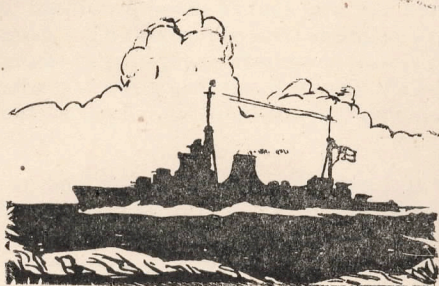




H.M.S. "AJAX"

JANUARY, 1946

THE STORY
OF
H.M.S. "AJAX"



"Nec Quisquam Nisi Ajax"
(Nobody shall lead except Ajax)

THE SEVENTH "AJAX"

HM.S. "AJAX," one of the three British cruisers which defeated the 10,000 tons German pocket battleship "Admiral Graf Spee" in the historic battle of the River Plate in December, 1939, and inspired the British Empire with the first great sea victory of the war, is the seventh ship in the Royal Navy to carry that name.

The first "Ajax" was a 3rd rate with 74 guns which helped Rodney and Hood in their battles 160 years ago, and in the first World War H.M.S. "Ajax" was a battleship fighting at Jutland. She went to the shipbreaker's yard in 1926.

The present "Ajax" is the fifth and last to be built of the "Leander" class of six-inch cruiser, being completed by Vickers-Armstrong at Barrow-in-Furness in 1935. Her overall length is 554 feet, maximum beam 51 feet and her engines of 72,000 horsepower can still give a full 31 knots. The more obvious changes which have been made since building are: twin high-angle guns in place of singles, provision of Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns, fitting of tripod masts and radar and the removal of aircraft and catapult. When first commissioned she had a complement of about 640 officers and men, but by 1944 the number was more than 800.

Her first service was on the South America Station but she was transferred to the Mediterranean during the Abyssinian crisis. Had war developed it was the intention of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, to use "Ajax" as his flagship during operations. When the situation quietened the ship returned to South America for normal peacetime duties and she rendered assistance during a disastrous earthquake in Chile.

On the outbreak of war in September, "Ajax" (under Captain C. H. L. Woodhouse, R.N.) was transferred to the South Atlantic Station, joining the ships of Commodore Henry Harwood who had his broad pendant in H.M.S. "Exeter". During the first few weeks she rounded up and sank two German merchant ships. At the end of September there came the news that a British ship had been sunk off Brazil by a "Surface Raider" and a thrilling chapter in Naval history began.

Fuel Problem in South Atlantic.

The Admiralty took immediate steps to increase the forces in the South Atlantic but the area was enormous — 1600 miles from Brazil to Freetown and 3700 from Argentine to the Cape — and even the aircraft from the famous carrier "Ark Royal" could only cover a minute portion of it. The problem of fuelling was also for ever present owing to the neutrality of the South American Republics, and almost invariably this had to be carried out at sea, often in heavy weather.

The next news of the raider came on 22nd October when a merchant ship reported she was being attacked in a position east of St. Helena. After this there was silence until

A RAIDER AT LARGE

18th November when a signal was received from the Indian Ocean that the S.S. "Africa Shell" had been sunk by a pocket battleship off Lourenco Marques. There was no further news for some time, but on 2nd December a battleship was reported attacking the liner "Doric Star" east of St. Helena, and the following day a separate report indicated that the enemy was moving westwards, though this, of course, might be only temporarily. Once more, the hunt was up.

By this date Commodore Harwood had transferred to the "Ajax" and his forces were spread out over the 2000 miles between Rio de Janeiro and Falkland Islands. Although there were several wide areas the raider might use as a hunting ground, the Commodore decided that the one off the River Plate, 3000 miles from her last reported position, was the most important and vulnerable and he ordered the cruisers "Exeter" and "Achilles" to rendezvous with him there at 0600 on 12th December. He calculated that the enemy might arrive somewhere in the vicinity that evening or the following day, though it was obviously impossible to be certain that he had chosen the exact spot for which the raider was making.

But at 0614 on 13th December "Ajax" sighted smoke and within six minutes the squadron was engaged with the "Admiral Graf Spee". It was a brilliant forecast of the enemy's movements.

