

Summons to appear at HMAS SYDNEY II Commission of Inquiry --- questions?

Questions arising from submissions:

1. How did you become involved in the Inquiry?

Answer: At about the time of my retirement from the RAN in 1987 a retired RAN signals communications officer CDRE Ian Nicholson CBE asked me to assist with research in UK and Germany into some communication's matters that appeared to him not to have been investigated satisfactorily with SYDNEY II's loss. This led to my further research interest.

2. Your submission to the Commission dated 28 May 2008 indicated a comprehensive communications and SIGINT sub-specialist review was not conducted following SYDNEY II's loss? What could such a review have examined?

Answer: The interrogation of German POW's did not include a signals specialist officer. Limited responses seem to have been given to the very basic questions asked by interrogators. Command and Control of KORMORAN's raider activities would have involved a wide range of communications and signal intelligence issues. It is surprising that a more intense examination of signal matters that arose involving both ships was not followed up THEN and AFTER the war when more communications information became available. For example:

- a. Were the communications instructions in NCSI 371, The Fleet Signal Book, The Conduct of the Fleet, The Prize Manual, Fighting Instructions, perhaps Fighting Experience, and RACAS' tactical instructions for apprehending raiders and blockade runners, sufficiently comprehensive and unambiguous for the Australian Station?
- b. Were there any conflicts with the above and the plethora of Admiralty messages then relating to ship identification, anti-scuttling tactics, and collection of classified material to ensure a warship's Command Team was fully prepared against communications and other ruses employed by an enemy unit?
- c. What was the standard of communications and communications training in SYDNEY II at the time of the action? What had the RACAS Flag Lieutenant LCDR (S+) J.L.Bath, his assistant Warrant Telegraphist J.C.Smart and the ship's Signal Boatswain C.H.Nicholls to say about communications standards in SYDNEY II when RACAS and they left the ship and SYDNEY II reverted to convoy escort duties in 1941?

What did they know was prescribed in the Bridge File that SYDNEY II presumably had that contained procedures for apprehending or investigating unknown merchant ships?

- a. Which key communications personnel had been replaced at the time they left the ship and subsequently prior to SYDNEY II's loss?
- d. In the absence of a signals sub-specialist officer which Command Team officers would have handled communications and SIGINT matters? What was their signals competency? Was SYDNEY II's outfit of classified and signal intelligence publications current?
- e. What would the likely effects be on radio communications from direct hits in the bridge and foremast areas of SYDNEY II? Could emergency transmissions have been possible from the Main Wireless Office under the mainmast when low power circuits were inoperable following the torpedo damage? When was an H/F voice capability to have been fitted?
- f. When it was learned that SYDNEY II closed to about 1 mile (in reality probably 900 metres) from KORMORAN was this manoeuvre compared with Mediterranean standard operating procedures and the Fleet Code of Conduct to determine whether this stationing manoeuvre could have been conditioned by prior experience of SYDNEY II's bridge officers with Mediterranean Fleet formations and standard manoeuvring distances when stationing on friendly units?

- g. What were the communication's ruses employed by KORMORAN? What use was made of relative wind over the deck to obscure KORMORAN's flag hoist from being read until SYDNEY II had closed? Is it probable the QQQQ ruse enemy report signal by KORMORAN, that would have been intercepted by SYDNEY II, was the first occasion that SYDNEY II read clearly the name of the ship it believed it was closing and then located it's presumed secret war call sign from the master code/decode book? Was this a new ruse tactic?
- h. Could the merchant ship secret war call sign have been compromised by the loss of HMS HARDY at Narvik in 1940 or other allied warship, or captured merchant ships carrying classified mail? Were there 'in area' call sign amendments signalled or published prior to November 1941 that included STRAAT MALAKKA that could have been compromised?
- i. What were the SIGINT roles of KORMORAN's large radio staff?
- j. What SIGINT information may have been revealed in LEUT von Malapert's full diary confiscated on his repatriation to Germany in 1947 rather than merely 8 pages related to the escape from KORMORAN?
- k. What could have been resurrected for SIGINT review from Dr. John Chapman's 1980's translations of the German Naval Attaché, Tokyo's war diary, especially: the many references to the 'HIMALAYA' code book for blockade runners and probably armed raiders, the use of British 'secret war call signs for 1940' referring to the call sign of the British ship FIRM that is recorded in "The Navy List" as a civilian port support vessel manned by civilian operators, the use of Allied communications procedures for QQQQ etc. messages for alerting the German HQ if their vessels were apprehended, the compromise of some classified Dutch shipping (call sign?) details.
- l. Whether some auxiliary vessels and merchant ships that could be engaged to carry military cargoes, such as STRAAT MALAKKA, may have had their secret war call signs listed in both warship and merchant ship secret war call sign publications?
- m. Which personnel in KORMORAN had been sworn by the Hitlerian Oath and which bridge staff were so sworn on security matters?
- n. Whether there could have been collusion on signals matters between KORMORAN's Radio Officer and at least one other officer interviewed by the Commission before the former's demise?
- o. What were the Admiralty Merchant Ship communications (AMSI) and Mership Instructions compromised before November 1941 and promulgated to all German raiders and blockade runners? What SIGINT and ruse training was given to selected raider officers?
- p. What was the full text of the signal initiated by KORMORAN to the High Command when it first changed its disguise to the STRAAT MALAKKA?
- q. What communications material concerning raider operations has been located at the end of WWII from German records, for example, in Tambach, Potsdam, Kiel/Hamburg and Freiburg?
- r. How realistic are allegations that KORMORAN hoisted a white surrender flag to deceive SYDNEY II into a close approach observing that (to my knowledge) a white flag is not included in any warship or international merchant ship flag outfit? As a permanent item it would probably have had to be surreptitiously sewn onboard, fitted with flag hoisting clips and kept secretly from bridge staff for major morale reasons throughout the ship? Of course a white sheet could be bundled on a signal halyard and hoisted either as a decoy or to purport to negotiate surrender.
- s. What were or could have been the reasons for twice selecting STRAAT MALAKKA as the raider disguise?
Communications

