

23 Conspiracy: interception theories and cover-ups

The Montgomery theories

- 23.1 Mr Michael Montgomery advanced two interception theories:
- Commander-in-Chief China directed HMAS SYDNEY to intercept HSK KORMORAN.
 - German authorities directed KORMORAN to sink AQUITANIA. This was to be carried out in conjunction with a Japanese submarine.

He argued that evidence of the direction to SYDNEY had been covered up.

The alleged direction to SYDNEY

- 23.2 Mr Montgomery asserted that on 18 November 1941 SYDNEY 'actually received an order from C-in-C China to intercept KORMORAN'.¹ He was unable to produce evidence of any such 'order'. The only support for his assertion was 'the recent RN-published "Vessel Service History of Sydney"'.² This, he contended, 'reveals that on November 18th she actually received an order from C-in-C China to intercept Kormoran'.³
- 23.3 The *Vessel Service History* is not published by the Royal Navy, nor is it authorised by the Royal Navy. It comes from a website apparently maintained by a LtCdr G Mason RN Rtd.⁴ The website purports to set out a chronological history of SYDNEY from September 1939 to November 1941. The entries Mr Montgomery relied on are as follows:

17th [November] After relief by HM Cruiser DURBAN returned independently.

18th [November] Diverted to search for German raider KORMORAN.

19th [November] Intercepted KORMORAN 300 miles off Western Australia and closed when identity given was known to be incorrect.

¹ TRAN.018.0001_R at 0005_R; SUBM.006.0079_R at 0080_R

² SUBM.006.0079_R at 0080_R

³ SUBM.006.0079_R at 0080_R

⁴ COI.006.0050

Mr Montgomery neglected to refer to the explanatory note immediately following the entries for 18 and 19 November: 'Note: there have been a number of queries about these last two entries, but it has not been possible to identify the original source'.⁵

- 23.4 The basis for Mr Montgomery's assertion was thus a statement on an unofficial website where it was acknowledged that the original source for the statements made could not be found. That is no evidence at all. Further, the website contained demonstrable errors.⁶
- 23.5 But the absence of any signal directing SYDNEY to intercept KORMORAN did not deter Mr Montgomery. He maintained that signals to and from SYDNEY during this period '... seem to have been eliminated ...'⁷ His explanation for the absence of signals was that it was a conspiracy to hide the order directing SYDNEY to intercept KORMORAN. This is a common approach of conspiracy theorists: if the evidence to support a particular (unsubstantiated) theory does not exist, that evidence must have been 'eliminated' and there must be a 'cover-up'.
- 23.6 The signals between the Naval Board and C-in-C China concerning SYDNEY's failure to arrive in Fremantle demonstrate the fallacy of the proposition espoused by Mr Montgomery:
- On 23 November 1941 at 2333H⁸ the Naval Board signalled C-in-C China, 'Request time and position in which H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" parted company with H.M.S. "DURBAN" after handing over "ZEALANDIA"'.⁸
 - On 24 November 1941 at 1009H⁹ the Naval Board signalled C-in-C China, 'A.C.N.B. 1533Z/23. "SYDNEY" is apparently 36 hours overdue at Fremantle. Direct and "I" method have been used to communicate with her. Have you any information'.
 - On 24 November 1941 at 1251H¹⁰ C-in-C China signalled the Naval Board, 'Your 1533 23rd and your 0209 24th. 007°56' south 104°40' east at 0400 17th. No further information'.
 - On 24 November 1941 at 2247H C-in-C China signalled the Naval Board:

⁵ COI.006.0050 at 0054

⁶ TRAN.018.0001_R at 0021_R to 0022_R

⁷ TRAN.018.0001_R at 0023_R

⁸ NAA.074.0160

⁹ SPC.006.0011

¹⁰ NAA.040.0459

Following is a repetition of my 0907Z 24 and my 1115Z 24 begins. My 0451Z 24. H.M.S. DURBAN reports she could not obtain communication with H.M.A.S. SYDNEY(?) On 3835k/cs. No fault found in H.M.S. DURBAN. Ends.¹¹

Plainly, these signals represent a request by the Naval Board to C-in-C China for information about SYDNEY. C-in-C China responded that he had no information other than the time of leaving DURBAN after handing over ZEALANDIA. If C-in-C China had ordered SYDNEY to divert to intercept KORMORAN he would have said so. He did not say so because he had given no such order.

