THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

75TH ANNIVERSARY
13 DECEMBER
When we consider the Battle of the River Plate some 75 years ago, the story is often focused on the actions of the German Pocket Battleship GRAF SPEE and her Captain Hans Langsdorff. The scuttling of the ship and therefore the saving of many lives, is rightfully seen as an honourable action.

But I would like to focus on the actions of HMS ACHILLES and her crew and what this means to the Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) today. Out of a total complement of 567, ACHILLES had 321 New Zealanders onboard. When ACHILLES opened fire on the GRAF SPEE on 13 December 1939, it became the first New Zealand unit to strike a blow at the enemy in the Second World War. With the New Zealand ensign flying proudly over her, the battle was a special source of pride. The men onboard had come through their first test of combat with colours flying. Like all battles, the outcome was never certain. The three allied ships were outgunned by the GRAF SPEE and alternative decisions by those in command on both sides, could have seen quite a different result. ACHILLES’ contribution to the victory was a real boost for the New Zealand Naval forces. It seemed to justify the effort that had been put into them for the previous 25 years. This battle foreshadowed the full part New Zealand would play in the naval war over the next six years.

Today, in the Royal New Zealand Navy of 2014, this battle is a large part of our history; as is ACHILLES. The legacy that has been passed on to us by the brave men of ACHILLES is one we treasure. They did not shirk from the challenges they faced against a better armed opponent. They worked with their shipmates to achieve a glorious victory. That is why we honour the veterans of this battle every year and is also why the Director Tower and Y Turret are at the main gate of HMNZS PHILOMEL. When our new recruits join half of them are assigned to ACHILLES division and they learn of the history of this ship and of course this battle.

Our Navy today is a far cry from the Naval Forces of 1939. We have about a fifth of the numbers that were in the RNZN in 1941. Women serve in all roles now and we have developed our own unique identity. But the values that were on display in the Battle of the River Plate are the same values we cherish today. The notion of shipmates fighting alongside each other for the common good is something we continue to value. This battle was important for the allied effort in World War Two. It is still important for our Navy today. The actions of the men involved we can remember, study and relate to. They were sailors, they were prepared to go into harm’s way, much like the sailors of 1939. Their legacy will not be forgotten and indeed, it remains a vital part of our Navy today.

By the Chief of Navy, Rear Admiral Jack Steer

As the guns of HMS Achilles opened fire on the 13th of December 1939, little did her ship’s company know they were the first Kiwi unit to engage the enemy in World War Two. It became a literal baptism of fire.

Their target? A pocket battle ship named after the First World War Admiral, Maximilian Graf von Spee, KMS Admiral Graf Spee. The battle ship was one the ‘Deutschland’ class of three armoured ships (panzerschiff) designed to protect Germany’s Baltic trade.

By 1934 it had been decided that the German Navy would follow a traditional sea power policy and a strong battle fleet was to be created. In 1938 war with Britain was imminent and Hitler ordered a speeding-up of the construction programme.

At midday Sunday 3 September 1939 when war was declared, Graf Spee under the command of Captain Hans Langsdorff was in the mid Atlantic Ocean cruising in calm seas.

Meanwhile HMS ACHILLES, one of New Zealand’s two cruisers, had sailed from Auckland on 29 August to join the Royal Navy’s America and West Indies Squadron in the Caribbean. On 2 September ACHILLES was ordered
South America. The ship arrived at Valparaiso on the 12th and having fuelled and embarked fresh provisions, sailed the next day for what would be a six week patrol off the coasts of Chile, Peru and Ecuador.

HMS Achilles’ ship’s company had been going to Action Stations every morning before it sighted the Graf Spee. The heavily armed pocket battle ship was in the South Atlantic with the intention of attacking merchant ships should war erupt. Graf Spee Commanding Officer Captain Hans Langsdorff’s orders were to cruise further north, then move to the South Atlantic to hunt merchant shipping.

Meanwhile, with news of the pocket battleship’s several commercial raids, Achilles had been ordered to join forces with the heavy cruiser HMS Exeter, and Achilles’ sister ship HMS Ajax.

The New Zealanders saw the German raider’s smoke at 6.14am and moved into Action Stations immediately. There were 321 New Zealanders on board and they heard a loud “Make way for the Digger Ensign” and the NZ Blue Ensign, was raised.

Faced with a much more heavily armed German ship the three Allied vessels faced the prospect of annihilation on the morning of 13 December 1939. Admiral Graf Spee had longer ranged guns and was capable of sinking all three British ships before they could strike back. But the enemy made a tactical mistake. Instead of standing off to take advantage of his tactical range, Captain Lansdorff, who was thought to have mistaken the light cruisers for destroyers, closed with the enemy.

“*My policy with three cruisers in company versus one pocket battle ship – attack at once by day or night.*”

He advised his cruiser commanders. He intended to divide his force so that the enemy warship would have to split its heavy armament or leave one group unengaged. HMS Exeter headed towards one flank, and Achilles and Ajax to the other.

At 6.20 HMS Exeter, opened fire on the Graf Spee. At first the Graf Spee responded by splitting their armament, but then concentrated the fire of all six 11-inch guns on Exeter. Within six minutes several shells had hit HMS Exeter causing heavy damage and loss of life. Despite having one turret knocked out HMS Exeter remained in action, and took more hits. At 6.32 it fired torpedoes at the enemy ship, but they missed. In all 61 members of Exeter’s crew were killed or wounded during the action.

While Graf Spee concentrated on Exeter, Achilles and Ajax closed in. At 6.21am Achilles began firing, and two minutes later, HMS Ajax also opened fire. Eye witnesses on board say in the 80 minutes of action from 6.20 to 7.40 Achilles fired 220 broadsides. By then, according to Achilles veteran, the late Vince McGlone, Achilles’ six inch guns were so hot and had expanded so much they were too tight to fit into the gun cradle.

The two ships scored numerous hits, and almost 20 minutes later the Germans again split their main armament. One 11 inch gun turret fired on the enemy ship, but they missed. In all 61 members of Exeter’s crew were killed or wounded during the action.

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ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE painting

GRAF SPEE broke off from the battle and retired to the west. EXETER was out of the fight, and the German ship could concentrate on the two cruisers. ACHILLES continued to score hits. At 7.40am the light cruisers turned away under smoke.

Achilles was fortunate that she did not take a direct hit, with all casualties and damage being due to fragments from shells which burst short. Lansdorff decided to head to the neutral port of Montevideo to repair his ship. He was pessimistic about breaking through the enemy ring he perceived he was faced with, and the Graf Spee was scuttled by its own crew just days later.

