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The Secretary
HMAS "Sydney" Commission of Inquiry
Level 18 – Defence Plaza
270 Pitt Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Set out hereunder is my Submission to the Committee.

Background

I joined H.M.A.S Sydney in Fremantle on 2 September 1939 and served continuously in that ship until 27 October 1941. On this day I was drafted ashore to H.M.A.S Leeuwin to await an on-draft to H.M.A.S Cerberus to undertake a course for a commission.

I was allocated to duty in the Naval Control Service area which was based in Elders Building in Fremantle, the same building that housed the offices of the D.N.O.W.A and all the various sections that serviced the D.N.O.

It will be seen from the above that I served on the Sydney under both Captain J.A. Collins and for a lesser period under Captain J. Burnett.

Before H.M.A.S. Sydney sailed on 11 November 1941, I made arrangements to meet certain former shipmates on the ship's return to Fremantle. When the E.T.A. came and went I became concerned and began to ask questions but these were met by either silence or a brush off. Days passed. No word – only more silence.

When it was announced that ships may go from Fremantle to search for the H.M.A.S. Sydney I sought and was given an audience with the D.N.O. At the meeting a civilian Intelligence Officer was also present. I asked that I be allowed to go into the search area in one of the ships on the basis that following my long service on the ship, I might more easily recognize and identify any wreckage from H.M.A.S. Sydney. The civilian Intelligence Officer almost scoffed at my proposal and finally convinced the D.N.O. to reject my request. I was told to mind my own business and to get on with my work in the Naval Control Service.

I believe to this day that had my request been granted some wreckage may have been located that might help to solve the mystery of the missing crewmen. The carley float found on Christmas Island? Who knows.

The Hilken Rafts

At the start of the war, the Commander of H.M.A.S. Sydney was Commander T.J.N. Hilken R.N., a fine officer and very astute one.

He realized very early that the life saving complement of H.M.A.S. Sydney, while sufficient in peace time, was insufficient to protect a war time complement.

To supplement the existing boats, and carley floats, he arranged for large empty food tins, which formerly contained items like dehydrated foodstuffs, to be sealed up and two placed in pine boxes. Two of these boxes were joined by four pieces of pine timber and hoops of strong rope firmly fixed thereto. These "Hilken Rafts" as they were known, were secured around the upper deck in the same way as the carley floats. I do not know how many of these rafts were made but certainly at least a dozen, maybe even 20.

To sink such a raft, all four tins on each one would need to be punctured. Maybe a large general explosion could rupture every tin. Maybe no-one had a chance to launch one, and so, secured to the deck, they went to the bottom with the sinking ship.

I find it impossible to believe that every one of those Hilken Rafts disappeared without trace. Would it be possible for the ship that located the wreck to make a more detailed search of the upper deck to ascertain whether or not any of these rafts are still secured to the forecandle or the quarter deck. If not, where did they and the carley rafts go?

General

I now submit some general remarks on my own observations of Captain J. Burnett.

As seen in my background notes, I served on the H.M.A.S. Sydney under Captain Burnett's command from May to October 1941.

My impressions were that Captain Burnett was a capable ship handler. He was aware that he commanded a highly skilled and well trained ship's company and was backed up by highly trained, experienced and battle hardened senior officers. He struck me as a man who would listen and take advice.

The day to day ships routine did not change. Drills went on as usual. Cruising stations remained unchanged and action station drill continued.

Against this background I make two comments.

- (1) In the circumstances alleged to be present on the day of the action, the ships company would be closed up to action stations and there would be no crew members "lining the guardrails".
- (2) I am convinced that Captain Burnett would only have taken H.M.A.S. Sydney to a close-in danger situation if somehow he had been lured to do so by some act of Kormoran.

It is my firm belief that some officer took charge if the Captain was dead. He would have lookouts on the upper deck. There could also be other crew members about on the upper deck. Surely some of them could abandon ship as per the drill that they had practiced many times if an explosion happened and the ship was sinking. If some did leave the ship using available life saving equipment, where did they go?



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