

H.M.S. ACHILLES

RECORD OF HMS ACHILLES

HMNZS Achilles was the seventh ship of that name to serve in the Royal Navy. Her ship's badge bore the helmeted head of Achilles and the motto *Fortiter in Re, Unyielding in Action*'.

The first Achilles was a wooden schooner, purchased in 1747 for service in the West Indies. In the following year she was taken by two Spanish privateers between Jamaica and Martinique in a fierce action in which she lost a large number of her crew killed and wounded.

The second Achilles, launched in 1757, was a Fourth Rate of 1234 tons and 61 guns. In 1758 she helped to capture the French *Raisonné*, which was taken into the Royal Navy and which Nelson joined as his first ship in 1771. The Achilles, in 1759, flew the flag of Rear-Admiral Rodney in the squadron which bombarded Le Havre during the operations of the Seven Years' War. In 1761 the Achilles was one of the squadron which captured Belle Isle. She was sold out of the service in 1784.

The third Achilles was a small store-ship, built in 1781 and sold a few years later.

The fourth Achilles, launched at Gravesend in 1798, was a ship of 1930 tons and 74 guns. She was present at Trafalgar, under the command of Captain Richard King, and was the sixth ship in the lee line led by Vice-Admiral Collingwood. The French fleet at Trafalgar included an *Achille*, of 74 guns, which was blown up during the action. The fourth Achilles had a long life of 66 years, being finally sold out of the Navy in 1864.

The fifth Achilles, launched in 1861, was notable as being one of the first 'ironclads' in the Royal Navy. She was one of the squadron, commanded by Sir Geoffrey Hornby, which in 1871 forced its way through the Dardanelles to Constantinople. The Achilles was present at the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882.

The sixth Achilles, launched in 1905, was an armoured cruiser of 13,350 tons displacement, mounting six 9.2-inch and four 7.5-inch guns. She was not present at the Battle of Jutland on 31 May 1916 as she was away refitting at the time. On 16 March 1917, in company with the armed boarding steamer *Dundee*, the Achilles sank the German raider *Leopard*, which was disguised as a Norwegian tramp steamer, north of the Shetland Islands. The Achilles was broken up in 1919.

The seventh Achilles was a light cruiser of 7030 tons displacement, 554 ft 6 in' in length, and 55 ft 3 in in breadth. She was built by Cammell Laird and Company Ltd. at Birkenhead, being laid down on 11 June 1931, launched on 1 September 1932, and completed on 10 October 1933. Her original armament consisted of eight 6-inch and four 4-inch guns, but she was re-armed in 1943-44 with six 6-inch guns, eight 4-inch anti-aircraft guns, and fifteen 40-mm anti-aircraft guns. She also had eight 21-inch torpedo-tubes in two quadruple mountings. She was fitted with geared turbines driving four propeller shafts and developing 72,000 horsepower for a speed of 32 knots. The Achilles was on loan to New Zealand from March 1936 to September 1946. She was purchased by India in 1948 and renamed *Delhi* and has since served in the Indian Navy under that name.

Outbreak of War: Cruise of HMS Achilles

THE Achilles had returned to Auckland on 18 August 1939 from a cruise in the South Sea Islands and spent the following week in company with the *Leander* in exercises in the Hauraki Gulf. In the meantime the situation in Europe was deteriorating rapidly, and on 24 August the Prime Minister's Office informed the New Zealand Naval Board that the Government had decided to adopt the 'Alert Stage' as prescribed in the War Book, in which was tabulated what every Department of State had to do in the event of war and how and when to do it. Each department had its own chapter arranged on an identical plan in sections, each of which dealt with a successive phase of the preparation for an emergency and for war.

On 23 August a signal was made to HMS Wellington recalling her to Auckland from her cruise in the South Sea Islands, and orders were issued to the *Leander* and Achilles and the sloops to complete to full war storage. Two days later instructions were received from the Admiralty that the *Leith* and Wellington were to proceed from Auckland to Singapore with the utmost despatch.

The last days of August were a period of intense activity in the naval dockyard at Devonport. The exercises of the *Leander* and Achilles had been planned to last a fortnight, but they were cut short on 25 August when the ships returned to Auckland. The

Leander entered Calliope Dock that evening for bottom cleaning and painting and the Achilles was docked on the following day. The Leith sailed for Townsville and Singapore in the forenoon of 28 August. At five o'clock that evening the cruisers were reported as ready for service, the war complement of the Achilles having been completed with active-service ratings from the Leander and Philomel. Both cruisers were placed at twelve hours' notice for sea.

Meanwhile, many other steps were being taken, in accordance with the plan laid down in the War Book, to bring the naval forces of the Dominion to a state of immediate readiness. The Government was kept fully informed on the measures that were being taken in the armed forces of Great Britain to meet the rapidly worsening situation. For example, general messages outlined the 'preparations being pushed forward to counter immediately submarine and mining attack in the event of the present critical situation leading to war'. It was suggested that the New Zealand Government might 'consider the desirability of any possible similar steps for the protection of their own harbours'. Messages were also exchanged between the governments of New Zealand and Australia outlining the naval preparations in their respective spheres.

An Admiralty message of 25 August informed the New Zealand Naval Board that the 'defensive arming of merchant ships already stiffened is to be proceeded with now'. The Naval Secretary informed the Minister of Defence that, in accordance with Cabinet approval given on 21 June 1939, the Rangatira and Matua of the Union Steam Ship Company had been stiffened to take defensive armament and the Awatea was being similarly prepared at Sydney. The Maunganui had been stiffened in 1914-18. Preliminary arrangements were being made to mount guns in those ships. The gun crews would be drawn from the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and would be available by the time the ships were ready.

At 6.30 in the morning of 29 August the Governor-General received a telegram from the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs stating that 'in view of the critical situation vis-a-vis Germany and for reasons which will be fully appreciated, including the protection of trade', the Admiralty had requested that ships of the naval forces be held in immediate readiness and, where applicable, should move towards their war stations in accordance with the dispositions previously laid down: one New Zealand cruiser to join the West Indies Force. The message added that similar measures had been taken in respect of ships of the Royal Navy.

Prompt action on this message was taken by Navy Office. The Achilles received her sailing orders for the West Indies at nine o'clock that morning, and five hours later she put to sea on her way to Balboa.

It had been long decided that in the event of war a New Zealand military force would be sent to garrison Fanning Island, an important mid-Pacific link in the submarine cable connecting New Zealand with Canada. Almost exactly twenty-five years before—on 7 September 1914—a landing party from the German light cruiser Nurnberg, a unit of Admiral Graf Spee's Pacific Squadron, had cut the cable and destroyed the equipment of the station on Fanning Island. On 25 August 1939 the Government asked the British authorities whether a preliminary detachment or a full establishment of troops should be sent to garrison the island and at what date this was most desirable. Four days later a reply was received that the British Government 'would be grateful if the preliminary force could move at once to Fanning Island' and suggesting that 'it might be transported in a cruiser of the New Zealand Naval Forces'.

"During September 1939 the Rangatira and Matua and three overseas ships were fitted at the Devonport Dockyard with one 4-inch gun for defensive purposes. A 4-inch gun was also shipped to Sydney and mounted in the Awatea"

Accordingly, a detachment of two officers and thirty men embarked in the Leander, which sailed from Auckland at five o'clock in the afternoon of 30 August and proceeded at 24 knots on the 3000-mile passage to Fanning Island. In a message to the Governor-General of New Zealand, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs said that 'His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom much appreciate the action taken and, in particular, the speed with which it was executed'.

The Wellington arrived at Auckland from her interrupted cruise to the South Sea Islands early on 30 August. This vessel was docked for cleaning and painting and, after completing full war storage, sailed for Townsville and Singapore on Sunday, 3 September. Thus, within the week, the two cruisers and two escort vessels on the New Zealand Station had been brought to a state of complete and instant readiness for action and despatched on their several missions – proof of the efficiency and foresight of the naval administration and dockyard arrangements.

On 1 September the Prime Minister's Department informed the Naval Board that the proclamation of emergency, in terms of the Public Safety Conservation Act 1932, had been signed by the Governor-General. In the early hours of next morning the 'Warning Telegram' was received from London announcing that the 'Precautionary Stage' had been adopted against Germany and Italy. This

meant that relations with these countries had become so strained that the Government had found it necessary to take precautions against a possible surprise attack and to initiate preparations for war. The State Departments concerned could now take the action prearranged in the War Book.

Officers for naval control-service duties at Navy Office, Wellington, and at Auckland had already been appointed, as well as the naval officer in charge at Lyttelton and district intelligence officers at that port and at Port Chalmers. Consequent on the adoption of the 'Precautionary Stage' in New Zealand on 2 September, the examination services were put into operation forthwith at the defended ports of Wellington, Auckland, and Lyttelton. Arrangements were made for publication in the press of the Public Traffic Regulations, which were also issued as Notices to Mariners. The Army Department vessel Janie Seddon was made the examination steamer at Wellington – a duty she performed almost continuously for nearly six years. The Hauti and John Anderson were requisitioned for service as examination vessels at Auckland and Lyttelton respectively. Staffs were mobilised for the examination services, port war signal stations, and wireless stations at Auckland, Wellington, and Lyttelton, as well as for Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve headquarters at Wellington and to complete the complement of HMS Philomel at Auckland.

Arrangements were also completed for the immediate establishment of approximately sixty coastwatching stations in New Zealand. Armed guards were placed at vital points at the naval base and armament depot at Auckland, as well as on magazines and oil installations at that and other ports. Cabinet approved that Shipping Control Emergency Regulations be made, and a general postal and telegraphic censorship was established.

Authority to mobilise the naval forces of New Zealand as well as the reservists of the Royal Navy in the Dominion was given by Cabinet in the early hours of 3 September 1939. At the same time authority was granted to institute coast-watching in New Zealand. Navy Office took immediate steps, by the issue of Naval Mobilisation Emergency Regulations, to call up officers and ratings of the New Zealand divisions of the Royal Naval Reserve and the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

The Admiralty signal to all His Majesty's Ships to 'Commence hostilities against Germany' was made at eleven o'clock on the morning of 3 September. On that day the Prime Minister's Department informed the New Zealand Naval Board that 'war has broken out against Germany' as from 9.30 p.m. (New Zealand time).

The first consideration of the Admiralty was the security of communications and shipping at sea. Shipping tonnage was a cardinal factor in the war. On the outbreak of hostilities, instructions were sent to British merchant vessels in all parts of the world to darken ship by night. They were also warned to avoid focal areas and prominent landfalls as far as possible and to make large divergences from the ocean tracks normally followed. A further warning was issued by the Admiralty that it was vital for the safety of individual vessels that wireless silence should be strictly maintained, except in the case of an emergency. On 3 September Cabinet approved that Shipping Control Emergency Regulations be made, enabling control over merchant shipping to be exercised in New Zealand.

At the outbreak of hostilities the New Zealand Naval Forces included one minesweeping vessel, the Wakakura, which normally was employed as a training ship for the New Zealand division of the RNVR. When the war started three Auckland fishing trawlers – James Cosgrove, Thomas Currell, and Humphrey – the first of six proposed minesweeping craft, were requisitioned and fitted out. Each was armed with a 4-inch gun and depth-charges and fitted with wireless telephone and telegraph equipment and minesweeping gear, the work being carried out in the naval dockyard at Devonport. The James Cosgrove was commissioned for service on 10 October 1939 and the Thomas Currell and Humphrey six days later.

The Achilles had received her sailing orders at nine o'clock in the morning of 29 August. She was instructed to 'proceed at the best available speed to Balboa', where she was expected to arrive on 17 September. In the meantime she was to come under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief America and West Indies. During the morning the ship completed her war complement as far as possible. A draft of ratings from the Philomel and two junior naval reserve officers from the Leander joined the Achilles, which slipped from her berth at the Devonport Naval Dockyard at 1.30 p.m. and went to sea. The ship's company then numbered 567, of whom 26 officers and 220 ratings were from the Royal Navy and 5 officers and 316 ratings were New Zealanders.

