

31 Speculation: SYDNEY survivors as prisoners in Japan

31.1 In 1945 rumours that had previously circulated – that HMAS SYDNEY survivors had by some means fallen into Japanese custody and been taken to Japan as prisoners of war – were revived.¹ The matter was raised in Federal Parliament. The Minister for the Navy asked that inquiries be made in Japan by CDRE Collins, who was in Japan, having represented the Royal Australian Navy at the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay.

31.2 On 17 September 1945 the First Naval Member cabled CDRE Collins:

Personal for Commodore Collins from First Naval Member. The rumour that crew of HMAS "Sydney" may have fallen into the hands of the Japanese has been revived here.

The Minister desires that you should make such enquiries as you are able to ascertain whether Japanese can give any lead as to the fate of HMAS "Sydney" and her crew.

Request you will report result by signal.²

31.3 The matter was reported by ABC radio, causing the following signal to be sent from the Commodore Commanding the Australian Squadron to the Naval Board:

I have just learnt that the A B C announced on night 13/14 September quote Commodore Collins is making enquiries at Tokyo as to the fate of H.M.A.S. "Sydney" unquote. This untrue statement may give rise to unfounded hopes by next of kin although it is rather late suggest a denial and investigation as to origin.³

31.4 On 28 September 1945 CDRE Collins responded:

Following information obtained. My 241412 last paragraph. German Naval Attache Admiral Paul Hennyker [sic] only knows H.M.A.S. "Sydney" was sunk some hundred miles off Perth. He does not know whether ship was torpedoed but stated that subsequent Japanese broadcast that she was towed to Japan was definitely incorrect. Further no (R) no survivors picked up by any Axis vessel and none repeat none brought to Japan.

¹ SPC.004.0038; COI.004.0197

² SPC.004.0038 at 0043

³ NAA.012.0734

Japanese Navy Military Ministry have stated nothing known there but enquiries on our part are continuing. I feel however that no information is known anywhere in Japan which could support hopes that any personnel of H.M.A.S. "Sydney" are alive.⁴

31.5 On 30 September 1945 a report, apparently from General Headquarters in Japan, stated:

TO: Commander Sheppard, R.N.

1. In response to your enquiry concerning the disappearance of the H.M.A.S. Sydney in November 1941, this headquarters, through the Japanese Central Liaison Office, has checked pertinent naval records and questioned naval officials but has been unable to find any reference to the Sydney or the incident involved.

(signed) Walter S. Merwin
1st Lt
G-2, GHQ⁵

31.6 On 1 October 1945 the Chief of Naval Staff advised the Minister:

In accordance with your instructions Commodore J.A. Collins, C.B., was directed to ascertain any information regarding the fate of H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" available from Japanese sources.

2. Commodore Collins has now reported in the following terms:-

German Naval attache at Tokyo knows only that H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" was sunk some hundreds of miles off Perth. He does not know whether ship was torpedoed but stated that subsequent Japanese broadcast that she was towed to Japan was definitely incorrect.

Further, no survivors were picked up by any Axis vessel and none were brought to Japan.

The Japanese Navy Ministry have stated that nothing is known there but enquiries on our part are continuing.

Commodore Collins feels, however, that no information is known anywhere in Japan which could support hopes that any personnel of H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" are alive.⁶

31.7 On 5 October 1945 RADM Nakamura, representing the Imperial Japanese Minister for the Navy, reported to the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan:

⁴ SPC.004.0038 at 0040

⁵ NAA.012.0727

⁶ WAM.028.0137

With reference to your enquiry concerning the Sydney, Australian Cruiser, that was known to have been sunk by a German ship on the Pacific in November 1941 with all her crew missing ever since, we wish to report to you as follows: (1) We have made every available effort enquiring the matter of various offices and officials including the Third Section (Section for Intelligence) of the Naval General Staff, the Ex-Information Section for the former General Headquarters, and the Information Bureau of Prisoners of War. (2) The result is however, that there has [not] been found any suggestion except mere press news. Consequently we regret to inform you that the matter remains utterly unknown to us.⁷

31.8 On 13 October 1945 CDRE Collins signalled the Naval Board:

All possible contacts and enquiries in Japan have been made and Japanese Naval records have been inspected results are negative in every case. Refer my 281434 September. Confirmatory correspondence is being forwarded to Naval Board.⁸

31.9 On 18 October 1945 the British Naval Liaison Officer to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan signalled the Commodore Commanding the Australian Squadron:

The Loss of H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY"

1. With reference to your signal DTG 221025 and my 281140 September, the attached correspondence is forwarded for your information.

2. It is considered that no further information will become available, and that H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" was sunk with all hands.⁹

31.10 As a result of the signals quoted, on 19 October 1945 the Chief of Naval Staff advised the Minister for the Navy:

Further to my minute of the 1st October, 1945, concerning the enquiries being made by Commodore J.A. Collins, C.B., as to the fate of H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY" and her crew, I have to report that further advice has been received.

2. Commodore Collins has now reported in the following terms:-

"All possible contacts and enquiries in Japan have been made and Japanese naval records have been inspected. Results are negative in every case."¹⁰

⁷ NAA.012.0726

⁸ NAA.012.0729

⁹ NAA.012.0725

¹⁰ NAA.012.0728

Inquiries made in Japan in 1945 thus established that no survivors from SYDNEY had been taken to Japan as prisoners of war.

- 31.11 It is now established that SYDNEY sank with all hands, apart from the sailor in the Carley float found off Christmas Island. There were no survivors who could have been taken to Japan.