

HMS Durban (D99)
'D' Class Light Cruiser 1921.

Some time ago I looked at *HMAS Sydney's* time table in 1941, escorting *HMT Zealandia* to Sunda Strait (*Did HMAS Sydney Send Signals After Departure from Fremantle*) and if the *Sydney* sent any signals during that voyage. In that research I noted that *HMS Durban* took three days to get to the rendezvous point just south of Sunda Strait when she took over the escort of *Zealandia* from the *Sydney*.

I also noted that *Zealandia's* speed was limited to between 7 and 13 knots, so that for the trip from the rendezvous point to Singapore, with *Durban* as escort, the two ships took three days and averaged about 10 knots, which would appear correct. What I didn't look at in that research was *Durban's* times from Singapore to the rendezvous point other than to accept the navy's timing that she took exactly three days from midday 14 November to midday 17 November. She departed according to her sailing orders issued in signals 13/11/41 from C-in-C China to meet *Sydney* and take over the escort of *Zealandia* at 07° 15' south 104° 40' east, which she did on time.

Richard Summerrell in Guide 3 on the *Sydney*, confirms that *Zealandia's* speed was of some concern:

“Information from Singapore appeared to confirm the doubts about the *Zealandia's* speed. On Friday afternoon it was learned that *Zealandia* had arrived at Singapore 24 hours late, and thus it was assumed that *Sydney* would also be 24 hours late, not now reaching Fremantle until the afternoon or evening of 21 November. It was also possible that *Sydney* had been delayed for operational reasons, perhaps having been diverted.....”

Guide 3, page 45.

It is hard to see how this assumption that *Zealandia* was 24 hours late came about unless *Durban* had only taken 24 hours to the rendezvous and 36 hours to return to Singapore with *Zealandia*. This also raises the question of whether *Sydney* signaled after her departure Fremantle to confirm the rendezvous time if *Zealandia's* speed was so erratic.

The distance from Singapore to the rendezvous position is between 730 and 750 miles depending on the ships' track (inside Banka Island or outside). However, even 750 miles at a speed of 17 knots (*Durban* was capable of 29 knots), it would have taken only 42 hours. At an economical speed of 19 knots even less time, about 38 hours. Yet we are told she took 72 hours. Could it be that *Durban*, like the *Sydney* and her 24 hour disappearance, had another job to do during that remaining 30-34 hour period and if so what could it have been? It's very possible that *Durban* was actually escorting *Zealandia*, because of *Sydney's* absence during that night time period without the army personnel onboard being aware of it. It is extremely unusual for an escort to abandon her charge under any circumstances, but it may have been organised.

We know *Sydney* left the *Zealandia* unescorted for 24 hours yet surprisingly there was no complaint from the captain of the troopship, where one would have expected him to at least report such an incident. We also know *Sydney's* Seagull aircraft was in the air, as was a Dutch Do24 flying boat, additionally the Dutch submarine KIX and the RNN cruiser *Tromp* were also on patrol in the Sunda Strait area. There was a submarine alarm on the *Zealandia* and we know that Dutch records show that C-in-C China had control of two Dutch submarines during that period. With all this taken into account it seems that something was taking place and that *Sydney* could not have been too far away from *Zealandia* at the time.

It would also seem that *Durban* may have also been part of this operation, which took place on 16 November. If *Durban* had only taken two days to reach the rendezvous point with the *Sydney* (not *Zealandia*) she could have spent a full 24 hours on patrol along with the aircraft, while both the Dutch submarines and the *Sydney* were alongside each other, stationary and busy working together. It then seems understandable, why it was thought that *Zealandia* was a day late in Singapore. *Durban* took only two days to get there, but three days to return when it may have been expected that because *Durban* took two days out, they expected her to only take two days to return.

Commander Reg Hardstaff had some very pertinent information on page 46 of Vol. I in his submission to the Inquiry in that he supplied course, speeds, times etc regarding *Sydney's* movements. Using some of his data to apply to my chart I find the following: *Sydney* departed from *HMS Durban* at the rendezvous at 170400Z. Heading south on 161° making 18 knots (making good a speed of 17.75 knots for 780 n.m. to the point I believe *Sydney* turned off 161° to 180° would be about 44 hours. Once onto 180° (according to Battle Summary No 13) *Sydney* increased speed to 25 knots (which I have made 24.4 knots against the wind and current) for 300 n.m. to my calculated battle site. This took 12 ½ hours for a total of 56 ½ hours after departure from *Durban*. That means *Sydney* may not have arrived at my battle site until 191230Z, 2 ½ hours after the Germans said she did and 2 1/2 hours after the 'Q' message was sent. This may well explain the time lapses in the German account.

