

HMS AJAX

Brenda Ralph Lewis recalls the history of the ship which won fame at the Battle of the River Plate

EVER SINCE the Royal Navy came into being as a fighting force, it has contained certain ships which have caught the public imagination and have, as a result, achieved heroic status in the public mind. One such ship was the 6,985 ton light cruiser *Ajax*, one of the 'stars' of the war at sea between 1939 and 1945.

The 32.5 knot *Ajax* was one of five 'Leander' class cruisers built at Barrow by Vickers-Armstrong, and with her proportions of 522 feet x 55.75 feet x 15.5 feet, she was the smallest of them. Nevertheless, like the other four, *Ajax* was formidably armed. She carried eight 6-inch guns, eight 4-inch ack-ack guns, four three pounders, ten smaller guns, eight quadruple 21-inch torpedo tubes and a Fairey Seafox two-seater, twin-float biplane for reconnaissance duties. Launched on March 1 1934 and completed 15 months later, on June 3

1935, *Ajax's* guns enabled her to pack a powerful punch of 800 lb broadside, with an extreme range of 25,000 yards and a firing rate of 64 rounds per minute.

Below decks, *Ajax* was powered by four-shaft Parsons geared turbines of 72,000 shp, and her boilers comprised four Admiralty three-drum type. The cruiser's armour plating varied from 1 inch on her turrets, to 2 inches on her decks and between 2 inches and 4 inches on her main belt, and at the start of World War 2 in September 1939, she carried four W/T transmitters.

Ajax's war began early, within a month of commencement of hostilities. Of the many worries that beset the Admiralty at this time was the danger to shipping in the Atlantic presented by fast, powerful German surface raiders. In October 1939, to counter this threat, the Royal Navy formed hunting packs to patrol vital shipping lanes. One of

these was Force G, of which *Ajax* was a member, along with her sister ship *Achilles*. Force G's area was the south-east coast of South America. Only a few days after *Ajax* took up guard duties off the River Plate, Uruguay, in December 1939, this became the scene of the first major naval action of World War 2.

The Admiralty's fears of German marauders in the Atlantic soon proved more than justified and on December 13, *Ajax*, *Achilles* and another cruiser, HMS *Exeter* were confronted by the pocket-battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*.

Though outnumbered, the 11-inch *Graf Spee* possessed a broadside weight greater than that of all three British cruisers put together, and in the opening gun battle inflicted such damage on *Exeter* that she was forced to retire. *Ajax* also suffered as she and *Achilles* were plastered with about 25 salvos of *Graf Spee's* gunfire, which included 5.9-inch broadsides fired at the rate of four a minute. One of the German 11-inch shells struck the after superstructure of *Ajax*, speared straight through several cabins and wrecked the machinery below 'X' gun turret. Four of the gun crew were killed and six wounded. When the shell finally exploded, it jammed 'Y' turret, and so put both *Ajax's* after-turrets out of action at the same time. Another broadside



Top HMS *Ajax* on completion in June 1935. Note the Fairey Seafox twin-float two-seater biplane used for reconnaissance duties. Above *Ajax* in wartime camouflage.



from *Graf Spee* toppled *Ajax*'s main topmast and wrecked all her aerials. However, the German ship had also sustained a serious battering, for between them the three British cruisers had scored 17 hits. *Ajax* had expended 823 rounds, and her 'A' turret had pounded away continuously for 81 minutes.

Eventually, *Graf Spee* staggered away from the scene and limped off at 23 knots towards the haven of Montevideo and the River Plate. *Ajax* and *Achilles* gave chase. Captain Langsdorff, in command of *Graf Spee* managed to reach his haven, only to find the British ships were soon policing the waters outside Montevideo harbour, waiting for him to emerge. He never did. On Langsdorff's orders, *Graf Spee* was scuttled on December 17, and it was the Fairey Seafox from *Ajax* which flew over the scene and reported the triumphant news.

Back home in Britain, the victory provoked an outburst of rejoicing that was climaxed two months later on February 23 1940. That day, the officers and men of *Ajax*

and *Exeter* were inspected by King George VI at Horse Guards Parade, and then marched through streets crammed with cheering crowds to Trafalgar Square and on to lunch at the Guildhall. When the procession arrived, a band of the Royal Marines struck up with 'Heroes of the River Plate', which had been specially composed for the occasion.

There was a certain amount of euphoria in the air at this time, and not only over the River Plate triumph. For nearly six months after its declaration, World War 2 seemed to be something of a 'dud'. Little or nothing had yet happened to justify labelling it a full-scale, all-out struggle.