Although the battle was inconclusive all four ships were damaged, with the Graf Spee losing 36 sailors, and the British ships a total of 72 fatalities (two of them New Zealanders). The Graf Spee’s withdrawal and its subsequent scuttling made the battle a major British victory, and a welcome morale boost for the Allies.

New Zealanders were especially proud of their ship, and they welcomed the ship’s company home with cheering, parades and civic receptions in early 1940.
In August 1939, before war was declared, HMS ACHILLES deployed to South America. Historian Peter Corbett explains what our cruiser was doing in those long weeks before the Battle of the River Plate.

On 23rd August 1939 the British Admiralty declared an ‘emergency situation’. The ‘Preparatory Telegram’ was sent informing British and Dominion ships and naval commands world-wide that war was imminent. In Auckland, HMS ACHILLES was docked, cleaned, had her underwater hull painted and then loaded full of war stores at Devonport, Auckland. On the 28th August the ACHILLES was war-ready and she sailed the next morning to her war station. Britain’s ultimatum to Germany expired on 3rd September at 11.00 am, and the Admiralty telegram, ‘Commence hostilities against Germany’ was sent. Shortly afterwards in New Zealand the Prime Minister’s Department confirmed the decision to the New Zealand Naval Board. The Division was at war.

**BLOCKADE AND ESCORT DUTIES**

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

During her brief stay in the port, as a combatant in a neutral country, she could only stay for one day. Nonetheless formal courtesies were exchanged:

“ACHILLES… saluted the Chilean flag with 21 guns, and the Admiral’s flag flying from Chile’s battleship ADMIRAL LATORRE with 13 guns. Both salutes were returned.”

Two German merchant ships were in the port at the time but they could not be seized by the Royal Navy as they were in neutral territory. Captain Parry, after conferring with the British Naval Attaché in Valpariso, summarized his view on the ship’s mission: “Various German merchant ships then sheltering in ports on the west coast of South America were capable of being armed and were therefore a potential threat to our trade.

“The more active at the moment were those in Peruvian waters, which were endeavouring to obtain supplies of fuel oil. The Naval Attaché considered that the presence of HMMNZ [sic] ACHILLES would be reported at once along the coast and might induce these ships to intern themselves.”

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

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

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

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

ACHILLES then sailed around the Horn for the Falkland Islands, arriving there on 22nd October. Arriving at Port Stanley no time was wasted in refuelling and re-provisioning the ship. However, “opportunity was taken to give as much shore leave as possible”. Efforts were made to accommodate the crew: The 22nd being a Sunday, special arrangements were made to open the public houses, but local opinion would not tolerate a cinema performance.”
ACHILLES sailed the next day for the Rio Del Plata area, to rendezvous with ships of the South Atlantic Division, under the command of Commodore Henry Harwood RN. His force when at sea was also known as Force G (one of several task forces formed to hunt for enemy raiders). This division initially comprised two cruisers HMS AJAX (8 x 6-inch guns) and a sister ship to ACHILLES, and EXETER (6 x 8-inch guns). The two cruisers had been operating in the area since the war’s outbreak, EXETER left the division for a short time to escort British shipping, while AJAX intercepted and sank two German merchant ships. Shortly afterwards Force G was further reinforced by the heavy cruiser CUMBERLAND (8 x 8-inch guns) and two destroyers, HAVOCK and HOTSPUR. For over a month this formation patrolled the area concentrating between Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and River Plate. Their dual role was to protect British shipping in the area as well as intercepting German merchant ships and searching for enemy warships. One major problem facing Commodore Harwood was the supply of stores and fuel, considering the vast sea area he had to cover. The Naval Staff Narrative notes:

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

He was further restricted in that the only two British Fleet Auxiliary tankers in the area—OLWYN and OLYNTHUS—were ‘station tankers’. To refuel, the cruisers had to raft alongside the tanker in a sheltered anchorage. At this stage of the war the Royal Navy had not developed the equipment to refuel underway at sea.

With the outbreak of war two German ‘pocket battleships’ (panserschiff) had begun to operate against British merchant shipping. One of these, the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE had the South Atlantic as her intended operating area. She had sailed on 21st August from Wilhelmshaven, reaching the South Atlantic (via the North Sea, Greenland Sea and North Atlantic) on 26th September. During this time her orders were not to attack any shipping but to conceal herself and she commenced her attacks upon arrival. Between sinking her first victim on 30th September and her last on 7th December, she accounted for nine ships. Operating far and wide in the South Atlantic, GRAF SPEE even ventured for a short period into the Indian Ocean. In the meantime Harwood had shifted his flag to AJAX, and in company with the destroyers, provided escorts for British shipping in the area, while the two 8-inch cruisers were detached, serving as an independent hunting group.

On 20th October, the Admiralty in London informed Harwood that his force would be reinforced by ACHILLES. On the morning of 21st October, Harwood had shifted his flag to AJAX, and in company with the destroyers, provided escorts for British shipping in the area, while the two 8-inch cruisers were detached, serving as an independent hunting group. On 20th October, the destroyers were ordered away to the West Indies and Harwood then awaited ACHILLES’ arrival in the area. ACHILLES sighted EXETER, again Harwood’s flagship, early on the morning of 26th October off the River Plate. They joined up with CUMBERLAND on the 27th, and that day, Harwood again transferred his flag to AJAX, while EXETER left for the Falkland Islands to undertake minor repairs. The three cruisers operated together, but Harwood ordered CUMBERLAND into Buenos Aires to refuel, leaving just the two 6-inch ships at sea. EXETER had sailed from the Falklands on the 4th and rejoined the force, when Harwood again split his force up, with the two 8-inch armed ships operating together.

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

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CAPTAIN PARRY

Captain Parry made a number of official calls including:

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

Leaving on the 12th, the Brazilian admiral’s flagship, flying from the battleship SAO PAULO, was saluted with fifteen guns. ACHILLES proceeded to patrol the shipping lanes off the coast until the 22nd when she met up with AJAX off the River Plate, sailing separately later that day to San Boromdon Bay to refuel and take in three months of provisions from OLYNTHUS, with ACHILLES sailing late that night, under orders to show herself off Brazilian ports. This she did, sometimes too close for Brazilian comfort. While approaching Rio Grande de Soi, a Brazilian military aircraft overflew her. Later a formal complaint was made by the Brazilian Chief of Naval Staff about her movements off the harbour.

