

The Not So Great Escape

Wednesday 12 August 2009 by Alexandra Orr. 9 comments

News, Personal Stories, New acquisitions, Collection, Collection Highlights, Prisoner of War, Theodore Detmers, HMAS Sydney, HSK Kormoran, Escape Maps

On the 19th November 1941, Australian cruiser HMAS *Sydney* II was lost, with all hands, off the coast of Western Australia after engaging with the German raider HSK *Kormoran*. The discovery in March 2008 of the final resting place of the *Sydney* and the *Kormoran* attracted much attention. Understandably, there has been much discussion over the circumstances surrounding the loss of the *Sydney*; however the story of the *Kormoran*'s Commander, Theodor Anton Detmers, and that of his crew, continued long after the battle. Almost a week after the sinking of the *Kormoran*, Detmers was picked up in a lifeboat along with other crewmen. Brought to Australia as a prisoner of war, he and several of his countrymen were detained in Dhurringile Prison Camp, Victoria. It was not long before the Commander and his countrymen had formulated a plan to escape their fortress using a hand-drawn map of Australia's east coast, now held by the Australian War Memorial.



Group portrait of German Officer prisoners of war (POWs) interned at Dhurringile. Detmers is in the front row, third from left. 030185_05

Dhurringile Prison Camp had been established when military authorities took over Dhurringile Homestead. Isolated and vacant, it had been commandeered to house German Officers.



Dhurringile Homestead, later a camp for German prisoners. 028650

Conditions for tunnelling were apparently favourable as escape plans at the camp had been attempted before. Such was the zeal of the prisoners that inspection trapdoors had been constructed in the floors of all ground-level rooms. Merely one room lacked this precaution, a tiny room containing a crockery cupboard. The prisoners had an idea to lift some of the floorboards and slide down between the cupboard and the wall.

By the turn of 1945 a new tunnel had been designed and engineered by the prisoners using what they could muster, be it fashioning a crude compass or utilising the water level in a garden hose. Their plans were rather sophisticated as they knew from experience not to build the tunnel entry close to the hole in the floorboards lest it be discovered. They fashioned air ducts out of water pipe joined by jam tins, creating air flow using a hand bellows and a beer-pump from the canteen. The tunnel was dug and passed forty meters beyond the security wire, past the spot where listening devices had previously been laid by guards in order to detect digging. While tunnelling was taking place there were some close calls and on the odd occasion workers had to be temporarily left in the tunnel while those up top concealed the entrance from suspicious guards. In all, it had took six months to construct by twenty prisoners.



The watch-tower at Dhurringile Prisoner of War Camp. 028651

Once the tunnel had been completed, however, they still had to escape and make their way across the country undetected. Fortunately for these prisoners, obtaining civilian clothing was relatively simple because they could make use of the plainer part of their uniforms. A handful of men possessed money, a ration of food, and hand-drawn maps. Theodor Detmers was one of those men.



Captain Theodor Detmers, Knight's Cross, Iron Cross. 053869

Detmers was a career navy man, having joined the German navy, the Reichsmarine, in 1921. He was steadily promoted and had visited Australia back in 1933 during a training cruise. Holding senior rank in the camp, it has naturally been assumed that he was one of the masterminds of the operation.

The escape was timed for the evening of Wednesday the 10th of January, 1945. On the night of the escape, Detmers had been so brazen as to ask his guard the outlook of the weather. Despite the suspicions of the guards and their attempts to thwart any escape attempt, twenty prisoners broke from the tunnel in two groups over a period of several hours. They could not have timed the weather better, implementing their plan under the disguise of a storm. Their success was not discovered until the next morning's roll call at 7am. By then, the men had scattered across the countryside. Relevant authorities were notified and photographs and names were distributed to newspapers and police.

20 GERMANS ESCAPE FROM PRISON CAMP
PRISONERS AT LARGE

TUNNELLING under the barbed wire, 20 Germans escaped yesterday from a prison camp for officers in the Goulburn Valley, and 19 are still at large.

The men — 17 officers and three batmen — were led by Captain Theodore Anton Detmers, former commander of the merchant ship raider *Kormoran*, which was sunk by H.M.A.S. *Sydney*.

The escape was carefully planned and executed, details obtained previously today by the guards following discovery of prison tunnelling attempts. The 19 at large are —

Captain Theodore Anton Detmers, Navy, 42, 6 ft, 11 stone 8 lb. Fresh complexion, light brown hair, blue eyes.

