

Eye-Witness Account of the Sydney / Emden Battle – 1914

by Wireless Telegraphist James Clifford

(provided by his son Julian Clifford)

Oct 31st

We have arrived at Albany WA a distance of 2,100 miles. On arrival, in fact before we had lost way, a collier came alongside and then came 900 tons. On this occasion all previous runs were broken. Our average coaling being 142 tons per hour. A few privileged chaps who reside in W.A have been granted a couple of hours ashore.

Nov 1st

Escorting Cruisers and Convoy got under way and formed up outside already for trip to Columbo. The HMS MINATAUR is in charge with Sydney and Melbourne escorting Cruisers. All is excitement and all so many ships mustered makes one wonder if all vessels from every land have been in Aussie. All troopships line up for a start off.

The Convoy sailed in following order:

Australian Convoy

ORVIETO

WILTSHIRE

EURIPIDISE

SOUTHERN

MEDIC

ARGYLLSHIRE

PERA

ASCANNIS

SHROPSHIRE

ARMADALE

STAR OF

ENGLAND

AFRIC

SALDANHA

GEELONG

BENELLA

KATUNA

PORT

LINCOLN

RANGATIRA
HYMETTUS
KAROO
STAR OF VICTORIA
SUFFOLK
MARERE

HOVARALA
ANGLO
EGYPTIAN
CLAN
MACCORQUADALE
OMRAH MILTIADES

New Zealand Convoy

MAMGANUI
ORAMA
ORARI
ATHENIC
STAR OF
INDAI
HAWKESBAY
LIMERICK
RAUPEHN
TAHITI
WAIMANA

All told thirty eight ships in convoy and three warships Total 41.

MINOTAUR took up station ahead. The Sydney on Port Beam whilst the Melbourne on the Starboard beam of Convoy. Later the Japanese Cruiser IBUKI joined in the gathering and took up station astern. The PERA, one of the convoy had the bad luck of her Port engine breaking down just after we started, but she kept up with one engine going while the other was being repaired. The speed of the Convoy varied from nine to ten and a half knots.

Nov 3rd

The HMAS PIONEER (one of my old ships) joined up in the morning and by the afternoon discovered a defect. Of course anything is expected of her. She is a time worn tub, hardly able to keep up with the Ferries. The Pioneer was ordered to return to Fremantle W.A. Bet there were many happy faces among the lads.

Nov 4th

The MANGANUI reported a sick case. The ships head was turned on to the heavy sea running and a most successful operation performed.

Nov 6th

Been a deal of trouble in trying to get the convoy to darken ship properly. This is most essential, because the smallest light is a good target at night time, and must say that we do not wish to get into any trouble.

Nov 7th

The escorting party has been lessened by one. The MINOTAUR has received instructions to proceed and perform another duty. She left the Melbourne in charge of us.

Nov 8th

During day we received orders that no transmitting by Wireless was to be carried out until one hundred miles of Columbo. Only buzzer to be used. The reason given was that if a raid intended Cocos Islands would be used as a jumping off place. The convoy would pass Cocos Island during the night.

Nov 9th

This morning I had the morning watch (4 am to 8 am). The hours as usual dragged on. My messenger was Norm Hunter. At **6.23am** I heard a strange spark, which was at once I realized foreign. Being a little dazed and thinking that I was imagining things, was afraid to take action. After some three minutes had elapsed the same vessel called again and used a ten letter code. This time I was certain of my ears and immediately sent for Captain Glossop. Within a few minutes the Captain was in the room in his night attire, and I reported the matter to him. Saying that I heard a strange ship not more than 60 miles off us, using a ten letter code, and showed him the Code. He was certainly dumbfounded. In fact do not think that he credited my statement. The Captain then left the room. Some few minutes later I heard Cocos Island call and say that "a strange ship was at entrance of harbour". The remainder of this signal was jammed deliberately by the other ship. Again the Captain came in for further news which I placed in front of him. The Melbourne then ordered the Sydney to proceed and investigate. We then turned and raised full speed. The Japanese Cruiser also wanted to fight and turned to do so, but was ordered to return. At 8am I was relieved by Ward. When at breakfast I was so sure of seeing a fight that I offered four pounds to two, but no one would accept. After breakfast the usual routine was gone through and at nine am as usual we went aft to church.

9.15am

The Captain came off the bridge and ordered Clear ship for action. All rails were then dropped and all guns loaded and trained, also were torpedoes fitted in readiness with War

Heads. From the Fore Top land had been sighted also a strange cruiser from the Fore Control Top. The challenge signal was then hoisted by us, but no reply from the stranger. Many of us were on the forecandle looking at the vessel and I bet 10/- that she was the Karlsruhe which bet of course I have lost and paid.

