

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

Precis of the research into the loss of HMAS Sydney by Stanley L Davis and Neil H Coates

NAVIGATION

HMAS *Sydney* made three previous voyages returning alone from rendezvous off Sunda Strait which were identical to her final voyage. The tracks for these voyages have been plotted and indicate that if she had conformed with these previous movements she would have been found approximately 200 nautical miles north of the wreck site. To reach the site where she has been found she would have had to have proceeded "with moderate despatch" at a speed of approximately 22 knots for about 45 hours, exceeding her normal wartime private cruising speed of approximately 18 knots. On all other occasions such increased speeds have been approved by higher authority and signals authorising this have been identified. No such signal has been found for her final voyage despite a thorough targeted search of archives. Due to lack of resources, the search has not been exhaustive.

SIGNALS INTELLIGENCE

Wireless Telegraphy (W/T) interceptions originating from HSK *Kormoran* have been interpreted as Latitude and Longitude rather than the German grid code used for signalling positions. Gridded charts for the Atlantic ocean have been seen but a gridded chart for the Indian Ocean is known to have been produced but has not been located. This could be of use in testing the veracity of Captain Detmers' account of the action in relation any deception used in the prelude to the action. Further corroboration of Detmers' account could be made by reference to the "Mership [Merchant Ship] Secret War Callsign" book which will not be released by UK archives until 2013.

Signals communicating High Frequency Direction Finding (H/F D/F) bearings have been located in the National Archive of Australia (NAA) in Melbourne. They have been plotted for the day of the action and the previous day but all bearings are towards the South China Sea, there are none towards the Indian ocean. This is indicative of the Japanese build up for impending action in SE Asia on 7-8 December 1941.

Higher authority appeared to have a focus on Japan as Admiral Sir Guy Royle, First Naval Member and Chief of Naval Staff proceeded to Fremantle in spite of persuasion to remain in Sydney because of "the Far Eastern situation." Such pre-occupation would have taken the attention from routine escort duties and may have reduced the urgency and immediacy that should have been given to the *Sydney* being overdue and thus affected the necessary search and rescue response.

STRATEGY

Captain Burnett has been criticized for his close approach to *Kormoran* however he was probably conforming with anti-scuttling directives that were in place at the time. The Ship's Logs, War Diary and Reports and Letters of Proceedings record the exercise of anti-scuttling parties at sea and of their being sent ashore in Fremantle for instruction a few days before the last voyage.

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

He would also have in his mind the criticism of Captain Farncomb when HMAS *Canberra* engaged *Coburg* and *Ketty Brovig* in March 1940 where he stood off at 19 000 yards to avoid potential attack by torpedo and disabled the vessels by gunfire. He was criticized for lack of aggression and the expenditure of a large amount of ammunition.

High expenditure of ammunition was also an issue in June 1940 when Admiral Cunningham had to report to the Admiralty on the engagement between three Italian destroyers and the 7th Cruiser Squadron of which *Sydney* was an element with Captain Collins in command. In his previous appointment as Assistant Chief of Naval Staff Captain Burnett would have been well aware of the views of higher authority on these points.

SHIPS BOATS

As there were survivors from *Kormoran* but none from *Sydney* the lifesaving capability of the latter has been questioned. *Kormoran* was equipped mainly with large capacity Merchant service style lifeboats by means of which a large proportion of the crew survived. Naval pattern ships' boats were designed and evolved over centuries to fulfil specific purposes: to carry crew, to carry stores, to work ground tackle and other specialised tasks. Although providing a lifesaving capacity *in extremis*, none were specifically designed for, or suited to, this purpose. Lifesaving capacity was increased for the ships complement by the provision of Carley floats. *Sydney's* full outfit of boats appears from contemporary photographs to be deficient by the Gig, but its stowage has been occupied by two Carley floats. Overall lifesaving capacity would have been adequate.

Many of *Sydney's* boats have been found very close to the wreck given the depth of water. This indicates that they were securely stowed at the time of sinking and not prepared for lowering. It can be assumed that an early abandonment of the ship was not contemplated. From the separated bow being found relatively close to the rest of the hull it can be assumed that a sudden and catastrophic failure occurred at the site of the torpedo damage. Under these circumstances the lack of survivors is not surprising. There are several examples of the total or near total loss of crews even when other ships are in close proximity to effect rescue. The relative positions of the two wrecks suggest that she may have been under control at the time of sinking and making for Geraldton, the nearest practicable port.

There is at least one similar catastrophic failure of the bow of a vessel of similar hull configuration. HMS *Liverpool* was struck by torpedo from a torpedo bomber and lost her bow. She remained afloat as there was no other damage and was towed to port and repaired. There may have been a design weakness in the hull in the bow area contributing to the apparent sudden sinking of the *Sydney*.

COMMUNICATIONS

The policy stringently maintaining W/T silence must be questioned. The rationale for this developed during World War I naval operations in the Admiralty Home Command waters, particularly the North Sea. Distances were short and the D/F stations of both sides were well placed to produce First Class bearings with good cuts resulting in accurate positions. The reverse of these conditions applied on the Australia Station and adjacent waters in that distances are large and no enemy D/F stations existed in the region. The only enemy presence in these

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

waters was the occasional isolated vessel which could only obtain a single bearing which was of limited use at best. The maintenance of W/T silence thus denied the use of a strategic and tactical tool that would have entailed very little risk by its use.

The distances within Australia also affected the internal communications organisation. The organisation was widely spread with the Department of the Navy in Canberra, the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board in Melbourne, the Rear Admiral Commanding the Australian Squadron in Sydney and the District Naval Officer, Western Australia in Fremantle. An illustration of the communications problems is *Sydney's* movements immediately before her final voyage.

She escorted *Duntroon* and *Talabot* from Fremantle to a rendezvous in the Great Australian Bight at 120° E longitude to exchange *Zealandia* being escorted by HMAS *Adelaide* from the East coast. The rendezvous was effected and after separation, *Adelaide* signalled on behalf of *Sydney* the successful handover and her ETA Fremantle. However at 0530 hours local time on 8 November an aircraft from RAAF Pearce was ordered to scramble with task "locate HMAS *Sydney* and ask ETA."

If *Sydney* had been permitted to break W/T silence and seek advice on *Kormoran's* disguise the outcome of the affair may well have been different. In any case it would have been normal procedure at the time of opening fire to send a Plain Language Flash precedence enemy action report by W/T signal. The fact that one was not received indicates the loss of W/T capability at the first exchange of fire probably by the loss of a mast and its associated aerials.



Stanley L Davis

26/05/2008



Neil H Coates

26 May 2008