



“Ship Ahoy!”  
G.F.Ward



Frankston -13 November 2008

To Commander Katrina Radburn  
Commander RANR  
Commission Secretary

HMAS SYDNEY (II)  
COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE SINKING OF HMAS SYDNEY ON 19  
NOVEMBER 1941 BY THE GERMAN RAIDER / HILFSKREUZER SMS  
KORMORAN.

When I was told that an inquiry was being held into the sinking of HMAS *Sydney* (II) I had to re-enter the path I went down when I researched the sinking after reading ‘HMAS SYDNEY Loss and Controversy by Tom Frame’ (Published 1993).

I started this journey by talking firstly with sailors who had served on the *Sydney*, Gordon ‘Knocker’ D White (Range to elevation operator), ‘Paddy’ Ryan and Clarence R Attwell, all members of the Chelsea RSL, Sydney Association. Others included were WWII veterans, RAN personnel, Maritime Defence, HMAS Cerberus, and last but not least Hermann Ortmann ,assistant loader, No 4 Gun on the SMS *Kormoran.*, who would never put anything down on paper and preferred to say, “I never said that to Montgomery, or to Winter,or to.....!” and /or , “Their translation was wrong!” How convenient.

So let us go down the path that we know about, on the basis, if in doubt, leave it out!

All the German survivors strongly refute the claim that a Japanese ship, in any form, had anything to do with the sinking. Japanese foodstuffs were found on many German vessels.

The distance from the *Kormoran* to the *Sydney* at the start of the battle was close, very close , about 750 metres ( 820 yards). This lead to Detmers firing under a false flag. At this close range one false move on the part of the *Kormoran* would have been ‘disasterous’ with so many mines on board! Let Hermann Ortmann relate on what happened;

“In the distance I could hear the *Sydney*’s aircraft’s engines roar into life, then after a while they stopped! We had been at action stations for nearly 20 minutes! Whatever our signal officer said to the *Sydney* caused this to happen! All of us on the *Kormoran* owe our lives to Detmers and Ahlback! Later I looked up over the guns screen and saw that all of the *Sydney*’s guns were pointed straight at us and just forward of the bridge several bakers were leaning on the hand rail. With normal eyesight I could see them clearly! The *Sydney*’s AA Guns were not manned at all! Both ships were almost stationary and a small boat (cutter) was being swung out! Then I was told to run around to the camouflage screen and be ready to release it, but as I was about to go around to operate the release handle No 4 gun fired it’s first salvo, Gun No 3 did the same thing! To operate the lever was now impossible. I had to lie on my back and kick it with my feet, then it dropped away. The screen had been damaged by the blast from the gun or the shell clipping it!



Suddenly there was a huge explosion and a wall of water rose up against the side of the *Sydney*, forward of her bridge. Then all of our guns commenced firing. Only one torpedo was fired at the *Sydney*. Our No 4 gun fired continuously for about 10 minutes ( one shell fired every 10 seconds, that's 10 x 6 =60 shells) at the *Sydney's* port side, then we came around to the *Sydney's* starboard side and did the same thing for another 10 minutes. Anybody that showed their face to us was shot! Our guns barrel got so hot at one stage we had to cool it down with water before we could fire it off again!" **Now comes the part I do not believe happened!** "*The Sydney suddenly turned away from us and headed towards Perth, she was on fire and the last thing I saw of her was a glow in the distance as she sailed over the horizon!*" You mean she actually sailed away? " Yes, she must have been built out of strong material, we could not sink her!" From then on until midnight we were involved in getting a lifeboat out of the forward hold as none of our winches were working! We eventually got the boat into the water and Kapitan Detmers ordered explosive charges to be set around the ship. He then returned with our battle flag and then we cast off . We were about 1000 yards from the ship when a ripple seemed to run across the surface of the sea as the whole stern section of the *Kormoran* exploded. A piece of steel hit the life-jacket of the sailor sitting beside me and several other pieces landed in the sea around us. When I looked over to where the *Kormoran* was she suddenly rose out from the water and then sank."

