

by Michael Kinsman, M.A.

the hunting of the hunter

Seaplanes! What enemy ship carried seaplanes? It could only be something big. A pocket-battleship or cruiser. . . . Hunting groups formed to speed to all areas where a raider might strike again. Nine groups of warships fanned out over the oceans.

And already, German plans were working. German policy for ocean raiders was not only 'disruption and destruction of enemy shipping', but 'frequent changes of position—to create uncertainty'—and tie down our warships in the hunt. And already, one sinking had had immense and far-reaching effect on our navies. Diverted to the hunt from our naval commitments round the world: one battleship, three carriers, one battle-cruiser and five cruisers!

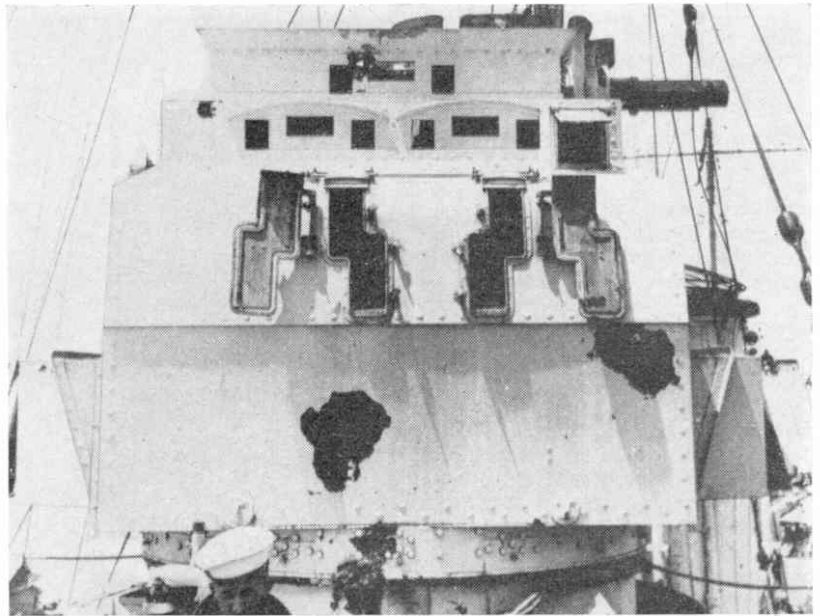
German Admiralty had reason to be pleased.

Where next would the raider pounce? At Admiralty H.Q. a single cross on a huge chart marked *Clement's* end. Where would the next appear?

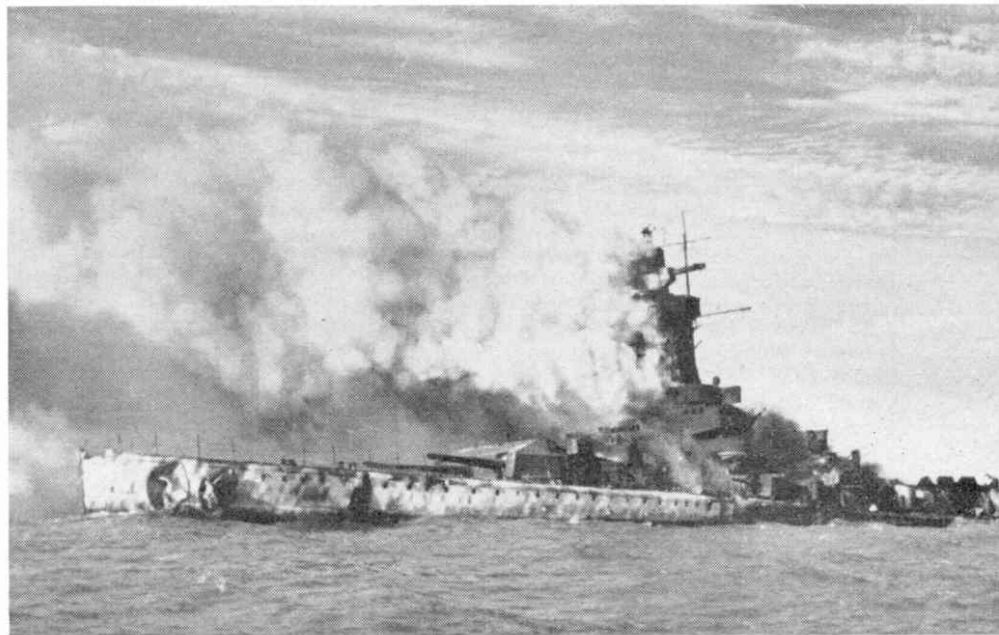
October 5th: S.S. *Newton Beach*, captured. The raider slipped away with her prize. October 9th: a plane from *Ark Royal*, in Hunting Group H, sighted a ship, radioed her to identify. She said she was American, and the plane went away. She was, in fact, the raider's fueller, *Altmark*. A narrow escape. . . . October 7th: cargo-boat *Ashlea*, disappeared. October 10th: *Huntsman*, 8,300 tons, captured. October 22nd: *Trevanion*; sunk.

