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*The First Fateful Shot:  
Port Phillip Bay, August 1914*

One Day Conference  
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Queenscliff, Victoria

# THE FIRST FATEFUL SHOT: PORT PHILLIP BAY, AUGUST 1914



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## Emden beached and done for.

### Dr David Stevens

During August-September 1914, while the bulk of the Royal Australian Navy's strength was engaged in the occupation of the German colonial territories of Samoa and New Guinea, discussions had been underway concerning the transport to Europe of the first 30,000 men of the Australian and New Zealand expeditionary forces.<sup>1</sup> The greatest threat to their safe passage was posed by the German East Asian cruiser squadron commanded by Vice Admiral Maximilian von Spee, which was cruising somewhere in the Pacific, and the light cruisers *Emden* and *Königsberg*, operating in the Indian Ocean. The British Admiralty made it clear that for reasons of safety and efficiency it would countenance neither independent sailings of troopships nor the sailing of several small convoys.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, by mid-September, arrangements were in place for the New Zealand transports to sail from Wellington via the Southern Ocean to Western Australia so as to arrive by 7 October. Initial escort would be provided by the three small cruisers of the Royal Navy's New Zealand squadron, *Psyche*, *Philomel*, and *Pyramus*, despite dominion anxiety that their capabilities were insufficient to deal with a German attack. Waiting for them at King George Sound at Albany would be the assembled Australian transports, after which the combined convoy would be escorted across the Indian Ocean by the three most modern ships of the RAN, the battlecruiser *Australia*, and the light cruisers *Sydney* and *Melbourne*.<sup>3</sup>

These arrangements were thrown into disarray by the unexpected appearance of the two most powerful of von Spee's ships, the armoured cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, off Apia in Samoa on 14 September, the successful campaign against British trade in the Bay of Bengal begun by the light cruiser *Emden* in the same week, and the appearance of *Königsberg* off Zanzibar on 20 September. Thereafter the Admiralty directed that *Australia* and *Sydney* remain in the Pacific, while the British armoured cruiser *Minotaur*, commanded by Captain Edward Kiddle, and the Japanese *Ibuki* would detach from the China Station and join with *Melbourne* at Fremantle. Since the Admiralty assessed that von Spee would be far more likely to attack the ongoing New Guinea expedition than steam south into waters where he could not get coal, these new dispositions did nothing to enhance the escort from New Zealand. This was a severe political miscalculation, for the apparent freedom of movement displayed by the German warships did nothing but increase dominion fears as to the safety of their transports.

Against its better judgment, on 23 September the Admiralty directed *Ibuki* and *Minotaur* to bypass Fremantle and steam south around Australia to New Zealand, the authorities accepting that this must impose a three-week delay in the departure of the first Australasian contingents.<sup>4</sup> The two cruisers duly arrived at Wellington on 13 October, and sailed three days later with the ten transports of the New Zealand convoy as well as *Psyche* and *Philomel*. *Pyramus* joined them in Hobart on 21 October. With the New Zealand convoy underway, the RAN's administrative authority, the Commonwealth Naval Board, ordered the Australian

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<sup>1</sup> Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 18 Aug 1914, The National Archives (TNA): ADM137/7/5-6.

<sup>2</sup> OU5470, *The First Australasian Convoy 1914*, Naval Staff Monograph No. 14, Jan 1921, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Governor New Zealand to Colonial Office, 13 Sep 1914, and Australian Commonwealth Naval Board (ACNB) to Admiralty, 14 Sep 1914, TNA: ADM/137/1.

<sup>4</sup> Admiralty to Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) China, 23 Sep 1914, TNA: ADM/137/7/13-14.

transports to concentrate at King George Sound by 28 October, *Melbourne* covering their movements around the Australian eastern and southern coasts. It remained only to enhance the Indian Ocean escort. To this end, the Admiralty requested that the old Australian cruiser *Pioneer* accompany the convoy from Fremantle and ordered *Sydney* to detach from the remainder of the RAN fleet. The fleet by this time had moved to Suva to block von Spee returning east, after the latter had appeared off Tahiti.<sup>5</sup> *Sydney*, commanded by Captain John Glossop, reached Albany on 31 October, the day before the convoy sailed.<sup>6</sup>

