Mystery ship – an easy one for Christmas

Well, the mystery ship pic we ran on November 5 has been the subject of considerable attention, mainly from the usual suspects.

Newby Michael Doyle of the Maritime Communications Program at Campbell Park (Canberra) said: "I have two submissions for this mystery ship HMAS *Tobruk* (the destroyer) and HMAS *Canberra* (the cruiser).

Sorry Michael, but no.

Bob Harvey was first in with: "It is HMAS *Perth* from a painting in action just before she was sunk."

No Bob. Close but the wrong ship.

Harold Goodall of Buranda (Brisbane) led the pack for the ill-fated HMAS *Sydney* II. He thought the previous month's boom defence vessel was too hard but says of Miss November: "I think she's HMAS *Sydney*."

Danny Grose of the Technical Support Group, Ship Repair Contract Organisation–WA also believes it was the WWII version of *Sydney*.

So does Gary Matthews who reckons *The Sunday Telegraph* appeared to have the same image in a "story on the finding of (think he means 'search for') *Sydney* in its November 12 edition".

That's close but sorry, wrong ship.

A number of readers got the class right but the ship wrong.

Peter Endean of the NSW RTA says: "The ship looks like a Leander class light cruiser of WWII. Therefore it could be HMAS *Sydney*, HMAS *Perth* and HMAS *Hobart*. For a stab – HMAS *Perth*."

Peter, right class but you stabbed in the wrong place.

And my old mate 'Skinhead' Kelson has done a thorough job of reading more into my remarks than was actually intended. He says: "The article of Miss November has my feeble brain cells in hyperdrive. I can't help but think you have a series of veiled clues to her, of an event which could and would identify her. I nominate her class as our modified Leander."

Right.

"All three had illustrious service. All heroic, two tragic, Battle of Sunda Strait and *Sydney* lost off Carnarvon, WA and *Hobart* ignobly sold to Japan for scrap."

OK.

"Your comments of Miss November – 'is not a ceremonial occasion – is lit but not dressed overall, surprised and embarrassed and perhaps dazzled by the exposure.' Could this allude to *Sydney*'s encounter with *Kormoran* which was posing as the *Straat Malakka* ?"

No Skinhead – yer shadow-boxin', son. It's not *Sydney* II.

Those who stabbed in the right place – and luck had everything to do with it – were ex-Defence civilian, ex-RANVR cadet and RANR(NS) Reg Bonney and John Flowers of Peregian Springs, Qld.

Reg describes Miss November as a light cruiser.

"If it served in the RAN, I consider it to be HMAS *Hobart* 1, a modified Leander Class," he writes. "She had been built by Devonport Dockyard, England for the RN as HMS *Apollo* and was launched on 9 October 1934.

"She was commissioned into the RAN on 28 September 1938. Her armament consisted of four twin turrets of 6 inch, four twin turrets of high angle/low angle 4 inch, three quad .5-inch machineguns, two quad 21-inch torpedo tubes and she carried a Walrus aircraft.

"After serving with distinction in WWII, she was decommissioned on 20 Dec 1947 and sold for scrap on 22 Feb 62."

And, as esteemed historical WA salt Vic Jeffery said when he sent me the image: "It shows the cruiser HMAS *Hobart* illuminated on an eerie black night by a searchlight from its sister ship HMAS *Sydney* during wartime exercises west of Rottnest Island off the West Australian coast. Now any one worth their salt knows it has to be one of those two or their sister HMAS *Perth*!"

Reg and John *were* 'worth their salt'. Congratulations and prizes for you both after I have finished putting this edition of *Reserve News* to bed.

☠

A footnote to the unidentified boom defence vessel in October's mystery ship: I received an email from retired senior officer CDRE Max Sulman.

"LCDR Underwood indicates that he can find no evidence of HMAS *Kimbla*'s involvement in the recovery of a crashed aircraft in Botany Bay in 1961. I find that extraordinary and the fact that he has uncovered no evidence does not reflect well on the level of his research.

"In fact *Kimbla* was involved in two such recovery operations, the first was off Mackay a year or so earlier when another commercial aircraft crashed, also with loss of life. In both cases *Kimbla* was employed because of its heavy-lift capability and featured in newspaper coverage of the disasters.

