

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 95

### “The Far Seas”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In 1914, Britain has the largest merchant fleet in the world, and is more dependent on keeping the shipping lanes open than any other country. A great deal of the British economy is dependent on sea trade, and Britain itself imports over 60% of the food the British people consume.

The German Navy isn't large enough to blockade Britain. But if German sea raiders can threaten the safety of British merchant ships plying the world's trade lanes, the fear they instill in nervous shipping companies and investors might be enough to threaten Britain's lifelines.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 95. The Far Seas.

At the outbreak of the Great War, Germany had a modest colonial Empire and a substantial fleet of merchant ships. Although Germany's overseas military resources are modest, especially compared to what the British have to draw on, the German Admiralty had prepared ambitious plans to make maximum use of Germany's colonial holdings, and her merchant ships, in the event of war.

When the Great War did break out, many of these merchant ships found themselves impounded in the ports of enemy nations or trapped in German or neutral ports. The Royal Navy, which had a presence everywhere, would seize German merchant ships when it could. Others would hightail it to the nearest neutral port to avoid capture. The five neutral nations that played host to the largest numbers of German merchant ships hiding from the British were the United States, Chile, Portugal, Brazil, and Spain, in that order.

I talked about the competition between British and German passenger ships over the lucrative North Atlantic lines back in episode 64. German companies owned some of the biggest and fastest passenger liners in the world, faster than many naval vessels. In the event of war, these ships could be lightly armed and sent out to raid enemy commerce. The German Admiralty identified about a dozen liners that had the potential to be converted into warships, and plans

were made to outfit them in German ports, or perhaps neutral ports, or perhaps even on the high seas, in the event of war.

And then there were the cruisers. I mentioned cruisers before, when we talked about different kinds of naval vessels in this period. Cruisers are the middle class of ship, smaller than battleships but larger than torpedo boats or destroyers. Cruisers, as the name implies, were intended to cruise long distances, alone or in small groups, on the open sea, raiding enemy commerce.

The German government had agents stationed at neutral ports around the world, where they could buy coal. This coal could be carried out to sea by merchant ships, and then used to refuel armed vessels in the open ocean. Some friendly neutrals might even be persuaded to allow German ships to refuel in their ports. This was technically a violation of neutral status, but if you recall the Russo-Japanese War, the French and German governments during that conflict were willing to look the other way while the Russians used French colonial ports and German merchant ships to load up on coal, and although the Japanese protested, there wasn't much they could do about it. The German Navy hoped that similarly helpful friendly neutrals might be available to support plucky German warships fighting what would amount to guerilla warfare against the British.

The Royal Navy was well aware of these German preparations, and the thought of potentially as many as forty German ships operating independently all around the world, preying on defenseless British merchant ships, and then slipping away and losing themselves in the vastness of the world's oceans kept more than a few British admirals up at night.

Today I want to talk about what happened when these ambitious German plans met the reality of the Great War. Let's talk about the civilian liners first. To begin with, most German ships that found themselves stuck in neutral ports were afraid to go to sea because the Royal Navy knew exactly where they were and were waiting to pounce as soon as they left neutral waters. And the government of the United States, the number one host to German merchant ships, was quite strict about neutrality, and in no mood to look the other way while these ships were armed.

There were quite a few German ships that were in international waters when the war broke out and were able to get themselves armed at sea by German naval vessels. The most notable of these was the Norddeutscher-Lloyd ocean liner *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, which you may recall made a cameo appearance in episode 64. *Kronprinz Wilhelm* was one of those modern German luxury liners that was making a good living off the transatlantic passenger trade, and causing problems for the British Cunard and White Star lines. You may also remember that *Kronprinz Wilhelm* was the liner that had rammed an iceberg head on in 1907, which banged up her bow, but she was still able to proceed to New York.

*Kronprinz Wilhelm* was in the western Atlantic when the war broke out. She was able to rendezvous with the German cruiser *Karlsruhe* in international waters and take aboard two

88mm guns, a machine gun, and some lighter arms and ammunition, and was commissioned into the German Navy as an auxiliary cruiser. She headed for the Azores to take on coal, then spent some time at sea while her crew worked to arm the ship and practice firing.

When she was ready, *Kronprinz Wilhelm* headed to South America, where the ports were neutral and the British presence was scant. She was able to obtain coal from civilian German ships that bought it in Brazil or Uruguay or Argentina, loaded it up, and then took it out to sea to transfer to *Kronprinz Wilhelm* in international waters.

