The battle of the Falklands

December 1918

By Tom Burtchaell

Despite all the comment - military, naval, political, economic, moral and historical - poured out about the recent Argentinian action in the Falklands, no one has seen fit to recall the only other military event of importance that took place there.

It is often forgotten now in the early eighties that in the early days of the twentieth century Germany, not to be outdone by nearly all her European neighbours, had several overseas colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. These included a colony and naval base on the Chinese main island Tsingtau, where her East Asiatic Squadron was based, and when World War I broke out in late July 1914, this force was commanded by Admiral Maximilian Graf Von Spee (pronounced Shipay). The German title of Graf is the equivalent of the English or French Count. This tall, burly, goatee-bearded officer had then been on the Chinese station for nearly two years and was the personification of Prussian efficiency and sense of duty. His two sons Otto and Heinz served as lieutenants in the squadron which consisted of six modern ships all less than ten years old. Of these the two armoured cruisers "Scharnhorse" and "Gneisenau" were the most powerful units, each being 11,000 tons and carrying six 8.2" and six 5.9" guns and having a speed of 24 knots. These two sister ships were the most powerful units, each being 11,000 tons and carrying six 8.2" and six 5.9" guns and having a speed of 24 knots. These two sister ships were the most powerful units, each being 11,000 tons and carrying six 8.2" and six 5.9" guns and having a speed of 24 knots.

Von Spee's situation in August 1914 was not one to envy. Powerful and modern though his ships might be he could hardly hope to reach home by any route without being intercepted and destroyed by more powerful Allied forces. Again if he waited at base or set off across the Pacific for the West coast of South America where he hoped to intercept and destroy shipping in the busy lanes approaching and leaving that continent. On setting out he detached Emden under Captain Von Mueller into the Indian Ocean to raid commerce there which she did to such effect that her depredations have gone down in the annals of naval history, but that is another story.

In these times of oil and nuclear powered naval vessels it is hard to visualise the problems of fuelling in the days of coal burning. A squadron like Von Spee's would be accompanied by colliers whose slow speed of ten to twelve knots would dictate the speed on the whole. Alternatively a squadron could rendezvous in mid-ocean with colliers but this operation required tremendous organisation which was difficult to keep secret in war time. Add to this the factor that coaling in mid-ocean was messy, complicated and downright dangerous and could not be done at all in heavy weather.

The Allies had several units scattered around the Pacific each of which was more than a match for Von Spee, but they got their priorities all wrong and began busily subduing the German Pacific colonies of Samoa and the Carolines which posed no threat at all. Von Spee's location and destruction should have taken priority, after which the colonies could be dealt with at leisure.

As if anticipating that his career would be short, Von Spee wrote in his log with grim foreboding: "I must plough the seas of the world doing what mischief I can, until my ammunition is exhausted, or a foe of superior strength succeeds in catching me".

Now enter the Falkland Islands. Here at Port Stanley was the English Navy's South Atlantic Station under Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock. It was the fifth of October before the Admiralty at Whitehall learned whither Von Spee was bound and they telegraphed Cradock to prepare to meet and destroy him which as we will see was the tallest of all orders. Cradock had at his disposal H.M.S. "Good Hope", 14,000 tons. two 9" and sixteen by 6" with a guns with a speed of 20 knots; H.M.S. "Monmouth", 9,800 tons, fourteen by 6" guns, and H.M.S. "Glasgow" two by 6" and ten by 4" guns.

Winston Churchill was first Lord of the Admiralty while Prince Louis of Battenberg was First Sea Lord. The latter was the father of Lord Louis Mountbatten who was assassinated in Co. Sligo in 1979. Chief of Naval Staff Sir Doveton Sturdee was for sending heavier units to aid Cradock but Churchill and Battenberg vetoed the proposal, being obsessed with fear of German high seas fleet strength in the North Sea. They dispatched instead H.M.S. "Canopus" in...
the mistaken theory that her four by 12" guns would be more than a match for Von Spee. They would be if they were not in a ship capable of only 12 knots and badly needing an overhaul when she arrived on the scene on 18th October.

