

17 Does the empirical and expert evidence support the German account?

- 17.1 The discovery of the wrecks of HMAS SYDNEY and HSK KORMORAN in March 2008 and expert technical analysis of images taken of the wrecks and debris field have provided a source of empirical data against which the veracity of the account given generally by the German survivors can be measured. If their account accords with the empirical evidence, it provides a strong basis for accepting the general thrust of the German description of the engagement. The empirical evidence now available does not, and cannot, address the detail of SYDNEY's approach to KORMORAN, but it can address the account given of the battle and its aftermath. If the account of the battle and its aftermath is generally accurate, it renders more likely the accuracy of the account of the approach and signalling.
- 17.2 Chapters 8 and 9 set out the essential elements of the German account. That account has SYDNEY approaching KORMORAN from astern, signalling by lamp, with KORMORAN responding by flag. Shortly before fire was opened, KORMORAN transmitted, and repeated, a distress signal—'QQQQ 111 E 26 S 1100 GMT STRAAT MALAKKA'. Shortly after that SYDNEY had steamed up to a position parallel to and abeam on KORMORAN's starboard side, at a distance of between 1,000 and 1,500 metres. The vessels were in that approximate position when KORMORAN opened fire with her 3.7-centimetre and 20-millimetre guns, followed immediately by four 15-centimetre guns.

SYDNEY responded very soon thereafter, but her initial salvos were unsuccessful. Before KORMORAN was hit, KORMORAN's 15-centimetre guns struck SYDNEY's bridge and director control tower. Early 15-centimetre shells struck SYDNEY's catapult, destroying the aeroplane and causing severe fires. KORMORAN launched her two above-water starboard torpedoes, one of which hit SYDNEY about 20 metres from the bow, near A turret, causing the vessel to rise and dip in the water. SYDNEY's gunnery response then struck KORMORAN in the funnel, No. 1 wireless room and the engine room, disabling her and causing severe fires. With her engines disabled, KORMORAN eventually slowed to a stop. Having been torpedoed by KORMORAN, SYDNEY dropped astern and turned to port, passing astern of KORMORAN. By this time, SYDNEY had suffered serious damage on her port side, and her four 6-inch turrets were out of action. Having passed astern of KORMORAN, SYDNEY's starboard side was then

subjected to severe punishment from all of KORMORAN's port-trained guns—in particular, the 15-centimetre guns. SYDNEY then launched four torpedoes from her starboard mount, but they missed KORMORAN. Severely on fire, SYDNEY proceeded at slow speed until she disappeared from sight in the darkness, the glow from her fires being visible for some hours. KORMORAN then abandoned ship and scuttled, causing a major explosion of the mines carried in her stern. KORMORAN crew members saw no SYDNEY survivors in boats or in the water.

- 17.3 With the exception of one matter—SYDNEY's firing of four starboard torpedoes—the empirical evidence now available supports the German account.

Location

- 17.4 CAPT Detmers maintained that the engagement occurred at 26°S 111°E. His location was verified by the finding of the wreck of SYDNEY at 26°14'45"S 111°12'55"E¹ and the wreck of KORMORAN at 26°06'32"S 111°04'21"E.² The wrecks are about 12 nautical miles apart.

QQQQ signals

- 17.5 On 8 December 1941 two KORMORAN radio operators, LS Linke and LS Pachmann, stated that at about 1800H a signal 'QQQQ. 111E 26S 1100 GMT STRAAT MALAKKA'³ was sent out on the 600-metre wavelength (500 kilocycles) and repeated. Their accounts of KORMORAN's transmission were given before either knew that any such messages had been intercepted. As noted in Chapter 8, distorted versions of these signals were picked up by the tug UCO at 1803H and by Geraldton radio at 1805H. This accords with the sending of the signals from KORMORAN at about 1800H. The reporting of those signals thus confirms that aspect of the German account.

A close and parallel course

- 17.6 The German account has the initial battle being fought with the ships on a close and parallel course, about 1,000 to 1,500 metres apart. In Naval warfare terms, such a range is point blank. The severe damage suffered by SYDNEY on her port side is indicative of intense 15-centimetre shell fire from close range. Observations of the SYDNEY wreck show that SYDNEY suffered at least forty-one 15-centimetre shell

¹ FSF.010.0001 at 0037

² FSF.010.0001 at 0042

³ NAA.012.0087_PACHMANN; NAA.012.0085_LINKE

hits on the port side, 34 being to the structure of the ship, four to A turret, one to B turret, and two to the catapult. Further, the shell trajectory revealed by penetrations to the port side whaler, as depicted in Figure 12.93, shows a flat trajectory of shell fire and thus close proximity between the gun and its target. The damage suffered confirms the German account.

