed with eight 4-inch single mount guns, eight 3 pounder guns and several machine guns. The ship also mounted two 14-inch torpedo tubes above the waterline. _Pioneer_ first arrived in Australian waters in October 1905 and continued in service as a unit of the Royal Navy on the Australia Station until 29 November 1912 when she paid off at Sydney for transfer to the RAN as a gift from the Admiralty. Commissioned as HMAS _Pioneer_ into the RAN on 1 March 1913, she was subsequently used as a seagoing training ship for the Naval Reserve.

When war with Germany was declared on 4 August 1914, _Pioneer_ was in dry dock at Williamstown, Melbourne. Within 24 hours of the declaration of war the ship was afloat, provisioned, coaled and ready for sea. The following day she sailed for Fremantle, from where she patrolled the waters off the West Australian coast.

On 16 August, eight miles west of Rottnest Island, _Pioneer_ captured the German steamer _Neumünster_ (4424 tons) and escorted her into Fremantle. On 26 August _Pioneer_ captured a second ship, the Norddeutcher-Lloyd vessel _Thüringen_ (4994 tons), also off Rottnest Island. Neither of the German ships carried wireless equipment and it transpired that their masters were unaware of the outbreak of war.

In early November 1914, _Pioneer_ sailed as part of the escort to the first Australian troop convoy bound for the Middle East. Unfortunately she suffered condenser failure and was consequently ordered to return to Fremantle to effect repairs. This twist of fate was to result in an adventure that would take _Pioneer_ away from Australian waters for almost two years, where she participated in a classic example of sea control in the littoral environment.

On 24 December 1914, the Admiralty requested the urgent aid of _Pioneer_ to take part in a blockade off the German East African coast. In September the German cruiser _Königsberg_, mounting ten 4.1-inch guns, had engaged and destroyed _Pioneer_'s sister ship, HMS _Pegasus_, and had skilfully manoeuvred herself approximately 12 miles upstream in the shallow Rufiji River delta, in German East Africa, beyond the range of effective fire from the sea. The British forces assembling off the African coast were now faced with a double duty: first, the maintenance of a blockade to prevent supplies reaching German land forces in East Africa; and, second, the neutralisation of a dangerous German raider.

_Pioneer_ sailed from Fremantle on 9 January 1915 and joined the British force off Zanzibar on 6 February. The force consisted of the light cruisers HMS _Weymouth_ and _Hyacinth_, HMS _Pyramus_ (another of _Pioneer_'s sister ships), the armed merchant cruiser _Kinau Castle_ and six smaller vessels. Formal blockade was proclaimed on 1 March 1915, and five days later Vice Admiral Sir H. G. King-Hall arrived in the old battleship HMS _Goliath_ to take charge.

For the purpose of blockade operations, the East African coastline was divided into three sections. _Pioneer_ was ordered to patrol the northernmost of these and was appointed in charge of the _Kinau Castle_, the armed steamer _Duplex_ and the whaler _Pickle_. There was little traffic to be watched, except for native dhows creeping along the coast, but signal activity by the enemy gave the impression that the _Königsberg_ would soon make her bid to break through the blockade.
After several attempts to drive Königsberg from her lair, it was decided to tow to the scene the 6-inch gun monitors, HM Ships Severn and Mersey that had been specially designed for river work. By taking advantage of their shallow draught it was planned to manoeuvre them upstream within range of the raider. The attack began early on the morning of 6 July 1915, with the two monitors creeping silently into the northerly Kikunya mouth of the river under the cover of darkness. Pioneer’s orders were to proceed with Hyacinth to the southerly Simba-Uranga mouth and bombard its shore defences, as shown on the map of overleaf.3

Serving in Pioneer was Surgeon Lieutenant G. A. Melville-Anderson who described the action as follows:

‘On we went, very cautiously, and when we were about 5,000 yards from the river entrance, we dropped anchor and allowed the tide to swing us broadside on. Hence all our starboard guns bore on the entrance. Previous to anchoring, a shell burst in the water not far from the ship, and another in the air. No one knew from whence they came. Very soon we were firing salvos and then each gun rapidly independently. Our shells were bursting everywhere, throwing up great clouds of sand and earth. No sign of life was visible in the neighbourhood.

In the meantime, the monitors were steaming up the river under heavy fire from the banks, but they went on and soon were within range of the Königsberg. They then directed their fire on her, the range being five miles. Seaplanes assisted the monitors in locating the position, but they were not very successful. The Königsberg fired salvos of five guns, the accuracy of which was good. From firing salvos of five guns she dropped to four then to three and two and finally one. During the last hour-and-a-half of the engagement she ceased fire altogether. One of her shells hit the forward gun of Mersey and practically wiped out that gun’s crew - four men were killed and four wounded’.3

At 3:30 pm after firing 600 6-inch shells, both monitors were withdrawn. The Königsberg although badly damaged had not been destroyed and she remained a threat. Consequently the operation was repeated on 12 July. This time Königsberg straddled the Severn as she prepared to drop anchor, but Severn quickly found the range and hit the German ship several times, setting her on fire and forcing the enemy to complete her destruction using demolition charges. While this was taking place, Pioneer was again engaged in bombardment against German shore defences from a range of 2000 yards.

Following the destruction of Königsberg, Pioneer spent a period patrolling off the river mouth, and later, some time in the southern section of the blockade area. By the end of July she had been under way every day for more than six months with the exception of nine days spent in harbour. On 31 August she ceased patrol duties and six months with the exception of nine days spent in harbour. On 31 August she ceased patrol duties and later, some time in the southern section of the blockade area. By the end of July she had been under way every day for more than six months with the exception of nine days spent in

Pioneer’s hulk was scuttled off Sydney on 18 February 1921. The postbox souvenired by two of Pioneer’s officers, Acting Commander W.B. Wilkinson and Lieutenant R.C. Creer, who were acting as Beach Master and Provost Marshal respectively.

By this time the naval situation in East Africa had stabilised, as the German forces were being driven inland, and contraband traffic by sea was not considered likely to do them much good.4 It therefore became possible to send Pioneer home.

On 22 August 1916 she sailed from Zanzibar to Australia, flying her paying off pennant. Her arrival in Sydney on 22 October brought the career of this obsolete ship, dating from pre-war years, to an end, yet she had probably seen more actual fighting and fired more rounds in the course of World War I than any other Australian ship.5 Pioneer’s hulk was scuttled off Sydney on 18 February 1931. The postbox souvenired by two of Pioneer’s officers remains in commission.

1 L. G. Wilson, Cradle of the Navy, Victoria, 1981, p. 27.1.
3 M. A. Melville-Anderson, An Account of the Movements of HMAS Cerberus during the Great War, August 1919, (Navy Historical Section).

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