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TRAPPED ON BOARD THE GRAF SPEE

Wellington Resident Recalls His Experiences
In River Plate Battle

IT will be five years next Wednesday (December 13) since three British cruisers, one of them our own Achilles, attacked and crippled the pocket battleship Graf Spee. Throughout the battle, which ended with the scuttling of the Graf Spee four days later, there were British prisoners on board the German ship, and one of them, A. D. DIXON (right), is now a resident of Wellington. Here is his account of his experiences as told after his liberation to the "Peking and Tientsin Sunday Times":

* * *

IT was when we were four days out from Durban that we heard the S.O.S. from the Doric Star, attacked on the high seas by a German raider. Our own ship, the Tairua, homeward bound from Brisbane, promptly altered course. Next day at 4.45 a.m. we were roused from our bunks by the look-out: "All hands on deck! There's the raider, on the horizon!"

We dived into warm clothing and made for the fo'c'sle head. I trained my binoculars on a ship which was heading straight for us and coming up very fast. From her high control-tower I realised she was a battleship of sorts. We hove to and Captain Starr ran up the answering pennant. No one was certain what she was as, at that distance, no ensign was visible; but we guessed she was the raider which had sunk the Doric Star.

She bore down on us at a tremendous pace, and then I saw the Nazi ensign. They saw it on the bridge, and Sparks was ordered to send out an S.O.S. — "Tairua being attacked by Scheer." As he was sending the message, the raider opened fire. Five-nine shells hit the bridge; wheel and binnacle were smashed, and sandbags simply disappeared overboard.

"All hands to the boats!" We on the fo'c'sle made for the bridge ladder. I was half-way up when something like a cricketball struck my sea-boot. Running aft, I was climbing the iron ladder to the boat-deck, when another burst of firing hit the bridge. A white-hot piece of metal went streaking across the deck, and my binoculars, which were slung round my neck, were knocked clean overboard.

A Boarding-Party

With Second Officer Costa we had lowered one boat into the water when a launch from the raider pooped the stern. Her officer waved to us to get back on board, and as we returned to the ship, a boarding-party climbed up the rope ladder. Then, by the seamen's hatbands, we saw that the raider was the pocket battleship, Graf Spee.

The two lifeboats in the water were ordered to be cast adrift. Then Captain Starr was told to get under way, but he explained that as the forward steering-gear had been shot away he would have to use the docking bridge wheel aft. Thereupon the German officer changed his mind, sent a semaphore



message to the Graf Spee, and ordered us to collect clothes and blankets as we must go aboard the raider as prisoners-of-war.

The boarding-party scurried round with revolvers, opening up hatches, and putting time-bombs into the holds. It was about now that I felt as if my boot was full of water and my ankle began to be painful. I found my boot full of blood, and realised that what had struck it as I climbed the ladder was a shell fragment. I was put into the first launch, together with two sailors who had both been wounded in the thigh.

"Chivalry of the Sea"

On board the Graf Spee they put us into the hospital ward, where a doctor X-rayed my ankle and then told me he would not extract the shrapnel unless it were painful, as he did not wish to risk cutting an artery. He was a fine, fatherly fellow, with a full moustache and a duelling-scar on his cheek; he was from Heidelberg, and spoke English well.

They sank the Tairua by gun-fire and steamed off. A couple of hours later Captain Langsdorff visited us in hospital and apologised for having wounded us. "We do not make war on civilians," he said, "but you use your telefunken, so I have to open fire!"

He was a sandy-haired man of medium height, aged, as I judged him, about 42, with a keen, intelligent face. He was an officer of the Imperial Navy, and upheld the traditional chivalry of the sea. In the nine merchantmen he sank, only three British were wounded, all on the Tairua.

On the third day of steaming at full speed, we met the German tanker which refuelled the Graf Spee. Captain Starr and the crew of the Tairua, except for the Chief Officer, Chief Engineer, Wireless Operator, and Chief Refrigerating Officer, were put on board her.

We in hospital waved good-bye to our shipmates from the port-hole as the launches took them across. It was the last we saw of them.

Another Capture

Four days later, at six in the evening, the Graf Spee sighted another British ship. Gas masks were distributed and the