Turn to port

- 17.7 The German account of the battle has SYDNEY, having suffered heavy damage on her port side, falling astern after being struck by a torpedo, then turning to port, passing astern of KORMORAN and, after KORMORAN turned to port, SYDNEY's starboard was exposed to constant gun fire. According to the German account, KORMORAN's guns continued to fire on SYDNEY successfully, hitting her on many occasions.
- 17.8 It is now known that SYDNEY suffered at least forty-six 15-centimetre hits on her starboard side, 42 of which hit the structure, and one hitting X turret, one the director control tower, one the starboard torpedo mount and one the 4-inch gun locker.
- 17.9 Damage to the starboard side of SYDNEY confirms that she did pass astern of KORMORAN, KORMORAN turned to port, and as SYDNEY sailed on she was subjected to continuing heavy fire from KORMORAN's port side armaments.

Damage to the bridge, the director control tower and the high-angle control station

- 17.10 The German account was that SYDNEY's bridge and director control tower suffered severe damage early in the battle, probably resulting in the death of many officers and disrupting SYDNEY's firing. There is evidence of damage to the bridge, the director control tower and the high-angle control station in the location of the weapons hits shown in Figures 12.10, 12.11, 12.14 and 12.15. Photographs of the damage can be seen in Figures 12.87, 12.88, 12.103 and 12.104.

Fire

- 17.11 The German account was that the early damage SYDNEY suffered caused severe fires that spread about the ship, making it visible for some hours after the battle.
- 17.12 The areas affected by fire are shown in Figure 12.19. Photographs show fire damage to the entire bridge structure, across the breadth of the forecastle deck, midships below the aircraft platform, across the upper

deck, through the aft superstructure and upper deck on the port side, and to the aft superstructure on the starboard side below the aft control position.

17.13 This confirms the German account.

SYDNEY's boats

17.14 Some German survivors said they thought shell damage and fire made it unlikely that SYDNEY's boats would be usable.

17.15 This is confirmed by the observable damage to the five boats found in the debris field (see Figures 12.20 to 12.34).

The KORMORAN wreck

17.16 The German account was that KORMORAN was scuttled, the scuttling charges causing a significant explosion of the mines carried on board. Large portions of about 90 to 95 metres of the forward section of KORMORAN remain on the sea bed. The aft balance of the vessel has been subjected to an extremely large detonation, causing pieces of the debris to be scattered throughout the debris field. Consistent with the German account, there is no damage from SYDNEY's shell fire observable on the remaining forward portion of the vessel. The dispersed aft section in the debris field is consistent with the expected effect of a mass detonation of mines (see Figures 12.70, 12.81 and 12.82). This is consistent with the German account of events.

The HEROS Carley float

17.17 German survivors denied that they shot survivors in the water or in lifeboats with small-arms fire. Analysis of the damage to the Carley float recovered by HEROS shows there is no damage from bullet or small-arms fire and that the damage was caused by shattered shell fragments or spallation effects. This is consistent with the German denial of the use of small-arms fire against survivors.

Torpedoes

17.18 The observable damage to SYDNEY is consistent with the German assertion that KORMORAN fired two torpedoes from her above-water starboard mounts, one of the torpedoes striking SYDNEY about 20 metres from the bow near A turret, causing the ship to rise then fall. The observable damage confirms that aspect of the German account.

- 17.19 German survivors' accounts of torpedoes SYDNEY fired did, however, vary. Initially CAPT Detmers⁴ and CPO Jürgensen⁵ said SYDNEY fired two torpedoes from her port mounts, both of which missed KORMORAN. Six of SYDNEY's torpedoes are observable in the underwater photographs, meaning that SYDNEY fired two torpedoes. They came from the port mounts. The initial statements by CAPT Detmers and CPO Jürgensen were thus correct.
- 17.20 CAPT Detmers and many other German survivors gave evidence that SYDNEY, having turned to port and passed astern of KORMORAN, fired four torpedoes from her starboard mounts. That evidence is not correct. Three torpedoes remain in SYDNEY's starboard mount; the fourth from that mount was found in the debris field. In that respect the German account is not correct.

Conclusion

- 17.21 Apart from the account of SYDNEY firing torpedoes, the other damage observable as a result of locating the wrecks of SYDNEY and KORMORAN, photographing those wrecks and analysing the photographs confirms the general accuracy of the German account of the engagement and its aftermath. The fact that the wrecks are some 12 nautical miles apart is consistent with SYDNEY having sailed away from KORMORAN at slow speed, subsequently sinking rapidly without survivors.
- 17.22 The empirical evidence establishes the accuracy of the German account in relation to the sending of QQQQ signals, the location of the battle, the positioning of the two vessels at the time of battle, the damage SYDNEY suffered, and the aftermath of the battle. There is therefore no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the German account in relation to the approach and the signals.

⁴ NAA.096.0029_E

⁵ NAA.012.0402

