

# The Battle of the River Plate: Excerpts from the Diary of Surgeon Commander Jack Cussen RN, PMO of HMS EXETER

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## Commentary

HMS EXETER, the second of two York Class heavy cruisers, was launched in 1929. She had a displacement of 8,400 tons, a complement of 628 and main armament of three twin 8-inch guns in addition to AA guns and torpedoes.

At the outbreak of World War Two, EXETER was heading back to South American waters. She had spent most of the three previous years in the South Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Pacific "showing the flag." After this long commission away from home, she returned to Devonport in August 1939, only to set sail again for the South Atlantic after four days alongside, just enough time for any reliefs to join. Some of the ship's company were on a second consecutive commission and had been with the ship for four years.<sup>1</sup>

EXETER, commanded by Captain Frederick Bell, joined up with cruisers HMS CUMBERLAND and HMS AJAX to form the South American Squadron. Commodore Henry Harwood, in overall command, flew his pennant from EXETER.

The Germans lost no time after the outbreak of war in attacking and sinking merchant shipping. Initially it was thought that the raider responsible was the ADMIRAL SCHEER. The British squadron's job was to escort Allied shipping in the area and to hunt down the German raider, but the vastness of the South Atlantic served to hide it for three months to the extent that there was a growing belief that it didn't exist. Jack Cussen's diary relates:<sup>2</sup>

*In the Commander's Weekly Situation Report for the first week of December he mentioned in a paragraph that the 'Scheer' might be expected to be in one of three places: "Falkland Island on December 8th, Pernambuco area on December 12th and the River Plate area on December 14th."*

In early December, CUMBERLAND sailed to the Falkland Islands for maintenance. EXETER, with the two Leander class cruisers HMS AJAX and HMNZS ACHILLES, headed for the River Plate. Harwood transferred his pennant to AJAX. On the morning of 13 December, contact was at last made with the enemy ship. It soon became evident that this was not the SCHEER but another pocket battleship, the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE. This could have been little consolation, as both packed a much greater punch than the British cruisers, with a main armament consisting of six 11-inch guns, against the 8-inch guns of EXETER and the 6-inch guns of the Leanders. Harwood divided the squadron in two in order to split the German fire.<sup>3</sup>

At 0618 hours GRAF SPEE opened fire. EXETER returned fire at 0620. Over the course of the next half hour, EXETER sustained very extensive damage from GRAF SPEE's heavier guns. Both A and B turrets were hit and put out of action, their gun crews being killed or wounded. One blast largely destroyed the bridge, leaving only three survivors including Captain Bell, who repaired to the after conning position in order to continue to fight the ship. There, communications had largely been destroyed and orders had to be conveyed by a chain of messengers. Damage to the hull led to considerable flooding. The sick bay took a shell which fortunately passed through without exploding, but which caused severe damage. By 0650 hours EXETER had a starboard list of about 7 degrees due to the flooding and Y turret was the only remaining heavy armament, now firing under local control. She continued firing until at 0730 hours when, in spite of the crew's best efforts, she began to fall astern. When power failure rendered Y turret unusable she was forced to break off action and attempt repairs until ordered by Harwood to make for the Falklands.

Damage to the GRAF SPEE caused by gunfire from EXETER and the two Leanders, their inferior firepower notwithstanding, was sufficient to slow her down. In addition, EXETER had fired her starboard torpedoes; the combined result was that the GRAF SPEE turned away. Ultimately her captain, Hans Langsdorff, withdrew her from the action and put into Montevideo. Unable to remain there due to Uruguay's neutrality, facing internment if he made for Buenos Aires, or running the gauntlet of the British warships, thereby risking further casualties and damage, Langsdorff took the decision to scuttle his ship.

During the action EXETER lost 5 officers and 50 ratings dead, two more missing and 82 wounded. More would die during the voyage to Port Stanley and ashore in the sick quarters.

At the outset, EXETER carried two medical officers (MOs), this being one MO and four Sick Berth Attendants (SBAs) short of her war-time complement. The medical emergency stations were the sickbay (Principal Medical Officer (PMO) Surgeon Commander Jack Cussen and one Chief Petty Officer (CPO) SBA) and the Wardroom (Surgeon Lieutenant Roger Lancashire).