"Although not involved in either operation, I was the Executive Officer of *Kimbla* from December 61 to June 62, and many of the Ship's Company had been there for both incidents, therefore I can assure you that the recoveries took place. Indeed, displayed in the wardroom, on wooden plaques, were two twisted Rolls Royce name plates that had been removed from the recovered engines of both aircraft. I would imagine that they could still be found in the naval repository."

Miss November II

Well, I must confess I have been badly caught out, that my research has been found wanting … and it was, in fact, confined to what I could turn up on the Internet.

In mitigation, I am basically a journalist rather than an historian and perhaps I should have consulted my friends in the SeaPower Centre who could have confirmed *Kimbla*'s involvement.

Sir, I am chastened by your remarks, suitably contrite and will strive to do better in future.

☠

Looking to the future, please examine the image of Miss November II, *sans* hull number, above ('II' since we have two issues of *Reserve News* in November instead of one in December).

The fact that this is a colour pic indicates that the event which features the ship is much more recent than the usual images of vessels we offer for identification.

We are approaching the 21st anniversary of the incident. It happened about two years after the box-office blockbuster, *Ghost Busters*, was released and, I understand from one who was serving at the time, virtually the next day, sailors in ship's company were seen in the streets wearing T-shirts bearing the words Wharf Busters.

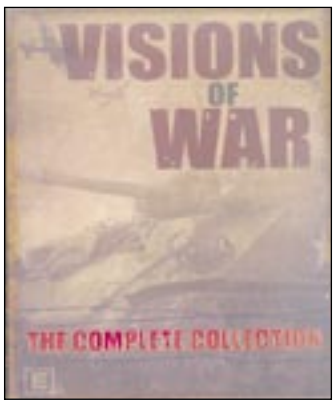
It doesn't take long.

Responses by January 24 please. I look forward to reading them on return.

— LCDR Antony Underwood

Reviews, Reviews, Reviews, Reviews, Reviews, Reviews, Reviews, Reviews, Reviews, Reviews,

Digital video visions of WWII



Don't let the nine hours of viewing time deter you from watching this reproduction of the 2003 series, *Visions of War*.

The three discs contain chapter menus so it is quite easy to segment your viewing and easily return to it at any time.

Given the asking price of some of these discs when offered for single sale, the set is good value.

Sixty years on, you might ask yourself what new vision can there be as yet unseen from World War II? What fresh facts might emerge in the telling of the conflict that cost about 55 million lives, including the extermination of six million Jews?

The most cursory glance here will pick up repetitive imagery in these three discs but there probably still is plenty as yet unseen, even by the most ardent of WWII enthusiasts.

Broadly speaking, the collection is divided into four main parts: The Story of Hitler, Artillery (of both world wars), Blitzkrieg (Poland invaded, fall of France, Russia attacked) and The World in Flames (War in The West, Africa and Asia and Turning The Tide).

I particularly enjoyed the in-depth look at Artillery, how Germany rebuilt a post-World War I army of about 100,000 into a force of four million in such a short time and The Story of Hitler – that egomaniacal, fabulously fallible, fantastically flawed, fabled Fuhrer of the "everlasting" Third Reich.

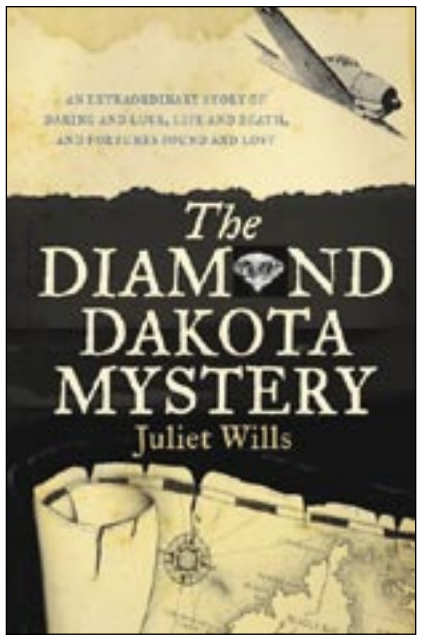
There is a school of thought that Hitler remained at the periphery of some of World War II's biggest atrocities but if this is a faithful rendition of the thoughts, conversations and writings of the world's most filmed and discussed leader, then he is condemned out of his own mouth on the subject of Jews, clerics, the upper class, the "final solution" and his counterparts among the Allies.