And so, for two months, a trail of destruction and capture lengthened across South Atlantic, into the Indian Ocean, and back again. Ship after ship. One raider, heavily armed, lightning-fast, nameless. . . .

Then, December 2nd, after midnight, message intercepted by British steamer: RRR RRR RRR 19 deg. 5' south, 05 deg. 05' east, *Doric Star* GUNNED BATTLESHIP.



The Battle of the River Plate. 13th-17th December, 1939. The director tower of H.M.S. Achilles showing splinter damage after an 11-inch shell from the Admiral Graf Spee had burst just short of the ship. These splinters did not put the director out of action or damage any important instrument



The tragic end of a great ship. Burning and slowly sinking beneath the waves in the River Plate estuary

Battleship! 0501—another signal flashed out of the night: this time another vessel. Again, the fateful RRR—meaning 'surface-raider'. Two minutes later, transmission stopped. Silence. Whatever had happened out there on the dark water was over.

Which battleship? Commodore Harwood, commanded the nearest squadron of cruisers. Quickly, he planned. At 15 knots cruising the raider could move from her last known position to the Rio de Janeiro shipping area by morning, December 12th, to the rich River Plate area by the 12th or 13th, or the Falklands by the 14th.

Which? He decided: the Plate. So on

that area three cruisers converged. Their names were soon to become famous: H.M.S. EXETER, H.M.S. AJAX and H.M.S. ACHILLES.

For speeding for the same area, grey hull low in the water: the raider. On her way she claimed one further victim. Then resumed her course, racing towards fate.

Dawn, December 13th. Harwood's small squadron, now in formation off Uruguay, swept the sea at action stations . . . looking . . . waiting. . . .

On those three ships, five officers and 59 ratings had less than two hours to live. At 0613 the squadron was speeding in

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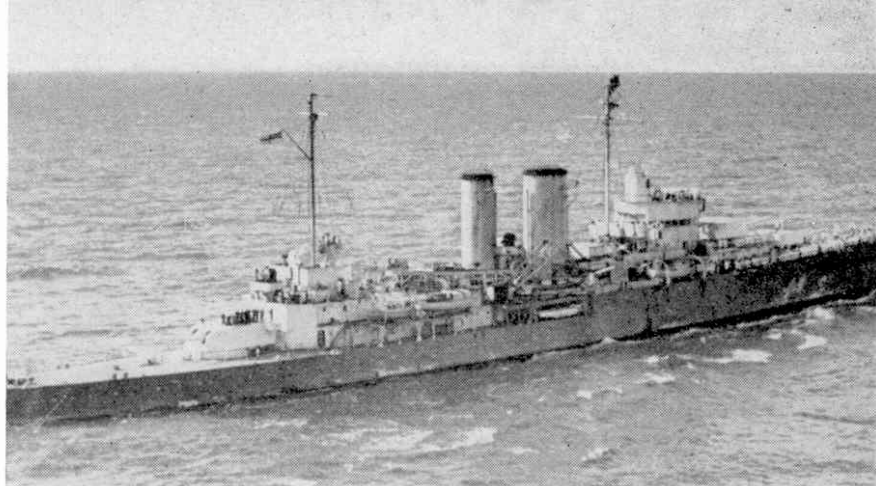
line: *Ajax*, *Achilles*, *Exeter*. At 0614 smoke was sighted. *Exeter* was ordered to close and investigate. 0616: *Exeter* reported: I THINK IT IS A POCKET-BATTLESHIP. . . .

