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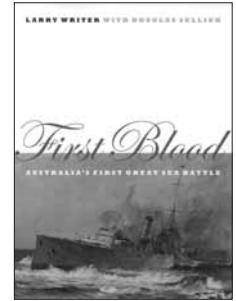


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First blood: Australia's first great sea battle

by Larry Writer with Douglas Sellick

Media 21 Publishing Pty Ltd: Double Bay, New South Wales, 2009, ISBN 9781876624057, 296 pp., RRP \$27 (paperback), Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 718 WRIT 2009



This is the latest book on the stunning Australian naval victory by the new light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* and the elusive German commerce raider SMS *Emden* in the Indian Ocean early in the first year of World War 1. While the story is well known and worthy of a fresh approach, this book fails to satisfy any serious nautical reader, despite being well-researched. It could be termed “gush and guff” in naval terms. It was a difficult book to review, being over-hyped, condescending and disparaging of both sides, and full of senseless journalese.

The authors chronicle the previous naval careers of both commanding officers and some of their principal officers. Both leaders were in their first major commands at sea and both determined to excel amongst their peers and both had had previous active service experience prior to the outbreak of the Great War. Neither rose to greater fame (although Captain Glossop RN was later promoted to flag rank), and both left the naval service shortly after the end of the War. Neither was married until after the war, when they retired to blissful family life. Thus they were similar in many respects.

As warships, the *Sydney* and *Emden* were decidedly mismatched, and when they engaged each other in almost mutual surprise, both ships' tenacity led to a fight to the finish, with *Emden* progressively suffering greater damage until Kapitän von Mueller resolved to drive his ship aground on a reef at the Cocos North Keeling Island. Here he intended to evacuate his wounded and destroy his ship to prevent capture. Alas it was not an easy proposition, even though *Sydney* ceased firing and left the scene to urgently intercept *Emden's* collier, the *Buresk*, which had previously been sighted in the vicinity.

In the event, *Sydney* was robbed of her prize as the merchant ship scuttled herself on being overtaken, so Captain Glossop impatiently rescued her hapless crew, before being able to return to deal with the wreck of the *Emden*. With signalling on *Emden* reduced to indiscernible flag-wagging Morse, her signal code books destroyed and battle ensign still flying, *Sydney* was forced to open fire

once more to ensure her surrender and the German flag to be struck. On conclusion of hostilities, seafarer's humanity to recover the wounded and distressed prevailed, but it was inevitably a painfully slow process.

The miraculous escape of *Emden's* landing party, which had wrecked the Cocos Island cable and wireless station before *Sydney's* timely appearance, is a legend in its own right and deserves mention. Their six-month enduring hardship and epic return to Turkish Istanbul, led by the redoubtable First Officer von Mücke, is recounted in a short chapter.

With the story retold, the reader is reminded of the gracious foreword by the Director of the National Maritime Museum (which houses some relevant artefacts) but is then confronted with the authors' unrealistic hyperbole – quite in contrast with actual written quotes from the period, which are relatively restrained, despite the general euphoria the naval victory engendered.

The constant referral to warship captains as “skippers” is particularly grating, while the authors' unfamiliarity with naval terminology is frustrating and often mistakenly used, then peppered with obscure slang and journalese. To observe a foreword acknowledgement that the script had been endorsed by the Naval Historical Society remains a disservice to both parties.

There is a good selection of photographs mid-section, but the book is padded with bibliography after every chapter, although the footnotes are helpful, and finally there is no index – which makes referencing impossible. Sadly, the technical glossary at the end is another clue to non-professional compilation, with many senseless explanations. In summary, a good subject poorly executed, and not a book to be recommended to serious students – previous books were far better presented.

(Incidentally, *Emden's* name board was returned to Germany in a generous and much appreciated gesture in 1927, and can now be seen on display in the Bremerhaven Maritime Museum).

Richard Francis