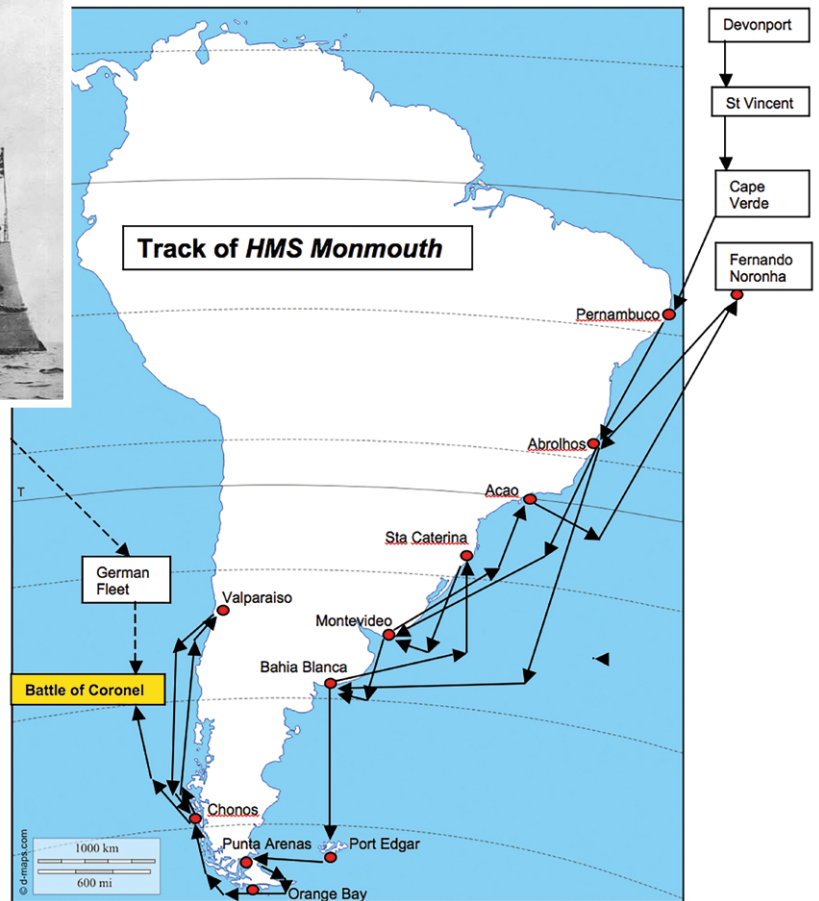


## A letter from HMS Monmouth

Naval officer Bernard Child joined the CA in 1913, aged 27. He went to sea on *HMS Monmouth* three days before the start of the First World War and died in the Battle of Coronel only three months later. **Ted Osborn** has tracked down his last letter and recounts the history of his tour of duty in South America



In June 2014 we reported in *Cruising* how the CA went to war a hundred years earlier, and of the yachting scene at the time. We included brief details of the members who had lost their lives, something of the boats they cruised and made an appeal for refurbishment of the Memorial Plaque to them. The work on the Memorial is now complete and it is hanging in the Information Centre. I am told it should now last for at least another 100 years.

In December of 2014 we gave as much information as we could find about the men who were killed and something of what happened to their boats. More information has come in since and we can now tell in detail the story of one of those men: Bernard Child. He was only 28 when he died. He had joined the CA only the year before but was a sailor all his short life and was lost in a dreadful sea battle which also killed 1,600 other sailors.

Bernard came from Herne Bay in Kent. As a young lad he was educated locally but at the age of 13 was sent to the Junior Naval College at Osborne House in the Isle of Wight where he found his love for the sea. At 17, in 1903, he went to the Dartmouth Naval College to study marine engineering. Clearly a bright young man, he was commissioned aged 19 and taken on to the teaching staff. He went back to

Osborne in 1912 to be in charge of *HMS Racer*, the college pinnace, but retained his teaching post at Dartmouth.

When war became likely he was told he would be appointed to *HMS Monmouth*, a 10,000-ton armoured cruiser, as an Engineer Lieutenant. He continued teaching until suddenly, at one hour's notice, on August 1, three days before hostilities broke out, he was ordered to report to the vessel then at Devonport. Some days were spent munitioning, provisioning and coaling then, two days after war began, the vessel put to sea. Once offshore, the crew were told that they were to follow the trade routes to South America looking for German commerce raiders. Bernard would sail nearly 20,000 miles without setting foot on land.

