

## CHAPTER 5

### SIGNALS, SUBMARINES AND SPEEDBOATS

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... I firmly believe that jammed signals were heard. *Kormoran* always jammed signals sent by any ship that she was involved with. The [*Kormoran*] radio operator said that he did jam signals, so I do believe signals were sent [from Sydney].<sup>1</sup>

5.1 The issue of whether or not signals were sent from *Sydney*, and where those signals may have been picked up, has been one of the most widely debated issues of the inquiry. The principle areas of dispute are whether or not *Sydney* sent signals and whether or not those signals were received by Harman Naval Station outside Canberra. Also open to debate is the accusation that signals were sent and received, but not acted upon.

#### Signals Sent from *Kormoran*

5.2 It is widely accepted that *Kormoran* sent a Q signal<sup>2</sup> after she had encountered *Sydney*. Evidence of this signal exists in the Archives, and it is not in dispute in this inquiry. This signal was probably sent for two reasons. First, Captain Detmers hoped that by sending the signal, he could dupe *Sydney* into thinking there was another suspicious ship in the area, and that *Sydney* would cease pursuit of *Kormoran*, allowing her to escape. Second, the Q signal was a way to '... inform Germany that the raider or the vessel sending it was in trouble'.<sup>3</sup> Apparently:

... if [the signal] had a particular letter sent with the time, that indicated to outside sources that the raider was in strife. The Q signal sent by the *Kormoran* was only picked up in mutilated form by two receivers. One of them noticed that the time was present and it finished with 'GMT' which was unusual – you do not send the time as well as the letters 'GMT' – indicating that the Germans were trying to advise someone else they were in trouble. I have heard it may have been intended for a nearby station which would then repeat it and that that repeat of the signal would have been picked up in Germany.<sup>4</sup>

5.3 In her book, Winter raised the point that 'a ship that knew enough to send "Q" signal was probably under Admiralty orders and could thus have expected to have a secret call sign'.<sup>5</sup> The Q signal was designed to convince Allied ships that *Kormoran* was not the enemy and may have contributed to Captain Burnett's decision to bring *Sydney* in close.

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1 McDonald, G, Transcript, p. 295.

2 According to Richard Summerrell, ' "Q" messages (or more correctly QQQQ messages) were distress signals used by merchant vessels to indicate that they were being attacked by a disguised merchant raider' (Summerrell, op. cit., p. 29).

3 Olson, Transcript, p. 210.

4 ibid., pp. 208-9. GMT – Greenwich Mean Time.

5 Winter, op. cit., p. 134.

Even if *Kormoran* had been unable to supply the *Straat Malakka's* secret call sign, Captain Burnett may not have been convinced she was an enemy ship. According to Winter:

Though *Sydney*, using the code book, could work out what *Straat Malakka's* secret call sign ought to be, this did not mean that the call sign had ever been issued to her. Dutch ships had begun to be issued with secret call signs only after 1 June 1941, and this recognition procedure was still 'only applicable to red ensign and *some Dutch ships*'.<sup>6</sup>

5.4 In evidence given to the Committee, Dr Kim Kirsner of the HMAS *Sydney* Foundation Trust, stated that:

The critical three or four [pieces of data] come from three or four people who were in the radio transmission section of *Kormoran*, all of whom identified the source of contact – not the actual battle, but the source of contact – as 26 111 which actually falls right on the edge of [the area where the Trust believes *Sydney* sank]. They all claimed, as did many of the other survivors, including Detmers ... that there was a signal from *Kormoran* at the moment of contact. They basically represented themselves as a merchantman signalling contact with a ship approaching them. That signal was picked up by two Australian sources, a vessel off the coast [*Uco*] ... and ... Geraldton radio where the latitude was corrupt but the longitude was not.<sup>7</sup>

5.5 Interviews undertaken by Mr David Kennedy with Mr Hans Linke, a wireless operator on the *Kormoran*, indicate that '*Kormoran* jammed *Sydney's* signals. ... [Linke said] "we jammed by pretending to call other ships. Brazilians, neutrals, we called. We made wireless traffic that did not really exist"'.<sup>8</sup>

## Signals Sent from *Sydney*

5.6 A great many submissions to this inquiry addressed whether or not signals were sent from *Sydney* prior to, during and indeed after her encounter with the *Kormoran*. The issue is complicated by uncertainty about whether the messages attributed to *Sydney* were transmitted in plain voice (para 5.32), morse or encrypted code and the reports of signals are largely anecdotal.

5.7 A number of reports of signals believed to have been from *Sydney* have emerged, including:

- the Q signal, actually sent by *Kormoran*, but originally thought to have possibly originated from *Sydney*;<sup>9</sup>
- a message allegedly received at Naval Communications Station, HMAS *Harman*, (according to Mr Robert Mason) that *Sydney* had 'bailed up a quere (sic)

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6 *ibid.* Italics in original. See also Olson, Submission, p. 4204.

7 HMAS *Sydney* Foundation Trust, Transcript, p. 165.

8 Linke, in Kennedy, Submission, p. 3073.

9 Summerrell, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

customer' and was going to investigate. There is also a report from the same source of a signal that *Sydney* was about to open fire, and a later message that was not recorded as the operators had supposedly left the headsets unattended;<sup>10</sup> and

- the 'Sydney calling Darwin' signal, indicating the ship was on fire and the crew were preparing to abandon ship (see paras 5.28-5.33). This signal, in morse but not encoded, may also be the message heard on short wave radio at the Esplanade Hotel in Geraldton.<sup>11</sup>

5.8 With the exception of the 'Q' signal which has already been discussed above, the evidence for these signals is examined in this section. Verifying the source of the signal has proved difficult, as can be seen from the following comments. According to one submission, 'the puzzling radio communication question arising from the incident is the apparent lack of any official record of any message ever having been received in any form either in plain language or code from either ship in the encounter'.<sup>12</sup>

5.9 A corollary of this is that if signals were sent from *Sydney* before or during the action and received, why was a search for *Sydney* not sent out until 24 November,<sup>13</sup> a full four days after her amended estimated date of arrival in Fremantle. The official version of events states that 'From *Sydney* herself, no word was ever received'.<sup>14</sup>

## The Official Account

5.10 During wartime, radio silence would normally have been observed, and the official account reflects a belief that, upon meeting an unidentified ship and subsequently being sunk by it, the *Sydney* sent out no radio message to indicate its position or the trouble it was facing.

