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## THE RIVER PLATE BATTLE

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 30th December, 1939, by Rear Admiral H. H. Harwood, K.C.B., O.B.E., Rear Admiral Commanding South American Division:—

H.M.S. AJAX,  
30th December, 1939.

I have the honour to submit the following report of the action between H.M. Ships AJAX\* (Captain C. H. L. Woodhouse, Royal Navy), ACHILLES† (Captain W. E. Parry, Royal Navy) and EXETER (Captain F. S. Bell, Royal Navy), under my orders, and the German Armoured Ship ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE on Wednesday, 13th December, 1939, and the sequence of events leading to her self-destruction on Sunday, 17th December, 1939.

All times throughout this report are in the time of Zone plus 2, except where otherwise stated.

## PRELIMINARY DISPOSITIONS

2. The British ship DORIC STAR had reported being attacked by a pocket battleship in position 19 degrees 15' south, 5 degrees 5' east during the afternoon of 2nd December, 1939, and a similar report had been sent by an unknown vessel 170 miles south-west of that position at 0500 G.M.T. on 3rd December.

From this data I estimated that at a cruising speed of 15 knots the raider could reach the Rio de Janeiro focal area a.m. 12th December, the River Plate focal area p.m. 12th December or a.m. 13th December and the Falkland Islands area 14th December.

\* Wearing the Broad Pendant of the Commodore Commanding the South American Division.

† Of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy.

3. I decided that the Plate, with its larger number of ships and its very valuable grain and meat trade, was the vital area to be defended. I therefore arranged to concentrate there my available forces in advance of the time at which it was anticipated the raider might start operations in that area.

4. In order to bring this about, I made the following signal to the South American Division timed 1315 of 3rd December, 1939:—

"In view of report pocket battleship, amend previous dispositions. CUMBERLAND self-refit at Falkland Islands as previously arranged but keep at short notice on two shafts. ACHILLES leave Rio de Janeiro area so as to arrive and fuel Montevideo 0600 (Zone plus 2) 8th December, EXETER leave Falkland Islands, for Plate a.m. 9th December, covering S.S. LAFONIA with returning volunteers. AJAX, ACHILLES concentrate in position 35 degrees south, 50 degrees west at 1600 (Zone plus 2) 10th December. EXETER to pass through position 090 degrees Medanos Light 150 miles at 0700 12th December. If concentration with AJAX and ACHILLES is not effected by that time further instructions will be issued to EXETER. Oiler OLYNTHUS is to remain at sea rendezvous until situation clears instead of proceeding to Falkland Islands."

5. Strict W/T silence was kept after passing this signal.

6. Concentration of all three ships was effected by 0700 Tuesday, 12th December, and I then proceeded towards position 32 degrees south, 47 degrees west. This position was chosen from my Shipping Plot as being at that time the most congested part of the diverted shipping routes, i.e., the point where I estimated that a raider could do most damage to British shipping.

7. On concentrating I made the following signal timed 1200/12th December to my Force:—

"My policy with three cruisers in company versus one pocket battleship. Attack at once by day or night. By day act as two units, 1st Division (AJAX and ACHILLES) and EXETER diverged to permit flank marking. First Division will concentrate gunfire. By night ships will normally remain in company in open order. Be prepared for the signal ZMM\* which is to have the same meaning as MM\* except that for Division read Single Ship."

8. I amplified this later in my signal 1813/12th December as follows:—

"My object in the signal ZMM is to avoid torpedoes and take the enemy by surprise and cross his stern. Without further orders ships are to clear the line of fire by hauling astern of the new leading ship. The new leading ship is to lead the line without further orders so as to maintain decisive gun range."

I exercised this manoeuvre during the evening of 12th December.

#### THE ACTION.

Wednesday, 13th December, 1939

0530-0623.

9. At 0520/13th December, the Squadron was in position 34 degrees 34' south, 49 degrees 17' west. With the last of the dawn I exercised manoeuvring signals, and then re-formed the squadron on a course of 060 speed 14 knots in the order AJAX, ACHILLES, EXETER. At 0614, smoke was sighted bearing 320 and EXETER was ordered to close and investigate it. At 0616 EXETER reported "I think it is a pocket battleship" and two minutes later the enemy opened fire, one 11-in. turret at EXETER and the other at AJAX.

10. The First Division immediately altered course together by signal to 340 degrees to close the range. Captain F. S. Bell, Royal Navy, of H.M.S. EXETER, hauled out of the line and altered course to the westward in accordance with my plan, in order to attack the enemy from a widely different bearing and permit flank marking. All ships increased speed.

