

*Orion's* sinking of the *Niagara* in Auckland harbour, he complained that 'I hear for the first time of the presence of a raider in Australasian waters; I consider that I should be informed of raider movements in East Asia'. Not until 7 December did he receive any news of the *Kormoran's* loss.<sup>19</sup> Again, there is no mention in official German sources (let alone in Detmers's book) of a rendezvous that the *Kormoran* appears to have made with a Japanese supply ship in the Indian Ocean shortly after the sinking of the *Mareeba* and *Velebit* four months earlier, and which was witnessed by survivors from both these ships. Mr Olyc recalled that stores were taken on board over a period of five or six days but that no prisoners were transferred to the other ship (which would in itself be a pointer to its having been Japanese), while Mr Jones specifically describes it as a 'Japanese freighter' in his book and goes on to relate how floats were sent across containing, amongst other things, whisky, cigarettes, Japanese beer, and English and Australian newspapers<sup>20</sup> (this deliberate omission incidentally helps to explain the otherwise surprising length of time—sixteen days, according to Detmers—that the *Kormoran* remained stationary in this position<sup>21</sup>).

The presence of the submarine also suggests an answer to the puzzle of the lack of distress shown by the survivors picked up by the *Aquitania* from their raft on the morning of 23 November, having ostensibly spent three and a half days tossing about in heavy seas. The destruction of the *Kormoran* would not automatically have spelt an end to Japanese designs on the liner; might not they have been employing the raft to set the very kind of trap that Captain Gibbons is recorded as having feared, that is, as a decoy for the submarine? An I-Class unit would certainly have been able, if not to accommodate all twenty-six of the raft's occupants at once (and even the biggest of these submarines were notoriously short of living space), then at least to offer them the facilities to wash, shave, eat, and rest in turns. That the *Aquitania* managed to escape such a trap may be put down to the combination of her speed and the haste with which Captain Gibbons got her under way again, which would not have allowed the submarine enough time to manoeuvre (under water) for a shot.

No other explanation of their condition would seem to be

available, and statements made to members of the *Aquitania's* crew to the effect that the action had taken place on the 22nd (Mr Rees recalls one in particular made by an airman in leather jacket and boots, presumably A. Dzudek, a Flying Corps mechanic, that 'we sank one of your cruisers last night') appeared similarly incompatible in the light of all the other evidence pointing to the 19th. For instance, there are everywhere references in the interrogation evidence to it having coincided with the Day of Atonement in the Lutheran Church Calendar, and Herr Kriesel recalls that the occasion was marked by a special 'farmer's breakfast', whose unaccustomed richness he was sleeping off in the heat of the afternoon when he was so rudely interrupted.

But surely, it might be asked, if the Japanese were going to take anybody on board they would have taken Detmers first? That might indeed have been their intention, but it would have been easier said than done to locate in darkness and heavy seas one particular lifeboat or raft out of the seven that were launched, and which had been so widely dispersed by daybreak that only two of them were still within sight of one another; it can also hardly be a coincidence the raft was apparently the only one of the seven to carry a radio set. There is also evidence to show that this was in fact Detmers's own expectation: he himself sighted the *Aquitania* later the same day, but when one of his companions in the boat got up to fire a flare, Detmers ordered him to sit down again because, as he himself writes in his book, 'I was hoping to fall in with a neutral steamer, of course, and I had the impression that we were gradually approaching more frequented shipping lanes'.<sup>22</sup> After being exposed to the elements for the best part of four days in an open boat shared by sixty others this speaks of confidence indeed, and another of his companions recalled that it was specifically the Japanese that Detmers declared that his hopes were resting on. That it was a submarine rather than a ship that he was expecting can be confirmed by a glance at the Fremantle Harbour logbook, which shows no Japanese vessel had called there since the *Takunama Maru* on 9 December 1940, almost twelve months earlier.<sup>23</sup>