I don't think this is quite in the class of benchmark *The World At War*, *The American Civil War* or perhaps even the much older *Victory in the Pacific* but it is still worth a look.

VISIONS OF WAR
Boxed set of three DVDs
540mins. Sirenvisual.
RRP $32.95.

— Barry Rollings.

The diamond Dakota mystery



This is better than fiction. Envisage a refugee-packed civilian Dakota escaping from the advancing Japanese Army with a fortune in diamonds aboard, running into returning Zero fighters which had attacked Broome, crash-landing on a desolate northern beach and the diamonds disappearing. It actually did happen!

A true-life mystery from World War II, it is an extraordinary story and the scene was set with one of the last planes to escape from Java, DC-3 Dakota, named the Pelikaan, taking off in a tropical downpour with lightning flashing at 1.15am on March 2, 1942 with a crew of four and eight refugees aboard.

At the controls of the aircraft was Captain Ivan Smirnoff, who had been Imperial Russia's second most decorated fighter pilot on the Eastern Front during World War I, who, unbeknown to him, was carrying 6500 gemstones worth more than $40 million at today's prices.

Just as he was about to start the engines, the door burst open and a red-faced man stood puffing in the doorway of the aircraft. Gathering his breath he yelled out to catch the captain's attention, stepping over the passengers seated on the wooden floor.

He thrust a package wrapped in white paper with two impressive wax seals on it into Smirnoff's hands without the normal associated documentation, stressing he should take good care of it as it had great value. 'An Australian bank will take delivery of it in Sydney.' After wishing the pilot well and again stressing the importance of the package, he left the plane.

Sporting the nickname *Ivan the Indestructible*, Smirnoff was considered to be daring, cool and uncannily lucky by fellow pilots. He had shot down 11 German planes, a phenomenal feat on the Eastern Front, and his bravery had earned him a swag of honours, including the French *Croix de Guerre*, the Cross of St. George (awarded when he was a foot soldier), the White Eagle of Siberia and the Order of St George (the Russian equivalent of the Victoria Cross).

Like many others, Smirnoff had been forced to flee his homeland after the 1917 Russian Revolution, eventually ending up in England, where he served in the Royal Air Force before joining KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, making headlines as an international pilot breaking world flying records. The war in Europe saw Smirnoff and his wife flee Amsterdam to Java, where he was mobilised to help the Allied war effort.

Finally airborne and banking south heading for Australia, the Dakota had the misfortune to fly straight into the path of three top-cover Japanese Zero fighters returning from the devastating air attack on the northern West Australian pearling town of Broome which had seen 15 flying boats and seven aircraft destroyed and around 100 people killed. This raid is detailed in a graphic account in Chapter 2 of the book.

As the Zeros dived on the Dakota, using all of his skills, Captain Smirnoff tried to evade the fighters and although badly wounded in both arms and his thigh, he managed to crash-land on a desolate beach at Carnot Bay on Cape Baskerville about 80 kilometres north of Broome. This landing has been described as a great show of flying.

The merciless Zeros strafed the stricken aircraft and left many of those aboard badly wounded and in urgent need of medical assistance and food and water. Three of the survivors, including a mother and her child, died of thirst under the hot Kimberley sun before the others were finally rescued some days later.

Enter beachcomber and sailor Jack Palmer who discovered the diamonds on the crashed aircraft and who hid them in salt-and-pepper shakers aboard his lugger before later revealing his find to two mates, giving them both a part of the haul.

Without giving too much away, some of the diamonds were recovered and others have never been found. Treasure hunters still visit northern beaches in the hope of finding some of the missing diamonds.

Award-winning journalist Juliet Wills combined her investigative talents with Dutch journalist and filmmaker, Marianne van Velzen, to narrate this fascinating story behind one of Australia's most gripping wartime mysteries.

The Diamond Dakota Mystery,
Allen & Unwin
soft cover,
222 pp, 20 photos,
RRP $26.95.

— Vic Jeffery, Defence Public Affairs (WA).