*Kronprinz Wilhelm* had an exceptionally successful career as a raider because she was able to maintain access to coal, and because most of the cargo headed from South America to Europe was beef and grains, which could be captured and then used to feed her crew. She was faster than most civilian merchant ships, so she was able to capture them by simply approaching and threatening to fire on them unless they surrendered. Since these merchant ships had no guns to fight back with and couldn't run away, surrender was the only real option. A boarding party would board the captured ship and search it. Ships that were deemed to be of no military value and carrying nothing of worth might be released. If a ship had useful cargo or coal or was deemed capable of being converted into a raider itself, then it would be scuttled, after its crew and passengers and coal and cargo were transferred to *Kronprinz Wilhelm*.

She captured a total of fifteen Allied merchant ships in her seven-month career as a raider. In March 1915, after a rendezvous with a resupply ship was broken up by the Royal Navy, she gave up the fight and headed for neutral waters. The crew's health had deteriorated badly by then, probably because of malnutrition. They'd gotten plenty of beef and bread in the past six months, but fruit and vegetables had been in short supply. She arrived in Newport News, Virginia on April 11, 1915, and the ship and the crew were interned. When the United States entered the war in 1917, *Kronprinz Wilhelm* was seized by the US government, refurbished, and commissioned into the US Navy as USS *Von Steuben*.

[music: *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*]

I mentioned the German cruiser *Karlsruhe*, which had also been in the western Atlantic when the war began. She, too, headed into the South Atlantic and raided in the same seas as *Kronprinz Wilhelm*; she captured 16 ships. The captain then decided his activities were attracting too much attention and tried to relocate to the Caribbean, but on November 4, 1914, an explosion went off aboard *Karlsruhe*—no one knows exactly what happened—and the ship quickly sank.

There was another German cruiser in the Caribbean, *Dresden*, which had been patrolling the Atlantic coast of Mexico. She played a small supporting role in last week's episode, ferrying Victoriano Huerta out of Mexico after his resignation. *Dresden* headed for South America and on into the Pacific, so I'll come back to her later in the episode. Then there was *Königsberg*, which had been assigned to German East Africa. We'll talk about her when we get to talking about the war in Africa.

The other important German warships outside of Europe were five cruisers in the Pacific. *Leipzig* was patrolling the Pacific coast of Mexico when the Great War broke out. And of course, it's not a coincidence that the Germans had a cruiser patrolling both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Mexico. It's because of the Mexican Revolution. Germany had more than its share of emigrants and expatriates living in Mexico, and this was Germany's way of showing the flag and warning the warring factions in Mexico of the consequences of harming German nationals.

The cruiser *Nürnberg* had previously been patrolling the Pacific coast of Mexico, and having just been relieved by *Leipzig*, was on her way back to Qingdao. The remaining three, *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, and *Emden*, were the other principal ships in the German East Asia Squadron, also based at Qingdao, in China.

The commander of the East Asia Squadron was the 53-year old Admiral Maximilian von Spee. At the moment war was declared, von Spee and his two biggest ships, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, were in the Caroline Islands on a routine patrol.

*Emden* had been at Qingdao as the July Crisis had unfolded, the only German cruiser in the port at the time. Her eager-beaver captain, Karl von Müller, saw the handwriting on the wall and put out to sea on July 31, back when Willy and Nicky were still exchanging their telegrams. The day after the war was declared, *Emden* captured her first prize, *Ryazan*, a Russian merchant ship. *Emden* took *Ryazan* back to Qingdao, where she was converted into an auxiliary cruiser and commissioned as *Cormoran*.

On August 5, von Spee signaled Müller by radio, ordering *Emden* to rendezvous with his ships in the Mariana Islands. *Emden* came, along with the auxiliary cruiser *Prinz Eitel Friedrich*, which in happier times had been an ocean liner, and the collier *Markomania*. I should mention here, just for clarity, that these German cruisers are coal-fired ships with limited space aboard to stockpile the coal, and so it's standard procedure for some other ship to act as a collier, carrying additional coal reserves for the warship. These colliers follow the warship around, then skedaddle out of sight when the cruiser goes into combat. We don't typically mention them, but just be aware that they're usually there, and they're how these German warships manage to operate over such long distances as well as they do. Unarmed colliers can also be sent into neutral ports to buy coal and then deliver it to the warships at sea, as we've already seen.