On *Exeter* a flag was run up, yellow-and-blue in the morning sun: ENEMY IN SIGHT BEARING 322. Alarm-gongs sounded: Action Stations! Hundreds of men raced to their posts, the excitement was intense: this was it! Gunnery control computers hummed. Each ship had become a machine, exact, split-second-timed.

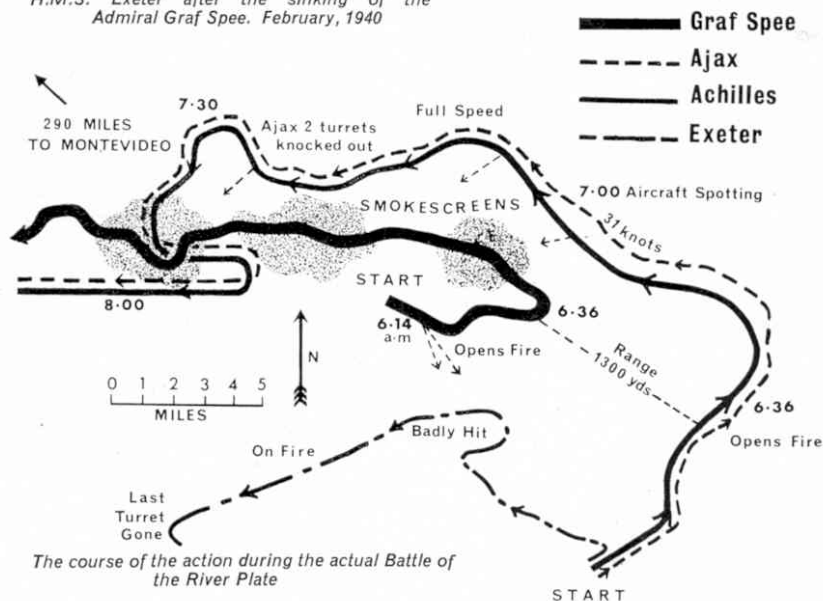
For a moment the warships rushed, in uncanny silence, towards conflict. Range: 19,800 yards. Then the enemy's sides, racing low on the horizon, belched orange. A two-ton broadside, hurtling at one-fifth-of-a-mile each second, arced invisibly through blue-gold sky. Seconds later, the sea round *Exeter* erupted. The third salvo straddled her, one shell bursting amidships, killing the starboard tube's crew in a steel shambles. Another. Another. The British and New Zealanders' guns roared response. Ships shook, trembled as they raced. 0624. An 11 in. shell shattered *Exeter's* 'B' turret, killing the crew, and steel splinters swept the bridge, scything down all there except the Captain and two others. Flame bellowed upwards. *Ajax* and *Achilles* shook with repeated fire. The three cruisers wheeled at speed, closing in. Their enemy: GRAF SPEE—10,000 tons of compact, furious battleship.

Battle joined. For 50 minutes the ships raced, wheeled and struck, salvos raining blood and death across blue water. *Exeter*, a furnace, suffered blow after blow. Forward wheelhouse wrecked, decks holed and twisted, she reeled and burned. With incredible courage she fought back with one turret, as shells poured into her, exploding with terrible effect. At length, retiring behind smoke-screen, she withdrew. 0710. Harwood, on *Ajax*, ordered action

A proud Mr. Winston Churchill—then First Lord of the Admiralty—being cheered by the victorious crew of the battle-scarred "Exeter" upon her return home



H.M.S. *Exeter* after the sinking of the Admiral Graf Spee. February, 1940



broken off till dark. *Spee* sped toward the mouth of the Plate, *Ajax* and *Achilles* shadowing. Each ship attended her dead, her burnt and wounded.

