

Jump TO Article



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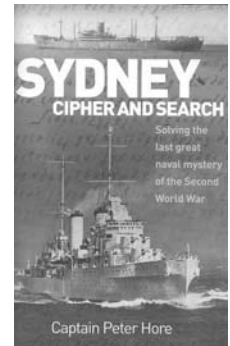
Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEW

Sydney Cipher and Search: solving the last great naval mystery of the Second World War

by Captain Peter Hore, RN

Seafarer Books: UK, 2009, pp 314, ISBN 978-1-906266-08, RRP \$37.50 (paperback)
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This is the latest book on the discovery of the wrecks of HMAS *Sydney* and the German auxiliary cruiser HSK *Kormoran* in 2008. The author, Captain Peter Hore, RN, is a published naval historian who was formerly head of Defence Studies for the Royal Navy and is currently chairman of the research committee of the Society for Nautical Research.

Sydney Cipher and Search is one of those gripping books which are so well written that it is impossible to put them down. The author has been involved in research on *Sydney* for nearly 10 years and while there was not much new to discover in the official records, his measured application in partnership with wreck hunter David Mearns ultimately delivered the goods. He takes us through his re-examination of the records and a deeper insight into the career of the German Captain, Detmers, until piece-by-piece, the wreck hunters were able to consolidate into a small enough sea area to explore with ultra-modern technology, which would give them a reasonable chance of success when the Australian government raised its budget significantly. His parting words to me after the 2005 King-Hall Naval History Conference were: “We **will** find her (*Sydney*)!” – prophetic and confident indeed!

His persistence in tracing the few surviving members of the German cruiser, even as remotely located as Santiago de Chile, have paid dividends – not before time as the former radio officer, von Malapert, died a short time afterwards (aged 95). On re-examination of the English translation of Detmers’ book published in 1959 and his earlier intercepted log of events (intended for his masters in Berlin), Hore discovered significant errors, which led to a better appreciation of the course of the battle. This has been endorsed more recently by the findings of the Coles Commission of Inquiry into the loss of *Sydney*.

The compilation of underwater video and photographic evidence by the Find the Sydney Foundation has finally determined the cause of her sinking after the savage battle with *Kormoran*. Few surface ships in World War II would have endured a pounding such as *Sydney* received during the hour-long engagement. British-designed cruisers were not easily sunk by gunfire (as the *Graf Spee* discovered early in the war) and torpedo hits outside the large machinery spaces were not likely to be any more successful. These spaces were well-protected by an armour belt sufficient to resist 6-inch shells at close range. However, the sheer volume of shells spread through the upperworks and superstructure would have caused massive casualties and raging fires, which probably overcame the survivors’

efforts to save their ship. Progressive flooding further aft along the waterline, possibly reaching the vital machinery spaces themselves after several hours, would have caused an eventual loss of buoyancy. This would have caused *Sydney* to plunge by the bow, as evidenced by the discoveries in the debris field leading to her final resting place, upright on the sea floor, over 2000m below.

The wreckage of both ships reveals a general endorsement of the hitherto uncorroborated German accounts (which had led to disbelief in many quarters). The lack of survivors from *Sydney* now appears more reasonable as the ship would have sunk quite suddenly and the lack of serviceable life-rafts would have mitigated against anyone escaping from the ship. Given the inevitable delay in organising one, any search of the vast sea area involved would not have been prompt enough to find any survivors in the water in the conditions prevailing at the time.

Hore explains how other British cruisers engaged in hunting German raiders had been extremely lucky not to have been equally surprised by enemy ships. The enemy had learned the lessons of World War I raider warfare very well. British Admiralty directions and policy in these circumstances evolved slowly, but progress was being made in better identifying stray merchant ships by building up complex shipping plots in shore headquarters – though this may not have been timely enough for *Sydney* on the far-off Australia Station.

Hore also examines damage in other cruisers, particularly those with catastrophic torpedo and bomb damage which led to sinkings. The Royal Australian Navy suffered a greater proportion of losses, not surprising considering the degree of enemy engagement encountered throughout World War II. There is no shame in this fact. Our ships were well-built and well-handled. *Sydney* was undoubtedly surprised and ‘caught a tartar’, but her response ultimately sank the *Kormoran*. The German survivors were forced to surrender, but the air/sea search for *Sydney* failed to find them too, and some lifeboats were lucky to be rescued by passing merchant ships, while others reached shore by their own efforts. Their escape from a burning ship in difficult conditions must also be considered lucky – considering the immense threat to the cargo of mines onboard – and a credit to Detmers and his crew. That *Sydney* herself did not explode is curious, but her sudden plunge was equally destructive and final.

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