

APPENDIX No. 14.

THE GERMAN CRUISER SQUADRON AT PAPEETE.

The following is a summary of a narrative by Claude Farrère and Paul Chack (*Combats et Batailles sur Mer*), based on numerous official and private documents of the time:—

When on the 21st of September von Spee anchored off Bora-Bora, he flew no flag and gave orders that only officers speaking French or English should receive visitors. Soon afterwards two Europeans, the "brigadier de gendarmerie" in charge of the island and a local settler, came off to interview the new arrivals. On the deck they found two officers volubly arguing in English, one of whom asked in French: "What news of the war?" "None, captain," said the brigadier; "We heard from a visiting English vessel that you had declared war on Germany, but I don't know if France has joined in or not." "Oh, France is in it," said the pseudo-Englishman; "Indeed, I fear that the enemy squadron may have already captured Papeete, where we hope to coal. Can you tell us anything?" On that, of course, the brigadier launched out into a full description of the defencelessness of Papeete; the gunboat *Zélée*, he said, was moored in the harbour, but her guns were ashore and were the only artillery the French had there—as for a garrison, there were 25 colonial infantry and 20 *gendarmes*. But the stock of coal was large, the settler informed them, since, in addition to the 5,000 tons always kept in stock, 3,000 had just been taken from a captured German collier. Still under the impression that they were entertaining English cruisers, the Bora-Borans provisioned the ships to the best of their ability, and it was not until he left port that von Spee acknowledged the brigadier's farewell salute by hoisting German colours.

Meanwhile at Papeete, Lieutenant Destremau, the commander of the *Zélée*, had long since taken what precautions he could. Left by his government in ignorance of all military or naval details, he feared an attack from the *Geier* or the *Cormoran*, which he supposed to be at Apia. He landed most of the *Zélée's* guns (four 2½-inch, one 4-inch) and placed them in battery on a hill about 300 feet above the town; he collected all the French reservists in the group and raised a volunteer corps of Tahitians; with the *Zélée* and her one remaining 4-inch gun he went off to Makatea and captured the German vessel *Walküre*, which was loading phosphates there. (This was the "collier" the settler had spoken of.) He then mined the beacons that guide vessels through the reef (the Governor would not let him blow them up), dug trenches across the roads east and west, and established observation-posts round the island and another, with a beacon, on Moorea northwards.

At dawn on the 22nd of September the Moorea beacon-fires were sighted above a heavy fog, which lifted at 6.30 a.m. and disclosed the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* about nine miles off shore. Destremau immediately ordered his subordinates to blow up the guiding beacons, fire the stock of coal, get up steam aboard the *Zélée*, and sink her in the passage through the reef either before or after the enemy

ships had traversed it. As soon as the cruisers were within a mile of the reef, the battery fired three warning salvoes, and von Spee broke the German flag. His launches, with steam up, could be discerned at the catheads; but, instead of at once attempting the passage, he steered along the outside of the reef, meanwhile signalling vehemently to his squadron. The salvoes from the unsuspected battery made him cautious, and for more than an hour he patrolled the reef in the hope of discovering its emplacement when he should reopen fire¹. Destremau knew too much to do that until his enemy was actually inside the reef. About 7.45 a.m. the cruisers opened a searching fire on the hills without success, and about 8 o'clock seemed to be making for the entrance: Destremau therefore ordered that the *Zélée* (which always took three hours to get up steam, and was consequently immovable) should be sunk at her moorings. But von Spee had come to the conclusion that Papeete was not worth the risk of losing his men; the battery's strength and situation were still undiscovered, the French flag still defied him both from the mast of the sinking *Zélée* and from the tallest building in the town, and the coal (which after all was the one thing he needed) was burning merrily. He decided to let well alone; but before leaving, to impress the natives, maybe, he proceeded to put forty-nine shells into the place, two of which helped to sink the *Zélée*.

¹The German official narrative states that a rain storm lying over the land prevented the squadron from immediately observing the position of this battery. Its fire prevented him from attempting a peaceful entry.