

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE LOSS OF HMAS SYDNEY II

Before The Hon TRH Cole AO RFD QC

Held at residence of Mr Willi Rönchen  
[REDACTED] Germany

Counsel Assisting: LEUT Matthew Tyson  
LEUT Stephen Harper

On Monday, 7 July 2008  
(Day 8)

1 THE PRESIDENT: We have come to the home of Herr Willi  
2 Rönchen in [REDACTED] in Germany to take evidence in relation  
3 to the encounter between HMAS Sydney and the Kormoran.  
4

5 Herr Rönchen, thank you very much for agreeing to  
6 see us and help this Commission, and I would ask you,  
7 please, to take the oath.  
8

9 <WILLI RÖNCHEN, sworn:  
10

11 LEUT TYSON: Q. Good afternoon, Herr Rönchen. My name  
12 is Leut Matthew Tyson. I'm here with Herr Frank Thomas,  
13 interpreter, and my colleague, Stephen Harper.

14 Herr Rönchen, just before we begin, can you confirm that  
15 the Instrument of Appointment has been shown to you and  
16 you've had the opportunity to review that?  
17

18 A. Yes.

19 Q. Sir, could you start, please, by telling us your full  
20 name?

21 A. Willi Rönchen with two Is, and Rönchen.  
22

23 Q. Thank you. And what is your date of birth?

24 A. 30th of March 1922.  
25

26 Q. And what is your address, Herr Rönchen?

27 A. [REDACTED]  
28

29 Q. Now, sir, just before the outbreak of World War II,  
30 what was your occupation?

31 A. I was a sweetmaker - like candies, I made candies.  
32

33 Q. Can you explain to us, please, how it was that you  
34 came to be on Kormoran?

35 A. Well, my answer to this is going to be a long one,  
36 because at the age of 11 I handed in my first application  
37 to the cadet school for young officers, but in the end it  
38 turned out that they would only take people from the coast.  
39 Then, at the age of 16, I volunteered for the navy and when  
40 all these medical examinations took place then my time of  
41 apprenticeship had already passed and then at the age of  
42 18, that was 1940, I was commanded to the navy.  
43

44 Then we had six weeks in a training company where we  
45 received our basic training for being a soldier, and then  
46 it was asked who would be willing to go on a  
47 never-come-back command, if you understand what I mean, and

1 from these people in these training troops, 28 volunteered  
2 for Kormoran, or 28 of these ended up on Kormoran without  
3 receiving any special particular training.

4  
5 Q. Now, when you were on Kormoran, what were your duties;  
6 what was your job on Kormoran?

7 A. Well, I was in the division of seamen, but that was  
8 already when the ship was still in Hamburg, and it was  
9 converted into an auxiliary cruiser, and when it was built  
10 basically.

11  
12 Q. When Kormoran left Gotenhafen, you continued in the  
13 seamen division; is that correct?

14 A. Yes.

15  
16 Q. And who was in charge of that division?

17 A. That was Chief Leut Skeries.

18  
19 Q. Now, sir, I want to take you forward to the afternoon  
20 of 19 November 1941, and I'm going to ask you a series of  
21 questions, in particular about what you saw and what you  
22 did after the alarm rang that afternoon. Now, first, do  
23 you remember on this afternoon of the encounter between --

24 A. Maybe you can get out the drawings already.

25  
26 LEUT TYSON: I've got it here.

27  
28 THE INTERPRETER: Don't we have more detailed ones?

29  
30 LEUT TYSON: No.

31  
32 THE INTERPRETER: Okay.

33  
34 THE WITNESS: Yes. There was a small second director  
35 control unit. There was one here above the bridge and  
36 I was there in the aft, together with Mr Brinkmann, the  
37 lieutenant, and I sat there in this very small battery  
38 control unit.

39  
40 LEU TYSON: Mr President, what I might do, I might just  
41 mark the position that was indicated by Herr Rönchen.

42  
43 Sir, is that the position that you indicated?

44 A. Yes, the same.

45  
46 THE PRESIDENT: I'll mark that as exhibit 21.

47

1 EXHIBIT #21 DOCUMENT MARKED BY HERR RÖNCHEN

2  
3 LEUT TYSON: Q. Now, sir, if I can take you back to this  
4 afternoon of 19 November, do you remember the alarm ringing  
5 that afternoon?

