

THE AUSTRALIA STATION - JULY - NOV. 1941 PAGE 458.

SUBM. 009. 0022

Some weeks later a letter dated 2nd July 1941, commenting on the encounter, was received at Navy Office from Admiral Leatham, Commander-in-Chief, East Indies. Referring to the expenditure of ammunition, Leatham wrote:

It was correct that *Canberra* should have taken precautions against the possibility of the supposed raider firing torpedoes, but I think it was being over cautious to avoid approaching nearer than 19,000 yards on this account. Had a more effective range been attained quickly the enemy might have been identified sooner and much ammunition saved.

By the time this letter reached Navy Office, Burnett was away in command of *Sydney*, having been succeeded as Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff by Captain Getting. It is probable, however, that he knew of Leatham's comments, as a copy of Leatham's letter was sent, in August 1941, to the Rear-Admiral Commanding the Australian Squadron. If, as is possible, Burnett's action in closing *Kormoran* was influenced by the implied criticism of Farncomb's standing off from *Ketty Brovig* and *Coburg*, one can but conjecture what he would have done had he known of *Devonshire's* experience. On the other hand, both Farncomb and *Devonshire's* captain had more positive reason for suspicion in their encounters than had Burnett in his; and it may well be that, influenced by the near approach of darkness, he was moved to determine the question quickly; and thus was swayed to over confidence; first in the genuineness of *Straat Malakka*; second in *Sydney's* ability, with all armament bearing and manned, to overwhelm before the trap, if such existed, were sprung. Yet to act as Burnett did was to court disaster should a trap exist, disaster at the worst total, as it was; at the best professional for Burnett; for even had *Sydney* triumphed in an action it is improbable that it would have been without damage and casualties, and Burnett would have been unable to explain the risks he ran.

In such an encounter, with the raider an apparently innocent merchant vessel, the other an undisguised warship known to the raider as an enemy, the element of surprise must have remained with Detmers until Burnett's suspicions deepened into absolute certainty. In the circumstances Burnett created, he could not have reached such certainty until Detmers abandoned all disguise and struck—a matter of almost simultaneous decision by him and action by his guns, giving him the tremendous advantage of that vital second or two in the first blow at such close quarters. In the event, *Sydney* must have been crippled from the outset by those devastating initial salvos at point blank range, the torpedo hit, and the fire from her aircraft's petrol. That she managed to inflict fatal wounds on her adversary after such staggering blows is evidence of the undefeated spirit of those who survived them, and who fought on in "X" and "Y" turrets, with the secondary armament, and at the torpedo tubes.

It is probable that *Sydney* sank during the night of the 19th-20th November 1941. Not only did she suffer the torpedo blow below water, but German survivors estimated that she received up to fifty shell hits on the

PAGE 458

water line. She was not observed to blow up. The "occasional flickerings" just died to nothingness in the night. It is not surprising that there were no survivors, for after the punishment she received from shells and bullets, and the ravages of the fires on board, it is unlikely that much that could float remained. It is therefore probable that the delays in receiving information from the wireless stations of the receipt of *Kormoran's* mutilated "suspicious ship" message, and from *Aquitania* of the earlier rescue of survivors from *Kormoran*, unfortunate though they were, had no bearing on the ultimate fate of such of *Sydney's* complement as survived the actual fighting.

News of the action, and of the presumed loss of *Sydney*, was publicly released in an official statement by the Prime Minister, Mr Curtin, on the 30th November 1941. The next of kin had been informed by personal telegram three days earlier. Unfortunately, however, through failure to observe correct censorship procedure in which both the Naval Board in Melbourne and the Government in Canberra were equally culpable, leakage of information occurred on the 25th November and gave rise to rumours which circulated throughout Australia and caused deep distress to next of kin. The Naval Board were responsible in the failure to inform the Chief Publicity Censor and to request an adequately worded censorship instruction as soon as doubt arose regarding *Sydney* on the 23rd November. The Government at Canberra were responsible in that on the 25th November, without informing or consulting the Naval Board, they instructed the Chief Publicity Censor (Mr E. G. Bonney, who had succeeded Mr Jenkin in that appointment earlier in the year) to issue a censorship instruction "No reference press or radio to H.M.A.S. *Sydney*". Circulated to all newspapers and broadcasting stations through Australia, this implied that some misfortune had befallen *Sydney*, and started the rumours, which spread rapidly and which, in addition to the distress they caused, threw suspicion on the official statement when it was issued five days later. Nor did rumour end with the issue of that statement. For many months thereafter stories, either malicious or merely mischievous, of news received from survivors of *Sydney* in Japan, continued to emerge and circulate, causing pain and distress in a number of Australian homes.

Apparently the only material evidence of the loss of *Sydney* is an Australian naval type Carley life-float which, damaged by gun fire and containing two Australian naval life-belts, was recovered by H.M.A.S. *Heros* on the 27th November 1941 (eight days after the action) in a position approximately 160 miles north-west of Carnarvon. This life-float is preserved in the Australian War Memorial at Canberra.

On or about the 6th February 1942 a Carley float bearing the remains of a corpse was sighted off Christmas Island, where it was towed ashore and the body buried "with full military honours". It was at first thought that this might be from *Sydney*, but in the early post-war years, and after detailed investigation of all reports and descriptions of the float and its