The Achilles was far out in the Pacific when, at 11.30 p.m. on 2 September, in accordance with orders from the Commander-in-Chief America and West Indies, course was altered for Valparaiso, Chile, and speed increased to 17 knots. She was instructed to consult the British Naval Attaché at Valparaiso and, 'in the event of hostilities, to take such immediate action as was considered necessary'.

The Admiralty signal 'Commence hostilities against Germany' was received in the Achilles at 0.53 a.m. (ship's time) on 3 September. From that time action stations were exercised at dawn and dark and the ship was darkened at night. From 9 September

onward, as the Achilles approached the more frequented waters of the South American coast, the ship's company was kept at cruising stations by night and, during conditions of low visibility, by day. No ships were sighted on the passage across the Pacific.

The Achilles arrived in Valparaiso roads at 12.25 p.m. on 12 September. She saluted the country with twenty-one guns and the flag of Rear-Admiral C. K. Garcia in the battleship Almirante Latorre¹ with thirteen guns. Both salutes were returned. During the afternoon Captain Parry called on Vice-Admiral J. Allard, Director of Naval Services, who returned the call in person – a most unusual honour for a ship commanded by a captain – and was saluted with seventeen guns on leaving the ship.

As in August 1914, the outbreak of war had almost completely halted the considerable German trade in those waters, as it had in most parts of the world. German merchant ships lying in ports on the west coast of South America and capable of being armed were a potential threat to British trade. After consultation with the British Naval Attaché to Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, Captain Parry had decided to visit Talcahuano and Puerto Corral and then proceed north to Callao in Peru, making a call at the Juan Fernandez Islands, about which no reports had been received,¹ when he received from the Commander-in-Chief America and West Indies a list of ports where German influence was active and German ships were known to call. Parry decided to visit as many of these ports as possible and omit the call at Juan Fernandez. As the arrival of the Achilles had been reported in the Chilean newspapers, his general policy would be to advertise her presence as much as possible.

"Almirante Latorre, 30,000 tons, ten 14-inch guns; built in England for Chile, 1912–15; served in Royal Navy as HMS Canada, 1915–19; delivered to Chile 1920"

During her brief stay at Valparaiso the Achilles took in fresh provisions and 1365 tons of fuel-oil. Parry heard later from the Naval Attaché that the Chilean authorities were impressed by the Achilles' strict observance of their neutrality laws in sailing within twenty-four hours after a long sea passage and a busy day in harbour. Admiral Allard said that, although his country's neutrality laws allowed a belligerent warship to load only sufficient fuel to reach the nearest port of a neighbouring state, he realised that it might be necessary to proceed at full speed and he allowed the Achilles to be re-fuelled accordingly. As there was a shortage of oil fuel in Chile at that time, this was a particularly friendly action.

During the next six weeks the Achilles patrolled the rugged coasts of Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. She called at many ports and anchorages bearing Spanish names that were well known to British navigators of past centuries. The advent of the Achilles, the sole Allied warship in those waters, sufficed to hold German trade at a standstill and virtually to immobilise seventeen German merchant ships totaling 84,000 tons along a coastline of some 5000 miles from the Panama Canal to Cape Horn. Thus was exemplified the truth of the old saying that nine-tenths of naval warfare is made up of the continuous drudgery and monotony of patrols and the search for enemy ships which are not there but would be if the patrols were not.

After a stay of barely twenty-four hours the Achilles sailed from Valparaiso on 13 September and steamed south to Talcahuano and Puerto Corral. There were three German merchant ships in harbour at Talcahuano – Frankfurt, 5522 tons, Osorno, 6951 tons, and Tacoma, 8268 tons. They had full crews on board and apparently there was nothing to prevent their sailing at any time when the coast was clear. Returning north on 15 September, the Achilles looked in at the anchorage of Caleta de la Fragata at the northern end of Isla Mocha, where Drake had spent two days in November 1578. No ships were seen there or at Isla Santa Maria. It was a few miles to the westward of Santa Maria that the Battle of Coronel was fought on 1 November 1914, when the cruisers Good Hope and Monmouth were sunk by Admiral Graf Spee's cruiser squadron.

"The Juan Fernandez Islands lie about 360 miles west of Valparaiso. In the early months of the war of 1914–18, the cruisers of Admiral Graf Spee's Pacific Squadron flagrantly violated the neutrality of Chile by using the islands as a coaling and supply base. The cruiser Dresden, which escaped the Battle of the Falkland Islands, was sunk at anchor there by HMS Glasgow on 14 March 1915. Based on the doctrine of 'hot chase', a British apology for this breach of neutrality was accepted by the Chilean Government"

On 16 September the Achilles intercepted a wireless message from the Norddeutscher Lloyd steamer Lahn, 8498 tons, informing the radio station at Talcahuano that she was about to enter harbour. At the time the Achilles was about 70 miles to the northward and a radio direction-finding bearing confirmed the Lahn's position at the entrance to Talcahuano and thus well within Chilean territorial waters. The Lahn, which was regularly employed in the Australian trade, had been last heard of at Sydney, whence she was to have sailed on 5 September for Germany. Shortly after midnight of 25–26 August, however, she left her anchorage in Sydney harbour and, without a Customs clearance or a pilot, went to sea. The ship was fully bunkered, but was short of fresh provisions which had been ordered for delivery on 26 August. After clearing Sydney heads, the Lahn had steamed across the Pacific to the Chilean coast.

At that time it was officially computed that 237 German merchant ships totaling 1,204,000 tons were either in or on their way to neutral ports or endeavoring to get back to Germany. By the end of December 1939, at least twenty ships totaling 134,250 tons had been scuttled by their crews after interception by British or French cruisers, fifteen others totaling 74,800 tons had been captured, and forty-eight totaling 381,000 tons had arrived in Germany.

Proceeding north during the next five days the Achilles visited numerous ports and anchorages on the coasts of Chile and Peru, including Coquimbo, Huasco, Antofagasta, and Iquique. A number of neutral ships were sighted at sea or in harbour and one German ship was found at Coquimbo. For the most part the coast was rugged, barren, and uninteresting.

The Achilles anchored at Callao, chief port of Peru, early in the morning of 21 September and saluted the country with twenty-one guns. Less than an hour after her arrival the cruiser intercepted a wireless message from the German ship Leipzig, 5898 tons, reporting her approach to the harbour. Captain Parry at once ordered the Achilles to get under way. The German ship was then seen to be well within territorial waters and it was evident that she could not be captured; she anchored off the entrance to the harbour a few minutes later. Although the departure of the Leipzig from Guayaquil in Ecuador, some 650 miles to the northward, on 19 September had been reported to Callao the same day, the Achilles did not receive this intelligence till after the ship had arrived. 'This episode was therefore most disappointing,' remarked Parry. The arrival of the Leipzig brought the number of German ships sheltering at Callao up to five.

The British Minister to Peru was uneasy about the situation in those waters. The Pacific Steam Navigation Company's liner Orduna, 15,500 tons, carrying a valuable cargo and important passengers, was expected to leave Balboa on 25 September, to arrive at Puerto Payta on the 27th and at Callao a day later, on her way to Valparaiso. The renewed activity of the German ships which had been trying to obtain fuel, combined with the sudden arrival of the Leipzig, their suspected supply ship, might indicate a project to seize the Orduna. Parry accordingly made a signal to the Commander-in-Chief America and West Indies suggesting that the continued presence of the Achilles in the Peruvian area was desirable and was instructed to remain on the west coast until further orders. After consultation with the British Naval Attaché, who had flown up from Santiago (Chile), Parry decided that protection of the Orduna was the most important consideration at the moment.

The Achilles sailed from Callao in the afternoon of 21 September and patrolled during the night in search of a ship which had been reported as passing Puerto Payta but which was not sighted. At daybreak course was shaped to the northward at 20 knots in order to arrive before dark off Puerto Chicama, where the British Minister wanted the cruiser to be seen as the town was largely a German colony.

At daybreak on 23 September the Achilles entered Puerto Payta, where she found the German motor-vessel Friesland, 6310 tons, at anchor. She appeared to be fully loaded but no sign of any armament could be seen. Barely two hours after leaving Puerto Payta the Achilles arrived at Talara, where she went alongside to take in 900 tons of fuel-oil. Talara, which has a deep-water harbour, derives its importance from considerable exports of oil and motor-spirit. The wells are at Negritos, a few miles to the south, and the crude oil is carried by pipelines to Talara, where it is refined. Later in the war when supplies from normal sources were cut off, New Zealand drew a considerable tonnage of fuel-oil and motor-spirit from Talara. The Achilles was accorded an enthusiastic welcome by the British community. As few of the ship's company had been ashore since leaving New Zealand, the cruiser spent a night in harbour and shore leave was given freely. A visit to the oilfields, sports, a cinema show, and a dance filled in the brief stay and the generous hospitality was greatly appreciated.

After leaving Talara the Achilles proceeded north across the approaches to the Gulf of Guayaquil. In the forenoon of 25 September she entered Bahia Santa Elena and anchored off La Libertad, the oil port of Ecuador, where she remained for twenty-four hours but got no oil.

As he was still uncertain of the exact movements of the Orduna, Captain Parry decided that on his way north there was only sufficient time to visit Buenaventura, the principal Pacific port of Colombia. The Achilles anchored in the morning of 28 September off Punta Soldado, eight miles below Buenaventura, and sailed about four hours later to meet the Orduna. Actually that ship did not leave Balboa till the afternoon of 29 September, and the Achilles had twice to break wireless silence before a rendezvous about 40 miles west of Cape Corrientes could be arranged for ten o'clock next morning. After contacting the Orduna the cruiser turned to the northward. As soon as the liner was out of sight, the Achilles shaped course to keep within 25 miles of her during the passage south. Both ships arrived at Callao on the morning of 4 October.

In view of numerous reports and rumours regarding the possible movements of German ships, the Achilles sailed from Callao on 5 October about the same time as the Orduna in order to give the impression that the latter was being escorted south. The cruiser remained on patrol in the vicinity of Callao until daybreak on 6 October, when she laid course for Valparaiso.

On 27 September the Achilles had received a signal informing her that the fleet oil-tanker Orangeleaf, 5980 tons, had been placed under her orders, and on 2 October instructions were received from the Admiralty that, after fuelling from her tanker, she was to proceed south about to the South Atlantic. The Achilles was to show herself at Chilean ports as considered desirable and refuel at the Falkland Islands. The passage was to be made with moderate despatch and on arrival the cruiser was to come under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief Africa.

The Achilles arrived in Valparaiso Bay on the morning of 10 October and berthed in the inner harbour. Various urgent engine-room defects were at once taken in hand and repairs were completed by the afternoon of 12 October. The opportunity was taken to give as much shore leave as possible to the ship's company, to take in fresh provisions, and to paint ship. The Chilean naval authorities had given permission for the granting of leave but the Captain of the Port was obviously nervous of possible trouble with the crews of German ships. 'It was therefore most gratifying when he told us at the end of our stay, that he had heard nothing but praise of the behaviour of our libertymen,' reported Captain Parry. There were no official entertainments during the ship's stay in port but officers and men received much private hospitality, both from the British community in Valparaiso and the Chilean Navy. The British Naval Attaché reported that the naval authorities were showing greater activity in asserting the neutrality of Chile. This was confirmed by the absence of all the destroyers from Valparaiso and the arrival of one destroyer in company with the Orduna which she had escorted from Iquique.

