



Commemorating the Crews of HMAS *Sydney (II)* and HSK *Kormoran* at Home and Abroad

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On 19 November 2021, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) paused to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the action fought between the Australian light cruiser HMAS *Sydney (II)* and the German auxiliary cruiser *Kormoran*.

The *Sydney – Kormoran* action holds a special place of significance in the annals of the RAN and many historians view the engagement as being unique due to the disparity of the two vessels concerned and the outcome of the action.

HMAS *Sydney (II)*



HMAS Sydney (II) wearing her second pattern camouflage in October 1941.

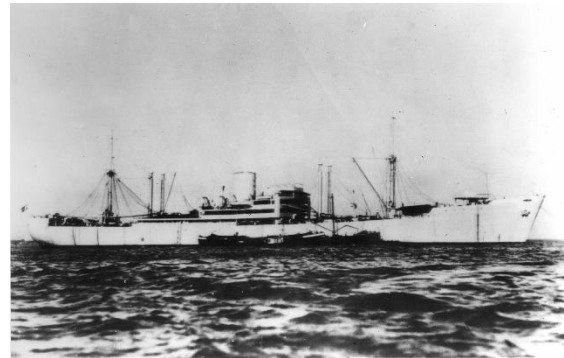
HMAS *Sydney (II)*, a modern and well-armed 6-inch gun light cruiser, was built and commissioned in the mid-1930s, prior to the Second World War.

When hostilities began *Sydney*, under the command of Captain John Collins, RAN, saw service not only in Australian waters but also with the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet. In the years 1940 and 1941, she took part in various naval operations distinguishing herself repeatedly, notably during the Battle of Cape Spada in which she successfully engaged two Italian cruisers crippling one, that was later sunk by attendant destroyers, and damaging another.

Following many narrow escapes in the Mediterranean, *Sydney* received the mantle of a

'lucky ship' by those following her exploits back home in Australia. Following her return to the Australia Station in early 1941, *Sydney* was tasked with patrol and escort duties based in Western Australia.

HSK *Kormoran*



The German raider Kormoran was the largest of Germany's auxiliary cruisers.

Kormoran was originally built as the German freighter *Steiermark*. Following the outbreak of World War II, the Kriegsmarine requisitioned the vessel converting it to a Handelsstörkreuzer (commerce raider). Named *Kormoran*, and placed under the command of Fregattenkapitän Theodor Detmers, she was the largest of these well-armed, disguised auxiliary cruisers. By November 1941 *Kormoran*, had sunk ten unsuspecting merchant ships and taken another as a prize.

Interception

On the afternoon of 19 November 1941 *Kormoran* was disguised as the Dutch merchant ship *Straat Malakka* when *Sydney*, under the command of Captain Joseph Burnett, R.A.N, sighted her during a return voyage to Australia from the Sunda Strait. *Sydney* closed to interrogate the mysterious vessel using visual signals to communicate with her, all the while rescinding her tactical advantage of superior armament and range. Having drawn almost parallel with *Kormoran*, and at somewhat less than a mile from her, a final challenge was issued for the ship to respond with *Straat Malakka's* secret call sign. Not knowing the correct response, Detmers ordered his crew to hoist the German naval ensign, de-camouflage and engage.



Engagement

The ensuing battle was fought at close range with *Kormoran* opening fire with guns and torpedoes. *Sydney* sustained critical hits early in the action but was to respond, inflicting serious damage on the raider. The action lasted just under an hour and *Sydney* was last seen by the crew of *Kormoran*, ablaze and disappearing into the night, steering in a south-easterly direction.

By that time *Kormoran* was in a state of extremis and Detmers was left with little option other than to abandon ship and set scuttling charges to speed her on its way. None of *Sydney*'s crew were to survive the encounter but more than 300 German sailors survived to become prisoners of war in Australia.

Commemoration

The crews of both ships are today commemorated in both Australia and Germany.

