

GRIPPO

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A RECORD OF THE FIRST COMMISSION OF
H.M.S. *AJAX*, APRIL 1935-AUGUST 1937, ON THE
MEDITERRANEAN AND AMERICA AND WEST
INDIES STATIONS

"NEC QUISQUAM NISI AJAX"

PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION



CAPTAIN C. S. THOMSON AND COMMANDER J. E. SISSMORE, B.Sc.

FOREWORD

By CAPTAIN C. S. THOMSON, R.N.

A COMMISSION such as the first commission of *Ajax* deserves some permanent record, and our thanks are due to the authors and editors for the time and trouble which they have devoted to the production of this book.

The authors certainly cannot complain of lack of material or variety. For distance steamed, for variation in latitude and longitude, and for the number of Admirals under whom we have served, I think the Commission must be nearly a record.

A book has been produced which I think will be of lasting interest to all who served in the *Ajax*, and I hope to their descendants, and I congratulate the authors on their success.

From the many letters I have received from British Ministers, Governors and Consuls, as well as from foreign officials, I know that *Ajax* has left nothing but pleasant memories behind in all the widely separated ports visited, from Port Said to Panama, the Falklands and South Georgia. For this happy state of affairs I take this opportunity of thanking all on board. Such results could only be achieved by a ship's company who took a pride in their ship, and tackled every situation with a cheerful determination to succeed, in fact such a ship's company as it has been my good fortune to command.

Naturally I know some members of the ship's company better than others. Some I know well through a series of short interviews over a certain table, but I can only say that I can never hope to serve with a finer ship's company.

C. S. T.



H.M.S. *AJAX*

PREFACE

THE title of this book, *Grippo*, is a shibboleth of the ship and needs no explanation.

Our aim has been to record as much as possible of the interests, experiences and impressions of what must be one of the most varied commissions in any ship at any time. Though many incidents, of necessity, are left unrecorded, it is hoped that those here set down will awaken memories of others now less vivid.

At the same time it has been our ambition to produce a narrative sufficiently comprehensive to interest those indirectly concerned with the ship.

To contributors and those who have spent much time in reading and criticizing the script we tender our thanks. We regret that some contributions could not be accepted in their original, but most will be found in the text in substance.

For the imperfections of this book we ask your indulgence, and hope that at least some pleasure may be found within the covers.

A few blank pages have been included at the back of the book in order that those who wish may insert some of their own photographs.

W. H. S. C.

G. W. D. S.

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CHAPTER I
HISTORICAL

AJAX

AJAX was a legendary hero of ancient Greece, and the most famous hero, after Achilles, of the Trojan War. He was a man of giant stature, very daring and self-confident. He engaged Hector in single combat, and with the aid of Athene he rescued the body of Achilles from the hands of the Trojans.

Agamemnon awarded the armour of Achilles to Odysseus ; this so disappointed Ajax that it drove him mad ; he rushed out of his tent and fell upon the flocks of sheep in the camp thinking they were the enemy. He then recovered his senses and slew himself with the sword which Hector had given him as a present. From his blood a red flower sprang up which bore on its petals the letters "A I."

Ajax was the tutelary hero of the island of Salamis, where he had a temple and an image, and where a festival called Aiantcia was celebrated in his honour.

There was another Ajax, known as the Lesser to distinguish him from Ajax the Great ; there can however, I am sure, be no doubt that the ships of the British fleet have been named after Ajax the Great.

"NEC QUISQUAM NISI AJAX"

The literal meaning of the motto is : "Not anyone but Ajax." The meaning of that phrase can only be understood by knowing the context of the quotation. Our motto is the shortened form of a Latin sentence meaning "No one is able to overcome Ajax but Ajax himself." The fall of Ajax is impossible without his consent ; he is in perfect control of himself.

For us, then, the meaning of the motto is that Ajax is superior to all.

H.M.S. *AJAX*

The first British ship to bear the name of *Ajax* was built at Portsmouth in 1767. During the year 1780 she was in action several times under Rodney, assisting in the capture of a Spanish convoy and its escort in January and taking part in the operations against De Guichen in April and May off Martinique. In the next year, again off Martinique, she was in action in the fleet commanded by Sir Samuel Hood against the French fleet under the Comte de Grasse. Later she was present when Admiral Groves failed to defeat the French in Chesapeake Bay, thus having considerable influence on the result of the war in America. In 1782 she was in the fleet with which Rodney gained his decisive victory over de Grasse off Dominica, known as the Battle of the Saints. She was sold in 1785.

The second *Ajax*, a vessel of the third rate of 74 guns, received her baptism at the blockade of Brest in 1799-1800. In 1801, under the command of Captain the Honourable Alexander Cochrane, she did valuable work in landing and supporting troops in Egypt, visiting the lands which were to see her namesake 135 years later. In 1805 she was a unit in the British Fleet under Sir Robert Calder in action off Ferrol, and in the same year, commanded by her First Lieutenant, John Pifold, she fought at Trafalgar. In 1807, commanded by Captain the Honourable Sir Henry Blackwood, she took part in the Dardanelles Expedition, and in the same year caught fire and blew up.

