

HMAS Sydney – an end to the controversy

by Peter Hore and David L Mearns

For sixty years a copy of Captain Theodor Detmers' *Gefechtsbericht* or action report of the fight between his ship, the German raider *Kormoran*, and the Australian cruiser *Sydney* in November 1941 has lain hidden in a dictionary. Detmers kept this dictionary throughout his captivity in Australia and brought it home to Germany: it has now been fully transcribed and translated. The dictionary account, which was briefly examined by Barbara Winter in the early 1990s, is written by dots under letters, within the German-English part of a two volume dictionary published by Cassell and Co in December 1939 in London, Toronto, Melbourne and Sydney. The dots are barely visible to the naked eye until one's attention is drawn to them. How the dictionary came into Detmers' possession is not known, but it is not damaged by sea water as might be expected if it had been in the lifeboats with the Germans after they abandoned *Kormoran*. Though the pages are yellowed with age the dictionary is in good condition: it is tightly bound, the spine is not worn or broken, and the pages are not thumbed or dog-eared, suggesting that it was carefully preserved. Further, the dots are excessively difficult to read and transcribe. Other evidence indicates that this account was probably dotted into the dictionary in early 1942 after Detmers was reunited with his officers in the Dhurringile prisoner of war camp. Clearly this was a reference copy rather than a working copy of the deck log, and other versions like the 1945 coded and 1947 typed versions were written by reference to a parent document, and this may have been the deck log itself.

Another copy of Detmers' action report, which has been disregarded since 1947, is among documents rediscovered this year in the basement of the Admiralty Library in London, and recently posted on the Royal Australian Navy's Sea Power Centre website.¹ The 1947 report was confiscated from *Kormoran*'s survivors when they arrived in Cuxhaven onboard the steamer *Orontes* and is described as "Report of the action on the 19th Nov. '41". At first glance this two page document seems just another copy of the log book and engine room log of the *Kormoran* whose provenance is the 1945 coded copy which Detmers took with him on his escape, but there are significant differences in detail.

Previously the best known German account of the battle was the one found in code on Detmers after his escape from prisoner of war camp. When Detmers was recaptured he was carrying a document in code, which is sometimes described as a diary but in fact was a notebook. In its most complete and earliest form in the Australian Archives, the document consists of a covering letter, two pages of cryptographic worksheets, and 15 pages of the cypher and its corresponding German plain language text

¹ <http://www.navy.gov.au/spc/history/archives/kormoran/kormoran.htm>

(the actual notebook containing the coded account appears no longer to exist).² Page one of the cypher is missing, but there are two manuscript translations upon which a number of subsequent typed versions are based.³ A close reading of these pages and comparison with other accounts reveals that the process of encryption, decryption, translation and typing had lead to errors. In order to make an accurate comparison, the coded version has been freshly decrypted and translated, and allows the authors of this paper to reveal errors which have misled historians for many years.

For example: the first attempt at translating “Segler in Sicht BB voraus Peilung etwa 20 rw” gives “Sailing vessel in sight on port bow bearing about 20 south-west”. However, “rw” is the German abbreviation for “rechtweisend” meaning “true bearing”, thus the correct translation should be “Sailing vessel in sight on port bow bearing about 020 True”.

Similarly the German plain language “Auf V-Mann Weg gegangen” is in some versions not translated or “VMANNWEG” is held to be a corruption (see Table 1 below). In fact “V-Mann” is the German military abbreviation for “Vertrauensmann” meaning an “informant” or a “trusted source”. Examination of other references makes it clear that Detmers was referring obliquely to a message received from the German radio monitoring service known as the B-Dienst.

