Background

The convoy was escorted by HMAS Melbourne, HMAS Sydney, HMS Minotaur and the Japanese battle cruiser HIJMS Ibuki, and included some thirty-eight transport vessels. The ships assembled in King George Sound in late October, loaded with men and horses of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Among the ships was the Orient liner Orvieto, which carried AIF commander, Major General William Bridges, and the newly-appointed official war correspondent, Charles Bean.

The convoy took on coal and water in preparation for the journey, then sailed from Albany on the morning of 1 November bound for the Suez Canal. By the time the convoy had formed up outside the harbour, it reached seven and a half miles (12 kilometres) in length.

‘In no other port of the Commonwealth were the ships seen together … in the full magnificence of their numerical strength.’


It was expected that the convoy would take fourteen days to cross the Indian Ocean, but many were worried about the threat posed by the German raider SMS Emden. In a space of just six weeks the Emden, under the command of Captain Karl von Müller, had destroyed oil tanks at Madras and captured and sunk some twenty vessels, including the Russian light cruiser Zerntchung and the French torpedo-boat destroyer Mosquet.

On the morning of 9 November, the convoy was near the Cocos (Keeling) Islands when it intercepted distress signals indicating that an enemy warship was approaching. HMAS Sydney, under the command of Captain John Glossop, went to investigate and sighted the Emden close to the islands.

The Sydney was faster than the Emden, and better armed, but Müller began with rapid and accurate long-range fire in the hope of inflicting damage quickly. The Emden scored hits on Sydney’s control platform and range finder, causing casualties among the crew, but Sydney immediately retaliated and within forty minutes the Emden was riddled with holes and burning fiercely, with some 130 casualties.

Müller realised his ship was at Sydney’s mercy, and he ran the Emden aground on the reef at North Keeling Island to save the remainder of his crew. The Sydney chased the Emden’s collier, SS Buresk, which had appeared during the action, but the crew scuttled the ship before it could be seized. The Sydney then returned to the Emden and signalled to Müller to lower the ship’s ensign, to concede defeat. A confused exchange followed and the Sydney again fired its guns at the wreck. Finally the ensign was struck, bringing an end to Australia’s first decisive naval engagement.

The destruction of the Emden ensured safe passage through the Indian Ocean for the convoy, which reached Egypt safely on 3 December, 1914.
Teaching Activities

Use the poster, background information, historical sources and websites listed below, to answer the following questions:

1. Look at the 2014 Remembrance Day poster.
   a. What can you see?
   b. Do you think this artwork is an accurate representation of the convoy?

2. Read the text on the poster. What two main events does the text refer to?
   a. What was the main role of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in 1914?
   b. Why was it important for the RAN to escort the troops headed for the war?

3. a. Why do you think Albany was chosen as the last port of call before leaving to join the Allied forces in Europe?
   b. What might be the advantage of travelling in a convoy on the way to the war?
   c. How many ships were in the first convoy which left Albany on 1 November?
   d. Where was the convoy originally headed? Where did the convoy finally arrive on 3 December 1914?
   e. Why do you think the government would not allow the media to cover the convoy’s departure from Albany?
   f. Why would the media say that the convoy was heading for ‘an unknown destination’?

4. Read the personal log of Arthur Read of RMS Orvieto from 20 October to 4 December 1914, available on the T. S. Vindicatrix Association website listed on page 4.
   a. What activities did the crew do while they were waiting in Melbourne?
   b. What did the troops do while waiting for the convoy to leave Albany?
   c. Why was a Japanese ship, the Ibuki, part of the convoy?
   d. What kinds of jobs were done on board the Orvieto?
   e. Read Arthur’s version of events on 9 November 1914. Why were the crew and troops so excited by the day’s events?

5. Compare the specifications of HMAS Sydney and SMS Emden given below. Which of the two ships would have the advantage in a naval battle? Give your reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HMAS Sydney</th>
<th>SMS Emden</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class: Chatham Class light cruiser</td>
<td>Class: Dresden Class light cruiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launched: 29 August 1912</td>
<td>Launched: 26 May 1908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioned: 26 June 1913</td>
<td>Commissioned: 10 July 1909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complement: 490/450</td>
<td>Complement: 361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length: 457 feet [139.29 m]</td>
<td>Length: 388 feet [118.3 m]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beam: 50 feet [15.24 m]</td>
<td>Beam: 43.33 feet [13.5 m]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draught: 18 feet [5.46 m]</td>
<td>Draught: 17.75 feet [5.54 m]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displacement: 5400 tons</td>
<td>Displacement: 3664 tons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed: 25.5 knots</td>
<td>Speed: 24 knots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armament: 8 x 6-inch (15.2 cm) guns</td>
<td>Armament: 10 x 10.5 cm guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 x 3-pounder (4.7 cm) guns</td>
<td>8 x 5.2 cm guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 x 21-inch (53.3 cm) torpedo tubes</td>
<td>2 x 45 cm torpedo tubes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armour: 3 inch [7.61 cm] side</td>
<td>Armour: 2 inch [5 cm] deck</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Read the following three sources which describe the engagement between HMAS Sydney and SMS Emden.

   a. Describe the damage inflicted on the Emden.
   b. Why was the letter written by Captain Glossop to the captain of the Emden never delivered?

**Source 1.**
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 am we ceased firing, the action having lasted 1 hour 40 min.

Lieutenant Rupert Clare Garsia, HMAS Sydney.
Royal Australian Navy, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 2010, page 6

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**Source 2.**
Original signed letter written by Captain Glossop requesting the captain of SMS Emden to surrender his vessel and crew following the beaching of the German ship on North Keeling Island. The letter was not actually delivered as the battle flag of the Emden was still raised when the Sydney returned from chasing the Buresk.

Part of the letter reads:
‘… I have the honour to request that in the name of humanity you now surrender your ship to me … In the event of your surrendering which I venture to remind you is no disgrace but rather your misfortune, I will endeavour to do all I can for your sick and wounded …’

AWM 3DRL/3479

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**Source 3.**
A signal log with the message ‘Emden beached and done for’, sent by Captain Glossop aboard HMAS Sydney following the destruction of SMS Emden on North Keeling Island, 9 November 1914.

AWM 1DRL/0660

7. Read the description of SMS Emden on the Australian War Memorial website.

   a. Why was the Emden described as the ‘scourge of the Allied navies’?
   b. What was the Emden doing when it was spotted by HMAS Sydney on 9 November 1914?
8. Look at the following two sources:
   a. What event do these items commemorate?
   b. Who would want to commemorate this event? Why?

   Souvenir teacup and saucer. The teacup bears the words 'H.M.A.S “SYDNEY” DESTROYED THE “EMDEN” AT KEELING Cocos Island NOV. 9. 1914'.
   AWM REL38949

   A stained glass window at HMAS Cerberus.
   Image courtesy of Sea Power Centre – Australia

9. a. What is the role of the Royal Australian Navy today?
   b. What kinds of operations are the navy currently involved in?
   c. How does this compare to the role of the navy in the First World War?

References

Websites
Department of Veterans’ Affairs

Australian War Memorial
Q5: http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_12749.asp/
Q7: http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_12749.asp/

Department of Defence

National Library of Australia

Other
Q3: http://www.wa.vindicatrix.com/pdf/First%20convoy%20to%20England%20from%20Albany.pdf
Q4: http://www.wa.vindicatrix.com/pdf/First%20convoy%20to%20England%20from%20Albany.pdf