5.11 The Department of Defence drew attention to the fact that 'There were standard occasions for breaking radio silence when it was imposed, and one of them was contact with the enemy'.<sup>15</sup> If no signal was sent from *Sydney*, as the Department of Defence asserts, this suggests several possibilities: that Captain Burnett must have been convinced that the ship it had encountered was not the enemy; or Captain Burnett did not have sufficient time to send a signal before *Sydney's* communications systems were inoperable; or finally, that at the time of the encounter between the two ships, *Sydney* was passing through what Barbara Winter refers to as a 'dead spot'.<sup>16</sup>

5.12 Mr James Eagles theorised that:

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10 *ibid.*

11 *ibid.*, p. 38; and Laffer, Statutory Declaration, in End Secrecy on *Sydney*, Submission, p. 2185.

12 Anderson, Submission, p. 126.

13 Even the date on which the search was sent out is unclear, and evidence has been received by the Committee which suggests that the official search was not sent out on 24 November, as officially reported, but on 23 November. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

14 Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

15 Department of Defence, Transcript, p. 42.

16 Barbara Winter writes 'As far as wireless reception in Perth and Fremantle is concerned, the area west of Carnarvon is a notorious "dead spot", especially by day' (Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 236). See also McDonald, E, Submission, p. 2613.

... some of the first shell hits apparently were in the bridge area and around the director. They could quite easily have taken out all the aerials on the ship, including the roof aerials. So while all the transmitters might have been quite functional and a signal might actually have been sent and jammed, there may not have been enough range or power output to actually get out a signal.

He went on to suggest that emergency aerials might have been rigged, depending on the level of damage sustained during the engagement.<sup>17</sup>

### **Mason's Claims and his Critics**

5.13 Mr Robert Mason, a Naval writer posted to *Harman*, has stated that a message was in fact received at *Harman* on the evening of 19 November 1941, and that all staff present there that night were sworn to secrecy. Mr Mason was told a message had been received that the *Sydney* had a 'queer customer bailed up' and was attempting to identify her. There was another signal indicating *Sydney* was going to open fire. A further signal was lost as the two headsets had been left unattended for a short period.<sup>18</sup> He claimed that the Naval Board knew *Sydney* was in trouble, but decided not to send out a search. Other staff present at *Harman* on 19 November 1941 have made submissions to this inquiry, refuting Mr Mason's account of what happened that night.

5.14 In support of Mr Mason's claims, the Committee was told by Mr David Kennedy that he interviewed Mr David 'Ron' Griffiths in 1997, who said:

... that he was a young and very conscientious telegraphist relieving at HMAS *Cerberus* for a week when he picked up a signal in three-letter emergency fleet code on ship-shore frequency just before 8pm on 19 November. Griffiths said, 'It was difficult to read, fading and I was only getting bits of it but what I received I wrote in the log ... I didn't decipher it ...'.<sup>19</sup>

5.15 Griffiths also said that he handed over to a senior WRAN at the end of his shift, telling her that he thought the message was something important. When he returned a couple of minutes later 'the headphones were on the desk and the WRAN was in the galley making coffee'.<sup>20</sup> Both *Harman* and *Cerberus* logs are missing<sup>21</sup> and there is no documentary evidence to suggest that signals either to or from *Sydney* were received.<sup>22</sup>

5.16 If anyone had heard a signal from *Sydney* it would most probably have been *Harman*, '... the most powerful wireless station in the Southern Hemisphere ...',<sup>23</sup> (more powerful than stations in Western Australia) and there would have been at least two wireless ratings listening to the frequency set aside for enemy reporting. In the event of a signal being

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17 Eagles, Transcript, pp. 561-562.

18 Interview with Mason, in Kennedy, Submission, p. 962.

19 Kennedy, Submission, p. 965.

20 Griffiths, in Kennedy, Submission, p. 965.

21 Kennedy, Transcript, p. 453.

22 The Archives indicated that 'A total of 10 signals were transmitted to the *Sydney* after her departure from Fremantle. The last two signals [were] sent on 14 November ...' (Summerrell, op. cit., p. 32).

23 Sheedy, Submission, p. 2.

received, the signal would (normally) have been redirected to the Australian Commonwealth Navy Board (ACNB), which would have in turn forwarded it to the Admiralty in London.<sup>24</sup>

5.17 Mr John McArthur was convinced by Mr Mason's account of 19 November at *Harman*. In evidence to the inquiry, Mr McArthur stated that:

Interviews with [Mason] before his death and the subsequent release of his documents give rise to the gravest doubts about Navy's position. Even in the face of Mason's evidence the Navy has gone to great lengths to destroy Mason's story. The fact that another person, D(avid) Griffiths has emerged to confirm the receipt of signals at HMAS *Cerberus* has been studiously ignored. My own research has put me in contact with the duty RAN signalman in Fremantle on the night of 19 November. In front of a witness he related what happened to him that night. Early in the evening watch he received a signal from *Sydney*: RRRR v *Sydney*. It meant that *Sydney* had encountered a warship. The signalman notified the Chief Petty Officer on Duty, CPO Roberts. But a senior officer could not be found ... The last signal [the signalman] recalls was in clear English – no need for code. *Sydney* was '*on fire, abandoning ship*'.<sup>25</sup>

5.18 This claim is supported by Mr Kennedy. He submitted details of an interview with *Kormoran* wireless operator Hans Linke which:

... tends to support the statements made by Robert Mason that signals were received from *Sydney* and allows for them being broken up – as also described by David Griffiths at *Cerberus* ... It should also be considered that Mason's references to *Sydney* having bailed up a queer customer would have been what Mason was told by Ben Tiller, in paraphrased colloquial form, rather than a direct quote of a signal.<sup>26</sup>

5.19 Mr Kennedy's point about Mr Mason not actually hearing the message personally is important, and discussion on this possible signal is not always clear on this point.

