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What may the wreck of the World War II cruiser, *Sydney*, reveal?

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In November 1941, the war between the Axis powers, Germany and Italy, against the Allies, including Australia, had been under way for over two years. With the Axis winning everywhere, HMAS Sydney was patrolling off the West Australian coast when it chanced upon the German raider, Kormoran. In the ensuing engagement, both ships were severely damaged. The Kormoran sank and it is assumed that the Sydney also sank with the loss of all hands, but the wreck has never been found. In this paper, Tom Lewis indicates what the wreck, if found, might tell us about Australia's greatest naval loss.

If HMAS *Sydney* is ever found, what will the wreck reveal about her last fight with the raider *Kormoran*? Will the discovery answer some of the mysteries of Australia's greatest naval loss?

The story, as related by the German survivors, is well known. On 19 November 1941, some three weeks before Japan entered the war, the *Sydney*, patrolling off the Western Australian coast, closed up to the raider, which was flying a false flag, for interrogation. The *Kormoran* struck the flag, hoisted her true colours, and opened fire, hitting the cruiser with her third salvo in the bridge. *Sydney* hesitated, and then replied. The two ships fought each other for just under an hour, the *Sydney* taking a torpedo hit, and the *Kormoran* began sinking, her survivors taking to their lifeboats. The *Sydney*, on fire, and having taken a tremendous battering, moved off, probably not under effective control. The ship was never seen again, and there were no survivors from the cruiser, although a body in a Carley float, presumed from the ship, was later recovered and buried at Christmas Island.

There are many controversies associated with the action. Why did the *Sydney* not stand off at extreme range where she would have had the disguised raider under fire from her own more effective weapons? Why did she not deploy her embarked aircraft for overhead inspection? Some allegations made over the years range from the possible to the extreme. Did *Kormoran* open fire under the German flag, or another? Were Japanese forces involved – several weeks before Japan entered the war (e.g. Montgomery 1981; Montagu 2006)? Were survivors machine-gunned in the water to prevent their speaking out about broken “war rules”?

To answer such questions, and also to bring closure to the relatives of the *Sydney* ship's company, there has been much pressure, and several unsuccessful attempts, over many decades to find the wreck of the cruiser. But can finding the ship give any answers?

Will an inspection of *Sydney* tell us much about the battle?

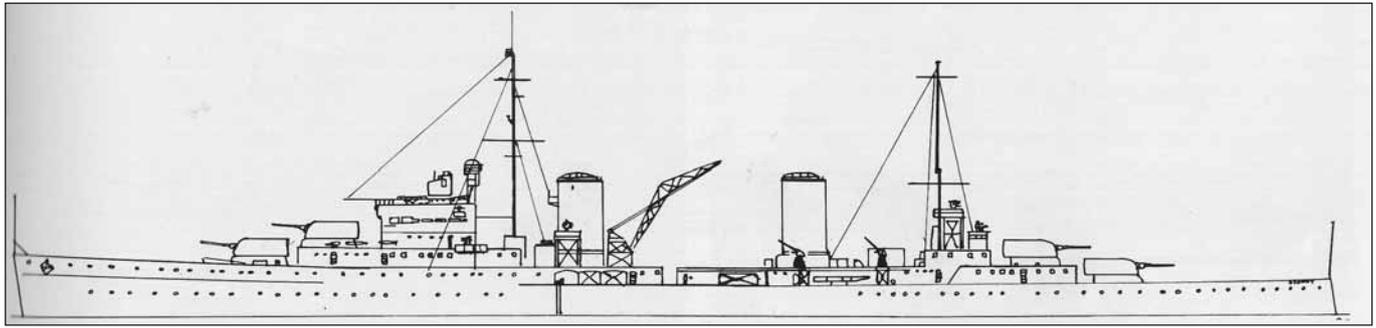
Sydney engaged in a lengthy fight with a heavily-gunned raider. According to the *Kormoran*'s gunnery officer, Lieutenant Fritz Skeries (Gill 1957, 454)², the raider scored:

- 5.9-inch armament hits on the bridge and [gunnery] director tower;
- further hits on the bridge and amidships;
- a hit on the *Sydney*'s embarked aeroplane;
- effective fire from *Kormoran*'s anti-aircraft machineguns and 3.7-cm guns against *Sydney*'s bridge, torpedo tubes and anti-aircraft batteries;
- a torpedo strike under *Sydney*'s A and B turrets; and then
- many more hits fired by a large number of salvos from the *Kormoran*'s main guns, causing the separation of a turret from the cruiser and setting the ship on fire.

