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THE END IS NOT YET

The Battle of the River Plate

By R. Adm. Edward Ellsberg, USNR (Ret.), '14

We were a very glum lot at the American Naval Base in Massawa on the Red Sea in the early summer of 1942.

Rommel was at El Alamein. Eritrea, where I commanded the Naval Base and the Red Sea Salvage Squadron, was jammed with American and British refugees tossed in on us by "the flap" from Egypt. According to these hordes poured down by the air from Cairo, as soon as Rommel, who had now outfoxed a dozen times the battered British Eighth Army, got himself set to outfox it once more, he'd burst through at El Alamein into Egypt. I was assured that shortly, right there in Massawa, I'd be making the acquaintance of the Desert Fox himself.

In Massawa, the American Naval Base (hurriedly being rehabilitated from a thoroughly sabotaged set of smashed Italian shops and sunken drydocks) had as its sole mission helping to keep the British Mediterranean Fleet in being in the face of a vastly superior Italian Navy. We Americans weren't too concerned, in spite of the odds against them, over the Royal Navy's holding up its end against the Eyties and protecting us by sea; we had faith in the Royal Navy. What had us sweating (aside from the infernal Red Sea climate) was the land side. There it looked to us that only fervent prayers to God that He (in limey parlance) "pass a miracle" would give the limeys of the beaten Eighth Army the slightest chance of holding at El Alamein and keeping us from finding Rommel and his Afrika Korps breathing down our necks in Massawa.

That then was the setting when I got orders to proceed at once by air to Alexandria for a conference with Adm. Sir Henry Harwood, RN, CinC of the Medi-

terranean Fleet, on what my naval base on the Red Sea could do in support of his fleet. It seemed that the Alexandria dockyard, in imminent danger daily of capture, was immobilized already by Rommel's bombers less than twenty minutes' flying time away.

I proceeded to Alexandria. En route, out of professional curiosity, I dropped in on Port Said to check the British salvage situation there. And at Port Said, I got my first shock when I sighted, moored there in the stream, Harwood's entire battle force—one ancient pre-World War I dreadnought! The obsolete HMS CENTURION out there was all Harwood had to oppose the Italians with at least four modern super-dreadnoughts! My faith in the Royal Navy's ability to hold the enemy off us by sea began to waver.

But if what I saw caused my faith to waver, what next I heard from Captain Damant of the Royal Navy, escorting me, caused it to begin vibrating at ultrasonic frequency. The dreadnought I thought I was seeing was no dreadnought at all—she was just a dummy! HMS CENTURION had had all her real big guns, turrets, and armor removed and cut up during the disarmament idiocy of the 1920's—what I saw out there in the stream on her forecastle and quarterdeck were only some very realistic imitations—painted wooden guns mounted in wooden turrets!

"Our Eytie friends, when they sight her cruising in the Med, think she's a battleship," commented Captain Damant. "We're pulling their legs, just the way we pulled yours. Good job, isn't she?"

My heart sank. Good job, all right; but so far as I personally was concerned, I preferred to have some honest-to-goodness guns and some real armor interposed be-

tween me and the Axis rather than any dummy job in wood putting up a bluff, however good.

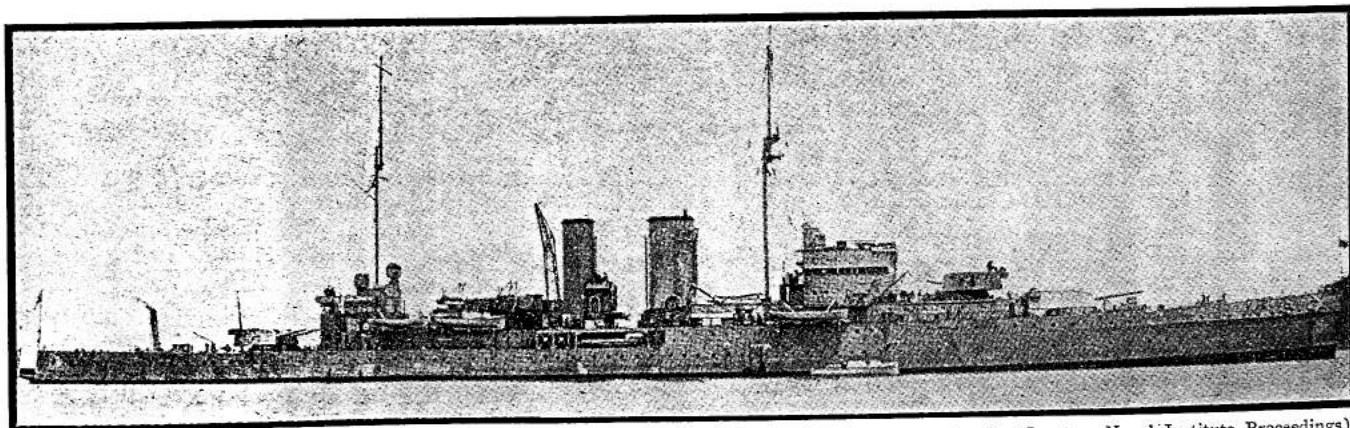
But after all, there was still Harwood's cruiser force. Harwood indisputably was in control of the sea; he must have quite a superiority over the Eyties in heavy cruisers to offset his lack of battleships and to back up his bluff—that must be the answer. Feeling a little better, I shoved off from Port Said for my conference in Alex.

