

CN SPEECH AT THE HMAS SYDNEY MEMORIAL GERALDTON
ON THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN
HMAS SYDNEY(II) AND HSK KORMORAN

19 NOVEMBER 2011

[This speech was one of nine 3 minute messages delivered as part of the ceremony. It does not address any detail of the battle itself, this was covered elsewhere in the ceremony]

Your Excellency, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is hard to stand here in front of this memorial and not be overwhelmed by the scale of the human tragedy that took place during this action, this brutal sea battle that occurred not too far from here 70 years ago today.

As we stand here and look out to sea, towards the sunset over this great ocean, we should also recall those sailors of so many other navies who have given their lives for their countries, their loved ones and their mates. The sea does not respect nationality, it is harsh as well as it is beautiful.

The Australian view of battle is, not surprisingly, predominantly understood through the prism of the land. Land battles are filmed, they are re-enacted and can be more easily related to by people who live on land.

In contrast few of us can conjure up the imagery of a battle at sea, a battle not just between people, ships and equipment but a battle where the elements, the sea itself, is all too often the final arbiter.

War at sea is lonely, conducted, like most of our Navy's daily operations, out of sight of all but the participants.

War at sea is also brutal, it has a brutality and a finality all of its own.

All sea farers know that ultimately the sea is the common enemy. As with any enemy it lies in wait and pounces on any momentary lapse or simple instance of bad luck.

In the end this was true for both these ships 70 years ago. When they had finished trading their savage blows it was the sea and its relentless presence that both crews had to contend with. It was the sea that ultimately won this contest of wills.

As you have heard 645 of our best and 82 German officers and sailors were killed. We will never know of the individual and collective acts of valour that

undoubtedly occurred onboard SYDNEY that day, either during the battle itself, or, in her final moments.

But, the discovery of both ships only 3 and a half years ago however, at least has given us an understanding of the ferocity of the action.

In thinking about what happened on this day 70 years ago, some are eager to attribute blame and to luxuriate in the benefits of hindsight and speculation. I would contend though that this ship, this great ship, this great cruiser, one that bears a name of unsurpassed achievements in the 100 year history of the Royal Australian Navy, and her great crew, fought a battle that day that was as heroic and notable as any fought before and since.

Each and every one of her 645 crew deserve equal recognition and the thanks and reverent remembrance from this nation of ours.

Let us re-commit ourselves to their memory.