



THE RAAF IN THE LOSS OF HMAS SYDNEY

The remains of the Royal Australian Navy's light cruiser *Sydney* (the second RAN warship to bear that name) were discovered on 16 March 2008 about 250 kilometres off the West Australian coastline, at a depth of nearly 2.5 kilometres. Just days earlier, the wreck of the German commerce raider HSK *Kormoran* was located some 22 kilometres away. For half an hour in the late afternoon of 19 November 1941, these two ships had traded shell-fire and torpedoes with such damaging effect that both sank later that night—*Kormoran* with the loss of 78 men, *Sydney* with its entire complement of 645.

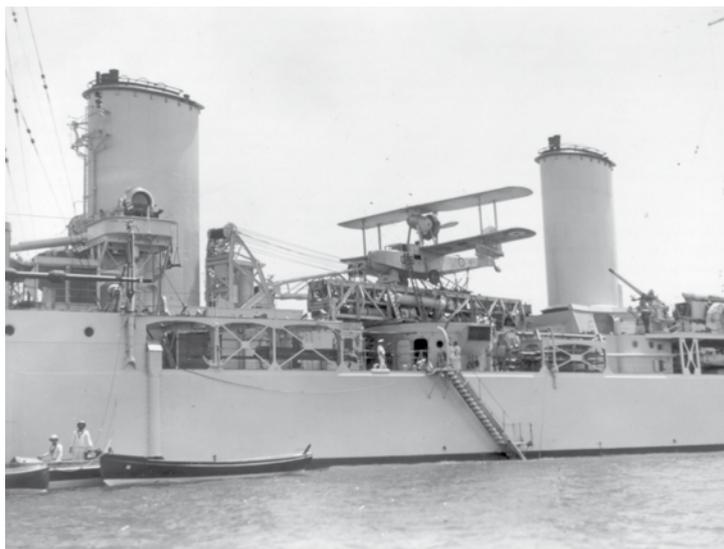
The finding of both ships 66 years after the action which claimed them brings closure to an enduring mystery. That sense of relief, while strongest among Australia's naval community, is shared across the nation. It is also felt within the Royal Australian Air Force, which had six of its uniformed members on board *Sydney* when it disappeared without trace.

These were men from the RAAF's No 9 Squadron based at Rathmines on Lake Macquarie, north of Sydney. They formed a detachment which was embarked to operate and maintain the Walrus amphibian aircraft which the cruiser carried to undertake reconnaissance, gunnery spotting, and search and rescue work.

In the modified *Leander* Class ships of the RAN's light cruiser force, the Walrus sat on a catapult positioned amidships between the ship's two funnels. When required for use, the amphibian took off from there; during recovery, it was lifted by crane from the water alongside and returned to its place high on the ship's superstructure. It is known that *Sydney*'s Walrus was sitting on its exposed perch at the start of the ill-fated clash with *Kormoran*. German eyewitnesses reported that the aircraft

was on the catapult with its engine running, and propeller turning, apparently in preparation for launching.

At this point, *Sydney*'s commander, Captain Joseph Burnett, was still attempting to satisfy himself that the strange ship he had encountered was the Dutch freighter *Straat Malakka* that it claimed to be. Flying off the ship's aircraft would have seemed a prudent step to take, if Burnett had doubts about the stranger's identity and thought that he might need to order his ship into action.



HMAS Sydney with its amphibian aircraft on catapult, 1936 (View close to that presented to Kormoran on 19 November 1941)

This makes it all the more puzzling that he reportedly drew almost abeam of *Kormoran* to starboard, and barely 1500 metres distant, before demanding that the mystery vessel's secret identifying code letters be displayed. This put *Sydney* at point-blank range when *Kormoran*'s captain chose the moment to drop his ship's disguise and open fire.

Within four seconds of firing two ranging shots, a salvo from *Kormoran*

struck *Sydney*'s bridge and armament director tower—thereby almost immediately restricting the Australian ship's capacity to make effective reply. A full salvo from *Sydney* passed over the German raider and failed to score any hits. Two more salvos from *Kormoran* again smothered *Sydney*'s bridge and tore amidships, followed by two more which took out the cruiser's forward gun turrets. According to Lieutenant Fritz Skeries, the gunnery officer in *Kormoran*, it was apparently between the third and fourth salvos that a single 'lucky shot' hit the cruiser's aeroplane and set it ablaze, causing its motor to shut off.

Nothing is known of what happened to the Walrus three-man crew, which would have normally consisted of the RAAF pilot, Flying Officer Ray Barrey, a naval officer

who acted as observer, and a RAN rating who was telegraphist air gunner. The other RAAF members of the air detachment—three fitters, one armourer and a photographer—were all maintenance and support personnel who would have taken their place at Action Stations among the ship's crew on or below deck. Whatever their individual part in the engagement, it is clear that the Air Force men shared the same fate as the rest of *Sydney's* crew.



RAAF Ansons (type shown) flew in search of Sydney

The disappearance of *Sydney* was not immediately noticed. The ship had previously advised that it expected to arrive at Fremantle, Western Australia, on 20 November, and it was not until the next day that it was reported as late. Even then there was no particular concern until the 23rd, when the ship was instructed to report by signal. Only on the following day were steps initiated to locate the missing cruiser. Among these measures was an air search by RAAF Ansons from the base at Gerraldton, north of Perth. The Commander-in-Chief of the Netherlands Navy in the East Indies was also asked to carry out an air search south of Java, where *Sydney* was last known to have been on 17 November when it handed over a troopship it had escorted to the Sunda Strait.

Efforts to find the missing cruiser took a different course after the first report was received that a British tanker had rescued survivors from a German ship approximately 120 miles off Carnarvon, Western Australia, on the evening of 24 November. It was now realised that a naval action of some sort had taken place. Ships already in the area were instructed to keep a lookout for other survivors and additional naval vessels were dispatched to assist in this work. The

RAAF was also requested to send Hudson aircraft from Pearce to Carnarvon, to be better positioned to carry out a detailed aerial search at sea. Two Catalina flying boats with longer endurance were additionally ordered from Townsville to undertake a wide ocean reconnaissance. These were measures which soon led to the location of many more boatloads of German survivors, both at sea and ashore on the WA coast, but revealed nothing about the whereabouts of *Sydney*.

One tantalizing hint on this score emerged some two months later, but has only recently reassumed significance. When a Carley float containing the remains of a corpse washed up on Christmas Island in early February 1942, it was first thought that this might be from *Sydney* but the idea was then discounted. In 2007, however, the grave containing the mystery corpse was located and the remains subjected to close forensic examination. It was subsequently concluded that the body definitely came from the lost cruiser, and based on indications that it had been dressed in overalls when found, the field of DNA matches was first thought to be narrowed to three engineering officers. Now, the investigators are seeking descendants of 13 men from *Sydney's* crew, in the hope that DNA samples may enable a final identification to be made from these 'possibles'. Among the 13 names is Flying Officer Ray Barrey.

- *The finding of HMAS Sydney II is an event of significance to the Air Force as well as the Navy, on account of the loss of six RAAF men during the 1941 action*
- *The RAAF also played a prominent part in the search effort to locate the missing cruiser in the week after the battle with Kormoran*
- *The pilot of the air detachment is among the men from Sydney being considered in the effort to identify a corpse washed up on Christmas Island in 1942*

*"The greatest crime to our own people is to be afraid to tell the truth ... Since the day of the air, the old frontiers are gone."
- Stanley Baldwin, former British PM (1943)*



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