

An analysis of the loss of HMAS SYDNEY

By David Kennedy



The 6,830-ton modified Leander class cruiser HMAS SYDNEY

THE MAIN STORY

The sinking of cruiser HMAS SYDNEY by disguised German raider KORMORAN, and the delayed search for all 645 crew who perished 70 years ago, can be attributed directly to the personal control by British wartime leader Winston Churchill of top-secret Enigma intelligence decodes and his individual power.

As First Lord of the Admiralty, then Prime Minister, Churchill had been denying top secret intelligence information to commanders at sea, and excluding Australian prime ministers from knowledge of Ultra decodes of German Enigma signals long before SYDNEY II was sunk by KORMORAN, disguised as the Dutch STRAAT MALAKKA, off north-Western Australia on November 19, 1941.

Ongoing research also reveals that a wide, hands-on, operation led secretly from London in late 1941, accounted for the ignorance, confusion, slow reactions in Australia and a delayed search for survivors . . . in stark contrast to Churchill's direct part in the destruction by SYDNEY I of the German cruiser EMDEN 25 years before.

Churchill was at the helm of one of his special operations, to sweep from the oceans disguised German raiders, their supply ships, and also blockade runners bound for Germany from Japan, when SYDNEY II was lost only 19 days before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Southeast Asia.

Covering up of a blunder, or a punitive example to the new and distrusted Labor government of John Curtin gone terribly wrong because of a covert German weapon, can explain stern and brief

official statements at the time and whitewashes now, with Germany and Japan solidly within Western alliances.

The official history, Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942, from the Australian War Memorial 1957 by English-born Intelligence publicity censorship liaison officer George Hermon Gill, states: "The story of her action was pieced together through exhaustive interrogation of KORMORAN's survivors. No room was left for doubt as to its accuracy."

The RAN Director of Naval Intelligence Rupert Long told media he would: "not release any more information without a ministerial directive".

Curtin said in a message to the nation: "Her actual fate, in the absence of other evidence, must remain a mystery."

Churchill would, a month after Pearl Harbor, tell Curtin that "London had not made a fuss when it was bombed. Why should Australia?"

Bronwyn Bishop, who initiated the JSCFADT (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade) sub-committee inquiry, when Veterans Affairs Minister, lost an uncle on the SYDNEY, acting Chief Petty Officer Allen Leslie Smith. She told parliament last year that the KORMORAN "had acted with deception and lured the SYDNEY so that it lost its firepower advantage". When the ships were found and "we heard again the story of the last half-hour of the SYDNEY the only version being the German version? It was not an honourable battle. The German ship behaved dishonourably. To whitewash the fact that all Australians were lost and 317 Germans were rescued is to whitewash the greatest loss of naval personnel in the history of Australia".

Troop ship AQUITANIA and tanker TROCAS, used also as a fleet tanker, were both under Admiralty control . . . and were the first two ships to locate German survivors and pick them up. AQUITANIA, with the rescue on the 23rd. officially did not report it find until four days after the rescue and then by visual signal to Victoria's Wilson Promontory. The TROCAS message, on the 24th, was officially received in Australia from Singapore.

An "independent" Commission of Inquiry in 2009 -- under Naval Reserve commodore Terence Cole and commander Jack Rush as counsel assisting -- declared as "almost inexplicable" SYDNEY captain Joseph Burnett's "initial decision to assess the sighted ship as innocent". It blamed Burnett for the loss of his ship but did not formally find him negligent.

But the Commission must have overlooked, among all the words written on war, intelligence and politics, the writings of Graham Freudenberg, Australian speech writer and adviser to Labor prime ministers Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke and state premiers and whose father served at Gallipoli; Edinburgh University historian David Stafford; and even a Dino de Laurentiis film Under Ten Flags, an amalgam of the World War II raiders with the technical advisers Bernhard Rogge, captain of raider ATLANTIS, and its adjutant Ulrich Mohr. Charles Laughton plays a uniformed Admiralty chief but has the unmistakable authority and personality of Churchill.

Australia's first World War Two Prime Minister Robert Menzies wrote in his diary "Winston is a dictator", US Office of Strategic Services head William "Wild Bill" Donovan accused him of

"dictatorship proclivities" and Churchill's wife Clementine, wrote that he adopted a "rough iron-fisted 'Hunnish' way".

In 1943 Churchill was in Canada at the Quebec conference: "Ironically, his host at Quebec, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King remained in the dark about Ultra [The decrypt of Enigma]. Only one Commonwealth Prime Minister knew the secret: Field Marshal Jan Smuts of South Africa. Churchill revered and trusted the old Boer fighter and personally revealed it to him."

After Minister for External Affairs Bert Evatt, in the House on November 27, criticised Britain, Churchill sent an outraged cable dated 1am to Curtin, reminding him of the despatch of the yet-to-be-lost Prince of Wales and Repulse "in the face of the grave misgivings" and concluded with condolences on the loss of HMAS SYDNEY whose predecessor, in 1914, "had sailed, under Churchill's orders, into the Indian Ocean, where it had destroyed the German raider EMDEN".

It is inconceivable that Churchill had not connected the first-class cruiser SYDNEY II, whose home base was then Perth, to the pending arrival of the PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE in Singapore, where the SYDNEY's former captain John Collins was acting as assistant to the Naval Chief of Staff, and was responsible for protection of merchant ships from raiders. This connection made by me before the JSCFADT inquiry started may have been a reason for former HMAS PERTH's Norman "Knocker" White, later a captain, who asked me how to get transcripts, being told by a Defence Minister's aide to "help us get Kennedy". "Knocker", who retired as commander of the Royal Australia Naval College at Jervis Bay, told me instead of what he had been asked to do.

Curtin replied to Churchill: "We assume that your Government welcomes our independence of thought and advice". But he added that "we will be at great pains to see to it here that no criticism of your policy in respect of war and foreign affairs is given publicity". "The loss of the SYDNEY was a 'heavy blow which must be borne'."

Freudenberg writes in Churchill and Australia in 2008 that, "For a civilian chief with no naval experience, Churchill's hands-on approach was astonishing and unprecedented. The intensity of his interference in day-to-day operations is shown in his daily instructions to the Admiralty. On 1 October 1914 he wrote: 'there is no need for MELBOURNE and SYDNEY [I] to remain in Australasian waters. SYDNEY [I] should immediately be ordered to join HAMPSHIRE, YARMOUTH and CHIKUMA in the EMDEN hunt!'"

"Churchill was enthused not only by the event itself but by his exaggerated sense of his own part in placing SYDNEY [I] at the decisive point."