Conflicting Information.

It is curious reasoning to have John Curtin giving two different positions for the battle on the same day and the Germans giving several other different positions for the battle yet again. The *Wyrallah* also found the same wreckage reportedly in two different positions as well. Gill gave the same position for the battle twice in the same series of books (*HMAS Series*) but then gave a different position in a different (official) series of books (*History of the RAN in WW2*).

The Navy and the government have accepted the Germans version of the battle but we know now the Germans seriously misinformed everyone about at least a few things:

1. They said they never fired torpedoes (p64 260530Z DNOWA, Hardstaff)
2. They did not know the secret callsign.
3. They did not use the *LS3*
4. Denied they carried mines.
5. Had not replenished from supply ships since leaving Germany.

6. Gave different versions of the story of the battle.
7. Gave different positions for the battle site.
8. Did not meet other raiders.
9. Did not meet any U-boats.
10. During the interrogation it was stated by some crew members that they carried 21" torpedoes, but Detmers indicated they could not use the torpedoes loaded for submarines (which were 21") because they used a different size. This would also seem to be another lie. They also misled the interrogators about other things as well and the Intelligence Officer in Fremantle at the time stated straight out that they were lying. Why does the Navy now believe they told the truth? Why, in fact would anyone believe they told the truth?

Search question.

Commander Hardstaff lists in his submission (Vol 1, page 68) the following signal:
"270805Z – Received NR51 from Pearce – To Catalinas (both) from Pearce –
Possibility three Dutch Catalinas and cruiser Tromp in vicinity – 0425Z/27"

While this appears straight forward, in fact, it is far from it. 0800Z is 1500 local time in the search area where the two Catalinas were operating and at that time they were operating no further north than 24° 12'S, while the Dutch were limited to search only as far south as 20°S so these two groups should have been at least 250 miles apart. Why would they have been warned of being anywhere each other?

Page 65 of the same submission gives the co-ordinates of the two groups of Catalinas and their search areas do not come close at any point. The only reason I can understand from reading the signal was that something was found and all the Catalinas and the *Tromp* headed for the same particular area to do a full concentrated search. This is normal search and rescue procedure. It does mean, however, that there must be signals missing from the search period of the 27th, not that that would surprise anyone.

LS3 Track.

I have advocated the use of the *LS3* to tow lifeboats to the coast, just as the lifeboats were towed after the *Atlantis* was sunk in the Atlantic. Anyone who has a copy of the chart I included with "*HMAS Sydney II and Operation Fish 1941*", who takes the time to look through Commander Hardstaffs' notes taken from SWACH reports of the positions where survivors were collected by search ships, will find they were distributed closely either side of the *LS3* track. The general direction of all the lifeboats, from the aircraft reported sightings, shows a trend from west to east. Especially interesting is the Carley Float and the British lifejacket picked up by the *Heros* and *Evagoras* respectively. These life saving floats managed to out-sail all the boats and rafts and wreckage heading north from Detmers' position by 150 miles in just 4 days from where survivors were picked up by the *Centaur* on the 24th to where they were found on the 27th that is about 3 times the drift rate of everything else, so the Carley Float and lifejacket had to have been discarded by the lifeboats being towed by the *LS3*. It then follows that Detmers' boats were able to collect wreckage from the *Sydney* after the battle. Further on the *LS* debate - Captain Peter Hore cites a signal dated 16 December 1941 (page 243)

“Add paragraph C4. There is good reason to believe that enemy raiders, if stopped by British Warships, have orders to withhold fire until the British Ship is stopped and is lowering a boat. The raider will not send their own boat if they can avoid doing so.” Another signal dated 11 June 1942 refers to the *LS* boats carried by raiders, which indicates (in part):

“These craft are about 40 feet long speed 40 knots and are hoisted out by derrick. Usual signals are made to stop and M.T.B.’s also make signals in English and may wear White Ensign in endeavour to deceive. All Masters of Merchant vessels are to be warned on the lookout for this form of attack which there is reason to believe is generally *delivered during dark hours*”. (My italics)

Apart from the above signals issued by Admiralty, Crace specifically mentions mine-laying speedboats in the interrogation instructions and during the interrogations information on the *LS3* was given by the German survivors. Richard Summerrall too mentions the *LS3* in the Sydney Guide 3. Yet during the Senate Inquiry Rear Admiral Oxenbould, L/Cdr Stevens together with the Archivist from the Navy Historical Centre at that time, J. H. Straczek all denied the navy knew anything about an *LS3*. When queried by the Senate committee Oxenbould agreed to look into it and later wrote to the committee and again denied the navy knew anything about the *LS3*. When the Germans and the navy all strongly deny something, I always assume that it has a direct bearing on the solution to the *Sydney* mystery and this is no exception. The Germans have always made a point of strongly denying they knew the secret callsign.