In Australia's capital, Canberra, the names of the 645 men lost in HMAS *Sydney* (II) are recorded on the Roll of Honour at the internationally acclaimed Australian War Memorial. There too, may be found the largest item recovered from *Sydney* during search operations following her sinking, a shrapnel splintered Carley life raft.



The commemorative area at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra where the names of Australia's fallen service personnel are recorded on panels in the cloisters.

On the other side of Australia, at Geraldton, Western Australia, can be found the official HMAS *Sydney* (II) memorial. This stunning memorial overlooks the Indian Ocean where the battle took place, recording the names of all those lost in the

cruiser. Further north at Denham, Western Australia is another striking memorial situated 112 nautical miles east of where the wrecks of both ships were discovered in March 2008. Carnarvon is also home to a memorial cairn and commemorative sea wall, while at Quobba Station a memorial to *Sydney* and *Kormoran* also records where members of *Kormoran*'s crew came ashore days after the action.



The HMAS Sydney (II) memorial situated at Geraldton, Western Australia

Each memorial reinforces the close bonds that the crew of *Sydney* (II) formed with the citizens of Western Australia. Elsewhere throughout Australia in the towns and communities from which *Sydney* men answered the call of duty can be found myriad other tributes on cenotaphs and in memorial halls.

Murchison, Tatura and Dhurringile Mansion

Murchison, Tatura and Dhurringile Mansion are not names one immediately associates with the *Sydney-Kormoran* engagement but each are important parts of the historical narrative.

The German War Cemetery Australia

The first of those memorials can be found outside the small town of Tatura, around 180 km north of Melbourne, Victoria. On the outskirts of this little town is the only German war cemetery situated in Australia. It was built in the 1950s by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to serve as a central cemetery for Germans who died around Australia during the First and Second World Wars. Overall, 251 graves can be found in the graveyard, and today it is cared for by the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge.



One of the neatly kept graves is that of Obergefreiter Erich Gustav Heinrich Meyer. Along with his rank and name, his death date and age are engraved into the metal plate on the gravestone although there is nothing indicating that he was a member of *Kormoran's* crew.

Meyer was born on 20 June 1919 in Cuxhaven, Germany and was one of the more than 300 men of *Kormoran* who managed to escape the crippled raider and who was later picked up from a lifeboat at sea on 27 November 1941. He was initially interned in a hospital at Fremantle, and Fregattenkapitän Detmers later recorded that Meyer was already ill prior to the battle taking place. According to a report on prisoners of war, Meyer had served in the Kriegsmarine for two years before becoming a captive. Prior to that he was a member of a labour battalion, presumably a member of the Reich Labour Service. Following health checks and interrogations, *Kormoran's* crew was transferred to Tatura, but Meyer was to remain in a Perth hospital where he died on 24 March 1942. *Sydney-Kormoran* Author Barbara Winter attributes Meyer's death to lung cancer, but there is no information in P.O.W. records or Detmer's account to confirm that.



Gravestone of Obergefreiter Erich Gustav Heinrich Meyer, the only member of Kormoran's crew to die in Australia. (Tim Döbler, 2015).

Prisoner of War Camp 13C

Not far from Tatura *Kormoran's* crew was interned in Murchison Camp 13, a camp especially constructed for German military personnel. Initially, the entire crew was encamped there until the officers were separated from the men and transferred to another not far away at Dhurringile Mansion.



Dhurringile Mansion c.1944.

The two camps were home to the German sailors until 1947 at which time they were returned to Germany.

During their captivity, selected P.O.Ws were granted permission to work outside the camp on nearby farms while those within the camp undertook other activities. Among those was the erection of a stone cenotaph commemorating fallen comrades. There is no information on where the *Kormoran* crew got the bricks and stones to build the memorial, but considering how it is masoned, it is likely they found the material in and around the campsite.

In the middle of the monument is a plain white recessed square with the following inscription in German: "Unseren gefallenen Kameraden." (Our Fallen Comrades). Pictures taken during the war reveal that the top of the original memorial featured a 1939 pattern Iron Cross.

