

Daily Telegraph

and Daily News

Sydney, Friday, November 30, 1945

R.N. Destroyer Damaged in Harbor; Torpedo Explosion

An explosion, heard six miles away, wrecked the superstructure of the Royal Navy destroyer Kempenfelt in Sydney Harbor last night and seriously injured a sailor.

The explosion occurred in the air vessel of a torpedo tube and blew a 21/2-ton torpedo and a warhead containing 350lb. of T.N.T. out of the tube. The torpedo, 25 feet long, was hurled fin-first through four strong bulkheads and buried in the funnel 30 feet away. Captain E. J. McGregor, D.S.O., commander of the destroyer flotilla, said that had the explosion occurred a few minutes earlier, casualties would have been much higher. Several men on shore leave who were paraded at the gangway where the injured man was standing would have received the full blast. The explosion and fire which followed wrecked the superstructure of the vessel. Alarm bells brought members of the ship's crew running to the fire, and hoses were played on the flames within a few minutes.

So great was the explosion that city crowds hurrying to catch home-going trains and trams about 6 o'clock heard it above the city noise. Residents of Neutral Bay and Kirribilli Point rushed from their homes and saw a thick cloud of brown smoke billowing from the Kempenfelt. Officers at the signal station at South Head heard the explosion, which rattled windows across the Harbor at Double Bay and four miles away at Bellevue Hill. The Daily Telegraph continued to receive telephone inquiries for an hour after the explosion from residents of Harbor suburbs.

The injured man is Able-Seaman Derrick Pullin, 20, of Loughton, Essex (England). He suffered extensive burns to the face and body. The ship's medical officer reported last night that his condition was critical. An officer said it was believed that the war-head was disintegrated by the force of the explosion, and that the T.N.T., being highly inflammable, caught fire. The war-head, containing 350lb. of T.N.T., did not explode, as there was no primer fitted at the time. Had it done so, the whole ship might have blown up.

Ship "Kicked Up"

Pullin, who was on duty as quartermaster, heard air escaping from the torpedo, and was walking over to investigate when it blew up. Sub.-Lieut. N. V. Mercer had just walked past the torpedo and was sheltered from the blast. Ratings below decks in the Wager were thrown to the floor when the destroyer "kicked up" at the impact of the explosion on the Kempenfelt. Seven firemen, under Officer Griffiths, from City Headquarters were sent across to the destroyer in a launch, but found that the ship's crew had the fire in hand.

The Kempenfelt, Royal Naval Vessel of 1300 tons, is berthed between the supply ship Tyne and the sister destroyers Wager and Whirlwind. She arrived in Sydney only a few days ago from Hongkong, after operations in the China Sea. She was to have sailed for England with food in a week, but will be delayed about a fortnight.

The Sydney Morning Herald

Sydney, Friday, November 30, 1945

Explosion on Warship

Buildings Shaken

An explosion on the after-deck of H.M.S. Kempenfelt, a destroyer, moored at the dolphins, Kirribilli Point, shook buildings and seriously injured one naval rating, about 6 p.m. yesterday. The explosion is thought to have taken place in the compressed air chamber of a torpedo. Large buildings on the city side trembled as if an earthquake had occurred. On the Kirribilli side crockery fell from shelves in some kitchens, and women who were preparing the evening meal rushed into the streets. The Navy stated that the only official casualty was Able Seaman D. J. Pullin (CJX559323), who was seriously injured. It is understood that several other ratings suffered slight shock and burns.

Flames Mast High

Witnesses from the shore described a blinding flash, in which flames leapt mast high, followed by dense clouds of white and grey smoke, which poured from the vessel. A fire broke out near the engine-room and spread to the awnings, but it was controlled by the crew. The seriously injured rating was transferred to the hospital on board the British naval depot ship, H.M.S. Tyne, which was moored on the starboard side of the Kempenfelt.

The explosion was heard in the eastern suburbs, and many residents in the Bellevue Hill area congregated on the heights which overlook the harbour to try to ascertain the cause. The explosion was also heard in the western suburbs. Thousands of people gathered on the foreshores of the harbour. Some believed the noise to have been due to the firing of a large calibre naval gun.

Buildings Trembled

Houses in the North Sydney area were severely shaken, and even large blocks of flats at King's Cross and Potts Point trembled with the force of the explosion. Naval headquarters at Garden Island received numerous telephone inquiries, but no information was given.

The cause of the accident was not officially disclosed, but it was announced last night that it would form the subject of a naval inquiry. It is assumed that the explosion took place in the compressed air chamber of the torpedo, which was in a tube, adjoining others. The body of the torpedo penetrated the radar room on the deck, and the funnel of the Kempenfelt. The torpedo warhead travelled in the opposite direction, carrying away the aerial of H.M.S. The Wager, a destroyer moored on the port side of the Kempenfelt. Fragments of the torpedo also fell on another destroyer, H.M.S. Whirlwind, on the port side of The Wager.

No Damage to Ships

No damage was done to the hull of the Kempenfelt except for scorched paint. The adjoining ships suffered no serious damage. Members of the fire brigade, in charge of Third-Officer Griffith, members of the Maritime Services Board, and water police on board the launch Osiris in charge of Sergeant Maguire, were alongside the destroyer within a few minutes. The Navy thanked them for their offer of assistance, but said the crew were able to cope with the flames. Three fire floats from Goat Island – the Pluvius, the Hydra, and the Endeavour, under Captain Lockett – also went to the destroyer's assistance, but their services were also not required.

Thanks to Ted Longshaw for his photographs and copies of the front-page newspaper articles. VS.