

# Never a nobler act

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By Chris Lloyd



**RESPECTED: Rear-Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock of Hartforth**

**Rear-Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock – an honourable and experienced seaman, who led his crew into a battle he knew he wouldn't be able to win.**

“He lies beneath the ocean – no more fitting resting place for men of our race. His body is separated from us by half the world, and he and his gallant comrades lie far from the pleasant homes of England. “Yet they have their reward... “Theirs’ is an immortal place in the great roll of naval heroes whose work has built up the Empire and has secured the freedom of mankind...”

THESE were the words of the former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour on June 16, 1916, as he unveiled a large memorial in York Minster to Rear- Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock, who had died in Britain's first naval defeat for more than a century.

Sir Christopher lies, as Mr Balfour said, half a world away at the bottom of the Pacific, somewhere off the coast of Chile.

His defeat, on November 1, 1914, came as a shock to the British people. They thought that the fighting would be over by Christmas, but the death of the North Yorkshire sailor, and 1,600 of his men, suddenly made it clear to them that their country did not even rule the waves anymore.

Cradock had come up against a vastly superior enemy force.

He was, Mr Balfour said, “out-gunned and out-ranged” so badly that he knew “success was an impossibility”.

Against all the odds, “in the face of death, certain and imminent”, he mounted an attack against the enemy.

He lost two ships – his flagship, HMS Good Hope, and an armoured cruiser, HMS Monmouth – and hundreds of men.

In contrast, just five German sailors were wounded.

Yet Sir Christopher is a hero. He was born on July 2, 1862, at Hartforth Grange, near Gilling West, into one of the area’s most prominent families. It was a Cradock who had built Gainford Hall as a grand family seat in 1600; it was a later Cradock who had built Hartforth Hall as an even-more-grand family seat in 1720.

Christopher George Francis Maurice Cradock – simply known to friends as “Kit” – went to Richmond Grammar School, and so studied in that beautiful location beneath the castle overlooking the River Swale.

Perhaps it was the watery views that inspired his career choice: when he left in 1875, he joined the Royal Navy.

This was the era of undoubted British supremacy, and Cradock sailed the seven seas, defending the far-flung empire against all-comers. He served in Egypt, Sudan and China. He commanded the royal yacht Britannia for a couple of years and, as he was a keen huntsman, he was also master of the Britannia Beagles.



**Richmond School, overlooking the Swale, where Cradock was educated**

Rising through the ranks, he was mentioned in despatches, and he was knighted for, in December 1911, rescuing King George V's sister when she and her husband were shipwrecked off Morocco.

When the First World War broke out, Cradock was in command of the North American and West Indies Station, looking after British ships from Canada down to Cape Horn.

BUT a thousand or so miles away in China, his destiny was being shaped by the German East Asian Squadron.

It was led by Vice-Admiral Maximilian Reichsgraf von Spee who had a very similar CV to Cradock. A year older, he also had been born into a prominent family – his title was Graf von Spee, or Count – and had served in similar places.

When war broke out, von Spee realised he was practically doomed. The Germans had been run out of their colonial territories in the east, so he had nowhere to shelter, and he knew the chances of him sailing unscathed around the world back to Germany were very slim.

Yet he had five fast, modern, well-armed, well-crewed warships in his squadron. So he set about sailing about the Pacific, terrorising as much Allied shipping as he could before he was destroyed.