*Emden*, under the command of *Fregattenkapitän* von Müller, had detached from the East Asian Squadron on 14 August. Von Spee could hardly have placed his trust in a more capable commander, even a British assessment describing von Müller as ‘combining dash with prudence’ and ‘eminently capable of playing a lone hand’.<sup>7</sup> He began *his* raiding career by capturing the British steamship *Indus* on 10 September, and within six weeks had accounted for 82,398 tons of Allied shipping, worth more than £2 million.<sup>8</sup> The first shock of *Emden*’s appearance resulted in the paralysis of all shipping movements east of Colombo in the northern Indian Ocean. Further confounding the Allies, von Müller bombarded and destroyed British oil tanks at Madras, and sank the Russian cruiser *Zhemchug* and French destroyer *Mosquet* during an audacious early morning raid on Penang.

By late October more than a dozen Allied warships were looking for *Emden*, so von Müller chose as his next target the British cable and wireless station at Direction Island in the remote Cocos (Keeling) Islands. An attack here, he expected, would not only disrupt communications between Australia and England but also create the impression that he was heading for the trade routes south and west of Australia, thereby achieving both the more general disturbance of shipping and potentially the removal of at least some of the patrols in his next planned hunting grounds in the Arabian Sea.<sup>9</sup> *Emden*, accompanied by the captured collier *Buresk*, proceeded via the Sunda Strait, where she spent 4-5 November in an unsuccessful wait for Allied shipping.

The Australasian convoy, Convoy 1, began its departure from King George Sound early on 1 November, heading initially for Colombo, and then on to Aden. Nothing on this scale had ever previously left Australian shores, the ships filing out for two and a half hours. Once in formation, the twenty-six Australian transports steamed in three columns, with the ten New Zealand transports following in two columns of their own. *Southern*, the formation’s slowest ship, set the pace; even with heavy stoking she could barely average 10 knots. Two days after sailing, *Ibuki*, *Pioneer* (temporarily) and another two transports joined from Fremantle. The formation now carried almost 30 000 men and 8000 horses, covering an ocean area of between 140 and 180 square miles across a front of 12 miles. In command of the escort, Captain Kiddle placed his own ship, *Minotaur*, 5 nautical miles ahead of the convoy and *Melbourne* a similar distance astern, with *Sydney* and *Ibuki* placed respectively on the port and starboard wings at 4 miles.

At daybreak on 8 November, Kiddle ordered the convoy to stop engines for an hour and dropped astern with *Minotaur* so that *Melbourne*’s Captain Mortimer Silver, his next senior

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<sup>5</sup> Admiralty to Vice Admiral Commanding the Australian Fleet (VACAF), 14 Oct 1914, TNA: ADM/137/2.

<sup>6</sup> OU5470, *The First Australasian Convoy 1914*, Naval Staff Monograph No. 14, Jan 1921, pp. 16–19.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Fayle, *Seaborne Trade*, John Murray, London, 1920, p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> OU5472, *The China Squadron 1914*, Naval Staff Monograph No. 16, August 1921, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Erich Raeder, *Der Krieg zur See, 1914–1918, Der Kreuzerkrieg in den ausländischen Gewässern*, Vol. 2, Mitler, 1923, pp. 62–63.

officer, could come aboard.<sup>10</sup> News had just arrived of von Spee's dramatic appearance off the coast of Chile, where he had destroyed a British squadron at the Battle of Coronel. In response, the Admiralty had ordered *Minotaur* to the Cape of Good Hope, there to cover any German movement from the Atlantic against South West Africa or into the Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup> After providing a briefing on intelligence matters, Kiddle turned the convoy over to Silver, then parted company.<sup>12</sup> *Melbourne* took up *Minotaur*'s previous station.