In their search they crossed the Atlantic three times before spending many weeks patrolling the whole coast of South America (see chartlet). As with most ships of the era, engines were fuelled by coal and only had a range of about 3,000 miles. Every opportunity had to be taken to refill with coal. This was done by meeting up with collier vessels in remote islands and anchorages, never alongside, since it was a thoroughly dirty and messy job. Food ran short several times.

During this time they found many merchantmen each of whom had to be stopped and searched, but did not come across any German vessels. The German merchantmen were in neutral countries, afraid to put to sea in case they met a British warship, and the German warships proved few and elusive. British warships patrolled slowly in a given area and quickly responded to any intelligence received by radio. The Germans could not read the British signals but the British could read the German – they had a copy of the German codebook. But this did not help if the Germans kept radio silence.

Eventually, while they were anchored in one of the bays off Cape Horn, they picked up signals purporting to come from the German heavily armed cruiser *Leipzig* that it was leaving Valparaiso and sailing south. The *Monmouth*, *Glasgow*, and *Otranto*, with *Good Hope* acting as flagship under Admiral Cradock, made rendezvous at Chonos and prepared to meet *Leipzig*. The Germans were sailing south because they had had a message indicating that the *Glasgow* was in the area and they set out to look for it with the *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, and *Dresden* as well as the *Leipzig*. Both battle groups thought they were looking for a single enemy warship and both were in for a surprise.

H.M.S. Monmouth  
South America Station

15th September 1914

Dear Shaw

Tomorrow being the day on which you should return to Osborne, it occurred to me to write to you to say that I am afraid I shall be unable to return to carry on your Engineering Instruction. Also I thought perhaps it might interest you and the Greynvile term to hear what we have been doing.

Mr Wansbrough and myself, as you perhaps remember, had an appointment to this ship before you went on leave. Three hours after you left we were ordered to join at once at Devonport, and we left less than hour afterwards catching the 1.30 boat to Southampton.

We arrived on board at about 9 pm. The next 5 days were spent in amunitioning, provisioning, docking and coaling the ship and we sailed for an unknown part of the world on Thursday August 6th. When we got to sea we were told we were to follow the trade routes and join the *Glasgow* on the South American station.

We called first at St Vincent, C. Verd Isles to coal and then proceeded to Pernambuco. At St Vincent we saw the *Carnarvon* and transferred 9 cadets of the Dartmouth Hawke term to that ship.

We have 9 Dartmouth Drakes and 1 Hawke term (Dartmouth). The latter has today been rated midshipman and the Drakes have been promised it as soon as they show that they are any use.

After calling at Pernambuco which was full of German merchant ships afraid to come out, as was also St Vincent, we patrolled the coast to a rock called Abrolhos where we coaled from a collier. We found a German store ship there which had been captured by the *Glasgow*. Since then we have met the *Glasgow* and the *Good Hope* and the *Cornwall* is on her way down from the West Indies.

We have been south to Montevideo, where we coaled, up north again to search in Acao, Fernando Noronha and other small rocks and islands which the Germans might have been using as a base, then to Abrolhos again to coal and then we were ordered south to search Bahia Blanca.

Just as we had reduced speed to 8 knots one night so as not to get in to Bahia Blanca before daylight we heard by wireless that the German cruiser *Dresden* had been seen at a place called Santa Catherina so we went north again at 19 knots to search for them, but drew another blank.

We are now approaching Monte Video again and shall anchor in the broad mouth of the river to coal. We are not allowed to go within 5 miles of neutral territory if we wish to call there again in less than 3 months so you can imagine Mr Wansbrough and myself have not been ashore.

We have had practically no news, only the bare facts about the British Army doing so well and about the Germans suffering enormous losses. We also heard about the light cruiser squadron fight in the North Sea. We got a few local English newspapers 10 days ago at Monte Video but those are the only ones we have seen since August 6th. We also got a few provisions there, which was a good thing as we had been living on corned beef and salt pork for some time and have

H.M.S. MONMOUTH.  
*South America* ~~CHINA STATION~~  
15<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Dear Shaw,

Tomorrow being the day on which you should return to Osborne, it occurred to me to write to you to say that I am afraid I shall be unable to return to carry on your Engineering Instruction. Also I thought perhaps it might interest you and the Greynvile term to hear what we have been doing. Doubtless you have been reading the papers carefully, and have followed the movements of the Allies troops

nearly got back to that stage again. We ran short of all luxuries such as potatoes, butter, matches, fruit, beer, etc.