At the advent of the Royal Australian Navy in 1913, "Churchill nailed his colours to the Admiralty mast when he tried to prevent HMAS AUSTRALIA leaving the Atlantic for the Pacific, to take its place as the flagship of the Australian Navy."

"The orders came from Whitehall . . . [historian Arthur] Jose did not name Churchill but sailors, of course, understood exactly whom he was criticising. AUSTRALIA was ordered to leave the Pacific, and arrived at Plymouth 'shortly after midnight' on 28 January 1915. At last Churchill had the Australian flagship where he had always wanted her -- with the Home Fleet."

"From the start of the Great War, Churchill acquired the habit of treating Australian forces as an extension of British arms, taking their orders direct from London. He was never able to break the habit. Churchill's flurry of signals to the Empire's naval outposts had alerted the Australian Government to the emergency even before the official communication to the Governor-General, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, arrived via the Colonial Office."

Churchill's "total self-belief and his urge for action had their stubborn reckless and spiteful aspect. Australia often seemed to bring out that darker side".

"Colonel John Monash wrote from Gallipoli to his wife . . . in August 1915: 'We have dropped the Churchill way of rushing in before we are ready and hardly knowing what we are going to do next . . . !'"

"Australians at home could not know how close the Anzac landing came to ignominy. In fact, they knew nothing about it at all for days. The despatch by Charles Bean, the Australian official war correspondent, was delayed by military censorship and bureaucracy. The first full report, published in Australian papers on 8 May, nearly a fortnight after the landings, was the work of the British correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, a flamboyant adventurer with influential connections . . ."

"The Dardanelles Commission of Inquiry" was "appointed later to whitewash the fiasco". It "criticised Churchill for inadequate consultation with his Board of Admiralty". Australia's Andrew Fisher implied that he had failed to do his constitutional duty. The West Australian newspaper said Churchill had no real scheme: "Like a new Joshua, he would sound his trumpet and the walls of Jericho would collapse." The Sydney Morning Herald called Churchill's conduct "an example of the rashness of an amateur in risking great issues on the strength of his opinion on highly technical subjects". Churchill declared that the verdict of history would be favourable, "particularly as I intend to write the history myself".

Andrew Fisher, succeeded by Billy Hughes as Australian Prime Minister in October 1915, was weighed down by "cavalier treatment by the British Government" and "the lack of information about the role or even the whereabouts of the Australian troops he had committed to the fortunes of war".

"Labor's rejection of conscription for overseas service distorted . . . Churchill's attitude towards the Curtin Labor Government."

"Winston is back." The Admiralty signal flashed around the Royal Navy; and for the second time in twenty-five years Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, sent the signal: 'Commence hostilities against Germany'. As in 1914, Churchill's order put Australia on war alert ahead of the official notification from the British Government."

"Repeating 1914 more urgently, he recalled the navy west of Suez. This included most of the Royal Australian Navy, which on 9 November 1939, was once again placed under control of the British Admiralty and its First Lord. He discarded once and for all the navy's inter-war doctrine of 'Main fleet to Singapore'."

"Churchill tried hard to hide the new reality from the Australian Government."

"Australia's place in Churchill's grand design was clear and simple . . . [when] the Australian leadership began to ask whether national and imperial interests were identical, the scowl became an angry growl."

Churchill attacked allied, but defeated, France's fleet at Oran, a decision he called "the most unnatural and painful I ever made" in July 1940 to prevent it falling into German hands.

Curtin's decision not to accept Robert Menzies' request to join a national government "rankled with Churchill, who had a poor understanding of Australian politics and stubborn prejudices about them". From London, High Commissioner Stanley Bruce cabled Menzies, protesting against the lack of consultation and information about Britain's latest Singapore policy.

Churchill "strained every nerve" . . . to "put the Australians just where he wanted them" even if this "meant glossing over unpalatable realities".

When Churchill sent British troops to strengthen the Free French in the abortive bid to seize Vichy Dakar, Senegal, in September 1940, cruiser HMAS AUSTRALIA was part of the naval squadron that had two ships badly damaged by gunfire. "He told the Australian Government nothing about it." Menzies cabled Churchill that "It is absolutely wrong that [the] Australian Government should know practically nothing of details of engagement . . . absence of real official information from Great Britain has frequently proved humiliating". Churchill replied that it was "impossible to avoid uncertainty and hazard" and that he expected "a generous measure of indulgence should any particular minor matter miscarry".

Of North African fighting at the end of 1940, Menzies complained to Churchill about lack of information: "We are represented as a government that knows less than the newspaper reporters."

Churchill and his Middle East commander Archibald Wavell both used the citing of "high authorities" and "men on the spot" to mislead Menzies, and AIF commander Thomas Blamey, on the planned Greek campaign, with Wavell telling Blamey he had consulted with Menzies. "It was just not true."

Hearing Churchill deny that he had unnecessarily sacrificed Anzac troops in the Greek fiasco, official Australian war correspondent Kenneth Slessor wrote in his diary that "Churchill's deft evasion of the truth, his clever appeal to sentimentality and patriotic emotion, and his extraordinary misstatements of the facts of the Greek campaign determined me to get the real story back to Australia." He wrote of a preparedness "callously and cynically to sacrifice a comparatively small force of Australian fighting men for the sake of a political gesture". "Slessor got as far as Blamey in Cairo", who told him it would not get past the censor, but gave him a confidential interview which went unpublished for 40 years. Blamey said the guarantees were between governments: "What is a gesture to the politicians is death to us."

Menzies wrote in his diary on 14 April, 1941: "W.C. speaks at length as the Master Strategist ... Wavell and the Admiralty have failed us. The Cabinet is deplorable -- most of whom disagree with Winston but none of whom dare to say so ... Winston is a dictator; he cannot be overruled . . . his power is therefore terrific."

"Churchill told the Dominions Office to go easy on propaganda about the imminent invasion threat: 'I do not see the object of spouting all this stuff unless it is thought the Dominions require to be frightened into doing their duty'."

"Menzies wrote in his diary: 'Winston is not a receptive or reasoning animal'."

Menzies, visiting London in May 1941, repeated his constant theme: "I confess I have no great confidence in the Chiefs of Staff who allow Churchill to determine their strategy for them."

Churchill wrote in his history *The Hinge of Fate*: "when, as it seemed to them and their professional advisers, destruction was at the very throat of the Australian Commonwealth, they did not all join together in a common effort". This "influenced his attitude to life-and-death decisions affecting Australian troops".

