

*a quest for Australia's*  
**WARTIME  
SHIPWRECKS**



by DAVID MEARNS

When Robert D. Ballard and his Wood's Hole Oceanographic Institution team discovered the remains of the White Star Liner *Titanic* in 3,800 meters of water off the coast of Newfoundland in 1985, it ushered in a new age in deep-ocean exploration. In the years that followed, other famous—or infamous—deepwater shipwrecks began to be found



in quick succession, including the *Bismarck*, *MV Lucona*, *MV Derbyshire*, *HMS Hood*, and the Japanese submarine *I-52*. As impressive as this ever-growing list was, a number of historically important shipwrecks continued to elude detection despite intense interest in their discovery. Among these was the modified Leander class light cruiser

SYDNEY'S 'B' TURRET WAS DESTROYED BY AN ACCURATE 16-CM ARMOR PIERCING SHELL

HMAS *Sydney*—the pride of the Australian navy—which was lost under controversial and mysterious circumstances following a battle with the German raider *Kormoran* some 207 kilometers (112 nautical miles) off the coast of western Australia on November 19, 1941. All 645 men on board the *Sydney* perished, thus accounting for about one-third of Australia's total naval losses during the Second World War. The defeat of the *Sydney* by the *Kormoran* was the first time in history that a raider had scored such an improbable victory.

Ten months before the battle, the *Sydney* had carried out an extremely successful campaign in the Mediterranean as part of the war effort, the highlight of which was the sinking of the larger and faster Italian heavy cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni*. The *Sydney's* courageous exploits in battle were celebrated by the public and they filled Australia's fledgling navy with admiration and pride.

Despite her clear superiority in gunnery and speed, the *Sydney* was hit several hundred times and comprehensively defeated by *Kormoran* in a close-action gun battle fought at the naval equivalent of point-blank range. In stark contrast, the *Kormoran* was hit just a few times by the *Sydney's* 6-inch guns while just 79 of that ship's crew of 399 died in the action with most of the fatalities happening when a liferaft overturned as the crew abandoned ship just before she was scuttled.

The loss of the *Sydney* and her entire company to a seemingly inferior opponent—essentially a converted cargo ship fitted with guns and torpedoes—tormented Australia for decades. Many Australians were unable to accept the German accounts that the *Sydney* had blundered into a trap set to draw her near the *Kormoran* in order to neutralize her long-range superiority.

Over the years, questions surrounding the German accounts of the battle intensified, leading to spirited debate over precisely what had happened. Some two dozen books were written about the battle and the actions of the German crew, in particular those of Captain Theodor Detmers

of the *Kormoran*. Accusations ranged from their waving of a white flag of surrender before opening fire to machine-gunning *Sydney* survivors in their lifeboats. In 1998, the Australian Parliament undertook a wide-ranging but largely inconclusive inquiry that further fueled debate. One of the main recommendations of their report, however, was for a search to be mounted for the wrecks to determine the truth once and for all.

In the years following release of the parliamentary findings, Australian researchers were locked in fierce disagreement about where to begin looking for the wrecks. In 2005, Australia's Chief of Navy finally endorsed an expedition to find the wrecks with the search area based upon research I had conducted along with several Australian and English colleagues.

My personal interest in the wrecks had been piqued by a paper presented at a 2001 symposium convened by the navy on the sixtieth anniversary of the battle. I instinctively believed the German version of the story and felt that there must still be primary source documents to back it up. My suspicions proved correct when I came upon several undiscovered or overlooked documents, none more important than a secret account of the entire battle that spelled it out in tantalizing blow-by-blow detail, which was hidden by Captain Detmers in a dictionary he used while in a POW camp. I was sure Detmers had told the truth about where the battle took place and, fortunately, the Chief of Navy agreed with that view.

Even with the search area narrowed by following the German account, the range of possible sinking positions still covered some 700 square kilometers (270 miles). One knowledgeable commentator likened the search to looking for a needle in a thousand haystacks.

It took two years for the project funding to be raised. In March 2008, I was appointed search director on behalf of the Finding *Sydney* Foundation, a private non-profit foundation funded with government grants and public donations of more than \$5 million Australian dollars. We had at



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*KORMORAN'S STARBOARD ANCHOR*

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Severed by exploding mines, the *Kormoran's* starboard anchor was found 1,300 meters away from the hull.







our disposal a 60-meter survey vessel mobilized with sophisticated deep-tow side-scan sonar and remotely operated vehicle (ROV) equipment ready to depart the port of Geraldton in western Australia to begin the search. My plan was to find the *Kormoran* first, as all the German accounts related to her position, and then use *Kormoran*'s wreckage to point us toward the *Sydney*, which according to Captain Detmers, was last seen on the horizon engulfed in flames.

The search got off to a bad start. Our survey vessel and side-scan sonar were both crippled by technical problems. On top of that, we took a direct hit by a tropical cyclone just prior to our arrival at the designated search zone, which set us back still further.

Given all that we had endured, we were understandably ecstatic when *Kormoran*'s wreckage first popped up on our sonar screens after 64 hours of searching, followed by the unmistakable shape of the *Sydney*'s hull some 67 hours later and just 22 kilometers (12 nautical miles) away. Our joy was complete once it was clear that both wrecks were lying in water less than 2,600 meters deep and thus could be reached by our 3,000-meter-capable ROV.

