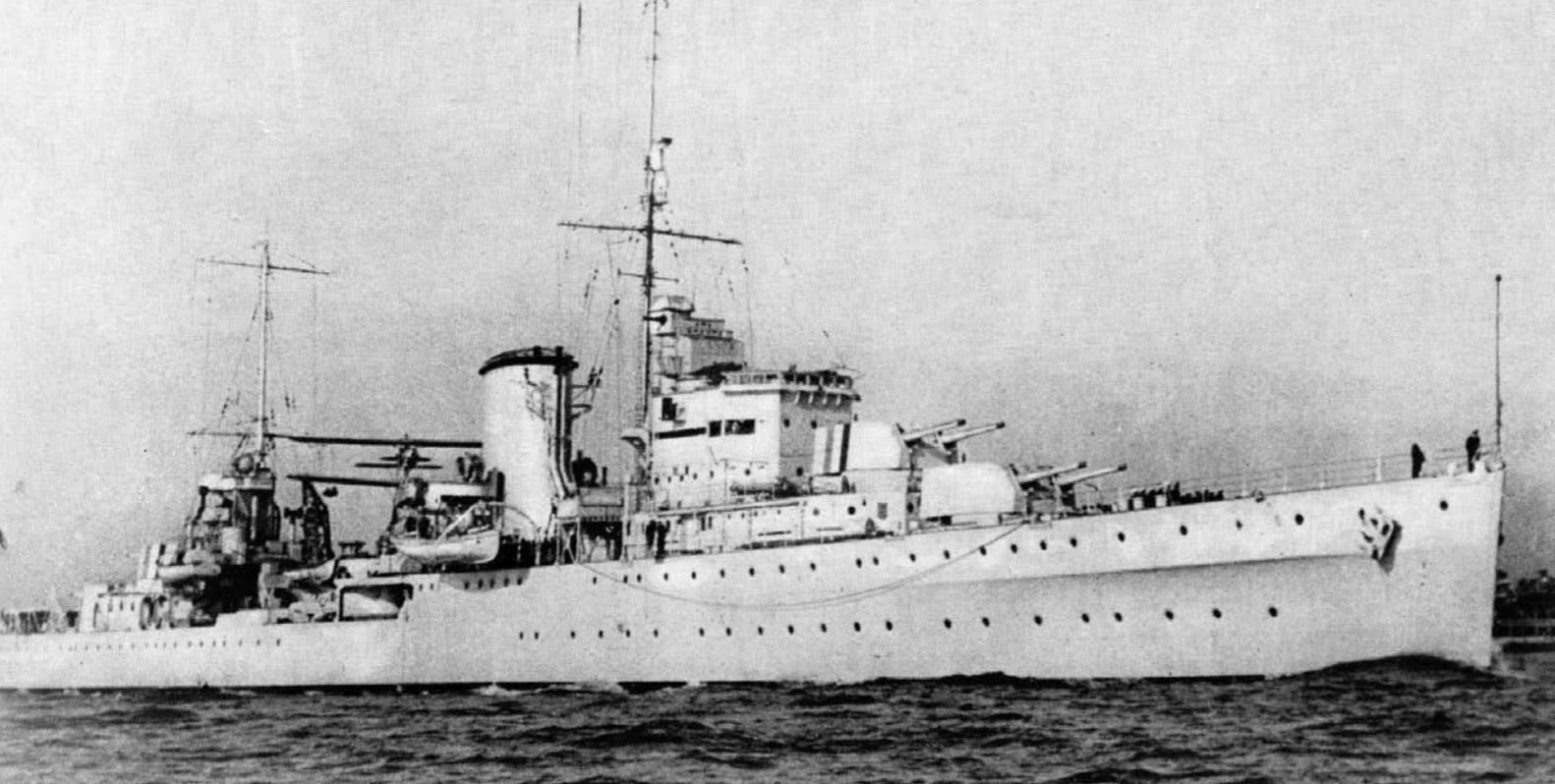


**THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE**

**THE NEW ZEALAND STORY**

New Zealand Government



**BY IAN MCGIBBON**

History Group,  
Ministry for Culture and Heritage

**PAINTINGS**

(Cover) Edward S. Annison, The “Achilles” opening the attack on the “Graf Spee”, 1939, oil, Ref: AAAC 898 NCWA 384, National Collection of War Art, Archives New Zealand

Frank Norton, HMS “Achilles” in the Battle of the River Plate, 1940, gouache, Ref: AAAC 898 NCWA Q223, National Collection of War Art, Archives New Zealand

**PHOTOGRAPHY SOURCE**

S.D. Waters, *Achilles at the River Plate*, War History Branch, Wellington, 1948



When the cruiser HMS *Achilles* opened fire on the German ‘pocket battleship’ *Admiral Graf Spee* in the South Atlantic, at 6.21 a.m. 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 from her mainmast – as battle loomed, a signalman had run aft with the ensign shouting ‘Make way for the Digger flag!’ – *Achilles* also became the first New Zealand warship to take part in a naval battle.

The 82-minute engagement between the *Graf Spee* and its three smaller British opponents – *Achilles*, *Ajax* and *Exeter* – was inconclusive. All four were damaged, with the British ships suffering 72 fatalities (two of them New Zealanders) to the *Graf Spee*’s 36. But the German warship’s subsequent withdrawal to the neutral Uruguayan port of Montevideo, and its dramatic scuttling by its own crew on 17 December, turned the Battle of the River Plate into a major British victory – and a welcome morale boost for the Allied cause. *Achilles*’ role in the battle was a special source of pride for New Zealanders, who welcomed the ship’s crew home at huge parades in Auckland and Wellington in early 1940.



The long sea route to Britain – essentially across the Pacific to the Panama Canal and thence across the Atlantic – was all-important.

### NEW ZEALAND'S NAVAL FORCES

In December 1939 the New Zealand naval forces were a quarter of a century old. They had come into being with the arrival of the decrepit training cruiser HMS *Philomel* at Wellington in July 1914. Almost immediately, however, the outbreak of the First World War interrupted New Zealand's naval development plans. *Philomel* was returned to Admiralty control and headed off to the Middle East. For the next three years it was used in a gunboat role, mainly in the Persian Gulf, occasionally carrying out shore bombardments and landing shore parties. In 1917, no longer fit for service, it returned to New Zealand and was de-commissioned, becoming a depot ship at Devonport.

Following the war New Zealand resumed its naval programme, forming a New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy in 1921 and taking control of the cruiser HMS *Chatham*. Three years later a more modern cruiser, HMS *Dunedin*, arrived to replace *Chatham*. *Dunedin* was joined by its sister ship HMS *Diomed* in 1926. Leander-class light cruisers replaced these D-class cruisers in the mid-1930s. *Achilles* joined the New Zealand Division in 1936 and HMS *Leander* in the following year.

As their formal title indicated, the New Zealand naval forces developed within a Royal Navy framework. The cruisers were loaned to New Zealand, which merely paid their running costs – a major advantage for a cash-strapped government. New Zealand also depended upon British expertise

and personnel. Senior officers, including *Achilles*' captain Edward (later Rear-Admiral Sir Edward) Parry, were seconded British officers. In 1939 the New Zealand Division comprised 82 officers and 1257 ratings, of whom eight officers and 716 ratings were New Zealanders; supporting them was a 670-strong New Zealand Volunteer Naval Reserve. New Zealand sent its personnel to Britain for training, relied on British logistic support, and looked to the Royal Navy for traditions, advice and example. A small element of the wider British fleet, this force would be placed under the operational control of the Admiralty on the outbreak of war, in accordance with New Zealand's defence strategy.

### NAVAL STRATEGY

Between the world wars New Zealand's defence was conceived as part of an imperial system based on the power of the Royal Navy. This system provided New Zealand's physical security from invasion or attack and also protected the trade routes upon which its economy depended. These routes were comparatively restricted in scope because of the narrow basis of New Zealand's economy, which was almost exclusively devoted to producing meat, wool and other primary products for the British market. The long sea route to Britain – essentially across the Pacific to the Panama Canal and thence across the Atlantic – was all-important.

Both countries had an interest in keeping open this sea route and the others on which

Britain depended (for Britain's survival as a market and source of military support was vital to New Zealand). The Royal Navy and the many strategically located bases it controlled gave Britain the means of protecting its vital sea lanes. Although the approaches to the British Isles obviously needed the most protection, given the proximity of powerful potential enemies, trade protection was a worldwide effort – coordinated by the Admiralty in London. New Zealand's role was to assist this effort by making available the resources it could spare to bolster the collective effort.