The "Graf Spee" had six 11-inch guns, each firing a 661-lb shell. Compared with this, the "Exeter" had six 8-inch, firing 256-lb projectiles, and the other two British cruisers eight 6-inch guns each, with 112-lb shells. In addition to her 6-inch guns the enemy had four 5.9-inch guns on each side.

Commodore Harwood's pre-arranged tactics for a day action were for the "Exeter" to break away from the two six-inch cruisers in order to engage from a different angle. This would not only assist in identifying fall of shot but might create doubt in the mind of the enemy as to whom he should engage or whether he should divide his armament. These tactics were put into effect without signal and immediately proved successful.

"Exeter" On Fire.

The enemy started by firing one turret at "Ajax" and one at "Exeter", but the latter's fire seemed to worry him, for after shifting target once or twice, causing loss of output, he concentrated all his 11-inch guns on the "Exeter". This gave "Ajax" and "Achilles" a free shoot of which they made good use. But the "Exeter" was being hard hit. Her "B" turret and bridge were quickly out of action and she had other serious damage. She had to be conned from the secondary position on the mainmast, wheel orders being passed by a chain of messengers, but she continued to close the range in order to fire torpedoes and make the best use of her remaining guns.

Twenty five minutes after opening fire she had only "Y" turret in action, her speed was reduced and she was fiercely on fire; but she had done considerable damage to the "Graf Spee" and she had managed to get rid of her torpedoes. Thereafter she struggled to keep up but was unable to take any further effective part in the battle.

"GRAF SPEE" SCUTTLED

In the meantime "Ajax" and "Achilles" had closed to about 13,000 yards to help the "Exeter". This move made the "Graf Spee" again divide her armament and eventually to turn away behind a smoke screen. From then on the general trend of the battle was to the westward with the two cruisers engaging from the quarters at ranges varying from 8,000 to 17,000 yards. Both ships were damaged and had casualties through splinters from near misses, particularly in the director control tower of the "Achilles". But only "Ajax" received direct hits. An hour after firing had opened, an 11-inch shell went through the Commander's cabin and the pump space of "X" turret, before bursting in the Captain's cabin. The base of the shell hit "Y" turret and jammed that. So two turrets were out of action. "Ajax" retaliated by firing her port torpedoes but the enemy turned away.

Shortly after this the Commodore received a report that "Ajax" was running short of ammunition, so he decided to increase the range and then to shadow the enemy until he could force a close action after dark. With one of her last salvos in this phase the "Graf Spee" shot down the topmast of "Ajax" causing further casualties. The time was 0740 and the main action had lasted an hour and twenty minutes.

Throughout the day "Ajax" and "Achilles" hung on grimly to the enemy who, if they got too close, fired a few salvos. By about 1900 it became fairly clear that he was making for the River Plate and the cruisers, after following to the entrance, settled down to blockade him as in the days of old.

All the British forces in the South Atlantic were in the meantime hurrying to the spot, but only the cruiser "Cumberland" could arrive in less than six days, and therefore every diplomatic effort was made to delay the sailing of the "Graf Spee" after she had made good the damage resulting from the sixty to seventy hits she had received. Up to a point these efforts were successful, but on Sunday, 17th December, it was evident that the "Graf Spee" was about to sail, but that she had transferred some of her ship's company to a German merchant ship.

"Graf Spee" Scuttled.

Then came the "Graf Spee's" dramatic scuttling. At 1817 she slowly left harbour and at sunset blew herself up about five miles from the entrance to Montevideo. The British steamed past and saw the German wreck blazing furiously in the darkness, with flames reaching to the top of her control tower.

The Battle of the River Plate was a great triumph for the British cruiser squadron. In the original action, had the "Graf Spee" been handled with the skill and resolution displayed by the British force, there is no doubt that she could have sunk one ship and probably two. Her own fate would have been little different.

This was the first real naval action of the war, and its effect was of major importance not only in the destruction of a potent enemy, but in re-affirming to the world the fighting qualities of the Royal Navy.

FATE OF ITALIAN DESTROYERS

Many valuable lessons were learnt concerning damage control, particularly from the "Exeter's" experiences, and the action was also useful in proving that our peacetime training was capable of standing the test of war.

"Ajax" fired 823 rounds of 6-inch. Since 24th August steam had been off her main engines for only five days. The casualties, mostly in "X" turret, were: killed—7 ratings; seriously wounded—1 officer and 14 ratings. "X" turret was, of course, permanently out of action, but "Y" turret was serviceable about two hours after it was damaged.