EXETER opened fire at 0620, ARCHILLES at 0621 and AJAX at 0623.

An enemy report was immediately initiated and was broadcast at 0634. Amplifying reports were made at 0640, 0646 and 0722.

11. From this point until the action was broken off, no alter course signals were made. Captain W. E. Parry, Royal Navy, of H.M.S. ACHILLES manoeuvred his ship as necessary to clear her line of fire, remaining close to AJAX and conforming to her movements. EXETER proceeded independently, her initial course being about 280 degrees.

12. AJAX and ACHILLES opened in Single Ship firing, but Concentration was employed as soon as W/T touch had been established at about 0625.

13. It appeared at this stage as if the enemy was undecided as to her gunnery policy. Her turrets were working under different controls, and she shifted target several times before eventually concentrating both turrets on EXETER.

0623-0630.

14. EXETER was straddled by GRAF SPEE's third salvo, one shell of which burst short amidships, killed the starboard tube's crew, damaged communications and riddled the searchlights and aircraft. Preparations were being made at this time for catapulting the aircraft, but as both were by then out of action, they were manhandled over the side.

15. At 0624, after EXETER had fired eight salvos, she received a direct hit from an 11-in. direct-action shell on the front of "B" turret. This shell burst on impact, put the turret out of action, and splinters swept the bridge, killing or wounding all personnel there with the exception of the Captain and two others, and wrecked the wheelhouse communications.

16. Captain F. S. Bell, Royal Navy, then decided to fight his ship from the after conning position, but owing to communications being destroyed it was some time before the ship could be brought under the control of that position, and then it could only be done by means of a chain of messengers to pass orders to the after steering position.

Meanwhile EXETER had swung to starboard, and was closing her "A" arcs,\* but she was brought back to port by an order from the torpedo officer, Lieutenant-Commander C. J. Smith, Royal Navy, who succeeded in getting word through to the lower conning position.

Two more 11 in. hits were received in the fore part of the ship during this phase.

17. AJAX and ACHILLES were in Concentration firing and seemed to be making good shooting. They were closing the range rapidly and gaining bearing on the enemy.

0630-0638:

18. About this time, the GRAF SPEE shifted the fire of one 11 in. turret on to the First Division and AJAX was straddled three times at about 0631. The First Division turned slightly away to throw out the enemy's gunfire.

His secondary armament was firing alternately at AJAX and ACHILLES, but with no effect, though some salvos fell close.

19. AJAX catapulted her aircraft with Lieutenant E. D. G. Lewin, Royal Navy, as pilot, at 0637, a very fine evolution observing that "X" and "Y" turrets were at that time firing on a forward bearing. Owing to delay in establishing W/T communication the first air spotting report was not received until 0654. This method was then employed for the rest of the action.

20. The First Division turned back to port at 0634 in order to close the range.

21. EXETER fired her starboard torpedoes in local control at 0632 as she turned back to her westerly course, but at 0637 the GRAF SPEE altered course some 150 degrees to port,

\* The signification of these signals was:

ZMM—ships are to turn to course . . . starting with the rear ship.

MM—Commanders of Divisions are to turn their Division to course . . . starting with the rear Division.

\* The arcs on which all guns of a ship's main armament will bear, this allowing them to fire simultaneously at the enemy.

and steered to the north-westward under cover of smoke. AJAX and ACHILLES immediately hauled round, first to north, then to the west to close the range and regain bearing, accepting the temporary loss of "A" arcs. Both ships were by this time proceeding at full speed.

It appears probable that the First Division's concentration and also EXETER'S fire had up to this point been most effective and it is thought that this and the firing of EXETER'S torpedoes were the cause of the enemy making smoke and altering course away.

0638-0650.

22. At about 0638 EXETER altered course to starboard so as to fire her port torpedoes. She then steered to the north-east to close the First Division till about 0645 when she turned to a westerly course to keep within range.

23. During this period, EXETER received two more 11 in. hits. "A" turret was put out of action, and the second shell burst in the Chief Petty Officers' flat amidships, started a fierce fire, and caused the 4 in. magazine to be flooded by burst water mains. All compass repeaters were now out of action, and Captain Bell, using a boat's compass, resolutely maintained EXETER in action with "Y" turret firing in local control and the gunnery officer, Lieutenant-Commander R. B. Jennings, Royal Navy, controlling the fire from the after searchlight platform.