3. A submission to the Commission states that the KORMORAN's Commanding Officer was heard on a telephone circuit asking the radio officer whether they had STRAAT MALAKKA's secret war call sign and that as they did not that they had no option but to decamouflage and open fire at point blank range. Isn't this statement conclusive that Allied merchant ship secret war call signs were not compromised?

Answer: No. This was a highly trained and efficient raider with a clever Commanding Officer. The ship had been at sea for almost a year on active operations. Evidence confirms that Detmers rehearsed his tactics consistently with his ship's company and had developed his ruses secretly should he meet up with an Allied warship. He had a large radio team capable of building up SIGINT shipping plots and collating ship call signs, and copying Allied H/F area warship ship-shore and broadcast circuits together with merchant ship H/F and M/F networks. Detmers was regularly updated by other raider and support vessel meetings at sea. Enigma communications provided impressive machine cipher capability. Compromise of the known secret war call sign systems would have provided an invaluable ruse for ships caught 'in extremis'.

There are statements that KORMORAN did not use her Varta signal lamp with SYDNEY II. However when interrogated as to what were her voyage particulars her alleged reply would have exceeded the flag hoist capacity on her stay or yardarms so she would have had to respond by signal lamp which is confirmed in one statement. A merchant ship was unlikely to have the same portfolio of pennants as a warship for repeating alphabetical letters or numerals. Thus to avoid 'giving herself away' she would have used her signal lamp as a back up. The very possible use of her signal lamp by Yeoman Ahlbach to deter SYDNEY as she showed no sign of ceasing the chase or to confuse her with STRAAT MALAKKA's briefly repeated international call sign and draw her closer would be another typical ploy.

Curiously if KORMORAN used the interrogative pennant as a 'not understood' response to all signals including an order to stop, but briefly flashed its international call sign --- PKQI PKQI --- as part of a ruse of deliberately badly directed and operated morse to entice SYDNEY II to approach more closely, whether or not she also had STRAAT MALAKKA's secret war call sign, the correct response IP to the call sign challenge may have been spotted by SYDNEY II's signalman inside the poorly repeated international call sign! Reported to the cruiser's bridge an event such as this could have contributed to a relaxation of the approach rules and resulted in a close approach in a manner similar to taking station on a friendly unit. That SYDNEY II appeared to have relaxed from full action stations indicates that a prior compelling event occurred during the chase to convince the command team the merchant ship was harmless! The response "coming from Batavia, going to Lorenzo Marques" when in a geographic position of about 800 km from Fremantle is unconvincing and would have immediately aroused further suspicions on SYDNEY II's bridge with the challenge then being signalled or re-signalled.

At this dramatic moment at close range in a warship encounter with or without the compromised procedure of an Allied merchant ship secret war call sign challenge it does not seem credible that Detmers would calmly ask of his radio officer "Do we have our disguise's secret call sign?" knowing full well that all Allied shipping had secret call signs and the need for having one or a false substitute in his ruse armoury would have been a compelling and ultimate 'in extremis' ruse. Having drawn SYDNEY II into a position where she had lost gun advantage, was vulnerable to underwater torpedo attack (why else would such a secretive weapon system exist but for covert 'in extremis use?'), I would suggest it less fanciful that Detmers could have been more likely to say to his action bridge staff "The cruiser is now so vulnerable there is no need to disclose anything (we have compromised). We have the initiative but cannot escape increasing suspicion. This is it! Decamouflage and engage the cruiser with all weapon systems!"

Equally it does not seem credible that the mine warfare officer on the signal platform, whilst being engaged in passing range and bearing information to weapon positions, would be in a position to disregard his prime action task and select and listen in to Detmer's tense conversation with his action officer of the watch, on a split system intercom and hear incredibly clearly, and recall precisely after 67 years, the bridge discussion! Rather this specific remark could be a reconstruction from collusion between officers in the POW camp and subsequently, even years after their repatriation!