During the passage from convoy to strange ship we worked up to full speed in an incredible short space of time. Later all hands guessed the stranger to be the Emden. As soon as the Emden sighted us she blew her siren, the reason of which later turned out to be, to recall her landing party which had gone ashore to smash up the Wireless Station and Cable Station which is there. When the Emden saw how she was pressed for time, she cleared out and left her landing party behind.

The Emden apparently tried to clear the land before we could get her in gun range, but lost badly in attempt. By this time we were doing twenty seven knots and steering for the point of land. The Emden meanwhile worked up to full speed doing all she knew. The first shot was fired by the Emden at 10,500 yards and hit water 100 yards short of Sydney and then screamed overhead. We then began to return fire and away went the sport.

9.39am

After exchange of many shots, broadsides were fired. This is my first experience and must say that a ship shakes with a broadside. As far as could be seen through the bursting of shells, for the first twenty minutes the Emden had the best of the fight and our chance seemed a bad one. Before the action was under way ten minutes, the Emden had either placed a lucky one, or a good shot, and carried away our rangefinder from the Fore Bridge. The operator was killed. This shot passed through signal Halyards and cut off a mans leg, then through five inches of brass on Rangefinder, through a thickness of hammocks lining bridge, through bridge awning and rail and then exploded. Some shell eh. The next thing was our Starboard Battery. A shell hit Starboard Number 2 gun and seven out of nine of the crew were knocked out. The Gunlayer Reg Sharp was killed. The After Control came next, one shot blew the five men out and made a mess of the place. Carved a lump out of both legs of the after control officer (Jeff Hampden). All were wounded. One mans eye was blown out, another man, name Meldrum had thigh bone broken in seventeen places. Just about at this time a bonza shell from the Emden took a big lump off our main mast, but pleased to say not enough to bring her down.

Another scooped a piece out of the top of Shield of Starboard 1 and tore the gunlayers stomach out. That shot was the last that the Emden got in for a while. She had had her run and then we began to give her a fair go. We had been greatly handicapped by the loss of our rangefinder, which had since been replaced.

Up to this time it was not possible to see what damage we had done, but afterwards we

learned that our third Salvo had smashed in their submerged flat and disabled the steering gear. There were eleven in the Submerged flat, including Prince Francis Joseph Hohenzollern. He was the only one saved from there (dead lucky). Now things were humming and we could get our moneys worth with the naked eye.

10.04am

Emdens Foremast and funnel dropped.

10.20am

Our shells caused an explosion by Emdens mainmast and a big fire followed.

10.34am

The Emdens Foremast and her Fore control top toppled into the ditch.

10.41am

Second Funnel followed the first and an explosion occurred owing to some of our shots ferreting out the Emdens engine room.

11.08am

Emdens third Funnel followed previous two. I suppose that it was tired of being alone. At the same time the Emdens Fore Bridge did the disappearing trick. The Emden now altered course and steered for land. Or perhaps she was unable to avoid it. We tried very hard to sink her before she had reached the land but was unlucky.

11.11am

The Emden grounded.

11.15am

We ceased fire and gave chase to a collier which had been laying off and looking at the fight. This friend had to watch the whole affair and as soon as she saw the Emden had gone she made an attempt to bolt. We had enough chasing & therefore were not too keen on more of it, so just put a shot across her bows which stopped her immediately. On drawing near we ordered her to "strike her colours". This she did and burned them to save capture. An armed party was then sent aboard and the Huns made no resistance. The prisoners were got off OK and then we put four shots into her and she went down ablaze. A Glorious death. Her name was "BURESK".

It may seem a waste to sink her but we had no alternative. She had opened her Kingston Valves and had so badly bent them that we could not capture her and she was sinking fast. As soon as her prisoners had embarked, Sydney took two of the Colliers boats in tow and then returned to the Emden.

On approach she was seen to be still flying the German Ensign. We called on her by flags and morse code. "DO YOU SURRENDER"

Emden replied "NAAT SIGNAL NO SIGNAL BOOK" by morse code. Again Sydney made by morse code "DO YOU SURRENDER". There was no reply. Then we made "WILL YOU SURRENDER". Again no reply. Emden waved Morse Flag to proceed with message, but would not acknowledge receipt or reply. Captain of Sydney then gave order "Open fire and aim for foot of mainmast". The Port Guns fired first with three salvos, "15 shots", but failed to hit it. So the ship turned around to let the Starboard guns have a go. As we were turning around a man went aloft aboard the Emden and hauled down the Ensign. The Emden destroyed Ensign to avoid capture. As soon as Emden surrendered a boat was sent over with water and provisions and a message to say rescue work would be started in the morning. Darkness began to draw on now, so Sydney got under way to go in search of and pick up some men in the water. One fellow whom we rescued had been in the water seven and half hours, while two others, eight hours. They had kept themselves up by lifebuoys.