6  
7 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Just before you do, what was the  
8 function of being on the afterdeck there?

9 A. I was mainly responsible for passing on messages to  
10 the two - to pass on messages which I received from the  
11 director's control unit, so I was responsible for the two  
12 aft guns that were guns No. 5 and 6 - we had two of them -  
13 and from the director control unit it was not possible to  
14 see them, because the funnel was in between, and that's why  
15 I was responsible for passing on these messages to the  
16 guns.

17  
18 THE PRESIDENT: Q. And were the messages received  
19 through earphones?

20 A. Yes.

21  
22 THE PRESIDENT: Q. And he would then advise the gunnery  
23 officers?

24 A. Yes, I told the people on the gun the distance for how  
25 long they had to shoot - distance.

26  
27 LEUT TYSON: Q. The two aft guns which were being  
28 controlled, were they 15-centimetre guns, or also the  
29 2-centimetre guns?

30 A. They were 15-centimetre guns.

31  
32 Q. And when you spoke to the main director control tower,  
33 who did you speak to in that tower?

34 A. Chief Leut Skeries.

35  
36 Q. And did you have a range finder in this aft director  
37 control position?

38 A. No, I received the orders or the messages from the  
39 main control unit.

40  
41 Q. Okay. I now want to go back step by step through the  
42 afternoon of 19 November 1941. Now, do you remember the  
43 alarm ringing that afternoon?

44 A. Yes, certainly, I heard this over the headphones. No,  
45 the whole ship - well, everybody received the message to  
46 proceed to their action stations.

47

1 Q. And, sir, your action station, was that the position  
2 that you've just described where you were?

3 A. Yes, on the aft deck.

4

5 Q. Now, from that position where you were at that aft  
6 director control unit, were you able to see the mastheads,  
7 the flag poles, on Kormoran?

8 A. No.

9

10 Q. Do you remember when it was in the afternoon that the  
11 alarm rang?

12 A. It must have been about 4 o'clock - 1600.

13

14 Q. Did Kormoran's position, her heading, change at all  
15 after the alarm rang?

16 A. No, not at this point, but later.

17

18 Q. Can you describe that later change of position,  
19 please?

20 A. As far as I remember, we had it more to port.  
21 Kormoran moved to the port side, because it seems - we had  
22 the impression that Sydney was coming towards us and trying  
23 to ram us, and to avoid this collision we went more to  
24 port, but that was during the battle, so that was much  
25 later.

26

27 Q. Let's take a step back.

28 A. All the way when Sydney was approaching until she  
29 finally arrived we kept the same heading.

30

31 Q. I just want to ask you about your observations of  
32 Sydney. When you first saw Sydney, can you please tell us  
33 what you saw. Describe what you saw.

34

35 THE PRESIDENT: How far away was she?

36

37 LEUT TYSON: Q. To start off, how far away was she, were  
38 you able to see just masts, or the hull, or what did you  
39 see of Sydney when you first saw her?

40 A. Well, practically, I couldn't see very much, because  
41 I was in my very small hut there at the back and I had to  
42 lean out of the window to see something. Of course, I was  
43 curious, like everybody else on the ship as the alarm rang,  
44 to find out what this ship was, but then I could see Sydney  
45 approach and then I think the first time I saw her, that  
46 was approximately 5 to 6 nautical miles away.

47

1 Q. And when you first saw her, do you remember was she  
2 travelling quickly or slowly? What was she doing?

3 A. No, I would say it was just normal cruising speed. It  
4 was not particularly fast.

5  
6 Q. And during this period as Sydney approached, were  
7 there any communications between you and the bridge, or you  
8 and Skeries?

9 A. There was no communication between the two of us,  
10 between Skeries and me, because at this point I didn't have  
11 anything to do.

12  
13 Q. And what was Brinkmann doing at this point?

14 A. Well, he was somewhere hiding. In fact, I don't even  
15 know where he was, because at this point there wasn't  
16 anything to do for us, so he was just somewhere, and I  
17 don't know where he was, because we only had something to  
18 do if there was a target we could shoot at behind the stern  
19 of our ship.

20  
21 Q. When was the first time after you reached this battle  
22 station that you did have something to do?