24. At 0640 an 11 in. direct action shell fell short of ACHILLES in line with the bridge and burst on the water. Splinters killed four ratings in the D.C.T. and stunned the gunnery officer, Lieutenant R. E. Washbourn, Royal Navy. Captain Parry and the Chief Yeoman who were on the bridge were also slightly wounded at the time. The D.C.T. itself was undamaged and, after a few minutes, resumed control from the after control position which had temporarily taken over. The survivors of the crew of the D.C.T. took over the duties of the casualties in a most resolute and efficient manner.

About 0646 reception on ACHILLES fire control W/T set faded, and thereafter she carried on in individual control.

0650-0708.

25. During the period ACHILLES was in individual control, she had great difficulty in finding the line, and at first her salvos were falling well short. Reports of the fall of these salvos were transmitted by the aircraft of AJAX whose gun control officer, not knowing that ACHILLES was no longer in concentration firing, accepted them as referring to his own fall of shot, and corrected accordingly.

The enemy was making smoke at the time, and conditions for direct observations were very bad.

This resulted in AJAX salvos falling well over and the target was not found again until 0708.

26. AJAX and ACHILLES hauled round to the north-westward at 0656 to open their "A" arcs. GRAF SPEE made frequent alterations of course to throw out our gunfire, and from 0700 onwards she made great use of smoke; she appeared to have some form of chlorosulphonic apparatus aft, and used this as well as smoke floats.

27. Captain Bell, of H.M.S. EXETER, hauled round to the westward at 0650, and was still engaging the enemy, adjusting his course so as to keep "Y" turret bearing.

EXETER now had a list of 7 degrees to starboard, and had several compartments flooded forward as a result of an 11 in. hit under the forecastle. She was still being engaged by GRAF SPEE, but the latter's fire appeared at this time to be falling a considerable distance over EXETER.

0708-0728.

28. GRAF SPEE'S range from the First Division was still 16,000 yards at 0710. I then decided to accept the loss of "A" arcs in order to close the range as rapidly as possible. Course was altered to the westward, and AJAX and ACHILLES were ordered to proceed at their utmost speed.

29. At 0716, GRAF SPEE made a drastic alteration of course to port under cover of smoke, but four minutes later she turned to the north-west and opened her "A" arcs on the First Division. AJAX was immediately straddled three times by 11 in. at a range of 11,000 yards, but the enemy's secondary armament was firing raggedly, and appeared to be going consistently over, between AJAX and ACHILLES.

30. At 0720, the First Division turned to starboard to bring all guns to bear. Our shooting appeared to be very effective, and a fire was observed amidships in GRAF SPEE.

31. At 0725, AJAX received an 11 in. delay action hit on the after superstructure. The shell passed through various cabins, then "X" turret trunk, wrecking the turret machinery below the gunhouse and finally bursting in the Commodore's sleeping cabin, doing considerable damage. A portion of the base of the shell struck "Y" barbette close to the training rack and jammed the turret. It was this shell that killed four and wounded six of "X" turret's crew. This one hit therefore put both "X" and "Y" turrets of AJAX out of action.

32. It now appeared to me that GRAF SPEE intended to neglect EXETER and was determined to close the First Division on a north-westerly course. Thinking she would hold this course, it was decided to fire one broadside of torpedoes from AJAX.

At 0724 AJAX turned to starboard and fired four torpedoes at a range of 9,000 yards. GRAF SPEE probably saw these being fired, as she at once turned some 130 degrees to port, though she came back to the north-west three minutes later.

0728-0740.

33. EXETER had been dropping gradually astern, as she had to reduce speed owing to damage forward. She still continued firing "Y" turret in local control until about 0730, when power to the turret failed due to flooding. She could then no longer keep up with the action, and about 0740 steered to the south-east at slow speed, starting to repair damage and make herself seaworthy.

34. AJAX and ACHILLES hauled back to about 260 degrees at 0728 to close the range still further. At 0731, the aircraft reported

"Torpedoes approaching, they will pass ahead of you." I decided, however, not to take any chances, and altered course to 180 degrees, engaging the enemy on the starboard side, with the range closing rapidly. So as to blank ACHILLES' fire for as short a time as possible, I directed her by signal to pass under the stern of AJAX.

35. At 0732 GRAF SPEE turned away to the west, making much smoke and zigzagging to throw out the First Division's gunfire, which, particularly from ACHILLES, appeared to be very accurate at this stage. AJAX was also making very good use of her three available guns. GRAF SPEE altered to the south-west at 0736, and again brought all guns to bear on the First Division.

36. By 0738 the range was down to 8,000 yards. At this time I received a report that AJAX had only 20 per cent. of ammunition left and had only three guns in action, as one of the hoists had failed in "B" turret and "X" and "Y" turrets were both out of action.

