

## The Secret Signal Mystery – The Letters ‘IK’

Of all the mysteries surrounding the loss of *HMAS Sydney II* in 1941, the secret challenge by *Sydney* to the *Kormoran* to authenticate her identity is the probably the strangest. It is this secret callsign that must have been accepted by the *Sydney*'s captain for the *Sydney* to approach so closely, if the German story is to be believed.

There is no possibility of *Sydney* having approached so closely to the *Kormoran* unless the challenge had been issued and the correct reply given. The story of the challenge and reply comes to us from *Battle Summary No13* issued in 1942 by the British Admiralty. In their summary of the action *Actions with Disguised Raiders*, it is written that:

“They were, in fact, the second and third letters of the *Straat Malakka*'s secret call sign IIKP.”

This was followed by G. Hermon Gill in his history of the Royal Australian Navy in writing: “The crucial moment was approaching. *Sydney* made a two-flag hoist, the letters IK, which the raider could not interpret. They were in fact (and their being quoted correctly under interrogation is corroboration of the German story) the centre letters of *Straat Malakka*'s secret identification signal, which was unknown to the Germans, They made no reply.” [Gill, Vol I, p454]. The author Tom Frame in his book about the *Sydney-Kormoran* action follows the same line but with a line of caution : “There is some speculation about the manner in which *Sydney* asked *Straat Malakka* for her callsign. According to Admiralty procedures, *Sydney* should have signaled the letter ‘IK’ – the middle two letters of *Straat Malakka*'s secret callsign ‘IIKP’.” All of these authors are following the line taken by the Admiralty Battle Summary.

Wes Olson in his book about the *Sydney* is much more expansive, he has written on page 181 of *Bitter Victory*:

“What interested the interrogating officers was not the exchange of signals, but the confusion caused by one signal. Ahlback said that after the cruiser had asked them for their destination it made another two-flag hoist. Although he could not remember the actual signal, he clearly remembered his bewilderment after consulting the code books to establish its meaning. He said it meant “Have you suffered damage from cyclone, typhoon or tempest,”

The 1931 International Code of Signals contained two references to Cyclones and typhoons, ‘GY’ (‘Cyclone, hurricane, typhoon is approaching. You should put to sea at once’) and ‘IK’ (‘You should prepare for a cyclone, hurricane or typhoon’).

Neither of these two signals made sense to the interrogating officers either. That was until the secret call for *Straat Malakka* was discovered to be ‘IIKP’. It was then realized that *Sydney* had made the signal ‘IK’, this being the secret challenge.

The procedure was for a warship (or aircraft) to challenge a suspect vessel by signaling the two inner letters of that vessel's secret call



sign. The vessel was then expected to reply by signaling the two outer letters of its secret call sign. Unfortunately for Detmers, he did not know *Straat Malakka's* secret call sign, and could not reply correctly. Because *Sydney* had signaled 'IK', and Ahlbach had mistaken it for a storm warning, the authorities accepted this as proof that the prisoners were telling the truth."

In fact, the Germans appeared to have been telling anything but the truth about the entire engagement with *Sydney*. Ahlbach, by the above statement, never actually said *Sydney* signaled 'IK', so he may just as easily have been referring to the reply, having seen the meaning while looking up what Detmers told him to reply if challenged. While the story by Olsen above tells the official version of the story, it still does not explain why *Sydney* approached so close (again if the German story is accurate). It can only be explained if the Germans did have the secret callsign and when challenged simply replied with the correct authentication. Only then, and only then, would the *Sydney* have approached so close. While some self appointed authorities have stated that there is simply no way that the secret callsigns could have been discovered by the Germans, there is evidence that they were. In Singapore there were a number of British officers and troops that had access to this information and much more, and it is known that they passed this information to the Japanese.

It is common knowledge nowadays that the Germans did know the British operational codes into 1943 and the whereabouts of all British and Allied warships at the outbreak of the war, and raiders at sea were given updates of warship movements in their areas of operation. Anyone in any doubt should consult the book *Hitler's Spies* by David Kahn – the virtual sequel to his earlier work *The Codebreakers*. Both are excellent.

The possibility of the secret callsign being known to the Germans was discussed at the Senate Hearings in Brisbane. Barbara Winter, author of *HMAS Sydney, Fantasy, Fact and Fraud*, gave her oral evidence about the secret callsign, where she denied that it could have been known. In reply to the Chairman's question about it she replied....

"There is nowhere it could have been captured from...."

"...there had to be some place from which it was captured, and these callsigns were not put on air. They were not wireless. They were handed over in port."