Churchill was as determined to keep the 9th Australian Division in Tobruk as Rommel was to get them out. From June to October 1941, Churchill waged a bruising battle against the governments of Menzies, Fadden, and then Curtin, to prevent its relief and replacement. It was the most serious dispute between Churchill and Australia until the fall of Singapore; and for its long-lasting influence on Churchill's attitude towards Australia, one of the most significant of the war.

Concentrating the Australian forces overseas was another issue. The British military historian Corelli Barnett wrote in 1960: "Of the Dominions, only the Australian and New Zealand divisions had been in constant combat." Only the Australians aroused Churchill's resentment whenever they attempted to exercise a measure of independence. Churchill prejudiced even King George who wrote in his diary: "In Australia, they are always being critical."

Churchill insisted that politics, not tactics, lay at the root of Australia's conduct over Tobruk but Menzies, Fadden and Curtin, all leading different parties, took the unanimous advice of their military advisers in Tobruk, Cairo and Melbourne.

After Curtin was sworn in as Prime Minister on October 7 1941 and reaffirmed his two predecessors' stand on Tobruk, Churchill portrayed Curtin's reaffirmation as the "crucial Australian refusal". Curtin was a Labor prime minister, ideologically opposed to Churchill at a time when Churchill had indications that Japan would extend the war it had been fighting in Asia for a decade.

"Mr Churchill fires every shot and feels every wound," Curtin said after they met in London in May 1944. The Tobruk dispute continued to rankle with Churchill.

Churchill wrote to his First Lord of the Admiralty, Dudley Pound, in February 1941: "Our object is to get the Americans into the war, and the proper strategic dispositions will soon emerge when they are up against reality."

Australia, under Menzies, and later that year Labor's John Curtin, was excluded from knowledge of the Ultra intercepts. Before the threat of a Japanese entry into the war, Curtin had advocated an arrangement with Tokyo for peaceful access to minerals in the north of Western Australia.

In his December 27, 1941 "US keystone" message to the Australian people, Curtin wrote: "Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom."

There would be more clashes over Churchill's wish to divert the 7th division to defend an already doomed Rangoon and the general return of Australian forces from the Middle East to fight the Pacific War.

"Curtin had won his battle with Churchill; but his worst private ordeal was just beginning. . . . His friend, Frank Green, Clerk of the House of Representatives" had heard from Curtin's driver that Curtin had not been to bed for days and spent each night walking the grounds of the Lodge. Green went to the Lodge after the House rose after midnight, found Curtin and asked him what was the matter. "We stood in silence in the darkness for some minutes, and then he said: 'How can I sleep with the men in the Indian Ocean among enemy submarines'."

Unlike HMAS SYDNEY, the troop convoys arrived safely in port.

Of the first Cabinet meeting of the First War, Freudenberg quotes British Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith as writing: "Winston dashed into the room radiant . . . he was going to send telegrams to the Mediterranean, the North Sea and God knows where! You could see he was a really happy man."

On land in Belgium for the defence of Antwerp, Churchill took to "ordering the Royal Naval Division about as if it was his private army".

"Winston Churchill famously coined the phrase: 'terminological inexactitude'. Another favourite expression of his was 'being economical with the truth'."

First Sea Lord "Jacky" Fisher said he was silent when Churchill announced his Dardanelles naval assault plan, to bombard Turkish forts, to the War Council on January 13 1915. He later told the Dardanelles Commission of Inquiry regarding Churchill's pose that he was speaking for all the Admiralty: "It was none of my business to kick the shins of the First Lord of the Admiralty under the table. He was my chief and it was silence or resignation."

Churchill told Fisher that as only older battleships were involved, their loss would not weaken the navy's strength against the Germans in the North Sea. Fisher retorted that even the loss of old ships meant the loss of irreplaceable young men.

"When Churchill became Prime Minister in May, 1940, he was to adopt" Lloyd George's formula that the PM should "direct and overlook the whole machine thoroughly, controlling all the levers by making himself Minister of Defence".

"By early 1941, Churchill knew a good deal about Hitler's plans through Ultra, the brilliant code-breaking operation whose intelligence was so vital to the Allied war effort that its secrets were not disclosed for 30 years." In his war memoirs of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Churchill would not reveal even its existence, much less its influence on his decisions. He usually attributed signals intelligence to "daring agents" on the ground.

Stafford writes of Churchill: "Always a 'hands-on' minister, he found the temptation to involve himself in the details of operational matters irresistible." And: "Even in highly technical matters Churchill would insist on the elaborate presentation of his own views, often arguing with such persuasiveness that Admiralty officials, through sheer exhaustion, would capitulate against their better judgement."

In an order as first Lord of the Admiralty on November 29, 1914, Churchill decreed that signals intelligence intercepts should go to "only a handful of people" in the Admiralty. "Remarkably absent from the list were any members of the Cabinet or War Council, the supreme body created by Asquith to run the war. And Asquith 'only by courtesy of Churchill'."

Churchill's determination "to restrict knowledge to the smallest possible number of people in the Admiralty" in turn "created a system that was over-centralised and inefficient".

"Most harmful still, Churchill's system excluded the commanders at sea." Churchill "insisted that intercepts were to remain within the Admiralty. It alone would decide what intelligence should be passed to ships at sea. This, as events were soon to prove, was a mistake" [On December 16, 1914, two German battle cruisers shelled Scarborough and Whitby and another three others pounded Hartlepool, causing 500 civilian killed or injured. Some 36 hours earlier wireless intercepts revealed the time of the German ships' departure for the raids and arrival back but not the targets. To preserve the secrecy of the wireless intercepts Churchill and his advisers decided to intercept the returning German vessels but this failed when sea mist gave them cover. Churchill was however pleased that the signals intelligence worked. "Churchill resisted all demands for an internal inquiry."

Churchill "carefully weeded his papers" in specific cases.

Churchill agreed that, in the matter of the intercepts of projected movements of the U-20 to the Irish Sea prior to its sinking Lusitania, "Room 40 intelligence should be concealed from any inquiry. This was not to cover up a conspiracy, but to safeguard the secret that Britain was reading German ciphers". In April 1915, amid concern that German submarines were heading towards the eastern Mediterranean, Churchill had an intercept from Room 40 that U-33 was under way to an unknown destination. "Again, he carefully disguised the source to suggest it came from 'a trustworthy agent'." That month "U-21 torpedoed the battleship Triumph at anchor off Gallipoli".

