

THE SECRET RAIDERS

The German light guns could easily be seen taking heavy casualties amongst the fire-control personnel. The *Sydney's* fire-control system was clearly out of action, and she was reduced to independent firing from the guns of her two after turrets. These scored three hits. The first passed through the funnel, exploded on the raider's disengaged side and filled the wireless office with splinters, killing two men. The second shell burst in the auxiliary boiler-room and oil bunker and put out of action the ship's fire-fighting equipment. The third shell destroyed the transformers of the main engines, while a fourth shell, although it failed to explode, injured members of the crew of No. 3 gun. The effect of all this damage was to start a heavy fire in the engine-room, and in a black chaos of pouring smoke and frequent electric flashes and short circuits as the electrical gear failed the *Kormoran's* engine-room personnel tried to put out the fire, but none of them were ever seen again.

As the result of her damage, the *Sydney* had now dropped astern, but she could see by now that the *Kormoran* was out of control and she tried to ram her. *Kormoran's* No. 5 gun kept on firing, and the *Sydney* then turned away, steaming slowly at about five or six knots; as she went she fired four torpedoes, the nearest of which missed the *Kormoran* by 150 yards. The *Sydney* had turned now, but her turrets were apparently jammed, for they were trained on her disengaged side, while the Germans kept her continuously under fire and hit her again and again on the water-line; the Germans' 5.9-inch guns were firing salvoes every four or five seconds, and altogether fired about 500 rounds.

By six o'clock, just a half an hour after the action had started, it was growing dark; the *Sydney's* port quarter was heavily ablaze and there were continuous explosions coming from her. At a distance of 10,000 yards she was out of reach of the *Kormoran's* guns and steamed on slowly towards the horizon. For hours, as they strove to save their own ship, the Germans could see the huge fire on board their enemy, until an hour before midnight, when it disappeared. It was probably then that the *Sydney* sank.

The *Kormoran* was nearly as badly ablaze as the *Sydney*, and with her fire-fighting gear out of action there was very little that her crew could do. Detmers, realising this, ordered everybody away but the guns' crews. Some of the boats had

REFERENCE TO WHAT WAS SAID BY CAPTAIN ROSKILL (WAR AT SEA) ON THE SINKING.¹ *KORMORAN* (SHIP 41)

been destroyed by fire, so that recourse was had to rafts and rubber dinghies, while two steel lifeboats were got out of No. 1 hold -- by hand, as the auxiliary machinery was out of action.

As the crew left the ship it was seen that about twenty men had been killed in action; then about sixty more were drowned as a big rubber dinghy sank while the ship was being abandoned. The Germans tumbled over the side, knowing that the flames were nearing the stored mines. At one o'clock in the morning Detmers hauled down his flag and pennant and got into the last boat; twenty minutes later the mines exploded and the *Kormoran* sank stern first.

The weather became worse and the men in the boats, in the dinghies and on the rafts were separated from each other. One boatload was picked up by a coasting steamer, which passed on the news, and the RAN and RAAF set out in search of the survivors, from both sides, of this battle to the death. All the Germans were found, but some of them took six days to reach shore. On one raft there were fifty-seven men in an area of twenty-five by ten feet, taking turns standing or sitting, as no one could lie down. By the time they reached shore all the survivors had suffered greatly from heat and cold. Afterwards they all, including Detmers, reported that in captivity they had been well treated by the Australians.

Clearly it was a terrible mistake on the part of the *Sydney's* captain that she came so close to the *Kormoran* and allowed herself to be taken by surprise. Long after the war the British official historian of the war at sea dealt at length with the incident, for it was a heartbreaking example of a tragic waste of a fine ship and a fine crew, the lessons of which will be of enduring value as long as men make war upon the sea.

Captain Roskill wrote:¹

... the situation in which her (*Sydney's*) captain found himself was liable to occur in every contact with a suspicious ship, until a firm system of checkmating a raider's bluff by calling the shore authorities had been established. And, of course, the ability of the shore authorities confidently to tell a patrolling warship that the ship she had intercepted must be an enemy was absolutely dependent on having accurate knowledge of every true Allied merchant ship's position, all over the world,

¹ op. cit. vol. I, p. 549.





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at any given time. Such knowledge was not easily amassed and kept ready for instant use in time of war, and the system was, in fact, not perfected until later. Yet, granted the difficulties of piercing raiders' disguises, the very close approach made by the *Sydney* during the exchange of signals was certainly injudicious.

'As early as January 1940 one of our own Q ships whose gun and torpedo armaments were about the same as the *Kormoran's* was intercepted off Sierra Leone by the *Neptune*, a sister ship of the *Sydney*, which was unaware of her true identity. The cruiser approached, and remained for some time steaming at slow speed, within a few hundred yards of the Q ship whose captain later reported to the Admiralty that, had he been a German, he 'could have disabled (the *Neptune*) with two torpedoes and swept her upper deck'. But such complete secrecy enveloped the work of the Q ships that the report was never circulated to the Naval Staff and the fate which the *Neptune* escaped actually overtook the *Sydney* more than eighteen months later. The unheeded warning of the Q ship had not been the only pointer to the danger of making a close approach to a suspicious ship. The engagements between the raider *Thor* and the armed merchant-cruisers *Carnarvon Castle* and *Alcantara* in July and December 1940, and the loss of the *Voltaire* in April 1941, had amply demonstrated the capacity of the enemy to hit back hard and suddenly; the Admiralty had issued several warnings to that effect. Yet, in February 1941 the *Leander* also made a close approach to a suspicious ship which, had she been a German instead of an Italian raider, might well have brought on her the *Sydney's* fate.¹ The truth is clear. Though a comprehensive system of plotting the positions of all friendly merchant ships and the issue to them all of secret call signs are essential to success in anti-raider operations it will always take time to establish such measures on a world-wide basis. Meanwhile the difficulty of identifying an intercepted ship will inevitably remain. But to make a close approach to a suspicious ship, on a favourable bearing for gun and torpedo fire, is to court disaster.'

¹ This is a reference to the Italian banana vessel *Ramb I* sunk by the *Leander* seven days after leaving Massowa. In her very brief career she met with no success.

CHAPTER II

THE *THOR* (SHIP 10),
SECOND CRUISE

RIGHT up to the end of the war the SKL was studying the raiders' voyages, one after the other, and issuing as secret documents accounts and appreciations of what they had done. This preparation for winning another war went on until the war which was then in progress had been lost and it was never completed.

Accordingly, details of the cruises of the later ships in the second wave are harder to obtain than in the case of those already described.

After the *Kormoran*, there were five other ships in the second wave. Of these two never left European waters, one being sunk and one damaged on their way through the Channel. The three remaining vessels were the *Thor*, whose first cruise had lasted from June 1940 to April 1941, and two new raiders, the *Michel* (Ship 28) and the *Stier* (Ship 23).

In addition, during 1942 three Japanese armed merchant raiders also made their appearance in the Indian Ocean. The small number of these ships, in view of the size of the Japanese merchant fleet, is surprising. So, also, is their comparative lack of success.

During May and June the *Aikoku Maru* and the *Hokoku Maru* operated to the east of Madagascar, looking for Allied shipping which they hoped would have been driven out of the Mozambique Channel (between Madagascar and the mainland) by Axis submarines. On May 10 they captured the *Genota*, and at the end of the month reconnoitred Diego Suarez, then just fallen into British hands, with a seaplane. On June 5 a seaplane from the raiders bombed the British steamer *Elysia*, of 6,757 tons, which was then finished off by the raiders' guns, and on their way home towards Japan they sank the