

The Wolf in ship's clothing

Stephen Loosley

The Wolf

By Richard Guilliat and Peter Hohnen

Random House, 338pp, \$34.95

THIS is a ripping yarn, of the genre once satirised so wonderfully by Michael Palin.

But there is a great difference between Palin's boys' own annual fantasies and this wartime tale. *The Wolf* is true and its characters are real.

The year is 1917 and World War I is going badly for the Allies. Russia is collapsing and will soon be knocked out of the war. America, courtesy of the Zimmerman Telegram, inviting Mexico to invade the US as a German ally, has entered the conflict but has not arrived in strength. And the Anglo-French allies desperately need not only American reinforcements but also the very staples of battle.

Imperial Germany's U-boats are choking Britain's Atlantic lifeline. Germany can still triumph, despite the Allied blockade and a war-weary people.

To stretch Allied naval resources throughout the war, the German navy dispatched surface raiders to different parts of the globe. Flying neutral flags and disguised as merchantmen, German surface raiders played havoc with Allied shipping, through both direct attacks and by mine-laying off major ports.

Indeed, Australian naval history had been made early in the war when the German surface raider SMS Emden was sunk by HMAS Sydney off the Cocos Islands in November 1914.

Sydney had been escorting the original ANZAC convoy, bound for Egypt. But by 1917 the infant Australian Navy was part of the Royal Navy squadrons at Scapa Flow, in Scotland. They were detailed to the North Sea, not the Pacific. This was to have serious consequences when the German raider, the Wolf, arrived in Australian waters.

By 1917, SMS Wolf was a converted merchant ship of the Hansa line. It could be disguised by altering the shape of its funnel and changing the height of its radio mast. Fitted for guns and torpedoes before leaving Germany, it also took aboard a quantity of mines and enough coal for a journey of six months.

But neither its disguise nor its physical attributes constituted the decisive element in the threat that SMS Wolf, now painted black and with its weapons (including its aircraft) concealed, was to pose in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans.

This was to be found in the dedicated personality of its captain Karl Nerger. A gifted sailor with a sense of humour, Nerger was possessed of a single-minded determination to complete his mission without docking and without radio contact with Berlin. Wolf would sail for a year, plundering supplies and imprisoning crews and passengers of ships that were sunk or taken as prizes.

This was so audacious that Nerger's superiors at Kiel were highly sceptical; even dismissive. But Nerger's iron resolution forms the core of this wartime story, which is told well and from the perspective of those aboard the raider itself. Nerger is the principal character: stoic and reserved but

not lacking humanity. Most of the German crew also behaved well towards their prisoners, especially the Wolf's doctor Hauswaldt.

However, not all the Wolf's complement were loyal servants of the kaiser. By an extraordinary chance, among the ship's crew was Theodor Plievier, already a dissident, who would later emerge as a prominent German communist writer.

The future author of the World War II trilogy — *Moscow, Stalingrad* and *Berlin* — brought a radical view of the ship's mission, which he regarded as suicidal, and of the war overall. There is no question but that his service in the heat and grime below decks merely confirmed Plievier's militancy.

Equally remarkable was the fact that Gerald Haxton, a young lover of W. Somerset Maugham, was taken prisoner aboard the Wolf, after the ship on which he was travelling was sunk.

The Wolf laid minefields off South Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand. The mines claimed victims as the authorities refused to concede that the losses were the result of a raider. Instead, saboteurs, especially suspected among German immigrant communities, were blamed. Australia was gripped by fear approaching hysteria, as ships sank off Gabo Island and as others simply disappeared in the Pacific.

Guilliatt and Hohnen sketch the Australia of 1917 as divided over conscription and fearful of enemies real and perceived; domestic and foreign.

This was the Australia of prime minister William Morris Hughes, who had broken the Labor Party on his own ambition and wilfulness and was now turncoat leader of a conservative government. Hughes played the sabotage card ruthlessly, bringing a brutality to Australian domestic politics that saw Australians of German heritage imprisoned in shameful conditions in internment camps. It is an appalling stain on our history.

The sinking of HMAS Sydney by the German raider Kormoran off the West Australian coast in late 1941 is known to everyone. The story of the Wolf deserves to be known more widely for it is a compelling lesson as to what political opportunism and military neglect can wreak in real damage to national security.

Richard Guilliatt is a Walkley award-winning journalist who has contributed extensively to Australian, British and American publications and now writes for *The Australian's* weekend magazine. Peter Hohnen was a prominent Canberra lawyer and a respected contributor to Australian military history.

Given the success of this book in opening up a little-known episode from World War I to a wider audience, it is to be hoped the authors find another subject of interest. They can tell a story of danger that holds their readers' attention.

The story of the Wolf is a great yarn. There is even a message in a bottle.

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