

John Curtin – Two Positions on the Same Day

In my submission (No 42) to the Senate Inquiry, I made a case for the *Sydney-Kormoran* battle to have taken place 300 miles west of Carnarvon. Since then I have located a copy of the Prime Ministers' public statement, made by John Curtin about the *Sydney* sinking on the 4th December 1941, which to my surprise also included the statement that the battle took place 300 miles west of Carnarvon.

“SYDNEYS' FINAL VICTIM – NAZI RAIDER KORMORAN.

German Survivors at Fremantle and Carnarvon.

In a statement issued in Canberra on Wednesday, the Prime Minister (Mr. J. Curtin) announced that, following the sifting and checking of evidence, resulting from the interrogation of prisoners from the German raider *Kormoran*, it was now possible to reconstruct to an extent, the action between that ship and the *HMAS Sydney*.

The *Kormoran*, disguised as a merchantman, was encountered by the *Sydney*, some 300 miles west of Carnarvon, West Australia.”

Townsville Daily Bulletin, 4th December, 1941.

The Australian Archives Guide 3, on the *Sydney* material has produced an oddity that I cannot explain, but about which the Senate Committee should be concerned. Their documents show that a Minute was signed by the Prime Minister after he made the above statement on the evening of the 3rd of December 1941 and published on the 4th. On the 4th of December he signed a Cabinet 'Minute' stating the position of the battle was in position 25° South 111° East, which is the position (pretty much) given by the German captain (about 160 miles SW of Carnarvon).

The strange thing about this is, that the two positions the Prime Minister gave then are about 150 miles apart.

That leaves us with the situation of the Prime Minister having signed a document giving one position and issuing a public statement on the same day, giving a completely different location. It seems to me there are three options.

He deceived the public and the world.

He deceived the Cabinet, using the latitude and longitude in the Cabinet 'Minute' supplied by the Navy. Did he consider the 300 mile west of Carnarvon position and the Latitude and Longitude he gave were one and the same, or was he told by the Navy that the Latitude and Longitude were the same as the one he had announced to the public. Not many people can look at a latitude and longitude and know exactly where that spot is without considerable effort and the use of a chart.

Finally, that leaves us with the possibility of the Navy supplying misleading information to the Prime Minister. While wartime circumstances may have made that necessary, taken together with all of the other circumstances I have looked at, it appears that the Navy has indeed, been party to an ongoing plan of misleading everyone about this matter, and that was not the only example of it happening.

Excerpts from War Cabinet minute 1528/1941. This minute, a record of the War Cabinet's 'decision' of 4 December 1941, was prepared with the assistance of the handwritten notes of the meeting taken by the official notetaker, a copy of which appears earlier in this chapter. NAA: A5954, 807/1 - War Cabinet Minutes Volume IX

MINUTES

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WAR CABINET MEETING

MELBOURNE, 4th DECEMBER, 1941.

PRESENT: The Hon. John Curtin, M.P., Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Co-ordination.
 The Hon. F.M. Forde, M.P., Minister for the Army.
 The Hon. J.B. Chifley, M.P., Treasurer.
 The Hon. H.V. Evatt, K.C., M.P., Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs.
 The Hon. J.A. Beasley, M.P., Minister for Supply and Development.
 The Hon. N.J.C. Makin, M.P., Minister for the Navy and Minister for Munitions.
 The Hon. A.S. Drakeford, M.P., Minister for Air.

(The Chief of the General Staff, the Chief of the Air Staff and the Acting Chief of the Naval Staff were also present at this meeting).

H.M.A.S. "Sydney" - Action with German Raider. (Previous Reference - Minute No. (1528)). The Acting Chief of the Naval Staff reported the results of further interrogation of German prisoners ex the "Kormoran", and read the following reconstructed account of the action :-

"The engagement took place in position 25° South 111° East on 19th November. H.M.A.S. "Sydney" on a bearing S.W. from the raider, made the first sighting at a range of 15 miles. The raider altered course from 000° to 250° and made no reply. At closer range the raider, which was flying the Dutch flag, made "Straad Malakka" by light.

This part of the Minute in the Australian Archives signed by Prime Minister Curtin on 4 December 1941 give the position 25° South 111° East, which is certainly not 300 miles west of Carnarvon at all.

However, there is an explanation for this and is simply that what he said publicly and what had to go into the official Minutes of the War Cabinet were two entirely different things. Richard Summerrall in Guide 3 on HMAS Sydney records in the Australian Archives states:

"In the context of the records of the War Cabinet and the Advisory War Council, a 'Minute' was a decision. These Minutes were not a verbatim record of the War Cabinet and Advisory War Council's discussions, but rather a statement of the decisions reached. The War Cabinet Minutes were regarded as vital records".

HMAS Sydney, Guide 3, Minutes and Agenda.

So the War Cabinet decided that would the position officially recorded but it was not the actual position of the battle. Then in the evening of 4 December Curtin announced to the press and on the wireless that the battle took place 300 miles west of Carnarvon.