The third, also a third rate of 74 guns, was built in 1809 and was present at the blockade of Toulon in 1809-10. In 1810 she was present at Captain Blackwood's action off Bandol and later in the year assisted in the destruction of a French convoy at Palamos. In 1811 in conjunction with the frigate *Unite* she captured the French corvette *Dromedaire* in the Mediterranean. In 1814, after other actions, she captured the French brig *Alcion*. In 1846 she was converted to a screw

guard-ship and was present at operations in the Baltic in 1854-5 and at the bombardment of Bomarsund. She was broken up in 1865.

Then came two other ships named *Ajax*, a second-rate ship of 80 guns which never saw active service, being kept in reserve at Sheerness, and a twin-screw turret ship of 8,000 tons which was built in 1880 and which was employed in coastguard work in Scotland.

The sixth *Ajax* was a 23,000-ton battleship, built by Scott's of Greenock and launched in 1912. In 1913 she joined the 2nd Battle Squadron and was present at Jutland under the command of Captain James Baird. She was sold for breaking up in 1926.

The seventh and present *Ajax*, a Leander class cruiser of 6,840 tons, was laid down on 7th February 1933 at Messrs. Vickers Armstrong's Yard at Barrow-in-Furness, and was launched by Lady Chatfield on 1st March 1934. During the period of fitting-out she received the honour of a visit from T.R.H. the Duke and Duchess of York. The ship left Barrow for Portsmouth on 12th April 1935 and was commissioned for service on the America and West Indies Station at Portsmouth on the 15th April 1935.

CHAPTER II
OVERTURE

IN anticipation, the building of a ship should be a period of absorbing interest. You tell yourself you will see the "mighty mastodon" grow inch by inch out of nothing but a pile of steel; in an agreeable hum of activity you are to watch Britain's latest marine masterpiece taking shape before your eyes . . . these and other such thoughts insinuate themselves pleasantly into your mind as you pack your bag and buy your ticket for Barrow-in-Furness.

Actually things turn out very differently. After a long and weary train journey you arrive at the branch-line station of Barrow. It is raining. The friends, who were to have met you, are waiting on the wrong platform or haven't come at all. You charter a taxi and begin the miserable hunt for an hotel.

Next day more of your dreams are shattered. It is still raining. You travel down to Messrs. Vickers' shipyard in a diesel bus (that Barrow smell), and on passing over the swing-bridge to Walney Island, your eye catches sight of a rusty wreck lying against the jetty. You enquire of the man in the next seat where the tanker was wrecked and you receive that indulgent look which the Lancashireman reserves for the ignorant Southerner. "Wreck? Eh, lad, that's th' *Ajax*!"

Later on you realize what the building of a ship entails. You become used to the ceaseless racket of rivetters, the persistent hiss of electric welding, the pipes to trip over and the holes to fall down—the gradual birth of a monster out of a sea of mud.

All of us at Barrow remember Joe Crawford. Joe, with his antique walrus moustache, has fathered more warships than

he can recollect. His humorous smile and readiness to cooperate will always be remembered, as will his favourite ending to any technical argument—"If it's no b—— good, send it back t' th' Admiralty."

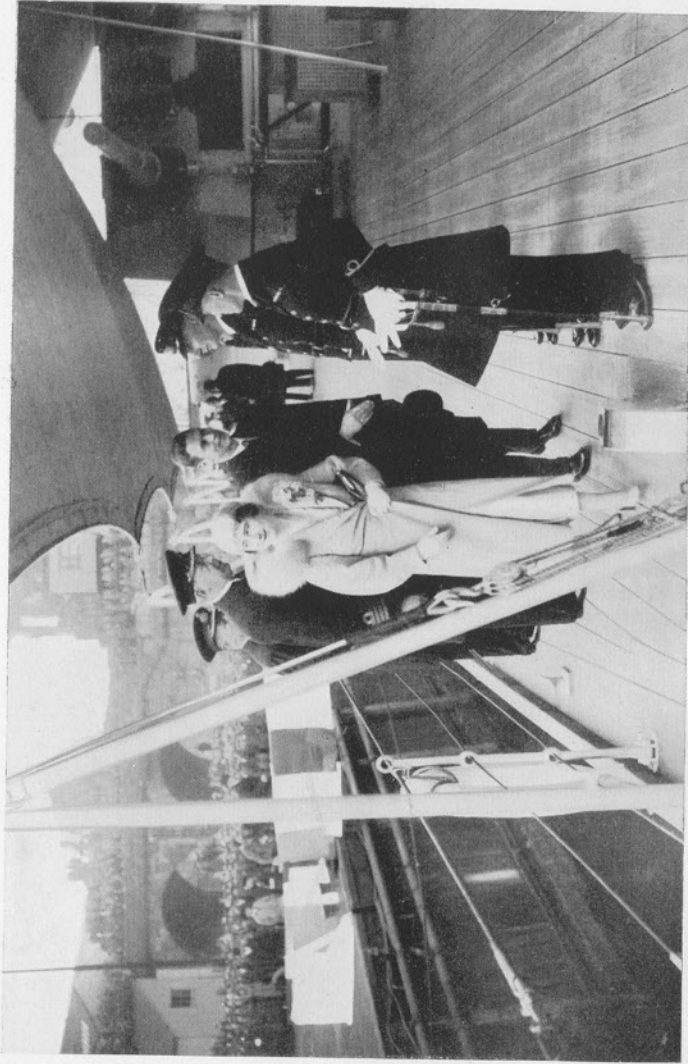
Most of us enjoyed Barrow to the full. Messrs. Vickers allotted the ship a set of offices, and in addition we were able to take away with us many little extras which were generously provided. On the other hand, almost the only "recuerdo" we left behind us was an ancient Bean car, the sometime property of an officer, which maintained its already notorious career by having its mudguards painted crimson.

