

COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE: THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

THE White ensign

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H.M.S. ACHILLES



FORTITER IN RE

Christmas Greetings

W. Nicol

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GUEST EDITORIAL

I am extremely pleased to be writing this guest editorial for The White Ensign. Seventy years ago I couldn't have known that I would survive the Battle of the River Plate, or the whole war, and be able to write of it in my 94th year. My recollections of the Battle of the River Plate are still vivid.

We had been going to Action Stations every morning, before we sighted the GRAF SPEE. This was fortunate as when we saw the GRAF SPEE's smoke at 6.14am we moved into Action Stations immediately. There were 321 New Zealanders on board and we heard a loud "Make way for the Digger Ensign" and the NZ Blue Ensign was raised. It was a proud moment for us all.

At 6.20 EXETER opened fire on the GRAF SPEE. At 6.21 ACHILLES did also and the flagship AJAX opened fire at 6.23. In the 80 minutes of action from 6.20 until we stopped at 7.40, ACHILLES fired 220 broadsides. By then our 6 inch (152mm) guns were so hot and had expanded so much that they were too tight to fit into the gun cradle. This led to modifications of the guns in every subsequent ship.

The 4 inch (102mm) guns were not used as they had no range or penetrating power. I was on the highest point of the ship in the 4 inch Control Tower when a shell burst close by and a cluster of fragments hit the 6 inch Director Tower. The Director Tower was open at the top and the shot landed four feet below me.

Three were killed and six injured. These are memories you don't

forget. Our Captain, Bill Parry, was also injured when that shell exploded—he was a man among men.

There are no atheists on board a ship in action. When the battle was over I looked up and crossed myself. "Deos gracias" were the first words I said. We had breakfasted that morning on a billy of tea and white bread and butter. Lunch, post-battle, was grander—bacon and kidneys.

Dick Washbourn walked around after the fray taking photographs of the ship. LT Washbourn was "Guns" to us, but not to his face. Well respected, he could take over any gunnery position. (He was also a great man for taking the whaler out sailing and there were always too many volunteers for places available to sail with him.) We were honoured to have both him and Captain Parry among our officers.

The majority of the crew rested after the battle. Then we had the waiting game as to whether the GRAF SPEE would come out and fight again. We didn't see the initial scuttling of the GRAF SPEE, but we did see the explosions going up like a fire-works display. AJAX launched a plane to get a look at the action and the Americans were reporting on it from the highest building in Montevideo. Later, we learned of Captain Langsdorff's death. He was reputed to have said "Better 1000 live seamen than 1000 dead heroes."

Before the Battle of the River Plate we had met interned German merchant sailors at Valparaiso, Chile, and shared a drink or two. One

of them remarked "Isn't it a pity that our countries are at war".

Some time after the battle ACHILLES visited Buenos Aires, across the Plate estuary in Argentina. Going ashore, we heard some great music playing, we followed the sound and walked into the club it was coming from. It was the German Social Club! Stoker Bill Cahoe and others shook hands with their German counterparts. We were made welcome. Later three German sailors came down to the wharf where the ACHILLES was alongside. As we took down our flag the three Germans saluted it with us.

After the Battle we had Christmas at the Falkland Islands. Early in 1940 we came home to a heroes' welcome.

Today there are only 12 of us left from those who were in ACHILLES for the battle. At the funerals of those who have "crossed the bar" I have tried to honour each one. We have a tradition—the New Zealand Blue Ensign is laid over the coffin and the ACHILLES life ring is placed in front. The Last Post is played and I recite the Ode to the Fallen.

LEST WE FORGET.

VINCE M'GLONE

*(former Able Seaman, NZD 1130)
Battle of the River Plate Veterans Association*

FRONT COVER:
The front cover is taken from a postcard designed by cartoonist "Inky" M'Nicol, a member of the ship's company at the River Plate 1939. FORTITER IN RE - ACHILLES MOTO (Firmness in Action).

BACK COVER:
WW2 Navy Week Loans Poster.

BACKGROUND IMAGE:
Lapel badge given to ship's company. c1936

HMS ACHILLES in 1939

THE PRELUDE TO BATTLE

In August 1939, before war was declared, HMS ACHILLES deployed to South America. Peter Corbett explains what our cruiser was doing in those long weeks before the Battle of the River Plate.

On 23rd August 1939 the British Admiralty declared an 'emergency situation'. The 'Preparatory Telegram' was sent informing British and Dominion ships and naval commands world-wide that war was imminent. In Auckland, HMS ACHILLES was docked, cleaned, had her underwater hull painted and then loaded full war stores at Devonport, Auckland.¹ On the 28th

August the ACHILLES was war-ready and she sailed the next morning to her war station. Britain's ultimatum to Germany expired on 3rd September at 11.00 am, and the Admiralty telegram, 'Commence hostilities against Germany' was sent. Shortly afterwards in New Zealand the Prime Minister's Department confirmed the decision to the New Zealand Naval Board.² The Division was at war. ►

¹ This meant three months' supplies and filling the magazines to full capacity. Normally, only one month's supplies would be carried, and the magazines would be half filled.

² S.D. Waters, The Royal New Zealand Navy: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, Wellington: War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs, 1956, p.18.



ABOVE: Gale the ship's mascot. 1939



ABOVE: HMS ACHILLES Rum issue.



ABOVE: On deck after the battle Master of Arms Frederick Loader auctions off the kit belonging to the dead crew members. Proceeds went to sailor's family.

BLOCKADE AND ESCORT DUTIES

At sea when war broke out, ACHILLES was ordered to divert to Valparaiso, Chile, arriving there to refuel on 12th September. The strategy of blockade was as old as naval warfare, so when war was declared against Germany, the Admiralty instituted a blockade world-wide. ACHILLES thus bore the brunt of blockade duties on South America's west coast. In Valparaiso she received new orders to patrol the Pacific Coast of South America in search of German shipping.

During her brief stay in the port, as a combatant in a neutral country, she could only stay for one day. None-the-less formal courtesies were exchanged: "ACHILLES...saluted the Chilean flag with 21 guns, and the Admiral's flag flying from Chile's battleship ADMIRAL LATORRE with 13 guns. Both salutes were returned."³

Two German merchant ships were in the port at the time but they could not be seized by the Royal Navy as they were in neutral territory. Captain Parry, after conferring with the British Naval Attaché in Valparaiso, summarized his view on the ship's mission: "Various German merchant ships then sheltering in ports on the west coast of South America were capable of being armed and were therefore a potential threat to our trade. The more active at the moment were those in Peruvian waters, which were endeavouring to obtain supplies of fuel-oil. The Naval Attaché considered that the presence of HMNZS [sic]⁴ ACHILLES would be reported at once along the coast and might induce these ships to intern themselves."⁵

Over a six-week period she searched the area, calling at sixteen ports and anchorages, the most northerly Buenaventura in Colombia, to the most southerly Puerto Montt in Chile. During this time a number of German ships were encountered, all within neutral waters, and thus could not be seized. The sight of the cruiser along the South American Pacific coast, however, had the desired effect, as only a few German ships put to sea and a large number interned themselves for the duration of the war.

³ Admiralty, Naval Staff Narrative; Operations of HMS Achilles, August 1939 – February 1940, London: HMSO c1946/1947, p. 3.
⁴ Captain Parry's Report of Proceedings was written in January/February 1940, the Naval Staff Narrative not until 1946 or 1947. The ship's prefix was HMS not HMNZS in December 1939.
⁵ Admiralty, Naval Staff Narrative; Operations of HMS Achilles, August 1939 – February 1940, London: HMSO, n.d., p. 4. Quote from HMS Achilles Report of Proceedings.



ABOVE: Base of wooden tray purchased in Rio de Janeiro by Able Seaman T.E. Alely while serving in HMS ACHILLES in 1939. The scene is made out of snake skin, butterfly wings under glass.

The South American navies were impressed with both the conduct of the cruiser and her Captain: "Captain Parry later heard from the Naval Attaché in Valparaiso that the . . . authorities were impressed with Achilles' strict observance of their neutrality laws in sailing within 24 hours after . . . a busy day in harbour."⁶

During the time off the west coast of South America, ACHILLES also escorted several British-flagged merchant ships. The Naval Staff Narrative summarised this period:

"Yet the mere presence of the ACHILLES in South American waters was sufficient to keep German trade at a standstill and virtually to immobilise some 17 enemy merchant ships totalling 84,000 tons in neutral ports from the Panama Canal to the Strait of Magellan, along a coastline of 5,000 miles."⁷

ACHILLES then sailed around the Horn for the Falkland Islands, arriving there on 22nd October. Arriving at Port Stanley no time was wasted in refuelling and re-provisioning the ship. However, "opportunity was taken to give as much shore leave as possible". Efforts were made to accommodate the crew: "the 22nd

being a Sunday, special arrangements were made to open the public houses, but local opinion would not tolerate a cinema performance".⁸

FORCE G

ACHILLES sailed the next day for the Rio Del Plata area, to rendezvous with ships of the South Atlantic Division, under the command of Commodore Henry Harwood RN. His force when at sea was also known as Force G (one of several task forces formed to hunt for enemy raiders). This division initially comprised two cruisers HMS AJAX (8 x 6-inch guns) a sister ship to ACHILLES, and EXETER (6 x 8-inch guns). The two cruisers had been operating in the area since the war's outbreak. EXETER left the division for a short time to escort British shipping, while AJAX intercepted and sank two German merchant ships.⁹ Shortly afterwards Force G was further reinforced by the heavy cruiser CUMBERLAND (8 x 8-inch guns) and two destroyers, HAVOCK and HOTSPUR. For over a month this formation patrolled the area

⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹ Normal practice was to put a prize crew on the ships and then sail them to a British port, but AJAX was unable to spare the men, so the ships were sunk and their crews taken aboard the cruiser.

concentrating between Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and River Plate. Their dual role was to protect British shipping in the area as well as intercepting German merchant ships and searching for enemy warships.

One major problem facing Commodore Harwood was the supply of stores and fuel, considering the vast sea area he had to cover. The Naval Staff Narrative notes:

"They were operating off the neutral coasts of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, which fringed the Atlantic for 3,000 miles. His nearest British base, the Falkland Islands, was 1,000 miles to the southward of the River Plate and the selection of suitable anchorages for refuelling was a difficult matter."

¹⁰ He was further restricted in that the only two British Fleet Auxiliary tankers in the area—OLWYN and OLYNTHUS—were 'station tankers'¹¹, to refuel, the cruisers had to raft alongside the tanker in a sheltered anchorage. At that stage of the war the Royal Navy had not developed

¹⁰ Admiralty, Naval Staff Narrative; Operations of HMS Achilles, August 1939 – February 1940, London: HMSO, n.d., p. 22. Remember, though Harwood could refuel in neutral territory, as a belligerent his stay was limited to a maximum of 24-hours, and even then he was restricted to only enough fuel to reach the nearest port of a neighbouring state.
¹¹ Station Tankers: Tankers assigned to the South Atlantic Station. Re-fuelling had to be done in a safe harbour.

the equipment to refuel underway at sea.

NINE SHIPS SUNK

With the outbreak of war two German ‘pocket battleships’ (panzerschiff)¹² had begun to operate against British merchant shipping. One of these, the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE had the South Atlantic as her intended operating area. She had sailed on 21st August from Wilhelmshaven, reaching the South Atlantic (via the North Sea, Greenland Sea and North Atlantic) on 26th September. During this time her orders were not to attack any shipping but to conceal herself and she commenced

¹² These were the so-called ‘pocket battleships’ in the British press. This was never an official designation; the Germans themselves referred to them as Panzerschiff – literally in English, armoured ship – which was the exact description of the replacement ships allowed Germany as printed in the German language copy of the Versailles Treaty of 1919. Incidentally, the Germans’ re-rated the two survivors, ADMIRAL SCHEER and DEUTSCHLAND renamed LÜTZOW, as heavy cruiser in 1940.

her attacks upon arrival. Between sinking her first victim on 30th September and her last on 7th December, she accounted for nine ships. Operating far and wide in the South Atlantic, GRAF SPEE even ventured for a short period into the Indian Ocean.

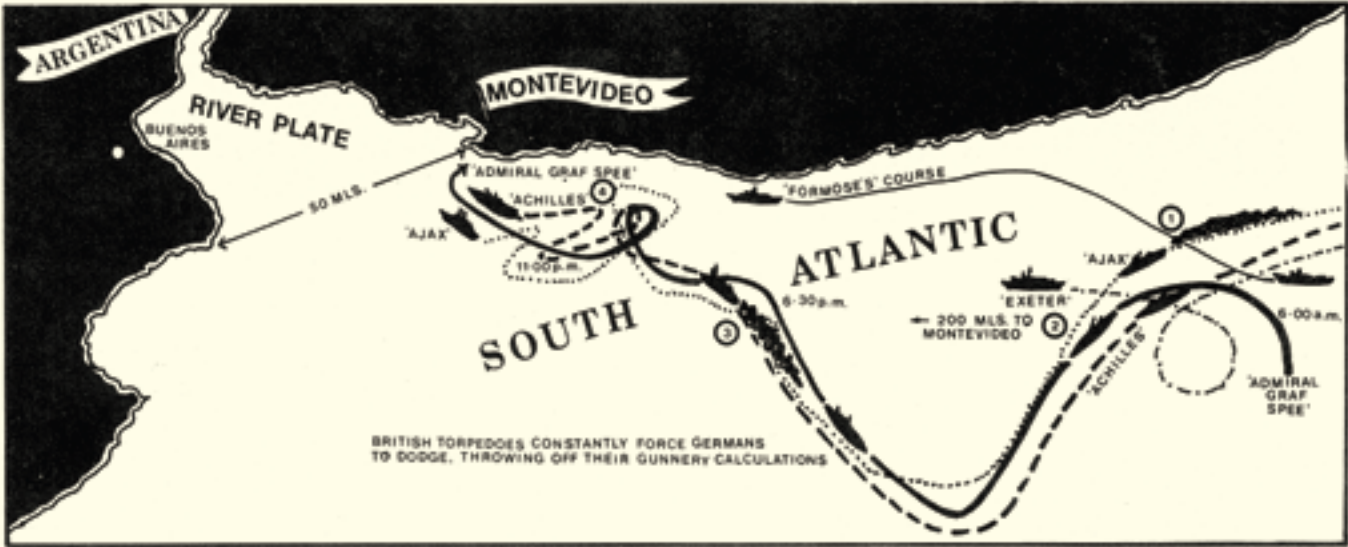
On 2nd October, the Admiralty in London informed Harwood that his force would be reinforced by ACHILLES. In the meantime Harwood had shifted his flag to AJAX, and in company with the destroyers, provided escorts for British shipping in the area, while the two 8-inch cruisers were detached, serving as an independent hunting group. On 20th October, the destroyers were ordered away to the West Indies and Harwood then awaited ACHILLES’ arrival in the area.

ACHILLES sighted EXETER, again Harwood’s flagship, early on the morning of 26th October off the River Plate. They joined up with CUMBERLAND on the 27th, and that day, Harwood again transferred his flag to AJAX, while EXETER left for the Falkland Islands to undertake minor repairs. The three cruisers operated together, but Harwood ordered CUMBERLAND into Buenos Aires to refuel, leaving just the two 6-inch ships at sea. EXETER had sailed from the Falklands on the 4th and rejoining the force, when Harwood again split his force up, with the two 8-inch armed ships operating together.

AJAX and ACHILLES operated independently, the former patrolling the River Plate area, and the latter further along the Atlantic coast. From the 7th to the 16th, ACHILLES operated independently in a similar way to her original deployment off the Pacific coast—a combination of port visits while searching for German ships. Achilles entered Rio de Janeiro on the 10th, saluting the Brazilian flag flying from Fort Villegagon.

CAPTAIN PARRY

Captain Parry made a number of official calls including: the British Ambassador,



ABOVE: A track chart showing the phases of Action, c1970.