5.20 Miss Marion Stevens, a WRAN present at *Harman* on the night *Sydney* sank, has refuted Mr Mason's claims, criticising them on a number of grounds. First, Miss Stevens states that 'no CAPTAIN or any other officer would authorize a message '**AM ABOUT TO OPEN FIRE**'. The *Kormoran* would have been monitoring *Sydney* and a message like this one would give the *Kormoran* a distinct advantage to get off the first 'shell'.<sup>27</sup> She also stresses 'the fact that the Transceiver in *Sydney* **WAS THE LATEST AND MOST MODERN 'NAVY No 36' BUT IT WOULD ONLY HANDLE MORSE CODE** ... Any R/T signals originating anywhere **DID NOT ORIGINATE FROM THE SYDNEY**'.<sup>28</sup>

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24 *ibid.*, p. 3.

25 McArthur, Submission, pp. 2252-2253. Emphasis in original.

26 Kennedy, Submission, p. 2307. See also Kennedy, Submission, p. 965.

27 Stevens, Submission, p. 3925. Emphasis in original.

28 *ibid.*, p. 3925. Emphasis in original.

5.21 This evidence is damning of claims made in the documentary 'No Survivors',<sup>29</sup> in which it was stated that 'weak plain language signals [were] received from *Sydney* by RAAF personnel in Darwin. According to this programme, signals indicated that *Sydney* was on fire ... the message was passed on to Naval authorities but no searching aircraft were sent out because the Navy claimed that *Sydney* was not then overdue'.<sup>30</sup>

5.22 Mrs Daphne Wright, also present at *Harman* the night *Sydney* sunk, supports Miss Stevens' recollections. Mrs Wright's submission to the inquiry stated that:

During the period when HMAS *Sydney* was apparently overdue, my clear recollection and experience was of receiving firm and urgent instructions ... to listen out ... for a signal from HMAS *Sydney*.

To my knowledge, no one was aware at that time of the encounter of HMAS *Sydney* with an enemy ship on the 19 November in the Indian Ocean off the West Australian Coast as HMAS *Sydney* **did not break W/T silence** to advise of the impending engagement. Certainly not as far as HMAS *Harman*'s reception was concerned. Also, as **no signal of distress** was received from HMAS *Sydney* at HMAS *Harman*, presumably after the fatal encounter with the German raider *Kormoran*, it may be assumed that its wireless apparatus had been destroyed.<sup>31</sup>

5.23 Miss Stevens also rebuts the evidence of Mr David Griffiths about *Cerberus*, pointing out that there were no WRANS present at *Cerberus* until May 1943.<sup>32</sup>

5.24 One of the WRANS present at *Harman* the night of 19 November, Mrs Judy Saunders, initially supported Mr Mason's claims that a something significant happened that night. In a submission to the inquiry, Mrs Saunders stated that:

I was a telegraphist on watch at Harman on 19th November. I remember the C.O. had the headphones on, which was most unusual. I cannot say if he received a message or had been called in because of one, but he put the headphones on and rushed into his office – we were told it was to ring Navy Board in Melbourne. From then on we all kept watch on all possible channels listening for a message from the ship. Somehow we all knew it was the *Sydney* we were searching for.<sup>33</sup>

5.25 Mrs Saunders, in a supplementary submission, indicated that 'on reflection I realise my dating of the incident which occurred at *Harman* could be inaccurate ...'.<sup>34</sup>

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29 Exhibit No. 20, 'No Survivors – The Mysterious Loss of HMAS *Sydney*'. Prospero Productions, Fremantle, 1993.

30 McDonald, E, Submission, p. 2613.

31 Wright, Submission, p. 1123. Emphasis in original.

32 Stevens, Submission, p. 3927.

33 Saunders, Submission, p. 133.

34 *ibid.*, p. 1977.

5.26 Mr Alan Cohn was a Senior Coder in one of the four watches at *Harman* in November 1941. As such he was 'privy to all matters which occurred during a watch on which [he] was on duty'. It is Mr Cohn's 'considered opinion that no message was received by *Harman* from HMAS *Sydney* at or after her action with the German ship *Kormoran*'. Mr Cohn recollects calls going out from *Harman* for *Sydney* over several days, but to his knowledge there was no response.<sup>35</sup>

5.27 In the light of the evidence of four people intimately involved in monitoring of signals at HMAS *Harman* in November 1941, doubt must exist regarding the accuracy of Mr Mason's recollections about the timing and indeed nature of the signal.

## Other Signals

5.28 Other claims that signals were received emerged after the war. According to PMG Officer Len Hall, stationed at the Hamelin Pool PMG repeater station at the time, late in the night of 19/20 November 1941 heavy telephonic traffic (between Fremantle and RAAF Pearce) took place on the line between Perth and Carnarvon,<sup>36</sup> with that situation continuing for the next five or six days. Mr Hall, in an interview many years later, claimed 'he had heard a signal recording that *Sydney* opened fire first'.<sup>37</sup>

5.29 Another signal supposedly received from *Sydney* in Darwin (as '*Sydney* calling Darwin') was sent in plain language (i.e. unencrypted). Mr Gordon Laffer reportedly saw a file in RAAF intelligence records, indicating a message along the lines of '*Sydney* calling Darwin. On fire fore and aft. Preparing to abandon ship ...', followed by a latitude and longitude. No record of the signal or the file can be found. The potential failure of people to properly identify signals is illustrated by an instance in which LCDR Ean McDonald RAN (Retd) advised the Committee that a similar signal was reportedly logged by HMAS *Perth* in Port Phillip Bay, about 25 November 1941. LCDR McDonald acknowledges that he realised later the signal could not have come from *Sydney* as it was some days after the ship was actually lost.<sup>38</sup>

5.30 In her book *The Intrigue Master*, Barbara Winter cites this signal, stating that 'the key is an entry in the South West Area Combined Headquarters Log for 1543 on 4 December 1941:

S/L (Squadron Leader) Cooper and Geraldton reports one of his operators listening on 24.5 metres heard R/T telephone sign calling Darwin or technical telegraph operator. Signals weak & operator thought it may be from HMAS *Sydney*. Later Geraldton report strength of signal increasing.<sup>39</sup>

5.31 It has been accepted by many *Sydney* authors that this signal was not, as is widely believed, from HMAS *Sydney*, but rather, from the PMG *Sydney*.<sup>40</sup> Mr David Kennedy has also raised the possibility that the signal may have been 'messages sent to wireless stations

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35 Cohn, Submission, pp. 3143-3144.

36 Exhibit No. 5, p. 93.

37 McDonald, E, Submission, p. 538.

38 *ibid.*, pp. 534-536.

