

11 The government response to the loss of HMAS SYDNEY

11.1 The government's response to the loss of HMAS SYDNEY caused some disquiet and controversy during the remainder of World War 2 and shortly thereafter. The disquiet arose because of the time the government took to announce the loss of SYDNEY with no survivors and to inform relatives of SYDNEY's crew and because of the government's decision not to publish a full account of what was known about the fate of SYDNEY but instead to restrict access to information and documents in government control.

It is important to record the response of government and to expose the factors considered by the government in determining what action it should take once it became aware of the loss of SYDNEY.

11.2 Two principal matters weighed on government. The first was the need to advise crew members' relatives as soon as possible. The second was the need to maintain wartime security and to deny the enemy information that was then regarded as valuable. Strict censorship laws were enforced in Australia, restricting the print and broadcast media in what they could publish. In determining what information could be published, consideration was given not merely to Australian interests but also to the interests of the Allies in the war effort. Although not specifically mentioned in the documentation, Australian morale was no doubt also a factor. Views differed as to the weight to be given to the competing interests of notifying relatives and denying valuable information to the enemy.

11.3 When considering the relevant documents, it is important to understand the governmental structure. The War Cabinet had been formed on 26 September 1939, under the prime ministership of the Right Hon. RG Menzies KC. On that day Cabinet resolved:

... that the War Cabinet, which should include such Ministers as the Prime Minister should direct, together with such Ministers as from time to time were co-opted, should deal with all matters in relation to the conduct of the war other than matters of major policy. Matters of major policy should be determined by the full Cabinet.¹

Later, the Chiefs of Staff Committee – comprising the chiefs of staff of the three armed services – was invited to attend the War Cabinet in an

¹ PUB.043.0001 at 0003

advisory capacity. The Secretary to the War Cabinet was Sir Frederick Shedden.

11.4 On 28 October 1940 the Advisory War Council was created pursuant to the National Security (Advisory War Council) Regulations.² The council consisted of the members of the War Cabinet together with members of the Opposition invited to join by the Prime Minister. In November 1941 the members of the War Cabinet were the Right Hon. J Curtin, Prime Minister; the Hon. FM Forde, Minister for the Army; the Hon. JB Chifley, Treasurer; the Right Hon. HV Evatt KC, Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs; the Hon. JA Beasley, Minister for Supply and Shipping; the Hon. NJO Makin, Minister for the Navy and Minister for Munitions; and the Hon. AS Drakeford, Minister for Air and Minister for Civil Aviation. In addition to those people, on the Advisory War Council were the Right Hon. RG Menzies KC, the Right Hon. AW Fadden, the Hon. PC Spender KC, the Right Hon. WM Hughes KC and the Hon. J McEwen.³

11.5 As noted in Chapter 10, on Friday 21 November the District Naval Officer Western Australia advised the Naval Board that 'SYDNEY has not yet arrived'. On Saturday 22 November DNOWA advised Navy Office that ZEALANDIA had been a day late arriving in Singapore. On Sunday 23 November at 1036H the Naval Board signalled SYDNEY, asking her to report by wireless her estimated time of arrival at Fremantle. That afternoon it was decided there would be an air search for SYDNEY, starting at 0800H on Monday 24 November.

On 24 November the Chief of Naval Staff, VADM Sir Guy Royle, provided a secret memorandum to the Minister for the Navy:

The Minister.

1. Early P.M. on 11th November H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" with s.s. "ZEALANDIA" with troops on board, sailed from Fremantle to rendezvous with H.M.S. "DURBAN" near the SUNDA STRAITS.
2. At Noon 17th November H.M.S. "DURVAN" took over "ZEALANDIA" at the rendezvous and proceeded to Singapore, where they arrived on 20th November.
3. In normal circumstances "SYDNEY" would have reached Fremantle on the return trip P.M. 21st November at the latest. Since Noon 17th November no news has been received of "SYDNEY".

² NAA.015.0001 at 0059

³ PUB.043.0001 at 0211 to 0213

4. It is unusual for a warship to break W/T silence except in an emergency. Since midnight 23rd/24th November endeavour to contact "SYDNEY" by calling on W/T has been unsuccessful.
5. Admiralty, the Commander-in-Chief, China Station, and the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station have been informed.
6. The Commander-in-Chief of the Netherlands East Indies Naval Forces has been asked to conduct an air search along "SYDNEY'S" possible line of advance from the rendezvous off Sunda Straits. R.A.A.F. Perth are conducting a search to a depth of 300 miles along "SYDNEY'S" probable track.
7. The situation at present is -
 - (1) We know that "SYDNEY" turned the "ZEALANDIA" over to "DURBAN" at Noon on 17th off Sunda Straits.
 - (2) She should have returned direct to Fremantle where she should have arrived at P.M. 21st.
 - (3) We have called her continuously by W/T since Midnight 23rd/24th.
 - (4) It is most unlikely that she has received instructions from other Naval Authorities to proceed outside Australia Station.
8. I will keep you informed of developments.⁴

The reference to no news having been received of SYDNEY 'Since Noon 17th November' in paragraph 3 is a reference to the then known fact that SYDNEY had parted from HMS DURBAN at noon on 17 November after handing over ZEALANDIA, as referred to in paragraph 2. Similarly, although SYDNEY had earlier advised that she would arrive at Fremantle 'P.M. Thursday'⁵ (20 November), paragraphs 3 and 7(2) refer to the circumstance that she should have reached Fremantle by 'P.M. 21st November at the latest'.

It is not known why the expected arrival time in Fremantle was stated as 'P.M. 21st November at the latest' rather than 'PM Thursday', unless the 24-hour change was due to the circumstance that, since ZEALANDIA was 24 hours late arriving in Singapore, SYDNEY might have been 24 hours late arriving in Fremantle. (The Naval Board had been advised by DNOWA on 22 November that ZEALANDIA had been 24 hours late arriving in Singapore.⁶) As will appear, however, this 24-hour delay was stated in a memorandum to be a possible basis for

⁴ NAA.040.0452

⁵ SPC.006.0002

⁶ SPC.004.0254 at 0257

SYDNEY arriving on 22 November rather than 21 November, not for an expected delayed arrival from 20 to 21 November.

- 11.6 The archives the Inquiry examined contain a document dated 25 November 1941, a 'most secret' report on SYDNEY. It is not known if the Naval Board provided it to government. It reads:

"SYDNEY" has been overdue on return to Fremantle from escort duty since P.M. 21st November and has not replied to instructions from Naval Board to report her E.T.A.

The British Tanker "TROCAS", bound from Palembang to Fremantle, reported at 1700 yesterday she had picked up 25 German Naval men on a raft in position 24° 06'S: 111° 40'E (about 115 miles W.N.W. of Carnarvon), and requested guards, which have been despatched from Fremantle embarked in four of H.M.A. Auxiliary vessels. Survivors stated they were from "COMORON" which had been sunk by a cruiser.

Air searches over the area are being carried out this morning to locate "SYDNEY" or boats. Two Flying Boats have been ordered to Fremantle from Port Moresby to carry out a search along "SYDNEY's" possible track tomorrow, Wednesday.

All British and Allied Merchant Vessels in the area, bound for Australia, were ordered to proceed to the above position to search for survivors. One British Ship outward bound from Fremantle has also been ordered to the area.

Dutch Cruiser "TROMP" leaves Sunda Strait this morning, Tuesday, and will proceed to Fremantle at high speed to search the probable route taken by H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY".⁷

The document bears a handwritten notation:

Latest news

1030 Tuesday 25th

Aircraft sighted lifeboat in position 40' south of where raft was picked up.

The above must be kept most secret as enemy is probably unaware of the situation.

- 11.7 A further and more complete report, dated 25 November 1941 and also headed 'MOST SECRET', was prepared and, since it appears to be an update of events since the Chief of Naval Staff's memorandum of 24 November, presumably was provided to the Minister. It reads:

⁷ NAA.040.0425

H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" sailed from Fremantle p.m. on 11th November, escorting S.S. "ZEALANDIA" with troops on board to a rendez-vous with H.M.S. "DURBAN" near the Sunda Straits.