The Dictionary version	The Coded version captured from Detmers in 1945	The Typed version confiscated in 1947
<p>811 Alterations [to engines] completed. Test run without incident. Proceeding on information received [from B-Dienst].</p> <p>Will by [the] new Moon be off Perth.</p> <p>Information from [PP = d/f ?]⁴ about Cornwall with comvoi [sic] off Cape Lewin [sic] [on] westerly course, therefore turned towards</p>	<p>Trial run without trouble. Proceeded to (VMANNWEG?), as still time left till new moon. Shall then be off Perth.</p> <p>Report of Cornwall with convoy off Cape Leeuwin on westerly course. Thereupon set course north-east.</p>	<p>8.11.41 Alterations [to engines] completed. Test run without incident. Proceeding on information received [from B-Dienst].</p> <p>Will by (the) new Moon be off Perth.</p> <p>Information about Cornwall with convoy off Cape Leuwin [sic] [on] westerly course, therefore turned towards the North East.</p>

² Australian Archives (VIC) B5823/1: Dietmar’s (sic) Diary – Account of Action between *Kormoran* and *Sydney*, Decode and Translations. This is subtitled: Folder of Papers Contained Encrypted, German Plain-Text and Translated English Version of the Deck Log and the Engine Room Log of HSK *Kormoran*.

³ Australian Archives Guide no 3: The Sinking of HMAS *Sydney*, a Guide to Commonwealth Government Records, January 1997. Page 95.

⁴ The meaning of “PP” has not been clarified.

the North East.		
Intention to survey the coast off Sharkec [sic] Bay.	Intention: investigation of coast off Sharks Bay.	Intention to survey the coast off Sharks Bay.

Table 1

Another error concerns the substitution table for numerals, which was used within the coded text. The table given by the Australian decoders in the covering letter to their work dated 20 July 1943 is: A=1, B=2, C=3, D=4, E=5, F=6, H=7, I=8, J=9 and D=0.⁵

There is an obvious mistake here: while using “G” to replace “7” in the decryption, the Australian decoder has both missed out the letter “G” from the table, and overlooked the use of “I” and “J” as one letter. In addition the German coder used A and A indiscriminately for the number “1” and sometimes used the letter “K” instead of “D” for zero. Thus the correct substitution table for numerals is: A or A=1, B=2, C=3, D=4, E=5, F=6, G=7, H=8, I or J=9 and D or K=0. This corrected table alters our understanding of parts of the deck log. In an important entry the deck log says “AGAE Kreuzer laeuft [läuft] stbd [Steuerbord] querab mit abstand IHM” this is translated as “1715 Cruiser cuts across starboard at range of 8 h[undred] m[eters]”.⁶ A better translation and accurate number substitution would be “1715 Cruiser opens out on [to the] starboard beam at range 900 meters”. A comparison of the three versions under discussion makes this clear (See Table 2 below):

The Dictionary version	The Coded version captured from Detmers in 1945	The Typed version confiscated in 1947
[17]15 Enemy opens out on starboard beam at range 900 meters.	1715 Cruiser cuts across starboard at range of 8 him. [i.e. 800 meters]	1715 Cruiser opens out on starboard beam at range 900 meters.

Table 2

There is an additional error in Table 2, because in typing up the German plain language text someone has added a zero, placing this in square brackets. Perhaps the writer was incredulous that the *Sydney* had got so close to the *Kormoran*. However, in the English translation the brackets have been dropped,⁷ so that in its commonest form this passage is held to say that *Sydney* opened out to 8000 meters.⁸ Some theories about what happened in the fight between *Sydney* and *Kormoran* have been based on this misunderstanding.

⁵ Australian Archives (VIC) B5823/1: in the substitution table there are 30 letters: the alphabet is used with the addition of A, B, C, and D.

⁶ The contents of all square brackets in this text are the author’s.

⁷ PRO ADM 1/18899 contains the typed German and English language versions.

⁸ Wesley Olson, *Bitter Victory: the Death of HMAS Sydney* (University of Western Australia Press), Nedlands WA, 1997, is one example.

Between the initial manuscript translation and the printed version such as that in Olson’s book on pages 190 to 193, many errors in the initial decryption and translation have been edited out, but in a notable exception a new error was introduced. In Table 3 (see below) the coded version clearly says “Vorsteven taucht fast voellig [völlig]” i.e. in English “Stem almost entirely submerged”, but in later versions the English has been changed from stem to stern.⁹ The sum of these errors and changes has altered perceptions of what happened and confused some analysts. In addition in Table 3 the numbers are wrong, for the reasons explained above.