Lieut. Colonel Wilhelm Bortman, Luftwaffe, 37, 5 ft, 7 lb, 12 stone 11 lb. Dark complexion, dark brown hair, brown eyes.

Lieut. Wilhelm Greif, Luftwaffe, 34, 5 ft, 10 lb, 12 stone, medium complexion, brown hair, brown eyes.

First Lieut. Kurt Jax—Army, 25, 3 ft, 11 lb, 10 lb. Fair complexion, fair hair, grey eyes.

First Lieut. Bruno Krausack—Army, 26, 5 ft, 11 1/2 lb, 12-stone, dark complexion, black hair, brown eyes.

Lieut. Hans Faller—Luftwaffe, 31, 5 ft, 10 lb, 12-stone 10 lb, fair hair, blue eyes.

Captain Berthold Jaxg—Luftwaffe, 38, 5 ft, 11 lb, 12-stone 1 lb, dark complexion, brown hair, brown eyes.

Lieut. Albert Fiedler—Luftwaffe, 30, 5 ft, 11 lb, 12-stone 6 lb, fair complexion, fair hair, blue eyes.

Lieut. Rudolf Wilhelm Jansen—Navy, 30, 5 ft, 10 lb, 12-stone 8 lb, fair complexion, light brown hair, blue eyes.

Lieut. Heinrich Meigt—Luftwaffe, 28, 5 ft, 10 lb, 12 stone 2 lb. Fair complexion, fair hair, grey eyes.

Second-Lieut. Paul Kneid, Army, 28, 5 ft, 11 stone. Fair complexion, dark brown hair, blue eyes.

Engineer-Officer Harry Radach—M.N. 25, 5 ft, 9 lb. Fair complexion, fair hair, light blue eyes.

Assistant-Engineer Officer Emil Erhardt—M.N. 25, 5 ft, 12 stone, medium complexion, dark hair, brown eyes.

First-Officer Viktor Semann—M.N. 22, 5 ft, 10 lb, 9 stone 10 lb. Fair complexion, light brown hair, blue eyes.

Second-Officer Hans Mader—M.N. 27, 5 ft, 10 lb, 11 lb. Dark complexion, brown hair, grey eyes.

First-Officer Harold Bismeyer—M.N. 22, 5 ft, 11 lb, 10 lb, 11 lb. Dark complexion, dark brown hair, brown eyes.

Private Rudolph Koch—Army, 31, 5 ft, 7 lb, 11 lb, 10 lb. Medium complexion, black hair, brown eyes.

Private Heinrich Sommer—Army, 28, 5 ft, 5 1/2 lb, 11 lb, 12 lb. Fair complexion, fair hair, brown eyes.

Seaman Walter Radwin—Navy (Kormoran), 26, 5 ft, 8 lb, 10 lb. Fair complexion, brown hair, brown eyes.

Second-Lieutenant K u r a d Schmidt (Army) was recaptured near Murrumbidgee about 10.30 a.m. soon after the escape was discovered.

He was wearing a full officer's uniform, but police headquarters said last night that the type of clothes worn by the other escapees was not known. Officer prisoners are permitted to wear sports clothes, which they may buy out of their pay, and their use of ordinary civilian type.

The officers may have worn their camp uniforms over civilian clothes to avoid suspicion by their guards. Other ranks probably would be wearing prisoner of war burlap uniforms.

Last night police and military searches were continuing, the rain and a close watch was being made. Weather conditions were ideal for the escape as army spokesman said last night. A high wind blew all the night before and rain which started at 10 p.m. continued until morning.

Escaped Men

Hans Mader, Rudolf Bismeyer, Viktor Semann, Heinrich Meigt, Walter Radwin, Heinrich Meigt, Paul Kneid, Paul Kneid, Bruno Krausack, Berthold Jaxg.

The Sun, Melbourne, Friday 12th January, 1945.

Road and rail were under guard by the army and police as searching continued over several days. Weather worked against the search parties, covering their tracks and the search went on with interesting results. One escapee's train was delayed and he was subsequently apprehended as he downed a beer in a nearby pub to pass the time. Police investigated a sighting of suspicious looking characters on a golf course only to find they were a gang of local thieves, still carrying their booty. The descriptions of Detmers offered in the newspaper articles are interesting: 6ft, fresh complexion, use of double-possessive and superfluity of sibilants.

WIDE SEARCH FOR ESCAPED POW'S

Germans Tunnel From Camp

Detectives, Commonwealth security officers, and Army personnel throughout last night continued a widespread search for 19 German prisoners of war, who escaped from a Goulburn Valley camp yesterday.