2. "SYDNEY" was due to return to Fremantle p.m. on the 21st.
3. There was considerable doubt as to what speed would be made good by the "ZEALANDIA". Between Melbourne and Fremantle her speed had varied from 7 knots to 13 knots.
4. Information was received that "ZEALANDIA" had arrived at Singapore 24 hours late and we had every reason therefore to assume that "SYDNEY" would arrive at Fremantle 24 hours late, i.e. p.m. on the 22nd.
5. As she had not arrived then, a discussion took place the following day, 23rd, when it was decided to give her another 12 hours, i.e. until dark, before breaking W/T silence. There was nothing unusual about this procedure as with a cruiser on the trade routes there were always possibilities of her being diverted to answer Q.Q. messages.
6. As she had not arrived by dark i.e. p.m. of the 23rd, endeavour was made all that night to communicate with her by W/T, and as there was still some doubt as to whether she might have missed H.M.S. "DURBAN" at the rendezvous and proceeded on to Singapore, a signal was made to the C-in-C., China, asking for time and date of rendezvous.
7. As no communication could be established with the "SYDNEY" air searches from Perth were started at daylight on 24th along the home track; meanwhile reply was received from C-in-C., China, giving time and position of rendezvous, which definitely indicated that the "SYDNEY" was overdue.
8. C.Z.M. was then asked to search with aircraft the northern part of the route. P.M. on the 24th, two Catalinas were ordered from Port Moresby to Perth to search outwards along "SYDNEY's" possible track.
9. At 1700 on the 24th, the British Tanker "TROCAS", bound from Palembang to Fremantle reported that she had picked up 25 German naval men on a raft in a position about 115 miles W.N.W. of Carnarvon. The survivors stated they were from the "COMORON" which had been sunk by a cruiser. Four R.A.N. Auxiliary craft were despatched with armed guards on board to R.V. with "TROCAS".
10. Air searches are continuing, and all British and Allied Merchant Vessels in the area bound for Australia have been ordered to pass through the above position and to search for the survivors. One British Ship outward bound from Fremantle has also been ordered to the area. Four Auxiliary Vessels from Fremantle have been ordered to the area.

The Dutch Cruiser "TROMP" leaves Sunda Straits this morning, Tuesday, and will proceed to Fremantle at high speed to search the probable route taken by "SYDNEY".

11. 1030, Tuesday 25th, aircraft sighted a lifeboat in position 40 miles south of where the raft was picked up.⁸

Again, it is not clear why the expected late arrival in Fremantle was changed from 20 November to 21 November in this memorandum. It is probably a continuation of the error in the memorandum of 24 November.

11.8 On Tuesday 25 November the War Cabinet discussed SYDNEY. The War Cabinet Agendum No. 401-1941, a document prepared after the War Cabinet discussion, is dated 25 November 1941 and bears the signature of the Hon. NJO Makin, Minister for the Navy. It reads:

"H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" sailed from Fremantle p.m. on 11th November, escorting S.S. "ZEALANDIA" with troops on board to a rendezvous with H.M.S. "DURBAN" near the Sunda Straits.

21st p.m. "SYDNEY" was due to arrive at Fremantle.

There was considerable doubt as to what speed would be made good by the "ZEALANDIA". Between Melbourne and Fremantle her speed had varied from 7 knots to 13 knots.

21st p.m. Information was received that "ZEALANDIA" had arrived at Singapore 24 hours late and it was assumed therefore that "SYDNEY" would arrive at Fremantle 24 hours late, i.e. p.m. on the 22nd.

23rd a.m. As "SYDNEY" had not arrived p.m. 22nd, a discussion took place the following day, 23rd, when it was decided to give her another 12 hours, i.e. until dark, before breaking W/T silence. There was nothing unusual about this procedure as with a cruiser on the trade routes there are always possibilities of her being diverted to answer Q.Q. messages. There was also some doubt as to whether she might have missed H.M.S. "DURBAN" at the rendezvous and proceeded on to Singapore; a signal was made to the C-in-C., China, asking for time and date of rendezvous.

23rd p.m. As she had not arrived by dark, i.e. p.m. of the 23rd, endeavour was made all that night to communicate with her by W/T.

⁸ NAA.040.0336

24th- Daylight. As no communication could be established with the "SYDNEY", air searches from Perth were started along the home track; meanwhile a reply was received from C-in-C, China, giving time and position of rendezvous, which definitely indicated that the "SYDNEY" was overdue.

24th p.m. C.Z.M. was asked to search with aircraft the northern part of the route. Two Catalinas were ordered from Port Moresby to Perth to search outwards along "SYDNEY's" possible track.

24th 1700 The British tanker "TROCAS", bound from Palembang to Fremantle, reported that she had picked up 25 German naval men on a raft in a position about 115 miles W.N.W. of Carnarvon. The survivors stated they were from the "COMORON" which had been sunk by a cruiser.

Air searches are continuing, and all British and Allied merchant vessels in the area bound for Australia have been ordered to pass through the above position and to search for the survivors. One British Ship outward bound from Fremantle has also been ordered to the area. Four auxiliary vessels from Fremantle have been ordered to the area.

25th a.m. The Dutch Cruiser "TROMP" leaves Sunda Straits this morning, Tuesday, and will proceed to Fremantle at high speed to search the probable route taken by "SYDNEY".

25th 1030 Aircraft sighted a lifeboat in position 40 miles south of where the raft was picked up.

25th noon Aircraft reported two lifeboats on the coast north of Carnarvon.

The tanker S.S. "TROCAS" has been asked to obtain more detailed information from the survivors.⁹

This agendum explains the anticipated late arrival date of 22 November; it is, however, based on the erroneous assumption that SYDNEY's original arrival date was 21 November, when in fact it was the afternoon of 20 November.

11.9 On 25 November 1941 the Secretary of the Department of Defence Coordination advised the Prime Minister:

The Admiral has just spoken to me on the secraphone. A raft has been picked up carrying some German sailors from a raider, which they said was sunk by a cruiser. The Admiral fears that "Sydney" was also sunk by the raider.

⁹ NAA.025.0058

The Admiral is coming to Canberra by air tomorrow morning with the Chief of the Air Staff to discuss the matter and wishes to attend War Cabinet in the afternoon, leaving as soon as possible for Singapore. I said that you would do your best to meet him by such an arrangement.¹⁰

- 11.10 On 26 November a teleprinter message from the Secretary of the Naval Board was sent to the Secretary of the Department of the Navy:

Following for Admiral Sir Guy Royle, Chief of Naval Staff.

Begins. Herewith proposed Statement for Prime Minister if Government consider release at this stage imperative. It is submitted that release, while undesirable at present, should, if contemplated, be subject to sufficient delay to permit

(a) informing next of kin,

(b) arranging simultaneous release by overseas authorities.

The statement begins:-

"Information has been received by the Government from the Naval Board that H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" has been in action with an enemy vessel, which she sank by gunfire. The information was received from survivors from the enemy vessel, who were picked up some time after the action. No subsequent information has been received from or of H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY". It is known that this vessel suffered some damage in the action, but since there has as yet been no direct communication from this vessel, the Naval Board are not aware of the extent of such damage. All possible action is being taken to secure further information, and this House and the People of Australia will be kept informed of any developments. Ends.¹¹

It seems likely that the Chief of Naval Staff raised with the War Cabinet the question of announcing the loss of SYDNEY and advised against it.

- 11.11 On 26 November the War Cabinet again discussed SYDNEY. The minute reads:

Note was taken of the statement submitted by the Chief of the Naval Staff in regard to H.M.A.S. "Sydney", which had been overdue at Fremantle since 21st November.

2. The Chief of the Naval Staff outlined the substance of information that had been obtained from the survivors of the German raider "Comoron", landed at Carnarvon, W.A., which was to the effect that the "Comoron" had been sunk in an engagement with a cruiser and that the cruiser when last seen was in flames and believed sunk. A

¹⁰ NAA.019.0365

¹¹ NAA.040.0330

message from the "Trocas", which had picked up survivors from the "Comoron", stated that the engagement had taken place on 19th November and that the condition of the cruiser was not known. More detailed information was being sought from the "Trocas" and Naval Intelligence officers and interpreters were to arrive at Carnarvon to interrogate the survivors there today.

3. It was decided that the next-of-kin of the crew of the "Sydney" should be informed, the notification being to the effect that their relatives are missing due to enemy action. No public statement is to be made at present, and steps are to be taken to ensure the complete censorship of all references to the "Sydney" in the press and in broadcasts.

