

## NOVEMBER 1914 - AUSTRALIA'S FIRST VICTORY AT SEA

*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 <sup>1</sup>

*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 <sup>2</sup>

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.



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

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.



*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 killed and more than a dozen wounded, fortunately these were to be the only RAN casualties. Thereafter, Glossop kept his distance, eking maximum advantage from his speed and heavier (6-inch) weapons. *Emden* made only a dozen hits all up, and her fire soon slackened as *Sydney's* gunnery began to tell. By 1100, only one German gun remained in action and the Australian crew watched in awed fascination as a large fire took hold of *Emden* aft and the enemy ship crumbled under the weight of their shells. First the foremost funnel toppled, then the foremast, 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 salvos. 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'.<sup>3</sup> 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 correspondent 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 people and our navy — which some of us used to call a pannikin navy — was never taken very seriously. And now we have actually sunk a German ship!<sup>4</sup>

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. Admiration 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 deemed all the greater. 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.

- 1 JS Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, edited by E Grove, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1988, p. 343.
- 2 Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Canberra, 2009, p. 64.
- 3 A Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy 1914-1918*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935, p. 567.
- 4 AB Paterson, *Song of the Pen: Complete Works, 1901-1941*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1983, p. 646.