After the battles of Coronel and the Falklands. "The sinking of the DRESDEN again revealed how Churchill and the Admiralty regarded intercepts as almost private property." Wilhelm Canaris, as a young lieutenant in March 1915, had been sent across in a pinnace to a pursuer GLASGOW when the DRESDEN had been detected by signals intelligence as needing to coal from a supply ship at the remote Chilean Juan Fernandez islands but the British, who had opened fire, resumed shelling despite claims that internment had been effected. Four months earlier, at the Cocos islands in the Indian Ocean, the first SYDNEY had resumed shelling smaller cruiser Emden, grounded and defeated.

GLASGOW captain John Luce told Canaris: "My orders are to destroy the DRESDEN wherever I find her. Other matters are not my concern -- the diplomats will have to settle those later."

"The Oxford historian Maurice Ashley, employed in the 1930s to help Churchill in the writing of his massive biography of the first Duke of Marlborough, never forgot his startling directive: 'Give me the facts Ashley, and I will twist them the way I want to suit my argument'."

Basil Liddell Hart, military correspondent for the Daily Telegraph and later for The Times, and military adviser to Encyclopaedia Britannica, was "a savage critic of Churchill during the Second World War, denouncing him for rejecting a compromise peace and waging total war". Reprisals "bred a generation addicted to violence".

"Churchill had delighted in SIGINT since writing Room 40's charter in 1914. Now, a World War later, he described the Ultra intercepts as his 'Golden Eggs'. Remaining true to a lifetime's habit, he demanded deliveries of the raw intercepts direct from Bletchley Park. Only thus was he able to see, touch and feel the enemy, and act as his own intelligence officer."

"Ultra was a source of undreamed-of power; knowledge to use against the unsuspecting enemy, but also a trump card in his negotiations on strategy with his Chiefs of Staff and allies. For Churchill as war leader was instinctively a strategist . . . Britain's supreme strategic co-ordinator."

Stafford records that at the Quebec conference in late 1943, host Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King "remained in the dark about Ultra. Only one Commonwealth Prime Minister knew the secret. Field Marshal Jan Smuts of South Africa. Churchill revered and trusted the old Boer fighter and personally revealed it to him".

The Ultra blackout had been maintained on Australia in any event with the election of the John Curtin Labor government in October 1941.

Members of the US intelligence team to visit Britain in February 1941 "were shown the bombes [giant deciphering machines] and also supplied with the wiring of the military Enigma's rotors", supporting other reports that Enigma was excluded to Australia also by the United States.

"Once installed as Britain's war leader in 1940", Churchill "immediately revitalised the intelligence services, enthusiastically consumed his 'golden eggs' [of secret intercepts] and masterminded the London-Washington intelligence alliance." This would involve Ultra material also being withheld from Australia by the US.

While exaggerating U-boat losses, Churchill ordered that contradictory naval intelligence figures "should be shown only to himself, the First Sea Lord and the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, and that other sets of figures for broader circulation should be specially prepared and vetted by him before release".

"Behind the rhetorical bravura lay a skilful massaging of the intelligence data."

"For all that he insisted that Admiralty bulletins should establish an impeccable record of truthfulness, he regarded public statements about U-boat losses as matters of high policy".

The head of the Admiralty's press section and the Director of the Anti-Submarine Warfare Division were both abruptly transferred to sea.

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Rear-Admiral John Godfrey, criticised Churchill's exaggerated success claims in a letter that was blocked from reaching Churchill by First Sea Lord Admiral Dudley Pound. Two years later Godfrey was removed, and was alone among colleague of his rank in not receiving any special decoration at the end of the war.

Other factors not addressed sufficiently by establishment historians so far are evidence that the British had broken the rarely-used surface raider code and that the information that German counter-intelligence chief Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, on upcoming major offences and operations, had to also be going to Churchill. Canaris was ordered executed by Hitler in 1945, hung, jerked up and dropped again.

Stafford writes that "British code breakers failed to crack the German Navy's high-grade Enigma cipher until the spring of 1941." That statement defies Britain's claims that the raider code was never broken. Also Bletchley Park decrypter Alec Dakin writes in *Code Breakers, The Inside Story of Bletchley Park* that early in the centre's history "a remarkable signal" from "some remote area of the South Atlantic" named a ship that caused considerable trouble to decoders but it was worked out to

be Ole Wegger. German raider PiINGUIN captured that ship in the Antarctic in mid-January 1941 and would have signalled when clear of the capture point.

Apart from preserving the secrecy of signals intelligence and knowledge of weapons, there were overriding factors in the failure to hold a stringent inquiry into some evidence that KORMORAN had fired a concealed underwater torpedo tube in a surprise covert start to the action. There would have been reprisals against Allied prisoners of war, the German surface Navy had more peacetime international exposure to the British Empire forces than the now-prominent U-boat arm, its sailors had mutinied in 1918 to hurry the end of the First World War, its intelligence and counter-espionage world also had a more honourable reputation than the U-boat service and Churchill knew Germany would be needed one day as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

Of Ultra: "In March, 1941 it also helped produce Britain's first great naval victory with the defeat of the Italian fleet at Matapan, a blow of psychological and practical importance in securing the Mediterranean."

Such an operation as that involving the SYDNEY had been used earlier that year to round up or sink supply ships that had been deployed to support battleship BISMARCK had she succeeded breaking out to raid commerce. BISMARCK was sunk on May 27, 1941, three days after sinking the Hood.

In 19 days from June 3, nine supply ships for BISMARCK and other surface raiders were targeted, hunted down and sunk, captured or scuttled in the North Atlantic.

And these were classic trademarks of the handling of signals intercepts since the start of the First World War by Churchill, who never visited Australia but directed its forces by remote control with an information base that he guarded jealously from all but one Empire prime minister.

David Stafford's exhaustive Churchill & Secret Service, well reviewed at the time by The Spectator, Sunday Times, Times and New York Times, was no Churchill-basher and discounted charges that he had pre-knowledge of the sinking of the Lusitania and the bombing of Coventry, while revealing that the leader altered, or left out, damaging events in his later writings and that many documents from both wars were still withheld or missing in 1997, when an Australian parliamentary inquiry into SYDNEY's loss began.

That Joint Subcommittee on Defence, Foreign Affairs and Trade, which had international and national government, military and community input found, in its 1999 report, that there was a strong case for an underwater torpedo from KORMORAN having played a significant role in the sinking and the Defence Signals Directorate submitted that no signals from KORMORAN to Germany or Japan had been recorded but that there was no guarantee that that they would have been picked up.