According to Skeries, *Kormoran* fired 450 rounds from her main armament, and several hundred from her anti-aircraft batteries. When initial firing commenced, the distance between the two ships was approximately 1,600 yards. This is an incredibly close distance when one considers that the *Sydney*, when previously in combat with two Italian cruisers, opened fire at 20,000 yards, and obtained a hit on one of them within six minutes (Gill 1957, 188-90). How many out of at least 450 shots fired would have hit home? One set of World War II wargame rules shows that, at 2,000 yards, once your ship had straddled the target, you were then “on”, and two thirds of shots fired would hit at such close range. All things considered, it seems reasonable to expect as an absolute minimum 100 rounds of 5.9-inch hits; more realistically 150 strikes. It might be thought that some hits would have been deterred

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²Gill had access to Detmers' Action Report in which Detmers gives these numbers in his concluding paragraphs. The report has been much reproduced, e.g. Royal Australian Navy Seapower Centre (2001, 45-6).



HMAS *Sydney* II in outline, without its aircraft catapult [courtesy R Gillett]

by the armoured magazines and machinery spaces – the sides having 3.5-inch and 3-inch plate (Raven and Roberts 1980, 416), respectively. However, the design specifications for the Leander-class dictated that the magazines were to be immune to 6-inch fire above 10,000 yards, and this requirement was met by the fitting of 3-inch plate (Raven and Roberts 1980, 143). Skeries reported that, in the final stages of the 55-minute battle, the Australian ship was being constantly hit by gun fire from the raider (Gill 1957, 456). With this sort of firepower being directed against the light cruiser at such a short range, the *Sydney* was doomed.

What might the *Sydney*'s ordeal have caused the vessel to look like? In World War I, in the battle between the German cruiser *Emden* – coincidentally against the previous *Sydney* – the *Emden* was hit by “about 100” 6-inch shells over an hour and twenty minutes, and she was “...totally wrecked, with the hull holed at numerous points, its superstructure a blazing shambles...and steering only possible using the screws” (Coulthard-Clark 1998, 98). Returning to the 1941 engagement, if we add the 3.7-cm fire and the torpedo hit, it seems reasonable to presume massive damage, with the *Sydney* barely afloat – it is a tribute to the damage control expertise on board and the ship's company's determination that she was still on the surface.

Will the *Sydney* be a battered wreck; or will it be relatively undamaged, having engaged, as some of the “Japanese lobby” claim, in a short sharp fight with the *Kormoran*, which it won, only to be sunk by a Japanese torpedo? The cruiser should be smashed extensively on both sides. It was only around a few minutes after battle was commenced that *Sydney* veered hard to port, and fired four torpedoes. The course took her astern of the *Kormoran*, and exposed her starboard side to the raider. In summary, the combat began with both ships side by side, the *Sydney* on *Kormoran*'s starboard, but then *Sydney*'s port side was exposed (e.g. Frame 1993, 86-7).

So if the wreck is found, if it is damaged massively on both sides, this is significant. If a wreck examination bears this out, then the survivors' accounts are supported. If the *Sydney* is only damaged on one side, or if her damage differs markedly to what may be expected from receiving over a hundred rounds of 6-inch fire, then the *Kormoran* accounts are suspect.