¹³the British Consul, the Brazilian Minister of Marine, Chief of Naval Staff, and Senior Naval Officer Afloat and Parry and his ship’s officers had cocktails with the ambassador that night. Despite being at war the requirements of defence diplomacy still had to be met. Leave was granted and as Captain Parry noted in a press release it was a ‘most popular city and there were no leave breakers’¹⁴.

Leaving on the 12th, the Brazilian admiral’s flag, flying from the battleship SAO PAULO, was saluted with fifteen guns. ACHILLES proceeded to patrol the shipping lanes off the coast until the 22nd when she met up with AJAX off the River Plate, sailing separately later that day to San Borombon Bay to refuel and take in three months of provisions from OLYNTHUS, with ACHILLES sailing

¹³ Rio de Janeiro at this time was the national capital.
¹⁴ Admiralty, Naval Staff Narrative; Operations of HMS Achilles, August 1939 – February 1940, London: HMSO n.d., p. 56. ‘We paid a very pleasant 48-hour visit . . . we did our Christmas shopping; we danced and lost money in the casinos; and we played golf in ideal surroundings.’ Leave breakers were those sailors who were late back to the ship.

late that night, under orders to show herself off Brazilian ports.

This she did, sometimes too close for Brazilian comfort. While approaching Rio Grande de Sol, a Brazilian military aircraft overflew her, later; a formal complaint was made by the Brazilian Chief of Naval Staff about her movements off the harbour.¹⁵

On 4th December ACHILLES was ordered south to refuel at Montevideo, arriving there on the 8th. During her solo mission she encountered many ships, indicating the amount of sea traffic on the South American sea routes: ‘ACHILLES had sighted at sea 58 ships of foreign nationality – United States, French, Belgian, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, Swedish, Greek, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Brazilian, Argentinean, and Panamanian – as well as many British merchant ships.’¹⁶

A list of defects was provided to justify her stay in the port over the normal one day limit. Captain Parry made no official calls during the stay but leave was granted to the ship’s company. Charabanc (bus) tours, dances and suppers, visits to sports events, were all arranged and again there was good behaviour and no leave breaking.¹⁷

COMMODORE HARWOOD

ACHILLES sailed late on the 9th to rendezvous with Harwood off the River Plate where he had decided to concentrate his force. ACHILLES joined AJAX the next day and they

were joined by EXETER on the 12th.¹⁸ Commodore Harwood believed the German raider was heading to the River Plate area, as he later wrote: “I decided that the Plate, with its larger number of ships and its very valuable grain and meat trade, was the vital area to be defended. I therefore arranged to concentrate there my available forces in advance of the time it was anticipated the raider might start operations in that area.”¹⁹ Harwood was correct; on the morning of 13 December, the South Atlantic Division, intercepted the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE some 200 nautical miles off the estuary of the Rio Del Plata. The Battle of the River Plate had begun. ■



PETER CORBETT

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¹⁸ Cumberland, was at the Falkland Islands completing a self-refit to remedy urgent mechanical deficiencies, but could sail at twenty four hours notice, with two engines ready at any one time.
¹⁹ Admiralty, Naval Staff Narrative; Operations of HMS Achilles, August 1939 – February 1940, London: HMSO n.d., p. 71.
Quote from Battle of the River Plate, Report of Rear-Admiral Commanding South American Division.



ABOVE: Tom Carey was a Royal Marine serving in ACHILLES during the Battle of the River Plate. He was the ship’s butcher. During the battle the elevator carrying the shells up to his gun position broke down and being extremely strong he passed the ammunition physically to the gun crew. He emigrated to New Zealand after the war. Displayed here are his Tug of War medallion (front and back) from his time on ACHILLES, c1939.



ABOVE: There was time made for leisure. These black woollen swimming trunks were issued to the Ship’s company, 1939-1945

RIGHT: Chrome plated cigarette case engraved with ADK HMS ACHILLES, 1940.

LEFT: ACHILLES Crossing the Line Ceremony. 1939



¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 59.
¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 60. Quote from Parry’s Report of Proceedings.
¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 61.

With a thunderous crack, six 11-inch guns fire, send their shells across 19,000 metres of the South Atlantic. The Battle of the River Plate, and the ultimate test of a bold new concept in naval warfare - the panzerschiffe, the pocket battleship. Using wartime German naval documents held in the Defence Library in Wellington, Richard Jackson looks at the technological edge the pocket battleships sought to exploit.

DEATH OF A PANZERSCHIFFE

Germany's first pocket battleship, the **DEUTSCHLAND**, was designed in the mid-1920s and launched in 1928. The new ship was built under the limitations of the Treaty of Versailles, which restricted Germany to ships of 10,000 tons with guns no larger than 11-inch (280mm) calibre. In an age when a nation's strength was exercised by battle fleets and power measured by the calibre of their guns, this was a crippling limitation. The naval geography of Germany meant that Britain



ABOVE: Torpedo Crew pose with mascot Hori.
RIGHT: Ear defenders enclosed in tin container. Inside 2 ear plugs with grass gauze filters

France had to be viewed as potential rivals - even in the twenties. Eight years before the rise of Hitler, the German Naval High Command was striving to make the best of its allowance under the Treaty, designing each ship to outclass the ships of the Royal Navy.

ARMS CONTROL TREATY

The Royal Navy had its own problems. In the 1920s it still consisted of the ships from the Grand Fleet of World War I, ships built specifically to face the Imperial German Navy across the North Sea. A post-war naval arms race between the United States and Japan (which would have dragged in Britain when she was economically weak) had been averted by the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922. This arms control treaty halted all battleship construction for ten years (then it was extended until 1936) and limited cruisers to 10,000 tons and eight inch (203mm) guns.

This gave the German designers their opportunity - the halt to battleship construction meant that the majority of French and British battleships were slow and short-ranged, and there were very few fast battle cruisers in the Royal Navy. For the German Navy, a ship that could outrun the battleships and

out-gun the heavy cruisers could have an immense tactical advantage. The "armoured ship" (panzerschiffe) was designed with long range, fuel-efficient diesel engines, a new technology for navies when steam-driven ships were the norm (and coal-fired ships still common). The **DEUTSCHLAND**, the first of the new ships, with a main armament of six 11-inch guns and a secondary armament equivalent to contemporary light cruisers of eight 150mm guns (5.9 inch), had an immediate impact on the naval scene. The French Navy promptly designed and built two new battle-cruisers in response.

LEANDER CLASS CREATED

The British had no direct response to the new German ships. The Admiralty were engaged in a struggle with the Treasury as the new heavy cruisers, designed up to the Washington Treaty limits, were too expensive to replace the World War I cruisers one for one. To save money on the County-class cruisers and to stay within the Treaty limits, the British skimped on armour plate. Britain in fact preferred smaller cruisers, and followed the County-class with two graceful, and better armoured, cruisers armed with six eight-inch guns, **YORK** and **EXETER**. Then they started to build a class they ▶



ABOVE: Port No.1 gun crew
BELOW: B turret crew



really liked, the Leander class - 8,000 tons and eight six-inch guns. EXETER was completed in 1931 and the Leander class, including AJAX and ACHILLES, were completed between 1933-35.

In Germany, DEUTSCHLAND was followed in the next few years by two sisters, the GRAF SPEE and the ADMIRAL SCHEER. Disregarding the Treaty of Versailles, these two ships were heavier, about 12,000 tons and had more armour. There were improvements to their layout - the aircraft and catapult¹ were moved abaft² the funnel, the control tower enlarged and topped with a massive range finder, and SPEE had Germany's first naval radar set installed.

RAIDING WAR PLAN

As tension grew in Europe during 1939 the German Naval High Command set its commerce raiding war plan into motion. The tanker/supply merchant ship ALTMARK was to support the GRAF SPEE and departed Germany on 2 August for the United States. There she took on 9,400 tons of diesel fuel, then sailed for her secret waiting area in the Atlantic. At this stage the United States were not aligning themselves with either side and so were still able to supply fuel to any buyers. SPEE herself sailed secretly for the South Atlantic on 21 August. Yet the German Naval Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Raeder, was pessimistic about capabilities of his fleet. "German naval forces are so inferior in numbers... that

they can do no more than show that they know how to die gallantly... The pocket battleships, however, cannot be decisive for the outcome of the war."

Despite Raeder's pessimism, his orders for Captain Hans Langsdorff commanding the GRAF SPEE, were:

- to intercept and damage enemy supply routes.
- to undertake engagements with enemy naval forces only if this furthered the purpose of the operation.
- to make frequent changes of operational area so as to further increase the enemy's insecurity.

The Germans recognised that this operation was new in the history of sea warfare, the employment of a large, highly developed fighting ship in long months of operations over wide areas of ocean without any recourse to base facilities.

Langsdorff knew that the operation would make the heaviest claims on the endurance and constant readiness of his ship's company.

DECLARATION OF WAR

As part of the panzerschiffe's communications outfit, SPEE had a wireless monitoring unit on board to study British naval and merchant ship message traffic. The unit intercepted the British signal ordering hostilities against Germany, nearly an hour before they got their own orders to go to war. But it was not until 26 September that the Naval High Command ordered the GRAF SPEE and DEUTSCHLAND, both at sea in the North Atlantic, to

commence raiding operations. There was also a caution: "any gain of prestige by England is undesirable." Aboard SPEE, Langsdorff noted in his war diary that he would "avoid any engagement with one of the heavy cruisers, since a single lucky hit might end SPEE's career as a raider... but my task is to conduct raiding operations and to tie down as many enemy escort forces as possible."

Langsdorff decided that the South American area was the most important area for British trade, and on 30 September he sank a British freighter off the Brazilian coast. For the next two months SPEE operated in the South Atlantic and the southern Indian Ocean, sinking nine ships, refuelling from the ALTMARK and transferring merchant seaman prisoners to the supply ship. Each sinking was done in accordance with the Prize regulations³: a warning shot to stop the ship, the crews given time to abandon ship, and a prize crew sent aboard. If a

³ Prize Regulations: In the 19th century when a ship was captured it was called a prize. There were formulas to calculate how much the ship was worth. Once the ship was taken back to port this money was then distributed to all the ship's company on a sliding scale. Prize Courts existed to oversee this.

distress signal was sent by the target, SPEE would open fire on the bridge with machine guns. No merchant seaman was killed in these attacks.

Mechanical wear and tear on the main engines was taking its toll though, while the refrigeration plant (which also cooled the ammunition magazines in tropical waters) was giving trouble. And in the warm Atlantic waters, the Spee's hull slowly fouled, reducing the ship's top speed. But there was enough fuel aboard, and available in the ALTMARK, to keep the panzerschiffe at sea until February 1940. In December 1939, Langsdorff took the Spee back to South American waters.

HUNT FOR THE SPEE

22 British and French ships were now hunting the GRAF SPEE, formed into hunting groups, each intended to be

Shrapnel fragments from GRAF SPEE were collected after the battle

tactically strong enough to take on a panzerschiffe. German intelligence about British warships off South America was accurate: two heavy cruisers, CUMBERLAND and EXETER, with two light cruisers, AJAX and ACHILLES. The latter was largely New Zealand manned - having sailed from Auckland to her war station off South America on 30 August. But when at dawn on 13 December the SPEE's lookouts sighted three masts at 31 km range, Langsdorff first assessed the unknown ships as

Exeter and two destroyers. He assumed there must be a convoy close by. The raider went to action stations and closed the enemy.

BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

The ensuing battle was a gunnery officer's dream - excellent visibility, calm seas, and plenty of sea room. It was what both navies had trained for since 1918. German gunnery doctrine stated "use the main armament against the main opponent" yet Langsdorff opened the ►



ABOVE: 1939 British newspaper supplement celebrates the "incredible audacity" of the AJAX, EXETER and ACHILLES.

LEFT: HMS AJAX seen from ACHILLES in pursuit of GRAF SPREE.

BELOW: ACHILLES ceremonial life buoy, 1939



¹ Catapult: A device installed in warships to launch aircraft
² Aft: Closer to the stern.



ABOVE LEFT: ACHILLES' Surgeon Lt Pittar, shown here after the battle, left his practice as an eye surgeon within an hour of receiving the call to join ACHILLES.
ABOVE RIGHT: Surgeon Lt C.G. Hunter



battle by dividing his fire. Exeter was the immediate threat, but the two light cruisers could not be ignored. At 0618 SPEE fired on EXETER from 19,700 metres with her fore turret, using her aft 280mm guns against AJAX and ACHILLES. It was three minutes before EXETER's eight-inch guns responded. SPEE straddled with the second salvo and shells exploded either side of the ship and then began to concentrate all six guns on EXETER; the cruiser's battle narrative records a total of six direct hits by 11-inch shells in the next hour, which knocked out both forward turrets, caused flooding forward, started a major fire and eventually cut power to the after turret. Sixty-one sailors were dead and 23 wounded. In return, SPEE suffered two eight-inch hits from EXETER.

According to the German Naval Gunnery Experimental Command, the range "of least danger for a panzerschiffe is between 16,000 and 18,000 metres, where an eight-inch shell does not yet penetrate the horizontal armour," but the German 11-inch shells could penetrate the British 76 mm armour. The first phase of the battle proved that theory; three direct hits on the armoured gun turrets

of the GRAF SPEE had no effect on her firepower, while only one British shell penetrated her armour belt to explode on the main armoured deck.

Commodore Henry Harwood's light cruisers, AJAX and ACHILLES, therefore had the daunting task of getting close enough to the GRAF SPEE to actually hurt with their six-inch shells. In doing so, they saved the EXETER, drawing the fire of SPEE's main armament. The two cruisers, in accordance with Harwood's plan, had deliberately separated from EXETER so as to split the SPEE's fire. As they worked up to full speed, they remained about 16,000 metres from the enemy, at first firing together under radio command from AJAX. ACHILLES was near-missed, but the shell burst sent splinters through the thin plating of the director control tower, killing four and wounding nine ratings. Then at 0710, Commodore Harwood closed the range, eventually coming within 9,000 metres of the SPEE and firing torpedoes. AJAX was hit aft, knocking out two turrets, so the main weight of fire was delivered by ACHILLES. AJAX's Captain commented: "ACHILLES was getting magnificent results".

BELOW: Marines HA Gun crew



BELOW: STBD torpedo crew



SPEE UNSEAWORTHY

It was against this threat that the German's secondary armament should have proven effective, but the British reports all state that the 150 mm gunfire was ragged and inaccurate. In part that would be due to the eight hits amidships on the GRAF SPEE, which knocked out one gun and smashed the ammunition hoists for the forward secondary armament. As the range closed, SPEE's 105 mm anti-aircraft guns also joined in against the light cruisers, but two of the three twin mountings were soon knocked out.

By 0740, the battle had settled into a westerly chase. The two British cruisers, concerned at the rate they were using ammunition, opened the range to shadow the SPEE, putting more room between them and the enemy. The panzerschiffe had full power available (although she was never plotted at more than 24 knots) and her main armament was intact - still a formidable opponent. But, exactly as Langsdorff had earlier feared, sufficient damage had been done to end the raider's career: 36 men dead, 60 wounded, only 40 percent of 11-inch ammunition remaining, nearly 50 percent



ACHILLES shrapnel damage.



of the secondary ammunition used up, six torpedoes available, and only one-third of the anti-aircraft armament operational. The galleys were smashed and the ship's flour store was flooded. The hits on the hull forward at the front of the ship made the SPEE unseaworthy for a return to Germany across the winter North Atlantic.

