

"Ship Ahoy!"  
Graham F Ward



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I revised this letter on the **12th November 2008** before sending it on to the **HMAS SYDNEY II, COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY**

This letter was further revised on **Monday 2nd February 2009** and sent to the following identities as a matter of interest. Nothing more and nothing less! And to put an end to those that continually refer to the sinking of the *HMAS Sydney* (II) as a controversy!

When George .H Johnston, the noted journalist, wrote an article in the Sydney Morning Herald on the exploits of the *Sydney* after she had completed months of service in the Mediterranean and then dedicated his book 'GREY GLADIATOR'- **To the Officers and Men of HMAS SYDNEY AND OF OTHER WARSHIPS – British and Australian which had served in the Mediterranean Sea campaign in WW II** and went on board her prior to her sailing and spoke to many of her crew, person to person, about their experiences, he should have first heeded the warning a slave gave to Julius Caesar, '**that all glory is repealing.**'- World War II was not over yet!

Professor Geoffrey Blainey

President of the Commission into the Finding of the Sydney (II) Foundation, The Hon Terence Cole AO, RFD, QC..

Naval Support Command

Dear Sir,

I read with interest your story (Professor Geoffrey Blainey's story) on the sinking of the H.M.A.S *Sydney*, (Herald Sun , Tuesday, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2008). As an avid reader of sea stories I was intrigued by the fact that no two books written on the subject were in agreement. Some said one thing while others touted that they had gained confidential information from a reliable source, or that they had ascertained how the *H.S.K Kormoran* sank the HMAS *Sydney* while having sustained only a slight amount of damage to herself. One such viewpoint, which was sent to me from a retired naval officer, claimed that the *Sydney* was overloaded with gold bullion to such an extent that her 6 inch gun turrets were unmanageable.( He made up booklets on the subject and sold copies privately!)

However, from several eyewitness accounts of the battle (war diaries) and Kapitan T. Detmers own account, scribed in his books 'HILFSKREUZER' *Kormoran* by Kapitan Zur See, ad.Theodor Detmers and Jochen Brennecke and translated into English as THE RAIDER, *Kormoran* by Edward Fitzgerald (1959) we obtain about 90% truth, 10% fabricated. The reason that some parts were a fabrication of the truth comes in several parts,

The *Kormoran* was in fact a 'pirate ship'- (by definition a pirate ship or a ship used to commit piracy is termed as *korm* that is engaged in doing- '**the act, practice, or crime of robbing ships on the high seas, the taking of property by open violence, without authority, on the high seas**)- in this case, the ship was manned by a crew of German sailors. The very fact that when the *Kormoran* entered service her crew actually made up a 'Jolly Roger 'flag is an endorsement of their intentions. To attack allied ships and

plunder their cargoes - to take from these allied ships their charts, log books, secret codes, uniforms and helmets, flags (signal and recognition), foodstuffs and light armaments and of course, fuel. When Detmers was informed that a 'Pirate flag' had been made up he brought his crew to order and told them that even though their ship was to sail under a false flag, they were still German sailors and their ship was an armed raider and that their was a difference between a ship operating in war time compared to that of peace.time.

That the *Kormoran* was many ships in one, she was a supply ship capable of refuelling and re-arming submarines at sea with torpedoes and shells and giving them information on allied shipping movements and supplying them with charts that were relevant to the area they were operating in. She was also capable of doing repairs to damaged German ships at sea (especially submarines damaged by depth-charges). Of capturing allied ships and turning them over to the German authorities for their own use, their cargoes then being used to supplement their own war effort. The refrigeration ship *Duquesa* was one such ship. Stationed at a secret rendezvous point, her cargo of foodstuffs was 'plundered' to stock the larders of German supply ships, raiders and submarines

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On several occasions the *Kormoran* repaired damaged submarines when they had been depth-charged and their seams had ruptured and opened up. Detmers recalled the time when one such submarine could not successfully dive so he took her in tow ,welded an overhead seam that had ruptured, personally inspected the repair and congratulated the seaman/welder on a job well done!

As well as this the *Kormoran's* engineers made castings out of white metal/bronze and repaired their own main engine bearings while still at sea. This meant that they had the capacity to do the machining as well. In fact they replaced the *Kormorans* engine bearings over 120 times causing them to be always short of the required amount of metal (gun metal, white metal) to do the job, but they somehow managed. Detmers was ever fearful of the day he might have to return to a 'safe port' for repairs, that he would rather 'stay out' and elude any attempts by the enemy to hunt him down.

