

“I CANNOT SPEAK too highly of the behaviour of officers and ship's company,” wrote Captain W. E. Parry, C.B., R.N., Commanding Officer of H.M.N.Z.S. “Achilles,” in his official report on that ship's proceedings in the memorable Battle of the River Plate, fought on December 13, 1939. “Very few people in the ship had been under fire before. Yet every one carried out his duty with complete unconcern; and it was not until after breaking off the main action that any signs of unusual

excitement appeared. This took the form of a souvenir hunt amongst those who were fortunate enough to be detailed to clear up the debris . . . I can only add that New Zealand has every reason to be proud of her seamen during their baptism of fire.”

Sir Henry Harwood, R.N., who commanded the division of three cruisers—“Exeter,” “Ajax,” and “Achilles”—that boldly fought the “Admiral Graf Spee” and drove her to Montevideo and her inglorious scuttling there, recorded in his official despatch describing the action, “the honour and pleasure I had of taking one of H.M. ships of the New Zealand Division into action, and I fully concur with her Commanding Officer's remarks concerning the behaviour of her company.”

The Battle of the River Plate, the first major naval engagement in this war, and the first in which a New Zealand ship largely manned by a New Zealand crew ever took part, wrote one more brilliant page in the age-old story of the Royal Navy. It demonstrated that New Zealand seamen, equally with their brethren of the parent Navy, “can find precedent or parallel for any situation that the force of the weather or the malice of the King's enemies may bring about.”

There is not space here fully to retell the famous story of this bold, swift action in which three cruisers tackled the heavily-gunned, armoured German ship and ended her brief commerce-raiding career. Nine British merchant ships—two of them New Zealand traders—had been sunk by the “Admiral Graf Spee” when she was intercepted and engaged by the patrolling trio. Between them they opposed six 8 in. and sixteen 6 in. guns to the German's six 11 in. and eight 5.9 in. guns. In the early morning main action lasting barely three hours, H.M.S. “Exeter” had four of her six 8 in. guns disabled and sustained other damage which greatly reduced her speed and compelled her to withdraw. H. M. S.

“Ajax” also took punishment, and at one time had only three of her eight 6 in. guns in action.