*Emden* and *Buresk* had meanwhile rendezvoused 30 miles north of the Cocos Islands. For 18 hours von Müller listened to the message traffic between Cocos and *Minotaur*, postponing his attack by a day, but correctly interpreting that the warship was moving further away. Unfortunately for von Müller, the convoy sailed under enforced wireless silence, and the absence of any other ship-to-ship message traffic misled him into thinking that Kiddle must be operating independently. Indeed, the German remained entirely unsuspecting of the convoy's presence only 50 miles away, holding to the belief that any such troop movement would proceed directly to Aden, thereby passing at least 500 miles from Cocos.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, von Müller remained naturally cautious and, to avoid risking *Buresk*, ordered her to remain at the rendezvous and follow only when called. During the night of 8–9 November he made his approach to Direction Island and *Emden* anchored just after sunrise, once her lookouts had reported the horizon clear and that a sailing schooner, *Ayesha*, was the sole occupant of the harbour. Von Müller estimated that his men would need at least two hours to complete the wireless station's destruction and cut the cables, so he landed immediately an armed party of 43 men under his first officer, *Kapitanleutnant* Hellmuth von Mücke. Then, since the conditions for coaling appeared favourable, he ordered *Buresk* to rejoin.

The staff at Direction Island had full instructions on the procedure to be adopted in the event of a warship's unexpected appearance. Despite *Emden*'s attempts to jam the transmission, the station managed to send out both a general wireless warning that a strange ship was at the harbour entrance and a cable message describing a three-funnelled warship landing men in boats.<sup>14</sup> *Melbourne* received the call from Cocos at 6.25am on 9 November, and attempted to establish contact.<sup>15</sup> *Emden* intercepted *Melbourne*'s reply, but the German operators estimated the enemy ship to be 200–250 miles distant. Von Müller cancelled his coaling plans and instructed von Mücke to hurry, still believing that sufficient time remained.

Recognising his own responsibility to remain with the transports, Captain Silver ordered *Sydney* to raise steam for full speed and investigate the station's report, returning to the convoy if the enemy had disappeared.<sup>16</sup> Captain Glossop knew there remained time to send his men to breakfast at 8.00am. Prayers followed at 9.00am, and 15 minutes later his lookouts sighted land, and shortly afterwards funnel smoke. Glossop sounded general quarters and cleared his ship for action.

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<sup>10</sup> *Melbourne* to C-in-C East Indies, 14 Nov 1914, TNA: ADM/137/2.

<sup>11</sup> Admiralty to *Minotaur*, 6 Nov 1914, TNA: ADM/137/2.

<sup>12</sup> *Minotaur*, Report of Proceedings, 19 Nov 1914, TNA: ADM/137/370.

<sup>13</sup> Raeder, *Der Krieg zur See, 1914–1918, Der Kreuzerkrieg in den ausländischen Gewässern*, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> ACNB to Admiralty, 9 Nov 1914, TNA: ADM/137/2.

<sup>15</sup> *Melbourne* to C-in-C East Indies, 14 Nov 1914, TNA: ADM/137/2.

<sup>16</sup> Comments by Director of Operations Division, 12 Dec 1914, TNA: ADM/137/2; and *Melbourne* to VACAF, 3 May 1915, NAA(VIC): MP1049/1, 1918/0184.

Aboard *Emden*, the sighting of *Sydney*'s smoke did not immediately elicit alarm, as von Müller expected *Buresk* at a similar time. However, the appearance of two tall masts and four funnels on the horizon soon made it clear that he faced a warship. Ordering steam for all boilers, von Müller likewise ordered his crew to action and repeatedly sounded the siren in a forlorn bid to recall the landing party. Deciding that he could not wait, von Müller got his ship underway and, despite the marine growth fouling her hull, *Emden* soon got up to 20 knots. The German cruiser certainly came out much quicker than Glossop had expected, and the action began almost before *Sydney* was ready. *Emden* opened fire at 9.40am at 10,500 yards. Her first salvo straddled, some shells falling within 20 yards.<sup>17</sup> With her second salvo, the shells began to hit.

*Sydney* immediately returned *Emden*'s fire, but her shooting at first failed to match the German's for rate of fire and accuracy. Neither captain yet knew for certain their opponent's identity, but von Müller recognised that his adversary was more modern, faster and powerful than his own. Hence the German knew that his best tactic was to score early hits, slow his opponent down and thereby close within torpedo range. These tactics initially seemed successful, *Emden*'s third salvo achieving hits on both *Sydney*'s fore and aft control positions. In all, fifteen of *the German* shells struck home, but fortunately for the Australian cruiser only half exploded and none caused critical harm.<sup>18</sup>

Glossop had no intention of throwing away his superiority, and thereafter kept his distance, manoeuvring as needed to control the action.<sup>19</sup> Ten minutes into the engagement, *Sydney* got the range and her first hit smashed *Emden*'s wireless office, killing everyone inside. Thereafter, 'showers of shells poured down' upon the German upper deck crews.<sup>20</sup> Only two of *Emden*'s gunners escaped death or severe injury and, with no reserves to call upon, officers, medical staff, supply parties and cooks were soon manning *Emden*'s armament.

