

1939 - BRITAIN AT WAR

Raider at Large

The German Navy could not match the Royal Navy in a full scale surface battle, such as had occurred in 1916 at Jutland. But with its fleets of U-boats and its fast and powerful pocket-battleships it could create havoc along the lifelines carrying Britain's maritime commerce. As it happened, two of these pocket-battleships had left harbour before the war began, and for one of them, the *Graf Spee*, a spectacular voyage began which held the world's attention.

At the outbreak of the Second World War instruction number 1 from the German high Command was brief and to the point: the German Navy will conduct mercantile warfare with Britain as its principle target. For this task the specially built pocket-battleships were the most suitable of all surface vessels. At first Hitler however refused to operational freedom to the raiding cruisers as he still hope to make peace with the Western Powers.

Eventually on September 26 as a result of pressure from Admiral Raeder permission was given for the cruiser warfare to begin. At this time the *Graf Spee* was already in the waiting area in the South Atlantic. Captain Langsdorff of the *Graf Spee* had given careful thought to his position and concluded that the importance of the South American trade routes offered better opportunities than those around the Cape of Good Hope. He therefore decided to push westwards Pernambuco in Brasil leaving his supply vessel *Altmark* behind in his waiting area. At 13.00 hours on September 30 the the first enemy ship came into sight, it was the British vessel *Clement*. As the *Graf Spee* closed to within 15 miles the *Clement* turned away as though to escape. Langsdorff ordered the seaplane aboard the *Graf*

Spee to take off and stop the ship which it did, but not before sending off an alarm signal. The ship's captain and chief engineer were taken aboard the *Graf Spee* for interrogation and the remainder of the crew were allowed to take to the lifeboats and a message sent to the wireless station at Pernambuco to ensure their safety. The *Clement* was then sunk. As a result of the interrogation, Langsdorff was able to determine that all British merchant ships had been instructed to send out wireless messages for as long as possible to warn that they were being approached by an enemy raider.

In view of the countermeasures that he expected would be taken against him Langsdorff decided to make for the trade routes around the Cape of Good Hope. He also took the opportunity to disguise the *Graff Spee* to appear more like an Allied warship and thus avoid early detection by an intended victim. On October 5 another merchant vessel the *Newton Beech* was sighted and managed to send out a weak signal before being boarded. The captain admitted he had been misled by the *Graff Spee's* disguise. Two days later the *Graff Spee's* camouflage worked again when the British vessel *Ashlea* was sighted the captain confirmed that he had been duped into believing he was being approached by a French warship. On the afternoon of October 10 the camouflage worked again, this time a large British merchantman the *Huntsman* was captured and a prize crew was put aboard. These successes had all been achieved north of St Helena and Langsdorff had to reckon on countermeasures being taken against him. Also considerable activity by British radio stations in Africa was noticed indicating that the *Graf Spee's* presence was no longer secret.

At this point Langsdorff believed that he could be facing a re-inforced British naval presence comprising battleships, aircraft carriers and heavy cruisers searching for him in the South Atlantic. Not a moment

too soon Langsdorff turned away westward for the British Commander South Atlantic had organised his forces and would have been able to destroy the *Graf Spee* without coming in range of her guns. On October 28 the *Graf Spee* met the supply ship *Altmark* at an agreed location before turning eastwards once again into the Indian Ocean. By now the weather had become rough and stormy and although the tanker *Africa Shell* was sunk on November 15 the raid in this area was not proving so successful. The sinking of the *Africa Shell* had also confirmed to the British that a surface raider was at large in the Indian Ocean and between November 27 and December 2 British squadrons cruised south of the Cape of Good Hope in vain. It seems at this point that Langsdorff was becoming concerned about the necessity of having to return to Germany for the much needed overhaul of the *Graf Spee*'s diesel engines, but decided on one last foray into the South Atlantic before doing so.

On December 7 a British vessel the *Streonshalh* was captured and documents taken from the captain provided details of the assembly points for British merchant ships in the area of the river Plate. Thinking that this would be a good hunting ground Langsdorff immediately set course for the assembly point mentioned in the captured documents. The *Graf Spee* now searched the trade routes of the river Plate in long zig zagging patterns but without sighting a single vessel. However a message from the German high command raised expectations; the message stated that a British convoy consisting of four ships was about to leave Montevideo. During the night of December 12/13 the *Graf Spee* patrolled the area off the river Plate but found nothing, so towards morning turned eastwards. At 5.30 hours a lookout reported the tops of two masts on the horizon and Langsdorff assumed this was the convoy he was seeking. He was soon disillusioned, as the two ships closed the British ship

was recognised as the *Exeter* and behind her were two cruisers of the *Achilles* class. He attacked immediately not wishing to give his opponents time to work up full steam. The battle of the river Plate had begun.

For Commodore Harwood commanding the British South American division aboard HMS *Ajax* together with two further cruisers, HMS *Achilles* and HMS *Exeter* the last news he had of *Graff Spee* was nearly three weeks old. He only knew that that she had sunk the *Africa Shell* on November 17 in the Indian Ocean. He was aware that the shipping routes from the river Plate would be a great temptation to the pocket battleship, in addition, he was also aware that his base at Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands might be vulnerable to attack from the sea. Giving consideration to his options, he concluded that there were three areas of the South Atlantic that the Germans might choose; Rio de Janeiro, the mouth of the river plate or the Falklands. As he could only choose one of these, he selected the river Plate and gave orders accordingly – *Ajax*, *Achilles* and *Exeter* would meet off the Plate on December 10, while a fourth cruiser the *Cumberland* refitting in the Falklands would keep at short notice.