4. If and when it is established that the "Sydney" has been sunk, the initial announcement regarding its loss is to be in a form which does not convey any useful information to the enemy.¹²

11.12 It is apparent from both the Naval Board's message and the War Cabinet minute that both the Navy and the War Cabinet were concerned to notify next of kin of the loss of SYDNEY but to delay any announcement of the loss until more information was available and to exclude from such an announcement any information that might be useful to the enemy. No statement was made after the War Cabinet meeting of 26 November.

11.13 The formal minutes do not record what the Chief of Naval Staff said. The handwritten notes of the secretariat record the following as coming from the Chief of Naval Staff:

4 things

A raft & lifeboat at sea, 2 lifeboats on coast

What happened - out of communication for 3 days. Sunk by cruiser. If Syd sunk only if took unwise approach + raider's put two torpedoes into her - every cruiser captain know certain things - keep ahead - because may be trailed by submarine - inconceivable that this could have happened.

Message from Trocas

1. German vessel sunk by gunfire - 19 Nov

Condition cruiser not known

2. Survivors 110 70 miles north raider engagement cruiser Perth class - British ship in flames and believed sunk.

3. phone conversation from Carnarvon - engagement with 1° class cruiser their ship blew up - when last seen cruiser was on fire.

¹² NAA.040.0142

4. wireless operation inform - W/T on raider "Comoron" raider - guns 8 in + a/a new ship Incl OC 6 months - sank Greek ships - met cruiser Perth class - escort 5 ships cruiser closed - raider opened fire 1/2 mile - Comoron burning & sunk cruiser vanished burning - believed sunk.

Confirmed by aft [afternoon]. 1° class cruiser 7000 tons cruiser thought vessel belonged to convoy + approached - fired on by raider - crew.

Notes of the Chief of Naval Staff's discussion continued:

Most unlikely Syd would be escorting ships - had no orders to do so - was returning home on her own - also raiders have not 8" guns in view necessary for 8" guns - 5.9" & 6" guns most likely - Officer of Burnetts perspicacity think ship join up with his convoy in broad daylight - own interpreters arrive there but not likely to be any different.

- Trocas men may give different story - 3rd lifeboat crew possibly

at 7 miles cruiser (Syd) cd have sunk her she has 3 inch armour - but at 1/2 mile or 1 mile point blank range not as good not effective ag raider with 6 inch guns.

The Prime Minister is noted as commenting that it was all conjecture, his conclusion being 'Syd gone'. The Chief of Naval Staff is then recorded as follows:

No survivors picked up - do not know about 2 merchant vessels - re survivors - "cd make report to say Syd missing due to enemy action" but may get inform shortly (if made a mistake & got near - see torpedoes coming + sink ship before arrive - dynamos may have failed + can't send messages).

Press asked told in confidence what happened but not to publish -

cd send message to next of kin saying missing + further inform.

There is then recorded a statement by a member of the War Cabinet:

not policy to publish inform. Give gratuitous inform to enemy - & if they knew Cormoran sunk would be to their adv.

he is ag making public statement but if to be done should be done simultaneously UK + also not say anything about raider - merely to say Syd lost due enemy action.

PM - inf. next of kin, & keep censorship on press & broadcasting.

agreed.¹³

¹³ NAA.020.0026 at 0027 to 0030

- 11.14 These notes make it clear that the Chief of Naval Staff's view was that SYDNEY could only have been lost if she had made an error in approaching close to KORMORAN and that SYDNEY's advantage lay in using her guns at a distance.
- 11.15 Following the War Cabinet meeting, there was a meeting of the Advisory War Council. The minutes of that meeting record:

H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY"

Note was taken of the report of the Chief of the Naval Staff regarding H.M.A.S. "Sydney" contained in War Cabinet Agendum No. 401/1941 and Minute No. (1521).

2. The following decisions of War Cabinet were noted and endorsed:-

"It was decided that the next-of-kin of the crew of the 'Sydney' should be informed, the notification being to the effect that their relatives are missing due to enemy action. No public statement is to be made at present, and steps are to be taken to ensure the complete censorship of all references to the 'Sydney' in the press and in broadcasts.

"If and when it is established that the 'Sydney' has been sunk, the initial announcement regarding its loss is to be in a form which does not convey any useful information to the enemy."

Mr. Hughes dissented from the decision to notify the next-of-kin now, in view of the degree of publicity which would necessarily be involved and the value of the information to the enemy.¹⁴

- 11.16 On 26 November 1941 the Naval Board signalled all district Naval officers around Australia:

It is desired to take press into confidence regarding HMAS Sydney. It is therefore requested that you will arrange for editors in your city to be secretly repetition secretly advised as followbegins: HMAS Sydney sank German raider late afternoon Wednesday 19th November five hundred miles north west Fremantle. Information received from German survivors picked up subsequent to action. Known "Sydney" damaged but extent unknown as no direct communication since received from her. All possible action being taken to secure information. Meanwhile publicity most undesirable following reasons (A) Fate of "Sydney" at present is doubt (B) Fate of enemy unknown to Germany and important to keep them in ignorance (C) Undesirable advertise loss or damage to HMA ship in view Pacific situation. Press

¹⁴ NAA.018.0309

will be kept informed and cooperation requested needless to say next of kin will be advised immediately definite news received. End.¹⁵

The sending of that signal was approved by the Publicity Censorship Liaison Officer.

11.17 On 26 and 27 November the Air Board and the Naval Board respectively sent messages to relatives, advising them of the loss of next of kin.

11.18 On 27 November the Secretary of the Department of Defence Coordination forwarded to the Secretary of the Department of the Navy a copy of Minute 1521, recording the War Cabinet's discussion of HMAS SYDNEY on 26 November. He noted, 'It is presumed your Department has taken all necessary action in regard to censorship of this matter'.¹⁶

11.19 Concerned that information about SYDNEY not be published, the Naval Board signalled the CZM on 27 November as follows:

Following publicity and communications censorships in force in Australia begins: is reference to HMAS Sydney or any statements or rumours regarding alleged naval activity Australian waters ends. Request you conform.¹⁷

11.20 At 1818 on 27 November 1941 the Secretary of the Naval Board sent a memorandum to the Secretary of the Department of the Navy:

IMMEDIATE AND SECRET.

Would you please place the following before the Minister :-

"It is learned that sections of the press have requested permission to publish names of members of the crew of H.M.A.S. "Sydney" as "reported missing owing to enemy action" but without mentioning name of ship. Chief Publicity Censor has appealed to Minister for Information for guidance. If permission to publish is granted any newspaper would be entitled to publish a complete crew list of H.M.A.S. "Sydney". It is considered that this most undesirable at this juncture as informing the enemy of the loss of a large Naval vessel and giving wing to present rumour within Australia. It is urgently requested that you will strongly represent to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Information the necessity of withholding such publication and of instructing censorship accordingly."

¹⁵ NAA.040.0371

¹⁶ NAA.026.0141

¹⁷ NAA.026.0321

The matter is very urgent.¹⁸

At 2139 the Secretary of the Department of the Navy responded:

MOST IMMEDIATE.

SECRET.

Your M.2791. Minister has conferred with Prime Minister. Names of members are not (repeat not) to be published. Whole matter is subject to complete censorship until a statement is made by the Prime Minister.

ENDS.¹⁹

- 11.21 On 27 November the Naval Board signalled the Admiralty, C-in-C China, C-in-C East Indies and the New Zealand Naval Board:

My 0829Z/25 leakage of information in Australia and widespread rumour consequent on notices to next of kin may impel Australian Government to make early statement at short notice. Beneficial for public if announcement of loss could be accompanied by statement of sinking of raider. Statement will be made on following lines. Begins. Information has been received from the Naval Board that H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" has been in action with an enemy vessel which she sank by gunfire. The information was obtained from survivors from the enemy vessel who were picked up some time after the action. No subsequent communication has been received from H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" and it must be presumed that she has been lost. Ends. Request your very early views and if any compelling reasons for deferring publication any longer.²⁰

Receipt of this message is recorded in the British War Diary.²¹

- 11.22 On 27 November the Secretary of the Naval Board forwarded to the Secretary of the Department of the Navy a most secret report for the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, the Minister for the Navy and Sir Frederick Shedden:

H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" sailed from Fremantle p.m. on 11th November, escorting S.S. "ZEALANDIA" with troops on board to a rendezvous with H.M.S. "DURBAN" near the Sunda Straits.