Because the *Kormoran* was an ex-passenger liner that was converted into a merchant navy protection cruiser and then into **Raider Ship No 41**, there was a surplus of cabins available. Several of these were converted into classrooms where seamen were trained to learn other trades, electrical, mechanical and carpentry, in fact anything that may be advantageous in them in gaining higher rank or to improve their knowledge in civilian life later on. The crew were encouraged to attend these classes by Detmers.

**Additional** armaments were added to the *Kormoran* to make her more efficient. Two 37 mm (army type) anti-tank guns and two underwater torpedo tubes, one to port, one to starboard were fitted. These underwater tubes were at the time a German secret weapon .*Kormorans'* starboard side underwater tube was used to great effect in the sinking the *Sydney* (II) as there was no 'tell-tale' splash visible when it was fired, while the 37 mm anti-tank guns,( one to port ,one to starboard ) were used to prevent any of the *Sydney's* crew from firing off her torpedoes or manning her 4 inch A-A guns. The *Sydney's* crew were in the process of sending an armed boarding party across to investigate the *Kormoran* when without any warning the *Kormoran's* No 3 and 4 -150 mm guns fired on her bridge and six inch gun turret director control. Seconds later a torpedo exploded against her hull. Both Nos 3 and 4 guns fired over their camouflage screens! By doing this- (even though the blast damaged the camouflage screens and they had to be forced down manually, Hermann Ortmann told me that he could not drop the screen on No 4 gun in the normal manner. On No 4 gun, he had to lie on his back and kick the lever until the screen dropped free. He had only seconds to do this as the next round was about to be fired)- Detmers' gunners were able to destroy the *Sydney's* chain of command. This is why no evasive action was taken to avoid the underwater torpedo, Detmers had eliminated that possibility, a very smart tactical move on his part, don't you think?

Hermann Ortmann reiterated that after this the *Sydney* never gained any speed, that the action between the two ships was fought at almost a 'standstill'pace, although the *Kormoran* did pick up speed to about six knots to come around to engage the *Sydney* on her starboard side. Ortmann stated that it was at this time that the barrel on No 4 gun was 'watered down' as it had become so hot after having being fired continuously for about ten minutes. The shells were of two types, explosive and semi-armour piercing. Detmers stated that there was no return fire at all coming from the *Sydney* at this point of time, so as far as the Germans were concerned it was now just a 'turkey shoot.' If there were to be any survivors from the *Sydney* the command to cease fire would needed to have come at this point of time from Kapitan Detmers, but no such order was forthcoming. Detmers stated that, "Because of the intense fire coming from our secondary armaments no one on board the *Sydney* dare show their face to us!"- on the port side!

\* GERMAN SUBMARINE U 124 HAD ITS BULKHEAD WELDED UP AT SEA BY THE CREW OF THE KORMORAN.



Why then were no survivors from the *Sydney (II)* picked up ? Detmers answered this question in his book- " Because of the intensity and the rate of fire from our anti-aircraft guns and heavy machine guns no man dare show his face to us on board the *Sydney!*"- on the starboard side either!

(P.S It should be remembered that light armaments were taken from several of the captured allied ships. At close range these stolen weapons would have been used to good advantage against the *Sydney's* crew.)

Contrary to popular belief the action between the *Sydney* and the *Kormoran* was fought at slow speed and at close range, too close! Detmers gave reference to this when he wrote,-"But the situation was different now, I needed no more time, my eyes were glued to the bearing compass and as soon as I saw that the enemy cruiser had come practically to a standstill (from the German translation -"**the Sydney had- no speed!**") I gave the order to "De- camouflage!"-" Open Fire!" By this time the *Sydney* had closed to a range of about 750 metres ( 820 yards)-and -"That at one stage during the action we were so close that we could reach out and almost touch each other!"

One crucial admission, 'Did the *Kormoran* fire on the *Sydney (II)* under a false flag?' YES! The *Kormoran* had no option, at such close range and with over 400 mines stored in racks below deck!. One false move while under the *Sydney's* guns would have been a disaster for the *Kormoran*, for she had very little armour plating. It would have taken only one explosive shell to detonate a mine, and the whole outcome of this action would have been reversed. So what does this mean? It means that this situation occurred only because the ships were too close to each other, but the Germans must accept the fact that -if you fire on a ship under a false flag, even for a short period of time, and in that time you gain the advantage, then you cannot claim any 'honour or glory', for in doing so you lose all rights! And if by definition any ship that attacks and robs ships at sea and /or is a robber of ships on the high seas is termed '**a pirate ship**', then the *Kormoran* was a **pirate ship!** Especially if she had at the time a Dutch flag flying from her masthead.

**Detmers own modifications to the SMS Kormoran**

To gain further advantage Detmers instructed his men to build a wooden anti-submarine gun on the *Kormoran's* stern, the same as on allied ships. This fake gun was manned by a crew wearing duffle coats and British style army helmets, most authentic!