DIPLOMATIC DRAMA

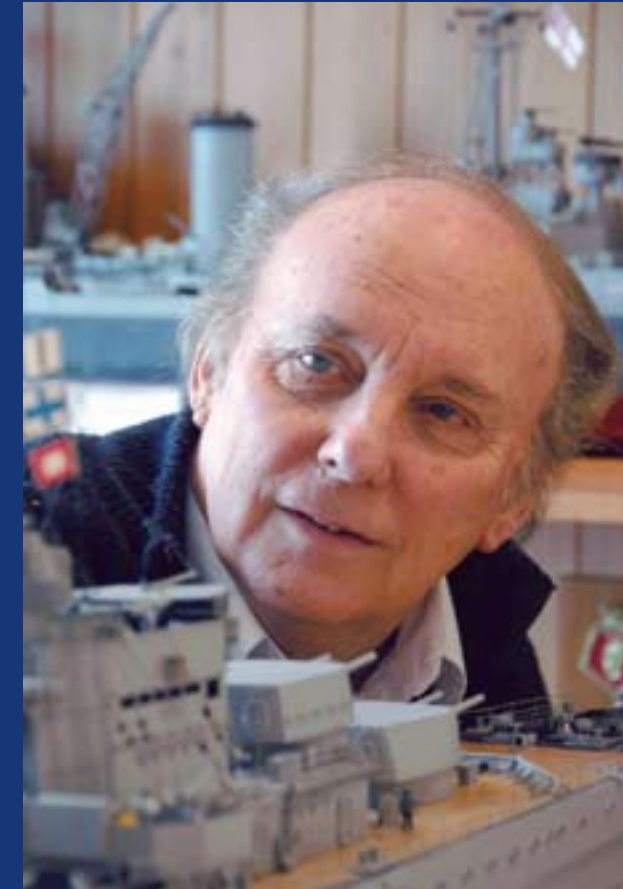
Langsdorff took his damaged ship into Montevideo, Uruguay, seeking respite for repairs. The arrival of a damaged German battleship in this neutral port caused a media sensation, with radio reporters from the United States giving constant coverage as the subsequent diplomatic drama unfolded. Forced by the international rules to leave within 72 hours, unwilling to have his ship interned, and believing that more British ships were gathering off the Plate estuary, Langsdorff scuttled his ship in sight of Montevideo on 17 December. It was world-wide news.

BLOW TO GERMAN PRESTIGE

The battle proved that the German commerce raiders were indeed formidable opponents. The Royal Navy would have to spend much effort throughout the remainder of the war to contain Germany's heavy ships. At the River Plate it was a close-run battle, SPEE very nearly sank the EXETER. If Langsdorff had kept the range open from the light cruisers his panzerschiffe would have had a better chance of scoring more damaging hits while staying immune from the British six-inch shells. If the cruisers had been forced to abandon the action, it would have been a tremendous blow to morale in the Royal Navy and throughout the Empire. Instead, Langsdorff committed 'a tactical blunder of the first magnitude,' according to a 1940 Admiralty analysis.

The River Plate action was a blow to the prestige of the German Navy, not least in the eyes of Hitler. At year's end, in conference with Admiral Raeder, the Fuehrer reiterated the fact that the Exeter should have been completely destroyed. As the war progressed, Hitler lost confidence in the surface fleet, restricting their operations and so giving a priceless advantage to the Allies. ■

RICHARD JACKSON



GRAHAM BEESON

NAVY SHIP MODEL MAKER

Graham Beeson is all about accuracy and detail when it comes to replicating a ship. He works from the actual ship's plans drawn for the building of the initial ship. He has created the whole of the River Plate Battle Fleet including GRAF SPEE.

The Navy Museum is the lucky beneficiary of the fleet for the New Navy Museum. What makes this set valuable is they are all created with the same ratio. This means the viewer can compare ship size and gun size by looking at the models.

He is currently working on a replica of HMS NEW ZEALAND which will be added to the Navy Museum collection.

The Navy Museum has copies of all ships' plans in the collection which are available for purchase through the Navy Museum Shop. ■



RADAR AT THE RIVER PLATE

The aerial array of the New Zealand-built radar installed on ACHILLES in 1941. ACHILLES, AJAX and EXETER did not have radar in 1939, but the discovery after the battle that the German Navy had a gunnery radar set in GRAF SPEE galvanised the Royal Navies in their subsequent development of radar.

As the British cruisers sailed past the still-burning wreck of the scuttled GRAF SPEE, one officer aboard Achilles had a shock. LT Toby Harper RNVR recognized that radar aerials were mounted on GRAF SPEE's superstructure...

LT Toby Harper, a young RNVR Torpedo Specialist, was probably the only man aboard the three British cruisers with technical and highly secret knowledge about radar. He knew that his friends in England were attempting to reduce radar to a size that would fit into a ship's gun directors but as far as he knew, the solution was still a long way off. Yet as he looked at a group of aerials, looking like a bed-mattress on its side fastened to the GRAF SPEE's Director Control Tower, he realized their significance. An aerial array on the Director's Control Tower could only be a gunnery control radar set. Toby gasped as he realized the narrow margin by which ACHILLES had escaped destruction. A fire-control radar

should have been decisive in the gunnery duel at the River Plate.

LT Harper went to the Captain of ACHILLES and told him what he knew. Captain Parry informed the Admiral, the newly-promoted R.A. Harwood, who promptly signaled the Admiralty. Subsequently the British purchased the wreck of GRAF SPEE from the Uruguayan Government and sent a civilian radar expert to inspect the aerials. He used a hacksaw to dismantle the radar set and sent the pieces to England for examination.

SEETAKT

One must go back to the Battle of Jutland to understand the role of radar on

the German ships. During that action on 31 May 1916, most ships on both sides had the depressing experience of their optical range-finders being obscured by mist and drifting smoke. The future Head of the German Navy, Admiral Raeder, pondered on this battle and realized that a better method of fire control might have led to victory. He knew that sound-ranging had been successful with land-based artillery so he asked his chief scientist, Dr Kuhnhold, to develop sound-ranging for naval use.

Kuhnhold realised that radio waves would be more suitable than sound waves for this purpose. In July 1935 he demonstrated to Admiral Raeder, a radar set that could direct naval gun-fire with an

accuracy matching the best optical range-finder. The Germans first mounted this radar, which they called SEETAKT, aboard Torpedo Boat G 10 to gain some sea experience. The prominent aerials became a dominating feature of the small ship. A German publisher issued an annual pocketbook similar to "Jane's Fighting Ships" illustrating the world's naval ships and it included a photograph of G 10.

Admiral Raeder had SEETAKT fitted to all his capital ships giving them lethal superiority in any gun duel, especially under conditions of poor visibility or long range. At the outbreak of World War II the Royal Navy was well behind in the race since the British regarded radar primarily as an air warning system to detect approaching bombers.

Germany had begun the rebuilding of the German surface fleet by designing a unique class of ships, dubbed "pocket battleships" by the world's press, that had sufficient speed to run away from any ship that could out-gun them. By using diesel engines and an electrically welded hull to save weight, three ships each displacing 14,000 tons were built - ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE, ADMIRAL SCHEER and DEUTSCHLAND. Each had high speed (26 knots), long cruising range (a radius of 10,000 nautical miles at 20 knots), a heavy armour belt (5½ inches = 140 mm), and 11-inch guns (280 mm). They were also fitted with SEETAKT fire-control radar from 1938. HMS HOOD was to learn the deadly efficiency of SEETAKT-directed gun-fire when she was destroyed by BISMARCK with her fifth salvo on 24 May 1941.

DESIGN FLAWS

But Admiral Raeder did not realize until too late that he had incorporated two incompatible features in his pocket battleships. The diesel engines were essential for long cruising range but they caused more vibration than turbines, especially when driven hard. This vibration shook the copper wires of the SEETAKT radar causing them to break. Gunfire had the same effect. Moreover the designers had installed SEETAKT in massive cast aluminum water-tight cabinets making access difficult thus making rapid repairs almost impossible when vibration or gunfire broke the wires,

GRAF SPEE's SEETAKT radar enabled her to quickly gain an accurate

range which helped conserve ammunition when sinking merchant ships. The SEETAKT may also have facilitated location of supply ships at remote ocean rendezvous. From the British perspective, if the enemy had radar, he would be able to track their manoeuvring even in smoke and have his turrets trained and ready to fire when the British ships emerged. Worse still, the SEETAKT radar should have enabled GRAF SPEE to fire accurately while the small cruisers were still hidden in smoke!

This ability was inconceivable at this stage of the war. Few people aboard the British ships had even heard of radar, which was top secret at that time. But by a happy mischance, the German radar was out of action for most of the battle, resulting in victory for the three British cruisers.

SPEED AND AGILITY

At outbreak of World War II Admiral Raeder turned GRAF SPEE and ADMIRAL SCHEER loose in the world's oceans as commerce raiders. SPEE went on to sink 80,000 tons of British merchant shipping. The Royal Navy and the French Navy both responded by deploying several task forces, some of them groups of fast cruisers, intending that their speed, agility and numbers would compensate for their smaller guns and thin armour. One such task force included the New Zealand cruiser HMS ACHILLES in company with her sister ship HMS AJAX and the two 8-inch gunned cruisers HMS EXETER and CUMBERLAND. Unfortunately, on the day of battle, CUMBERLAND was in Port Stanley, in the Falklands, undertaking a boiler clean.

Admiral Harwood was imaginative. He realized that speed and agility were the only advantages possessed by his under-gunned and under-armoured ships. He assigned a suicidal role to EXETER. She was to close with GRAF SPEE at full speed to bring her smaller guns within effective range and thus divert fire from AJAX and ACHILLES. They were to attack from different directions, making smoke, and manoeuvring at full speed. Much to their surprise, GRAF SPEE would aid them by making smoke herself - no doubt secure in the knowledge that this would enhance the advantage conferred by her SEETAKT radar. AJAX and ACHILLES would dash out of the smoke from an unexpected direction



ABOVE: Silhouetted against the sunset the GRAF SPEE burnt fiercely with small explosions every few minutes. 17 Dec. 1939

and swing their nimble 6-inch turrets to loose off a couple of salvos before the ponderous turrets of the battleship could turn in their direction. They then would disappear back into the smoke.

Captain Langsdorff of GRAF SPEE began the battle by dividing his main armament between EXETER and AJAX, not always a wise policy in a gun duel especially when it was discovered post-war that SEETAKT was not capable of engaging two targets simultaneously. The ►



ABOVE: ACHILLES observes the scuttled GRAF SPEE

fire against EXETER was deadly accurate, suggesting that she was “enjoying” the full attention of SEETAKT. Within a few minutes both forward turrets of EXETER were destroyed, both aircraft had been hit and had to be man-handled overboard, most of the bridge crew had been killed and EXETER was being controlled from the after steering position. Deciding that she was finished, Captain Langsdorff turned his SEETAKT-directed fire on AJAX. To his horror, EXETER then turned towards him and attempted to torpedo him. This bold attack so unsettled Captain Langsdorff that he turned away and never again regained the initiative. Simultaneously, the accuracy of GRAF SPEE’s gun-fire deteriorated.

When subsequently analyzing the battle back in New Zealand, the Allies believed that a lucky shell splinter had hit the SEETAKT radar set but with the benefit of post-war examination of German records, it seems more likely that the over-driven diesel engines had proved too much for the flimsy wires of the SEETAKT radar.

What happened next must be pure speculation. The loss of SEETAKT would have been devastating to gun crews brought up on the accuracy of radar-directed fire. The harried electronic technicians must have spent all day getting SEETAKT back in action but by this time the Germans had lost the battle.

GRAF SPEE’S VULNERABILITY

AJAX and ACHILLES manoeuvred at full speed through their smoke and dashed out to fire broadsides at the battleship. By the end of the day AJAX had fired 820 rounds of 6-inch ammunition, and ACHILLES 1240 rounds. But GRAF SPEE’s engines, guns and ammunition were safe behind armour plate and there seemed no way of hurting her. Captain Parry of ACHILLES was heard to remark “We might as well be pelting her with snow-balls!” However GRAF SPEE was vulnerable in an unexpected way. Not all her crew could shelter behind armour plate. Bridge crew were unprotected, look-outs were posted all around the ship to watch for torpedoes and the Director Control Tower crew spotting fall-of-shot¹ had only thin steel plate between them and incoming shells.

When 36 of his crew lay dead and 60 wounded, Captain Langsdorff realized that his crew’s morale was collapsing. A career of sinking defenceless merchant ships had not prepared the Germans for an enemy who actually fired back. He had no alternative but to seek shelter in a neutral port so with diesels hammering, GRAF SPEE made a bee-line for Montevideo at 23 knots,

followed at a respectful distance by AJAX and ACHILLES, like a pair of Pekinese threatening a mastiff.

SALVOES AT SUNSET

Commodore Harwood took AJAX south around the English Bank to cut off possible escape. He ordered ACHILLES to follow GRAF SPEE which was now silhouetted against a setting sun, a perfect mark for the optical range-finder on ACHILLES which was in relative darkness and safe from GRAF SPEE’s optical range-finding. At 8.50 PM GRAF SPEE fired 3 salvoes at 22,000 yards range, all accurate for line, the first two short and the third over. It appears likely that SEETAKT was again operating. The straddle² demonstrated to Captain Parry that destruction was not far away. ACHILLES replied with 5 rapid salvoes and retired fast, making smoke. Between 9.30 pm and 9.45 pm GRAF SPEE fired a further 3 salvoes, all falling short. We can perhaps speculate that ACHILLES was now protected from radar-directed fire by echoes from adjoining land.

When GRAF SPEE eventually entered Montevideo Harbour after the battle she was granted 72 hours to repair damage. Her eventual scuttling made world wide news.

² Straddle: To fire successive artillery shots in front and behind a target, in order to determine its range.

BELOW: Comparison of the Shells used at the Battle of the River Plate.

LEFT: British 6 inch (ACHILLES and AJAX)
CENTRE: British 8 inch (EXETER)
RIGHT: German 11 inch (GRAF SPEE)



¹ Fall -of-shot: Watching carefully where each salvo lands to make corrections to gunnery range.

In February ACHILLES arrived in New Zealand to a hero’s welcome. The crew paraded up Queen Street in Auckland to delirious acclamation from crowds.

TOBY HARPER

LT Toby Harper saw little cause for celebration. He considered ACHILLES had escaped annihilation by a very slender margin and resolved that his Ship would never again have to fight blind. He approached Navy Office in Wellington and offered to build a radar set that could control the fire of the guns of ACHILLES in smoke or darkness and warn of the approach of other ships. He did not realize that there was already an active radar programme in New Zealand albeit aimed at supplying the Army with radar to control the fire of fortress guns and helping the Air Force to detect surface ships. No work was being done for the Navy.

The Navy Office detached Harper from ACHILLES and sent him to Canterbury University where he helped design and

build a simple radar warning set which was installed aboard ACHILLES in the incredibly short time of 4 months. He then built a fire-control radar to measure target range and hopefully observe fall-of-shot to correct range. An improved version was fitted in August 1941 together with a dedicated set for simple ship warning. Overall, our Navy embraced radar with a much greater enthusiasm than did its sister services, the Army and RNZAF. Of 180 radar sets built in New Zealand, almost half went to the Navy.

In Wellington, Navy Office embarked on a 5-pronged programme of Staff Training, Coast Watching (CW), Ship Warning (SW), Ship Warning and Gunnery (SWG) and Aid to Allies.

A specialist radar officer was appointed to Navy Office to supervise this programme, first, LT Harper, then CDR Giles and finally LTCDR Marklew. These officers established a close and cordial liaison with the civilian organization charged with radar design and construction. Civilian scientists

were given honorary commissions and invited aboard naval ships so they could appreciate technical aspects of naval needs and view operational problems directly. This programme was successful and it was not until late in the war that the RNZN turned to the Royal Navy to supply its ships with radar sets. ■

DR IAN K. WALKER D.Sc. FNZIC

Born in Auckland and educated at Auckland Grammar School and Auckland University. During WWII he designed and installed radars for the NZ Navy and served with an honorary commission aboard HMS ACHILLES. He was then seconded to the US Marine Corps to install and operate microwave radar in the Solomon Islands. Then next to England to help design radar sets at ADRDE, after this joining the team of NZ scientists who helped design the British atomic bomb at Chalk River (Canada) and Harwell (England). Post war he returned to NZ, investigating and solving the problem of spontaneous fires in wool cargoes that had plagued the NZ wool export trade for over 70 years.