This system worked pretty well for the Germans. The British, by contrast, with their larger network of colonial ports that can serve as coaling stations, were less adept at coaling and resupplying at sea. One thing the British were adept at was intercepting and decoding the wireless signals that the German warships and colliers inevitably had to exchange in order to coordinate their movements, which often gave the British valuable information about where the German ships were and what they were up to.

Anyway, von Spee also contacted *Nürnberg*, the ship that had been returning to Qingdao from Mexico, and summoned her to rendezvous with his squadron. *Nürnberg* met up with von Spee on August 6, and *Emden* on August 12.

Von Spee now found himself in command of the most powerful German naval force outside of the German home waters, and pondered the question of what to do with it. The British had their China Station, a squadron of a few older ships based at Hong Kong, a force that was probably inferior to the newer ships under von Spee's command. There was the Australian Navy, especially her flagship, the battlecruiser *Australia* and her new cruisers *Sydney* and *Melbourne*. Actually, in the early weeks of the war, these ships were engaged in the operation to capture German New Guinea, but von Spee wouldn't have known that.

New Zealand also had naval forces, but not enough to pose a threat to von Spee's squadron. The first military action New Zealand took during the war was to capture German Samoa. The point of these early raids on German islands in the Pacific, by the way, was to capture and shut down their wireless stations. The British are all too aware that there are German cruisers prowling the Pacific, and want to shut down their communications network.

You see, the British mostly controlled the world's network of underwater telegraph cables. This is the most important means of global communication in the early twentieth century, as we have already had occasion to discuss. I think it's fair to say that the underwater cable network was to the world of 1914 what the internet is to our world, and when war was declared, the German government lost ready access to it, and just like that, most of the world went dark, from the German point of view. The next best option was wireless communication. The German colonial holdings in Africa and the Pacific were enough to put together a basic network of powerful radio stations that could communicate with each other and relay messages to and from Germany.

The Allies of course wanted to inhibit coordination between Berlin and the German raiders. British merchant shipping was close to paralyzed in the early days of the war, for the obvious reason that the private companies that owned the ships didn't want to risk them being captured or sunk by German raiders. The British government was doing everything in its power to reassure the private interests that the seas were safe for British-flagged ships, but the Germans were scoring some early successes—we've already seen some of them—and it was therefore imperative that the Royal Navy shut down German raiding as quickly as possible. If people got the idea that these German raiders were too much for the RN to handle, British trade might dry up overnight.

All of this is a roundabout way of getting at the fact that von Spee is quickly losing the ability to communicate with the German Admiralty or even with German colonies. So now that it's time for him to decide what to do with the largest German naval force outside German home waters, he's going to have to figure it out on his own, without orders from the Admiralty, and without reliable information about conditions in the Pacific.

By the time von Spee had gotten his squadron assembled on August 12, it was already clear to him that Japan was about to enter the war on the Allied side. His squadron might have been enough to take on the British China Station, but adding in the entire Japanese Navy meant that the western Pacific was no longer safe. It also meant that Qingdao was no longer available as a base for von Spee, since blockading Qingdao would surely be one of the first Japanese moves.

He also deemed that his squadron wasn't suited to commerce raiding. His two most powerful ships, *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*, were armored cruisers. They were meant to duke it out with enemy warships. They were too slow for commerce raiding.

So von Spee hit upon a plan. He would take his ships east, toward South America. The British had only a small cruiser squadron in the southeast Pacific and von Spee hoped to take them by surprise. He also judged that the nation of Chile, on the Pacific coast of South America, while formally neutral, was friendly to Germany and likely not to be too terribly strict about enforcing neutrality rules, meaning that the East Asia Squadron was likely to find it easier to refuel and resupply there than most other places.

Admiral von Spee shared his thinking with the captains of the ships in his squadron. One of them, Karl von Müller, commander of *Emden*, protested. *Emden* was a light cruiser, the fastest warship in the squadron, as a matter of fact, and von Müller felt that the talents of his ship and his crew would be wasted in hunting down British cruisers, so he volunteered his ship for a cunning plan. While the rest of the Far East squadron steamed east for South America, *Emden* would slip away to the west, through the Dutch East Indies, and begin commerce raiding in the Indian Ocean. The British would never expect that. Von Spee approved of the suggestion, and off *Emden* went.