Clearly tunnelling under barbed wire entanglements, 15 officers and 1500 other ranks who were in the camp composed an intense galled freedom from an officers' camp early in the morning.



Photo: John Brown

One of the officers, Lt Col Edward ... was caught near the camp by Detective McMillan, of ... after he had been at liberty for a few hours. He was still wearing his army uniform.

Two Germans who escaped from a ... camp on Jan 4 are still at large.

The escape yesterday was the largest and most daring ever made in this ...

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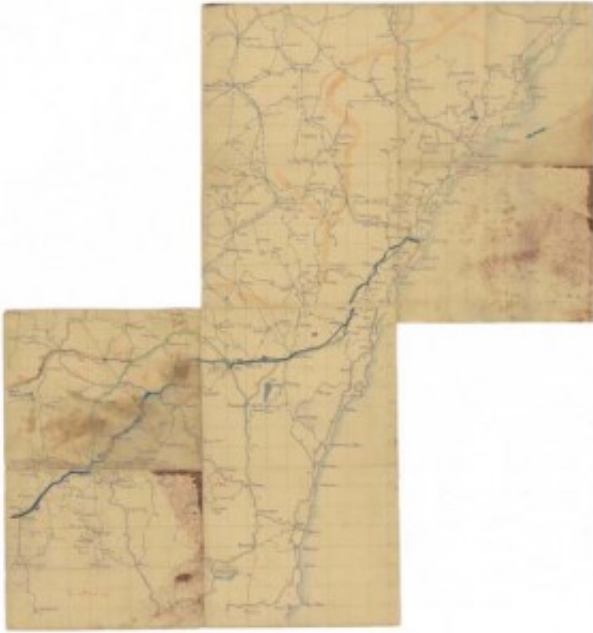
THIS NAZI WOULD SAY "JONES'S CAT"

If you should get into casual conversation with a stranger on a tram, in a bar, or (and this is where you must be particularly alert) while collecting the family chops at the butcher's shop, and you notice that he uses a superfluity of sibilants in such phrases as "Jones's cat" or "Mr Mensie's persiflage"—cut the conversation short and rush for the nearest policeman. It might be your big chance to capture a real live Nazi! An official Army statement was issued

yesterday giving further personal details of the four German prisoners of war who are still at large after having escaped from a Goulburn Valley camp on January 11. This statement referring to Captain Theodor Detmers, former commander of the armed merchant raider *Kormoran*, says, among other things: "He is also prone to use the double possessive—'Jones's cat.' In addition, he pronounces all O's hard. He may be carrying a small leather satchel." (Not, we hope, with Jones's cat inside!)

The Argus, Melbourne, Friday 12th and 17th January, 1945.

By Wednesday the 17th, only four men remained at large, including Detmers. Some of the prisoners had fled south seeking Melbourne, while others, including Detmers, had set their sights on Sydney. Detmers' intended destination may be assumed by his possession of a hand-drawn map produced during his internment at Dhurrigile. Recently donated to the Australian War Memorial, the map consists of two pieces, themselves folded into quarters. The two pieces overlap, seeming to centralise on Sydney.



Escape map used by Captain Detmers. RC08481

By the 18th, Detmers, with a prison mate, had progressed north to Tallygaroopna, not far from the New South Wales-Victoria border. They had been walking by night and resting during the day but when his partner injured his ankle their progress became sluggish. Their food supply dwindling, Detmers waited nearby for his companion to risk venturing into a store. The game was up when his companion was recognised by the owner. First Constables Wilson and Watson apprehended them without a struggle, for it had been a long, exhausting, dirty, hungry, hot and rainy week for the escapees. Wilson confiscated some items from them, including the map. Back at the police station, the prisoners hungrily consumed a loaf of bread and a pound of cheese.

LEADERS OF POW CAMP BREAK TAKEN

Only Two Now At Large

Sen-Commander Theodore Anton Detmers, 42, of the German Navy, and Lieut-Colonel Helmut Bertram, 37, of the Luftwaffe, who are believed to have been the ringleaders in the break of 20 Nazi prisoners from a Goulburn Valley POW camp on January 11, were captured on Thursday evening not 20 miles from the point of their escape.

Only two of the escapees — Lieut Heinrich Menge, 25, of the Luftwaffe, and Viktor Somann, 33, merchant navy officer—are still at large. None of the 18 men captured had travelled more than 30 miles.

