

The battle of the Falklands

December 1918

By Tom Burtchaell

Despite all the comment - military, naval, political, economical 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 mainland Tsingtao, 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 Shpay). 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 "Gneisnau" 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 supported by the light cruiser "Emden", "Leipzig", "Nurnberg" and "Dresden", each with ten 5'9" guns and capable of a speed of twenty-four and a half 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 in China the Imperial Japanese Navy (Japan had declared war on Germany on 23rd August) would very soon set up a blockade, thus neutralising him at one stroke.

Not one to delay for long, Van Spee 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

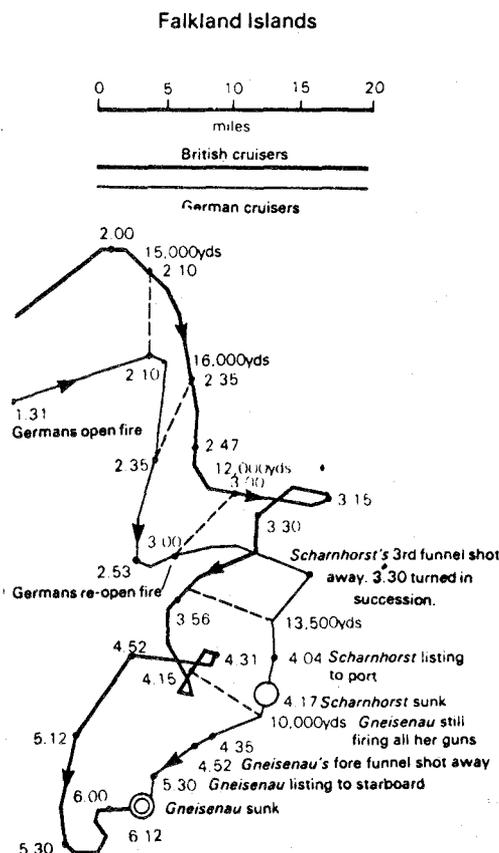
twelve knots would dictate the speed on the whole. Alternatively a squadron could rendezvous in mid-ocean with colliers but this operation required tremendous organisation which was difficult to keep secret in war time. Add to all this the factor that coaling in mid-ocean was messy, complicated and downright 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 battle's timescale.

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 Royal Navy in 1909. This old sea-dog realised in a flash Cradock's peril and immediately dispatched H.M.S. "Defence" to his aid, while cabling him not to offer battle without Canopus and Defence. This cable never reached Cradock who was already in the Pacific seeking Von Spee.

Most of the West Coast of South America is Chilean and belligerents could get coal in neutral Chile, which Von Spee was doing at Valparaiso when he heard of Cradock's presence off Coronel, two hundred miles south. He immediately sailed to engage and the opposing forces sighted each other at 5.40 p.m. on 1st November, 1914. What followed was later described by a British survivor as "the most rotten show imaginable". Von Spee's gunners had held for the previous two years the Battle Practice Cup and they now proved that what they could do in peacetime they could also do under fire. In a little over two hours Monmouth and Good Hope after suffering a fearful hammering went down with all hands, including Admiral Cradock, while Spee's ships had only suffered six hits and two wounded.

Today when Britain is no longer considered mighty, it is difficult to imagine the effect this German victory had on world opinion. The Royal Navy, the impregnable bastion of British power, whose supremacy had gone unchallenged since Trafalgar in 1805, had been humbled by a naval upstart with little navy tradition. How the spirits of Nelson, Jerram, Collingwood and St. Vincent felt is not recorded. "Brittania rules the waves" had degenerated to the level of a Kerryman joke.

Von Spee put back to Valparaiso to finish coaling. He received orders to attempt to break through and reach home where a welcome to end all welcomes

could be anticipated. His arrival would also provide a welcome re-inforcement to Von Tirpitz's High Seas Fleet in the Baltic and North Seas.

As can be imagined, Fisher had other ideas. He unjustly blamed Sturdee for Coronel, and after sacking him, sent him to replace Cradock at Port Stanley giving him two battle cruisers to take there. These ships were of 17,250 tons with eight by 12 inch guns and a speed of 26 knots and singly could handle anything Von Spee could throw at them. Here the story takes a curious turn because the name of one of these fine ships was "Invincible" identical with that of the flagship of the recent British task force, and both ships (1914 and 1982) sailed out of Portsmouth. Invincible's companion was her sister "Inflexible". Fisher could not risk escorting these large craft on their 7,000 mile voyage because the escorts would slow the operation and speed was vital if Von Spee was to be brought to book. He decided to risk the U-Boat menace and they left on 1st November, arriving on 7th December in Port Stanley.

There being no land between Portsmouth and Port Stanley, and air reconnaissance being virtually unknown in 1914, Von Spee had no way of knowing about the moves being made on the naval chessboard to bring about his destruction. The battle cruisers were joined off Brazil by the cruisers "Cornwall", "Carnarvon", "Kent", "Glasgow" and "Bristol", and all except Carnarvon were faster than Scharnhorst and Gneisau, although not as heavily armed.

Von Spee rounded Cape Horn from the Pacific into the Atlantic on 27th December and then a few days later made the fatal decision that resulted in 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 had recommenced at dawn and there 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 Invincible and Inflexible and in fact Sturdee was having breakfast. Caught like this, coaling and low in steam is, in naval

parlance, a classic example of having one's trousers down and low down at that. If Von Spee had kept his head he could have slammed 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., and in latitudes below the equator, 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 16,000 yards 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 Gneisau but Sturdee had anticipated such a move and immediately Glasgow, Kent 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 ships. The uneven struggle went on all afternoon until at 4.17 p.m. Scharnhorst, refusing a demand to strike her colours, sank with all hands. Gneisau now down to 15 knots after several hits continued to fire and her last shot hit the Invincible before her captain blasted out her sides with explosives and opened her sea cocks at 6 p.m. and she found a watery grave far from home in the South Atlantic. Two hundred survivors were picked up. Neither Von Spee nor his sons survived the action and they left a lonely widow and mother in far off Germany.

Meanwhile the chase of the light cruisers continued. The Dresden surpassed 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, riddled like a "watchman's bucket" by the Kent, sank after a running chase by the 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. Britannia once more ruled the Waves and the Kerryman jokes were forgotten.