The following account compiled from Jack Cussen's diary and other writings gives an idea of the extreme conditions below deck. It is important to realise that contemporaneous record-taking was impossible, and that the abrupt and extensive damage to the ship and medical supplies restricted treatment of casualties, for the most part, to first aid, including stabilisation of fractures, covering of wounds, and analgesia. The sickbay was extensively damaged, rendering instrument sterilisation impossible, and casualties were moved to adjacent compartments. Of the wounded, 63% had lacerations from metal fragments. Nine of these also had open fractures. There were 18 cases of burns. Absent were any blast injuries, since EXETER was spared major explosions from shells or aircraft bombs, an important feature later in the war.<sup>4</sup>

### Jack Cussen's account

*Over the early morning Action Stations cup of tea in the Sick Bay the Chief Sick Berth P.O. the guests and myself decided "this Scheer buzz was just another piece of nonsense" and when the 'Secure' was sounded off at about 5.20 a.m. I left the Sick Bay to go to my cabin and on my way along the deck I thought that Ajax, Achilles and ourselves made quite [a] toy like picture in the still calm dawn for any Commodore to play with, as we each zig zagged over the rippling blue waters and kept perfect stations. Before I turned in I warned the deck sentry to call me at 7 a.m. and at 10-minute intervals afterwards until I surfaced from*

*my cabin, which would be 7.30. It seemed to me that I was no sooner in my bunk than I was awakened by a terrific "rat-ta-tat" on my door, with the sentry shouting excitedly: "Action Stations Sir. Scheer in sight!" I shot out of bed, dressed and was out of my cabin, up the ladder to the boat deck, walking along its starboard side before I quite realized this was myself in the hell of a hurry and still a bit stupefied with sleep.*

*Just as I turned athwart ship to enter the doorway of the Sick Bay flat I noticed on the port beam two puffs of black cloud on the horizon that drifted to form the pattern of a sailing ship's sails. But no hull was visible. I wondered what had produced such an extraordinary cloud effect.*

*Then I noticed a dark, squat, tower-like object peeping just above the horizon just ahead of those black clouds drifting astern. The voice of a Sailor doubling to his Action Stations shouted: "That's the Scheer, she's opened fire." That startled me. I dived through the doorway.*

*The Sick Bay flat was full of men hurrying to their Action Stations. The ladder to the flat above and thence to the bridge had a continual stream of people ascending it. The Chief, without his reefer and shirt sleeves rolled up, looked extremely business-like as he stood there to greet me.*

*"Scheer Sir?" And at the same time he was busy handing out extra first aid bags and boxes to a member of guns' crew and fire and repair parties. The first aid stretcher party, composed of the Master at Arms [MAA] cooks and stewards, was assembling.*

*I no sooner obtained my first aid bag and hung it around my neck than there was a dull sickening thud for'ard.*

*"We've been hit!" There was an awful, frightening silence. The ship seemed to shudder.*

*"The fo'c's'le has been hit. It's on fire!"*

*How such news travelled is a mystery, but it was always accurate.*

*Then events jumbled and blurred themselves in my brain and everything seemed to happen at once as I stood on the threshold of the Sick Bay. A casualty was brought to me and I injected him with morphia. The blood trickled through his shirt at the back.*

*I asked: "Where are you hit?" "Arm Sir." Tourniquet to arm. "Many casualties on the Bridge?" "Yes Sir. Everyone copped it. God!"*

*Then we opened fire. The concussion deadened my*

mind. We did not seem to fire many salvos when there was another sickening thud.

Voices spoke. "B turret's been hit." "The Bridge has been hit. They're all flattened out up there."

A white wraith of a figure fell down the ladder and landed at my feet. He was bleeding from the side of his head. His midshipman's uniform seemed many sizes too big for him as I raised him to his feet. He leaned against the ladder and groaned "Oh my arm Sir. My arm." His pyjama coat inside his monkey jacket was torn and covered in blood. I told somebody to tie a bandage as a tourniquet around his arm. I injected him with morphia and then he fainted. I dragged him against the lockers along-side the Sick Bay door and left him there.

"Chief" I cried. "Where's the brandy? Give all these first aid men a tot. Have one yourself."

Immediately the whole Sick Bay flat was pitch dark and full of choking fumes. Water poured in. We were soon ankle deep. It swished from side to side and that made things look worse. Stretcher cases began to arrive. They were dumped on deck.

The deck got red hot.

"A turret is out of action!" Somebody said "Gas!" "Put on your gas masks."

I asked the Chief to fetch me my gas mask from the Sick Bay office. He produced it like a conjurer. Then I told him to get me some more morphia, "In case this bottle runs out."

I took off my monkey jacket and cap and put them on top of a locker as it gave me more freedom.

I put on my mask but it was not proof against the fumes. They were awful. People choked, coughed and shuddered. It became very dark.

"Can anyone tell me what's happening?" I cried. "Why is this deck so bloody hot?"

