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Tuesday, 19 August 2008

The Secretary
HMAS Sydney Commission of Inquiry
Level 18 Defence Place
270 Pitt Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir or Madam

For many years I have researched the loss of HMAS Sydney, interviewed many people and documented their statements. All of my research (a copy of which is enclosed) was passed to the Maritime Museum in Fremantle and made available to anyone who was interested, especially other researchers.

The following is a summary of my research and outlines the conclusions I have reached based on that research and that of others of the events that led to the loss of HMAS Sydney with all hands. I hope this will help bring to light the true account of what happened on that fateful day of 19th November 1941 when we lost so many of our boys.

It is believed HSK Kormoran was planning to sink RMS Aquitania with the help of a Japanese submarine. The only way they could achieve this was for HSK Kormoran to get RMS Aquitania to stop, maybe by requesting assistance in some way. The submarine could then torpedo RMS Aquitania and leave HSK Kormoran to take credit for the sinking.

This plan could have been successful as RMS Aquitania did stop to pick up some HSK Kormoran survivors even though she had been ordered not to stop on her trip south from Singapore (not even for survivors). *This is information obtained according to reports that I have read.*

The HSK Kormoran Captain and the Japanese submarine Commander were putting this plan together when HMAS Sydney arrived on the scene. The submarine crashed dived but stayed in the area with the idea that maybe the plan to sink the Aquitania could work on this Cruiser.

HMAS Sydney suspected HSK Kormoran was the raider that had been reported to be somewhere in the area, so when challenged and a satisfactory reply was not received HMAS Sydney opened fire setting HSK Kormoran alight.

The only confirmation of a Japanese submarine being present at this stage is from Shu Ah Tahs and others. Shu Ah Tahs states there was a submarine present from which three torpedos were fired which hit HMAS Sydney. This contradicts Captain Detmers claim that he fired 1 – 2 torpedos. If three were fired the additional one could have come from the submarine. I have read a report that states there was a very loud noise made by the rush of air as the submarine crashed dived when HMAS Sydney was sighted and approaching fast.

Also there is the statement made by Heinz Grossman, a Snowy Mountain Scheme worker, who claimed to be aboard HSK Kormoran during the Kormoran/Sydney encounter in which he claims HMAS Sydney was sunk by a Japanese submarine, the crew of which subsequently murdered HMAS Sydney survivors.

I know this is not conclusive proof that a Japanese submarine was involved but gives sufficient grounds to investigate this possibility. We know the Japanese were active along the west coast of Australia at this time as caches of arms etc were found.

It has become evident the Japanese were planning to invade Australia so it is logical they would have a presence at the time of the encounter. I have heard of Japanese sailors being picked up on the coast and being disposed of. There are, most likely, a lot more incidents like this that we are unaware of.

One of the HSK Kormoran survivors, picked up by the MV Koolinda, states that on the evening of the 19th November HSK Kormoran was challenged by a British Cruiser which opened fire on them and they subsequently retaliated.

The operator of the Overland Telegraph Station at Shark Bay recalls a message came through stating HMAS Sydney came in out of the sun and opened fire first.

This action set HSK Kormoran on fire and according to one of the survivors, their ship burnt like a cellulous factory and provoked a frantic panic to abandon ship. If, as Captain Detmers claims, they were moving at 14 knots it would have been difficult to launch the life boats and you would assume those who had jumped overboard would have been sucked into the propellers and killed.

This, to me, indicates HSK Kormoran was stationery and at this point had surrendered with most of her crew on board. She wouldn't have been in a position to respond to the attack by HMAS Sydney as Captain Detmers claimed.

I say most of HSK Kormoran crew had abandoned ship because Captain Detmers stated that he had piped the crew on deck after the engagement and mustered approximately 100 crewmembers including some of his officers, which I do not believe to be accurate in view of the assumption they would have been frantically trying to distance themselves from the ship in the belief that it's destruction was imminent.

So, I believe, this is the situation we have at this time of the engagement. HSK Kormoran is stationery and ablaze with most of the crew having abandoned ship either in life boats or swimming towards HMAS Sydney in the hope of being rescued. One of the survivors of HSK Kormoran stated HMAS Sydney as lowering a boat to pick up the survivors who had abandoned ship. Although it was believed this action

was to put a boarding party on HSK Kormoran it does not seem feasible that this would occur when the ship was on fire and could blow up at any minute.