Sydney may have lost significant items of equipment. *Bismarck*, sunk by the Royal Navy in World War II, rolled in her sinking so that all four of her gun turrets fell out of their mounts, and then sank and righted herself so she now lies upright on the sea bed. The wreck has been visited many times by deep-sea submarine. Her remains,

however, do not tell us much that was not already known from accounts of her last battle. If *Sydney* has lost her guns, this will give even less of a wreck to examine. But if found, the cruiser's guns should be significantly damaged, bearing out the German raider's account. If not, then there will be cause for further speculation.

Some analysis of the bow compartment flooding, caused by the torpedo strike, suggests that counter-flooding in the stern may have contributed to a propensity to roll during the action (Hore 2001, 261). “The consequence may have been flooding of sufficient spaces...to cause sudden capsizes.” Will *Sydney*'s wreck be right side up, and does that tell us anything? Probably, it is a “yes” to the first question, and a “no” to the second. Observation of other battles leads to a conclusion that warships generally finally end up on an even keel. Out of twelve wrecks catalogued from the Battle of Savo Island, for example, ten are keel down, one on its side, and one upside down (Ballard 1993, 200-1). *Sydney* will probably be right side up, and inspection will be made easier.

The basic dimensions of the wreck, if she is in one piece, will be a ship 171.3 metres long x 17.3 metres wide. Confirming features will include the two funnels and two masts of the Leander-class, and eight guns in twin turrets. The ship's Walrus aircraft was mounted between the two funnels, but little of it will remain, although the 16-metre launching slide and recovery crane may be located. Leanders also carried four 4-inch single guns and eight torpedo tubes in two quadruple-mounts. The condition of all of these will provide further clues as to the veracity of the accounts of the ship's end.

Will signs of torpedo strikes be visible in the wreck of the *Sydney*?

Probably the most controversial suggestion is that the cruiser was hit by a Japanese submarine's torpedo. This damage would be additional to that caused by the *Kormoran*'s single strike. It would be significant if there were signs of, say, five torpedo strikes, as the *Kormoran*'s captain, Detmers, thought only one of his impacted, although he may have been wrong. Significantly for the Japanese lobby, though, it will be impossible to tell what sort of torpedo, German or Japanese, impacted the hull. Such weapons caused a massive hole affecting several compartments. There is not going to be a trace of any weapon which exploded to be found in the hull.

Shipwrecks which sit on an even keel invariably sink into the seabed as the ocean floor is covered in sand and silt. In observations of nearly a hundred wrecks by the author, this seems to be the case. There are exceptions: the wooden clipper, *Star of Russia*, in Vanuatu, sits up to

a degree of the upper half of her hull protruding, probably due to its composition of wood. The submarine *I-124*, sunk with 80 crew on board outside Darwin, was for decades airtight in her bow compartments, causing the wreck to sit up off the sand (Lewis 1997). But most ships, especially if they contain heavy cargoes, sink down into the sea floor to at least their Plimsoll line.

Given that the wreck, if it is sitting on an even keel, will have sunk into the seabed, it will be difficult to see if there are torpedo holes below the waterline, especially as along the sides of the hull there will also be much gun damage.

Will there be human remains in the *Sydney*?

There is often little left internally in a ship's remains to enlighten historical analysis. Anything not made of tough materials does not survive. Paper disappears, breaking up, eaten by fish, generally dispersing. Wood becomes porous and crumbles. Bones are corroded by salt water and remains are dispersed by tide and fish. This takes a comparatively short time. An example is the case of USS *Peary*, sunk in battle with 91 crew on 19 February 1941.

Peary was one of many ships in Darwin Harbour when Japanese forces launched their first attack on Australia. She fought hard but was hit by a small bomb and sank quickly by the stern. Post-war, her location was sought by the United States war graves organisation. Despite sinking in full view of hundreds of people, quite close to shore, she could not be found. Fourteen years later HMAS *Quadrant* found her by accident, proceeding into Darwin Harbour with her echo sounder operating. The wreck, located in a deep valley, was explored by divers, initially for the purpose of finding remains. They located only "some human bones, specifically in the wardroom passage and the yeomen's office. Eventually these were recovered and returned to America for burial" (Lewis 1992, 32). After only 14 years, most of 91 sets of human remains had disappeared. So it will be with the *Sydney*. There will be no compartment of the ship left unflooded, particularly considering the depth at which the ship lies – the tremendous pressures of the deep ocean around where she sank will ensure that. Human remains will not be present.

