

A précis of search-related events leading up to the commencement of the HMAS *Sydney* Search

The basis of a speech presented at the announcement of the HMAS *Sydney* search in November 2007 at the Western Australian Maritime Museum.

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Background

In 1976, the Federal Minister responsible for the newly-promulgated Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act delegated his authority for the management of all wrecks off the coast of Western Australia to the Director of the Western Australian Museum. Though they still remained the property of the Australian and German navies, this delegation also covered the wrecks of HMAS *Sydney* and its adversary HSK *Kormoran*, if found in Australian waters. On behalf of the Director, staff of the Department of Maritime Archaeology at the Museum, as is standard practice with any historic wreck, sought to become acquainted with the literature, the archives and with those people known to have an interest in the *Sydney/Kormoran* saga. In the late 1970s these were predominantly families of those lost, residents of the town of Carnarvon on the NW coast where many Germans came ashore, and members of a loose affiliation of former service personnel and researchers called the *Sydney Research Group*. Two of those members LCDR Ean MacDonald (RAN Retd.) a former sailor on HMAS *Sydney*, and Dr John McArthur remain active today.

The many books that followed after the opening of archives 30 years after the war ended produced such an efflorescence of interest and in some cases speculation that they can be seen as the genesis of nationwide communal, rather than a purely familial or service-based, desire to have the wreck(s) located. As a result of the publicity the number of unaffiliated people interested in the *Sydney/Kormoran* story grew dramatically. The number of descendants of those lost also grew. All sought an explanation and with a few exceptions all wanted the ships found.

The first shallow water searches for indications of HMAS *Sydney*:

While at the time the waters in which the *Sydney/Kormoran* engagement was believed to have taken place were considered far too deep for search and analysis, the possibility that HMAS *Sydney* was attempting to make the coast before it disappeared was brought to the Western Australian Maritime Museum's attention by Michael Montgomery son of HMAS *Sydney*'s navigator. On a research visit to Australia in order to examine wartime documents, he advised that indicators of the wreck might be found in coastal oil search records. A search of data held at the Department of Mines led in turn to the finding of a very promising magnetic anomaly off the *Zuytdorp* cliffs north of Kalbarri. Being outside its normal operating parameters, the Museum requested the RAN to assist in the analysis of the 'find'. As a result, in October 1981 a combined Museum/RAN team joined on board the hydrographic survey ship HMAS *Moresby* to locate and analyse the anomaly, finding it to be a geological formation lying c. 200 metres below the seabed.

In May 1985 the Department of Defence advised that in the course of a survey then being conducted off Shark Bay HMAS *Moresby* had encountered 'irregular bottom topography consistent with wreckage' on the 100m contour north of Cape Inscription on Dirk Hartog Island. Though appearing part of a known series of geological phenomena along that same contour, the Museum requested the reports be further analysed and later the phenomenon was shown to be non-magnetic. In this same period it also requested the USN to provide any of their geophysical data which might prove to be indications of a wreck in the region of the battle position. Reply was received to the effect that their tracks did not pass close enough to be of any value. Later the Museum also inquired of Telstra in respect of any remote-sensing indications of a wreck that might emerge in their preparations for a Singapore to Fremantle cable, again in the negative.

In May 1987 the RAN received a report advising of a dive on the wreck of HMAS *Sydney* II in c. 30m of water, 10 nautical miles off Dirk Hartog island (the Sampey report). The RAAF then commenced an extensive airborne magnetometer search utilising a P3C Orion aircraft, but

no evidence of a ship was found. Having also received a report of the grave of a sailor on the cliffs overlooking Turtle Bay on Dirk Hartog Island, HMAS *Geraldton* was asked to examine the area of the report. A 'possible grave site' was found and an analysis later conducted by the Museum showed that there was no evidence of a grave, or sub-surface disturbance of any sort.

SS *Titanic* is found : could *Sydney* be located?

