'Atlanta' class cruiser

David L.Kimble covers history and colour schemes, and suggests improvements for the Matchbox model.

By 1940, the USN was well along in work on its new 'Atlanta' class AA cruiser. These ships were the first of their kind for the USN and it would seem that they borrowed heavily from the design of the Royal Navy's 'Dido' class already coming into service. The RN, evidently aware of the threat that aircraft posed to fleet operations, converted during the 1930s certain ships of the old C class. These conversions were only a stop-gap measure pending the entry into service of the 'Didos' however, and for various reasons the whole C class was not converted. The USN must have watched the development and success of these vessels with great interest because the resulting 'Atlantas' and the 'Didos' bore a number of similarities in size, disposal of armament and superstructure arrangement. It has been stated that the USN made several changes during construction of the 'Atlantas' which were a direct result of the RN experience with this type of ship.

The final product, however, was strictly a USN solution to a problem which was unique to it. The original intention was to create a vessel capable of protecting fleet operations at prolonged high speed in the vast distances of the Pacific with the added capability to act as a destroyer flotilla leader in the style of the Netherlands' *Tromp* light cruiser. The results, not surprisingly, were somewhat less than hoped for as the extended radius of action had to be sacrificed for high speed and the flotilla leader notion was dropped rather early on as a result of early surface actions.

Even with those compromises made, the hull, which was not that different in size from the *'Didos'*, was crammed with armament and piled high with superstructure. Sixteen dual purpose 5 inch 38 cal guns were mounted in eight twin turrets. Six of these were carried on centreline, while two others, known as wing or waist turrets, were mounted on opposite sides of the rear superstructure aft of the tubes. It is interesting here to note that half of the main battery armament was mounted higher than main deck level. Later, because of this, redesign and rearrangement of lighter guns would be necessary. Two banks of four 21 inch torpedo tubes were mounted. No reloads were carried. Two HA/DCTs and RDF gear were mounted and this equipment was upgraded as it became available throughout the war. Light armament on the first four units was 3 or 4 x 1.1 inch quads (the extra was carried on *San Juan, San Diego* and perhaps the *Atlanta* also), and eight 20mm singles. Armour, rather generous for a vessel of this size, consisted of a 3½ inch belt, 3¾ inch on the conning tower and 1½ inches on the turrets. Four boilers provided 75,000 shaft horsepower and it was thought that this would suffice for 38 knots (*Atlanta* made 40 knots on trials) but when full load displacement rose to 8100 tons, speed dropped to 33 knots which proved sufficient.

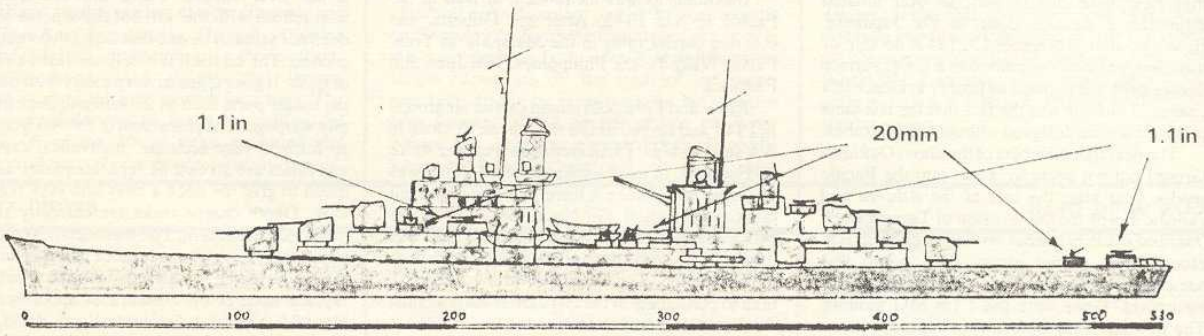
The entire 'Atlanta' class consisted of eleven ships made up of three distinct groups. The first four, *Atlanta, Juneau, San Diego* and *San Juan* were launched in 1941. The next four, *Oakland, Reno, Flint* and *Tucscon* entered service between 1943 and 1945. Following the end of the war, *Juneau II, Spokane* and *Fresno* were commissioned. The differences between the groups will be covered later.

Atlanta, launched on 6 September 1941, was the first ship of the class to reach a combat area serving in the escort of the carrier groups at the Battle of Midway in June of 1942. The three other units of the first group all followed *Atlanta* into active service within the next four months of 1942. All four actively participated in the South Pacific campaign in late 1942. *San Diego* and *San Juan* participated in the landings at Guadalcanal in August. In October, *San Juan* was damaged by a 550lb bomb which passed completely through her stern without detonating. Besides their duties as AA ships, The 'Atlantas' were pressed into service as destroyers. Photos taken of the ships at this time indicate the mounting of depth-charge racks on the stern and ship's histories tell of their employment in the anti-submarine role. There is no mention of any encounter while serving in this function.

