

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)

31 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: There. Everything's running. We'll start.

32

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

36

37 Herr Rönchen, thank you very much for agreeing to
38 see us and help this Commission, and I would ask you,
39 please, to take the oath.

40

41 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Good day. We are here at the house of Mr Willi
42 Rönchen [REDACTED] in Germany. We have come here to take Mr Rönchen's
43 evidence in relation to the sinking of the HMAS Sydney II. Mr Rönchen, I
44 would like to thank you sincerely for making the time today to
45 participate in this interview. To start off with, I would like you to
46 take the oath, on the Bible. Herewith you swear that whatever evidence
47 you give here is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. If

1 that is so, please say: "So help me God."

2

3 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes. So help me God.

4

5

6 <WILLI RÖNCHEN, sworn:

7

8 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Thank you very much.

9

10

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

14

15 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

16

17 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Shall I translate that? Or ... because you said "yes"
18 straight away ...

19

20 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, well, I have practically forgotten everything I
21 learned way back then. I haven't spoken English for all these years.

22

23 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: That is not a problem. So. Good day, Mr Rönchen, my
24 name is Matthew Tyson. I am here together with our interpreter Mr Frank
25 Thomas and with Mr Stephen Harper.

26

27 LEUT TYSON: Q. Herr Rönchen, just before we begin, can you confirm that
28 the Instrument of Appointment has been shown to you and
29 you've had the opportunity to review that?

30

31 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Mr Rönchen, before we begin, may I ask you whether
32 you have received the official Instrument of Appointment and had a look
33 at it, as it lies before you?

34

35 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, yes.

36

37 A. Yes.

38

39 Q. Sir, could you start, please, by telling us your full
40 name?

41

42 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Could we please begin with you stating your full
43 name for us?

44

45 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Willi Rönchen, with two "i". R-ö-n-c-h-e-n. Well, you
46 normally write "o-e."

47

1

2 A. Willi Rönchen with two Is, and Rönchen.

3

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

5

6 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Thank you. And what is your date of birth?

7

8 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: [REDACTED]

9

10 A. [REDACTED]

11

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

13

14 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: What is your current address, Mr Rönchen?

15

16 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Well, here. [REDACTED]

17

18 A. [REDACTED]

19

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

22

23 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Before the outbreak of World War II, what was your
24 occupation?

25

26 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I was a lolly maker. Ha, ha. What is that? Do you have
27 an idea what that is?

28

29 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Yes, I assume so, yes.

30

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

36 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you please explain to us, how it was that you
37 came to serve on the Kormoran?

38

39 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I would like to expand a little. I was only eleven
40 years old when I first applied to the sea cadet school. But I was
41 rejected then; they mainly needed the boys from the coast at the time.
42 And then I enlisted with the Kriegsmarine (German Navy), at 16 years of
43 age. And by the time I had gone through all the preliminary examinations,
44 I had completed my apprenticeship and was directly drafted in July 1940
45 at the age of 18. I spent 6 weeks at the recruits' training company and
46 then we were asked: "Who is interested in a suicide mission?" For all of
47 us were voluntary enlisted personnel, committed for service for 12 years.

1 "Who is interested in a suicide mission?" ... There we were 28 who then
2 came on board the Kormoran. No prior special training, but directly from
3 the recruits' company to boarding the ship.

4

5 A. Well, my answer to this is going to be a long one,
6 because at the age of 11 I handed in my first application
7 to the cadet school for young officers, but in the end it
8 turned out that they would only take people from the coast.
9 Then, at the age of 16, I volunteered for the Navy and when
10 all these medical examinations took place then my time of
11 apprenticeship had already passed and then at the age of
12 18, that was 1940, I was commanded to the Navy.

13

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

18

19 from these people in these training troops, 28 volunteered
20 for Kormoran, or 28 of these ended up on Kormoran without
21 receiving any special particular training.

22

23 Q. Now, when you were on Kormoran, what were your duties;
24 what was your job on Kormoran?

25

26 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: When you were on the Kormoran then, what were your
27 duties on board?

28

29 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I was in a seamen division. We got to Hamburg first,
30 when the ship was still in the process of being converted and completed.
31 [Translator's note: It is a little ambiguous whether the ship was still
32 in the process of being converted or already completed, but more likely
33 still in the process.]

34

35 A. Well, I was in the division of seamen, but that was
36 already when the ship was still in Hamburg, and it was
37 converted into an auxiliary cruiser, and when it was built
38 basically.

39

40 Q. When Kormoran left Gotenhafen, you continued in the
41 seamen division; is that correct?

42

43 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: When the Kormoran left Gotenhafen, were you still
44 in the seamen division then?

45

46 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes. I always stayed in that division. There is no
47 change.

1

2 A. Yes.

3

4 Q. And who was in charge of that division?

5

6 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Who was the officer leading your division?

7

8 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: First Lieutenant Skeries.

9

10 A. That was Chief Leut Skeries.

11

12 Q. Now, sir, I want to take you forward to the afternoon

13 of 19 November 1941, ...

14

15 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: I would like to go back with you now to the

16 afternoon of the 19 November 1941 ...

17

18 Q. ...and I'm going to ask you a series of

19 questions, in particular about what you saw and what you

20 did after the alarm rang that afternoon.

21

22 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: I shall ask you a series of questions in relation

23 to that, individual questions which in particular deal with what you saw

24 when the alarm rang and so on.

25

26 Q. Now, first, do

27 you remember on this afternoon of the encounter between –

28

29 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I belonged to the weapons control unit. And was ... Oh,

30 you have something better there.

31

32 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: What? Oh, I see.

33

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

35

36 LEUT TYSON: I've got it here.

37

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

39

40 LEUT TYSON: No.

41

42 THE INTERPRETER: Okay.

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: So, you are welcome to point it out there.