23 A. Well, for quite a long period we didn't have anything  
24 to do. Only until much later when Sydney passed behind our  
25 stern, that's when we had something to do, because at this  
26 point the main director control unit were not able to see  
27 Sydney anymore, as the funnel was in the way.

28  
29 Q. When Sydney passed behind the stern, had the firing  
30 already started before that time?

31 A. Yes.

32  
33 Q. How long had the firing been going on before Sydney  
34 passed behind the stern?

35 A. Well, battle must have started some time around  
36 5 o'clock, that is, 1700 o'clock. Then shells went to and  
37 fro between both ships and some time later Sydney passed  
38 behind our stern, as I said before, and then she could not  
39 be seen anymore from the main bridge as the funnel was in  
40 the way, and then Leut Brinkmann took over the command.

41  
42 Q. You've talked, sir, about the battle starting at about  
43 1700 hours. Which of the two ships fired first?

44 A. We did.

45  
46 Q. Do you know why Kormoran fired at that time? Did any  
47 message precede the firing?

1 A. Yes, the commander ordered to fire - gave the order to  
2 fire.

3

4 Q. Do you remember, sir, what the order was?

5 A. Well, it was, "Remove disguise" and then, "Open fire",  
6 or, "Start to fire", something like that.

7

8 Q. How did you hear that order?

9 A. Well, it was transmitted through loud speakers and  
10 through the whole ship.

11

12 Q. And after that order was given, how long from the  
13 order till when Kormoran started to fire?

14 A. Well, the flaps went down or up - depends on which gun  
15 that was - and the turrets were lifted or positioned in the  
16 right position and they could immediately start to fire and  
17 I think all together that must have taken about 2 to  
18 3 minutes.

19

20 Q. Is it the case that different guns on Kormoran had  
21 different types of camouflage?

22 A. (In German - not translated).

23

24 Q. Fifteen centimetres.

25 A. Yeah.

26

27 Q. Are you able to explain the different types of  
28 camouflage on different types of guns on Kormoran?

29

30 THE INTERPRETER: Shall I not translate what he said  
31 before?

32

33 LEUT TYSON: Sorry.

34

35 THE INTERPRETER: Sorry.

36

37 THE WITNESS: Well, I have to say that, yes, of course  
38 they had different types of disguise. The guns No. 1 and 2  
39 and No. 5 and 6 the flaps went up, whereas on guns No. 3  
40 and 4 the disguise was lowered. It was the same as for the  
41 overwater torpedo tubes. That was the same as for the guns  
42 3 and 4.

43

44 LEUT TYSON: Q. Do you know which of the guns was able  
45 to come into action first?

46 A. No, I cannot say that. I don't know, no. As I was  
47 sitting in my little box there, I was not able to see any

1 of this, so I had to move out every time I wanted to see  
2 something. That was simply not possible all the time.

3

4 Q. But were you moving out to see things from that little  
5 box?

6 A. Well, I was not - well, every now and then I could  
7 move in such a way that I could look out of my box. There  
8 were ropes hanging around there, and I looked through that  
9 and, also, I mean, it didn't happen very often because  
10 I was not allowed to be seen.

11

12 Q. On those occasions when you did look out, can you tell  
13 us what you saw, please?

14 A. Well, I didn't see very much, but quite in the  
15 beginning I could see the shell - that was during the first  
16 shots that were fired - a shell hit the aeroplane on the  
17 starboard side of Sydney and the aeroplane fell immediately  
18 down.

19

20 Q. Do you remember seeing anything else?

21 A. Well, before the battle really started, I could see  
22 amidst the seamen dressed in white, but when the first shots  
23 were fired they disappeared.

24

25 Q. Do you know roughly how many seamen you saw dressed in  
26 white?

27 A. I don't really know - five to six maybe.

28

29 Q. Now, sir, you mentioned earlier Sydney passing astern  
30 of Kormoran. How far apart were the two ships when Sydney  
31 passed astern of Kormoran?

32 A. Well, we were going at a very slow speed at that point  
33 again, and it must have been more or less 1.5 to  
34 2 kilometres behind our stern.

35

36 Q. And can you describe Sydney at that stage?

37 A. No, because that was exactly the time when I had to  
38 take care of the shooting going on, because that was my  
39 duty at that moment. As I said before, the people on the  
40 bridge could not see anymore.

