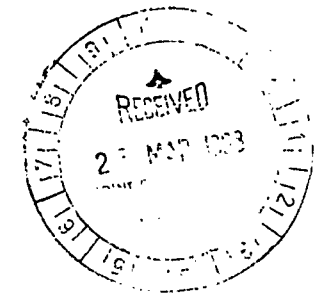


**SUBMISSION No 118**

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24 March 1998



Ms. Joanne Towner  
 Secretary  
 Defence Sub Committee  
 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade  
 Parliament House  
 Canberra ACT 2600

Set out hereunder is my submission to the Committee. Due to the fact that other submissions have covered in great detail matters pertaining to the site of the action, directions in which the ships were steaming etc., I will confine this submission to two areas with a few general comments.

Background

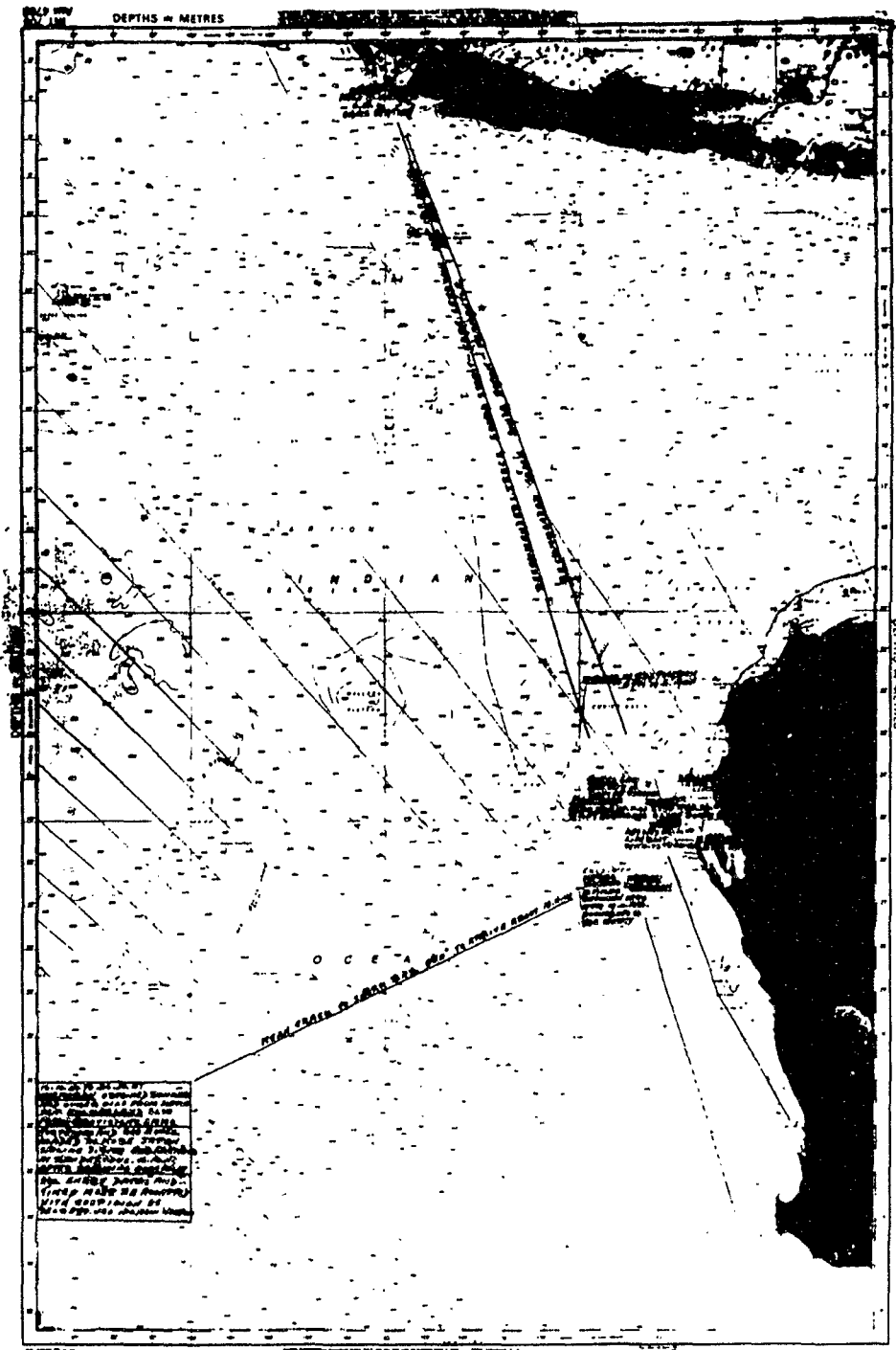
I joined H.M.A.S. Sydney in Fremantle on 2 September 1939 and served continuously in that ship until 27 October 1941. On this day I was drafted ashore to H.M.A.S. Leeuwin to await an on-draft to H.M.A.S. Cerberus to undertake a course for a commission.