The location of SS *Titanic* and the German battleship *Bismarck* by Dr Robert Ballard of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute (WHOI) in the mid 1980s posed the obvious question, 'could *Sydney* be also located' and if so what was the search area? In July 1990, Dr David Gallo on behalf of WHOI met with Museum staff and expressed interest in joining in the search. A formal invitation was issued and in the expectation that the search area would be narrowed down significantly, WHOI wrote back accepting. The Office of War Graves, the RSL (with some reservations), the Australian War Memorial, the German Government, the *Kormoran* Survivors Association and the Federal Minister responsible for the Historic Shipwrecks Act then all formally expressed support for the notion of a non-disturbance search and survey regime. The German Navy was invited to participate, and the RAN offered a platform for the search. The Museum and the Commonwealth department responsible for the operations of the Historic Shipwrecks Act, then developed contingency plans for the protection of the wrecks, should they be found. This included the declaring of a restricted zone around the site(s) prohibiting access, for all but bona fide research purposes.

Using funds provided by the Commonwealth Government under the Historic Shipwrecks Program, visits were then made to the archives in Canberra, Melbourne and elsewhere. Many researchers, too numerous to list, also provided their insights. As but a few examples of the widespread nature of the interest and the expertise provided to the Museum, one specialist was Dr T.O. Paine head of the American Submarine Warfare Library in California, a noted engineer and former NASA (Apollo lunar space program) chief. Another specialist Professor Kim Kirsner of the University of Western Australia analysed the value of oral histories in accurately recalling past events. He also provided the results of his hindcasting—with other scholars, including Assoc Prof. J. Dunne and S. Hughes— of a position for the battle based on the drift of wreckage and boats. Prof. Kirsner also proposed the convening of a data-gathering, commemorative seminar on the HMAS *Sydney* at the 50th anniversary of its loss. Further specialist support was provided in April of 1991 when local remote sensing firm Associated Survey International, later Fugro Survey (headed in WA by Ted Graham and Gray Roughan) offered their services. Local and international film-makers also jostled for position should a search get underway.

Researchers, serving and retired naval personnel, archivists, oceanographers, climatologists, search and rescue operatives (AMSA), the RAN Hydrographic Service and other experts then joined at the Museum on 19 November 1991 for a 50th Anniversary Forum on the loss of the *Sydney*. Proceedings were opened by Naval Officer Commanding Western Australia, Commodore Peter Briggs. Letters of support from Otto Jürgensen, representing the *Kormoran* survivors association, and the Hon. Kim Beazley, then a Minister in the Federal government, were read. These, the many papers and the discussions that followed were recorded and collated for the major archives and institutions.

One of the 'key' questions put to the oceanographers, climatologists, search and rescue specialists present was the issue whether the spread of wreckage (not counting anything that could have been propelled or steered) supported Fregattenkapitan T.A. Detmer's assertion that the battle took place at or around 26°32'-34'S., 111° E (the Detmer's position). While the answer was unequivocally 'yes', the notion that *Sydney* could be found was dealt a severe blow when the specialists proved unable to reduce the search area down to anything like the proportions of the

two previously successful deep-water searches. The area for *Kormoran* was c. 350 NM, while that for HMAS *Sydney* was far larger at c. 7000 square kilometers. In comparison the area for the successful *Bismarck* and *Titanic* searches was around 500 square kilometers. Further in contrast to these successful projects, no-one was able to say where HMAS *Sydney* went down. It was with all those imponderables in mind that WHOI understandably declined to proceed with the search.

The examination of shallow-water reports of finding

The possibility that HMAS *Sydney* could have tried to reach the Western Australian coast, and could lie in (relatively) shallow water and perhaps be found during fishing or trawling operations, remained a constant factor. This proved especially a possibility as shore-based fishing (for rock lobsters, crabs and fish) progressed into deeper water throughout the 1990s. There have been numerous reports received in this context and as a result the WA Maritime Museum and the RAN regularly joined to examine snags, magnetic anomalies, unusual echo sounder traces or other indications of a wreck. Some reports were most promising, though when approached for advice on snags, the Fisheries Department advised caution was needed. This was due to the presence of a number of lost trawlers and ‘a significant series of rises and rough bottom topography’ in the vicinity of the 100m depth contour stretching north from the Abrolhos Island up past Carnarvon.

