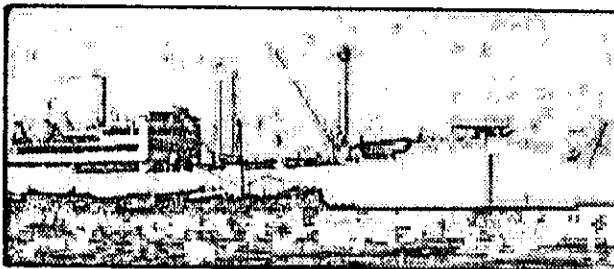


MYSTERIES

MEDIA



Is this how the Sydney was sunk?

In the last hours of daylight on November 19, 1941, one of the most mysterious sea battles of the Second World War took place off the coast of Western Australia. Facing each other were HMAS Sydney, glamour ship of the Royal Australian Navy, and the German raider Kormoran, under the command of an ambitious and ruthless captain. In a brief but bloody encounter, each ship sank the other. But whereas almost all the crew of the German raider survived, all 645 men on the Sydney perished, making her the largest ship in the whole war to go down with all hands.

How was it possible that there was not one single survivor from the Sydney? How could a converted merchant ship destroy an experienced and heavily armed cruiser - an event unique in the war? Why have the authorities in Britain, Australia and the United States suppressed files relating to the action? PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY reports on a man's long search for the answer to one of the last great secrets of the war.

AT A naval history symposium in Annapolis next week, historian John Costello will raise the refusal of the British Cabinet Office to release three files which he believes would explain why an exchange of telegrams between Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt on November 26, 1941, is apparently missing from the records.

The telegrams themselves could be the last pieces in a jigsaw laboriously put together by a British writer, Michael Montgomery, whose father, the navigator on the Sydney, went down with her. Montgomery was only four years old when his father died and it was not until 1973 that he read the official account of the incident. This left so many questions unanswered that he decided to embark on his own investigation.

Montgomery read recently-released official documents and the conflicting reports of interrogations of the Kormoran survivors, conducted when they reached Australia and when they were later held in POW camps there. He tracked down and interviewed many of her crew still alive in Germany. (And noted that some seemed afraid to talk to him.)

But so many official doors were closed to Montgomery that he came to believe that there was a cover-up, that there was something to hide

over the sinking of the Sydney. He now believes that he knows what it is. His reconstruction of the last hours of the Sydney and the Kormoran goes like this:

The Kormoran sighted the Sydney at 5 pm. The first report was only of "a big ship"; as a survivor was to write, "Danger rose on the horizon in the evening twilight". But soon the identification was made - a Perth class cruiser. The Kormoran's position now appeared hopeless. The range of the Sydney's main armament was 22,000 yards, so she could simply stand off beyond the reach of the Kormoran's guns and blow her to pieces.

Camouflage

The only hope her captain, Commander T A Detmers, saw was to fall back on "camouflage and the unexpected and ruthless use of all weapons," prescribed in his standing orders. But this could not have protected him for long. Although he was flying the Norwegian flag, this alias would quickly be broken once the Sydney had consulted her "Vessels in the area" list.

So Detmers tried another trick. He got his radio operator to put out a "Q signal" - the signal warning of a suspicious ship in the area. His radio operator deliberately distorted and faked the position, so as to suggest to



the Sydney's captain, J Burnett, that the suspicious ship was elsewhere, but nearby.

Detmers then ordered his crew to make it appear as if the Kormoran had been a recent victim of this suspicious ship. This was not hard to do - a lot of smoke and the tangle of firchoses on the deck was sufficient. So, soon after 5.30 pm, what did Burnett see and what did he know. He could see a modern merchant ship flying the Norwegian flag, limping along at 9 knots, making a lot of smoke and apparently on fire. He knew that she had sent him an SOS and called for medical assistance, and that his radio had picked up a "Q signal" indicating the presence of a raider some 100 miles away.

So Burnett ordered his Walrus seaplane made ready to look for the raider. He then changed his mind when he saw the heavy swell and, instead, he signalled the Kormoran to heave to and close to half a mile. Half an hour later he had drawn alongside, stopped engines and began preparing to put a boat party across, not only to render assistance but to obtain information about the raider.

The Sydney was thus broadside on to the Kormoran, only 1,200 yards away and was so confident that she was in the presence of a stricken Norwegian ship

that her pantrymen were lining the rails for a closer look. This was the moment the Kormoran had been waiting for. Detmers opened fire with two torpedoes from the Kormoran's torpedo tubes below the waterline. Both hit. The two above-water tubes were then uncovered and fired, followed by a 3.7 centimetre gun from the bridge; then, after a slightly longer interval, by the machine guns, and finally by the four 5.9 inch guns.

