The primary object of the fleet is to secure communications, and if the enemy’s fleet is in a position to render them unsafe it must be put out of action.

Sir Julian Corbett, 1911

Major surface combatants, submarines and other naval capabilities, supported by air combat and maritime surveillance and response assets, are necessary to establish sea control, and to project force in our maritime environment (including for the purposes of maintaining freedom of navigation, protecting our shipping, and lifting and supporting land forces).

Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030

Ninety five years ago the Royal Australian Navy fought its first single-ship action at sea. Celebrated in most accounts as a worthy opening page in the young nation’s battle history, the engagement between HMAS Sydney and SMS Emden on 9 November 1914 has also provided the RAN with an admirable foundation for its wartime traditions. But despite such laurels, it is the battle’s immediate strategic influence, and in particular its impact on the mobility of Australia’s wartime resources, that is of the greatest continuing relevance.

In late 1914, Australia’s sea communications were under threat from two German cruisers then known to be at large in the Indian Ocean. The first, SMS Königsberg, achieved some limited success harrying trade off Aden before being cornered in German East Africa, but the second, Emden, proved far more active and difficult to counter. Her captain, Korvettenkapitän Karl von Müller, had rapidly established a reputation for skill and daring. In just two months he had captured or sunk 25 allied steamers, a Russian cruiser and a French destroyer. In a classic example of a successful distraction campaign, by October 1914 more than a dozen Allied warships were out searching for Emden, insurance rates were soaring, commodity prices were rising and shipping was being kept in port. Even more worrying to Australian authorities was the danger posed to the passage of the first contingent of Australian and New Zealand troops, then awaiting transport to the European Theatre.

Initially delayed by concerns over the whereabouts of German warships in the Pacific, the 28 Australian transport ships did not begin assembling at Albany until the last week of October. There they awaited the ten New Zealand transports and four warships directed by the British Admiralty to provide an escort. Convoy 1, carrying 21,528 men and 7882 horses, finally sailed on the morning of 1 November 1914.

Captain von Müller had no knowledge of the convoy, but was aware from intercepted wireless messages that the search for him was gathering strength. He therefore chose as his next target the British cable and wireless station in the remote Cocos Islands. An attack here would not only interrupt communications between Australia and England, but also might draw the search away from his next raiding grounds, the steamer route between Aden and India.

On the night of 8 November, von Müller crossed the course of Convoy 1 less than 40 miles ahead and arrived off Direction Island the following morning. In an attempt to resemble a British cruiser, Emden had hoisted a false fourth funnel, but the station superintendent recognised the ruse and managed to send out a warning before Emden jammed his transmission. A German landing party then set to work destroying machinery, cutting the telegraph cables, and blowing up the wireless mast, but it was all too late. Some 50 miles to the north, HMAS Melbourne, the senior ship of the convoy escort, had intercepted the distress call just after 0630. Accepting that his duty was to remain with the convoy, Melbourne’s Captain ML Silver, RN, ordered Sydney, the escort closest to Cocos, to raise steam for full speed and investigate.

A stained glass window at HMAS Cerberus that commemorates the two protagonists (Defence)

The sea battle between HMAS Sydney and the German cruiser Emden, 9 November 1914 (Phil Belbin)
Sydney, commanded by Captain John Glossop, RN, had the
edge over Emden in speed, range of guns, and weight of
metal. Hence, the result of the action, one of the few single-
ship encounters of the war, was never really in doubt.
Nevertheless, Glossop underestimated, as did British naval
authorities more generally, the effective range of the German
105-mm (4.1-inch) naval guns and just after 0940 Emden
made the first hits of the battle. Sydney suffered four men
crushed under the weight of their shells. First the foremost
funnel toppled, then the foremost, the second funnel, and
then finally the third. Incapable of firing back and hoping to
save lives, von Müller made for North Keeling Island, where
Emden grounded at 1120.

Sydney disengaged and sped after Emden’s collier, Buresk,
which had come up during the action. Overtaking her shortly
after noon Glossop was unable to prevent Buresk’s crew
scuttling their ship to avoid capture. Sydney returned to
Emden at 1600 and Glossop was surprised to find the
German ensign still flying. After an inconclusive exchange of
signals, he closed in and reluctantly fired two further salvoes.
The Imperial Ensign immediately came down and the
Germans displayed a white sheet on the quarterdeck.
Feeling obliged to first check on the situation at Direction
Island, Glossop could not render assistance to the German
survivors until the following morning.

The German ship had 316 crew, and the battle left 134 dead
and 65 wounded. Despite the initial delay, the care and
consideration subsequently lavished on the German
wounded by the Australians certainly helped to dissipate any
animosity. Indeed, given the rare chance to associate closely
for a few days after their battle, officers from both ships came
to the joint conclusion that ‘it was our job to knock one
another out, but there was no malice in it’.3 Glossop allowed
the German officers to keep their swords and took great care
not to offend their sensibilities, but elsewhere the news of the
battle was received with unrestrained jubilation. AB (Banjo)
Paterson accompanied the Australian troops as a war
reporter and even the bush poet felt the exultation:

Arrived in Colombo to find everybody in a wild state of
excitement … We can hardly believe that Australia’s
first naval engagement could have been such a
sensational win, for our people are not seagoing
sailors. An ordinary warship engagement could be so
little taken very seriously. And now we have actually sunk a German ship!4

Both sides agreed that Emden’s men had displayed
consummate bravery when faced with almost certain defeat.
Unusually, for a war marked by so much hatred, the general
opinion in the Allied press had been that Emden’s actions
against shipping were ‘sportsmanlike’ rather than
indiscriminate. Admiralty naturally found its focus in the
character of her captain, whose chivalrous behaviour was
said to have ensured that no non-combatant life was lost
during the raider’s rampages.

With Emden’s exploits singled out for praise, the quality of
Sydney’s victory against a brilliant and cunning foe was
demonstrated. The world’s press remarked on the
far-sighted statesmanship that had seen the creation of the
RAN, while the journal Punch even depicted Emden as a fox
in the jaws of an Australian lion. Reflecting the importance
attached to the battle, both Australia and Germany did their
best to ensure that the names of the two ships lived on. The
Germans soon christened a second Emden and allowed her
to display an Iron Cross at her bow in honour of her
illustrious predecessor. The RAN plans to commission a fifth
Sydney in 2017.

Sydney’s mast preserved on Bradleys Head and now
saluted by every warship as they sail past (Defence)

Yet, however much the battle is portrayed as confirmation of
the Australian sailor’s fighting spirit, the strategic context
must not be forgotten. At the cost of a handful of lives, sea
power had removed the only immediate threat to Australia’s
oceanic links. In direct consequence, troop convoys were
able to cross the Indian Ocean without escort for more than
two years and no Australian soldier was ever lost to enemy
action on his passage to the Middle East. In any accounting,
this was an extraordinary achievement. Australia’s strategic
geography does not change over time and, as the 2009
Defence White Paper reminds us, establishing sea control
remains a necessary part of any Australian attempt to project
power over the sea.

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1 JS Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, edited by E
2 Department of Defence, Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific
Century: Force 2030, Canberra, 2009, p. 84.
3 A Jose, The Royal Australian Navy 1914-1918, Angus & Robertson,
4 AB Paterson, Song of the Pen: Complete Works, 1901–1941,