I'll get back to the rest of the squadron later, but first I want to follow the subsequent career of *Emden*. It's quite a remarkable story, perhaps the most remarkable career of any ship in German naval history.

Remember the cruiser *Königsberg*, which is at German East Africa? I mentioned her earlier. Von Müller knew she was there, and so he decided to keep *Emden* away from the western Indian Ocean, and concentrate his efforts in the eastern Indian Ocean. British shipping in the Indian Ocean, like British shipping everywhere, had declined dramatically in the opening days of the war, but with no sign of German ships on the prowl, it had begun returning to more or less normal levels by the time *Emden* reached the Bay of Bengal on September 5. By then, her crew had rigged a phony fourth funnel for their ship, so at a distance she would resemble a British cruiser.

Von Müller guessed, correctly as it turned out, that Indian and Australian soldiers would be travelling on troop transports toward the Suez Canal, and therefore most of the enemy's naval resources would be escorting those transports. That meant that ordinary commercial shipping in the Indian Ocean would likely be unguarded, so that's where he made his move. *Emden* took the

British completely by surprise, capturing or sinking eight merchant ships in one week and developing a reputation for bold, clever, and humane raids. *Emden* was scrupulous about observing the law of war; she treated captured crews honorably and released them as soon as was practical. As *Emden*'s reputation grew, British shipping in the Indian Ocean came to a standstill once again. Even the Australian government suspended the movement of troops to Egypt until *Emden* could be captured or destroyed.

*Emden* headed to the east coast of India to avoid the patrols sent out to hunt for her. On September 22, she shelled the Burma Oil Company storage tanks at the Indian port of Madras. Half a million gallons of oil were destroyed, and von Müller hoped the raid would make the British look weak, and thus spark opposition to British rule in India. The raid succeeded in making the British look bad, but it was a little early to be inciting an Indian revolt.

*Emden* then raided more ships in the waters around Ceylon, then steamed for the British-controlled island of Diego Garcia, where there was a coal reserve and maintenance facilities for commercial ships. She arrived on October 8. This was more than two months after the war had begun, but there was no telegraph cable to Diego Garcia, and the British officials there were not aware that they were at war with Germany. The Germans carefully avoided enlightening them; *Emden* remained for a few days while the ship refueled, the crew rested, and her hull was scraped. Barnacles need to be scraped from a ship's hull from time to time so that she can maintain speed. For an isolated raider like *Emden*, it's nearly impossible to get this kind of maintenance done in wartime, but von Müller had found a way.

The British then captured *Markomannia*, *Emden*'s collier, but *Emden* just went ahead and captured her own merchant ship to use as a replacement. But that meant it was time for *Emden* to move on to a new location. She headed for the west coast of British-controlled Malaya and attacked the port of Penang on October 28. In the harbor there was the Russian cruiser *Zhemchug*. *Zhemchug* was a veteran of the Russo-Japanese War. She had been part of the Second Pacific Squadron, had been badly damaged at the Battle of the Tsushima Strait, and had managed to flee to the neutral American-controlled port of Manila, where she was interned until the end of that war. After the war, she had been repaired and returned to service, but she had had the bad luck to be at Penang that day. She was in for repairs and was not prepared to fight. *Emden* sank her, killing 88 Russian sailors. *Emden* also fired on some merchant ships in the port, and on the way out of the harbor, *Emden* encountered the French destroyer *Mousquet*, sinking her as well, and taking the lives of 47 French sailors.

But *Emden*'s luck was about to run out. Von Müller determined her next target would be the Cocos Islands, where the British had a coaling station and a communications station, which included a powerful wireless as well as a telegraph cable hub with connections to Australia, the Dutch East Indies, and South Africa. *Emden* arrived there at about 5:00 AM on November 9. As she approached, an eagle-eyed British medical officer ashore noticed that her fake funnel was

fake and correctly guessed the identity of the approaching ship. The wireless station sent out a distress call, which was quickly jammed by *Emden*.

The Germans proceeded with their plan to put a landing party ashore to destroy the communications station. They were aware that a distress call had gone out, but believed the nearest warship was ten hours away, which would give them plenty of time to complete the mission.

But in fact, the nearest warship was a lot closer. Remember how the Australians had postponed troop transports to Europe because of *Emden*? Well, they finally got together a convoy of transports to carry Australian and New Zealander troops to Europe, and lined up some British, Australian, and Japanese cruisers to escort it. The Australian cruiser *Sydney* was detached from this convoy and ordered to the Cocos at high speed.