23.7 Mr Montgomery put forward three possible reasons why these signals did not refer to the order he alleges was given by C-in-C China to SYDNEY to intercept KORMORAN:

- It was a sensitive situation to acknowledge a submarine was involved.¹²
- C-in-C China was deceiving the Australian Naval Board and intentionally withholding the order directing SYDNEY to intercept KORMORAN.¹³
- It would have been of extreme concern to the Admiralty that it (through C-in-C China) was responsible for SYDNEY's loss.¹⁴

23.8 There is not a skerrick of evidence, or of logic, to support Mr Montgomery's speculation. The signals just quoted demonstrate beyond argument that C-in-C China did not direct SYDNEY to intercept KORMORAN. It is fanciful to think C-in-C China would not inform the Naval Board of such an order. The three reasons Mr Montgomery proffers as to why C-in-C China did not inform the Naval Board are absurd. I had the opportunity to read and gain an understanding of an array of materials, including numerous signals and communications between C-in-C China, the Admiralty and the Naval Board. This material exposes the relationship and the nature of the intercourse between these entities, all staffed by Royal Navy officers. The notion that C-in-C China would not inform the Naval Board of an order directing SYDNEY to engage an armed merchant raider, KORMORAN, is not supported by analysis of these communications.

¹¹ NAA.026.0435

¹² TRAN.018.0001_R at 0026_R

¹³ TRAN.018.0001_R at 0028_R

¹⁴ TRAN.018.0001_R at 0030_R

23.9 The depth of unreality to which Mr Montgomery descended in order to maintain that C-in-C China had directed SYDNEY by signal to divert to engage KORMORAN is exposed in the following exchange in examination before the Inquiry:

Q: How do you say, Mr Montgomery, that SYDNEY was directed to intercept *Kormoran*; by what method?

A: That KORMORAN's presence in the Indian Ocean was well known. We had evidence that she was being tracked by DF [direction finding] and the SYDNEY would therefore have had a pretty good idea of her position.

Q: But what was the methodology? How was SYDNEY directed to intercept the KORMORAN – by signal?

A: She would have been directed by C-in-C China.

Q: By signal?

A: Yes.

Q: So that in itself would be, on your evidence, a very sensitive signal?

A: Indeed.

Q: And if C-in-C China is prepared to direct SYDNEY by sensitive signal, why would it not be prepared to inform the Naval Board, by exactly the same method, of its direction?

A: Because C-in-C China would then have realised that she [sic] was responsible for SYDNEY's loss, which would be a matter of extreme embarrassment to her to explain to the Australian Naval Board.

Q: So do you maintain that SYDNEY's loss is directly caused by the signal by C-in-C China Station?

A: I do, yes.

Q: And, tell me, was the Naval Board or the Australian Government ever informed of that signal?

A: I don't think so, no.

Q: So this is also something, is it, that has remained covered up by Admiralty and, in effect, the British Government for nearly 70 years?

A: I believe that to be the case, yes.¹⁵

¹⁵ TRAN.018.0001_R at 0030_R to 0031_R

- 23.10 The plain alternative, that C-in-C China had *not* by signal diverted SYDNEY to engage KORMORAN—as all the signals quoted make clear—could not be countenanced by Mr Montgomery because it did not accord with his preconceptions.
- 23.11 It is pointed out in Chapter 4 that, although in November 1941 it was known that there might have been a raider off the Western Australian coast, neither the fact that KORMORAN was off the coast nor her location or movements were known to Australian or British authorities. It follows that SYDNEY could not have been directed to intercept KORMORAN.