Our discovery of the two ships—announced to an anxious nation by Prime Minister Kevin

Rudd—dominated Australian news for weeks. The public was eager to see the first pictures of the wreck, which did not disappoint. They showed the *Sydney*'s hull riddled with shell holes of every German caliber and most of the *Kormoran*'s obliterated by detonation of the enormous cache of mines, which had been stowed on board.

Our detailed examination of the damage seen in both wrecks and their associated debris fields matched the German accounts of the battle down to the smallest details. The *Sydney*, as had been reported, was the victim of rapid, repeated, and accurate fire from the *Kormoran*'s guns and an extremely well-placed torpedo strike into her bow. The reason why there were no Australian survivors was plain for everyone to see; the most chilling sight was that of every hatch door swung wide open, indicating that a considerable number of men had abandoned the *Sydney* alive, only to perish at sea.

Following conclusion of our search, the Rudd Government set up an official Commission of Inquiry (COI), presided over by Justice Terrance Cole, into the loss of the *Sydney* and to conduct a forensic examination of the wrecks. The COI was unprecedented in the depth and scope of its inquiries. It took more than a year to consider evidence and testimony from hundreds of witnesses and thousands of documents. When

its 1,400-page report was published in August 2009, it agreed with our earlier conclusions that the German accounts were truthful. After 67 years the unanswered questions about the loss of the *Sydney* had finally been answered and it was now possible to close the book on one of the most remarkable battles in the annals of naval warfare.

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With the *Sydney* found, pressure was mounting for us to carry out a similar search for Australia's second most tragic wartime loss—the hospital ship *Centaur*. The *Centaur* had figured in the *Sydney-Kormoran* story when, as a combination passenger liner/freighter of the famed Blue Funnel Line, it had rescued a lifeboat full of *Kormoran*'s survivors, including Captain Detmers, whose notes we had used to find the ships. A little more than a year later after the famed battle, the *Centaur* was converted for use as a hospital ship by the Australian Army and it was on such service off the coast of Brisbane when it was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine *I-177*. The torpedo's explosion triggered a secondary and larger explosion of the *Centaur*'s fuel tank, causing the ship to sink in less than three minutes and the death of 268 doctors, nurses, field ambulance personnel, and ship's crew—all non-combatants. Only 64 managed to survive. Whatever the submarine commander's motivations he had committed one of the most savage and heinous war crimes against Australia, for the submarine attacked a well-lit hospital ship marked with large red crosses—a flagrant violation of the Hague Convention.


Buoyed by our finding of the *Sydney*, the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments jointly funded a search for the *Centaur*'s wreck and named me as the project manager and search director. Although there was far less controversy about the sinking position of the *Centaur*, there was still considerable doubt about the navigating officer's position that needed to be verified. No logbook or report from the Japanese submarine was found and any details that could have been provided by its commander—who never admitted the atrocity—went to the grave with him.

Our main challenges in finding the wreck were dealing with the extreme seabed geology of the continental slope where we would be searching and the fast East Australian Current that flowed past the wreck's location.

After seven months of research and planning,

our search got underway in mid-December 2009. As suspected, the seabed in the area was extremely rugged, with local slopes of 45° being typical and current speeds up to 4.2 knots at times. Both made the sonar operators' job far more challenging as they tried to pick out the small shipwreck among the mountainous and rocky terrain. Despite these hazards, however, locating the wreck was relatively straightforward owing primarily to the accuracy of the position provided by the *Centaur*'s navigator. In the end, after just six days of searching, the wreck was found in a narrow, steeply sided gulley, sitting within a large subsea canyon at a depth of 2,070 meters.

Because of a misunderstanding when the *Centaur* was loading out in Sydney—some of the merchant seamen thought that the rifles being carried on board by the ambulance crew would constitute illegal arms in violation of the Hague Convention—there has been persistent questions about whether the Japanese attack was justified. The rifles it turned out were perfectly legal but the resulting row led others to speculate that larger quantities of illegal arms were also stowed on board. If this unfounded speculation proved to be true, then the violation of Hague Convention rules on hospital ships would have been perpetrated by Australia, not Japan, and this act would have condemned the ship's company to a certain and justifiable death. Of all the improbable and untrue stories about the *Centaur*, this was the one that upset and haunted the relatives most.

Prohibited from entering the shipwreck because of its war grave status, we could only peer into the converted cargo holds with our ROV cameras to identify the contents. We saw no illegal armaments anywhere, only the remnants of hospital beds. The most poignant item found, however, was a felt slouch hat—the iconic symbol of the Australian Army. This symbolized more than anything else, the ultimate sacrifice of those who served and died on the *Centaur*. 

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## BIOGRAPHY

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A director of Blue Water Recoveries ([www.bluewater.uk.com](http://www.bluewater.uk.com)), David Mearns, FI'91, is a marine scientist, author, and shipwreck hunter. He has led the discovery of 22 major shipwrecks in water depths from 3 meters to 5,762 meters and has been awarded three Guinness World Records for deep-water accomplishments.