Likewise the comment by the same witness in his statement that KORMORAN never used radio jamming and H/F ship/shore transmissions is discredited as both were used extensively!

4. Regarding the white flag theory is this a feasible ruse?

Answer: Considered unlikely as it is not a flag in conventional flag outfits as remarked earlier. Allusions to its use could have been followed up by Australian authorities. It is not known whether these allusions were attributed to contact with KORMORAN's bridge staff or communications sailors. That Detmers appeared to have had some feelings of guilt about his tactics and that significant differences appear in his book between German and English versions suggests he may have harboured a misunderstanding of the British rule of law alongside then existing German law as to establishing guilt. Furthermore if such an event did occur it would be fanciful to believe SYDNEY II would not have immediately gone to full action stations. However feigning surrender of enemy character for military advantage and then commencing an action under a national flag may lead to accusations of perfidy. Nevertheless it transpires that another German ship is recorded as using white material as a surrender flag.

5. Do you believe there may have been something troubling the Admiralty with instructions to ships identifying unknown shipping?

Answer: It is curious that staff considerations in Admiralty Divisions pre-1942 appear to have been excised from the UK PRO London files. Therefore the contentious confusion between advice and instruction following the earlier loss or near loss of three cruisers remains unclear.

Nevertheless palpable comments in files leading to amended CAFO's and other instructions including The Prize Manual after 1941 reveal a number of issues worrying cruiser Commanding Officers. What is evident is that in 1941 there was an expectation that every effort would be made by Commanding Officers, when apprehending or commencing a chase of suspected or unknown but possible enemy shipping, to prevent these vessels scuttling and to obtain as much classified material from them as possible if found to be enemy vessels. The danger associated with these situations does not appear to have been fully evaluated and resolved until 1943. Furthermore debate as to the possible compromise of secret war call signs seems to have been carefully excised from the files and the CHECKMATE system was only refined after SYDNEY II's loss.

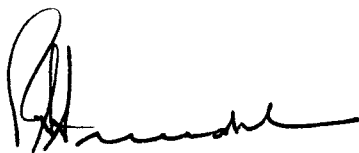
6. Is there any evidence the merchant ship secret war call sign S.P. could have been compromised?

Answer: As at October 2008 I was unable to locate a copy of the above Signal Publication, but a copy may reside in one of the many US or Canadian archives. It would be invaluable to locate a copy to establish when STRAAT MALAKKA appeared in the S.P. and whether the amendment pages reveal any local or area amendments were inserted. Until it can be authoratively confirmed that no compromise of this S.P. occurred with warship losses in enemy shallow waters (such as Flotilla Leader HMS HARDY at Narvik in 1940) or from captured merchant ship classified material vaults it is likely a suspicion will remain that a compromise of STRAAT MALAKKA's secret war call sign may be associated with SYDNEY II's decision to close a vessel believed to be friendly and harmless. However individual call signs could have been compromised by transmitter, operator or traffic analysis processes or other physical security lapses.

7. Have you any comments on KORMORAN's communications ruses?

Answer: The following communications ruses appear to have been cleverly prepared and rehearsed if apprehended by an Allied warship:

- a. On sighting SYDNEY II KORMORAN turned radically away thus conforming to compromised Admiralty instructions.
- b. KORMORAN selected a course where relative wind over the deck effectively masked her flag hoist from being read beyond about 3 to 4 miles from SYDNEY II. The cruiser had to close.
- c. To feign being unable to understand any signal from SYDNEY II, including an expected direction to stop, KORMORAN continually hoisted the interrogative pennant at the dip and to fumble flags as a ruse. Then whether or not KORMORAN possessed STRAAT MALAKKA's secret war call sign a brief and deliberately poor transmission of her disguise's international call sign could only have encouraged SYDNEY II's continued approach. If SYDNEY II had signalled a challenge after monitoring KORMORAN's QQQQ signal on the international M/F distress frequency this may have been the first occasion the presumed merchant ship's Dutch name was read clearly. Then the latter ploy of signalling her disguise's international call sign may have resulted in SYDNEY II misreading the correct reply to her challenge inside the poorly repeated international call sign --- IP, i.e., PKQI PKQI.
- d. KORMORAN's QQQQ signal may have further deceived SYDNEY II.
- e. KORMORAN's QQQQ signal on the standard M/F international distress frequency confirms the AMSI instructions had also been compromised as described in Dr.J.Chapman's translations of the Naval Attaché Tokyo's War Diary. If German Navy Command had signalled for its blockade runners to use a unique call sign formula, if apprehended, in their compromised Allied emergency ruse message to alert the German High Command it does not appear credible that its raiders, on which so much depended to disrupt Allied command of the seas, would not have the same 'in extremis' ruse communication instructions! A comprehensive examination of the 'HIMALAYA' signal instructions ought to have been undertaken after WWII.
- f. Receipt of the uncompromised secret or believed secret war call sign, by SYDNEY II would have provided evidence the vessel in the chase was friendly and harmless.



Richard Arundel

19 January 2009