**Vice-Admiral Graf Maximilian von Spee**

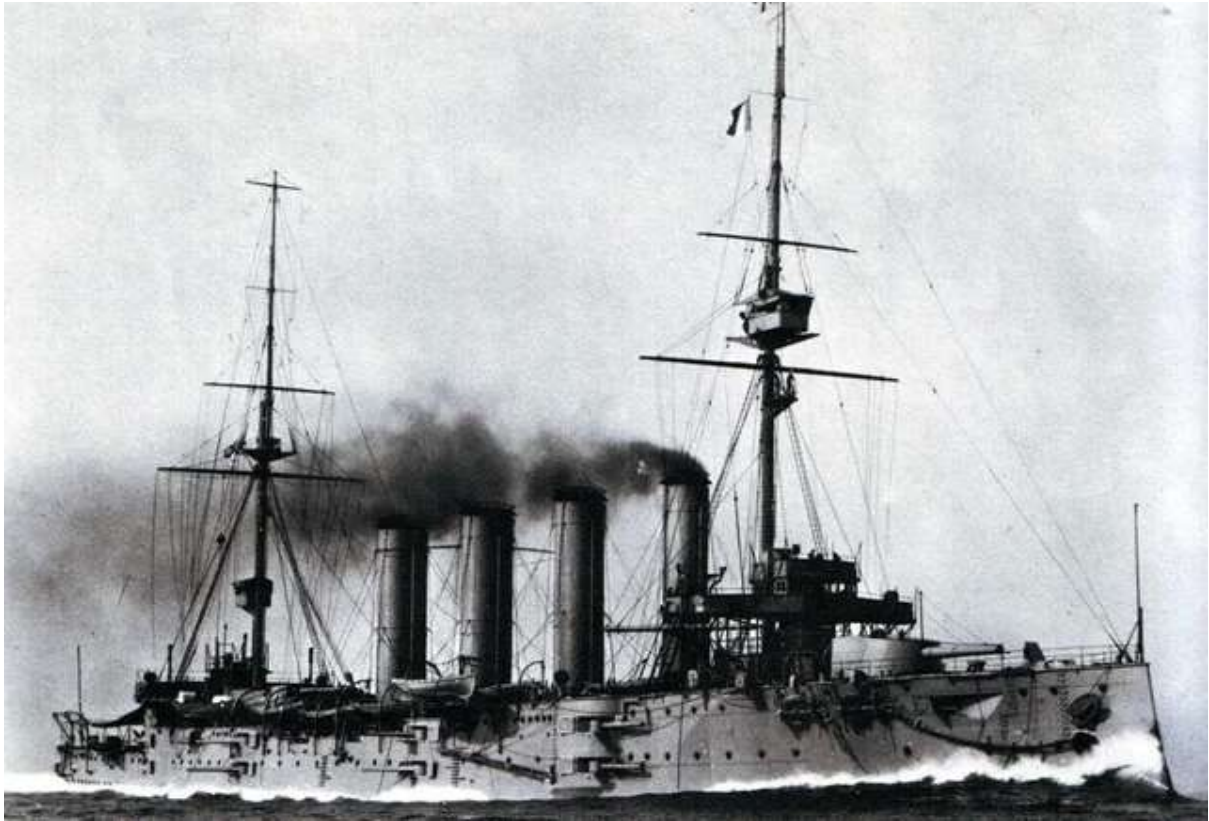
Cradock was ordered to keep an eye on him with his handful of ageing cruisers.

The Yorkshireman's squadron also included HMS Otranto, a converted slow-moving liner and a newly arrived reinforcement, a warship called HMS Canopus. Canopus was supposed to give Cradock firepower, but the ship had been reprieved from the scrapyard and had a top speed of only 14mph.

Because Canopus was slowing the squadron down, Cradock decided to leave it near the Falkland Islands while he rounded Cape Horn in search of the Germans.

His orders became confused.