The alleged direction to KORMORAN

- 23.12 The second interception theory advanced by Mr Montgomery was that German authorities directed KORMORAN to intercept and sink AQUITANIA.¹⁶ No evidence was advanced in support of this.
- 23.13 The Inquiry established, by searching the German military records (as recounted in Chapter 7), that German authorities gave no direction to KORMORAN to intercept and sink AQUITANIA. There is no evidence that those authorities, or KORMORAN, knew where AQUITANIA was or the proposed timing of her voyage to Australia.

Conclusion

- 23.14 There is no substance in either of Mr Montgomery's theories—that SYDNEY was directed to intercept KORMORAN, and that KORMORAN was directed to intercept AQUITANIA.

The Lander theory

- 23.15 The Inquiry received a number of submissions supporting the assertion by Mr Reginald Lander, deceased, in a statutory declaration submitted to the Parliamentary Inquiry, that the movements of a raider operating off the Western Australian coast were tracked in the days preceding the engagement between SYDNEY and KORMORAN. Mr Lander's declaration was presented to the Parliamentary Inquiry, with Mr Lander's permission, by Mr John Doohan.¹⁷
- 23.16 The substance of Mr Lander's account is as follows:
- Mr Lander joined the Department of Civil Aviation as a radio operator technician in 1940 and was stationed at Rose Bay flying

¹⁶ TRAN.018.0001_R at 0005_R to 0006_R

¹⁷ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0095 to 0097

boat base in Sydney, the base being operated by Qantas Empire Airways.¹⁸

- Mr Lander was engaged with personnel from Amalgamated Wireless Australia Pty Ltd and employees of the Department of Civil Aviation in the testing of high-frequency direction finding equipment, calibrating the equipment and testing remote control systems between Holsworthy Army Base in western Sydney and Rose Bay.¹⁹
- He had been informed by Mr John Christie, whom he described as 'Officer in Charge' 'Radio Chief' at Mascot aerodrome, that there was a German raider operating off the Western Australian coast 'outside Fremantle and moving up and down the coast, or so they thought, transmitting on a certain frequency each night ...'²⁰
- The signals from the raider were 'coming through at midnight' and Mr Lander, with others, was rostered to listen for 'this coded signal to Danzig from the raider'.²¹
- Bearings of the signal were also taken at RAAF Pearce in Western Australia. The information was passed to the Post Master General, who passed it on to the Navy or Air Force for plotting.²²
- The signal being sent by the raider was for the purpose of arranging rendezvous with supply ships and submarines: 'They were letting each other know where they were'.²³
- Interception of 'the raider's traffic was done over a period of about 8 to 10 days and every night there was something there ... This ship was followed along the coast'. This occurred until the receipt of the news of the loss of SYDNEY.²⁴
- Mr Lander was told SYDNEY was coming 'down from the north', the 'Dutch East Indies', to meet the raider and they 'couldn't believe it, that this ship that knew it was going to intercept a raider had been sunk'.²⁵

23.17 Others have promoted the Lander theory from time to time. Mr David Kennedy referred to Mr Lander's account in a submission to the

¹⁸ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

¹⁹ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

²⁰ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

²¹ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

²² PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

²³ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

²⁴ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

²⁵ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0066 and 0096

Parliamentary Inquiry.²⁶ Mr John Doohan adopted Mr Lander's account in his submission to this Inquiry.²⁷ Mr John Samuels, in his book *Somewhere Below*, referred to Singapore intercepting transmissions from a raider in the late afternoon of 17 November 1941; no source for this statement was provided.²⁸

23.18 In relation to Mr Lander's claims, the Department of Defence submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry stated:

Claims have been made, especially by Mr R Landers, that KORMORAN was being tracked via a secret HF/DF facility located in the Holsworthy area. In order to track KORMORAN by HF/DF she would be required to be regularly using her radio. There are a number of technical difficulties associated with the organisation as described in the claims, not the least being the concept of HF/DF tracking.