The same explanation may also provide the answer to another poser, namely the position of the R.A.N. lifebelt

picked up by the *Evagoras*, 80 miles north of the relatively compact circle in which the other belts, boats and raft were located (see the map on page 113); it is improbable that the forces of wind and current could by themselves account for such an anomaly, which therefore invites the suggestion that the belt's occupant was taken on board the submarine and the belt itself subsequently discarded. In fact rumours that survivors from the *Sydney* had been taken back to Japan began to circulate soon after news of the action was published, and the possibility was put to Detmers at his final interrogation at Dhurringile on 7 January 1942; he replied that 'I do not think so at all. I do not think there was a Japanese ship within six days sail of where the action took place.'<sup>24</sup> In a letter dated March 1942 to a member of the A.I.F. serving in the Middle East the writer said that 'the girls told me about a couple of chaps that were on the *Sydney*. Their mothers had letters from them a fortnight ago and they are prisoners in Japan; it seems that the *Sydney* sank the German raider and the Japanese got the *Sydney*, but didn't sink her.'<sup>25</sup> The navy evidently continued to take such rumours seriously, because Mrs V. Kelly recalls being telephoned some six months after the action and asked if a letter that she had received that week was from her son, Able Seaman J. V. Kelly. In March 1943 American Associated Press journalist John Moroso filed a report of the rumour, but his evidence for it seems to have been based on no more than the denial of it by Mr Makin, Minister for the Navy, in Parliament two months earlier.<sup>26</sup> In October 1945 Commodore (as he then was) Collins visited Japan in person to make enquiries and inspected such records as were available, but could find nothing to support it. This is, of course, not necessarily conclusive, for not only had orders gone out shortly before the Japanese surrender on 14 August to all commandants of Prisoner of War Camps to kill their occupants,<sup>27</sup> but in the ten days between the surrender and the arrival of the first occupying forces a wholesale destruction of sensitive documents had also taken place. A. Bancroft, who was taken prisoner after the sinking of the *Perth*, was asked by a Japanese interrogator at some later stage of his captivity whether he had had any contact with prisoners from the *Sydney*, which would seem on the face of it almost tantamount

to an admission that survivors from the latter had been taken alive. By contrast, the A.I.F. letter's other insinuation that the *Sydney* was herself somehow captured intact is something less than credible. In 1944 Tokyo Radio went even further and broadcast that the *Sydney* had been towed back to Japan intact;<sup>28</sup> their motives in making such a grotesque claim can only be a matter for conjecture.

That the Japanese either assisted in, or were even wholly responsible for, the disposal of *Sydney* survivors in the water has an altogether greater probability. There is nothing to be gained here by retailing the grisly record of subsequent such 'terrible deeds' on their part; instead, it will suffice to quote the following order issued to commanders of the First Submarine Force, a copy of which was captured in March 1943: 'Do not stop with the sinking of enemy ships and cargoes; at the same time that you carry out the complete destruction of the crews of enemy ships, if possible seize part of the crew and endeavour to secure information about the enemy.'<sup>29</sup> The temptation to 'completely destroy' the crew of the *Sydney* would have been overwhelming, granted such an authorization, and it would in any case have constituted obedience to the following further instruction which was included in Yamamoto's order to the fleet of 5 November: '*In the case of discovery within 600 miles of the objective against which war is to be declared, make immediate preparations to attack and destroy the unit responsible.*'<sup>30</sup>

This imperative need to cover their tracks may also (in addition to the oil fire that continued to burn long after both ships had sunk) help to explain the lack of wreckage discovered in the subsequent search; apart from the Carley floats, lifebelts and dog-kennel, R. Crooke on the *Heros* remembers seeing no more than a pipe and slipper. An I-Class submarine may have had a minimal capacity for storing wreckage on board, but there was nothing to prevent it making a sweep of the area and sinking the larger items with its machine gun. There is at least one precedent for such a step: after sinking the *Triona*, Weyher records how he then spent some hours sinking wreckage from her in order to conceal the event from other ships heading for Nauru and so ensure the surprise of his intended attack on the island the next day.<sup>31</sup>