

APPENDIX No. 17.

AN OFFICER'S ACCOUNT OF THE SYDNEY-EMDEN ACTION.

The following account was printed in *The Times* of 15 December, 1914:—

"An officer on board H.M.A.S. *Sydney*, in a letter to his father, writes.—

'I will now give you some account of our action with the *Emden* on November 9 and some subsequent happenings on November 10 and 11.

'On November 9 we were steaming about 50 miles to the eastward of the Cocos Islands (south-west of Java), heading for Colombo, when at 7 a.m. we took in a very interrupted wireless message from the Cocos wireless station—"Strange ship . . . off entrance." The *Melbourne*, as senior officer, ordered us to raise steam for full speed and go and investigate.

'I was in my bath when Bell-Salter¹ came in with news that the enemy was within 40 miles of us. I, of course, took it for a "leg haul," but he soon convinced me, and the noise made by the propellers going at rapidly increasing speed soon left us in a state of great elation. It was, as far as I was concerned, quite sincere, though I had a half-formed thought at the back of my mind, wondering whether I might be knocked out. I am a little interested as to what other fellows were feeling, but it is a question I have never heard answered satisfactorily. Anyone I have heard speaking on the subject says, "O-o-oh yes, of course I was in an awful funk!" This usually from a most stolid and unimaginative-looking man. At any rate, although I had been a little livery the two previous days, I happened to feel as fit as a lark that morning, and at 7.30 a.m. sent for the barber and had my hair cut, to the accompaniment of no end of badinage from the surrounding cabins, which they got back in kind and with interest.

'At 9.15 a.m. the tops of the coconut trees of Keeling Islands were sighted. At 9.20 we sighted the *Emden*, or rather the tops of her funnels, 12 or 15 miles away. At 9.40 a.m. she opened fire at a very big range, and shortly after that we started in on her.

'Throughout the action I was almost constantly engaged running backwards and forwards between the ammunition hoist and the forecastle gun or between the hoist and No. 1 starboard or No. 1 port.

'The hottest part of the action for us was the first half-hour. We opened fire from our port guns to begin with. I was standing just behind No. 1 port, and the gunlayer (Atkins,² 1st Class Petty Officer) said, "Shall I load, sir?" I was surprised, but deadly keen there should be no "flap,"³ so said, "No, don't load till you get the order." Next he said, "*Emden's* fired, sir." So I said, "All right, load, but don't bring the gun to the ready." I found out afterwards that the

¹ Commr B O Bell-Salter R.N.; b Wyke Regis, Dorset, Eng., 28 March, 1888

² CPO B J Atkins (No 8214, R.N.); b Battersea, London, Eng., 1 Aug., 1878

³ i.e., that there should be no undue excitement.

order to load had been received by the other guns ten minutes before, and my anti-"flap" precautions, though they did not the slightest harm, were thrown away on Atkins, who was as cool as a cucumber throughout the action.

'Later I heard a crash and looking aft saw that a shell had hit near gun No. 2 starboard. But owing to the screen being in the way, I did not know it had knocked out practically the whole of that gun's crew. Not seeing any flame or smoke rising (we cope with the smallest fire immediately) I went on with my job. This required continual attention. The men are splendid at loading drill, but to practise supply of ammunition is almost impossible in peace time. To have a big supply stacked on the upper deck is far too dangerous a proceeding in action, and what with getting an even distribution of projectiles and cartridges between the two guns, getting the safety caps off, with fiddly pins and things to take out, attending to missfires, cheering up the one or two who seemed to be "pulling dry," you can imagine I had little time to be thinking much about the *Emden*. I noticed once or twice when going forward the starboard side to the fore-castle gun that we seemed to be in the thick of it. There was a lot of "Wheee-oo, Wheee-oo, Wheee-oo," and the "But-but-but" of the shell striking the water beyond, and as the range was pretty big, this is quite possible since the angle of descent would be pretty steep.

'Coming aft, I heard a shot graze the top of the shield of No. 1 starboard. A petty officer now came up limping from aft, and said that he had just carried an officer below (he was not dangerously hit), and that the after-control position had been knocked right out and every one wounded (they were marvellously lucky). I told him if he was really able to carry on to go aft to No. 2 starboard and see there was no fire, and if there was that any charges about were to be thrown overboard at once. He was very game and limped away aft. He got aft to find a very bad cordite fire just starting. He with others got this put out. I later noticed some smoke rising aft, and ran aft to find that it was just the remains of what they had put out, but found two men, one with a badly wounded foot, sitting on the gun platform, and a petty officer lying on the deck a little further aft, with a nasty wound in his back. I found one of the men was un wounded, but badly shaken. However, he pulled himself together when I spoke to him, and told him I wanted him to do what he could for the wounded. I then ran back to my group.

'All the time we were going 25 and sometimes as much as 26 knots. We had the speed on the *Emden* and fought as suited ourselves. We next changed round to starboard guns and I then found the gunlayer of No. 1 starboard had been knocked out close to the conning tower, so I brought Atkins over to fire No. 1 starboard. I was quite deaf by now, as in the hurry there had been no thought of getting cotton-wool. This is a point I won't overlook next time.

'Coming aft the port side from the fore-castle gun I was met by a lot of men cheering and waving their caps. I said, "What's happened?" "She's gone, sir, she's gone." I ran to the ship's side, and no sign of a ship could I see. If one could have seen a dark cloud of smoke, it would have been different. But I could see no sign of anything. So I called out, "All hands turn out the life-boats, there will be men in the water." They were just starting to

do this when some one called, "She's still firing, sir," and everyone ran back to the guns. What had happened was a cloud of yellow or very light-coloured smoke had obscured her from view, so that looking in her direction one's impression was that she had totally disappeared. Later we turned again and engaged her on the other broadside.

