

A SAILOR'S GRAVE IN BANGKOK GERMAN CUISER EMDEN



(Full inscription)
Paul Zudock
Heizer
Kreuzer Emden
22.1.16
31.3.31

To those familiar with Penang's history, any mention of the German warship Emden will immediately recall the daring raid by this cruiser on Penang Harbour in 1914, the first year of World War I. The history of the raid, whose centenary passed a few months ago, has been highlighted by the Penang Heritage Trust on several occasions. PHT members and other Penangites may be interested to know that there is an Emden-related grave in the Protestant Cemetery in Bangkok, Thailand.

This cemetery, which I visit on every trip to Bangkok, is a fascinating repository of the history of Bangkok's foreign community since the mid-1800s. Under the care now of Bangkok's Anglican church and the British Embassy, the cemetery lies on land given by the King of Thailand to the Protestant Christian community of the time. It has for a century and a half become the final resting place of over one thousand Protestant and Jewish residents of Bangkok (long-term, short-term or simply transients who died while passing through Bangkok — as apparently did the deceased in this case).

When I came across this grave I wildly thought that this might be 'our' Emden, but close inspection and further research quickly showed me otherwise. This was the third German warship carrying the Emden name. 'Ours' was the first (1908-1914), being destroyed by the Australian Navy shortly after the Penang incident. A second German cruiser (1916-1919) took the Emden name for the rest of the First World War. The third cruiser of this name (1925-1949) survived much longer for a quarter of a century and outlived the Second World War. This third one's specification and role was very much restricted under the rules for rearmament imposed on Germany by the victorious Allies after the Treaty of Versailles. Until the Second World War this ship was limited essentially to a training role and made a number of training voyages, to 'show the flag', to SE and E Asia. It was on such a voyage, to China, that the ship passed through Bangkok in 1931. The seaman in question must have died in or close to Bangkok for him to be buried there (the cemetery contains many other seafarers who died in Bangkok or at sea near Bangkok).

It is interesting that the sailor was so young, just over 15, although admittedly this was a training ship. This Emden was a coal-fired ship at that time and the sailor was a stoker (Heizer).

For those who are interested, the Bangkok Protestant cemetery is easily accessible in the centre of Bangkok, in New Road, right on the river, immediately next to (downstream from) the Ramada Hotel. The gravestones, with their historical descriptions of the people, their roles and deaths, provide a wonderful cross-section of the history of the foreign community in Bangkok since about 1850, when Siam (as it then was) opened itself up afresh to foreign business. Catholic Christians were buried elsewhere and their cemetery seems not to have survived. Jews were, however, welcomed into the Protestant cemetery and continued to be buried here until a few years ago when the Jewish community secured a small plot of land adjacent to the Protestant Cemetery and started a separate cemetery there. Interestingly, the Jewish graves and memorial stones in the Bangkok Protestant cemetery seem very much to follow the norms and styles of the Protestant ones and do not reflect the distinctive (and plain) Jewish stylistic features seen in the Penang Jewish cemetery which was the subject of the PHT's January 2015 site visit.

The flowers seen on the grave of the Emden sailor in the photos above are a nice touch. At Christmas 2014, when these photos were taken, some local well-wishers or religious groups placed flowers (a yellow marigold and a spray of Thai orchids) on every grave in the cemetery.

Brian Walling, March 2015