

The Admiralty transmitted a warning on the 27th of November, saying that it was known that U-boats had been used as escorts for returning raiders and supply ships. The signal also included probable tactics and added that Vichy French submarines were probably being used as escorts for merchant ships.

On November 30, 1941 - Prime Minister John Curtin made the stunning announcement about the sinking of the HMAS Sydney.

When the Prime Minister made the first of two public announcements, all he did was confirm the widely circulating rumours that the Sydney had been sunk.

The public's shock on said loss was accompanied by bewilderment that such a disaster had occurred. Suspicion that information was being concealed by the lack of any real explanation when the announcement did come and by the secrecy which surrounded the official investigation of the disaster.

It lead people to believe that in official archives there must exist documents which provide answers, unless the relevant information had been destroyed. No record of a board or court of inquiry or any formal investigation have surfaced. It is said that Naval Intelligence did conduct an investigation in January 1942, however only a reference of said report / investigation, not the report itself has been located (NAA: MP1049/5, 2026/19/6).

Two months after the sinking of the HMAS Sydney, it on record that on the evening of January 19, 1942 - a Japanese submarine followed a merchant ship and cruiser entering Darwin harbour. The submarine was sunk and one of the items recovered by Australian divers was a 'Japanese Naval Code Book'.

Australian sources also confirmed that a Japanese mini-sub launched torpedoes at the USS Chicago which was anchored at the Sydney Harbour, however the torpedoes missed the American cruiser and passed under a Dutch K-9 submarine and one of the torpedoes exploded under HMAS Kuttabul, a converted harbour ferry docked at Garden Island and 19 sailors were killed and others injured.

In February 1942, about two and a half months after Sydney's fatal encounter, a carley float was washed up on the beach of Christmas Island and contained the body of a sailor clothed in a blue boiler-suit bleached white by the sun on a life raft which was riddled with bullets, who was thereafter the subject of an autopsy and buried in an I-shaped coffin with military honours.

Barbara Craill (at 64 years of age) claimed that the remains belonged to her father Walter Edward Freer and said the sailor's skeleton should be exhumed and DNA tested to end the neglect of over then 59 years. Is it true that the RN Frigate Rother removed the body of the sailor at Christmas Island in 1945 which might have been one crew from the HMAS Sydney?

But if Mr. Montgomery had hoped that the deeper he looked into the affair, the clearer everything would become, he was in for a surprise. The more he studied the German survivors accounts of the action, the more contradictory they became.

Had they done something in the way of flying a neutral flag after the action had started, or firing on Sydney survivors in the water, that might have rendered them culpable as war criminals?

How was it that some German survivors, picked up from a raft three days adrift, appeared so fresh and clean-shaven? Had they been succoured by a Japanese submarine? And if there was a Japanese submarine present, had it played a much more sinister part in the affair?

Had the Germans perhaps something to hide, and if so, what? His book is a fascinating and unusual piece of naval detection, and one can only deplore the attitude of the Australian Naval authorities over the years in being so secretive. Although the naval records are now available says Montgomery, those who may have something valuable to say are still bound by the Official Secrets Act.

Is it too much to hope in the interest of historical truth, as well as respect for the Sydney's dead, that they be released from their vow of secrecy?

The rumour at the time was that there was a Japanese submarine where the action took place and according to Michael Montgomery, "The temptation to completely destroy the crew of the Sydney would have been overwhelming among the Japanese."

It has been pointed out that at the beginning the whole interrogation was handled poorly, was disorganised and amateur, lacked a sense of urgency and indicative that the war was still a long way from the Australian continent. The dependence on Great Britain and the imposition of the 'Official Secrets Act' at the time.

Among some of the people who assisted Montgomery were, Dr. D.C. Allard Head of Operational Archives branch, department of the Navy, Washington, D. Wright of the Military Archives Division, National Archives, Washington, R.A.N. (Ret'd); Commander P.R. Burnett, R.A.N. (Ret'd), son of the late Captain J. Burnett; Elizabeth Clarke who obtained various items from the Archives in Canberra and Melbourne after Michael had departed Australia.

Michael Montgomery had interviewed and corresponded with and/or received assistance from no less than 500 people.

As pointed out by Michael Montgomery regarding the finding of the HMAS Sydney - "It will be interesting to see the Australian government's reaction to the search for the Sydney, whether they say it should be stopped because it is a wartime burial ground or some other excuse?"