41

42 Q. In carrying out that duty, can you please tell us, in  
43 as much detail as possible, what you actually did?

44 A. Well, I was here, as you can see on the drawing, on  
45 guns No. 4 and 5, and I passed on the information  
46 I received from the chief lieutenant, who gave me the  
47 distances, and as Sydney came more and more around our

1 stern, then also gun No. 6 could start firing again at  
2 Sydney. But, however, as both ships were doing very light  
3 speed, the distance of course increased between the two  
4 ships.

5  
6 Q. So you received distances, ranges, from the bridge,  
7 from the chief lieutenant. Was that Skeries?

8 A. Yes, from the bridge and from the range finder there.

9  
10 Q. And then you passed those messages on to Brinkmann,  
11 did you, or to the guns directly?

12 A. Well, the messages were passed on to Brinkmann who  
13 then gave it to me and I gave it directly to the gun  
14 operators - first for guns No. 4 and 5, and later also for  
15 gun No. 6.

16  
17 Q. Now, with these guns that were under control of that  
18 position, did they fire as soon as they were able to, or  
19 did they fire in salvos?

20 A. No, everybody shot for himself and as soon as  
21 possible.

22  
23 Q. Some of these distances that you were calling out, do  
24 you remember what the distances were?

25 A. Well, it was in fact quite easy. I received messages  
26 like, "4 ahead" from the chief lieutenant, and if that was  
27 too far, then I received a message like, "2 backwards",  
28 because he could see quite easily from the bridge if the  
29 shells would hit or not, and that's how I received these  
30 messages.

31  
32 Q. Was the aft 2-centimetre gun also under control of  
33 Brinkmann and this director control unit at this time?

34 A. Well, I had nothing to do with the 2-centimetre guns;  
35 they were commanded by the main deck, and I didn't have  
36 anything to do with that. I was just responsible for the  
37 15-centimetre guns.

38  
39 Q. But did you hear the 2-centimetre gun firing at the  
40 same time?

41 A. I can't remember this anymore. I don't know. The  
42 2-centimetre guns were only on this side, so when Sydney  
43 passed behind the stern they were not able to fire at her  
44 anymore and the same I think goes for the 3-centimetre  
45 guns, they couldn't fire at her.

46  
47 Q. And the 15-centimetre guns under your control, did

1 they have any particular targets - parts of Sydney that  
2 they were aiming for?

3 A. No, there were no particular targets or areas to fire  
4 at.

5  
6 Q. And, Herr Rönchen, do you remember how long these  
7 15-centimetre guns fired for?

8 A. Well, at one point our gun No. 4 stopped to fire  
9 [sic], because the Sydney was already very far away and  
10 moved in a straight direction where it was difficult to  
11 target at her and I think only turrets or guns No. 5 and 6  
12 continued to fire at her and I think - I cannot really  
13 remember but I think more or less it must have taken half  
14 an hour, and it went so long until I think Mr Detmers at  
15 the end said to cease fire, and that must have been about  
16 1830.

17  
18 Q. Did any of the 15-centimetre guns where you were run  
19 out of ammunition?

20 A. No idea.

21  
22 Q. Do you also have any idea about what type of shells  
23 were fired?

24 A. No, I didn't know this, because that was something  
25 I wouldn't have received via the loud speakers.

26  
27 Q. Would you also know the type of shells that were being  
28 fired from the 15-centimetre guns, whether there was a fuse  
29 in the nose or in the base of the shell?

30 A. I don't know. I cannot tell you which shells they  
31 have been using - I don't know.

32  
33 Q. I'd just like to ask you some questions about Sydney's  
34 guns and Sydney's firing. Do you know how long it was  
35 after Kormoran started firing when Sydney started to fire?

36 A. It must have been very shortly after the first shot by  
37 Kormoran and, as they were also ready for battle, but  
38 I cannot tell you the exact time anymore. It's such a long  
39 time ago.

40  
41 Q. Did any of Sydney's shells do any damage to the part  
42 of the Kormoran where you were?

43 A. Yes.

44  
45 Q. Can you please explain what the damage was?

46 A. Yeah, well, she received - yes, I know that one shell  
47 hit the funnel. That just went straight through without

1 causing any further damage. However, I didn't see this  
2 myself, that's what other people told me, and it's the same  
3 with the shell that hit our engine room.