GRAF SPEE'S shooting was still very accurate and she did not appear to have suffered much damage.

I therefore decided to break off the day action and try and close in again after dark. Accordingly at 0740 AJAX and ACHILLES turned away to the east under cover of smoke.

37. One of GRAF SPEE'S last salvos brought down AJAX'S main top mast and destroyed all her aerials. Jury aerials were, however, soon rigged.

38. It subsequently transpired that the report of shortage of ammunition in AJAX referred only to "A" turret, which had been firing continuously for 81 minutes, but this was not realised at the time.

39. GRAF SPEE made no attempt to follow, but steadied on a course of about 270 degrees, proceeding at about 22 knots on a course direct for the River Plate.

40. After opening the range under smoke for six minutes, I again turned the First Division to the westward and ordered ACHILLES to shadow in Sector "A", on the enemy's starboard quarter, and AJAX in Sector "B", on his port quarter. The range at this time being about 15 miles.

41. The general trend of GRAF SPEE'S retreat at this stage was about 255 degrees. His very conspicuous control tower made it an easy matter to shadow him at long range in the excellent visibility prevailing.

At 0807, as AJAX'S aerials were still down, I ordered ACHILLES to broadcast GRAF SPEE'S position, course and speed to all British merchant ships. A similar message was broadcast every hour from AJAX until the end of the chase. I also passed this information to Admiralty at 1017 and 1700.

42. At 0912, AJAX recovered her aircraft, the operation being excellently performed under difficult conditions by Captain C. H. L. Woodhouse, and the pilot of the aircraft, Lieutenant E. D. G. Lewin, Royal Navy, and shadowing was resumed.

43. At 0946 I ordered CUMBERLAND, then at the Falkland Islands, to close the Plate at

full speed. She left at 1200, on the initiative of her Commanding Officer, Captain W. H. G. Fallowfield, Royal Navy, who had by then only received very jumbled messages. On receipt of my signal she at once increased to full speed.

At 1005 ACHILLES over-estimating the enemy's speed had closed to 23,000 yards. GRAF SPEE thereupon altered course and fired two three gun salvos at ACHILLES; the first was very short, but the second fell close alongside. She appeared to wait for the first salvo to fall before firing the second.

ACHILLES turned away at full speed under smoke and resumed shadowing at longer range.

44. At 1104 a merchant ship was sighted close to GRAF SPEE. She was stopped and was blowing off steam. A few minutes later the following W/T signal was received on 500 k/cs: AJAX (pre-war call sign) from GRAF SPEE—"please pick up lifeboats of English steamer."

On coming up with the merchant ship she turned out to be the British S.S. SHAKESPEARE. All her boats were hoisted, and in response to my signals she reported that she was quite all right and did not require any assistance. By this time she was moving out to the southern flank.

At 1105 I received a signal from EXETER who reported that all her turrets were out of action and that she was flooded forward up to No. 14 bulkhead but could still do 18 knots. I ordered her to proceed to the Falkland Islands at whatever speed was possible without straining her bulkheads. She later reported that one gun of "Y" turret could be fired in local control.

At 1347 I informed the British Naval Attache, Buenos Aires, that GRAF SPEE was heading direct for the Plate.

45. At 1543 ACHILLES signalled "Enemy in sight 297", and later reported "Suspected 8 inch cruiser." However, at 1559, she negated the report, and the ship sighted was subsequently identified as S.S. DELANE, whose streamlined funnel gave her a similar appearance to a "Blucher" at very long range.

46. Shadowing continued without incident until 1915, when GRAF SPEE altered course and fired two salvos at AJAX who immediately turned away under smoke. The first salvo fell short and in line, the second in AJAX'S wake as she turned. The range at this time was about 26,000 yards.

47. It now appeared that GRAF SPEE intended to enter the Plate, and at 1902 I ordered ACHILLES to follow her if she went west of Lobos, while AJAX would proceed south of the English Bank in case she doubled back that way. I also directed ACHILLES to take every advantage of territorial waters while shadowing. My instructions were perfectly carried out by Captain W. E. Parry who took ACHILLES inside Lobos Island and close to the Uruguayan coast.

48. Just after sunset GRAF SPEE fired three salvos at ACHILLES, the third being very close. ACHILLES replied with five salvos and appeared to straddle. ACHILLES at this time was just clear of Punta Negra.

49. The Uruguayan gunboat URUGUAY closed AJAX about 2115. She appeared to be on patrol duty, but was soon left astern.

50. GRAF SPEE also fired single salvos at ACHILLES at 2132, 2140 and 2143, but the visibility to the eastward was very bad for her at these times and firing must have merely been intended to keep shadowers at a distance.