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AFTER the Battle of the River Plate "Ajax" returned to England for repairs and by the summer of 1940 she was again operational, with Captain E. D. McCarthy in command in place of Captain Woodhouse.

She joined the Mediterranean Fleet at a time when our comparatively small forces were pitted against the potentially powerful Italian Fleet—and the Luftwaffe—and it was not long before she was in action.

On October 11th "Ajax" and her sister ship "Orion" sailed from Malta to intercept an Italian force thought to be proceeding from Italy to Tripoli. The British ships spread out about 20 miles apart and it was the good fortune of "Ajax" at 0153 next morning to sight a destroyer about 4,000 yards away on the starboard bow on an approximately opposite course. Fire was opened at once and almost simultaneously "Ajax" was hit on the bridge by two shells fired by a second enemy destroyer, this one being on the port bow. The latter was engaged by "Ajax's" port 4" guns.

After about 20 minutes the first enemy ship was stopped and blazing fiercely. "Ajax" turned all her attention to the second, which shortly afterwards blew up. Meanwhile a third enemy was sighted and engaged at about 6,000 yards. After some 15 minutes this destroyer was seen to be stopped, the whole fore part blazing furiously and the stern submerged. There was a violent explosion onboard her, and as two further destroyers had appeared on the scene, "Ajax" left her and went after them. They were, however, able to escape in the darkness and at 0345 the chase was abandoned.

In this encounter "Ajax" was hit seven times at very close range. The most serious damage was in the bridge structure, where the plotting office was wrecked and the crew killed. A shell in the central stores flat caused a fire which took 3½ hours to extinguish, during which time the crew of the transmitting station and others were trapped below. The casualties amounted in all to 13 killed and 22 seriously wounded.

BIG ACTION OFF MATAPAN

At the end of March, 1941, and at a time when the German threat of attack upon Greece was becoming increasingly ominous, the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Andrew Cunningham, thought it possible that the Italian Fleet might try to interfere with the flow of our men and supplies from Alexandria to Greece. He turned back all convoys, and when three Italian cruisers were sighted by a Royal Air Force plane, steaming towards Crete at noon on 27th March, he took the British Fleet secretly to sea.

The Battle of Matapan.

Just before daylight on the 28th, four British cruisers, including "Ajax", and four destroyers, all under the command of Vice-Admiral Pridham-Whippell, were about 50 miles south of the Western end of Crete when they saw an Italian shipborne aircraft and knew that enemy ships must be near. Shortly afterwards British aircraft reported enemy forces, and at 0745 three Italian 8-inch cruisers were sighted by the British light forces.

The Vice-Admiral tried to draw the enemy towards our fleet but at about 0900 the Italians turned away to the westward. They were at once followed. Contact was lost for a time but at 1058 our cruisers suddenly sighted the Italian battleship "Vittorio Veneto" which opened an accurate fire on them and they again had to withdraw, making smoke and zigzagging. Almost simultaneously six torpedo aircraft from our aircraft carrier "Formidable" attacked the "Veneto" and scored one hit without loss to themselves, in spite of intense fire.

By noon all British forces were in company, the damaged Italian battleship was 55 miles away making for home at reduced speed, and it was known that the Italian Admiral had six 8-inch and two 6-inch cruisers with him. The chances of bringing the enemy to action before dark were remote, so a second torpedo attack was made by aircraft from the "Formidable" to try to slow him down still more. One hit was achieved. All afternoon the chase continued and at dusk a further air attack was made and resulted in the cruiser "Pola" being hit and stopped.

Meantime the British light forces had been sent on ahead of the fleet in order to gain surface contact, but unfortunately the enemy, by a drastic alteration of course, evaded them. The main British force, consisting of the battleships "Warspite", "Valiant", "Barham" and the "Formidable", managed, however, to detect the "Pola" by radar shortly after 2200 and within a few minutes they sighted two more cruisers.

The resultant action developed at a range of about 3500 yards and was over in 4 minutes, during which some ninety 15-inch shells were fired, probably a third of them hitting. The enemy was taken by surprise and never fired a gun. As a result of the night's work the 8-inch cruisers "Zara", "Fiume" and "Pola" and a destroyer were sunk and other ships were seriously damaged, while in the whole operation no British ship was touched in any way and the only loss suffered was one aircraft crew.