Life at Barrow was a tranquil affair. In spite of being so remote, it had plenty of distractions—the Rugby League matches on Saturday afternoons, the Cumberland lakes about an hour's bus ride away, Saturday-night dances at the Victoria Park Hotel, and the cheapest cinemas in England. Other amusements included innumerable private cocktail parties and that age-old and undying sport called "baiting your landlady."

Almost the only event of importance was the visit of T.R.H. the Duke and Duchess of York to launch the liner *Strathmore*. After a hitchless ceremony, their Royal Highnesses paid a visit to *Ajax*—an *Ajax* chastened by the concentrated attack of an army of charwomen. If the ship did not exactly glitter in the early April sunlight, at least it was clean enough for a Royal Inspection—the first honour that was paid to us. None of us who shook hands with their Royal Highnesses could foresee that within two years the Duke and Duchess of York would have become the King and Queen of England, through the death of one king and the abdication of another.

In those days indeed King George V was in sound health, and conversation on leaving Barrow dwelt often on the coming Jubilee, which brought such a spontaneous demonstration of loyalty to the Throne and such unforgettable scenes in London. Some of us went up to Town from Portsmouth for Jubilee night, and will long remember the half-hour it took us to drive along Piccadilly, the amazing sight of a Bond Street festooned and closed to traffic, with peanut-sellers doing

B



VISIT OF T.R.H. THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF YORK

a roaring trade in front of Cartier's and Atkinson's, the scenes reminiscent of Armistice night, when revellers straddled the bonnets of buses, waving banners and paper streamers.

The ship left Barrow for Portsmouth on 12th April, and on the 15th, after we had imagined that everything was properly organized for commissioning, the ship was invaded by her first crew. There followed days of anguish as people got settled down, to the accompaniment of the dockyard maties' drills and hammers. We were docked, then undocked, further bits of equipment arrived, and during May we started doing final technical trials. These included a trip to Portland, where we spent a couple of days, but we found little of interest. We got a few laughs out of the catapult trials, the crew of one aircraft providing some unexpected entertainment in the form of an impromptu diving display when their machine became inverted while being hoisted in in the Solent.

For the last few weeks most of us concentrated on seeing all we could of our families, etc., and took every opportunity of week-end leave that was offered. Our cruise programme was known and thoughts played about the sunny West Indies and the glamour of South America that we were later to experience at more intimate quarters. None of us guessed how radically altered that cruise was going to be; none of us foresaw a dramatic return to the Mediterranean for 10 months' "war" service; no one could imagine that we should be in Palestine for the Arab revolt, in Egypt for the Student riots, in Gibraltar for the Spanish civil war, and in Peru soon before the Presidential elections; no one knew that we should escort King Farouk from Marseilles to Alexandria, that we should pass one Christmas in Egypt and the next in the Straits of Magellan, that we should visit Robinson Crusoe's island in the far Pacific and assist *Discovery II* to rescue some of her men on the fringe of Antarctica; and though we expected great distances we never guessed that on return to England the log would show 61,000 miles.

CHAPTER III

DEPARTURE—WORKING UP

THE morning of the 11th June 1935 dawned cold and cheerless. All stores were on board (including 9 hounds for the Calpé Hunt, Gibraltar), and also, strangely enough, all personnel, and at half-past seven a large crowd of relations and friends had gathered on the jetty to see us off. At a few minutes to eight the last wire was cast off, we were drawn from the jetty and slowly turned round. The band struck up appropriate tunes, and at last the ship moved ahead downstream and our crowd of relations became a blurred mass of white handkerchiefs. Quickly we slipped through the harbour entrance, leaving the fussy Gosport ferry-boats, checking our way a moment for a Ryde steamer to come up harbour, then out past the piers and Spit Fort to meet the short angry chop of the Channel. With suspicious lumps in our throats we went to breakfast.

Coming on deck later we were well out from the land, and England showed only as a hard grey line on the horizon, no different in appearance from many such hard grey lines that we were to see during the next two and a half years. It was perhaps the one time when everyone spontaneously wished good fortune to the commission, with thought for a happy day some time in 1937 when we should steam up the familiar harbour to another crowd of blurred handkerchiefs.

As we proceeded westwards at a steady 18 knots we met the Atlantic swell, and soon the ship had her own particular roll on, sending a large majority to seek refuge in sleep. The others remained strangely tolerant and good-mannered.

After two days of this the weather cleared. The hounds,