In December 1992, being in receipt of a report of a large object projecting over 10 metres above the seabed in the area off Carnarvon (The Ted Graham report), a combined RAN/WA Museum team set out on board HMAS *Moresby*, concluding it was geological. This was followed on the same voyage by examination of an anecdotal report received by the RAN of another promising object projecting over 25m above the seabed (the Sampey/Thomas report). This also proved geological. Then in 1993, at the request of the Museum, the RAN examined an extremely promising 200 metre long by 10 metre high and 20 metre wide formation off Dirk Hartog Island, again showing it to be most likely geological (The Pryor report). Later, the Museum sought to dispel any doubt remaining at this extremely promising site by examining it with magnetometers deployed from a boat skippered by the son of the finder and found it to be non-magnetic. Nonetheless, links were also established with Western Australian oil-field diving companies with deep-water capacity and remote operated vehicles (ROVs) with a view to facilitate a non-disturbance inspection of the remains of *Sydney* and/or *Kormoran*, should either or both be found in relatively shallow water.

Political and other expressions of interest in finding HMAS *Sydney*

In 1994 Minister Beazley, who had a keen interest in military history and whose father was in Government at the time of HMAS *Sydney*'s loss, invited Museum staff to meet and discuss the best means of seeking funds from Government for a search and (as a necessary preliminary) the archival search. Later in that same year, another senior local politician and war veteran Mr Graham Edwards also met with staff with a similar aim in mind. When approached for assistance, the Department of Librarianship, Archives and Records at Monash University also offered its services in the search, management and analysis of the resultant archives, subject to funding. Despite this enthusiasm and support, funding was not obtained however. Nor did anything come from the approaches made by the Museum, politicians and other researchers when *RV Knorr*—the vessel on which RMS *Titanic* was found—called into Fremantle in 1994.

The HMAS Sydney Trust.

In March 1995 Western Australian Government looked towards supporting a search should the

archival search narrow the search zone down and three public groups began gearing up to raise money to find the HMAS *Sydney*. Two fell by the wayside leaving the *HMAS Sydney Trust* led by Wayne Sydney Born, a car salesman, the primary force. His group included local politicians such as Stephen Smith, Graham Edwards, elements of the SRG and other researchers, including Ted Graham of Fugro Survey. They eventually hoped to perform a deep-water search in the 'Detmer's area'. In May of that year, politician Paul Filing, another member of the Trust, made a bipartisan call in parliament for the Commonwealth Government to support any moves to locate the HMAS *Sydney*. He also called on the House to support a call for public subscriptions, for the government to fund a memorial, to establish an Act of Parliament protecting the wreck from unauthorized access and to keep the coordinates of the wreck (if found) a secret.

As its first project the Trust sought to have an anomaly located in c. 100m of water SW of Carnarvon examined (the Williamson site). Though the Museum and the RAN indicated they were committed to examining the site in due course; convinced it was very significant, the Trust elected to proceed independently. After obtaining sponsorship from the West Australian newspaper a team led by Mr Born including the finder, Mr Edwards and Ted Graham set out to examine it the following May. The subsequent news item advising of the failure to locate a wreck also ominously noted that in the terrible weather encountered on site, 'most members of the party had become very sick—Mr Born very ill'. Though he recovered from the combined effects of seasickness and a virus sufficiently to conduct an interview with the West Australian, it was not long after, that Mr Born died of heart failure.

