

DID A SUB REALLY FIRE THE FATAL TORPEDO?

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FIFTY YEARS ago, in what was to become Australia's greatest naval tragedy, the cruiser HMAS Sydney came upon the German raider Kormoran about 150 nautical miles south-west of Carnarvon in Western Australia.

Sydney was a modern 6,830-ton fighting ship, capable of more than 32 knots and with a war complement of 645 officers and men. Her armament included eight six-inch guns, eight four-inch dual purpose guns and eight torpedo tubes.

She had served with distinction in the Mediterranean under Captain J. A. Collins, who became Australia's naval hero when Sydney sank the Italian fast cruiser Bartolomeo Colleoni with accurate long-range gunfire.

Kormoran, which was disguised as the Dutch merchantman Straat Malakka, was a fast, converted cargo ship of 9,400 tons, with a complement of 393 officers and men, capable of 18 knots. Her armament included six 5.9-inch guns, four 3.7-inch guns and six torpedo tubes, two of them below the water line. In her 12 months as a raider, she had sunk 11 merchant ships totalling 68,274 tons.

In the normal course of events, a fast cruiser would have had the upper hand in an encounter with a raider, especially if she kept her distance. But Sydney and Kormoran were fairly evenly matched in the weight of metal they could throw at one another.

If they were to close to, say, one nautical mile, the initiative would probably lie with the captain of the raider. He could open fire as soon as he had dropped his gun screenings, struck the foreign colours and hoisted his own flag.

For this reason, the Admiralty had devised a standard procedure for the interception of suspicious merchant vessels. The warship was to keep her distance – which might mean 15,000 to 20,000 yards – at high speed and radio headquarters asking if the ship could be what she claimed to be.

Inexplicably, on that late afternoon of November 19, 1941, Captain Joseph Burnett of the Sydney seems to have ignored this procedure. He closed to within about 1,600 yards of Kormoran.

It was a fatal mistake. German surface raiders were renowned for the accuracy of their fire, particularly at close range. Kormoran was no exception. At 5.50 pm, Commander Theodor Detmers struck the Dutch colours and ran up the German naval ensign, with its swastika on a black background.

Kormoran's opening broadsides were devastating. Within four seconds, she had scored hits on Sydney's

bridge and gunnery director tower. Later, she fired two torpedoes, one of which struck Sydney's bow. Though crippled, the Australian ship fought back bravely, hitting Kormoran in the funnel and engine room.

For five minutes, the ships kept up a murderous exchange at close quarters. Then, Sydney passed astern of Kormoran, burning fiercely, gradually losing way. Kormoran's gunners pounded her mercilessly for nearly an hour, until she passed out of range.

Sydney disappeared over the horizon, never to be seen again. Kormoran was abandoned. Most of the Germans were rescued; not one of the 645 men on Sydney survived, which was unusual but by no means unheard of.

Within days, according to the historian Barbara Winter, rumours circulated that a Japanese submarine, keeping a mid-ocean rendezvous with a German supply vessel, had been a silent witness to the action and had delivered the coup de grace to the Australian warship.

The claim that Sydney was lost as a result of underhand practices on the part of the Germans and Japanese has never been accepted by the Royal Australian Navy. But it has been accorded a special place in Australian folklore and was given a new lease of life in the 1981 book *Who Sank The Sydney?* by Michael Montgomery, the son of Sydney's navigator.

If Montgomery is right, it is necessary to rewrite the history of World War II in the Pacific. After all, Japan was not at war with the Allies until December 7, 1941, 18 days after the Sydney-Kormoran exchange.

Despite the gravity of his charge, Montgomery offers only disappointing scraps of evidence, presented in a narrative which moves effortlessly from speculation to allegation. He is unable to identify the alleged Japanese attacker, beyond suggesting that it was a long-range submarine equipped with a reconnaissance floatplane. Unfortunately, that hasn't stopped his claims being taken at face value by prominent British and American historians.

Meanwhile, others have jumped into the fray. In 1987, a retired commercial diver, Colin Sampey, claimed that he had come across the hulk of Sydney in 110 feet of water while filming dugong. There were clear signs, he told RAN investigators, that Sydney had been hit on the port side by three torpedoes, not one. If true, that would add credence to the submarine story. Sampey also claimed to have visited Japan and met a Captain Fujita, who "confirmed" that his submarine "Tiger Lily" had sent Sydney to the bottom.

Sampey's story strained credulity, not least because Japanese submarines were identified by letters and numbers, rather than exotic names like Tiger Lily. But there was enough intriguing collateral in his account for the Navy to mount a thorough search for Sydney, using a P3-C Orion search aircraft. With the magnetic anomaly detection equipment deployed, there was a 100 per cent probability of locating a ship of 6000 tons if it were anywhere near the reported position. The search turned up nothing.

