

31 October 2008

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

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Loss of HMAS Sydney II**

I refer to the report of the 1999 senate inquiry into the loss of the *Sydney* and particularly Chapter six dealing with the subsequent searches. The report contains many wonderful howlers by submitters and the committee itself, and this chapter is no exception. My favorite is the proposition that *Aquitania* did not need an escort from the Sunda Strait because she could outrun any raider she encountered. Ah! yes but could she outrun a 6" shell?

Group Captain Bourne's evidence seemed to be directed to proving the proposition that *Aquitania* must have advised Fremantle that she had picked up survivors, otherwise his flight would not have been ordered on 23 November. Others with some justification, have suggested that the time lapse between the two events was too short, and would not have allowed debriefing of the sailors.

It is possible that they are both wrong. I have previously suggested that the RAN knew there was a Hilfskreuzer in 'Australasian waters' on 17 October. In fact *Kormoran* and *Kulmerland* were off Cape Leeuwin (Point Marius) Others have said that they were actively engaged in tracking a ship which moved up and down the coast in the weeks following.

Others again have said that there were scrambled voice communications received in Fremantle and Darwin, and possibly also at Cape Gregory on the night of 19/20 November. One witness says there was heavy telephone traffic between Fremantle and Pearce on the night of 19/20 November and for five days thereafter.

There may also have been radio communications picked up at HMAS Harmon and HMAS Cerberus, but on the other hand there may not. They would be listening to the normal ship to shore frequency, but since it is likely that *Kormoran's* gunners aimed first at the bridge and radio room (as was their practice) the transmitter was probably put out of action very quickly. Detmers had no need to involve the rest of the Australian Navy and Air Force.

*Sydney's* estimated time of arrival back in Fremantle had been calculated before she left as early on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. She was not going on an extended Indian Ocean cruise, she had a simple job to do, and no doubt there would be another one waiting when she got back.

The distance from Fremantle to the Sunda Strait is about 3000km. At 20 knots that is about 75 hours sailing time. At 5.30pm on 19 November *Sydney* was still about 800km from Fremantle, or about 20 hours away. She was not going to arrive in the early hours of 20 November, in fact it is unlikely that she could have arrived before the next afternoon. Had she been delayed by having two men fall over board near Christmas Island and having to stop and look for them in the dark?

Unless Burnett was in the habit of sending his sea plane aloft to scout ahead of him, he was never going to know what was over the horizon, and there was therefore little likelihood of any deviation from his course. The Navy must have known (or could have readily confirmed) that *Sydney* had left the Sunda Strait on time, because *Zealandia* had already arrived safely in Singapore.

Imagine the panic then, when mysterious bits of messages started coming in that all was not well, and *Sydney* failed to show up at the appointed time.

With two Commonwealth Government Departments, RAN and RAAF, with little or no co-ordination, and the hierarchy all on the wrong side of the continent, it was going to take days to organise a search even if/when the Navy decided that a search was necessary.

In fact it took four days before anything was done and by then it was far too late. The normal bureaucratic reaction would be to sanitize the files in the following days so that any knowledge of a problem prior to 24<sup>th</sup> November could be denied. This was easy, because most of the correspondence had been conducted on the telephone. Of course there was still the question of why *Sydney* was not asked to report when she failed to show up, but that was potentially less damaging. As long as there was no inquiry with witnesses called, all would be well.

However in any bureaucracy there are always a few misfits who want to accomplish something. It would not be surprising therefore, if after three days of dithering, by which time every one in Perth knew that *Sydney* was overdue, someone at RAAF Pearce, acting on his own initiative, thought he would adjust the days flying roster to send one aircraft down to the south where there had been some suspicious activity around 16/17 October.

Group Captain Bourne followed the shipping lane south from Rottnest Island 15nm offshore to 34° 30' south, (Cape Leeuwin / Point Marius), then west 40nm and back along a parallel track, so that he searched a band of sea about 75nm wide. Visibility from the aircraft would be about 20nm on each side.

There was no reason to expect that the *Sydney* would be found south of Fremantle, but perhaps the flight coordinator was hoping to find something else. Since the flight was a routine exercise with a small aircraft, it did not form part of the official air search, but Group Captain Bourne would quite naturally associate this flight with the search for *Sydney* in later years.

The official search which started the next day with Hudson bombers extended only 300nm from Rottnest. *Sydney* should have been within 300nm of Fremantle by 19/20 November, but she wasn't because she was running late. Apparently, even four days later, no one thought to send a Hudson (with a return range of 850nm) out along her presumed track from the Sunda Strait.

Yours sincerely

  
Howard Patterson