The M.A.A. said: "There's a fire in the Serving Flat." "But where is the water coming from. Is there no hope of controlling it?"

The Chief appeared and stood groping, gasping and dazed in the doorway of the Sick Bay.

An eleven-inch projectile had just [gone] through the forward part of the sick bay which was situated almost under 'B' turret and passed out through the starboard side of it without exploding. But it created an [enormous] amount of damage. It cut off the heat, light and water, broke all the utensils and most of the

stretchers. Several splinters caused leaks in the deck overhead through which water poured, three times that morning drenching bedding and patients, from hoses controlling the flames up top. The Bay was filled with suffocating fumes and smoke.

The M.A.A. said: "That last shell passed through the Sick Bay."

Going to the Chief's assistance he asked him: "Are you hurt, Charlie? Are you all right?"

The Chief nodded: "All right, thank you."

He had had a marvellous escape. He was flung on the deck by the force of the shell's passage and temporarily dazed. The two bottles of morphia were broken by the fall. He came towards me shielding his face behind his hands because of the fumes.

"Where's the morphia?" I bellowed. He held up the broken bottles. "Hell, you've bust 'em. Get me another box of morphia ampoules. Quick!" Without hesitation he disappeared into the blackness of the Bay.

I saw a petty officer in the Flats who, I knew, belonged to the H.A. Gun's crew [High Angle: naval equivalent to Anti-Aircraft (AA) guns, with an elevation >50° from the horizontal]. In a confused manner I asked him, "Why are you here?"

"The H.A. Guns are out of action. We've been told to find shelter, sir."

"Where the hell is all this water coming from?" I asked him.

Somebody said: "It's from a burst pipe at the end of the Sick Bay flats."

"Can no one turn it off. We'll soon have to do artificial respiration on some of the stretcher cases lying on the deck of the Sick Bay if this water rises anymore."

Another sailor said: "Someone's gone to report it to the Engine Room."

Later during a lull in the action stretcher cases were brought. Soon the area was overcrowded. It happens in action with severe casualties that messmates and shipmates are unrecognisable to their pals as they are brought in. The badly burned blackened faces with hair completely singed; the deathly pale grey complexion of serious shock; the face contorted in agony due to a mangled limb. It was enough to frighten anybody. It so upset the younger members of the team that they had to withdraw temporarily and were glad to return to their duties in other parts of the ship. So, the Chief and I were the only two left in the early stages to carry on.

*In the after-end of the ship the Surgeon Lieutenant and his staff had things well under control in the Wardroom, Gunroom and Captain's day cabin.*

*I began to feel cold. My thin 'chain-breaker' vest was no protection against the breeze or was it the result of nervous reaction. Those dull thuds, concussion and thunder of our guns was as if someone had burst a paper bag close to one's ears and at the same time hit you on the crown of the head with open hands. Not so funny. If anybody should abandon ship I would have run like a hare. Yet I also thought of the wounded.*

*How could they be rescued? Where could we carry them? All the boats were either smashed or riddled. Only the rafts were seaworthy. I'd have had to return for the wounded. But my first instinct was to rush.*

*There were no casualties for some time so I was idle. I began to get worried. The anxiousness brought by insufferable waiting began to get irksome. If only I could find out what was happening. I asked several but nobody knew. I dropped the morphia ampoule file. I opened two more boxes to find a file but there were none. At last the Commander passed. He handed me his bottle of morphia and syringe saying "You'd better have this one."*

*How I wished there was a syringe invented where you could push the ampoules into the barrel like a cartridge and push the handle on it like a trigger of a gun so that as the fluid was injected the glass would be ejected. What time and trouble it would save, whereas now I was unable to break the funnel of the ampoule in my fingers. The H.A. Petty Officer was able to do this for me and hold it steady while I inserted the needle of the syringe through the hole and withdrew the contents. So long as I had something to do I was alright, but the interminable wait between the wounded was most irritating and irksome. My palms felt hot and cold. I wished I could smoke, but I'm a non-smoker. I had no chewing gum or sweets at that early hour.*

*If only I could look out and see and learn something about the action but I felt if I poked my nose outside the door curiosity would be the cause of my death or reward me with a wound. Then would such a risk be fair to the Ships Company? We were a doctor and four Sick Berth attendants short of war complement. I felt we were receiving the hell of a hammering, as if you entered a boxing ring against a much bigger and heavier opponent who, after all your previous training, hit you - one ... two - before you had your guard up before you were quite ready after you had shaken hands. There was no "Seconds out of the ring - First Round ... time" in this fight. It seemed unfair. It*

*was impossible to realise that this was actually war. We were being killed and yet were killing for our own preservation. But we had no hate or exultation.*