*Sydney* arrived much earlier than the Germans expected. Her commander, Captain John Glossop, believed, incorrectly, that *Sydney* had better range than *Emden* and so he began firing on her at once at long range. *Emden* fired back and scored a few early hits, but was unable to deal serious damage to *Sydney*. *Sydney* closed the distance and pounded *Emden* for nearly two hours. More than a hundred Australian shells scored hits, and *Emden* was forced to beach herself to avoid sinking. 134 of *Emden*'s crew died in this battle as against four Australians. The Royal Australian Navy had just won its first battle, and the single German ship that had caused so much chaos and disruption was defeated at last. Ships in the Indian Ocean no longer required escort, and the Central Powers were no longer a threat to Australia or New Zealand.

The survivors among *Emden*'s crew were taken prisoner, but the landing party, consisting of *Emden*'s first officer, Hellmuth von Mücke, and 52 officers and sailors, escaped the Australians by commandeering an abandoned sailship in the harbor, named *Ayesha*. She was in a sorry state, but the Germans were able to use her to evade *Sydney* and escape to the Dutch East Indies, where they transferred to a German freighter that took them to the Arabian Peninsula, nominally Central Powers territory, but in fact the Germans spent a harrowing five months traveling north along the Red Sea coast by boat and on foot, a journey that included firefights with Bedouin raiders. They finally reached the Hejaz Railway at Medina and were able to ride the train from there to Constantinople, and then return to Germany, where they were greeted as heroes.

[music: *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*]

When we left Admiral von Spee and his squadron in the Pacific, they were on their way to the west coast of South America to see how much grief they could cause the British there. Early in September, von Spee detached one of his ships, *Nürnberg*, to the neutral American port of Honolulu, where it would be possible to contact Germany by telegraph and apprise the Admiralty of his situation. *Nürnberg* returned with the news of the New Zealanders' capture of German Samoa, so von Spee took his squadron there, in the hope that they might catch an isolated British or Australian or New Zealander warship by surprise. But when they arrived,

there were no enemy ships in the harbor at German Samoa. Von Spee considered bombarding the port, but decided against it. Because as far as he was concerned, this was still German territory, and German ships have no business firing on a German port.

So they turned east and made for the French colonial port of Papeete, on Tahiti. Papeete had no telegraph cable or wireless station and only a handful of soldiers. It did have coal, and von Spee planned a landing to seize that coal on September 22. But although the French forces were outgunned, and an elderly French gunboat and a commandeered German freighter sunk in the harbor, the French forces on the island managed to set their stockpile of coal on fire. Von Spee saw the smoke and decided that there was now no point in continuing the raid, so he withdrew his ships.

The raid on Papeete caused property damage and cost the French, but it probably cost von Spee more. Not only had his ships expended irreplaceable ammunition on a minor target, but the attack alerted the Royal Navy to von Spee's position, and made it clear that he was headed toward South America.

The Admiralty alerted the 52-year old Rear Admiral Sir Christopher Craddock, commander-in-chief of the North America and West Indies Station. This was a minor and neglected unit of the Royal Navy, with old ships, crewed by reservist sailors. Remember that when the war began, there were two German cruisers in the western Atlantic, *Karlsruhe* and *Dresden* that were threatening merchant shipping. These were Craddock's first assignment, and it wasn't very long before the raiding stopped and, to all appearances, Craddock and his ships had won the day.

In fact, *Karlsruhe* had been destroyed in an explosion and *Dresden* had sailed around Cape Horn and was headed for a rendezvous with von Spee. On October 12, von Spee's squadron met up with *Dresden* and also with *Leipzig*, that ship that had been assigned to the Pacific coast of Mexico. Von Spee's squadron now has been augmented with two additional cruisers.

Craddock had been ordered to patrol the shipping routes through the Strait of Magellan from Montevideo in Uruguay on the east coast of South America to Valparaiso in Chile on the west coast, and the Admiralty sent him the elderly pre-dreadnought battleship *Canopus* to help bolster his firepower. *Canopus* was slow by modern standards, but she had two 12-inch guns and 12 6-inch guns, giving her more firepower than anything von Spee had available. Winston Churchill had this notion that *Canopus* might function as a sort of mobile citadel. As long as Craddock's other ships stayed close to her, she would negate the firepower advantage that von Spee would otherwise enjoy.