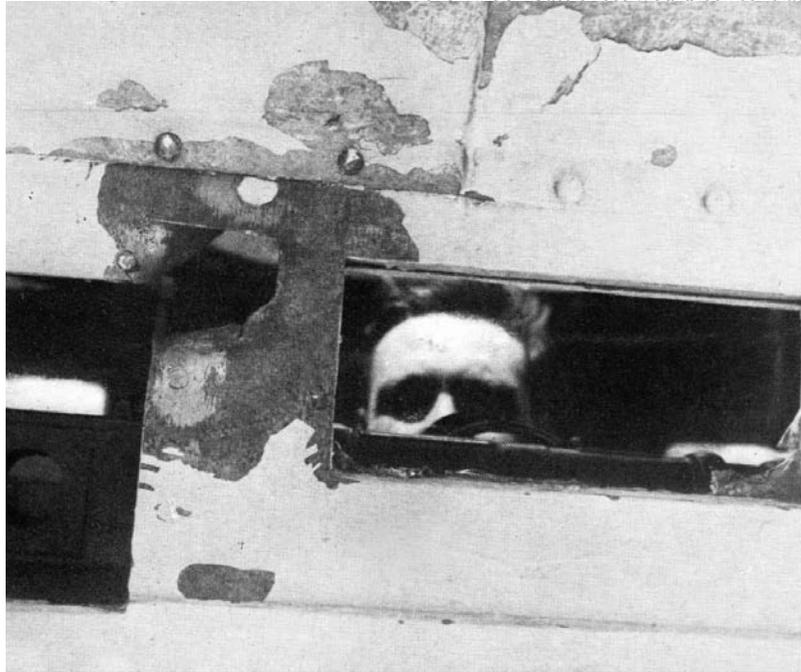
### THE THREAT TO NEW ZEALAND

Physical protection posed a greater problem. The biggest threat in the interwar period seemed to be posed by the Empire's former ally Japan. With the scuttling of the German fleet at Scapa Flow in 1919, the Japanese Navy had emerged as the world's third largest; only the United States and British fleets were larger. Despite a visit by the US battlefleet in 1925 (much larger than any naval visit ever made by the Royal Navy), New Zealand did not count on US support in the event of war with Japan. Isolationism was strong there, and Japan was expected to avoid attacking US interests if it went to war with the British Empire.

But was the Royal Navy strong enough to assert its power in the Pacific? The admirals in London insisted that it was: they developed a strategy centred on a major naval base at Singapore. In the event of trouble with Japan

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the British battlefleet would concentrate



there, threatening the flank of any Japanese drive towards the South Pacific. Accepting these assurances, New Zealand contributed a million pounds towards the construction of this base. But international developments during the 1930s raised doubts about the strength of the fleet that could be sent to Singapore in an emergency.

#### THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

New Zealand's naval strategy ensured a worldwide perspective in 1939. War plans developed by the Admiralty called for one of New Zealand's cruisers to join the Royal

Navy's America and West Indies Squadron, which guarded an area through which New Zealand trade passed. The other would remain in the South Pacific to guard shipping from enemy raiders.

As the international situation darkened in the last week of August 1939, the likelihood of these plans being implemented suddenly became very real. Both New Zealand cruisers were hurriedly readied for sea. Ships' bottoms were cleaned, supplies were loaded, and crews were brought up to their war complements. In HMS *Achilles*' case, this amounted to 31 officers and 536 ratings – of whom five officers and 316 ratings were New Zealanders.

Early on 29 August, with Germany preparing to invade Poland, the Admiralty requested that the ships move to their war stations. Seven hours later *Achilles* put to sea, bound for Balboa in Panama's Canal Zone. Soon afterwards HMS *Leander* was dispatched to Fanning Island with a 32-man detachment to guard the cable station there and prevent a raid such as the German East Asiatic Squadron had mounted at the outset of the First World War.

*Achilles* was well away from New Zealand when shortly after midnight on 3 September Captain Parry received a signal from London: 'Commence hostilities against Germany.' The previous day he had been ordered to change course to the Chilean port of Valparaiso. *Achilles* arrived there on 12 September 1939.

#### THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

Of all the battles waged during the Second World War, arguably the most important was the Battle of the Atlantic, the struggle to keep open the sea routes to the British Isles. The outcome of this battle was vital to the survival of Britain and, later, to the eventual liberation of Europe by providing a staging point for the intervention of American power. This battle, fought by naval and air forces and the civilian seafarers of the Merchant Navy, began on the first day of the war and continued to the last.

At the outset, the battle also involved denying the Atlantic and other sea routes to Germany. An immediate task for the Royal Navy was to track down and destroy the estimated 237 German merchant ships at sea or in foreign ports. As well as cutting off German trade, this action would prevent these vessels being armed and used to prey on Allied trade.

For six weeks *Achilles* played its part in this worldwide effort, moving along the coasts of Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia in order to deter German ship movements. The only Allied warship on this coast (all the South American countries were neutral), it was ready to intercept any German merchant ship heading for refuge in a neutral port or any of the 17 ships already holed up at various places that might dare to put to sea.

In time the Battle of the Atlantic became mainly a fight against German U-boats seeking to strangle British sea lines of communication. But at the outset there

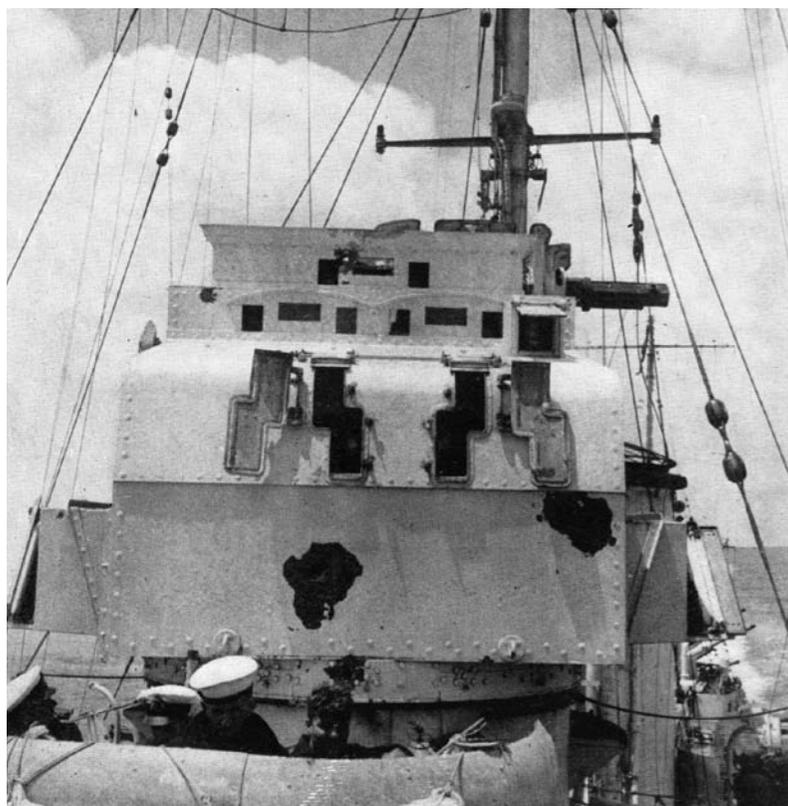
#### ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE

Initially Germany's interwar naval development had been constrained by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which imposed strict limits on the size and number of warships that it could commission. Restricted to a tonnage limit of 10,000 tons, the Germans responded by creating a class of armoured cruisers (*Panzerschiffe*). Although cruisers by tonnage, they carried heavier guns than existing cruisers. As a result the British dubbed them 'pocket battleships'. Three were launched between 1931 and 1934: *Deutschland*, *Admiral Scheer* and *Admiral Graf Spee*.

Although nominally 10,000 tons, *Admiral Graf Spee* probably displaced 14,000 tons (the Germans having cheated on the Versailles limits). It was much larger than the British heavy cruisers (about 8000 tons) and outgunned them too. Whereas a British heavy cruiser had 8-inch guns, *Graf Spee* boasted six 11-inch guns in two triple turrets, capable of throwing 294-kilogram shells 27,000 metres. As secondary armament, it had eight 5.9 inch guns and eight 21-inch torpedo tubes, and it carried two seaplanes. It was capable of 28 knots at full power of its diesel engines.



The aim was to disrupt enemy sea movements by creating doubt and uncertainty.



was also a significant danger from enemy surface vessels: armed merchant raiders and the German Navy's warships. In 1939 that navy was not strong enough to challenge British command of the seas as it had in the First World War, but it contained a number of powerful warships, especially suited for commerce raiding.

#### INTO THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

With war looming in August 1939 Germany, like Britain, took preparatory steps at sea. These included deploying the pocket battleships *Deutschland* and *Admiral Graf Spee* so they could attack seaborne commerce should war erupt. Commanded by Captain Hans Langsdorff, *Graf Spee* sailed from Wilhelmshaven on 24 August, five days before HMS *Achilles* left New Zealand. A support ship, the tanker *Altmark*, left Germany on 2 September.

Langsdorff's orders were to cruise near the Cape Verde Islands till war began, then move into the South Atlantic to operate as a commerce raider. The aim was to disrupt enemy sea movements by creating doubt and uncertainty. Since repair or replenishment would be difficult after a major engagement, he was to avoid contact with enemy naval vessels.

After exercising near the Cape Verde Islands, *Graf Spee* was finally given the green light by Berlin to begin raiding operations on 26 September. Four days later, the warship claimed its first victim, sinking the British

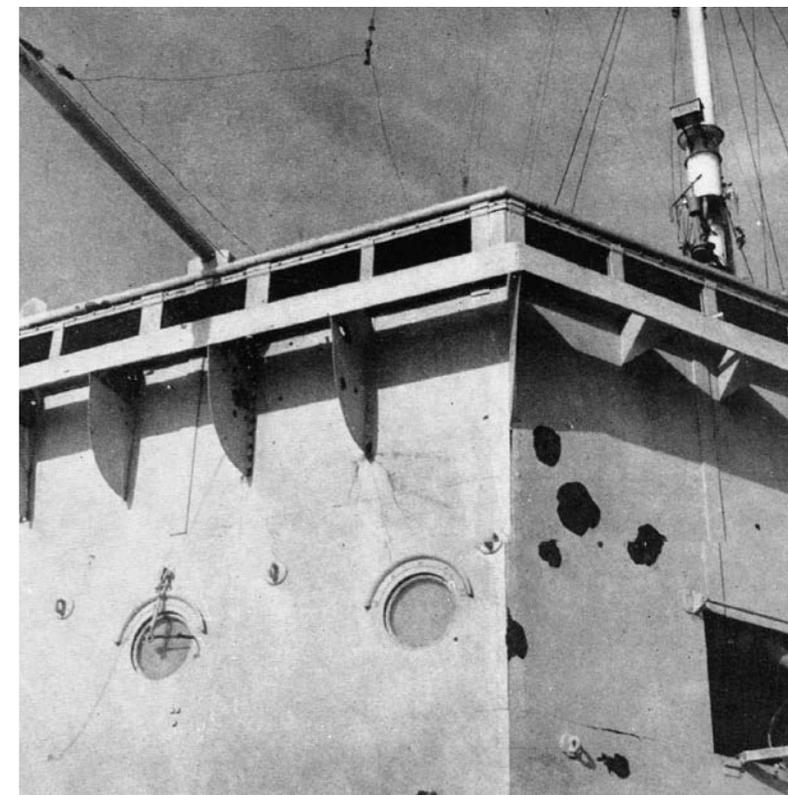
merchant vessel *Clement*. The British ship managed to broadcast a distress signal, providing the first indication that a German raider was operating in the area (although it was initially thought to be *Admiral Scheer*).

