

BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

A compilation of documents

By Pat Fogwill.

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The contents of this book are extracts from the following sources:

Official Battle Summary:

Summary of two lectures given by Sir Eugen Millington Drake, K.C.M.G.
(British Minister at Montevideo at the time of the Battle of the River Plate):

“THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE: Fact and Fiction”.

“THE DRAMA OF THE ‘GRAF SPEE’: Checkmate at Montevideo”.

The Crew of HMS Exeter at the Battle of the River Plate:

http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/_people/crewexeter.php

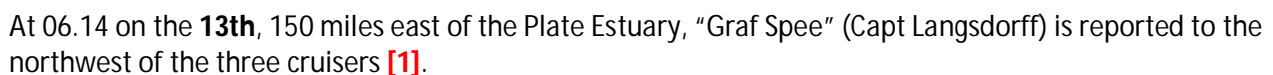
A Seaman’s Story:

Transcribed from a handwritten document addressed to the ‘Torquay Times’ a local newspaper in Torquay, Devon, England. Which was published 29th March 1963.

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Now back in the South Atlantic, "Graf Spee" claims three more victims to bring the total to nine ships of 50,000 tons, before heading for the South American shipping lanes off the River Plate. Cdre Harwood with Hunting Group G - 8in-gunned cruisers "Exeter" and "Cumberland" and 6in light cruisers "Ajax" and New Zealand "Achilles" - correctly anticipates her destination. Unfortunately "Cumberland" is by now in the Falklands.



"Graf Spee" concentrates her two 11in turrets on "Exeter" which is badly hit [4]. By 06.50 all ships are heading west [5], "Exeter" with only one turret in action and on fire. "Ajax" and "Achilles" continue to harry the pocket battleship from the north [6], but at 07.25 "Ajax" loses her two after turrets to an 11in hit [7] and "Achilles" already has splinter damage. HMS Exeter is forced to break off and head south for the Falklands [8], but "Graf Spee" still fails to press home her advantage. By 08.00, still with only superficial damage, she heads for the neutral Uruguayan port of Montevideo, the cruisers shadowing [9].

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The official Dispatch Summary

Extract from lectures presented by SIR EUGEN MILLINGTON DRAKE, K.C.M.G.

Based upon the Official Dispatch:

- dated December 30th, 1939, by the late ADMIRAL SIR HENRY HARWOOD, K.C.B.

PART 1 - THE 'GRAF SPEE'S' RAIDER CRUISE - (Aug. 21st—Dec. 12th, 1939)

- 1.1 'GRAF SPEE' starts from WILHELMSHAVEN a fortnight before the outbreak of war and on Sept. 1st, just north of the EQUATOR, meets her supply ship, the oil tanker 'ALTMARK'. She receives orders to begin operations only on Sept. 26th and on Sept. 30th, off PERN AMBUJO, sinks the first British merchantman, 'CLEMENT'.
- 1.2 Four more British merchantmen sunk in the EASTERN HALF OF THE SOUTH ATLANTIC (Oct. 5th-22nd). 'GRAF SPEE'S' usual procedure is to approach very near to them end-on flying French flag and then to hoist Swastika flag and machine-gun the bridge and wireless cabin to stop wirelessness. From these four ships some 200 prisoners had been gradually transferred to the 'ALTMARK', which 'GRAF SPEE' meets for fifth time on Oct. 28th.
- 1.3 'GRAF SPEE' then starts a diversion to the INDIAN OCEAN, finding no wool ships from Australia off the CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, but sinks Captain Dove's 'AFRICA SHELL' (Oct. 15th) within 3 miles of coast off PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA near LOURENCO MARQUES. Then returns through the 'ROARING FORTIES' to SOUTH ATLANTIC. The 'ALTMARK' again met the 'GRAF SPEE' camouflaged (Nov. 26th-29th).
- 1.4 Move towards SOUTH-WEST AFRICAN COAST, South of ST. HELENA. Captain Langsdorff's first error of judgment: far off 'gunning' of the 10,000 ton cargo liner, 'DORIC STAR' (Dec. 2nd), enabling her to send out repeated wireless distress signals. Sinking of 'TAIROA' (Dec. 3rd), her courageous distress signal notwithstanding shell-fire also picked up. From these Commodore Harwood rightly calculates 'GRAF SPEE'S' probable move to THE PLATE. Her last meeting with 'ALTMARK' (Dec. 6th), to which are also transferred prisoners from the last two ships sunk. But 29 senior officers from all ships sunk are retained on 'GRAF SPEE' as Captain Langsdorff intending to return with them to Germany in January.
- 1.5 After sinking the last British merchantman 'STREONSHALH' (Dec. 7th) and taking officers and crew on board 'GRAF SPEE' approaches THE PLATE as foreseen by Commodore Harwood. He concentrates 'AJAX', 'ACHILLES' and 'EXETER' 250 miles eastward off THE PLATE (Dec. 10th-12th).

PART 2 - THE BATTLE - MORNING, PURSUIT AND EVENING (Wednesday, Dec. 13th, 1939)

2.1 THE BATTLE IN THE MORNING

The Encounter, 5.52—6.17 a.m. 'GRAF SPEE'S' ultra-powerful range-finder spots masts to the south at 5.52 a.m.; sunrise 5.56 a.m.; 'EXETER' identified 6 a.m. with 'two destroyers'. Captain Langsdorff seeks battle at 25 knots. At 6.10 a.m. he sees that two destroyers are in fact two light cruisers. These spot smoke at 6.10 a.m. and at 6.15 a.m. identify 'GRAF SPEE'. 'EXETER' and twin light cruisers divide according to plan, 'EXETER' to NW. and the twin cruisers to the NE.

First Phase, 6.17—7.10 a.m. 'GRAF SPEE' opens fire at 20,000 yards and by 6.27 a.m. has scored three most damaging direct hits on 'EXETER', which nevertheless fires starboard **torpedoes and had scored two direct hits. The torpedoes and concentrated fire of three** cruisers, makes 'GRAF SPEE' turn back westward (6.36 a.m.). 'ACHILLES' receives damaging splinter hit (6.40 a.m.), killing seven and wounding Captain Parry and the Chief Gunnery Officer, Lt. Washbourn.

'AJAX' aircraft catapulted 6.47 a.m. but spotting on wrong wavelength for twenty minutes. 'EXETER', although receiving fourth direct hit, turns eastward at 18 knots to fire port torpedoes, but after receiving two more direct hits retires south-westwards, still firing one stern 8-inch gun with a list and heavy casualties (see below).

Second Phase, 7.10—7.45 a.m. 'AJAX' and 'ACHILLES' now at maximum speed of 31 knots, turn westward and go straight at 'GRAF SPEE', closing to 8,000 yards for torpedo attack, to prevent her finishing off 'EXETER'. Meanwhile they make 18 direct hits but 'AJAX' has X and Y turrets and main mast knocked out. Owing to ammunition shortage and apparent failure to damage 'GRAF SPEE' Commodore Harwood breaks off the action in order to shadow and renew it at nightfall.

British Prisoners on the 'GRAF SPEE' experiences during these two phases a hairsbreadth escape from a 6-inch shell direct hit.

2.2 THE PURSUIT ALL DAY, 7.45 a.m.—6.15 p.m.

'AJAX' and 'ACHILLES' shadow all day just out of range but 'GRAF SPEE' fires accurate 11-inch salvos at 26,000 yards when they approach too close. 'EXETER', all guns out of action and casualties 5 officers and 56 men killed and many wounded, ordered to Falklands while 'CUMBERLAND' ordered from there to the Plate.

Captain Langsdorff assesses damages and casualties (37 killed, 60 wounded) and decides to enter Montevideo. He sends wireless message signed 'Graf Spec' to 'AJAX' (11 a.m.) requesting her to pick up boats of British merchantman 'SHAKESPEARE', but, as her crew refuse order to take to their boats, she is not sunk.

2.3 BATTLE IN THE EVENING, 6.15 p.m. — 9 p.m.

There was an exchange of salvos on entering RIVER PLATE ESTUARY, but resulting only in near misses. This part of the action was observed by Uruguayan gunboat, 'URUGUAY', which then tries to keep up (like an umpire's launch!); her captain's report in Uruguayan Blue Book.

There was also great excitement at famous seaside resort of PUNT A DEL ESTE (the Uruguayan Le Touquet) and all along the Uruguayan coast.

The 'ACHILLES' pursues 'GRAF SPEE' closely and further exchange of salvos at sunset, while 'AJAX' keeps out to the southward in case 'GRAF SPEE' doubles back. At midnight 'GRAF SPEE' enters MONTEVIDEO HARBOUR without pilot.