45

46 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, yes. Here, way at the back. There was a branch of

47 the weapons control unit; that was up here, above the bridge. And I was

1 back there, together with First Lieutenant Brinkmann. He then had the
2 command and I was far aft here in this small weapons control unit.

3

4

5 THE WITNESS: Yes. There was a small second director
6 control unit. There was one here above the bridge and
7 I was there in the aft, together with Mr Brinkmann, the
8 Lieutenant, and I sat there in this very small battery
9 control unit.

10

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

13

14

15 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Mr President, I shall make a cross just here, at
16 the point indicated by Mr Rönchen.

17

18 LEU TYSON: Sir, is that the position that you indicated?

19

20 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, yes.

21

22 A. Yes, the same.

23

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

25

26

27 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: I'll admit this as Exhibit Number 21.

28

29 EXHIBIT #21 DOCUMENT MARKED BY HERR RÖNCHEN

30

31 LEUT TYSON: Q. Now, sir, if I can take you back to this
32 afternoon of 19 November, do you remember the alarm ringing
33 that afternoon?

34

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

37

38 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: What exactly was the function there which you
39 fulfilled, on the afterdeck, in this weapons control unit?

40

41 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: To inform the aft guns as to how far they should fire.
42 That was the 5th and the 6th gun, that's the two aft ones then ... Here ...
43 It could not be seen from up on the stand because the funnel was in
44 between.

45

46 A. I was mainly responsible for passing on messages to
47 the two - to pass on messages which I received from the

1 director's control unit, so I was responsible for the two
2 aft guns that were guns No. 5 and 6 - we had two of them -
3 and from the director control unit it was not possible to
4 see them, because the funnel was in between, and that's why
5 I was responsible for passing on these messages to the
6 guns.

7

8 THE PRESIDENT: Q. And were the messages received
9 through earphones?

10

11 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did you receive the order through earphones, from
12 the main control unit?

13

14 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

15

16 A. Yes.

17

18 THE PRESIDENT: Q. And he would then advise the gunnery
19 officers?

20

21 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And you then passed that on to the gun crew(s)?

22

23 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes. Provided the information about which distance
24 should be fired.

25

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

28

29 LEUT TYSON: Q. The two aft guns which were being
30 controlled, were they 15-centimetre guns, or also the
31 2-centimetre guns?

32

33 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: These two aft guns, were they 15-centimetre guns?

34

35 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: 15.

36

37 A. They were 15-centimetre guns.

38

39 Q. And when you spoke to the main director control tower,
40 who did you speak to in that tower?

41

42 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And when you spoke to the central control unit, who
43 did you speak to there?

44

45 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: With First Lieutenant Skeries. He was in charge up
46 there.

47

1 A. Chief Leut Skeries.

2

3 Q. And did you have a range finder in this aft director
4 control position?

5

6 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did you also have a rangefinder in your control
7 unit?

8

9 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, I received all that from above.

10

11 A. No, I received the orders or the messages from the
12 main control unit.

13

14 Q. Okay. I now want to go back step by step through the
15 afternoon of 19 November 1941. Now, do you remember the
16 alarm ringing that afternoon?

17

18 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Now I would like to go step by step through the
19 individual phases of that afternoon of the 19 November 1941. Can you
20 remember that on that afternoon the alarm was ringing?

21

22 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, I heard that through the earphones. We were told
23 to go to our action stations. It went through the whole ship.

24

25 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: The whole ship heard that?

26

27 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

28

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

32

33

34 Q. And, sir, your action station, was that the position
35 2 that you've just described where you were?

36

37 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And your action station was precisely what you have
38 just described to us, on the aft deck?

39

40 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, on the aft deck.

41

42 A. Yes, on the aft deck.

43

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

47

1 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: From this position where you were, on the aft ship
2 in this branch of the main fire unit, could you see the signal masts from
3 there, which flags were being hoisted there?
4
5 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.
6
7 A. No.
8
9 Q. Do you remember when it was in the afternoon that the
10 alarm rang?
11
12 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you still remember what time it was
13 approximately ...?
14
15 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, it was approximately at 4 o'clock. 16:00 hours.
16
17 A. It must have been about 4 o'clock - 1600.
18
19 Q. Did Kormoran's position, her heading, change at all
20 after the alarm rang?
21
22 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did the Kormoran change her course after that alarm
23 had rung?
24
25 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No. Not at that time. Later, yes.
26
27 A. No, not at this point, but later.
28
29 Q. Can you describe that later change of position,
30 please?
31
32 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you describe how she changed the course later?
33
34 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Of course. We turned off towards the port side because
35 it looked as if the Sydney was coming towards us, would possibly ram us,
36 and we avoided that just in time. But that was already during the battle.
37
38 A. As far as I remember, we had it more to port.
39 Kormoran moved to the port side, because it seems - we had
40 the impression that Sydney was coming towards us and trying
41 to ram us, and to avoid this collision we went more to
42 port, but that was during the battle, so that was much
43 later.
44
45 Q. Let's take a step back.
46
47 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Well, until the Sydney caught up with us, we always had

1 the same course.

2

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

5

6 Q. I just want to ask you about your observations of
7 Sydney. When you first saw Sydney, can you please tell us
8 what you saw. Describe what you saw.

9

10 THE PRESIDENT: How far away was she?

11

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

15

16 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Now I would like to ask you about the point when
17 you were able to see the Sydney yourself for the first time. What could
18 you see yourself? How far was she away? Could you see the masts, or
19 already the hull, or how was that? Could you see anything at all?

20

21 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I could see something. Let's say, practically, I could
22 not see anything because I was inside this enclosure. I had to look
23 outside on the side so that I could see something. For I was curious,
24 what's approaching there, what's going on there, why did the alarm ring?
25 The Sydney approached us slowly then from the rear.

26

27 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you still know how far she was away then,
28 approximately?