Evening: battle, again, *Graf Spee* struggling, her steering wrecked, for the Plate—and repairs in Uruguay's neutral

harbour of Montevideo. Under glow of lights of a suddenly wildly excited capital city, the warship slipped in, dropped anchor. Outside the harbour, as night deepened the British ships prowled, impatient.

Now began a drama that was to fascinate the entire world.

A German warship, in neutral harbour. Outside, the British. How long would she stay? Would she come out and fight? World attention focused on Montevideo, and on *Spee's* Captain, Langsdorff.

Overnight, the whole world knew Langsdorff. An officer of great dash and exemplary humanity to prisoners, he had fought magnificently. During *Spee's* raids, no ship had fallen to his guns till abandoned and her crew safely taken. The next move: his. What would he do? The world waited.

Spee's damage was grievous. By international law, a combatant can remain in neutral port long enough to repair damage—no more. Outside the three-mile limit, the British waited. Langsdorff asked the Uruguayan authorities for 30 days for repairs. Ashore, his British prisoners, whom he had freed, laid wreaths at a funeral for *Spee's* dead. The British wanted Uruguay to allow

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Spee safe harbour five days: long enough for the arrival of reinforcements, now racing to close the trap. Next day battleship *Cumberland* joined the hunters outside the Plate. Then carrier *Ark Royal*. The odds against *Spee* were overwhelming.

Uruguay was friendly to Britain. But she refused to be pushed by either side. She would inspect *Spee's* damage—and decide—by law. Two days passed. Uruguayan engineers examined *Spee*. Langsdorff pressed, courteously, for 30 days. The British, for five. On December 15th the President issued a decree. And the world was thunderstruck. *Spee* must leave Montevideo—IN 72 HOURS. Deadline: 8 p.m., December 17th.

Langsdorff's position was agonising. Seventy-two hours was not enough to make *Spee* seaworthy. If he went out to fight the overwhelming forces now ranged out at sea against him, *Spee* faced inevitable capture. If she remained, she would be interned—and perhaps handed over to Britain. He conferred with his officers and by radio with Berlin. What would he do? Make a dash to escape by night? Fight to the death? No one knew. Deadline approached. Vast crowds lined the harbour. The capital was electric.

On the 17th, *Graf Spee* lay at anchor. Morning: Langsdorff went ashore, talked to Uruguayan authorities again. Then returned to his ship.

Evening. An hour to go. *Spee's* entire

crew were aboard. Smoke—from her funnels! She was going to move out! The watching thousands were hushed. Radio and television crews intent. The tension was unendurable. Two minutes. One. The great ship lay silent. Then, her hawsers were raised. Slowly she began to make way. A city, a world, held their breath as she moved down the river, out towards open sea. Then she stopped. Sunset flaming her topworks, she was motionless. What was happening? Boats lowered from her sides. Her crew were leaving! Minutes passed. A sudden, appalling light smote the harbour, the faces of stunned, incredulous thousands. Seconds later, across four miles of water, a deep and terrible thunderclap hammered the shore. *Graf Spee*, riddled with time-bombs, rather than capture, was blowing herself to death. Explosion after explosion racked her hull.

When the British ships heard, their captains saluted. On shore, people wept. At length, the explosions ceased. The proud battleship lay twisted, blackened. Great fires roared through her. Oily smoke rolled skyward. It was over.

Next morning, covered in *Spee's* battle-flag, Captain Langsdorff was found. Shot through the temple. He had chosen to die alone with his ship, after saying goodbye to his crew, for the honour of his Navy.

Now, 25 years later, veterans of both sides, from *Graf Spee*, *Achilles*, *Ajax* and *Exeter*, still meet to re-live a mighty encounter: of men, of war, and the sea.

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