

# GERMAN CAPITAL SHIPS AND RAIDERS IN WORLD WAR II

Volume I: From *Graf Spee* to *Bismarck*, 1939–1941



With an Introduction by Eric Grove

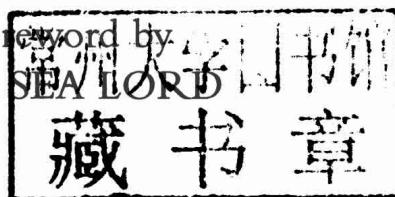
With a Foreword by the First Sea Lord

# GERMAN CAPITAL SHIPS AND RAIDERS IN WORLD WAR II

VOLUME I:  
FROM *GRAF SPEE* TO *BISMARCK*, 1939–1941

With an Introduction by  
ERIC GROVE  
*University of Hull*

With a Foreword by  
THE FIRST SEA LORD



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GERMAN CAPITAL SHIPS AND RAIDERS  
IN WORLD WAR II

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Naval Staff Histories were produced after the Second World War in order to provide as full an account of the various actions and operations as was possible at the time. In some cases the Histories were based on earlier Battle Summaries written much sooner after the event, and designed to provide more immediate assessments. The target audience for these Naval Staff Histories was largely serving officers; some of the volumes were originally classified, not to restrict their distribution but to allow the writers to be as candid as possible.

*The Evacuation from Dunkirk: Operation 'Dynamo', 26 May–4 June 1940*  
With a preface by W. J. R. Gardner.

*Naval Operations of the Campaign in Norway, April–June 1940*  
With a preface by Christopher Page

*The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean, Vol. I: September 1939–October 1940*  
With an introduction by David Brown

*The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean, Vol. II: November 1940–December 1941*  
With an introduction by David Brown

*German Capital Ships and Raiders in World War II*  
*Vol. I: From Graf Spee to Bismarck, 1939–1941*  
*Vol. II: From Scharnhorst to Tirpitz, 1942–1944*  
With an introduction by Eric Grove

*The Royal Navy and the Palestine Patrol*  
Ninian Stewart

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*Between pages 10 and 11 of Section II*

1. Victory at the River Plate (a); the German armoured ship *Admiral Graf Spee* burns after being blown up by its own crew off Montevideo on the evening of 16 December 1939.
2. Victory at the River Plate (b); as the *Graf Spee* burns, the British cruisers waiting in the Plate cheer.
3. The cruiser *Suffolk* played a vital role in shadowing the *Bismarck*.
4. 'The mighty *Hood*', which led the first attack on *Bismarck* in the Denmark Strait and blew up with the loss of all but three of her 1,421 men.
5. *Bismarck* in action against HMS *Hood*, as seen from *Prinz Eugen*.
6. The view from *Prinz Eugen* apparently not long after *Hood* had blown up.
7. A third view from *Prinz Eugen* clearly showing the results of the damage inflicted by *Prince of Wales*.
8. Also in pursuit was Home Fleet flagship *King George V* and aircraft carrier *Victorious*, here seen together at sea in October 1941.
9. The nine Swordfish of 825 Squadron form up on the deck of HMS *Victorious* before their attack on *Bismarck*.
10. Although crippled, at the outset of her final action *Bismarck* could still shoot with some accuracy. Here 15-inch shells land close to the battleship *Rodney*.
11. The raider *Atlantis* burns as she is sunk by HMS *Devonshire* on 21 November 1941.
12. The armed merchant cruiser HMS *Carnarvon Castle*, which fought an unsuccessful engagement with the raider *Thor* on 5 December 1940.



Foreword by Admiral Sir Nigel Essenhigh KCB ADC  
First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff

These volumes are a compendium edition of five Battle Summaries and two Naval Staff Histories dealing with some of the larger units of the German surface fleet in the Second World War. Battle Summaries were classified reports written as quickly as possible after events, so that lessons could be learned. Some of these were later converted into Naval Staff Histories when information became available from German sources. This volume covers some of the most momentous actions of the War, including the chase and destruction of the GRAF SPEE; various actions with enemy disguised raiders and the major surface engagement with the BISMARCK.