PART 3 - THE FOUR DAYS IN MONTEVIDEO AND SELF-DESTRUCTION 'GRAF SPEE' **(Thursday, Dec. 14th—Sunday, Dec. 17th)**

3.1 THE FIRST DAY, THURSDAY

Morning: 'GRAF SPEE' refuels from 'TACOMA' and lands 60 wounded. German and British pleas to are made to the Uruguayan Foreign Minister, Dr. Guani, who had been Minister in Brussels, Paris and London and delegate to League of Nations. He had returned to Montevideo as Minister for Foreign Affairs in 1938 in a new and fairly elected Government, which had the confidence of the Uruguayan people. The British request that 'GRAF SPEE', being sea-worthy, be allowed only 24 hours stay. The Germans request for 15 days to repair damage to make her sea-worthy again.

Afternoon: The release of British prisoners. Uruguayan experts inspect damage on 'GRAF SPEE'. The only Uruguayan shipyard had refused all help. Captain Langsdorff's conference with his officers and optimism because 15 days would allow arrival of German submarines to help him break blockade. H.M.S. 'CUMBERLAND' arrives from Falklands at 10 p.m., so joining 'AJAX' and 'ACHILLES' in watch in the Estuary.

3.2 THE SECOND DAY, FRIDAY

Morning: British Minister receives new instructions to try and keep 'GRAF SPEE' in till following Tuesday, when 'ARK ROYAL' and 'RENOWN' would arrive. But these vessels reported as visible from 'GRAF SPEE' lookout by Chief Gunnery Officer. Funeral ashore of 37 'GRAF SPEE' dead.

Captain Langsdorff gives naval, not Nazi salute (which was not prescribed for the Navy till over a year later): British merchant captains present.

Afternoon and Evening: Uruguayan Government decree limiting 'GRAF SPEE'S' stay to 72 hours, terminating 8 p.m. Sunday.

Langsdorff's preoccupation at this further bad news and report to German Admiralty stating breakout seaward impossible because of 'ARK ROYAL' and 'RENOWN' but proposing breakout to Buenos Aires if possible without prospect of disaster; or alternatively scuttling or internment.

British merchantman 'ASHWORTH' had been made to sail 6.15 p.m., wherefore 'GRAF SPEE', according to International Law, could not sail for 24 hours. British Minister and Naval Attache see Dr. Guani at 11.30 p.m.: their request for placing a Uruguayan picket on board refused.

3.3 THE THIRD DAY, SATURDAY

Morning: Montevideo had become the centre of world attention, e.g. telephone call from Tokyo; and crowds coming in from the provinces to watch 'GRAF SPEE'. Captain Langsdorff and German Minister interview Uruguayan Minister of Defence, whom they report to be 'entirely in enemy camp'. American broadcaster by chance in Uruguay to record bird songs and habits is authorised to broadcast events for 'hook-up' throughout U.S.A. His broadcasts listened into on British Cruisers,

Afternoon: In Berlin Admiral Raeder, after conferring with Hitler, approves proposed breakout to Buenos Aires but alternatively excludes internment and stipulates thorough sabotage in case of scuttling.

Many musters on deck of 'GRAF SPEE' while breakout being prepared, but Langsdorff and his officers and German Naval Attache subsequently decide secretly on scuttling because of difficulties of manoeuvring in very shallow water of the Plate (as 'GRAF SPEE' drew 22 feet and the cruisers only 16-17 feet) and risk that mud drawn into water-cooling intake in her bottom would incapacitate engines. This decision was subject to final attempt of German Minister to obtain extension of time limit, which was again steadfastly refused by Dr. Guani in two-hour interview. At the German Legation Captain Langsdorff prepares a long letter of protest

Battle of the River Plate – A compilation of documents

at attitude of Uruguayan Government which, he states, obliges him to scuttle his ship. He only returns on board at 3 a.m. when all repair work is secretly stopped.

British Admiralty congratulations to Commodore Harwood, his officers and men. He is promoted Rear-Admiral and made Knight Commander of the Bath and his captains Commanders of the Bath. High morale on the British cruisers, on which men volunteer to remain at action stations all that night.

3.3 FOURTH AND LAST DAY, SUNDAY

Morning: Harwood's preparations as for another battle. Mr. Churchill's anxiety at the Admiralty. 'GRAF SPEE' disembarks welding apparatus brought from Buenos Aires and prepares secretly for scuttling. Much machinery and apparatus destroyed with hammers, also destruction of confidential codes and papers including, erroneously, Langsdorff's special action report on the battle, to his great annoyance.

Afternoon: North and South American envoys convened by Dr. Guani fully support Uruguayan attitude.

Some 800 of 'GRAF SPEE' crew transferred to 'TACOMA', which follows 'GRAF SPEE' out of harbour at 6.30 p.m. 'GRAF SPEE' heaves to 4 miles out and at 7.35 p.m. Captain Langsdorff and skeleton crew of 43, leave in launches for 'TACOMA' after lowering flag as secret signal to 'TACOMA' that fuses set going for explosion in twenty minutes. Anxiety on 'TACOMA'.

Explosion at 7.54 p.m. (11.54 G.M.T.) reported instantaneously to Foreign Office and B.B.C., who announce it just after midnight.

Captain Langsdorff, his officers and crew transferred to two tugs and lighter flying Argentine flag, though belonging to the Hamburg-South America Line. In these they cross overnight to Buenos Aires.

3.4 Monday, December 18th.

Captain Langsdorff and his crew reach Buenos Aires and are accommodated in naval barracks. German plea that they are ship-wrecked sailors, and not liable to internment. The Montevideo press publishes Langsdorff's long letter of protest, which provokes storm of indignation in Uruguayan and Argentine press.

3.5 Tuesday, December 19th.

Argentine Government decree internment. Captain Langsdorff's last address to his men and suicide, leaving letter taking full responsibility for scuttling of 'GRAF SPEE'.

4.6 1940, January-February.

'TACOMA' interned by Uruguayan Government as having acted as German Naval Auxiliary (Jan. 1st).

'ALTMARK', with 304 British prisoners on board in the South Atlantic, succeeded in reaching Norwegian coast unchallenged and, when spotted, took refuge in a fjord where the destroyer 'COSSACK', under Captain Vian, boarded her and released the prisoners.

Captains, officers and crew of 'AJAX' and 'EXETER' welcomed by King and Queen and Cabinet on Horse Guards Parade and march through Trafalgar Square to Guildhall. (February 23).

By coincidence, on the same day the 'ACHILLES' is welcomed back at Auckland, New Zealand, with ceremonies and rejoicing.

The Ships - Dramatis Personae.

Battle of the River Plate

Dramatis Personae: The Commanders, Ships, Armaments and Speeds.

Ship	Commander	Completed	Tonnage	Crew	Armament	Aircraft	Knots
'GraSpee'	Captain Hans Langsdorff	1936	13,000	1,100	Six 11-inch & eight 5.9-inch guns	Two 'Arado' with machine gun	28
H.M.S. Exeter	Captain F.S. Bell	1931	8,400	600	Six 8-inch guns	Two	32
H.M.S. Ajax	Captain C.H.L. Woodhouse	1935	7,000	520	Eight 6-inch guns	Two	33
H.M.S. Achilles <i>Of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy</i>	Captain W.E. Parry	1933	7,000	550	Eight 6-inch guns	None	33
H.M.S. Cumberland	Captain Fallowfield	1928	10,000	710	Eight 6-inch guns	Three	31.5
Uruguay <i>Of the Uruguay Navy</i>	Captain Fernando J. Fuentes	1910	1,500	80	Two 4.7-inch guns	None	20
H.M.S. Ark Royal	Captain Arthur J. Power	1935	22,000	1,300	Sixteen 4.5-inch guns	21 torpedo Rec. (Swordfish) & 9 Fighters (Skuas)	31
Altmark <i>Tanker of the German Navy Auxiliary List, formerly of the Hamburg-America Line</i>	Captain Heinrich Dau	1938	7,000	130	Anti-aircraft guns & pompons	None	18
Tacoma <i>Of the Hamburg-America Line</i>	Captain Hans Konow	1930	8,300	62	None	None	15

Extreme Ranges and Weights of Broad­sides of Ships Engaged in the Battle

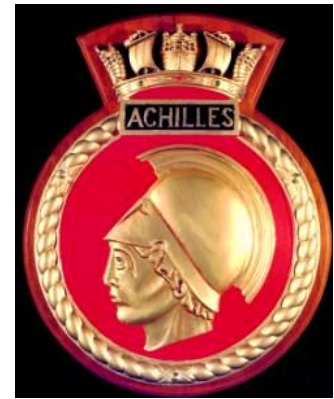
Graf Spee	11-inch guns	30,000 yards
H.M.S. Exeter	8-inch guns	27,000 yards
H.M.S. Ajax	6-inch guns	25,000 yards
H.M.S. Achilles	6-inch guns	25,000 yards

Total Weight of Broad­sides

Graf Spee	4,708 ibs
The three British Cruisers Combined	3,136 lbs

H.M.S. Achilles

HMS Achilles was a *Leander* class cruiser (7200 tons) (from 1936, *Improved Leander* class), built in Birkenhead, England and launched (**as HMS Achilles**) on **1 September 1932**. She was commissioned into the Royal Navy on 10 October 1933. She was transferred to the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy on 31 March 1937. Her crew was approximately 60% from New Zealand and 40% Imperial. She was later re-commissioned as HMNZS *Achilles* when the New Zealand Division became the Royal New Zealand Navy in September 1941. She was paid off from the Royal New Zealand Navy at Sheerness, Kent, England on 17 September 1946 and returned to the Royal Navy. She was then sold to the Indian Navy and re-commissioned on 5 July 1948 as INS *Delhi*. She remained in service until decommissioned for scrap at Bombay on 30 June 1978.



