

FINDING HMAS SYDNEY (II)

HMAS *Sydney* (II) was one of three modified British *Leander* class light cruisers purchased by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in the years immediately prior to World War II. She gained fame early in the War for her exploits while operating as part of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet. On 19 July 1940, against superior odds, *Sydney*, under the command of Captain John Collins, RAN, engaged and destroyed the Italian light cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and damaged another, the *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere*. This action became known as the Battle of Cape Spada and in many ways mirrored the earlier success of HMAS *Sydney* (I), when in 1914 she vanquished the German cruiser *Emden*. The second *Sydney* likewise became the 'darling' ship of the Australian nation.



HMAS Sydney (II) pride of the Australian fleet (RAN)

Recalled to Australia in early 1941, *Sydney* was feted during visits to both Fremantle and Sydney. The cruiser received a hero's welcome in her home port and her crew marched from Circular Quay to the Town Hall for a civic reception and lunch. Within the RAN *Sydney* became well known as the 'lucky ship', while many of Australia's civilian population considered her invincible. Following a short refit, *Sydney* was assigned to duties on the Australia station and was soon operating in Western Australian waters, undertaking routine patrols and convoy escort duties.

On 11 November 1941, now under the command of Captain Joseph Burnett, RAN, *Sydney* sailed from Fremantle to escort the troop ship *Zealandia* to the Sunda Strait. She handed over her charge to the British cruiser HMS *Durban* at midday on 17 November. *Sydney* should have returned to port on 20 November, but the Australian cruiser and her men were never seen again.

What had happened to *Sydney* was subsequently reconstructed from the interrogations of German naval officers and seamen, some of whom were rescued from lifeboats, while others made it ashore to remote parts of the Western Australian coast. It was learned from these men that they were survivors from the German auxiliary cruiser HSK *Kormoran*. *Kormoran*, under the command of Kapitän zur See Theodor Anton Detmers, was a merchant

ship which had been well armed and converted into a disguised raider.

During a voyage of almost a year, Detmers had sunk 10 Allied merchant ships and taken another as a prize. According to the German account on 19 November, *Kormoran* encountered *Sydney* approximately 120 nautical miles west of Steep Point, Western Australia. The cruiser immediately challenged the unknown vessel's identity, but configured as the Dutch merchant ship *Straat Malakka*, *Kormoran* feigned innocence while *Sydney* continued to close. With the distance reduced to approximately one nautical mile, and not satisfied with the mysterious vessel's responses, the cruiser issued a final challenge to reveal her secret call sign. Not knowing how to respond, Detmers de-camouflaged and opened fire on *Sydney* at the equivalent of point-blank range.

The ensuing engagement saw *Sydney* crippled by a torpedo hit to her bow and from withering fire to her bridge, primary and secondary armament and upper decks. Despite the destruction *Sydney's* 'X' turret managed to score several critical hits on her opponent. Within an hour both ships were ablaze and mortally damaged. The last the Germans had seen of *Sydney* was as a distant glow on the horizon late in the evening as they began setting scuttling charges in their doomed vessel. Although 317 of *Kormoran's* crew survived, none of *Sydney's* crew of 645 men lived to tell the tale.

During the many years following *Sydney's* loss, conjecture and debate surrounding her fate intensified rather than abated. Public interest was such that on 26 August 1997 the Australian Government requested the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to investigate and report on the circumstances surrounding the sinking. In March 1999 the Committee published its report, with one of the primary recommendations being that the RAN sponsor a seminar aimed at establishing the likely area of the battle and hence the location of the wrecks of *Sydney* and *Kormoran*.

The Sea Power Centre – Australia (SPC-A) subsequently convened a Wreck Location Seminar in Fremantle on 16 November 2001. Regrettably the aim was not achieved as the seminar served primarily to highlight the many differing theories on where the wrecks might lie. Here the matter might have rested were it not for a volunteer group known as the Finding Sydney Foundation (FSF).¹ Intent on conducting an in-water search for *Sydney* and *Kormoran* the FSF established their credentials with the SPC-A, RAN and ultimately the Australian Government. Confidence in the foundation was further inspired through its alliance with notable shipwreck investigator David Mearns, who had a successful record in locating deep-water shipwrecks including that of the famous Royal Navy battlecruiser HMS *Hood*. This alliance aided the FSF's objectives considerably and in August 2005 the foundation obtained partial funding for a search from the Federal Government. Other sizeable donations were obtained from the State Governments of Western

Australia and New South Wales, and from members of the general public. The proposed scope of the search still exceeded the available funds, but after further lobbying an additional commitment by the Federal Government in August 2007 brought total funds up to \$4.2 million.

