



* For reference purpose only!

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Re: The sinking of HMAS *Sydney*(II) by the German raider HSK *Kormoran* on 19th November 1941-
'The Final Chapter.' (Revision 'A')

Dear Michael,

As an avid reader of sea stories I was always intrigued by the mystery of the *Sydney*, so many contradictions. I decided then to get the answers in my own way. After having spent nearly sixteen hours interviewing Hermann Ortman, the youngest survivor from the *Kormoran* and many other naval veterans with experience of what conditions were like during WWII, I am now in a position to conclude, say 90% right, 10% guessing of what happened to the light cruiser HMAS *Sydney II*.

What caused the sinking of HMAS Sydney (II)?

Stage 1 of the action - From 17.30 hours to 17.40 hours.

The light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* had drawn almost level with the *Kormoran* and moving at the reduced speed of 'slow,'- almost stopped,- which suggests that an armed boarding party had been assembled and was about to cross over to check out the identity of the **DUTCH** merchantman, *Straat Malakka*. From the bridge on the *Sydney*, Captain Joseph Burnett, RAN, scrutinised the as yet unidentified vessel as up until this point in time had not given the correct secret call sign even though she had been requested to do so. Burnett was suspicious of the ship. Was she a **DUTCH** merchant ship? Or perhaps an Axis supply ship or even a 'prize' ship captured by the enemy? The two ships were now cruising on a parallel course at the reduced speed of about four knots and at a distance of only 750 metres (820 yards).

At 17.30 hours a torpedo was fired from the heavily disguised merchantman! For this was no harmless **DUTCH** commerce ship but the armed German merchant cruiser HSK *Kormoran*. Her captain, Kapitan Zur See ad Theodor Detmers had been personally decorated during the Norwegian campaign (April- June 1940) while commander of the destroyer SMS *Hermann Schoemann* for *fortitude and endurance, under fire*-. Detmers concluded, "We put into Trondheim the next morning after having successfully completed the invasion of Norway, and the destroyer flotilla's commander, Commodore Bey came on board the *Hermann Schoemann* and personally decorated me with the Iron Cross, First Class." Detmers had pondered over how he would react if he was ever engaged by a ship of the 'Grey Army'. From the *Kormoran*'s starboard side underwater tube a torpedo sped towards it's target. Twenty seconds later Detmers ordered guns Nos. 3 and 4 to open fire over the top of their false sheetmetal bulwarks, which normally dropped away when firing commenced. These shells hit the bridge. As guns Nos 3 and 4 were readied to fire a second salvo, the *Kormoran*'s starboard side 37mm anti tank gun

targeted *Sydney's* port side 4-inch general purpose guns, quadruple torpedo tubes and the aircraft sitting on the catapult. The aircraft's fuel tank exploded sending burning aviation fuel down onto the deck below. *Sydney* fired only one full broadside from her four twin six-inch turrets, but even though these guns were pointed menacingly at the *Kormoran*, all the shells went over. The torpedo exploded forward and destroyed both of *Sydney's* forward turrets. Now all guns on the *Kormoran* fired at designated targets, this included full broadsides from the *Kormoran's* 1, 3, 4, and 5 – 5.9 inch (150 mm) main guns, 37mm anti-tank gun, 20mm A/A guns and heavy machine guns. There is no mention of the *Kormoran's* starboard side, deck mounted, twin torpedo tubes being fired?. *Sydney's* rear turret 'X' made corrections and managed to fire off two salvos. Three 6-inch shells hit the *Kormoran*, one went through her funnel and ruptured the pre-heated oil line to the engines and two hit her in the engine room, causing extensive damage. The return gunfire from the *Kormoran* destroyed turrets 'X' and 'Y'. This meant that all of *Sydney's* main armaments were out of action by 17.32 hours, and in this time she had been hit with 50 – 150mm shells. Keeping to course 250 degrees until 17.40 hours, the German raider *Kormoran* fired off another 8 x 24 = 192 shells at a range of 750 metres, termed in naval gunnery as being –**at point-blank range!**

Stage 2 of the action – From 17.40 hours to 17.48 hours.

Australian light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* turns to port slowly at a speed of around 4 knots, straight into the *Kormoran's* guns. By 17.45 hours her superstructure had been almost 'shot to pieces' and her bow blown off. She now lies dead in the water and starts to sink. Suddenly there is a huge explosion, an account of which is taken from Lieutenant Commander Bretschneider's diary, "On the cruiser there is a tremendous explosion, she has completely disappeared in a black fog, and as the smoke clears we can observe that her bows are slowly sinking!"