Did *Kormoran* explode?

Kormoran was carrying a cargo of mines, although it seems from examination of the prisoners' statements, that none were ever deployed. However, they were utilized to scuttle the ship. Detmers stated: "Explosive charge in port forward oil tank...touched off charge, last boat cast off. Mines explode. Ship sinks rapidly stern first" (Australian Archives B, 8). Quite a few of the *Kormoran* survivors confirmed the mines being used to destroy the vessel. Albert Ruf, an engine-room rating, stated mines were carried aft and "probably were the cause of the vessel blowing up" (Australian Archives A, 20). The summary of analysis, presented to the Australian War Cabinet on 4 December, stated: "At about 1815H the raider's crew abandoned ship, and at midnight the vessel, which was scuttled, blew up" (Frame 1993, 85).

The final explosion was massive. *Kormoran* survivor Herman Ortmann related his escape from the burning raider, where he and his fellows in the lifeboat "rowed like mad to get as far away from the *Kormoran* before it blew

up thirty minutes later", and he also described steel raining down all around them (McDonald 2005, 83-4).

So will *Kormoran* be in one piece, and therefore be a beginning search point for the search for the *Sydney*? We might expect the mines to have caused such massive damage that the ship is in so many pieces that she is not a complete wreck any more. It may be the case though, as the mines were not distributed around the ship, that she suffered massive damage in only one place.

Will *Sydney's* wreck be in one place? Was there an explosion?

Shipwrecks often do not remain intact. Sometimes they break apart from the stresses engaged in the disproportionate pressures necessitated in compartments being flooded. *Titanic*, for example, although involved in a fairly simple collision – *i.e.* no-one was killed in the initial collision with an iceberg, and she settled slowly over around three hours – finally broke in half during her sinking. Ships involved in battle suffer considerable damage which can lead to much more break up. HMS *Hood*, for example, was sunk in the Atlantic in World War II, in a brief fight with German naval units. She caught fire and, shortly afterwards, exploded. The wreck is scattered over three main sites, with "debris fields" nearby (HMS *Hood* website).

Even if the *Sydney* did not break apart in her dive to the bottom of the sea, she may have broken up through explosion. If she did, what are implications for the wreck? Any explosion is going to mean a further scattering of wreck fragments, although depending on the force of the blast, not necessarily to a huge extent. There are a few, but only a few, accounts of *Sydney* blowing up. Frame (1993, 103) quotes one *Kormoran* survivor as speaking of "the cruiser exploding as they rowed towards her in the hope of being picked up".

Captain Detmers is on record as thinking she blew up. He said: "I had been badly hit and was making preparations to abandon my ship. Before leaving, I looked around and, in the darkness, I could see *Sydney* still blazing fiercely. Then just before abandoning ship, I looked for the *Sydney* but she had gone. All was blackness...My opinion is that *Sydney* had been hit by me at a vital spot, and the fire reached the magazine and that she blew up and sank. I do not think there could have been any survivors" (Australian Archives B, 4).

However, there are other suggestions. The 1999 Senate Committee of Inquiry examined this theory but concluded: "it is difficult to assess the veracity of such claims when there is no evidence, for example from interrogations, that German survivors actually witnessed *Sydney* exploding" (Parliament of Australia 1999, Chapter 4). In summary, the explosion possibility must be largely discounted, although unverified reports³ continue.

How quickly did the cruiser sink?