29

30 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Oh, no. 5, 6, 7 miles perhaps.

31

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

39

40

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

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you still remember when you saw her first, did
45 she travel fast or rather slowly? Or were you able to observe anything
46 else?

47

1 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, I would like to say it was somehow a certain line
2 of approach. It was not a particularly fast speed.

3

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

6

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

10

11 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: During this period when the Sydney approached
12 slowly, were there any communications between you and the bridge, or
13 between you and Skeries?

14

15 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Not at all between the two of us. At that point I did
16 not have anything to do at all yet.

17

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

21

22 Q. And what was Brinkmann doing at this point?

23

24 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: What was Mr Brinkmann doing at this point?

25

26

27 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: He was hiding. I don't know where he was. I did not
28 concern myself with that so much because there was nothing at all to do
29 for us yet. Because we could only become active when there was something
30 from out of the stern.

31

32 A. Well, he was somewhere hiding. In fact, I don't even
33 know where he was, because at this point there wasn't
34 anything to do for us, so he was just somewhere, and I
35 don't know where he was, because we only had something to
36 do if there was a target we could shoot at behind the stern
37 of our ship.

38

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

41

42 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: When had the time come then, after you had reached
43 your action station, that you had something to do?

44

45 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Not at all during the first period. That was only much
46 later. From the actual control unit, nothing could be done any more when
47 the Sydney had turned off and then passed behind us [Translator's note:

1 ambiguous; or: "followed us"]. Over to one side in front ... That's when
2 those at the front, from this up here, from the other deck, they could
3 not see any more, the funnel was in the way.

4

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

10

11 Q. When Sydney passed behind the stern, had the firing
12 already started before that time?

13

14 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: When the Sydney passed the stern of the Kormoran
15 then, had the firing already started before that time?

16

17 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

18

19 A. Yes.

20

21 Q. How long had the firing been going on before Sydney
22 passed behind the stern?

23

24 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: How long had the firing been going on when the
25 Sydney passed at the stern?

26

27 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: The battle began approximately just before five, just
28 before 17:00 hours. A whole series of shells was flying back and forth.
29 And then came the Sydney, she then passed behind us [Translator's note:
30 ambiguous; or: "followed us"], then she could not be seen any more from
31 the front. And that's when First Lieutenant Brinkmann took over the
32 command.

33

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

40

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

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: You have just said that the battle began at circa
45 17:00 hours. Which of the two ships fired the first shot?

46

47 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: We did.

1

2 A. We did.

3

4 Q. Do you know why Kormoran fired at that time? Did any
5 message precede the firing?

6

7 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you know why the Kormoran began to fire at that
8 point? Was there any command about that beforehand?

9

10 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, from the Commander.

11

12 A. Yes, the Commander ordered to fire - gave the order to
13 fire.

14

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

16

17 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you know what exactly the order was? How exactly
18 it went?

19

20 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: "All remove disguise", and "Fire at will" or "Open
21 fire", or something like that.

22

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

25

26 Q. How did you hear that order?

27

28 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: How did you hear that order?

29

30 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: It went through the whole ship. Through loud speakers,
31 through the whole ship. In particular though to the action stations.

32

33 A. Well, it was transmitted through loud speakers and
34 through the whole ship.

35

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

38

39 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: After this order was given, how long did it take
40 from the order until the Kormoran actually fired her first shot?

41

42 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: The flaps went up immediately, or the disguise down,
43 and the guns out at once ... Well, that was maybe two, three minutes.

44

45 A. Well, the flaps went down or up - depends on which gun
46 that was - and the turrets were lifted or positioned in the
47 right position and they could immediately start to fire and

1 I think all together that must have taken about 2 to
2 3 minutes.

3

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

6

7 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Is it the case that the different guns on board the
8 Kormoran had different types of camouflage?

9

10 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes. Let's put it this way. The guns 1 and 2, at the
11 front in the bow, and 5 and 6 out aft, there the flaps went up, the
12 camouflage flaps went up. And with 3 and 4, here on the side, the
13 disguises went down.

14

15 A. (In German - not translated).

16

17 Q. Fifteen centimetres.

18 A. Yeah.

19

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

22

23 THE INTERPRETER: Shall I not translate what he said
24 before?

25

26 LEUT TYSON: Sorry.

27

28 THE INTERPRETER: Sorry.

29

30 THE INTERPRETER: Well, I have to say that, yes, of course
31 they had different types of disguise. The guns No. 1 and 2
32 and No. 5 and 6 the flaps went up, whereas on guns No. 3
33 and 4 the disguise was lowered.

34

35 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: The same as it was for the torpedo tubes. Above-water
36 torpedoes. The same as it was for 3 and 4.

37

38 THE WITNESS: It was the same as for the
39 overwater torpedo tubes. That was the same as for the guns
40 3 and 4.

41

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

44

45 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you know which of the guns was ready to fire
46 first and fired first?

47

1 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I cannot say, I don't know that. For I was sitting
2 inside my box, I could not see anything, after all. Whenever there was a
3 chance, I could look past my box, but no more than that.

4

5 A. No, I cannot say that. I don't know, no. As I was
6 sitting in my little box there, I was not able to see any
7
8 of this, so I had to move out every time I wanted to see
9 something. That was simply not possible all the time.

10

11 Q. But were you moving out to see things from that little
12 box?

13

14 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: But every now and then it happened that you leaned
15 out to have a little look?

16

17 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, I could look past the side. To the right there,
18 next to the box, there were coiled-up ropes, ropes this thick, and I
19 could look in between those. Of course I was not allowed to let myself be
20 seen.

21

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

27

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

30

31 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Those times when you did look out, can you tell us
32 what you saw then?

33

34 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: That was not much. What I noticed straight in the
35 beginning was that a shell ..., when the very first shots were fired, that
36 a shell hit the aeroplane and that fell down out of the starboard side.
37 That could no longer be used.