On the outbreak of the Second World War, *Achilles* started patrolling the west coast of South America looking for German merchant ships, but by 22nd October 1939 she had arrived at the Falkland Islands, where she was assigned to the South American Division under Commodore Harwood and allocated to *Force G* (HMS *Exeter* and HMS *Cumberland*). In the early morning of 13th December a force of *Achilles*, HMS *Ajax* and HMS *Exeter* detected smoke on the horizon, which was confirmed to be a pocket battleship, thought to be the *Admiral Scheer*, at 0616. A fierce battle ensued, at a range of approximately 20,000 yards/metres. *Achilles* took some damage, her captain, W.E. Parry RN being injured, but fortunately only four crew members were killed in the battle, compared to 36 of *Graf Spee*'s crew killed. The range reduced to about 4 miles/7,000 yards/6400 metres, by the time *Graf Spee* broke off the engagement around 0745 to head for the neutral harbour of Montevideo which she entered at 2200 that night, having been followed by *Achilles* and *Ajax* all day.

Following the battle, *Achilles* returned to Auckland, New Zealand on 23 February 1940, where she was refitted until June. After Japan entered the war, she escorted troop convoys, then joined the ANZAC squadron in SW Pacific. While operating off New Georgia with U.S. forces, she was hit by a bomb on X turret on 5 January 1943. Repaired at Portsmouth from April 1943 to May 1944, during which X turret was replaced by 4-2 pdr. Sent to the Eastern Fleet, *Achilles* then joined Task Force 57 in May 1945 for final operations in the Pacific.



HMS ACHILLES

H.M.S. Ajax

HMS *Ajax* was a *Leander*-class light cruiser. Built at Vickers shipyard, Barrow-in-Furness, England, she was laid down on 7 February 1933, launched on 1 March 1934, and completed on 12 April 1935.

Ajax served on the America and West Indies Station from completion, then part of South American Division on the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. Operating off the River Plate, she intercepted the German merchantmen *Carl Fritzen*, *Olinda*, and *Ussukuma*. She was the flagship of Commodore Henry Harwood's Force G during the hunt for the *Admiral Graf Spee*. *Ajax* was hit seven times during the Battle of the River Plate on 13 December 1939.



Under repair until July 1940, she then moved to the Mediterranean. On October 11/12 1940 she engaged Italian forces, sinking the torpedo boats *Airone* and *Ariel*, and badly damaging the destroyer *Artigliere*, which was later sunk. *Ajax* participated in the Battle of Cape Matapan and the evacuation from Crete, removing the last troops on 29 April 1941. She was hit by bombs from Ju87's on 21 May, covered Syrian operations in June, and joined Force K at Malta in November 1941, but was withdrawn February 1942.

She was refitted in England, May-October 1942, then returned to the Mediterranean where she was damaged by bombs again, necessitating repairs in New York between March and October 1943. *Ajax* returned to the Mediterranean again, then to Normandy with Force K at Gold Beach for the D-Day landings, and at landings in southern France. *Ajax* operated in the Aegean during the reoccupation of Athens and the communist uprising in Greece.

Laid up postwar, she was broken up in November 1949.

The **Town of Ajax**, in Ontario, Canada, was named after the cruiser following the Battle of the River Plate. The town has streets named after members of the ship's company. For example, Harwood Avenue is the town's main north-south street.



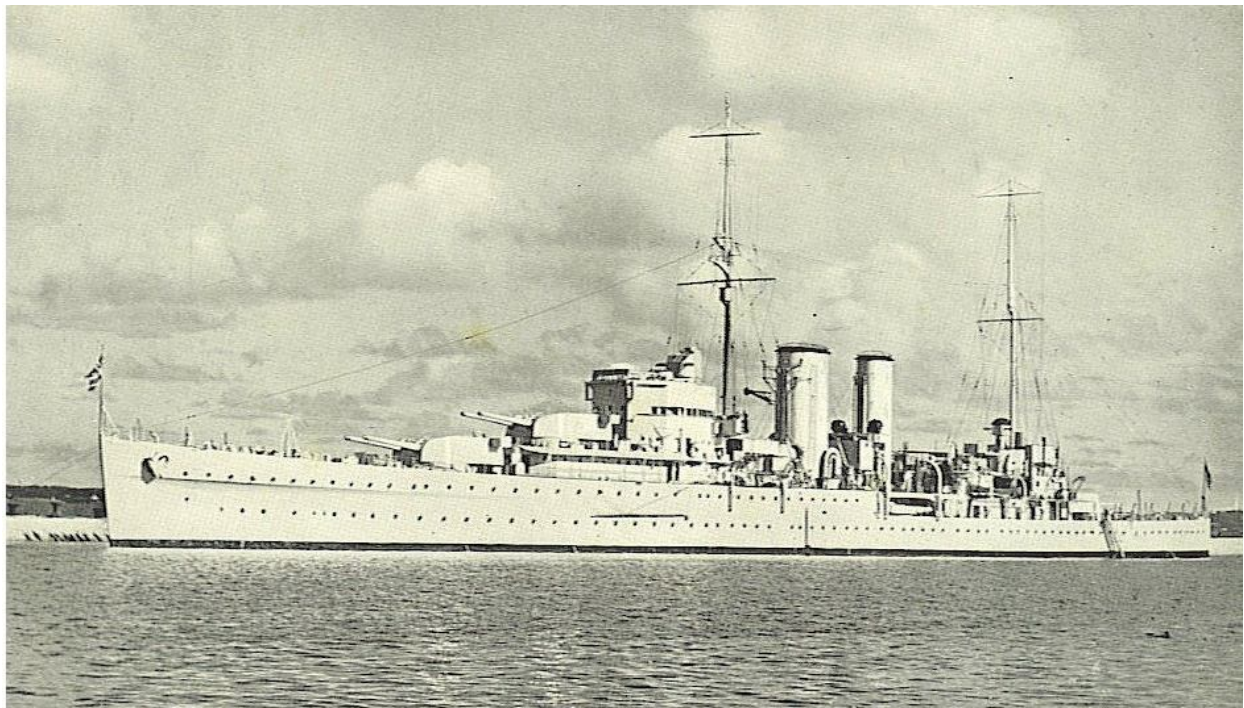
HMS AJAX

H.M.S. Exeter

Exeter-class cruiser (2f/2m). *L/B/D*: 575 × 58 × 20.3 (175.3m × 17.7m × 6.2m). *Tons*: 10,490. *Hull*: steel *Comp.*: 630. *Arm.*: 6 × 8 (3 × 2), 4 × 4, 2 × 2pdr; 6 × 21TT; 2 aircraft. *Aarmor*: 3 belt, 1.5 deck. *Mach.*: geared turbines, 80,000 shp, 4 shafts; 32 kts. *Des.*: Sir William Berry. *Built*: Devonport Dockyard, Plymouth, Eng.; 1931.

HMS *Exeter* was one of two heavy cruisers built after the cost of the first ten County-class cruisers proved prohibitive. In September 1939 she was assigned to Commodore Henry Harwood's Force G to look for the German pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee (Captain Hans Langsdorff). On December 12 *Exeter* and the 6-inch cruisers *Ajax* and *Achilles* rendezvoused off Uruguay, 150 miles east of the broad River Plate estuary. At dawn the next day, Force G encountered *Graf Spee* at 0614, with *Exeter* (Captain F. S. Bell) deployed as the single-ship Second Division. Six minutes later, *Exeter* opened fire in reply to *Graf Spee* at 18,700 yards. *Graf Spee* straddled *Exeter* with six 11-inch shells at 0623, and after eight salvos scored a direct hit on "B" turret. The same hit killed all but three men—Captain Bell among them—on the bridge. At 0638 "A" turret and the gyrocompasses were also knocked out, although the engines were unaffected and the ship could still make good speed. At this point, Langsdorff decided to concentrate on *Ajax* and *Achilles*, which certainly saved *Exeter* because the "Y" turret ceased to work by 0730. By early afternoon, with the ship steaming at only 18 knots, Bell signalled Harwood, "All guns out of action." She had lost 53 crew.