4  
5 Q. But there was no damage to the part of the Kormoran  
6 where you were?

7 A. No.

8  
9 Q. And also, Herr Rönchen, when Sydney came past astern,  
10 did she fire any torpedoes at any stage at Kormoran?

11 A. One or two torpedoes must have passed our stern.

12  
13 Q. Did you see the torpedo tracks?

14 A. Yes, I saw the bubbles - the (inaudible) and the  
15 bubbles I saw, yes.

16  
17 Q. And at any stage after Sydney moved astern, did the  
18 Kormoran fire a torpedo or torpedoes at Sydney?

19 A. No. I don't know it, but if they were shot, they  
20 didn't hit, that's for sure.

21  
22 Q. Now, sir, after the firing stopped, did you stay in  
23 your position in the director control unit after, or what  
24 did you do? Did you move?

25 A. No, I didn't move around, because that was the  
26 moment - I didn't stay at my place, because shortly after  
27 that there was already the order given to abandon ship.  
28 Then I tried to - I went to my cabin to get some things out  
29 from the cabin, and I think I grabbed a piece of cloth and,  
30 also, I remember that I took the box of gas masks and put  
31 cigarettes and matches in there to take them with me on the  
32 lifeboat. Oh, yeah, and then we also had to get our  
33 lifeboats ready.

34  
35 Q. At any stage after the order to abandon ship did you  
36 see Sydney?

37 A. Well, it was burning. Much more, we couldn't see.  
38 When it sank, I cannot tell.

39  
40 Q. But, sir, did you see Sydney burning?

41 A. Yeah, it was burning from fore to aft.

42  
43 Q. Are you able to say at all if the burning was  
44 concentrated in a particular area or centred in an area?

45 A. Well, I just want to assume that it was burning more  
46 concentrated amidships rather than at the front or the aft,  
47 at the bow or the stern, and then somewhere the oil tanks

1 have (unclear - simultaneous speakers), but I didn't know,  
2 because it was dark at that time and you could only see  
3 fire but you couldn't really see where it came from, you  
4 know.

5  
6 Q. And were you able to observe Sydney's speed at this  
7 time? Did she seem to be moving very slowly, slowly, or  
8 quickly, or drifting? How would you describe her movement  
9 in the water?

10 A. I think she was only drifting at that point, because  
11 I cannot imagine that the engines were still working at  
12 that time.

13  
14 Q. Are you able to say, sir, roughly what time this was?

15 A. It must have been some time after 8 o'clock, that is,  
16 2000 o'clock. In November it's already pretty dark at this  
17 time - something around this - but, you see, on the other  
18 hand, if the order is given to abandon ship, then all you  
19 can think of and all you do is actually to think of  
20 yourself, and this was in particular the case because our  
21 boats, some of them didn't work and were just thrown  
22 overboard and into the water, and that was quite difficult.  
23 Then we had these rubber boats and I just jumped in the  
24 water and swam to one of these rubber boats.

25  
26 Q. How many men were in the boat that you swam into, sir?

27 A. Well, I didn't jump myself, I used a ladder, but the  
28 problem was that we couldn't lower the boats anymore in a  
29 reasonable way, because we didn't have any energy from the  
30 engines, so we had to throw them into the water and I ended  
31 up in the biggest boat of all of them, and together with me  
32 there were 73 people in this boat.

33  
34 Q. Who was the most senior person in that boat?

35  
36 THE INTERPRETER: Sorry, the most senior person or --

37  
38 LEUT TYSON: Q. The most senior person or officer in the  
39 boat; who was in charge of the boat?

40 A. That must have been Mr von Goessel n. He was the most  
41 senior officer there, and we took him out of the water,  
42 because he came swimming towards us.

43  
44 Q. Was Bunjes also in that boat?

45 A. I cannot tell who was - I have forgotten the names.  
46 Maybe it was this person who had so bad injuries from the  
47 fire that he died later in the boat, but names and me,

1 those are two different things. I cannot remember well  
2 names anyway.

3  
4 Q. Herr Rönchen, we need to change tapes.

5  
6 SHORT ADJOURNMENT

7  
8 LEUT TYSON: Q. Now, sir, I just want to ask you, at any  
9 stage during this time when Kormoran was being abandoned,  
10 did you notice what flag was flying on Kormoran?