38

39 A. Well, I didn't see very much, but quite in the
40 beginning I could see the shell - that was during the first
41 shots that were fired - a shell hit the aeroplane on the
42 starboard side of Sydney and the aeroplane fell immediately
43 down.

44

45 Q. Do you remember seeing anything else?

46

47 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you still remember anything else you saw?

1

2 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Well, in the beginning, before the firing started,
3 before shots were fired, we saw sailors dressed in white standing
4 amidships on the side. But they had disappeared when the first shots were
5 fired.

6

7 A. Well, before the battle really started, I could see
8 amidships seamen dressed in white, but when the first shots
9 were fired they disappeared.

10

11 Q. Do you know roughly how many seamen you saw dressed in
12 white?

13

14 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you remember approximately how many seamen you
15 saw there?

16

17 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I don't know that any more. 5, 6, or however many.

18

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

20

21 Q. Now, sir, you mentioned earlier Sydney passing astern
22 of Kormoran.

23

24 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: You said earlier that the Sydney passed by the
25 stern of the Kormoran.

26

27 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

28

29 Q. How far apart were the two ships when Sydney
30 passed astern of Kormoran?

31

32 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: About how far apart were the two ships in that
33 moment?

34

35 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: We gathered a little speed again. Maybe about one and a
36 half kilometers. One and a half to two kilometers.

37

38 A. Well, we were going at a very slow speed at that point
39 again, and it must have been more or less 1.5 to
40 2 kilometres behind our stern.

41

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

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you describe how the Sydney looked at that
45 point? What state she was in?

46

47 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, no. For I had to take care of the shots continuing

1 then. Because at the front there, it could no longer be seen.

2

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

7

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

10

11 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And as you had to carry out your duty, there at the
12 action station, can you tell us, in as much detail as possible, what
13 exactly you did?

14

15 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, initially was ...

16

17 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: So, in that moment when the Sydney ...

18

19 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: One moment, what was then ... Back is 4, yes ... The 4th
20 gun and the 5th, I could pass that on then, ordered by the First
21 Lieutenant what was to be done, which distance had to be fired, and so
22 on. When the Sydney was further around, then the gun number 6 could also
23 attack. Well, and due to both ships going at slow speed, the distance was
24 increasing all the time.

25

26 A. Well, I was here, as you can see on the drawing, on
27 guns No. 4 and 5, and I passed on the information
28 I received from the chief Lieutenant, who gave me the
29 distances, and as Sydney came more and more around our

30

31 stern, then also gun No. 6 could start firing again at
32 Sydney. But, however, as both ships were doing very light
33 speed, the distance of course increased between the two
34 ships.

35

36 Q. So you received distances, ranges, from the bridge,
37 from the chief Lieutenant. Was that Skeries?

38

39 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: So you received the distance information from the
40 bridge. Did you receive it from Mr Skeries?

41

42 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, from the bridge. There was a rangefinder there.

43

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

45

46 Q. And then you passed those messages on to Brinkmann,
47 did you, or to the guns directly?

1
2 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And then you passed this distance information on to
3 Mr Brinkmann, or directly to the gun crew(s)?
4
5 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, Brinkmann himself received it, too. And then gave
6 to me, how the guns should further be adjusted.
7
8 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And you then passed it on directly to the guns?
9
10 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, on to the guns. Passed on with the device to the
11 guns. First 4 and 5, then later also 6.
12
13 A. Well, the messages were passed on to Brinkmann who
14 then gave it to me and I gave it directly to the gun
15 operators - first for guns No. 4 and 5, and later also for
16 gun No. 6.
17
18 Q. Now, with these guns that were under control of that
19 position, did they fire as soon as they were able to, or
20 did they fire in salvos?
21
22 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Now these guns you were in charge of, did they just
23 start as soon as they could, meaning as soon as they could fire, or did
24 they shoot together in salvos?
25
26 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, no, no. Each by himself.
27
28 A. No, everybody shot for himself and as soon as
29 possible.
30
31 Q. Some of these distances that you were calling out, do
32 you remember what the distances were?
33
34 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: The distance information you passed on, can you
35 remember any figures from that time back then, of this distance
36 information you passed on?
37
38 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: That was quite simple. The First Lieutenant said: "4
39 forwards" and if he noticed that it had been too far, "2 back". One could
40 see, after all, whether the shells were hitting or were too short or went
41 above the ship. He then commanded correspondingly what I should announce.
42
43 A. Well, it was in fact quite easy. I received messages
44 like, "4 ahead" from the chief Lieutenant, and if that was
45 too far, then I received a message like, "2 backwards",
46 because he could see quite easily from the bridge if the
47 shells would hit or not, and that's how I received these

1 messages.

2

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

5

6 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Were these two 2-centimetre guns at the stern, were
7 they also under the command of the main firing unit?

8

9 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No. That was done by the main deck. I no longer had
10 anything to do with that. I only had the 15-centimetre guns.

11

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

16

17 Q. But did you hear the 2-centimetre gun firing at the
18 same time?

19

20 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: But could you hear that the 2-centimetre guns were
21 firing at the same time?

22

23 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I cannot remember that. I don't know that. The 2-
24 centimetre ones stood on the side only. In the end they could not at all
25 ... when the Sydney was out back there, was out aft, they did not have any
26 chance any more ... and the 3.7 did not either ...

27

28 A. I can't remember this anymore. I don't know. The
29 2-centimetre guns were only on this side, so when Sydney
30 passed behind the stern they were not able to fire at her
31 anymore and the same I think goes for the 3-centimetre
32 guns, they couldn't fire at her.

33

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

35

36 they have any particular targets - parts of Sydney that
37 they were aiming for?

