

[REDACTED]
March 11, 1998

Dear Ron,

Please forgive me for not replying sooner to your most welcome letter of January 10, which arrived while I was having a most unwelcome stay in hospital, from which I am still recuperating.

I found your recollections re the Sydney-Kormoran battle fascinating, because I had quite a lot of contact with some of the Kormoran survivors in the 1960s and 1970s. I was then press attaché at the Australian Embassy in Bonn. The ambassador received an invitation from the Kormoran survivors to attend one of their annual reunions and he passed it on to me, as an ex-naval bloke.

It was in Hamburg and there were about 50 blokes, some of them with wives, and also the captain, Detmers. I was the guest of honour and was received with the utmost courtesy. I speak German and gave them a short talk about Australia, then showed them a short documentary film about Australia. After that I moved around from table to table, carefully working my way towards where Detmers was sitting.

He had suffered a stroke but was only mildly incapacitated and could speak quite easily. I said how much we appreciated being invited to their reunion, to which he replied that the Kormoran sailors had the highest regard for Australia and Australians, who had treated them very fairly and decently. We waffled on for a while about post-war conditions in Germany, then, to try to get onto the subject of the battle, I mentioned that I had lost a close friend in the Sydney, who used to go sailing with me before the war. His reply surprised me. He said it was sad that so many Australians had lost close friends and loved ones in the Sydney, because the Sydney should not have been sunk. He said a proper naval cruiser should never have been sunk by an auxiliary cruiser and it was only due to freak circumstances that Sydney was lost. Before I had time to ask what the circumstances were, he said Sydney should never have come so close. I can still hear him saying: "Ich konnte unser Gluck kaum glauben" (I could hardly believe our luck).

It was getting quite late by this time and two ladies came alongside to help him get up and leave, so that was the end of the conversation. I never met him again as he died soon after that. It was, however, not the end of my talks with the Kormoran blokes. They invited me to all their reunions after that, treated me like a king and even visited me in my office at the Embassy to ask for an Australian flag which they could use at their reunions. We didn't talk much about the battle, although one bloke volunteered that Sydney had not even been at action stations when Kormoran opened fire - he recalled seeing a cook carrying a bucket of something along the deck and seeing Sydney's officers leaning over the side of the bridge gawking at them. He said Kormoran raked Sydney's decks with its anti-aircraft guns and very few blokes could have got to their action stations. Since retiring I have

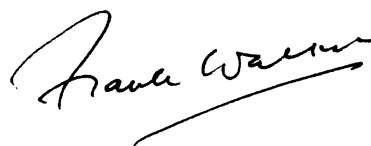
had letters from them, but the contact has now faded out - maybe they have faded out too.

The point about this, Ron, is that if these blokes committed the atrocities some people are claiming, the last thing they would do is to approach the Australian Embassy and befriend an ex-naval man. They would just have lain doggo and said nothing. Also, I was surprised to find that they seemed to be ardent Nazis when in the Aquitania. German AMCs were largely manned by sailors the Nazis didn't like - there was little, if any, chance of them ever getting back to Germany, so it was a good way of getting rid of non-Nazis. There would have been a sprinkling of Nazis among them, of course, but it is most likely that the rest merely pretended to be Nazis.

I hope this is of some help to you. The committee set up to investigate the Sydney won't get far unless they locate the wreck. So far the Navy have refused to allow survey ships to look for it, which makes one suspect that they do not want to find that her water-tight doors were not closed, as they would have been closed if Sydney had been at action stations. The suspicion is that she was only at first degree of readiness, with guns closed up but little else.

I hope to see you again at one of the A/S officers association outings.

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Frank Warner". The signature is written in dark ink and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.