Craddock had relocated his squadron to Stanley, in the Falkland Islands, and *Canopus* joined them there on October 12, which happened to be the very same day von Spee was meeting up with *Dresden* and *Leipzig* near Easter Island in the Pacific. Craddock split his force into two squadrons. One would stay in the Atlantic, and he would lead the other one into the Pacific and take up a position off the coast of Chile. Craddock's squadron would include *Canopus*, along

with Craddock's flagship, the armored cruiser *Good Hope*, her sister ship, *Monmouth*, and *Glasgow*, a light cruiser that was the most modern ship at Craddock's disposal.

Because *Canopus* was so slow, the rest of Craddock's squadron left her behind as they headed through the Strait of Magellan and into the Pacific. *Canopus* would catch up when she could. As the fastest ship in the squadron, *Glasgow* was sent on ahead to reconnoiter. On October 29, *Glasgow* began picking up German radio signals. From one particular German ship already well-known to these sailors. *Dresden*, their old nemesis from the Atlantic.

In fact, though, *Dresden* had already linked up with von Spee's squadron. But as they approached Chile, von Spee ordered the rest of his squadron to observe radio silence, while telling *Dresden* to chatter away as if she were the only German ship in the vicinity, hoping to lure *Glasgow* into a trap.

It sort of worked. On November 1, von Spee got intelligence on the position of *Glasgow* and ordered his squadron to pounce upon the lone British cruiser. But Craddock's other cruisers were not very far away. They picked up the sudden flurry of German radio traffic and also made for *Glasgow*'s position.

In view of the defeat that is about to unfold, some criticize Craddock for rushing into this fight knowing that von Spee had a superior force and that *Canopus* was too far behind to add her own firepower. Von Spee had, in fact, two armored cruisers and three light cruisers as against Craddock's two armored cruisers and one light cruiser. But even these numbers mask a deeper disparity. The German Admiralty had assigned some of its best ships and crews to the East Asia Squadron. The gun crews of *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* had both recently won German Navy marksmanship prizes. Craddock had been given command of older ships and reservist sailors.

So why did Craddock proceed? Historians still argue this question. It may have been because Craddock was friends with Admiral Troubridge, whom you may remember from episode 83, had to face a court martial for failing to engage *Goeben* and *Breslau* in the Mediterranean, even though Troubridge's ships were also outgunned. Or perhaps Craddock believed the German sailors to be worn out or malnourished or low on ammunition after their adventures in the Pacific. Maybe he didn't realize that he was engaging all of von Spee's squadron.

At any rate, the German advantage began to show right away. They spotted the British at 4:00 PM on November 1, forty minutes before the British found them. The British had been headed north; they turned south now and the Germans pursued. The Germans took advantage of their superior ships to outmaneuver the British, keeping to the east so the British ships would be outlined against the setting sun, and keeping a long range, to take advantage of their bigger guns.

The British tried to close to a better range, but took too many German hits. By sunset both *Good Hope* and *Monmouth* were on fire, making them plainly visible even after dark. By 10:00 that night, both ships had sunk, taking with them 1,570 British officers and sailors, including Admiral

Craddock. The more nimble *Glasgow* had managed to escape. The Germans suffered only slight damage and no fatalities.

It would be called the Battle of Coronel, and it was the first British naval defeat in more than a century. News of the defeat was met with shock and outrage in Britain, and the presence of von Spee's squadron now cut off Britain's supply of nitrate fertilizers from Chile.

After the battle, *Glasgow* and *Canopus* returned to the Falkland Islands. Von Spee's squadron headed for Valparaiso. Under the laws of neutrality in effect at the time, only three German warships could enter the port and they could only stay 24 hours. Von Spee took *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, and *Nürnberg* into the harbor. This also gave him an opportunity to contact the German Admiralty and report in.

The German community in Valparaiso greeted von Spee like a conquering hero. A reception was hastily organized at the German Club, where von Spee was given a bouquet of flowers. He quipped that they would nicely decorate his grave.

You see, although it looks like von Spee is riding high right now, he of all people knew better. His squadron had expended 40% of their ammunition in the Battle of Coronel, and they had no way of getting more. His ships were slowing down and in need of maintenance. And worst of all, he had just exchanged cables with Berlin, and his new orders were to make for home, and that meant running the British blockade.

