

A.W. Skimin

26 May 2008

EK18929  
 The Secretary,  
 HMAS Sydney II,  
 Commission of Inquiry,  
 Level 18, Defence Plaza,  
 270 Pitt Street,  
 SYDNEY NSW 2000

SIA  
 Dear Sir,

#### HMAS SYDNEY INQUIRY – SIGNAL COMMUNICATIONS NOV 1941

Apart from a passing interest in the loss of the RAAF 9 Squadron's Seagull – Walrus and the supporting personnel deployed with HMAS Sydney, I have no direct personal interest in the Sydney – Kormoran engagement in November 1941. Nevertheless, I will take a keen interest in the Cole Inquiry and the outcomes, in particular those aspects concerning Sydney's 'Outward/ Inward' communications with the China Station – Hong Kong.

These communications were in the form of a request from Sydney to China Station seeking approval to change heading/ bearing for her return from the Sunda Strait region after completion of her escort task. The communications were in the days immediately prior to engaging the Kormoran.

While I appreciate that the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade had in the late 1990s inquired into the circumstances surrounding the loss of the Sydney, it is unclear as to whether their research at that time had considered **all** of the related material. Their report tabled in June 2000 was made available on the Federal Parliament website: [www.aph.au/house/committee](http://www.aph.au/house/committee).

At that time the Joint Committee had drawn on the research assistance of Professor Peter Dennis, the then Head of the History Faculty – Australian Defence Force Academy. They also had access to the National Archives of Australia research guide: The Sinking of HMAS Sydney – A Guide to Commonwealth Government Records. This guide was subsequently made available on the National Archives website: [www.naa.gov.au](http://www.naa.gov.au).

Despite extensive efforts by both Professor Dennis and the National Archives, it seems no material of direct relevance to the focus of the Joint Committee inquiry was identified prior to the tabling of the Committee's report.

Later non-related research by a Defence related intelligence agency did, however, identify OUT/IN message traffic concerning Sydney's movements leading up to the Kormoran

engagement. These were contained in a series of Navy WWII message packs then held in custody of the National Archives – Melbourne Office.

These OUT/IN message packs had been made up of many hundreds/ thousands of individual messages (Classified) arranged chronologically by date/ time group. The messages covered diverse navy operational activities including ship movements.

As I recall the message packs were made up of distributed information copies of ACNB – Head of ‘N’ related messages. These formed part of the CRS – MP1074 Flag Signal OUT/IN messages 1939-1945. The memory dulls on detail, but I think that I have this right. National Archives – Melbourne and the Defence Intelligence agency involved at the time should be able to confirm.

In the process of the Defence examination of the Navy classified message packs two (perhaps three) HMAS Sydney related signals were identified in two different packs. These involved a HMAS Sydney ‘outwards’ transmission to China Station – Hong Kong seeking approval for change of heading/ bearing (and I think speed) for her return from the Sunda Strait region in completion of the Zealandia escort. The related message from China Station simply agreed/ approved the Sydney request for heading change. Sydney provided no reason for the heading change request.

Subsequent discussions with Mr Robert Hyslop (a retired APS and Assistant Secretary – Department of Navy/ Head of ‘N’) had suggested that HMAS Sydney was one of at least two RAN ships (HMAS Perth was the other) which had special W/T radio intercept and Direction Finding D/F billets.


Previously in discussions late 1980s the late Commander Eric Nave (RAD Rtd) had alluded to this special capability in context of dedicated ‘afloat’ capabilities in the RAN fleet.

Assuming the view expressed by both Hyslop and Nave to be correct the ‘trigger’ for Sydney’s request for a heading change other than a direct Sunda Strait/ Fremantle track may well have been a W/T signal intercept of a transmission from Kormoran. This is purely supposition. But given the ongoing controversy it might be a line worthy of enquiry: Dietmar Dairy and Kormoran logs may give a lead on their W/T activities in the days immediately prior to Sydney’s signal request to China Station/ Hong Kong.

The Defence Intelligence agency involved in the examination of the Navy WWII message packs from the Melbourne MP series had alerted both Navy Office and the National Archives of the Sydney/ Hong Kong messages. More recently, Mr Bob Trotter of the Sydney Foundation ‘team’ Perth (20 August 2007) and Dr David Stevens – Director Navy History (March 2008) were acquainted with this background by phone.

I hope the Cole Inquiry is able to finally resolve the HMAS Sydney WWII controversy. The heading change request may assist in establishing why Sydney was found where she now lies.

Yours sincerely,

  
**ARTHUR SKIMIN**  
 RAAF (Rtd)