38

39 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: The 15-centimetre guns you were in charge of, did
40 they have any particular targets on board the Sydney they were supposed
41 to fire at? Any given targets?

42

43 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.

44

45 A. No, there were no particular targets or areas to fire
46 at.

47

1 Q. And, Herr Rönchen, do you remember how long these
2 15-centimetre guns fired for?

3

4 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And, Mr Rönchen, can you remember how long these
5 15-centimetre guns fired for, roughly?

6

7 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Gun 4 later also stopped. The Sydney was then, let's
8 say, so far away that only [...] straight ahead ... the distance increased.
9 Well, then it was only 5 and 6 that could fire. But how long they fired
10 for ... maybe another half hour, at most. Yes, one moment. At some point
11 Commander Detmers then also ordered: "Cease fire". That was half an hour
12 later, that was at about half past six, 18:30 hours, "Cease fire".

13

14 A. Well, at one point our gun No. 4 stopped to fire
15 [sic], because the Sydney was already very far away and
16 moved in a straight direction where it was difficult to
17 target at her and I think only turrets or guns No. 5 and 6
18 continued to fire at her and I think - I cannot really
19 remember but I think more or less it must have taken half
20 an hour, and it went so long until I think Mr Detmers at
21 the end said to cease fire, and that must have been about
22 1830.

23

24 Q. Did any of the 15-centimetre guns where you were run
25 out of ammunition?

26

27 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did any of the 15-centimetre guns run out of
28 ammunition?

29

30 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No idea. I don't know. I did not hear of that via the
31 loudspeakers.

32

33 A. No idea.

34

35 Q. Do you also have any idea about what type of shells
36 were fired?

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

39

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

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you know what type of shells was used with the
45 15-centimetre guns? Were they the ones with a fuse at the head or in the
46 rear section?

47

1 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, I don't know that. I cannot tell you that, I don't
2 know. What they fired in detail, I don't know that.

3

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

6

7 Q. I'd just like to ask you some questions about Sydney's
8 guns and Sydney's firing.

9

10 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Now I would like to ask you a few questions about
11 the guns on board the Sydney and how the Sydney fired.

12

13 Q. Do you know how long it was
14 after Kormoran started firing when Sydney started to fire?

15

16 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you know how long it took after the Kormoran had
17 fired the first shot at the Sydney, until the Sydney returned fire?

18

19 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: That was very shortly afterwards.

20

21 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Approximately?

22

23 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: That must all have been prepared already at that time ...
24 I cannot tell you that, I don't know. That is too long ago, I don't know
25 that any more.

26

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

31

32 Q. Did any of Sydney's shells do any damage to the part
33 of the Kormoran where you were?

34

35 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did the part of the Kormoran where you were on duty
36 get hit in any way by the shells from the Sydney?

37

38 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

39

40 A. Yes.

41

42 Q. Can you please explain what the damage was?

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you explain what kind of damage was created by
45 that?

46

47 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, but let's say ... There was a shell that went through

1 the funnel, went through the chimney. Then all the smoke came out of the
2 hole. There was no further damage; it just cleanly went through and into
3 the water on the other side. I did not see that, however, it was only
4 talked about later on. And then a shell got into the engine bearings
5 [Translator's note: German: "Maschinenlager", or "engine store"?]. But I
6 did not see that either. That was the reason though why we had to give up
7 the ship. Because everything was burning and there was no power any more.

8

9 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: We'll get to that later on.

10

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

13

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

17

18 Q. But there was no damage to the part of the Kormoran
19 where you were?

20

21 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: But the spot where you were on the Kormoran, that
22 did not get any proper hits or got damaged?

23

24 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.

25

26 A. No.

27

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

30

31 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And also, when the Sydney passed by the stern of
32 the Kormoran, did she fire torpedoes then, at the Kormoran?

33

34 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: One or two torpedoes must have gone past behind us.

35

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

37

38 Q. Did you see the torpedo tracks?

39

40 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, just the bubbles.

41

42 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: The question was whether you saw the bubbles from
43 the torpedoes? The torpedo tracks ...

44

45 A. Yes, I saw the bubbles - the (inaudible) and the
46 bubbles I saw, yes.

47

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

3

4 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: After the Sydney had passed astern the Kormoran,
5 did the Kormoran still fire torpedoes at the Sydney?

6

7 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, no. That is, I don't know. But in any case, if so,
8 they did not hit.

9

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

12

13 Q. Now, sir, after the firing stopped, did you stay in
14 your position in the director control unit after, or what
15 did you do? Did you move?

16

17 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: After the firing had ceased, what did you do then?
18 Did you stay in your control unit position there on the aft deck or did
19 you go somewhere else?

20

21 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, basically the command then came that we had to
22 abandon the ship. And then we tried to get any of the boats out. And
23 then I tried to get to my cabin deck and I still took a few things with
24 me. I must have taken some clothing, and what do I know, this container
25 from the gas mask, I grabbed that and packed cigarettes and matches into
26 it. Because it was: "The ship must be abandoned." How do you react in a
27 situation like that?

28

29 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: May I quickly translate first?

30

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

40

41 Q. At any stage after the order to abandon ship did you
42 see Sydney?

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did you see anything else of the Sydney, at any
45 time after the order had been given to abandon ship?

46

47 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: She was burning. We could not see any more either. As

1 to when she sank, no idea.

2

3 A. Well, it was burning. Much more, we couldn't see.

4 When it sank, I cannot tell.

5

6 Q. But, sir, did you see Sydney burning?

7

8 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Pardon?

9

10 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: But you saw clearly how the Sydney was burning?

11

12 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: She was burning, yes. From fore to aft.

13

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

15

16 Q. Are you able to say at all if the burning was

17 concentrated in a particular area or centred in an area?

18

19 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Are you perhaps able to say, possibly whether the

20 flames were more concentrated in particular areas, were more, stronger

21 than in other areas? Or whether that was spread evenly?

