



'TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY'

December 1939 in Britain was a time when there was a noticeable absence of Christmas spirit. War with Germany appeared to have reached stalemate. News of the 'Graf Spee victory', better known as 'The Battle of the River Plate', provided much needed seasonal cheer.

The early months of World War Two were sometimes referred to as 'the phoney war'. In some quarters it seemed as if the Royal Navy was the only service doing any fighting. But the war at sea was for real and in earnest. "It was never 'phoney' for us", commented Lord Louis Mountbatten, commander of an operational flotilla of destroyers. "It was the most strenuous winter I've ever known, and the most uncomfortable". He might have added "and the most dangerous". This was tragically illustrated when the battleship, HMS Royal Oak, 31,000 tons, was sunk by torpedoes fired from a German submarine with the loss of over eight hundred lives when at anchor in Scapa Flow in the Orkneys on 14 October. By Christmas, a second war with Germany within the space of a generation had become grim reality.

Although it was the menace of U-boats which posed the greatest threat to shipping, attacks on ocean commerce by surface raiders, if they could be sustained, would have been even more formidable. The three German pocket battleships (panzerschiff) permitted by the Treaty of Versailles in the wake of the First World War had been designed with the sole intention of acting as destroyers of commerce. Their six enormous 11-inch guns, a speed of 26 knots and the armour they carried had been compressed with masterly skill into the limits of 10,000 tons displacement. No single British cruiser could match them. However, despite their design they were a grave disappointment to Hitler who had no appreciation of sea warfare or its importance. Nevertheless, one pocket battleship, the Admiral Graf Spee, was

despatched from Wilhelmshaven two weeks before the outbreak of war on the first day of September.

As well as her heavy armament, the capabilities of this ship were formidable. Her diesel engines gave a range of 10,000 miles for cruising at 15 knots, and enabled her to attain her maximum speed of 28 knots faster than steam turbine ships. She was fitted with an early form of radar which had only a range of 19 miles but was a great improvement on any form of radar which had not yet been fitted in British ships. She had a special wireless device which continually combed the air for all wireless communications and indicated their occurrence; special cypher experts able to decipher practically any code, and a group of German Merchant Navy officers from the Naval Reserve who were thoroughly familiar with the trade routes where it was intended she should operate. With typical German thoroughness the Kriegsmarine had done its homework.

Commanded by 45 year old Captain Hans Langsdorff, who had been awarded the Iron Cross at the Battle of Jutland in 1916, the ship received orders to begin operations in the South Atlantic on 26 September. Three days later the Graf Spee opened its campaign off the coast of Brazil by sinking the 'Clement', a British merchantman. Captain Langsdorff skilfully continued to alter his areas of operations and over the next three months zig-zagged across the South Atlantic, around the Cape in South Africa into the Indian Ocean and back into the Atlantic. During this time the ship succeeded in sinking nine British merchant ships totalling over 50,000 tons without the loss of a single life. Unlike

U-boat commanders, Langsdorff gave warning of his intentions, captured the crews and transferred them to his accompanying supply ship, the 'Altmark'.

The British response to these heavy losses was to form hunting groups. These included fast battleships, no fewer than five aircraft carriers, as well as a number of heavy and light cruisers. Raider hunting at sea was governed by the advantage for the raider of surprise and easy concealment over vast stretches of ocean, while the hunters were forced to employ many ships spread out over thousands of square miles if they were to have any chance of tracking down their quarry. One such hunting group comprised three ships, HMS Exeter, a heavy cruiser with six 8-inch guns, and the Royal Navy's HMS Ajax, and the New Zealand Navy's HMNZS Achilles, two light cruisers each with eight six-inch guns. This squadron was commanded by Commodore Henry Harwood flying his flag as Commodore of the South America station in HMS Ajax. It was Harwood who cannily anticipated Langsdorff would set course for the mouth of the River Plate where it was likely there would be easy pickings from merchantmen entering and leaving the port of Buenos Aires in Argentina.