Below decks, the German engineers were marginally safer from shrapnel, but had little else to be thankful for. Fifteen minutes into the action, a hit wrecked the ventilating motor for the starboard engine room, then, just after 10.00am, another knocked over the forward funnel. Internal temperatures climbed above 66°C, and the machinery spaces filled with smoke, shell fumes and steam. The concussion of exploding shells had meanwhile burst most of the electric light bulbs and extinguished the candles used for emergency lighting, leaving the engineers to toil in semi-darkness. *Emden*'s steering gear had also failed, and thereafter von Müller could steer only by main engines, slowing his speed considerably.

The German fire grew increasingly intermittent and wild. By 11.00am only one of *Emden*'s guns remained in action and this soon fell silent due to a lack of shells and powder. The relative movement of the two ships had seen them progress some 14 miles to the northwest and, incapable of further action, von Müller made for nearby North Keeling Island. At 11.20am *Emden* ran up on the sloping coral bottom, her bow about 200 yards from the shore. A fire in her after section blazed out of control and, upon reaching the upper deck, the torpedo officer found a 'terrible picture of wreckage': 'Everything was lying tossed together; what was destructible destroyed, two funnels completely demolished, and the foremast thrown over by a full hit lying across the railing with its point in the water ... Everywhere lay

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<sup>17</sup> Lieutenant Denis Rahilly to family, 14 Nov 1914, SPC-A: Rahilly Papers.

<sup>18</sup> *Sydney* statement, 17 Apr 1917, Australian War Memorial (AWM): 1DRL/0663.

<sup>19</sup> Telegraphist Clifford, diary, 9 Nov 1914, AWM: PR03158.

<sup>20</sup> 'Emden Third Officer's Diary', SPC-A: *Sydney* (I) file.

the wounded and dead, and the groaning and cries of the former caught at one's heart, and filled one with the bitterest regret, for first-aid materials were lacking...'.<sup>21</sup>

Glossop fired two more broadsides, then turned away to pursue *Buresk*, which had come up during the action.<sup>22</sup> In all, *Sydney* had fired 670 rounds and one torpedo, and lost three men killed and twelve wounded, one mortally.<sup>23</sup> Overtaking the German collier shortly after noon. Glossop ordered her to stop and sent over an armed boat, but her crew had already begun scuttling procedures. Taking *Buresk*'s men on board, Glossop returned to *Emden*, on the way passing two Germans who had been blown overboard and leaving them a boat. *Buresk*'s men confirmed *Emden*'s identity, and by 4.00pm *Sydney* had returned to the helpless raider. Having expected immediate aid for their wounded, the surviving Germans thought *Sydney*'s disappearance 'an unworthy act of a victor',<sup>24</sup> but even now their ordeal was far from over, for on arrival Glossop found the German naval ensign still flying.

This should not have been wholly surprising. On his accession Kaiser Wilhelm II had issued clear instructions that, 'even if they meet with misfortune, my ships will go to the bottom with honour rather than lower the flag'.<sup>25</sup> But although von Müller considered *Emden* helpless, Glossop had no way to determine either the state of her weapons or her intentions. He ordered hoisted the signal flags for 'Do you surrender?', and *Emden* replied by Morse flag in English, 'No signal books'. With the range down to around 4000 yards, *Sydney* made several more attempts to signal, but received no answer. Unwilling to take more risks, and informed by *Buresk*'s officers that von Müller would never surrender, at 4.30pm Glossop fired two more salvos.<sup>26</sup> The shells struck the forecastle where the Germans had temporarily put their wounded, and killed another fifteen or twenty men. Others jumped overboard only to be smashed on the reef and drowned.