Source: Transcript Brisbane Hearing 29 May 1998, p FADT543/544)

..... and she denied they could have been known because of the time factor. The Chairman directly asked "So you discount it ?" and she replied "Absolutely". She also stated that the time factor was important, there was only a certain period when the callsign could have been compromised and passed to the Germans. As the Germans passed secret intelligence to the Japanese, from the *Automedon*, for instance, a year previously, it is reasonable to assume that the Japanese passed intelligence to the German Attache in Tokyo as well. Winter herself said that intelligence was a two way exchange.

Winter, for obvious reasons, must not have heard of Patrick Heenan, nor the other British officer traitors, that operated for the Japanese in Malaya from 1940 until the Japanese success in capturing Singapore. Heenan had ample time to pass the callsigns to the Japanese, then to Admiral Wenneker in Tokyo, to be passed to the *Kormoran* by the *Kulmerland* replenishment just one month prior to the battle with *Sydney*. The time frame here is perfect, however, the British had taken great pains to keep the story under close secrecy as they did with the loss of the *Automedon* codes and intelligence. There were at least five British spies operating in Malaya, as well as thousands of Japanese, Indians and others. There is, in fact, a perfect example of the secret identification letters and challenges being compromised, because Peter Elphick wrote:

“Initially there was some confusion among the Australian pilots because the enemy escort ships were flashing the correct British recognition signal of the day, the letter ‘K’. The Japanese may have learned the signal from their officer spy Captain Patrick Heenan (he was shot on 13 February 1942 and his body thrown into Singapore Harbour) who as Air Liaison Intelligence Officer had access to such information.”

Other callsigns were certainly compromised and the time factor here is relevant. The Air Liaison Intelligence Officer would have had access to these callsigns as air patrols would certainly have been challenging all shipping approaching Singapore and the only means of challenging these merchant ships was by using the secret callsigns.

At another point in the hearing the Chairman stated to Commodore R W Burnett regarding the secret callsign:

“Given your theory that the captain of the ship, Detmers, had access to the secret callsign of these other ships, if we could somehow get information that proved that, it would perhaps change the historical story.”

While the Admiralty’s version of the story about the secret callsign, has continued to circulate ever since 1942, there seemed to be no evidence to doubt what the Admiralty had released about the callsigns. The first item that came to notice was when Barbara Winter wrote in her book:

“In a minute paper of 20 October, Getting agreed, commenting on the identification procedure (the italics are the author’s) [that is Winter’s]:  
An almost water-tight system is provided for the identification of merchant ships. The merchant ship is asked for her signal letters. These are converted in a C.B. [Code Book] to her secret call sign. *The outer letters of the call sign are then made to the*



*merchant ship, who should reply with the two inner letters.”*

{Winter is incorrect, C.B. is not Code Book, but Confidential Book}

With the Battle Summary by the Admiralty to focus on, it was thought that Winter had it right and there was no reason to doubt what she had written when she stated; “Even Captain Getting had the system wrong, the warship should have sent the two *inner* letters.” Getting, at the time, was the assistant Chief of Naval Staff in 1942 died of wounds received in the loss of HMAS Canberra at the Battle of Savo Island.

Since then, however, another naval officer, a Lt Commander, who served in the Second World War aboard three of Australia’s cruisers, *Canberra*, *Adelaide* and then *Shropshire*, was interviewed by the Australian War Memorial, on his wartime experiences. Included in the interview were his comments on his experience when his ship intercepted and sank the German vessel *Rameses*. When challenging the *Rameses*, he said:

“You used to have 4 letters. You’d give the outside 2 the signal of the day and the other ship had to give the inside 2 out of the 4.”

Now this is exactly the same as Captain Getting had stated, it was the outer letters that were sent, and the inner letters were the reply. Sydney would have made IP and Kormoran replied with IK. If that is the case, then the Germans interrogated in 1941 off the *Kormoran*, were actually admitting they had the correct reply to *Sydney*’s challenge. While the interview with the War Memorial was put on a web site and I knew where to contact this retired naval officer, I questioned his response and mentioned the *Sydney* having done the opposite to what he had stated regarding the challenge and reply. His answer was to say that he had probably got it wrong. It seems a bit much to expect that two operational naval officers, both of whom had served on cruisers in wartime, would make such an error, one that could have cost many lives.

However, there is a further example that there is some confusion over the use of this secret call sign. In a letter to the Naval Historical Review on the subject of the *Sydney*’s loss, a former Lt/Commander in the RAN, wrote of his experience in January 1940:

“.....when we were challenged by the cruiser *HMS Neptune*. It went something like this;- “What ship ?” – we replied with our secret call sign – “What is your secret war call sign ? (IK)” – we sent it – then the same signals again – then “Not identified. Stop engines, stand by for boarding party.”