The Commission of Inquiry into the loss a decade later, chaired by naval reserve commodore Terence Cole with adversarial lead counsel reserve commander Jack Rush and naval support staff, basically had only the ships as extra material. It did not test the evidence of Germans questioned a decade after the JSCDFAT, recruited testifiers that supported the Official History version and asked the naval architect John Jeremy if he could produce forensic evidence from the wrecks that could fit together with the official account, which so far as had been revealed had been based on the evidence of the only survivors, the Germans. Jeremy stated this twice at the annual general meeting of his professional association, the Royal Institution of Naval Architects.

Either the COI -- arguably ersatz martial law in the form of a military commission revising the decision of parliamentarians -- had information that has not been released, and why not, or agreement had been reached to support the German account in the interest of West German support against the new threat of Soviet-led eastern Europe.

The finding of the ships in 2008, where they were supposed to be, was with an expedition led by British-based American David Mearns at the insistence of then Australian Chief of Navy Admiral Chis Ritchie, and the appointed historian was former Royal Navy captain Peter Hore. Neither Australian, although the expertise was available in the country that lost almost the entire complement.

Mearns and Hore, chosen to locate the ships and tell the story, featured respectively a coded battle account by Detmers using dots in a dictionary and an action report -- both of which had been in fact available and decoded before the parliamentary inquiry -- and both stopped raising them at news conferences. Hore stated at an address to the National Archive of Australia that "Detmers was a naval officer and naval offices do not lie", to visible bemusement.

This writer could not help but believe that the "senior service" had closed ranks to preserve intelligence and political confidentiality and that the classic practice of not calling a commission of inquiry unless you can be certain of its findings was being strictly observed.

Stafford writes that in an order as First Lord of the Admiralty on November 29, 1914, Churchill decreed that signals intelligence intercepts should go to "only a handful of people" in the Admiralty.

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Churchill's determination "to restrict knowledge to the smallest possible number of people in the Admiralty" in turn "created a system that was over-centralised and inefficient".

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Churchill was however pleased that the signals intelligence worked and a later German raid resulted in the sinking of the BLUECHER, even though the pursuit leader, Admiral David Beatty stated of that operation: "in reality it was a terrible failure". "Churchill resisted all demands for an internal inquiry."

Churchill was removed as First Lord, the political head, of the Admiralty after his disastrous Dardanelles naval campaign that included the Gallipoli landings and forced withdrawal.

A "damaging separation of the cryptographers from intelligence was rectified only after Churchill had left the Admiralty," Stafford writes. He would return as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1939-40 and Prime Minister in 1940-45 and reimpose exclusive accesses.

Churchill knew that contact had been lost with SYDNEY after initial encounter signals from both the cruiser and KORMORAN but did nothing about it until the more successful raider ATLANTIS had been

sunk in the Atlantic three days later and he was satisfied that there was a cover story for the interception that protected the Enigma intercepts or made that issue insignificant. There were remarks attributed to Germans on KORMORAN that the Walrus amphibian spotter plane on SYDNEY had been picked up by the cruiser or that its engine had been running on its catapult, enough for thoughts that it had been in the air, and sufficient for a cover story.

Evidence of "do nothing" signals from London about the SYDNEY sinking reports were testified to by cryptographer Hetty Hall at Singapore naval base, where her mother also did that essential work and whose father was a defence engineer. Hetty added that there had been an Enigma machine there and a British Type-X machine to also carry ciphers.

Evidence that signals were transmitted from SYDNEY and KORMORAN before, during and after the clash, apart from a distracting QQQQ raider sighting report signal sent by KORMORAN radio operator Hans Linke, came also from figures including Linke, KORMORAN Communications Officer Baron Reinhold von Malapert, supply ship KULMERLAND Tokyo-based radio operator Heinz Herrmann and Harman, Canberra, naval wireless station commanding officer's writer-assistant Robert Mason. KORMORAN radio operator Adolf Marmann confirmed that KORMORAN's wireless room had power until he was ordered to abandon the ship hours after the action.

Linke told me that KORMORAN hit SYDNEY first with a torpedo from an underwater tube and the guns joined in as the torpedo hit. KORMORAN torpedo mechanic Edmund Abel wrote that the torpedo was already running as the firing started.

SYDNEY was observed from KORMORAN to have flared up at about 9.30pm while KORMORAN was scuttled about three hours later.

Initially due back in Fremantle on November 20, signals were not sent out in what was described as an attempt to contact SYDNEY until late on November 23, east-Australian time, which coincided with the end of the action in which the Royal Navy cruiser DEVONSHIRE sank ATLANTIS in the South Atlantic.

Just 13 days before SYDNEY intercepted KORMORAN, the blockade runner ODENWALD, disguised as the American WILLMOTO, was challenged by the US cruiser OMAHA and destroyer SOMERS in the Pan-American Exclusion Zone in mid-Atlantic and boarded as she attempted to scuttle. The ship was seized on the anachronistic grounds that she had been suspected of being a slaving vessel.

The raider KOMET, which had paused on the Capetown-River Plate trade route, ostensibly to come across prey while doing some maintenance, had a clearer run as the US ships escorted ODENWALD to Trinidad. KOMET captain Robert Eyssen had the experience to avoid what he could have perceived to have been a plan to intercept KOMET. Two days before ODENWALD was seized, the British oil tanker Olwen reportedly radioed that she was being shelled in the early morning by a raider, with that later changed to a submarine. Checks of U-boat records and inquiries of expert dedicated and specialist websites have failed so far to produce an identity of the purported submarine. Such a shelling would have been a classic cover story for an Enigma intercept.

In the case of ATLANTIS, DEVONSHIRE wireless operator Jack Nichol told me in Cape Town that he had taken a radio message from the British base at Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the night of November 21 that the cruiser was to proceed to a position, which it reached at about 8am. Devonshire sent up aircraft to fly over ATLANTIS before DEVONSHIRE opened fire and sank ATLANTIS after ascertaining from base that the suspicious ship was not what is purported to be.

In May, aircraft from the cruiser Cornwall overflew successful raider PINGUIN in the Atlantic before sinking it in an exchange of gunfire. Another random air patrol cover story opportunity, as well as helping remove any doubt as to the suspicious ship's identity.

In early October, the captured KOTA PINANG, now blockade runner KLARA, was intercepted off Cape Finisterre by cruiser Kenya.

One of the most graphic representations of what happened to the SYDNEY is in the Dino de Laurentiis film *Under Ten Flags*, an amalgam on the World War II raiders with the technical advisers Bernhard Rogge, captain of ATLANTIS, and its adjutant Ulrich Mohr. It features a scene in which a raider is stopped by a cruiser and shows two underwater torpedo tubes being uncovered and the cruiser torpedoed.