I believe it was at this stage the Japanese submarine fired on HMAS Sydney which was also stationery. Although HMAS Sydney sustained damage in this attack it was not sufficient to sink her straight away. They would have seen the torpedos coming from the submarine and at this stage they realised there was another enemy in the area.

The crew that were still aboard HSK Kormoran then decided to join the attack on HMAS Sydney (even though they had surrendered) and proceeded to fire on her. HMAS Sydney returned the fire and retrieved the boat they were despatching.

At this point HMAS Sydney tried to ram the submarine. The survivors of HSK Kormoran claim HMAS Sydney tried to ram them yet they claim HMAS Sydney was a blazing wreck and out of control from the devastating attack from them. This sounds inconceivable to me.

Following the unsuccessful attempt by HMAS Sydney to ram the submarine she moved out of the area to about 12 nautical miles from HSK Kormoran. She had to stop either to assess damage or loss of power. Stopping due to the loss of power would be more feasible as it would be unlikely she would stop in an area where she was potentially endangered by further attack from the submarine. (Although it is believed the attempt to ram the submarine was unsuccessful we cannot be sure of this.)

I know a fisherman who claims to have found an anomaly that resembles a submarine and which is situated not such a long way from the area where the encounter took place and which he will investigate this more thoroughly when next in the area in the hope this may bring more evidence to light.

It was about sundown that HSK Kormoran blew up. Research leaves no doubt about the timing of this contrary to Captain Detmers' claim this occurred after midnight. Firstly, in Michael Montgomery's book "Who Sank The Sydney", Bahn Noll and Von Goessln (survivors of HSK Kormoran) both claim HMAS Sydney was still alight at dusk and by which time HSK Kormoran had exploded. We also have statements from people on the coast who report an explosion earlier in the day which should be considered in substantiating the sequence of events.

The first of these statements I collected, as part of my research, from Jerry Rose of Geraldton who stated he was fishing at the beach with a group of people just north of Geraldton when they observed a column of smoke out to sea. Jerry stated that it was a smoke plume consistent with a cordite burn. When questioned, he advised that as a young man he lived near a naval base in England and periodically they burnt off the old cordite. These burns are distinctive and consistent beyond any doubt with what he observed from the beach that day. Jerry told me this story years before I began my research and I recall every detail. He could not recall the date of this sighting however he remembered the following day there were rumours circulating around Geraldton that HMAS Sydney was lost. Also he did not mention at what time of day they were fishing but the fact that Jerry habitually fished for Tailor within 1/2 to 3/4 of an hour

before sundown. I have fished with him on occasion and always at this time of the day. I have no compass bearing on the sighting as by the time I began my research Jerry had, sadly, passed away however I have no reason to doubt his recollections of this event.

The second statement I collected was from Ray Porter who lived at Riverside Station at the time and which is situated approximately 3 kilometres east of the Glen Bridge on the North West Coastal Highway and approximately 43 nautical miles from the coast. Ray stated that in November 1941 he was walking from the shearing shed down towards the homestead when he noticed a single cloud in the western sky. The sun had just gone down and as the cloud had colour in it he thought it was the last rays of the sun shining on the cloud. As he watched this cloud its shape changed to that of a large "S" and slowly faded away. I believe this was the same plume Jerry Rose reported and it would have reached its height when Ray sighted it having been dispersed by the prevailing winds to resemble a large "S". I took a compass bearing from Riverside Station to a point on the horizon indicated by Ray which gave a reading of 295 degrees. If this bearing is considered in relation to the area where the engagement potentially took place we now know it comes very close to the wreck of HSK Kormoran. This indicates conclusively enough that the plume or cloud which Ray sighted was the result of HSK Kormoran blowing up.

There is also a report from Ivy Mallard who was living at Comorong Station in November 1941. I didn't interview this lady personally however, she made a statement to Journalist, Ann Sanders. Many years later she was reported by other people who interviewed her regarding Sydney/Kormoran encounter as having a memory that was very good and clear. She states that late in the afternoon of 19th November 1941 she and her husband, Joe Mallard, the Station Manager, were sitting on the verandah prior to their evening mealtime when they heard loud noises which were coming from over the coast to the North West and across Dirk Hartog Island. There was a lot of booming noise which could be heard for about 15 – 20 minutes with flashes and flares plainly visible. There was also an enormous plume of grey/black smoke. Subsequently they heard a large explosion and saw heavy black smoke going up in all directions similar, they considered, to an atomic bomb with flashes and bangs. Once it quietened down suddenly they were both terrified. As they had watched it all Joe had commented that there must be a battle on out there and thought they should prepare to leave. They decided to wait for radio contact which didn't come so they decided to stay and didn't mention anything to anyone at that point. The important information here is that this recollection of events is consistent with the time as Jerry Rose and Ray Porter reported the plume of smoke. Also the duration of the booming noise they heard being 15 – 20 minutes begs the question of how long the battle lasted.

