



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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ON LOCATION

Montevideo was abuzz with excitement in the summer of 1955 when a British film crew arrived to shoot local footage for the movie *The Battle of the River Plate*. I was ten years old and could barely contain myself when my father agreed to take me to be in the crowd scenes. I couldn't wait to be in the movies.

Cameras were set up at two locations where people were asked to congregate: one in the port area downtown and one in Pocitos, which is where we lived. Dad and I walked along the Rambla to the Punta Trouville, where the camera crew had a panoramic view of the beach with its distinctive skyline and the Expreso Pocitos bar & café right in the middle. There were hundreds of people milling about, staring into the cameras and pointing. The production team had let it be known that they hoped people would refrain from driving cars manufactured after 1939, which is when the famous battle



took place. On the other hand, those with older cars—and there were plenty of them still in circulation in Uruguay in 1955—were encouraged to parade along the Rambla and possibly get their classic vehicle immortalized on film. We didn't have an old car so we just stood around, performing our roles as unpaid

extras. To be perfectly honest, I was dying to be immortalized on film, but after being jostled and shoved and elbowed aside by the crowd for an eternity, the movies didn't seem so glamorous after all and my father was able to persuade me to leave. As we strolled home, he told me the story.

The Second World War broke out in September 1939. One of Germany's early tactics was to disrupt the flow of supplies bound for Britain from the Río de la Plata. The Admiral Graf Spee, a German pocket battleship, was thus assigned to raid merchant shipping in the South Atlantic. The British Admiralty responded by dispatching three cruisers—the Exeter, Ajax, and Achilles—that found and engaged the raider on December 13, 1939 a few miles off the coast of Uruguay, in the wide estuary of the River Plate.

After a long day of battle all ships were damaged, especially the Exeter, which suffered the lion's share of casualties. The British ships took positions at the mouth of the estuary as the Graf Spee limped into Montevideo where her Commander, Captain Hans Langsdorff hoped to make repairs before attempting a run back to Germany. Uruguay was neutral at the time but had a longstanding, cordial relationship with Great Britain and was known to favour the Allies. The Uruguayan government was scrupulous in its reading of the Hague Convention and informed the German captain that he could have no more than 72 hours in port. British intelligence, meanwhile, was working furiously to feed false information to the Germans, who became convinced that additional Allied naval power was standing by to challenge the beleaguered battleship if it left the safety of Uruguayan waters.



BACK IN TIME ...Continued

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Captain Langsdorff had a reputation as an honourable man who avoided pointless loss of life by evacuating merchant seamen in lifeboats before sinking their ships. He earned the respect of British officers for his humane treatment of prisoners. By all accounts, "he was not a typical Nazi but a German gentleman of the old school. A decent chap." Langsdorff now faced a difficult decision. The German High Command was adamant that the Graf Spee should not fall into enemy hands. Given Uruguayan sympathies, remaining in Montevideo would guarantee that very result. His options were therefore to make a run for Argentina, which was pro-Nazi at the time, or scuttle his ship. Rather than risk the lives of his men for no military advantage, Captain Langsdorff chose the latter option, a decision that was rumoured to have infuriated Hitler.

The German sailors were taken off the Graf Spee and interned in Argentina, while arrangements were made for British prisoners to be released into Uruguayan custody. All the wounded were taken to the British Hospital in Montevideo. The German dead were buried in the Cementerio del Norte; Royal Navy casualties that had not been buried at sea were laid to rest in the British Cemetery.

On the evening of December 17, 1939 Captain Langsdorff and a skeleton crew sailed their ship out of Montevideo's harbour and dropped anchor just within Uruguayan territorial waters. After setting scuttling charges the Germans boarded an Argentine tug and were taken to Buenos Aires. As the sun set and thousands of people thronged the Montevideo shoreline, the Graf Spee exploded and burst into flames. In classic naval tradition, Captain Langsdorff wanted to go down with his ship, but his officers reminded him that it was his duty to help his crew navigate their new circumstances. Once he had taken care of those formalities, Captain Langsdorff retired to his hotel room and took his own life. He was buried with full military honours in La Chacarita Cemetery in Buenos Aires. The Graf Spee sank slowly and settled into the muddy bottom of the channel, leaving nothing but the tip of its mast sticking up out of the water, a poignant reminder of the dramatic chain of events of the past few days.

I eventually saw the movie, of course, and enjoyed the crowd scenes despite the fact that any shots of me had evidently ended up on the cutting room floor. It was a decent film, but I prefer to remember the story as my father told it that day, strolling home along Pocitos beach.

When You and I were Young

by Tony Beckwith, 2017

*Remember once upon a time
 when you and I were young?
 The world was simple and sublime
 Our song as yet unsung*

*We couldn't wait to go outside
 to woods or stream or beach
 The day unfolding far and wide
 was all within our reach*

*Our freedom seemed to know no bounds
 Our limit was the sky
 An air of magic still surrounds
 our youth in Uruguay*

*To think we barely noticed when
 our summers slipped away
 We took them all for granted then
 I cherish them today*