22

23 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I would assume that she burned better or more amidships

24 than at the front and aft. Yes, somewhere there also had to be the oil

25 tanks.

26

27 A. Well, I just want to assume that it was burning more

28 concentrated amidships rather than at the front or the aft,

29 at the bow or the stern, and then somewhere the oil tanks

30

31 have (unclear - simultaneous speakers),...

32

33 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: It was dark, after all. It was getting dark, out there.

34 We could then only see fire, nothing else. Where that was, one could not

35 see that any more.

36

37 A. ...but I didn't know,

38 because it was dark at that time and you could only see

39 fire but you couldn't really see where it came from, you

40 know.

41

42 Q. And were you able to observe Sydney's speed at this

43 time? Did she seem to be moving very slowly, slowly, or

44 quickly, or drifting? How would you describe her movement

45 in the water?

46 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you describe the speed or the progress that the

47 Sydney made at that time? Was she moving fast, slowly, medium fast, or

1 did she just drift?

2 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No. She practically only drifted then. I cannot imagine
3 that the engine was still running.

4 A. I think she was only drifting at that point, because
5 I cannot imagine that the engines were still working at
6 that time.

7

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

9

10 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you roughly say at what time that was?

11

12 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: It was sometime after 20:00 hours. Meanwhile it was
13 dark, in November. Sometime after 20:00 hours it was. You know, when you
14 have to get off the ship, you have no other thought than to get yourself
15 to safety. In particular, as there was no chance of getting our boats
16 out. One single one they got out, none of the others. They threw them
17 down like that, or threw out those rubber dinghies. We jumped after them.

18

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

29

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

31

32 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: How many people were in the boat that you then swam
33 to?

34

35 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I did not end up in the water. For I climbed down the
36 Jacob's ladder, but many did jump to get into a boat somehow. We had to
37 throw the boats down into the water beforehand. One could no longer lower
38 them down with the construction, because there was no power any more. And
39 to lower them down by hand, that was not possible. So we threw them over
40 board. Then they jumped after them. I was in the boat together with 73
41 people. That was the largest boat we had.

42

43 A. Well, I didn't jump myself, I used a ladder, but the
44 problem was that we couldn't lower the boats anymore in a
45 reasonable way, because we didn't have any energy from the
46 engines, so we had to throw them into the water and I ended
47 up in the biggest boat of all of them, and together with me

1 there were 73 people in this boat.

2

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

4

5 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Who was the highest-ranking officer ...?

6

7

8 THE INTERPRETER: Sorry, the most senior person or --

9

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

12

13 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Who was the officer in charge or the highest-
14 ranking officer in this life boat?

15

16 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: One moment, who was there again? Von Gösseln was there.
17 We still pulled him out of the water along the way.

18

19 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: You pulled him out of the water?

20

21 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, we did, in the boat. He came swimming towards us.

22

23 A. That must have been Mr von Goesseln. He was the most
24 senior officer there, and we took him out of the water,
25 because he came swimming towards us.

26

27 Q. Was Bunjes also in that boat?

28

29 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Was Mr Bunjes also in that boat?

30

31 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Who was that again? I have forgotten the name. Was it
32 him who had so many burn injuries? He later died in our boat. I don't
33 know any more. No idea. I cannot tell you any more. With me, names are a
34 matter of luck anyway.

35

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

39

40 those are two different things. I cannot remember well
41 names anyway.

42

43 Q. Herr Rönchen, we need to change tapes.

44

45 SHORT ADJOURNMENT

46

47 LEUT TYSON: Q. Now, sir, I just want to ask you, at any

1 stage during this time when Kormoran was being abandoned,
2 did you notice what flag was flying on Kormoran?

3

4 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: I would like to ask you, during the period when the
5 Kormoran was being abandoned, were you still able to see which flags were
6 hoisted on board the Kormoran?

7

8 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No idea. I did not even think of that.

9

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

12

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

15

16 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you happen to know what happened to the
17 Kormoran's war ensign?

18

19 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.

20

21 A. No.

22

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

26

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

29

30 Q. Herr Rönchen, you told me that you saw a shell hit the
31 aeroplane on Sydney.

32

33 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Mr Rönchen, you have said before that you saw how a
34 shell hit the aeroplane on the Sydney.

35

36 Q. Do you know if the propeller of the
37 aeroplane was turning at that time?

38

39 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Do you know if the propellers of the aeroplane were
40 turning at that time?

41

42 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did you not know, or could you not see it?

45

46 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I believe I could not see that at all. It was standing
47 on the launching platform then in such a way that it was intended to

1 start towards portside.

2

3 A. No, I couldn't see that. As far as - well, it stood
4 so on the starboard launching catapult that I couldn't see
5 that.

6

7 Q. About what distance was Sydney when the shell hit the
8 aeroplane?

9

10 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: How big was the distance to the Sydney when the
11 shell hit the aeroplane?

12

13 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: That must have been less than 1,000 metres. Our
14 Commander had waited until the Sydney was this close to us. Then she
15 approached to about 800 metres.

16

17 A. It must have been below 1,000 metres, because our
18 Commander waited for such a long time to have Sydney
19 approach until a distance of 800 metres, until she arrived
20 there.

21

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

24

25 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: When the aeroplane was hit, what was the position
26 of the two ships to each other?

27

28 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: What do you mean with "position"?

29

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

31

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

34

35 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Were the two ships even, parallel to each other, or
36 was the Kormoran further ahead or was it located a little further back?

37

38 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, at that time I could still look across exactly
39 opposite. Then we must have picked up a little speed again.

40

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

44

45 changed.

46

47 Q. So the aeroplane was hit when the ships were parallel

1 and about 800 metres apart?

2

3 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: That means the aeroplane was hit when the ships
4 were travelling about parallel and approximately 800 metres apart from
5 each other?

