

# The hunt for the Sydney

A new book by maritime detective DAVID MEARN'S reveals how forebearance, intuition and luck played roles in the discovery of HMAS Sydney's final resting place

**T**HE German raider HSK *Kormoran* steamed up the coast of Western Australia on the afternoon of Wednesday, November 19, 1941, heading just east of due north on her 352nd continuous day at sea.

No one on board – from her commanding officer, the experienced and battle-hardened Theodor Detmers, to the lowest engine room rating – knew how the events of the next several hours would forever change their lives and plunge an entire nation into a deep shock and questioning that would persist for the next 66 years.

*Kormoran*, an auxiliary cruiser or merchant raider of the German Kriegsmarine now disguised as the Dutch merchant freighter *Straat Malakka*, was about to cross paths with its worst nightmare.

HMAS *Sydney*, the Perth class light cruiser that had become the glory ship of the young Royal Australian Navy due to her famous exploits in the Mediterranean, was heading south-east on an intercepting course.

*Sydney* was much faster and more

powerful than *Kormoran*. Her top speed was 32 knots to *Kormoran*'s 18 knots and, on paper, *Sydney* was a deadlier ship, with better guns, fire control systems and protective armour.

She was exactly the type of superior naval enemy that Captain Detmers was ordered to avoid at all costs.

What happened next, well beyond 100 nautical miles from the nearest stretch of almost uninhabited coastline, has been vividly described by historians as Australia's greatest wartime naval loss.

By the time their blazing guns were silenced, some 75 minutes later, the damage these two ill-fated combatants had inflicted on each other would lead to the loss of both ships and 725 of the men.

The shock of *Sydney*'s loss – with the entire ship's company of 645 men – was enormous and felt deeply all across the nation. Sadness and anger was quickly replaced by disbelief and intense questioning.

How was it possible that *Kormoran*, this seemingly inferior converted freighter, was able to defeat and sink the glorious *Sydney*?

Most disturbingly, why were almost no traces of *Sydney*, or any of her men, ever found during the exhaustive air and sea searches that followed, when the sea was practically littered with life rafts and boats full of German survivors who were ultimately rescued and in relatively good condition?

With no Australian eyewitnesses

alive to tell their story, could the German accounts of the incredible battle and their improbable victory be trusted?

To solve the mystery once and for all, it was absolutely clear that the wrecks of *Sydney* and *Kormoran* would have to be found.

The great challenge of this quest was how to use the information left by Theodor Detmers to find them.

In my professional opinion as a shipwreck hunter, the risks were stark.

In my mind, the success or failure of the search would come down to this crucial question: Was Captain Detmers's account honest and accurate?

On a personal level, I would be putting my reputation on the line.

To put it bluntly, a lot of money, careers and the hope of millions of Australians would be riding on the account of one man, and I was betting big that he was right.

## THE SEARCH

The 25-knot winds and 2.5-metre swells that buffeted the SV *Geosounder* were not enough to keep us from working, but they certainly weren't helping the bridge officers with driving the ship or with producing the best quality sonar imagery.

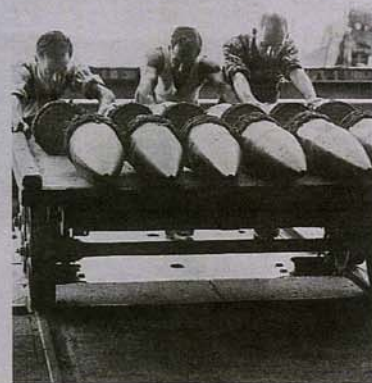
In deciding which technology and methods would work best in the search for *Kormoran* and *Sydney*, I never had



FOCUS



There was no longer any question in my mind. This was the debris of a shipwreck that had suffered a very violent sinking



**Triumph and tragedy:** HMAS Sydney crew members in a celebratory mood in the Mediterranean (main picture); one of the main gun turrets; loading shells; fun times in the crew's quarters.



any doubts that the correct tool to use was a deep-tow side-scan sonar, one that can operate very deeply, to a maximum of 6000-metres.

Based upon the location of my provisional search box, I estimated that the water depths in the area would range from roughly 2300m to 4200m. I had done everything I could think of to make sure I was searching in the right place for the wrecks.