When Germany found itself at war in 1939, it was at least four years too soon for the German Navy, whose Plan Z, the proposed construction of a major surface fleet, could not bear fruit until 1944. The German Fleet therefore was never able to dispute command of the sea with the Royal Navy. While they demonstrated that sufficient sea control was possible for a very limited time during the Norwegian campaign, from the outbreak of war they were committed to a *guerre de course* intended to disrupt British trade. These histories reveal both the difficulties of pursuing a policy of commerce raiding by surface vessels, and at the same time, the very large Allied resources required to counter the depredations of relatively few raiders. In addition, these volumes highlight the utility of a 'fleet in being', to a weaker sea power.

By the most strenuous efforts lasting to the end of the war, the menace of German surface units was eventually nullified. Soon after the war, the German Admiral Weichold wrote a history of the policy and operations of German surface ships in the Second World War, and concluded 'In the greatest World War of all time, which depended for its outcome on issues determined at sea, the sea and its vast open spaces were regarded by the German Command as of secondary importance'. It was the same lesson that, luckily for the British, Germany had not learned from the previous war.

Ministry of Defence  
January 2002

# INTRODUCTION

Germany's surface fleet was limited drastically by the Treaty of Versailles in both size and tonnage, and Hitler's declaration of war on Britain came far too early for the *Kriegsmarine* to make anything like a full recovery. The ambitious 'Z' plan – that would by the mid-1940s have created a fleet to rival the British Empire's – was still-born. Admiral Raeder and the German Naval Staff were forced back to a policy of concentrating on U-boats, something they had avoided in the pre-war period due to the general acceptance in naval circles of the impact of the new sonar devices on the operational effectiveness of submarines. In the event, the U-boats proved far more effective than expected and the German surface fleet effectively played a supportive role in the *guerre de course* waged against Allied merchant shipping. However, as the forces of the Royal Navy were stretched perilously thin by the pressures of an increasingly global war, even the relatively few ships available to the Germans proved to be of significant menace, capable of disproportionate successes in both tying down superior forces and inflicting serious damage and disruption.

The outbreak of war in 1939 saw only two major German units capable of immediate operational deployment, both *Panzerschiffe* (armoured ships), popularly known as 'pocket battleships'. These were the result of the German Naval Staff's attempts to solve the problem of producing as powerful a ship as possible on a displacement that could plausibly be passed off as within the Versailles Treaty's 10,000-ton limit. The result was a class that was effectively a heavily gunned cruiser that, in theory, could destroy almost anything from which she could not run away, and which was capable of dealing with any opponent of equal or similar speed. The British response to the first sortie by these ships, *Deutschland* and *Admiral Graf Spee*, is covered in the first of this collection of Battle Summaries compiled by the Admiralty's Naval Historical Branch from available contemporary records. *Deutschland* was worsted by the introduction of the convoy system in the North Atlantic but *Graf Spee* had a much greater impact against the independent shipping to be found in the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean. BR1736 (Battle Summary No. 26), based on information available up to September 1944, tells the story of the extensive anti-raider precautions taken from October to December 1939. It is noteworthy how many assets were diverted from their primary tasks to hunt for *Graf Spee*. The account goes on to tell how Commodore Henry Harwood, who had lectured on anti-*Panzerschiff* tactics at the Staff College before the war, found *Graf Spee* with his hunting group of three cruisers, *Ajax*, *Exeter* and *Achilles*, out-fought her at the Battle of the River Plate on 13 December 1939, and forced her to take refuge in Montevideo. Becoming convinced that much heavier forces had massed off the Plate, *Graf Spee's* Commanding Officer, Kapitän Langsdorff, made the decision to scuttle *Graf Spee*, giving the Allies their first major victory of the war.

In 1940, the German surface fleet suffered heavy damage in the Norwegian



## GERMAN CAPITAL SHIPS AND RAIDERS IN WORLD WAR II

campaign and was in no position to support the plans for a German invasion of Britain, a major cause of their failure. However, Germany's surface warships continued to take part in attempts to blockade Britain into submission. There were only five big ships available: the pocket battleships (now more properly classified as cruisers) *Lützow* (as *Deutschland* had been renamed) and *Admiral Scheer*, the larger battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* (usually rated as battle cruisers by the British) and the 8-inch gun armed cruiser *Admiral Hipper*. All but the unlucky *Lützow* had some success in 1940–41, but they had to be supplemented by disguised merchant ships rated as 'commerce disruption cruisers', seven of which were commissioned during 1939–40. The next Battle Summary describes actions against these ships.