Exeter returned to Devonport for a 13-month refit during which four 4-inch and sixteen 2-pdr. guns were added. In early 1942, she joined Dutch Rear Admiral Karel Doorman's ABDA (American-British-Dutch-Australian) Striking Force as it prepared to meet the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies. Sailing out of Surabaya on February 26, Doorman's vastly outnumbered striking force headed for Admiral Shoji Nishimura's transport fleet. Early in the Battle of the Java Sea, *Exeter* was hit by a shell that knocked out six of her eight boilers, and she retired to Surabaya. From there she left for Ceylon with destroyers HMS *Encounter* and USS *Pope*. On March 1, while still in the Java Sea, they encountered a Japanese force of four heavy cruisers and five destroyers. *Exeter* was sunk by a torpedo from the Japanese destroyer *Inazuma* at about noon in 4°40S, 110°E. *Encounter* and *Pope* were also lost.



HMS EXETER

Five Royal Navy Ships Named “Exeter”

HMS Exeter (- 1691)

The first HMS *Exeter* was a 70-gun Third-rate. Launched in 1680, she was involved in the Battle of Beachy Head against France in 1690. However, the ship suffered damage from an explosion the next year and was hulked before being broken up in 1717.

HMS Exeter (1697 – 1763)

The second *Exeter* was a 60-gun Fourth-rate. She was built in 1697 and survived until 1763, making her the longest serving ship to carry the name so far. She was involved in repeated actions against the French, in 1702 off Newfoundland, in 1705 when she captured the frigate *Thétis*, in 1711 in the Mediterranean and at the Battle of Quiberon Bay, and in 1748 at the Siege of Pondicherry. Samuel Hood, 1st Viscount Hood of Whitley, subsequently an Admiral and an important figure in British Naval history, served briefly on this vessel.

HMS Exeter (1763 - 1784)

The third *Exeter* was a 64-gun third-rate launched in 1763. She earned Battle Honours in 1782 at Sadras, Providien, Negapatam and Trincomalee. She was burned as unseaworthy in 1784.

HMS Exeter (1928 – 1942)

The best known is the fourth *Exeter*, a *York* class heavy cruiser that saw important action in World War II. She was built by Devonport Dockyard, Plymouth, Devon. Laid down on 1 August 1928, she was launched on 18 July 1929 and completed on 27 July 1931. At the outbreak of the Second World War, she formed part of the South American Division with HMS *Cumberland*. Together with the light cruisers HMS *Ajax* and HMNZS *Achilles* she engaged the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* in the Battle of the River Plate on 13 December 1939, which action resulted in the *Graf Spee*'s scuttling several days later. Severely damaged in the battle, *Exeter* made for Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands for emergency repairs which took until January 1940, then returned to Devonport for full repairs between February 1940 and March 1941. On returning to the fleet in 1941, she was engaged on escort duty for Atlantic convoys, but on the entry of Japan into the war she formed part of the Allied Striking Force intended to defend the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) from Japanese invasion. At the end of February 1942 she was damaged in the Battle of the Java Sea when she received a hit in the boiler room and was subsequently ordered to Soerabaya. When she attempted to reach the Sunda Strait, she was intercepted by the Japanese cruisers *Nachi* and *Haguro* and badly damaged by gunfire and a torpedo from the destroyer *Ikazuchi*. The crew was ordered to abandon ship, and she was scuttled off the Bawean Islands on the evening of 28 February 1942. Her destroyer escorts, HMS *Encounter* and USS *Pope* were also lost in this engagement.

HMS Exeter (D89) (1979 – present)

The fifth *Exeter* is currently (2004) in service. She is a Type 42 destroyer, launched in 1979 and seeing service in the Falklands War in 1982. Like the city of Exeter, with which she maintains close links, the ship bears the motto *Semper fidelis*.

HMS Exeter (1959)

A frigate, cancelled in 1956 was also to have borne the name *Exeter*.

Battle Honours



Battle Honours to H.M.S. EXETER

<i>SADRAS</i>	<i>1782</i>	<i>PROVIDIEN</i>	<i>1782</i>
<i>NEGAPATAM</i>	<i>1782</i>	<i>TRINCOMALEE</i>	<i>1782</i>
<i>RIVER PLATE</i>	<i>1939</i>	<i>SUNDA STRAIT</i>	<i>1942</i>
<i>FALKLAND ISLANDS</i>	<i>1982</i>	<i>KUWAIT</i>	<i>1991</i>

The Crew of HMS Exeter at the Battle of the River Plate:

There is no definitive list of the crew of HMS Exeter, during the Battle of the River Plate in December 1939, in existence – This list is as of August 2011.

Names in **BOLD** killed in action or died of wounds – ✕ decorated for services during the battle.

Surname - Forename - Rank – Decoration

A

ABRAHAM'S Cyril, L Tel
ACKERMAN, R E, EA
ADAMS, Thomas W,
ADDYMAN A G, EA
AINGE Walter A, age 39, Chief Petty Officer
ALDER G T C, LTO
ALLEN R H, Pay Lieutenant
ALLEN, Musician Royal Marines Band
AMY Arthur, LSA
ANSTEAD C,
ARNOLD E, Royal Marines
ATTWOOD Harry, Sgt Royal Marines
ATWILL Ron, Lieutenant
AUKENHURST K, Royal Marines
AYRES J, Tel

B

BACK Frederick E E, Engine Room Artificer 4th Class
BAGLEY Leonard C, Bandmaster 2 ✕ Mentioned in Despatches
BAKER F R, LTO
BALL Alfred J, Able Seaman ✕DSM
BALLANCE J H, Lieutenant, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve
BECKFORD W G, Wt Mech
BELL F S, CAPTAIN ✕CB
BELL Stephen, L, Stoker
BERNTSEN Ernest Basil, age 24, Officers Steward
BETHELL Frank, age 19, Able Seaman
BETHELL Joseph, age 19, Able Seaman
BEVIS Vincent, Stoker Petty Officer
BIDGOOD L, Supply
BLACKMAN R,
BLACKMORE C G,
BLAKE A B,
BLANDFORD Bert, Royal Marines
BOILING R, ERA
BOND Frank L, Engine Room Artificer 4 ✕DSM
BONHAM, Mentioned in Despatches

Battle of the River Plate – A compilation of documents

BOOTHROYD,
BOWES Raymond M, OD
BOWMAN-MANIFOLD John, Lieutenant Commander (N)
BOWN E,
BRADBURY W, Stoker
BRAY G,
BRIGHT Daniel, Stoker Petty Officer
BRODERICK, ER, Able Seaman
ROOKS, ER, Able Seaman
BUCKLE, Musician Royal Marine Band
BUDGE,
BURN S,
BURNS G,
BURNS R, Officers Steward
BURRAS Stanley W, Stoker First Class
BUTCHER, Royal Marines
BUTLER R, Seaman

C

CAMERON Archibald, Midshipman ¢DSC
CAMPBELL Frederick P, Stoker
CARTER Albert H, Seaman
CARTER Sidney A, Master-At-Arms ¢DSM
CARTTES S,
CAULDWELL R,
CAUSTON J, Pay Sub Lieutenant, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve
CHALKLEY Herbert V, Acting Petty Officer ¢DSM
CHANDLER R, ERA
CHAPMAN T Cd Eng
CHEDGEY G LTO
CHEESEMAM,
CLARK Royal Marines
CLARKSON Richard Mortimer Roy, age 18, Able Seaman
CLIFT MWM, EA
CLOAKE J,
CODMAN RW, Able Seaman
COGSWELL R J, Wt Elect
COLLARD F,
COLLIER, Musician Royal Marines Band
COLLINS Anthony C P, Chief Shipwright 2 ¢ Mentioned in Despatches - died 23rd December
COMLEY W, Royal Marines
CONYON J,
CONNOR F, Royal Marines
COOK A E, Dir Gnr
COOPER Horace Samuel, Able Seaman
COWANS, ERA

Battle of the River Plate – A compilation of documents

CRITCHLEY M,
CROCKER George I, Chief Stoker ✕ Mentioned in Despatches
CROKER Alfred John, age 25, Marine Royal Marines
CROSS, Victor, Able Bodied Seaman
CROWE Thomas H, Seaman
CURNOW F,
CUSSEN John, Surgeon Commander ✕ Mentioned in Despatches