The final search box I mapped out for *Kormoran* measured 52 nautical miles (north-south) by 34 nautical miles (east-west) and encompassed a colossal 1768 square nautical miles.

This would put a lot of pressure on the search team and ship drivers.

On March 12, by my reckoning, we had completed 20 per cent of the *Kormoran* search box, but had consumed 40 per cent of the search budget in the process.

There was no way to make up for the lost time without compromising my strict policy of maintaining 100 per cent search coverage, which I was not prepared to do.

It was clear that for us to have a shot at finding *Sydney* we would have to find *Kormoran* sooner rather than later.

I had set up my personal sonar imaging computer (and) I had been teaching the fundamentals of sonar interpretation to John (Perryman, a navy lieutenant and historian) as a way of passing the hours and hours of time I sat in this tiny two-square-metre space. I had no idea how quickly this

training would come to use. There was no warning for what was to happen next. The sonar screen showed a perfectly homogenous swathe of carnelian red, the colour I use to depict the soft sediments of the deep ocean seabed.

Seconds later, a dark navy blue shape appeared on the starboard channel that John was the first to notice.

"Hey what's that?" he exclaimed. The rectangular blocky shape of the target and the way the compact blue centre was fringed by dozens of pixels of greenish-yellow told me immediately that this was a man-made object and that it was quite big.

I yelled down the hall to where the film team had their office that we had a good target and to get their cameras rolling.

The time was 1730 hours on March 12 and the next 25 minutes were about to become one of the most satisfying highlights of my career.

As soon as I was able to, I switched my computer to "target mode" and took an approximate measurement of the object. It was roughly 35m long and there was the hint of an acoustic shadow behind it indicating that it was sitting quite high off the seabed.

Within a minute or so, a few other small sonar targets came into view, which to me was the first clear sign that a much larger debris field lay beyond them.

More and more sonar targets were being resolved as subsequent lines of

imagery advanced in tune with the four-second round-trip journey of each sonar ping.

As the density of sonar targets increased in a pattern I had seen many times before, there was no longer any question in my mind. This was the debris field of a shipwreck that had suffered a very violent sinking.

**A**S if on cue, a hull-shaped form began to scroll down the screen. It had all the characteristics I wanted to see: size, shape and reflectivity as measured by colour intensity.

However, it was the prominent acoustic shadow that pleased me most and removed any lingering doubts.

As soon as I saw the first couple of lines of the shadow I knew that we had done it and confirmed with a single line in my log "HSK *Kormoran* is found!"

I immediately shifted my thinking to a plan for finding *Sydney*.

A new search box would have to be established; one that specifically covered the range of probable locations where *Sydney* might have sunk.

In a very real sense I was going to use the wreckage of *Kormoran*, along with the last German sightings of *Sydney*, to point me in the right direction to where we might find her wreckage.

The distance over which *Kormoran's* wreckage was spread as a result of the simultaneous detonation of the 340 mines she was carrying was extraordinarily large.

I took the centre of this debris field at 26 05 46" South and 111 04' 33" East to be the position where *Kormoran* was drifting on the surface when the ship was scuttled.

This position was critical to my reckoning, because it was roughly where Detmers and the others last saw *Sydney* blazing away on the horizon before she disappeared.

What none of them could be sure of, however, was whether *Sydney* sank then or whether she continued over the horizon and out of their sight.

This was the big unanswered question about *Sydney's* loss that would largely determine whether we would find her wreckage, or not.

If *Sydney* lost all power before she sank, she would have been left, like *Kormoran*, drifting north with the current and wind such that the distance between the two ships would have stayed roughly the same.

In this case, when Detmers last saw *Sydney* before he abandoned *Kormoran*, this distance would have been about eight to nine nautical miles, which would make finding the wreck a fairly straightforward proposition.

If, however, *Sydney's* engines were still working and her crew steamed her over the horizon, there would be no way to know how long, and in what direction, they travelled before sinking.

If this was the case, the wreck could be literally anywhere.

*The Search for the Sydney* by David L. Mearns will be published by HarperCollins on August 1, rrp \$55. Buy *The Search for the Sydney* for the special Sunday Herald Sun reader price of only \$39 + \$6 p/h. ph: 1300 306 107 or post a cheque to Book Offers: P.O Box 14730 Melbourne Vic 8001.