I was allocated to duty in the Naval Control Service area which was based in Elders Building in Fremantle, the same building that housed the offices of the D.N.O.W.A. and all the various sections that serviced the D.N.O.

It will be seen from the above that I served on the Sydney under both Captain J.A. Collins and for a lesser period under Captain J. Burnett.

The Cover Up

Before H.M.A.S. Sydney sailed on 11 November 1941, I made arrangements to meet certain former shipmates on the ship's return to Fremantle. When the E.T.A. came and went I became concerned and began to ask questions but these were met by either silence or a brush off. Days passed. No word - only more silence.



When it was announced that ships may go from Fremantle to search for the H.M.A.S Sydney I sought and was given an audience with the D.N.O. At the meeting a civilian Intelligence Officer was also present. I asked that I be allowed to go into the search area in one of the ships on the basis that following my long service on the ship, I might more easily recognize and identify any wreckage from H.M.A.S Sydney. The civilian Intelligence Officer almost scoffed at my proposal and finally convinced the D.N.O. to reject my request. I was told to mind my own business and to get on with my work in the Naval Control Service. It soon became obvious that word had come down that I was to be given no information about H.M.A.S. Sydney. The cover up had been there since about 20 November and there was no let up.

I therefore urge the Committee to endeavour to locate any further archival material that may establish:-

- i. Who or what authority set up the cover up
- ii. The purpose of same.

#### The Hilken Raft

At the start of the war, the Commander of H.M.A.S. Sydney was Commander T.J.N. Hilken R.N., a fine officer and a very astute one.

He realized very early that the life saving complement of H.M.A.S Sydney, while sufficient in peace time, was insufficient to protect a war time complement.

To supplement the existing boats, and carley floats, he arranged for large empty food tins, which used to contain items like dehydrated foodstuffs, to be sealed up and two placed in pine boxes. Two of these boxes were joined by four pieces of pine timber and hoops of strong rope firmly fixed thereto. These "Hilken Rafts" as they were known, were secured around the upper deck in the same way as the carley floats. I do not know how many of these rafts were made but certainly at least a dozen, maybe even 20.

To sink such a raft, all four tins on each one would need to be punctured. Maybe a large general explosion could rupture every tin. Maybe no-one had a chance to launch one, and so, secured to the deck, they went to the bottom with the sinking ship. Or maybe the Hilken Rafts and the survivors hanging on to them were machine gunned in the sea and disappeared.

I find it impossible to believe that every one of those Hilken Rafts disappeared without trace unless they were destroyed by man.

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#### General

I now submit some general remarks on my own observations of Captain J. Burnett.

As seen in my background notes, I served on H.M.A.S. Sydney under Captain Burnett's command from May to October 1941.

My impressions were that Captain Burnett was a capable ship handler. He was aware that he commanded a highly skilled and well trained ship's company and was backed up by highly trained, experienced and battle hardened senior officers. He struck me as a man who would listen and take advice.

The day to day ships routine did not change. Drills went on as usual. Cruising stations remained unchanged and action station drill continued.

Against this background I make two comments.

- (1) In the circumstances alleged to be present on the day of the action, the ships company would be closed up to action stations and there would be no crew members "lining the guardrails".
- (2) I am convinced that Captain Burnett would only have taken H.M.A.S. Sydney to a close-in danger situation if somehow he had been lured to do so by some act of Kormoran.

In closing let me say that only by my reading of some of the other submissions did I become aware of the fixed under water torpedo tube said to be fitted to Kormoran. If it was so fitted, then it does create another dimension as to how H.M.A.S. Sydney was so quickly disabled.

It goes without saying, that if the final resting place of H.M.A.S. Sydney is ever located, it should be protected and honoured as a war grave.

*J.J. Ravenscroft*  
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Lieutenant Commander VRD RANR (Ret'd)

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