

## 14 Empirical evidence: KORMORAN's QQQQ signals

- 14.1 Shortly before the battle began HSK KORMORAN sent two QQQQ signals.<sup>1</sup> The signals gave her location as 26°S 111°E. The facts of the sending of the signals and of the location given are significant because this confirms, in two respects, the account of the encounter and engagement given by German survivors. Importantly, distorted Q signals were received and noted by both the tug UCO and Geraldton radio *before* any German survivors had given their account of the engagement. That empirical fact is thus confirmatory of the account they later gave. It is not known when or in what circumstances it became known to South Western Area Combined Headquarters that the tug UCO and Geraldton radio had advised of their receipt of distorted signals on 19 November. It is, however, known that at 0958Z on 25 November the Naval Board signalled TROCAS:

Signal following details

- (1) Date, time and duration of action
- (2) Condition of cruiser after action.<sup>2</sup>

That signal was apparently being broadcast or repeated by Geraldton radio because at some time on 25 November 1941 the Naval Board signalled Geraldton radio: 'Your telegram re my 0158Z/25 please cease transmission reply received'.<sup>3</sup> The telegram referred to has not been located. It seems likely that SWACH conveyed the information to the Central War Room on 27 November, shortly after it had received it.

- 14.2 At 1430H to 1445H on 27 November SWACH signalled the Central War Room as follows:

Following now reported.

On 19/11 at 1003Z Tug U.C.O. in position 2645S 11320E heard faint signal QQ repeat QQ remainder unintelligible and at 1005Z QQQQ

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<sup>1</sup> A QQQQ signal was a distress message, made by W/T, used by merchant ships to alert the Admiralty to the sighting of or upon being attacked by an armed merchant ship. The regime applicable to such messages was changed in the second half of 1941. The new system required the message to be transmitted three times on 500 kilocycles (600 m), in the format QQQQ, made three times, followed by the letters DE, the the secret call sign of the transmitting merchant ship, the time of origin and the nature of the distressor attack: UKAA.016.0012 at 0016 and UKAA.011.006 and compare UKAA.010.0074 at 0075.

<sup>2</sup> NAA.040.0424

<sup>3</sup> NAA.074.0185

repeat QQQQ and unintelligible group of figures badly made possibly containing figures 110 followed by 1000 G.M.T. (H) I.C.W. note strength 526 estimated by operator within 300 miles. Geraldton radio reports that at 1005Z 19/11 they received weak message strength 2 begins unintelligible then 7C 11115E 10000 G.M.T. ends. Could not estimate distance. No Q's distinguished waited two minutes no repetition. At 1015Z 19/11 Geraldton sent out message to ships asking if anything to report but received no reply.<sup>4</sup>

It is to be noted that UCO distinguished 'QQ', but Geraldton radio did not. Further, UCO said the unintelligible group of figures possibly contained '110' followed by '1000 GMT', whereas Geraldton radio interpreted a signal as containing the figures '1115E 1000 GMT'. UCO received the signal at 1003Z, with a later repeat. Geraldton heard one signal at 1005Z, with no repetition. Ten minutes later, Geraldton sent out a message to ships but received no reply.

- 14.3 At 1518Z on 29 November the Naval Board signalled the District Naval Officer Western Australia, 'Request W/T logs for 19th November of Tug UCO and Geraldton radio and ship-shore log of Perth radio be forwarded by air'.<sup>5</sup>
- 14.4 The Inquiry was unable to locate any signal in response or the logs referred to in the signal just quoted. It is safe to assume that the logs would contain only the information set out in the signal of 27 November.
- 14.5 Neither CAPT Detmers nor any of his officers or men mentioned the sending of signals when providing to interrogators their initial accounts of the engagement. It was not until 8 December, when the two radio operators LS Linke and LS Pachmann were interrogated, that the matter arose. Both LS Linke and LS Pachmann were in hut number 30 at Harvey, and they were both interrogated on 8 December. It appears from the interrogation notes that LS Pachmann was interviewed first. He said little. The notes recorded:

Wireless operator on board ...

Did not see fight as was on opposite side of wireless room (on the bridge).

No radio communication with Cruiser.

Will not answer any questions as to the nature of his work.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> SPC.004.0027

<sup>5</sup> NAA.074.0262

<sup>6</sup> NAA.012.0081 at 0084

14.6 LS Linke was more forthcoming:

Joined "Kormoran" as wireless operator under Lieut. von Malaport.

Received and sent messages.

Sent out two Q.Q. messages (600m. 500 kc.) before beginning battle with Cruiser. No acknowledgement of message received. Fight began after 4 p.m. (3 or 4 minutes after sending out Q.Q. messages) 26 S. 111E. given as position.