In Alex, I met for the first time Sir Henry Harwood. Not excepting even Jack Shafroth in his prime, Harwood was the biggest naval officer I ever laid eyes on—a whale of a man.

Harwood weighed down one end of the table at the conference for only a few minutes, just long enough to introduce me to his dockyard staff. Then, after inviting me that evening to come to dinner with him at his house ashore and to spend the night there afterwards, he vanished, to struggle presumably with the tactical problems involved in countering battleships with cruisers only.

I'll skip the conference—the Royal Navy went all out in offering whatever it had portable in men and materials at Alex to bolster up my base in Massawa. The conference ended very amicably, the conferees departed, except only the Dockyard Superintendent and the Fleet Naval Constructor. They stayed a few minutes to settle a most urgent matter they had on their hands—the dispatch from Alex to Durban in South Africa, 5,000 miles away, of a damaged light cruiser, the *Dido*, for drydocking and repairs to her flooded stern. Being at their elbows, I couldn't help hearing.

A light cruiser? Why send her right past my front door to Durban, almost at the



Jane's (Courtesy Naval Institute Proceedings)

THE HEAVY CRUISER HMS EXETER . . . Adm. Sir Henry Harwood's flagship at the battle of the River Plate.

southern tip of Africa, when Massawa in the adjacent Red Sea was only a short distance away? So I asked, why not Massawa? There we Americans could repair her in a quarter of the time required for the 10,000-mile round trip to Durban.

The Fleet Constructor explained to me why not. He'd had the same bright idea himself till he'd checked the *Dido* against the only floating drydock that so far I had working in sabotaged Massawa. The light cruiser *Dido* was classed as a light cruiser only because of the lightness of her armament, eight 5.25-inch dual purpose AA guns. But in displacement she wasn't so light, roughly around 8,000 tons. She exceeded by over thirty percent the lifting capacity of the solitary drydock I had working in Massawa. So, bitter as it was in a desperate wartime situation, there was nothing for it but to take the knock and send her to Durban.

I gnashed my teeth but I had to concur—there wasn't anything else for it. We separated. But all day long as I wandered about, killing time till evening and my dinner date with the CinC, my mind kept running over every conceivable and inconceivable fantasy of my undersized drydock and the oversized *Dido* being somehow fitted together in Massawa. But I found no answer.

Finally in the late afternoon, still dizzy over that problem, I ended in the vast Egyptian mansion which was the shore residence of Adm. Sir Henry Harwood. There a British naval steward soon had me in the only tub I'd seen in Africa in months—no scalding hot Massawa showerbath, but a real tub in which I could revel in cool water.

Probably it was the tub that did it—anyway, coming out of it, like Archimedes, I had an inspiration on matters hydrostatic—the answer on how to dock the *Dido* in Massawa! It dazzled me. But only for a moment, when I came down to earth again, completely deflated. Too unconventional and too seemingly dangerous a solution; I was not likely to persuade any of the stolid English I'd met there in Alex to let me try it with one of their precious cruisers—least of all, their commanding officer, that elephantine embodiment of British conservatism, Adm. Sir Henry Harwood, KCB, OBE, RN, who would have the final say. Considerably chastened, I swabbed myself dry, dressed in my best whites, went in to dinner.

There were at the table only the CinC, his Chief of Staff (a rear admiral), his flag lieutenant, myself—a very formal little party till with the service of the soup the Chief of Staff broke the ice by praising (most diplomatically, so he thought) a book I'd written some fourteen years before—what did his CO think of it? All he succeeded in doing was in putting his CO on the hook, for Harwood, in spite of his four-star rank, very honestly admitted he hadn't kept up with the literature of the sea and he'd never heard of my book—a most embarrassing admission for a man to be forced into about any book in the presence of its author.