D

DAKIN Eric T, Sick Berth Attendant ✕DSM
DALLAWAY Stanley J, Gnr ✕ Mentioned in Despatches
DANCE S T, Musician Royal Marines Band
DANN H, Sub Lieutenant, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve
DAVEY A,
DAVIES F,
DAVIES Gilbert L, Able Seaman
DAVIES S, Able Seaman
DAY E, Seaman
DAY H, Seaman
DAY Percy George, signalman
DEAR H,
DINGLE K,
DON Robert W D, Mentioned in Despatchess ✕DSO
DOVE Gilbert H, Acting Petty Officer
DOUST Ernest A, Snr Master ✕ Mentioned in Despatches
DRAKE,
DURHAM R , Seaman
DYER Frederick W G, Shipwright

E

EARP H,
EAST R D, MA Tempy. Instr Lieutenant
EDDEY W, EA
EDWARDS A, Petty Officer
EDWARDS, Royal Marines
EMBLETON Chas James, Stoker
EMMETT, Steven Anthony , Stoker
ENGLAND Philip A, EA 1 ✕ Mentioned in Despatches
EVANS D G , Seaman
EVANS R M, Stoker PO

F

FARTHING F C, LTO
FLOWERS W, Seaman
FOGWILL Reginald Albert, Seaman
FOWLER George CW, Lieutenant Cdr (O)
FRANCIS H W, Seaman

Battle of the River Plate – A compilation of documents

FREDERICKS JT, Seaman

FRENCH Frederick T, Able Seaman

FRENCH, Boy

FULLERTON Roy G, age 29, Seaman

FUTCHER, Tel

G

GARDNER LH, Corporal Royal Marines Band

GARRARD J S,

GARRETT V,

GASKELL J L, Ck

GEORGE Evan I, Leading Stoker - died 15th December

GIBSON Stanley C, Able Seaman

GIBSON, Musician Royal Marines Band

GILPIN L, Ck

GLEADELL Owen, Stoker

GOODE T, EA

GOODHALL F, Tel

GOODWIN Horace, Stoker First Class

GOULD C, Chief Petty Officer Wtr

GRAHAM R,

GRAHAM R R, Cdr DSO

GREEN J, Petty Officer - Chief Quartermaster

GREEN William E, Chief Quarter Master "DSM for steering ship while wounded

GREEN L, Seaman

GROVES G, Padre

GWILLIAM W G , Seaman "CGM

H

HALLAS Charles F, Petty Officer "DSM

HAMBLIN Victor A, Seaman

HARDING, Royal Marines

HARRINGTON Stanley P, Marine Royal Marines

HARRIS C,

HARRIS David, Stoker PO

HARRIS Hugh, Petty Officer Telegraphist

HARRIS S T, Sig

HATTON J,

HEARSON G, Cdr (E)

HEENAN R L, Lieutenant, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve Met

HEGGIE R M, Surgeon Lieutenant, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve

HICKS A, LSA

HIGGINBOTTOM Alan, Chief Yeoman of Signals

HILL Leonard C, Able Seaman - died 14th December

HILL Ronald B, Boy Bugler RM

HINDLE F,

HOARE D J,

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HOARE E,
HOCKINGS Henry Herbert, Corporal Royal Marines
HOGG Donald, Stoker
HONEY Leslie F L, Leading Signaller
HOOPER S J, Elec Artif
HOUGHTON F,
HOWARD Horace, Stoker
HOWELL Bernard L, Photographer
HUXSON, Royal Marines
HUNT, Royal Marines
HURLEY,
HUTTON J, Torpedo-man

I

IVEY W G, Stoker

J

JACKSON E, Corporal Royal Marines Band
JAMES Thomas L, Steward
JAMIESON, Musician Royal Marines Band
JEFFERY W,
JEFFERY W J, Seaman
JEFFREY A D, OA
JENNINGS Richard B, Lieutenant Commander (G) ⌘DSC
JOHN J (E?) L, Seaman
JOHN Henry B, MBE Pay Cdr ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches
JOHNS R,
JOHNS William, E Ch OA 1 ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches
JOHNSON L,
JONES Albert S, Stoker Petty Officer ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches
JONES C J, Seaman
JONES Edward (Ted), Musician Royal Marines Band
JONES J H, Royal Marines
JONES R M, Rev
JOPLIN Walter, Stoker

K

KAVANAGH Michael T, Telegraphist
KELLY Albert E, Stoker
KEMBALL HNE, Lieutenant
KENT W H, Royal Marines
KENWARD, Musician Royal Marines Band
KING D,
KNIGHT Frederick, Joiner Petty Officer ⌘DSM

L

LAMB Geoffrey Silverwood, Lieutenant (Pilot) (killed in an accident in a Spitfire in 1942)
LANCASHIRE Roger W G, Surgeon Lieutenant ¢DSC
LANGMEAD E,
LANSDOWNE Cyril, H L Tel Mentioned in Despatches
LARMOUR M, Shipt
LEGG Frank, Petty Officer Cook - died 16th December
LEWIS C G,
LEWIS D S G, Stoker
LLEWELLYN, Petty Officer Ck
LOCKER G,
LONDON S James , Stoker
LONSDALE Leonard H, Chief Mechanician
LOVELL A,
LUMSDEN Arthur R, Telegraphist
LYNN T J, Gnr (T)

M

MACLEOD William, age 25, Stoker 1st Class
MACNAMARA W,
MAGEE (McGee?), Musician Royal Marines Band
MANNING George, age 37, Stoker 1st Class
MANSON Tom, Corporal Royal Marines, on gunnery station during battle
MARSH William George Robert, age 21, Corporal Royal Marines
MARSHALL A S, Sig
MARTIN R B Commander (Staff Officer)
MASON,
MATHER James, Seaman
McAUSLAN,
McBARNET Donald T, Lieutenant RN ¢ Mentioned in Despatches
McDONNELL Francis, H Able Seaman
McEVOY James P, Marine Royal Marines
McGARRY Jans, Engine Room Artificer ¢DSM
McGEE W,
McGINN Jock,
MEDLEY, Reginald Royal Marines
MELLOW G,
MICHAEL H,
MILEHILL H,
MILLS Edward, Marine Royal Marines
MILLS G,
MINHINETT John L, Stoker ¢DSM
MITCHELL H B, Seaman
MOFFETT W, Stoker
MOLONEY J, Stoker
MONK L,

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MONKS Christopher, Stoker

MORGAN John David, Marine 11277

MORSE Clyde AL, Acting Sub Lieutenant ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches

MOTT John W, Sub Lieutenant (E) ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches

MUDGE G, Petty Officer Ck

MULBERRY ME,

MULVENNY.

N

NAPIER John, Seaman

NAYLOR Thomas H, Able Seaman

NEWMAN Harold E, Chief Petty Officer Tel ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches

NEWTON A 'Nutty'

NICHOLS S,

NOBLE R, Stoker

NODDER F,

NORTHCOTT Patrick, Seaman

NORTHCOTT W P, Royal Marines

O

O'BRIEN P, Stoker 1 ⌘CGM

O'LEARY Patrick J, Stoker

O'NEIL L,

OSBORNE E, Stoker PO

P

PARRY David J, Telegraphist

PARSONS A W C, Sgt Royal Marines

PAYNE OD,

PEARCE L, Seaman

PEARSALL J K, Lieutenant

PEATE, John Henry ('Jacky'), Able Seaman

PENN-GASKELL I, de NW Pay ⌘Mentioned in Despatchess

PETTIT S, Royal Marines

PETT Bryan T, Stoker

PETT L A, Stoker

PHILLIPS Alfred V, Acting Leading Seaman - died 14th December

PHILLIPS Thomas G, Engine Room Artificer 3 ⌘DSM

PIERCE L B, Seaman

PITMAN Harold H, PO

POINTON TCS, Lieutenant (E)

POPE C L, Sig

POPE Charles D, Sick Berth Chief Petty Officer ⌘DSM

POSTLE L,

POWELL H M, Seaman

POWTON C,

POWTON Richard F, Chief Petty Officer Cook - died 17th December

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PRIEST E L, Seaman

PUDDIFOOT George Welch, Sgt Royal Marines ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches

PULLYBANK L W L, Leading Supply Assistant, D/MX 50647

PUNCHARD E,

Q

QUINCY Gordon J, Squadron Leader RAF (FAA)

R

RAMSDON,

RANDLE Frank, Stoker PO

Raymond Angus Keith, Leading Airfitter (Airframe)

REAGAN, Tel

REAY F, Stoker

REMICK Thomas, Chief Yeoman of Signals

RENDLE Charles E, Warrant Shipwright ⌘DSC

RICHARDS Brynmor, Able Seaman

RICHARDS Glyndwr, Able Seaman

RICHARDSON A Duncan, Tel

RICHARDSON D A, Pay Sub Lieutenant, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve

RICKORD John S, Midshipman, Mentioned in Despatches

RIGLAR Arthur S, Telegraphist

ROBERTS R M, Stoker

ROBBINS J,

ROBINS I, Seaman

ROBINSON F, Seaman

ROBINSON S,

ROGERS C, StoPO ? NN 7/00

ROLFE J S, Seaman

ROOKE R,

ROOSKEY Joseph A, Chief Mechanician ⌘DSM

ROPE, Musician Royal Marines Band

ROSS A M, Captain Royal Marines

ROTHWELL Victor, Seaman

RUSE R, Ch ERA

RUSSELL A,

RUSSELL W A, Marine Royal Marines ⌘CGM

S

SALMON,

SAMPSON E, Seaman

SARTAIN, Musician Royal Marines Band

SCANLAN C J, Seaman

SCHOFIELD N, Tel

SCOBLE Clifford J, SBPO ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches

SCOTT, Able Seaman

SCOTT-KERR JHA, Mentioned in Despatches

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SEFTON, Royal Marines
SERCOMBE,
SHANNON Eric, Ck
SHAW E, Stoker
SHEFFIELD C, ERA
SHOESMITH Eric A, Act LAmn ¢DSM
SHORTEN J, Cd Gnr
SILCOCKS, PO Ck
SIMMS CE, Cdr ¢DSO
SIMONS A,
SKERRY A E, Royal Marines
SMALL Richard J, Blacksmith
SMITH Charles J, Commander (T) ¢DSC
SMITH George E, Plumber 3 ¢DSM
SMITH H, Royal Marines
SMITH Joab, Able Seaman
SMITH Stephen J, Petty Officer ¢DSM
SMITH W,
SOLT W, Stoker PO
SOPER M, Stoker
SPARKS Martin H, Seaman
SPARKS W J, Seaman
SPENCER Harry, Able Seaman
SPIERS W R, PO
SPILLER, Corporal Royal Marines
SPLAINE S,
SQUIRE Ernest B, Boy
SQUIRES,
STABB Douglas Harold, Stoker 2 DKX/92833
STAVERS R,
STEELE Robert M, Stoker Petty Officer
STEPHENS A C, Engine Room Artificer 4th Class ¢DSM (Conception Earthquake Medal in Bronze)
STEVENSON, Cecil Robert, stoker
STILES E, Ck
STRIKE Daniel J, Wtr
STUBBS Agean, Marine Royal Marines
STURDEE ARB, Mentioned in Despatchess
SUMMERLING L F, Steward
SWATTEN F, Royal Marines
SYMONS, Able Seaman

T

TAYLOR Robert, W Telegraphist
TEAGUE Samuel B P, Chief Petty Officer Stoker
TELFER,
THOMPSON James E, Stoker
TIMMS W, Canteen

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TINDLE L, Stoker
TOASE Aiden E, Lieutenant Royal Marines ⌘DSC
TOPE I, Seaman
TOVEY George E, Stoker Petty Officer
TOWELL W, Seaman
TREGIDGO Albert F, Chief Petty Officer D/J 89888
TREGARTHEN, Tel
TREGLOYNE T, Musician Royal Marines Band
TREHANE G L, FAA
TRIM, Royal Marines
TROTT Basil, Seaman
TROUT,
TURNER T W, Seaman
TWEDDELL T, Seaman
TWITCHIN M, Torp
TYE, Sig
TYLER Donald H, Pay Sub Lieutenant

V

VAUGHAN, Musician Royal Marines Band
VENNING H C, Wt Eng

W

WADE W,
WAKEHAM C F, Seaman
WALFORD Albert, Seaman
WARDER Simeon Henry Harris, Leading Seaman
WARREN OD,
WATTS Joseph W, Chief Petty Officer Steward ⌘ Mentioned in Despatches
WAY A,
WEAVER E,
WEEKS E, Stoker
WHITE R B,
WHITING D, Sig
WHITEHEAD A, Seaman
WHITEHEAD C, Seaman
WHITEMORE E, Royal Marines
WICKHAM D T, Lieutenant
WICKHAM K J, Lieutenant (E), Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve
WILDE Arthur B, Sergeant Royal Marines ⌘DSM
WILKINS L W, Seaman
WILLIAMS E,
WILLIAMS J D, Sig
WILSON E, FAA
WILSON Patrick, Stoker
WINSTANLEY F,

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WINTER, ERA

WOOD J S,

WOODS Humphrey RD, Capaint Royal Marines

WOODWARD G G, ERA

Y

YOUNG B, C

The following names are of those who served in Exeter during the commission December 1936 - August 1939, and were *probably* on board for the Battle of the River Plate in December 1939, but are not included in the main list above.

ARBERRY, Seaman

BLACKBURN, Boy

ELSTON, L Stoker

FAULKNER, Seaman

GILL, Stoker

HICKS, LSA

HIGMAN, OA

HOCKINGS, Seaman

LANGUARD, Leading Stoker

LOVESAY, Leading Steward

LOWTHER, Stoker PO

LUKEHURST, RM

MOORCROFT, Leading Seaman

MORGAN, Leading Stoker

MOUNTJOY, Leading Stoker

NORTHEY, Stokerr at HMS Drake. He was killed

PICKERING, Stoker

ROBINS, Petty Officer

SHELTON, Stoker

SOADY, Stoker

EMMOTT, J Able Seaman

FLEMING, J P, Able Seaman

HAYES, F W, Petty Officer

JOHN, J E, Petty Officer

LDGS G O PULLAR

RAVENS CROFT, J T, Stoker PO

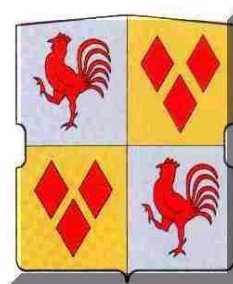
ROBERTS, LF, Able Seaman

SNOWDEN, C, Able Seaman

WILSON, G B, Leading Seaman

Admiral Graf Spee

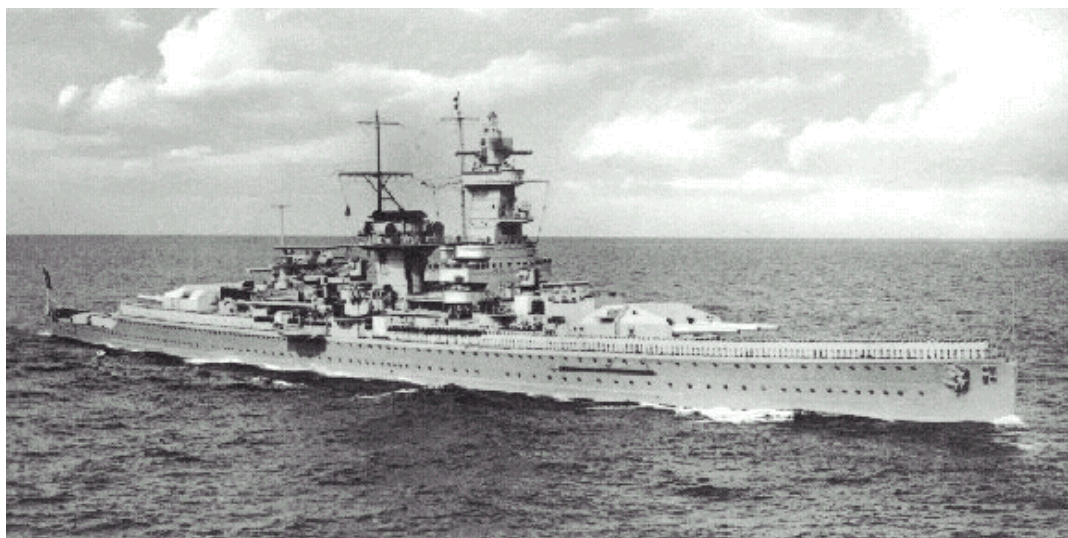
Deutschland-class battleship (1f/3m). *L/B/D*: 610.1 × 69.9 × 23.9 (186m × 21.3m × 7.25m). *Tons*: 16,020 disp. *Hull*: steel. *Arm.*: 6 × 11 (2 × 3), 8 × 5.9, 6 × 10.5cm, 8 × 37mm, 10 × 20mm; 8 × 21TT; 1 plane. *Aarmor*: 3.2 belt, 1.8 deck. *Mach.*: diesel, 52,050 shp, 2 screws; 26 kts. *Built*: Kriegsmarine Werft, Wilhelmshaven, Ger.; 1936.