So far we have not been lucky enough to meet any of the 5 German cruisers which are supposed to be here somewhere, but if you study the map and work out the distances you will see that it is rather like looking for needle in a haystack. Up to now we have steamed about 11,000 miles stopping every ship we see by firing a gun at her. They are nearly always British ships as the Germans are frightened to sail. The only German one we met was just outside St Vincent and she had started before the war began so we couldn't do anything to her.

After coaling again at Monte Video we may go, south again, to Bahia Blanca, Port Edgar in the Falkland Isles and Punta Arenas in the Magellan Strait. The *Good Hope* has broken down and can only steam 10 knots. The *Glasgow* is with us, and also an armed merchant ship called the *Otranto*, one of the Orient line. She has 6 or 8 4.7 inch guns, I forget which. We steam at night with all lights out always. We usually steam at about 13 knots and on sighting a ship increase to 15 knots until we catch her. One night we had a little excitement as we chased a ship showing no lights which tried to escape. We had to go 17 knots to catch her. She turned out to be a British ship called the *Vestris*. They of course had thought we were a German cruiser. The passengers appeared very excited when we turned our searchlight on them: it was about 3 a.m.

Show this letter to the rest of the Greynvile term if you think it will interest them. I hope you will get on well and whatever you do mind you beat the Exmouths at Rugger and Soccer. I have not heard from Mr Welby nor have I heard what ship he went to.

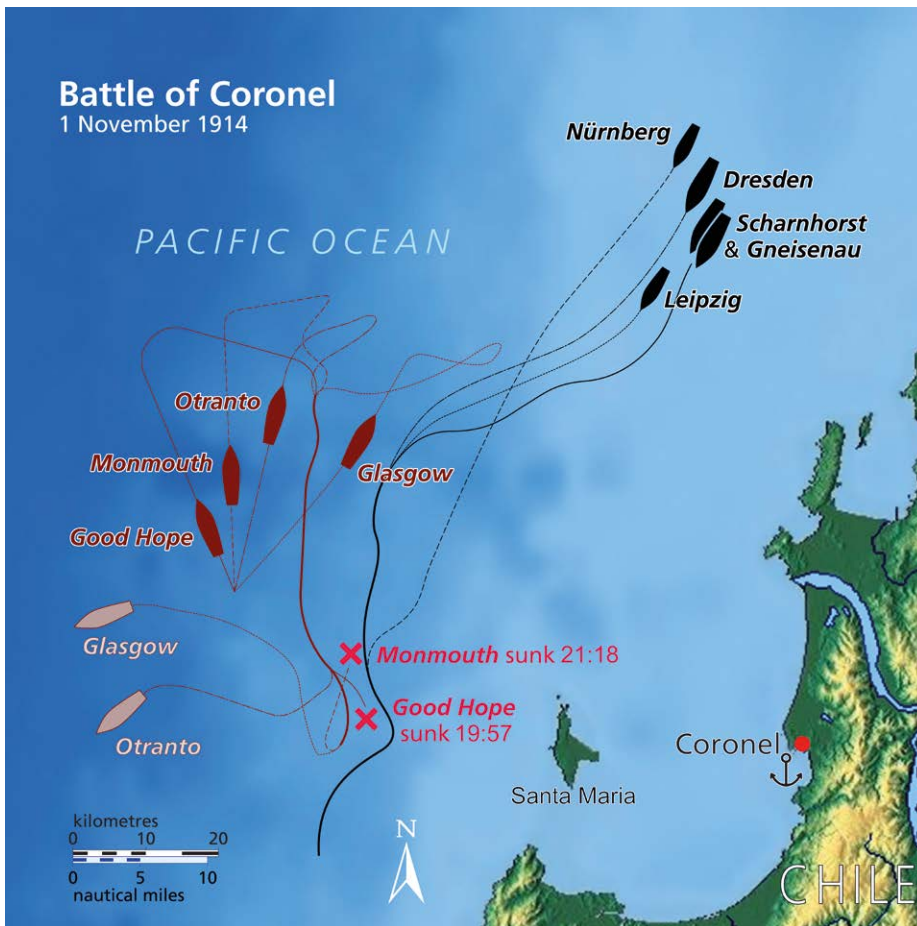
I remain

Yours sincerely

B Child

[Copy-typed from photocopy of original now with current *HMS Monmouth*]





