

(a) Next of kin notices had to be issued prematurely on Wednesday 26 November, owing to the wild spread of rumour, at a stage when nothing was known of the fate of HMAS *Sydney*.

(b) Rumour got quite out of hand, and the most extravagant stories circulated throughout Australia, and continue to circulate.

(c) As a result the Government was forced to issue an official statement at a time when it was most desirable to keep from the enemy the news that our Naval strength had been reduced so drastically, and again at a time when it was not possible to give a final picture of the happening. But for the leakage, it would have been possible to have delayed the issue of notices to next of kin until such time as -

(i) a complete story, devoid of false hope, could have been issued.

(ii) strategical requirements had been satisfied.

(iii) the official announcement could have been made immediately next of kin notices had been circulated, thus forestalling rumour. Much pain and anxiety would then have been spared the next of kin, and public morale would not have suffered from a surfeit of doubts and fears, as it undoubtedly did suffer.'

Durnford had no doubt that this and other recent leakages of secret naval information had occurred through Parliamentary press representatives in Canberra. He did not offer a view as to how they had obtained the information.

### Pressure for the release of information

By 28 November the Prime Minister was receiving urgent telegrams from newspaper editors urging the release of information.

Place seething. Disturbing rumours. Urge immediate news (*Daily News*, Perth); and

Disappointed we unable relieve extreme anxiety. Great number people who concerned at persistent rumours Commonwealth loss. Many stories current and our view is that immediate steps should be taken to give people authentic report. In view public uneasiness and our embarrassment at daylong and anxious enquiries we implore you consider making immediate release. Could we expect reply urgent (*Telegraph*, Brisbane).

That day at an Advisory War Council meeting the Prime Minister and the other members present received first hand evidence of these rumours from the Hon. J McEwen, who reported rumours heard by his wife.<sup>65</sup> The Prime Minister responded to calls by the press for a statement by saying that 'for vital strategical reasons' the Admiralty and Navy were insisting there be no release until they so authorised. However, on the same day further information was secretly released to newspaper editors, the Navy fearing that not to keep them informed would see an end to their cooperation.<sup>66</sup>

A revised Prime Ministerial statement based on the latest information was drafted, but the Naval Board urged that when released the statement should be for press only, with no broadcast or release overseas for 48 hours after its release in Australia. Radio reports concerning the loss of the *Kormoran* might be picked up by the supply ship that was believed to be still in the area.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Australian Archives (ACT): A5954, 518/36 - *HMAS Sydney - Sinking. Replacement Fund* and Australian Archives (ACT): SP109/3, 357/6 - *Suspension of radio stations for breaches of instructions regarding the sinking of HMAS Sydney*