After an inspirational Mediterranean campaign HMAS Sydney II and its crew had become Australian icons & a symbol of hope as the war widened. Here a celebratory march past in Perth captures that mood.

Sydney’s movements after being sent home from the Mediterranean to show the flag. On convoy duty, while coming home from Sunda Strait it disappears.

Passing ships find rafts. An air and sea search begins and boats are found.

Australia asked how can a “cargo ship” sink our most famous fighting ship? Rumours abound. They knew little of HSK Kormoran, a powerful warship in disguise.
There has now been accumulated a mass of confirmatory information that leaves no doubt that there are no survivors.

There are a number of reasons, however, why the full analysis should not be published, the principle that such an analysis would still not be accepted by some people as being absolute confirmation of the loss of all of the "Sydney"'s complement.

It is intended not to publish anything further concerning this action and its results, unless the Board is forced by Ministerial pressure to write a Ministerial Statement.

Faced with CMDR Long's decision, yet convinced the German survivors buried film of the battle on Quobba station north of Carnarvon, Jonathan Robotham, the Intelligence Officer who had guarded the Kormorans, commenced a lone obsessive search for the 'truth'.

He also believed that the official accounts were wrong. He advised all who inquired that Kormoran surrendered and he often showed a 'diary' (PO engineer Heinz Kitsche's?) in 'Old German' to that effect.

It was a fake, the first of many.

One can trace the need for the 2015 re-visititation to Sydney and Kormoran back to CMDR Long's decision and Lt Robotham's reaction to it.

Winter Montgomery's book, this next hoax (also apparently designed to force the government's hand) and other claims were met with a terse response. From here debate raged.
Under the terms of the 1976 Historic Shipwrecks Act the Director of the WA Museum became responsible for the wrecks. From then on we examined reports possibly related to Sydney-Kormoran. Here was our first link with CMST in the search for HMAS Sydney.

(L) John Penrose: founder of CMST

Pryor report

Wreck reports flowed in to WAM. This was found off Steep Point, Shark Bay by the late Ray Pryor, a crayfisherman. The Museum looked at the site with the RAN in 1992, and then independently. It and the RAN examined many others similar throughout the 1980s and 90s.

The RAN provided HMAS Moresby and other vessels. It was prepared to act, sometimes independently of the most flimsy evidence. It also called the RAAF in!

There was even a tech-based hoax for us to deal with!

According to the Australian Skeptics Association, such beliefs are often genuinely held. Many were drawn in by these claims and many of them appeared in an un-critical national press driven by sensational claims regardless of the effect on the relatives of those lost.

Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute’s location of RMS Titanic in c. 3800 m of water in 1985 and then the battleship Bismarck in c. 4900 m of water in 1989 saw them invited to join the WA Museum in the following year.

The proposal obtained the support of the RAN, the RSL, Office of War Graves, RAN, the Kormoran Survivor’s Association and the German Government. In 1991 the Museum convened a seminar to encapsulate all the evidence in readiness for a possible search.

M.McCarthy and Kim Kirsner (UWA) Convenors
There was some very high level support.

NOCWA (for the RAN) opened proceedings and here Minister Kim Beazley provides support for the Museum forum on finding Sydney.

Dr Thomas O. Paine, head of the American Submarine Warfare library was asked to comment on claims that IJN I 124 was involved in sinking Sydney.

Once a Fremantle-based submariner, engineer he had also been head of the Apollo space program. His impassionate account was tabled at the forum. It dispelled any doubts that Kormoran needed help in overcoming Sydney.

The exposed torpedo deck and \('4' inch AA guns were all vulnerable to Kormoran's machine gun fire. The 3.7 cm rapid fire gun (shown following) on the Kormoran bridge was especially deadly.

Narrowing the search zone

With the Museum still the only government institution actively seeking a resolution until the mid-1990s, the application of scientific reason, historical analysis and logic (e.g. by Kirsner, Tom Frame, Wes Olson et al.) was submerged in an increasing tide of speculation.

HERE THE PREVAILING VIEW AT THE TIME.
Two Private Members Bills tabled in the Federal Legislative Assembly, one by Paul Filing and the other by Steven Smith, both of the HMAS Sydney Foundation. These provided for the establishment and composition of a committee to investigate the loss of HMAS Sydney. In June the parameters for the inquiry were set leading to its sitting across Australia in the following year. One of its six aims was to examine the desirability and practicability of conducting a search for HMAS Sydney and the extent to which the Commonwealth Government should participate in such a search should one be deemed desirable and practicable.

The question of whether archival material was also still to be found was also raised as a matter of considerable priority. Finally, after an exhaustive round of national hearings and after collating all the evidence received into an 18-volume set, the Committee made 17 recommendations, including:

Recommendation 10. The Royal Australian Navy sponsor a seminar on the likely search areas for Sydney and Kormoran, involving as many of the individual researchers and groups as possible.

Recommendation 11. After the search area is more accurately defined, some preliminary surveys be undertaken to try and confirm the accuracy of the wreck locations, prior to a full in-water search. An initial search for HSK Kormoran at or near 26°32-34’S, 111°E, (if supported by the seminar would seem a logical starting point).