He was not in regular communication with German Stations. The wave length varied from 10-60 m. according to weather and time. Wave length increased as evening came on.

The Q.Q. signal was intended to distract attention from them. Sent on 200 watt power.

No other signals sent out.

Later on the radio apparatus was out of action and no message could be sent to Germany.

For receiving they had no fixed wave length.

They received messages and news from various stations

... Never sent out S.O.S. messages to lure ships. Practice was considered too dangerous.

They gave simple Q.Q. position, G.M.T. "Straat Malakka"; message was intended to be picked up by Dutch East Indies.

They had 4 receivers and two transmitters.<sup>7</sup>

14.7 LS Pachmann received a night in the cells on 8 December.<sup>8</sup> He must therefore have been separated from LS Linke. The 9 December interrogation notes for LS Pachmann record:

Corrects his former statement - had possibility of writing home by last supply ship in September. This ship flew no flag. the two ships remained together for a week. Loading done by daylight only. Does not remember whether it was moonlight or not.

On meeting Cruiser sent two messages (Q.Q. Suspicious Ship) "Kormoran" wanted to avoid the fight. Stated also their position 111 E. 26 S. This was about 10 minutes before opening fire. Spelt out name of "Straat Malakka", but did not give the International signal - i.e. Message was "Q.Q.Q.Q. 111 E. 26 S 1100 G.M.T. "Straat Malakka"".

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<sup>7</sup> NAA.012.0081 at 0085

<sup>8</sup> NAA.012.0087\_PACHMANN

This was given twice.

Knows nothing of radio communication with plane.<sup>9</sup>

Thus each of LS Linke and LS Pachmann confirmed the sending of two Q signals shortly before the start of the battle, each confirmed that the location given was 26°S 111°E, each confirmed that the message contained the words 'STRAAT MALAKKA', and each confirmed that the signal included 'G.M.T.', LS Pachmann stating that the time given was 1100 GMT. Plainly enough, the signals both UCO and Geraldton radio received, which contain some but not all of these elements, were distorted versions of KORMORAN's QQQQ signals.

It is to be noted that in his interview with Mr David Kennedy on 12 October 1998 LS Linke said it was he who had sent the QQQQ signal<sup>10</sup>, and he assumed that CAPT Detmers must have given instructions to send the signal.<sup>11</sup>

- 14.8 CAPT Detmers did not refer to the sending of the signal in his interrogations. His dictionary account noted, however, '1700. Signal on 600 m sent: QQQ Straat Malakka. 111 E 26 S. Perth radio repeats and requests more information if necessary'.<sup>12</sup>

This was not referred to in Dr Habben's memorised account. In the FRUMEL decoded account of 1945 it was noted, '1700. Signal on 600 m. "QQQ Straat 115-1-253". Perth radio repeats, consider further advice if necessary'. In the ORONTES account it was noted, '1700 Signal on 600 m sent: QQQ Straat Malakka. 111E 26S. Perth radio repeats (and) requests more information if necessary'.

- 14.9 In his book *The Raider Kormoran* CAPT Detmers wrote:

I now hoisted the Dutch flag and to make the confusion still worse I began to use my wireless, sending out the "Q" signal: "QQQ *Straat Malakka*", and informing the world that we were being challenged by an unknown cruiser. Perth wireless station picked up my signals, acknowledged receipt and gave the "understood" sign, telling me to keep in touch.<sup>13</sup>

Neither LS Linke nor LS Pachmann mentioned any acknowledgment by 'Perth'. The accounts given by CAPT Detmers whilst in captivity and in his subsequent book were derived from consultation with others whilst in the prison camp, so it must be inferred that somebody suggested to

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<sup>9</sup> NAA.012.0087\_PACHMANN

<sup>10</sup> PTE.006.0175\_01 at 0176

<sup>11</sup> PTE.006.0175\_01 at 0178

<sup>12</sup> COI.005.0006 at 0010

<sup>13</sup> PUB.022.0001 at 0141

CAPT Detmers that some form of response had been received. It is known from the 27 November SWACH signal to the Central War Room that at 1015Z (1815H) Geraldton radio sent out a message to ships. By then, however, the battle might well have started, and, apart from CAPT Detmers' later accounts, it is not known if that message was received by KORMORAN.

- 14.10 There is thus no doubt that at about 1700 KORMORAN ship's time—that being 1000Z, or GMT, and being 1800H—KORMORAN sent and repeated a QQQQ signal giving her location as 26°S 111°E and that the signal contained the letters 'GMT' and probably the time '1000'. Further, there is no reason to doubt the evidence of LS Linke and LS Pachmann that the signal also included the words 'STRAAT MALAKKA', although those words were not able to be detected by either the tug UCO or Geraldton radio, each of which was able to detect only portions of the signals.