Silence, but only for a moment, when the Chief of Staff turned to and strove to cover up his faux pas by elaborating on that book as the dinner moved along to its conclusion, a situation finally eased somewhat by Harwood's announcing he intended getting himself a copy of the book and reading it as soon as Rommel gave him a chance. Then over the after-dinner-coffee cups, I sought to help out a bit myself by creating a diversion—I seized the cruiser *Dido* by her

damaged stern and dragged her uncereemoniously into the conversation, suggesting I had a scheme for drydocking her at Massawa. But, apparently, I had only rubbed another raw spot.

"Scheme?" Admiral Harwood, who knew my drydock was far too small to lift that cruiser, was evidently gunshy of any "schemes." Would my "scheme" endanger the *Dido*? He dared take no chances with her. Did I know how few ships he had now in his Mediterranean Fleet to oppose the Italians?

I had to confess ignorance. So Harwood told me.

"It's top secret information, and if the enemy knew it, the Eyties would slaughter us. My whole fleet, including the *Dido*, consists of exactly four light cruisers! And two others out of those four, the *Euryalus* and the *Cleopatra*, the *Dido*'s sisters, are limping around here damaged exactly as the *Dido* is!"

My shaken faith in the Royal Navy vanished in toto. First a dummy dreadnought, and now only a lightly-gunned fleet (?) of one intact and three damaged AA ships left in the Med to fend off at least four Italian super-dreadnoughts and probably over twice that many cruisers! Should Mussolini, emboldened by the Afrika Korps' successes, order his ships in to attack now, a miracle on the sea frontier would be even more necessary than one on the land at El Alamein to save us in the Red Sea from the Axis. Glummer than ever, I eyed my massive host. God could "pass miracles" all right, should it suit Him, but usually it suited Him only when there was available to serve as His vehicle some proper human. Was this skeptical mastodon before me promising material for any such divine purpose?

Harwood? Harwood? Something came back to me through the numbing impact of over thirty months of almost unbroken Axis victories on land and sea, suggesting this Admiral Harwood might be exactly the man the Lord would choose.

Would Admiral Harwood mind, I asked, satisfying me on something I'd been curious about for some years? Wasn't it he, a commodore then, who had commanded at the Battle of the River Plate nearly three years before? What really had happened off the River Plate to cause the Nazi captain of the *Graf von Spee*, his opponent, to shoot himself?

"Hans Langsdorff and the *Graf von Spee*, eh? Did they really interest me?" Admiral Harwood warmed up instantly. The last vestiges of the embarrassment resulting from his Chief of Staff's unfortunate query faded altogether. The admiral settled heavily back in his chair, looked reflectively off into space, half a world away from Alex and Rommel pressing on it, to the South American coast.

The background of it all I remembered well enough. Germany in the early 1930's had rendered futile the naval restrictions of the Versailles Treaty by turning out the "pocket battleship," a most unorthodox warship type designed to outshoot anything it couldn't outrun, and to outrun anything it couldn't outshoot. And in 1939, immediately after the outbreak of World War II, one of them, the *Graf von Spee*, to the intense anguish of the British Admiralty slipped through the naval cordon guarding the North Sea exits, not to be heard of again till she was well south of the Equator. There, between the high speed and the extraordinary cruising range given by her 54,000 hp diesels, she flitted like a will-

o'-the-wisp between the South Atlantic and the Indian Oceans to paralyze all Allied shipping with her widespread sinkings.

Not for over two thousand years had anything to match that result been seen in war. Hannibal, after Cannae, had sent to Carthage as startling proof of his crushing defeat of Roman power, bushel baskets overflowing with golden rings taken from the fingers of slain Roman knights. Hans Langsdorff, captain of the *Graf von Spee*, outdid him in that bizarre gesture—he dispatched to Germany as concrete evidence of how thoroughly he had swept the South Seas, one of his prizes, a freighter, with her holds jammed full to the battened down hatches with captured British merchant service officers taken off his scuttled victims.