This summary (Battle Summary No. 13) is the earliest of the documents reproduced here and cannot identify all the ships engaged. The ship fighting *Alcantara* was in fact *Thor* (*Schiff 10*), known to the British as Raider 'E' or by her original name *Santa Cruz*, and is mentioned later with reference to her later successful engagements with *Carnarvon Castle* and *Voltaire*. Laid down in 1938 as a freighter, she was completed as a raider, being commissioned on 15 March 1940. Of 3,862 gross registered tons, she was armed with six 5.9-inch guns from old pre-Dreadnought battleships left to Germany after Versailles – which, despite their age, seem to have proved all too effective – and four torpedo tubes. *Thor* carried out two raiding voyages sinking 22 ships in all before her luck ran out in Japan in November 1942, when the German supply ship next to her blew up.

Italy joined in the *guerre de course* against shipping with both submarines and the disguised raider RAMB 1, which sailed from Massawa on 20 February 1941. (Her name came from her former owners, the Royal Associated Monopoly of Bananas.) She was armed with four 4.7-inch guns and was sunk before the end of the month by the cruiser *Leander* in the action described between the *Thor*'s successful actions with the *Carnarvon Castle* and *Voltaire*.

Engaging disguised raiders was a dangerous business and HMS *Cornwall* was lucky to overcome her mistakes and sink her target, the 7,766-ton *Schiff 33*, *Pinguin*, formerly the *Kandenfels* and similarly armed to *Thor*. HMAS *Sydney* was less lucky with *Kormoran* (*Schiff 41*), which took the Australian cruiser with her in an engagement that still sparks controversy. The most famous raider was *Schiff 16*, *Atlantis*, sunk by *Devonshire*, in the next engagement described, followed by another success by the cruiser *Dorsetshire*, against what proved to be a submarine depot ship, and one which adversely affected the South Atlantic U-boat campaign. One of *Atlantis*'s captures was the cargo liner *Speybank*, which returned to Germany to become the minelayer and U-boat supply ship *Doggerbank*. She was indeed the ship sighted by HMS *Durban* and HMS *Cheshire* in March 1942. She had an adventurous career, eventually meeting her end when sunk by mistake by a U-boat in March 1943.

Merchant raiders surprised the German Naval authorities by their effectiveness and sank more merchant tonnage than warships: 133 ships of 829,644 tons to 104 ships of 498,447 tons. However, their activities petered out in 1943 as shipping defence measures were further improved and it became more difficult to send them out through the Allied blockade. When *Komet* tried

## INTRODUCTION

a second voyage in October 1942 she was sunk by a British motor torpedo-boat in the Channel. *Stier* had been sunk the previous month by an armed American merchantman. *Coronel* was bombed and seriously damaged in the Channel trying to break out in February 1943, and *Michel*, operating in the Pacific out of Japan, was sunk by an American submarine in October of the same year. The survivors became auxiliaries of various kinds.

In August 1940, two powerful new German surface units were commissioned. The 15-inch gun battleship *Bismarck* and the large 8-inch gun cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. It took some time for these ships to become fully operational units, but by April 1941 they were ready and were sent out to sea the following month on Operation 'Rhine Exercise' to prey on British shipping. The result was 'The Chase and Sinking of the *Bismarck*' recounted in a Battle Summary which was later revised with the German material into a full Naval Staff History in 1950 (Battle Summary No. 5). This saw the German Navy's greatest individual success of the war, the sinking of the battlecruiser *Hood* early on 24 May 1941. It was a sign of the overstretch affecting the Royal Navy at this point that the breakout by the *Bismarck* could be immediately countered by only four capital ships, of which just one, the flagship *King George V*, was a fully modern and worked up fighting unit. The Home Fleet's carrier, *Victorious*, was also only semi-operational. The partially worked up *Prince of Wales* had, none the less, scored significant hits on *Bismarck*, which forced her to abort her mission. The drama continued, with contact with the German ships being lost and then regained – with a little help from 'Ultra', which accounts for the cryptic sentence in the history, 'The Admiralty had, however, come to the conclusion that Admiral Lütjens was steering for Brest...'. After some confusion, the fully worked up carrier *Ark Royal* of Force H from Gibraltar carried out the classical contemporary naval-aviation task of 'fixing', but not sinking, the *Bismarck*. The crippled battleship was then engaged by *King George V* and *Rodney*. After a devastating bombardment, of a ship that had already suffered serious underwater damage and progressive flooding, *Bismarck* eventually succumbed to the combined effects of scuttling by her own crew and torpedoes from the cruiser *Dorsetshire*.

