

# Tom Remick



Chief Yeoman of Signals D/J 45240, HMS Exeter, Royal Navy

Died December 13th 1939, aged 39

Commemorated on Plymouth Naval Memorial

Son of Thomas and Ethel Remick, of Port Isaac, Cornwall;

husband of Anne Remick, of Port Isaac

Tom was born March 10th 1900. He was affected by the death of his uncle Jonathan in 1914 and joined the Royal Navy at the age of sixteen. He rose to the rank of Chief Yeoman of Signals. At the outbreak of war, he was serving on HMS Exeter, a York class heavy cruiser commanded by Captain Frederick Secker Bell. She was part of South America Division with the County class heavy cruiser HMS Cumberland and the two Leander class light cruisers, HMS Ajax and HMS Achilles.



**HMS Exeter**

South America Division was given the task of locating and destroying the German Cruiser (*Pocket Battleship*) Admiral Graf Spee, commanded by Captain Hans Lansdorff, which was raiding commercial shipping in the South Atlantic. In early December, the Cumberland was undergoing a refit in the Falklands, so it was left to Exeter, Ajax and Achilles to continue the hunt. The group was commanded by Commodore Henry Harwood on the Ajax. Following intelligence from a sinking off South Africa, Harwood considered the next move of Graf Spee would be to attack the merchant shipping off the River Plate, the most congested shipping route of the South Atlantic. On December 12th 1939, they were off the River Plate awaiting their prey. Commodore Harwood's combat policy was to attack at once with Exeter on one side of the Graf Spee, and Ajax and Achilles on the other, thus either splitting the enemy fire and reducing its effectiveness, or if it focussed on just one side the other could render serious damage without fear of return fire. He knew his group was outgunned by Graf Spee, but accepted the risk that it would suffer possible destruction from the engagement whilst it would be inflicting serious damage on the Graf Spee. The objective was not necessarily to sink the Graf Spee, but to at least render it unable to engage in commerce raiding or other combat whilst returning to Germany for repairs. Even were the group lost, a weakened Graf Spee would have to run the blockade of the British Home Fleet and would be unlikely to survive. The loss of one of their few capital ships would have been a serious blow to German naval resources, whereas the loss of three cruisers would not have seriously dented British capabilities. Such was the necessary strategic thinking of the Admiralty and its Commanders.

At 0610 on the morning of December 13th, smoke was sighted and Harwood's policy was about to be tested. At 0618 Graf Spee opened fire on Exeter with six 11 inch guns from a range of 19,000 yards (10.8 miles). At 0620, Exeter opened fire with her 8 inch guns on one side, followed by Achilles and Ajax firing their 6 inch guns on the other side. Lieutenant-Commander Richard Jennings, Exeter's Gunnery Officer, remembers that Captain Bell thought it was the sister ship Admiral Scheer rather than the Graf Spee, and throughout the battle the crew thought they were fighting the Scheer. For those who recall the clipped tones of John Gregson as Exeter's Captain Bell in the 1956 film *Battle of the River Plate*, the language in battle was understandably more salty. Rather than the usual order 'Enemy in sight, bearing etc' Jennings received Bell's hail 'There's the f\*\*\*ing Scheer! Open fire on her!'

Graf Spee's fire was accurate, her third salvo straddling Exeter. At 0623 an 11 inch shell burst abreast the ship, killing the Torpedo Tube's crew, damaging the ship's communications and wrecking the gunnery spotter plane as it was about to take off. At 0626 Exeter received a direct hit on its B Turret putting its two guns out of action. The ensuing shrapnel swept the bridge killing all the bridge personnel except Captain Bell and two others, as well as destroying Captain Bell's communications so the ship had to be steered via a chain of messengers for the rest of the battle. By 0638 Exeter was listing and severely damaged. She had just one gun turret in action with Jennings on the roof shouting instructions to those inside. Exeter had done her duty as one of her 8 inch shells had hit Graf Spee's unprotected mid-ships funnel area and destroyed her complex raw fuel processing system, leaving her with insufficient fuel to return home.

Captain Langsdorff could not undertake repairs to the fuel system whilst under fire, and the Graf Spee was no longer seaworthy and could only make the neutral port of Montevideo. He laid down smoke and changed course. At 0650 Exeter was still steaming at full speed and firing with her one remaining turret. At 0730 water splashed in from a near miss and short circuited the electrical system of that single turret. Fire from Ajax and Achilles caused Graf Spee to change course and break away from finishing off Exeter. Ajax was hit by an 11 inch shell, which caused some casualties and put out one gun turret whilst jamming another. Ajax received a further shell, destroying her mast and causing more casualties. Shortly thereafter, the battle turned into a pursuit, with the Graf Spee shadowed by Ajax and Achilles. The stricken Exeter managed to limp down to the Falklands for repair (*complete with the surviving ship's mascot Skeues, a ginger and white cat that stowed away when the ship called in at Bermuda*) before returning to Devonport for a major refit. Subsequently, she was sunk in the second battle of the Java sea in March 1942.

At 0010 on December 14th, the Graf Spee anchored in Montevideo, where she was effectively trapped. After exhausting all options, and believing overwhelming British forces were waiting outside the harbour, Langsdorff scuttled the vessel to avoid unnecessary loss of life, a decision that infuriated Adolf Hitler.

Chief Yeoman of Signals Tom Remick was on the bridge when that shrapnel swept across at 0626, and was one of 61 officers and ratings of HMS Exeter killed that morning, as well as four from Achilles and seven from Ajax. His name is on the third 1939 tablet of the RN War Memorial on Plymouth Hoe.

It is ironic that the vessel that killed his uncle Jonathan off South America in the First World War was commanded by Admiral Graf Spee, and that Tom was killed off South America in the Second World War by the ship bearing the German Admiral's name.

**Sources:**  
HMS Exeter: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS\\_Exeter\\_\(68\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Exeter_(68)) and [http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/\\_people/crewexeter.php](http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/_people/crewexeter.php)  
Battle of the River Plate: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_River\\_Plate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_River_Plate) and [http://orlopdeck.net/BRP/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_River\\_Plate\\_timeline.html](http://orlopdeck.net/BRP/Battle_of_the_River_Plate_timeline.html)  
Family Information: Courtesy of Janet Townsend, Jonathan Richards and Elizabeth Broughton.



Chief Yeoman of Signals Tom Remick c1938

In Memory of  
Chief Yeoman of Signals  
**Tom Remick**  
  
D/J 45240, H.M.S. Exeter, Royal Navy who died on 13 December 1939 Age 39  
  
Son of Thomas and Ethel Remick, of Port Isaac, Cornwall; husband of Anne Remick, of Port Isaac.  
  
Remembered with Honour  
**Plymouth Naval Memorial**

Commemorated in perpetuity by  
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission