

Lost and Found

Shipwreck Hunter David Mearns Has Made an Art of Finding Vessels Lost to the Sea





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The Shipwreck Hunter

By Leef Smith Barnes

For nearly 70 years, historians searched for clues that would lead them to the deep-water grave of the Royal Australian naval cruiser HMAS *Sydney II*. Considered a menace to her foes during WWII, the ship was dealt a series of devastating artillery blows during a battle with the German raider HSK *Kormoran*. While the *Kormoran's* crew was ordered to life boats, the *Sydney* was last seen drifting ablaze. Her crew of 645 men perished at sea.

The *Sydney's* final resting place was never recorded, presenting an enduring mystery. Research was conducted. Inquiries were launched. Physical searches were undertaken. But nothing was ever found.

Her location might still be unknown were it not for the unrelenting work of David Mearns, who at 50 is arguably the finest shipwreck hunter of his generation.

With more than 20 finds to his credit, Mearns' dogged and meticulous research has given rise to the theory that anything lost can be found. His work on vessels like the HMS *Hood* and the *Rio Grande* – a find that set the record for the deepest wreck ever located – has earned him accolades.

Any skeptics were silenced in March when he located the *Sydney* laying broken in the depths of the Indian Ocean – a feat that defied governments and wreck hunters for more than 60 years and made news around the globe.

And the work continues. Last month, his company, Blue Water Recoveries, was awarded a \$4-million contract by the Australian government to the search for the hospital ship *Centaur*, which was torpedoed during WWII, taking the lives of 268 Australians.

"So many shipwrecks," says Mearns. "So little time."

SURFACING

Mearns received his formal education and training as a marine biologist and geologist. He was in his late 20s when he took a job recovering U.S. naval helicopters and airplanes lost in the ocean.

In 1990, his employer, Eastport International, a company based just outside Washington, D.C., won a contract to work on a different sort of search mission. It was hired by the Australian Criminal Courts to find the *Lucona*. The charterer of the vessel, Austrian industrialist Udo Proksch, claimed that the ship was carrying uranium-processing equipment when the boat went down in the Indian Ocean. The vessel foundered in less than three minutes, killing half of the 12 crewmembers on board.

Proksch filed a \$20-million insurance claim to recoup his losses, but fraud was suspected. Armed with a sidescan sonar and remotely operated underwater vehicle (ROV) that Mearns and his colleagues fashioned from scratch in a scant six months, the search team headed out to sea accompanied by two munitions experts, a naval architect and a judge.



THE FINDING SYDNEY FOUNDATION

David Mearns, search director of The Finding Sydney Foundation, works at the charting table.

Footage of the wreck revealed that the *Lucona* had in fact been sunk by explosives, which were placed in the ship's hold and detonated in the southeast Arabian Sea. Proksch was prosecuted and was serving a life sentence in prison when he died in 1991.

THE SHIPWRECK BUSINESS

The discovery of the *Lucona* was a watershed for Mearns,

British Battlecruiser HMS *Hood*, circa 1932.

who was now unexpectedly on the map in an ultra-specialized field.

"There was no way at the time, relatively new and inexperienced in that niche of finding shipwrecks, that I could have ever imagined I'd be looking for the *Sydney* 18 years later," Mearns says. "But I had a passion for it. I knew it was something I wanted to learn more about."

But how to proceed? There's no ready client base or marketing strategy for hunting wrecks. "You can't just knock on someone's door and say, 'Please, may I find your shipwreck, and will you play me millions of dollars to do it?'" Mearns says. "It's a very specialized business."

Which is why several of his finds were self-generated projects intended to broaden his reach.

Like finding the German Blockade Runner *Rio Grande*, which was sunk in WWII. Mearns and his company located the ship at a depth of 5,762 meters (3.5 miles), setting a Guinness World Record for the deepest shipwreck found.

And the Portuguese *Nau Esmerelda*, which sailed with the fleet of explorer Vasco de Gama. *Esmerelda* was lost in 1503 in the Indian Ocean. Her discovery was a search that Mearns said his company took on to gain experience with archeological recoveries. The research took him and his team around the world before they located a letter written in 1503 by the boat's captain, the only first-hand account of the ship's sinking. Mearns traveled to Portugal's National Archives Torre de Tombo, to see the original. The letter, he discovered, had been mistranslated.

"People were searching for the wreck in the wrong country," Mearns explains with incredulity. "In a completely wrong part of the Indian Ocean."



Officers and men of the HMAS Sydney on Nov. 2, 1941. Photo courtesy of the Finding Sydney Foundation.

RESEARCH FIRST

Dogged research remains the cornerstone of Mearns' efforts, the element that has repeatedly given him success where others have come up empty. While it is the high-tech sonars and ROVs, all dazzling underwater technologies, that offer the first stunning glimpses of sunken history, it is the years of research that Mearns does in advance of the hunt that makes it all possible.

For starters, he does his own work. If Mearns needs a document, he insists on viewing it himself. Copies are not good enough. The key to many of his victories has been in the re-translation of archived documents, and nuance, he says, is everything, even when it comes to the scratches of a pencil lead.

"I want to see the original piece of paper," Mearns says. "People are writing in the margins, and what you may find is that someone has written a note with one pencil and someone else has written another notation with a different pencil... You have to get into the heads of the people who first created these documents."

Once he makes that connection, Mearns is usually on his way to solving the puzzle. The hunter credits himself with an 84-percent success rate. A perfect score, marred only by the elusiveness of three 20th-century vessels, two of which Mearns said he'll yet find before he calls it quits some day.

SUNKEN TREASURE

With a skill like finding sunken vessels, why not search for lost treasure instead of warships?

While Mearns says he has no gripe with treasure hunters, the work fits neither his style nor his sensibility.

"It's a very risky business," he explains, adding that he approaches his work with a science and technology that are particularly methodical. "Treasure hunting is a high-risk gamble. We have people approach us all the time to do that kind of work, but they're not the kind of people we want to work with. You can lose your reputation very fast if you do things the wrong way. It's a very difficult field."



Indeed, it seems that for every story of found treasure, there is an accompanying saga about an agonizing legal battle to establish property rights and other problems.

THE FINDING SYDNEY FOUNDATION

The HMAS *Sydney II*, one of Mearns' finds.

Mearns was in graduate school in 1985 when Mel Fisher discovered the Spanish Galleon *Atochia* off Key West in Florida. The wreck yielded roughly \$120 million in precious antiquities, and today continues to be a source of significant treasure. But the years-long search came with a high price tag, both in terms of financing and for the Fisher family personally.

In 1975, Fisher's son Dirk, his wife and a crewmember were killed when one of their search boats capsized. Years later, the son of a National Geographic film crewman was killed aboard one of the dive boats when he jumped into the water and was sucked into a piece of equipment. Another Fisher crewmember was killed one night when he took off on a personal dive and suffered an equipment failure. The losses cut deep for the Fishers.



THE FINDING SYDNEY FOUNDATION

Wreckage strewn on top of *Sydney's* "Y" turret.

"I just couldn't do that," Mearns says.

THE HOOD AND THE BISMARCK

Before the *Sydney*, there was the HMS *Hood*. The battlecruiser, the flagship of the British navy, was sunk in 1941 in the Denmark Strait by the German warship *Bismarck* during one of the war's most famous naval battles. Only three of the 1,418 men aboard the *Hood* survived.

At the time, the *Hood* was considered the world's largest warship, but she was lightly armored and vulnerable to heavy shells, according to news reports. She went down minutes after being attacked by the *Bismarck*. Just three days after her sinking, the *Bismarck* herself was attacked by the Fleet Air Arm and was sunk. Her crew of 2,351 perished.

In 2001 Mearns led an expedition to find the *Hood* and relocate her foe. The *Bismarck* was first discovered in 1989 by famed oceanographer Robert Ballard, who found the *Titanic*, but her exact location in the Atlantic remained

secret, one that Mearns said would be shared with him for a considerable sum. Mearns declined.

Instead, he did his own research, using known information that the *Bismarck* was resting at the foot of the only undersea volcano, about 300 miles west of Brest, France. He found the ship, he says, in "three hours." With stunning broadcast-quality video of *Bismarck* in hand, Mearns went off to search for the wreckage of the *Hood*, which he found in the Denmark Strait, off the coast of Greenland.

It was the discovery of the *Hood* in 2001, and the vivid pictures his team brought up from the wreck, that propelled Mearns into the national spotlight.

Ted Briggs, the last living survivor of the vessel, was 78 when the *Hood* was found. He said the feeling of relief was palpable. "I've been haunted by this for the last 60 years," he said in press accounts at the time. "I've finally laid a ghost to rest." Briggs died last year.

BIGGER THAN TITANIC?

If there is one maritime discovery that everyone is familiar with, it is the RMS *Titanic*, whose story, thanks in part to the Oscar-winning movie by director James Cameron, needs little recitation. Considered by some unsinkable, *Titanic* went down on her maiden voyage in 1912 after hitting an iceberg. The demise of the Olympic-class passenger liner resulted in the deaths of 1,517 passengers and crew.

Titanic's grave was discovered in 1985 by a joint American-French expedition led by Ballard and Jean-Louis Michel. It was an ROV that spotted the wreck at a depth of 2.3 miles. The passenger liner was broken in two, valuable debris from the floating hotel fanned out and buried under the sandy bottom.

Titanic was the pinnacle of finds. Her discovery opened the door to an array of search technologies, lawsuits over property rights and debates about the sanctity of touching what many considered to be an underwater grave. It also sparked the curiosities of untold millions. Today, the stories of her sinking—her famed passenger list, the dearth of lifeboats, even the orchestra playing on the deck as the boat went down—are known around the globe.

Mearns was in his mid-20s when Ballard made the find. Years later, as he searched for the *Sydney*, he would tell the Australian press that the war vessel's significance was in some ways "bigger than the *Titanic*" because of what it meant to the Australian people. "Nothing," Mearns said at the time, "comes close to the *Sydney*."

Officials from the Naval Association of Australia concurred, describing it as "without doubt, in terms of the Navy and our history, the most significant find ever."

FINDING THE SYDNEY

The search for the *Sydney* began at Mearns's country home in West Sussex, England, where he was approached by the chairman of the Finding Sydney Foundation. Mearns had been researching the wreck. Armed with the promise of millions in funding, the chairman convinced Mearns to join forces to find one of Australia's most celebrated war vessels.

Mearns was not being asked to drag the oceans in search of the vessel. He was being asked to pinpoint the ship's location, something no one had been able to do in the 66 years since it went down. As with all of Mearns' discoveries, it was not technology that proved the key in finding the *Sydney*, but years of research.

Years earlier, the Australian Navy had launched a modern-day inquiry into the vessel's sinking and asked historian Peter Hore to contribute. In 2002, Hore turned his findings over to Mearns, including an unexplained reference number listed on a document. That number was accompanied by a prefix, two obtuse consonants typed in the margin, a P and a G.

Many German naval records were seized after the war and brought to the archives in Britain. Mearns recognized the "PG" notation as slang for "pinched from the Germans." It referred to an uncatalogued collection of documents that escaped detection during the time Hore was researching the British archives. It was just minutes after arriving at the archive that officials sat him down with the unexpected words, "We have something to show you."

Their prize was a cardboard box with "Kormoran" written in big black letters down its spine. Inside was an account of the battle with *Sydney*, written by Theodor Detmers, *Kormoran's* captain. The box had been sitting in the basement of the historical branch for more than 60 years. Untouched.

Over the next year, using Detmers's account as a guide, Mearns would track down three additional accounts of the battle, each written by Detmers, one of them coded. Each of them told the same story, pinpointing the area of the battle. And each of them helped uncover one vital fact: The Australians had made errors when translating their interview with Detmers after he was captured.

Detmers "gave a distance between the two ships as 800 meters," Mearns recalls. "They decoded it improperly and it became 8,000 meters. And that has stuck for all time. Other historians then used that information, and it's led to lots of confusion."

For decades, many believed Detmers had lied about the sinking, citing that as the reason why no one could find the ship. But Mearns, now working with Hore, compared Detmers accounts, "character by character, not just line by line," to examine the captain's credibility. "He wasn't lying," Mearns says.



BUNDESARCHIV

The *Kormoran*, photographed sometime between 1940 and 1941.

Mearns presented his research to the Australian Navy, which had years earlier taken a position that it would not support a search with vague, contradictory information as the guide. "There had been the political will to conduct a search, but there hadn't been any agreement of where to find" the *Sydney*, Mearns says. "Dozens of amateur researchers had opinions, but no one had found a wreck before. They had all approached the Navy with a great amount of rancorous debate, but no one could convince them that one theory was better than another."

Faced with Mearns' research, the Navy reversed its position. The search was on.

PROBING THE DEEP

Mearns had taken on a lot of responsibility pursuing the *Sydney*. But until he approached the Navy, until it said yes, the burden had been on him, primarily financially. For five years, he funded his own travel and research to prove that he could find the missing document that pointed to the wreck location, and to help the

ROYAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Endurance's sinking in November 1915.

Australians. But with the Navy onboard and the Australian people now tuned in to the probe, Mearns was under extraordinary pressure to make good on his research.

"Right up to the moment we found [the ship], people were saying, 'You'll never find it,'" Mearns recalls. "People would say, 'This is a needle in a haystack, and we don't know where the haystack is.'" Means says it was a lot like training for the Olympics: years of work for one shot at glory.

And it was glorious for Mearns and his crew of 35. It took just 64 hours of searching with the chartered vessel *Geosounder* for Mearns and his team to locate the *Kormoran*. Three days later, they found the *Sydney*.

"It was an exhilarating moment," Mearns remembers. "Five years of work were encapsulated in that moment when we saw the wreck appear on the screens – you knew you were right and everyone else was wrong. The stakes were so high. All of Australia was watching."

In fact, news of twin discoveries rocketed around the globe. To Australians, "The *Sydney* was as big as you could get," Mearns relates. "When we found it, the Prime Minister and the chief of the defense force and the Navy and Army all announced it live to Australia," he says, without arrogance. "You didn't have that with *Titanic*."

ON THE HORIZON

This summer, Mearns will publish the story of how he unraveled Australia's greatest naval mystery. Called *The Search for the Sydney*, the book will be released by HarperCollins, and will tell the story of the vessel's discovery, 1.5 miles below the sea.

He also continues hunting. Finding the *Centaur* is now Mearns' chief focus. The vessel was sunk without warning in 1943 by a Japanese submarine, about 50 miles northeast of Brisbane. Of the 332 people on board, only 64 survived. The ship and those lost aboard her "are reminders of what we as families, a State and a nation have lost in war," said Queensland Premier Anna Bligh. "It is right that in our remembering them we can say exactly where they lie."

If there is a project on his wish list, it is to find Sir Ernest Shackleton's ship *Endurance*. The three-masted Barquentine, the last of its kind, sailed for Antarctica on the 1914 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. She was crushed by ice and sunk the following year in the Weddell Sea.

Mearns has been working with National Geographic on the possibility of launching their own expedition to find the *Endurance*. All they need is about \$12 million in funding. Says Mearns, "We think we know where it is."

Leef Smith Barnes is the Managing Editor of Mad Mariner.

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