The loss of *Bismarck* marked an important point in the German *guerre de course* against merchant shipping. It was the last time a major German warship would penetrate into the Atlantic. The Royal Navy's campaign to protect shipping there could now concentrate on the U-boats, the defeat of which would take two more years. The heavy units of the German surface fleet would soon be moved to Arctic waters for a campaign against the convoys to the Soviet Union, invaded by Germany a month after the *Bismarck* episode. The Royal Navy's activities to counter this threat will form the central theme of the second volume in this collection.

The authors of these staff histories had no interest in scoring propaganda points, as they were writing classified accounts for the benefit of the Naval Staff and officers in the fleet at large. At times, further research, including recent exploration of the wrecks of the *Hood* and *Bismarck* on the floor of the Atlantic, has gleaned fresh evidence but any errors in the histories were always honest and

## GERMAN CAPITAL SHIPS AND RAIDERS IN WORLD WAR II

understandable. They were based on inadequate evidence and, given the official provenance of the accounts, of historical interest in themselves. The studies in this volume are, therefore, best treated as primary sources rather than as definitive historical accounts. Nevertheless, they form a remarkably rich vein of material more accessible and synthesised than many historical documents. They are essential reading for anyone interested in the events they describe.

ERIC GROVE  
*University of Hull*  
*February 2002*

*Attention is called to the Penalties attaching to any infraction of the  
Official Secrets Acts.*

## **B.R. 1736 (19)**

# **BATTLE SUMMARY No. 26**

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### **THE CHASE AND DESTRUCTION OF THE "GRAF SPEE"**

**1939**

**Including**

**The Battle of the River Plate**

**13th December, 1939**

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**NOTE :—The Contents of this Book are based on information  
available up to and including September, 1944**

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**TACTICAL, TORPEDO AND STAFF DUTIES DIVISION  
(HISTORICAL SECTION)**

**NAVAL STAFF,  
ADMIRALTY, S.W.1.**

**November, 1944.  
(T.S.D. 682/44.)**

## SOURCES

This Battle Summary has been compiled from the following papers :—

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| M.00697/39.   | War Memorandum (European), January, 1939.   |
| Admiralty Record<br>Office Case 7351.                     | South Atlantic Station Report of Proceedings, 1st September,<br>1939–31st January, 1940. (From C.-in-C., South Atlantic.) |
| M.0201/40.  | Fuelling and other Facilities for H.M. Ships on South Atlantic<br>Station.  |
| M.013752/39.  | Commodore S.A.D.'s Letter of Proceedings No. 5/39, 25th August–<br>20th September, 1939.                                  |
| M.016672/39.  | Commodore S.A.D.'s Letter of Proceedings No. 6/39, 20th<br>September–27th October, 1939.                                  |
| M.02124/40.   | R.A.S.A.D.'s Letter of Proceedings No. 7/39, 27th October–<br>13th December, 1939.  |
| M.017657/39.  | <i>Exeter</i> , Letter of Proceedings, 27th October–10th November,<br>1939.   |
| M.014663/39.  | <i>Cumberland</i> , Report of Proceedings, 28th August–30th September,<br>1939.   |
| M.04031/40.   | <i>Cumberland</i> , 1st–31st October, 1939.   |
| M.04030/40.   | <i>Cumberland</i> , Report of Proceedings, 29th December, 1939–<br>11th January, 1940.                                    |
| M.012635/39. }<br>M.013530/39. }<br>M.013821/39. }        | Destruction of German S.S. <i>Olinda</i> , 3rd September, 1939.   |
| M.012637/39. }<br>M.013820/39. }                          | Destruction of German S.S. <i>Carl Fritzen</i> , 4th September, 1939.   |
| N.L.5234/39.  | Capture of German S.S. <i>Uhenfels</i> , 5th November, 1939.  |
| N.L.1717/40.  | Destruction of German S.S. <i>Ussukuma</i> , 5th December, 1939.  |
| N.L.799/40.   | Destruction of German S.S. <i>Adolf Leonhardt</i> , 9th December, 1939.   |
| Admiralty Record<br>Office Case 5450<br>(Vols. I and II). | Report on the Battle of the Plate.  |

# CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Foreword by Admiral Sir Nigel Essenhigh, First Sea Lord	ix
Introduction by Eric Grove	xi
Battle Summaries:	[pages]
I: The Chase and Destruction of the <i>Graf Spee</i> (including the Battle of the River Plate, 13 December 1939) Plans 1, 2, 3, 4, 4A, 5 and 6	[1-56]
II: Actions with Enemy Disguised Raiders, 1940-1941 Plans 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8	[1-26]
III: The Chase and Sinking of the <i>Bismarck</i> Addendum: <i>Bismarck</i> Operations Chase of <i>Bismarck</i> Plans 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10	[1-50] [51-52] [53]
Appendix: German Battleship <i>Bismarck</i> : Interrogation of Survivors, August, 1941	[1-60]

# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I

### THE SOUTH ATLANTIC, SEPTEMBER, 1939

Section	Page
1. Introduction .. .. .	1
2. British Naval Policy, 1939 .. .. .	1
3. The South America Division, September, 1939 .. .. .	2
4. South America Division, Fuelling Policy, September, 1939 .. .. .	5

## CHAPTER II

### THE SOUTH ATLANTIC, OCTOBER, 1939

5. A Surface Raider Reported, 1st October .. .. .	7
6. The Institution of Hunting Groups, 5th October .. .. .	7
7. South America Division, First Half of October .. .. .	11
8. Commodore Harwood's Policy against Raiders, October, 1939, and a Raider Report, 5th October .. .. .	12
9. South America Division, Second Half of October, 1939 .. .. .	14
10. A Raider Report, 22nd October, 1939, and Sweeps by Forces "H" and "K" .. .. .	15
11. Sweep by Force "K," 28th October-6th November .. .. .	15

## CHAPTER III

### THE SOUTH ATLANTIC, NOVEMBER, 1939

12. Forces "H" and "G," First Half of November, 1939 .. .. .	16
13. South America Division, First Half of November, 1939 .. .. .	16
14. Another Raider Report, 16th November, 1939 .. .. .	17
15. Forces "H" and "K," Second Half of November .. .. .	18
16. South America Division, Second Half of November .. .. .	19
17. French Forces, Dakar, November, 1939 .. .. .	20

## CHAPTER IV

### BRITISH MOVEMENTS LEADING TO THE BATTLE OF THE PLATE, DECEMBER, 1939

18. Disposition of South Atlantic Forces beginning of December, 1939 .. .. .	21
19. Forces "H" and "K," 1st-13th December, 1939 .. .. .	21
20. South America Division, 1st-13th December, 1939 .. .. .	23
21. Concentration of British Force in the River Plate Area, 12th December, 1939 .. .. .	24

## CHAPTER V

### THE "ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE"

22. The Cruise of the <i>Graf Spee</i> , September-December, 1939 .. .. .	25
---	----

## CHAPTER VI

### THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE, 13TH DECEMBER, 1939

23. The Battle, First Phase .. .. .	27
24. The Battle, Second Phase .. .. .	30
25. The Watch on the River Plate, 14th-17th December .. .. .	32
26. British Forces close the Plate, 13th-17th December .. .. .	33
27. The End of the <i>Graf Spee</i> .. .. .	35

**CONTENTS**—continued

<b>APPENDICES</b>		<i>Page</i>
A.	Board of Admiralty, December, 1939 .. .. .	36
B.	Forces, South Atlantic Command at Outbreak of War .. .. .	37
B1.	Forces, South Atlantic Command, 13th December, 1939 .. .. .	38
B2.	Organisation of " Forces " against Raiders, Admiralty Telegram 1409/5, October, 1939 .. .. .	40
C.	Selection of Signals .. .. .	41
D.	The Battle of the River Plate : Selection of Signals .. .. .	43
E.	Commodore Harwood's Signals, December 3/1315 and December 15/1135 ..	45
F.	Events at Montevideo preceding Scuttling of <i>Graf Spee</i> .. .. .	46
F1.	Reported Events in <i>Graf Spee</i> preceding Scuttling .. .. .	47
G.	Battle of the River Plate : Expenditure of Ammunition and Torpedoes ..	48
H.	Extract from Commodore Harwood's Report on the Battle of the Plate ..	49
<b>INDEX</b> .. .. .		50

