

HMAS Sydney II – Cole Inquiry

A submission by Garry F Baverstock AM

(Nephew of Able Seaman Ernest G. Baverstock)

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Introduction

It has been a worthwhile and fascinating journey for me to be a recent part of the quest of seeking the truth surrounding the mystery of the Sydney/Kormoran action in WWII. To understand my reasons for doing so, please refer to my letter to relatives recently inviting participation in the Virtual Memorial being compiled by the Finding Sydney Foundation (see attached).

A large part of the puzzle for 66 years for the uniformed was the actual position of the wrecks. The discovery by now friend, David Mearns, the famous wreck hunter, was an epic moment. This wonderful discovery was due to long term interest by so many researchers after 15 years of concentrated research and fund raising by the Sydney Search people in Australia. The nation owes a great debt to this famous group of people led by Ted Graham known working through the Finding Sydney Foundation. Through their persistent pursuit for a comprehensive in-water search for the shipwrecks, a great opportunity for a final, emotional and historical closure was created.

This closure for the nation and most importantly the surviving relatives of the crew, and former crew (who also have been long term researchers) such as Lt Comdr Ean McDonald and Tom Fisher of WA, now has a much better chance of resolution based, on data and facts rather than speculation and unconnected reports and data.

Also, I now believe final closure is within reach if the haunting unanswered questions posed by many researchers, professionals and amateurs are dealt with comprehensively. It should now be much easier to answer or credibly explain many of the loose ends surrounding this mystery through this Cole Inquiry. Let us hope so.

My Role

As can be seen in the brief Baverstock story (attached), I am one generation removed from those affected by the initial loss of HMAS Sydney II and all its crew. However, since a child I had close enough ties as a relative, having a remorseful father, Able Seaman Frederick J Baverstock who like my heroic uncle E.G. Baverstock served in the RAN during WWII. If one reads the story in more detail one can better understand why I have emotional interest in the outcome and warranted, understandable national pride in helping establish justice for all the surviving relatives in finally knowing beyond doubt what actually happened. Critical to this full knowledge is needed of why events transpired as they did, and

why it had to remain such a mystery for so long? I have never been a researcher as such and really have never held had a definitive theory either. However, until all the facts are known or knowable, I believe that the full story may never be revealed. The official story always appeared to be deficient of so much detail. Perhaps that can now be rectified.

But since my committed involvement to the HMAS II historical truth, I have always been mostly interested in due process occurring. The discovery/release of the full facts about the battle, the lead up to it and the aftermath, however palatable or unpalatable it may be, is what is expected by the Australian public and the relatives in particular.

For this reason I list critical questions that have never been satisfactorily explained to date for consideration by the Inquiry.

List of Pertinent Questions:

1. Were radio or W/T signals received before, during or after the battle?
2. Have all secret documents been researched openly for unclassified and secretly for classified material that may be associated for the Sydney/Kormoran battle, here in Australia, Great Britain and Germany?
3. Did Kormoran come into Gauge Roads after 11th November was allowed to leave unscathed?
4. Were the Naval, Army and Air Force chiefs in Geraldton the night of the battle arriving on the 18th November?
5. Was Winston Churchill involved in any way (through secret orders or briefings) in HMAS Sydney II's last mission?
6. Were there Japanese spies active along the stretch of coast at the time of the Sydney/Kormoran battle?
7. Was the Japanese involved in this last mission of Kormoran in any way?
8. Who was in hierarchical control of HMAS Sydney II on its last fateful mission, particularly the return trip? Was it the RAN or C in C China (in Singapore)?
9. Were documents relating to the Sydney/Kormoran battle, logs and records destroyed by Cmndr Rupert Long after the war?
10. Did HMAS Sydney II have D/F capability or not?

11. Was there D/F capacity on shore of the WA at the time of the battle?
12. Was the Kormoran spotted during a night reconnaissance by RAAF leading up to the battle?
13. Was the HMAS Sydney II carrying gold, hastily exited from Singapore on its last mission?
14. Were coded messages from Sydney able to be intercepted by the Japanese and /or the Germans via Kormoran?
15. Were coded messages from Kormoran to the high command able to be intercepted by the British in Singapore?
16. Did the British command share all intelligence with the RAN at the time?
17. Why was there no admission that the Christmas Island body was from Sydney II for over 60 years?
18. Given that DNA techniques are now being used to analyse 3000-year-old Egyptian mummies for family linkages, why has it been so long and so hard for the Christmas Island body to be finally identified?
19. Will full photographic records be kept by the Australian Government from the forensic examination of the Christmas Island body for future reference by this and or the next generations, should it be ceremonially buried in the meantime?
20. Was his fatal injury categorically caused by a bullet or shrapnel, and what is the possible explanation of how did he managed to get into the life raft in such a state?
21. Has the battle area been identified, or will there be, for future investigation to establish an accurate location why the battle started and finished as evidenced by remnants on the ocean floor?
22. Was an underwater torpedo used at the beginning of the battle, as well as the end of the battle?
23. Why was the existence of an underwater torpedo unknown for so many years?
24. Was the Kormoran virtually stopped when the battle started or moving at 14 knots as claimed in the official account thus far?

25. Did the Germans use motorized boats as part of their lifeboat journeys after scuttling their ship?
26. What is the complete explanation of why there were no Sydney survivors and why no searches were able to find any when the two ships sank so close together?
27. It is possible that local residents in Port Gregory and Geraldton, on the night of the battle, were able to see flashes and hear shellfire or explosions from such a large distance?
28. Were bodies washed up on shore between Carnarvon and Port Gregory and secretly buried by army burial party?
29. Was a lifeboat from HMAS Sydney II washed up on a beach north of Port Gregory weeks after the battle and taken away by the army?
30. Was there a cover up of the reasons for the delayed search for Sydney after the battle?

Final Considerations

There have been so many other stories and reports posing more questions than answers that I have read or been told to me over many years. From my perception, possibly due to the continual questioning of the official story and along with the integrity of people in charge of naval intelligence, they have not always been respectfully or comprehensively handled in my opinion to date, or answered categorically by anyone in authority in a manner that satisfies the doubters. It may be because of the lack of resources and the annoying/insulting implications of such questioning or criticisms. In a way, I do understand the sentiments of those in charge, especially if the official story is in fact proven to be very close to the full truth. To me that contention is still not that obvious.

It must be understood by the Inquiry that I am not insinuating that there was or is a "conspiracy" of sorts, but maybe in 1941 certain aspects of the full story could have been suppressed in the national interest and justifiably continued over the following decades for post war diplomacy reasons. This is perfectly understandable. But it is difficult to believe this is still defensible, if in fact the case, after 67 years.

If possible, this Inquiry needs to fully explain exactly what the case was and is in context of today's international relations.

Thus, the Cole Inquiry represents a magnificent opportunity to bring all reasonable people together with a unified understanding of what happened, if sensitively handled and independently investigated.

If these questions (and many more like them posed by the various researchers) are not properly dealt with then the controversy may simply continue due to immense interest in the event that has grown over many decades. The answers /responses must be accurately based on data, records and verifiable reports and / or detailed scientific analysis / simulation or overwhelmingly indisputable expert opinions are possible. Otherwise, results and conclusions will continue to be inconclusive out of reach from a reasonable man's logical perspective.

I am confident that after 66 years this Inquiry should be able to deliver credible responses to above questions and hopefully document the final accurate detailed story as it actually happened.

All the best to all investigators involved!