The Dictionary version	The Coded version captured from Detmers in 1945	The Typed version confiscated in 1947
About our 8 th to 10 th salvo torpedo hits at front of A turret. 2 nd torpedo just misses the bow.	At about 7th to 9th salvo torpedo fired. Hits on bow turret. Two torpedoes. Passed short of bow. Bow almost entirely submerged. Holding to course 260 because of torpedoes. Pom-poms not manned because [of] A/A MG fire.	About our 8 th to 10 th salvo torpedo hits at front of A turret. 2 nd torpedo just misses the bow

Table 3

Comparing the three accounts, it is clear that they are similar but not the same. As a rule the dictionary account is shorter and contains less detail, whereas sometimes different detail is included in the decrypted version (1945) and the confiscated plain language version (1947). A further comparison of three similar but differing portions of the text of these documents is shown in Table 4 (see below). This includes the translation in the decrypted version of the German “stellt Motor ab also voellig [völlig] ahnungslos” as “Cruiser stops engines, therefore completely unsuspecting”. In the German original there is no subject to this phrase and the translator has added the word “cruiser”: “Kreuzer” does not appear in the decrypted version before translation from German. Again, a number of theories about what happened are based on this mistake, and a comparison with the dictionary account and the confiscated account reveal a different story: it is clear that it is the aircraft whose engine was turned off, not the Cruiser’s.

⁹ See, for example, Olson *ibid* page 192 which repeats the error “Stern almost completely submerged”,

The Dictionary version	The Coded version captured from Detmers in 1945	The Typed version confiscated in 1947
[17]25	1725 Further signal. Hoist your secret call. Further delay can only make situation worse.	1725
Remains completely clueless. [Turns] aircraft engine off.	Cruiser stops engines, therefore completely unsuspecting.	Enemy turns aircraft engine off. [He] is thus completely clueless.
<p>[17]30 Order: off disguise. Time taken 6 sec.</p> <p>Battle flag flies clear at the mainmast.</p> <p>Enemy [drops] astern.</p>	<p>Thereupon at 1730 Identity declared. Removal of disguise. Strike Dutch flag, German colours clearly shown. War flag flies over from main mast. Time taken to reveal identity 6 seconds. Order to stand by with guns and torpedoes. Enemy falls slowly astern</p>	<p>1730 Order: reveal identity</p> <p>Battle flag flies clear at the mainmast. Time taken to reveal identity 6 sec</p> <p>Enemy drops astern</p>

Table 4

When, in November 1943, Detmers wrote a twenty page lecture on the subject of honour he did so on a typewriter which did not have a German typeface and therefore could not use German characters with an umlaut like “ä”. But when another German officer, Bunjes, wrote a twenty-one page account of the cruise of the *Kormoran* in March 1946, he did so on a typewriter with a German typeface. So, as the typed copy confiscated in 1947 was made on a typewriter with a German typeface, it was probably not written before the end of 1943. Thus the confiscated version can be dated to between 1943 and 1947: however, it certainly contains more information than the dictionary (1942) but has not been embellished as much as the coded version (1945), which implies that the confiscated version was written before the coded version which was captured in 1945.

All three accounts are written in the present tense, but the dictionary account alone contains a number of misspellings of English words, see Table 1 column 1, and twice the dictionary account refers to *Kormoran* as *Straat Malaga* or *Malagga* (i.e. with “G” and not “K”). All these mistakes have been corrected in later versions, which suggests that the first writer was not an English speaker or was unfamiliar with the names. Several times too the dictionary account is clearly recording contemporary orders which were given, such as, shortly after 1825: “Alle offs auf die Bruecce (Brücke)” i.e. “All officers to the bridge”. All this indicates that, as the Australian

authorities themselves concluded in 1946 about the coded account, "...this is a copy of the deck log of the German raider *Kormoran* ..." ¹⁰ The clear implication is that the Germans carried the deck log into captivity with them. There are other indications that the engine room log survived the shipwreck of the *Kormoran* and was carried into captivity, so maybe so too did the deck log.

Nevertheless, a comparison of these three accounts, and a synthesis of other new information gathered from German sources, enables a new understanding about the battle between the German raider and the pride of the Australian fleet.