#### ACHILLES JOINS THE HUNT

As a result, *Achilles* was ordered to quit its watchdog role along South America's west coast and proceed to the South Atlantic. After a steady passage, and refuelling at the Falkland Islands, *Achilles* reached the southern approaches of the River Plate on 26 October. It joined Commodore Henry (later Admiral Sir Henry) Harwood's South America Division, which had been transferred from the America and West Indies Station. The New Zealand ship joined the division's heavy cruisers HMS *Exeter* and *Cumberland* and the light cruiser *Ajax* in patrolling the Rio de Janeiro/River Plate area. The monotony was broken by a visit to Rio de Janeiro from 10 to 12 November, and then a long patrol north as far as the northern boundary of Brazil, which was reached on 2 December.

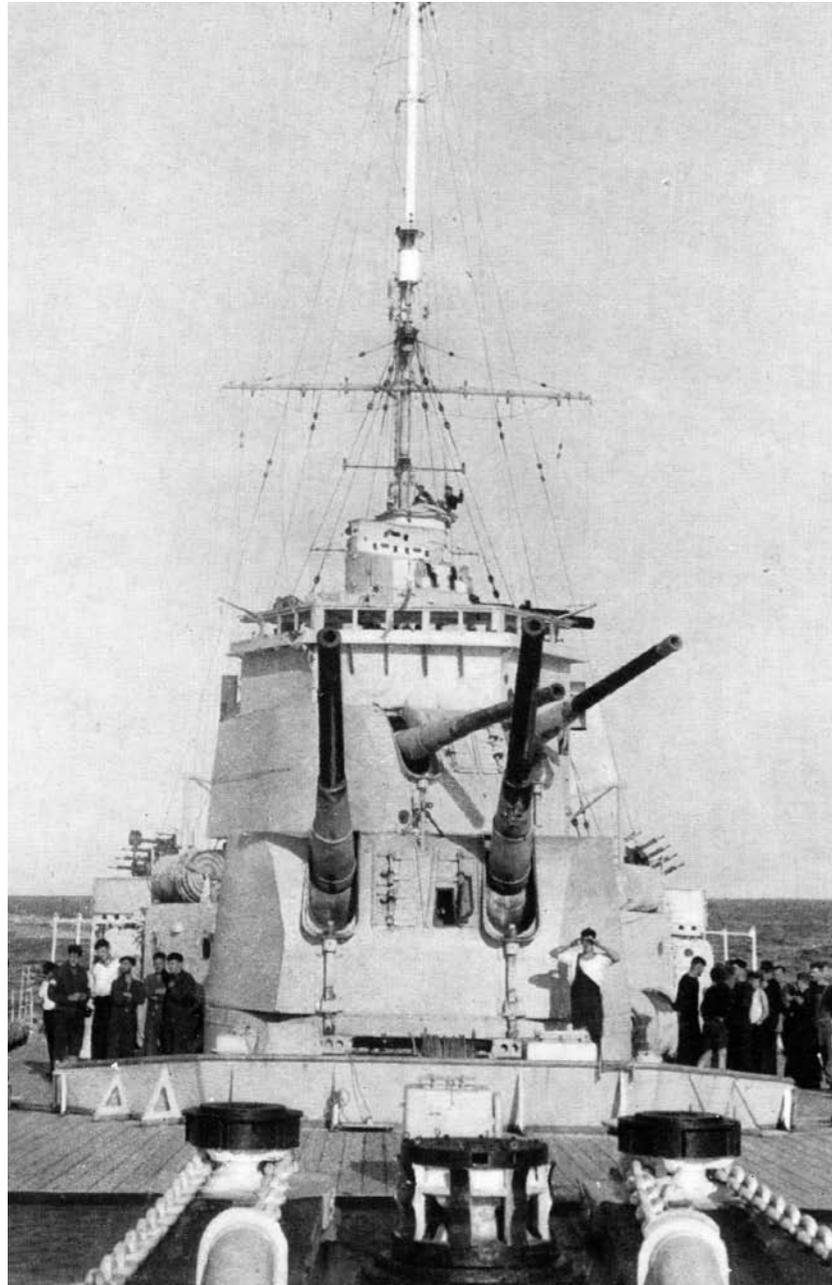
#### THE NEXT MOVES

Meanwhile, Langsdorff had headed around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean, where he intercepted and destroyed several more Allied merchant ships. He moved back into the South Atlantic on 20 November. On 2 December, in the eastern South Atlantic, the *Graf Spee* sank the Blue Star Line's *Doric Star*, bound from New Zealand to the United Kingdom with a