The tormented British Admiralty faced an impasse. With Hitler's fleet in being to counter in the North Sea, not one British big-gunned ship fast enough to have any hope of catching the fleet *Graf von Spee* could be sent from home waters. All that were available to search the vast wastes of some millions of square miles of two southern oceans for the *Graf von Spee* were cruisers, light and heavy, all with armor much thinner than hers, all armed with only six-inch or eight-inch guns. Suppose one of them should find her? What then? Against the real armor on the *Graf von Spee* which their cruiser guns could hope to pierce (if at all) only at very close range, while her eleven-inch battleship turret guns could hurl shells 30,000 yards to penetrate their cardboard decks and sides, what chance had even a heavy cruiser of closing to effective range? No wonder the Lords of the Admiralty were in torment, British control of the seas tottering.

Admiral Harwood sighed reminiscently, began to explain. He, a commodore then, commanded the 8th Cruiser Squadron covering the South Atlantic Station. He had as flagship, the heavy cruiser *HMS Exeter*, with six 8-inch guns in three turrets, and as consorts two light cruisers, the *Ajax* and the *Achilles*, each armed with eight six-inch guns carried in four center-line twin mounts. One thing only he had in his favor—speed. All his ships could make 32 knots as against the *Graf von Spee*'s 26. If ever she were sighted, they could catch her and bring her to action, but after that, what? Singly or as a squadron, they would have caught a Tartar—between the *von Spee*'s six 11-inch turret guns and her eight broadside 5.9's, her weight of metal both in quantity and striking power far outmatched that of his entire squadron.

Harwood drained his coffee cup, gazed at it, seeming to ponder again the hopelessness of his dilemma. Silently a white-robed Egyptian behind him refilled the cup. Harwood took a sip, continued.

Logically, he had no hope of success. But what logic was there in his being logical under such circumstances? Just twenty-five years before, one of his predecessors on the South Atlantic Station had been, to Britain's great distress. In late 1914, Sir Christopher Cradock, commanding a squadron of British armored cruisers searching the southern seas for the German Admiral *Graf von Spee*, ironically enough the very man for whom Harwood's *bête noire* was named, had at last found him off Coronel, Chile. Badly outgunned by the Germans (though not so badly as was Harwood now) Cradock had, nevertheless, steamed bravely in with his squadron to engage, as logic demanded, in normal battle line. Cradock and his armored cruisers, guns firing till they vanished beneath the seas, had all been swiftly sunk by *Graf von Spee*'s better armed ships

without inflicting on the enemy the slightest damage.

So, much as it went against the grain of everything he'd ever been taught in how to attain maximum effectiveness in fleet action gunnery, in the face of anything tinged with the memory of the late Graf von Spee, Harwood decided logic had best be tossed to the winds. Survival for Harwood could lie only in leaving logic to his enemy, Hans Langsdorff, who, a good Nazi, could be counted on to carry out his orders from der Fuehrer. As for Harwood himself, he must be wholly illogical or die.

On that basis, Harwood drew up for his little squadron a most unconventional plan of action. Then, firmly of the belief that nothing so irrational as what he expected of his captains could be successfully acted out impromptu, he began rehearsals with the broad South Atlantic for his stage and a commandeered British passenger vessel, assigned him as a supply ship, as a stand-in for the GRAF VON SPEE. The one important actor in the drama needed to fill out his seagoing cast in staging the actual show, Capt. Hans Langsdorff, he couldn't rehearse. But regarding him, Harwood had no qualms—Langsdorff would be logical, he would act out to the end the part Harwood assigned him.

Day after day, in a widespread scouting line, Harwood's three cruisers hopefully searched the South Atlantic; they sighted nothing. Still, every day they eased the monotony of their search by converging on their supply ship as the enemy, picking her up always in a different quarter of the horizon. Then EXETER, AJAX and ACHILLES, all violently churning up the seas, acted out their parts while Harwood discovered and corrected the weaknesses in his script.

But where was Langsdorff? Would they ever find him? And when they did, would their play, rehearsed by now *ad nauseum*, be a success? In spite of how glowingly all the rehearsals had gone, till the final curtain was rung down on an actual performance, one could never know about a play. And should this one prove a flop, for the

men in that squadron, it would be the final curtain indeed.

Then out of a welter of conflicting radio reports of Langsdorff here, of Langsdorff there, of Langsdorff simultaneously everywhere in both South Atlantic and Indian Oceans, came certainty. In the early dawn of December 13, with Harwood's squadron spread wide as usual for scouting and at the moment working off the southern coast of Brazil, came from the southward off Rio Grande do Sul an SOS from the French freighter FORMOSE. She was being chased by the GRAF VON SPEE. The search was over.