To a layman the odds in the event of a battle were in favour of Harwood and his three ships. But this was not the case; the *Graff Spee* had six 11 inch guns with a range of 17 miles while *Ajax* and *Achilles* had eight 6 inch guns with a range of under 10 miles. *Exeter* had six 8 inch guns with a range of 15 miles. It is also doubtful that Harwood ever expected that the *Graff Spee* would actually come steaming over the horizon on the dawn of December 13, he had assumed that the first indication of her whereabouts would be through a raider report for a merchantman. Once the *Graff Spee's* smoke was sighted *Exeter* was ordered to turn out of line and investigate. The two ships were closing at nearly 50 mph and at this

point Captain Bell of the *Exeter* signalled "I think it is a pocket battle ship".

At 06.17 *Graff Spee* straddled *Exeter* one shell burst amidships killing the starboard torpedo tube crew, but much worse putting the gunnery communications equipment out of action. Moments later an 11 inch shell hit B turret ripping it off and killing the crew. Splinters riddled the bridge killing all but Captain Bell who was wounded, and two others. At this point *Exeter* was virtually out of control, but she did manage to land one shell on the *Graff Spee* striking near the funnel. In the meantime *Ajax* and *Achilles* had closed on the *Graff Spee* and opened fire although their salvos fell short. By now *Exeter* was terribly wounded and *Graff Spee's* main armament was directed towards *Ajax* and *Achilles* as they attempted to close the range. At this point *Achilles* port side and bridge were hit by an 11 inch salvo which rendered the Captain unconscious and put the gunnery control out of action. With *Exeter* effectively out of action and *Achilles* damaged Harwood now took a bold and brave decision; he decided to close with the *Graff Spee* at top speed fully aware that he could lose both ships. Soon after this *Ajax* fired four torpedoes, unfortunately all were spotted by *Graff Spee* which turned away. Langsdorff who was a torpedo specialist and particularly sensitive to their threat seems to have been un-nerved by this.

A few minutes later two things happened, Harwood was told that only two of *Ajax's* eight 6 inch guns were still firing and that only 20% of her ammunition remained. Realising that *Achilles* must have about the same amount of ammunition left and that the *Graff Spee* was steaming at full speed apparently undamaged Harwood famously commented "we might as well be bombarding her with bloody snowballs". He noted in his report "I therefore decide to break off the action and try to close with her after dark." At this point the first

phase of the battle ended and the shadowing began. Aboard the *Graff Spee* assessments indicated that little damage had been incurred, indeed the gunnery officers had comments that although being hit by 17 shells “they had bounced off like turnips.” Despite this Langsdorff decided that the ship was not seaworthy and must be taken into port. After some consideration Montevideo was selected as the best harbour for this purpose.

At noon Harwood discovered the true extent of the damage to *Exeter* and immediately ordered her to try and make for the Falklands. The *Cumberland* was simultaneously ordered to come north from Port Stanley but this would take 36 hours. All this time the shadowing continued until it became clear that the *Graff Spee* was heading for the river plate estuary and by 22.13 the ship was silhouetted against the lights of Montevideo. At 5.00 the following day Harwood’s dispatch notes that the *Graff Spee* had anchored in the Montevideo Roads and the two cruisers settled down to watch the 120 mile wide estuary. The Admiralty in London meanwhile was assembling; with the help of the BBC news broadcasts an entirely imaginary fleet just over the horizon among them the *Ark Royal*. Meantime the *Exeter* was limping towards the Falklands and the *Cumberland* was steaming at top speed towards the river plate. However, although no one knew it at the time, Harwood had won the battle, the fighting was over.

There was little seriously wrong with the *Graff Spee*, she was still a formidable fighting vessel well able to deal with the *Cumberland* and Harwood’s two battered cruisers. Intense diplomatic activity now ensued in order to try and detain the *Graff Spee* in harbour as long as possible to enable the British time to gather reinforcements capable of destroying her. Meanwhile, during this first afternoon in port the British prisoners aboard the *Graff Spee* were being released. At the

same time arrangements were being made for the funeral of the German seamen killed in action. There were several British merchant ships in Montevideo at this time and the British were thus able to invoke a clause in international law which stated that in a neutral port in the time of war if one belligerent power gives notice of an intention to sail a merchant ship the neutral government must prevent any warship of the opposing side from leaving within 24 hours.

On Saturday December 16 much activity was apparent on board the *Graff Spee* and although the British had indicated that they would be sailing another merchant vessel the Uruguayan authorities advised that they could accept no further notices as the *Graff Spee* had announced her intention to leave port the following day. Sunday December was a bright clear day. Massive crowds had come into Montevideo and there was an air of expectancy. Broadcasts had announced that the *Graff Spee* would probably sail that day and that there would be a sea battle. Then late in the afternoon sailors were seen leaving the ship and launches were transferring them to a German freighter the *Tacoma*. Eventually over 800 were counted so it was clear that she could not fight. At 6.15 pm the *Graff Spee* followed by the *Tacoma* steamed about three miles out of harbour and stopped. The *Tacoma* had also stopped alongside and some more activity was seen from the shore. Time passed in confusion and suspense but the unlikely truth was beginning to dawn on the watchers.

Exactly as the sun set a massive volume of smoke billowed up from the *Graff Spee* and an enormous flash followed in due course by the boom of a large explosion signalled the end of the *Graff Spee*.

The next morning *Graff Spee* was still burning fiercely and continued to do so for the next four days. Gradually it was possible for the British to piece together what had actually occurred. Having turned his ship off the main channel Captain Langsdorff had opened the seacocks. Torpedo heads had been suspended by ropes over the open magazines and fuel sluiced over the decks and set alight as the last of the crew left the ship. The fires had burned through the ropes and the torpedo heads fell into the magazines and exploded. The end for Captain Langsdorff was tragic, either by some private code of his own or by orders from Hitler he shot himself the following night.