After sinking the British merchantman 'Streonshah' on 7 December, and taking the crew prisoner, the Graf Spee, as foreseen, approached the entrance to the River Plate. Commodore Harwood, who had positioned his ships some 250 miles to the east, made contact with the enemy at 6am on Wednesday 13 December. The discovery was made when the Graf Spee saw masts on the horizon. Detecting an adversary at sea in this way showed that despite many other technological advances little had changed since spotting masts and topsails in Nelson's day. This time, however, the advantage was with the Germans. The Graf Spee opened accurate fire on the largest British ship, HMS Exeter, and was soon hitting her with deadly effect. Harwood then split his force in two so that the two cruisers, Ajax and Achilles, with their smaller armament could engage the enemy from widely divergent angles.

The range closed rapidly from 20,000 yards to 12,000 yards with some damage being inflicted on the Graf Spee although in reply Exeter lost four of her six guns and most of her bridge personnel. "We might just as well have been bombarding her with bloody snowballs" Harwood remarked later. Both sides used smoke to conceal their manoeuvres. Exeter eventually retired from the battle, burning fiercely and listing. However, the two smaller cruisers continued hammering away, unnerving and aggravating the pocket battleship, despite Ajax having two of her turrets disabled. "I therefore decided to break off the day action and try to close in again after dark", Harwood reported. But at the same time it was seen, with amazement and no little satisfaction, the Graf Spee was heading for the sanctuary of Montevideo in Uruguay.

Captain Langsdorff appeared not to realise he had the three British cruisers at his mercy. Instead he received permission from the

shore authorities to remain in port for seventy-two hours, take the wounded ashore and bury those crew members who had been killed. Despite diplomatic protests in London and Berlin that Uruguay, as a neutral country was giving assistance to an aggressor, the pleas were not accepted. Langsdorff's request, however, for the ship to remain there for longer than three days to carry out repairs was refused. The British authorities also began spreading false intelligence to convince Langsdorff that if he left Montevideo his ship would face certain destruction at the hands of a newly arrived force comprising a battle cruiser and an aircraft carrier.

On Sunday 17 December, as Harwood was preparing his ships for another battle, the Graf Spee with Captain Langsdorff and a skeleton crew left harbour at 6.30pm. The pocket battleship hove to some the four miles out and Langsdorff and the remaining crew were transferred to waiting launches and tugs. What happened next is described in a report by the British Naval Attache. "Time passed in considerable speculation and suspense but the truth, unlikely though it appeared was beginning to dawn on some of us. Exactly as the sun set behind her, a great volume of smoke billowed up – and an enormous flash was followed in due course by the boom

of a large explosion. So the Graf Spee met her end". The pride of the German Navy had been scuttled. Photographs of her final ignominious moments were published around the world. Except in Germany. The expected force of additional capital ships was still a thousand miles distant.

Langsdorff and his crew crossed the River Plate overnight to Buenos Aires where they were accommodated in a naval barracks. On Tuesday 19 December Captain Langsdorff gave his farewell

address to his men. Later that night, having completed all formalities for the safe internment of his crew with the Argentine authorities, he went to his room, put a pistol to his head and shot himself. By him was the flag of the old Imperial German Navy.

In February 1940, the captains, officers and crews of Ajax and Exeter, now back in Britain, were welcomed by the King and Queen on Horse Guards Parade and marched through the streets of London to the Guildhall. On the same day, the crew of the Achilles was welcomed back to Auckland, New Zealand, with ceremonies and rejoicing.

On 29 October 1956 a film "The Battle of the River Plate" was given a Royal Command performance. Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger it starred Peter Finch as Captain Langsdorff, Anthony Quayle as Commodore Harwood and John Gregson as Captain Bell (captain of Exeter). The American heavy cruiser USS Salem took the role of the Graf Spee.

Footnote. When the author of this article visited the port of Montevideo in 1976, the scuttled wreck of the Graf Spee was still clearly visible. [AC](#)

Words and pictures by Roger Paine



OPPOSITE PAGE PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE: Christmas card of Graf Spee given to British Ambassador in Montevideo, signed by captains of ships sunk by her: HMS Exeter returns to Devonport. Exeter's sailors give the 'thumbs up!'. **THIS PAGE:** Captain Langsdorff gives traditional naval salute at funeral for comrades while other officials give Nazi salute.