6

7 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, straight in the beginning. Straight with the first
8 shots.

9

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

11

12 Q. You also said that at various times you received
13 messages from Herr Skeries to adjust the firing of the guns¹⁰ by saying,
14 "4 ahead" or "2 back."

15

16 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: You have also said that you repeatedly received
17 instructions from Mr Skeries in order to adjust the guns, such as "4
18 forwards" or "2 back" .

19

20 Q. When you say "4 ahead",
21 does that mean 400 metres further, or is it just a cog on a
22 scale?

23

24 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, not that much.

25

26 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: When you ... This information "4 forwards", did it
27 mean 400 metres forwards?

28

29 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, no, no. Not 400 metres.

30

31 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Or was it just a mark on a scale? Four marks
32 forward or something like that?

33

34 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes, yes, yes. But how many metres that was,
35 unfortunately I cannot tell you any more, unfortunately I don't know that
36 any more.

37

38 A. No, it had nothing to do with metres. It was just
39 4 points on a scale. How many metres that was, I have no
40 idea today.

41

42 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: It was a few metres each.

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Each point?

45

46 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

47

1 A. Each of them was a few metres.

2

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

6

7 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: That was the elevation information, but can you
8 remember what details Skeries gave as to the distance at which to fire?
9 At the very first shot, which distance was that?

10

11 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I don't know that any more.

12

13 A. I can't remember anymore.

14

15 Q. Did you see Kormoran fire torpedoes?

16

17 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did you see whether the Kormoran fired torpedoes?

18

19 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, I could not see that at all. I could only just look
20 past the side of the box there. That was also a coincidence then that I
21 saw that, with that aeroplane. Because I could not see the whole ship. I
22 could only see a part of it. Also the aft guns, I could not see them
23 either. Only just that view to the aeroplane there. That I saw, how that
24 was hit by the shell and fell into the water on the other side.

25

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

32

33 Q. Did you see where Sydney was hit by a torpedo from
34 Kormoran?

35

36 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Were you able to see where the Sydney was hit, by a
37 torpedo?

38

39 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, I heard that later that the Sydney was hit in the
40 fore ship, but I could not see that at all from my position. You have to
41 imagine it like this: that little device, perhaps half of the cupboard
42 there, a little bigger than the table, a wooden hut, and I could only
43 just look past it. No more. I was not able to see the whole ship.

44

45 A. No, I couldn't see it myself. I just heard it later
46 that Sydney got hit in the fore ship by a torpedo, but
47 I didn't see it myself. You have to imagine it was just a

1 small wooden box - I would say the size of this to make it
2 in the video.

3

4 Q. To disguise?

5 A. To disguise and where I was behind and where I had
6 this - yeah, where I was hiding, and I wasn't able to see
7 the whole of the ship neither the Sydney nor the Kormoran
8 I think.

9

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

13

14 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: When you saw how the aeroplane was hit, that was at
15 the time when the ships were practically lying parallel at a distance of
16 about 800 metres, could you see then in which direction the guns on board
17 the Sydney were pointing?

18

19 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, I could not see the fore guns at all. And at the
20 aft ...and I think the aft was also more like a "Doppelturm".

21

22 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: You could not see aft either?

23

24 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No. I had a very slim line of vision through to that
25 aeroplane there; I could not see any more than that. For I could not
26 stand up and look over the top of everything.

27

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

30

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

34

35 Q. Did you see anyone on Sydney trying to lower a boat
36 near the aeroplane?

37

38 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Were you able to observe in the vicinity of the
39 aeroplane on board the Sydney whether a boat was lowered into the water
40 there?

41

42 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.

43

44 A. No.

45

46 THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, they are the questions I wanted
47 to ask.

1

2 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Thank you. Those are the questions I still wanted
3 to ask you.

4

5

6 LEUT TYSON: Q. Herr Rönchen, at the time of this
7 engagement between Kormoran and Sydney, on Kormoran was
8 there a fake gun, a dummy gun situated somewhere on her
9 poop deck?

10

11 THE INTERPRETER: Sorry, I was just changing sides. Can
12 you please repeat the question?

13

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

18

19 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: During the encounter with the Sydney, on 19
20 November 1941, was there a fake gun on the poop deck of the Kormoran?

21

22 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I don't know whether it still stood there. As Straat
23 Malakka, it should have still stood there. I don't know that any more.
24 That was more than 60 years ago. Such details today, well ...

25

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

31

32 Q. So I now want to ask you about the interrogations at
33 Harvey in Western Australia.

34

35 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Now I would like to ask you about the
36 interrogations you already had in Harvey, in Australia, back in those
37 days when you were a prisoner of war.

38

39 Q. Do you remember being
40 interrogated on 5 December?

41

42 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.

43

44 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you still remember that you were interrogated
45 back then on 5 December?

46

47 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No. Yes, I know that I was interrogated but that is

1 all. I have wondered about that these last few days too, what was
2 actually discussed then. I don't know any longer. No idea.

3

4 A. Well, of course I can remember being interrogated at
5 this time, but I have no idea what happened at the
6 interrogation. I thought about it in fact during the last
7 couple of days before this interview of today, but I cannot
8 remember what was said.

9

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

12

13 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: I shall ask Mr Thomas now to read to you briefly
14 which notes were taken back then during the interrogation. I'll briefly
15 read it out, more or less. It says here: "Rönchen, Willi. 19 years old.
16 Seaman. In the Navy since July 1940." Then it says here: "Eurolochus. At
17 an earlier time of the voyage. The last ship sunk in October. Six or
18 seven weeks ago in October, we handed over prisoners to a supply ship. We
19 were lying together with our supply ship for about four days. We had
20 about 70 to 80 prisoners on board."

