

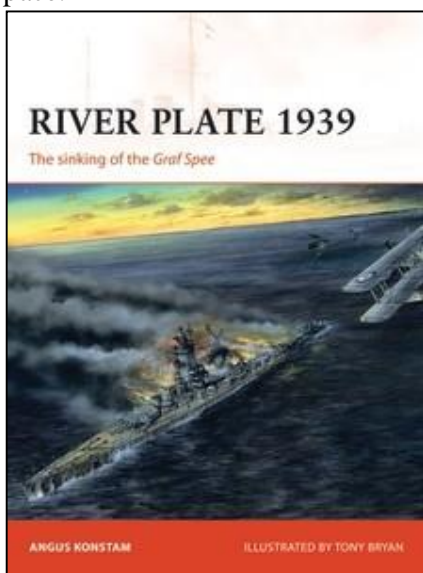
**River Plate 1939**  
Osprey Campaign series No. 171 (2016)  
By Angus Konstam  
£14.99 / \$24.00

**Review by Jonathan Aird**

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Outside of the New Vanguard series, naval titles are in relatively short supply within the Osprey imprint, which makes this a welcome addition to the Campaign series. 'River Plate 1939' is sub-titled 'The sinking of the Graf Spee,' which is a reminder that although a highly significant encounter this is the story of one of the smallest, in terms of total tonnage, famous naval encounters of the 20th century. The difficulty is to make a battle that is, it's fair to say, no Jutland or Midway, into a fascinating and informative read. Fortunately, Angus Konstam is among the best writers that Osprey regularly use and he keeps the story rolling along at a fine pace.



Setting the scene in the first few pages, it's interesting to note that the Nazi pocket battleships were actually commissioned under the Weimar Republic; although by the time they were in-service the Reichsmarine had become the Kriegsmarine. Along with this change in title had come a change in the anticipated use of the heavily armed cruiser fleet. No longer thought of as being direct counters to French or British warships, their role was now seen as commerce raiders -- able to disrupt merchant shipping and tie down large numbers of enemy warships in either actively pursuing the raiders or being forced into defending convoys of merchantmen. So, when war came, the Graf Spee was ordered to avoid contact with warships. It was aided in so doing by the early development of Refuelling At Sea techniques and the deployment of dedicated supply ships to carry this out.

Angus Konstam compares the major officers on both sides of the campaign. Langsdorff and Harwood are shown as well matched -- of similar ages and strikingly similar careers in their respective navies. Harwood is emphasized to be the right man in the right spot: pre-war he had been involved in developing tactics to counter the pocket battleship threat and as war broke out he was in charge of ships deployed to the very part of the world that the Graf Spee was given as its hunting ground. Moreover, both are described as popular with their men and as more than

able staff officers. There follows a concise history of the opposing ships -- the Graf Spee on the German side and the British squadron made up of the heavy cruiser HMS Exeter, and the light cruisers Ajax and Achilles -- although it is noted that there were 22 warships involved in the search for the Graf Spee, including three battlecruisers and three aircraft carriers. In the end though, the climatic encounter of the search fell to three under-armoured and under-gunned vessels facing a far superior opponent in terms of armament and armour. But, then, if the British Force K -- including a battleship with bigger guns than Graf Spee and an aircraft carrier with a 60-aeroplane complement -- had been the ships that finally cornered the German ship then the story wouldn't be one of daring and determination, but rather an unglamorous tale of dogged tracking followed by an easy kill.

The bulk of the book then details the commerce raiding activities of the Graf Spee prior to the contact with British naval forces. It's a fascinating story which includes some intriguing what-ifs. What if the Royal Navy had deployed a little sooner to prevent the Graf Spee escaping into the North Atlantic? What if, before the commerce raiding had even started, the Graf Spee's floatplane hadn't spotted HMS Cumberland and allowed the German ship to avoid an encounter with this heavy cruiser? And there are others -- the voyage of a commerce raider often seems to rely on luck -- and, even when apparent good luck came Langsdorff's way, this could have been seen to actually have been a negative. What if the SS Streonshalh's captain had realised sooner that the disguised Graf Spee wasn't a Royal navy ship? He would then have had time to destroy more of his confidential papers -- it was the capture of the shipping routes from the River Plate to Britain that tempted Langsdorff to target this area next because he was confident that he would easily find further victims. This apparent good luck enabled the battle of the River Plate to occur!

The description of the hunt for the German ship shows what a problem it was -- with more and more of scarce resources being tied up in the search. The eventual description of the battle is also told with great pace -- and brings home quite dramatically the horror of being involved in this kind of naval encounter. The accompanying pictures give a good idea of the physical damage taken by the vessels -- but the description of the effects on the crew of a shell burst inside the cramped quarters of a ship are gruesome. The double-page colour illustrations are very good, and also serve to illustrate the crucial role played by the relatively frail little floatplanes that both sides had available to them. The maps of the campaign and battle are admirably clear.

Overall, this is a fine book, a good read but also for the wargamer a perfect guide to refighting the battle, as well as offering many alternative scenarios to explore. It's probably true to say that very few wargamers are likely to find themselves running to Montevideo rather than taking their chances of breaking away from Ajax and Achilles -- but that's the luxury provided by playing with model ships rather than the lives of a thousand men. One downside to the volume is that there are quite a few annoying typo's and small errors which really should have been picked up during proof reading. In the discussion of the Graf Spee's design, there's an indecisiveness about its displacement: 10,000 tonnes or 100,000 tonnes. A big difference. In the chronology, it is incorrectly stated that prisoners were transferred to a merchant ship that was deliberately sunk the next day -- as the main text explains they were transferred from a ship that was then sunk. Again a significant difference! Along with double words (e.g. 'heading head') and misplaced characters, these don't ruin the book but they do jar -- Osprey usually does better in this department. Nevertheless, an excellent read and recommended to anyone who games WWII at sea.