GRAF SPEE’S RADAR AERIALS

THE BRITISH NAVAL AUTHORITIES naturally wondered why no-one had noticed the GRAF SPEE’s radar aerials before this. The ship had first been on show at the British Coronation Fleet Review for King George VI in 1937 and then she had operated in international waters when she intervened in the Spanish Civil War in 1938. There had thus been ample opportunity to photograph her. They went back to those old photographs and found that the structure on the Director Control Tower (DCT) had always been there but was kept covered by a canvas shroud. Any such attachment to a DCT could have only one function - directing the fire of the main armament. A shrouded structure should have rung alarm bells in the mind of any alert intelligence officer. There was even more embarrassment. When UK Naval Intelligence was reviewed after the war, they discovered that in early 1939 they had purchased in Berlin an openly-published manual of Kriegsmarine ships which showed Torpedo Boat G10 carrying a radar aerial forward of the main-mast. These intelligence failures probably stemmed from the then predominant British view of radar as a shore-based installation to detect the approach of hostile aircraft. ■

DR IAN WALKER



ABOVE: Copy of an original painting showing the GRAF SPEE.



Captain Edward Parry COMMANDING OFFICER of the ACHILLES



There were, of course, a number of notable elements of the Battle of the River Plate. One of these is that among the Royal Navy participants were two officers, both onboard HMS ACHILLES, who were destined to lead the Royal New Zealand Navy as its Chief of Naval Staff. The first of the officers was the Commanding Officer of the ACHILLES– Captain W.E (Edward) Parry. David Ledson, who retired from the position of New Zealand Chief of Navy this year, writes here about Parry's outstanding career.

Captain Parry was no stranger to war. He had joined the Royal Navy in 1905 at the tender age of 12 and served at sea throughout World War I. After the war, between 1917 and 1929, he specialised as a 'Torpedo Officer' in various posts including HMS VERNON, the Torpedo School at Portsmouth; the Atlantic Fleet and HMS DOLPHIN, the Submarine Base.

He had spent around 30 years of his career focused on the torpedo and submarine aspects of naval warfare when there was an 'elemental' change in 1932 as he was posted to the aircraft carrier HMS EAGLE as the Executive Officer – as a fairly senior Commander. Parry must have performed pretty well because he left EAGLE having been promoted to Captain at the age of 41. In

early 1936 he assumed command of the Royal Navy's Anti-Submarine School at HMS OSPREY and after 15 months at OSPREY, Captain Parry spent most of 1938 undergoing higher Defence training at the Imperial Defence College.

A WELL ROUNDED OFFICER

Consequently, he was what could be considered a 'well-rounded' officer

when he took command of HMS ACHILLES in January 1939 before the outbreak of war some nine months later in September. He brought with him his four years of World War I service and a good mix of operational experience in a variety of maritime dimensions, two of which were directly related to decisive areas in the coming war – the U-Boat threat and the threat and exploitation of air power. It can be assumed, too, that his 'torpedo' specialty and his most recent postings had given him some familiarity with the importance of technology to the development and evolution of military capabilities.

When Captain Parry assumed command of ACHILLES the ship had just completed an extensive refit. So, two months later when the ship left the United Kingdom to sail back to New Zealand it was, presumably, in a good material condition – and morale would have been high as the large number of New Zealand sailors among the crew were on their way home. However, war with Germany was inexorably drawing closer and on 29 August 1939 Captain Parry was ordered to sail ACHILLES to her assigned war station with Royal Navy forces on the West Indies station.

Five hours after the Sailing Orders were received, ACHILLES slipped away from Devonport, Auckland, and sailed towards the ship's and crew's moment of drama and victory at sea. The Battle of the River Plate probably presented Captain Parry with his greatest challenge – and greatest success – at the 'tactical' level. He was made a Companion of the Bath (CB) for his performance.

BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

During the battle an 11 inch shell from the GRAF SPEE hit the water near ACHILLES's bridge. The resulting shrapnel seriously wounded 2 ratings and killed 4 others. Captain Parry was hit in the legs and knocked out. Regaining consciousness he realised the guns were not being fired at the GRAF SPEE and using the voicepipe he called the gunnery officer, Lieutenant Washbourn, to rectify this. Washbourn had been hit in the head and was just coming to but quickly took action and soon the Director Tower was back in action with their guns focused on the GRAF SPEE.

Parry commented later on the GRAF SPEE's manoeuvrability, "She appeared

to turn as quickly as a ship one-half her size and she made the fullest use of her mobility...On several occasions, when her situation was becoming unhealthy, she turned 180 degrees away, using smoke to cover her turn."¹

Parry was proud of his seamen and Rear-Admiral Harwood concurring wrote to the New Zealand Naval Board, "The ACHILLES was handled perfectly by her captain and fought magnificently by her captain, officers and ship's company."² By all accounts the ACHILLES was a happy ship. Captain Parry later wrote: 'New Zealand has every reason to be proud of her seamen during their baptism of fire.'

Captain Parry was obviously enjoying his time in ACHILLES. However, less than three months after the ship returned to New Zealand he was to be required to 'step up' and perform at the operational and strategic levels.

A WIDE PORTFOLIO

On 1 May 1940 Captain Parry was made a Commodore 2nd Class and posted as the First Naval Member of the New Zealand Naval Board, Chief of Naval Staff, Commodore Commanding New Zealand Squadron and Commanding Officer HMS ACHILLES. This range of tasks would have been a heavy load in

¹ S.D. Waters, The Royal New Zealand Navy: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, Wellington: War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs, 1956. pp 54-55
² Ibid: p68

peace time – it is hard to imagine their weight during war. Parry, however, was clearly determined to make things work and was clear that it was the strategic role that was the most important; although there are indications that he would have preferred to remain at sea.

DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

In September 1940 he sensibly recommended to the Government that combining the Chief of Naval Staff and New Zealand Squadron command responsibilities be separated and that the Chief of Naval Staff should be based in Wellington. The Government agreed and on 15 October Parry left ACHILLES with, I am sure, a heavy heart. However, he quickly set about organising the Naval Staff to meet the demands of the war – clearly drawing on his experience in the United Kingdom and his education at the Defence College.

There is no more appropriate summary of his contribution as Chief of Naval Staff than that in S.D. Waters' Official History, 'New Zealand was fortunate to have had the services of Commodore Parry as Chief of Naval Staff during a critical period of the war. When he took up that appointment he found Navy Office ill prepared to cope with many urgent problems...By the time Japan entered the war...he had organised an adequate and balanced naval staff, as well as a sound recruiting and training scheme. His ►



ABOVE: Captain Parry was wounded in the leg from flying shrapnel during the battle.

foresight in these and many other matters was confirmed by the march of events. When the time for his departure came, the Government was loath to lose him.³

Nevertheless, on 16 June 1942, after over two years as Chief of Naval Staff and having seen the birth of the RNZN, and, in the process, become its first Chief, Commodore Parry returned to Royal Navy service.

For almost all of 1943 he served in command of the battlecruiser HMS RENOWN and, after promotion to Rear Admiral in January 1944, he was the 'Naval Commander of Force L' for the Allied landings at Normandy.

POST WW2

At the conclusion of the war Rear Admiral Parry was appointed Chief of Staff (Post Hostilities) to the British Naval Commander-in-Chief, headquartered in London, and then as the Deputy Head of Naval Division, Control Commission for Germany, based in Berlin. In July 1946 he took up duties as Director of Naval Intelligence. After almost two years in the post, and by then a Vice Admiral, Parry moved on to his final Naval posting - in India as the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Indian Navy, a post which was so reminiscent of his New Zealand service. This must have delivered him one of the most nostalgic moments of his long and distinguished career because, here, he encountered the ACHILLES again- commissioned in 1948 with the Indian Navy as DELHI.

In January 1950 India became a Republic and, so, Admiral Parry had the unique privilege of becoming not only the first Chief of Naval Staff of one Navy, but the first Commander-in-Chief of another, as the Royal Indian Navy then became the Indian Navy.

Leaving India in 1951, he was promoted to Admiral, and with a Knighthood from the 1950 New Year's List, Admiral Sir Edward Parry, Knight Commander of the Bath (KCB), retired in January 1952. He was to live for another 20 years - dying in London on 21 August 1972 aged 79. ■

DAVID LEDSON

David Ledson joined the Navy in 1967. He retired in April this year after just over 42 years service - the last eight years of which included three years as the Maritime Component Commander and five years as the Chief of Navy.

³ Ibid: p. 445

⁴ Two 'Naval Forces' were involved in the D-Day landings at Normandy. The 'Assault Force' which was responsible for the initial landing and the 'Follow Up Force' which landed troops on the second tide of D-Day. There were two components within the 'Follow Up Force' - Force 'B' the US element commanded by Commodore C.D. Edgar, USN, and Force 'L' the British element commanded by Rear Admiral Parry.



ABOVE: Mr Tai Mitchell presented this Kiwi feather Korowai (cloak) on behalf of the Maori people, at a luncheon given to ACHILLES' ship's company in Auckland Town Hall on 23 February 1940.

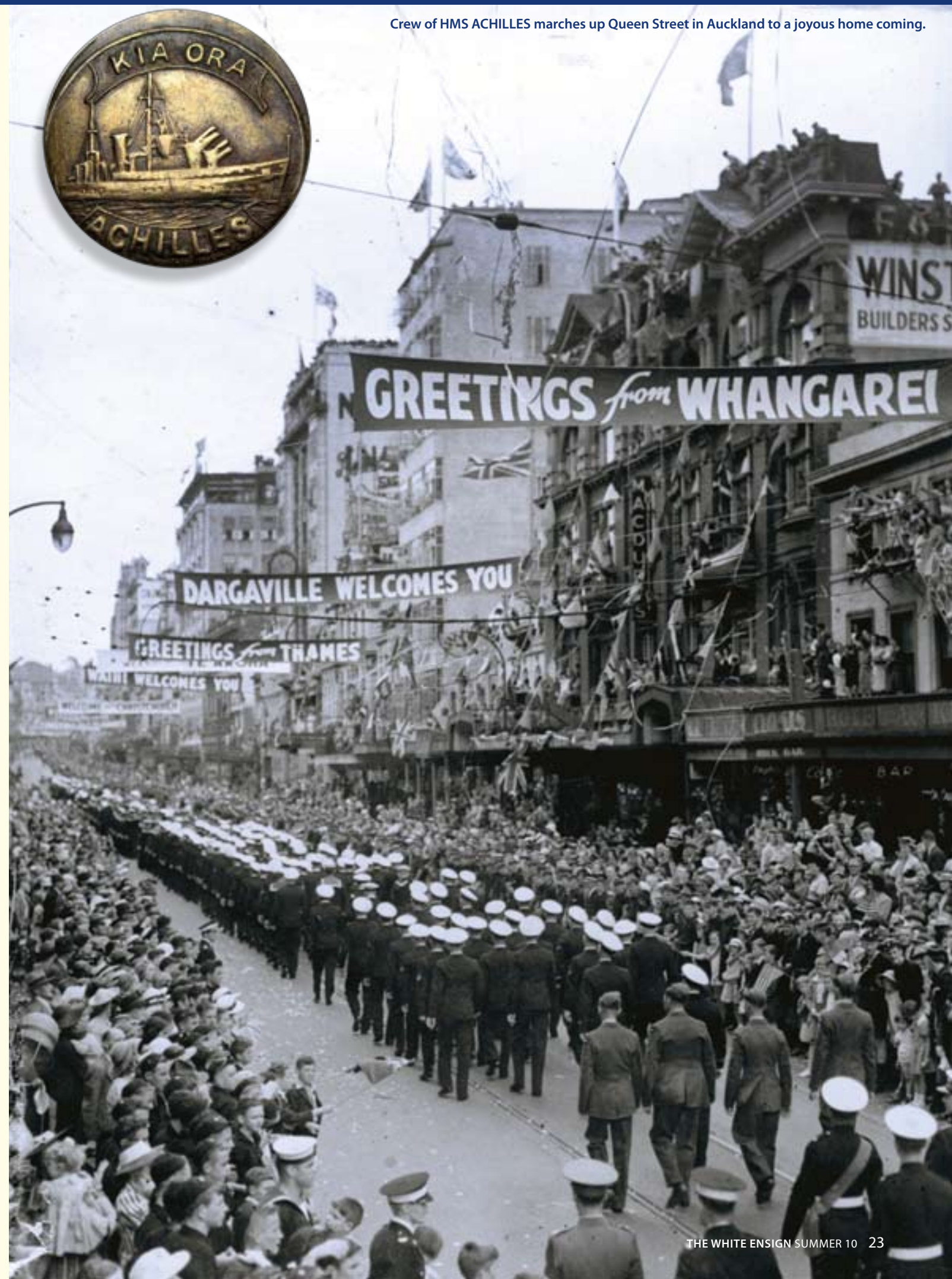


ABOVE: When Captain Parry addressed the crowd outside the Auckland Town Hall on the 23 February 1940, the crowd responded with a spontaneous rendition of 'For he's a jolly good fellow'.



ABOVE: ACHILLES Deck Plate

Crew of HMS ACHILLES marches up Queen Street in Auckland to a joyous home coming.





ABOVE: Framed banner used at the reception given for Leading Seaman Bert Rogers on the 11 March 1940 by the residents of Hokitika and autographed by them.

BELOW: Luncheon in the Auckland Town Hall 23 February 1940. Special favours included complimentary bus passes for the heroes.

LEFT: Civic Welcome Lunch Menu.

BELOW RIGHT: Silver napkin ring with ACHILLES badge.



Memories of ACHILLES return home

I clearly recall visiting the "Achilles" at Central Wharf near the bottom of Queen Street on her return from the recently fought "Battle of the River Plate" action with the German pocket battleship "Admiral Graf Spee". My Mother and I had travelled up from Wellington on the overnight "Auckland Express", with the olive coloured oilcloth blinds all firmly pulled down before sunset because of the war blackout regulations, to visit my maternal grandmother in Remuera. I remember we walked down Queen Street and my Mother treated me to a "Rangitoto Special", three scoops of ice cream in a long narrow dish decorated with passionfruit, and other fruits and "hundreds and thousands". I was 6 years old.

It was in late February, 1940 when I saw "Achilles" with her grey painted, pock-marked, shrapnel damaged superstructure, her sheer size at such close proximity, she really seemed to tower over me. I do remember that Central Wharf seemed reasonably quiet at the time of our visit.

I realised much later that all the pomp

and circumstance of her arrival was over and that she was about to cross the harbour for her well earned refit.

This was an exciting time for me: Short-wave radio broadcasts about the war on the B.B.C "World Service", at home maps on the dining-room wall follow the progress of momentous events overseas, and the very well remembered, orange printed covers of the "Penguin" guides for every aircraft identification that Father had as a Home Guardsman. We were living then in Coutts Street, Rongotai – the Centennial Exhibition was virtually over our back-fence and one of our "great domestic events" at this time was our cat "Sandy" giving birth to a litter of kittens in my Father's "tin hat" in the bottom of the hall closet. But still for me above all is the clean memory of that sunny day at Central Wharf in Auckland, of the "Achilles" proudly showing her honourable scars of battle to a 6 year old lad. ■

PETER ROSS

Cricket Museum, Lower Hutt.



ABOVE: Albert Parrington in naval uniform with ACHILLES' cap ribbon photographed by his father at Princess Wharf, Auckland. The photo was taken a few weeks before ACHILLES sailed for the Plate. His father Leonard Henry Parrington was a plumber onboard ACHILLES.

The Home Coming



HMS ACHILLES sailors Special Pass

BACKGROUND: ACHILLES arrives to a heroes' welcome, Auckland Harbour.