Just a few words about the ship and Captain. All through the action we had water running over the decks in case of fire. This did save two fires. One fire did start by the Starboard 2 Gun, but it was got under at the expense of burning two men badly. It was quite possible for a fire to have started on the forecastle, but the water stopped it and only a big hole was made. The shell that had exploded on our mess deck.

Owing to the excessive speed a great amount of water was shipped, filling the flat and causing a big list. During the fight all hands were naturally excited. Our Captain remained by the compass, as cool as ice, the whole of the fight.

After we had left the Emden, we steamed slowly out to sea as we did not know of the whereabouts of the Koenigsburg, and naturally had no intention to be caught napping. Late in the night we all mustered aft to pay our last to our three dead Pals.

This ceremony was most impressive. The Rev Little read the burial service by the light of Hurrican lamp. I shall never forget the sound of those bodies rushing into the water. Tis hard luck to see good Pals go away in such a fashion.

Later we received information that the Emden had 43 men ashore with two machine guns. Sydney then decided to land party at daylight and chase them. The reason of waiting for daylight was that owing to poor landing facilities the Huns would had had too good a chance to murder us during landing in dark.

Nov 10th

At daylight, landed an armed party of thirty three men. On Sydneys armed party landing they were met by the inhabitants, who said that the Germans had stolen their schooner, also their stores and bolted. They also said the Germans were waiting for us to land in the darkness. Their plan was to allow us to get alongside the one and only pier and then open fire with their machine guns. So that not one of us would have returned to the ship. Apparently it was a wise plan to wait for the light.

The inhabitants gave us a rousing cheer. They informed us that the Germans had left at daylight with schooner and stores. The people could not do enough for us. Gave us smokes, fruit and booze freely. Will be honest and say it was good.

As we started off the people began singing "He's a jolly good fellow". They reckon they had their moneys worth and could see the first part of the scrap from the shore. On arrival on board our Capt thanked the Operator for sending his message.

The Sydney then proceeded to the Emden to do rescue work. On nearing the Emden she was noticed to be flying the International flag "IN WANT OF IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE". Two boats were then lowered from Sydney and rescue work began.

On boarding the Emden our Officer (Ned Garsia) informed Capt of Emden that we would start rescue work if he would give his parole. Captain Von Muller gave this for himself, officers and men, and said they placed themselves under naval discipline and would not interfere with anything on board HMAS Sydney. Rescue work was then commenced. A very heavy ground swell made work awkward, lowering the wounded into boats. We supplied Flexible Bamboo stretches which were greatly appreciated. Other kinds being useless.

There were one hundred and eighty five alive on board, forty five of whom were seriously wounded. Out of her crew of four hundred, 185 men and ten officers remained. Leaving two hundred and five killed. Our losses were four killed, thirteen wounded, eight of whom seriously.

Last of Emdens wounded came on board at 5 PM. The Captain was the last man to leave the ship. All our own boats being hoisted, we proceeded round to the other side of the Island in search of twenty men who had been stranded. They were men who had jumped overboard when we had opened fire a second time and were all seriously wounded by shot going over. An officer and men were landed with orders to find men and make them as comfortable as possible for the night. Sydney then shoved off and held burial service on Sydney and Emdens men who had died during the day.

Description of Emden.

The Emden was in an awful state from right Forward to the foc'sle gun she was untouched except for a tremendous big hole in the bows caused through grounding. Only the deck of the Fore bridge was left. The remainder having been blown overboard. The foot of the foremast remained intact, but the Fore topmast, likewise the Chart House etc were among the missing. All amidships from the Foremast to Main Mast was one mass of torn and twisted iron. The Wireless room was like a curio box which had been turned over. In one corner of the Port Battery was a pile of humanity covered with coal bags. All three funnels were laying dejectedly across the port Battery. Bodies were strewn in all directions. Majority having been burned to death. Our LYDDITE shell must have been terrible stuff to face. Under the Fore Bridge Starboard side was a proper wreck. Gaping holes all along the Starboard Battery. Three large holes in side. From main mast to right aft was nothing but a shell, through Sydneys LYDDITE exploding inside. There was a straight drop from upper deck to Keel plate. All woodwork had been burned and nothing but iron left. The Quarter Deck was oval instead of flat caused by internal explosions. Gas from shells escaped where deck was perforated. English and German coins were laying everywhere. There were plenty of sovereigns among the coins. It has been estimated that they had thrown overboard £60,000 in notes and coins, both English and American money. Heavy grounding swell prevented diving operations. The distance covered during fight was fifty miles. Capt Von Muller and Kaisers nephew, Prince Franz Joseph Hohenzollern, were uninjured. The Captain and Officers of Emden were allowed to retain their swords.

