

Supplementary Paper - Captain Joseph Burnett

The Culpability of Captain Burnett?

Captain Joseph Burnett's culpability may be argued if the naval tradition that the captain always has full responsibility to what happens to his ship is the dominant paradigm. Simply, Burnett lost his ship because he came too close to a raider. It was all his fault. He was outwitted by his adversary. There Burnett's indictment has rested – as it has for over fifty years. Yet it is an argument that has all the hallmarks of a perfunctory glance. Its purpose at the time - that of dismissing the *Sydney* case from the national psyche in view of an impending war with Japan was solved. Chief of Naval Staff, G Royle, found Burnett and Lt Cmdr Morgan Singer, the gunnery officer, both at fault. The final account written by F. Eldridge (a master at the Naval Academy) was based on selections of 'interviews' of *Kormoran* prisoners of war and it is now believed that this report became that of a Board of Inquiry as it was passed on in its entirety to Admiralty and Canada.

To read the German version of the battle between the two ships, HSK *Kormoran* and HMAS *Sydney* is to read the account of the victor implementing a trap decided upon by the captains of the commerce raiders *Pinguin*, *Atlantis* and *Kormoran*.¹ An analysis of all three when cornered shows a remarkable similarity that cannot be put down to chance.

In each instance the intent of the cornered raider was to adopt the identity of another Allied ship which might reasonably be present in that part of the ocean. Each also broadcasted either RRRR or QQQ signals in the faint hope of escaping by bluff.² In the case of *Atlantis* it signaled HMS *Devonshire* that it needed the warship to come closer as it had something important to communicate. Each kilometer a warship approached increased the opportunity for the raider to spring a surprise.

It is with this intent in mind that Burnett's behavior needs to be reviewed. The paradigm used is based on a more probing analysis and a rejection of culpability if a captain was following procedures long established and was not hazarding his ship given the need for the utmost caution.

German writers such as Otto Jurgensen have treated Burnett with derision and to a large extent they have been followed by other authors such as Barbara Poniewierski (Aka Barbara Winter), Tom Frame and George Hermon Gill³ who alleged that Burnett was not up to the task as a captain. In addition, Winter also claims that the position of *Sydney*, beam on and parallel with the raider was done by all British warships but Burnett: "... was the bunny who got caught". The flippant dismissal of Burnett's captaincy and the gross exaggeration containing it can only be

¹ However Detmers would have the reader believe when reading his English edition that given the circumstances he had to evaluate the situation and act decisively. Tactics had been discussed previously with fellow raider commanders but he downplays this.

² The broadcast also was to serve another purpose. SkL ordered the signal be on low power so that other Allied ships or shore-based listening stations would pick up and relay it – thus informing Germany that the raider may well have come to the end of its useful life.

³ Gill was asked by Gavin Long, the editor of the series, to write a history of the Australian Navy at war 1939-1945.

viewed with contempt and rejected as Dr Frame has done. Although it must also be admitted that Frame was the only author to write that even if Burnett had survived he would have been court martialled for his part. The late Lt Cmdr W. H “John” Ross, who served as a paymaster officer on *Sydney*, is quoted by Frame as questioning the accusations leveled by Templeman in particular against Burnett for proceeding too close to merchantships in the period July- October 1941. Ross was certain that such behaviour would have been the talk of the wardroom. So much for Templeton.

Burnett was not to know that the underwater tube of the ship before him had been deliberately installed so that its torpedo fired only to the rear. He may well have known of a report some time earlier by Admiralty that some of the German raiders had single underwater torpedo tubes on the port and starboard side and such knowledge may well have inclined him to keep his ship at a ‘safe’ distance aft of the German ship. However, such information contained a significant omission. The tubes fired at 45° from the line of the ship. Insufficient attention has been paid to this aspect. No-one has been prepared to say that the underwater tube fitting was deliberate so that it would take advantage of a warship almost stopped on the starboard or port side. It is clear that Detmers would never volunteer information about it nor discuss it. To have done so would have been to provide the Allies with important news about a secret weapon. (It is a wonder why no author has ever investigated the German initiative in the placement of the tube). About it Detmers wrote:

Bei einer Richtung von etwa 45 Grad von achtern konnte er daher nur bei höchstens drei Knotten Fahrt geschossen werden.⁴

Its location meant that a ship (ie his ship) could not be moving faster than three knots if this torpedo were to be fired. There was a danger that it could rebound. The implication which can be drawn is that neither ship was proceeding at more than three knots.

Detmers had practiced the intended use of the tube during his ‘shake down’ trials when he persuaded one of his colleagues, then in charge of a destroyer, (Z 23) to play the role of a British warship demanding him to stop. The destroyer took up a position aft of the raider. Of such a position Detmers wrote:

Dabei gelang es mir, beim dem Zerstörer einen Übungstorpedo aus dem Unterwasserrohr anzubringen, ohne dass sein Kommandant den Angriff verhindern oder ausmanövrieren konnte. Wir ahnten beide nicht, wie bitter ernst einmal eine Situation werden sollte, in der Torpedo seine Rolle spielen werden

The significance of this claim is the surprise element and the absolute inability of his opponent to do anything about what was to happen. The German captain of Z 23 had no idea how vulnerable he was. He was in such a position that he could not manoeuvre or escape from the dummy torpedo – even if he had seen it. He was taken completely by surprise. Such would also be the fate of any Allied warship

⁴ Kapitän z. S. a.D Theodor Detmers Unter Mitarbeit von Jochen Brennecke: Kormoran: Der Hilfskreuzer, der die „Sydney“ Versenkte, Koehlers Verlagsgesellschaft, Deutschland, 1959, p. 23.

whose captain (oblivious to the inherent danger in doing so) placed his ship in such a position.