Insistent that what they had were large AA flotilla leaders, the US Navy was presented with a chance to employ them in that capacity in late 1942 at Guadalcanal. Tactically speaking, the waters around that island were controlled by US aircraft in the daytime and the Imperial Japanese Navy at night. The Japanese, hard pressed to keep their garrison on the island supplied, would send warships into the area during darkness to bombard and/or bring reinforcements. The USN attempted to counter these nocturnal visits by forming task groups (more often than not these groups consisted of cruisers and destroyers of the carrier groups thrown together, ad hoc) to contest the Japanese in the restricted waters close to Guadalcanal. The USN was learning by hard experience how to fight these actions against the more experienced IJN and the results were often savage and spectacular gun and torpedo duals fought out at one or two miles range.

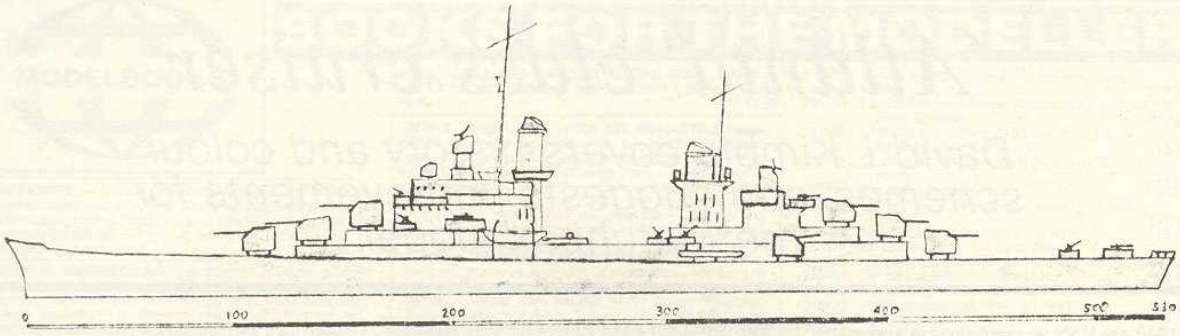
On November 12, both sides undertook large scale reinforcement movements. *Juneau* and *Atlanta* were made part of a 13 ship group of cruisers and destroyers that during the daylight hours had fought air to surface with Japanese aircraft. Now they were deployed to stop an IJN bombardment force proceeding toward Guadalcanal with two battleships, light cruisers and destroyers.

The USN formation was disposed in single file with the *Atlanta* the first US cruiser behind four US destroyers. Due to some confusion on the flagship and the usual communications muddle, the two converging forces very nearly ran head on to each other in the dark. *Atlanta* almost immediately turned on searchlights and opened fire on the battleship *Hiei* passing to starboard and a destroyer directly ahead. The fire was returned and *Atlanta's* bridge area was smashed, killing everyone there and starting several fires. Then a torpedo hit the forward engine room, which left the ship without power and drifting. At this point, the ship began taking hits from port side astern (survivors have long insisted that the hits were from *San Francisco,* an 8 inch cruiser. Later examination revealed 8 inch shell holes and fragments with *San Francisco's* shell dye colour. The Japanese employed no 8 inch ships in this engagement), which riddled the rear superstructure area, and knocked out the No 3 and five 5 inch turrets. Some shells from this barrage passed completely through the rear superstructure to knock out the starboard waist turret. Hit by forty nine major calibre shells, all but two of the 5 inch guns knocked out, *Atlanta* drifted burning until she



ATLANTA November 1942

Hull - Navy Blue. Superstructure - Medium (Ocean) grey over pale grey.



SAN DIEGO 1943

Overall Navy Blue with Deck Blue horizontal surfaces. Oakland carried a similar scheme in 1943 and 1944. Location of AA described in the text.

was scuttled the next afternoon.

Juneau, further back in the US formation, had barely opened fire when she was hit in the forward fireroom by a torpedo and lost power. Thus damaged she rejoined the homeward bound US formation the next day only to be torpedoed by a Japanese submarine en route. The torpedo hit a forward magazine and the ship disintegrated. Out of a crew of 700 only 7 survived the sinking and subsequent marooning.

Officially the US Navy was pleased with the performance of both ships in this action. This may have been due in part, to over inflated estimates of damage done to the Japanese. However, after November 13, 1942, no ship of this class was ever committed to a major surface engagement and perhaps as further evidence of a change of mission was the fact that the last units of the class were designed without torpedo tubes.