'By now her three funnels and her foremast had been shot away, and she was on fire aft. We turned again, and after giving her a salvo or two with the starboard guns saw her run ashore on North Keeling Island. So at 11.20 a.m. we ceased firing, the action having lasted one hour forty minutes.

'Our hits were not very serious. We were "hulled" in about three places. The shell that exploded in the boys' mess deck, apart from ruining the poor little beggars' clothes, provided a magnificent stock of trophies. For two or three days they kept finding fresh pieces. The only important damage was the after-control platform, which is one mass of gaping holes and tangled iron, and the foremost rangefinder shot away. Other hits, though "interesting," "don't signify."

'We started chasing a collier which had been in attendance on the *Emden*, and when we boarded her we found they had opened the seacocks and the ship was sinking fast, so we took every one off her and returned to the *Emden*, getting back there at about 4 p.m.

'They sent a man aloft to cut down the colours, and waved a big white flag from forward. It was getting dark and we did not know for certain that the cruiser *Königsberg* might not be near, so we could do no rescue work that night and had to steam away. A cry in the darkness, and we stopped, and lifeboats were lowered to pick up a nearly exhausted but very lucky German sailor. The fourth rescued from the water that day.

'November 10.—Early in the morning we made for the cable station, to find that the party landed by the Germans to destroy the station had seized a schooner and departed. The poor devils aren't likely to go far with a leaking ship and the leathers removed from all the pumps. Although they had broken up all the instruments, the cable people had a duplicate set buried, so that was satisfactory.

'At 11.10 a.m. we arrived off the *Emden* again. I was sent over to her in one of the cutters. Luckily her stern was sticking out beyond where the surf broke, so that with a rope from the stern of the ship one could ride close under one quarter, with the boat's bow to seaward. The rollers were very big, and the surging to and fro and so on made getting aboard fairly difficult. However, the Germans standing aft gave me a hand up, and I was received by the captain of the *Emden*. I told him from our captain that if he would give his parole the captain was prepared to take all his crew on board the *Sydney* and take them straight up to Colombo. He stuck a little over the word "parole," but readily agreed when I explained the exact scope of it. And now came the dreadful job of getting the badly wounded into the boats. There were fifteen of these. Luckily we have a very good pattern of light stretcher into which men can be strapped. We got three badly wounded in each boat. The Germans were all suffering badly from thirst, so we hauled the boats' water-casks up on deck, and they eagerly broached them, giving the wounded some first.

I took an early opportunity of saluting the captain of the *Emden* and saying, "You fought very well, sir." He seemed taken aback, and said "No." I went away, but presently he came up to me and said, "Thank you very much for saying that, but I was not satisfied. We should have done better. You were very lucky in shooting away all my voice-pipes at the beginning."

'When I got a chance, with all the boats away, I went to have a look round the ship. I have no intention of describing what I saw. With the exception of the fore-castle, which is hardly touched from fore-bridge to stern post, she is nothing but a shambles, and the whole thing was most shocking. The German doctor asked me to signal for some morphia, sent me aft, and I never came forward again.

'Of the German officers, Witthoef, the torpedo lieutenant, was a thoroughly nice fellow. Lieutenant Schal was also a good fellow, and half English. It quite shook them when they found out that the captain had asked that there be no cheering on entering Colombo, but we certainly did not want cheering with rows of badly-wounded men laid out in cots on the quarter-deck. Captain von Müller is a very fine fellow.

'At Colombo we dropped all our wounded cargo, English and German. From the number of men we rescued—i.e., 150—we have been able to reckon their losses. We know the number of men who landed at Cocos and got away, and the number of the prize crew in the collier. They cannot have lost less than 180 men killed, but 20 men badly wounded and about the same number slightly.

'There are lots of redeeming points in the whole show. Best of all was to see the gun's crew fighting their guns quite unconcerned. When we were last in Sydney we took on board three boys from the training ship *Tingira*, who had volunteered. The captain said, "I don't really want them, but as they're keen I'll take them." Now the action was only a week or two afterwards, but the two out of the three who were directly under my notice were perfectly splendid. One little slip of a boy did not turn a hair, and worked splendidly. The other boy, a very sturdy youngster, carried projectiles from the hoist to his gun throughout the action without so much as thinking of cover. I do think for two boys absolutely new to their work they were splendid.

'It was very interesting talking to some of the German officers afterwards. On the first day they were on board one said to me, "You fire on the white flag." I at once took the matter up, and the torpedo lieutenant and an engineer both said emphatically, "No, that is not so; you did not fire on the white flag." But we did not leave it at that. One of us went to the captain, and he got from Captain von Müller an assurance that we had done nothing of the kind, and that he intended to assemble his officers and tell them so.

'The day Captain von Müller was leaving the ship at Colombo, he came up to me on the quarter-deck and thanked me in connexion with the rescue of the wounded, shook hands and saluted, which was very nice and polite of him. I think, acting under their rules, he and his crew refused to give parole after their arrival at Colombo, but he conscientiously observed it while in the *Sydney*, which was more like a hospital ship than a man-of-war, while running to Colombo. Prince Hohenzollern was a decent enough fellow. In fact, we seemed to agree that it was our job to knock one another out, but there was no malice in it."