#### SOUTH AMERICA DIVISION

In December 1939 the South America Division included the heavy cruisers HMS *Exeter* and *Cumberland*, each displacing 8400 tons, and armed with six 8-inch guns capable of firing 116-kilogram shells 17,000 metres. It also included the light cruiser *Ajax*, in which Harwood, from 28 October, flew his pennant as commodore of the division. Like *Achilles*, it displaced about 7000 tons and mounted eight 6-inch guns that fired 51-kg shells. The cruisers were capable of 32 knots.



valuable cargo of frozen meat and wool. The raider distress signal that the *Doric Star* managed to send alerted the Admiralty. British naval authorities pondered the raider's next move. It would clearly not stick around the area, but where would it go next? An important clue was received on 7 December when a distress message was picked up from the ninth (and last) of *Graf Spee's* victims, the Shaw Savill and Albion steamer *Tairoa*. As this was west of the *Doric Star's* position, it appeared the German ship was heading for the east coast of South America.

Harwood was conscious of three focal points for British trade – the Falklands Islands, Rio de Janeiro and the River Plate – where a raider might expect rich pickings. He concluded that the River Plate was the most likely target and decided to concentrate his force there. *Achilles*, having returned from its patrol along the Brazilian coast, had already arrived in Montevideo on 8 December. Ordered to sea the next day, it joined *Ajax* on the 10th. Although *Cumberland*, refitting in the Falklands, was unavailable, *Exeter* arrived to join the light cruisers at 6.30 a.m. on 12 December.

When smoke was spotted on the horizon at 6.14 a.m. next morning, and the ship was quickly identified as a pocket battleship, Harwood's guess was vindicated. But, as alarm rattlers alerted the crews, he had no time for self-satisfied reflection. Within minutes his division was in action.

## THE BATTLE

Faced with a much more heavily armed German ship, Commodore Harwood's division faced the prospect of annihilation on the morning of 13 December 1939. With its longer-ranged guns, *Admiral Graf Spee* had the means of sinking all three British ships before they could strike back. But Captain Langsdorff made a major tactical blunder. Instead of standing off to take advantage of his guns' longer range, he closed with the enemy, perhaps mistaking the light cruisers for destroyers.

Despite the dangers, Harwood did not hesitate. Imbued with the Royal Navy's traditional aggressive spirit, he immediately put into effect his tactical plan. 'My policy with three cruisers in company versus one pocket battleship – attack at once by day or night,' he had advised his cruiser commanders. He intended to divide his force so that the enemy warship (still thought to be *Admiral Scheer*) would have to split its heavy armament or leave one group unengaged. HMS *Exeter* now headed towards one flank, its two consorts towards the other.

## INTO ACTION

*Graf Spee* opened fire at 6.18 a.m. at a range of just under 20,000 metres. *Exeter*, closing fast, replied two minutes later. At first the Germans responded to Harwood's tactic by splitting their armament, but then concentrated the fire of all six 11-inch

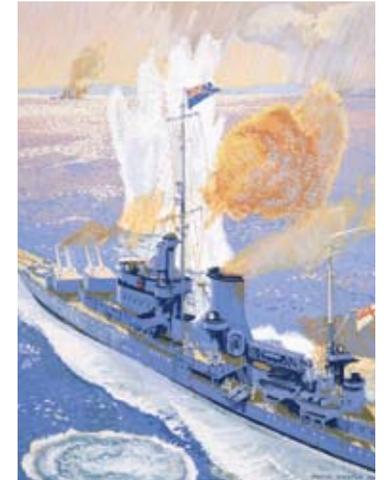
guns on *Exeter*. Within six minutes, several shells had hit *Exeter*, causing heavy damage and loss of life. Despite having one turret knocked out, *Exeter* remained in action, and took more hits. At 6.32 it fired torpedoes at the enemy ship, but they missed. In all, 61 members of *Exeter's* crew were killed or mortally wounded during the action.

While *Graf Spee* concentrated on *Exeter*, *Ajax* and *Achilles* closed in. *Achilles* opened fire at 6.21 a.m. and *Ajax* two minutes later. Their 16 smaller guns scored numerous hits, though the damage was limited by the small weight of the shells. Even so, the fire discomfited the Germans and, at 6.30, they again split their main armament. One 11-inch gun turret fired on the light cruisers. *Ajax* was straddled by shells three times.

*Achilles* did not escape unscathed. At 6.40 a near miss sent shell splinters tearing through the director control tower, killing four ratings – two of them New Zealanders – and seriously wounding three more. Captain Parry and five others were slightly wounded.

## THE ENEMY BREAKS OFF

*Graf Spee* now retired to the west at full speed. With *Exeter* out of the fight, the German ship could concentrate on *Ajax* and *Achilles*. The latter, carrying out what was later described as 'beautiful shooting', continued to score hits. But the weight of the German shells presented a major threat.