*The theory existed that the German's first salvo is always a straddle because of their superior range finders. Was her gunnery so vastly superior to ours?*

*"We're going into her. We're closing the enemy."*

*"Where the hell are Ajax and Achilles?" "Oh, they've buggered off out of it."*

*"A' turret's been hit. Your friend Clarkson's gone." "Seven Royal Marines killed in 'B' turret, among them Blandford and Mills." "Mills?"*

*"Yes, Mills."*

*"He'd no business to be there. He's 'B' turret shell room."*

*"Yes, but he was put in the turret as a sub for Corporal Marsh who was in the Sick Bay, and he's gone too."*

*A figure came and spoke to me. "Can you go up to the Bridge. There's one or two that might be saved if they could get first aid quickly. They're bleeding and in great pain."*

*"I'm sorry. I can't leave here. I'm not allowed to leave my Action Station until the scrap is over. But tie this bandage tightly above the bleeding point and try and stop the bleeding."*

*The figure moved away.*

*Another figure spoke: "Could I come to the waist? A chap's had his leg off."*

*Another spoke: "Could I come and see Petty Officer so & so? He's badly burnt."*

*Then another and another messenger came.*

*A man, ghastly pale and sick with nausea, turned away from a group at the entrance to the Sick Bay, covered his face in his hands and cried in an agonised voice: "Christ...Oh, Jesus Christ!"*

*The crowd drew back and looked apprehensively towards me. I moved forward in the gap made for me and stepped over the combing of the door-way.*

*A red, raw, dripping, stump of a left forearm was held in front, a flag halyard was firmly bound around it at the bend of the elbow. The right arm was covered by part of the flag and was supported, by a companion walking beside the wounded man. I looked at him. His face was grey, covered in perspiration and oil drops. I groaned: "Oh, poor Russell" and rushed to*

## Reprinted Article

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him, busy searching my pockets for the morphia. To his pal I said: "Sit him down on the locker" indicating the locker underneath the ladder.

[Russell was a Royal Marine who had been in A turret when it was hit.]

"Oh, I'm alright" said Russell, 'I'm alright."

I gave him 1/4 grain morphia and he sat on the locker. Then I apprehensively raised the blood-soaked flag from his right forearm. Thankfully it was still there. Though there was a wide through and through wound near the elbow joint. Examination and movement of it caused him excruciating agony.

But was his elbow joint intact? We helped him, slowly, painfully shuffling along with many encouraging cries of "Take it easy, old man. Take it easy. You're doing, fine, Aubrey. You're doing fine."

Eventually we got him to the Blacksmith's Shop and laid him in a corner among the iron mongery. It was a rough and ready dressing station, but he was glad of the shelter.

"She's runnin' away from us. The Spee is runnin' lads. It's alright now. I'll come inside and lie down for you" he muttered through white lips.

We were making a huge smoke screen. I saw a huge fountain of water rise up on our starboard side disclosed by the smoke. The smoke rolled away like a huge black sausage far astern of us. An aeroplane appeared. It flew quite close and noiselessly because of the gunfire deafness in my ears. It looked as if held by a string like a kite.

"It's Ajax's aircraft - a Seafox by the look of it." Its lamp winked a message. Then we turned towards the 'Spee' again.

"We're following, up. We're going after the Spee." "Christ, haven't we had enough" I said. "When in God's name are we to collect the wounded?"

A voice said very evenly and calmly. "It's the Navy's tradition to fight while there is a gun left. 'Y turret is still firm, and there is one H.A. gun intact out of the four. We must stay in the fight."

"We're altering course again."

"We're goin' away."

"Ajax and Achilles are taking up the fight. Ajax is firing now."

A messenger came to me to me as I stood watching the aircraft.

"From the Captain Sir. Will you go and attend the wounded on the Bridge now Sir, please."

I returned to the Sick bay. It was crowded with the first aid party bailing the water out through the scuttles and helping to mop the place up.

More wounded began to arrive. The six cots were occupied. There were wounded on stretchers on the deck. It was difficult to move in the Bay without treading on someone.

I came out on the flat and climbed the ladder to the flat above.

There were two figures in the starboard corner that had fallen through from the signal deck above - about 12 feet. One had lost both his thighs and was hobbling on the stumps. His trousers were ripped right off. He fell across the threshold of the Captain's sea cabin. He tried to speak to me. His lips moved but gave[out] no sound. He was ashen grey. I gave him a large injection of morphia. I was about to tie a tourniquet around each thigh, even though there was only slight bleeding, but he gave a convulsive shudder and his head fell back. I covered him with a tattered flag. Poor devil. He had many escapes from disrating over the drink question and had become a teetotaller for many weeks. His £87 hard cash found in his duty box was in itself a token of his great effort to remain on the waggon.