On 4th December ACHILLES was ordered south to refuel at Montevideo, arriving there on the 8th. During her solo mission she encountered many ships, indicating the amount of sea traffic on the South American sea routes: ACHILLES had sighted at sea 58 ships of foreign nationality – United States, French, Belgian, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, Swedish, Greek, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Brazilian, Argentinean, and Panamanian – as well as many British merchant ships. A list of defects was provided to justify her stay in the port over the normal one day limit. Captain Parry made no official calls during the stay but leave was granted to the ship’s company. Charabanc (bus) tours, dances and suppers, visits to sports events, were all arranged and again there was good behaviour and no leave breaking.

ACHILLES sailed late on the 9th to rendezvous with Harwood off the River Plate where he had decided to concentrate his force. ACHILLES joined AJAX the next day and they were joined by EXETER on the 12th. Commodore Harwood believed the German raider was heading to the River Plate area, as he later wrote: “I decided that the Plate, with its larger number of ships and its very valuable grain and meat trade, was the vital area to be defended. I therefore arranged to concentrate there my available forces in advance of the time it was anticipated the raider might start operations in that area.” Harwood was correct; on the morning of 13 December, the South Atlantic Division, intercepted the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE some 200 nautical miles off the estuary of the Rio Del Plata.

The Battle of the River Plate had begun.

References


Admiralty, Naval Staff Narrative; Operations of HMS ACHILLES, August 1939 – February 1940, London.
The “armoured ship” (Panzerschiffe) was designed with long range, fuel-efficient diesel engines, a new technology for navies when steam-driven ships were the norm and coal-fired ships still common.

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

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

The Germans recognised that this operation was new in the history of sea warfare, the employment of a large, highly developed fighting ship in long months of operations over wide areas of ocean without any recourse to base facilities, Langsdorff knew that the operation would make the heaviest claims on the endurance and constant readiness of his ship’s company.

Left: Admiral Graf Spee

PANZERSCHIFFE

With a thunderous crack, six 11-inch guns fire, send their shells across 19,000 metres of the South Atlantic. The Battle of the River Plate, and the ultimate test of a bold new concept in naval warfare – the Panzerschiffe, the pocket battleship.

Using wartime German naval documents held in the Defence Library in Wellington, Richard Jackson looks at the technological edge the pocket battleships sought to exploit.

Germany’s first pocket battleship, the DEUTSCHLAND, was designed in the mid 1920s and launched in 1928. The new ship was built under the limitations of the Treaty of Versailles, which restricted ships to 10,000 tons with guns no larger than 11 inch calibre. In an age where a nation’s strength was exercised by battle fleets and power measured by the calibre of their guns, this was a crippling limitation. The naval geography of Germany meant that Britain and France had to be viewed as potential rivals – even in the twenties. Eight years before the rise of Hitler, the German Naval High Command was striving to make the best of its allowance under the Treaty, designing each ship to outclass the ships of the Royal Navy.

ARMS CONTROL TREATY

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

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

For the German Navy, a ship that could outrun the battleships and out-gun the heavy cruisers could have an immense tactical advantage. The Deutschland, the first of the new ships, with a main armament of six 11-inch guns and a secondary armament equivalent to contemporary light cruisers of eight 150mm guns (5.9 inch), had an immediate impact on the naval scene. The French Navy promptly designed and built two new battle-cruisers in response.

LEANDER CLASS CREATED

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

Then they started to build a class they really liked, the Leander class - 8,000 tons and eight six-inch guns. EXETER was completed in 1931 and the Leander class, including AJAX and ACHILLES, were completed between 1933-35. In Germany, Deutschland was followed in the next few years by two sisters, the GRAF SPEE and the ADMIRAL SCHEER. Disregarding the Treaty of Versailles, these two ships were heavier, about 12,000 tons and had more armour. There were improvements to their layout – the aircraft and catapult1 were moved abast the funnel, the control tower enlarged and topped with a massive range finder, and SPEE had Germany’s first naval radar set installed.

RAIDING WAR PLAN

As tension grew in Europe during 1939 the German Naval High Command set its commerce raiding war plan into motion. The tanker/supply merchant ship ALTMARK was to support the GRAF SPEE and departed Germany on 2 August for the United States. There she took on 9,400 tons of diesel fuel, then sailed for her waiting area in the Atlantic. At this stage the United States were not aligning themselves with either side and so were still able to supply fuel to any buyers. SPEE herself sailed for the South Atlantic on 21 August. Yet the German Naval Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Raeder, was pessimistic about capabilities of his fleet. “German naval forces are so inferior in numbers... that they can do no more than show that they know how to die gallantly... The pocket battleships, however, cannot be decisive for the outcome of the war.”

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BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

The ensuing battle was a gunnery officer’s dream – excellent visibility, calm seas, and plenty of sea room. It was what both navies had trained for since 1918. German gunnery doctrine stated “use the main armament against the main opponent” yet Langsdorff opened the battle by dividing his fire. Exeter was the immediate threat, but the two light cruisers could not be ignored. At 0618 SPEE fired on EXETER from 19,700 metres with her fore turret, using her aft 280mm guns against AJAX and ACHILLES. It was three minutes before EXETER’s eighteen-inch guns responded. SPEE straddled with the second salvo and shells exploded either side of the ship and then began to concentrate all six guns on EXETER; the cruiser’s battle narrative records a total of six direct hits by 11-inch shells in the next hour, which knocked out both forward turrets, causing flooding forward, started a major fire and eventually cut power to the after turret. Sixty-one sailors were dead and 23 wounded. In return, SPEE suffered two eight-inch hits from EXETER.

According to the German Naval Gunnery Experimental Command, the range “of least danger for a panzerschiffe is between 16,000 and 18,000 metres, where an eight-inch shell does not yet penetrate the horizontal armour,” but the German 11-inch shells could penetrate the British 76mm armour. The first phase of the battle proved that theory; three direct hits on the armoured gun turrets of the GRAF SPEE had no effect on her firepower, while only one British shell penetrated her armour belt to explode on the main armoured deck.