A southern position for the Sydney/Kormoran battle is postulated

In early 1993 Mrs Glenys McDonald, a mid-west resident advised on the basis of her inquiries that a search of the Port Gregory region was required and later she suggested a grid search of the region. She had reached this conclusion after conducting extensive oral histories and archival study. This was following on from earlier reports to the Museum from former Geraldton resident Mrs Adeline Cox and Mr Ted King of Kalbarri. They had earlier (in 1991) reported sightings possibly indicative of a 'battle' in those regions. In November airborne geophysical company Aerodata, (J. Bell, T. Ridsill-Smith, D.F. Pridmore) that was later to be incorporated into World Geosciences advised the Museum of the location of two aeromagnetic anomalies thought to be *Sydney* and *Kormoran* in the area north of the Abrolhos Island. Though their subsequent analysis of the two anomalies—at a significant cost to their company and covering an area of 10,000 sq km over several weeks—showed them to be geological, the extensive publicity given to it and the research that preceded it swung public attention to possibility that HMAS *Sydney* could have been trying to make for Geraldton before it succumbed. It also caused some to question Detmer's veracity and postulate a southern battle position somewhere north of the Abrolhos. A number of analyses by experienced navigators, some past and serving RAN officers (including Ean MacDonald), also concluded that lifeboats from HSK *Kormoran* that landed north of Carnarvon emanated from the Abrolhos region and not from the Detmer's battle position. These combined with earlier claims by Lt Col (retd.) T. Warren Whitakker and inventor Mr Lindsay Knight to have found HMAS *Sydney*, HSK *Kormoran* and an unidentified Japanese vessel in the region by a combination of 'map dowsing' and Mr Knight's Subtle Energy Detection System. This all combined to cause many researchers—no matter how implausible the Whitakker/Knight claims were—to turn their attention to that area.

The HMAS Sydney Foundation, and the Parliamentary Inquiry.

On the death of W.S. Born, the Trust collapsed and was reformed at the instigation of Mr Edwards, under the leadership of Ed Punchard of Prospero Films as the *HMAS Sydney Foundation*. Having most of the former Trust, including Ted Graham, Kim Kirsner, and Mr

Born's widow, Karen on board, it garnered further high-level political and academic support and was launched at a public ceremony held at the Maritime Museum in December 1995. Eventually senior politicians Kim Beazley, Graham Edwards, Paul Filing, Tim Fischer, John Panizza and Steven Smith sat on the Foundation's board attesting to the success of its leaders and organizers in garnering very high-powered support and national interest. Despite this great success and as was the case with the Trust, the Maritime Museum declined invitations to join the *HMAS Sydney* Foundation, being required to maintain its independence and thereby be best placed to provide independent advice and expertise should the need arise. A Memorandum of Understanding was entered into, however.

Partly with a view to the growing national interest, in April 1996 Australian Archives produced its comprehensive *Source Analysis for HMAS Sydney and HSK Komoran* (R. Summerrell ed.). It was an update of a listing prepared for the 1991 Forum seeking to 'identify all Commonwealth government archival records known to exist concerning the sinking of HMAS Sydney'. It was an essential preliminary to any projected in-water search. In June a very-well attended forum, hosted by Glenys McDonald and World Geosciences was held at the WA Museum in Geraldton. Many views were aired and it proved another focus for interest in the possibility that the wrecks lay in that region. In February 1997 another well-attended forum was held, this time in Fremantle (the host HMAS *Sydney* researcher John Doohan). The diverse, sometimes controversial and occasionally acrimonious views expressed at both the 1996-7 Geraldton and Fremantle gatherings alerted many to the growing controversy. These two public events and the resultant publicity were followed by two Private Members Bills tabled in the Federal Legislative Assembly, one by Paul Filing and the other by Steven Smith, both of the *HMAS Sydney Foundation*. These provided for the establishment and composition of a committee to investigate the loss of HMAS *Sydney*. In June the parameters for the inquiry were set leading to its sitting across Australia in the following year. One of its six aims was to examine the

. . . desirability and practicability of conducting a search for HMAS *Sydney* and the extent to which the Commonwealth Government should participate in such a search should one be deemed desirable and practicable

The question of whether archival material was also still to be found was also raised as a matter of considerable priority. Finally, after an exhaustive round of national hearings and after collating all the evidence received into an 18-volume set, the Committee made 17 recommendations, including

Recommendation 10. The Royal Australian Navy sponsor a seminar on the likely search areas for Sydney and Kormoran, involving as many of the individual researchers and groups as possible.

Recommendation 11. After the search area is more accurately defined, some preliminary surveys be undertaken to try and confirm the accuracy of the wreck locations, prior to a full in-water search. An initial search for HSK Kormoran at or near 26°32-34'S, 111°E, if supported by the seminar, would seem a logical starting point.