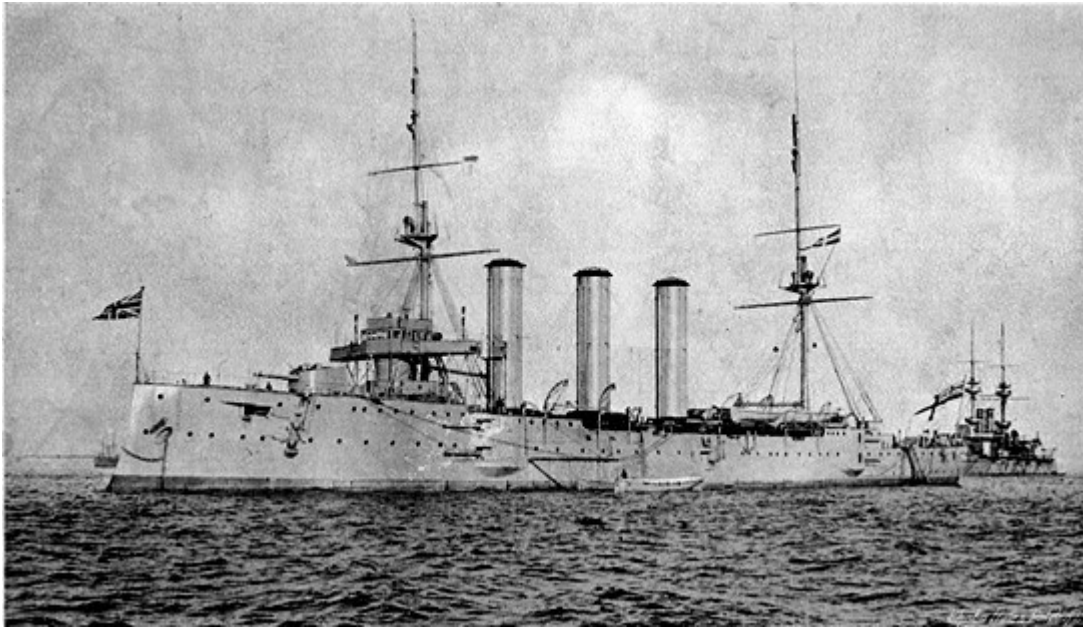
### **HMS Good Hope, Cradock's flagship**

In a brief message, Winston Churchill, the first sea lord, told him he had sufficient resources to do the job – without explaining what the job was.

Mindful that a fellow rear admiral had recently been court martialled for failing to engage a superior enemy force, Cradock thought he knew what job he should be doing – although it was only when the enemy's smoke was sighted on the horizon that he realised he was up against five warships.

And by then, it was too late to turn back.

So, at 4.20pm on November 1, 1914, off the coast of Chile, he sent Otranto, the converted liner, away because it was unfit for battle, and he advanced north with his three remaining vessels: Good Hope, Monmouth and HMS Glasgow.



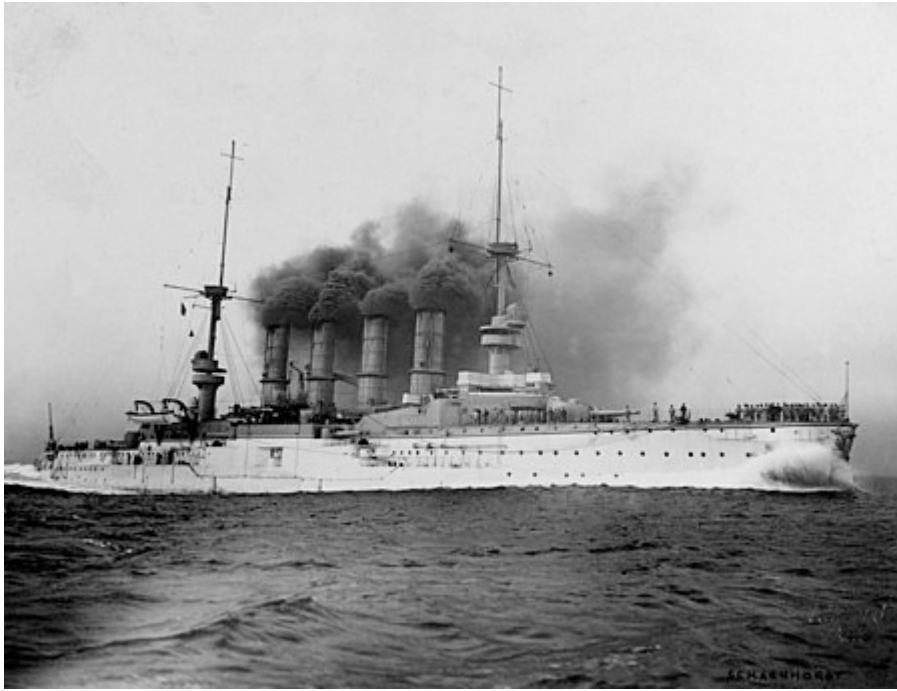
### **HMS Monmouth, in Cradock's squadron**