HUNT FOR THE SPEE

Twenty two British and French ships were now hunting the GRAF SPEE, formed into hunting groups, each intended to be tactically strong enough to take on a panzerschiffe. German intelligence about British warships off South America was accurate: two heavy cruisers, CUMBERLAND and EXETER, with two light cruisers, AJAX and ACHILLES. The latter was largely New Zealand manned - having sailed from Auckland to her war station off South America on 30 August. But when at dawn on 13 December the SPEE’s lookouts sighted three masts at 31 km range, Langsdorff first assessed the unknown ships as EXETER and two destroyers. He assumed there must be a convoy close by. The raider went to action stations and closed the enemy.
It was against this threat that the German’s secondary armament should have proven effective, but the British reports all state that the 150 mm gunfire was ragged and inaccurate. In part that would be due to the eight hits amidships on the GRAF SPEE, which knocked out one gun and smashed the ammunition hoists for the forward secondary armament. As the range closed, SPEE’s 105 mm anti-aircraft guns also joined in against the light cruisers, but two of the three twin mountings were soon knocked out. By 0740, the battle had settled into a westerly chase. The two British cruisers, concerned at the rate they were using ammunition, opened the range to shadow the SPEE, putting more room between them and the enemy. The panzerschiffe had full power available (although she was never plotted at more than 24 knots) and her main armament was intact - still a formidable opponent. But, exactly as Langsdorff had earlier feared, sufficient damage had been done to end the raider’s career: 36 men dead, 60 wounded, only 40 percent of 11-inch ammunition remaining, nearly 50 percent of the secondary ammunition used up, six torpedoes available, and only one-third of the anti-aircraft armament operational. The galleys were smashed and the ship’s flour store was flooded. The hits on the hull forward at the front of the ship made the SPEE unseaworthy for a return to Germany across the winter North Atlantic.

**DIPLOMATIC DRAMA**

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

**BLOW TO GERMAN PRESTIGE**

The battle proved that the German commerce raiders were indeed formidable opponents. The Royal Navy would have to spend much effort throughout the remainder of the war to contain Germany’s heavy ships. At the River Plate it was a close-run battle, SPEE very nearly sank the EXETER. If Langsdorff had kept the range open from the light cruisers his panzerschiffe would have had a better chance of scoring more damaging hits while staying immune from the British six-inch shells. If the cruisers had been forced to abandon the action, it would have been a tremendous blow to morale in the Royal Navy and throughout the Empire. Instead, Langsdorff committed “a tactical blunder of the first magnitude,” according to a 1940 Admiralty analysis. The River Plate action was a blow to the prestige of the German Navy, not least in the eyes of Hitler. At year’s end, in conference with Admiral Raeder, the Fuehrer reiterated the fact that the EXETER should have been completely destroyed.

As the war progressed, Hitler lost confidence in the surface fleet, restricting their operations and so giving a priceless advantage to the Allies.
The following is an excerpt from a letter written by ACHILLES gunnery officer Lieutenant Richard Washbourn to his friend in England, shortly after the Battle of the River Plate. In it he describes the battle in detail, the tactics and the emotional impact.

My Dear Bill,

I have been wondering how this little picnic is affecting you and yours.

It was a fine moment when I, being the Principle Control Officer on watch at the time, inspected the smudge of smoke on the port beam and came to the unshakeable conclusion that at last we had bumped up against the enemy, and that all one’s training and thought was about to be put to the test.

The three of us separated into two groups, the 8 inch ship out onto one flank, and we two six inch ships went off to the other. All three opened fire within a minute or two of the other. It was a proper ding-dong battle on the old principles of warfare. The Hun was under the usual delusion of the decadence of the Royal Navy, and came on at us for the first ten minutes, which was just what we wanted to get into good, effective fighting range within our cannon. Thereafter, when we showed no sign of conforming to his expectations and bolting from his undoubtedly superior force, he turned around and bolted himself, and never again showed any inclination for a fight.

We engaged him hotly, having the superior speed, for nearly an hour and a half. Poor old EXETER having the bigger guns and therefore being the more dangerous foe, received the benefit of his attention mostly for the first three quarters of an hour, and she was unlucky. It was gratifying to hear that she was still afloat at the end. I didn’t for a moment expect to see her alive. When last seen by us she was still gallantly holding on within range with only one of her guns in action and enveloped in smoke, she retired to the southeast leaving us with a still very lively pocket battleship.

We continued to lose until we reached the point blank range of four miles... we hauled off and shadowed.

There was something of a thrill of excitement. I think that is only natural. It was a fine moment when I, being the principle Control Officer on watch at the time, inspected the smudge of smoke on the port beam and came to the unshakeable conclusion that at last we had bumped up against the enemy, and that all one’s training and thought was about to be put to the test.

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We continued to lose until we reached the point blank range of four miles... we hauled off and shadowed.

That is what happened from the tactical point of view. Now from the personal point of view. You know of course that I seat myself up on top of all things in my little Control Tower, in the company of ten others, and with their assistance I am in complete control of all the Main Armament, even to the extent of having the Layer who actually presses the trigger and aims the guns within the reach of my right toe.

There was something of a thrill of excitement. I think that is only natural. She looked very fierce and most menacing through my optical instruments. I have a very clear picture of her fixed in my memory. Her hull is just above the horizon, waterline still down. A great grey shape twisting and turning and making smoke, and surrounded by the white columns of water thrown up by our broadsides. Her great 11 inch guns belching forth a brilliant red flash followed by a thick opaque black cloud of smoke.

My guns came into action very smoothly and well, and we established hitting early on. It was just like a practice, only here was no crippling limit to the ammunition we fired, and the target was a bit more difficult.

Controlling the guns I was much too busy to worry about what was going on around me. I remember being most grateful to EXETER from time to time when I saw those damned great guns speaking in her direction, and leaving us to the ineffective attention off her secondary armament, although this was the same size as our own to all intents and purposes.

Occasionally when the splash of a short 11 inch shell intruded upon my line of sight I realised that we were being fired at, and I felt a strangely illogical resentment, and I was amused at my illogic.

“It is all very interesting and impersonal. There is no hatred of the other fellow at all. It is a game of great skill, for high stakes, and one in which courage and resolution play a big part.”

About 20 minutes after fire had been opened we were straddled by the 11 inch and the short shells burst on the surface of the water and peppered this ship pretty thoroughly from truck to waterline. There were a few casualties among the goofers on the upper deck, the A.A guns crew who had nothing else to do, and the bridge was penetrated by a splinter or two. One made a couple of holes in the captain’s legs, both of them and then went on and shattered the knee of the Chief Yeoman of Signals. Up in my little box we were unlucky. We had more than our share. There was a hellish din, and I remember crouching down and nursing a head streaming with blood. An undamaged officer on my left passed me up a bandage which permitted me to make running repairs. I wasn’t as dead as I had first surmised. A couple of light scalp wounds, and a small hole in the left shoulder. I didn’t notice this latter until some time later when it dawned upon me that the growing stiffness in that part of my anatomy might be worth looking in to.