Was there other support for a 300 miles west of Carnarvon position. While some claimed that there was not – others including some of the British and even the Germans themselves proved them wrong. Here is a small list of references:

300 Mile West of Carnarvon reference.

German survivors on the *Trocas* gave a similar position (26° south 108° east) prior to Detmers giving his position. Frame stated that Dechaineaux used the above position from the Germans in *Trocas* in his report, but still came up with 25° 34" south 111° east (See Guide 3, R Summerrell, p70 and Frame p95).

Did Hans Linke tell David Kennedy that that was the correct position ?
 “Linke said that *Kormoran* did not try to mine Fremantle before the battle, which took place on a level with Carnarvon.” (Vol 9, Submission No 66B, p 2036).

Lloyd’s War Losses give the 300 mile position, Lloyd’s War Losses was compiled using various sources (A list of these sources is given in Vol 4, Submission No54, p694).

Britain’s Glorious Navy published mid-1942. In Chapter 16 – “The Navies of the Empire”, p286, “Later, after destroying an enemy armed merchant raider, the *Steiermark*, she herself caught fire and went down some 300 miles west of Australia.”

The Melbourne Herald, 3 December 1941, stated that the battle took place 300 miles west of the coast of W.A. and quoted Prime Minister John Curtin’s speech.

Captain John Leslie Hehir, Army Intelligence, private papers, (Vol 6, Submission No74, p1136). ON 16th January, 1942 he wrote, “16th Jan, Lt Horwood left at 9 a.m. Sgts Thompson and Carminer and Lt Yarra this evening at 6 p.m. and this is the story of the sinking of the Sydney:- “The German raider H.S.K. *Kormoran* met H.M.A.S. Sydney 300 miles off the Australian coast on the evening of the 19th November, 1941.....”

Prime Minister John Curtin twice announced the 300 mile position to the public and gave two differing positions on the same day.

The Australian War Memorial published it twice during World War II, in the *HMAS* series of books, edited by G. Hermon Gill, where he twice gave the 300 mile west of Carnarvon position in two of the four books.

Heinz Messerschmidt, Mines Officer, *Kormoran*, in an interview with David Kennedy already cited gave the 300 mile position. It is also interesting that Messerschmidt stated that his job was to detonate the scuttling charges but seemed unfamiliar with the term “Versetzen” (Scuttling) used to identify demolition charges already prepared on all of the raiders for just such a situation when the order “Measure V” was given. He said, “I was engaged to set of fire the sinking ... the detonate”. Kennedy, “The charges ?” Messerschmidt: “The charges, yes” (Vol 9, Submission No 66B, David Kennedy, p2039).

“Movietone” newsreel of German survivors coming ashore in Fremantle in 1941 give the 300 mile west position. Copy of this held by us. Showing of the film on TV on the 60th anniversary of the Sydney sinking had the 300 mile position edited out. The television documentary, which included the 300 miles position, is part of the short film “Austrian Story: The Rest is Silence” made by the ABC with Glenys McDonald. This documentary went to air on ABC-TV on 19 March 1998. The monologue to the newsreel states: “Survivors of the German raider *Kormoran*, They solved the mystery of the disappearance of *HMAS Sydney*, 300 miles off the West Australian coast the two ships had engaged simultaneously at point blank range, each was set on fire. *Kormoran* was quickly abandoned, exploded and sank, and from their lifeboats at nightfall the Germans caught their last glimpse of *Sydney* blazing from stem to stern to disappear with all hands and without trace.”

General newspaper reports of the sinking from 1941, give the position as 300 miles west of Carnarvon, as does the survivor of the *Mareeba* in the book of his experiences entitled *Prisoner of the Kormoran*, however, he apparently obtained the position from the Prime Ministers announcement, after returning from internment in Germany.

Herman Ortmann, *Kormoran* survivor (now living in Australia), in an interview with Glenys McDonald was asked : “Whoever was left onboard [*Sydney*], particularly if they had injured on board, you would image that they would head for the nearest source of assistance”. Ortmann replied, “Well I tell you you know that due east more or less Carnarvon, but the way they were travelling was Fremantle”. – If Carnarvon was due east, then *Sydney* left the battle site due west of Carnarvon. What could be plainer than that.

Tom Frame in his book on the loss of the *Sydney* cites a signal from the Australian Naval Board [which had been decrypted and found in German Archives] giving the 300 miles position and Yeoman E C Reynolds also gives that position in the *HMAS* series of books which was edited by G. Hermon Gill during the war.

Since then the much touted position 26°South 111°East by the *Sydney* Search group supported by the secret dictionary supposedly made by Captain Detmers giving that position, is suspected of being a fake created during the war to mislead and create doubt about the real position, which is exactly what it has done. The fact is, that up until about March 1942, the position was 300 miles west of Carnarvon, then suddenly it was changed and many different position were allowed to be promulgated throughout the community until the real position of the battle was forgotten or mixed up with the rest as a probable site but generally derided by the official community.

James Eagles
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