On the 23rd February 1940 ACHILLES returned to Auckland to a heroes welcome. The newly named Achilles Point flew the New Zealand Ensign and signalling flags spelt out Nelson's famous Trafalgar Signal. The Town Hall resurrected the lights from the King's coronation and the Auckland Electric Power Board augmented this with a display which included a 30 foot (10 metre) model of the ACHILLES.

The parade route was alive with colour and there was a carnival atmosphere in the air. The route was decorated with bunting and Queen Street shop owners had decorated their shop frontages. Queen Street had been cleared of all traffic by police and traffic officers. Senior Cadets from High Schools and Territorials lined the sides of the route. Much to school children's delight, Auckland and suburban schools had been granted a day off! School children from country districts were not to miss out and could get to the parade on special trains which had been put on for the day. Many offices, shops and factories granted their staff a few hours holiday to attend the parade. Auckland was alive with anticipation.

Of course as Auckland is the City of Sails Auckland boaties met the ACHILLES long before she got into harbour. Tugs, launches, private boats met and escorted her in. At Narrow Neck Beach and North Head 600 troops greeted her. At 6.30am she passed a silent Devonport Naval Base when suddenly cheers rang out, every merchant ship in port sounded their



ABOVE: Flag signed by all the crew, Fleet Trophy collection



ABOVE: Stoker Petty Officer Hubber made this garter for his sister. 1937

sirens, trains whistled, 1000s of cars lining the wharf tooted. The lads were home! ACHILLES berthed at the central wharf and the ship's company met with their family and friends. Captain Parry then received calls from the Governor General, Viscount Galway, and government and local authority representatives.

Aucklanders began to line the street for the parade from 9.30 onwards. Every place with a view was occupied and at ground level people stood ten deep. On the side streets which had a slight elevation people jostled for a better position. A 1000 ex-servicemen and women began the parade, followed by the Royal Marines Band, then the Navy and the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Captain Parry and his wife were next, riding in an official car, Parry's leg wound still troubling him. When the ACHILLES ships' company appeared flags and handkerchiefs were waved and confetti and streamers were thrown. Throughout the parade the crowd clapped and cheered. The ACHILLES sailors certainly knew they were the heroes of the day.

On reaching the Town Hall the ship's company were surrounded by yet more members of the public. Speeches from Auckland's Mayor Sir Ernest Davis and the Deputy Prime Minister Peter Fraser were enthusiastically received by the crowd and when Captain Parry prepared to speak he had to wait while the crowd serenaded him with "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow". The National anthem was sung and the crew moved into the Town Hall for a Civic luncheon. Their families lunched next door in the Concert Chamber.

The lunch was not a stuffy affair as the orchestra played new and old war tunes throughout accompanied by singing from the sailors. But in a more solemn moment Captain Parry received a gift from Mr Tai Mitchell on behalf of the Maori people- a beautiful kiwi Korowai (cloak). In addition the Mayor presented a laurel wreath on behalf of the people of Auckland and this was later hung on the fore bridge of ACHILLES.

The crew were granted shore leave for several days. Later when she travelled to Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin the crew were also received as national heroes. ■

TERRY MANSON



ABOVE: ACHILLES' Ships' company parade up Queen Street, Auckland 23 February 1940.



ABOVE: Ron Pemberton receives a warm welcome in Auckland.

Lieutenant Richard WASHBOURN

ACHILLES GUNNERY OFFICER

Lieutenant Richard Washbourn was ACHILLES Gunnery Officer during the Battle of the River Plate. Both he and his Commanding Officer, Captain Parry, went on to eventually lead the RNZN.

A SOUTH ISLAND LAD

Washbourn was born in Nelson in 1910 – and he joined the Royal Navy in 1927. After he had completed his initial training in HMS EREBUS, Whale Island, Portsmouth, he served in the Mediterranean in the cruiser HMS LONDON from 1929 to 1931. Then after further training, in 1933 he joined the battleship HMS WARSPITE and, after this, the cruiser HMS DIOMEDE. He returned to Whale Island in 1937 and 1938 for specialist courses at the ‘Gunners’ School’ HMS EXCELLENT. By the time he joined the ACHILLES, with Captain Parry, in January 1939 he was an ordnance specialist and so it was unsurprising that he was appointed as the ship’s Gunnery Officer.

BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

In Washbourn’s subsequent report on the Battle of the River Plate he wrote¹ that he heard a “hellish noise” and received “a thump on the head which half stunned me”. Despite the carnage around him, he remained calm and focused on the task at hand, “ACP (After Control Position) take over”, he ordered, wrapped his head in bandages as he was bleeding profusely and ‘got on with it’. After the battle he went around the ACHILLES taking photos. Vince McGlone of the Battle of the River Plate’s Veterans Association remembers that Washbourn was popular with the Ship’s company and “what he didn’t know about guns wasn’t worth knowing”.

SERVICE WITH RNZN

Washbourn remained with ACHILLES

until the middle of 1942 when he returned to EXCELLENT and after a year or so there he returned to sea as the Gunnery Officer of the battleship HMS ANSON. This turned out to be another posting of about a year and his final sea posting of the war. It was also the start to two years ashore on the scientific and technical staff at the Admiralty Gunnery Establishment – during which time he married.

After almost twenty years of Royal Navy service, broken only by his two and a half years in ACHILLES, Washbourn, now a Commander, re-engaged with the RNZN when he joined HMNZS BELLONA in 1946 as the Executive Officer. Commodore L. E. Stanners remembered during his time on BELLONA that “Richard Washbourn was a very tough Commander indeed... although I always found him very easy to get along. He was a man of very wide interests and an officer who was thoroughly and totally professional”²

Washbourn stayed with the ship for almost two years and ironically, when he departed in 1948, his relief was Peter Phipps. Washbourn later relieved Phipps as the Chief of Naval Staff in 1963 when then Rear Admiral Phipps became New Zealand’s first Chief of Defence Staff. Following his time in BELLONA, he was posted as the Commander Superintendent to the Navy Dockyard, succeeded by a further shore posting as Deputy Director of Naval Ordnance³ and promotion to Captain.

MEDITERRANEAN POSTING

After three years in this position, Captain Washbourn spent the next two and half years in the Mediterranean as Chief Staff

Officer to Flag Officer (Flotillas).⁴

Given the Cold War context and Egypt’s strategic position, this must have been an interesting time in which to be in that particular theatre of operations. However, Washbourn returned to the United Kingdom during 1955 and so missed out on the Royal Navy’s operations against Egypt in late 1956. Rather, in 1956 he was back ashore – this time for two years – as the Director of Naval Ordnance.

SPECIALIST SKILLS

He was offered ‘respite’ back at sea when he assumed command in 1959 of HMS TIGER – the first of the TIGER Class cruisers. They had the distinction, too, of being the last cruisers built for the Royal Navy. The ships had semi-automatic 6-inch (152 mm) guns in twin high-angle mounts with each gun capable of shooting 20 rounds per minute, and a secondary battery of fully-automatic 3-inch (76 mm) guns which delivered 90 rounds per minute per gun. Each 6 inch and 3 inch mounting had its new director, with a dedicated radar and the new all-electronic MRS 3 gun direction system.

Washbourn only had command of the ship for a relatively short period – the focus of which was on trials to set her new armament to work. Clearly, his gunnery and ordnance experiences were important factors in him being selected for this task. But as with his previous sea posting, in the Mediterranean, the demands for his specialist skills meant he

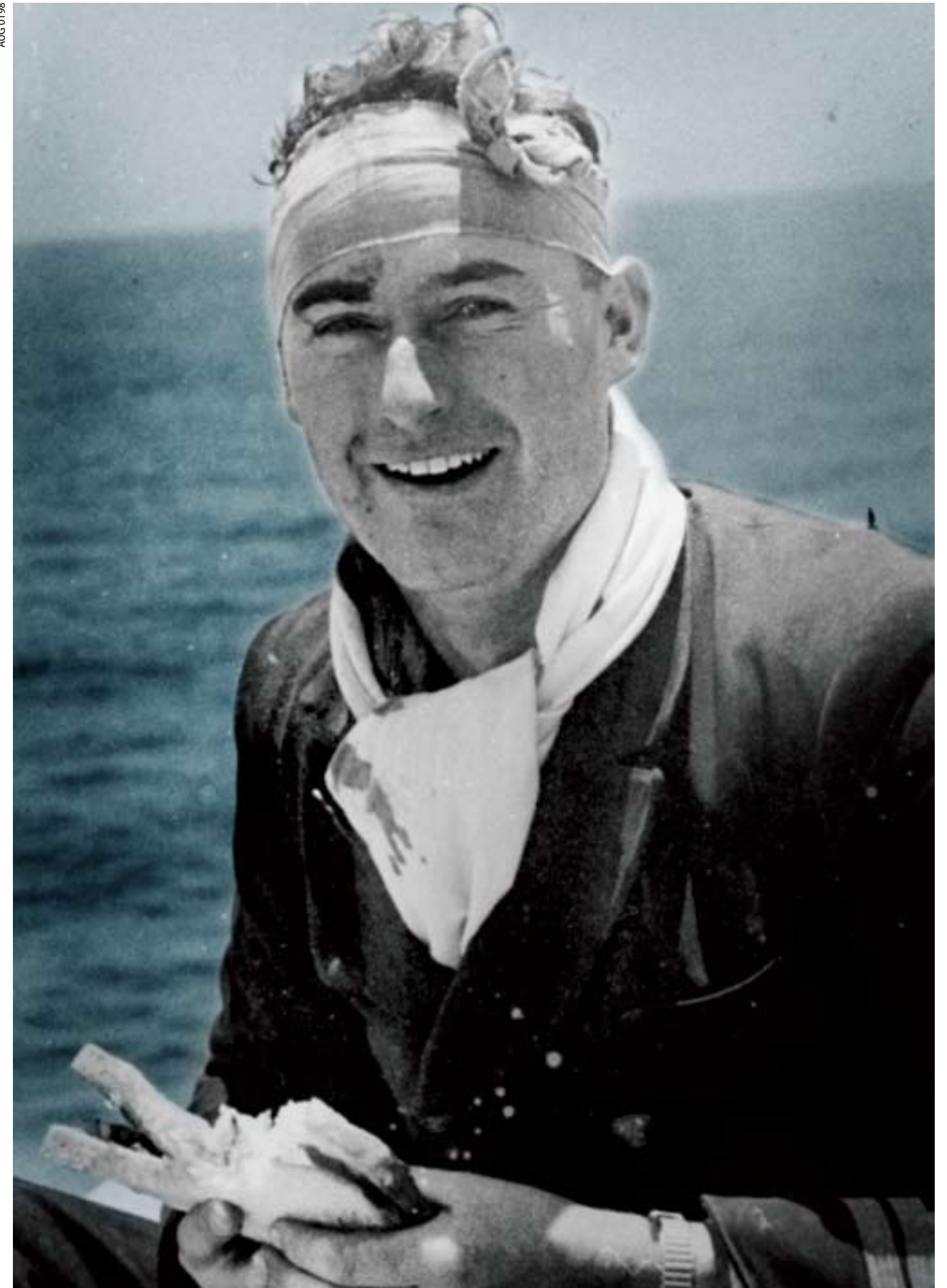
⁴At this time in the Mediterranean Fleet the flotilla vessels (the various destroyers and frigates) were grouped under their own flag officer. The individual ships deployed in task groups for specific operations, remained part of their own flotilla for administrative purposes. The Flag Officer (Flotillas) or FOF would oversee the annual programme for those ships, their maintenance plans and also their operational effectiveness, by means of inspections. So the Chief Staff Officer would run FOF’s staff and manage all the relevant information they needed about ships’ activities and maintenance states.

¹ Waters, S.D, New Zealand in the Second World War; ACHILLES at the River Plate, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1948, p25

² Commodore L.S. Stanners DLA 21

³ Ordnance: Military supplies such as guns and ammunition.

AUG 01 98



ABOVE: During the battle Lt Washbourn was wounded in the head and was momentarily knocked out. He came to and carried on with his duties. Many of the photographs post battle are the work of Washbourn’s photography. This photo was taken while he was sitting on the DCT. 13 Dec. 1939



ABOVE: Washbourn briefs the crew after the battle. December 1939

left the ship before it started on a round of interesting operations - at the end of 1959 she deployed to the Mediterranean for a year as Fleet Flagship and took part in operations during Confrontation⁵ in the early 1960s.

His next posting, his fifth and final one into his specialist area, this time as Director-General Weapons, brought with it promotion to Rear Admiral. It meant he had spent around 12 years - or almost half of his professional life since he had completed his Gunnery training in 1938 in heavily specialist focused jobs. This was, too, his last post with the RN because in 1962 he resigned and joined the RNZN as the Chief of Naval Staff.

CHIEF OF NAVAL STAFF

It must have been an interesting and challenging transition for him; particularly

as he had not served in the Naval Staff at all in the RN - nor had he undergone any senior staff training.

Furthermore, while he was a New Zealander by birth he had entered the RN in 1927, 35 years previously, and he had served only some five years with the Navy he was to now lead. In the end he served as Chief of Naval Staff for just over two years.

The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History concludes that 'the main problem with which he had to contend during his tenure...was the composition of the new Ministry of Defence, but he revealed little grasp of the issues or forcefulness in expressing his views.'⁶

This judgement, though, looks only at part of the context in which Washbourn had to perform.

When he became the Navy's Chief Washbourn was, in all likelihood, not in the best of health. Furthermore, there

were other pressures with which he had to deal - pressures that are brought into clearer relief when his situation is compared with that faced by his Captain in ACHILLES, Captain Parry, when he assumed the Navy's senior position.

While he, like Parry, was essentially an outsider, there were some important differences in the situation in which each found himself. Parry became Chief of Naval Staff immediately following a great triumph, Washbourn, on the other hand, came to the position after a posting to what was undoubtedly an important position, but one without any particular mana, especially to New Zealand sailors. Parry reported directly to the Government but Washbourn reported to his predecessor who was now the Chief of Defence Staff. While Parry was working in a time of expansion and during war, Washbourn worked in a period when the country was at peace, but was soon to be involved in Confrontation with its Commonwealth partners. Parry had a broader range of experiences and training that in all likelihood better suited him to lead the Navy.

In the final analysis, though, both Parry and Washbourn had distinguished careers and served their countries and Navies with considerable distinction.

Washbourn had served in HMS DIOMEDE, HMNZS ACHILLES and HMNZS BELLONA and ended his career as Chief of Naval Staff. He retired as Admiral Washbourn with a CB, DSO, OBE⁷ and Mention in Despatches.

He died in Nelson, the place of his birth, in 1988. ■

DAVID LEDSON

⁷ CB: Companion of the Order of the Bath; DSO: Companion of the Distinguished Service Order; OBE: Officer of the Order of the British Empire.

NEW ZEALAND ENSIGN FLIES *at the Battle of the River Plate.*

The New Zealand Ensign was flown at the battle of the River Plate. Chief Yeoman of Signals L.C. Martinson was responsible for seeking permission from Captain Parry for this. In his Oral History he recalls how it came about:

There was a lot of kerfuffle and talk and newspaper reports and other media reports and other stuff about the flying of the New Zealand flag by Achilles in the battle. They were quite right, but they had it all wrong how it happened. I knew how it happened; How it happened was simply that the night before the battle I was sitting in the Signals Office as I say and I heard one of our youngsters talking outside to another Signaller and I heard him say something that set me thinking. He said "What do we do about ensigns in the morning, has Chief told you". Ensigns, ensigns, ensigns, why the blue ensign, why not the New Zealand ensign? There is nothing in the regulations that says you can't, there was nothing that said that you could. We were supposed to fly the White Ensign but we were the Zealand Division of the Royal Navy then.

"Alright put up the biggest one you've got, we'll fly it"

When I went down to the Captain with the log after colours I asked permission to speak as you do to a superior Officer, particularly your Captain, even though I was his Chief. He said "Yes, what's on your mind?" Captain Parry was a man you could talk to, he listened and he said yes or he said no. I said to him, "well I overheard a conversation last night and it strikes me we are going into action, we know we are going into action, whether we float or sink is another matter. Why can't we fly the New Zealand Ensign at the main?"

