

# GERMAN RAIDERS IN HAMPTON ROADS

BY ELIJAH PALMER



Prinz Eitel Friedrich in Hampton Roads, spring 1915. (HRNM image)

In the spring of 1915, two German commerce raiders came to Hampton Roads for repairs. *Prinz Eitel Friedrich* arrived in March, and *Kronprinz Wilhelm* arrived in April. At the beginning of hostilities in 1914, the passenger liner *Prinz Eitel Friedrich* was in Germany's colony in Tsingtao, China, where the German navy armed the ship with guns and men. Vice Admiral Graf von Spee ordered it to attack allied merchant ships, which it did for the next seven months in the South Pacific and Atlantic Oceans before seeking refuge in the neutral port of Hampton Roads.

The other ship, *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, was a passenger liner before the war. It was commissioned into the German navy in August 1914 and rendezvoused with a German naval vessel in the Atlantic, where it gained guns and some crew. Preparations for re-arming the ship were cut short, however, due to the

appearance of British naval ships in the vicinity. After a brief stop at the Azores, the ship headed to Brazil, completing its refit by early September. *Kronprinz Wilhelm* operated off the east coast of South America for six months, but low coal supplies and poor health conditions caused the ship to stop at Hampton Roads.

Between them, *Prinz Eitel Friedrich* and *Kronprinz Wilhelm* had taken over two dozen prizes and represented an obstacle to Anglo-American relations. The British wanted the crews arrested for piracy, while the United States wanted to remain neutral. Hoping to take advantage of Woodrow Wilson's call for neutrality, the German navy chose to allow the ships and their crews to be interned by the U.S. government. The U.S. Navy moved them from Newport News, where the ships had gone for repairs, to Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth.

The German ships and sailors became popular local attractions, as news of their cruises had been well-reported by the American press. Because they were not technically prisoners of war, the crews (numbering close to six hundred men) had a fair amount of freedom and were able to go out into the community and even travel to other regions; however, the sailors were confined to the naval yard after the escape of several officers in October 1915.

After months of internment, the German sailors constructed nearly fifty buildings, forming what the locals called the "German Village." The Germans called it "Eitel Wilhelm,"



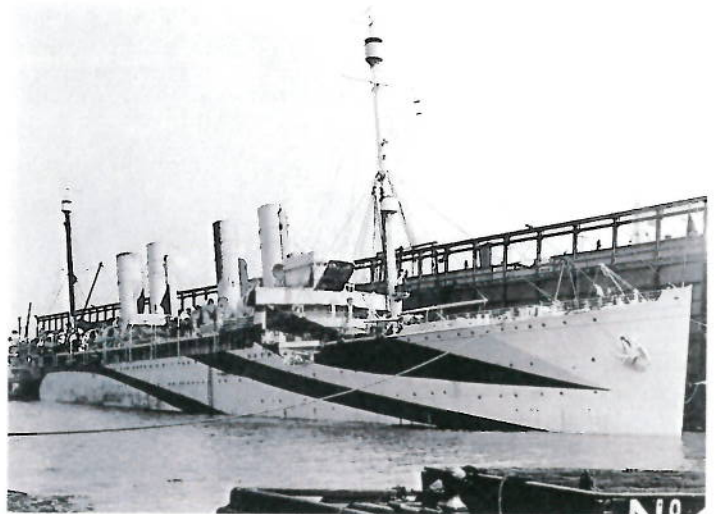
Officers and crew of *Kronprinz Wilhelm* in Newport News, April 1915. (HRNM image)



*The German Village with the ships in the background. (HRNM image)*

combining the names of the two ships. They built the structures out of scrap material from the naval yard and from their ships. The sailors charged 10 cents for admission, which went to the German Red Cross, and they also sold food and souvenirs. The site was quite popular, bringing in tourists from all along the East Coast.

The German Village lasted until August 1916, when the Navy made plans to increase the size of the fleet in preparation for the United States' eventual entry into the war. The Norfolk Naval Shipyard planned new dry docks, and these plans necessitated the destruction of the village; it ceased to exist by the end of the summer. In September 1916, the Navy transferred the ships and sailors to Philadelphia. When the United States entered the Great War, the crews went to a prisoner of war camp in Georgia and the ships were pressed into service as troop transports. Together, the two ships transported thousands of troops of the American Expeditionary Forces to the war in Europe and back home again. In June 1918 on the voyage from Brest to New York, USS *Von Steuben* encountered seven small boats under sail on the port bow and, more dramatically, the periscope of German *U-151*, the source of the torpedo bearing down upon USS *Von Steuben*. The ship avoided the torpedo and delivered a desultory depth-charge barrage, which subjected the submarine to a severe shaking. Unfortunately the transport ship left the seven small boats, survivors of the sunken British steamer *Dwinsk*, in fear that they were simply decoys. The boats seemed uninhabited because the master of the *Dwinsk* ordered his people to lie low so that other Allied ships would not be drawn into the waiting U-boat's trap. Fortunately, he and his men were saved eventually.



*Kronprinz Wilhelm was renamed USS Von Steuben. The Navy repainted this ship with a camouflage scheme. (NHHC image)*



*Locals and sailors on the Kronprinz Wilhelm at Norfolk Naval Shipyard. (HRNM image)*