51. Those shots, however, did not deter Captain Parry from keeping touch and by 2200 ACHILLES had closed to within five miles of GRAF SPEE. The latter was well silhouetted first against the afterglow, and then against the lights of Montevideo. GRAF SPEE proceeded north of the English Bank and anchored in Montevideo roads at 0050.

52. My chief pre-occupation at that time was how long did GRAF SPEE intend to stay there. The primary necessity was to keep to seaward of the GRAF SPEE if she came to sea again, and at the same time to avoid being caught against the dawn light. At 2350 I ordered AJAX and ACHILLES to withdraw from the Plate, ACHILLES to patrol the area from the Uruguayan coast to a line 120 degrees from English Bank, and AJAX the southern area, both ships to move back into the Plate in their respective sectors after dawn.

*Thursday, 14th December.*

53. I requested His Britannic Majesty's Minister, Montevideo, to use every possible means of delaying GRAF SPEE'S sailing, in order to gain time for reinforcements to reach me. I suggested that he should sail British ships and invoke the 24-hour rule to prevent her leaving.

54. I learned that ARK ROYAL, RENOWN, NEPTUNE, DORSETSHIRE, SHROPSHIRE and three destroyers were all closing the Plate, but none of them could reach me for at least five days.

55. CUMBERLAND reported that she would arrive in the Plate at 2200/14th December, having made the passage from the Falkland Islands in 34 hours. I ordered her to cover the sector between Rouen and English Banks, with ACHILLES to the north of her and AJAX to the south. These dispositions were maintained during the night of the 14th/15th December.

Should GRAF SPEE come out, she was to be shadowed and all ships were to concentrate sufficiently far to seaward to enable a concerted attack to be carried out.

*Friday, 15th December.*

56. I ordered R.F.A. OLYNTHUS, Captain L. N. Hill, to proceed to Rouen Bank to be ready to fuel H.M. ships, and proceeded there in AJAX. I ordered CUMBERLAND to close and cover AJAX, remaining at visibility distance to the northward so as to be able to give warning in case GRAF SPEE came out without her sailing being reported.

57. I made the following policy signal timed 1135/15th December:—

"My object destruction. Necessitates concentrating our forces. Increased risk of enemy escape accepted. ACHILLES is now to watch north of English Bank and CUMBERLAND to west of English Bank, latter showing herself off Montevideo in daylight,

If enemy leaves before 2100, ships in touch shadow at maximum range—all units concentrate on shadower. If enemy has not left by 2100, leave patrol positions and concentrate in position 090 degrees San Antonio 15 miles by 0030; AJAX will probably join CUMBERLAND on her way south.

"If enemy leaves Montevideo after sunset, CUMBERLAND is at once to fly off one aircraft to locate and shadow enemy, if necessary landing in a lee, risking internment, and trying to find a British ship in the morning. If plan miscarries, adopt plan "B," all units concentrate in position 36 degrees south, 52 degrees west at 0600."

I also repeated my signal 1200/12th December (see paragraph 7) to CUMBERLAND at 1136/15th December, substituting CUMBERLAND for EXETER in the original.

58. AJAX took in 200 tons of fuel from OLYNTHUS, bad weather causing wires to part including the spans of two hurricane hawsers. AJAX then proceeded to join CUMBERLAND.

59. I received a report that GRAF SPEE had landed a funeral party this morning, and later, that she had been granted an extension of her stay up to 72 hours, in order to make herself seaworthy. It appeared that she had been damaged far more extensively than I had thought likely, and had been hit 60 to 70 times in all. The British ship ASHWORTH was sailed at 1900 and GRAF SPEE accepted the edict that she would not be allowed to sail for 24 hours after this. At the same time I could feel no security that she would not break out at any moment.

*Saturday, 16th December.*

60. CUMBERLAND, AJAX, and ACHILLES made rendezvous off San Antonio at 0030 in accordance with my plan. The squadron closed the Plate towards dawn and AJAX flew off her aircraft for a reconnaissance of the harbour. The aircraft was instructed not to fly over territorial waters.

61. The aircraft returned at 0830 and the crew reported that they had been unable to see anything owing to bad visibility. They had been fired at while in the vicinity of the Whistle Buoy. This seemed to indicate that GRAF SPEE was taking advantage of the mist and was trying to break out. All ships went to action stations, but a report received shortly afterwards from Montevideo indicated that GRAF SPEE was still in harbour.