First of all he said "No, aren't we supposed to fly the White Ensign?" This was between him and me. I said "But it doesn't say we can't fly a blue one" which was true. After some consideration he looked at me and he said "Can we ask Navy Office's permission". I said "No



ABOVE: This photograph from the Navy Museum's photographic collection shows the ensigns flying at the Battle of the River Plate. The lower ensign shown here is part of the museum's flag collection. 13 December 1939.

Sir, it's Wireless Telegraph silence". "Oh I'd forgotten". "No Sir, we can't break silence for such a small matter", we would have given ourselves right away. He said "Alright put up the biggest one you've got, we'll fly it". That's how it happened. The simple story of it, as simple as that. I went away happy. Captain Parry carried on walking up and down. He had enough

on his mind without dammed things like blue ensigns and all that. That was my trigger not his. Next morning of course half past 6, ruffle and scuffle and there she was." ■

REFERENCE

Chief Yeoman of Signals L.C. Martinson D.S.M., DLA 0012



Stereoscopic Spotting Binoculars thought to be from ACHILLES' Director Control Tower and used by Washbourn during the Battle of the River Plate.

Lincoln C. MARTINSON

“The first thing I saw was a blob of smoke on the horizon. ...It was about 6.30 in the morning.... honestly I think everybody was relieved at last, the weight was off our shoulders, here it was. It was on”

Chief Yeoman of Signals Lincoln “Bully” Martinson who joined the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy in 1921 at 16 as a signal boy, had been serving on board the Leander-class cruiser HMS ACHILLES since early in 1939 and was quietly drinking a cup of tea when the German raider the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE came steaming into view shortly after dawn on 13 December 1939. As a result of a discussion the night before between Martinson and Captain Parry, the Battle Ensign along with the New Zealand flag was hoisted, much to the delight of her crew as they secured the ship for action and prepared to do battle.

The HMS EXETER was ordered to investigate and within minutes the German vessel was on the attack. The Royal Navy vessel responded with three salvos in quick succession, before sustaining a direct hit on B turret which Martinson in his signals capacity was witness to: “I watched the captain of the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE knock EXETER amidships, bang her

about aft, but he didn't finish the job. He didn't finish her off. Why he didn't, I don't know. Then he took us on and he took the AJAX on too. He damaged the AJAX and we got some very near misses, but he didn't actually damage us. We had a few holes here and there, shrapnel holes”

“Then of course I got mine,” continues Martinson. “Langsdorff put one 11-inch very close, it was a beautiful shot, it only wanted another 10 feet and we would have gone to glory on the bridge, the whole lot of us, but it just dropped short. The shot got me ... and Captain, Parry, he got shrapnel wounds in the leg. The shot should have really got the lot of us, but it didn't.” The ACHILLES in actual fact sustained two hits in this barrage from the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE and four men on board were killed and several others in addition to Martinson and Parry were injured.

Martinson was taken down to the Boy's Mess and was laying on top of the lockers,

“... thinking, well this is it, well so be it”, when one of his signalmen arrived with a tot of rum. “Now it wasn't an ordinary tot of rum,” recounts Martinson in his oral history. “It was about three tots of rum in one bottle and I will never forget it, it was neat. Anyway I took the tot of rum. I think that helped me to fight everything that happened because after I had that tot of rum I was ready for the world.”

Soon after Martinson was transferred to the sick bay and the ship's doctor did his best to save his leg that had been very seriously injured. “My knee was mangled to glory,” recalls Martinson. “They couldn't give me a new knee ... and I was hit in various other parts, a bit in the right hip and so on. ... Up top I could hear the occasional boom, boom and the signalman came down and put me in touch with what was going on.”

Later in the battle Captain Parry came down to the Sick Bay to check on Martinson and convey some extremely bad news that had come through on the



Wireless Telegraph from Navy Office in Wellington, when the AJAX had broken radio silence at the start of the action. “He came down and he asked me how I felt,” remembers Martinson. I told him I didn't feel good, naturally. He said, ‘well I have got a piece of news for you’ ... and I thought, what the devil can the piece of news be? ... I wasn't in the state to receive bad news or good news or any old bloody news, I was just in a state where I wanted to sleep and finish with it. However, the captain sat along side me and he said, ‘I must give you the news. It is my duty to do so.’ And he burst out crying. He was a fine man you know; he was a man of feeling and emotion, he said, ‘I'm sorry to tell you that your eldest daughter Joan has passed away.’

Martinson was patched up on board the ACHILLES and sent directly to the Navy hospital on the ship's return to New Zealand but ultimately lost his leg. He received a Distinguished Service Medal for his role in the Battle of the River Plate, and stayed on in the service as a non-combatant, as a trainer until the end of the war.

“I was proud of my uniform,” concludes Martinson. “And I was damned proud of the boys that fought at the Plate. So I thought to myself well if I can do something that's going to help, well I will do it, so I did and I finished off my service in 1945 in PHILOMEL. I put many Signalmen through, good and bad, but all for the same reason to, fight a war and that was that.” ■

KELLY ANA MOREY

REFERENCE

Chief Yeoman of Signals L.C. MARTINSON D.S.M.
DLA 0012

BELOW: WW2 Signal Lamp used at night to communicate between ships



ABOVE: Wounded Trimble and Martinson being lowered on to a barge to be transported ashore to hospital.



ABOVE: Naval Signal “Commence Hostilities at once with Germany”

Photograph taken during the battle - AJAX firing at GRAF SPEE





ABOVE: Beesley photographed above
"Trying to catch up on some sleep while
closed up at one of the guns"



Able Seaman "Harry" HUIA BEESLEY

The ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE's life may have come to a premature end in the shallow muddy waters of the Rio del Plata estuary, but, for Harry Beesley who was a seaman gunner on board HMS ACHILLES during the River Plate battle, 'the war was still on and we had to carry on with our duties.' Remembering the scuttling of the GRAF SPEE, 'action started, action carried on and action finished,' concludes the veteran.

HARRY BEESLEY-CABIN BOY

In 1932 16-year old Huia "Harry" Beesley, a cabin boy in the Merchant Navy, answered the call for young recruits for the New Zealand Division and was lucky to be one of 10 chosen from a pool of some 500 applicants. He subsequently trained as a seaman gunner and was on board the Leander-class cruiser ACHILLES in that capacity when the vessel set sail from New Zealand just two days before the outbreak of war. The vessel had been on patrol duty in the waters off the west coast of South America for some six weeks with a number of Royal Naval vessels before the fateful day it encountered the German pocket-battle ship.

ONE OR TWO CLOSE MISSES

'About 6.10, on the 13th December, recalls Beesley, 'the alarms went and it was all go. It was the GRAF SPEE, sighted in the horizon about 14-15 miles away. The tip of her mast was the only thing to be seen. It was full action stations. EXETER was despatched out to the port and within minutes there was a flash on the horizon and in a suitable time the shells started landing. My action stations was on the open P1HA¹ gun which is down on the iron deck, just below and aft [of] the bridge. We couldn't do much at all really [on our gun] because of the range distance. ...

¹ P1 HA gun was the port side forward open (unshielded) 4" (102mm) high angle anti aircraft gun. ACHILLES had four 4" guns, each in single open mountings, two on each side of the funnel. Later in the war they were each replaced by twin 4" guns in shielded mountings.

We just had to stay at our action stations until such time as things ceased. We fired a couple of shots, but to no avail at all.'

'There were one or two close misses,' continues Beesley, somewhat understatedly bearing in mind that his action station was hit. 'Unfortunately young Ian Grant who was along side of me copped it in the chest. He died immediately. A chap called, I think his name was Marr or Marra, I have just forgotten his name, he dropped to the deck. He was shot all around the buttocks. I picked him up, threw him over my shoulders like a sack of coal to get him down to the Sick Bay'

This initial engagement of approximately an hour and 20 minutes, between the German and Royal Navy ships saw HMS EXETER sustain substantial damage and record a total of 61 dead, and a further 23 injured. The other two Royal Navy vessels were moderately damaged in the engagement: HMS AJAX had 7 dead and 15 wounded and ACHILLES had lost four men with a further 9, including Captain Parry, wounded.

CAT AND MOUSE

From then on recalls Beesley taking up the story again, '... it was catch-as-catch-can. Running in towards the Graf Spee, firing a few, running out again. The way that ship was handled was marvellous It was flung about like a motor-boat you know and it was really marvellous.'

After a period of playing cat and mouse at



ABOVE: ACHILLES gun crews fall out on deck for fresh air, after the action. The turrets are still trained to port and the paint on the gun barrels has blistered from the heat of rapid firing.

sea during which the Graf Spee was holding its own, the German vessel abruptly turned for shore, heading up the estuary and into the nominally neutral Uruguayan harbour at Monte Video. 'Why the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE turned and went into Montevideo,' continues Beesley, 'I do not know. I don't think anybody will know to this day.' AJAX and ACHILLES followed the German vessel as far into shore as they could. Beesley remembers that the GRAF SPEE '... was in the shadow of the setting sun. She was running in to the west and you could see her silhouette into the setting sun and as she entered harbour we peeled off and waited outside.'

BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT: EXETER after battle, ACHILLES sailors kit, ACHILLES X and Y Turrets in action.



SURPRISE SCUTTLING

AJAX and ACHILLES both low on fuel and ammunition, and HMS CUMBERLAND which joined them after the battle, patrolled the harbour entrance for four nights awaiting the German ship's next move which came on the 17th of December. 'Well eventually, I think it was a Sunday,' says Beesley, remembering that late summer afternoon 70 years ago, 'when we got news that the Graf-Spee had sailed. Well that was it! It was tense! We closed up at action stations. I might add we never had much ammunition left anyway. I think there was only about ten rounds a gun left as I recall. She could

have blown us right out of the water had she known. Then all of a sudden there was a mighty flash on the horizon where ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE had run herself on to the English Bank, set charges and had exploded BOOM!'

'The next day,' continues Beesley, 'we cruised up close to her, dipped the flag. Yeah we dipped the flag to what was then a burned out hulk and then went on about our business.' ■

KELLY ANA MOREY

REFERENCE

Able Seaman Huia Beesley DLA 0010

Hans Wilhelm LANGSDORFF

20 March 1894 – 19 December 1939

On the 19th of December 1939, two days after scuttling the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE, Captain Hans Langsdorff, having considered his options, sat down in his room at the Naval Hotel in Buenos Aires and wrote letters to his family and superiors.

I am convinced ... he wrote to the German Ambassador ... that under the circumstances, no other course was available to me, once I had taken my ship into the trap of Montevideo. For with the ammunition remaining, any attempt to fight my way back to open and deep water was bound to fail. ... For a captain with a sense of honour, it goes without saying that his personal fate cannot be separated from that of his ship. ... I can do no more for my ship's company. Neither shall I any longer be able to take an active part in the present struggle of my country. ... I alone bear the responsibility for scuttling the pocket-battleship ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE. I am happy to pay with my life for any possible reflection on the honour of the flag. I shall face my fate with firm faith in the cause and the future of the nation and of my Führer ...

With his correspondence taken care of, Langsdorff lay down on a German Naval Ensign and shot himself. It was a dramatic and tragic end to the life of a naval officer who had always conducted himself with great loyalty, honour and integrity.



ABOVE: In WWI Langsdorff was awarded the Iron Cross 1st class.

AWARDED THE IRON CROSS

Langsdorff, the eldest son of a family with a history in legal and religious quarters, was born in Bergen in 1894. At 18, and very much against his parent's wishes, he entered the Kiel Naval Academy and quickly acquitted himself, gaining rapid promotion. His talents as an officer during the First World War saw the then 22-year-old, Lieutenant Langsdorff awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class in 1916, for his role in the Battle of Jutland and later receiving the Iron Cross 1st Class. It wasn't all about the navy though. In early 1924 Langsdorff, then 30, married Ruth Hager. A son, Johann, was born exactly 9 months later.

ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 saw Langsdorff posted for a little over a year, to the then brand new battleship ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE.

In 1937 Langsdorff was promoted to Captain. In late 1938 Langsdorff was given command of the vessel. Within months of this happening Germany was at war with Britain and Langsdorff was issued with orders to steam the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE for the South Atlantic to disrupt enemy commercial shipping. Once the vessel arrived off the South American coast Langsdorff and his crew had a productive 10 weeks, stopping and sinking nine British merchant ships with no loss of life.

However, the German ship's run of luck came to an end on the morning of 13 December it engaged the AJAX, ACHILLES and EXETER at the Battle of the River Plate.

72 HOURS RESPITE

The Battle over GRAF SPEE sought refuge in Montevideo harbour. The Uruguayan authorities gave the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE an extra 72 hours stay of execution over and above



ABOVE: For his service at the Battle of Jutland Langsdorff was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd class in 1916, he was 22.

the normal 24 hours allowed. This allowed Langsdorff to see to his injured and casualties, consult with his superiors and consider his options. Ultimately, under duress from Germany, Langsdorff elected to scuttle his vessel. When the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE's time ran out, the vessel was steamed slowly out of the estuary towards open water. On reaching the limit of Uruguayan territorial waters Langsdorff and his crew were taken off by Argentine barges. Langsdorff had requested permission to go down with his ship but had been denied by the Uruguayan authorities who didn't want his blood on their hands. As the sun set, the crew of the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE watched in silence as a series of planted charges blew up the pocket battle ship and it settled into the shallow water mud of the River Plate tidal estuary.

A MAN OF HONOUR

Hans Langsdorff was buried in the German section of the La Chacarita Cemetery in Buenos Aires, Argentina and was honoured by both his own people and the British and her allies for his honourable conduct. Langsdorff died a Captain's death; having followed his orders and faithfully fulfilled his duty while maintaining at all times his own personal code of honour and decency. ■

KELLY ANA MOREY

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1.



2.



3.



4.



5.

1. GRAF SPEE sailors bury their dead. Rumour had it that the coffins contained arms for use of interned crew members who broke free and returned to Germany.
2. Coffins containing German dead being landed at Montevideo from a barge.
3. Langsdorff salutes his dead crew members at their funeral.
4. Funeral procession of GRAF SPEE dead, Rio de Janeiro. There were 36 dead and many more wounded.
5. Langsdorff's Funeral

Dr. Hans J. Dietrich

CAPTAIN LANGSDORFF'S ADJUTANT

Dr Dietrich joined the German Navy in 1937 and after training as an officer cadet joined the pocket battleship GRAF SPEE. In 1999 while visiting Auckland, Dr Dietrich recorded an interview with the Navy Museum. In this Oral History he records the SPEE's deployment to the Atlantic prior to the outbreak of war and her engagement with ACHILLES, EXETER and AJAX at the River Plate. When the GRAF SPEE was scuttled Dr Dietrich became the adjutant to Captain Langsdorff. The crew of the GRAF SPEE were interned in Argentina and it was Dr Dietrich who discovered his Captain dead.

Dr Dietrich escaped from the internment camp, walked over the Andes to Chile and returned to Germany. He served in the war in E Boats and was captured by the British during the Normandy landings. He was taken to the United States eventually returning to Germany in 1946. Following a period at university he joined the German Diplomatic Service and was stationed in New Zealand in the 1960s.



ABOVE: Captain Langsdorff talks to the German Minister Herr Langmann at the quayside, Montevideo.

The following excerpts are from his 1999 interview:

Just after dawn on the morning of the 13th December 1939, the "Panzerschiff" ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE ran into the Royal Navy's Force 'G', EXETER, AJAX and ACHILLES, off the mouth of the River Plate that divides Uruguay and Argentina in South America. At that moment Hans Dietrich was a newly promoted Lieutenant on the GRAF SPEE.

"My brother had been in the Navy of the First World War and didn't come back, went down with his ship. There were several others in the family more or less concerned with the Navy. It was so to speak, a Navy family as far as my mother and I were concerned ..."