We can now sum up the situation by stating that any unit which could catch the Germans in this area could not sink them and any unit which could sink them could not catch them. This stalemate was later to be almost exactly repeated, twenty-five years to the day, and in almost the same area when the German pocket battleship Graf Von Spee cruised in the South Atlantic in the early days of World War Two. No marks for guessing after whom this latter ship was named.

Realising that Canopus was but a liability, Cradock left her behind at Port Stanley on 22nd October and started a sweep around Cape Horn to seek what he then knew to be a superior force. Prince Louis, because of his German origin, was hounded out of Whitehall a few days later and replaced by Admiral Sir John Fisher, who had resigned from the Navy two years earlier. This old sea dog realised in a flash Cradock's peril and immediately dispatched H.M.S. "Defence" to his aid, while cabling him to offer battle without Canopus and Defence. This cable never reached Cradock who was already in the Pacific seeking Von Spee in the West Coast of South America—s Chilean and belligerents could get coal in neutral Chile, which Von Spee was doing at Valparaiso when he heard of Cradock's perils off Coronel. Two hundred miles south. He immediately sailed to engage and the opposing forces sighted each other at 5.40 a.m., 1914, and the battle of the Falkland Islands resulted in the destruction of the Battle of the Falkland Islands. On his way home he decided to raid Port Stanley, believing it to be only barely defended if at all. The purpose of the raid was to destroy the wireless transmitter and all naval installations and render the port useless as a base. Welcome coal stocks and bunkering facilities could also be anticipated. The German Squadron was sighted off Port Stanley at 7.35 a.m. on 8th December, less than twenty four hours after Sturdee had arrived. Coaling of the British ships which had been suspended the previous evening when darkness fell and opened her sea and was consternation as both sides sighted each other. One can imagine the sinking feeling in Von Spee's stomach as his lookouts reported battle cruisers when he could have sworn that there were no such vessels nearer than 7,000 miles. One visualises him screaming through his megaphone for confirmation and when it came realising that his end was in sight.

Steam had not been raised on the Inflexible and Invincible and in fact Sturdee was having breakfast. Caught like this, coaling and low in steam is, in naval parlance, a classic example of having ones trousers down and low down at that. If Von Spee had kept his head he could have alamed every British ship there because he could manoeuvre and they could not, but he lost his nerve and bolted when he should have known that, while he could run he could not hide, and inevitably he had to be cornered.

Sturdee, when he heard of Von Spee's turn-off calmly finished breakfast, reminiscent of Drake's game of bowls at Plymouth in 1588. The time was 8 a.m., December was in midsummer and, therefore, a long, clear, calm summer's day stretched ahead. Someone described it as excellent conditions for a shooting match. Inflexible and Invincible cleared the harbour at 10 a.m. and the chase was on. Just after one o'clock at 16,000yards Invincible opened fire on Leipzig the last ship in the German line. At 1.20 p.m. Von Spee ordered his three light cruisers to turn away southwards and try to escape, hoping to draw all the British fire onto Scharnhorst and Gneisnau but Sturdee had anticipated such a move and immediately sailed to engage and the Nurnberg, Kante and Cornwall turned after them.

Sturdee now proceeded to hammer the two German heavier ships and, even though Von Spee's accurate gunnery once forced him to turn away and increase range, his 12'' guns were far too heavy and punishing for the 8'' German guns. The unenviable task of the Kerryman jokes was forgotten.

Meanwhile the chase of the light cruisers continued. The Dreadnought passed herself and reached a speed of 27 knots and escaped to the South West in some rain squalls which luckily for her appeared unexpectedly. She survived another four months before being finally nailed in West Africa. The Nurnberg, rid-died like a "watchman's bucket" by the Dreadnought and arrived at St. Vincent's Kent. There were seven survivors of a crew of four hundred. The Leipzig went down at 9.23 p.m. with eighteen survivors out of over four hundred. Thus ended an eventful day with all but one of the East Asiatic Squadron on the bottom. Von Mueller's "Emden" had been caught and destroyed at the Cocos Islands by H.M.S. "Sydney" in November. Dresden was to survive a few more months so all German surface units on the high seas had been eliminated. Britain once more ruled the Waves and the Kerryman jokes were forgotten.