- * It is said that Mr. Ortmann had lost touch with six other Kormoran sailors who also had migrated to Australia, as well as, Shu Ah Fah and two other Chinese survivors of the Kormoran had also made Australia their home. Regarding the 3 Chinese (Shu Ah Fah & 2 others) it is said that there are curious omissions in the recorded evidence as it now exist in the normal archives and other official sources. The most significant is that of Shu Ah Fah's evidence at his interrogation at Freemantle. Have any member's of the Press, Radio or TV ever taken the time to interview these people about the tragic event to date?

(RSL News) dated August 1998, by Mabango Mackrell.

In the article he stated that he had just read a transcript of the Parliamentary inquiry into the circumstances of the sinking of the HMAS Sydney and after considering the submissions to the inquiry, he formed the opinion that the Sydney was tricked by Captain Detmers into a situation of intrigue. He points out that he believed that the Kormoran was waiting for the Aquitania at the west coast of Australia from Singapore and that the Japanese Embassy in Keppal Harbour were signalling the Kormoran of her progress.

That someone in the Naval Board knew this and deferred the sailing of the Aquitania by putting her in dry dock for repairs, however the Kormoran still lay in wait at the Australian west coast.

That the HMAS Sydney had been on escort duty up to Sudan Strait and was on her return to Freemantle and almost on the same path that the Aquitania would have taken.

That the Sydney had been informed that the supply vessel Kulmerland, sister ship of the Kormoran was somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

- * That Captain Burnett who had been Deputy Chief of Naval Staff in 1940 knew his business. Most likely Captain Burnett might have figured out that the Kormoran was the supply ship Kulmerland not the armed merchant raider Kormoran.

It is said that in the last few weeks the Kormoran had been painted and had changed her appearance as the 'Straat Malaka', as well as flew a Dutch flag. That most likely Captain Burnett was on the verge of dispatching his Walrus plane when the Kormoran put up a white flag.

Mr. Mackrell said that he believed that when Captain Detmers saw the HMAS Sydney, he knew he was in trouble as it turned out it was not the Aquitania which he was waiting for, so he tried subterfuge and hoisted his white flag.

However as it turned out, only six of the sailors knew about the white flag - Captain Detmers, the first officer, gunnery officer, coxswain, signals officer and the helmsman and therefore they might have been in breach of the Geneva Convention.

In other words the sailors who were in the engine room did not know about the white flag nor what had happened on the bridge.

*

- 1.) The Press would not publish the whole of it.
- 2.) No account would be conclusive;
- 3.) Publication would only serve to fuel further speculation.
- 4.) It would be derogatory to the service in that it infers that the Sydney was far from being alert. It would be better to let it rest to resurrect it to no good purpose.



An indecipherable signature added the following rider: "In many minds there will never be any finality in the matter; we should write nothing unless the Press brings pressure for a ministerial statement."

On 'ANZAC Day' - many people say 'We Remember, Lest We Forget' In 2002 I wrote this in the hope that 'Lest We Forget' some newspaper editor/publisher assign an investigative reporter to resolve the mystery of the sinking of the 'HMAS Sydney', and hopefully have it finally solved.

Many people have gone into this subject in earnest for years. Some have exhausted all avenues and feel they have reached a dead end. Most of them would be grateful if some Member of Parliament or the 'Media' or some kind soul, would take a serious look into this 65 year old mystery and resolve it once and for all. Some questions that have been asked are:

- * Whether a Japanese, German or French Vichy submarine participated in the sinking of the HMAS Sydney? Where there any of the survivors shot while on life rafts or in the water? Where the bodies from the HMAS Sydney picked up off the coast of Western Australia and buried in a mass grave?

Suspicion that information was being concealed without explanation despite widespread public rumour, announcement did not come and the secrecy which surrounded the official investigation of the disaster continued from January 1942 and into the year 2007. As we can all see, many obvious questions the government has failed to publicly address.

Public perception that the full story was not being told was sustained throughout the war by persistent press reports speculating about what might have happened, and by privately published accounts by W H Ross and W A Jones. At the conclusion of the war Commander R B M Long, director of Naval Intelligence continued to prevent publication and insisted that nothing further be published unless the Naval Board was forced to do so by Ministerial pressure.

The publication of the official history of the Royal Australian Navy in 1957 by Lieutenant Commander George Hermon Gill the Navy's wartime Publicity Censorship Liaison Officer, a chief advocate that nothing further be published did little to satisfy those seeking answers to a number of questions.

One of them is that was it not common knowledge that there certainly were Japanese submarines in Australian waters?