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GREECE, CRETE AND NORMANDY

Greece Evacuated.

BY THE middle of April, 1941, the situation in Greece was critical and it was decided to evacuate, despite the absence of adequate air support. Although "Ajax" was involved in all the Greek operations her outstanding effort was to embark about 2,500 soldiers, mostly New Zealanders, in four hours from lighters and boats at Port Raptis during the night of 27th-28th April. The following night she was back again, this time at Monemvasia, to save a further 1,200 troops, including General Sir Bernard Freyberg, V.C., Admiral Baillie-Grohman and many wounded.

The campaign was not over and in the following month "Ajax", operating with our sadly battered and overstrained naval forces, helped to prevent any German seaborne invasion of Crete, the British Navy's most striking achievement being the destruction of a whole convoy on the night of 21st May. They were days of incessant enemy bombing during which we lost three cruisers and six destroyers, while every ship in the Fleet sustained damage. Eventually as a result of the air invasion, Crete, too, had to be abandoned.

For the remainder of 1941 "Ajax", now commanded by Captain S. L. Bateson, carried out 'routine' duties in the Eastern Mediterranean, convoying, bombarding and being bombed. By the beginning of 1942 she was more than a little battered and returned to England to refit.

In October, 1942, she re-commissioned at Chatham under Captain J. J. Weld and sailed back to the Mediterranean where the Navy was backing the Anglo-American Armies in North Africa. She was unlucky on this trip, for on New Year's Day, 1943, she was hit in Bone harbour by a 1,000 lb. bomb from a fighter bomber. Two of her boiler rooms were put out of action and the third damaged. After temporary repairs she went under her own steam to Algiers and thence to New York.

Re-commissioned at Portsmouth, she sailed on Christmas Day, 1943, for Scapa Flow for working up before another spell in the Mediterranean. Among other operations she bombarded the Island of Rhodes before returning to Britain for the momentous Normandy invasion.

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Normandy Invasion

"AJAX" formed part of the bombarding force which supported the assault by the 50th British Infantry Division at the extreme western end of the British area between Port en Bessin and Arromanches.

The approach to the French coast was uneventful and the ship was in position for her initial task at 0528, on D-Day, 6th June, 1944, opening fire at 0530 on Longues Battery. This consisted of four 150 m.m. guns with 7 ft. thick concrete casements.

MR CHURCHILL VISITS ATHENS

Fire was opened at a range of 12,000 yards and the battery was silenced by 0620 after the expenditure of 120 rounds of 6-inch ammunition. When this battery had been occupied by our troops, two out of the four guns were found to have been completely destroyed by direct hits through the embrasures. Prisoner-of-War reports indicate that the survivors were still in a state of "trembling anxiety" 24 hours later.

"Ajax" suffered no damage or casualties, the nearest escape being from a stick of bombs which fell 50 ft. off the starboard quarter during an air attack shortly after dark on D-Day.

With the exception of one day spent re-ammunitioning at Plymouth, the ship remained off the beaches giving support to the Army's advance inland until 20th June. She engaged, in all, 56 separate targets with either air or ground observer spotting and fired a total of 2,587 rounds. A German broadcast referring to naval gunfire during this phase stated: "Moreover, time and again he put up an umbrella of fire (Feuerglocke) over the defenders at the focal points of the fighting, compared with which incessant heavy air attacks have only a modest effect."

By July 13 "Ajax" was once more in the Mediterranean, this time preparing for the invasion of the South of France a month later. But on this D-Day, when she operated with United States naval forces, opposition was so slight and the Army's advance so rapid that she had little to do.

In October (under her present Commanding Officer, Captain John Cuthbert, C.B.E.) she formed part of the liberating force for Greece. She left Taranto in Italy on 14th October carrying 648 troops, 26 war correspondents and 13 jeeps. These were landed at the Piraeus on 17th October. Most of the following six months were spent in Greek waters.

