

# DEATH of a GERMAN WARRIOR

The destruction of *Admiral Graf Spee*  
and Captain Hans W. Langsdorff

BY ROD REDMAN



The first truly epic sea engagement of the Second World War began near dawn on 13 December 1939 when the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* was intercepted by three British cruisers off the coast of South America.

The *Spee*, carrying prisoners from nine Allied cargo ships sunk during the ten weeks since the war began, was seeking further conquest. Smoke pluming the horizon in the early morning light sent Capt. Hans Langsdorff in pursuit of the French steamer *Formose* — 900 miles out of Rio de Janeiro *en route* to Montevideo — as she headed for shore, her wireless operator flashing signals for assistance.

British cruiser HMS *Ajax*, scouting for Nazi raiders in the area, answered the frantic SOS, releasing a smoke screen between victim and pursuer. As two sister cruisers, *Achilles* and HMNZS *Exeter*, joined *Ajax*, the *Graf Spee* began a battle for her life.

Her 11-inch guns, each using 650 pounds of explosives per round, gave her more destructive capacity than the combined firepower of the 6- and 8-inch guns of her three opponents.

But the light

cruisers, all under 8000 tons, had the advantage of maneuverability over the 10,000-ton battleship.

The cruisers herded the *Spee* close to the shoreline, the tropic sunrise diffusing around them, laying smoke screens and ducking for cover after placing their salvos. Within four hours the Nazi ship had put the *Exeter* out of action, but three direct hits had destroyed her gun-control tower. The Germans continued the battle, making do with speaking tubes instead of telephones, using lanterns in lieu of electric lights, while the Captain took over manual controls as less-skilled crewmen strapped in to replace wounded gunnery specialists.

The badly damaged *Exeter* ran toward the Falkland Islands as *Ajax* and *Achilles* played hare-and-hounds with the *Spee* along the scenic Uruguayan coastline for another twelve hours. Sixty-two Allied prisoners on the German ship — merchant seamen ranging in age from 15 to 72 years — had awakened to gunfire before their guards locked the cell doors beneath the *Spee*'s gun turrets and raced to battle stations. They cheered as the cruisers' guns inflicted 17 hits on the *Spee*, although British fire could easily turn their floating prison into a common coffin.

Throughout the day, rumors of a sea battle circulated in Montevideo, fed by persistent radio bulletins. By 6:00

pm the ships were within 20 miles of Punta del Este, and observers lined heights behind the resort area a bit over 60 miles from the city as *Ajax* and *Achilles* ran in along the shore shadows, forcing the *Graf Spee* to continue fighting facing into the summer sun.

Near midnight, residents of Montevideo were stunned by the shrilling of sirens from the waterfront. Glaring harbor lights lanced the night sky and people converged on the docks by the hundreds as the *Graf Spee* materialized out of the darkness, seeking refuge in the neutral port from certain destruction by the British warships standing guard outside the estuary of the Rio de la Plata.

Excitement grew as the *Spee*'s identity was confirmed by radio. Although 11,000 Germans lived in Uruguay, the tiny country was strongly pro-Ally in contrast to its giant neighbor Argentina, where Nazi supporters were strong among the quarter-million Germans residing in the sprawling nation.

Aboard the *Graf Spee*, near midnight, a German officer announced formally to the elated prisoners, "Gentlemen, for you the war is over. We have just entered Montevideo Harbor."

Sometime between 2:00 am, when port authorities boarded the *Graf Spee* and 8:00 am, when Uruguayan officials inspected the ship's damages, Capt. Langsdorff released his prisoners after complimenting them on the "gallant fight" put up by the British cruisers.

"When people fight like that," he said,

With some of the crewmembers standing at attention, the newly-completed *Graf Spee* heads out for a sea trials test voyage.