62. I informed H.B.M. Minister, Montevideo, of the firing on our aircraft, and suggested that an investigation into this might be a way of delaying GRAF SPEE sailing. He replied, however, that it was definitely not GRAF SPEE who fired, and that it had possibly been the Argentine Guard Gunboat at Recalada, or in some other position.

63. The Admiralty informed me in message 0219/16th December that I was free to engage GRAF SPEE anywhere outside the three-mile limit. I decided to move my patrol into the area north and east of English Bank, as I considered that a battle in the very restricted water just outside the three-mile limit off Montevideo was impracticable, owing to lack of sea room, and possibility of "overs" landing in Uruguay and causing international complications.

64. Information from Montevideo was to the effect that GRAF SPEE was still repairing damage, having obtained assistance from the shore, and had provisioned. It was reported as unlikely that she would sail that night; on the other hand, once again I did not feel able to rely on such an optimistic report.

65. I signalled the following appreciation to ships in company timed 1615/16th December—

“My object Destruction necessitates keeping my force together. My Appreciation. Rely on getting his time of sailing and initial course from shore. For subsequent movements rely on CUMBERLAND'S aircraft reconnaissance reports.

“Enemy's courses of Action. (a) North of English Bank. (b) Between English and Rouen Banks. (c) Between Rouen Bank and San Antonio. (d) Double back on any track. My Course of Action. I rule out fighting him off Whistle Buoy as being politically impossible. Until the dawn phase I want to keep the advantage of light and from this it follows that I must keep to the east and move to intercept him from area to area depending on time and information. My Plan. To keep within reach of intercepting him north of English Bank moving south or doubling back as information comes in. Tactical. I must keep CUMBERLAND so placed that she will not have her fire masked initially, and therefore I will work in divisions 8 cables apart with ACHILLES in close order astern of AJAX.

“After action commences, divisions have complete freedom of action. CUMBERLAND'S aircraft is to be flown off as soon as news is received of enemy's sailing.”

66. The British ship DUNSTER GRANGE was sailed from Montevideo at 1700 and a further period before GRAF SPEE could be allowed to sail was claimed. It was, however, reported that she had made very rapid progress with her repairs, and might break out at any moment.

67. The difficulty of intercepting GRAF SPEE who had so many courses of action open to her will, I feel sure, be realised. It was in the dog watches of this evening that I received the Naval Secretary's signal 1717/16th December informing me from the First Lord of the Admiralty of the honours so graciously bestowed by His Majesty the King on myself, Captain W. E. Parry, Captain C. H. L. Woodhouse and Captain F. S. Bell, and also that I had been promoted to Rear Admiral to date 13th December. This was a most stimulating tonic to us all and I took steps to pass it on to H.M. Ships under my command, emphasising the share of all concerned in the honours which their senior officers had received.

68. The squadron spent the night patrolling on a north and south line five miles to the east of the English Bank Light Buoy. OLYNTHUS proceeded to sea with order to be at the Rouen Bank by 1000 the next morning if GRAF SPEE had not broken out.

*Sunday, 17th December.*

69. I ordered ACHILLES who was getting low in fuel, to oil from OLYNTHUS off the Rouen Bank during the forenoon. AJAX and CUMBERLAND acted as look-outs at visibility

distance during the operation. The squadron then cruised in company off the south-east of the English Bank, remaining concentrated throughout the afternoon and ready again to take up the same night patrol as on the previous night.

70. It was reported that GRAF SPEE had landed all her borrowed welding apparatus during this forenoon. We all expected that she would break out at any moment. I would like to place on record the fact that at this stage the most cheerful optimism pervaded all ships in spite of the fact that this was the fifth night of waiting for the enemy.

71. At 1540 I received a signal that GRAF SPEE was transferring between 300 and 400 men to the German ship TACOMA lying close to her in the ante-port. At 1720, a further report stated that over 700 men with their baggage and some provisions had now been transferred, and that there were indications that GRAF SPEE intended to scuttle herself.

Shortly after this GRAF SPEE was reported as weighing.

72. I immediately altered course to close the Whistle Buoy, and increased to 25 knots. AJAX'S aircraft was flown off and ordered to proceed towards Montevideo and report the position of GRAF SPEE and also TACOMA.

GRAF SPEE left harbour at 1815 and proceeded slowly to the westward. TACOMA also weighed, and followed her out of harbour.

73. I ordered my squadron to assume the First Degree of Readiness, in case GRAF SPEE intended re-transferring her crew from TACOMA outside the harbour, or intended to break out with or without her surplus crew.

74. AJAX aircraft reported sighting GRAF SPEE in a position in shallow water some six miles south-west of Montevideo. At 2054 the aircraft signalled: “GRAF SPEE has blown herself up.”