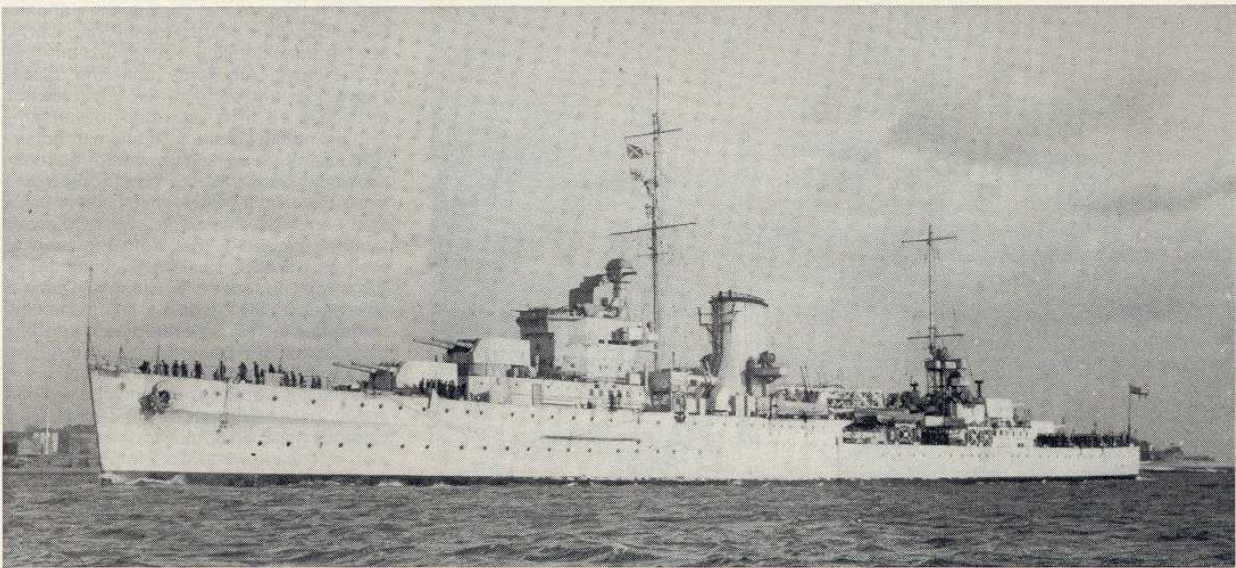
This, however, is precisely what the war became not long afterwards, and one of the most bitterly contested theatres of all was the Mediterranean, the next scene of operations for HMS *Ajax*. The cruiser arrived there after a period under repair in England and on October 12 1940, brought off a brilliant solo against the Italian Navy. South-east of Sicily *Ajax* sank three Italian vessels

and damaged a fourth while sustaining seven hits herself.

Ajax's next major encounter with the Italians was equally dramatic. At the end of March 1941, she was part of a force seconded from patrol duty in the Aegean to take part in the battle of Matapan. This was the confrontation in which two Italian heavy cruisers and four destroyers went to the aid of their companion cruiser *Pola*, which had earlier been crippled by British carrier-borne aircraft. After nightfall, the Italians ran straight into a force of British ships which had been chasing the main part of their fleet. *Ajax* was fitted at this time with Type 279 RDF (radio direction finding) equipment, later known as radar. At 2155 hours on March 28 the screens on *Ajax* picked up signals from 'three unknown ships' — in reality the *Pola* and two of her rescuers — some five miles distant. In consequence, five Italian ships, including the *Pola* were sunk in a brief, but devastating action in which the Italians, not being equipped for night fighting, were



Top *Ajax* pictured in April 1935 just before completion by her builders, Vickers-Armstrong. **Above** Another view of *Ajax*. During the River Plate battle. *Ajax* fired four torpedoes at *Graf Spee*. All missed, but one passed within eight feet of the bows of the German ship.



helpless targets for the British guns.

The other, German, enemy in the Mediterranean was a good deal more formidable and determined, as *Ajax* discovered when she took part in the mass rescue of British troops from Crete two months after Matapan.

Greece and Crete had been swamped by a German invasion in April, 1941, and ships of the British Mediterranean Fleet were rushed in to evacuate British forces trapped by the enemy onslaught. The operation was carried out under particularly harrowing conditions, with British ships pounded hard and continuously from the air. *Ajax* was among the casualties. At 2100 hours on May 28 1941, a near-miss exploded close to the cruiser, damaging her side, killing 20 crewmen and causing a minor fire. *Ajax* was ordered back to base at Alexandria where, fortunately, the damage was pronounced not quite so serious as had at first been feared.

Ajax remained in the Mediterranean for another three years. During that time, she

helped keep open the vital lifelines to the beleaguered island of Malta, and spent another spell operating in the Aegean. She also took part in an impudent venture with three destroyers in May 1941, when she bombarded the German-held port of Benghazi in Libya. For good measure, the four British vessels sank two German ammunition ships on their way to top up the dwindling supplies of the German forces in North Africa.

In 1944, *Ajax* effected another 'double' when she assisted in both the Allied invasion landings in France. At 0530 hours on D-Day, June 6, in preparation for the Normandy landings, *Ajax* opened fire on the four-gun battery at Longues which, with other emplacements, posed a threat to the invasion beaches. Longues proved a tough nut, even for the redoubtable British cruiser. It was not silenced until 0645 hours by which time *Ajax*, aided by HMS *Argonaut*, had pumped 179 shells into it and put direct hits through the battery's embrasures.

Operation Dragoon, the invasion of southern France, had originally been planned for the same day as the Normandy landings, but for various reasons it was delayed until August, 1944. The huge fleet of 1,000 amassed for this onslaught included 21 cruisers, *Ajax* among them.

The aftermath of World War 2 provided the now illustrious service record of HMS *Ajax* with a curious sequel. On February 16 1946, she accompanied the liner *Highland Monarch* from Buenos Aires to Montevideo where officers and ratings of the *Admiral Graf Spee* who had sat out the war in Uruguay were embarked for repatriation to Germany.

Three years later, in 1949, *Ajax* went to the scrapyard. However, she left in Montevideo a permanent reminder of the exploit that had first made her name. On December 13 1949, *Ajax's* polished brass bell was formally presented to the city of Montevideo still bearing the scars it sustained in the action against the *Graf Spee* ten years before. □



Top and above Bow three-quarter views of *Ajax* in January 1938. She was the eighth Royal Navy ship to bear that name since 1767. Men of the *Ajax* received numerous awards for the River Plate action including two DSOs, six DSCs and 14 DSMs.