While Detmers described this action in his English edition (of his book) its value is to be seen only in his German edition.

In describing the success of his weapon, Detmers wrote:

Wir ahnten beide nicht, wie bitter ernst einmal eine Situation werden sollte, in der torpedoes eine Rolle spielen wuerden⁵.

It is argued that Burnett took up a position that was typical of his caution and that he could have no idea that in so doing he was hazarding his ship. Ironically, had he taken a position parallel to and abeam of the raider, the outcome could have been quite different as it took precious minutes for the raider to reveal its armaments and there is no way the underwater torpedo could have been used (contrary to what Frame writes as his writing places the torpedo at right angles to the line of the raider). The above is arguably one of the most important pieces that Detmers has ever written. It is a reflection on something that was to happen and in which his secret weapon, the underwater torpedo, would play a significant role. There was only one ‘Situation’ which could possibly fit this reminiscence – the encounter with HMAS *Sydney*.

The Senate Inquiry into the circumstances of the loss of HMAS *Sydney* produced a report which contained the following:

4.114

The Committee believes a strong case can be made that the Kormoran’s underwater torpedo played a major role in the defeat of Sydney.

That the implications of this statement were not examined is an indictment of the Senate’s report. In fact it can be argued that the report’s author failed many times to achieve the balance that was, and still is, an essential requirement of serious academic-like writing. It may be argued that the Senate Inquiry did no more than patch together an account which would support the Chairman’s claim before the Inquiry had finished.

While other writings have attacked Burnett for not flying off his seaplane, for failing to request *Harman* for information on *Straat Malakka*, for believing the ship before him was none other than the German supply vessel, *Kulmerland* and thus lured in to capture it, they all have their failings. Their arguments are thin. Frame destroyed the *Kulmerland* theory and even John Curtin the newly appointed Prime Minister in 1941 made an argument why Burnett did not fly off his plane. As for the practice of requesting a suspicious vessel to close on a boat which a warship would lower while it backed off for several miles, the answer lies in the same reasons why he did not fly off his aircraft.

⁵ Op cit., p. 43.

The author Michael Montgomery wrote that he was told by Major Schrader (who accompanied many of the Germans as they were repatriated after the war) that Detmers had confided in him that he knew the secret callsign of *Straat malakka*. It follows that he also knew what might be expected if he did not reply as required and that is an investigation by the warship which would entail launching a boat with a boarding party – something which Burnett had practiced as can be seen by a reading of his earlier proceedings.

As for the argument that *Sydney* had reduced its level of readiness, it is completely demolished by the fact that all its guns fired at the raider; a simultaneous act with the decamouflaging and firing of the latter's guns. In short, *Sydney's* guns were ready to fire; their level of readiness had not changed. The gun crews had not been stood down, nor were the cooks hanging over the rails. This imagery has served the German and other writers such as Templeton (very much a grudge against Burnett) and Winter who unapologetically supports the Germans' accounts – a point also made by Frame to attack Burnett. In fact, Winter's rather weird discussion has the cooks putting pressure on Burnett to hurry up so that they could serve dinner. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion such an incredible claim is only part of her desire to portray Burnett in the worst possible light.

If Burnett is to be tried within the first paradigm referred to in this paper, then he can never escape the blame leveled at him. If that of the second paradigm is used – a detailed examination of the facts as may be gleaned from the opposing German captain – then he is not guilty.

For those who would argue that all of this is wrong and that the Germans' consensus of an action fought parallel and abeam must be accepted, then their failure is to be guilty of being beguiled by a fictitious story. For Detmers to have any chance with the warship he had to have an advantage. In this instance, the underwater torpedo. However, for it to be successful it had to hit *Sydney* moments before her guns opened fire – hence the 'over' shot of her only broadside. Second, it cannot be avoided that Detmers must have fired before he struck the Dutch flag – possibly as much as thirty seconds or more before. Little wonder that some Australian papers raised exactly such an accusation.

The *Daily News* of 5 December 1941 contained the following letter from the Minister for the Navy in reply to doubt expressed in letters to the editor that the German captain had broken international law and should be punished. He wrote about Detmers and the action as follows:

If he failed to honour this international obligation by failing to break the Nazi flag before engaging Sydney, her (Kormoran) survivors are not entitled to claim the treatment accorded to prisoners of war and may be treated as pirates.

Little wonder that Detmers expressed relief in his book that he would not be treated as a pirate. There would seem to be no reason why this should happen as the authorities barely entertained a notion than the action was any other than what Detmers described (with changes) to his captors.