With sufficient funding in place, detailed planning for the in-water search could begin in earnest with early 2008 set as the objective. David Mearns was confirmed as the search director while the Norwegian company, DOF Subsea, secured the contract for the search vessel, the SV *Geosounder*. The vital deep-water side scan sonar equipment needed to find the wrecks was provided by an American firm, Williamson and Associates.

The search team mobilised from Geraldton, Western Australia in February 2008 and sailed in early March to begin searching an area of seabed equivalent in size to the Australian Capital Territory. The first objective was to locate the *Kormoran* which could then be used as a reference point to find *Sydney*. Despite setbacks caused by equipment malfunctions and the influence of a tropical cyclone, the defined search box proved accurate and wreck of *Kormoran* was identified on 12 March. This discovery enabled David Mearns to further refine his search box. Four days later at 11:03 on Sunday 16 March the wreck of *Sydney* was found at a depth of roughly 2500 metres. News of the discovery was quickly communicated ashore and an official announcement was made by the Prime Minister, the Honourable Kevin Rudd, on Monday 17 March. What has been described as Australia's most enduring maritime mystery had been solved.

With the location of both wrecks identified, the search vessel *Geosounder* returned to Geraldton where the search team began mobilising for Phase II of the search, obtaining imagery of *Sydney* and *Kormoran* using a Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV). *Geosounder* was fortunately equipped with a suitable vehicle which was soon being prepared for this crucial part of the expedition. On 28 March the *Geosounder* sailed again from Geraldton and returned to the wreck sites. Both wrecks were now protected under the provisions of the *Historic Shipwrecks Act, 1976* and as such permission had first to be sought before the *Geosounder* could re-enter the area.



Sydney's 'X' turret, credited with inflicting the mortal blows on Kormoran (FSF)

Again the expedition was dogged with bad weather and further technical difficulties which had to be resolved at sea with only the expertise available onboard. These setbacks were eventually overcome and the ROV obtained its first images of *Sydney* at 15:10 on 3 April when its powerful underwater lighting illuminated one of the cruiser's MK XXI 6-inch gun turrets. The wreck was upright, and as the ROV was maneuvered along *Sydney's* port side it became clear that, in spite of obvious battle damage, she was in a remarkably well-preserved state with little marine growth. The extreme depth and darkness in which *Sydney* lies is, and will continue to be, her greatest protector.

An initial examination of the wreck confirmed *Sydney* had lost her bow, and appeared to support much of what the German seamen had revealed following their capture in 1941. *Sydney's* bridge, mid-ships section and upper works were severely damaged and the accuracy of the German gunnery was apparent on each of her four gun turrets which had all received multiple direct hits.

A separate ROV inspection of *Kormoran* revealed that the scuttling charges placed by the Germans among the 300 plus mines which she carried had destroyed most of the vessel with only the well deck and forecastle remaining.



Two of Sydney's boats lying within the scattered debris field (FSF)

The FSF's objective to locate both wrecks was achieved. Equally importantly the crews of both ships were commemorated by the search team with short services being conducted over the site of each of the wrecks.

The data and imagery collected by the FSF has now been forwarded to the Commission of Inquiry into the loss of HMAS *Sydney II*, presided over by the Honourable Terence Cole. This Commission was appointed by the Chief of Defence Force to inquire into and report on circumstances surrounding the loss of *Sydney* and consequent loss of life and related subsequent events. Special commemorative services will also be conducted around Australia on 19 November 2008, to mark the 67th anniversary of her loss.

1. See the HMAS *Sydney II*, Finding *Sydney* Foundation web site, <www.findingsydney.com> (16 September 2008).