11 A. No, no idea. I haven't even thought about that at  
12 this moment in time.

13

14 Q. And do you know at all whatever happened to Kormoran's  
15 war ensign?

16 A. No.

17

18 Q. Sir, I want to ask you some questions. Do you  
19 remember at Camp Harvey in December 1941 you were  
20 interrogated by Australian officers?

21

22 THE PRESIDENT: Just before you go to that, can I ask you  
23 a few questions?

24

25 Q. Herr Rönchen, you told me that you saw a shell hit the  
26 aeroplane on Sydney. Do you know if the propeller of the  
27 aeroplane was turning at that time?

28 A. No, I couldn't see that. As far as - well, it stood  
29 so on the starboard launching catapult that I couldn't see  
30 that.

31

32 Q. About what distance was Sydney when the shell hit the  
33 aeroplane?

34 A. It must have been below 1,000 metres, because our  
35 commander waited for such a long time to have Sydney  
36 approach until a distance of 800 metres, until she arrived  
37 there.

38

39 Q. And when the aeroplane was hit, what was the relative  
40 position of the two ships?

41 A. What do you mean with "relative position"?

42

43 Q. Were they parallel to each other, or was Sydney astern  
44 of the Kormoran, or was she ahead of the Kormoran?

45 A. No, I could see it quite well at that moment, then we  
46 were parallel. Just a bit later then we went on with a bit  
47 more speed again. That's when the relative positions

1 changed.

2

3 Q. So the aeroplane was hit when the ships were parallel  
4 and about 800 metres apart?

5 A. Yes, quite in the beginning with the first shots.

6

7 Q. You also said that at various times you received  
8 messages from Herr Skeries to adjust the firing of the guns  
9 by saying, "4 ahead" or "2 back." When you say "4 ahead",  
10 does that mean 400 metres further, or is it just a cog on a  
11 scale?

12 A. No, it had nothing to do with metres. It was just  
13 4 points on a scale. How many metres that was, I have no  
14 idea today. Each of them was a few metres.

15

16 Q. They were adjustments, but do you remember what the  
17 first direction was that was given by Skeries as to the  
18 distance at which to fire?

19 A. I can't remember anymore.

20

21 Q. Did you see Kormoran fire torpedoes?

22 A. No, I wasn't able to see that. Because I was in this  
23 box, it was difficult to see from there. As it was very  
24 difficult from my position to see things, I could only see  
25 parts of Sydney, and it was quite a coincidence that I saw  
26 this shell hitting the aeroplane that fell off on the other  
27 side of Sydney, but apart from that I didn't see anything.

28

29 Q. Did you see where Sydney was hit by a torpedo from  
30 Kormoran?

31 A. No, I couldn't see it myself. I just heard it later  
32 that Sydney got hit in the fore ship by a torpedo, but  
33 I didn't see it myself. You have to imagine it was just a  
34 small wooden box - I would say the size of this to make it  
35 in the video.

36

37 Q. To disguise?

38 A. To disguise and where I was behind and where I had  
39 this - yeah, where I was hiding, and I wasn't able to see  
40 the whole of the ship neither the Sydney nor the Kormoran  
41 I think.

42

43 Q. When you say the aeroplane hit when the ships were  
44 parallel and about 800 metres apart, did you see where  
45 Sydney's turrets or guns were pointing?

46 A. No, I couldn't see that, the fore turrets, it was just  
47 impossible, and also the aft turrets I couldn't see. There

1 was just a very small gap where I could look through and  
2 I only saw this aeroplane and of course I didn't stand up  
3 to have an overview of the whole ship. I was hiding there.

4  
5 Q. Did you see anyone on Sydney trying to lower a boat  
6 near the aeroplane?

7 A. No.

8  
9 THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, they are the questions I wanted  
10 to ask.

11  
12 LEUT TYSON: Q. Herr Rönchen, at the time of this  
13 engagement between Kormoran and Sydney, on Kormoran was  
14 there a fake gun, a dummy gun situated somewhere on her  
15 poop deck?

16  
17 THE INTERPRETER: Sorry, I was just changing sides. Can  
18 you please repeat the question?

19  
20 LEUT TYSON: Q. Sure. At the time of this engagement  
21 between the two ships on 19 November 1941, as part of  
22 Kormoran's disguise was there a fake or dummy gun on  
23 Kormoran's poop deck?