This was all that he told me about the *Kormoran/ Sydney* close range battle in the six or seven times I spoke to him. He did say that when he returned home to Germany that the town that he came from was not badly damaged, but when he went to Hamburg he saw a city in ruins. He also spoke about being a POW at Murchinson, "You know they gave me a gun to shoot rabbits with, we were better shots than our guards so we did the shooting sometimes!"

Of all the questions asked about the action, two stood out that needed to be answered,

**Q. Why did Captain Joseph Burnett come in so close to the Kormoran?**

**A.** Because Detmers signalling fooled him. Detmers knew what ship the *Sydney* was but Burnett had no idea what ship the *Kormoran* was! Was it the Dutch merchant ship *Straat Malakka* en-route to Batavia with a cargo of piece-goods?-Who had on board a very inexperienced signalman, a 'g r e e n h o r n'! Or was it a German supply ship or even a spy ship? Kapitan Detmers let Burnett decide the answer to these questions, but in the meantime the gap between the two ships was closing, until..... !

Refer to Captain S. W. Roskill's comment about raiders ! (Reference taken from THE SECRET RAIDERS by David Woodward)

**Q. Why were there no survivors from the Sydney?**

**A.** That was Detmers decision, and it was a complex one to answer. Firstly there was the sinking of the SMS *Emden*. After sinking the *Sydney* he spoke of 'poetic justice!' He wanted revenge! Then there were the allied seamen, prisoners on board the *Kormoran*, who were continually informing Detmers that it was impossible for him to have got through the blockade thrown around the Atlantic by British sea power, this kind of statement infuriated Detmers. Another issue was that if you destroy your enemy in it's entirety then they wont be coming back against you at a later date! And of course, in the case of the *Sydney*, Australia / England lost experienced seamen, as well as a light cruiser, when she was sunk. Her crew would have been hard to replace in wartime.

When two German seamen dived into the sea to save an injured sailor from one of the allied ships sunk by the *Kormoran*, when Detmers mustered his crew aft, which he did after every encounter with an allied ship, and discussed the battle tactics used, with an

emphasis on –‘could it have been done better’ –he told his crew,-- “That although the act of saving a life was correct, they should also remember that they have a job to do for Germany, and that they would be hard to replace if something went wrong, that they should remember that!” (In other words don’t do it again!)

Because the job of a ‘raider’ was to seek and destroy allied merchant ships, causing them to seek out alternative routes and force them to become a member of a protected convoy, a much slower and costly process, and then after having sunk or taken a ship as a ‘prize’, simply to disappear into the night and do the same thing, over and over. In WW I the raider SMS *Emden* had almost closed down trade passing through the Indian Ocean. What if the *Kormoran* had have sunk the *Sydney* in it’s entirety and got away, what mayhem this would have caused! And last but not least there was the loss of morale, not just at sea, but on land as well!

Hermann Ortmann told me on one occasion when he had been on board the *Kormoran* only two days, “ Detmers came up to me and called me by my name, I felt so proud of the fact that he knew who I was. I had heard that he was well connected in the SKL and that some day he would become a ‘flag officer’ ”.

I trust that the information I have supplied may be of some use in your inquiry, as I said, I only became interested in what happened to the light cruiser *Sydney* because of the controversy and that Hermann Ortmann was good enough to invite me inside when I knocked on his door. When he handed me the two books, HILFSKREUZER “Kormoran” and THE RAIDER KORMORAN I was able to cross reference the information, from one to the other, to check the facts. However I was surprised that Hermann changed a few things, but then times have changed, that was in the past, this is the present day

Yours with respect,  
Graham.

nb This additional information was sent out on 26/1/09 to enable those researching the sinking of HMAS *Sydney* to gain further knowledge of the action.