



OFFICE OF AIR FORCE HISTORY

Level 3, 205 Anketell St, TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

EK11978
 The Secretary
 HMAS SYDNEY II
 Commission of Inquiry
 Level 18
 Defence Plaza
 270 Pitt Street
 SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir,

On behalf of the Royal Australian Air Force, I wish to offer some views on events connected with the loss of HMAS *Sydney II* for the information of the Commission. The Air Force interest in this matter stems from the circumstance that six members of the RAAF's No 9 Squadron were among the 645 personnel lost in *Sydney*, after the RAN ship was engaged by the German raider HSK *Kormoran* on 19 November 1941 and probably sank early the next day. This submission focuses on the roles and uses of the RAAF-operated aircraft in *Sydney* and what is known about what part it did or did not play in the naval action of 19 November 1941. By analysing and describing how the cruiser's amphibian could have made a difference to the outcome of that contest, it is intended to highlight what thoughts were, or might have been, passing through the mind of *Sydney*'s commanding officer up until the point when the engagement started.

It was established practice in the years before World War II for RAAF detachments to be embarked in Australian cruisers to operate and maintain Seagull V amphibian aircraft used for reconnaissance, gunnery spotting, and search and rescue work. An aircraft of this type had been routinely carried in *Sydney* from the time the ship was commissioned in 1935. Light cruisers in the modified *Leander* class (such as *Sydney II*) had two widely-separated funnels, and it was in this space high on the superstructure that an EIIH rotating catapult had been installed. The aircraft could be launched from there, but had to be recovered by crane over the ship's side and hoisted back up onto the catapult cradle for re-use.

The recovery process carried a high risk of accidental damage being caused to the ship's aircraft each time that it flew, especially if hoisting had to be performed in other than sheltered water. Because of this, cruiser captains operating in local Australian waters tended to be conservative in how they employed the sole amphibian they had embarked, and often avoided flying them off at all when engaged in convoy or trade protection duties. This attitude was, however, less prevalent in ships which had seen action in overseas theatres. While on deployment to the Mediterranean during 1940-41, for instance, *Sydney* had become well-practised in using the amphibian to extend the range of surface reconnaissance beyond the horizon—even if this meant requiring the aircraft to recover to the nearest land base after making its report, rather than attempt to return to ship. Although Captain Joseph Burnett had not had the benefit of active service, having been at Navy Office in Melbourne from the start of the war until appointed in May 1941 to command *Sydney* following its return to Australia, he was highly regarded by the Chief of the Naval Staff for his remarkable capacity 'to grasp a situation rapidly and to formulate decisions'.

Personnel in *Sydney* would also have been fully aware of the problems associated with operating the Seagull V when combat action was expected or experienced. It was, for instance, fully realised that

muzzle blast from firing the ship's main armament posed a great risk of causing disabling structural damage to the amphibian. This hazard arose whenever the 6-inch guns in the rear two Mark XXI turrets were fired on forward bearings, and also because the 4-inch Mark V guns which formed the main anti-aircraft defence were located on either side of the rearmost funnel—in close proximity to the catapult.

Knowledge of these factors gives heightened significance to statements taken from German survivors of the *Sydney-Kormoran* clash that, in the moments before the disguised German raider opened fire, the Australian cruiser's amphibian was observed to be still sitting on the catapult cradle with its engine running and propeller turning, apparently in preparation for launching. From what is known of normal practice relating to the use of a RAN cruiser's amphibian, it would have made no sense at all for *Sydney's* commanding officer to decide to fly off the aircraft when he had already closed to within a nautical mile (1.8 kilometres) of a suspicious ship that he was attempting to identify. Having exposed himself to broadside fire at virtually point-blank range, this was not the appropriate time to even contemplate such a step. Even less likely was this the case if, as reports also indicate, *Sydney* had reduced speed with the probable intention of sending across a boarding party. Although the amphibian was also used for a variety of subsidiary tasks, such as flying urgent medical cases ashore or carrying mail, none of these roles were seemingly called for right at that moment. Far more likely, and credible, is that Captain Burnett had been preparing to send off the Seagull V at an earlier point in the encounter.

Again according to statements from interrogated German survivors, *Kormoran* had been steering north-east towards the West Australian coast (on its way to lay mines off Shark Bay) when the Australian cruiser was first sighted bearing south at a distance of 19 kilometres, whereupon the raider reversed course and attempted to maintain separation for as long as possible before *Sydney's* superior speed allowed it to catch up. It would have been entirely logical and prudent for Captain Burnett to have contemplated launching his ship's aircraft during the earlier portion of this chase which lasted 90 minutes, on either (or both) of two grounds. Sending the amphibian aloft when *Kormoran* could only be observed as a smoke smudge on the horizon could have proved of great assistance to *Sydney* in identifying what sort of ship the cruiser had encountered, and possibly settled any concerns over its identity. Moreover, getting away the Seagull V would have seemed a desirable precaution if Captain Burnett imagined that he was about to fire his ship's heavy guns in combat, since it was unlikely to be flyable afterwards. As the distance to land was 250 kilometres and the Seagull had a range of more than 960 kilometres, this meant that Burnett need not worry about having to recover the aircraft at sea after any action.