2. "SYDNEY" was due to return to Fremantle p.m. on the 21st.

¹⁸ NAA.025.0052

¹⁹ NAA.040.0233

²⁰ NAA.074.0221

²¹ SPC.002.0196

3. There was considerable doubt as to what speed would be made good by the "ZEALANDIA". Between Melbourne and Fremantle her speed had varied from 7 knots to 13 knots.
4. Information was received that "ZEALANDIA" had arrived at Singapore 24 hours late and we had every reason therefore to assume that "SYDNEY" would arrive at Fremantle 24 hours late, i.e. pm on the 22nd.
5. As she had not arrived then, a discussion took place the following day, 23rd, when it was decided to give her another 12 hours, i.e. until dark, before breaking W/T silence. There was nothing unusual about this procedure, as with a cruiser on the trade routes there was always possibility of her being diverted to answer Q.Q. (distress) messages.
6. As she had not arrived by dark, i.e. p.m. of the 23rd, endeavour was made all that night to communicate with her by W/T, and, as there was still some doubt as to whether she might have missed H.M.S. "DURBAN" at the rendezvous and proceeded on to Singapore, a signal was made to the Commander-in-Chief, China, asking for time and date of rendezvous.
7. As no communication could be established with the "SYDNEY", air searches from Perth were started at daylight on 24th along the home track; meanwhile reply was received from Commander-in-Chief, China, giving time and position of rendezvous, which definitely indicated that the "SYDNEY" was overdue.
8. The Netherlands Naval Commander-in-Chief was then asked to search the northern part of the route with aircraft, and p.m. on the 24th two Catalinas were ordered from Port Moresby to Perth to search outwards along "SYDNEY's" possible track.
9. At 1700 on the 24th, the British Tanker "TROCAS", bound from Palembang to Fremantle, reported that she had picked up 25 German naval men on a raft in a position about 115 miles West-North-West of Carnarvon. The survivors stated they were from the "KORMORANT", which had been sunk by a cruiser. Four R.A.N. Auxiliary craft were despatched with armed guards on board to rendezvous with "TROCAS".
10. The Dutch cruiser "TROMP" was despatched from Sourabaya in support of the aerial search organised by the N.E.I. [Netherlands East Indies] Naval Commander-in-Chief. A lifeboat, at the time unidentified, was sighted by aircraft at 0707 Western Australian time on the 25th. Later in the day 2 lifeboats were sighted by aircraft on the beach 40 and 50 miles north of Carnarvon.
11. It now transpires that they contained 120 survivors from an enemy raider. They have been brought to Carnarvon and questioned, and such information as they have imparted is contradictory and some of it certainly untrue. All seem to agree, however, that "SYDNEY" was on fire when last seen.

12. Intensive air search was continued on the 26th and 27th, up to 20 aircraft being employed. Early on the 26th an armed guard was placed on board the "TROCAS" and she arrived in Fremantle at 9 o'clock on 27th November. The prisoners are being questioned, and it is hoped information from them will assist in obtaining a correct story. A summary of this questioning is expected late tonight.

13. 2 more lifeboats were sighted by aircraft some 70 miles North-North-West of Carnarvon at 7a.m. Western Australian time on the 25th. These two boats were picked up by ship "CENTAUR" and towed towards Carnarvon. It is not yet known if the occupants have been questioned.

14. An additional lifeboat has been sighted, making a total of 5, and an Auxiliary Naval Vessel is closing the position. The nationality of the occupants has not yet been established.

15. His Majesty's Transport "AQUITANIA" has passed Wilson's Promontory this afternoon en route from Singapore to Sydney, and reported to Wilson's Promontory Signal Station that she had picked up 26 Germans from a raft on the early morning of the 23rd in the same area in which it is considered the action took place. These prisoners will be interrogated on the arrival of "AQUITANIA" in Sydney.

16. Air search supported by Naval Auxiliary vessels will be continued. It is understood R.A.A.F. have ordered more Hudson aircraft from Darwin to support those already employed.²²

11.23 On 27 November 1941 at 2216 the Naval Board forwarded to the Department of the Navy, for the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Navy, the following report:

H.M.A.S. "Sydney", a modified "Leander" type cruiser, was laid down on 8th July, 1933, at the yards of Messrs. Swan Hunter, England. She was laid down as H.M.S. "Phaeton". She was purchased by the Australian Government and re-named H.M.A.S. "Sydney". Launched on 22nd September, 1934, she was completed on 24th September, 1935, and commissioned at Portsmouth on the same date. Her dimensions were: Displacement 6,830 tons; length 562 feet; beam 56 feet 8 inches; horse-power 72,000; speed 32½ knots. She mounted eight 6" guns as main armament; with secondary armament and A.A. guns. She also carried torpedo tubes. Commissioned in September, 1935, H.M.A.S. "Sydney" spent the critical months of 1935 and 1936 (when sanctions were applied against Italy) in the Mediterranean. When affairs had eased there, she proceeded to Australia, arriving in Fremantle on 2nd August, 1936. She continued on the Australian Station, and was in Fremantle when war broke out with Germany on September 3rd, 1939. It was on the 11th of November of that year that she came under the command of Captain Collins. After war duty on the Australian Station

²² NAA.026.0174

she sailed from Australia for the Mediterranean on the 22nd April, 1940, joining the Mediterranean Fleet in the following month. She remained in the Mediterranean until January of this year. During the period she was with the Mediterranean Fleet she saw much successful action. On 20th June she took part in the bombardment of Bardia following Italy's entry into the war. A week later she was in action west of Zante, when the Italian Destroyer "Espero" was sunk. She rescued a number of survivors from this vessel. H.M.A.S. "Sydney" was one of the first vessels to open fire in the Gulf of Calabria action on 9th July, when the Mediterranean Fleet chased an Italian Fleet of double its size back to port. Ten days later, on 19th July, H.M.A.S. "Sydney" in a brilliant action against two Italian cruisers each of equal gun power to her, and of superior speed, sank the "Bartolomeo Colleoni" and damaged the "Giovanni Delle Bande Nere" before the latter escaped through her superior speed. Other actions in which H.M.A.S. "Sydney" was engaged in the Mediterranean included the bombardment of Scarpanto Island, one of the Italian Dodecanese Islands, and the night attack in the Adriatic on Italian convoyed ships and destroyer escorts when the convoy was destroyed in November 1940. She sustained many air attacks. She also took part in the transport of the first allied troops to Greece. In February of this year the "Sydney" arrived back in Fremantle on her return to the Australia Station. She was given a great welcome in Sydney when she reached there on 9th March. She remained on duty on the Australia Station.

On 15th May, Captain Joseph Burnett assumed command. Her senior officers were:

Captain Joseph Burnett, R.A.N.: Captain Burnett was born in New South Wales in 1899. He entered the Royal Australian Naval College as a Cadet Midshipman in December, 1912, going to sea as a Midshipman four years later. He saw service in the last war in the Battlecruiser H.M.A.S. "Australia". He obtained wide experience in various ships of the R.A.N. and the Royal Navy. Promoted to Lieutenant Commander in 1928, he became a Commander in 1932 and Captain six years later. Captain Burnett became Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff at Navy Office, Melbourne, shortly after the outbreak of war, and held that position until he assumed command of the "Sydney" in May of this year.

Commander Edmund Wyberg Thruston, D.S.C., R.N., was Commander of the "Sydney". He came to Australia on exchange duty from the Royal Navy as Lieutenant Commander in 1935, joined "Sydney" in 1937, and was promoted to Commander in June last.

Lieutenant-Commander Michael Morgan Singer, D.S.C., R.N., was the "Sydney's" Gunnery Officer. He also was on exchange duty from the Royal Navy ... He was promoted Lieutenant-Commander in August, 1940.

Lieutenant-Commander Jack Cawston Bacon, R.N., was the Naval Air Observer on board. He was on exchange and had been in Sydney since April, 1938.

Lieutenant-Commander C.A.C. Montgomery, R.N., was the "Sydney's" Navigator, and Lieutenant Eric Elton Mayo, R.A.N., the Torpedo Officer.