The AJAX, much the nearest, rushed over the horizon and raced impetuously in between the GRAF VON SPEE and her intended victim, laying down a heavy smoke screen to shield the FORMOSE and permit her to escape while the AJAX, in spite of the odds, took on in single-handed combat, if necessary, the oncoming German.

But it wasn't necessary. There was no combat. The GRAF VON SPEE swung away, heading south, ignoring the FORMOSE, ignoring also her would-be protector, weak though she was. Harwood had correctly estimated the Nazi orders—the GRAF VON SPEE was at sea as a commerce raider only; she was to avoid at all hazards action with any warship in which she might, though sure finally of destroying her attacker, be damaged herself and thus handicapped for her vital mission.

Wholly content, the AJAX prudently opened the range to a safe distance, maneuvering only to keep well on the horizon to the eastward, thereby, while keeping the VON SPEE in sight, cutting her off from the open sea till the unseen British ships could come up.

Even with a six-knot speed advantage, that took them some hours. First to arrive was the ACHILLES, steering to fall in behind her sister. Still, as expected, the GRAF VON SPEE took no action and the trio steamed amicably southward, till at long last, over the northern horizon directly astern the GRAF

VON SPEE appeared the heavy cruiser EXETER, steaming to take up the position Harwood had always occupied in his rehearsals.

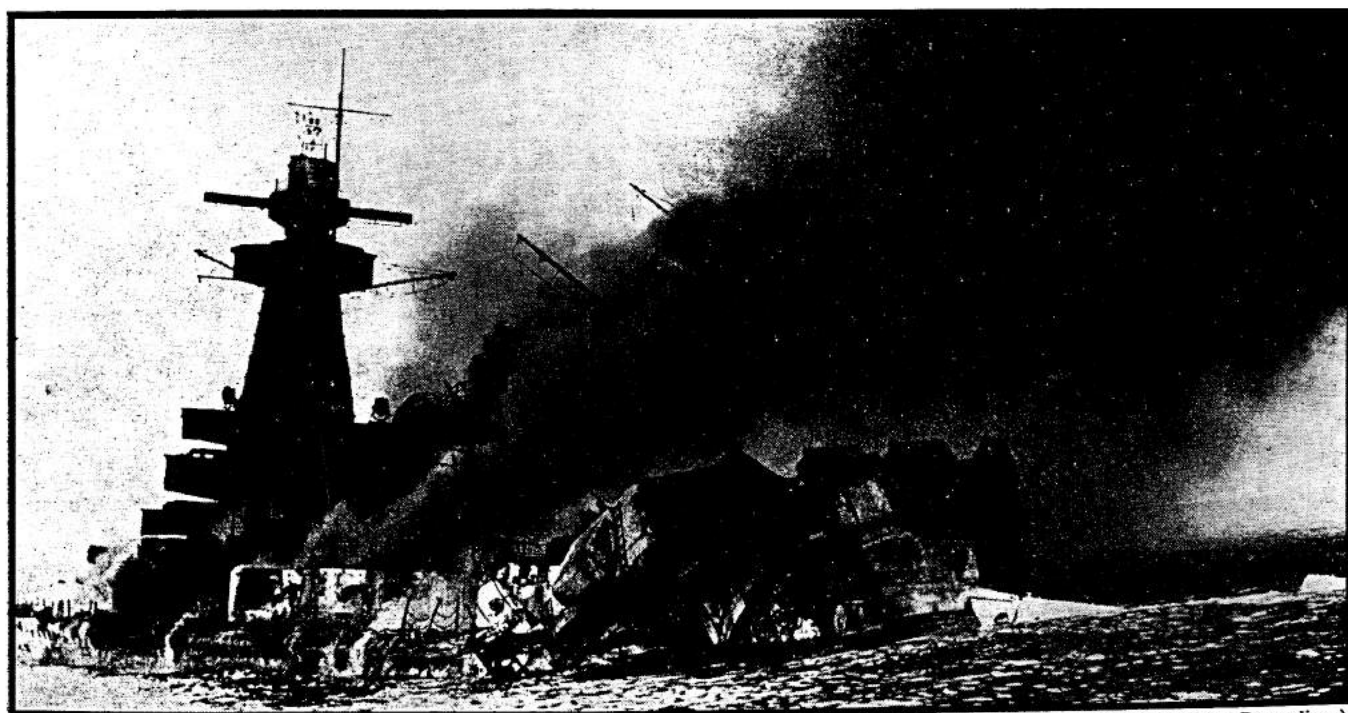
All the actors were now on the stage. Nervously the captains of the two light cruisers waited their cue—it was to come, not from their commodore, but from Langsdorff himself.