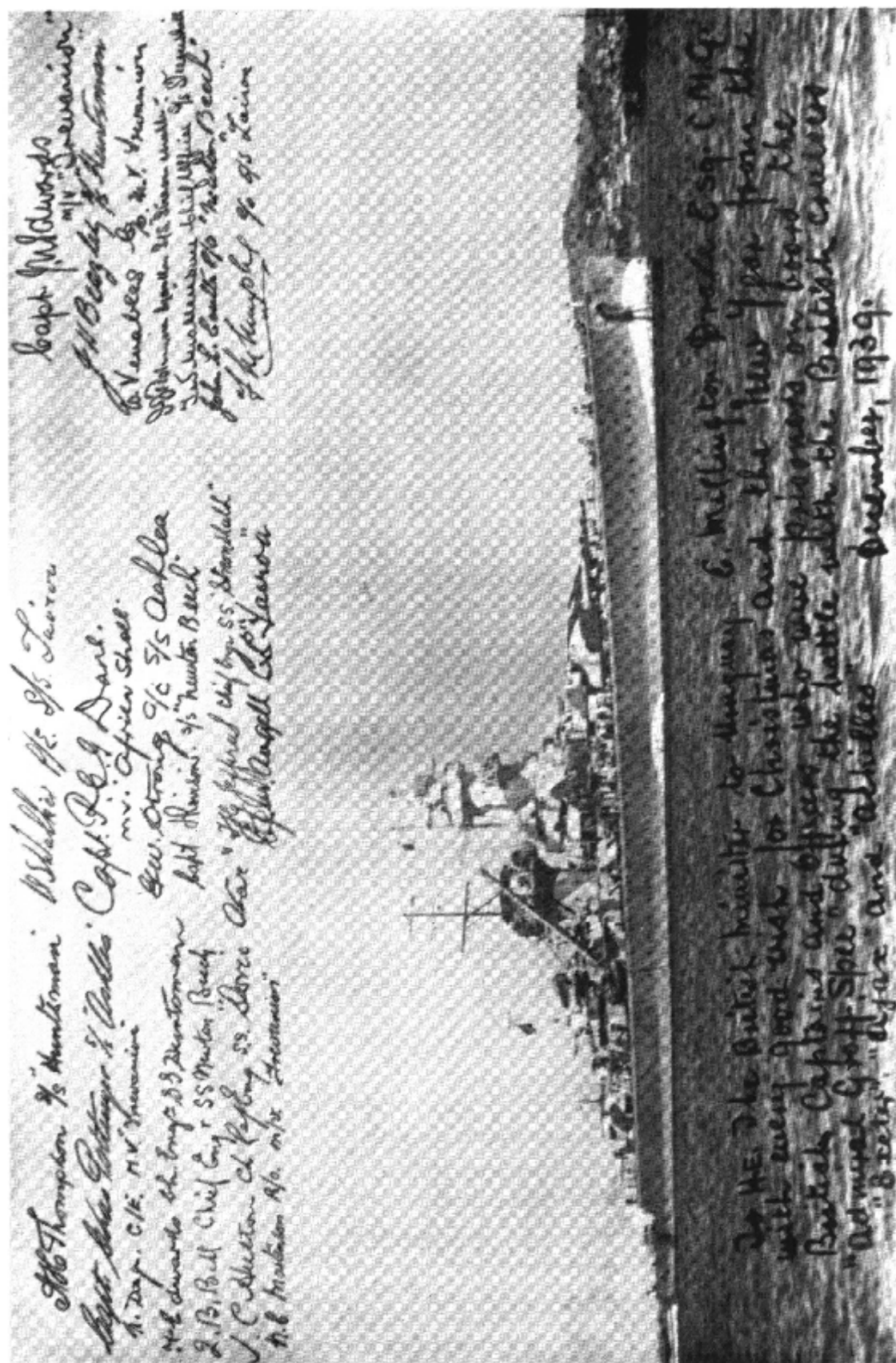
One of three pocket battleships—the other two being Lützow (ex-*Deutschland*) and Admiral Scheer—the *Admiral Graf Spee* was named for Admiral Graf von Spee, who went down in SMS Scharnhorst at the Battle of the Falklands in 1914. Under Captain Hans Langsdorff the *Graf Spee* slipped quietly out of Wilhelmshaven on August 21, 1939, with orders to proceed to the South Atlantic, there to await the coming war. To enable the *Graf Spee* to remain at sea for the next four or five months, the supply vessel Altmark had been sent out ahead to rendezvous.

Graf Spee's mission as a commerce raider was three-fold: to sink merchant ships, to force costly changes to the routing of merchant ships, and to draw Allied naval units off their assigned stations in other parts of the world. In the last, at least, *Graf Spee* succeeded brilliantly. As soon as the existence of a surface raider in the South Atlantic was known, twenty-two British and French ships—ten 8-inch cruisers (including Exeter and Cumberland), five 6-inch cruisers (including Ajax and Achilles), three battlecruisers, and four aircraft carriers—were dispatched to the search. Crisscrossing the South Atlantic, and with one brief foray into the Indian Ocean, *Graf Spee* took nine merchant prizes, though none of great size; not one British crewman died as a result of *Graf Spee*'s actions. Because of the limited facilities for prisoners, Langsdorff periodically transferred his captives to the Altmark. *Graf Spee*'s luck ran out after nine prizes, the last being SS Streonsalsh, taken on December 7, aboard which were confidential papers that suggested the River Plate as the best hunting ground. Unfortunately for Langsdorff, he was anticipated by Commodore Harry Harwood, commanding a squadron that included the *Exeter*, *Ajax*, and *Achilles*.

The adversaries met at dawn on December 13, in about 34°S, 49°W. After some indecision, Langsdorff decided to concentrate *Graf Spee*'s fire on *Exeter*, which after two hours was forced to break off and retired to the Falklands. Rather than pursue *Exeter* and finish her off or turn on the 6-inch cruisers, Langsdorff made directly for the Plate, trailed by *Ajax* and *Achilles*. She anchored in Uruguayan waters shortly after midnight on December 14. At this point diplomatic forces came into play, and Langsdorff was quickly down to three options—to attempt a breakout, to remain interned, or to scuttle the ship. Even if he could battle his way out of the River Plate against still inferior forces, it is unlikely that he could have sailed his ship to Germany without being brought to decisive battle at some point, and internment was unthinkable. On December 17, having removed all valuable and secret equipment (including radar), Langsdorff sailed *Graf Spee* into international waters and scuttled his ship in 35°11S, 56°26W. The next night, in Montevideo, he shot himself.



Admiral Graf Spee



Signatures and inscription on a photograph of the "Graf Spee" in Montevideo Harbour given to H.M. Minister, Mr. E. Millington-Drake, C.M.G., at a Christmas Eve Dinner at the British Legation, Montevideo.

A Seaman's Story

"When war seemed far away."

"The Battle of the River Plate". - A seaman's perspective serving aboard H.M.S. Exeter during the action. – Able Seaman, R.A. Fogwill, ('Lofty') (1921 – 1997).

It was the 13th December 1939. I had the middle watch that is from 12 o'clock midnight until 4 o'clock in the morning. I was a lookout on the port side of the after control position of the 8 inch gun on the cruiser **H.M.S. Exeter** commanded by **Captain F.S. Bell R.N.** We were in the company with **H.M.S. Ajax** commanded by **Captain C.H. Woodhouse, R.N.** and **H.M.S. Achilles** Commanded by **Captain W.E. Parry R.N.**, the whole being the **South American Squadron** commanded by **Commodore H.H. Harwood R.N.** with his broad pennant onboard **H.M.S. Ajax**.



HMS Exeter

The night was warm and as far as I was concerned the war was far away. It was known that the German raider was sinking our shipping, but we were right down in the **South Atlantic Ocean** patrolling off the **River Plate**, the great river that divides **Argentina** and **Uruguay**, and never thought that the raider would come over our way.

Directly after the middle watch we went to dawn action stations which lasted about an hour. By the time we stood down from dawn action stations I was jolly tired and so I didn't need much rocking when I turned into my hammock.

I was fast asleep when action stations sounded, but by force of habit I was out of my hammock and at my action station before the bugler had finished sounding general quarters.

From the man I relieved on lookout, I was told that a ship had been sighted on the port quarter. Just at that time the challenge lights on the mast lit up and I turned my glasses onto the sighted ship. The masts were just showing through the slight haze and then there was a flash, which I took to be the flashing light in answer to our challenge. There were splashes all around us and then I heard the sound of the guns and knew that this was no friendly ship. I looked at my watch, it was two minutes past six o'clock and then it was given out over the "Tannoy" system that we were engaging the German Pocket Battleship '**Von Sheer**' (It was not until later in the day that we learnt it was not the '**Von Sheer**' but the '**Graf Spee**').



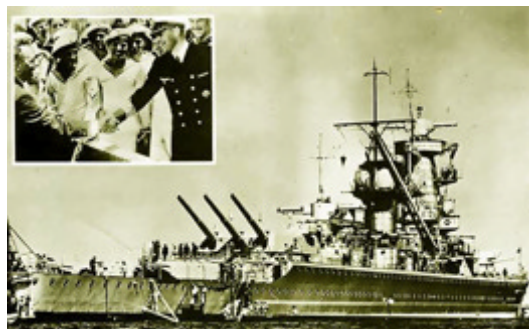
'Lofty'

The three cruisers at this time were in line-ahead formation, being lead by the Ajax, then the Achilles and last in line the Exeter. Directly it was realised that an enemy was engaging us, the **Exeter** was turned out of line towards the '**Graf Spee**'.

