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THE RIVER PLATE BATTLE

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 30th December, 1939, by Rear Admiral H. H. Harwood, K.C.B., O.B.E., Rear Admiral Commanding South American Division:—

H.M.S. AJAX,
30th December, 1939.

I have the honour to submit the following report of the action between H.M. Ships AJAX* (Captain C. H. L. Woodhouse, Royal Navy), ACHILLES† (Captain W. E. Parry, Royal Navy) and EXETER (Captain F. S. Bell, Royal Navy), under my orders, and the German Armoured Ship ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE on Wednesday, 13th December, 1939, and the sequence of events leading to her self-destruction on Sunday, 17th December, 1939.

All times throughout this report are in the time of Zone plus 2, except where otherwise stated.

PRELIMINARY DISPOSITIONS

2. The British ship DORIC STAR had reported being attacked by a pocket battleship in position 19 degrees 15' south, 5 degrees 5' east during the afternoon of 2nd December, 1939, and a similar report had been sent by an unknown vessel 170 miles south-west of that position at 0500 G.M.T. on 3rd December.

From this data I estimated that at a cruising speed of 15 knots the raider could reach the Rio de Janeiro focal area a.m. 12th December, the River Plate focal area p.m. 12th December or a.m. 13th December and the Falkland Islands area 14th December.

* Wearing the Broad Pendant of the Commodore Commanding the South American Division.

† Of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy.

3. I decided that the Plate, with its larger number of ships and its very valuable grain and meat trade, was the vital area to be defended. I therefore arranged to concentrate there my available forces in advance of the time at which it was anticipated the raider might start operations in that area.

4. In order to bring this about, I made the following signal to the South American Division timed 1315 of 3rd December, 1939:—

"In view of report pocket battleship, amend previous dispositions. CUMBERLAND self-refit at Falkland Islands as previously arranged but keep at short notice on two shafts. ACHILLES leave Rio de Janeiro area so as to arrive and fuel Montevideo 0600 (Zone plus 2) 8th December, EXETER leave Falkland Islands, for Plate a.m. 9th December, covering S.S. LAFONIA with returning volunteers. AJAX, ACHILLES concentrate in position 35 degrees south, 50 degrees west at 1600 (Zone plus 2) 10th December. EXETER to pass through position 090 degrees Medanos Light 150 miles at 0700 12th December. If concentration with AJAX and ACHILLES is not effected by that time further instructions will be issued to EXETER. Oiler OLYNTHUS is to remain at sea rendezvous until situation clears instead of proceeding to Falkland Islands."

5. Strict W/T silence was kept after passing this signal.

6. Concentration of all three ships was effected by 0700 Tuesday, 12th December, and I then proceeded towards position 32 degrees south, 47 degrees west. This position was chosen from my Shipping Plot as being at that time the most congested part of the diverted shipping routes, i.e., the point where I estimated that a raider could do most damage to British shipping.