Eventually, Sydney will be found, just as the Titanic and Bismarck were found. But we don't have to wait until then to dismiss the theory about a Japanese submarine. On the evidence already available, the theory does not stand the light of day.

At the time of the chance encounter between Kormoran and Sydney, the Imperial Japanese Navy's energies were focused obsessively on the forthcoming strike against the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour and on the simultaneous dash to seize the oil, rubber and tin of South-East Asia.

It would have been unthinkable for a nation playing for such high stakes, with a strike force about to sail for

Hawaii, with everything planned down to the last detail, the very fate of the Empire at hand, to risk all for the sake of an Australian cruiser. HMAS Sydney mattered a great deal to us. She mattered hardly a jot to the Japanese.

Those Australians who advance the notion of a German-Japanese conspiracy not only impose an intolerable strain on the evidence; they suffer from an inflated sense of their nation's importance in the global scheme of things.

Nor is it conceivable that a Japanese submarine captain sank the Sydney while off on a frolic of his own. Japanese commanders did not go off on unauthorised frolics; they followed orders to the letter. Nor, for that matter, is there any record of naval co-operation at sea between Germany and Japan at this time.

However, the conspiracy theory founders most decisively on the fact that all Japanese submarines can be accounted for. Research undertaken in the Japanese archives shows that no Japanese submarine could have been involved in the attack on the Sydney. This is borne out by interviews with retired Japanese submariners.

At the outbreak of the Pacific War, the Imperial Japanese Navy had a fleet of 46 I-class, or first-line, submarines, 12 of which were equipped with scout planes.

Where were the 46 submarines on November 19, 1941?

We know, beyond a shadow of doubt, where 28 of them were – in Japanese waters preparing to leave for Pearl Harbour or actually on their way to Pearl Harbour.

The Second Submarine Group under Rear-Admiral Yamazaki Shigeteru and consisting of I-2, I-3, I-4, I-5, I-6 and I-7 left Yokosuka Naval Base on November 16 bound for Hawaii. I-1 followed on November 21. The First Submarine Group under Rear-Admiral Sato Tsutomu and composed of I-9, I-15, I-17 and I-25 set out from Japan on November 21.

Rear Admiral Shigeyoshi Miwa's Third Submarine Group – I-8, I-68, I-69, I-70, I-71, I-72, I-73, I-74 and I-75 – left the Inland Sea early in November, making for Hawaii via Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands.

The Special Attack Force of Captain Hankyu Sasaki – I-16, I-18, I-20, I-22 and I-24 – left Kure on November 18 for Hawaii, each carrying a 46-ton midget submarine. Three reconnaissance submarines – I-19, I-21 and I-23 – sailed from the Kurile Islands on November 26 with the main Japanese battle fleet.

In the meantime, the large headquarters submarine I-10, which was equipped with a reconnaissance floatplane, left Yokosuka for the South Pacific at 7 am on November 16. I-10 sighted the US heavy cruiser Astoria in the Fiji islands. But since the sighting was made before the Pearl Harbour attack, she gave the cruiser a wide berth and continued eastward. That is about as clear an indication as one could get that for Japan everything hinged on December 7.

The scouting submarine I-26 left Yokosuka on November 19 for a reconnaissance mission in the Aleutian Islands in the North Pacific.

None of these 30 boats – among which were the 12 aircraft-equipped submarines – could have been off Carnarvon on November 19.

We also know that Japan's four mine-laying submarines – I-121, I-122, I-123 and I-124 – could not have been off Carnarvon at the time. In early November they were in their home ports, preparing for wartime

operations in the South China Sea.

That accounts for 34 of the 46 submarines. Where were the others?

Five boats – I-53, I-54, I-55, I-56, I-57 and I-58 – arrived at San-Ya on Hainan Island from Japan on November 27, departing on December 1. Another four – I-62, I-64, I-65 and I-66 – arrived at San-Ya from Japan on December 2. It would have been impossible for any of these nine boats to have been off Carnarvon on November 19. Nor could I-52 have been there; she was in home waters "assigned to headquarters".

That takes the tally to 44. Where were the other two submarines, I-59 and I-60? According to Professor Teruaki Kawano of the Military History Department of the National Institute for Defence Studies in Tokyo, they, along with all other operational submarines, were at their home ports preparing for major operations.

No-one has questioned the accuracy of the relevant Japanese log books and patrol reports. After 50 years, it is time to accept that Sydney was lost because Captain Burnett failed to follow proper procedures. The evidence suggests that the Japanese, whatever else they did in World War II, had nothing to do with the sinking of HMAS Sydney.

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