Looking round me I found the right side of the Control Tower was a shambles. It resembled a slaughterhouse on a particularly busy day. I won’t harrow you with details. Five of my crew were out, three for keeps. Two who were actually in physical contact with me were very dead. Two within a couple of feet of me were shockingly wounded, and one down in the region of my right foot had been in the way of two large splinters.

Six splinters in all had come inside. We are packed so closely in that compartment that we have to go inside in the right order or it is impossible to find one’s own position. I have no complaints myself; I bear a very charmed
The little square window four inches directly in front of my head was shattered. My binoculars through which I was looking were wrecked. And the right upper corner of the back of my chair was removed. My damage was so superficial I was back again controlling the fire within a minute.

It is comforting to realise there is no suffering whatsoever. The dead were dead before they knew that anything had happened. The suddenness is merciful, and so is the shock. My two severely wounded had very little pain, which was a good thing because the exit was jammed by splinters and we had to keep them with us for some time until they could be evacuated. It would have been difficult in those cramped quarters had they made a fuss.

The others were magnificent. They took over the extra jobs and carried on with the battle. One youngster, just turned eighteen, found that the dead and very mutilated body of his predecessor was in the way and there wasn’t room to shift him, so he sat on top of this unpleasantness and operated his most important instrument for the remaining hour of the action without batting an eyelid.

Personally I was completely unaffected by the carnage around me. I admit I have always rather dreaded the show down: one never knows until one has experienced it how one will react, and I’m, though you might not think it, a rather sympathetic type.

When, after an hour and a half’s hot firing we turned away under smoke to await a more favourable opportunity to use up the small remainder of our ammunition I felt a bit disappointed and baulked of my prey. It was nevertheless exactly the right moment. She was utterly defeated, morally, and, probably, materially too. It didn’t look like that at the time and we were full of conjectures as to why she was bolting from us and what her plan was. It was incredible she should be running away from two small and rather battered six inch cruisers. AJAX had only three guns left in action by this time.

…We hung about from Wednesday until Sunday, awaiting renewal of the action, got perhaps with relish as Winston might suppose, because the odds were too obvious to all of us, but certainly with determination. We got our loaded guns on her smoke smudge, clearly visible at 25 miles. It was all very cold blooded and deliberate, but the spirit of everyone was excellent. We went in to polish her off but were disappointed. She blew herself up. I didn’t see the burst myself but others on board did. We cleared lower deck and everyone came up and clambered upon every point of vantage to see the last of the old enemy. There was then the most amazing spontaneous expression of feeling, and relief, I ever hope to hear.”
There were, of course, a number of notable elements of the Battle of the River Plate. One of these is that among the Royal Navy participants were two officers, both onboard HMS ACHILLES, who were destined to lead the Royal New Zealand Navy as its Chief of Naval Staff. The first of the officers was the Commanding Officer of the ACHILLES—Captain W.E. (Edward) Parry. Former Chief of Navy David Ledson, writes here about Parry’s outstanding career.

Captain Parry was no stranger to war. He had joined the Royal Navy in 1905 at the tender age of 12 and served at sea throughout World War I. After the war, between 1917 and 1929, he specialised as a ‘Torpedo Officer’ in various posts including HMS VERNON, the Torpedo School at Portsmouth; the Atlantic Fleet and HMS DOLPHIN, the Submarine Depot ship. He had spent around 30 years of his career focused on the torpedo and submarine aspects of naval warfare when there was an ‘elemental’ change in 1932 as he was posted to the aircraft carrier HMS EAGLE as the Executive Officer—as a fairly senior Commander.

Parry must have performed pretty well because he left EAGLE having been promoted to Captain at the age of 41. In early 1936 he assumed command of the Royal Navy’s Anti-Submarine School at HMS OSPREY and after 15 months at OSPREY, Captain Parry spent most of 1938 undergoing higher Defence training at the Imperial Defence College.

A WELL ROUNDED OFFICER

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

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

Five hours after the Sailing Orders were received, ACHILLES slipped away from Devonport, Auckland, and sailed towards the ship’s and crew’s moment of drama and victory at sea—a moment of which Captain Parry later said, ‘New Zealand has every reason to be proud of her seamen during their baptism of fire.’ The Battle of the River Plate probably presented Captain Parry with his greatest challenge—and greatest success—at the ‘tactical’ level. He was made a Companion of the Bath (CB) for his performance.

BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

During the battle an 11 inch shell from the GRAF SPEE hit the water near ACHILLES’ bridge. The resulting shrapnel seriously wounded two ratings and killed four others. Captain Parry was hit in the legs and knocked out. Regaining consciousness he realised the guns were not being fired at the GRAF SPEE and using the voicepipe he called the gunnery officer, Lieutenant Washbourn, to rectify this. Washbourn had been hit in the head and was just coming to but quickly took action and soon the Director Tower was back in action with their guns focused on the GRAF SPEE. Parry commented later on the GRAF SPEE’s manoeuvrability, ‘She appeared to turn as quickly as a ship one-half her size and she made the fullest use of her mobility... On several occasions, when her situation was becoming unhealthy, she turned 180 degrees away, using smoke to cover her turn.’

Parry was proud of his seamen and Rear-Admiral Harwood, concurring, wrote to the New Zealand Naval Board, “The ACHILLES was handled perfectly by her captain and fought magnificently by her captain, officers and ship’s company.”

A WIDE PORTFOLIO

On 1 May 1940 Captain Parry was made a Commodore 2nd Class and posted as the First Naval Member of the New Zealand Naval Board, Chief of Naval Staff, Commodore Commanding New Zealand Squadron and Commanding Officer HMS ACHILLES. This range of tasks would have been a heavy load in peace time—it is hard to imagine their weight during war. Parry, however, was clearly determined to make things work and was clear that it was the strategic role that was the most important; although there are indications that he would have preferred to remain at sea.
DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

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

There is no more appropriate summary of his contribution as Chief of Naval Staff than that in S.D. Waters’ Official History, ‘New Zealand was fortunate to have had the services of Commodore Parry as Chief of Naval Staff during a critical period of the war. When he took up that appointment he found Navy Office ill-prepared to cope with many urgent problems... By the time Japan entered the war, he had organised an adequate and balanced naval staff, as well as a sound recruiting and training scheme. His foresight in these and many other matters was confirmed by the march of events. When the time for his departure came, the Government was loath to lose him.’

