

Summary of February Address

Guest Speaker: Lt John Perryman

Subject: “The Search for HMAS Sydney”

Most appropriately, Rear Admiral Ross Swan outlined John’s naval career including reference to his father having been in the Royal Navy and his mother a WREN. A sea cadet in his youth, John joined the RAN aged 16 in 1980, progressing to Warrant Officer Signals Yeoman before commissioning as a Lieutenant. He developed and maintained a keen interest in naval history, and upon completion of 25 years service transferred to the Naval Reserve, taking up a position in the Australian Public Service as Senior Naval Historical Officer at the Sea Power Centre – Australia based in Canberra. In December 2006 he was awarded a Deputy Chief of Navy Commendation for contribution to preserving and promoting naval history.

You’ll note that the above Commendation includes not only “preserving” but also “**promoting**” Naval history, and John proved most excellent in that regard. His presentation warrants top marks on all scores.

In understanding the publicity surrounding the loss of this ship, we need to take account of its high National profile at the time. A light cruiser, officially designated *HMAS Sydney 11*, it had served with considerable success in the Mediterranean early in World War 11 and had been feted on its return to Australia in February 1941. In its namesake city Sydney, school children were given a holiday to witness the parade of the crew, and a special medal was struck. Following a refit and transfer of command to Captain Joseph Burnett she left Sydney on February 27, 1941 returning to Fremantle to take up troop ship escort duties – mainly in the Indian Ocean, but she also did some service in other Asian and Pacific waters. Having escorted the troopship *Zealandia* from Albany bound for Singapore, on November 17, 1941 she handed over such duty and was returning to Fremantle when on February 19 she encountered a vessel posing as a Dutch merchant ship *Straat Malakka*. This turned out to be the cleverly disguised heavily armed German Raider *HSK Kormoran* which had already sunk 10 allied merchant ships in the Atlantic. The experienced Raider crew were masters at luring quarries to close range by drawing out the exchange of signals and *Sydney* closed in to approximately 1 mile losing the advantage of her weaponry. *Kormoran* accurately fired on *Sydney*’s gun turrets and bridge and fired a torpedo which struck near *Sydney*’s bow turret. All *Sydney*’s arms were knocked out and she limped away on fire, last seen as a glow on the horizon. *Kormoran* took a pounding too and was scuttled. *Sydney* was lost with all 645 hands, whilst 317 Germans survived.

News of the loss of the *Sydney* stunned Australia. A much smaller nation then, the crew had been drawn from all over, and the loss of so many lives was personally felt throughout the land. The sinking without a trace and with no survivors created all sorts of conspiracy theories as to what may have happened, including that the Germans had gunned down survivors and that a Japanese submarine was involved. Books were written and conflicting views were promoted including that a Government cover up had occurred. Controversy continued over the years with various interest groups formed. In 1988 a Government Inquiry produced 18 recommendations. In November 2001 a Wreck Location Seminar reached no consensus where to mount a search and the Government and Navy said no to involvement until there was some positive data put forward. The Finding Sydney Foundation continued to lobby and in 2004 formed an alliance with David Mearns who had successfully found the *Bismark* and the *Titanic*. There was concern to ensure that when found, wreck stripping by bounty hunters did not occur as had occurred with the *Titanic*.

In 2005 there was a Statement of Support from the Navy and a Government grant of \$1.3million – which became tied up in red tape by the Department of Environment and Heritage for 2 years. The FSF became unsettled and concerns were raised with the RAN and the Government. In August 2007, the Navy was authorised to manage a Government grant of \$2.4 million. This facilitated acquiring the service of search vessel *SV Geosounder* with its side scan sonar. David Mearns was confirmed as Search Director. Because the

Kormoran had been sunk with charges, its location was able to be more accurately estimated and a “search box” 52 x 34 N Miles along longitude 111 degrees east was created.

The venture was mobilised at Geraldton WA on February 25, 2008 and sailed on March 3. Despite being plagued with bad weather and equipment defects, The *Kormoran* was discovered on March 12 at a depth of 2,560m and the *Sydney* on March 16 at a depth of 2,470m. A high resolution image of *Sydney* confirmed its identity before the announcement of the find by the Prime Minister on March 17. A commemoration service covering both ships took place.

The remainder of John’s presentation mainly comprised fascinating photographs of the *Sydney* wreck including the main structural elements and debris – many shown side by side with original photos of the components - which clearly showed how identification was confirmed. This evidence also indicated that it had been close contact with the *Kormoran* that had sealed the fate of both vessels.

Both wrecks are protected by the 1976 Historic Shipwrecks Act