



Back In Time

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The Battle Of The River Plate

There was a time during the early 1960s when I travelled back and forth to Buenos Aires almost every week. They were business trips and I would sometimes take the Night Boat but usually fly PLUNA or Aerolíneas Argentinas. On most of those flights the pilot would dip his wing so that his passengers could see the tip of the mast of the Admiral Graf Spee, the German battleship, sticking up out of the waters of the River Plate. On one occasion I was travelling with my father and as we peered through the window at the mast he said, "I saw her go down." He noticed my look of surprise and, as we enjoyed our café con leche and croissants, 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, that 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.

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 be tantamount to just that. 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—including my father—watched from 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.

My father finished the story as we taxied towards the airport, then we went our separate ways to take care of the business that had brought us to Argentina. That evening we were on the same flight home to Montevideo. Shortly after taking off the airhostess brought us a couple of scotch and sodas and some peanuts. Just then the pilot dipped his wing and we were once again peering down at the water. Dark waves rippled around the mast, now ghostly in the moonlight, rising up from the battered wreck that had been sitting on the bottom of the sea for twenty-five years. My father raised his glass and said, "To Uruguay." I touched my glass to his and agreed.