Let's have a look into this. There is some discrepancy in the time frame the HSK Kormoran survivors claim the engagement lasted being 1½ hours, 1 hour and 20 minutes. The 20 minute time frame is consistent with what Ivy Mallard reported. Could the claim the engagement lasted 1½ hours have been based from the initial sighting of HMAS Sydney until HSK Kormoran blew up at sundown? The other claim the engagement lasted 1 hour could have based on the time frame from when HMAS Sydney opened fire until HSK Kormoran blew up at sundown. The third claim the engagement lasted 15 – 20 minutes would indicate the duration of the engagement

followed by HSK Kormoran exploding at sundown. This is consistent with Ivy Mallard's statement and which I consider to be close to the true chronological order of events.

Considering at this stage HMAS Sydney is approximately 12 nautical miles from the engagement area and stationery, potentially from a loss of power, the Japanese submarine could have launched another attack on her which could account for the front part of the bow missing. I believe she must have lost the front of her bow subsequent to the initial engagement as it is not feasible for her to have travelled 12 nautical miles with the front of her bow missing.

It is reasonable to assume that with HMAS Sydney debilitated to such an extent the Japanese submarine surfaced and proceeded to murder HMAS Sydney survivors. One survivor of HSK Kormoran reported an explosion and repeated gunfire which would support this theory.

At about 1:30am on the 20th November 1941 people reported gunfire off Port Gregory which lasted for approximately 1 hour and along with the information gathered during my research of this incident and believed the wreck of HMAS Sydney would be found in this area but as we now know this is not the case. Which brings us to question what the gunfire off Port Gregory was? The only explanation is that it was connected in some way to the Sydney/Kormoran engagement.

Some researchers claim the people who reported this gunfire are confused with the shelling off Port Gregory by a Japanese submarine approximately 12 months later. I interviewed Jessie Shanks who was in Port Gregory in 1941 but left there around December 1941 so there is no way she could be confused with the subsequent shelling the following year.

There was debris picked up off the beach by local residents but this could not be connected beyond doubt with HMAS Sydney. Some of these people were interviewed by Army personnel and I believe interrogated. The beach was closed and although locals were told it was due to a tropical thunderstorm they were also advised they should not talk about it or there would be ramifications.

The only insight I can offer regarding the Port Gregory shelling is that it was possibly to confuse us into believing the engagement between HMAS Sydney and HSK Kormoran was off Port Gregory and we would be searching there for survivors and that this would give the Japanese more time to make sure no survivors of HMAS Sydney were left alive to tell of the involvement of the Japanese.

It has been hard to obtain an accurate date of the gunfire heard at Port Gregory. We know it was a Wednesday night as Mrs Adelina Cox (nee Dawson) recalls her father waking her in the early hours of the morning to come out and look at what was happening out to sea. She describes seeing a glow out to sea which could have been a ship burning on or beyond the horizon. She also stated it was a dark night with no moon. The Meteorological Department in Perth confirmed for me that the 19th November 1941 was a night with no moon as the moon set a few minutes after the sun. Her father stated that that night there was an unusual amount of traffic on the air that night, he states they were Oriental and he thinks, Japanese who were very excited

and in close proximity. This being true and I have no cause to think otherwise would indicate that there were two Japanese craft in the area with one being a surface craft.

Bob White states that as a boy he lived in Geraldton and one night in November 1941 he heard a rumbling noise during the night. The following morning he asked his father if he had heard the noise and he was told it was Naval gunfire. Bob White's father was a retired British Naval Officer so would be well placed to identify this. Bob added that when he went to school that day he was told HMAS Sydney had been sunk.

I trust this information will assist you with your inquiry and wish you and your staff the best in determining the correct account of this tragic incident.

Yours faithfully,



DRE (Ted) King