The only raider to sink a regular cruiser was KORMORAN and its captain Theodor Detmers described in his book how he practised such a torpedo shot in the Baltic against a friend in a destroyer. Detmers wrote that the exercise would become bitterly earnest in the future.

The film also depicted the central controlling figure in naval uniform, played by Charles Laughton with an authoritative "hands-on" manner -- who had the character, force and overriding authority of a Churchill rather than of a sea lord -- that the character clearly represented the prime minister.

Members of the US intelligence team to visit Britain in February 1941 "were shown the bombes [deciphering machines] and also supplied with the wiring of the military Enigma's rotors", supporting other reports that Enigma was excluded to Australia also by the United States.

Ronald Lewin noted how Churchill "thrilled to the excitement of intercepted signals . . . the broken code, the sense of participation".

"The same impulse also drew him to mavericks and buccaneers, unorthodox figures who defied convention. In politics, it explained his friendship with Beaverbrook and Birkenhead". Lord Beaverbrook's "Daily Express" newspaper carried a brief story on December 3 on the KORMORAN-SYDNEY action, stating that SYDNEY had overcome a raider with gunfire and was closing to sink it and pick up survivors when it was hit by a torpedo, with it not known if the torpedo was from the raider or a submarine. The defence writer told author Michael Montgomery, son of SYDNEY's Royal Navy navigator, decades later that he could not recall the source of his story, which had been said to have come from Singapore. There is a reasonable probability that Churchill had informed Beaverbrook of the circumstances. The citing of Singapore as the place of origin also interests in that John Collins was there with a responsibility for countering raiders in a commerce protection role. Devonshire, in sinking ATLANTIS three days after the SYDNEY action, stayed well away from the raider and made figures of eight after its aircraft reported a submarine was being refuelled.

Stafford wrote in 1999 that: "Intelligence files covering events from the First World War onwards are still being released . . . They arrive in the Public Record Office in small batches, sometimes unannounced . . ." "This is a continuing process . . . and will continue for many years. No one can ever be sure what new revelations they may contain. One thing, however, is certain: our picture of Churchill will require constant revision."

In June 1912 a Joint Standing Committee of the Admiralty and War Office and five major newspaper organisations was secretly established to exercise a system of voluntary and informal press censorship. In the Commons Churchill was strictly economical with the truth."

"Thus was born the 'D-notice' system for the vetting of national-security stories in the media. It lasted as an effective self-censorship system for the next seventy years."

In November 1939, Churchill's candidate as Director of the Secret Intelligence Service, after talking with the First Sea Lord Admiral Dudley Pound, was Captain Gerald Muirhead-Gould, then commander of the cruiser HMS Devonshire "Even on the most generous interpretation Muirhead-Gould possessed no obvious qualifications for the top job in British intelligence," Stafford writes. "But as British naval attache in Berlin from 1933 to 1936 he had caught Churchill's eye and congratulated him on a barnstorming Commons speech on German rearmament. 'Magnificent', he had written, 'the Germans fear, and I hope you will be 1ST Lord -- or Minister of Defence!' The prospect of such an obvious Churchill protege in command of SIS quickly united (Foreign Office Head Sir Alexander) Cadogan, Halifax and Chamberlain behind Stewart -- even though Cadogan, for one, had reservations about his suitability. At the end of November Halifax told officially of his appointment . . . Most crucially he was to be 'C' to Churchill throughout the Second World War, controlling Ultra intelligence."

[Muirhead-Gould would become Commander of the port of Sydney in Australia, reporting on aspects of the loss of HMAS SYDNEY, including German survivors picked up by AQUITANIA, and entertaining ashore the commander of the US cruiser CHICAGO six months later when Japanese midget submarines attacked with the aid of detection loop deficiencies and poor and erratic response.

The Royal Navy's Rear-Admiral Commanding the Australian Squadron, Australian-born John Crace, in October 1941, requested a transfer back to Britain, complaining of interference in operations by the Australian Navy Board, but this was not immediately granted. The Navy Board was headed by Britain's Fifth Sea Lord Sir Guy Royle, described officially by the Australian Director of Naval Intelligence Rupert Long, as having had severe mental lapses].

It is not difficult to nominate Muirhead-Gould as having been in Churchill's Intelligence loop. Others would reasonably include the Governor-General Lord Gowrie (Alexander Hore-Ruthven, a Victoria Cross holder), Rupert Long and Director of Navy Signals and Communications Jack Newman in Melbourne and John Collins in Singapore. But the extent of their knowledge, if any, may lie in documents still classified or missing.

AQUITANIA was held up in Singapore until the morning of November 19, the day SYDNEY was to go into action, for reasons including an alleged fire in a rope locker, reportedly sabotage. If it had left on time it could have been intercepted by KORMORAN for a torpedo shot. QUEEN MARY had a torpedo blow up short of her, wireless officer on the two Queens, Jim Delaney, told me. The delay could also have been intentional.

Contacted about this article in early November, Subiaco Post editor Bret Christian, who testified to the Commission of Inquiry stated in reply to the question of where the buck stopped with the sinking of the SYDNEY said: "Churchill". He stated though that his paper would not run the story. The West Australian duty Chief of Staff Neale Prior, sent all the material said within days that he was no longer in the Chief of Staff chair and knew little of the SYDNEY saga. He asked if he could show the material to somebody closer to the story and was given permission.

The West Australian did not run the story, which was later distributed by Australian Associated Press.

THE ACTION



Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1985-074-27
Foto: o. Ang. | 1940/1941 ca.

The German auxiliary cruiser KORMORAN

KORMORAN approached the West Australian coast after being resupplied by supply ship KULMERLAND, which had sailed from Japan. KULMERLAND had been shadowed by an unknown vessel while level with New Zealand but the ship had dropped away.

While waiting 1100 nautical miles west of Fremantle, KULMERLAND had been approached briefly by a British freighter, which soon made off, but the two German ships went well north after their rendezvous on October 16 in case the sighting had been reported.