24 A. I can't really remember if it was still there. It  
25 should have been there, because we were disguised as Straat  
26 Malakka, but, you know, this is 60 years ago and this is  
27 just such a small detail, I cannot remember this, you are  
28 asking me questions really. There you can see it.

29  
30 Q. So I now want to ask you about the interrogations at  
31 Harvey in Western Australia. Do you remember being  
32 interrogated on 5 December?

33 A. Well, of course I can remember being interrogated at  
34 this time, but I have no idea what happened at the  
35 interrogation. I thought about it in fact during the last  
36 couple of days before this interview of today, but I cannot  
37 remember what was said.

38  
39 Q. Sir, I might just ask Herr Thomas to read you the  
40 notes that were made from your interrogation.

41  
42 (Notes read in German to witness by interpreter)

43  
44 THE INTERPRETER: We what?

45  
46 THE PRESIDENT: "We now were together, three supply  
47 ships."

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THE INTERPRETER: Okay.

LEUT TYSON: "We saw all together three supply ships."

(Notes continued to be read in German to witness by interpreter)

Q. Now, sir, I just want to see whether that's helpful to you in helping your memory.

A. I've got no idea what I was saying at this time anymore. I don't know. I just can't remember.

Q. Okay. Well, do you remember anything at all about a Yugoslavian ship which was attacked by Kormoran and nine men were rescued by that ship. Do you remember that at all?

A. Yes, but why there were only nine men rescued, I cannot remember, I don't know. I don't even know why the others drowned with the ship, if there were other people left on board at all.

LEUT TYSON: Mr President, I was going to turn now to a final series of topics, if that's convenient.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

LEUT TYSON: Q. Herr Rönchen, as you know, there have been many books written about the engagement between Sydney and Kormoran and many different theories have been suggested by different writers. It's very important as part of this Commission to see what the eye witnesses have to say about some of these theories, and the Commission wants to see whether you agree or disagree, or what you have to say in response to some of these theories.

Now, one theory is that a Japanese U-boat or Japanese submarine fired a torpedo into Sydney. Do you agree with that, or disagree with that? What do you say about that?

A. That's absolutely impossible, because at those times we didn't have - there weren't any atomic nuclear U-boat submarines, and it must have been impossible to go from Japan all the way through the southern tip of Australia and to Fremantle where we were - that must have been 18,000 to 20,000 kilometres - and then back to Japan. That's just impossible and, furthermore, Japan hadn't declared any war at this point. As far as I know - well, our encounter was

1 on 19 November, and the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on  
2 7 December the same year and on 8 December they declared  
3 the war to the US, but to be there on 19 November in  
4 Australian waters near Fremantle, it was completely  
5 impossible.

6  
7 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Did you ever see a Japanese  
8 submarine?

9 A. No.

10  
11 LEUT TYSON: Q. What about any other naval units,  
12 perhaps a German U-boat or a German surface unit, were they  
13 involved in attacking Sydney?

14 A. No; nobody knew where we were.

15  
16 Q. There's also a very serious allegation which is made  
17 that some survivors of Sydney in the water were shot or  
18 machine-gunned by members of Kormoran crew. Did you see  
19 anything like that happen?

20 A. I personally haven't seen any, and during our crew  
21 meetings, which we had for many, many years, every year we  
22 had these crew meetings, no-one ever talked about that he  
23 has seen any survivors of Sydney in the water.

24  
25 Q. So did you ever see any survivors of Sydney in the  
26 water?

27 A. No, I've never seen any.

28  
29 Q. Did you see any debris from Sydney in the water,  
30 remains of lifeboats or any parts of her in the water?

31 A. No, nothing.

32  
33 Q. And, finally, did you see Kormoran when she blew up?  
34 Did you see the explosion?

35 A. Yes, that was shortly after midnight.

36  
37 Q. Can you describe the picture, what you saw?

38 A. It was just a giant cloud of fire.

39  
40 LEUT TYSON: Mr President, they are the questions on  
41 behalf of counsel assisting, if that's convenient.

42  
43 THE PRESIDENT: I have no other questions.

44  
45 Herr Rönchen, thank you very much indeed for your  
46 help.

47 A. Yes.

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

LEUT TYSON: Thank you very much.

THE INQUIRY ADJOURNED ACCORDINGLY



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