In concluding the report, which was tabled in March 1999, Chairman Senator David MacGibbon noted that

The search for *Sydney* and *Kormoran* is not guaranteed of success. If it does succeed, it may provide those interested in the fate of the ships some further insights into the events of 19 November 1941. If the search is unsuccessful, it does not mean that people will no longer wonder about the final resting place of the ship. However, an attempt to find the *Sydney* will be a sign that Australia cares about the 645 men who gave their lives in defence of their country, as well as their families and friends.

HMAS Sydney Search Pty Ltd,

Towards the end of 2000, the *HMAS Sydney Foundation* ceased activities. In mid 2001 its place was taken by *HMAS Sydney Search Pty Ltd*, led by Ted Graham, Kim Kirsner and Don Pridmore. Later they were joined by Ron Birmingham QC; Keith Rowe; Commodore Bob Trotter (RAN, retd) as CEO; Bob King and finally Glenys McDonald. They too have proved successful in obtaining external support with Professor Geoffrey Blainey, former Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer and Rear Admiral David Holthouse its patrons. A number of senior politicians including Ministers Julie Bishop, Chris Ellison, Ian Campbell and Senator David Johnson also assisted. Later highly successful deep-water searcher David Mearns of *Blue Water Recoveries*, finder of HMS *Hood* and numerous other deepwater sites, began making contact with both the Museum and the HMAS Sydney Search Company in respect of the search for HMAS *Sydney*. As with its earlier counterparts, the Museum continued to maintain its independence, of the HMAS Sydney Search Company, providing assistance and advice where requested. It does so to this day.

The 2001 HMAS Sydney Location Seminar

The 1998/9 Parliamentary Inquiry was followed in 1999 by the report of an independent analysis by the Department of Geomatics at the University of Melbourne, finding in support of the 'Detmer's position'. This in turn was followed in November 2001 by a 60th Anniversary *HMAS Sydney Location Seminar* held at the WA Maritime Museum and hosted by the Sea Power Centre (RAN). It was opened by Rear Admiral Adams, the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff and in his opening speech he strongly encouraged 'anyone who believes they have relevant information to come forward'. He also stated that the aim of the seminar was 'to more accurately define the potential search area for the wrecks' and he advised that the results were to be forwarded to the Chief of Navy to allow him to make recommendations in respect of the search.

In essence the seminar, which extensively reviewed the archival, oral, oceanographic and scientific evidence, foundered in respect of the hoped-for narrowing of a search area. This was partly due to the strength of the belief expressed by Warren Whitakker supported by a number of experienced navigators, that it was impossible for the *Kormoran* lifeboats to have traveled from the Detmer's position to the Carnarvon region. They concluded that the boats came from a 'southern battle' site, near the Abrolhos Islands. The failure to table scientific advice advising of the absolute impossibility of the KDLS System—that had been used as proof that the wrecks lay in that area—was another factor. This all led to sharp divide and a lack of consensus amongst those present, with those supporting a search of the Detmer's battle position, passionately opposed by those who argued for a search of the Abrolhos region. This led the Chair Professor Peter Dennis of the Sea Power Centre to conclude

. . . more research . . . is needed so that those who have to make the decisions about using large amounts of money, at least some of it public money, can do so on the best possible and informed basis. I have to say as a concluding comment, that I am disappointed that several years on from the parliamentary report and given all the work various

groups here today have been doing, a greater measure of agreement and precision does not yet seem to be emerging. Until it does, talk of mounting searches at this stage is still premature.

Claims to have located HMAS Sydney

Claims to have found HMAS *Sydney* or its adversary have been regularly received by the Museum since the early 1980s. Where indications of a wreck are provided e.g. in the form of verifiable echo sounder traces, relics, magnetic or other anomalies, the Museum has always taken steps to have the site inspected either with the assistance of the RAN, or with oil industry help. As indicated above, to date all reports have proved geological. This included a number of anomalies found during a combined RAAF/RAN sweep in the area north of the Abrolhos Islands in late 2000, conducted at the instigation of Glenys McDonald. These were examined by HMAS *Huon* in the following year.

