

7 October 2008

The Secretary  
HMAS Sydney II  
Commission of Inquiry  
Level 18 Defence Plaza  
270 Pitt Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Loss of HMAS Sydney II**

I have already submitted some written notes and questions which arose in my limited examination of the accounts of the loss of *HMAS Sydney II*.

The Inquiry will have to hear and assess evidence from the RAN as to its account of the loss of the ship. The RAN is a public service organization, and as such it seeks at all times to put the best possible construction on its performance and competence.

However it would be unwise to accept much that it offers at face value. The 'ship history' provided on its website for *HMAS Sydney II* is a case in point. The attached notes are an examination of its account of the Battle of Cape Spada which essentially determined the war time reputation of *HMAS Sydney*.

Whilst irrelevant to the present inquiry, they serve to illustrate the difficulty which the RAN has in coming to terms with history. Since writing my earlier submission I have also come across a reference regarding Captain Burnett's knowledge of 'raiders'.

The Naval Historical Society of Australia website records that on 22 October 1941 Captain Burnett addressed the crew of HMAS Sydney advising that a German 'raider' was known to be operating in 'Australasian waters'. The NHSA's entry suggests that the vessel was still known under the original name of 'Steiermark', (of which the Navy had photographs) and that the information may have been known to the Naval Board since 17 October 1941. It doesn't say where *HMAS Sydney* was at the time.

The NHSA does not say either how the Naval Board acquired this information, but other sources tell us that *Kormoran* met up with its supply ship *Kulmerland* on the morning of 16 October at a prearranged meeting point, 'Point Marius' off Cape Leeuwin, having steamed across the Indian Ocean from the Arabian Sea. i.e. *Kormoran* had been in 'Australasian waters' for only one day.

If the NHSA note is true, it is extraordinarily significant. The information which it contains must have been derived from someone who was on board on 22 October, wherever the ship was then, but who did not sail in her last fateful voyage. It suggests that the RAN knew that a ship suspected of being Steiermark (*Kormoran*) was in Australian waters within 24 hours of its arrival. If it was true, the RAN would also have had an idea of the location of the suspect on 17 October, and chose to do nothing about it.

Had the RAAF over flown the two ships and reported the fact to the RAN? It wouldn't have been the first occasion that a 'raider' had been over flown by aircraft of the RAAF. It had detected 'Orion' off Tasmania on 22nd August 1940, and again off Albany on 4th September 1940, and had scrambled six aircraft to deal with it. 'Orion' gave them the slip on both of those occasions.

The Navy had the British Naval Intelligence report No 60 dated 30 May 1941 and it's 'Supplement on German Raiders'. Had Captain Burnett seen it? An RAAF pilot may not have seen the supplement, but he might have been suspicious of two similar ships travelling in very close proximity, or even apparently exchanging supplies on the high seas.

A week later the *Kormoran* could be anywhere, and this in the bureaucratic naval mind would be sufficient reason to be vague about location, and would also serve to fudge the fact that RAN might have had more specific information which it hadn't acted on, thereby compromising its own vessels as well as civilian ones. There was reference in the 1999 inquiry that some persons in the defence signals service behaved rather strangely when *HMAS Sydney* was first reported missing.

It would be interesting to know if there were any reconnaissance flights conducted on 16 October 1941 (or even later) from RAAF Pearce or Busselton, (or any other airfields in the SW) and whether there are any extant records of them. Any surviving airmen should be re interviewed.

We are told the two ships remained in company for a week, transferring oil and supplies, and finally parted on 24 October. *Kormoran* then spent a week (or more) in the eastern Indian Ocean repairing its electrical systems, and avoiding a convoy escorted by the heavy cruiser *HMS Cornwall* (which had sunk *Penguin* May 8th) which was sailing westwards from the Cape. Then *Kormoran* turned north towards Shark Bay.

This record of events also starts to make sense in conjunction with evidence given to the 1999 inquiry by an ex RAAF pilot, that when the search began for *HMAS Sydney*, he was sent to search the sea to the south west of Perth where *Kormoran* and *Kulmerland* had been four weeks before. That inquiry found no use for his evidence.

There is a wealth of information about *Hilfskreuzers* on the internet, including maps showing the cruises of the 'Orion' and 'Komet' in 1940 and accounts of the 'raiders' *Penguin* and *Passat* which laid a total of 230 mines in sea lanes between Newcastle and Sydney, off Hobart and northern Tasmania, and around Wilsons Promontory, Cape Otway and Spencer Gulf over a period of about ten days in October/November 1940.

When the RAAF over flew suspicious ships, the RAN was nowhere to be seen. During WWII the RAN couldn't secure the sea outside Port Jackson, and didn't have any permanent presence at all in Western Australia. The RAAF was probably reluctant to bomb ships which it couldn't properly identify, and which might turn out to be harmless merchantmen. There may also have been an element of rivalry/jealousy between the two services with the RAN so patently ineffective.

As I have noted elsewhere the RAN showed little interest in apprehending 'raiders' or escorting merchant shipping. In late 1941 it was preoccupied with flag waving tours to New Zealand, New Caledonia and Fiji, *HMAS Hobart* was in the Mediterranean, and *HMAS Australia* was surveying the Crozet Islands, a French dependency south of Madagascar. Important work indeed!

Yours sincerely



Howard Patterson