

JAPANESE CLEARED OF SYDNEY'S SINKING

By DAVID JENKINS

Research in the naval archives in Tokyo has put paid to the belief, deeply entrenched in Australian folklore, that a Japanese submarine helped sink HMAS Sydney, which was lost in mysterious circumstances half a century ago.

Sydney, a modern 6,830-ton cruiser, disappeared off Carnarvon on November 19, 1941, after an encounter at close range with the heavily armed German raider Kormoran, which also sank.

Although most of Kormoran's crew survived, no trace was ever found of Sydney's 645 crew.

The Navy has always accepted that Sydney was lost because Captain Joseph Burnett, discarding caution and established naval procedure, allowed himself to get dangerously close to Kormoran.

But rumours persist that a Japanese submarine, keeping a mid-ocean rendezvous with the German vessel, was a silent witness to the action and delivered the coup de grace to the Australian warship.

The rumours were 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's claims were substantiated, it would be necessary to rewrite the history of World War II. Japan was not at war with the Allies on November 19, 1941. The Imperial Japanese Navy's operational forces were not ordered to open hostilities until December 7, 1941.

Tokyo has repeatedly dismissed the claim that a Japanese submarine sank Sydney.

Archival material held at the Military History Department of the National Institute for Defence Studies in Tokyo establishes beyond doubt that none of Japan's 46 I-class submarines could have been off Carnarvon on November 19.

At the time, Japan also had 15 smaller RO-class submarines. But they were in home ports preparing for operations in the South China Sea and the Pacific

Lieutenant Tom Frame, a prominent naval historian, said yesterday: "In the absence of reasonable explanations for the actions of Sydney there is great appeal in alleging Japanese complicity. And although it would seem to explain a great detail, it adds very little clarity to our efforts to unravel the mystery."

In 1987, a retired commercial diver, Colin Sampey, claimed that he had come across the hulk of Sydney in 33 metres 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 Imperial Japanese Navy submarines were identified by letters and numbers, rather than exotic names like Tiger Lily. But there was enough intriguing material 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 6,000 tons if it were anywhere near the reported position. The search turned up nothing.

PAGE 15: Was it a sub's torpedo?

Keywords:

Navies Japan HMAS Sydney