Nevertheless, on 16 June 1942, after more than two years as Chief of Naval Staff and having seen the birth of the RNZN, Parry moved on to his final Naval posting - in India as the Commander-in-Chief, headquartered in London, and then as the Deputy Head of Naval Division, Control Commission for Germany, based in Berlin.

In July 1946 he took up duties as Director of Naval Intelligence. In September 1949 he sensibly recommended to the Division of Responsibilities

POST WW2

At the conclusion of the war Rear Admiral Parry was appointed Chief of Staff (Post Hostilities) to the British Naval Commander-in-Chief, headquartered in London, and then as the Deputy Head of Naval Division, Control Commission for Germany.

In July 1946 he took up duties as Director of Naval Intelligence.

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

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

Briefing on ACHILLES

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

A fire-control radar should have been decisive in the gunnery duel at the River Plate.

By Dr Ian K Walker

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

SEETAKT

One must go back to the Battle of Jutland to understand the role of radar on the German ships. During that action on 31 May 1916, most ships on both sides had the doubtful experience of their optical range-finders being obscured by mist and drifting smoke. The future Head of the German Navy, Admiral Raeder, pondered on this battle and realized that a better method of fire control might have led to victory. He knew that sound-ranging had been successful with land-based artillery so he asked his chief scientist, Dr Kuhnhold, to develop sound-ranging for naval use. Kuhnhold realised that radio waves would be more suitable than sound waves for this purpose.

In July 1935 he demonstrated to Admiral Raeder, a radar set that could direct naval gun-fire with an accuracy matching the best optical rangefinder. The Germans first mounted this radar, which they called SEETAKT, aboard Torpedo Boat G 10 to gain some sea experience. The prominent aerials became a dominating feature of the small ship. A German publisher issued an annual pocketbook similar to “Jane’s Fighting Ships” illustrating the world’s naval ships and it included a photograph of G 10.

Admiral Raeder had SEETAKT fitted to all his capital ships giving them lethal superiority in any gun duel, especially under
conditions of poor visibility or long range. At the outbreak of World War II the Royal Navy was well behind in the race since Admiral Raeder turned GRAF SPEE and ADMIRAL SCHEER loose in the world’s oceans as commerce raiders. SPEE went on to sink 40,000 tons of British merchant shipping. The Royal Navy and the French Navy both responded by deploying several task forces, some of them groups of fast cruisers, intending that their speed, agility and numbers would compensate for their smaller guns and thin armour. One such task force included the New Zealand cruiser HMS ACHELLES in company with her sister ship HMS AJAX and the two 8-inch gunned cruisers HMS EXETER and CUMBERLAND. Unfortunately, on the day of battle, CUMBERLAND was in Port Stanley, in the Falklands, undertaking a boiler clean.

Admiral Harwood was imaginative. He realized that speed and agility were the only advantages possessed by his undergunned and under-armoured ships. He assigned a suicidal role to EXETER. She was to close with GRAF SPEE at full speed to bring her smaller guns within effective range and thus divert fire from AJAX and ACHELLES. They were to attack from different directions, making smoke, and manoeuvring at full speed. Much to their surprise, GRAF SPEE would aim by making smoke herself – no doubt in the knowledge that this would enhance the advantage conferred by her SIEKTAK radar. AJAX and ACHELLES would dash out of the smoke from an unexpected direction and swing their nimble 6-inch turrets to loose off a couple of salvos before the ponderous turrets of the battleship could turn in their direction. They would disappear back into the smoke.

Captain Langsdorff of GRAF SPEE began the battle by dividing his main armament between EXETER and AJAX, not always a wise policy in a gun duel especially when it was discovered that SEIKTAK was now silhouetted against a setting sun, a perfect mark for the optical range-finder on ACHELLES. Between 9.30 pm and 9.45 pm GRAF SPEE fired a further three salvoes, all falling short. We can perhaps speculate making smoke. Between 9.30 pm and 9.45 pm GRAF SPEE fired a further three salvoes, all falling short. We can perhaps speculate making smoke. Between 9.30 pm and 9.45 pm GRAF SPEE fired a further three salvoes, all falling short. We can perhaps speculate that GRAF SPEE was vulnerable in an unexpected way. Not all her crew could shelter behind armour plate. Bridge crew were unprotected, look-outs were posted all around the ship to watch for torpedoes and the Director Control Tower crew spotting fall-of-shot1 had only thin steel plate between them and incoming shells. When 36 of his crew lay dead and 60 wounded,

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

**GRAF SPEE’S VULNERABILITY**

AJAX and ACHELLES manoeuvred at full speed through their smoke and dashed out to fire broadsides at the battleship. By the end of the day AJAX had fired 820 rounds of 6-inch ammunition, and ACHELLES 1240 rounds. But GRAF SPEE’s engines, guns and ammunition were safe behind armour plate and there seemed no way of hurting her. Captain Parr of ACHELLES was heard to remark “We might as well be petting her with snow-balls!” However GRAF SPEE was vulnerable in an unexpected way. Not all her crew could shelter behind armour plate. Bridge crew were unprotected, look-outs were posted all around the ship to watch for torpedoes and the Director Control Tower crew spotting fall-of-shot1 had only thin steel plate between them and incoming shells. When 36 of his crew lay dead and 60 wounded,

Captain Langsdorff realised that his crew’s morale was collapsing. A career of sinking defenceless merchant ships had not prepared the Germans for an enemy who actually fired back. He had no alternative but to seek shelter in a neutral port so with diesels hammering.

**GRAF SPEE MADE A bee-line for Montevideo at 23 knots, followed at a respectable distance by AJAX and ACHELLES, like a pair of Pekinese threatening a mastiff.**

**SALVOES AT SUNSET**

Commodore Harwood took AJAX south around the English Bank to cut off possible escape. He ordered ACHELLES to follow GRAF SPEE which was now silhouetted against a setting sun, a perfect mark for the optical range-finder on ACHELLES. She was vulnerable in an unexpected way. Not all her crew could shelter behind armour plate. Bridge crew were unprotected, look-outs were posted all around the ship to watch for torpedoes and the Director Control Tower crew spotting fall-of-shot1 had only thin steel plate between them and incoming shells. When 36 of his crew lay dead and 60 wounded,

When GRAF SPEE eventually entered Montevideo Harbour after the battle she was granted 72 hours to repair damage. Her eventual scuttling by German soldiers was news. In Britain ACHELLES arrived in New Zealand to a hero’s welcome. The crew paraded up Queen Street in Auckland to delirious acclamation from crowds.