The latest arrests were due to the alertness of a storekeeper at Tallygaroopna, 10 miles from Shepparton. The men entered the shop to purchase some food, and the storekeeper recognised them from photographs he had seen in the Press. Shepparton police were advised by telephone. First-constables Wilson and Watson arrested Bertram and Detmers about a mile from the store.

Both men were wearing civilian clothes, and had apparently been without food for some time. They were ravenous when they arrived at the police station, and ate a loaf of bread and a pound of cheese.

An Army spokesman said yesterday that the wide publicity, photographs, and information given by the Press had materially assisted in the recapture so far of all but two of the escapees.

The Argus, Melbourne, Sat 20th Jan 1945.

Detmers was promoted to Captain while a prisoner of war in Australia and awarded the Knight's Cross, a German military decoration. He remained a prisoner until after the war when he was repatriated. Although his attempt to escape was unsuccessful, it demonstrates the ingenuity which many Prisoners of War exercised in order to obtain their freedom if not cause havoc for their keepers.

References:

1. *The Argus* (Melbourne, VIC), Friday 12th January 1945; Saturday 13th January 1945; Wednesday 17th January, 1945; Saturday 20th January 1945.
2. Detmers, Theodor Anton. *The Raider Kormoran*, translated from the German by Edward Fitzgerald.

(London: William Kimber, 1959).

3. *The Sun* (Melbourne, VIC), Friday 12th January 1945.

4. Winter, Barbara. *Stalag Australia: German Prisoners of War in Australia* (North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1986)

Comments

Kathryn Hadley says:

Wed 12 Aug 2009

This is a fascinating post. The history of German PoWs in Australia is very rarely studied in the United Kingdom, so this is a great addition. I look forward to following your blog. Kathryn Hadley
www.historytoday.com

Bob Meade says:

Thu 13 Aug 2009

Alexandra, thank you for this very interesting and topical blog post. In the top group photograph, in front of Oberleutnant zur See Joachim Greter at left, there is a sign stand with the numbers "134" upon it. Could you please tell me what the number means?

aleorr says:

Thu 13 Aug 2009

Hi Kathryn and Bob. Thank you for your comments. The story captivated me from the outset and their ingenuity intrigued me, not to mention the often comical results of their capture. Barbara Winter's book *Stalag Australia*, which I referenced in the post, gives great detail on the escape as well as providing other interesting chapters on prisoners of war in Australia. Newspapers of the period are also a great resource on the progression of the escape and recapture of the prisoners. To answer your question, Bob, the sign stand with the numbers 134 is a reference to the photographer's original photograph number for that particular shot. If you look at some of the other photographs taken of prisoners at Dhurringile during the period, they have similar numbers, but never the same. You can search for these photographs using our collections database.

Bob Meade says:

Fri 14 Aug 2009

Thanks.

Brett Fitzpatrick says:

Wed 9 Sep 2009

Some further information about this group of escapee's deeds was published by the Australian Railway Historical Society (ARHS) in 1962. 29332 THE WANGARATTA ACCIDENT, 18 JAN 1945

Lyell, AR This is a remarkable story of deliberate train wrecking by enemy aliens, and gives a comprehensive account of the action of the saboteurs. Details are given of the subsequent inquiry by both Departmental officers and the army court, and the conclusion that it appeared highly probable that the damage had been caused by escapees from a prisoner-of-war camp. 3 photos, 1 diagram. An errata appears in Bn 296, Jun 1962, p 96. IDENTIFIERS: Government Railways Vic / Country Railways Vic / Railway Accidents Vic / Wangaratta Vic PUB. DATA: Vol. 13, No. 293, Mar 1962, pp 39-44 Regards Brett Fitzpatrick

aleorr says:

Wed 9 Sep 2009

Thank you for alerting us to this article, Brett. There is no doubt that the escape caused much apprehension amongst unsuspecting locals.

George Collings says:

Wed 30 Sep 2009

Thankyou very much for this interesting piece, it adds a postscript if not another chapter to the history of the sinking Of the HMAS Sydney and shows what a cunning sod Detmers was.

Gaelen (High School Student) says:

Tue 18 May 2010

At school, we were made to do a report on a shipwreck in Australian waters. I chose to write my report about The Kormoran. I found this article immensely helpful, particularly the photographs. It also helped me when I realised I had false information about the escape attempt. Thank you!

Brett Fitzpatrick says:

Wed 9 Mar 2011

On the national library of Australia website, in the John Buckland collection of photographs, there is a picture of a signal gantry at Wangaratta, which it is thought was damaged by Captain Detmers' group. The photograph was taken on 18 Janaury 1945. Regards Brett Fitzpatrick

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