

As readers of WIFR are well aware, the Australian light cruiser *Sydney* was lost off Western Australia in November 1941, and her whole crew of 645 men disappeared, following a fierce battle with the German disguised enemy raider *Kormoran*. According to the Australian minister for veterans speaking in September last year, "The location of the ship's final resting place remains our nation's most enduring maritime mystery." He was speaking at the announcement by the Australian government of a grant of A\$4.2 million for the search for the *Sydney*. This, when joined with A\$550,000 provided by the Western Australian Government, a further A\$250,000 from the New South Wales Government and some public and corporate sponsorship, has made the search for *Sydney* possible.

However, there are only German accounts of where *Sydney* might be, so the searchers must first find her adversary, *Kormoran*.

The search will be lead by David Mearns, one of the world's most experienced and successful deep-sea shipwreck hunters, who over a career spanning two decades, has discovered some 50 shipwrecks, including the battleship *Hood* and the bulk carrier *Derbyshire*.

Sixty years after the disappearance of *Sydney*, the technology now exists to look for and examine *Sydney*. Nevertheless the search presents a huge challenge because of the area involved and the depth of water which is up to 15,000 ft or 4.5km. At least the searchers know that the sea bottom is clear of major geologic features which could complicate the sonar search. The search will be run in two phases, a systematic survey of the sea floor using side-scan sonar, followed by a photographic/video confirmation. David Mearns, the British-based but American-born wreck-hunter, says "The first step is to find the German ship *Kormoran* and after we find the *Kormoran* then we'd find *Sydney*," and he is confident of success but he adds, "But it is going to be a real challenge, and probably one of the most difficult ones I've faced in my career." Speaking to WIFR at the end of January, David assessed his chances of success of finding the wreck of *Kormoran* as 80% and after that 80% of finding *Sydney*. This gives an overall probability of 64% or a two in three chance of finding both ships. The in-water search is due to start within the next few months.

However, Dr Michael "Mac" McCarthy, curator of maritime archaeology at the Western Australia Maritime Museum in Perth, is slightly less optimistic than David. Mac is responsible for all wrecks off the Western Australian coast and has studied the various attempts to find *Sydney* over the last thirty years. Mac has looked at the archival, oral and scientific evidence as well as the less likely means of finding *Sydney* which he describes as being of "dubious historic and technical record" such as map dowsing. On the basis of his work, Mac describes the present attempt to find the wrecks as having "every chance of failure, especially with regard to HMAS *Sydney*." David's assessment may be too optimistic and Mac's too pessimistic.

The author reckons that the chances of finding *Kormoran* are 100%. We know where *Kormoran* is because he told us both immediately after his rescue, in various secret accounts which he guarded, and his 1959 book.

The author believes that original sources are the best and most truthful in any research, and in the case of *Sydney* versus *Kormoran*, Detmers in the highest authority as to what happened. If the errors in decoding Detmers' secret battle report are corrected and if the mistakes translating and transcribing are rectified – as I have done in my work – and if the various conspiracy theories (none of which are backed by any credible evidence) are discounted, then we are left with the position which Detmers gave: 26 24 South 111 East.

Detmers and his navigator, Henry Meyer, were professional and experienced seamen and there is no reason the doubt their navigation. Even though *Kormoran* had been out of sight of land for many months, her position by astronavigation would have been accurate to within 2 or 3 miles. In a professionally run warship the chart would have been marked when *Sydney* was sighted and Meyer would have kept a dead reckoning during the battle. Perhaps, in the heat of battle and as *Kormoran* drifted engineless afterwards, another two or three miles of error might have been introduced. But when Detmers abandoned his burning ship he took care to retrieve his command pennant and note the time, and it seems unlikely that he did not also step to the chart table and note the position, even if, unlikely as it may seem, he did not take the chart and the deck log with him into his lifeboat. 25 34 South 111 East is position which Detmers remembered and that, within a few miles, is where David Mearns must look.

Finding *Kormoran* will establish a datum for the search of *Sydney*, but finding *Sydney* will be a whole lot harder. While it seems likely that she did not survive more than a few hours after the battle and was drifting off in an easterly or south-easterly direction, we simply do not know how long she survived, what speed she was able to maintain (other than Detmers' estimate), nor indeed do we know accurately what course she followed. So, a successful search for *Sydney* is by no means assured, but will rely heavily not just on David Mearns' expertise but also on luck.

Whatever the chances of success of the forthcoming mission to the Indian Ocean, in the words of Senator MacGibbon, the “attempt to find the *Sydney* will be a sign that Australia cares about the 645 men who gave their lives in defence of their country.”