"GRAF SPEE was my first ship. Then

just before the war broke out we left Wilhelmshaven that was the harbour in the North Sea and went around England and into the Atlantic. We literally had to wait with our force for the British Air Force and so on. In order to avoid that, the ship went from Central Europe the other way around into the Atlantic then once we had arrived there the war broke out "GRAF SPEE commenced commerce raiding in the South Atlantic shipping lanes where she was supplied and refuelled by the ALTMARK, which also interned survivors from the nine ships sunk by the GRAF SPEE in the months prior to the River Plate.

"The ALTMARK was always hidden in the South Atlantic and we would signal that

we would meet them and get ammunition and food."

On the 2nd December, the Blue Star liner DORIC STAR, homeward-bound from New Zealand with a full cargo of meat, wool and dairy produce, succeeded in transmitting her position 3000 miles off the South American coast at the time of the attack, before she was sunk by the GRAF SPEE.

Dietrich recalls "The guns were normally directed DORIC STAR and it was ordered not to use its radio. The officers on the bridge wanted to shoot but the Captain said no, but the ship had given his position. The Captain realised that our position was known to the Allied forces we went westward."

GRAF SPEE left the area at high speed. But

Commodore Henry Harwood, Commander of Force 'G,' correctly anticipated that GRAF SPEE would probably cross the South Atlantic arriving in the area of the River Plate and Montevideo on or about the 12th December. His ships were there to meet the German pocket-battleship and the Battle of the River Plate began early the next morning.

"It was very shortly before 6 o'clock in the morning that the alarm bells rang, the shrill is a terrible noise indeed and so you wake up at once and that was the beginning..."

"I was under the deck and I could see and hear something but nothing special. I hadn't any idea who was there and what was going on. Then gradually it was clear that there were three ships of the allies. At the beginning we did not have a feeling for the shells exploding in the ships because we could reach much longer. My own action station was with the central Fire Control of the Medium Artillery. As they came closer to us I could feel shells exploding, amazing especially the ACHILLES coming so close in battle. They were shooting at a speed that was fantastic. Then later I was told we had found a shell in the bed of a Petty Officer not having exploded. The sailors from B Turret in ACHILLES later said they had shot so fast that they couldn't get a real shell and so they took the practise shell and that is what ended in the bed."

GRAF SPEE retreated into Montevideo Harbour to effect repairs sustained during the course of the Battle.

".... Langsdorff wasn't sure if the ship which had been hit in several parts, was seaworthy again There were holes especially on the left side further down very close to the waterline. I didn't really know what else as I was busy looking after the people we had taken from the merchantmen we had sunk."

Dietrich comments on the uncertain stay in Montevideo Harbour:

"Then the Committee started in Uruguay, first the Allies said the ship must leave and then turned around and to the astonishment of the people in Montevideo and the Government there, and said no, leave the GRAF SPEE until it is ready, hoping that more and more Royal Navy ships would come."

Dietrich's comment about the Committee in Uruguay refers to the intense diplomatic pressure being exerted on the Uruguayan Government in Montevideo at this time, that ultimately led to Captain Langsdorff's decision to take GRAF SPEE beyond the three mile limit off Montevideo Harbour

and scuttle her.

Captain Langsdorff transferred most of the crew of GRAF SPEE to the merchantman TACOMA and then scuttled the pocket-battleship. The crew on TACOMA were then joined by the Captain and his scuttling party and together they came ashore in Buenos Aires in Argentina where they were promptly interned under a gentle regime in an Immigration Camp. Langsdorff's suicide shocked everyone.

"The morning that he killed himself we had gone for breakfast. Then when we were all there I knocked at his door but nothing happened. I knocked again, nothing happened and a third time nothing happened. I opened the door and found him in full uniform lying on the floor on the flag of GRAF SPEE close to the window where he had been seated writing a letter to the Ambassador and another to his wife. He had shot himself in the right temple, the pistol having fallen out of his hand. It was terrible for the First Artillery Officer Ascher who mentioned afterwards to some Officers that he had given his pistol to the Captain who had demanded it on the pretext to use it as a defence weapon in case of need."

Dietrich escaped from the Internment Camp and with the aid of the German community in Argentina, walked over the Andes into Chile and returned to Germany.

"On orders from Berlin the Ambassador had to give the First Artillery Officer from



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Navy Museum Deputy Director Cliff Heywood, Dr Hans Dietrich and River Plate Veteran Eddie Telford pose in front of ACHILLES 6" turret 1999.

GRAF SPEE a false passport and money so that he could get back to Germany. He got away and unfortunately became the First Artillery Officer on BISMARCK which was then sunk by the British in the North Atlantic. Then another of the youngest Lieutenants and I decided that we would escape. The Ambassador did not give us a false passport or any money and said I have no orders and so on. But we had prepared everything and got some money from Germans in Buenos Aires. One drove us to the south but only halfway between Buenos Aires and the south cape. We hired a horse and rode high up in the Andes mountains. Two days later we were taken by a German family to the Consul General from the German Embassy. Then we got a passport and money because in the meantime Berlin had given an order. My friend went over the Pacific to Japan and I went north to Bolivia and then Brazil. I went from there in an Italian aircraft over to Africa, Italy and then Germany."

Hans Dietrich reported back to the Navy on his return to Germany. After a year patrolling the fjords in southern Norway he was promoted to Kapitän of a schnellboote, an E Boat¹ and joined the 5th E Boat Flotilla in Cherbourg in France where he was in action until the Allied landings in Normandy in 1944. He was captured by the British when his E Boat was sunk by a mine in the English Channel. He was taken to a camp North of London. They couldn't feed all the prisoners there and so they were sent to America and imprisoned in the United States before returning to Germany in late 1946. He was the only sibling in his family to survive the War.

Hans Dietrich studied at the University of Heidelberg and graduated with a Ph.D. in Law and joined the West German Foreign Service. He volunteered to come to New Zealand when a small Embassy opened here in 1953. He eventually became secretary of the New Zealand River Plate Veterans Association. At a Rotary Club address in Wellington in the 1990's he told A.G. Stacey, fellow River Plate Veteran.

"Now we two are here together again and getting along with each other as if nothing had happened. The reason for this is I think, that the River Plate was fought by all who took part in it as a square and fair fight. This is without doubt a very great thing." ■

RUSS GLACKIN

¹ E Boat: The Germans called them schnellboote- S-boats or fast boats and the British called them E Boats. They were a real threat to British coastal convoys and achieved some outstanding successes.

AB Gould peers out next to shrapnel hole from ACHILLES director tower. 13 Dec. 1939

INTRIGUE IN URUGUAY

When Captain Langsdorff took his damaged 'Panzerschiff' into Montevideo Harbour in neutral Uruguay to repair battle damage, he sparked off an intense diplomatic incident that ultimately led to his decision to scuttle GRAF SPEE in the sight of Montevideo. Journalists from around the world had rushed to the city. The eyes of the world were focussed on the unfolding drama.

Langsdorff's decision brought World War II, then only three months old, to a neutral Uruguay that was far distant from the major theatres of military operations. They were suddenly faced with the need to arbitrate a very tense situation between two of the main antagonists in the War. The British wanted to get the damaged GRAF SPEE out of Montevideo Harbour to finish off the threat she posed to their vital Atlantic supply line. The Germans wanted to repair their pocket-battleship to enable her to escape the Royal Navy and run for home to fight another day. It was a daunting task for the Uruguayan Government who had only the Articles of the international Hague Convention of 1907 to guide their decision-making, the terms of which were well-known to both Britain and Germany.

A DIPLOMATIC BATTLE

The opening salvoes of the diplomatic battle saw Langsdorff and Otto Langmann, the German Minister in Uruguay, ask the Uruguayans for the longest possible

stay in Montevideo. Long enough to repair their ship and enable the arrival of German submarines to help the GRAF SPEE reach the mouth of the River Plate. Initially the British Ambassador, Sir Eugen Millington-Drake, requested that Graf SPEE's stay be limited to twenty-four hours as per Article 12 of the Hague Convention which permitted belligerent warships to remain in neutral ports only for that length of time.

Despite sustaining damage which had knocked out all but one of the galleys and receiving sufficient hits to render her unseaworthy for a North Atlantic winter crossing, the survey undertaken in Montevideo deemed her still to have a reasonable fighting capacity. GRAF SPEE had come 300 miles at full speed, she was considered seaworthy and therefore it was decided she did not need additional time in port. Article 14 of the Convention only permitted a prolonged stay on account of damage or weather. In truth the ship did not have the resources to affect the necessary repairs and on leaving Montevideo Harbour GRAF SPEE

would have to face the guns of the waiting AJAX and ACHILLES now reinforced by the arrival of CUMBERLAND. If she stayed any longer than twenty-four hours the British insisted she should be interned.

CHANGE OF STRATEGY

Surprisingly then Commodore Harwood changed the British strategy and requested instead that Millington-Drake do everything possible to delay the GRAF SPEE's departure from Montevideo for at least five days. Armed with intelligence of the damage to the GRAF SPEE, he sought to gain time for Royal Navy reinforcements in the form of ARK ROYAL, RENOWN, NEPTUNE, DORSETSHIRE, SHROPSHIRE and three destroyers to arrive. They were still five days away.

Article 16 of the Hague Convention prevented belligerent warships leaving neutral ports less than twenty-four hours after the departure of a ship flying the flag of its adversary. To continually delay GRAF SPEE's departure Harwood suggested

that the Ambassador sail British merchant ships out of Montevideo each day.

72 HOURS REPRIEVE

While Langsdorff worked feverishly to repair the damage to the GRAF SPEE and the Royal Navy was rushing reinforcements to the River Plate, the Uruguayan Government, acting on the advice of their Technical Commission who were overseeing repairs to the ship (as per Article 17 of the Convention which permitted them to do so) decided that the Germans be given seventy-two hours to effect the necessary repairs.

Afraid that the Germans may have been considering crossing to Buenos Aires to give GRAF SPEE to neutral Argentina, the British Naval Attaché telephoned the Ambassador in Buenos Aires requesting him to arrange refuelling for two capital ships which would be arriving in the immediate future. This was to keep the imminent arrival of British naval reinforcements in the forefront of the German mind. Faced with the supposed approaching arrival of powerful Royal

Navy reinforcements, a threat heightened by constant German surveillance out to sea, Admiral Raeder, German Naval High Command, conferred with Adolf Hitler and then authorised Langsdorff's break-out to Buenos Aires. Raeder countenanced a scuttling so long as the destruction of GRAF SPEE was effective but opposed internment of the pocket battleship. Langsdorff's options were fast disappearing.

LANGSDORFF'S CHOICES NARROW

The Uruguayan deadline was insufficient to patch up the ship and its existing condition precluded any idea of breaking through to Germany. Insufficient ammunition existed to fight a way through what was perceived to be a rapidly strengthening Royal Navy blockade and the shallow waters of the Plate inhibited movement should a naval battle occur in the harbour. Similarly a break-out to Buenos Aires was discounted as it was questionable whether neutral Argentina would allow any longer for repairs than Uruguay. When the Uruguayan Government adhered to its decision that GRAF SPEE must put to sea by 2000 hrs on Sunday, 17th December or be interned, then scuttling was the only option left. Langsdorff made the decision to scuttle the GRAF SPEE but the watching world did not know that.

Harwood rated a successful breakout by GRAF SPEE at about 70% which further intensified the growing tension on the ships in the Royal Navy blockade as the deadline for the departure of GRAF SPEE drew closer. Would Langsdorff

take the battered GRAF SPEE out of the River Plate in a glorious fight to the death? Would he make a dash through territorial waters to Buenos Aires, only four hours away?

GRAF SPEE was the centre of world attention as thousands gathered to watch and millions listened to radio broadcasts from overseas commentators that had been gathering for days. The Americans were broadcasting from the highest building in Montevideo. At 1800 hrs a Nazi ensign was flown on GRAF SPEE's foremast and she headed out to sea but then altered course to the west before slowing and stopping. She put up a smoke screen followed soon after by a small flash and then a massive explosion. ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE was soon ablaze from end to end. The ship burned for a whole week.

Langsdorff had done all he could to ensure the safety of his ship's company and he felt, for his country. From his hotel room in Buenos Aires he wrote to the city's German ambassador to explain why he had reached the decision to scuttle the SPEE: "After a long inward struggle I reached the grave decision to scuttle the pocket-battleship GRAF SPEE in order to prevent that she should fall into the hands of the enemy." He lay down on the Spee's ensign and shot himself.

The funeral procession filled the streets and thousands of people filed past Langsdorff's coffin. A poignant end to the dramatic sequence of events which had followed the Battle of the River Plate. ■

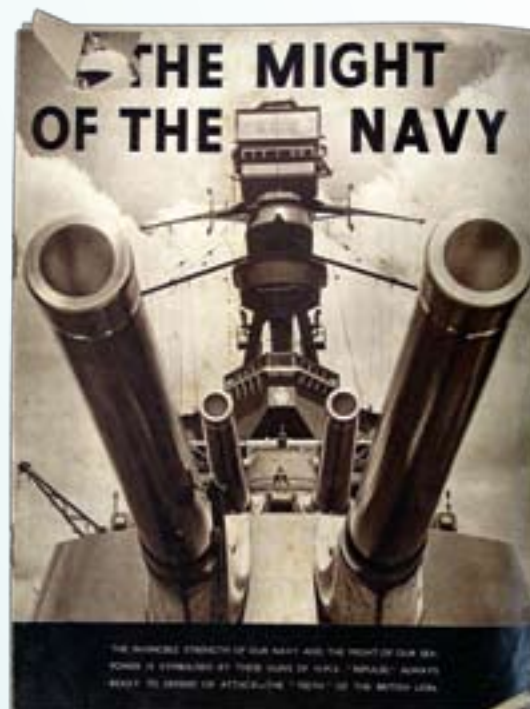
RUSS GLACKIN

1 Sir E. Millington-Drake, The Drama of GRAF SPEE and the Battle of the River Plate; A Documentary Anthology 1914-1964, Surrey: Peter Davies Ltd, 1964, p. 368



ABOVE: German Naval Pocket book. WW2
BELOW: GRAF SPEE leaving Montevideo





The Battle of the River Plate and the scuttling of the GRAF SPEE made world wide news.



HMS ACHILLES Silver Tray commemorating River Plate, used as a Fleet Trophy.



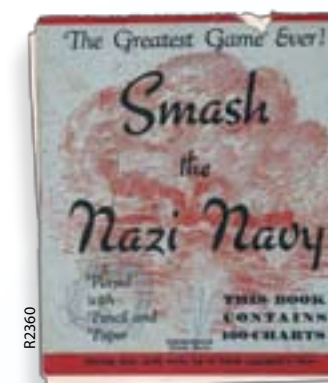
Telegram to Leading Seaman Terence Hutchins from his wife Violet after the battle, "God bless you very proud"-14 December 1939.



Tapestry Cushion made by Rt. Rev Gordon Melville M'Kenzie, who was chaplain onboard ACHILLES from June 1940 to January 1941.



German Souvenir Lifebuoy c1938



WW2 Family Game



RIGHT: Souvenir Felt Pennant 1939

Women's blue enamelled brass make up compact with ACHILLES Badge 1939

German Mauser 7.65mm model HSc pistol made in the 1930s



40th Anniversary souvenir pewter plate which belonged to River Plate veteran Seaman Boy Max Dorset. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for his actions at the battle.



This carving was presented by the Rotorua Maori Patriotic Committee in 1945 to HMNZS ACHILLES in appreciation and admiration of their service 1939-1945

Auckland's Achilles Point Memorial

'Fortiter in Re' – 'An unflinching resolve to persevere to the end'

Looking out towards Auckland Harbour is Achilles Point. The ashes of a number of River Plate Veterans are scattered around the point, a site named to honour those sailors.

Achilles Point is on a headland at the Eastern end of St. Heliers Bay and was formerly a ridge Pa named Whakamuhu or Te Pani-o-Horowiri.

