

The Merchants Ships Captured by the Graf Spee

War broke out 3rd September 1939 and Langsdorff was ordered to commence raiding operations 26th September on unarmed British Merchant ships but not to engage the Navy; it led a hit and run type of campaign.

First to be captured and sunk; *SS Clement* on 30th September 1939, 75 miles south-east Pernambuco Brazil. Captain F. C. P. Harris, and chief engineer and one injured crew taken on board Graf Spee. Rest of crew put on the boats and pointed to Maceio, Brazil. The three were later put on passing Greek steamer to Cape Verde having promised not to send any signals. (Perhaps such acts lead to Langsdorff being described as a Gentleman and Prince of Honour by many?)



SS-Clements

Second: *SS Newton Beech* Captured 5th October & sunk 8th October 480 miles east-south-east Ascension Island. Crew captured.



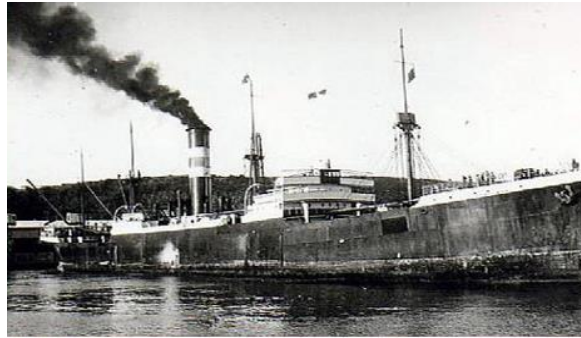
SS-Newton-Beech

Third: *SS Ashlea* Captured and sunk 7th October between Cape Town & Freetown. Crew captured.



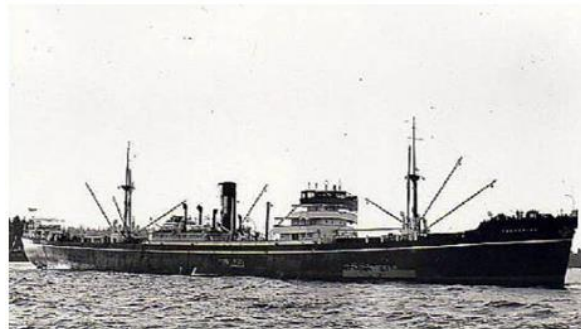
SS-Ashlea

Fourth: *SS Huntsman* Captured 10th October on route to Liverpool from India and East Africa. Used as a supply ship and eventually sunk 5th December 650 miles south-west St Helena. Captured crew eventually transferred to *Altmark*.



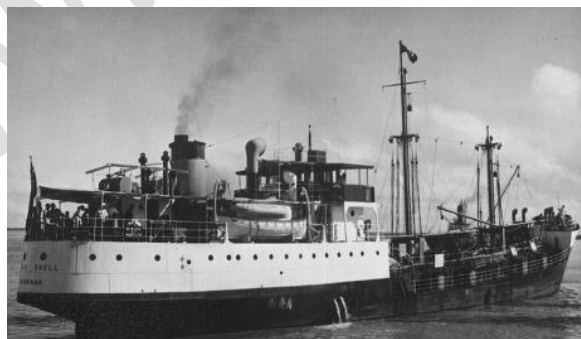
SS-Huntsman

Fifth: *MV Trevanion* Captured and sunk 22nd October on route from South Australia to UK. Captured crew later transferred to the *Altmark*.



MV-Trevanion

Sixth: *African Shell* Captured and sunk 15th November 160 miles north-east of what is now Maputo, Mozambique. The crew were allowed to leave by boats but Master (P.P.G. Dove) taken prisoner.



African-Shell

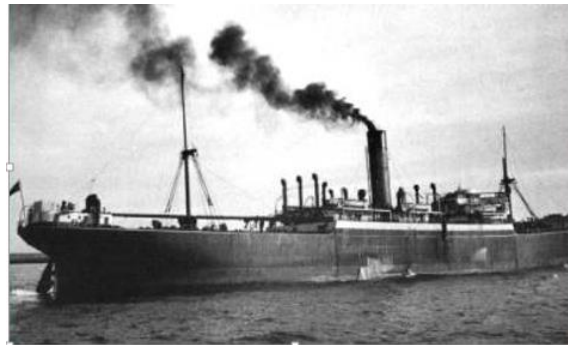
[16th November 350 miles south-west Madagascar Dutch motorship *Mapia* stopped but released]

Seventh: *Doric Star* Captured and sunk 2nd December 500 miles west of what is now Namibia on route from New Zealand to UK. Passengers and crew taken off.



Doric Star being sunk by 5.9-inch shells

Eighth: *SS Tairoa* Captured and sunk 3rd December off coast of what is now Namibia. Crew removed.



SS Tairoa

Ninth & final: *Streonshalh* Captured and sunk 7th December 1000 miles east of Sao Francisco, Brazil on route Montevideo to UK. Crew removed.



Streonshalh from Graf Spee with captured crew

The Merchant refrigerated freighter *Tairoa* sailed from Brisbane; four days out from Durban she heard an SOS from the “*Doric Star*” which was being attacked by the *Graf Spee*. The *Tairoa* altered course to try to avoid the same fate as the *Doric Star* but the following morning, 3rd December 1939, *Graf Spee* was upon her. An SOS was sent but the *Graf Spee* shelled her without warning, smashing the Bridge, wheel and binnacle, wounding three of the crew.

At first she was ordered to steam on, but when it was discovered the steering was damaged the crew were taken off and the *Tairoa* sunk by gunfire. Three days later the *Graf Spee* met a tanker disguised as a Norwegian ship; the *Altmark*. The *Tairoa*'s Master and the Crew, except the wounded who were in the hospital (chief refrigerating officer, chief officer, chief engineer and the wireless officer), were put aboard the *Altmark*. Captain Langsdorff came to the hospital and apologised to the wounded men, saying that he was forced to open fire because radio messages were being sent out and they were the only men wounded out of the nine merchantmen that had been sunk. In addition to its crew of 40 the *Altmark* had three hundred prisoners living in cramped conditions. Langsdorff ordered the *Altmark* back to Germany and this was the last time the two ships met.

www.hmsajax.org