Meanwhile, back in Britain, the Admiralty had no choice but to take drastic action in response to the defeat at the Battle of Coronel. The Royal Navy had been keeping all of its dreadnoughts in European waters. Now they detached two of their newest and fastest battlecruisers—*Invincible* and *Inflexible*—and sent them to the South Atlantic. The British guessed that von Spee's next move would be an attack on Stanley. *Canopus* had returned there and had been beached and camouflaged; essentially, she had been converted from a battleship into an artillery emplacement.

On December 6, after the German squadron had transited the Strait of Magellan and taken some time to rest and refuel, von Spee and his ships' captains debated their next move. Von Spee and two of the captains wanted to raid Stanley. The other three captains judged that move too dangerous and voted to steam north along the coast of Argentina while raiding British shipping. So a tie vote, except that von Spee is the guy with the most braid, so Stanley it is.

*Invincible* and *Inflexible* arrived at Stanley on December 7. Von Spee arrived at dawn on December 8. This is pretty remarkable when you stop and think about it. Two squadrons of ships each crossing thousands of miles of open ocean from opposite directions to converge on the Falkland Islands, neither having any information concerning the whereabouts of the other...and they arrive less than 24 hours apart.

It was terrible timing, from von Spee's point of view. If the battlecruisers had arrived a little later, they would have missed the fight. If they had arrived earlier, von Spee might have had time to learn that they were there and change his plan. As it was, the best intelligence available to von Spee said there were no British warships at Stanley, and so he proceeded with his plan.

When the Germans arrived, *Invincible* and *Inflexible* were taking on coal and their boilers were cold, which might have made them vulnerable to a quick strike, but von Spee didn't know that. As his ships approached, though, the hidden guns of *Canopus* began opening fire on them, and the German's spotted the distinctive masts of the British battlecruisers.

The German force turned around and headed for the open sea. The British battlecruisers fired up their boilers and began to pursue at about 10:00 AM. The Germans were fifteen miles away by then, but the British battlecruisers were faster, and there was still plenty of daylight.

By 1:20 PM, the Germans were in range, and the British began firing. Von Spee tried detaching *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* to engage the two battlecruisers while the other ships escaped. The Germans scored a few hits, but *Scharnhorst* sank some time after 4:00, and *Gneisenau* went down just after 6:00. British cruisers were able to sink *Nürnberg* and *Leipzig*; only *Dresden* escaped. She returned to the Pacific and would finally be cornered and sunk in March 1915.

1,871 German officers and sailors died that day, including von Spee and his two sons. A further 215 were rescued and taken prisoner. The British lost 10 killed and 19 wounded.

The Battle of the Falkland Islands effectively ended the threat of German commerce raiding, and by the spring of 1915, escorts were a thing of the past and Allied shipping traveled the world's oceans freely once again.

The British had feared that dozens of German ships might potentially be converted into raiders, but in the end only five were, and all five were sunk or hiding in American waters by April 1915. The German raiders of this period have left us some exciting and romantic tales, but the cold facts are these: altogether, German raiders sank or captured about 220,000 tons of British shipping, with about a third of that total attributable to *Emden* alone. The British sank or captured 250,000 tons of German shipping. And when the raids were over, the British had control of the seas and the Germans were bottled up behind a blockade. Not much achieved to weigh against what Germany lost in warships and sailors.

By early 1915, the attention of naval strategists was turning to the North Sea, the one place where the German Navy was still a force, and the world waited for the seemingly inevitable grand battle between the world's two most powerful navies.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and thank you to Justin for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to help support *The History of the Twentieth Century* by becoming a patron, head on over to the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), and click on

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to Europe and ponder the situation in German-occupied Belgium. Did the Germans commit war crimes in Belgium? They surely did. Did the Allies do their best to make propaganda hay out of the German Army's bad behavior? They surely did, as well. Separating out the real crimes from the propaganda can be a tough call, even with a hundred years' worth of hindsight, but we will give it our best shot. The Rape of Belgium, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The career of *Emden* inspired Kaiser Wilhelm to award her an Iron Cross, and when a namesake ship was constructed in 1916, she had an iron cross on her bow. The German Navy would commission three further ships named *Emden*, in 1925, 1961, and 1983. This last was decommissioned in 2013. The German Navy would commission battleships named *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in 1935 and 1936, respectively.

[music: Closing War Theme]