Nov 11th

At daylight we returned to place where we had left the landing party overnight. On arrival we picked up the rescue party and twenty German wounded. These Germans were in a shocking state, owing to the land crabs of big size getting into their wounds and eating into the body. After a little while we got all on board and then shoved off to return the Island doctor who had volunteered his services. I must say that his assistance was greatly needed. Captain Glossop thanked the doctor and he went ashore. Then Sydney set course for Columbo. The Germans did not like this as they had boasted they would take the next mail to Columbo. We passed the "EMPRESS OF ASIA" on her way to Cocos with intelligence party on board.

Nov 13th

Picked up "EMPRESS OF RUSSIA" and to her we transferred the "Buresk" Chinese crew, also some slightly wounded Emden men. This was done so as to ease the duties of our own two doctors. At noon all was fixed and both ships got under way and proceeded to Columbo. We received a message from the Senior Officer of Convoy requesting the Sydney to pass up the lines of the Convoy on our way to Columbo. This request was granted providing that there would be no demonstrations owing to the number of wounded Germans on board.

Nov 14th

We steamed through the lines of the Convoy. All was very quiet. Not a sound, until from one of the New Zealand boats came "I'll MAKE YOU LOVE ME". That sounded funny.

Nov 15th

Sydney and Empress of Asia arrived at Columbo. This distance covered since leaving Albany was 3380 miles, and I will say that is has been a long run. As Sydney entered the harbour every ship present hoisted signals of congratulations. Although an order was given not to cheer, one of the NZ convoy broke out and rang the air with them. What odds. Of the remainder of the Convoy the soldiers lined the ships sides and bareheaded stood to attention making a most impressive sight. Congratulations were received from Jap Cruiser IBUKI, HMS Hampshire, Minotaur and HMAS Australia, Melbourne and Encounter. Immediately after securing ship, all the Emdens Crew, Officers and men were sent to Hospitals and internment camps. Both our wounded and the Emdens were sent to General Hospital, Columbo. During ships stay in port she was temporarily patched up, disinfected and cleaned generally.

Nov 16th

The Governor General of Ceylon paid a visit. Some ship to gaze on. Last night we were granted leave and enjoyed a good bust. At the Bristol Hotel I played the marker billiards. He was playing me on a thirty five break 250 up. I cannot spell this Indians name but he has played such men as Reece Ian Gray etc. So you see my chance.

We received messages of congratulations from the following personages.

Secretary of State for Colonies.

Governor General of Australia.

Mayor of Glenelg South Australia

First Lord of Admiralty

Governor of Western Australia

Vice Admiral Sir George Patey

Governor of South Australia

Japanese Consul of Kobe

High Commissioner for New Zealand.

Governor Western Pacific Suva Fiji

Senior Naval Officer New Zealand

Lord Denham

Consul General of France

Lord Mayor of Sydney

Consul General of Japan

Sir John Madden

Prime Minister of Canada

Mayor of Hobart Tasmania
Minister of Defence New Zealand
Mayor of Port Nelson
Lord Mayor of Melbourne
Union Club Sydney
Mayor of Port Dungeness
Chamber of Commerce Hobart
Chamber of Commerce Bundaberg Qld
Chamber of Commerce Toronto Canada
Chamber of Commerce Ipswich Qld
Merchants of London
Merchants of Liverpool Eng
Melbourne Club Australia
Canadian Club Winnipeg Canada
Navy Board Australia
Mr Shearsen Royal Naval House.

There were also many more from private individuals, in fact several hours have been taken up in reading them. Suppose they are all right enough, but all reckon a shout or two would go well.

Nov 19th

Sydney left Columbo, Ceylon. When passing all ships, they repeated their congratulations. We seem to be in the boom. Many of us are just recovering from the welcome at Columbo. While ashore at Columbo, the Emden must have been refloated and sank several hundred times. I did see in few places around the tables, where some beer had been upset to represent the sea, and the Emden was refloated to show the people the course the ships had traversed during the fight. Naturally as time and drink went on, the fight grew more exciting and better. Till in fact the lot amounted to little more than play.