The SPC Seminar was split between proponents of a northern battle position (Detmer’s area) and a southern battle (Abrohos area).

The latter was part-based on:

1) reports of flashes and gunfire one November night in WWII.
2) Lindsay Knight’s map drawing method and his Knight Subtle Energy Detection System found three wrecks off the Abrohos.
3) Some (including former RAN navigators) claimed that it was impossible for German liferafts to make the voyage from the Detmer’s position to the Cliffs north of Carnarvon.

The Museum’s attempts to find a solution came to nought.
Though the 2001 RAN Seminar found against conducting a search the WA Museum continued to urge for action. (Wes Olson’s archival committee placed Kormoran near 25°58’S 110°56’E, with Sydney possibly lying within 15NM).

The Museum also supported noted wreck hunter David Mearns 2002 expression of interest in leading a search. He was following on from a 1996 suggestion by Museum director Graeme Henderson.

After WHOI departed Mearns became the only deep water wreck searcher with the required experience and credentials.

Defining the Search Area – The German Accounts

In their work for the Finding Sydney Foundation cognitive scientists Kim Kirsner and John Dunn of UWA showed that:

‘The variations in the German accounts accord with the true pattern of archival memory’.

‘The personnel that could be expected to have direct access to the navigation information provided complementary information as depicted in the table (right).’

Correlation of reports from German survivors
(As determined by Kim Kirsner and John Dunn of the University of Western Australia)

A number of objects were picked up after drifting from the wreck sites.
 Including oceanographic data from the Museum’s 1991 Finding Sydney Seminar and from other researchers Kirsner and Dunn generated an area of probability for the origin of the drift objects.

This research generally confirmed the proposed search area.

The Foundation’s researchers Kim Kirsner, John Dunn, Bob King et al. compile all the data to define a Search Area with high probability of discovery.

David Mearns (BWR) & his assistants Capt. Peter Hore (RAN Retd) and Wes Olson, do similar and through Barbara (Walter Poniwowski) are led to ‘new’ archival data that supports the German accounts.

This is the PRIMARY SOURCE that independently convinces Mearns, the German account is correct.

The Search Area, however remained very large.

How I’ll find Sydney

Hope rises for sailor’s family

Hunter on the scent of mystery

David Mearns joins

Sunday Times: November 12 2006

Defining the Search Area – Independent Corroboration
Other claimants also came forward, some as far away as Britain. This one from late 2006 used “satellite imagery, claiming to have found the wrecks at the Detmer’s position and wanting $1000 to reveal all. As with all others, it was initially treated with due respect, and properly scrutinised by the Museum. Claims that a Japanese aircraft carrier was also found nearby saw our books firmly closed on it. The proponent continues his claims to this day.

In 2007 another claim to have found HMAS Sydney off Shark Bay, nearly derailed the process until the Museum and the RAN joined to show it was a fishing vessel.
Map of finds

The FSF Board
G. McDonald, K. Rowe, D. Padrone, R. Trotter and T. Graham. (Retired members were R. Birmingham, R. King, K. Kirsner)

David Mearns (Search Director) with Lt J. Perryman RAN.

SECRET PACIFIC RAIDERS INTELLIGENCE. (1) On 19th November 1915, HMAS "Morning" sank enemy raider in position 43° 22' 10" S. 113° 43' 30" E. HMAS "Morning" has not been heard of since. Last seen Moruouti anchorities and apt steering north at 5 knots. RAIDER possibly RAIDER G NUMBER 41. 32 German Naval Survivors picked up "Mocass" from raft 04/7/1915. 2 German Life Boats Launched near Cape Dwyer Western Australia (?). STRIKC ORDERLY IN FORCE AT PRESENT.

ACW.. So they've found us... hope they don't come to Sydney! Let the lads rest peacefully. Regards, Jim, 2008.

R.I.P.
Those relatives are entitled to assume that Australia will do all it can to establish the circumstances in which the deaths occurred,” the Commissioner [TH Cole QC] said.

“To quote the words of Dr Michael McCarthy, an early and persistent campaigner for finding Sydney II, the failure to do so would strike ‘at the very heart of the notion of service to one’s country and the possibility of making the ultimate sacrifice in times of dire need’.”

The ‘Unknown Sailor’ is finally acknowledged and is subsequently interred in a gazetted Commonwealth War Grave at Geraldton.

Though DNA studies are continuing to this day and though a few conspiracy theorists remain, a time of relative quiet set in after the services, the official commemorations of 2008, the production of websites, books, the striking of commemorative coins etc.
November 2011

Two ‘dreamers’ from Curtin University arrive on the scene. They show a 3D reconstruction based on the 2008 imagery and seek the Museum’s support for a return to the wrecks.

Andrew Woods
Andrew Hutchison

‘Making the Inaccessible Accessible’

‘INACCESSIBLE HISTORIC SITES MUST BE MADE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL, BECAUSE THEY BELONG TO THE PEOPLE.’

(Andrew Viduka, Heritage & Wildlife Division, Commonwealth Government)

Being a science-based institution, Curtin has extended accessibility to the nation’s scientists while at the same time keeping the WA Museum’s focus on those lost. This only became possible through DofSubsea’s extraordinary gift to the nation.”