**THE HUNT FOR *GRAF SPEE*: September-December 1939**

“*Once Germany was committed to war against the United Kingdom, her whole naval effort was directed against British shipping and sea communications. If this campaign failed to achieve decisive results, then Germany’s defeat, whatever form it might happen to take, became inevitable”* Admiral Karl Doenitz (1891-1980) after war was lost

* The Battle of the River Plate was the first major sea battle of WWII
* The Battle of the River Plate was the last major sea battle before submarines, aircraft and radar changed the face of naval warfare

**THE POCKET BATTLESHIP *ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE***

* The *Graf Spee,* her keel was laid down 10/1932*,* was commissioned 1/6/1936 – new ideas in naval warfare – plates and frames electrically welded together for speed, diesel engines instead of steam turbines for speed, range and quickness to accelerate, on a cruiser hull, six 11 inch guns in 2 turrets for punch of a battleship, guns were new Krupp model firing a 670 lb. shell 15 miles, secondary guns quantity 8 5.9”, torpedo tubes and 2 floatplanes - radar for accurate ranges was being developed but ship vibrations caused problems and didn’t work properly
* *Graf Spee* called **PANZERSHIFFE,** armored ship, 1000-man crew
* Ship named for Admiral Maximilian Johannes Maria Hubert Reichsgrafvon Spee (1861-1914) who was killed in WWI Battle of the Falklands (ironically not far from River Plate)
* Treaty of Versailles Germany was not allowed to build warships this big but gave false information of the displacement weight (treaty said 10000 tons, *Graf Spee* 16000 tons)
* Admiral Erich Johann Albert Raeder (1876-1960) head of Nazi navy has **Z Plan** assured by Hitler war would not start until 1944 plans to attack British merchant fleet not battle fleet
* The *Graf Spee* 28 knot speed, after sinking a ship it can be 500 miles away the next day
* The *Graf Spee* can alter its appearance adding dummy funnel and turret
* 8/20/1939 new captain Hans Wilhelm Langsdorff (1894-1939) grew up as neighbor of the Admiral the ship was named after, received the [Iron Cross](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Cross) 2nd Class at the [Battle of Jutland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Jutland) later winning Iron Cross 1st Class – not a coward

**COMMERCE RAIDING CAREER OF *GRAF SPEE***

* *Graf Spee* puts to sea 8/20/1939 knowing war is coming, Hitler invades Poland 9/1/1939
* *Graf Spee*is ordered to hide in non-shipping lanes (due to currents and winds) to avoid attacking until British intent was known, 9/26/1939 ordered to attack shipping
* British know pocket battleships were out before start of war, create 9 squadrons of ships consisting of 3 battleships, 3 carriers and 14 cruisers to hunt down raiders – purpose of surface raiders is to 1/ destroy shipping, 2/ burden British ships to find them spread over Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian Oceans – British also need to set up convoys but short of destroyers.
* Force G Squadron off South America consists of HMS *Exeter* 8390 tons six 8” guns, HMS *Ajax* 7270 tons 8 6” guns, and HMNZS *Achilles* 7270 tons eight 6” guns – all not a match for *Graf Spee*
* *Graf Spee* meets its supply ship *Altmark* posing as Norwegian tanker *Songne* out of Oslo, Z Plan calls for auxiliary ships to supply fuel, rearm and serve as prison ship for prisoners
* *1/ SS Clement* 5050 tons cargo kerosene crew 50 – Graf Spee approaches with tricolor flag (France) then orders to stop and not transmit – Clement transmits RRR (instead of SOS RRR means surface raider, AAA aircraft SSS submarine), crew taken prisoner, ship boarded looking for intelligence, try to sink with 2 torpedoes fails, gunfire eventually works (later victims sunk by scuttling) sunk 9/30/1939
* *2/ SS Newton Beach* 4657 tons cargo maize crew 34 sunk 10/8/1939
* *3/ SS SS Ashlea* 4222 tons cargo sugar crew 35 sunk 10/7/1939
* *4/ SS Huntsman* 8196 tons cargocargo tea crew 84
* *Graf Spee* meets *Altmark* to refuel and give them the prisoners
* *5/ SS Trevanion* 5299 tons cargo concentrates crew 33 sunk 10/22/1939
* Langsdorffdecides to go around Cape of Good Hope into Indian Ocean (problem for British)
* *6/ MS Africa Shell* 706 tonscargo oil crew 28 sunk 11/15/1939
* Langsdorff takes *Graf Spee* back into South Atlantic, meets Altmark for fuel and remove prisoners – alters appearance adding turret on bow and smokestack (look like *HMS Repulse*)
* *7/ SS Doric Star* 10036 tons cargo meat & diary from New Zealand crew 64 sunk 12/2/1939
* *8/ SS Tairoa* 7983 tons cargo meat from Melbourne crew 81 sunk 12/3/1939
* *9/ SS Streonshalh 3895 tons cargo wheat sunk 12/7/1939*
* ***Graf Spee* had destroyed 9 British merchant ships totaling 50085 tons without loss of life**

**THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE DECEMBER 13, 1939**

* Sums on a Signal pad - Commodore Henry Harwood (1888-1950) leader of Squadron G using a signal pad , location of last *Graf Spee* victim and assuming 15 knots cruising speed comes up with three possible routes: **1/** Target rich Rio de Janeiro arrive 12/12**, 2/** Target rich River Plate estuary arrive 12/13**, 3/** Desolate Falkland Islands for revenge 25th anniversary of Admiral Spee death arrive 12/14, all are about 1000 mi from each other, Harwood chooses River Plate
* Harwood makes controversial decision to split forces if in battle, one group the light cruisers Ajax and Achilles, heavy cruiser Exeter attack alone
* 0618 *Graf Spee* sees Squadron G and misidentifies as a heavy Cruiser and 2 destroyers, thinking they guard a convoy *Graf Spee* attacks *Exeter* and the 2 light cruisers split up to attack from different directions – *Graf Spee* focuses on *Exeter* as they learn the destroyers are really light cruisers – serious problem for Langsdorff cruisers more concern than destroyers
* 0624 *Graf Spee* lands direct hit on *Exeter* turret B destroying both bos guns killing many on bridge with metal splinters, destroying steering, *Exeter* withdraws from battle listing starboard to go to Falklands for emergency repairs
* 0725 *Graf Spee* heavily damages *Ajax,* 0750 light cruisers withdraw under cover of smoke, *Graf Spee* hit over 50 times heads for Montevideo, Uruguay a neutral country for repairs and fuel

**TRAP OF MONTEVIDEO**

* 13TH Hague Convention 1907 – belligerent warships can stay in neutral port for 24 hours, Uruguay allows 72 hours then *Graf Spee* will be interned for duration of war
* British make Germans believe powerful forces are guarding the passages out to sea including *Ark Royal* and *Renown,* but they are actually in Rio 1000 miles away
* The Germans did not want *Graf Spee* to be defeated in a way that brought prestige to Britain, so if escape was impossible and internment unacceptable on solution was to scuttle the ship
* On December 17 at 1956 hours the *Graf Spee* was scuttled in the River Plate estuary

**EPILOUGE**

* Langsdorff: “*I alone bear the responsibility for scuttling the pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee. I am happy to pay with my life for any possible reflection on the honour of the flag*” – On December 20, 1939, wrapped in the flag of the old Imperial German Navy (not Nazi flag) he shoots himself
* The *Altmark* evaded British warships until February 15, 1940, when *HMS Cossack* captured it in a Norway fiord and released the prisoners they were holding with the famous cry ***“THE NAVYS HERE,*** *releasing* over 300 prisoners
* The *HMS Exeter* repaired went out to the Pacific where the Japanese sunk it at the Second Battle of the Java Sea March 1, 1942

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