The Achilles sailed from Valparaiso in the forenoon of 13 October and met the Orangeleaf next morning. They then proceeded into Tongoy Bay, south of Coquimbo, where the Achilles took in 1300 tons of fuel-oil and forty tons of stores, the work being delayed by a heavy swell. Both ships sailed on the morning of 15 October and parted company when clear of the land.

After steaming to the southward for two days, the Achilles entered the Gulf of Coronados at daybreak on 17 October, passed through the narrow channel separating the island of Chiloe from the mainland and steamed up a land-locked gulf for about 25 miles to Puerto Montt, a provincial capital and terminus of the longitudinal railway of Chile which runs northward for 2862 miles. Official calls were exchanged during a brief stay of two hours at Puerto Montt, a large proportion of whose population was German. The Achilles then proceeded south through the Gulf of Ancud and the Gulf of Corcovado. Night was falling when the ship passed out to the open sea between the southern end of Chiloe Island and the northern fringe of the Chonos Archipelago, which comprises a large number of closely packed, rugged islands extending in an unbroken chain for 200 miles to the southward.

The Achilles ran into a strong north-west gale and high seas during the night and experienced an extremely rough and uncomfortable passage. Visibility was poor, and it was with difficulty that a landfall was made about midday on 18 October off Cape Tres Montes, on the western side of the Gulf of Penas. Once inside, conditions improved and the Achilles steamed up the Gulf of San Esteban into St. Quintin Bay, which was found to be deserted. The ship's company was much impressed by the grandeur of the scenery, which included a fine view of the Oliqui glacier. St. Quintin Bay was used by Admiral Graf Spee as a coaling base for the five ships of his ill-fated Pacific Squadron which spent five days there in November 1914 before proceeding round Cape Horn to the Falkland Islands.

The Achilles lost no time in clearing the Gulf of Penas and continued her passage south in heavy weather. The ranges of islands which form the Patagonian Archipelagos extend along the south-west coast of Chile for some 700 miles to Cape Horn. This inhospitable region is mountainous and cut up by deep and tortuous fjords and narrow channels of a complexity unsurpassed elsewhere in the world and as yet imperfectly surveyed and charted. Heavy rains, varied by sleet and snow, prevail throughout the year and furious westerly gales succeed one another with monotonous rapidity.

The weather had moderated when the Achilles made her landfall by sighting the Evanjelistas islets, 19 miles off, in the forenoon of 19 October. Half an hour later Cape Pillar, the northern extremity of Desolation Island, came into view, and at noon the New Zealand cruiser entered the Strait of Magellan. After proceeding for about 120 miles, she anchored for the night in Fortescue Bay, one of the best anchorages in the Strait and known to the early Spanish and other navigators as Bahia de Fuerte Escudo (Bay of Good Shelter). The cruiser got under way at daybreak on 20 October and about two hours later rounded Cape Froward, the headland forming the southern extremity of the Cordilleras of South America and marking the centre of the Strait. Fortunately, the weather was clear and sunny and the ship's company was able to admire the unforgettable scenery of a region where fine days are few. The Achilles anchored at Magallanes (Punta Arenas), where the customary official calls were exchanged during a stay of three hours.

The presence of a single British cruiser on the west coast of South America had exercised a markedly restraining influence on enemy shipping. The only German merchant ships at sea in the South Pacific when the Achilles arrived were fugitives such as the Lahn from Sydney and the Erlangen from New Zealand, which had vanished into the vast spaces of that ocean in the week before the outbreak of war and succeeded in reaching the territorial waters of Chile undetected. Of those already in harbour only the Leipzig had moved, and she barely escaped capture mainly because of the delay in obtaining intelligence and passing signals.

The task of the Achilles in patrolling the western coastline of the continent and keeping watch on German and neutral shipping was the more difficult because she had to be careful not to offend the susceptibilities of four neutral republics. There was no port on the west coast of South America to which she could send any neutral ship for examination and search. On numerous occasions she had had to enter territorial waters to inspect anchorages and ports and such German ships as were found in harbour.

'On leaving the west coast of South America,' remarked Captain Parry in his report of proceedings, 'I do not feel great anxiety regarding the German shipping in this area. Both Chilean and Peruvian navies are anxious to assert their neutrality by every means in their power and I feel that their own feelings are distinctly benevolent to ourselves'. He said that, from Valdivia southwards, Chile was 'almost a German colony' and he understood that the majority, even those whose families had been established there for generations, remained German. In view of the nature of the coast, enemy submarines and raiders could easily be supplied by these German-Chileans without the knowledge of the authorities. The German merchant ships in the various ports had not been thoroughly searched and must therefore still be considered as potential raiders or, more probably, supply ships. None of these ships was interned. Captain Parry therefore felt that, when the situation elsewhere permitted, the presence of a warship on this coast was desirable.

After the Achilles left the west coast a number of the German merchant ships, moving furtively from port to port, contrived to make their way into the Atlantic, where several were intercepted and sunk. In the belief that the coast was clear, one left Valparaiso northbound after receiving news of the River Plate action, but was captured two days later by HMS Despatch, which had been sent south on patrol from the Panama Canal. More than two years later, three of the German ships succeeded in reaching Japan, and two others, the Portland and Dresden, made off into the Atlantic to act as prison ships for German raiders and ultimately arrived at Bordeaux.

Sailing from Magallanes soon after midday on 20 October, the Achilles cleared Cape Virgins at the eastern entrance to the Strait of Magellan at dusk. The ship then encountered the full strength of a northerly gale which continued throughout the whole of the following day. Visibility was very poor, but a landfall was made in the late afternoon when Cape Frehel, on the north coast of East Falkland Island, was sighted at a distance of about three miles. When the Achilles entered Port William it was too dark to see the leading marks for entering Stanley harbour. The gale was at its height and the ship anchored about three-quarters of a mile from Navy Point Light. The anchor dragged immediately and the ship went to sea for the night.

By daybreak next morning the weather had moderated and the Achilles anchored in Port Stanley shortly after six o'clock. Captain Parry called on the Governor of the Falkland Islands, the call being returned by his aide-de-camp. The cruiser took in fresh provisions and 835 tons of fuel-oil during her stay in harbour. Shore leave was given freely and the ship's company was most hospitably entertained by the residents of Port Stanley. The 22nd October being a Sunday, special arrangements were made to open the public houses but local opinion would not tolerate a cinema show. At the invitation of Captain Parry, the Governor made an official visit to the ship during the forenoon of 23 October and was saluted with seventeen guns. The Achilles then unmoored and proceeded for the River Plate at economical speed.

The Battle of the River Plate

AT 5.20 in the morning of 13 December the British cruisers were in a position about 240 miles due east from Cape Santa Maria on the coast of Uruguay and some 340 miles from Montevideo. While daylight was breaking, the ships carried out the normal routine of dawn action stations and again exercised the tactics to be employed against an enemy raider. The ship's companies fell out from action stations at 5.40 a.m. and reverted to their usual degree of readiness. The squadron then reformed in single line ahead, in the order Ajax, Achilles, Exeter, zigzagging on a mean course of north-east by east at 14 knots. The sun rose at 5.56 a.m. in a cloudless sky, giving extreme visibility. There was a fresh breeze from the south-east, with a low swell and a slight sea from the same quarter.

At 6.14 a.m. smoke was sighted on the north-west horizon and the Exeter was ordered to investigate. Two minutes later she reported: 'I think it is a pocket battleship'. Almost simultaneously, the enemy was sighted by the other cruisers and action stations was sounded off in all three ships. When the alarm rattlers sounded in the Achilles, a signalman with a flag under his arm ran aft

shouting: 'Make way for the Digger flag!', and proceeded to hoist a New Zealand ensign to the mainmast head to the accompaniment of loud cheers from the 4-inch gun crews. For the first time a New Zealand cruiser was about to engage the enemy.

While their crews were hurrying to their action stations, the British ships began to act in accordance with the Commodore's plan. The Ajax and Achilles turned together to north-north-west to close the range and the Exeter made a large alteration of course to the westward. These movements were made in order that the enemy would be engaged simultaneously from widely different bearings and compelled either to 'split' his main armament to engage both divisions or to concentrate his fire on one and leave the other unengaged by his 11-inch guns. The enemy's problem was the more difficult because of the wide dispersion of the two targets. According to the German account of the action, the Ajax and Achilles, when first sighted, were taken to be destroyers and Captain Langsdorff assumed that the force was escorting a convoy. He decided to 'attack immediately in order to close to effective fighting range before the enemy could work up to full speed, since it appeared to be out of the question that three shadows could be shaken off'. At 6.18 a.m., only four minutes after her smoke was first seen, the Admiral Graf Spee opened fire at 19,800 yards, one 11-inch turret at the Exeter and the other at the Ajax, the first salvo of three shells falling about 300 yards short of the former ship.

The British cruisers were rapidly working up to full power and were steaming at more than 25 knots when the Exeter opened fire at 6.20 a.m., with her four forward guns, at 18,700 yards. Her two after guns fired as soon as they would bear, about two and a half minutes later. The Achilles opened fire at 6.21 a.m. and the Ajax two minutes later. Both ships immediately developed a high rate of accurate fire, the Admiral Graf Spee replying with her 5.9-inch guns. The 8-inch salvos of the Exeter appeared to worry the enemy almost from the beginning. After shifting targets rapidly once or twice, the German ship concentrated all six 11-inch guns on the Exeter. At 6.23 a.m. one shell burst short of the Exeter amidships. It killed the crew of the starboard torpedo-tubes, damaged the communications, and riddled the funnels and searchlights with splinters.

One minute later, after she had fired eight salvos, the Exeter received a direct hit from an 11-inch shell on the front of 'B' turret. The shell burst on impact and put the turret and its two 8-inch guns out of action. Splinters swept the bridge, killing or wounding all who were there, with the exception of Captain Bell and two officers; the wheelhouse communications were wrecked. The Exeter was no longer under control from the bridge and Captain Bell at once decided to fight his ship from the after conning position. The lower conning position had taken over when communication with the wheelhouse failed. Even so, the ship had started to swing and there was a probability that the two guns of the after turret would be masked and unable to bear on the target. The torpedo officer, Lieutenant-Commander C. J. Smith, RN, who had been knocked down and momentarily stunned, noticed this and got an order through to the lower conning position which brought the ship back to her westerly course.

When Captain Bell arrived aft he found that all communications had been cut. The steering was therefore changed over to the after steering position, orders to which were conveyed by a chain of messengers. For the next hour the Exeter was conned in this difficult manner, the captain and his staff being fully exposed to the blast from the after pair of 8-inch guns and the heavy fire of the enemy. Both aircraft were extensively damaged and one was spraying petrol over the after conning position. Owing to the serious risk of fire, both aircraft were manhandled over the ship's side. During this time the Exeter received two more hits forward from 11-inch shells and suffered damage from the splinters of others which burst short.

All this happened during the first ten minutes of the action. In that brief period, however, the Ajax and Achilles were making good shooting and, steaming hard, were closing the range and drawing ahead on the Admiral Graf Spee. Clearly, the concentrated fire of their sixteen 6-inch guns was worrying her, for at 6.30 a.m. she again split her main armament and shifted the fire of one 11-inch turret on to them, thus giving some relief to the Exeter. The Ajax was straddled three times and she and the Achilles turned away slightly to throw out the enemy's fire. The Admiral Graf Spee was firing alternately at the two ships with her 5.9-inch guns, but without effect, though some salvos fell close to them. At 6.32 a.m. the Exeter fired her starboard torpedoes, but these went wide when the German ship made a sudden large alteration of course to port and steered to the north-westward. This drastic turn was made under cover of a smoke screen and was probably dictated by the hot and effective concentrated fire of the Ajax and Achilles and the flanking fire of the Exeter, as well as by her torpedoes. The two 6-inch gun cruisers immediately hauled round to close the range and regain bearing. The Ajax catapulted her aircraft away at 6.37 a.m., under severe blast from her four after guns, and it took up a spotting position.