When the *Kormoran* was in company with another German ship , whether it be a supply ship, submarine or warship, Detmers always asked their captains to. examine the outline of the *Kormoran* before parting, for any signs, anything at all that would make an allied ship suspicious of his ship being anything other than a harmless allied freighter.

**'When a man seeks revenge, he should bring two coffins!'**( Chinese proverb.)

Detmers continues his account of the battle;-**"When the torpedo struck the *Sydney*(17.30 hours) abaft of turret A, an enormous column of water shot into the air and her stern dipped into the water up to her flagstaff. This put both of her fore turrets out of action (Turrets 'A' and 'B'), for they did not fire again. We fired a further eight salvos (32 shells fired from four guns at 10 second intervals, means 80 seconds had elapsed) and at such close range every shell we fired at the enemy cruiser was a direct hit. The *Sydney's* two remaining turrets 'X' and 'Y', mounted aft, began to fire independently. *Sydney's* Turret 'Y' fired two or three salvos, but they went wide of target and then ceased firing altogether. However, turret 'X' continued to fire with considerable accuracy, the first salvo was too high and ripped through our funnel at about bridge height. This shell ruptured the pre-heater oil line to the diesel engines and ignited the hot oil, sending burning oil down into the engine room , The second salvo hit the *Kormoran* amidships, setting her engine room on fire. Up until this point of time none of *Sydney's* torpedo tubes had been manned. The cruiser *Sydney* now drifted passed our stern, she was now stationary in the water. Our main and secondary armaments were now firing at point blank range into the enemy cruisers starboard side. I instructed my chief engineer in the engine room to abandon his post if the situation became intolerable, as he had already complained of the heat! (At 18.00 hours a crewman reported to Detmers through the engine room telegraph that the revolutions on both the *Kormoran's* engines were falling away rapidly and that he had lost contact with the engine room. A short time later the engines failed and stopped ) Detmers continues; "I was now informed by the crewman that all contact with the engine room personnel was now lost and that the engine room was sealed off by the intensity of the heat! .I told him to return and see if there was any chance to get one of the engines back on line! Meanwhile our guns continued to fire with deadly accuracy and the enemy ship was receiving one direct hit after another. I gave the order to cease fire at 18.25 hours!"**

According to Detmers book he returned to check on the crewmen in the engine room some time later! Detmers continues,-" Now that the engagement was over I went amidships to see what state the ship was in

for I had been informed that she was well alight in that area. As I hurried through the corridor on the port side , I saw that the cabins there were burning fiercely. I now opened the midships door (it had to be forced open) into the engine-room but billows of thick black smoke rolled out and darting flames shot up. With some difficulty I got the door closed again. I now went aft and spoke to damage control personnel who informed me that the fire fighting equipment in the engine-room had been damaged and that the foam extinguishers on the starboard side were out of action and that the pipes were severely damaged!"

What was it that Detmers said to his No 1, Foerster, about 'poetic justice' when they were interviewed in \*Car? What justice was there in keeping men stationed in the *Kormoran's* engine-room until the *Sydney* was sunk, with the loss of all hands in that area! These men worked night and day in difficult conditions to keep the engines of the *Kormoran* serviceable so that she could overtake enemy ships with her superior speed. The *Kormoran* only achieved success because of the loyalty of the men stationed in the engine room, and yet it was in this area that the majority of the casualties came from!

My intention then is to gain input from people interested only in the facts. I spent a lot of time going over the action with men who had sailed on the *Sydney*, previous to her demise of course, and to civilians who had war diaries. I also spent time talking to Hermann Ortmann, one of the nine man gun crew on *Kormoran's* No. 4 gun.

Even though Detmers knew that the *Sydney* had been sunk and that from her crew of 645 officers and ratings there were no survivors and yet he remained silent over their demise. Did he in reality want revenge for the sinking of the SMS *Emden* by the *Sydney* (I) that much? The answer to this question in it's entirety may never be known, but we do know that he stated in his books as he sat beside his No I, Lieutenant Foerster, at the W.A port of Carnarvon after being picked up by the freighter *Centaur* in late November 1941 and waited until nobody was within hearing distance, "I then whistled in satisfaction, the *Sydney*, Foerster, we must have sunk her! What a coincidence! And almost in the same spot where the first *Sydney* destroyed the *Emden* in the 1914/18 war! That's poetic justice ,if you like!"-and earlier, "Foerster and I exchanged a glance and dug each other in the ribs, so that 'Perth' class cruiser had been the *Sydney* and she hadn't got back to port so we had obviously sunk her!" and on Detmers passing a personal comment on the situation as a whole, "It was altogether a satisfactory business for us. In November 1914 the S.M.S *Emden* had fallen victim to the more powerful *Sydney* (I) and now, in November 1941, the modern more powerful cruiser *Sydney* (II) had been sunk by the refitted passenger liner *Kormoran* acting as an auxiliary cruiser. Is this correct? Or should a more correct definition of the ship be re-written as follows:-