Commander (E) Lionel Sydney Dalton, D.S.O., R.A.N., was the "Sydney" Senior Engineer Officer. A native of Melbourne, he joined the R.A.N. in 1916. He had extensive service in a variety of ships of the Australian Squadron, as well as in engineering establishments and ships of the Royal Navy.

Lieutenant-Commander Alexander Mackay Wilkinson, R.A.N., joined "Sydney" in July last from carrying out staff duties in Sydney. A native of Queenscliff, Victoria, he joined the R.A.N. in 1920.

Surgeon Commander John Reid Hasker, R.A.N., was the Senior Medical Officer on board. A native of Ballarat, he was educated at Geelong Grammar and Melbourne University, and joined the R.A.N. in 1928.

Paymaster-Commander Thomas Francis Maynard, R.A.N., was the Ship's Paymaster. A Victorian, he was at Geelong High School before joining the R.A.N. in 1917. He was appointed to the "Sydney" in 1937.²³

- 11.24 The Advisory War Council discussed the loss of SYDNEY on 28 November. The minutes record the following:

(A) DESCRIPTION OF ACTION.

"Kormorant", steering north, sighted from starboard bow ship steering south at about 1600H 19th. Raider altered course to the westward, bringing cruiser on to starboard quarter. Cruiser altered course to the westward, closed-rapidly, challenging with daylight lamp. Raider made no reply but opened fire when cruiser was within comparatively short range. Estimated range varies from about 1 to 5 or 6 miles. One survivor stated he could see men on deck of cruiser. First shot from raider hit cruiser's bridge and started fire. Cruiser altered course to port. Survivors stated that it appeared that he intended to ram. Passed close round stern of raider and proceeded on parallel course, gradually drawing ahead on port side of the raider. Cruiser was now heavily on fire in bridge and midships section. Raider also badly damaged and on fire in engine room area. Hit in engine room, put electrical controls out of action. Literally all electrical equipment, including fire fighting, inoperative. Action commenced at about 1730 and lasted for about one hour.

²³ NAA.025.0048

Raider abandoned ship at about 1900H, her reason that fire could not be put out, and it was certain that fire would reach ammunition stowage. Survivors stated Captain and officers were on board when they abandoned ship at about 1900. At this time cruiser was seen still heavily on fire and shortly afterwards disappeared. No violent explosion was seen or heard. They believe she was torpedoed. Three torpedoes were fired by the raider, one of which thought to have hit. Raider blew up about midnight.

(B) ARMAMENT OF RAIDER

6 15- centimetre guns.

4 2-centimetre guns A/A guns.

Machine guns not used

2 above water and 1 submarine torpedo tube besides.

One aeroplane of rods stated to have been damaged and not flown for three months, and possibly more were carried.

150/200 mines were carried, but stated that none had been laid.

(C) COMPLEMENT.

About 400.

(D) ACTIVITY.

Left Dodhamausen near Danzig December 1940. Proceeded north about to Atlantic and Indian Ocea via Cape of Good Hope. Ships sunk stated as -

"ANTONIOS"

"AFRICA STAR"

"AGNITA"

"RAFTSAN"

"BRITISH UNION"

"MAREEBA"

"BELEVIT"

"EMBIRICOS"

"NIKOKLIS"

Survivors stated that they had not sighted any land since leaving Norwegian coast. Two supply ships met with. Prisoners transferred to these. As also to "Radolite" which ship was despatched with a prize crew.

(E) Generally considered that, with few exceptions, survivors spoke the truth.

Captain's name Dettmer (Commander of destroyer prior to taking command of raider).

Teleprinter Message M.2801

"The raider captain confirms the previous reports with the addition that the action took place in latitude 26 degrees, longitude 111 degrees. He states that 'Sydney's' two torpedoes missed. The raider's torpedo hit forward and the salvo hit 'Sydney' amidships. 'Sydney' was badly on fire. The action began at 1600 on the 19th November and was broken off at 1830. The raider was struck in the engine room and was on fire. H.M.A.S. 'Sydney' was last seen turning behind a smoke screen, turning 153 degrees 5 minutes from the raider and steering south at about 5 knots. The raider had 23 killed. The remainder of a crew of 400 in boats and rafts experienced bad weather."

2. The Prime Minister said that no public statement would be made until the Naval authorities indicated that it was opportune for this to be done.²⁴

11.25 This description of the action, the details of KORMORAN and the statement that with few exceptions survivors spoke the truth, as recorded in the minutes on 28 November, were in terms identical to those in a summary provided to the Governor-General, the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Navy on 27 November.²⁵

11.26 At 2305 on 28 November the Naval Board advised the Department of the Navy, for transmission to the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, the Minister for the Navy and Sir Frederick Shedden, of the results of the search for HMAS SYDNEY:

During today, extensive searches by sea and air have been carried out in the area where it is assumed the action took place.

2. The result of the air searches has been negative.

3. In the sea search, H.M.A.S. "WYRALLAH" today, in position 160 miles North West of Carnarvon, picked up the following:-

(a) 1 Foreign Life Belt.

(b) 2 Carley floats (Nationality being investigated).

(c) 1 R.A.N. Lifebelt.

4. Further searches by sea and air being carried out 29th November.²⁶

²⁴ NAA.018.0307

²⁵ NAA.026.0162

²⁶ NAA.026.0127

11.27 On 28 November 1941 Admiralty responded to the earlier cable with suggested amendments to the proposed public statement.²⁷ The Department of the Navy proposed that the statement be issued at 2100 on Sunday 30 November:

... for publication Australian morning press only Monday, 1st December. Casualty lists cannot reach Western Australia earlier than Sunday evening. Overseas release and lifting Australian broadcasting and communications censorship ban 48 hours after press release.²⁸

Censorship was regarded as so important that on 28 November the Prime Minister sent to a publisher in Perth a telegram:

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL ADMIRALTY AND NAVY INSIST NO
RELEASE UNTIL THEY AUTHORISE stop THIS IS FOR VITAL
STRATEGIC REASONS

CURTIN.²⁹

11.28 There was also concern about maintaining good relations with the press. On 28 November the Naval Officer Commanding (Sydney) signalled the Naval Board:

SECRET

Your 0428/26 consider essential acquaint editors further information now available under existing pledge secrecy. Editors aware Naval Boards promise that they will be kept informed. Failure to adhere to promise may have deplorable effect future cooperation.³⁰

11.29 On 28 November the Secretary of the Department of the Navy recorded a minute received from the Prime Minister:

The Prime Minister desires that Navy be requested to air mail to each State capital the complete casualty list (6 copies) for purposes of prompt release to newspapers when release is authorised. It is desired that the name and address of the officer who will be charged with the release of casualty list be notified to the Prime Minister so that he may inform the press here for them to make known to their offices.³¹

²⁷ NAA.070.0096

²⁸ NAA.025.0041

²⁹ NAA.019.0361

³⁰ NAA.070.0165

³¹ NAA.026.0132

- 11.30 On 28 November the Naval Board forwarded the following to the Prime Minister:

IMMEDIATE. SECRET.

Following for the Prime Minister. Copy to Minister for the Navy.

Following the receipt of information which throws more definite light on the fact of H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY", it is suggested that if and when a statement is issued, it should be in the following amended form :-

Begins:

"Information has been received from the Naval Board that H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" has been in action with an enemy vessel which she sank by gunfire. The information was received from survivors from the enemy vessel, who were picked up some time after the action. No subsequent communication has been received from H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" and the Government regrets to say that it must be presumed that she has been lost. The next of kin, to whom the Government and the Naval Board extend the deepest sympathy, were informed on Wednesday. For strategical reasons, it was not desirable to publish information earlier than now. The Government and the Naval Board had, however, kept the press informed of developments as information was received, and are sensible of the co-operation of the press in withholding publication. While regretting the loss of a fine ship and her gallant complement, the people of Australia will be proud that she and they upheld the traditions of the Royal Australian Navy, and completed a glorious career in successful action against the enemy." Ends.