39 *The Intrigue Master*, p. 118, cited in Poniewierski, Submission, p. 298.

40 See also Templeton, Transcript, p. 471.

from a central authority about signals from HMAS *Sydney*. Basically, we appear to have Darwin and Singapore being informed of efforts to get signals from, or to, a distressed *Sydney* ...'.<sup>41</sup>

5.32 Other reports of plain voice distress calls attributed to *Sydney* have emerged from time to time. For example, Mrs Glenys McDonald recounts the recollections of a young girl living in the Port Gregory area who 'recalled a plain voice distress call from HMAS *Sydney* breaking into her evening radio programs'.<sup>42</sup> However, in regard to these and other such claims, it is relevant to note the statement by Alastair Templeton that '*Sydney* did not even have an R/T capability, so any words heard were not from *Sydney*'.<sup>43</sup>

5.33 The Committee agrees with Dr Frame that:

It is also possible, and one suspects probable, that some individual on board *Sydney* would have attempted to send some signal during the action if the ship's communications equipment was operational. If this individual was not a specialist radio operator, or if some or all of the ship's communications equipment was damaged, ... it is likely that signal transmissions from *Sydney* could have been totally unsuccessful, broken and incoherent, difficult to decipher, or sent on inappropriate frequencies or by suspect methods in the hope of raising some alarm ashore.<sup>44</sup>

## Records of Signals

5.34 The process of intercepting radio communications was a hit and miss affair. A signal, even if not picked up in Australia, may have been picked up elsewhere, for example in London or Washington or Berlin.<sup>45</sup> The Acting Director of DSD pointed out that navy signals intelligence operators in Australia would have been focusing not on signals from Australian ships, but on foreign signals. He added that 'If they did roll onto an Australian communication for some reason, they would keep going because their whole reason for being is to focus on foreign communications'.<sup>46</sup>

5.35 DSD's Acting Director went further when he stated that 'as a signals intelligence organisation, [DSD] would not collect signals intelligence against Australian platforms under any circumstances; therefore, if we were operating at the time [which was not the case], we would still have no records related to [the loss of *Sydney*] because that is not part of our function as a foreign intelligence collector'.<sup>47</sup>

5.36 As noted in Chapter 3, there is a large volume of signals packs in the custody of the Australian Archives that has not been examined. However, as Australian Archives has indicated:

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41 Kennedy, Submission, p. 4449.

42 McDonald, G, Submission, p. 169.

43 Templeton, Transcript, p. 472.

44 Frame, op. cit., pp. 189-190.

45 DSD, Transcript, p. 47.

46 ibid.

47 ibid., pp. 49-50.



In order to identify all signal traffic passing to or from the *Sydney*, the Archives has conducted a search of these signal packs for messages sent and received between 11 and 20 November 1941 inclusive, the period during which any signals sent by the *Sydney* after her departure from Fremantle would have been transmitted. No signals either to or from the *Sydney* during this period, other than those described, have been found.<sup>48</sup>

5.37 The historical adviser to the Committee, Professor Peter Dennis, also inspected signal packs at the Australian Archives Melbourne office, without locating anything new by way of signal traffic (see para 3.10).

5.38 On balance, the Committee believes that it is likely that *Sydney* attempted to signal once the engagement was underway, but there is no evidence that the signals were received by naval or other authorities. The Committee can find no evidence that signals were received and were ignored deliberately by the RAN or by the Admiralty.

## Theories of Third Party Involvement

5.39 The magnitude of the loss of *Sydney* and the ensuing debate on her fate has focused in large part on whether the engagement was as described by the German survivors or whether another explanation was more likely:

Hovering above all on the mystery of the *Sydney* there remains a burning flame of suspicion on how a gallant cruiser which had proved itself as totally efficient and well-armed in several major engagements of actual combat, could be sunk without even one survivor of her 645 crew, in an encounter with an armed merchant raider which although itself sunk, had 315 survivors from its crew of 400 (sic). That is why it has already been suggested that there was a third party involved at the scene of the encounter.<sup>49</sup>

5.40 Since the loss of *Sydney*, there has been a proliferation of theories that *Kormoran* did not act alone. Among the suggestions put forward in this inquiry are that a Japanese submarine, an Italian submarine<sup>50</sup> or a German U-boat<sup>51</sup> were involved in or responsible for the sinking.<sup>52</sup> The accusations levelled at the Japanese extend to claims that they murdered survivors from the *Sydney* so as to leave no trace of the battle and to cover up their

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48 Summerrell, op. cit., p. 32.

49 Denholm, Submission, p. 1256.

50 See for example Heazlewoods Solicitors, Submission, pp. 1346 and 1349. This submission contains a Statutory Declaration by Mr V C Gambling, in which he states an Italian POW said that *Kormoran* opened fire and *Sydney* was crippled by a torpedo. However 'he didn't say his ship fired the torpedo **but I think it did** and he was concealing this from us' (emphasis added).

51 See for example Submissions, Nitschke, p. 1339, Gould, p. 2279 and Sharkey, p. 2955. Evidence was received by this Committee that 'No German submarine reached the Indian Ocean by [the time *Sydney* was sunk], owing to problems of supply of fuel and provisions' (Poniewierski, Submission, p. 2639).

52 Suggestions were also made that a French submarine was involved in sinking *Sydney*. According to Frame, Rear Admiral Crace, in his private diary of 26 November, commented that 'Naval Board think there is a possibility that a Vichy submarine escorting a Vichy ship has torpedoed [*Sydney*]' (Frame, op. cit., p. 5).

involvement.<sup>53</sup> Of these theories, the Japanese submarine theory is the most widely repeated, experiencing a resurgence in the aftermath of the publishing of Michael Montgomery's book in 1981. Until the publication of Montgomery's book, theories about a Japanese submarine had been largely ignored by mainstream commentators. As one person noted:

Hitherto, the question of a Japanese submarine has been scorned, largely on the grounds that the Japanese would have taken great pains to ensure that there were no 'incidents' prior to 7 December which would have alerted their enemies.<sup>54</sup>

5.41 Notwithstanding Mr Montgomery's contribution to the theory that a Japanese submarine sank *Sydney*, the theory itself circulated many years earlier, soon after the ship was lost. According to one submission, 'The [Japanese submarine] rumour continues today. No one seems to know how it started, but it was supposed to have come from some-one who was on a ship in the Indian Ocean at the time of the battle'.<sup>55</sup> Another submission asked:

What was the origin of the story of a Japanese submarine? Strangely enough, this seems to have started with a propaganda broadcast from Tokyo, sponsored by the Department of Naval Propaganda, probably in late December, although transcripts from that period do not seem to have survived. The aim of these broadcasts was to create confusion and despondency in Australia. In this case, they succeeded only too well ... The Japanese were not responsible for sinking *Sydney*, but they were responsible for the rumour that they did.<sup>56</sup>

5.42 It was suggested that probably in late December 1941 Radio Tokyo (sponsored by the Department of Naval Propaganda) was transmitting that a Japanese submarine was responsible for sinking *Sydney*.<sup>57</sup> Evidence was given by the Western Australian Maritime Museum (WAMM) that in 1942 Radio Tokyo broadcast that *Sydney* survivors were being held in Japan, a story proved later to be false.<sup>58</sup>

5.43 Others submitted evidence to the inquiry which supported the theory of Japanese involvement in sinking *Sydney*. Mr J J Collins told the inquiry that:

... when we were in Victoria Point in Burma we were working for the Japanese and got to speak to a Japanese Lieutenant (known as a chui) who told use they were a part of the Emperors Guard, from memory he said his unit was called 'Nino Ichi Emma Gee' this was a machine gun unit and they referred to M.G. as emma gee – the same as we did at the time. This was in July 1942 when Japan was triumphant in its war with the allies, and they were boasting of their success. He said quite openly that they 'of course had sunk the *Sydney*!'<sup>59</sup>

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53 The claim that *Sydney* survivors were murdered in the water is discussed in Chapter 6.

54 Baker, Submission, p. 90.

55 Wilson, Submission, p. 3327.

56 Poniewierski, Submission, p. 3596.

57 *ibid.*, p. 3596. See also Wilson, Submission, p. 3327.

58 Western Australian Maritime Museum, Submission, p. 4076.

59 Collins, Submission, pp. 131-132, and Collins, Transcript, p. 354.

5.44 Mr Collins also referred to an incident which occurred some weeks before *Sydney* was lost, in which *Sydney* received reports of a submarine in the Indian Ocean. Mr Collins was on board *Zealandia* at the time and the two ships had been together when *Sydney* received the report.<sup>60</sup>

5.45 Mr Collins also recounted the story:

... of a gentleman who went over with BCOF and went to the Kure training area, which was analogous with Annapolis or with Jervis Bay in Australia. When he was looking through the place straight after the war he noticed a mural in this large room. One of the murals, the large mural, showed a Japanese submarine sinking an Australian cruiser. He queried it with the admiral in charge who looked at him ... and said nothing. The next day he came back and it had been taken off the wall.<sup>61</sup>

5.46 Mr Bernard Eneberg also supports the involvement of a Japanese submarine:

I do not believe [Burnett came in too close.] The scenario I had was that he stood some distance away and commenced to shell the *Kormoran* and then a submarine intervened ... and put a couple of torpedoes into the *Sydney*. The *Sydney* heard the torpedoes coming on their asdic and started up ... After she was hit, she had no control over her momentum, which could have brought her up to the *Kormoran* and the *Kormoran* then took over and attacked her with all her armament.<sup>62</sup>

5.47 Mr Eneberg theorised that the reason for the Japanese presence off the coast of Western Australia on 19 November 1941 was that the Germans and the Japanese had hatched an elaborate plan to transfer specialised Japanese communications personnel to Germany. Mr Eneberg suggested that:

At the beginning of November ... perhaps the Japanese High Command decided that it was necessary to send an important group of personnel to co-ordinate the war effort with her Axis partner Germany. Rear Admiral Wegener in Tokyo would have offered the services of the German raider *Kormoran* to meet with a Japanese submarine and take aboard the German group.<sup>63</sup>

Mr Eneberg believes that when *Sydney* interrupted the transfer, the Japanese were forced to open fire. The Committee considered this theory, but found it unconvincing. Japanese plans for war were well advanced and it appears most unlikely the Japanese would have chosen such an uncertain and dangerous route for transferring personnel to Germany. Again, there is a total lack of documentary evidence to support Mr Eneberg's theory.

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60 Collins, Transcript, p. 354.

61 *ibid.*

62 Eneberg, Transcript, p. 424.

63 *ibid.*, pp. 428-431, and Eneberg, Submission, pp. 2046-2047.

5.48 One other possible source for the Japanese submarine theory is a series of sketches by Dr List (of the *Kormoran*), which many have suggested contain shorthand revealing Japanese involvement in the sinking of *Sydney*. However, 'Dr List has always maintained that there were no shorthand signs in the sketches'.<sup>64</sup> The lines in the sketch have never been identified. Winter discussed the supposed 'shorthand' and noted 'the symbols are certainly not in any of the major German [shorthand] systems...'.<sup>65</sup>

5.49 In their book *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor*, James Rusbridger and Eric Nave briefly cite the *Sydney/Kormoran* encounter as evidence of Japanese involvement in World War Two prior to the attack on Pearl Harbour.<sup>66</sup> It is their claim that 'on 19 November 1941 Japan commenced hostilities. Not against America or Britain, but Australia, when the German surface raider *Kormoran* met the Australian ... cruiser HMAS *Sydney* off the western coast of Australia and fought the most mysterious sea battle of World War Two'.<sup>67</sup>

5.50 Nave and Rusbridger cite as their source Michael Montgomery's book *Who Sank the Sydney?* They also challenge several key theories which are accepted by many, namely that 'not a single body [from the *Sydney*] was ever found' and that 'since the *Kormoran* was not in a state to fire the last torpedo it must have come from another vessel'.<sup>68</sup> Nave and Rusbridger also believe that by 24 November 1941 the Australian Naval Board 'were satisfied (although they had no absolute proof) that a Japanese I-class submarine had been operating in conjunction with the *Kormoran* and had sunk the *Sydney*'.<sup>69</sup> No evidence is given by Nave and Rusbridger to support their claim.

5.51 Other submissions point to the presence of Japanese milk bottles in the possession of the Germans as somehow proving that a Japanese submarine was involved in the action. However, *Kormoran* was re-supplied by *Kulmerland*, which in turn obtained supplies from Japan. It is therefore not surprising that some of the items would have Japanese markings on them.<sup>70</sup>

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64 Winter, op. cit., p. 233.