**PLANS**

1.	South Atlantic Station, Distance Chart .. .. .	} At end
2.	Estuary of the River Plate .. .. .	
3.	Cruise of the <i>Graf Spee</i> , September–December, 1939 .. .. .	
4.	} Battle of the River Plate, 13th December, 1939 .. .. .	
4A.		
5.	British Forces close the Plate, 13th–17th December, 1939 .. .. .	

Fig. 1. (in text, Sect. 6b). Sinking of the *Lorentz W. Hansen*, 14th October, 1939.

Fig. 2. (in text, Sect. 15). Scuttling of the *Adolf Woermann*, 22nd November, 1939.



# THE CHASE AND DESTRUCTION OF THE "GRAF SPEE," 1939

## CHAPTER I

### THE SOUTH ATLANTIC, SEPTEMBER, 1939

#### 1. Introduction

Early in the war of 1914-1918 it was painfully evident that in favourable circumstances a small hostile cruiser could wreak great havoc amongst unescorted merchant ships on an ocean trade route. By 9th November, 1914, the German light cruiser *Emden*<sup>1</sup> had accounted for no less than 16 merchant ships in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal totalling 66,146 tons, valued at more than two million pounds sterling.<sup>2</sup> She was finally brought to action off Cocos Island on 9th November by the Australian light cruiser *Sydney*,<sup>3</sup> which "had little difficulty in putting an end to the raider's career."<sup>4</sup>

The merit of the *Emden*'s cruise was fully appreciated in Germany for at the outbreak of the Second World War in September, 1939, the Third Reich possessed three small capital ships, or "pocket battleships," designed specially for commerce raiding on an ambitious scale. Armed with six 11-in. guns in triple turrets they were far more powerful than the *Emden*. With a maximum speed of 27·7 knots they could out-distance all but five of the British and French capital ships, which were the only Allied ships able to oppose them in single combat with any certainty of success. Their destruction was therefore no easy problem. One of them was the *Admiral Graf Spee*.<sup>5</sup>

#### 2. British Naval Policy, 1939

The broad lines of British Naval Policy for the protection of trade in the event of war with Germany and Italy were laid down in an Admiralty memorandum dated January, 1939, which also included the dispositions of the British and French forces for 1st August, 1939.<sup>6</sup>

This memorandum, anticipating attacks by raiders, including the three pocket battleships, in the Atlantic, Red Sea and Indian Ocean, specified the "traditional and well-proved methods" of protecting British trade. These, it stated consisted in the dispersal of shipping, the stationing of naval patrols in focal areas where cruisers could concentrate in pairs against a superior enemy, and the formation of adequately escorted convoys. It added that detachments from the main fleet could also be used if required.

"By such means," says the memorandum, "we have in the past succeeded in protecting shipping on essential routes, and it is intended to rely on these methods again, adapting them to the problem under review."

<sup>1</sup> *Emden*, Korvetten-Kapitan von Müller, 3,592 tons, 10—4·1-in. guns, 24 knots.

<sup>2</sup> She also captured and released one Allied and 12 neutral merchant ships, totalling 53,544 tons.

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney*, Captain John L. T. Glossop, R.N., 5,600 tons, 8—6-in. guns, 26 knots.

<sup>4</sup> Naval Staff Monograph, "The Eastern Squadron," 1914, O.U. 5413 (C), page 101.

<sup>5</sup> *Admiral Graf Spee*, German pocket battleship, Kapitän Zur See Hans Langsdorf, 10,000 tons, 6—11-in., 8—5·9-in. and 6—4·1-in. H.A. guns. The others were the *Deutschland* (renamed *Lützow*, December, 1939) and *Admiral Scheer*.

<sup>6</sup> M.00697/39, War Memorandum (European). South Atlantic dispositions were:—Cape Verde Force (Freetown), *Neptune*; Freetown Force, two escort vessels (from Africa) Pernambuco Force (in Rio de Janeiro area initially), *Exeter* and *Ajax*.