The next four members of the class (*Oakland* Group) did not begin to report into the Pacific until a year after the loss of the *Atlanta* and *Juneau.* It was the the invasion of Tarawa when *Oakland* made her debut serving as close-in AA escort for a carrier group. This group was somewhat different in appearance and equipment. Gone were the 1.1in MG mounts. The newer 40mm Bofors twin replaced them. The waist turrets had been beached in favour of the quadruple 40mm (later twin mounts in some ships). The number of 20mm singles had been raised from 8 to as many as 19 in some ships. RDF equipment was updated. Improved splinter shielding was added to the bridge area as were external escape ladders to allow emergency exits from the superstructure in case of fire. In addition, the bridge of the newer units was square in construction, rather than round as in the first group. *San Diego* and *San Juan* received most of these modifications except for the 40mm mounts on the galley roof (boat deck between the funnels) and they retained the waist turrets and the original rounded bridge. It was as the additional light AA was added that problems developed with excessive top hamper. The heavy 40mm quad could only be used at main deck level. In *San Juan* and *San Diego,* this meant only one could be carried and that on the stern. Later on it proved necessary to remove the 40mm mounts from the galley roof in some units for the same reason. It should also be noted that some sources have credited the *Oakland* with only six 21in tubes. Photographs, however, clearly show that at least *Flint* and *Reno* carried eight.

Oakland, as was mentioned, arrived in the Pacific in late 1943. After the Gilberts, she escorted carrier raids in the Marshals, at Truk, Palau, Wake Is, the Philippines, Iwo Jima and Formosa.

Reno and *Flint* both joined carrier air groups in 1944 and served as did the others, as close-in AA screen ships. Participating in a carrier strike on Formosa, in mid October of 1944, *Reno* was hit on her No 6 five inch turret by a Kamikaze but remained in action. On November 3, 1944 she was torpedoed by the submarine *I-41* and was damaged. She did not return to active duty before the war ended. *Tuscon* arrived in the Pacific in time to participate in the last carrier raids against the Japanese home islands.

San Diego and *San Juan* served throughout the rest of the war in their primary role as AA screens with occasional detached duty for shore bombardment. *San Diego* was only damaged once in her career and that by a small fragment that only slightly injured one man. *San Juan,* after repairing bomb damage in October of 1942, was basically untouched the rest of the war.

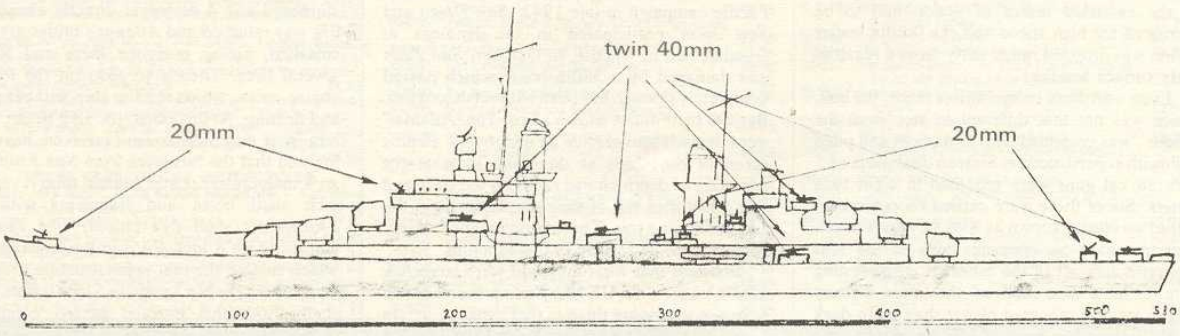
The final three vessels of the class: *Fresno, Juneau II* and *Spokane* were all launched too late to participate in World War 2. They differed from the first two groups in having No 1, 2, 5 and 6 five inch turrets at main deck level to reduce topweight. They shipped no torpedo tubes.

In the final accounting these ships gave good service and provided the USN at least a part of what it was looking for in 1940: a fast AA ship for fleet service. With improved RDF and the advent of the proximity fuse in 1943, these ships became doubly effective and the result could not have been disappointing.