Ideally, the scenario that Burnett might have expected to play out would have been similar to that which occurred when the Royal Navy heavy cruiser *Devonshire* encountered the German raider *Atlantis* in the South Atlantic—coincidentally on 22 November 1941, only three days after the *Sydney-Kormoran* clash. On that occasion the British ship's Walrus amphibian (actually the same aircraft type as the Seagull V) had kept the mystery ship in view while the cruiser contacted shore headquarters to ask whether *Atlantis* could be the Dutch ship *Polyphemus* that it claimed. As soon as advice was received that unmasked *Atlantis*, the raider was engaged from 14 kilometres (beyond the range of *Atlantis's* guns)—with the Walrus spotting to ensure the accuracy of the British fire. The German ship was quickly overwhelmed and destroyed, without having been able to return a shot in its own defence.

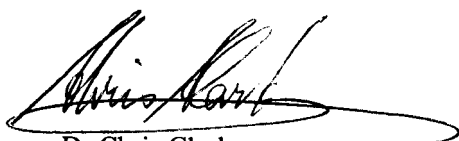
There were, however, important differences between the circumstances in which *Sydney* found itself and those applying to *Devonshire*. For a start, the British cruiser's aircraft had already been airborne at the start of the encounter; it was, in fact, the Walrus which sighted *Atlantis* more than 60 kilometres from the cruiser and directed it to the scene. Accordingly, the cruiser's captain was able to proceed at high speed without bothering about the process entailed in sending off its amphibian. Because the Walrus needed to be catapulted into breeze to attain lift, the cruiser normally needed to present itself side-on to the prevailing wind, and could not be travelling forward at high speed during launch

because of the severe airflow this movement generated from the bow. Put simply, launching the ship's aircraft inevitably meant some loss in time and speed.

Secondly, the captain of *Devonshire* was not maintaining radio silence and from the outset had much greater reason to suspect that he had come across an enemy raider. At the moment when it was discovered, *Atlantis* had been engaged in refuelling a U-boat. Despite the best efforts of the Germans to shield the submarine as it crash-dived, its presence was observed and reported. Then, while *Devonshire* waited for a response to its enquiry ashore, the cruiser's aircraft not only reported that the mystery ship's stern did not match its claimed identity but also noted packing cases suspiciously positioned like gun mounts. As soon as confirmation was received that *Polyphemus* was elsewhere, *Devonshire* wasted no time in opening fire. Nothing that occurred in the context of *Sydney*'s encounter with *Kormoran* gave rise to the same probable cause for proceeding with caution, but in ordering his aircraft to ready itself for launch, Captain Burnett was demonstrably exercising a proper and appropriate level of prudence. Given that the RAAF detachment was led by an officer of junior rank, Flying Officer Raymond Barrey, the decision whether or not to launch the Seagull V would have been taken by Captain Burnett, as part of his principal role to command the fighting of his ship, and not anyone else.

A third factor had been the different time of day at which both contests occurred. *Atlantis* was sighted at 0816 hours—in conditions of clear morning light. *Kormoran* was first encountered at about 1600 hours, when approaching nightfall and evening haze would naturally have caused Captain Burnett some concern. If *Sydney* lost sight of its quarry at such a late hour, the mystery ship could well be able to use the cover of darkness to make good its escape. It would have been understandable that Burnett did not want to lose time by launching the Seagull V, even while he put its crew on stand-by for launch and ordered the pilot to run-up its engine in preparation. Moreover, the imperative for launching the amphibian would have reduced as *Sydney* steadily overhauled the mystery vessel and was able to subject it to visual inspection. A final consideration that arose as the chase wore on was that if the Seagull was launched, it might have to be recovered at night or else make landfall after dark—something for which neither aircraft nor ship had adequately trained.

In summary, therefore, it is contended that the reason why Captain Burnett did not make use of the ship's aircraft was because he was not prepared to risk losing contact with *Kormoran* by taking time to conduct a launch. This consideration was entirely separate to any deception measures that were, or may have been, initiated by the *Kormoran*'s captain with the object of maintaining the raider's disguise. But the fact that the amphibian was prepared for flight and held in readiness is nonetheless a clear indicator that Burnett's approach to the situation in which he found himself was initially neither totally unsuspecting, nor incautious, regardless of whatever subsequently transpired that caused him to drop his guard.



Dr Chris Clark
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3 June 2008