An important clue was received on 7 December when a distress message was picked up from the ninth (and last) of *Graf Spee's* victims, the Shaw Savill and Albion steamer *Tairoa*.



**SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD SEAMAN BOY ARTHUR HUNT RECALLED GOING INTO BATTLE ABOARD ACHILLES**

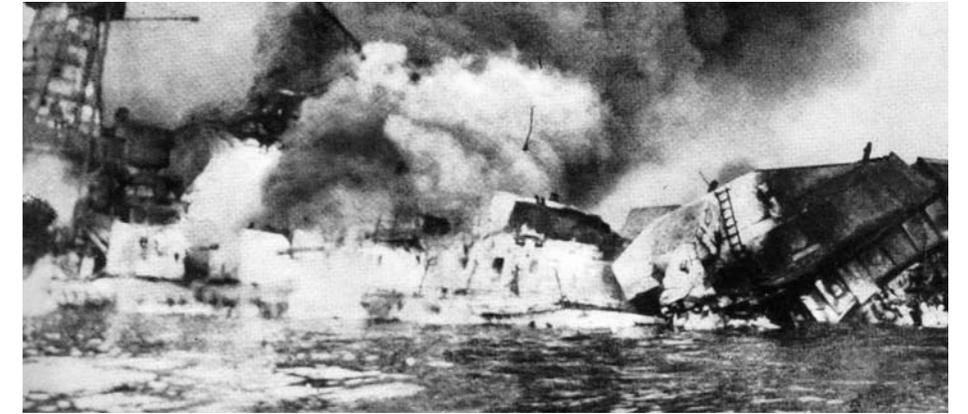
‘Whistles – clanging bells – shouted orders – and the clatter of hundreds of booted sailors rushing for their stations. This was the moment all our months of dreary training had led to. The whole ship’s company moved with precision, and every man knew that this time it was real, that the day of the mock battle was over.’

At 7.40 a.m. the light cruisers turned away under smoke. In the 82-minute action *Achilles*’ sweating gun crews had fired more than 200 broadsides at the German ship.

A more aggressive German commander might have persisted with the action, or at least finished off *Exeter*. But Langsdorff decided to break off and head for a neutral port to effect repairs. He set course for the River Plate estuary. The battle became a pursuit, as the British light cruisers shadowed their enemy. There were occasional flurries as *Graf Spee* turned on its pursuers, firing salvos to keep them back; several fell close to the British ships. Eventually, after traversing 300 miles, *Graf Spee* entered the Uruguayan port of Montevideo. It dropped anchor shortly after midnight.

#### **AFTER THE BATTLE**

By the morning of 14 December 1939 the damaged *Admiral Graf Spee* was anchored in neutral Montevideo. Under international law, a belligerent warship entering a neutral port had only a limited time to carry out repairs before being forced to put to sea.



**GUNNERY OFFICER LIEUTENANT R.E. WASHBOURN DESCRIBES THE BLOW SUFFERED BY ACHILLES**

‘I was only conscious of a hellish noise and a thump on the head which half stunned me. I ordered automatically: “A.C.P. [After Control Position] take over.” Six heavy splinters had entered the D.C.T. [Director Control Tower]. 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.

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 ...’

The British victory gave a huge boost to Commonwealth morale. It was the first bloody nose inflicted on the Germans.

With reinforcements steaming at full speed for the River Plate, the British were anxious to delay *Graf Spee's* departure as long as possible. They used another rule that prevented an enemy warship from leaving a neutral port for 24 hours after one of the other side's merchant ships did so. Several Allied merchant ships duly put to sea, but it was unclear whether Captain Langsdorff would abide by the rule. British naval authorities were relieved when HMS *Cumberland* arrived to join the vulnerable *Ajax* and *Achilles* late on 14 December 1939. Langsdorff was convinced that even stronger forces had arrived off the estuary.

There was trepidation aboard the waiting British cruisers. Their adversary was still lethal, and the outcome of a new engagement was by no means assured. But Langsdorff was pessimistic about his chances of breaking through the enemy ring he now believed lay between him and the sea. Motivated by a desire to avoid useless loss of life among his crew, he decided to scuttle his ship rather than to go down fighting. Berlin agreed to his plan.

*Graf Spee* weighed anchor at 6.17 p.m. on 17 December. Watched by thousands of spectators on shore, it headed slowly towards the sea. The ship stopped, its crew was taken

off and scuttling charges were blown. The *Graf Spee* settled on the shallow seabed, a smoking ruin. Its crew was landed in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they were interned. Langsdorff committed suicide soon afterwards.

#### THE BATTLE'S SIGNIFICANCE

The immediate outcome of the battle gave the Admiralty much satisfaction. A major threat to Atlantic shipping had been removed, a powerful German warship was destroyed, and many Royal Navy ships could now be released to other duties. But the psychological and moral impact was even more important than its material outcome. The British victory gave a huge boost to Commonwealth morale. It was the first bloody nose inflicted on the Germans.