The Model

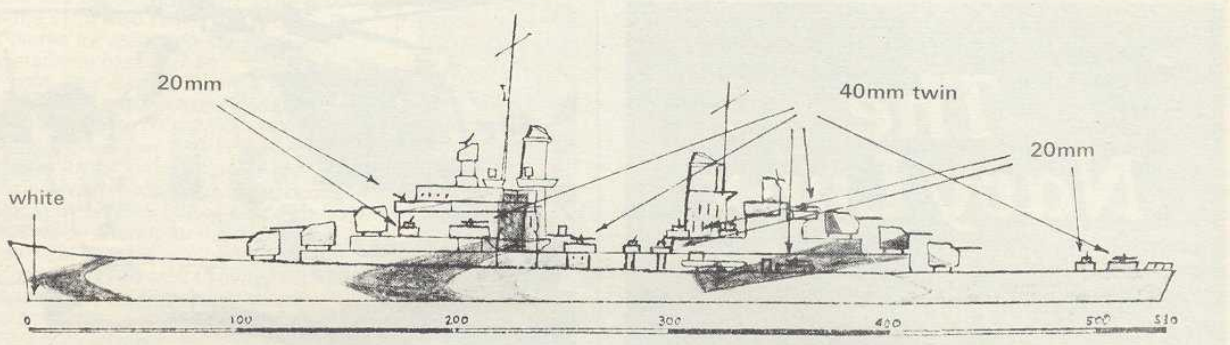
The AMT/Matchbox model represents the *San Diego* as she appeared in 1943 after early refits were completed. The instructions are clear if not over simple. There are also painting instructions with the kit, but the scheme shown does not seem to be one that *San Diego* actually carried. The kit itself is nicely moulded and free of flash. It goes together very easily with none of the longer parts such as the hull and deck having any warpage. The placement of the AA guns and so forth is very accurate. paravanes, capstans and floats are all cast as separate pieces and do much to give the deck a busy and very realistic look. Depth charge racks are correctly shown moulded on the stern. The mast detail is correct if somewhat heavy in appearance and it is an easy matter for those wishing to take the trouble to replace some of the crossbraces and stays with bits of fine wire. A few more floats could have been included or moulded vertically on the sides of the rear superstructure, but this is not a criticism and the kit as it is, is correct.

There are a couple of items, however, which bear noting. First the 40mm guns are simply too long in the barrel to pass for 40mm in this scale. They should be shortened up a bit until they look right. Secondly, and perhaps the worst thing about this otherwise fine kit, is the complete lack of anything resembling a 20mm gun to put in the nicely moulded tubs. In 1:1200 scale this would be forgiveable, but not in 1:700 scale. Fortunately a satisfactory solution is quick and easy. A small piece of card or plastic is cut to



RENO 1944

Medium (Ocean) Grey over pale grey. All horizontal surfaces Deck Blue.



FLINT 1944

All horizontal surfaces deck blue. Pattern is dark (Navy) blue, medium (Ocean) grey and pale grey with one patch of white as indicated. San Juan carried a similar pattern in 1945.

represent the 20mm shield. Then a bit of wire is inserted through a hole punched in the card with a small pin. A drop of glue on one side will hold the wire in place. When dry the wire is cut off on one side to represent the breech and the other side the barrel. Then the assembly can be slotted in the appropriate location with a drop of glue. Extra tubs can be easily constructed from strips of card cut to the same height as the ones on the ship and bent to fit. The metal from a toothpaste tube works better since it tends to stay once bent.

If one is willing to forgive the differences in the forward superstructure, modification of the *San Diego* to the earlier *Atlanta/Juneau* and later *Flint/Reno* is quite easy. The early *Atlantas* had the 1.1 inch quad mounts in the locations shown in the drawing. *Atlanta* and *Juneau* carried no stern 1.1 inch mounts for a time. The guns themselves can be made by cutting the barrels off of the 40mm twins provided and remounting four pieces of wire, evenly spaced, the same length as the 40mm guns, on the face from which the 40s were cut off. The 20mm guns should be made and placed as shown, and all other tubs removed. Extra boats will need to be added over the galley between the funnels and a crane fashioned as in the drawing and mounted on the centreline forward of the after funnel.

The major change in the *Oakland* group would be the removal of the five inch waist turrets and their replacement with a 40mm quad and its tub. The construction of the tub has already been described. The gun itself can be copied from the one mounted on the stern or from the scrap box. *Oakland* carried another pair of the quad mounts on the galley roof with the mounts projecting over the main deck on both sides. Carefully cut the single 20mm tub off the front of the superstructure. It can be remounted on the extreme bow forward of the anchor chains on *Reno.* Notice that there was a great variety of specific locations for the light AA in these ships especially on the galley roof where 20mm, and 40mm twins and quads were all mounted at one time or another.

When modelling a specific ship, every effort should be made to find pictures of the ship at the time the modeller wishes to show. The drawings are intended as a guideline and its evident from this article that armament arrangements varied greatly from ship to ship as attempts were made to solve the top-weight problem.

All in all this is a very good kit that should manage to satisfy the ardent warship enthusiast since this excellent model not only looks like an *Atlanta,* it has that undefinable feel of the ship that is so important. It is hoped that this kit is ony the forerunner of a whole series of RN/USN World War 2 warships in this scale, since 1:700 scale waterline models are certainly an attractive size to collect.