LS3 Again.

It has already been shown that there was another boat found by search aircraft that subsequently disappeared and was covered up by the counting of both boats being towed by the *Centaur*. It has been claimed that the lifeboats could not have been towed, but the *Centaur* has proved them wrong. Winter wrote:

“For several hours, the towing worked successfully. Then in the half-light of dawn, the lifeboat bow suddenly went under. As the boat filled with water, Kuhlén slashed the towrope with a hatchet the boat did not go to the bottom, Its air tanks held it in position just below the surface.”

It has been stated that Detmers’ boat was towed all night at 4 knots with 62 people onboard. When it filled with water; Captain Dark suspected that the boat had been swamped deliberately as part of a plot.....” After that Captain Dark had two of his lifeboats lowered and the Germans were put into the two boats and again taken under tow. There was no plot, but if the Germans had been towed by the *LS3*, then Detmers had to prove the point that the boats could not be towed with so many onboard. Although they had been towed successfully all night they waited until daylight before swamping the boat knowing it would not sink. If Detmers thought that he had proved his point about being towed, he has failed. It simply proved that the boats could be towed, and that there had not been 62 in the boat originally, but half of the crew aboard the *LS3*, once aircraft had spotted them, had been transferred to Detmers’ boat.



Further to this use of the *LS3*, Winter stated that the boat had been damaged at Walvis Bay and never used again. Detmers in his book, stated it had been used to collect a ship's crew from one of the vessels he sank *Stamatios G. Embiricos* "Our MTB was launched and went away to the *Stamatios* with the boarding party"]. Additional to that, another book written by Captain C. H. Hill-Willis, Master Mariner, described how, when he was the First Officer of the *Agnita*, the Germans on the *Kormoran* used the *LS3* to tow the lifeboats occupied by the *Agnita*'s crew, over to the *Kormoran* and they were all taken prisoner. [*On Their Majesties Service*, Neptune Press, Victoria, 1983, p144]. It is almost possible to put together the story of the *Sydney* from the items that the government and navy vehemently deny and the use of the *LS3* is one of the most strongly denied things of all.

LS3.

Just prior to December 1997 I wrote to the Fremantle Maritime Museum with some research I had completed on the loss of *HMAS Sydney* in 1941. In that research I outlined a theory on how the *Sydney* was lost which included the use of the *LS3* by the Germans disguised as a naval patrol craft and flying a white ensign. Since then I have come to the conclusion that the action must have taken place, not at 1600 in the afternoon but after dark. It would be impossible to mistake the *Kormoran* for the *Straat Malakka* in daylight, apart from the obvious discrepancies between the two of superstructure and hull shape, one was 900 tons larger than the other. These differences were not nearly so apparent at night if at all. As well as this, the *Straat Malakka* was never on the Australian Station at all during 1941 according to the ship movement cards from the navy.

The following appeared in a booklet published by the RAN Seapower Centre, Canberra under *Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs No.9* and edited by Captain Peter Hore of the Royal Navy. It is dated 2001.

Under Chapter Nine, page 243 is the following:

Raiders carry MTBs, June 1942

SECRET

1628B/11th June.

To "A" Message Home and Abroad 806A

Date 11.6.42

P/L BY T/P

From: Admiralty.

IMMEDIATE.

Positive evidence has been received that German raiders are carrying two or more

M.T.B.'s [motor torpedo boats] armed with 2 torpedoes and depth charges. These

craft are about 40 feet long speed 40 knots and are hoisted out by derrick. Usual

signals are made by Raider to endeavour to persuade ships to stop and M.T.B.'s

also make signals in English and may wear White Ensign in endeavour to deceive.

2. All Masters of Merchant vessels are to be warned on the lookout for this form of attack which there is reason to believe is generally delivered during dark hours.

Any vessel sighted with a motorboat slung on a derrick should be considered suspicious.

1628B/11.

For D.D.I.C. (1230)

As the first raider to carry an *LS* boat the *Kormoran* was able to use it with impunity simply because then nobody knew about them and if it was being disguised as a British or Australian patrol craft flying a White Ensign, in 1942, why not in 1941 ?

James Eagles

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