75. The squadron carried on towards Montevideo, proceeding north of the English Bank, AJAX and ACHILLES cheering ship as they passed each other.

76. Once again Captain Woodhouse and Lieutenant Lewin made an excellent recovery of AJAX'S aircraft, this time under almost dark conditions.

Navigation lights were then switched on and the squadron steamed past the Whistle Buoy within about four miles of the wreck of the GRAF SPEE. It was now dark, and she was ablaze from end to end, flames reaching almost as high as the top of her control tower, a magnificent and most cheering sight.

#### REMARKS BY REAR ADMIRAL COMMANDING SOUTH AMERICA DIVISION.

#### *Appreciation of conduct of Commanding Officers and Ships' Companies.*

77. I have the greatest pleasure in informing you of the very high standard of efficiency and courage that was displayed by all officers and men throughout the five days of the operation under review.

78. Captain W. E. Parry, Royal Navy, of H.M.S. ACHILLES; Captain C. H. L. Woodhouse, Royal Navy, of H.M.S. AJAX; and Captain F. S. Bell, Royal Navy, of H.M.S. EXETER, all handled their ships in a most efficient and resolute manner.

79. In addition I would like to place on record the very great assistance that I received throughout this period from my Flag Captain and Chief Staff Officer, Captain C. H. L. Woodhouse, Royal Navy.

80. The speedy arrival of H.M.S. CUMBERLAND, Captain W. H. G. Fallowfield, Royal Navy, from the Falkland Islands, was a most creditable performance, especially as that ship was self-refitting at the time the action commenced.

81. Throughout the days of waiting off the Plate, R.F.A. OLYNTHUS, Captain L. N. Hill, arrived punctually at the various rendezvous given him and did everything possible to facilitate the refuelling of H.M. Ships.

82. Within my own knowledge, and from the reports of the Commanding Officers there are many stories of bravery, devotion to duty and of the utmost efficiency which shows that H.M. Ships have been forcefully trained and made thoroughly ready to deal with the many and various exigencies of battle. In accordance with Admiralty message 1755/16th December, I am submitting separately a list of officers and ratings whom I consider to be especially deserving of award. I would remark, however, that the standard throughout has been so high that the preparation of this list has been very difficult.

83. I would like also to place on record the honour and pleasure I had to taking one of H.M. Ships of the New Zealand Division into action, and fully concur with the Commanding Officer of H.M.S. ACHILLES in paragraph 27 of his report where he remarks that "New Zealand has every reason to be proud of her seamen during their baptism of fire."

84. Further, it is most satisfactory for me to be able to inform you that the machinery and equipment generally of H.M. Ships proved to be of the highest efficiency and well able to stand up to the prolonged strain of battle.

#### *Lessons learned.*

85. The main impression left on my mind is of the adequacy of our peace training. Little that had not been practised occurred, particularly among the repair parties. Nevertheless, there are a very large number of points brought out in the reports by the Commanding Officers and I would recommend that they should be carefully studied.

86. As soon as the three ships were in company at the Falkland Islands I ordered committees of the Gunnery, Torpedo and Engineer Officers to be formed so as to analyse the lessons learned. Their conclusions have been forwarded direct to Admiralty.

#### *Enemy Tactics.*

87. The most salient point is that GRAF SPEE closed on sighting us, firing one turret at First Division and the other at EXETER.

This initial closing of the range by the enemy had the effect of bringing both the 8 in. and 6 in. cruisers into effective gun range at once and so avoided for us the most difficult problem of gaining range in the face of 11 in. gunfire.

88. It would appear that GRAF SPEE was heavily handled by the gunfire both of the First Division's concentration and also by that of EXETER in the initial phase, the culminating point perhaps being the firing of torpedoes by

H.M.S. EXETER. At this point GRAF SPEE turned away under smoke and from that time onwards her Commanding Officer displayed little offensive spirit and did not take advantage of the opportunity that was always present either to close the First Division or EXETER, the latter—and he must have known it—only having one turret in action. Instead GRAF SPEE retired between the two and allowed herself to be fired at from both flanks. Only at one period, i.e., at 0720, did she again open her "A" arcs and concentrate on the First Division, and she immediately abandoned this when AJAX fired torpedoes.

89. Her frequent alterations of course under smoke were, from an avoiding action point of view, well carried out and undoubtedly threw out our gunfire. This has shown up the necessity for more frequent practice at a highly mobile target at fine angles of inclination.

GRAF SPEE had an exceptionally high degree of manoeuvrability and apparently used full wheel for her turns. On many occasions this gave her an apparent list which raised our hopes, but she always came upright again on steadying.