For the purpose of keeping information from the enemy as long as possible, it is suggested that the above, when released, be for press only, no broadcast. It is also suggested that no outward communications be allowed of the news from Australia, and that release overseas be not made until 48 hours after press release in Australia.³²

- 11.31 The Prime Minister agreed with the restrictions suggested in the final paragraph of the message. Mr Major, Secretary of the Department of Defence Coordination, advised the Assistant Secretary, Navy, 'Your M.2808. Prime Minister agrees with restrictions in Paragraph 2 and suggests you inform Chief Censor. He also desires four copies of Casualty List be forwarded to him in Canberra'.³³
- 11.32 Although dated 29 November 1941, a Department of the Navy minute from the Publicity Censorship Liaison Officer was approved by the Chief of Naval Staff on 27 November. It read:

³² NAA.025.0042

³³ NAA.026.0133

It is proposed that an amended statement for release be forwarded to the Prime Minister in the terms of the attached:

2. In order to deny information to the enemy for as long as possible, it is submitted that release, when made, should be to Press only in Australia. Release overseas could then be delayed for a further forty-eight (48) hours.
3. This would necessitate:-
 - (a) Censorship ban on broadcasting to remain for 48 hours subsequent to Press release.
 - (b) Censorship ban on communications to remain for 48 hours subsequent to Press release.
 - (c) Overseas release time, for Press and Broadcasting, being delayed 48 hours subsequent to Australian release.³⁴

11.33 On 29 November 1941 the Naval Board advised the Admiralty, C-in-C China, C-in-C East Indies and the New Zealand Naval Board in the following terms:

SECRET.

Your 0421Z/28 Australian Government intend release Australian Press only for publication A.M. December 1st. Intend maintain censorship on broadcasting and external communications for 48 hours subsequent to release here. Request no release outside Australia before 1100Z 2nd December. Full text of intended Australian release as my 1519Z/27 amended as your 0421Z/28 and with following addition begins the next of kin to whom the Government and the naval Board extend deepest sympathy were informed on Wednesday. For strategical reasons it was not desirable to publish information earlier than now. Part 1 of my 0305Z/29 Part 2 follows

From N.B. Part 2 & Final of my 0305Z/29.

The Government and the Naval Board had however kept the press informed of developments as information was received and are sensible of the cooperation of the press in withholding publication. While regretting the loss of a fine ship and her gallant complement the people of Australia will be proud that she and they upheld the traditions of the Royal Australian Navy and completed a glorious career in successful action against the enemy. Ends.³⁵

³⁴ NAA.026.0139

³⁵ NAA.026.0107

- 11.34 Later on 29 November the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister advised the Department of the Navy as follows:

IMMEDIATE AND URGENT.

Reference Message No. M.2820. Prime Minister has conferred with Minister for the Navy and it has been decided that the Prime Minister will release statement to press in Canberra at 9 p.m. on Sunday, 30th. Press will be informed that Casualty Lists may be obtained from District Naval Officers, Brisbane, Port Adelaide, Fremantle, Hobart, and from Secretary, Naval Board, "N" Block, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, and the Commodore-in-Charge, Garden Island Sydney. Will you please ensure that authorities concerned receive instructions to release immediately after 9 p.m. E.S. time to newspaper representatives who will contact authorities.

In the case of Western Australia, it would appear to be necessary for the D.N.O. to make special arrangements to obtain delivery of lists on arrival of air mail at Perth and it is suggested that he inform daily newspapers where they may receive copies.

Please advise when four (4) copies requested to be despatched to me at Canberra will arrive and how addressed.

Re last sentence of M.2820. Presume you will notify Chief Publicity Censor, Melbourne, and Admiralty of time of release and operation of 48 hours' ban.

Ends.³⁶

- 11.35 The statement the Prime Minister issued to the press at 2100 on 30 November 1941 bore the endorsement 'NOT TO BE BROADCAST BY ANY AUSTRALIAN STATION. NOT TO BE CABLED OUTSIDE AUSTRALIA'. The statement read:

Information has been received from the Australian Naval Board that H.M.A.S. 'Sydney' has been in action with an enemy vessel which she sank by gunfire. The information was received from survivors from the enemy vessel, who were picked up some time after the action. No subsequent communication has been received from H.M.A.S. 'Sydney' and the Government regrets to say that it must be presumed that she has been lost.

The next-of-kin, to whom the Government and the Naval Board extend deepest sympathy, were informed on Wednesday, November 26.

Although this action took place some few days ago, the announcement of it was not made earlier for three reasons.

³⁶ NAA.025.0039

For strategical reasons it was not desirable to publish information earlier than now.

There was the remote, yet not impossible, eventuality of the Sydney still being afloat and of the hope that a version could be obtained from one of her personnel.

Time was taken in the very desirable direction of informing next of kin.

The Government and the Naval Board had, however, kept the Press informed of developments as information was received and are sensible of the co-operation of the Press in withholding publication.

While regretting the loss of a fine ship and her gallant complement, the people of Australia will be proud that she and they upheld the traditions of the Royal Australian Navy and completed a glorious career in successful action against the enemy.³⁷

11.36 Thus the loss of SYDNEY – which occurred late on 19 November 1941, which became the object of search on 24 November, when government was advised of her non-arrival and the inability to communicate with her, and which was accepted by government as having occurred by 26 November – was not announced to the general public until 2100 on Sunday 30 November 1941 and was not published in the press until 1 December 1941. There were three reasons for this delay:

- the need to confirm that the ship and its crew were in fact lost
- the need to arrange to inform next of kin in advance of any public announcement
- the need to deny the enemy what was regarded as strategically important information – that being the loss of KORMORAN and the loss of SYDNEY – for as long as possible.

The state of communications in November 1941 was such that, even after publication in Australia, withholding of the right to broadcast in Australia for 48 hours was regarded as an important tool in keeping the information from the enemy. This was because it was thought that radio broadcasts might be able to be intercepted, thus conveying the information to the enemy, but publication in the press in Australia would not make the information immediately available to the enemy.

11.37 Following the Prime Minister's statement at 2100 on Sunday 30 November 1941 and the publication of the statement in the press the following morning, the first speculation and rumours began.

³⁷ NAA.019.0343

Newspapers pressed the Prime Minister for new information about SYDNEY. They raised three questions in relation to which the Prime Minister sought advice from the Navy. At 1055 on 1 December the Prime Minister's Private Secretary wrote:

MOST IMMEDIATE AND URGENT

Afternoon papers this morning pressing Prime Minister for new information re H.M.A.S. "Sydney."

In respect of German prisoners' stories, understood to have been obtained by interviews by newspapers, Prime Minister is anxious to have Naval view as to their immediate or later release after censorship scrutiny.

Newspapers putting questions to Prime Minister and would appreciate your suggested answers to them to provide basis for new statement by Prime Minister.

Questions are -

1. Whether Navy have taken into account possibility that there were two raiders and/or supply ships and whether "Sydney's" crew could have been taken off or picked up by these vessels?
2. From the viewpoint of bringing the war close to Australia and awakening national interest in perils likely for Australia, can place and date of action be revealed?
3. What other information can be released?

Prime Minister's desire in respect of German prisoners' stories is that these, when suitably censored, should be transmitted here for general release to all newspapers. It is not desired that any paper should obtain a "scoop."

Messages of sympathy, including one from Capt. Collins in Singapore, are coming via newspaper cables. What is the opinion as to the release of these?

Prime Minister would like reply by 12.30 p.m. today at latest for lunch time interview.

ENDS.³⁸

- 11.38 The possibility of there being two raiders and of survivors from SYDNEY being on the second raider was raised at a meeting of the War Cabinet on 1 December. The notes of that meeting record the Prime Minister as raising:

³⁸ NAA.025.0031

Press anxiety for stories re Syd. 320 survivors from raider none from Syd – should not be published – whatever the criticism – also report was Kormoran [cablegram] but DW 990 of 30/11 says STEIERMARK 9,000 tons – no survivors from Syd -

Then raised was the speculation, 'Is it conceivable there are 2 raiders?'

The Minister for the Navy is noted as saying, 'First survivors said off "Kormoran". British inform says off Steiermark'. Then it is noted, 'PM asks min for Navy to clear up news all survivors of Syd may be on other raider'.³⁹

11.39 The possibility of two raiders was referred to in the formal minutes of the 1 December meeting, as was the supposed breach of the censor's restrictions on broadcasting by two radio stations. In connection with SYDNEY, the minutes read:

Reference was made to the report contained in cablegram DW.990 of 30th November that the raider with which the "Sydney" was in action was the "Steiermark". The possibility of two German raiders being present was discussed, and the Minister for the Navy said that he would consult the Naval authorities in the matter.