65 ibid.

66 Rusbridger, J and Nave, E, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor*, Summit Books, New York, 1991, p. 134.

67 ibid.

68 ibid.

69 ibid.

70 See for example Winter, op. cit., p. 191.

## Evidence Against Japanese Involvement

5.52 One of the difficulties facing researchers who support claims that a Japanese submarine was responsible for sinking *Sydney* is the lack of evidence of Japanese submarines in the area. Submissions stated:

There is no documentation and never has been in any official military files in Japan about Japanese submarine involvement.<sup>71</sup>

... my research and speaking to Japanese authorities cannot unearth one shred of positive evidence which could position a Japanese sub[marine] within six or seven thousand kilometres of the scene off the WA coast on 19.11.41.<sup>72</sup>

Japan did not have any submarines swanning in this area, they would have been in the North Pacific.<sup>73</sup>

5.53 The Department of Defence completely discounted the possibility of a Japanese submarine being involved. It believed that 'there is nothing which has provided any evidence for us to believe that [the *Kormoran* was supported by supply ships in an offensive role against *Sydney*] ... We have nothing that links the presence of a Japanese submarine to that action'.<sup>74</sup>

5.54 There is a striking lack of evidence to support the theory that a Japanese submarine was involved in, or responsible for, sinking *Sydney*. This, however, does not stop the theory from being stated.<sup>75</sup> Mr John Doohan, of the End Secrecy on *Sydney* Group, told the Committee that:

I have not said that there were Japanese submarines there, but everything points to them being there. *Kormoran* certainly did not [sink *Sydney*]. There were no German submarines in the Indian Ocean at that time. That is their record and I believe it ... We had Jap submarines in the Indian Ocean before we had German submarines.<sup>76</sup>

5.55 Some suggested that evidence had been deliberately destroyed to cover up Japanese involvement. However, Mr Doohan suggested to the Committee that:

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71 Loane, Submission, p. 2905.

72 *ibid.*, p. 200.

73 Roper, Submission, p. 212.

74 Department of Defence, Transcript, p. 29.

75 The resilience of the Japanese submarine theory is remarkable. Most recently, in a paper to The Enigma Symposium 1998, Hugh Skillen put forward this theory, based largely on the 'Kitsche diary' that Michael Montgomery also used in his book (Skillen, H, 'A Personal Rapport with German raider *Kormoran*', in Enigma Symposium 1998 papers, Print in Black, Bath, 1998, pp. 132-138). It should be noted that Barbara Winter and Tom Frame have both rejected the diary as genuine, with Frame stating that 'the alleged diary was merely a German translation of an English magazine article written by the journalist Robert Close' (Frame, *op cit.*, p. 136; see also Winter, *op cit.*, pp. 226, 245-246). Skillen goes on to suggest that submarine I-8 was responsible for the sinking of *Sydney*, largely on the reputation of its commander as a 'war crime specialist' (Skillen, p. 137). No details of its prior movements leading up to November 1941 are given by Skillen. Winter places submarine I-8 patrolling 'south of Oahu before and during the attack on Pearl harbour' (Poniewierski, Submission, p. 320).

76 End Secrecy on *Sydney* Group, Transcript, p. 275.

Any records of a Japanese submarine involved in sinking of an Australian ship by mistake – the Japanese certainly did not want to sink *Sydney* – that may have involved Germany or Japan or their involvement before the war were never going to be put on a piece of paper to go into archives – particularly with 645 men dead.<sup>77</sup>

5.56 Research on the whereabouts of Japanese submarines on 19 November 1941 refutes the claim that a Japanese submarine was responsible for sinking *Sydney*. Much attention has focused on what are called the I-class submarines, and in particular submarine I-124.<sup>78</sup>

5.57 Submarine I-124, which was sunk in Darwin Harbour in January of 1942, has been rejected by others however as the reason for *Sydney's* loss. Specifically:

I-124 would have been a spectacularly bad choice; she was one of the I series submarines with the shortest range and slowest speeds, both surface and submerged. She was one of four special mine-layers, and they were all engaged in minelaying around the Philippines (sic) and Malaya in the early days of the war.<sup>79</sup>

5.58 In his work on submarine I-124,<sup>80</sup> Mr Tom Lewis notes concerns (raised by Mr Ed Ferrier), that Japanese submarine I-124, sunk in the waters off Darwin, may contain information which could shed light on the circumstances surrounding the loss of *Sydney*. He suggested that this accounts for the reluctance on the part of the Japanese to allow the investigation of the wreck of I-124 in Darwin Harbour.<sup>81</sup> However, Mr Lewis states that 'there is no record of I-124 being in southern waters at that time'.<sup>82</sup> Mr Lewis also cites the work of David Jenkins, who states that I-124 was 'in Japanese ports in early November preparing for operations in the South China Sea'.<sup>83</sup>

5.59 Mr Lewis concluded that, following the publication of Montgomery's book, and other works, '... the myth of the Japanese submarine has slowly been accepted as factually based'.<sup>84</sup> He believes that 'there is no basis for suggestion that a Japanese submarine – and that includes I-124 – was involved in the tragic loss of HMAS *Sydney*'.<sup>85</sup> Mr Lewis also made a submission to the inquiry, in which he stated that 'I also wish to place on record my opinion that there was no "cover-up"'.<sup>86</sup>

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77 Doohan, Transcript, p. 284.

78 Winter stated that 'it should be noted that there was no such thing as an "I-Class" submarine, as the submarines with the "I" prefix were of different classes, as is indicated in good reference books on submarines. Japanese submarines had the prefixes "I", "RO" and "HA", on the pattern of an ancient poem that began "I-ro ha ni-ho-he-to" ' (Poniewierski, Submission, p. 319).

79 Gascoyne Historical Society, Submission, p. 1280.

80 Exhibit No 6: *Sensuikan I-124 – A History of the Imperial Japanese Navy Fleet Submarine Sunk in Northern Territory Waters*.

81 *ibid.*, p. 71.

82 *ibid.*, p. 72.

83 *ibid.*

84 *ibid.*, p. 71.

85 *ibid.*, p. 73.