At 0915 on November 1 the British fleet left Chonos and formed up in line ahead in stormy seas some 40 miles west of Coronel. At 1350 they spread out 15 miles apart at 10kt to widen the search. At 1617 the *Leipzig* spotted the *Glasgow* and went on to full speed at 20kt towards her. The expected pattern was reached – one ship versus another.

At 1620 the picture changed: the British first saw smoke on the horizon which soon turned into three German warships; the German fleet saw the British and continued in battle order. The British turned south to keep up-sun. Both fleets were now running parallel, closing and committed to battle.

At 2158 it was all over. The German guns were bigger with longer range; their crews were better trained and their accuracy much better; their ships were faster, more manoeuvrable and of better design. Two major British ships and 1,570 sailors were lost versus no German ships and only five German sailors injured. Five German ships had trounced four British ships in the first defeat of the Royal Navy since Napoleonic times. It became known as the Battle of Coronel.

We don't know whether Bernard Child was killed in the action or drowned when his ship finally rolled over and sank with its ensign still flying. His job on board was to

undertake damage control: an impossible task in the circumstances.

The log-books of all the surviving ships are available. They differ in minor detail since they were written in the course of battle but a good summary is available on the Coronel Memorial Archive at [www.coronel.org.uk/plymouth2coronel.php](http://www.coronel.org.uk/plymouth2coronel.php)

The log-book of *HMS Monmouth* went down with the ship of course but we have two records of her travels which enable us to construct the chartlet on p28. The letter from Bernard Child takes the story as far as Montevideo, and the other source is a series of letters and postcards written by Royal Marine William Hart, 19, going further on round Cape Horn and up the west coast of South America. We have them only because the *Monmouth* had met a mail ship just two days before the final fatal battle. The letters from Marine William Hart are now with his family.

The Bernard Child letter, presented recently to the captain of the present *HMS Monmouth*, was sent to Cadet Robert Shaw, one of Child's students at Dartmouth. Shaw became the father of Penny who married Kit Power, one of the CA's longest serving members. We are grateful for permission to use both sources.

Marine Hart, whose spelling was unusual, gives a good picture of life on board immediately before the battle:

“The scenery in the Magellan straits bottom of America was beautiful the numerous islands and snow capped mountains. We crossed over to the Falkland Islands very cold there our butcher and a few others went ashore and killed fifty two wild sheep so we have had plenty of mutton. Officers went ashore and shot wild duck and pheasants so we have been living in stile. We are on our way now to Valparaiso about half way up the Pacific side of South America. *HMS Glasgow* is with us and the Armed liner *Otranto* is following us up behind. A provision ship is expected to meet us at Valparaiso so we shall be all right. I am living well at present. Having porridge, dripping and perhaps corned beef for breakfast roast meat, beans (Harrogate) and pudding for dinner. Jam for tea and corned beef again for supper. I hope you are all getting along alright send me a *Lloyds News* if you don't mind. We are not getting much news about the war out here just the bare wireless. We anchor on an average once a week in some unhabited part of the coast and coal from our collier etc. There is some most wonderful bits of scenery though. We expect to meet some more of our own ships shortly. There are some German warships round here some where but we can't find them they are hiding from us. I expect we shall meet them sooner or later. We are getting very disheartened because we can't find them, but we are bound to meet them sooner or later.”

Revenge, if that is the right word, was achieved only six weeks later. After the battle the German fleet, led by Admiral Graf von Spee, rounded Cape Horn and approached the Falkland Islands determined to land and destroy any military installations. The main British South Atlantic fleet was waiting and the Battle of the Falklands Islands ensued. The Germans had used up most of their heavy ammunition at Coronel and were completely routed, losing all ships except one. Their loss of life has never been published but was certainly greater than that suffered by the British earlier.

Many thousands of young men on both sides did not live to see even the first Christmas of the war.