Langsdorff reacted to the appearance of the EXETER exactly as anticipated. The AJAX and the ACHILLES with their six-inch guns he had ignored. But the EXETER and her eight-inch guns were something else—backed by a daring and a skillful captain willing to close, the EXETER might hurt even while she was being sunk. Langsdorff would take no such chance by allowing the initiative to an opponent with eight-inch guns—he must sink the EXETER while still she was so far astern her guns could not reach him and he must waste no time at it. Once she came within 30,000 yards of him, he would give her all he had and end it swiftly.

He tried. When finally the EXETER, still on the far horizon, had closed the gap to where his guns could reach, cautiously felt out by several ranging shots from his after turret, Langsdorff swerved to port to bring both his forward and his after triple-gunned turrets to bear astern and, with all six of his 11-inch guns elevated to their maximum 60°, opened with full salvos.

On came the EXETER through a sea of boiling geysers thrown up by bursting 11-inch shells, steering an erratic serpentine to minimize the effectiveness of her enemy's fire, pouring oil lavishly into her furnaces striving to close and abbreviate the agony till her own guns might reach and she might do something to reduce that fire.

But in spite of all her evasive action, the GRAF VON SPEE's director-controlled big gun salvos clung closely to their weaving target till in the seventh salvo, an 11-inch shell came hurtling down on one of the EXETER's two forward turrets, exploded inside, tore the turret right out of the ship, wrecked the



British Official Photo (Courtesy of Naval Institute Proceedings)

The ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE in flames off Montevideo.

bridge and all its controls. Still, steering from them on aft, the stricken Exeter came courageously on, firing now herself with all her four remaining turret guns and thereby still holding on herself all the Grav von Spee's main battery fire.

Meanwhile, the sharp sverve to port of the Grav von Spee and that thundering first full salvo from her turrets directed at the Exeter was the cue the Ajax and the Acutles had been awaiting; they need wait no longer now. The enemy in opening their flagship had sweated toward them—so much the better for their purpose—they could close on her the faster. The Ajax, leading, slammed to her draft dampers, started to smoke heavily, sheered sharply to starboard toward her enemy. With the ships now on converging courses, the Ajax closed rapidly on her while the Acutles, following, lay hidden in her lee behind a dense smoke screen streaming down her leader's port quarter.

If Langsdorff (undoubtedly then concentrating on the Exeter astern) had his attention called to this unorthodox maneuver on the part of the hitherto innocuous and distant Uman on his port side, he disdained leaving her to the attention of his port battery of four 5.9-inch guns, throwing a heavier and a longer-ranged shell than the Ajax sixes, in spite of a slightly smaller caliber. And no doubt that German battery of four broadside guns, mounted singly, did as she hurried into range with her own eight 6-inch guns (double the number that could bear on her) all firing furiously. Still the speeding Ajax, closer now and changing deflection so rapidly as to make her no easy target, came relentlessly in. Then suddenly some thousands of yards off, she squared away parallel to the Grav von Spee, practically abeam, and with all her eight guns bearing beautifully concentrated on the battery firing at her.

Then came Harwood's Sunday punch. Bursting through the smoke curtain ascended the Ajax, till then shielded by it both from view and from gunfire, came the Acutles, to cross her sister's wake going all out headed directly for the Grav von Spee, close to her already and every second getting closer, with each of her eight guns spraying six-inch shells the instant she emerged from the smoke.

The broadside fire control on the Grav von Spee was unable to cope with that suddenly changed situation—her defensive secondary battery fire went to pieces, what with only four guns on that side to cover two separate targets at once, and with everything respecting either target changing with maddening rapidity. And not least to add to the confusion, the bursting shells from 16 British guns, all concentrated on one steady target only, drummed without ceasing against the Grav von Spee's unarmored topsides and her thinly-walled broadside gun shields.

Like a hurtling comet the Acutles swept down from astern the Ajax on one leg of a huge parabola focused at point-blank range off the Grav von Spee's port beam, all the while spraying her enemy's superstructure with close range destruction. Then she swung out and sped away on the other leg of that curve, to begin suddenly to lay down a smoke screen on her own account. And behind that impenetrable smoke cloud from the Acutles, the Ajax, her guns abruptly fallen silent, disappeared from German view.

Still firing, but now at longer range more deliberately, the Acutles, smoking heavily, delivered a second salvo.