

The Battle of Cape Spada

The function of naval historians has always been to portray the RAN in the best possible light, and what they leave out is as important as what they put in to their accounts. Of the three services the Navy played by far the least significant role in World War 2, and for much of the war its ships were safely tied up in Sydney Harbour, whilst 'hilfskruezer' and later, submarines, roamed unhindered around the east coast. The exception was the fleet of Bathurst Class ships, sailing under the RAN flag, but crewed in the main by reservists and volunteers.

The account of the Battle of Cape Spada on the RAN website indicates how little grasp of naval strategy the RAN has now, or had then, and how little of what it says can be relied upon.

We are told that *HMAS Sydney* was a 'modified Leander' class light cruiser. She carried 8 x 6" guns as her principle armament. We are told elsewhere that these had a range of about 20,000 yards, but we can assume that the possibility of hitting anything at this range would be small. It would be reduced even further if the target was 'stern on'. She had a top speed of 32.5 knots presumably only in ideal conditions.

The Leander Class cruisers had a number of deficiencies which soon became apparent. In particular they had relatively light armor on the hull, and the fire control area was considered to be highly vulnerable. The 'modified' class had separate compartments for boilers and engines which the basic design did not, but they were basically underpowered and therefore relatively slow.

It is hardly surprising then that the three ships *Sydney*, *Hobart* and *Perth* were sold to Australia after the Royal Navy decided it didn't want them!

We are told by RAN that on 19 July *HMAS Sydney* in company with *HMS Havock* received a report from a British destroyer group of two hostile ships 10 miles* to the south west of their position at 7.33am. (Other sources tell us that it was the RAF who informed them the previous evening) It is presumed that the distances referred to are nautical miles. (i.e. about 2km).

The two ships then proceeded 'at maximum speed' and sighted smoke on the horizon at 8.20am. Something is amiss here. A cruiser 10 nautical miles away (20,000 yards) would be visible from *HMAS Sydney* from the outset, and almost within range of her guns. At full speed *HMAS Sydney* and *HMS Havock* should have travelled about 25 nautical miles or 50km in 47 minutes, and the enemy which was on a closing course, was still over the horizon with only smoke visible!

The two cruisers were identified as the *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and the *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere* at a range of 23,000 yards (11½ nautical miles) heading east of north east. We are told that *HMAS Sydney* opened fire at 8.29am. By then it would have closed the range by at least 9000 yards in the nine minutes from first sighting (to less than 14,000 yards).

At 8.38am the destroyer group *HMS Hyperion*, *HMS Hasty*, *HMS Hero* and *HMS Ilex* were sighted 'to the south east at a distance of about six miles' (12,000 yds). The lookout on *HMAS Sydney* could spot a cruiser at 23,000 yards, but could only see a squadron of four destroyers that he knew were coming, at half that range.

'The enemy attempted to escape to the south west' with *HMAS Sydney* and the destroyers following in line abreast. The destroyers had now opened fire suggesting that the range had reduced to something like 12,000 yards.

Were the Italian cruisers attempting to escape? The *HMAS Sydney* had 4 x 6" guns in the bows, and the five destroyers each had 2 x 4.7" guns on the foredecks, making a total of fourteen guns to the cruisers combined total of eight 6" stern guns. With a bit of fancy maneuvering the pursuing ships might have been able to bring their rear guns to bear also, but there is no suggestion that they did.

At a range of 12,000 yards or less the Italian cruisers were outgunned. The sensible thing to do would be to increase the range so that they only had to deal with *HMAS Sydney's* guns. This would give them an advantage of eight guns to four.

The *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and the *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere* were both supposedly capable of 40+ knots 'light', which probably means that top speed was something less under full load. The maximum under these conditions was said to be more like 37 knots.

Both Italian ships were of the *Condottieri* Class and at full load displaced about 7000 tonnes, with 95,000hp engines to push them along. The *HMAS Sydney* by comparison displaced 6800 tonnes and had engines with capacity of only 72,000hp. (a power ratio of about 4:3)

The Italian ships did the sensible thing. They increased speed to match their pursuers, and the range to about 18,000 yards, thereby being able to engage *HMAS Sydney* out of effective range of the destroyers guns.

Having dealt with *HMAS Sydney*, the Italian cruisers could then bring their eight 6" stern guns to bear on the five remaining destroyers, at a range well in excess of the range of the destroyers 4.7" guns, and with a modicum of luck they could deal with all of them.

The navy website states that the two cruisers were "slowly drawing away (from *HMAS Sydney*) at approximately 30 knots" If the seas were calm as reported, 30 knots was well within reach of all of the ships involved, except perhaps *HMAS Sydney* which might struggle to keep up. The fact that the Italian cruisers were drawing away from *HMAS Sydney* suggests that they were keeping distance between themselves and the allied group, so that they didn't have to deal with all of them at once.

HMS Havock, *HMS Hyperion*, *HMS Hero* and *HMS Hasty* were all H class destroyers capable of 36 knots. *HMS Ilex* was an I class destroyer also capable of 36 knots. *HMAS Sydney* was therefore the slowest ship on either side by around 4 knots. (8000 yards/hour)

Contrary to the Navy assertion that the range was closing, by its own account *Bartolomeo Colleoni* was 18,000 yards ahead at 8.48am and 17,500 yards ahead at 9.19am a 'gain' of 500 yards in 31 minutes, during which the Italian cruisers had sailed a zig zag course, and laid a smoke screen.

However at that point something happened, because *HMAS Sydney* had closed to 7,500 yards by 9.38am, a gain of 10,000 yards in 19 minutes. This represents a differential speed of at least 15 knots. At the same time *Bartolomeo Colleoni* must have stopped firing, otherwise *HMAS Sydney* could not have come so close without suffering severe damage. At 7500 yards both ships were sitting ducks.

The RAN doesn't tell us what caused the *Bartolomeo Colleoni* to slow so dramatically. It may have suffered critical damage in the fight, but it might also have had engine trouble before the encounter began, which lead to a critical failure during the chase. All the while she had 80% power she could stay ahead of *HMAS Sydney*, and it would be expected that *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere* would stay with her for added protection.

Bartolomeo Colleoni was torpedoed by one or more of the destroyers, and survivors picked up from the water. This was the reverse of Captain Detmer's more gentlemanly practice on *Kormoran* which was to take the surviving crew off, then torpedo their ship.

HMAS Sydney ceased firing at 9.38am. The engagement had lasted an hour and nine minutes, and we are told that *HMAS Sydney* fired a few more rounds at *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere* before breaking off the engagement with only ten rounds of 6" ammunition left.

We are not told how many she had fired, but assuming a salvo on average every two minutes, that would be about 120 rounds. It seems that the pride of the RAN was swanning around the Mediterranean in wartime with less than 200 rounds of 6" ammunition in its lockers!

The Italian response to overwhelmingly superior hostile forces may have been to turn and run in a panic as the British and Australian Navies like to portray it. But the Italian ships should have been able to easily outrun the allies. It might equally have been a rational ploy to spread the field, and deal with the threats one at a time and with the advantage of superior fire power.

When *Bartolomeo Colleoni* was disabled, the odds for *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere* became one on one with *HMAS Sydney*, or one on five with the destroyers. *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere* wisely showed the fleet a clean pair of heels. She was able to "rapidly draw away" from *HMAS Sydney*, *HMS Hero* and *HMS Hasty* suggesting once again that the two Italian ships might have had the allied fleet on a long leash for the previous hour.