

friendly ship. It is not in my view necessary to imitate *any particular ship* (my italics). In his book, on the other hand, he then paradoxically goes on to add that 'in the end I decided to become the *Straat Malakka*',<sup>14</sup> but there is ample evidence to show that, far from wearing this one disguise continuously from early July right through to mid-November, the ship changed its identity at regular intervals in keeping with its new, 'insignificant' paintwork (in keeping also with the practice of other raiders: for instance, the Enigma signal to the U-68 to rendezvous with the *Atlantis*, which was intercepted and deciphered by the Admiralty cipher-breakers at Bletchley Park and so led to the latter's destruction, listed no less than five possible disguises that she might be wearing on the day<sup>26</sup>). Mr Olyc told me that it was changed 'almost daily', Swedish and Norwegian being the nationalities most often adopted. He spent some time in the sick-bay recovering from shrapnel wounds received in the shelling of the *Velebit*, and from there he was able to see the different flags laid out on the deck ready to hoist. W. A. Jones (from the *Mareeba*) corroborates this in his book *Prisoner of the Kormoran*: 'One morning we would find the *Kormoran* displaying two funnels and two masts; on another she would have one funnel and four masts. False decks would be erected and taken down as required. Sometimes the superstructure would be painted white, sometimes buff. The samson's-posts, with their telescopic masts, would often vanish from sight. As for the names she adopted, you can be sure *they were as various as they were plausible*' (my italics).<sup>27</sup> Herr Kriesel also described to me how the different names were pricked in outline on the stern, so that they could be rapidly painted in whenever the occasion demanded. Finally, several others of the crew, including O. Joergensen, formerly a teacher of English and noted as being 'highly intelligent', stated under interrogation that they had not known that the ship had been disguised as the *Straat Malakka* on the day of the action, which would be a highly surprising statement to make if she had been so disguised throughout the previous four months.

The *Straat Malakka*, then, was merely the first of a number of disguises that Detmers adopted over this period, and his claim was that it was the only one is demonstrably untrue. This

in itself still falls short of lending conclusive proof to the evidence already quoted that he was flying not the Dutch, but the Norwegian flag on 19 November, even when taken with the improbability that Burnett would have been deceived by the former. There are, however, three more comprehensive testimonies to this effect which between them, I believe, put it beyond all doubt that the *Kormoran* was flying the Norwegian flag.

The first statement comes from an ex-Merchant Marine seaman who was quartered with *Kormoran* survivors at Murchison; he stated during an interview with me that 'they all told me the same story: they were flying the Norwegian flag'. The second statement to this effect was made to a member of the truck party that went up to collect the survivors who had come ashore north of Carnarvon. When the convoy stopped at Quobba on the return journey to telephone the authorities that the survivors were German, he was instructed to do what he could to interrogate them. He duly fell into conversation with one of the three English-speakers from 17-Mile Well, who before the war had served as a steward with the Hamburg-Amerika Line and had attained a fair command of the language as a result. This man informed him that not only was the *Kormoran* flying the Norwegian flag, but that boards painted with the word NORGE were also hung over her sides; interestingly, cine-film taken on board the *Graf Spee* during her rendezvous with the *Altmark* shows the latter displaying precisely similar boards. Now it may be understood why, as we saw earlier, Detmers affected to dismiss these same boards as 'not worth all the trouble that they involved'.<sup>28</sup> The third such testimony appears in an account of the action written by Petty Officer H. Kitsche, which first came to light during Mr Robotham's unofficial search of the prisoners at Carnarvon and which the latter translated into his own somewhat florid English and published under another name (for very obvious reasons) in a Melbourne-based magazine dated 1 January 1942. It was then reincorporated in a notebook which Kitsche kept during his later imprisonment, and which was discovered after the war hidden in the false back of a box under a house in New South Wales belonging to a German expatriate;<sup>29</sup> it seems that it was smuggled there by

a sympathizer following an escape that Kitsche made from Murchison, for which he received twenty-eight days imprisonment.<sup>30</sup> Kitsche had been in the engine-room throughout the action and therefore wrote from a position of first remove, but on the essential features of the action he is quite explicit: "The First Officer met the Captain on the bridge and brought his glasses up to his eyes. "It is no merchant ship, Herr Kapitän, not at that speed," he said resolutely. In the quickly growing twilight the ship showed its silhouette on the horizon. The Captain stared through his glasses a few moments longer before answering. "We are running into trouble, Herr Oberleutnant; it is a light cruiser and it could be an enemy one," he said grimly. He turned to the Navigator: "Hoist the Norwegian flag, Herr Leutnant."

It was anyway the nationality that Detmers could have been most expected to adopt; mention has already been made of half a dozen ships of Norwegian ownership, and there were over ninety of them in all operating in the Far East at that time. There was even, as it happened, an eminently suitable alias for the *Kormoran* among them. The 9,296 ton *Tai Yin* was built for the Wilhelm Wilhelmsen Line in 1929 by Deutsche Werft, the same yard that was to convert the *Steiermark* into the *Kormoran*. She sailed from Colombo on 17 October 1941 for Sydney, where she arrived on 8 November, and, had she not been unexpectedly detained there for three weeks, she would have been back off Western Australia shortly afterwards.<sup>31</sup> Mr E. Hibberd and his wife, who sailed in her on the outward voyage, recall her master telling them that he was nervous not only because he knew the *Kormoran* to be in the area, but also because he was afraid of being actually mistaken for her by an Allied warship, *so closely did the two ships resemble each other*.

On every count, therefore, it can be established that the *Kormoran* was not flying the Dutch flag and that the *Sydney* did not signal the letters IK, which removes the contradiction of Burnett asking for the secret callsign at point-blank range while not being at action stations himself, and at the same time the single corroboration for the officers' account of the action as a whole.

One final question remains to be answered: why should the officers have chosen this particular peg on which to hang their

story? The explanation is to be found in the government statement of 5 December 1941 already quoted in Chapter 3: "It has been learned from different quarters that the prisoners tell different stories about the flag that the *Kormoran* was flying . . . Further interrogation is taking place to establish whether the *Kormoran* opened fire under a neutral flag, contrary to International Law; legal authorities point out that if this was the case, the status of the prisoners would not be that of Prisoners of War, but of common pirates."

If they had admitted to having been flying a Norwegian flag, they might have found it extremely difficult to refute such a charge. If, on the other hand, they were able to demonstrate, by quoting the two middle letters of the (Dutch) *Straat Malakka's* secret callsign, that the *Sydney* had gone through the full recognition procedure, then this would also appear to demonstrate that they had only opened fire because they had been unable to reply with the two outer letters, and that they were, therefore, not guilty of launching a surprise, and illegal, attack. Without such a demonstration, they must have stood in real fear of meeting the penalty reserved for common pirates: summary execution.