This officer was in command of a British ‘Q’ ship, and the challenge and reply were vital to their disguise. The *Neptune* did not know they were a “Q” ship and not what they pretended to be, just as the *Kormoran* had done. In the above statement, it is made clear that IK is not the secret call sign at all but is the general challenge : “What is your secret call sign ?” So what is the truth about the secret call sign ?

In an article written by another well known former naval officer and maritime author, Commodore Ian Nicolson (Rtd), who wrote:

“The conclusion is that Sydney was completely satisfied with the “*Straat Malakka*” and not just with her disguise (including her use of false international signal letters and the Dutch ensign). She had somehow come through the most testing examination. Why else did *Sydney* fall out from “action stations” leaving her secondary armament and torpedo tubes unmanned; cancel the Walrus aircraft flight; have off-watch personnel relaxing on the upper deck, etc; and close to point-blank range ?

The only logical explanation is that Captain Detmers had produced one of the “trump cards” of the war, which was to cost Australia dearly. In response to *Sydney*’s ultimate challenge it appears that *Kormoran* coolly answered with the requested elements of *Straat Malakka*’s secret callsign! Impossible some might say, and certainly unthinkable at the time. But revelations in recent years about compromised codes, captured ciphers and Germany’s early successes in the fields of intelligence and cryptanalysis indicate that such a coup was quite within the realms of possibility, even probability.

No less an authority than Britain’s official naval historian, Captain S. W. Roskill RN conceded in later life that not only had the Germans been reading our merchant ship codes in 1941, but also had gained knowledge of some secret callsigns.”

Roskill wrote in a letter “Yes, I am sure that the Germans had our Mersigs code, and some of our secret callsigns too.” Roskill has followed Hinsley’s lead in making understatements about the B-Dienst’s codebreaking ability. In fact, from the late 1930’s up until 1943 they were far better than the British codebreakers and were reading both the Naval Code and the Naval Cipher and other codes as well, including listening in to Churchill and Roosevelt’s private conversations on their scrambler phones.

However, for many years after the war the traitors in Malaya who were supplying information to the Japanese were only being whispered about and nothing had appeared in print so it was not generally known. Some information included by Gill in his history, and some that is obviously omitted shows a curious slant on the *Sydney* story as he wrote it. By the time this information had been studied the only conclusion was, that Gill had placed information in his history, which cast doubt on the official *Sydney* story. Indeed, he asked all of the same questions that everybody has been asking ever since 1941.

One of the curious items associated with the letters IK, was the fact that these two letters were included in Captain Burnett’s assessment by a superior officer. It is an ordinary abbreviation used by the navy, and simply means ‘Insufficient Knowledge’. This was not to Burnett’s detriment, but simply meaning the assessing officer had insufficient knowledge on which to assess him. If we apply the same rule to the callsign and the

Admiralty's story, perhaps Gill is saying that that is the story we were given but there is insufficient knowledge to give it credibility.

Even with the above information, there is yet another element to this part of the mystery and that does not belong to the *Sydney* at all but may well have had a very serious effect on the *Sydney*'s acceptance of *Kormoran*'s disguise, whatever it was. In March 1941, while in dockyard hands at Alexandria, *HMAS Perth* lost one of its signal books from the Bridge. A search of the entire ship resulted but nothing was found. There seems little doubt that the signal book was stolen, but was it the list of secret callsigns for merchant ships.

That is the very type of book, which would be found on the bridge, handy to the command crew and signalmen. What other losses of confidential material may have also contributed to Detmers knowing the secret callsign we may never know, but I'm sure there may have been other instances. In this case, there would have been no time to issue entire new books to all of the allied ships, before *Sydney* was lost in November, just seven or eight months later.

When we take into consideration the several different versions of the *Kormoran* story by some crewmembers, from that written by Detmers giving his version of the battle, we see that the same terms are used, as are about the callsigns: that the story was proven by the Germans all telling the same story ie Detmers version to the Australian interrogators. It seems that while the Germans attempt to stay with Detmers version, from time to time memory fails them and a glimmer of the truth emerges from the darkness. The question remains, however, of how much misinformation was given by the British during the war years about the loss of *HMAS Sydney*. Indeed, is there anything we have been told of the *Sydney* story, at all, that we can believe, or must we question every single statement ever written about her loss? I believe we must.

James Eagles  
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