Von Müller claimed that *Sydney*'s last signals were either not seen or not understood, but her renewal of the engagement made the message plain. He sent his steward aloft to haul down the imperial ensign, and *Emden*'s survivors waved any white material they could find. Obligated first to check on the situation at the British wireless station, Glossop sent in a boat with the men taken from *Buresk* to advise von Müller that he could do nothing further, but would render every assistance possible the next day. Unwilling to risk a landing in darkness, *Sydney* lay off Direction Island and only in the morning discovered that von Mücke had seized and provisioned *Ayesha*, then fled. After a series of adventures afloat and ashore, the German officer and his men eventually reached home.

Borrowing the station's medical staff, *Sydney* returned to *Emden* for a second time at 1.00pm on 10 November. In the engagement and aftermath *Emden* had suffered at least 134 men killed, but Glossop now faced the prospect of embarking the survivors of whom most were wounded. He sent an officer to *Emden* to negotiate and obtain from von Müller an agreement that, in return for embarking the Germans, none would interfere with *Sydney*'s fittings.<sup>27</sup> The operation proved an extreme test of seamanship, and some twenty Germans had to be

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<sup>21</sup> *Emden* Torpedo Officer's account, c. 1914.

<sup>22</sup> *Sydney* to Melbourne, 9 Nov 1914, AWM: 3DRL/2789.

<sup>23</sup> ACNB to Admiralty, 16 Nov 1914, TNA: ADM/1/802/412.

<sup>24</sup> 'Emden Third Officer's Diary'.

<sup>25</sup> 'Duties of Commanding Officers Abroad', 17 Aug 1885, in Raeder, *Der Krieg zur See, 1914–1918, Der Kreuzerkrieg in den ausländischen Gewässern*, Vol. 1, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> C.J. Pope, 'Description of the Action between HMAS *Sydney* and SMS *Emden*', *RANC Magazine*, July 1915, pp. 7–9.

<sup>27</sup> Lieutenant Rupert Garsia to his father, c. Nov 1914, AWM: 3DRL/1760.

recovered from the other side of the island. Not until the following day was *Sydney* ready to resume her passage to Colombo, where the wounded from both sides would eventually receive full medical treatment.

The engagement captured the public's imagination. Popular songs with titles such as 'Our Gallant Ship the *Sydney*', flooded the Australian market, and both sides milked the engagement for propaganda purposes. The Kaiser advised the Emden City Council that his cruiser had 'won laurels for Germany's war flag even in her defeat', and added that he would build a new and stronger *Emden* with an Iron Cross mounted on her bow.<sup>28</sup> He also awarded every *Emden* officer the Iron Cross First Class and fifty ratings received the Iron Cross Second Class. As a more general mark of honour, he permitted every surviving member of the cruiser's crew to add the suffix 'Emden' to their surname. The awards were less free flowing on the Australian side. Glossop became a Companion of the Order of the Bath, the Engineering Officer received early promotion, six ratings received a Distinguished Service Medal and another eight received recommendations for advancement.<sup>29</sup>

More importantly, however, the engagement had immediate and important ramifications for the safe passage of Allied shipping, in addition to silencing those who had dubbed the Australian fleet a 'pannikin navy', and refused to take it seriously.<sup>30</sup> Speaking at *Brisbane*'s launch ten months later, Prime Minister Fisher summed up the new conviction:

It was a dream but five years ago. It is a stern reality today. No living soul in Australia or elsewhere ever thought that one of the ships produced during the interval would be of infinite value, not only to Australian trade and commerce, but to the trade and commerce of the whole Pacific and Indian Oceans—the exploit of the 'Sydney'—(loud cheers)—brought into existence the name of Australia as a minor Sea Power as no other event in the world could have done.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Horn (ed.), *The Private War of Seaman Stumpf*, Leslie Frewin, London, 1969, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Sydney* to Admiralty Secretary, 28 Jan 1915, AWM: AWM36, 14/1–6; and *London Gazette*, 1 Jan and 15 April 1915.

<sup>30</sup> A.B. (Banjo) Patterson, *Song of the Pen: Complete Works, 1901–1914*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1983, p. 646.

<sup>31</sup> *Official Report of Speeches at the Launching of the Cruiser 'Brisbane'*, 30 Sep 1915, p. 3.