About a minute later the Exeter, while making a large alteration of course to starboard to bring her port torpedo-tubes to bear, was hit by two 11-inch shells. One struck the foremost turret, putting it and its two 8-inch guns completely out of action. The other burst inside the ship amidships, doing very extensive damage and starting a fierce fire between decks. The observer in the Ajax's aircraft reported that the Exeter completely disappeared in smoke and flame and it was feared that she had gone. However, she emerged and re-entered the action.

The Exeter had suffered severely. Both forward turrets were now disabled and only the two after guns were still in action in local control from the after searchlight platform. She was burning fiercely amidships and several compartments were flooded. What little internal communication was possible was being done by messengers. All the gyro-compass repeaters in the after conning position had been destroyed and Captain Bell had to use a boat's compass to con his ship. Nevertheless, the Exeter was kept resolutely in action. Her port torpedoes were fired as soon as the tubes were bearing on the enemy. A minute or two later she altered course towards the enemy and then hauled round to the westward. This brought her on a course nearly parallel to that of the Graf Spee, which she engaged with her two remaining 8-inch guns. The Exeter now had a list of seven degrees to starboard and was down by the head. She was still being engaged by the Admiral Graf Spee, but the latter's fire at that time appeared to be falling a considerable distance over the Exeter.

The Ajax and Achilles had now worked up to full power and were steaming at 31 knots, firing fast as they went. At 6.40 a.m. an 11-inch shell fell short of the Achilles in line with her navigating bridge and burst on the water. The flying splinters killed four ratings and seriously wounded two others in the director control tower. The gunnery officer was cut in the scalp and momentarily stunned. On the bridge Chief Yeoman of Signals L. C. Martinson was seriously wounded and Captain Parry hit in the legs and knocked down. When he came to he noticed that the guns were not trained on the enemy. He ordered cease fire and hailed the gunnery officer up the voicepipe. The latter replied rather shakily that he was regaining control and very quickly the director tower got the guns on the enemy and fire was reopened.

'I was only conscious of a hellish noise and a thump on the head which half stunned me,' wrote Lieutenant Washbourn, RN,¹ gunnery officer of the Achilles, in his report on the action. 'I ordered automatically: "A.C.P.2 take over." Six heavy splinters had entered the D.C.T.³ The right-hand side of the upper compartment was a shambles. Both W/T ratings were down with multiple injuries. ... A.B. Sherley had dropped off his platform, bleeding copiously from a gash in his face and wounds in both thighs. Sergeant Trimble, RM, the spotting observer, was also severely wounded. ... A.B. Shaw slumped forward on to his instrument, dead, with multiple wounds in his chest. ... The rate officer Mr. Watts, quickly passed me a yard or so of bandage, enabling me to effect running repairs to my slight scalp wounds which were bleeding fairly freely. I then redirected my attention to the business in hand, while Mr Watts clambered round behind me to do what he could for the wounded. Word was passed that the D.C.T. was all right again. A.B. Sherley was removed by a medical party during the action. Considerable difficulty was experienced, the right-hand door of the D.C.T. being jammed by splinter damage. When the medical party arrived to remove the dead, I learned for the first time that both Telegraphist Stennett and Ordinary Telegraphist Milburn had been killed outright. I discovered at the same time that Sergeant Trimble had uncomplainingly and most courageously remained at his post throughout the hour of action that followed the hits on the D.C.T., although seriously wounded. Mr Watts carried out his duties most ably throughout. ... He calmly tended the wounded ... until his rate-keeping was again required.

Captain R. E. Washbourn, DSO, OBE, RN; born Nelson, 14 Feb 1910; entered RN, 1928;
Lieutenant HMS Diomedé, 1933–36;
HMNZS Achilles, 1939–42;
Commander, 1944; HMNZS Bellona, 1946–48;
Commander Superintendent, Devonport dockyard, 1948–50.
2 After Control Position.
3 Director Control Tower.

... Boy Dorset behaved with exemplary coolness, despite the carnage around him. He passed information to the guns and repeated their reports clearly for my information. He was heard at one time most vigorously denying the report of his untimely demise that somehow had spread round the ship. "I'm not dead. It's me on the end of this phone," he said. The director layer, Petty Officer Meyrick, and the trainer, Petty Officer Headon, are also to be commended for keeping up an accurate output for a prolonged action of over 200 broadsides. ... The rangetakers, Chief Petty Officer Boniface and A.B. Gould, maintained a good range plot throughout the action, disregarding the body of a telegraphist who fell through the door on top of them. ...'

About twenty more broadsides had been fired after the control tower was hit when wireless communication with the Ajax failed and the Achilles reverted to single ship firing for the remainder of the engagement. For some twenty minutes the fire of both cruisers was ineffective owing to difficulties in spotting the fall of shot. The Admiral Graf Spee, however, failed to take any advantage of this and continued her retirement to the westward at high speed. After 6.40 a.m. the action became virtually a chase. The Ajax and Achilles hauled round to the north and then to the west to close the range, accepting the fact that this entailed a temporary inability to bring their after guns to bear on the enemy. They were by now doing 31 knots and still increasing speed. The 6-inch gun cruisers were fine on the starboard quarter of the Admiral Graf Spee and the Exeter slightly before her port beam, still fighting gamely with her two after guns.

At 6.56 a.m. the Ajax and Achilles altered course to starboard to bring all their guns to bear. The increased volume of fire appeared to have an immediate effect on the Admiral Graf Spee, which made frequent alterations of course and from seven o'clock onwards made great use of smoke. Her range from the Ajax and Achilles at 7.10 a.m. was still 16,000 yards. Commodore Harwood then decided to close in as quickly as possible. Accordingly, course was altered to the westward and the Ajax and Achilles steamed at their utmost speed.

At 7.16 a.m. the Admiral Graf Spee made a large alteration of course to port under cover of smoke and headed straight for the Exeter as though she intended to finish off that much-damaged ship. The Ajax and Achilles responded with a turn towards the enemy, under ineffective fire from his secondary armament. Their rapid shooting scored a number of hits and started a fire amidships in the Admiral Graf Spee, which turned back to the north-west until all her 11-inch guns were bearing on the two cruisers, on whom she opened fire. The range at that time was 11,000 yards and the Ajax was immediately straddled three times. The enemy's secondary armament was firing raggedly and appeared to be going consistently over between the two cruisers.

The Ajax received her first direct hit at 7.25 a.m. when an 11-inch delay-action shell struck her after superstructure. It penetrated 42 feet, passing through several cabins and then the trunk of 'X' turret, wrecking the machinery below the gunhouse and finally exploding in the Commodore's sleeping quarters, doing considerable damage. A part of the base of the shell struck 'Y' barbettes close to the training rack and jammed the turret. Thus, this hit put both the after turrets and their four guns out of action. It also killed four and wounded six of the crew of 'X' turret. The Ajax retaliated by firing a broadside of torpedoes at a range of 9000 yards. All four broke surface after entering the water and probably were seen by the enemy, who avoided them by turning well away to port for three minutes and then resumed her north-westerly course.

According to the German account of the action the Admiral Graf Spee attempted to fire a spread salvo of torpedoes a few minutes before this, but only one was actually discharged because at the moment the ship was swinging hard to port. At 7.28 a.m. the Ajax and Achilles hauled round to port to close the range still more, and three minutes later the former's aircraft reported: 'Torpedoes approaching. They will pass ahead of you.' Commodore Harwood was taking no chances and altered course to south, engaging the enemy on the starboard side, with the range closing rapidly. So as to blank the fire of the Achilles for as short a time as possible, the Commodore ordered her by signal to pass across the stern of the Ajax.

The Exeter had had to reduce speed owing to damage forward, but continued to fire her two after 8-inch guns in local control until about 7.30 a.m., when power to the turret failed owing to flooding. She could then no longer keep up with the action and about 7.40 a.m. she turned away to the south-east at slow speed, starting to repair damage and make herself seaworthy. She had taken heavy punishment but, in spite of severe casualties and the almost complete destruction of internal communications, had been kept in action as long as a gun could be fired, while damage control parties laboured to minimise the effects of shellfire and flooding.

The full burden of the engagement now fell upon the Ajax and Achilles. At 7.36 a.m. the Admiral Graf Spee altered course to the south-west in order to bring all her 11-inch guns to bear on the British cruisers. The Ajax and Achilles stood on, however, and by 7.38 the range was down to 8000 yards. The former's aircraft reported that, while the Graf Spee concentrated the fire of her main armament on the Ajax, the Achilles was making 'beautiful shooting'. The spread of her rapid salvos was very small and frequent hits on the German ship were clearly seen from the air. Captain Woodhouse, commanding officer of the Ajax, also praised the good gunnery of the Achilles. Nevertheless, there was disappointingly little apparent damage to the Graf Spee, and Commodore Harwood remarked to Woodhouse that 'we might as well be bombarding her with snowballs'.

About this time the Commodore received a report that the Ajax had only one-fifth of her ammunition remaining and only three guns in action, as one of the hoists had failed in 'B' turret and 'X' and 'Y' turrets were disabled. In the circumstances, the prospect of completing a decisive daylight action was not good. Harwood therefore decided to break off the engagement and to try to close in again after dark. Accordingly, at 7.40 a.m. the Ajax and Achilles turned away to the eastward under cover of smoke. While the ships were swinging, a shell from one of the enemy's last salvos cut the main topmast of the Ajax clean in two, destroyed the wireless aerials, and caused a number of casualties. Jury aerials were soon rigged. It subsequently transpired that the reported shortage of ammunition in the Ajax referred only to 'A' turret, which had been firing continuously and had expended some 300 rounds out of a total of 823 rounds fired from all turrets.

The action had lasted exactly 82 minutes. In that brief period the Achilles had fired more than 200 broadsides. All four turrets reported that after firing from sixty to eighty rounds the guns started failing to run out immediately after their recoil, due to heating up, and had to be pushed out by the rammers. 'The guns' crews,' said one turret officer, 'worked like galley slaves, loving it all, with no time to think of anything but the job. The whole of the turret from top to bottom thought the action lasted about twenty minutes. The rammer numbers were very tired towards the end, but did not appear to notice that till it was all over. ... Men lost all count of time. They spoke later of "about ten minutes after opening fire" when actually more than forty minutes had elapsed.'

'Towards the end of the action,' reported Sergeant F. T. Saunders, 1 Royal Marines, in charge of 'X' turret, 'the heat in the gunhouse was terrific, even though I had the rear door open and both fans working. The No. 1's of each gun, getting little air from the fans, were sweating streams. Everyone was very dry and thirsty. There wasn't the slightest delay in the supply of shells or cordite, which speaks well for the valiant work of those in the lower compartments. ... I was amused watching various men just tear off a garment as opportunity occurred. Some finished up bare to the waist. One of the rammer numbers was completely dressed in only a pair of white silk pyjama trousers, somewhat abbreviated, and a pair of native sandals. Another was clad in a pair of short drawers and his cap, to which he added later a corporal of the gangway's armllet.

'Everything went like clockwork, drill was correctly carried out, orders and reports passed and so on, just as if it was a practice shoot and nothing at all unusual was happening, except that everything seemed to be done at an amazing speed. The loading was absolutely superb. Marine Russell told me that we averaged seven seconds a round right to the end of the action. When we found we had expended 287 rounds, everyone in the turret was amazed: in fact I re-checked to make sure. The men all thought we'd fired about 40 or 50 broadsides and that was my impression too. There was a spirit of grim determination, concentration and cheerfulness during the whole job. Every man seemed bent on keeping this turret going at full speed. For instance, one number who was normally the butt of the turret's crew, all of whom were somewhat inclined to have a tug at his leg, had that expression that one sees on the face of an athlete going all out. He seemed determined that he wouldn't let his crew down and he really worked like a man possessed. Marine Harrison, having observed the enemy's possibly first fall of shot somewhere in our wake, was heard to say: "Blimey, he's after our heel," which I thought was rather clever. ...'