2. The Prime Minister stated that Stations 2UW and 3KZ had broadcast information regarding the loss of the "Sydney". This was a breach of censorship instructions imposing a ban of 48 hours on broadcasting of this news. The stations concerned had stated that the broadcast was made through an inadvertence. This, however, nullified the precautions which had been taken in the national interest. It was decided that action should be taken against both these stations for this breach.

3. The Prime Minister referred to representations made to him by the press to publish reports of interviews with German prisoners and photographs. He did not consider that any departure should be made from the restrictions at present imposed for security reasons on the publication of this information. War Cabinet agreed with this view.

4. Reference was made to requests from the Lord Mayor of Sydney and other bodies for permission to launch a public appeal for funds to replace the "Sydney". It was decided to approve of these requests on the basis that the funds raised will be available to the Commonwealth for general war purposes, which is to include the replacement of the "Sydney" if and when this is possible.⁴⁰

³⁹ NAA.020.0057 at 0068

⁴⁰ NAA.019.0063 at 0064 to 0065

11.40 The Navy's response was provided at 1315:

The Naval Board have continuously had under review the possibility of two raiders and this is the principal reason for their desire to delay as long as possible the information that one raider has been sunk from reaching the enemy. In the event of the sunken raider having a rendezvous with another raider or supply ship, the latter vessel would in due course be compelled to break W/T silence to inform somebody that she had not kept the rendezvous. If the Germans know that the rendezvous cannot be kept, they can inform the ship seeking the rendezvous what has happened. We are thus denied the opportunity of locating her by direction finding.

From the information at present available which is mostly obtained from the enemy survivors, it appears most unlikely that any of Sydney's crew have been picked up by any vessel. There is just the faint possibility that a ship passing through the area on 21/22 November may have a few survivors but it is considered that the ship would have returned to Fremantle or reported by W/T that she had them.⁴¹

The Navy had been insistent that there be no early announcement of the loss of SYDNEY because of the possibility that there was either a second raider or a supply ship it hoped it might locate should the vessel breach radio silence. It is not clear whether between 24 and 30 November the reasoning behind the desire to locate any second enemy vessel was so that the vessel might be destroyed or because of a view that the vessel might have picked up any SYDNEY survivors. It is, however, clear that by 1 December the Navy was of the view that the rescue of any survivors from SYDNEY – by any vessel, enemy or friendly – was only a 'faint possibility'.

11.41 A second rumour, which arose on 1 December 1941, was that SYDNEY had been discovered on the Western Australian coast. That came to the attention of the Prime Minister, whose Private Secretary wrote to the Navy:

SECRET

Rumours regarding H.M.A.S. "Sydney continue to be received by press representatives here from their state offices as being current in capital cities. Latest is that "Sydney" has been discovered on W.A. coast.

It is realised that Prime Minister will be advised immediately anything factual of importance re "Sydney" is to hand and foregoing is for information.

Ends.⁴²

⁴¹ NAA.019.0333

⁴² NAA.026.0044

Thus it took less than 12 hours after the Prime Minister's issuing of his initial statement for speculation about the involvement of a second vessel in the SYDNEY encounter, about the fate of SYDNEY's crew, and about the location and finding of SYDNEY to arise. The speculation continues to this day – with equal lack of foundation.

- 11.42 On 2 December 1941 the Naval Board signalled the Admiralty, C-in-C China, C-in-C East Indies and the New Zealand Naval Board:

.....SECRET.....

My 0305Z/29 Following censorship qualifies Australian release (A) no mention locality (B) no mention time of action (C) no mention prisoners landed in Australia. (D) no speculation outside bounds of official statements.⁴³

All that was permitted was the release of statements that there had been 'search by air and surface units to locate survivors'.⁴⁴

- 11.43 On 3 December the Navy recommended that the Prime Minister make the following statement:

It is recommended that the Prime Minister issue the following to afternoon papers and for broadcasting, begins:

"The Prime Minister, (Mr. Curtin) announced today that following the sifting and checking of evidence resulting from the interrogation of prisoners from the German raider "KORMORAN", it was now possible to reconstruct, to an extent, the action between that ship and H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY".

In releasing the statement, Mr. Curtin emphasized that in the absence of any information from H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY", one side of the picture only is given from direct evidence. Certain of the aspects on board H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" must remain a matter of surmise as to details. The broad canvas can, however, be taken as giving an accurate picture.

H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" was on patrol duties some three hundred miles west of Carnarvon, Western Australia, when she encountered the "KORMORAN". The initial advantage lay with the German, since she was disguised as a merchant ship, and her identity had to be established before she could be attacked. The "SYDNEY", on the other hand, was obviously a British cruiser and as such an undoubted enemy to the raider.

The encounter took place shortly before dusk. In the absence of direct evidence, it can only be assumed that some factor prevented the "SYDNEY" making use of her aircraft for reconnaissance from a

⁴³ NAA.026.0060

⁴⁴ NAA.026.0058

distance. With dusk falling, she had to close the suspect to establish identity. She did this cleared for action, and in a state of readiness.

As soon as the raider was convinced that her identity would be known, she opened fire, simultaneously with the first salvo from H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY". The raider's first salvo struck the "SYDNEY" full on the bridge, and put her at a temporary but vital disadvantage. In addition to doing grave damage to the central control, it started a fire which lasted throughout the action.

H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" closed the range immediately, and fought fiercely, probably with independent firing. She was soon on fire amidships as the result of another salvo from the raider. She had, however, meanwhile crippled the enemy by a direct hit in the engine room, and set her heavily on fire also. By this time it was dark, and the enemy ceased fire and abandoned ship, which subsequently blew up.

From their boats, the Germans watched the "SYDNEY" disappear over the horizon. She was then on fire amidships. That was the last seen of her.

Prisoners claim that a number of torpedoes were fired at the "SYDNEY". It is not known if any struck. If they did so, they may have been the cause of the ship's eventual sinking.

It is possible that the fires on board the "SYDNEY" were the cause of no boats from her having been picked up. The fires were in the midship section, where boats and Carley floats were housed. It must be assumed that these were destroyed.

There is nothing in the evidence to point to the "SYDNEY" having blown up. The last evidence of her was her disappearance, still afloat, over the horizon.

The search for her, however, has been long and wide. It has produced nothing but two empty lifebelts and one Carley float, badly damaged by gunfire. Her actual fate, in the absence of other evidence, must remain a mystery. All that we do know is that she fought gallantly, and successfully achieved her aim - the destruction of the enemy." Ends.⁴⁵

The Prime Minister duly made the statement.⁴⁶

- 11.44 The War Cabinet again discussed the loss of SYDNEY on 4 December 1941. The minutes record:

H.M.A.S. "Sydney" - Action with German Raider. (Previous reference - Minute No. (1526)). The Acting Chief of the Naval Staff reported the results of further interrogation of German prisoners ex the

⁴⁵ NAA.040.0024

⁴⁶ NAA.025.0019

"Kormoran", and read the following reconstructed account of the action :-

"The engagement took place in position 25° South 111° East on 19th November. H.M.A.S. "Sydney" on a bearing S.W. from the raider, made the first sighting at a range of 15 miles. The raider altered course from 000° to 250° and made no reply. At closer range the raider, which was flying the Dutch flag, made "Straad Malakka" by light.

"At 1650H the ships were on a parallel course, speed 15 knots. "Sydney" which was abaft the raider's beam, distant less than two miles, was at action stations and made 'Make your signal letters'. "Steirmark" immediately opened fire with guns and torpedoes, her first salvo hitting "Sydney's" bridge and starting a fire forward. "Sydney" opened fire simultaneously but her first salvo was over. Early in the action the cruiser was hit by a torpedo under A turret, resulting in A and B turrets being jammed. "Sydney's" torpedo tubes were hit by a further salvo, and a bad fire was started resulting in the destruction of her aircraft.

"The action was broken off after about half an hour, and "Sydney", burning fiercely and down by the bows, proceeded at 5 knots. The raider, which had received a vital hit, was now on fire amidships, with her engine room out of action. At about 1815H the raider's crew abandoned ship, and at midnight the vessel, which was scuttled, blew up.

"It is believed that "Sydney" sank at 2300H/19."