On a trip to Alexandria from Greece "Ajax" accepted the surrender of the island of Santorin. For this operation "Ajax's" commander (Commander R. S. Foster Brown, RN) used the ship's boats and H.M. caique "Santa Klaus" commanded by Sergeant Major Medley of the 4th Hussars. After the German garrison had been rounded up the Commander and the shore party attended a joyful ceremony at the war memorial and mail was distributed to released British prisoners. The mail had been sent in the caique so the men would have it at the earliest possible moment. Among the stores landed from "Ajax" for the islanders were: 30,400 lbs. flour, 5,200 lbs. sugar, 2,900 lbs. milk, 1,850 lbs. butter, 2,600 lbs. preserved meat, and medical stores.

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Mr. Churchill in Greece.

"AJAX" HAD the privilege of providing accomodation for Mr. Churchill during his dramatic Christmas visit to Athens. With Mr. Eden, Mr. Churchill arrived by air and went on board "Ajax" at 1600 on Christmas Day. During the three days' stay Mr. Churchill held conferences in the "Ajax" as well as ashore but he found time to walk round the ship. While the Prime Minister was on board he was not far from the fighting and one shell landed some 200 yards away.

SHOWING THE FLAG

Soon after the war in Europe ended she was standing by with H.M.S. "Orion" at Trieste during the political tension and there she renewed her friendship with the 2nd New Zealand Division.

In August, 1945, "Ajax", flying the flag of Admiral Sir John Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, visited the South of France to take part in the celebrations to commemorate the anniversary of the Allied landings.

The next month she embarked H.R.H. the Regent of Iraq at Naples and took him to Istanbul. "Ajax" was accompanied by the destroyers H.M.S. "Marne" and H.M.S. "Meteor" and they were the first British warships to pass through the Dardanelles since before the war. The Turkish people gave the Royal Navy a splendid reception when the bluejackets and Royal Marines, led by the cruiser's band, marched through the streets for a ceremony at the War of Independence memorial.

Later in September "Ajax" carried General Freyberg and representatives of the New Zealand forces back to Crete to revisit the scene of their gallant fight against overwhelming odds and to hold memorial services for those who died.

"Ajax" is now just over ten years old. In those ten years she travelled 315,600 miles and spent 19,769 hours at sea.

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H.M.S. "Ajax"—from 1767 to 1926

1. A 3rd Rate. 74 guns. 1,615 tons. 550 men. Built at Portsmouth and launched 1767. With Rodney in Bay of Biscay, 1780, helping to capture Spanish convoy and escort. Participated in Rodney's defeat of Langara off Cape St. Vincent and Rodney's action with de Guicher and de Grasse off Martinique and the Chesapeake. 1781, in Hood's action with de Grasse off Dominique. Sold 1785.

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2. A 3rd Rate. 74 guns. 1,953 tons. 690 men. Built at Deptford, 1798. In 1800, with Channel Fleet, blockaded Brest. 1801, with Captain the Hon. Alexander Cochrane at Alexandria when he superintended the landing of troops and supported them with a flotilla of armed boats. 1805, Calder's action off Ferrol. Trafalgar. 1807, Duckworth's expedition to Dardenelles. In that year she accidentally caught fire off Tenedos. 250 of crew lost.

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3. A 3rd Rate. 74 guns. Built at Woolwich, launched 1809. 1809-10, Blockade of Toulon. 1810, Blackwood's action off Bandol. Assisted in destroying French Convoy at Pacamos. 1811, with "Unite" (frigate) captured French corvette "Dromedaire" off Corsica. 1813, co-operated in reduction of San Sebastian. 1814, captured French 16 gun-brig "Alcion" off Scilly. 1846, converted to screw guardship (450 h.p., 60 guns). 1854-55, Russian War. Baltic operations and bombardment of Bomarsund. Broken up at Deptford 1865.

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4. A 2nd Rate. 80 guns. 2,609 tons. Built Pembroke as "Vanguard" 1835. Name changed to "Ajax" 1867. In reserve at Sheerness. Broken up at Chatham, 1875.

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5. 1885—Twin-screw turret ship. 8,492 tons. 6,000 h.p. Four 38-ton guns. Sold for breaking up, 1904.

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6. Battleship. Built Greenock, launched 1912. 23,000 tons. 27,000 h.p. Ten 13.5 guns and (in 1916) three torpedo tubes. 1913, 2nd Battle Squadron. 1916, Jutland (Captain George Baird). Sold Alloa Shipbreaking Company, 1926.