The range closed quickly and the enemy's firing was extremely accurate. **Exeter** was hit very early in the action but when we got into range one of our first salvo's hit the control tower of the '**Graf Spee**', thereby putting out of action their extremely accurate gunnery control. Nevertheless **Exeter** was getting a pasting, steaming right towards the enemy as she was, all the front part of the ship was knocked into a shambles. A & B turrets (8 inch guns) the 4-inch guns and the torpedo tubes were put out of action, their crews nearly all killed or wounded. Shells were passing completely through the superstructure, there was shrapnel flying everywhere, the bridge where the Captain was controlling the ship was put out of action, with most of the personnel being killed or wounded. The Captain although wounded about the face came back to the

after control. He sent the Commander (**Commander Graham**) forward to organise the forward control parties who were badly knocked about by an 11 inch shell passing into the ship on the port side just below B turret at an angle from the forward to aft and exploding above the 4 inch guns magazine and turning the place into a raging inferno. There was no direct way of getting into the flat, all the ladders and companionways were shot away but eventually a fire fighting party managed to get there. It was one of the worst places that a shell could have landed because through that flat ran all the cables to the transmitting station and telephone exchange, the nerve centres of the ship, and the explosion and fire had out communications to all parts of the ship out of action.

At this time the **Exeter** was in a sorry state, she was taking in water and had developed a list, all the guns were out of action except for the 2 guns of Y turret, the only steering position was the emergency position right aft where the sail maker was at the wheel, orders to him were being passed by a quickly formed chain of men, who were drawn from the quarters where there was no need of them, from the Captain in the after control right aft to the emergency steering position.



Admiral Graf Spee

When the Captain came aft I was in the nearest position to him, he couldn't see properly and all the time I was keeping him informed as to the position of the '**Graf Spee**' in relation to us. After a while I acted as the Captains messenger, and delivered messages to all parts of the ship. It seemed as if I bore a charmed life, because all the time I was going about the ship my shipmates were getting killed and wounded by the shrapnel, there were bodies everywhere and some were in a terrible condition. We were a young ships company, the majority of us were in our teens and early twenties and this was our first action, most of us had been together for nearly three years we were members of a fine ship, a crack ship in the fact, I would say the finest and most efficient ship in the **Royal Navy**. We were trained to the utmost and I am sure we were doing our duty automatically, and it was being done well.

The moral of the men was grand, even when the shells and shrapnel were flying everywhere. At one time during the action our wireless aerials were shot away, they fell down across the after control and got entangled with the after director until it couldn't move at all. I took an axe and cut through the cables where upon the door opened, the director layer poked his head out and politely said, "Thank you very much".

There was a lull in the action, because I do think that the '**Graf Spee**' must have suffered as much as we had, after all we had been pumping shells into her for nearly two hours, and they must have done quite a lot of damage. During this time we did manage to get the fires under control and cleared the amphibious aircraft from off the catapults and into the sea; as there was no power available this had to be done by sheer manpower.

Although there was now only two guns of the **Exeter** that was able to be fired and these were the two guns of Y turret, the after turret, we again steamed into action with the guns firing on their foremost bearing. The gunnery officer undertook the control of the turret, which was now in local control, with utter disregard to his own safety. We were now taking water fast, in a sinking condition and slowly listing to starboard, and when it became apparent to the Commadore that we were in a dangerous condition we were ordered to withdraw from the action and to make our way to **Port Stanley** in the **Falkland Islands**.

When it became apparent that the action was over, the shock of what we had been through sank into us. It struck me as it did many others in the form of hunger, there was at that time no means of getting a meal and I remember all we could get our hands on was raw cabbage and I know we ate this and enjoyed it.

Battle of the River Plate – A compilation of documents

We were not given time to dwell on the action, we were told off into watches and working parties and set to work clearing away the damage. Some of this work was ghastly because as the debris was cleared away so the great number of the dead and wounded was brought to light. There were over 60 killed and over 120 wounded.

During the afternoon our fallen comrades were buried at sea with full Naval Honours, all the ships company except the wounded and those on watch being present.

There were many deeds of heroism that day and I know that every man that day did his duty to the utmost and I know that every survivor thinks of his fallen comrades with pride and know they will never be forgotten.

After working day and night we eventually covered the 1,000 miles to the **Falkland Islands** where the wounded were immediately transferred to hospital. The good people of **Port Stanley** were ready for us; they took us into their homes and treated us as their own sons. Although the majority of the people were very poor we were given the best they could afford. I was taken into the family of **Mr and Mrs Smith** and to them I shall ever be thankful.

We worked every day on the **Exeter** and when she was in a seaworthy condition we set sail for home. We were escorted all the way and when we made our only port of call in **Freetown, Sierra Leon** no sooner had we dropped anchor then the first person up the gangway was my Father who at that time was serving onboard **H.M.S. Albatross**, a seaplane carrier. You can guess how we felt about meeting each other again.

It was February when we eventually arrived home to **Plymouth** to a tumultuous reception, headed by the then **First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill**.



H.M.S Exeter –Shrapnel damage

We were feted in **Plymouth, Exeter** and **London** where after marching to the **Horse Guards Parade** we were inspected by **H.M. King George VI**. Afterwards we marched through dense crowds to the **Guildhall** where we were entertained to lunch by the **Lord Mayor of London**.

The story of my part in **H.M.S. Exeter** and the **Battle of the River Plate** ends, - **except to forever remember all those who served with me.**

What happened to the other ships that took part in the action?

First the enemy, the **'Graf Spee'**, she was driven into **Montevideo** the capital city of **Uruguay**. From there she sailed into the estuary of the **River Plate** where she was scuttled. Her Captain, **Captain Langsdorff** committed suicide by shooting himself.

The cruisers **H.M.S Ajax** and **Achilles** patrolled off the **River Plate** until the **'Graf Spee'** was scuttled. They then sailed to **Port Stanley** and from thence they sailed to their homeports, **H.M.S Ajax** to **England**, and **H.M.S Achilles** to **New Zealand**.



H.M.S. "Exeter" returns to Plymouth, February 15, 1940, showing part of the cheering crowd.

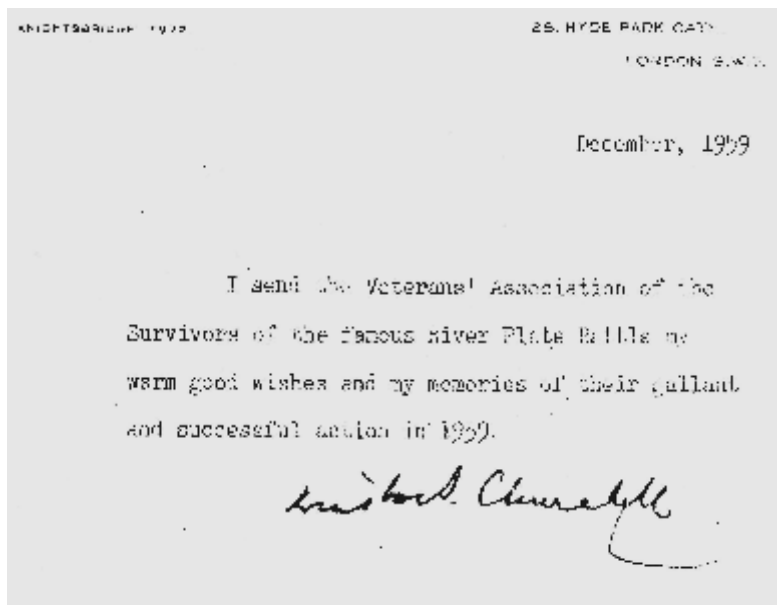
River Plate Veterans Association

The Association Tie



20th Anniversary: 1959

Telegram from Winston Churchill.



50th Anniversary: 1989

50th Anniversary Plaque



55th Anniversary: 1994.

Presentation of charcoal drawing to the RPVA Secretary (R. A. Fogwill "Len" "Lofty")



57th Anniversary: 1996.

Veteran's attending the memorial service – Plymouth Hoe.



In Remembrance:

This collection dedicated in memory of my father "Len" R.A. Fogwill (1921 – 1997) and to all his comrades who always gave him so much support over the years in the administration of the River Plate Veterans Association.

I know whenever I had the opportunity to attend these reunions all the veterans had a special affinity towards each other, and these occasions meant so much to all.

Finally, a special mention to Len's wife; Irene Fogwill, she gave so much in the organising of the reunions for the R.P.V.A.

Patrick Fogwill