21

22

23 (Notes read in German to witness by interpreter)

24

25 THE INTERPRETER: We what?

26

27 THE PRESIDENT: "We now were together, three supply
28 ships."

29

30 THE INTERPRETER: Okay.

31

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

33

34 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: "All in all, we met three times with the supply
35 ship. The supplies we received from them, among other things there was
36 oil and beer. The supply ships were about the same size as our ship. I
37 know we sunk a Yugoslavian ship. That was approximately in June. We saved
38 nine men. We could not save the remainder of the crew. We kept searching
39 for further survivors for several hours. The last supply ship we met was
40 painted black. The last time we met our supply ship, we handed over all
41 prisoners. All prisoners were treated well." That is all there was.

42

43

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

46

47 Q. Now, sir, I just want to see whether that's helpful to

1 you in helping your memory.

2

3 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I had no idea any more as to what I had said then. I
4 don't know any more.

5

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

8

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

13

14 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you remember at all that the Kormoran attacked
15 a Yugoslavian ship and that later nine men from that ship were saved?

16

17 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes. Only nine men, I don't know that any more. I
18 cannot remember what happened. I also don't know any longer why the
19 others then also perished, if there were any more people on board.

20

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

25

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

28

29 THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

30

31 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Now I would like to come to the last series of
32 questions, Mr President, if that is convenient. – Yes.

33

34

35 LEUT TYSON: Q. Herr Rönchen, as you know, there have
36 been many books written about the engagement between Sydney
37 and Kormoran and many different theories have been
38 suggested by different writers.

39

40 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: As I am sure you know, Mr Rönchen, numerous books
41 have been written about the sinking of the Sydney and various authors
42 have also published different theories on the reasons.

43

44 LEUT TYSON: Q. It's very important as
45 part of this Commission to see what the eye witnesses have
46 to say about some of these theories, ...

47

1 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: It is very important for this Commission of Inquiry
2 to hear evidence from persons who have witnessed that with their own
3 eyes, to hear what they have to say about these theories that are being
4 spread.

5
6 LEUT TYSON: Q. ...and the Commission
7 wants to see whether you agree or disagree, or what you
8 have to say in response to some of these theories.

9
10 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: The Commission of Inquiry would therefore like to
11 know from you what you have to say about some of these theories which we
12 would now like to introduce you to. Whether you agree to them or reject
13 them.

14
15

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

19

20 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: That is totally impossible.

21

22 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: One of these theories says that a Japanese
23 submarine was involved in the sinking of the Sydney. What do you say to
24 that?

25

26 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: But that is impossible. At that time there weren't any
27 nuclear submarines yet. And what kind of distance is that, from Japan
28 around the southern tip of Australia up to Freemantle. Yes, that's 18, 20
29 thousand kilometers, after all. And then back again. And Japan was not
30 part of the war yet. Our battle was on 19 November. The Japanese attacked
31 Pearl Harbor on 7 December, and on 8 December they declared war on the
32 Americans. But not yet on 19 November in the waters around Australia.
33 That is totally impossible.

34

35 A. That's absolutely impossible, because at those times
36 we didn't have - there weren't any atomic nuclear U-boat
37 submarines, and it must have been impossible to go from
38 Japan all the way through the southern tip of Australia and
39 to Fremantle where we were - that must have been 18,000 to
40 20,000 kilometres - and then back to Japan. That's just
41 impossible and, furthermore, Japan hadn't declared any war
42 at this point. As far as I know - well, our encounter was

43

44 on 19 November, and the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on
45 7 December the same year and on 8 December they declared
46 the war to the US, but to be there on 19 November in
47 Australian waters near Fremantle, it was completely

1 impossible.

2

3 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Did you ever see a Japanese
4 submarine?

5

6 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did you ever see a Japanese submarine?

7

8 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No.

9

10 A. No.

11

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

15

16 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: How about any other Naval units, for instance a
17 German submarine or a German surface ship, were they involved in any way
18 in the battle with the Sydney?

19

20 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No. Nobody knew where we were.

21

22 A. No; nobody knew where we were.

23

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

28

29 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: One very serious accusation which is made by some
30 authors is that the survivors of the Sydney who were swimming in the
31 water were shot dead either with machine guns or with handguns. What do
32 you have to say to that? Did you see anything like that?

33

34 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: I did not see any, and in the course of many years we
35 from the crew very often met, at least once a year. But there was never
36 any talk of anyone swimming in the water, from the Sydney, that any
37 sailors were in the water.

38

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

43

44 Q. So did you ever see any survivors of Sydney in the
45 water?

46

47 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: You personally never saw any survivors?

1

2 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No. No.

3

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

5

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

8

9 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Did you see any debris from the Sydney in the
10 water? Any remains?

11

12 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: No, nothing at all, no.

13

14 A. No, nothing.

15

16 Q. And, finally, did you see Kormoran when she blew up?
17 Did you see the explosion?

18

19 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: And finally, did you see how the Kormoran exploded?
20 Did you see the explosion?

21

22 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes. That was shortly after midnight.

23

24 A. Yes, that was shortly after midnight.

25

26 Q. Can you describe the picture, what you saw?

27

28 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Can you describe the picture you saw?

29

30 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: It was a huge cloud of fire.

31

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

33

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

36

37 THE PRESIDENT: I have no other questions.

38

39 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Mr President, those were the questions from my
40 side. Do you have any further questions? – No, I don't have any further
41 questions either.

42

43

44 THE PRESIDENT: Herr Rönchen, thank you very much indeed for your
45 help.

46

47 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Mr Rönchen, I would like to thank you very much for

1 your help.

2

3 RÖNCHEN [GERMAN]: Yes.

4

5 A. Yes.

6

7 THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

8

9 LEUT TYSON: Thank you very much.

10

11 INTERPRETER [GERMAN]: Thank you.

12

13

14 THE INQUIRY ADJOURNED ACCORDINGLY

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