86 Lewis, Submission, p. 135.

5.60 Mr J J Collins told the Committee that, despite his belief that the Japanese were responsible, he had no proof of such a theory. He stated in evidence that:

I have read how the Japanese had the best torpedo during the war – the long lance torpedo. There is evidence on that. I have heard people say, without corroborating it, that they were able to fire under the *Kormoran* and get the *Sydney*. There is no doubt that they did have the best torpedoes. There is plenty of evidence of that around. But no, I have no corroborating evidence for what the [Japanese officer said about the Japanese being responsible for sinking *Sydney*].<sup>87</sup>

5.61 The evidence suggests that all I-class submarines were able to be accounted for in locations other than off the coast of Western Australia on that date. If no I-class submarines could possibly have been responsible for sinking *Sydney*, the challenge to researchers now is to provide concrete evidence of the involvement of a particular submarine, rather than more generally proposing the theory of Japanese involvement. As Winter points out:

Japan ... had a finite number of submarines, and they can all be located elsewhere at a time that would have made it operationally unfeasible for them to have been in the area where *Sydney* was sunk, at the time when she was sunk.<sup>88</sup>

### **Pastor Wittwer**

5.62 The Committee received evidence from Pastor Ivan Wittwer that, while attached to the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Authority in 1951, he met a man who claimed to be Gerhard Heinz Grossman, former gunnery officer on the *Kormoran*. This man told Pastor Wittwer that a Japanese submarine had been responsible for sinking the *Sydney* and that this fact had been covered up by the Germans.

5.63 Pastor Wittwer claimed that Grossman told him the fatal torpedoes were fired from a Japanese submarine, from a distance of about 2.5 miles. Grossman also told Pastor Wittwer that *Sydney* survivors were killed in the water by machine gun fire, and stated that the number of the Japanese submarine was camouflaged.<sup>89</sup>

5.64 Mr Bernard Eneberg supports Pastor Wittwer's claims, despite his doubts about Grossman, the man who recounted the story to Pastor Wittwer. He told the Committee that 'Pastor Wittwer is quite confident that whoever it was knew what he was talking about, and I would certainly go along with that. Whether the man was Heinz Grossman is up for argument, but he evidently knew what he was talking about'.<sup>90</sup>

5.65 Pastor Wittwer, in his submission to the inquiry, related details of his subsequent interview by ASIO.<sup>91</sup> Having signed the *Official Secrets Act*, Pastor Wittwer claimed he was not able to release the information until 1982.<sup>92</sup> ASIO has not denied the interview occurred,

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87 Collins, Transcript, p. 350.

88 Poniewierski, Submission, p. 319.

89 Wittwer, Submission, pp. 3486-3487.

90 Eneberg, Transcript, p. 421.

91 See Wittwer, Submission, p. 3487.

92 *ibid.*, p. 3488.

but advise that 'It is possible that such an interview took place and the record was subsequently destroyed prior to the operation of the *Archives Act 1983*' or perhaps that the 'records associated with the interview may have been transferred to the predecessor of the present day Department of Defence'.<sup>93</sup>

5.66 The Committee has no reason to doubt that Pastor Wittwer did have a conversation with a person purporting to be Heinz Grossman, and that he may well have been interviewed by ASIO about this matter. However, the Committee has serious reservations about the identity of the person claiming to be Grossman and hence his truthfulness is also suspect. As Pastor Wittwer himself acknowledged:

Grossman was a con man, who cleverly worked himself into a position as representative of all the Germans.<sup>94</sup>

5.67 Given that the identity of the person claiming to be Grossman is not clear, the impact of his evidence is diminished, although there are those who still choose to believe his claims and/or the sentiments expressed by him.<sup>95</sup> Suggestions were made in the inquiry that Pastor Wittwer harboured negative feelings the Japanese, which may have influenced his reaction to the information given to him by the man claiming to be a *Kormoran* survivor.<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

5.68 The Committee was not convinced that a case has been made to show that the Japanese were responsible for sinking *Sydney*. Of all the submissions expressing support for the theory of Japanese involvement, none provided any hard evidence to prove Japanese involvement. The complete lack of any evidence in Japanese archives pertaining to *Sydney* also lessened the weight of the argument supporting Japanese involvement. Given that no Japanese submarine has been identified as being in the vicinity of where *Sydney* was sunk at the time of her loss, it is impossible to prove that the Japanese were involved in any way in sinking *Sydney*.

5.69 The Committee found that there is no evidence to support the involvement of a third participant in the engagement, whether it be a Japanese submarine, a German U-boat or an Italian submarine, as suggested in some submissions. The possibility of a third party being involved in the sinking appears to have had its genesis in the shock of the loss and the inability of people to accept that *Sydney* could be defeated in such a manner. It is unfortunate that the claims of third party involvement still continue to circulate in the absence of any substantive evidence.

## The Leichtes Schnellboot (Light Speed Boat)

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93 ASIO, Submission, p. 1771.

94 Exhibit No. 43, p. 2.

95 See for example, Eneberg, Submission, p. 2049.

96 Mr David Kennedy told the Committee that Pastor Wittwer confided to him that '... he could have killed the Japanese who killed his cousin or uncle, and how he was having to struggle against these feelings'. Mr Kennedy felt that Pastor Wittwer 'had a serious personal problem to come to terms with over the loss of his relative and the Japanese' (Kennedy, Transcript, p. 459).



5.70 Several submissions examined the possible role of the Leichtes Schnellboot (LS-3),<sup>97</sup> *Kormoran's* mine-laying speedboat which was 'specially constructed of light metal'<sup>98</sup> and 'was 41 feet long, weighed 11 and a half tons ... and was capable of at least 45 knots'.<sup>99</sup> It was armed with two mines able to be discharged vertically through tubes on the stern; plans for these type of vessels to carry two to four torpedoes were made but not implemented for this version (LS-4 on the raider *Michel* did carry torpedoes).<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that this vessel was not a motor torpedo boat, as a number of submissions called it; it was not equipped with torpedoes, but rather with mines.<sup>101</sup>