Not more than one man in ten in the ship's company saw anything of the action. The majority were segregated in groups, and in some cases singly, in gun turrets, in engine- and boiler-rooms and many other compartments below decks where no daylight entered. From the director control tower above the bridge were passed the ranges and much other data from which the calculating machines in the transmitting station, situated in the bowels of the ship and operated by a highly skilled staff, solved the problem of how a ship steaming at up to 31 knots was able to fire accurately, several times a minute, 8 cwt of shells at another ship moving at 24 knots up to nine miles away. The officer in charge of the transmitting station reported that the spirit of his crew was excellent and all were as bright and cheerful as in a practice run. The detonations of the enemy's 11-inch shells were heard distinctly, sounding like the explosions of depth-charges. 'Nutty (chocolate) was a great help. We missed the free cigarettes, but we did hear that the canteen door had been blown off.' Another officer remarked that 'why the entire T.S.'s crew are not ill with bilious attacks, I cannot imagine, as everything edible was grist to the mill regardless of sequence.' The officer of the after control position reported regarding his crew, Marine Cave and Boy Beauchamp, that 'they were perfect, the boy going out at one time into the blast of "X" turret to remove some canvas that was fouling vision.'

A major part in this naval drama was played by the men shut in below decks in the engine- and boiler-rooms of the British cruisers. They had a good idea of what was going on, but they saw nothing of the action. The report of the senior engineer of the Achilles gives some sidelights on the action as it was fought in the engine-rooms of the cruisers. 'The behaviour of all personnel,' he wrote, 'could not have been better in any way, including general bearing, endurance and efficiency.' The remarks of the officer-in-charge of the boiler-rooms are that he was 'most impressed by the behaviour of the stokers tending the boilers. Many of them were youngsters who never before had been below during full power steaming. ... As each salvo was fired, the blast caused the flames in the boilers to leap out about a foot from the fronts of the furnaces; yet the stokers never paused in their job of keeping the combustion tubes clean, or moved back from the boilers.'

The main engines of the Achilles, it was recorded, 'were manoeuvred with far greater rapidity than would have been attempted under any conditions but those of emergency. All demands on the machinery were met more than adequately, all material standing up to the strain in such a manner that nothing but confidence was felt during the action. ... The behaviour of both men and machinery left nothing to be desired. When all the machinery of the Achilles had worked up to full power, readings gave a total of almost exactly 82,000 horse-power, with the four propellers turning at an average of 283 revolutions a minute.' This tribute to the soundness of design and the excellence of British shipyard workmanship is underlined by the statement of Captain Woodhouse of the Ajax that steam had been shut off the main engines of his ship for only five days since 26 August 1939.

The position in the Exeter was complicated by the extensive damage in the fore part of the ship by enemy gunfire during the first half hour of the action. An 11-inch shell which exploded in the chief petty officers' flat immediately adjacent caused a complete blackout in one boiler-room. Shell splinters came down the air-fan intakes and the starboard air-lock door was jammed. Many important electric power leads were cut, causing a failure of communications, and orders had to be passed to the boiler-room by messengers.

Although the British cruisers had a considerable advantage in speed, the Admiral Graf Spee showed that she was a handy ship to manoeuvre. 'The rapidity with which the Graf Spee altered course was most striking,' wrote Captain Parry. 'She appeared to turn as

quickly as a ship one-half her size and she made the fullest use of her mobility. She appeared to be under helm for the greater part of the time. On several occasions, when her situation was becoming unhealthy, she turned 180 degrees away, using smoke to cover her turn.'

Regarding the enemy's tactics, Captain Parry said the 'outstanding and most satisfactory feature seemed to be a complete absence of the offensive spirit.' He certainly made skilful use of smoke to conceal himself from the 6-inch cruisers when their fire became effective, while continuing his main engagement with the Exeter. But in the end he retired from the Ajax and Achilles behind a smoke screen without attempting to finish off the Exeter, although he appeared from his subsequent reported statements to have known that she was out of action. 'The only possible explanation seems to be that he had been severely handled himself. In confirmation, it was noticed that his after turret was not firing for a long time towards the end of the action and that his 5.9-inch gunfire became increasingly ragged and ineffective.'

Yet, according to the German account of the action, the Admiral Graf Spee had sustained only two 8-inch and eighteen 6-inch hits. One officer and thirty-five ratings had been killed and sixty wounded. 'The fighting value of the ship had not been destroyed,' the report said. The main armament was 'fully effective', but there remained only 306 rounds of 11-inch ammunition, representing about 40 per cent of the original supply. The secondary armament was effective with the exception of one gun on the port side and the ammunition hoists of the forward 5.9-inch guns. In consequence, only the four ammunition hoists aft were available for use and the forward guns would have to be supplied from aft. More than 50 per cent of the ammunition supply for the secondary armament remained. The engines were available for maximum speed with the exception of defects of long standing in the auxiliary engines.

'The survey of damage showed that all galleys were out of action with the exception of the Admiral's galley. The possibility of repairing them with the ship's own resources was doubtful. Penetration of water into the flour store made the continued supply of bread questionable, while hits in the fore part of the ship rendered her unseaworthy for the North Atlantic winter. One shell had penetrated the armour belt and the armoured deck had also been torn open in one place. There was also damage in the after part of the ship. ... The ship's resources were considered inadequate for making her seaworthy, and there seemed no prospect of shaking off the shadowers.' Captain Langsdorff therefore decided to steer for Montevideo. He signalled his account of the action and his intentions to Berlin. Before the ship had entered Montevideo harbour he had already received from Admiral Raeder the reply: 'Your intentions understood.'

Almost exactly twenty-five years before – on 8 December 1914 – Admiral Graf Spee's four cruisers Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, Nurnberg, and Leipzig, had fought to the last against a greatly superior British force, 1100 miles south of the area from which the powerful ship bearing the name of the German admiral was now retreating at speed from two small cruisers, one of which had only half her guns in action.

When the Ajax and Achilles turned away, the Admiral Graf Spee made no attempt to follow them, but steadied on a course almost due west and proceeded at 23 knots direct for the River Plate. Six minutes later the British cruisers hauled round and began to shadow the enemy, the Ajax to port and the Achilles to starboard, at a distance of about 15 miles. In the prevailing conditions of extreme visibility, the conspicuous control tower and bridge of the Admiral Graf Spee, as well as her continuous funnel smoke, made it an easy matter to shadow her at long range.

The irregular arc on which the Ajax and Achilles had steamed and fought had brought them by eight o'clock to a position barely 20 miles north-west from that in which they had first sighted the enemy. As the Ajax's wireless aerials were still down, the Achilles was ordered to broadcast the position, course, and speed of the Admiral Graf Spee to all British merchant ships in the River Plate area. Similar messages were subsequently broadcast hourly by the Ajax until the end of the chase.

By 8.14 a.m. the Exeter was out of sight to the south-eastward and Commodore Harwood ordered his aircraft to tell her to close. At 9.10 a.m. the aircraft reported: 'Exeter is badly damaged, but is joining you as best she can.' Two minutes later the Ajax recovered her aircraft, which had been in the air for two hours and 35 minutes. Captain Bell of the Exeter did his best to rejoin but, having only an inaccurate boat compass to steer by, was unable to make contact. He then decided to steer towards the nearest land, some 200 miles to the westward, and speed was reduced while bulkheads were being shored and the ship's list corrected.

Harwood's objective was the destruction of the Admiral Graf Spee in close action after nightfall and he had to be prepared to meet the situation that would arise if the enemy succeeded in eluding him. The extent to which the German ship had been damaged was not known, but it was evident that her speed was unaffected and her main armament appeared to be fully effective. It seemed evident that the Ajax and Achilles, which had expended approximately 50 per cent of their ammunition, could not, unaided, compass the destruction of the enemy in action.

Accordingly, at 9.45 a.m. Harwood ordered the Cumberland, which had been refitting at the Falkland Islands more than 1000 miles away, to proceed at full speed to the River Plate area. The signal was some time in transmission, for when the Cumberland sailed from Port Stanley at noon it was on the initiative of her commanding officer, Captain Fallowfield, who, up to that hour, had intercepted only very jumbled messages. When the Commodore's signal reached him, he at once increased to full speed.

Meanwhile, the Admiralty had taken prompt steps to close the widespread net that had been set to trap the Admiral Graf Spee. Immediately it was known that Commodore Harwood's division had intercepted the enemy, orders were given for the Ark Royal, Renown, and other ships which had been patrolling some 3000 miles away to proceed at once to the South American coast. Measures were also taken to ensure that adequate supplies of fuel and stores would be available at various strategic points.

The Achilles had overestimated the speed of the enemy and by 10.5 a.m. had closed to 23,000 yards. The Admiral Graf Spee then turned and fired two three-gun salvos of 11-inch shell at her. That the enemy altered course sufficiently to bring her forward guns to bear seemed to indicate that the after turret was out of action at the time. The first salvo was very short of its target, but the second fell close alongside the Achilles, which probably would have been hit had she not already started to turn away at full speed. She immediately resumed shadowing at longer range, zigzagging frequently to throw out the enemy's gunnery plot. The enemy ceased fire and continued on his westerly course.

At 11.04 a.m. a merchant ship, apparently stopped since she was blowing off steam, was sighted close to the Admiral Graf Spee, from whom a few minutes later the Ajax and Achilles received a wireless signal: 'Please rescue lifeboats of English steamer.' Neither cruiser replied to this message. When they came up with her, the ship was found to be the British steamer Shakespeare, 5029 tons. All her boats were stowed and, in response to a signal from the Ajax, she reported all well and that she did not need any assistance. The Graf Spee's signal was apparently a ruse tried out with the object of delaying and evading the shadowing cruisers.

About this time Commodore Harwood received a message from the Exeter reporting that all her turrets were out of action and that she was flooded forward but could steam at 18 knots. She was ordered to proceed to the Falkland Islands at whatever speed was possible without straining her bulkheads. The Exeter later reported that one gun of her after turret could be fired in local control and that she was making 20 knots. She arrived at Port Stanley at noon on 16 December.

The afternoon passed quietly until 3.43 p.m. when the Achilles sighted a strange vessel and made the signal: 'Enemy in sight bearing 297 degrees.' 'What is it?' asked Commodore Harwood. 'Suspect 8-inch cruiser, am confirming,' replied the Achilles, who at 3.59 p.m. signalled: 'False alarm.' She had identified the approaching ship as the British motor-vessel Delane, 6054 tons, of the Lamport and Holt Line. The peculiar appearance of this ship, whose funnel was streamlined into the bridge superstructure, gave her at long range a close resemblance to a German cruiser of the Blucher class.

Thereafter the shadowing of the Admiral Graf Spee continued without incident until 7.15 p.m. when she altered course and fired two 11-inch salvos at the Ajax as that ship turned away under cover of a smoke screen. The Achilles also turned away on sighting the gun flashes, but quickly resumed her westerly course. These were the first shells fired by the enemy for more than nine hours.

By this time it was clear that the Admiral Graf Spee intended to enter the estuary of the River Plate, towards which she had been steering for more than twelve hours. Across the entrance to the Plate, on its northern side, there extends for some 16 miles a shallow bank known as English Bank. Harwood foresaw a possibility that the German ship might attempt to evade his cruisers and get back to the open sea by doubling round English Bank, and took steps to prevent this happening. He ordered the Achilles to follow the Admiral Graf Spee if she passed west of Lobos Island, while the Ajax was to steam to the southward of English Bank to intercept her if she attempted to come out that way. Thus, as soon as the German ship passed Lobos Island, the whole duty of shadowing her devolved upon the Achilles, by whom the Commodore's instructions were 'perfectly carried out.'