IS THIS *
2ND
TORPEDO HIT?

When I spoke about this to ex-seamen who were all veteran naval ratings from WW II and the Korean War, about what would cause this type of situation to happen, they felt that the most likely cause of this explosion was if a magazine close to an oil bunker had exploded.

Then there comes the comment in the Herald Sun newspaper on Thursday May 28, 1998 under the heading – **Captains grisly trophy.** – In reference to a letter sent to the Allied Armed Forces Trust in which a Croatian sailor, Oskar Magazinovic stated that he had a heated conversation with Captain Detmers at his home in Hamburg, Germany, in 1954. Magazinovic had served on the small 4,153 B.R.T Yugoslav freighter *Velebit* which was fired on and set on fire after a short engagement with the *Kormoran* on 26 June 1941. Detmers stated that the action between the *Sydney* and the *Kormoran* had lasted less than a minute and that the Australian cruiser was hit in the ammunition chamber and then sank. As Magazinovic was about to leave the house he noticed a large painting of the *Kormoran* in the entrance hall, and above was fixed a sad trophy. Hanging from the top of the painting was a sailors cap ribbon – **HMAS Sydney!**

Stage 3.-. From 17.48 until she sinks.

Why there were no survivors from the Sydney!

Because of the close range of the *Sydney* to the *Kormoran*, the *Kormoran's* gun crews were able to use their quick firing guns and heavy machine guns to good advantage against -'anybody who dared to show their face'- on the deck of the *Sydney*. When the *Sydney* turned to port at 17.40 hours, Detmers had to make sure that the *Sydney's* starboard side 4-inch dual purpose guns and the quadruple torpedo tubes were completely destroyed and could not be brought to bear.

* HERMANN ORTMANN TOLD ME THAT ONLY ONE TORPEDO WAS EVER FIRED AT THE SYDNEY - SHE WAS SHELLED THE REST OF THE TIME (20 MINUTES) THE 37mm ANTI-TANK GUN KEPT UP A CONTINUOUS BARRAGE AND TARGETED THE PLANE, THE 4" A/A GUN PLATFORM AND THE QUADRUPLE TORPEDO TUBE. (ALSO THE DAMAGE CONTROL CREW)



Detmers knew that it would take only one explosive shell to hit any one of the three hundred contact mines stored below deck on the *Kormoran* to totally destroy his ship.

Although at this stage, what condition was the *Sydney* in anyway after having been hit with over 350 – 150mm shells, all fired into her port side, and a further 70 shells fired into her starboard side and being hit with several torpedoes? Then there were the light armaments taken from captured allied ships, would they not have been used against the crew of the *Sydney* also? As far as can be ascertained then, the *Sydney* would have sunk with all hands at around 17.50 hours on 19th November 1941.

The location of the wrecks.

From the German book HILFSKREUZER *Kormoran* written by Detmers we are told that the wreck site of the *Kormoran* is – *Kormoran* sank auf 26 degrees 34 minutes Sud (South) by 111 degrees Ost (East). To locate the wreck of the *Sydney* we have to remember that the *Kormoran* drifted for six and a half hours in a N.N.Westerly (340 degrees)direction, from 18.00 hours until 00.35 hours, for a distance of say 7 – 8 nautical miles. So to find the wreck site of the *Sydney* we have to go in reverse - 160 degrees S.S East for say 7 – 8 nautical miles.

But in the words of Hermann Ortmann, "I do not understand what the fuss is all about, finding the wreck of the *Sydney*! If they ever do find the wrecks of either of the ships there won't be much left of them anyway!"

Was Captain Joseph Burnett responsible for the loss of his ship?

Before we answer this question we have to be aware of the changes that Detmers made to the German raider and what information may have been made available to him and the pressure he was under at the time. Each time Detmers made contact with an axis ship there was an exchange of information and ideas on how best to close down the allied trade routes. When Detmers made contact with any Axis ships he always requested that they look at his ship for any flaws in his disguise as being anything other than an allied merchantman! Anything at all that might arouse the enemy's suspicion of his identity! Detmers left nothing to chance!