90. At no time did GRAF SPEE steam at a higher speed than 24 knots, and generally her speed was between 19 and 22 knots. It was noticed that from the time of first sighting she was making a considerable amount of reddish-brown and occasionally white smoke.

91. Enemy smoke screens were good but not entirely effective as they did not rise high enough. A point brought out was the necessity for remote control of our smoke floats. Endeavours to light ours while the main armament was firing presented many difficulties.

#### *Enemy Gunnery.*

92. GRAF SPEE'S 11 in. fire was accurate throughout, particularly for line. The rate of fire was slow and there were short periods in which either one or the other turret did not appear to be firing, but by the evening phase both turrets were in action. They certainly did excellent shooting at AJAX and ACHILLES at a range of about 26,000 yards while these ships were shadowing. It was evident from this that shadowing ships should, available speed permitting, zigzag so as to prevent too accurate range plotting by the enemy. It was also found desirable to make drastic alterations of course when the first salvo was fired.

93. Perhaps the most interesting point was the mixing of armour-piercing delay action projectiles and direct action. AJAX'S one 11 in. hit and several of EXETER'S were of the delay action type. A delay of 42 feet was measured in AJAX and 65 feet in EXETER. It was most noticeable that at the short range at which the action was fought the 11 in. projectiles proceeded more or less on a horizontal course through the ship and did not directly affect the vitals below.

94. The direct action type produced most serious, and to a certain extent unexpected results. They burst on impact with either the ship or the water and showered splinters in all directions, causing a very large number of casualties to personnel and damage to rigging, electric cables and material generally. I would stress the necessity for more protection of bridges, fire control cables and such important



parts of the offensive organisation as the 6 in. director tower. A large number of casualties on EXETER'S bridge were caused by splinters from the hit on "B" turret ricocheting off the roof of the bridge. Immediate steps should be taken to pad the under surface of bridge roofs.

95. The 11 in. shells that fell short made a black splash and in the vicinity of bursts a black dust like soot was found.

96. The enemy 6 in. fire was ragged and ineffective and caused little, if any, anxiety.

97. There is some evidence that GRAF SPEE fired time-fuzed H.E. possibly from her high angle guns.

#### *Aircraft.*

98. The flying off of AJAX'S aircraft with "X" and "Y" turrets firing on a forward bearing while the aircraft was waiting was a gallant and most resolute effort. The handling of both AJAX and her aircraft during subsequent recoveries was also very well carried out. During the past two months I have been most impressed with the rough weather capabilities of the Seafox type of aircraft.

99. EXETER'S Walrus aircraft had been refuelled for the dawn phase, and it was unfortunate that both were hit by splinters before either could be flown off. It was extremely fortunate that the petrol which was being sprayed all over the after part of the ship did not cause any fires. This danger must always be present when an unexpected encounter occurs. Again it emphasizes the necessity for emptying the aircraft of petrol should a night encounter be likely and for the ability to be able to fuel and defuel quickly.

100. Another point that comes out is the need for speeding up the catapulting process.

101. The aircraft, once up, though extremely valuable at times, was not entirely successful.

102. GRAF SPEE'S aircraft was out of action before the battle and did not take part.

#### *Increased Protection.*

103. There must always be a tendency for a cruiser to desire increased protection and most of the claims must, generally speaking, be resisted. Nevertheless, there are portions of the control and of the offensive armament that I feel very strongly should be protected against splinters.

(a) The killing or wounding of nearly the whole of EXETER'S bridge personnel is one example. The bullet-proof plating, backed up by the instrument plate was more or less successful in keeping out most of the splinters. It should, however, be made thicker and, as mentioned before, the underside of the bridge roof should be padded to prevent splinters ricocheting off it. It was this latter factor that was the main cause of the casualties.

(b) The hitting of ACHILLES director control tower was most unfortunate, and I consider that, particularly in those ships with only one director tower it should be made splinter proof and also that the leads to it should be in a protected tube.

(c) The After Conning Position. This position was used throughout most of the action in EXETER, but its communications failed, and Captain Bell had to con the ship through a chain of messengers. In AJAX casualties from splinters occurred in this position, though it appears they were downwards from a hit on the main-topmast. I consider that the after conning position should be protected and more attention paid to the security of its communications.

(d) Other exposed personnel liable to attack from splinters. I consider that the experience of this action shows that some protection should be given to torpedo tubes' crews, H.A. guns' crews and 0.5 in. machine guns' crews.

(Signed) H. H. HARWOOD,  
*Rear Admiral Commanding,  
South America Division.*

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