The Admiral Graf Spee made a considerable alteration of course to the north-westward at 7.42 p.m. and, expecting her to open fire, the Achilles made rapid changes of course. As no firing took place, the latter resumed shadowing and increased speed to creep up on the enemy before dusk. The Achilles passed between Lobos Island and the mainland. About 8 p.m., being then off Lobos Island and 50 miles east of English Bank, the Ajax hauled round to the south-westward.

The sun set at 8.48 p.m., leaving the German ship clearly silhouetted against the western sky, and the Achilles altered course to north-westward to keep the full advantage of the after-glow while she remained under cover of the land. A few minutes later the Admiral Graf Spee altered course under cover of dusk and fired three 11-inch salvos at a range of 22,000 yards. The first two fell short and the third dropped close astern, all being accurate for line. The Achilles replied with five salvos of 6-inch shell while turning away at full speed and making smoke. The enemy ceased firing and the Achilles, which was then just clear of Punta Negra,

turned west again at 30 knots to keep touch. This brief engagement was watched from Punta del Este, the seaside resort of Montevideo, by thousands of Uruguayans who had a 'grandstand' view and mistook it for the main action. The Uruguayan gunboat, Uruguay, which appeared to be on patrol duty, closed the Ajax about 9.15 p.m., but was soon left astern.

Between 9.30 and 9.45 p.m. the Admiral Graf Spee fired three more 11-inch salvoes, all of which fell short, the second and third considerably so. The Achilles did not return the fire since the flashes of her guns in the twilight would have given away her position. The loom of the land must have made it extremely difficult for the enemy to have seen the Achilles, if at all, and these Parthian shots must have been merely intended to keep the shadowing cruiser at a distance.

They were the last shells fired by the Admiral Graf Spee. Since 7.40 a.m., when she headed for the River Plate, she had fired ten 11-inch salvoes, five of them from one turret only. They did not deter the Achilles which, by ten o'clock, had closed in to 10,000 yards. She could now estimate the enemy's course as taking him north of English Bank and reported accordingly to Commodore Harwood. It was becoming increasingly difficult to see the enemy, owing not only to low clouds northward of the after-glow but also to patches of funnel smoke. Course was altered at 10.13 p.m. to get the Admiral Graf Spee silhouetted against the lights of Montevideo. At 11.17 p.m. the Achilles received a signal from the Commodore to withdraw from shadowing and the Admiral Graf Spee anchored in Montevideo roads shortly after midnight.

Thus ended the day-long pursuit of the pocket battleship which, after putting the Exeter out of action and partly disabling the main armament of the Ajax during the early morning engagement, had avoided further close action and covered some 350 miles in sixteen hours to gain shelter in a neutral harbour, later referred to by her captain as 'the trap of Montevideo'. Throughout the day and three hours of darkness, the shadowing action of the Ajax and Achilles had been entirely successful and they had foiled every effort of the Graf Spee to elude or drive them off. By their discipline, their fighting energy, their readiness to take risk and punishment, the competence and team-play of their captains, their self-assurance and confidence, the Exeter, Ajax, and Achilles had gained the day in one of the most brilliant cruiser actions in the long annals of the Royal Navy.

From the tactical point of view, one 8-inch and two 6-inch cruisers did not make an ideal force for dealing with a ship such as the Admiral Graf Spee, but the main principles of sea warfare hold good through all ages and the Royal Navy can find precedent or parallel for any situation that may arise. It was Admiral Kempenfelt who wrote to Admiral Charles Middleton (afterwards Lord Barham), Comptroller of the Navy, in July 1779: 'Much, I may say almost all, depends upon this fleet; 'tis an inferior against a superior fleet; therefore the greatest skill and address is requisite to counter the designs of the enemy, to watch and seize the favourable opportunity for action..., to hover near the enemy, keep him at bay, and prevent his attempting to execute anything but at risk and hazard, to command his attention and oblige him to think of nothing but being on his guard against your attack....'

Such was the manner in which the British cruisers fought the Battle of the River Plate. The result of the action was completely satisfactory in the final outcome, but, as was stressed in an Admiralty survey, 'only a tactical blunder of the first magnitude by the enemy and the superiority of our personnel prevented the destruction of one of our ships and our being forced to abandon the action.' The result of that tactical blunder was underlined in Commodore Harwood's despatch. The most salient point of the enemy's tactics, he said, was that the Admiral Graf Spee closed on sighting the British ships and split her main armament, firing one turret at the First Division (Ajax and Achilles) and the other at the Exeter. This initial closing of the range had the effect of bringing all three ships into effective gun range at once and so avoided for them the most difficult problem of gaining range in the face of 11-inch gunfire.

It appeared that the Admiral Graf Spee was heavily handled by the gunfire both of the First Division's concentration and that of the Exeter in the first phase, the culminating point perhaps being the firing of torpedoes by the latter ship. At this point the German ship turned away under smoke and 'from then onwards her commanding officer displayed little offensive spirit and did not take advantage of the opportunity that was always present either to close the First Division or the Exeter, the latter – and he must have known it – only having one turret in action. Instead, the Graf Spee retired between the two and allowed herself to be fired at from both flanks. Only at one period, at 7.20 a.m., did she again concentrate on the First Division and she immediately abandoned this when the Ajax fired torpedoes.' The Admiral Graf Spee's frequent alterations of course were, from an avoiding point of view, well carried out and undoubtedly threw out much of the gunfire of the British cruisers. She had an exceptionally high degree of manoeuvrability and apparently used full helm for her turns. On many occasions this gave her an apparent list 'which raised our hopes', but she always came upright again on steadying. At no time did she 'steam' at a higher speed than 24 knots, and generally her speed was between 19 and 22 knots.¹

The casualties in the British cruisers during the action were as follows:

	Officers		Ratings	
	Killed	Wounded	Killed	Wounded
Exeter	5	3	56	20
Ajax		1	7	14
Achilles		2	4	7
TOTAL	5	6	67	41

The Destruction of the Admiral Graf Spee

ONCE the Admiral Graf Spee had anchored in Montevideo roads the main preoccupation of Commodore Harwood was how long she intended to remain there. It was of prime importance that the Ajax and Achilles should keep to seaward of the enemy ship if she came out and at the same time avoid being caught by her against the dawn light. For this reason Harwood withdrew his ships from the River Plate channels to seaward for the remainder of the night and closed in towards Montevideo once the risk of being Silhouetted against the dawn had passed.

For the time being the two small cruisers alone stood between the enemy and the open sea. Both were short of fuel after their hard and prolonged steaming the day before. The Ajax had expended more than 820 rounds and the Achilles 1240 rounds of their 6-inch ammunition. They could not hope to fight another successful action unless they were concentrated, and the geographical factors favoured the enemy rather than them. From the River Plate estuary, which is 120 miles wide between Lobos Island to the north-east and Cape San Antonio to the south-west, there emerge three widely separated deep-water channels. The northernmost runs between the English Bank lightship and Cumberland Shoal; the second, whose centre is nearly 30 miles further south, is between English Bank and Rouen Bank; the third is nearly 30 miles wide between the latter bank and Cape San Antonio.

Throughout Thursday, 14 December, the Ajax and Achilles kept constant watch over as wide an area of the River Plate estuary as possible. Commodore Harwood requested the British Minister at Montevideo to use every possible means of delaying the sailing of the Admiral Graf Spee in order to gain time for reinforcements to reach him. He suggested that the Minister should sail British merchant ships and invoke the twenty-four-hour rule to prevent the enemy's leaving harbour. The Naval Attaché, Buenos Aires, Captain H. W. U. McCall, RN, and the British naval intelligence officer kept him 'most adequately supplied' with the latest news of the Admiral Graf Spee. Harwood also learned that the Ark Royal, Renown, Neptune, Dorsetshire, Shropshire, and three destroyers were all on their way to the River Plate, but none could reach him for at least five days.

The arrival of the Cumberland at ten o'clock that night restored to its narrow balance a doubtful situation. She had made the passage of 1000 miles from the Falkland Islands in thirty-four hours. Now it was possible for all three deep-water channels to be patrolled. The Cumberland covered the sector between Rouen Bank and English Bank, with the Achilles to the north of her and the Ajax to the south. In a policy signal beginning 'my object destruction', Commodore Harwood ordered that should the Admiral Graf Spee come out she was to be shadowed, and the three cruisers were to concentrate sufficiently far to seaward to enable a concerted attack to be carried out. He also repeated to the Cumberland his signal of 12 December, substituting her name for the Exeter in the original. The Ajax took in 200 tons of fuel-oil from the tanker Olynthus in San Borombon Bay on 15 December in weather so bad that the securing hawsers parted.

It was reported to Commodore Harwood that the Admiral Graf Spee had landed a funeral party that morning to bury her thirty-six dead and, later, that she had been granted an extension of her stay up to seventy-two hours in order to make her seaworthy. The reports made it appear that she had been damaged far more extensively than had been thought likely and had been hit from sixty to seventy times during the action. The British merchant ship Ashworth was sailed from Montevideo at seven o'clock that evening and Harwood was informed that the Admiral Graf Spee had accepted the edict that she would not be allowed to sail for twenty-four hours after that time. Nevertheless, he could not be sure that she would not break out at any time that suited her.

In accordance with the Commodore's plan the Ajax, Achilles, and Cumberland assembled 15 miles east of Cape San Antonio at 12.30 a.m. on 16 December. The squadron closed the River Plate towards dawn and the Ajax flew off her aircraft for a reconnaissance of Montevideo harbour, with instructions not to fly over territorial waters. The aircraft returned at 8.30 a.m. and reported that it had been impossible to see anything owing to bad visibility. The aircraft had been fired at in the vicinity of the

whistle buoy, which seemed to indicate that the Admiral Graf Spee was taking advantage of the morning mist to put to sea. The cruisers at once went to action stations, but shortly afterwards it was reported that the enemy was still in harbour. When the Commodore suggested that an inquiry into the firing on the aircraft might be a way of delaying her sailing, the British Minister at Montevideo replied that it was definitely not the Admiral Graf Spee that had fired, but possibly an Argentine guard gunboat.

That day the Admiralty informed Commodore Harwood that he was free to engage the Admiral Graf Spee anywhere outside the three-mile limit. He decided to move his patrol into the area north and east of English Bank, as he considered that an engagement in the very restricted water just outside the three-mile limit off Montevideo was impracticable owing to lack of sea room and the 'possibility of "overs" landing in Uruguayan territory and causing international complications.'

It was reported during the day that the Admiral Graf Spee was still making good action damage with assistance from the shore and that she had taken in provisions. It was thought unlikely that she would sail that night, but Harwood was firm on taking no chances. Again with the prefatory 'my object destruction', he signalled to his ships an appreciation of the situation and the tactical dispositions to be made in the event of the Admiral Graf Spee sailing and being engaged. The British merchant ship Dunster Grange sailed from Montevideo at five o'clock in the afternoon and a further period of twenty-four hours' delay before the Admiral Graf Spee could sail was claimed. It was reported, however, that she had made rapid progress with her repairs and might leave harbour at any time.

Late that afternoon Commodore Harwood received the Admiralty's signal informing him of the honours bestowed by the King upon him (KCB) and the captains of the Exeter, Ajax, and Achilles (CB), and of his promotion to Rear-Admiral to date 13 December. 'This was a most stimulating tonic to us all,' he wrote in his despatch, 'and I took steps to pass it on to H.M. ships under my command, emphasising the share of all concerned in the honours their senior officers had received.'