Although we can reject an explosion, there seems

³See, for example: "Tales of the Sea: HMAS *Sydney* vs. HSK *Kormoran*" 25 February 2007 at <http://lefarkins.blogspot.com/2006/12/tales-of-sea-hmas-sydney-vs-hsk.html>, 1 July 2007; Wikipedia's 1 July 2007 entry for *Kormoran*: "*Sydney* was last seen by the crew of *Kormoran* in flames on the horizon followed by some kind of explosion".

evidence the Australian ship sank quickly. Gill (1957, 459) thought: "It is not surprising that there were no survivors, for after the punishment she received from the shells and bullets, and the ravages of fires on board, it is unlikely that much that could float remained". Frame (1993, 94) quotes *Kormoran* crewman Tymmers, who suggested "the cruiser sank at about 1930", and later Radio Operator Hans Linke, who, when in the raider's boats during the scuttling operations, noted that "the boats rowed towards the cruiser in the hope of being picked up; she was on fire amidships and astern, and disappeared so suddenly she was believed sunk" (Frame 1993, 103).

Captain Dechaineux's report to the Naval Board concluded "Survivors stated...at about 1900, cruiser was seen still heavily on fire and shortly afterwards disappeared. No violent explosion was seen or heard" (Frame 1993, 94). Dechaineux went on to say: "Most evidence seems to show that the cruiser disappeared suddenly and most prisoners believe that she sank before midnight" (Frame 1993, 95).

The interrogation of the prisoners summarized: "From darkness until about 2300, the glow of the burning *Sydney* could be seen about 14 or 15 miles away to the south eastward, but at a later time this glow disappeared and the raider's crew believe that she sank" (Australian Archives A, 9-10).

Several *Kormoran* survivor-interrogation reports noted that the cruiser, after she was hit by the torpedo, was down in the bows, most estimating by six feet (Australian Archives B, 178). This suggests quite heavy flooding in that area. Given evidence that the forward turrets were paralysed, there can be some conclusion that this area was heavily damaged, with damage control equipment in the area perhaps out of action. Captain Hore's analysis above contributes to thinking that the *Sydney* may have capsized and sunk quickly.

A summary of the accounts above suggest that *Sydney* may not be far from the wreck of the *Kormoran*. She seems to have sunk within view of the survivors in their lifeboats. Although we have suggested that the wreck of the *Kormoran* may have somewhat disintegrated, finding it will still prove useful in acting as a datum for a *Sydney* search.

Conclusion

What may we conclude is the final scene? The German raider *Kormoran* is only going to exist as a fragment of a wreck. The *Sydney* wreck is going to be in one piece, perhaps with sections missing. She is likely to be on an even keel, but is going to be so battered that her hull exterior will be insufficient to add to the story. The ship's remains are now 66 years old, and upright sections will have corroded and probably fallen in on the remainder. It will be heavily covered with growth which will have become concretions in many parts. Many sections will not be distinguishable as parts of a ship. Penetration of the wreck is certain to be strictly forbidden, as although human remains are unlikely to be present, the site will be considered a war grave out of respect for the feelings of the families of the 645 members of the Royal Australian Navy lost with the vessel.

Inspection of the wreck is likely to be possible to the extent that it will corroborate the *Kormoran* survivors' account – that their ship pounded the Australian cruiser

at close range, on both sides, extremely heavily, with 6-inch shell fire, a torpedo, and smaller calibre gunfire. Anything different from this will be grounds for further debate.

Given that this picture is the one most accepted by most historians, and given that there has been no variation in it over the years from the *Kormoran* survivors, it is likely that it is the truth. It is unlikely that the wreck of HMAS *Sydney* will contribute any conclusive answers to the mystery of why this cruiser was surprised and sunk so quickly. But one aspect of examining the wreck, and finding that it confirms the *Kormoran* survivors' account, is that it will finally end alternative speculation, which in some cases has amounted to derogatory and hurtful suggestions.

The Author: Tom Lewis is the author of five history books and several hundred articles. He specialised in shipwreck research for some years, as a diver and historian, leading to the publication of *Wrecks in Darwin Waters*, and *Sensuikan I-124*, the story of the Japanese submarine sunk outside Darwin Harbour in 1942. He holds a PhD in Strategic Studies and is a serving naval officer.

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