Mr Landers' claimed that KORMORAN was tracked using facilities at an Army base in Holsworthy, the QANTAS flying boat base in Rose Bay and the RAAF Base at Pearce, WA. Of the sites mentioned by Mr Landers neither the Defence Signals Directorate or Army are able to identify the Holsworthy site, the Rose Bay "site" was operated by a non-Defence organisation and the function of the HF/DF facilities at RAAF Pearce may also have been as an aerial navigation aid. The use of facilities at Rose Bay and Holsworthy would not provide a good enough cut to aid in obtaining a fix as they would both produce the same bearing to a target in the Indian Ocean.

The organisation, as described by Mr Landers, had a German warship being tracked by an ad hoc arrangement of Army, Air Force and civilian facilities. At the same time, there existed the Far Eastern Direction Finding Organisation (FEDO) which had been established to track warships in the Far East and Indian Ocean. The RAN HF/DF station at Jandakot, near Fremantle, was part of the FEDO and at some stage during 1940/1941 was monitoring German naval frequencies especially those used by raiders.

Whilst it is unlikely that the organisation as described by Mr Landers carried out the work he states, it is possible that these stations were involved in some form of HF/DF work. Though no station could be identified at Holsworthy, a facility known as the Australian Radio Research Station did exist in the Liverpool area. The exact functions of this facility are unknown, however, it may have been involved with experimental work in association with Rose Bay and RAAF Pearce.

²⁶ PINQ.SUBS.005.0056

²⁷ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0045

²⁸ PUB.001.0001 at 0021

The difficulties associated with HF/DF tracking can be illustrated by the tracking exercise conducted by the FEDO using HMS KENT [a warship] as a target in March 1939 ...²⁹

23.19 It is now known that the suggestion apparently made by Mr Christie to Mr Lander that 'There was a ... German raider on the West coast operating outside Fremantle and going up and down the coast, or so they thought, and was transmitting on a certain frequency each night and was making a rendezvous with Danzig radio'³⁰ and that:

Our interception of the raider's traffic was done over a period of about 8 to 10 days and every night there was something there. This ship was moving up the coast. I didn't know then that it was KORMORAN. This ship was followed along the coast for about 8 to 10 days until one day we received news that the SYDNEY had been sunk.³¹

cannot be true. If a ship was in fact being tracked, it was not KORMORAN.

That is so for at least the following reasons:

- KORMORAN's orders were to maintain radio silence, except in limited circumstances, from the moment she left her home port:

L. Communications Instructions:

1. The Communications instructions apply particularly to the auxiliary cruisers.

2. Wireless silence to be observed from the moment when the Home Port is left.

Wireless silence may be broken:

a) on contact with the enemy, or in the case of the ship's position otherwise becoming known. In this case, short messages about: Successes, position, preparations, fuel position, endurance and experiences, in as far as they have meaning [for future operations].

b) for sending short signals should wireless traffic be necessary or useful, when the position of the ship is not known to the enemy.³²

- KORMORAN obeyed those instructions. The Inquiry's searches of German Naval records show that the last signal KORMORAN sent to Germany was a short signal (*Kurzsignal*) sent on 26 October

²⁹ PINQ.SUBS.008.0066 at 0070

³⁰ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0065

³¹ PINQ.SUBS.009.0043 at 0096

³² SUBM.005.0136 at 0269

1941.³³ KORMORAN did not signal regularly at any time and certainly not for '8 to 10 days' continuously in November 1941.³⁴