The other figure lay at the bottom of the ladder. Both his thighs were gone and his left arm.

"Good God, is it you, and we played hockey together only a few days ago." He died as I was about to give him an injection of morphia.

The Bridge, its roof and sides perforated like a sieve, was a shambles. The dead lay as if a rugby scrum had fallen on top of each other. The two buglers, aged 16 and 17, were in each other's arms. Bodies lay in pools of blood. Death was instantaneous and all due to head wounds.

McBarnett shouted loudly and abruptly. "Right. Bring all the dead in the rear doorway." A young AB (Showden) groaned: "My leg. My muckin leg." A fractured thigh, a tourniquet, an injection of morphia, was sufficient attention for the time being for him.

I gave P.O. Truman, who was surprisingly cheerful considering that he had a broken bone in his right leg and a piece of metal in his left eye, an injection of morphia.

*Then I went down the ladders to the waiting wounded in the sickbay.*

*The sick-bay or hospital was full: wounded were stowed in every available corner-even the blacksmith's shop had a couple of wounded slung in their hammocks in that grimy quarter.*

*There now occurred a hiatus after the previous seventy minutes of battle with its disciplined feverish activity. The Captain gave the order "Splice the main brace" and each officer and man received a double tot of ship's rum. A traditional celebration of victory since time immemorial.*

*[At 1105 Harwood ordered EXETER to proceed to the Falklands. Heavily listing and with fires still burning she was able to make about eighteen knots. During the three days steaming the time was used in trying to repair as much damage as possible. She had lost 62 officers and men during the action.*

*It was not possible for the ship to land her wounded either at Montevideo or Buenos Aires for political reasons. In addition to which SPEE's fate was still in the balance. There were many burials at sea. The service was simple and brief. The Captain, one or two senior and divisional officers and a few mess mates and the Padre attended. There were no wreaths. A hammock sewn as a shroud suitably weighted contained the remains.*

*The two surgeons were so busy that sleep was out of the question. The nursing situation was an acute one. Blankets and pillows were scarce in the ship and due to three rapid successive floodings of the sick-bay the bedclothes were changed three times. When unprocurable an overcoat or a sailor-samaritan's blanket substituted.*

*To give the wounded constant regular meals or refreshments was a worry for the first two days but on the third day and last day the various messes or divisions looked after their own wounded and brought food at regular intervals especially cups of tea.*

*Necessity invented reasonable substitutes for those things broken. The Shipwrights made magnificent splints: empty ship's tobacco tins made urinals and seats whisked from the officers' heads came in handy when placed on spid-kids to make excellent bed-pans. They made back splints of wood to immobilise gravely injured limbs and cradles for injured heads and feet and cosy well-shaped splints for shattered arms and thighs.*

*The clothing store supplied dry vests, shorts and anything within reason. The torpedo party repaired quickly the electric light and radiator system and this counteracted any adverse fall in temperature. They got the sterilizers to work and the few instruments in hand could be boiled and dressings made aseptic.*

*By the third morning meals were good and the menus varied. The wounded received more regular attention. Remaking beds or cots, lifting wounded on or off improvised bedpans, handing them urinals, feeding them, was now undertaken by their special pals from their own part of ship.*

### Commentary (Continued)

EXETER stayed in the Falklands until January 1940. Some of the initial survivors of the battle, including Marine Russell, died in Port Stanley.

She then returned to Devonport for a lengthy repair and refit, following which she escorted Atlantic convoys and, at the start of the war in the Pacific, was transferred to the Far East. Sadly, she was sunk by the Japanese during the second battle of the Java Sea in March 1942. 54 men were drowned. Of the 651 men rescued, 150 died in captivity. Due to seabed looting by illegal salvagers virtually nothing of the ship remains today.

John Cussen, known as Jack, was born in 1896 in Newcastle West, County Limerick. He trained at Trinity College Dublin and qualified in 1922. He joined the Royal Navy (RN) in 1925 and was one of a significant number of Irish doctors and nurses to serve in the RN. He was drafted to HMS EXETER in 1936 as PMO and promoted to Surgeon Commander in 1937. He was mentioned in despatches after the Battle of the River Plate. On leaving EXETER he was drafted to HMS GREENWICH in 1941. His final draft was to HMS TRIUMPH, from which he retired from active service in 1949 to become a GP in Walton-on-Thames. Like many doctors, he was a keen golfer and played to a single-figure handicap. He died in 1969, aged 73.

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