**TOBY HARPER**

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

The Navy Office detached Harper from ACHELLES and sent him to Canterbury University where he helped design and build a simple radar warning set which was installed aboard ACHELLES in the incredibly short time of 4 months. He then built a fire-control radar to measure target range and hopefully observe fall-of-shot to correct range. An improved version was fitted in August 1941 together with a dedicated set for simple ship warning.

Overall, our Navy embraced radar with a much greater enthusiasm than did its sister services, the Army and RNZN. Of 180 radar sets built in New Zealand, almost half went to the Navy. In Wellington, Navy Office embarked on a 3-pronged programme of Staff Training, Coast-Watching (CW), Ship Warning (SW), Ship Warning and Gunnery (SWG) and Aid to Allies. A specialist radar officer was appointed to Navy Office to supervise this programme, first, LT Harper, then CDR Giles and finally LTRD Markiew. These officers established a close and cordial liaison with the civilian organisation charged with radar design and construction. Civilian scientists were given honorary commissions and invited aboard naval ships so they could appreciate technical aspects of naval needs and view operational problems directly. This programme was successful but it was not until late in the war that the RNZN was turned to the Royal Navy to supply its ships with radar sets.
By Kelly Ana Morey

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

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

AWARDED THE IRON CROSS

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

ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE

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

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

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

I am convinced… he wrote to the German Ambassador… that under the circumstances, no other course was available to me, once I had taken my ship into the trap of Montevideo. For with the ammunition remaining, any attempt to fight my way back to open and deep water was bound to fail. …For a captain with a sense of honour, it goes without saying that his personal fate cannot be separated from that of his ship. …I can do no more for my ship’s company. Neither shall I any longer be able to take an active part in the present struggle of my country. …I alone bear the responsibility for scuttling the pocket-battleship ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE. I am happy to pay with my life for any possible reflection on the honour of the flag. I shall face my fate with firm faith in the cause and the future of the nation and of my Führer…
With the battle over, GRAF SPEE sought the normal 24 hours allowed. This allowed Langsdorff to see to his injured and casualties, consult with his superiors and consider his options. Ultimately, under duress from Germany, Langsdorff elected to scuttle his vessel. When the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE’s time ran out, the vessel was steamed slowly out of the estuary towards open water. On reaching the limit of Uruguayan territorial waters Langsdorff and his crew were taken off by Argentine barges. Langsdorff had requested permission to go down with his ship but had been denied by the Uruguayan authorities who didn’t want his blood on their hands. As the sun set, the crew of the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE watched in silence as a series of planted charges blew up the pocket battle ship and it settled into the shallow water mud of the River Plate tidal estuary.

A MAN OF HONOUR

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

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CHIEF YEOMAN OF SIGNALS

LINCOLN C. MARTINSON

By Kelly Ana Morey

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

Chief Yeoman of Signals Lincoln “Bully” Martinson joined the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy in 1921 at 16 as a signal boy. He had been serving on board the Leander class cruiser HMS ACHELLES since early in 1939. He was quietly drinking a cup of tea when the German raider the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE came steaming into view shortly after dawn on 13 December 1939. As a result of a discussion the night before between Martinson and Captain Parry, the Battle Ensigns along with the New Zealand flag was hoisted, much to the delight of her crew as they secured the ship for action and prepared to do battle.
The HMS EXETER was ordered to investigate and within minutes the German vessel was on the attack. The Royal Navy vessel responded with three salvos in quick succession, before sustaining a direct hit on B turret which Martinson in his signals capacity was witness to: “I watched the captain of the ADMIRAL GRAf SPEE knock EXETER amidships, bang her about aft, but he didn’t finish the job. He didn’t finish her off. Why he didn’t, I don’t know. Then he took us on and he took the AJAX on too. He damaged the AJAX and we got some very near misses, but he didn’t actually damage us. We had a few holes here and there, shrapnel holes...”

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

A TOT OF RUM

Martinson was taken down to the Boy’s Mess and was laying on top of the lockers; “...thinking, well this it is, well so be it”, when one of his signalmen arrived with a tot of rum. “Now it wasn’t an ordinary tot of rum,” recounts Martinson in his oral history. “It was about three tots of rum in one bottle and I will never forget it, it was neat. Anyway I took the tot of rum. I think that’s going to help, well I will do it, so I did and I finished off my service in 1945 in PHILOMEL. I put many Signalmen through, good and bad, but all for the same reason to fight a war and that was that.”

Martinson was patched up on board the ACHILLES and sent directly to the Navy hospital on the ship’s return to New Zealand but ultimately lost his leg. He received a Distinguished Service Medal for his role in the Battle of the River Plate, and stayed on in the service as a non-combatant, as a trainer until the end of the war. “I was proud of my uniform,” concludes Martinson. “And I was damned proud of the boys that fought at the Plate. So I thought to myself well if I can do something that’s going to help, well I will do it, so I did and I finished off my service in 1945 in PHILOMEL. I put many Signalmen through, good and bad, but all for the same reason to fight a war and that was that.”

When Captain Langsdorff took his damaged “Panzerschiff” into Montevideo Harbour in neutral Uruguay to repair battle damage, he sparked off an intense diplomatic incident that ultimately led to his decision to scuttle GRAF SPEE in the sight of Montevideo.

Langsdorf’s decision brought World War II, then only three months old, to a neutral Uruguay that was far distant from the major theatres of military operations. They were suddenly faced with the need to arbitrate a very tense situation between two of the main antagonists in the war. The British wanted to get the damaged GRAF SPEE out of Montevideo Harbour to finish off the threat she posed to their vital Atlantic supply line. The Germans wanted to repair their pocket-battleship to enable her to escape the Royal Navy and run for home to fight another day.

It was a daunting task for the Uruguayan Government who had only the Articles of the international Hague Convention of 1907 to guide their decision-making, the terms of which were well-known to both Britain and Germany.

72 HOURS REPRIEVE

While Langsdorff worked feverishly to repair the damage to the GRAF SPEE and the Royal Navy was rushing reinforcements to the River Plate, the Uruguayan Government, acting on the advice of their Technical Commission who were overseeing repairs to the ship (as per Article 17 of the Convention which permitted them to do so) decided that the Germans be given 72 hours to effect the necessary repairs. Faced with the supposed approaching arrival of powerful Royal Navy reinforcements, a threat heightened by constant German surveillance out to sea, Admiral Raeder, German Naval High Command, conferred with Adolf Hitler and then authorised Langsdorf’s break-out to Buenos Aires. Raeder countermanded a scuttling order as the destruction of GRAF SPEE was effective but opposed internment of the pocket battleship. Langsdorf’s options were fast disappearing.