Describing the patrol off Montevideo, Captain Parry, wrote:

The next four days and nights, though uneventful, were full of anxiety. Fortunately, the American broadcast service kept our enemy in a blaze of publicity; but naturally we had to remain ready for immediate action for it was always possible that he might slink out unmolested. This entailed keeping all hands at their stations all night and very little sleep could be got by those of us who might be faced with a quick decision. The first twenty-four hours was perhaps the most critical, for it was not until the evening of 14 December that we were reinforced by the Cumberland and her welcome eight 8-inch guns. During this trying time the splendid spirit of the ship's company was most inspiring. If anyone's spirits had been inclined to droop they could not have failed to be revived by the strains of Maori music and songs, or the shouts of merriment which came from the various quarters. On the last evening the captain decided that the degree of readiness might be slightly relaxed to allow a proportion of the ship's company to sleep in their hammocks; but a few minutes later he received a unanimous request from all quarters that they would prefer to remain all night ready at their stations. Such a gesture is unforgettable.

The British cruisers spent Saturday night, 16 December, patrolling on a north and south line east of English Bank lightbuoy. The Achilles, whose oil was running low, refuelled next morning from the Olynthus off Rouen Bank, the Ajax and Cumberland acting as lookouts at visibility distance while the operation was in progress. The squadron afterwards cruised south-east of English Bank ready to take up the same patrol as on the previous night.

From the moment she sought shelter in harbour the Admiral Graf Spee became the subject of a world-wide flood of radio and press publicity which completely overwhelmed the spate of Nazi propaganda and falsities that made shift to gloss over the ignominy of her defeat and flight. Behind the scenes a considerable political and diplomatic struggle was proceeding. After the landing of her wounded and the release of the masters and fifty-four members of the crews of British ships sunk by her, discussions began over the restoration of the Admiral Graf Spee's seagoing efficiency. A German shipping surveyor from Buenos Aires and the ship's senior engineer officer assessed the period required for repairs as not less than fourteen days in view of the limited local repair facilities. The German Ambassador addressed a note to the Uruguayan Foreign Minister requesting permission for this length of stay.

During the afternoon of 15 December the German Ambassador was informed that the Admiral Graf Spee would be permitted a stay of seventy-two hours and that any extension was not acceptable. The Uruguayan technical commission had declared seventy-two hours adequate to make the ship seaworthy. The Foreign Minister agreed to recommend to his government that the period should be timed to commence from the return ashore of the technical commission. This would, in fact, allow the ship nearly ninety-six hours in harbour from the time of her arrival.

On receipt of this decision, Captain Langsdorff signalled to the German Naval High Command as follows:

Renown and Ark Royal, as well as cruisers and destroyers off Montevideo.¹ Close blockade at night. No prospect of breaking out into the open sea and getting through to Germany. Intend to proceed to the limit of neutral waters. If I can fight my way through to Buenos Aires with ammunition still remaining I shall endeavour to do so. As a break through might result in the destruction of Spee without the possibility of causing damage to the enemy, request instructions whether to scuttle the ship (in spite of the inadequate depth of water in the Plate estuary) or submit to internment.

The German Ambassador, in a telegram to the German Foreign Office, endorsed Langsdorff's appreciation and pointed out that a stay of fourteen days would not alter the situation and would merely assist the concentration of enemy forces. He regarded internment of the Admiral Graf Spee as the 'worst possible solution in any circumstances.' It would be preferable, in view of her shortage of ammunition, to blow her up in the shallow waters of the Plate and have her crew interned. The German Foreign Office replied ordering the Ambassador and Captain Langsdorff to seek to prolong the ship's stay and also sent the following telegram:

According to English press reports the Ark Royal is in the Plate area. As you know, we believe that the Ark Royal has already been sunk. By order of the Fuehrer you are to attempt to take photographs of the supposed Ark Royal. Signal results and forward the photographs.

The Germans in Montevideo noted that this order was impossible to fulfil since the ship had merely been allegedly sighted on the horizon and no aircraft could be got for reconnaissance.

Meanwhile, in Germany, Admiral Raeder was conferring with Hitler, who was opposed to internment 'since there was a possibility that the Graf Spee might score a success against the British ships in a break-through'. The Fuehrer approved the instructions the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy sent to Captain Langsdorff, who was to 'attempt by all methods to extend the time limit for your stay in neutral waters in order to retain freedom of action as long as possible'. Langsdorff's proposal to proceed to neutral limits and, if possible, fight through to Buenos Aires was approved. He was also told that the Admiral Graf Spee was not to be interned in Uruguay and that if the ship was scuttled he was to 'ensure effective destruction.'

Late in the afternoon of 16 December Captain Langsdorff discussed his plans with his senior officers, while the German Ambassador was having an interview with the Uruguayan Foreign Minister, which at times was very heated. The Ambassador finally requested an audience with the President, but the Foreign Minister insisted that this could not be granted unless the Ambassador acknowledged the seventy-two hours' time limit. The Uruguayan government adhered to its decision that the Admiral Graf Spee must put to sea by 6.45 p.m. on 17 December or be interned. The Ambassador reported the result of his interview to Captain Langsdorff, who thereupon wrote protesting against the time limit imposed and intimating his decision to scuttle his ship.

This was defeat, naked and brutal, and to it was added the sting of a sense of disgrace. All through the midsummer day of 17 December preparations for the self-destruction of the German ship went forward. By mid-afternoon the most important secret equipment and documents had been destroyed. Most of her crew were transferred to the German merchant ship Tacoma, Captain Langsdorff with four officers and thirty-eight ratings remaining on board to take the ship out and scuttle her. The Tacoma was to follow her, and the whole crew were to be transhipped to Argentine tugs which were to take them to Buenos Aires for internment.

Out at sea the three British cruisers steamed to and fro south-east of English Bank. 'We all expected that she would break out at any moment,' wrote Rear-Admiral Harwood in his despatch. '... At this stage the most cheerful optimism pervaded all ships in spite of the fact that this was the fifth night of waiting for the enemy.' The instant that word was received that the German ship was weighing anchor, the squadron assumed the first degree of readiness for action, increased speed to 25 knots, and steamed towards the whistle buoy at the entrance to the five-mile dredged channel leading into Montevideo. The Ajax flew off her aircraft to observe and report the enemy's movements.

At 6.17 p.m. the Admiral Graf Spee hoisted a large ensign on her foremast, as well as one at the main, and left the harbour before the eyes of wondering crowds. She steered to the south-westward and stopped about eight miles from the entrance, the Tacoma, which had followed, anchoring about two miles north-east of her. By 7.40 p.m. the fuses of the scuttling charges had been set and Langsdorff and his demolition party left in the ship's boats for the Tacoma, while two tugs and a lighter from Buenos Aires neared the latter vessel.

The first explosion occurred exactly at sunset. All the crew of the Admiral Graf Spee paraded on the deck of the Tacoma, making the Nazi salute. A fierce jet of flame leaped up from the doomed ship, followed by a dense cloud of smoke and the loud rumble of an explosion. Then a gigantic ball of flame burst aft as a second great explosion took place. There ensued a long succession of explosions accompanied by leaping flames and a great pillar of brown smoke rising against the red evening sky. Fires continued to

burn in the ship for six days. Her destruction in the shallow waters of the Plate estuary was watched by tens of thousands of awed spectators crowded on the roofs of Montevideo and along the seafront, while radio broadcasts and press cables flashed their graphic stories round the world.

Passing north of English Bank, the British cruisers were nearing Montevideo when at 8.45 p.m. the aircraft signalled: 'Graf Spee has blown herself up.' It was almost dark when the Ajax stopped to make an excellent recovery of her aircraft which had alighted on the water, and as the Achilles swept past her the ships' companies cheered each other. All three cruisers then switched on their navigation lights and steamed past the whistle buoy about four miles off the flaming wreck. 'It was now dark,' wrote Rear-Admiral Harwood, 'and she was ablaze from end to end, flames reaching almost as high as the top of her control tower – a magnificent and most cheering sight.'

It was an ignominious end for a great ship which bore the name of the German admiral who twenty-five years before had fought his ships to the last against great odds and perished with both his sons in the Battle of the Falkland Islands. Speaking at the launching of the Admiral Graf Spee at Wilhelmshaven on 30 June 1934, Admiral Raeder had recalled that, off Coronel on 1 November 1914, a German admiral – he whose name she took – 'for the first time in German history went into battle far from the German fatherland against an enemy of equal rank.' The Admiral Graf Spee had been chosen to represent the German Navy at the Coronation naval review at Spithead on 20 May 1937 and had carried Hitler triumphantly to Memel.

The first official German announcement of the end of the ship was in the following terms: 'The time necessary to make the Graf Spee seaworthy was refused by the Government of Uruguay. In the circumstances Captain Langsdorff decided to destroy his ship by blowing her up.' At three o'clock in the morning of 18 December, according to Raeder's diary, the second sentence was altered to read: 'Under the circumstances the Fuehrer ordered Captain Langsdorff to destroy his ship by blowing her up. This order was put into effect outside the territorial waters of Uruguay.'

Captain Langsdorff and his ship's company numbering 1039 officers and ratings arrived at Buenos Aires in the tugs in the afternoon of 18 December, after Uruguayan officials had tried unsuccessfully to get them back to Montevideo. The Tacoma was compelled by a Uruguayan warship to return to harbour. On the following day the Argentine Government decided to intern the crew of the Admiral Graf Spee, despite the German claim that they were shipwrecked seamen.

That night, after the German Ambassador had informed him of this decision, Langsdorff committed suicide by shooting himself in his room in a Buenos Aires hotel, the melodrama of this act being heightened by the fact that he lay on a German naval ensign. In a letter to the Ambassador, written shortly before he died, he recounted the reasons for his decision to scuttle the Admiral Graf Spee. 'I am convinced,' he wrote, 'that under the circumstances, no other course was open 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. ... It was clear to me that this decision might be consciously or unwittingly misconstrued by persons ignorant of my motives, as being attributable entirely or partly to personal considerations. Therefore I decided from the beginning to accept the consequences involved in this decision. For a captain with a sense of honour, it goes without saying that his personal fate cannot be separated from that of his ship. ...

After to-day's decision of the Argentine Government, 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. It only remains to prove by my death that the men of the fighting services of the Third Reich are ready to die for the honour of the flag. I alone bear the responsibility for scuttling the Graf Spee. I am happy to pay with my life for any 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 Fuehrer. ...'

The burial of Captain Langsdorff's body with full military honours took place in the German cemetery in Buenos Aires. The burnt-out wreck of the Graf Spee was sold some weeks later to a Senor Julio Vega of Montevideo, who employed divers and workmen to salvage fittings and other material as 'scrap iron'.

However we regard his typically German sense of 'honour', it is impossible not to feel a good deal of sympathy for the unhappy man who wrote thus from the 'jaws of measureless tribulation'. The British shipmasters who had been his prisoners spoke well of Captain Langsdorff; and in his official report Captain McCall, British Naval Attaché at Buenos Aires, paid him the tribute that he was 'obviously a man of very high character and he was proud of the fact that he had not been the cause of a single death as the result of any of his various captures' of merchant vessels.

Of the part played in the River Plate drama by the British cruisers, Rear-Admiral Harwood wrote in his despatch to the Admiralty: 'I have the greatest pleasure in informing you of the very high standard of efficiency and courage that was displayed by all officers and men throughout the five days of the operation. ... Within my own knowledge and from the reports of the commanding officers, there are many stories of bravery and devotion to duty, and of the utmost efficiency which shows that His Majesty's ships have been forcefully trained and made thoroughly ready to deal with the many and various exigencies of battle. ... The main impression left on my mind is of the adequacy of our peace training. Little that had not been practised occurred, particularly among the repair parties. ...'