*Achilles's* role was a special source of pride to New Zealanders. Their men had come through the test of combat with colours flying. There was huge excitement when *Achilles* returned to New Zealand in February 1940, the Admiralty having decided that it should be repaired at Auckland rather than Malta, as originally planned. A parade and civic reception was held in Auckland, and the crew later also paraded in Wellington.

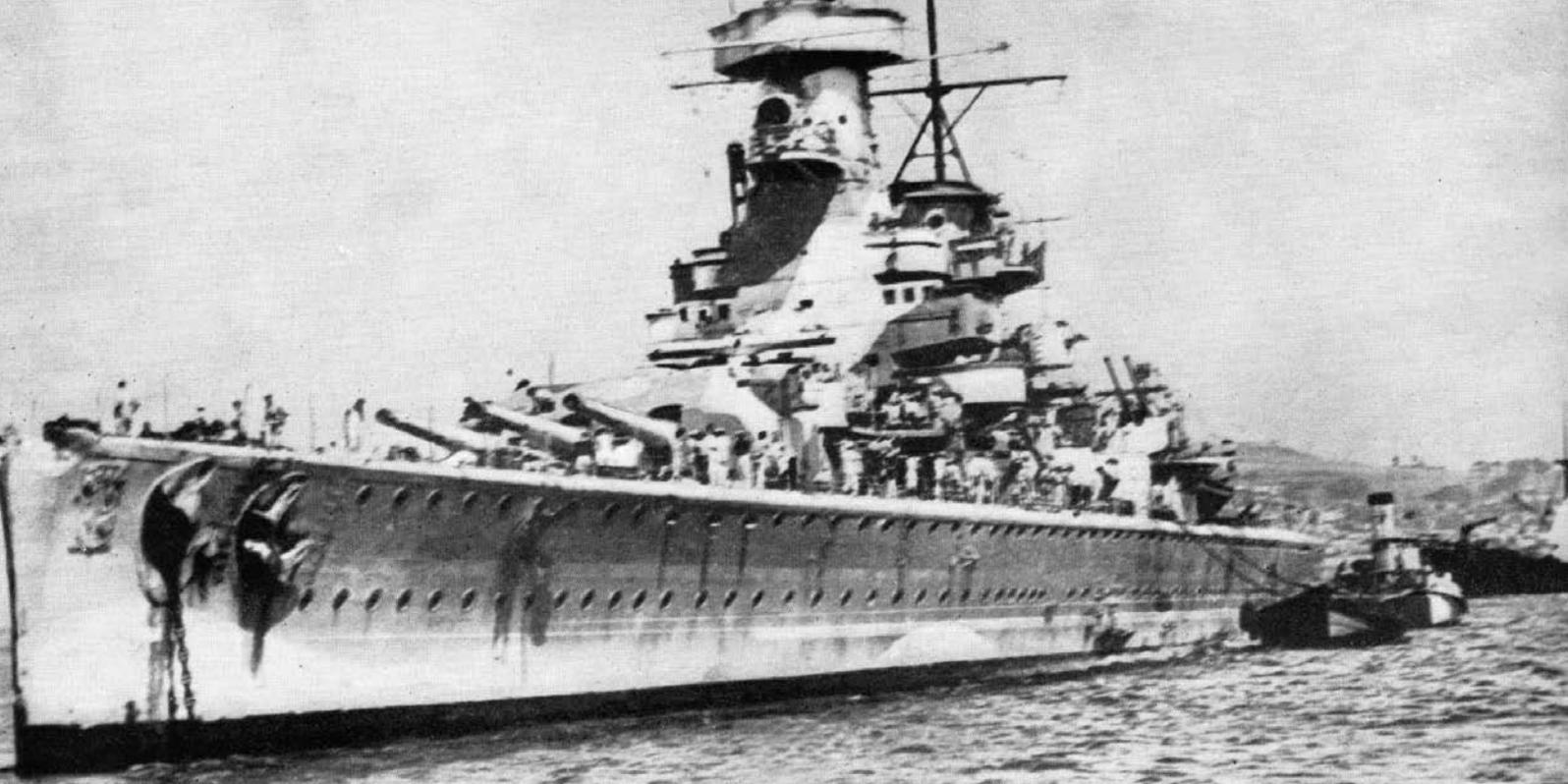


*Achilles's* contribution to the victory was also a boost for the New Zealand naval forces. It seemed to justify the effort and resources put into them over the previous 25 years. The action foreshadowed the full part New Zealand would play in the naval war over the next six years. Not just New Zealand warships were involved. This country also provided many thousands of men to serve on secondment in the Royal Navy. They were deployed throughout the fleet, and found

in every theatre of war in which the navy operated. At the peak of its strength, in July 1945, the Royal New Zealand Navy (as it had become in October 1941) had 10,649 men and women in its ranks.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

Battle of the River Plate, URL: <http://www.NZHistory.net.nz/war/battle-of-river-plate>



New Zealand Government