The HM EXETER was ordered to investigate and within minutes the German vessel was on the attack. The Royal Navy vessel responded with three salvos in quick succession, before sustaining a direct hit on B turret of the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE and four men on board were killed and several others in addition to Martinson and Parry were injured.

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

INTERLUDE IN URUGUAY

By Russ Glackin

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When the Uruguayan Government adhered to its decision that GRAF SPEE must put to sea by 2000 hrs on Sunday, 17th December or be interned, then scuttling was the only option left. Langsdorff made the decision to scuttle the GRAF SPEE but the watching world did not know that. The departure of GRAF SPEE drew closer. Would Langsdorf take the battered GRAF SPEE out of the River Plate in a glorious fight to the death? Would he make a dash through territorial waters to Buenos Aires, only four hours away?

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

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

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

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

Above: Graf Spee leaving Montevideo

LANGSDORFF’S CHOICES NARROW

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

HARRY BEESELEY—CABIN BOY

In 1932 16-year old Huia “Harry” Beesley, a cabin boy in the Merchant Navy, answered the call for young recruits for the New Zealand Division and was lucky to be one of 10 chosen from a pool of some 500 applicants. He subsequently trained as a seaman gunner and was on board the Leander-class cruiser ACHILLES in that capacity when the vessel set sail from New Zealand just two days before the outbreak of war.

The vessel had been on patrol duty in the waters off the west coast of South America for some six weeks with a number of Royal Naval vessels before the fateful day it encountered the German pocket-battle ship.

Above: ACHILLES A turret crew

ONE OR TWO CLOSE MISSES

‘About 6.10, on the 13th December,’ recollects Beesley, “the alarms went and it was all go. It was the GRAF SPEE, sighted in the horizon about 14–15 miles away. The tip of her mast was the only thing to be seen. It was full action stations. EXETER was despatched out to the port and within minutes there was a flash on the horizon and in a suitable time the shells started landing. My action station was on the open P1HA gun which is down on the iron deck, just below and aft [of] the bridge. We couldn’t do much at all really [on our gun] because of the range distance. … We just had to stay at our action stations until such time as things ceased. We fired a couple of shots, but to no avail at all.”

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

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

Reference
Able Seaman Huia Beesley DLA 0010

CAT AND MOUSE

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

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

SURPRISE SCUTTLING

AJAX and ACHILLES, both low on fuel and ammunition, and HMS CUMBERLAND which joined them after the battle, patrolled the harbour entrance for four nights awaiting the German ship’s next move which came on the 17th of December.

‘Well eventually, I think it was a Sunday,” says Beesley, remembering that late summer afternoon 70 years ago, “when we got news that the GRAF SPEE had sailed. Well that was it! It was tense! We closed up at action stations. I might add we never had much ammunition left anyway. I think there was only about ten rounds a gun left as I recall. She could have blown us right out of the water had she known. Then all of a sudden there was a mighty flash on the horizon where ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE had run herself on to the English Bank, set charges and had exploded BOOM!”

“The next day,” continues Beesley, “we cruised up close to her, dipped the flag. Yeah we dipped the flag to what was then a burned out hulk and then went on about our business.”
On the 23 February 1940 ACHILLES returned to Auckland to a heroes’ welcome. The newly named Achilles Point flew the New Zealand Ensign and signalling flags spelt out Nelson’s famous Trafalgar Signal. The town hall resurrected the lights from the King’s coronation and the Auckland Electric Power Board augmented this with a display which included a 30 foot (10 metres) model of the ACHILLES.

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

Of course as Auckland is the city of sails Auckland boaties met the AcHILLes long before she got into harbour. Tugs, launches and private boats met and escorted her in. At Narrow Neck Beach and North Head 600 troops greeted her. At 6.30am she passed a silent Devonport Naval Base when suddenly cheers rang out, every merchant ship in port sounded their sirens, trains whistled, and thousands of cars lining the wharf tooted. The lads were home! AcHILLes berthed at the central wharf and the ship’s company met with their family and friends. Captain Parry then received calls from the Governor General, Viscount Galway, and Government and local authority representatives.

Aucklanders began to line the street for the parade from 9.30am onwards. Every place with a view was occupied and at ground level people stood ten deep. On the side streets which had a slight elevation people jostled for a better position. About 1000 ex-servicemen and women began the parade, followed by the Royal Marines Band, then the Navy and the second New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Captain Parry and his wife were next, riding in an official car as Parry’s leg wound still troubled him. When the ACHILLES ship’s company appeared flags and handkerchiefs were waved and confetti and streamers were thrown. Throughout the parade the crowd clapped and cheered. The ACHILLES sailors certainly knew they were the heroes of the day.
On reaching the Town Hall the ship’s company was surrounded by yet more members of the public. Speeches from Auckland’s mayor Sir Ernest Davis and the deputy Prime Minister Peter Fraser were enthusiastically received by the crowd and when Captain Parry prepared to speak he had to wait while the crowd serenaded him with “For he’s a jolly good fellow”. The National Anthem was sung and the crew moved into the Town Hall for a civic function. Their families lunched next door in the Concert Chamber.

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

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

Above: Welcome home board
Battle experiences are traumatic and on board ships are naval chaplains, officers without rank, who care for the spiritual needs of the ship’s company and pray over the dead. They live through the same circumstances yet extend comfort and support. Unlike all other officers in the service, the naval chaplain has no rank as his parishioners may range from Admiral to Seaman Boy. We do not have a record of the chaplain who served in Achilles at the Battle of the River Plate.

In 1926 the first chapel was established on the Naval Base in the Seaman Boys’ classroom. When the base was significantly upgraded in the mid 1930’s, Chaplain G.T. Robson requested a better chapel than the small schoolroom he was using. St Christopher’s Chapel was completed in 1943, finally meeting the Chaplain’s request. The first service was held in May 1943 and dedicated on 20 June 1943 and named for the former patron saint of sailors.

Various stained glass windows have been incorporated into the chapel, for instance HMNZS TAMAKI and TASMAN. When it was originally built it was divided into a chapel and a gymnasium. This has subsequently been converted into a seminar room and doubles the seating space if there is large service to be held in the chapel.

Above: ACHILLES Point in Auckland and the St Christopher Chapel window at entrance.

The chapel is also home to a number of historic items which are on display in and around the chapel, all of which have links with ACHILLES. These include:

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