In a message to the New Zealand Naval Board, as well as in his despatch to the Admiralty, the Rear-Admiral said he was 'deeply conscious of the honour and pleasure of taking one of His Majesty's ships of the New Zealand Squadron into action. The Achilles was handled perfectly by her captain and fought magnificently by her captain, officers and ship's company.' In his despatch he said he fully concurred with the remark of Captain Parry that 'New Zealand has every reason to be proud of her seamen during their baptism of fire.'

During the time the cruisers of the South America Division were patrolling the River Plate estuary strong British naval forces were moving to their support, but after the destruction of the Admiral Graf Spee most of them were recalled for other duties. On Monday, 18 December, the Cumberland was left on patrol while the Ajax and Achilles went to San Borombon Bay, where they fuelled in turn from the tanker Olynthus. Rear-Admiral Harwood boarded the Achilles that evening and addressed the ship's company, praising them for their part in the recent action. Later, both ships got under way and shaped course for the Falkland Islands, where they arrived on 21 December.

The following morning the Achilles discharged her three seriously wounded ratings to the King Edward Memorial Hospital, to which a number of casualties from the Exeter and Ajax were also admitted for treatment. The Ajax and Achilles sent a number of men on board the Exeter to assist in the repair work. After fuelling from a tanker, the Ajax and Achilles sailed that evening.

Both cruisers returned to Port Stanley in the afternoon of 24 December and were joined about four hours later by the Cumberland and the Dorsetshire. The former had come down from the River Plate area and the latter arrived from Simonstown, whence she had sailed on 13 December. Christmas Day was observed by all five cruisers with traditional Navy custom. A strong south-west gale with violent hail and rain squalls was experienced from midnight of 26 December till the morning of the 29th, the Achilles riding with both anchors down and steam for slow speed. Despite the bad weather, the New Zealand cruiser managed to refuel from a tanker and to take in ammunition and stores from lighters. The three wounded ratings from the shore hospital were embarked on 29 December. The Ajax and Achilles sailed from Port Stanley in the early hours of 30 December for the River Plate.

At four o'clock in the morning of 3 January 1940 the Achilles parted company with the Ajax, which proceeded into Montevideo. The former embarked a pilot from the light vessel and steamed up the River Plate to Buenos Aires. A large crowd on the wharf gave the ship an ovation. The British Ambassador, Sir Esmond Ovey, paid the Achilles the great compliment of welcoming her personally and insisted on being the first person to board the ship on arrival. The Argentine authorities had agreed to waive all official calls, but the Minister of Marine and the Chief of the Naval Staff sent their ADCs to meet the Achilles.

In a report to the New Zealand Naval Board Captain Parry said that approximately thirty seriously wounded ratings from the Exeter and Ajax and three from the Achilles were landed at Port Stanley. The only hospital accommodation in the colony was a small cottage hospital of approximately twenty beds, of which five were reserved for maternity cases. The staff consisted of two doctors, a matron, and two trained nurses. This sufficed for the normal requirements of the colony, whose population was about 3000.

Captain Parry said that magnificent efforts were made to meet an unprecedented situation, and all difficulties were overcome so successfully that the patients could not have received better treatment and attention. They had complete confidence in the senior medical officer, Dr Kinnaird, and were full of admiration for the matron, Miss Gowans, and her staff of nurses and voluntary aids. The Governor of the Falkland Islands, Sir H. Henniker Heaton, KCMG, visited the hospital regularly.

No public recognition of their good work had been given to these people owing to the necessity of keeping secret the use made by the Royal Navy of the Falkland Islands, but Captain Parry suggested that a letter from the New Zealand naval authorities would be greatly appreciated. The Naval Secretary, therefore, on 5 March 1940 sent a letter to the Governor of the Falkland Islands, conveying the Naval Board's great appreciation of the efforts of the hospital staff.

Captain Parry also reported that, as soon as the first news of the River Plate action was received, the British Community Council in Buenos Aires provided at their own expense complete hospital equipment for 100 men and despatched it immediately to the

Falkland Islands. A radiologist and fourteen trained nurses, all of whom gave up their own work at short notice, went with the equipment in the steamer Lafonia. Although this assistance did not arrive in time to help the Falkland Islanders during the first week, it relieved the situation enormously. The modern X-ray apparatus was particularly valuable.

During the visit of the Achilles to Buenos Aires from 3 to 5 January 1940, the hospitality received and the amount of presents given to the ship were incredible, said Captain Parry. The reception of the ship had been arranged by the British Community Council and the Australia and New Zealand Association of Buenos Aires. In addition, the following sums of money were presented to the Rear-Admiral, South America Division, as a contribution to the families of men killed or seriously wounded in action off the River Plate: British Community Council, Buenos Aires, £1000; British Community, Rosario Consular District, £93; British Patriotic Funds, Valparaiso and Santiago (Chile), £300. This money was divided among the three ships in proportion to the numbers of men. On 5 March 1940 the New Zealand Naval Board sent a letter to the British Ambassador, Buenos Aires, expressing its great appreciation of and thanks for the generosity and good work of the British communities concerned.

Though their attitude was generally friendly, the Argentinians took little part in the reception to the Achilles, probably in order to appear strictly neutral. Leave in Buenos Aires was given only to organised parties from the Achilles, who were the guests of the British Community Council and the Australia and New Zealand Association. German seamen from the Admiral Graf Spee were still in uniform in Buenos Aires at that time and appeared to have no restrictions on their movements. Such contacts as they made with the ship's company of the Achilles were of a friendly nature, drinks and cap ribbons being exchanged. Captain Parry was also informed that two German seamen who were on the pier at sunset saluted as the flag of the Achilles was hauled down.

HMS Ajax had a rousing reception in Montevideo. It was remarked that the most striking thing was the spontaneity of the welcome, which could hardly have been greater had Montevideo been a British community. The Anglo-Uruguayan Trade Association made a presentation of plate to Rear-Admiral Harwood for 'his services in keeping the sea clear for Uruguayan trade.'

The Achilles left Buenos Aires on 5 January and rejoined the flagship that afternoon. The Dorsetshire and Shropshire were in company with the Ajax, the Shropshire having recently arrived from the Cape of Good Hope. Rear-Admiral Harwood then transferred his flag to the Achilles and the division proceeded to sea in single line ahead. That night the Ajax left on passage to England. After eight days on patrol, the Achilles arrived at the Falkland Islands on 14 January. It was at that time that Rear-Admiral Harwood proposed to the Admiralty that the Achilles, when relieved by HMS Hawkins, should proceed to New Zealand to refit at Auckland instead of Malta as had been previously intended.

After refuelling and taking in stores, the Achilles sailed from Port Stanley in the early hours of 16 January and patrolled as far north as the Rio de Janeiro area. In the afternoon of 26 January she arrived at Montevideo, where unstinted hospitality was accorded the ship's company during her stay of twenty-four hours. The German merchant ships Tacoma and Lahn were still lying in the harbour. The Achilles refuelled from the Admiralty tanker Olwen off Rouen Bank on 28 January and was at anchor there when the Hawkins arrived next morning. Rear-Admiral Harwood's flag was then struck in the Achilles and rehoisted in the Hawkins. The ship's company cheered him as he left the Achilles and farewelled him by singing 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' and the Maori goodbye song.

'During the short time his flag was flying at our masthead, he endeared himself to us all,' recorded Captain Parry. 'It was, therefore, very gratifying that, when he left us, he signalled:

My best wishes to you all. I have enjoyed flying my flag in your very happy ship.

Besides the debt we all owe him for his unforgettable example and leadership in the Battle of the River Plate, we are also more than grateful to him for forwarding a proposal that we should refit at Auckland instead of an Imperial dockyard.'

In the afternoon of 29 January the Achilles steamed into Montevideo roads to embark mails. This enabled the ship's company to take a last look at the wreck of the Admiral Graf Spee. 'The ship is now a pathetic sight,' wrote Parry. 'Her hull is no longer visible. Her upper works are rusting rapidly. Her funnel and mainmast lean heavily to starboard. Her fore-turret guns are just awash, while the after-turret, capsized by the explosion of the magazine underneath, lies on its back.'

Proceeding 'in execution of previous orders', the Achilles arrived in Stanley harbour for the last time in the afternoon of 1 February 1940 and sailed twenty-four hours later on her return to New Zealand. The transit of Magellan Strait was made on 4 February. The passage across the Pacific was entirely uneventful, and the Achilles arrived at Auckland on the morning of 23 February, thus ending a memorable and historic cruise.

During the six months since she left Auckland in August 1939, the Achilles had steamed 52,323 miles and spent 168 days at sea and only ten days in harbour. As she had already steamed 21,139 miles from the time she left England for New Zealand in February 1939, the total distance travelled during the twelve months was 73,462 miles.

Since 29 August 1939 leave had been given to the ship's company on nineteen occasions, including several brief periods when the ship was in harbour for only a few hours. Night leave had been granted fifteen times, on seven of which not more than twenty men had found accommodation on shore. Life on board had therefore been very strenuous, for sea time in war means continuous watchkeeping for everybody and the daily ordeal of going to full action stations at dawn. The strain bears particularly on the engine-room staff, who not only keep continuous watch at sea but have to seize every moment in harbour to carry out urgent repairs. That no breakdowns occurred during the cruise was evidence of the soundness of the machinery and the devotion to duty of the men who tended it.

'One thing at least is certain,' wrote Captain Parry in summing up his impressions of the cruise. 'The continued enthusiasm and cheerfulness, both in dull moments and in more exciting ones, of a predominantly New Zealand ship's company has been a revelation, and for four anxious days an inspiration to one who was bred and born in the Old Country. Though many weary and anxious times lie ahead, he feels complete confidence that such men cannot fail to win the final victory.'

The sea instinct and the imagination of the people of New Zealand had been stirred by the Battle of the River Plate. The announcement that the Achilles was returning to the Dominion was therefore received with much gratification. With the active cooperation of the Government, the civic authorities of Auckland made elaborate preparations to give the cruiser and her ship's company a fitting welcome. Arrangements were also made for the near relatives of her men from many parts of the country to be present when she arrived. The Governor-General, Lord Galway, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. P. Fraser (the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. M. J. Savage, being seriously ill), and four other Cabinet Ministers travelled to Auckland to take part in the proceedings. Interpreting the national feeling of thanksgiving and pride, the names of twenty-seven municipalities, ranging from the far north to the most southerly part of New Zealand, figured on the banners of welcome that were a prominent feature of the lavish decorations in Queen Street, Auckland.

As the Achilles steamed up Rangitoto Channel in the early morning of 23 February thousands of people watched her from every point of vantage. When she passed the Devonport Naval Base on her way to the city wharf at which she berthed, the Achilles cheered and was cheered by the Leander and the Philomel.

A vast crowd, estimated to number more than 100,000, assembled in Queen Street and its approaches to greet the ship's company, led by Captain Parry, as they marched from the wharf to attend the civic reception and luncheon at the Town Hall. Some 6000 officers and men of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy, the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, the Royal New Zealand Air Force, and the Merchant Navy took part in the parade, the route being lined by Territorial troops and school cadets. At the civic reception Mr Fraser read a cable message received that morning by the Governor-General from the Secretary of State for the Dominions expressing the British Government's appreciation of the notable part played by the Achilles and her New Zealanders in the River Plate action. The message said it was particularly appropriate that the Achilles should arrive home in New Zealand on the day on which the officers and men of the Ajax and Exeter were being reviewed by the King. The Governor-General, in reply, said the Government and people of New Zealand wished to associate themselves with the welcome to those ships' companies, to whom their comrades in the Achilles sent cordial greetings.

While the Achilles was undergoing a long refit, a party of about 400 officers and ratings travelled by train to Wellington, where they were given an enthusiastic welcome as they marched through the city streets. The rest of the ship's company visited Wellington four days later. Requests from many part of the Dominion for similar visits could not be granted. The presence in their home towns of men on long leave from the Achilles proved of great value to recruiting for the armed forces.