In summary, it now seems that at 1555 *Kormoran*, on a course of 025° speed 11 knots, sighted *Sydney* at a range of nearly 18,000 meters, bearing 020° True and turned to port and into the sun on a course of 260°, easing later to 250°. If Detmers had turned *Kormoran* to starboard, he would have increased the distance and maybe the *Sydney* might not have sighted him. However, *Kormoran*'s No 4 diesel engine broke down, belching a treacherous cloud of black smoke. *Sydney*, if she had not already spotted *Kormoran*, would have done so then, and she turned towards and gave chase. *Sydney*'s track took a dogleg, which brought her astern of *Kormoran* and to starboard of the German's track. By 1635 *Sydney* had closed to 8000 meters and was showing a narrow silhouette to *Kormoran*. Up to this point *Sydney* was able to close quickly by increasing her speed just a few knots, but by approximately 1705 she would have needed to begin to slow in order not to over-run *Kormoran* who was travelling some 6 knots slower. *Sydney* then began to show her profile by turning 10° to 20° to starboard, and took station on a parallel course at a range of between 900 and 1300 meters slightly abaft of *Kormoran*'s beam. There followed a brief fight in which both ships fatally wounded each other. These tactics are illustrated in the attached sketch.

The idea that the Germans were able to take the deck log or engine room log into captivity is not fantasy. Although many documents were confiscated from the *Kormoran*'s survivors during their captivity, the camp discipline was not strict and prisoners were not segregated. Many documents were covertly written in camp, and Detmers kept the existence of the dotted account in his dictionary secret, even from his own officers, throughout his imprisonment and afterwards. ¹¹ Some documents certainly reached Germany with accounts of the battle and of various lifeboat journeys, and were incorporated into the German naval staff battle summary in 1943. ¹² Frame even suggests that Habben, *Kormoran*'s doctor who was repatriated under a wartime prisoner exchange scheme, took the engine room log to Germany in 1943. ¹³ The

¹⁰ Australian Archives (VIC) B5554 page 372 and Australian Archives Guide no 3: The Sinking of HMAS *Sydney*, a Guide to Commonwealth Government Records, January 1997 page 95 "...this is a copy of the deck log of the German raider *Kormoran*..."

¹¹ Personal communication in November 2003 with *Kormoran* survivor Heinz Messerschmidt, who as a *Kapitanleutenant* was Detmers' secretary.

¹² Public Record Office London ADM 1/8899 ff 10-15 Operationen und Taktik Heft 10 Die Fahrt des Hilfskreuzer "Schiff 41" (Operations and Tactics volume 10 The Voyage of the Auxiliary Cruiser Ship 41) i.e. the German naval staff's battle summary of *Kormoran*'s voyage.

¹³ Tom Frame, *HMAS Sydney Loss and Controversy*, (Hodder and Stoughton) Sydney, 1993. Page 103.

Australian authorities suspected as much and asked the British to search the Germans and intercept any reports that they were trying to bring back to Germany.¹⁴

Kormoran's survivors were duly searched when the steamer *Orontes* arrived in Cuxhaven and several documents were confiscated. It is these documents which have now been posted on the Sea Power Centre's website. They were sent to Australia in August 1947 where some were copied and can now be found in the Australian archives, but all were subsequently returned to the Admiralty in London. Some were returned without being copied and have not been evaluated for over half a century. Amongst these accounts are those of Hartmann and Thurow who record navigational data of the action: they are, however, consistent with Detmers' accounts. Indeed, once the errors in transcription and translation have been removed and all the German accounts compared, they are remarkably consistent: conspiracy theorists who have argued otherwise are, quite simply, wrong.

In the course of this investigation other German sources have been studied. All the available evidence points to the so-called northern position, approximately 26° S 111° E, for the battle between *Sydney* and *Kormoran*. This brief article is the authors' summary of what they have determined so far: a book is planned in order to share their findings with a wide readership, and the authors are confident that they now know the position of the battle with sufficient accuracy to mount a search for both ships.

¹⁴ Acting Director of Naval Intelligence (T R Fenner) letter dated 28 January 1947 to Director of Naval Intelligence, London. "...it is understood that survivors [of *Kormoran*] produced a Secret official report regarding the "SYDNEY"/"KORMORAN" action ... [request] efforts be made to intercept any report ... and forward it to me for the information of the Naval War Historian."