The effect on the Sydney was devastating. As the Australians saw the Norwegian flag struck and the German ensign rising on the Kormoran's mast, their gunnery control room went out of action, their steering gear was damaged, and their Walrus seaplane set on fire. But the Sydney was an experienced warship and soon her guns were firing under independent control and at point-blank range.

The Sydney scored several hits in the Kormoran's engine room, which had to be abandoned. A hit on her funnel set alight some aviation fuel and she was soon "burning like a cellulose factory". Her firefighting equipment was knocked out and, finally, she was hit by a torpedo. Her crew began to abandon her.

The Kormoran now made a formal signal of surrender. From her sides, overloaded lifeboats struggled to get clear

and began to make their way towards the Australian ship in the hope of being picked up. Then, with a final act of deception, someone delivered the coup de grace to the Sydney. A torpedo hit her. The was a single terrific explosion. The great ship split apart and disappeared into the growing darkness.

Suspicious

WHO fired the torpedo? Montgomery believes that it came from a Japanese submarine; that the Kormoran had rendezvoused with the submarine to supply her; in short that Japan was actively engaged with Germany in the war against Britain before Pearl Harbour.

Further, the reason that there were no survivors from the Sydney was that the Japanese submarine systematically machine-gunned them all to prevent this fact being reported. This, says Montgomery, explains the inconsistent stories from the Kormoran survivors and their fear of talking to him - they remain afraid to this day of being charged with a war crime.

But why an official cover-up, and why do Montgomery and Costello think that Churchill and Roosevelt were involved? Their answer is that the Australian naval authorities suspected from early on that a Japanese submarine had sunk the Sydney and sent



Adversaries at sea: Commander Detmers and the Kormoran (left); Captain Burnett and the Sydney

a message to this effect to the Admiralty in London.

There Churchill learnt of it. The news came at a crucial time for him. Harried by America's isolationists, Roosevelt had still stopped short of making any concrete commitment to come to Britain's side in the event of her being attacked by Japan. Even worse, it seemed that America and Japan were about to come to terms on what would amount to a temporary pact of neutrality.

If Churchill were able to add to the growing evidence of Japanese war intentions the fact that the Sydney had been sunk by a Japanese submarine, and if he were to send this evidence to Roosevelt, it would not only appear to make war between Japan and Britain a certainty, but would offer Roosevelt positive proof of bad faith on the part of the Japanese. Thus Churchill would have provided a compelling argument for Roosevelt finally to commit himself. (The fact is that Roosevelt broke off negotiations with the Japanese, and Pearl Harbour followed a fortnight later.)

Once that step had been taken, it remained just as essential to both sides that Roosevelt be protected from charges of collusion from isolationists. Hence the missing telegrams and the long-lasting cover-up over who really sank the Sydney.

(Who Sank the Sydney, by Michael Montgomery, Leo Cooper/Secker and Warburg, £11.95)

A man

NOT SINCE the days of his saucy Sun was ro justly ahead of its arch-rival The Daily Mirror, has Larry Lamb enjoyed a so much as his past days. He is now editor of Daily Express - its fifth year - and he may just find the magic formula will turn the paper's upwards after 20 years relentless decline.

Since the Express launched its Millionaires' Club Monday, at an estimated of £3.5 million in market and promotion, its sales surged by more than 40 copies a day, pushing circulation to more than million, some 400,000 of Lamb's new arch-rival Daily Mail.

"It has a good claim the most spectacular paper promotion of all time," a cheery Lamb said last. It was fair comment leading national wholesaler newspaper retail chain firm that Express sales increased 15 per cent a and by more than 30 per in London - since Millionaires' Club launched.

The game itself it since The Express Group mailed 25 million Millionaires' Club cards to British homes. Each card a personal, 12-digit number set out in pairs. One example: 12-11-21-13-23-11.

Each card has a different number. Every day Express and the Sun Express on Sundays put two new winning numbers the £1 million prizes.

To win a million, all of a membership number must exactly match, in order and position, all 12 digits one of the published million numbers. Variants of this system are played the £100,000 accumulation prize and the other smaller prizes.

But what would happen the great Express dream nobody wins the million other editors are asking?

DO YOU HAVE AN OLD VEHICLE?

If it has a G.B. registration number and has been off the road for some years you may need to take action.

After 30 November DVLC cannot accept applications to record old vehicles under their original registration numbers.

If your vehicle is not registered by the Northern Ireland Licensing Authorities or at the DVLC Swansea, and if you wish to keep the registration

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