While the vast majority of reports are made in honest belief, some have proved fraudulent and others blatantly self-serving with a view to promoting untried technology, or for financial, or personal gain. Some reports have come from as far afield as Britain, including one from Timothy Akers claiming to have found the two wrecks using satellite technology. It received considerable publicity until the science was proved doubtful at best. After the press later published his claim to have located a Japanese aircraft carrier, all interest in his claims evaporated. Another report from Warren Whitakker and Lindsay Knight appeared in mid 2001. In their press release they again claimed to have found the *Sydney* and *Kormoran* using the Knight Direct Location System (KDLS). This was a derivative of the system they had used earlier to find the two wrecks and what they later claimed to be a Japanese submarine, with bones and samurai swords evident in the wreckage. GPS positions were also provided. Though clearly of a problematic nature, with the methods having a dubious historic and technical record, the report received uncritical national press, some of it front page under the heading 'HMAS Sydney Found'.

The 'southern battle position' rendered of secondary importance in any search

In 2002 a group comprising the Italian Oil major Agip, Sydney based ROC Oil, in partnership with Apache Northwest of the US and local companies, Voyager Energy and Bounty Oil and Gas combined to examine gratis (and at quite considerable expense to themselves) eight 'Sydney-related' sites that had been reported off Geraldton. This included the shallowest of the Whitakker/Knight GPS sites, showing all to be either geological or non-existent (John Begg, co-ordinator). Still refusing to accept this as proof and citing deficiencies in the remote-sensing equipment used, those supporting a southern position rejected the conclusions in respect of the Whitakker/Knight sites.

The first government grant is received

Despite the lingering, and still passionate, support for a 'southern battle site', in 2005 the Prime Minister announced a grant of \$1.3 million dollars to the HMAS Sydney Search Company to pursue the search and it then established a Memorandum Of Understanding with Mr Mearns, as its chosen in-water operative. The Western Australian government also provided support to enable the company to function.

The Whitakker/Knight claims categorically disproved.

In March 2007 HMAS Sydney Search Company reported that Perth based Geo Subsea Pty. Ltd. which had its research vessel *Geosounder* travelling en route Fremantle to Dampier, had investigated gratis the KDLS southern GPS site off the Abrolhos Islands. Using a state of the art

multi-beam echo sounder system capable of mapping the seabed for distance of three kilometres either side to a depth of 5000 metres, nothing but a bare seabed was found. This served to unequivocally remove the Whitakker/Knight positions from the agenda. Together with the 2002 results in mind the results also unequivocally rendered the ‘southern sites’ of secondary importance in any search and survey regime. The way was finally opened for Government to provide full financial support to the search of the ‘Detmer’s position’ at or around, plus or minus a degree of 26° 32–34’S., 111° E.

The 2007 claim to have found HMAS Sydney. The November 2007 funding and search announcements

In respect of HMAS *Sydney* there have innumerable media events in recent times, the most recent in August this year, filling front page news and TV prime time slots nationally (the Phil Shepherd Report). The images of the wreck provided by the team—who genuinely thought they had found HMAS *Sydney*—and an RAN examination out of HMAS *Leeuwin* showed the site was that of a small vessel clearly not related to HMAS *Sydney* or its adversary. After a short delay caused by the need to attend to this claim Senator Bruce Billson, the Minister assisting the Minister for the Navy, announced a Commonwealth grant of \$4.2 million for the search. This, when joined with \$550,000 provided by the Western Australian Government, a further \$250,000 from the New South Wales Government and some public and corporate sponsorship, made a search for HMAS *Sydney* and, as a necessary preliminary, its adversary HSK *Kormoran* finally possible.

Subsequently, on November 19 at a ceremony held at the Maritime Museum, the HMAS *Sydney Search Company* formally launched the search. Speakers included Ted Graham of the Search Company, John Perryman, Senior Historical Officer, Sea Power Centre (RAN), David Mearns of Blue Water Recoveries and on behalf of the Museum—in a speech reflecting the events outlined above—the author.

In concluding, and in acknowledging that there is every chance of failure, especially with HMAS *Sydney*, it is observed that Senator MacGibbon’s comments at the conclusion of the Parliamentary Inquiry into the loss of HMAS *Sydney* are the key to it all. He stated that the ‘search for *Sydney* and *Kormoran* is not guaranteed of success...an attempt to find the *Sydney* will be a sign that Australia cares about the 645 men who gave their lives in defence of their country, as well as their families and friends’.