

INTRODUCTION – by Malcolm Collis

As the Chairman has already said, a very warm welcome to you all.

So, why are we holding our annual Reunion Commemorative service here in Portsmouth and more specifically, why are we here in Southsea before the Normandy Memorial Wall?

Firstly, why Portsmouth? Well, 90 years ago, HMS Ajax, having been built and launched in Barrow-in-Furness, sailed down to Portsmouth to be Commissioned on 15th April 1935 – fuller details can be found in the Order of Service Booklet. She was the 7th ship to carry that proud name.

Having started her naval career as a Pommy ship she would mainly spend her first two commissions in the Caribbean and South America areas, not to mention a year back in the Mediterranean in 1935/36, along with the rest of the British Navy Fleet, due to rising tensions in the area over the Abyssinian crisis.

During the second commission she took part in what would become one of the most famous naval battles of the Second World War, The Battle of the River Plate which saw the destruction of the German Pocket Battleship, the Admiral Graff Spee.

Back in Chatham, Ajax underwent extensive repairs and eventually joined the 7th Cruiser Squadron in the Mediterranean where she would spend much of her life seeing a great deal of action. Despite many battles against Italian ships and German and Italian war planes, Ajax survived almost constant attacks, either as a hunting group or on escort duties.

Her luck, however, finally ran out on New Year's Day 1943 when she was in Bone Harbour in Algeria and took a direct hit from a 1000lb bomb from a German Stuka Dive Bomber, taking out two of her boilers and damaging a third. The resulting 7 casualties would be the last of the 44 Ajax crew killed in action – a list is included in the Order of Service.

Although she was down, she was not out, and she eventually made it to New York where she underwent extensive repairs lasting 9 months.

She was back in the Mediterranean by the end of January 1944 to resume her duties until she was recalled to take part in the most significant turning point of the War.

So why are we here in Southsea before the Normandy Memorial Wall I asked at the beginning? Well, that turning point was Operation Overlord, the Normandy Invasion, D-Day – Operation Neptune was the naval component of that campaign.

Early on the morning of Tuesday 6th June 1944 Ajax was off Gold Beach with orders to destroy a German Gun Emplacement at Longues-sur-Mer, some miles inland, that would pose a threat to invading troops. Ajax was the first to fire in the campaign and within 8 minutes of the first of her shells being fired at 05.20am, all 4 batteries were destroyed by 114 of her 6 inch shells.

The Naval bombardment lasted 2 hours and by the end of the day, 25,000 troops managed to land on Gold Beach – the beginning of the end of the Second World War. In 2023 our Association went to Normandy and it was particularly poignant to visit the preserved batteries and witness that destruction.

Here we stand before this Normandy Memorial Wall, dedicated and unveiled in 2018, now forming part of the D-Day Story Museum. You will see that the Wall contains bricks with names of some who served in the Campaign – last year the HMS Ajax & River Plate Veterans Association sponsored the Ship's Badge plaque and two bricks for two surviving Association members – both still with us: Albert Robb, now 107, was in HMS Meynell at the time; and Allan Lorrimer, now 100 was in Ajax.

Another member, Adam Prickett, who will lay one of the wreaths, also sponsored a Brick in memory of his grandfather, Ronald John Prickett who was a Chief Petty Officer on Ajax at the time of D-Day having served in her between December 1940 and July 1945. Unfortunately, he died in 1988 at the age of 67.

Ajax also took part in Operation Dragoon, in support of the Landings in the South of France and after the war remained in the Mediterranean for quite some time, although she did visit South America one final time. In early 1946 she escorted the Highland Monarch, repatriating 845 Graf Spee crew back to Germany from Uruguay & Argentina.

The following year, one of her most unpleasant tasks was to forcibly turn back a ship, The Exodus 1947, carrying a large number of Jews making their way to set up an independent state in Palestine.

After 14 years of service HMS Ajax finally Paid-Off on 16th February 1948 and when a planned sale to the Chilean Navy did not come to fruition, she undertook her final cruise - to the breakers yard ... but she didn't go down without a fight. Under tow to Messer's J. Cashmore Ltd Breakers Yard at Newport, South Wales, she ended up grounded not far from her final resting place; it took a week to re-float her. Demolition was completed in 1950

However, her name lived on when the 8th Ajax, a Frigate, entered service in 1963, serving until 1985 – a good number of her crew are here today.

We had hoped there would be a 9th Ajax, a submarine, but HMS Ajax became HMS Agincourt instead, until finally that name too was changed to HMS Achilles; another hero of the Battle of the River Plate.