

'The WATUSSI'

South Africa relied on the assets of its national airline to carry out its first aerial action of World War Two, explains **Andrew Thomas**

When war broke out in September 1939 the South African Air Force (SAAF) found itself lacking modern equipment. Its only option was to commandeer 18 Junkers Ju 86Z-1s being used by South African Airways (SAA).

First it was necessary to convert them for combat, which included adding external bomb racks, greater fuel capacity, dorsal gun positions and a ventral turret. As the security of the sea-lanes around the Union of South Africa's

coastline was the priority, four squadrons were formed at coastal locations – each equipped with three Ju 86s. Initially they wore their civilian registration with the addition of SAAF roundels, with most of the pilots being ex-SAA crewmen. These sorties also carried a naval officer though there were no navigation aids, life jackets or parachutes.

Initially 15 Squadron, based at Wingfield near Cape Town, joined searches for the pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*.

On December 1, the Ju 86 units were reorganised, with 15 and 16 Squadrons amalgamating to form 32 Squadron (A and B Flights) while 13 and 14 became 31 Squadron, though in reality it took some time for them to adopt the new identities. However, the following day, success crowned the Junkers crews efforts.

Fateful voyage

In late November the 9,500-ton Deutsche Ost-Afrika liner *Watussi*, which had been bottled

BELOW Still in its SAA colours, Junkers Ju 86Z ZS-AGE was the first SAAF aircraft to engage the 'Watussi' SAAF





INCIDENT



LEFT For the first few months of the war the Ju 86Zs taken over from South African Airways retained their civilian registrations, though were eventually allocated military serials
SAAF MUSEUM

up in the Mozambique port of Lourenco Marques, sailed for South America with a crew of 49, and 155 expatriate German passengers.

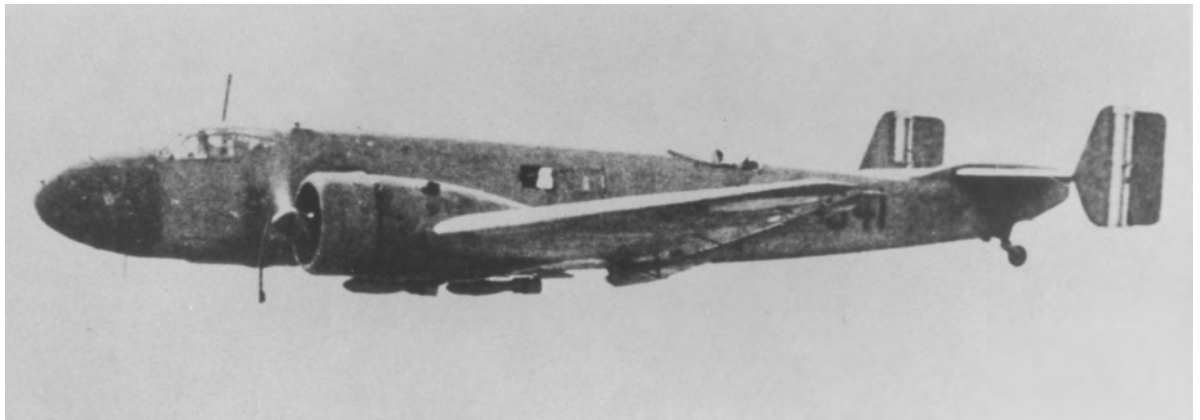
Shortly after 0800hrs on December 2, Capt H Q Boshoff and crew in ZS-AGE left Wingfield on a patrol. Two hours later when on their final

leg, 70 miles south of Cape Point, 2nd Lt Driver spotted a ship that was identified by the RN observer Lt McEwan as the *Watussi*.





RIGHT Seen after the 'Watussi' incident, this SAAF Ju 86Z shows the external bomb carriage SAAF



Reporting the sighting by wireless, the ship was ordered to head for Cape Town but initially the *Watussi's* Master Capt Stamer ignored the Aldis lamp signal. To persuade him otherwise, Boshoff ordered a burst of gunfire across the bows, then a 112lb bomb was dropped. This time it changed course, but when a lack of fuel forced Boshoff to withdraw the ship resumed its original course. At 1230hrs Capt Raubenheimer in Junkers ZS-ALN took off and contacted the *Watussi*, which once more altered course for Cape Town, though only at 2-3kts. Warned to increase speed or be attacked, she began steaming at 8kts and hoisted the German flag.

BELOW Smoke pours from the blazing hulk of the 'Watussi' off the South African coast SAAF

A third Ju 86, ZS-AJK, flown by the CO, Maj J M B Botes, took off at 1415hrs and, on arriving at

the scene an hour later, saw the lifeboats had been swung out, but were unmanned. Ten minutes later the ship suddenly stopped,

“Boshoff ordered a burst of gunfire across the bows, then a 112lb bomb was dropped. This time it changed course”

and the lifeboats were lowered as smoke poured from the vessel. Capt Stamer had set fire to his ship. *Watussi's* crew continued

to abandon ship and within minutes it was engulfed in flames. Having refuelled and returned to the scene, Boshoff saw the ship had developed a significant list. Guided by the Junkers, the cruiser HMS *Sussex* arrived at 1800hrs and picked up the survivors. Requests from the enthusiastic airmen to bomb *Watussi's* blazing hulk were refused and instead, the battlecruiser HMS *Renown* sank the *Watussi* by gunfire.

This was the SAAF's first action of the war and despite the frustration of not bringing in the ship to port, it was seen as a great success. The CO wrote in his report: "I feel that if we had been permitted to carry out our original intentions of destroying the lifeboats [while still stowed - author] this would have been achieved." **FP**