Barbara Winter elaborates that "[in] the new camp, 13C, the seamen erected their own monument, a somewhat larger cairn than the one in 13D, surmounted by an Iron Cross." A picture taken

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during the war, which today is part of the Victorian Collections, supports her statement as it shows a self-standing Iron Cross on top of the stone.

By the time the construction of the monument was finalised, the *Kormoran* officers had been separated from the men, but as Winter's account reveals, they, and the commandant of Camp 13C Major A.W. Smith, M.C. took great interest in it.



Kormoran officers pose in front of the original memorial cairn constructed by *Kormoran*'s crew at Murchison.

"At the dedication service on 15 March [1942] there were wreaths from the officers in Dhurrigle and from internees at Tatura, as well as a wreath from 13 C. The camp Commandant's attendance at the dedication service, at which he made a short speech, proved an early demonstration of joint commemoration that continues to this day.

Kormoran's crew were not the only Germans to build commemorative cairns in the P.O.W Camp, but the *Kormoran* cenotaph is the only one remaining. After the end of the war and the closure of the camp, the buildings were deconstructed. The land was later sold, and today it is private property. The only remaining evidence of the camp's existence is a decrepit cellblock, a watch bunker and the *Kormoran* memorial stone which has been kept in good condition albeit without the adornment of the original 1939 Iron Cross. In its place is a plain Iron Cross devoid of embellishments.

On 3 August 2017 the Heritage Council Victoria determined that the Tatura World War II

Internment and P.O.W. Camps Collection was of cultural heritage significance to the State of Victoria. It has also been recommended that the Murchison Prisoner of War Camp be included as a Registered Archaeological Place in the Victorian Heritage Register, which includes the *Kormoran* Memorial.



The Kormoran memorial cairn as it appears today. (Tim Döbler)

Laboe Naval Memorial

The third place of German commemoration dedicated to the crews of HMAS *Sydney* II and the raider *Kormoran* is located at Laboe, a small town near the City of Kiel in Northern Germany. There, on the Baltic coast, is the Laboe Naval Memorial. It is attended by the German Naval Association, which was founded in 1891.

The memorial was built in the late 1920s, but due to the economic crisis was not finished until 1936. In the decades following the Second World War, the German Naval Association transformed the memorial from a place of remembrance solely dedicated to fallen German Naval personnel to a site devoted to all those who lost their lives at sea.

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Today, people from differing nations visit it, and large wreath-laying ceremonies usually take place during Kiel Week, with delegations from visiting ships participating in proceedings. The German Navy itself annually conducts a large wreath-laying ceremony in November on the German “People’s Day of Mourning”.

On 12 November 2010, the “People’s Day of Mourning,” a memorial stone commemorating the battle between *Sydney* and *Kormoran* was inaugurated by the former Australian Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, Peter Tesch.

The stone was placed at the foot of the Naval Memorial at Laboe and is one of the first things visitors see on their way to the tower or the hall of remembrance. On the stone are two bronze plaques donated by Australia’s Finding *Sydney* Foundation, one is in English and the other in German, commemorating the crews of the two ships.



The HMAS Sydney and HSK Kormoran memorial stone at the foot of the Laboe Naval Memorial. (John Perryman 2013).

This very special memorial stone has, since 2010, become a place of mutual remembrance and respect. In 2016, for example, Captain Warren Bairstow, RAN, then in his role as Naval Adviser – London, and Rear Admiral (German Navy) Jan

Christian Kaack, then commander of the First Flotilla in Kiel, commemorated the battle between *Sydney* and the *Kormoran* together with descendants of the *Kormoran* crew.



The Laboe Naval Memorial, commemorates the service of all who lost their lives at sea.

Conclusion

All of the sites of commemoration have each taken on special significance for relatives of those who fought in the battle between *Sydney* and *Kormoran* and although some are unknown to many, they each share a mutual theme of remembrance and respect and they are today an affirmation of an enduring Australian-German friendship.