Von Spee sailed south with his five ships: Scharnhorst, his flagship, plus Gneisenau, Leipzig, Nürnberg and Dresden.

If this had been a game of Top Trumps, there was no category in which the British ships outtrumped the Germans: the faster Germans fired heavier shells over longer distances.

BUT it wasn't a game. It was real. And the only real chance the lightweight British squadron had of survival was with the wits of its commander. At first, Cradock's tactics were those of a small boxer taking on a large heavyweight: he dodged around, trying to keep away from the blows but trying to sneak close enough to land a punch of his own.

It didn't work – the sea was so rough that the lower British ships had trouble even firing their guns over the waves let alone hitting anything.



### **Scharnhorst, von Spee's flagship**

So at 5.10pm, Cradock played his final card: the setting sun. He spun round and launched an attack out of the west, the low sun at his back dazzling the enemy.

“It was,” says Cradock’s entry in the Dictionary of National Biography, “a desperate and bold manoeuvre.”

But von Spee was just as canny. He kept out of reach and bided his time until the sun slipped beneath the waves and turned the tables. The colour of the afterglow in the sky turned the British ships into highly visible black silhouettes while it made the Germans fade to invisible grey against the murky outline of the Chilean coast.

At the memorial service in York Minster, Balfour said: “He (Cradock) must have realised then that his hopes were dashed for ever to the ground, that his plan had failed.” The Yorkshireman was staring “in the face of death, certain and imminent”.



**Hartforth Hall, near Gilling West, is now a hotel \*. In its front-page obituary of Cradock, on November 15, 1914, The Northern Echo said his elder brother, Major W Cradock, was living in the hall**

\*At the time of publication of this article

Von Spee fired.

By 7.30pm, Monmouth was ablaze and had ceased launching shells. Good Hope was also alight but continued to fire until 7.50pm when it fell silent, exploded and sank. Cradock went down with his flagship – and with his loyal dog which sailed everywhere with him.

Scharnhorst had hit Good Hope 35 times. In reply, Good Hope had hit Scharnhorst just twice – and neither shell had gone off.

As Glasgow made its escape, Nürnberg completed the rout.

It approached the burning, drifting Monmouth and shined its searchlight at the stricken vessel's ensign – a request to surrender.

Monmouth declined. Nürnberg opened fire and sank it.

This was Britain's first naval defeat since 1812, but it did not, though, take long for Cradock to be avenged. Von Spee sailed round Cape Horn towards the Falklands,



and the British sent a taskforce, led by HMS Invincible and HMS Inflexible, to find him.

On December 8, they engaged him off Port Stanley, and sank four of his five warships (only Dresden escaped).

Von Spee and his two sons perished, along with 1,819 of hismen – 215 were saved from the sea.

But ever since, historians have debated why Cradock, a hugely experienced and sensible commander, should have engaged in a battle off Coronel he knew he couldn't win.

Their conclusion is usually that Churchill's ambiguous orders had left him with no honourable choice.

There is a stained-glass window in Cradock's memory in his local church, St Agatha's, at Gilling West, and, of course, there is the memorial in the Minster.

When Balfour, who had replaced Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, unveiled it he was in no doubt of Cradock's heroism. He spoke of his courageous unselfishness, of how he had put his country before himself.

Balfour concluded: "There never was a nobler act."