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Transcript
19/11/01

Family of war time victim meets German survivor

KERRY O'BRIEN: Sixty years ago tonight, the seemingly impossible happened -- an out-gunned German raider bested the pride of the Australian Navy.

The cruiser, *HMAS Sydney*, was set ablaze, 645 crew never to be seen again.

Ever since, the families of those men have waited to be told the whole story about how their sons, husbands or brothers died.

Over the past few days, German survivors of that fateful encounter and the families of the Australian sailors have gathered to remember the young men who lost their lives.

Mick O'Donnell reports on an extraordinary meeting.

MICK O'DONNELL: It is 60 years since Fritz Engelmann, a sailor on the *Kormoran*, has dipped his toes in the Indian ocean.

Today, he's come to remember the men who died while he lived.

FRITZ ENGELMANN, KORMORAN SURVIVOR: The men of the *Sydney* were sailors too, like me.

MICK O'DONNELL: One of the 645 who went down with *Sydney* was Charlie Patrick, a farm boy from Queensland.

On the docks at Fremantle, *Sydney's* last port of call, his sister June remembers him.

JUNE BICKLE: He was very much liked by the girls when he was at school, that's one thing.

He was just a good polite boy, did what he was asked to do and then just joined the navy.

MICK O'DONNELL: So today, full of questions, she meets one of the men who brought Charles to his death.



A boy who manned the guns which sank the *Sydney*.

JUNE BICKLE: My brother was on the *Sydney*.

You were on the *Kormoran*.

My brother was 18 and you were 19.

NEWSREEL VOICE-OVER: Arriving in Fremantle, the survivors of the German raider, the *Kormoran*.

The two ships had engaged simultaneously at point blank range.

Each was set on fire, and from their lifeboats at nightfall, the Germans caught the last glimpse of the *Sydney* blazing from stem to stern, and to disappear with all hands and without trace.

FRITZ ENGELMANN: It must have been terrible on the *Sydney*.

JUNE BICKLE: Then he went to sea at 17, and the month after he turned 18 he was dead, on the *Sydney*, went down.

So that's why we're here.

MICK O'DONNELL: *Sydney* had been the country's most celebrated ship, after victorious battles in the Mediterranean.

JUNE BICKLE: No-one expected anything to happen to the *Sydney*.

It became the invincible ship.

MICK O'DONNELL: *Kormoran* was a converted merchant ship, disguised as a Dutch trader.

Kormoran was clearly outclassed by *Sydney*.

WES OLSEN, AUTHOR: On paper, at close range, *Kormoran's* gun's were as deadly as *Sydney's*.

MICK O'DONNELL: Wes Olsen is a railways accident investigator.

In his spare time, he's turned his skills to re-investigating the demise of *Sydney* and to debunking many of the myths around her loss.

Do you believe that there was any sinister or underhand action by the Germans?

WES OLSEN: Oh, I'll put it this way - there's no evidence of it.

MICK O'DONNELL: Others like long-time *Sydney* researcher John Doohan still insist skulduggery sank the *Sydney*.



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The bitterness endures against the German survivors.

JOHN DOOHAN, RESEARCHER: A lot of them are not poor old chaps. They're poor old murders, a lot of them.

MICK O'DONNELL: Wes Olsen believes *Sydney's* captain Joseph Burnett was outfoxed by *Kormoran's* commander Theodor Detmers.

Burnett was under orders to try to capture enemy supply ships.

Maybe that's why he simply came too close, not realising he faced a radar.

Why do you think the Australian captain brought his ship brought his ship so close to your ship?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: That I don't know.

I think it was a fight between both captains, Captain Detmer and Captain Burnett.

MICK O'DONNELL: Yes.

FRITZ ENGELMANN: And they had the head.

MICK O'DONNELL: It was a battle of wits, yeah, a battle of wits.

FRITZ ENGELMANN: Yeah.

MICK O'DONNELL: You believe a Japanese submarine sank the *Sydney*?

JOHN DOOHAN: Yes, I do.

MICK O'DONNELL: And there's another theory that *Sydney* was really sunk by a Japanese submarine?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: Excuse me, I must smile.

MICK O'DONNELL: Today, Fritz says he was a gunner on the *Kormoran* during the fatal action, but 60 years ago, frightened of Australian interrogators, he said he was just a repairman, below decks during the fighting.

JOHN DOOHAN: Fritz Engelmann was not a gunner.

He was an ordinary seaman, and with three or four others carried out a repairs.

In other words, he was with a repair gang, worked below during the alleged action.

Worked below.



He was nowhere near a gun, but now he's changed his story.

MICK O'DONNELL: John Doohan claims Doohan wants to be known as a gunner who saw the action, so he can confirm the official story.

When did your captain order the German flag to be raised to show that you were German?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: It was the moment when we began shooting.

MICK O'DONNELL: Did you ever see a white flag raised?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: What flag?

MICK O'DONNELL: A white flag of surrender.

FRITZ ENGELMANN: From the *Sydney*?

MICK O'DONNELL: From the *Kormoran*.

FRITZ ENGELMANN: A white flag?

No, nothing at all.

MICK O'DONNELL: It does seem odd to many that there were many German survivors and no Australians?

WES OLSEN: *Sydney* was badly damaged, critically damaged in those first few minutes.

All her boats on the upper deck were smashed, set on fire.

MICK O'DONNELL: And there are some nastier stories, people claiming that the German crew must have fired at the Australian survivors in the water, or in lifeboats?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: It's nonsense.

When the fight was finished, *Sydney* was some kilometres.

MICK O'DONNELL: So it would be impossible for your crew, your fellow sailors, to fire at Australians in the water?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: Impossible.

JUNE BICKLE: You were doing what your country wanted of you, my brother was doing what his country wanted to do of him.

And that's how it was.

FRITZ ENGELMANN: That's right.



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WES OLSEN: There's been a bone of contention on whether the Germans were telling the truth or not.

MICK O'DONNELL: On Friday, in Fremantle, the navy hosted a seminar to plan a search for the wrecks of the *Sydney* and the *Kormoran*.

Many believe this is the only way to lay the ghosts and the conspiracy theories to rest.

JUNE BICKLE: Until they find that wreck and do some search, well then they may be able to find out exactly if another ship was there, or a submarine was there.

So these are all the theories and rumours, but you don't know what's true and what's not true.

MICK O'DONNELL: But were you happy with the victory?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: We were happy, yes. It could be...

MICK O'DONNELL: The other way round?

FRITZ ENGELMANN: Yes.

MICK O'DONNELL: Tonight, as we go to air, June and many others are laying wreaths in the Indian Ocean to remember the 645 Australians, among them her brother Charlie Patrick, who were lost at this time 60 years ago.

JUNE BICKLE: To me, it's my final act of saying goodbye to him.

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