KORMORAN captain Theodor Detmers said that KORMORAN was planning to cruise up the coast from Cape Leeuwin and possibly mine Shark Bay but had radio intelligence that cruiser Cornwall, in fact Canberra, was near the Cape, so he made for Shark Bay

But by criss-crossing the shipping lane north from Fremantle, KORMORAN could hunt for victims while monitoring coastal military facilities for Intelligence for Japan three weeks before Pearl Harbor and reach the Colombo-Sunda Strait to Fremantle convergence point in the hope of capturing a vessel to use as a minelayer and get rid of his 400 mines. Shark Bay would have been a sparse operational area. Fourteen months before, raider Orion had been planning to mine Fremantle but had been spotted and circled by a Hudson patrol plane, which returned to Busselton. Monitoring take-off intercoms at Busselton, Albany and Perth bases and radio direction-finding revealed that Hudsons were fanning out in relays of up to seven at a time in search patterns. Orion headed into a rain squall and could hear the planes overhead and in the air for more than four hours before they broke off the search. Orion captain Kurt Weyher's account was given to the Commission of Inquiry by this writer.

Six months before KORMORAN, KOMET had been at the point northwest off North West Cape where vessels turned for Fremantle from Colombo or Sunda Strait. Further up was where PINGUIN in October 1940 had captured the tanker Storstad and converted it to a successful minelayer.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Fregatten Kapitan (Commander) Theodor Detmers (Left) and Captain Joseph Burnett RAN (Right)

Action charts of the SYDNEY-KORMORAN clash normally have SYDNEY returning to Fremantle on a south-south easterly course of 165 degrees. But Admiralty Battle Summary No 13 of 1942 has SYDNEY on a direct southerly course of 180 degrees, as though she had been diverted from her course for Fremantle. KORMORAN would have been listening for signals from its own stations, any signs of shipping news as well monitoring shore facilities, as Orion and others had. The German Naval attache in Tokyo Paul Wenneker had warned ships that some wireless receivers had been giving off emissions that could be picked up. There has been evidence from two sources that KORMORAN had been sending short signals each night as she moved up the West Australian coast.

With Churchill working to get America into the war, and US President Franklin Roosevelt trying to overcome domestic resistance, boarding KORMORAN following its contact with KULMERLAND and electronic information gathering of the West Australian Coast, important to Japan, would have been a priority on top of the clearing of the seas of the three raiders out at the time. Regular warships such as the British cruiser Hawkins, as well as some armed merchant cruisers, had been used for electronic surveillance.

The poor recent sinking records of KOMET, ATLANTIS and KORMORAN can be attributed to shipping being diverted around the positions of the raiders gained by Intelligence and signals, just as Atlantic convoys were being steered clear of U-boat wolf packs.

Rather than stand off and sink KORMORAN, posing as the Dutch STRAAT MALAKKA, as CORNWALL did with PINGUIN and DEVONSHIRE would do to ATLANTIS, SYDNEY came in to less than 1000 metres and slightly behind the suspicious ship. KORMORAN wireless operator, Hans Linke, one of the

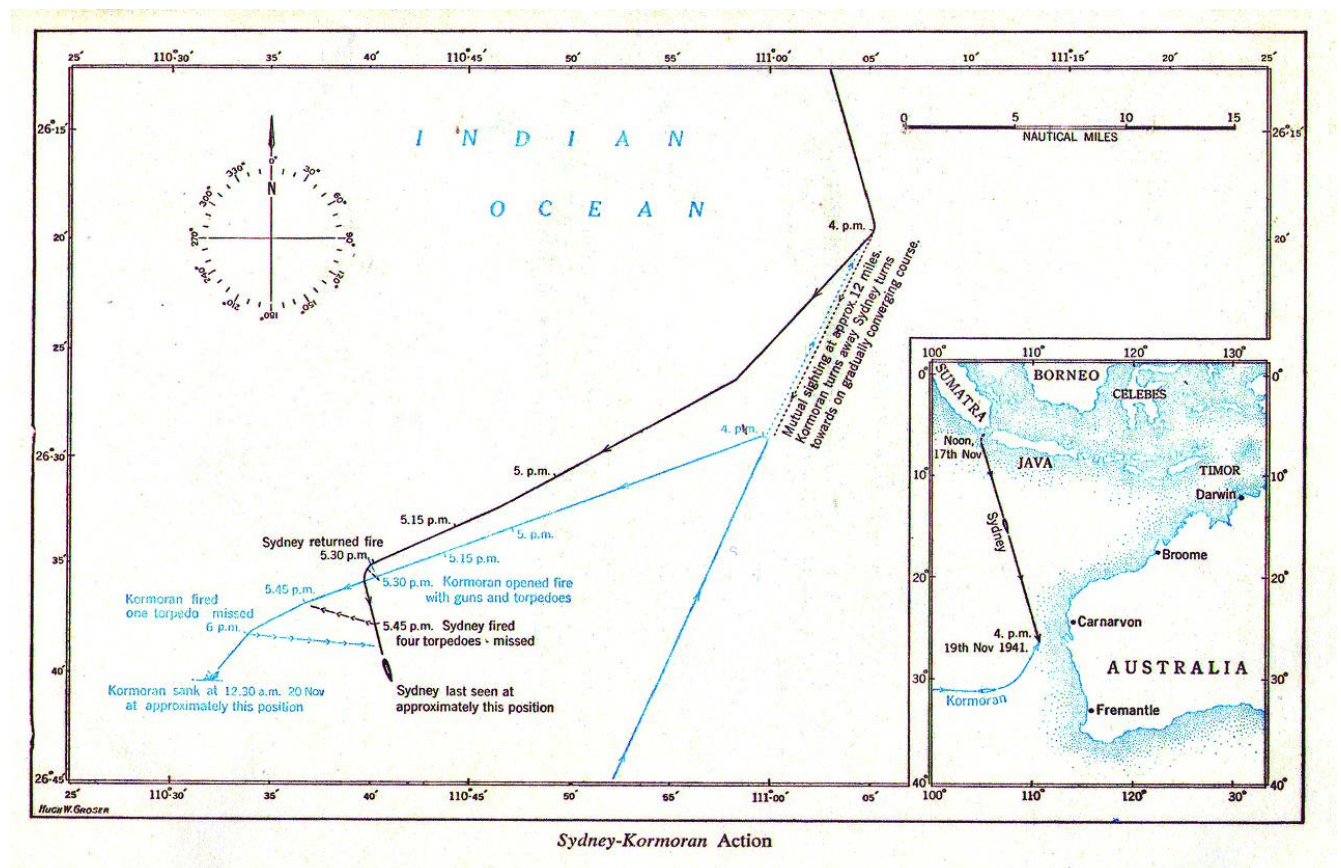
radiomen who spoke to an Australian journalist for the first time since repatriation in 1947, told me he believed that SYDNEY knew that his ship was a disguised raider.

But Captain Burnett did not know that KORMORAN had underwater torpedo tubes angled back at 127 degrees and could fire them without a tell-tale swirl or bubbles.

