

49. The Uruguayan gunboat URUGUAY closed AJAX about 2115. She appeared to be on patrol duty, but was soon left astern.

50. GRAF SPEE also fired single salvos at ACHILLES at 2132, 2140 and 2143, but the visibility to the eastward was very bad for her at these times and firing must have merely been intended to keep shadowers at a distance.

51. Those shots, however, did not deter Captain Parry from keeping touch and by 2200 ACHILLES had closed to within five miles of GRAF SPEE. The latter was well silhouetted first against the afterglow, and then against the lights of Montevideo. GRAF SPEE proceeded north of the English Bank and anchored in Montevideo roads at 0050.

52. My chief pre-occupation at that time was how long did GRAF SPEE intend to stay there. The primary necessity was to keep to seaward of the GRAF SPEE if she came to sea again, and at the same time to avoid being caught against the dawn light. At 2350 I ordered AJAX and ACHILLES to withdraw from the Plate, ACHILLES to patrol the area from the Uruguayan coast to a line 120 degrees from English Bank, and AJAX the southern area, both ships to move back into the Plate in their respective sectors after dawn.

*Thursday, 14th December.*

53. I requested His Britannic Majesty's Minister, Montevideo, to use every possible means of delaying GRAF SPEE'S sailing, in order to gain time for reinforcements to reach me. I suggested that he should sail British ships and invoke the 24-hour rule to prevent her leaving.

54. I learned that ARK ROYAL, RENOWN, NEPTUNE, DORSETSHIRE, SHROPSHIRE and three destroyers were all closing the Plate, but none of them could reach me for at least five days.

55. CUMBERLAND reported that she would arrive in the Plate at 2200/14th December, having made the passage from the Falkland Islands in 34 hours. I ordered her to cover the sector between Rouen and English Banks, with ACHILLES to the north of her and AJAX to the south. These dispositions were maintained during the night of the 14th/15th December.

Should GRAF SPEE come out, she was to be shadowed and all ships were to concentrate sufficiently far to seaward to enable a concerted attack to be carried out.

*Friday, 15th December.*

56. I ordered R.F.A. OLYNTHUS, Captain L. N. Hill, to proceed to Rouen Bank to be ready to fuel H.M. ships, and proceeded there in AJAX. I ordered CUMBERLAND to close and cover AJAX, remaining at visibility distance to the northward so as to be able to give warning in case GRAF SPEE came out without her sailing being reported.

57. I made the following policy signal timed 1135/15th December:—

“My object destruction. Necessitates concentrating our forces. Increased risk of enemy escape accepted. ACHILLES is now to watch north of English Bank and CUMBERLAND to west of English Bank, latter showing herself off Montevideo in daylight,

If enemy leaves before 2100, ships in touch shadow at maximum range—all units concentrate on shadower. If enemy has not left by 2100, leave patrol positions and concentrate in position 090 degrees San Antonio 15 miles by 0030; AJAX will probably join CUMBERLAND on her way south.

“If enemy leaves Montevideo after sunset, CUMBERLAND is at once to fly off one aircraft to locate and shadow enemy, if necessary landing in a lee, risking internment, and trying to find a British ship in the morning. If plan miscarries, adopt plan “B,” all units concentrate in position 36 degrees south, 52 degrees west at 0600.”

I also repeated my signal 1200/12th December (see paragraph 7) to CUMBERLAND at 1136/15th December, substituting CUMBERLAND for EXETER in the original.

58. AJAX took in 200 tons of fuel from OLYNTHUS, bad weather causing wires to part including the spans of two hurricane hawsers. AJAX then proceeded to join CUMBERLAND.

59. I received a report that GRAF SPEE had landed a funeral party this morning, and later, that she had been granted an extension of her stay up to 72 hours, in order to make herself seaworthy. It appeared that she had been damaged far more extensively than I had thought likely, and had been hit 60 to 70 times in all. The British ship ASHWORTH was sailed at 1900 and GRAF SPEE accepted the edict that she would not be allowed to sail for 24 hours after this. At the same time I could feel no security that she would not break out at any moment.

*Saturday, 16th December.*

60. CUMBERLAND, AJAX, and ACHILLES made rendezvous off San Antonio at 0030 in accordance with my plan. The squadron closed the Plate towards dawn and AJAX flew off her aircraft for a reconnaissance of the harbour. The aircraft was instructed not to fly over territorial waters.

61. The aircraft returned at 0830 and the crew reported that they had been unable to see anything owing to bad visibility. They had been fired at while in the vicinity of the Whistle Buoy. This seemed to indicate that GRAF SPEE was taking advantage of the mist and was trying to break out. All ships went to action stations, but a report received shortly afterwards from Montevideo indicated that GRAF SPEE was still in harbour.

62. I informed H.B.M. Minister, Montevideo, of the firing on our aircraft, and suggested that an investigation into this might be a way of delaying GRAF SPEE sailing. He replied, however, that it was definitely not GRAF SPEE who fired, and that it had possibly been the Argentine Guard Gunboat at Recalada, or in some other position.

63. The Admiralty informed me in message 0219/16th December that I was free to engage GRAF SPEE anywhere outside the three-mile limit. I decided to move my patrol into the area north and east of English Bank, as I considered that a battle in the very restricted water just outside the three-mile limit off Montevideo was impracticable, owing to lack of sea room, and possibility of “overs” landing in Uruguay and causing international complications.