In regard to the possibility of a second German ship being present at the action, the Acting Chief of the Naval Staff stated that, in the light of investigations which had been made, the Naval authorities did not accept this view.

The Acting Chief of the Naval Staff referred to the embarrassing position in which we have been placed as a result of the premature disclosure by the United Kingdom authorities of the name and description of the raider which was in action with H.M.A.S. "Sydney". A rigorous censorship had been imposed in Australia and advice as to the nature of the restrictions was communicated to the United Kingdom authorities. These restrictions, however, had not been imposed on the B.B.C. and United Kingdom press and the broadcast of information by the B.B.C. on 2nd December and publication in the United Kingdom press forced the premature release to the Australian press of other material which it was desirable for the time being to withhold.

It was decided that representations should be made to the United Kingdom Government in the matter and their attention invited to previous instances of premature broadcast by the B.B.C. and to the

assurances given that measures would be given to prevent recurrences of cases of this nature.⁴⁷

Unless it is a typographical error, it is not clear why the location of the engagement was given as 25°S 111°E, rather than 26°S 111°E, as the Advisory War Cabinet had been told on 28 November, following CAPT Detmers' 27 November confirmation of the location as 26°31'S 111°E.⁴⁸ Further, this is the first account that suggests KORMORAN signalled 'by light'. There is no evidence to support that suggestion.

The account of the action recorded in the minutes is similar, but not identical, to the account signalled by the Naval Board to the Admiralty and others on 7 December 1941.⁴⁹

- 11.45 The result of the BBC's premature release of information on 2 December was the statement by the Prime Minister on 3 December, as drafted by the Navy. The BBC release was regarded as a 'premature description of action'. The Naval Board signalled the Admiralty at 1919H on 3 December:

My 0321Z/2. Admiralty's release of name and details of raider without arranging simultaneous release here much regretted. Censorship loyally observed in Australia specifically banned mention locality time prisoners or any speculation outside official statement full text of which supplied in my 1519Z/27 and 0305Z/29. B.B.C. broadcast of Admiralty's additions to that statement at 0100Z/2 seriously embarrassed Naval Board and Cabinet which had supported Board against pressure from publicity media. Press resentful prohibitions here while prohibited items broadcast by B.B.C. with Admiralty sanction. Result of break was that increased pressure from press enforced release today of full story of search and premature description of action.⁵⁰

- 11.46 On 3 December the censorship prohibitions in relation to the loss of SYDNEY were lifted.⁵¹

- 11.47 Also on 3 December, the Minister for the Navy, Mr Makin, was reported as saying:

"The time that has elapsed since H.M.A.S. Sydney disappeared makes it almost inevitable that her fate will remain a mystery," the Navy Minister (Mr Makin) said in Canberra last night. "Her disappearance is an amazing thing. Even the most experienced naval men find it difficult to explain.

⁴⁷ NAA.019.0066 at 0067 to 0068

⁴⁸ NAA.018.0307 at 0308; SPC.006.0071

⁴⁹ NAA.026.0199 at 0200

⁵⁰ SPC.007.0017

⁵¹ NAA.026.0007

The area where she disappeared has been thoroughly searched by ships and planes.

Not one body or piece of wreckage has been found. This is difficult to explain.

“Some experts believe the only solution of the mystery is that the Sydney became suddenly unbalanced by an inflow of water and slipped under in an instant.

But even if this happened it is hardly likely there would be no survivors or wreckage.

For example there would certainly be some ratings and some officers above the waterline who would have a good chance of escape.

The search by sea and air will go on until we feel the public is satisfied that everything possible has been done”.⁵²

11.48 After the Prime Minister’s statement of 3 December the executive government issued no further public statements about the loss of SYDNEY, although it did correspond with various bodies about a public appeal to fund a replacement ship. Various internal Navy reports were prepared as the interrogation of the German survivors proceeded. The culmination was a report completed in late January 1942 by FB Eldridge MA.⁵³ The report contained Mr Eldridge’s analysis of material that had by then been obtained from interrogations of KORMORAN survivors, although he himself did not take part in the interrogations. He expressed no conclusions about the cause of the loss of SYDNEY or the reason for there being no SYDNEY survivors. A copy of the report was forwarded to the Admiralty on 12 February 1942.⁵⁴

11.49 The loss of SYDNEY was raised at an Advisory War Council meeting on 18 March 1942. The minutes record:

LOSS OF H.M.A.S. “SYDNEY”

6. In reply to an enquiry by the Prime Minister, the Chief of the Naval Staff said that a Court of Enquiry had investigated the circumstances surrounding the loss of H.M.A.S. “Sydney”. Its conclusions were summarised by the Chief of the Naval Staff as follows :-

“The ‘Sydney’ had worked into a position approximately 1500 yards from the raider. The raider opened fire and launched two torpedoes, one of which hit the ‘Sydney’. The raider had given a wrong name and was not on the daily list. The Captain

⁵² WAM.036.0078

⁵³ SPC.002.0233

⁵⁴ NAA.010.0304

of the 'Sydney' was 24 hours late in arriving at his rendezvous and had taken a risk in getting so close to the raider. In doing so he had not followed his orders.

"Further, the Gunnery Officer of the 'Sydney' was not ready. He should have been able to fire first and get in two salvos before the raider attacked."⁵⁵

11.50 There had not been any 'Court of Enquiry'. There could not have been one because there were no compellable witnesses who could give evidence: there were no SYDNEY survivors, and the KORMORAN survivors, being prisoners of war, could not be compelled to give evidence. What the Chief of Naval Staff conveyed to the Prime Minister was the result of the Navy's inquiry. The conclusions recorded as having been advanced by the Chief of Naval Staff were the same as those that had been expressed by the Naval Board in its signal to the Admiralty, the Rear Admiral Commanding the Australian Squadron, C-in-C Eastern Fleet, CZM, C-in-C East Indies and the New Zealand Naval Board on 23 December 1941:

1. Captain of "SYDNEY" was deceived and placed himself in tactically unsound position.

...

3. The necessity of Commanding Officers to regard all ships as suspicious. (1028Z/25)

My 1030Z/23 Part 5 Final.

The necessity for being ready to open fire at a moment's notice when approaching a merchant vessel and for keeping a close watch for the dropping of screens or other devices for concealing guns.

There will usually be a delay of 20 to 25 seconds whilst the guns of the M.V. are being trained on the correct object.⁵⁶

11.51 The statements made by government in relation to the encounter between SYDNEY and KORMORAN and the loss of SYDNEY personnel were thus based on an early assessment of the German survivors' accounts. In some respects they were not a complete summary of those accounts; nor could it have been expected that they would be, having regard to the mass of material obtained from survivors. The statements did, however, capture the essential features of the battle and described the circumstances that resulted in the loss of SYDNEY and its crew, as understood when the statements were made.

⁵⁵ NAA.022.0306 at 0309

⁵⁶ NAA.010.0263 at 0263 to 0264

- 11.52 The perceived need to delay the public announcement of the loss was in part a result of the unquestioned desirability of informing next of kin before any public announcement was made. It was also a result of the proper desire not to make any statement until a reasonably clear picture of the encounter and loss was obtained. Nor was it doubted by any minister in the government, by the War Cabinet or by the Navy that there were sound strategic reasons for using censorship restrictions to limit publication so as to deny the enemy what was regarded as valuable information in a time of war. There can be no criticism of this approach.
- 11.53 In spite of the efforts of government and the censor, records the Inquiry discovered in the German archives make it clear that Germany knew of the loss of both SYDNEY and KORMORAN on 26 November 1941. German records dated 26 November record the interception of a message for the Admiralty:

Brit. Admiralty reports on 26 November that the cruiser Sidney [sic] has been overdue in Fremantle for 6 days. It is assumed she was sunk by an enemy raider. However, there are no further details. German sailors in lifeboats were seen and some of them were rescued. Addendum *Skl*: This can only refer to Ship 41 which seems to have been lost after a successful battle.⁵⁷

This information was not, however, immediately accepted by German authorities: they continued sending signals to KORMORAN until 29 November. In a situation report prepared by German authorities and dated 1 December 1941 it was accepted that both SYDNEY and KORMORAN had been sunk.

⁵⁷ BUA.007.0277.0228_E (BUA.007.0277.0228)OR TRAN.025.0001_R at 0006_R