

*Journalist
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B. Burnett

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The day we sank the Sydney

Kormoran survivors say they owe their lives to errors made by HMAS Sydney's captain. **Graham Anderson** reports

Survivors of the German raider the Kormoran have welcomed the search for HMAS Sydney, saying the ill-fated Australian warship's crew of 645 were the victims of criminally incompetent commanding officers.

Kormoran Survivors Association president Ludwig Ernst, 89, says finding the wrecks of the Kormoran and the Sydney will verify their account of the Sydney's destruction on Wednesday, November 19, 1941.

Kormoran survivors — 30 of the original 319 are still alive — commemorate the date as their "second birthday".

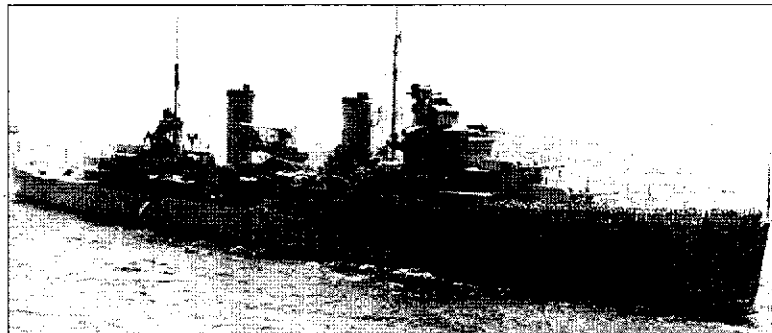
"I observed Sydney's incompetent command structure from the moment Sydney appeared over the horizon and turned to pursue us," Mr Ernst said. His job was to calculate range and elevation for the Kormoran's 15cm guns from the raider's bridge. He said the Sydney neglected all the rules of raider warfare, which he witnessed first-hand while serving on the German pocket battleship the Deutschland in the North Atlantic at the outbreak of World War II.



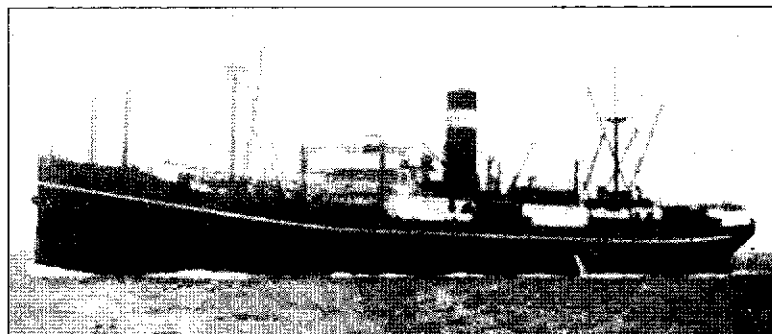
Lived to tell: Kormoran Survivors Association president Ludwig Ernst.

"Whenever we came across an unidentified object, it was standard practice to fire a shot at 5000m across its bows," he said. "We on Kormoran were all expecting Sydney to do the same, but it never came.

"Once Sydney had closed to within 2000m, I threw away my pencil and pad as there was no need to do any more calculations. And that is (Capt.) Burnett's crime — he closed on an unidentified ship to within 900m. And where does it state in Admiralty orders that a cruiser should sit abeam an unidentified vessel for 15 minutes at



Sydney: Kormoran survivors say they can't understand its captain's foolishness.



Kormoran: Scored several early, decisive and lucky hits on HMAS Sydney.

900m? When Sydney did ask us for our secret call signal, the only answer we had was our guns."

Mr Ernst added that the Sydney's criminal incompetence does not end there. Kormoran survivors still can't figure out why the Sydney's officers were all on the bridge when the ship should have been at action stations.

"The bridge was full of white caps, they were all clearly visible to us," he said. "But what really enabled our survival was the incompetence of Sydney's gunnery officer. He fired a bracket, Sydney's first salvo going over us and the

second falling short. At point-blank range you didn't need to do it. The simple maxim was 'shell and keep shelling'. What Sydney's gunnery officer did is beyond belief."

Should the Sydney be found, Mr Ernst's main interest will focus on the damage to her bow.

"Sydney's B turret exploded and was hurled over the side as if it were a plaything," he said. "Seconds later one of our torpedoes struck under B turret sending up a column of water indicating it had struck very deep.

"We had enormous luck — had the torpedo been set a half-metre

deeper it would have gone under Sydney and missed completely."

A contributing factor to the Sydney's disappearance may be the loss of its bow, a fate which the Russian cruiser Molotov and the British destroyer HMS Halstead suffered after being hit by German 1.5-tonne torpedoes in WWII.

"Eventually Australians will have to comprehend that the guilty party for Sydney's sinking is Capt. Burnett," Mr Ernst said.

Wreck hunter David Mearns' decision to search Kormoran Capt. Theodor Detmers' battle position of 26.34 south, 111 east received the backing of Frank Naegler from the German Military History Research Centre in Potsdam.

Dr Naegler said Mr Mearns' "American doggedness" would ensure the wrecks were found.

"At 900m, a 15cm shell from Kormoran needed just two seconds to strike Sydney's bridge, whereas a torpedo from Kormoran's fixed underwater tube would have needed at least a minute for a lucky hit. Pick your poison," he said.

The Kormoran's log states that in August 1941 it swept south along 111 east in the Fremantle-Sunda Strait shipping lane seeking victims.

The Kormoran's adjutant Heinz Messerschmidt, 93, said he had doubts about Mr Mearns' chances.

"I sincerely hope for Australia's sake that Sydney is found, but as no one knows exactly when and where Sydney sank, the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean may defeat Mearns," Mr Messerschmidt said.

But he is certain on one thing: "All we Kormoran survivors thank our lives to Capt. Burnett."