Services were taken at the point from its beginning but it was Reverend G. T. Robson who was the first naval chaplain to take a service there in 1951. Admiral Sir Edward Parry, once again with his old Ship's company, stood at a sunset ceremony organised by the River Plate Veterans Association, and remembered their battle in 1939.

Sir Ernest Davies, Mayor of Auckland wrote 'I have the honour to enclose the decision of the Auckland City Council to name a prominent Auckland Landmark ACHILLES POINT in recognition of the gallant part played by the New Zealand cruiser H.M.S. ACHILLES in the naval engagement with the GRAF SPEE. As New Zealand's Naval Base is at Auckland, citizens here are particularly proud of the performance of H.M.S. ACHILLES and the new chapter it has written in the naval history of our time.'

So when ACHILLES entered Auckland Harbour the New Zealand Ensign and Trafalgar Signal² were being proudly flown from the newly named point on some quickly erected flag-poles. No doubt the ACHILLES's Ship's company saw and

at a public ceremony on December 13 it was officially opened, a year after the battle date. All officers and men of the ACHILLES and their next of kin were invited. Among those in attendance was Chief Yeoman of Signals, L. C. Martinson D.S.M., who was still in recovery from the wounds he sustained in the battle. Commodore Parry spoke and the Minister of Defence dedicated and named it.

The original bronze memorial plaque on the point reads:

This reserve is dedicated to commemorate the gallant performance of HMS ACHILLES and the bravery of the captain, officers and ship's company in the victorious naval battle fought in the South Atlantic off the River Plate on December 13th 1939.

This year in a joint project between the RNZN and the Auckland City Council the lookout is being refurbished, finishing and improving the work that was begun in 1940. A new naval mast will be erected, hard landscaping, paving and seating will be added.

The original memorial plaque will be joined by two others which will help commemorate the four sailors who died at the battle of the river plate: three 19 year olds, Ordinary Seaman I.W. Grant, buried at sea 14 Dec 1939 in the River Plate; Telegraphist Frank Stennett and Ordinary Telegraphist Neville Milburn. Also 27 year old Able Seaman Archie Shaw who was also buried at sea at the mouth of the River Plate on 14 Dec 1939.

The refurbished memorial will be officially opened at a dawn ceremony on the 13 December 2009, 70 years to the day after the decisive Battle. Local Tangata Whenua will bless the site and a naval Ceremony at 10.30 will honour the men who fought in the battle. ■

TERRY MANSON

REFERENCE

Corbett, P, *Achilles Point Memorial Report*, Peter Corbett Heritage Consultants For The Royal New Zealand Navy Museum, May 2006.

Graham Marchant, *Parks Adviser (Environment-Heritage)*, Arts Community & Recreation Group. Auckland City Council. Conversation October 2009

¹ Auckland City Archives, January 1940.

² Trafalgar Signal: Before the Battle of Trafalgar Admiral Lord Nelson sent a signal to the assembled Royal Naval Fleet stating, "England expects every man to do his duty." Each flag carries a letter of the signal and so the Trafalgar Signal carries a huge impact.



Planned refurbishment of Achilles Point 2009. Drawing supplied by Brian Perry Civil (BPC) who are currently working on the construction.

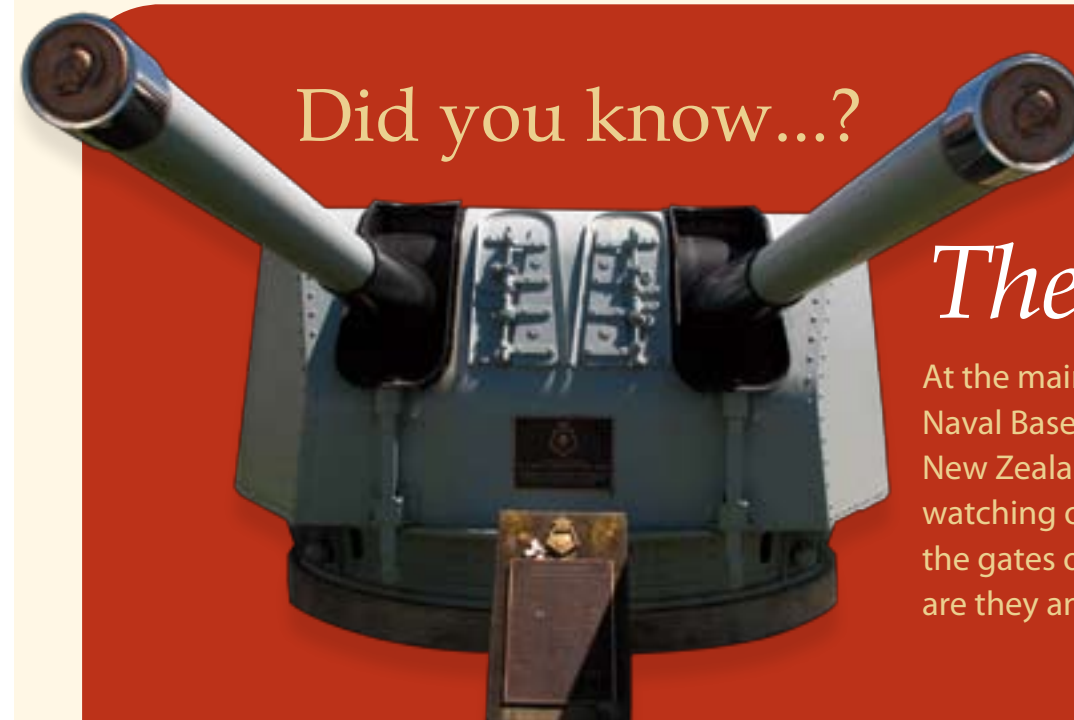
New Zealanders were proud of the heroes and the New Zealand Herald of 17 January 1940, ran an article entitled "Naval Victory H.M.S. ACHILLES, Honour From City" writing "In order that the gallant share of H. M. S. Achilles . . . may be perpetually commemorated, the City Council has decided that the prominent headland beyond St Heliers . . . shall be named "Achilles Point," and a tablet with a suitable inscription will be erected".

Writing to Winston Churchill that month

appreciated the honour being shown them, a prelude to the massive turnout in Queen Street.

In September that year construction of the Achilles Point Memorial began, paid for by the council and worked on by the unemployed. It was quickly completed and

Did you know...?



The Sentinels

At the main gate to the Devonport Naval Base – the home of the Royal New Zealand Navy, stand two sentinels watching over all who pass through the gates of our Navy of Today. What are they and how did they get there?

They are in fact one of the four twin 6 inch Turrets and the Director Control Tower (DCT) from the Leander Class Cruiser HMS ACHILLES, later renamed HMNZS ACHILLES, then INS DELHI. The turret was gifted to the People of New Zealand by the Indian Government when the ship decommissioned as INS DELHI for the last time in June 1978 in Bombay.

The turret, actually Y Mounting¹ (from the back of the ship), was shipped to New Zealand together with other significant items including the DCT and the Battle Honours board. The Honours Board is today in the Naval Chapel of St Christopher.

Originally the turret and control tower were landed and assembled at the Museum of Transport and Technology (MOTAT) in Western Springs, Auckland. They were refurbished with the assistance of the Navy and opened to public viewing after a ceremony conducted at the site on Saturday 10 May 1980. To signify the importance of this artifact to New Zealand the Prime Minister of the day, Robert Muldoon, opened the new exhibit.

Sadly however the passing of time was not kind to these two objects and they were subjected to attacks of vandalism resulting in many of the glass armour plated windows, which had stood up to 11" German shells, being shattered by uncaring vandals along Point Chevalier's Meola Road.

Not surprisingly, the ACHILLES' men were not happy to see this happen to their old ship and set about having these items removed to the Naval Base at Devonport where they would be under constant watch outside the Main Gate Security Office. Accordingly the River Plate veterans started fund raising to move the turret over the Auckland Harbour bridge along with the DCT and to think through all the associated problems involved in moving these large and heavy artifacts- but that is a story for another day.

From the River Plate Veteran's Association's funds and friends and relatives the Veterans raised \$14,000 to have the turret relocated but the total cost of relocation was in excess of \$30,000. This cost was due to the turret and tower having to have

purpose built plinths made from reinforced concrete owing to the their weight, the turret was 69 tons on its own. 1994 saw a magnificent homecoming with many veterans present to witness the occasion.

After their placement in the Naval Base museum staff assessed the damage to both objects. The DCT was found to be in a very poor state of repair with water inside it, birds entering through the many broken windows, had made their home where men had fought and died. It was decided that the DCT should be removed and restored to protect it for the future. At the same time the turret in less disrepair, would have to await its refurbishment for another day (see article on the website).

The DCT was taken over to the North Yard and completely gutted of all it's machinery and technical instrumentation, much of which was broken along the way. Copies of "The Bombay Times" of 1966 were found behind instrument panels! One interesting aside was in order to repaint the interior back to its original colours, museum staff contacted six former crew members as to what colour the compartment had been and, naturally enough, received six different answers! The colour was actually found behind an actuator which was in situ from the time the turret was assembled by Camel Laird, the ships builder, in 1933. The restoration work took seven full weeks to complete to a very high standard. When those who had served in this part of the ship were shown the finely restored turret, it bought tears to their eyes and memories flooded back of that Battle fought so long ago.

Today, some fifteen years after relocation, these sentinels are perhaps the two most viewed items in HMNZS PHILOMEL. Modern day sailors stand back in awe and admire the deeds of those who have gone before them when they fought on the ship that carried this magnificent turret. We also remember with pride the commitment of the young men who gave their lives in the Director Control Tower on the morning of 13 December 1939 – perhaps they are the true sentinels watching over us. ■

CLIFF HEYWOOD
Deputy Director 2009.

¹ Y Mounting: This was at the back of the ship together with the X Turret. The Front of ship had the A and B Turrets. The Y Turret was the Royal Marine's Turret.



ST CHRISTOPHERS CHAPEL AND THE ACHILLES CONNECTION

In 1926 when Chaplain G.T. Robson (Padre Robby) entered the Navy, as its first Chaplain, he conducted the first regular church services in the Classroom on the football field at the fledgling naval base. When the base was significantly upgraded in the mid 1930's 'Robby' asked that provision be made for a permanent chapel.

Accordingly St Christopher's Chapel was included within the new all purpose recreational facility which included a gymnasium by day, movie theatre at night in one section and a Chapel in the other for Sunday Service, folding divider doors allowing the size of the chapel to expand for special large services. Named after the patron Saint of Sailors the chapel was consecrated at a ceremony on 20 June 1943.

Over the years this building has undergone many alteration and additions, the first just after the end of WW II with the installation of the Memorial window which boasts as its centre piece the Ships Wheel from the old Cruiser PHILOMEL. Other stained glass windows have been donated by kindred associations including two windows relocated from St Brandon's Chapel when it closed at the former HMNZS Tamaki.

It is also home to a number of historic items which have links to HMS Achilles including:

- **HONOURS BOARD:** HMS ACHILLES Battle Honours Board.
- **PLAQUE:** Remembers HMS ACHILLES men of the NZ Division of the Royal Navy to be killed in action. Battle of the River Plate 13th December 1939.
- **SANCTUARY MEMORIAL WINDOW WW2:** Central Stained glass window in Chapel Sanctuary depicts the names of all the New Zealand ships who served in WW2 including ACHILLES in the top left quadrant.
- **BATTLE ENSIGN:** ACHILLES Battle Ensign was housed in the Chapel for many years but is now housed within the Navy Museum collection for safe keeping.
- **CHAPEL ENTRANCE:** The stained glass window on the right of the covered entrance way depicts St Christopher and below it has the ACHILLES ships badge with the words "In all time of danger be their defence".
- **ACHILLES ROAD:** The road on the naval base which leads past the front of the Chapel is called ACHILLES Road honouring ACHILLES ships' companies.
- **TREES WITH PLAQUES:** Trees planted at the front of the Chapel with commemorative plaques have two associated with ACHILLES. One tree is "In Memory of all River Plate Veterans 1939" and the other tree is "In memory of all who sailed in HMNZS ACHILLES".
- **CANDLESTICKS AND CROSS:** Presented by Chaplain Robson who served on board ACHILLES.

Sanctuary Memorial Window. The surround is from the helm of the old cruiser, HMS PHILOMEL.



NAVAL CHAPLAINS

BATTLE EXPERIENCES are traumatic and onboard ship are naval chaplains, officers without rank, who care for the spiritual needs of the ship's company and pray over the dead. They live through the same circumstances yet extend comfort and support. Unlike all other officers in the service, the naval chaplain has no rank as his parishioners may range from Admiral to Seaman Boy. We do not have a record of the chaplain who served in ACHILLES at the Battle of the River Plate. Chaplain Gordon Melville McKenzie was the chaplain who served in ACHILLES from June 1940. In January 1941 he was posted to HMS TAMAKI, the training establishment on Moutihi Island. He later became Bishop of Wellington. Among the collection items from naval chaplaincy we hold Chaplain Robson's communion set, complete with communion wafers. ■

ABOVE: Chaplain Robson's Communion Set.

BELOW: ACHILLES' Chapel



FURTHER READING

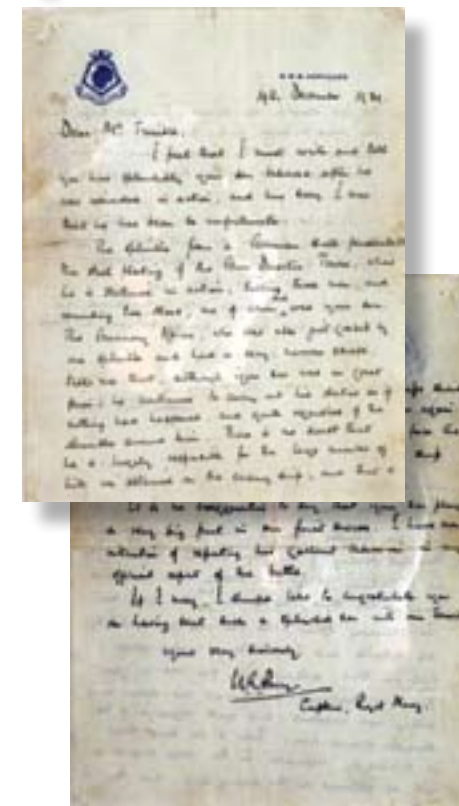
Further articles about the Battle of the River Plate and Letters to the Editor for this issue are on the website www.navymuseum.mil.nz



SERGEANT TRIMBLE'S

LETTER AND MEDALS

Trimble was in the DCT during the battle and although badly wounded carried on passing the range of the enemy to the guns. For his bravery and commitment he was awarded the prestigious and rare Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. Captain Parry wrote to his mother informing her of her son's courage. The museum holds all 5 of Trimble's medals and Parry's letter, which were donated by the Trimble family in 1989. ■



ABOVE: Ordinary Seaman Ian Grant, died 18 years old.



ROLL OF HONOUR

Battle of the River Plate 13th December 1939

HMS ACHILLES

4 Killed

Ian W. Grant

Neville J. Milburn

Archibald C.H. Shaw

Frank Stennett

Ordinary Seaman

Ordinary Telegraphist

Able Seaman

Telegraphist

HMS EXETER

61 Killed

HMS AJAX

7 Killed

GRAF SPEE

36 Killed

Lest we forget

THE White ensign

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E-NEWSLETTER: TE WAKA

Keep in touch with progress on the new Navy Museum project by subscribing to our free monthly emailed newsletter Te Waka.

Contact: Christine.hodgson@nzdf.mil.nz to be put on our mailing list.

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Anyone who would like to contribute an article to The White Ensign is asked to first contact the Editor. To join or leave our mailing list.

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NAVY WEEK



New Zealand expects...

THAT EVERYONE THIS WEEK
WILL INVEST IN THE

**3rd LIBERTY
LOAN**

NAVY MUSEUM

Te Waka Taonga o Te Taua Moana o Aotearoa