- On the infrequent occasions when KORMORAN did signal, she signalled by *Kurtzsignal*. Because of its brevity, this signal rendered it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a bearing fix on the source of the signal.³⁵
- To know that the signals allegedly intercepted were being transmitted to Danzig and were to let German authorities 'know where they were' implies that the signals were understood. That could not be so because raiders transmitted using a German Navy Enigma key called 'Außerheimisch'. That Enigma key was not broken until after the end of World War 2.³⁶ As Dr Pfennigwerth (CAPT RAN Rtd), formerly a Director of Naval Intelligence, wrote:

If *Kormoran* was transmitting to another ship then the messages would have been coded, most probably in the *Ausserheimish* variant of Enigma which, my information states, was unbroken at the end of the war. However, Mr Christie stated that she was transmitting to 'Danzig Radio'. Raider transmissions to Germany were made using *Kurtzsignal* which was of extremely short duration and very difficult to detect. How the identity of the receiving station would have been known if the outgoing transmission itself was not detected is difficult to understand.³⁷

23.20 Other factors also make the Lander account highly improbable. Dr Pfennigwerth dealt with them:

Provided the appropriate arrangements were put in place, there is no technical reason why a DCA DF station in Sydney might not have cooperated with a RAAF DF station in Western Australia. However, one would have expected the RAN intercept station at Jandakot Western Australia to be part of such a network and even to have had charge of it. Moreover, Jandakot was one station in the Pacific Ocean DF Network operated by all Commonwealth navies and directed from the Far East Combined Bureau, in late 1941 located in Singapore. If there had been a raider transmission detected, then it would have been this network which was tasked to make intercepts. This does not mean that the RAAF would not have been asked to participate. Intercepts from RAAF and RAN stations were matched and plotted at an Area Combined Headquarters; I'm not sure where this was located in the Perth area in 1941. However, the absence of evidence that the Network was so tasked – despite the raider's transmissions said to be common

³³ BUA.007.2017.0319_E (BUA.007.2017.0319)

³⁴ See Chapter 7

³⁵ CORR.020.0182 at 0183

³⁶ CORR.020.0182 at 0183

³⁷ CORR.020.0182 at 0183

knowledge to the RAAF and DCA – does detract from Mr Lander’s account of events.

...

Civil radio stations were involved in the passage of military traffic, most notably that of the Coast Watchers, but I am unaware of any cooperation of civil and military DF sites that took place during the war. To task a civil site for a military intercept would have required the disclosure of information at least at a Secret level, and possibly higher. Severe restrictions were placed within the military on the dissemination of intelligence derived from radio interceptions.

... HF is notoriously prone to a number of anomalous radiation effects which affect the readability of a signal at various points on the surface of the Earth. HF transmissions off the coast of Western Australia are routinely heard on the east coast, depending on the time of day, power of the transmission and frequency selected, and it was standard procedure for RAN ships to transmit in this way to the naval communications station in Canberra. However, it would, I believe, be quite unusual for a site in Sydney ‘at midnight’ Eastern Australian Time to be receiving a transmission the same frequency as the much closer RAAF Pearce at 10 p.m. WA time, especially as the operators in *Kormoran* would have chosen a frequency that could be heard by ‘Danzig Radio’.³⁸

Conclusion

- 23.21 Experimental civilian trials of direction finding equipment might have been carried out from a combination of facilities at Rose Bay and Ingleburn in Sydney. Military installations might have been involved in the trials. It is not credible, though, that the facilities were involved in tracking a raider. If RAAF Pearce was involved in that alleged activity, it is inconceivable that both the Navy and the Central War Room were not alerted to the supposed existence of a raider that was able to be tracked for ‘8 to 10 days’.
- 23.22 In truth, there was no tracking of a raider in November 1941. The evidence is clear that military authorities did not know whether there was a raider off the Western Australian coast, nor did they know the location of any raider. Certainly KORMORAN was not so tracked: she did not send out regular signals, and she sent none after 26 October 1941.

³⁸ CORR.020.0182 at 0184