5.71 A number of theories were put forward about the LS-3's possible involvement in the events of November 1941:

- LS-3 was laying mines in *Sydney's* path, two of which exploded, thereby explaining the inconsistency in accounts seen by some on how many torpedoes struck *Sydney*;<sup>102</sup>
- LS-3 was used to tow some of *Kormoran's* lifeboats after the ship was scuttled (according to Mr Eagles until the morning of 22 November when the LS-3 was itself scuttled), thereby explaining the speed with which survivors apparently reached the Western Australian coast.<sup>103</sup> It is also claimed that the towing would explain why some of the Germans were reported as being 'clean-shaven' and in good condition when rescued;<sup>104</sup> and
- the LS-3 was used to trail *Sydney* survivors in the water, allowing the Germans to dispose of those who remained from *Sydney's* crew.<sup>105</sup>

5.72 Mr Eagles is convinced that the role of LS-3 has been insufficiently examined to date, and believes that there exist many compelling reasons why Captain Detmers may have used LS-3.<sup>106</sup> Mr Eagles told the Committee that:

Detmers was a torpedo boat captain. He was a torpedo specialist, although the motor torpedo boat was not armed with torpedoes. I believe that his two assets, the things that he knew most about – the

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97 Leichtes Schnellboot 3 was the updated model of the LS-1 and LS-2. See Eagles, Submission p. 2365 and p. 3618.

98 Winter, op. cit., p. 26.

99 Eagles, Submission, p. 2365.

100 Conways Maritime Press, quoted in Eagles, Submission, p. 3618. Mr John Doohan, of the End Secrecy on *Sydney* Group has incorrectly stated that LS-2 and LS-3 were 'exactly the same' (Transcript, p. 254). This ignores the different engines used in LS-1 and LS-2, compared with LS-3, and the different fitout for laying of mines.

101 For example, Mr James Eagles refers to the vessel as an MTB (motor torpedo boat), although in his submission he acknowledges that the LS-3 did not carry torpedoes (Eagles, Submission, p. 2394).

102 *ibid.*, p. 2368.

103 *ibid.*, p. 2394.

104 McDonald, E, Submission, p. 553.

105 McDonald, E, Transcript, p. 234. McDonald also raises questions about the use of the motor torpedo boat after the battle in a submission (McDonald, E, Submission, pp. 3173-3174).

106 Eagles, Submission, p. 2368.

motor torpedo boat and underwater torpedoes – are the two things that he would have used ...<sup>107</sup>

5.73 Mr Eagles feels that during the interrogations of Captain Detmers and his crew, insufficient questions were asked about the significance of the LS-3.<sup>108</sup> He believes that the Leichtes Schnellboot was laying mines near *Sydney*. He suggested that the inconsistency regarding the torpedo strikes on *Sydney* may be explained by the theory that LS-3 was using magnetic mines to force *Sydney* to turn, and that two mines exploded. Mr Eagles further suggests that the reason for the battle taking place 300 miles off the coast was that this was the limit of the LS-3's range, and that Captain Detmers had calculated this on the grounds that LS-3 might be needed to tow survivors to shore.<sup>109</sup> Mr Eagles also maintains that part of the reason for secrecy about the role of the speedboat was 'not to attract any importance to it. They [*Kormoran*] were the first to use the LS boats'.<sup>110</sup> This however, ignores the fact that other raiders already operating were fitted with similar boats.<sup>111</sup>

5.74 In his submission to the inquiry, Mr Michael Montgomery supported the second of Mr Eagles' claims, but with an apparently different destination for the LS-3. He stated that:

Looking at a plot of the positions in which the *Kormoran* lifeboats were found, one is immediately struck by the greater distance – at least 80km – covered by the two which made land at 17-Mile Well and Red Bluff. My book includes a photograph of the pile of stores landed at the latter far in excess of what one would expect to be contained in a boat already crammed with 57 men ... while one of the survivors at the former indicated that they had been beached there the previous day – ie the 23rd. This necessarily implies that both boats had been assisted by a motorised vessel, possibly the *Kormoran's* large motor boat which was then scuttled ...<sup>112</sup>

5.75 Mr John McArthur agreed with Mr Eagles and Mr Montgomery, supporting the theory that LS-3 played an important role in the confrontation between *Sydney* and *Kormoran*. Of concern to Mr McArthur was:

How a heavily laden boat with a lug sail could travel against a strong SE wind and cover such a distance is truly remarkable UNLESS it was towed while having only 40 men and then the occupants of the towing boat ditched their craft and came on board knowing that rescue was only hours away. An explanation [is that it was] the Leichtschnellboot from the *Kormoran*. The same boat that Frame ignores completely,

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107 Eagles, Transcript, p. 565. Barbara Poniewierski states in a submission that the LS-Boot on *Kormoran* was equipped to lay mines (not torpedoes), and therefore that *Sydney* cannot have been attacked by '*Kormoran's* torpedo boat' (Poniewierski, Submission, p. 316).

108 Eagles, Transcript, p. 568.

109 Eagles, Submission, p. 2368.

110 *ibid.*, p. 2383.

111 *ibid.*, p. 3618.

112 Montgomery, Submission, p. 638.

Winter says could not have been used, and Detmers conveniently ignores altogether.<sup>113</sup>

5.76 This opinion is supported by LCDR McDonald RAN (Retd) who claimed that 'the "shaven" group collected by *Aquitania* could well have been the crew of the MTB'.<sup>114</sup>

5.77 Contrary to these theories is evidence about the use of the LS-3 from Barbara Winter who notes in her book that the propeller of the boat was damaged in early 1941 and that it was not used after that, and that furthermore the boat was unable to be raised when *Kormoran* was being abandoned.<sup>115</sup>

5.78 It is apparent, however, that the theories of the use of the LS-3 are only speculative, with there being no agreement on whether it towed all of the boats for a period, whether it towed two boats to land (according to Michael Montgomery) or whether it towed the boat that was eventually picked up by *Aquitania*. The Committee felt that, without any evidence, it was impossible to determine if the LS-3 played any role either during or after the battle.

5.79 The Committee also rejects the claims that the LS-3 was used to shadow survivors of the engagement, and kill them as they floated in the water. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that this occurred, and the continued claims of such behaviour, as with so many unfounded claims about the whole *Sydney-Kormoran* engagement, are both malicious and distressing to family members of those lost on *Sydney*.

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113 McArthur, Submission, p. 2259. In fact, Frame mentions the LS-3 on p. 47 of his book; and Detmers refers to it on a number of occasions in his book: pp. 20, 30, 38.

114 McDonald, E, Submission, p. 3174.

115 Winter, op cit., pp. 58, 142.