"The first and only torpedo we fired at the start of the action was with an underwater tube and it hit SYDNEY under the leading edge of the bridge area," Linke said. "Then we opened fire with our main cannon, anti-tank guns, 20 mm cannon and machine guns."

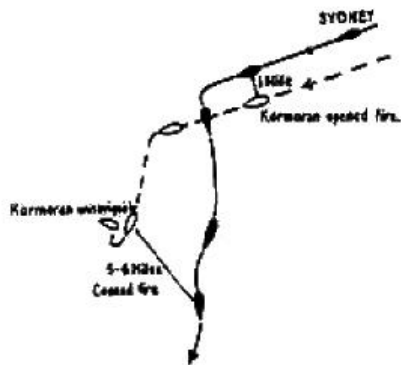
His account was backed by another radioman, Adolf Marmann, who said he heard a dull thud before the shooting and a torpedo mechanic, Edmund Abel, who said the torpedo was running before the guns fired. Abel was the only KORMORAN crewman whose interrogation record advised that he was worth interviewing further.

In a sad twist, Stuart "Bluey" Waterhouse, a young prisoner on KOMET released north of New Guinea on Emirau island with others in late 1940, said he had told Australian navy officers that KOMET had underwater torpedo tubes "but they ignored me, saying a young jack-shit like me wasn't worthy of interviewing".

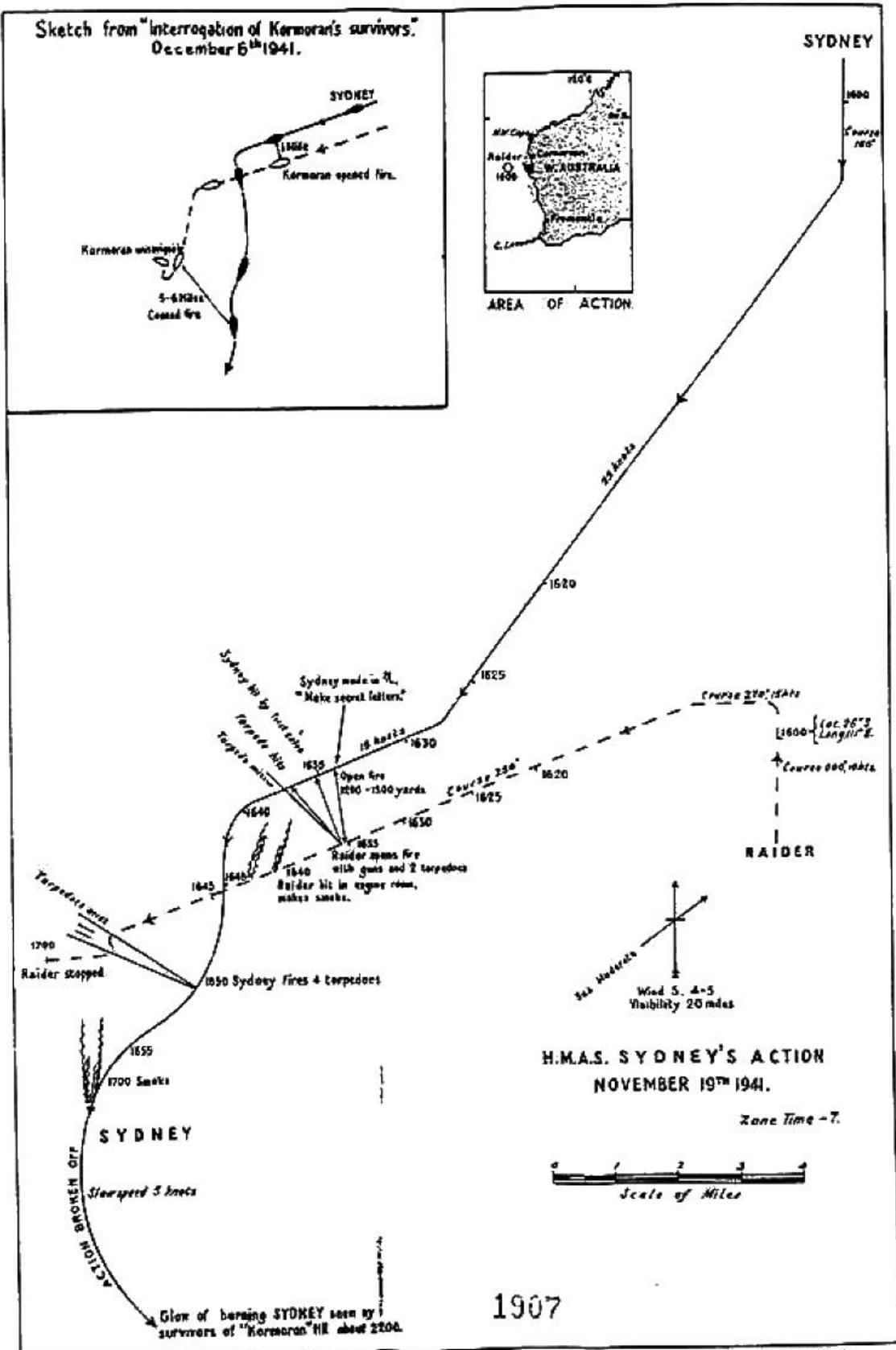


PLAN 5

Sketch from "Interrogation of Kormoran's survivors,"
December 6th 1941.



AREA OF ACTION



H.M.A.S. SYDNEY'S ACTION
NOVEMBER 19th 1941.

Zone Time -7.



1907

With 70 years passing since the action, it is time to renew efforts to ensure that all records on the action are released . . . the traditional custom of hiding sensitive material for man's allotted "three-score years and ten" is unnecessary in these times. Also, the custom of making a package of papers embargoed for longer by putting a newly-restricted paper on top should get the deep six.

For more information on actions with enemy disguised raiders 1940-1941 read C.B. 3081 (5), [ADMIRALTY BATTLE SUMMARY No. 13](#) This is an Adobe Acrobat file

All materials relating to the los of HMAS SYDNEY II can be found on the [HMAS Sydney II Commission of Inquiry](#) web site

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Scores of interviews over 18 years with Allied and Axis participants in English and German.
Viewing of scores of documentaries and films.
Attendance at two major government inquiries and several forums and seminars on the loss of HMAS Sydney.

About the author:

David Kennedy has been a journalist on major newspaper, radio and television media in Australia, Britain, Germany and Papua New-Guinea, as well as Reuter and an Australian Associated Press contributor over five decades.