Detmers had instructed the leader of his boarding party, Lieutenant. Diebitsch, to follow a set of procedures when he boarded any captured allied ships. In brief those procedures were:- From the bridge, chart room and radio/ wireless shack bring back all code books, charts, log books and any information of importance and the ships manifest etc, etc. From the top deck, livestock, uniforms, helmets and any light weapons. From below, fresh food and any other useful items, such as guns and ammunition.

Because Detmers recognised Allied merchantmen at a distance by the 4-inch anti-submarine gun mounted on their stern, he gave instructions for a dummy wooden gun to be mounted on the stern of the *Kormoran*. To fool the enemy even further the dummy gun's crew were dressed in coats and British style steel helmets taken from captured allied ships.

Detmers had his ship painted in the colours of a Norwegian ship, the *Straat Malakka*, and flew a Norwegian flag from her masthead.

When intercepted he would have let the two monkeys out of their cages and the two ships dogs to run freely around on the upper deck. He also displayed live animal cages on the deck in the same way as Greek merchant ships. The *Kormoran* also had several items of womens apparel taken from captured ships, including bathing costumes. Detmers had mistaken the identity of prisoners wearing bandanna's as they climbed on board,- "That from a distance, they looked and had the appearance of being women."

And one very important issue was the way Detmers had instructed his Yeoman of Signals, Ahlback, to send reply signals back to the light cruiser *Sydney*.

When Detmers intercepted the 4,153 B.R.T. Yugoslav merchantman *Velebit* (out from Split), on 26th June 1941, Detmers at the time was utterly frustrated by her poor style of signalling. Detmers stated, "Then I asked, 'What ship?' I repeated this signal three times and still there was no reply, I then ordered my gunners to open fire! She did not stop as ordered but kept on going. After a few more salvoes fires were started on her upper deck. So I checked my guns and signalled again, this time more demanding than before, 'Stop, damn you, stop!' I now ordered my gunners to fire at will, and keep on firing until her screws stopped turning!" In the meantime the *Kormoran* had come to within 500 yards of the Yugoslav ship which was by now burning fiercely, her whole upper deck was a mass of flames. But Detmers had made a massive tactical error, he never usually came in this close to an enemy ship.. If the *Velebit* had been equipped with any type of gun that fired an explosive shell, and the *Kormoran* had have been hit in her mine compartment,- with over 300 mines on board,- the *Kormoran* would have been totally destroyed!

Had Detmers learned something from this encounter with the *Velebit*? Is this the reason why he told signalman Ahlback, as the *Sydney* approached the *Kormoran* on her starboard quarter, "Answer slowly and awkwardly, Ahlback, like a real merchant navy greenhorn, and use flags. In the meantime they'll come even closer!"- " What do you want now?" signalled Ahlback- " I told you we are taking piece goods to Batavia!" etc., etc., and etc! How Captain J.Burnett on board the *Sydney* must have been frustrated by the poor signalling!

Determination, one of the most powerful forces of motivation, was pushing Detmers. The German raider *Kormoran* had been in the waters frequented by the German cruiser S.M.S *Emden* in WW I, but unlike the *Emden* had not - *brought the seaborne trade in the Indian Ocean almost to a standstill!* Detmers still had work to do if he was to overhaul the *Emden's* 101,182 tons of shipping captured or sunk or the German raider *Pinguins* total of 28 ships for a total of 136,551 tons, captured or sunk. Was Detmers the nemesis for those that had sunk the German raiders *Emden* (sunk by *Sydney* (I) on 9th November 1914) and the *Penguin* (sunk by HMS Cornwall on 8th May 1941). Did he want revenge?

I have also enclosed revised action plans SK-1 (A) and SK-2 (A) and also a copy of the German minelaying chart from the HSK *Passat* in Bass Strait.

Well, its no more *Sydney* /*Kormoran* for me. I started doing research on these two ships over 18 months ago and now we have to build some more bridges and move on. So we're off to San Francisco and Sutters Fort and the California Gold Rush and the 49'ers and how ships arrived in the 'Bay' and how their crews(including their captains) jumped ship, leaving their cargoes to rot away in the San Francisco bay. "Want a houseboat to live in! Here take mine!" To the paddle steamer S.S. *Central America* that sank in a hurricane in the North Western Atlantic and the recovery of thirty tons of gold from her locker using the same technology as was used to find the *Titanic*. One problem! As soon as anybody orders large quantities of fibre optic cable from now on, the word goes out and you are no longer the only person in the search for sunken treasure. So it's '*first in -best dressed*' from now on!

Yours with respect,
Graham F. Ward.