**Ship No 41** was an auxiliary cruiser, or to be more correct an H.S.K, or Handelssechutzkreuzer, a merchant navy protection cruiser as they were known for camouflage purposes. Ship 41 was originally a recently built 9,400 B.R.T.passenger liner of the Hamburg-Amerika Line which had been launched as the *Steiermark*. She was built at the Deutsche Werfte at Kiel and was powered by 4 diesel-electric engines generating 14,000 H.P. An additional power plant of two small diesel engines was set up in No 3 hatch to supply additional auxiliary power but it's capacity was of the minimum requirement. It was estimated that 5,000 tons of diesel oil was needed to keep the ship in service for a duration time of 12 months at a cruising speed of eleven knots ( 17 knots was her maximum). Refitted as a cruiser her armament was 6 -150 mm guns (5.9 inch), two to port and two to starboard with the other two mounted centrally fore and aft of the bridge section above holds 2 and 4. Her secondary armament consisted of two -37 mm army anti-tank (or A/A) guns, one to port and one to starboard, and 5- 20 mm rapid firing A/A guns ( raised up and down on hydraulic platforms). A variety of heavy machine guns were also carried in case of need. Some of these machine guns were taken as 'booty' from captured allied ships. Two twin torpedo tubes were mounted below the bridge, one battery to port and one to starboard. In addition to these torpedo batteries were two single fixed torpedo tubes mounted below the water line, one to port and one to starboard. Detmers stated that he was well qualified to do battle with a cruiser at 10,000 yards range, but at 3,000 yards his secondary armament would be effective as well.

As the determined and intentional attack on the *Sydney* and her crew unfolded, from 17.30 hours on, as soon as Detmers realized that there was no return fire coming from the *Sydney* he should have ceased fire and allowed those men that were still alive to man any kind of life support that could still float to abandon ship. These men could then have been taken on board the *Kormoran* as prisoners, but Detmers chose to do otherwise. It was his decision to destroy all that remained of the *Sydney* and her crew, after all the *Kormoran* was close at hand at the time. We now know that the HMAS *Sydney* did not sail away under her own steam as was claimed by Detmers and her crew. When the torpedo exploded forward against the *Sydney's* hull the *Kormoran's* main armament would have continued to fire at that weakened area as the

\* CARNARVON. W.A.

wreck site on the sea floor shows that she is missing her bow section. Her bow lies on the sea floor some distance away. Another problem is that when a wreck is located on the sea floor and examined for damage, a ship weakened by explosives on impact with the sea floor, tends to break up even more.

The four large rubber dinghies that were used by the *Kormoran's* crew to ferry torpedoes and ammunition when they re-armed submarines at sea were available for use as life-rafts (they could carry forty men each) as to were a small number of rescue rafts, so why weren't they used? In all other instances when ships were captured by the *Kormoran* and sunk or turned into 'prize' ships those seamen that survived were always taken as prisoners and boarded on the *Kormoran*, at one stage this numbered almost 200 men (and two women). No allied seamen were allowed to escape from captured ships! Detmers went to great lengths to make sure that nobody escaped to tell of their demise or to inform the allies of the *Kormoran's* disguise or of her whereabouts.

The *Kormoran's* main engines did not fail completely until 18.10 hours but the auxiliary power plant in No 3 hatch was still fully operational until the crew of the *Kormoran* abandoned ship at 21.00 hours. Detmers claimed that none of the winches could be made to operate because there was --'no power available to operate the winches'- was why the two lifeboats stored in hatch No 1 had to be manually lifted out using a block-and-tackle after Kapitan Detmers told his crew that he had no option left other than to sink the *Kormoran* with demolition charges.

After the war, a sea captain from one of the ships sunk by the *Kormoran* visited Detmers home in Hamburg, and there strung across a picture of the *Kormoran* was a cap band with the ships name facing out- HMAS SYDNEY. When Detmers was asked to comment on how he had managed to sink the *Sydney* he replied, "It was luck, that's all, just luck!"

When I asked Hermann Ortmann what happened to the two dogs, 'Struppi', the fox terrier and 'Senta,' the German sheep dog, the long tailed monkey and 'Tommy,' the Gibraltar ape, whose antics, over their time at sea, had been the most favourite amusement for the *Kormoran's* crew. With reluctance he replied, "They had to be left on board, they went down with the ship!"

I trust that the information may be of use to those searching for the answers,

Yours truly,

Graham. F. Ward

