

## The sinking of HMAS Sydney, November 1941

### The loss and the controversy

On 19 November 1941, HMAS *Sydney*, a light cruiser of the Royal Australian Navy with an impressive record of war service, was lost following a battle with the German raider HSK *Kormoran* in the Indian Ocean off the Western Australian coast. The loss of the *Sydney* with its full war complement of 645 remains Australia's worst naval disaster. The *Kormoran* was also sunk, but 317 of its crew of 397 were rescued. The fate of the *Sydney* remains one of Australia's greatest wartime mysteries; even the location of the wrecks was not established until 2008.

For 12 days the government maintained the strictest secrecy about the loss of the *Sydney*. When Prime Minister John Curtin made the first of two public announcements on 1 December 1941, he did little more than confirm rumours that the *Sydney* had been sunk. For the public the shock of the loss was accompanied by bewilderment that such a disaster could occur. A suspicion that information was being concealed was strengthened by the delay in making the official announcement, by the lack of any real explanation when the announcement did come, and by the secrecy which surrounded the official investigation of the disaster.

Little information was released until 1957, when the official history of the RAN in World War II was published (G Hermon Gill, *The Royal Australian Navy 1939–42. Volumes 1 and 2. Official History of Australia in the War of 1939–45*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957). Despite the history's assertion that the story of the *Sydney*'s last action 'was pieced together through exhaustive interrogation of *Kormoran*'s survivors' and that 'no room was left for doubt as to its accuracy', its failure to answer important questions confirmed for some the suspicion of an official cover-up.

The controversy over the loss of the *Sydney* continued to trouble many Australians and in 1997 the Minister for Defence asked the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the loss of the vessel. The Committee, which was assisted by an historical adviser, received in excess 400 submissions, and took evidence at hearings held in most Australian capital cities. In its report on the loss of HMAS Sydney, which was tabled in Parliament in June 2000, the Committee placed on the public record for the first time the findings of a major inquiry into the *Sydney* disaster.

In March 2008, a search organised by the Finding Sydney Foundation, in partnership with shipwreck investigator David Mearns, located the wrecks of HMAS *Sydney* and HSK *Kormoran*. As

a result, the Department of Defence held the HMAS *Sydney II* Commission of Inquiry, which drew on evidence not available at the time of the Parliamentary Committee inquiry. The Commission's [report](#) was released on 12 August 2009.

## The records

A number of commentators have held the view that Australia's government archives must hold documents which will provide answers to the *Sydney* controversy. In response to the continuing interest in the subject the National Archives has undertaken a systematic and extensive search of its holdings and of related records still in the Department of Defence in order to identify all relevant records. The research guide [The Sinking of HMAS Sydney: A Guide to Commonwealth Government Records](#), by Richard Summerrell (1997), lists and describes all records identified through this search.

Commonwealth government records relating to the sinking of the *Sydney* are held by the National Archives' offices in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, and by the Australian War Memorial and the Department of Defence in Canberra. The records include war diaries, signals, Central War Room operations records, naval and air track charts, War Cabinet and Advisory War Council papers, and interrogation and intelligence reports. A number of the key records are listed in the table below.

No records of any formal investigation into the sinking at the time have been identified, although the following two references have been located:

- Advisory War Council minute 842 of 18 March 1942, summarises the findings of a Naval Court of Enquiry (see item [A5954, 813/2](#)). No other reference to this Court of Enquiry or any records of such an enquiry have been found.
- A reference to a Naval Intelligence investigation conducted in January 1942 (see item [MP1049/5, 2026/19/6](#)). No other reference to the report of this investigation or the report itself has been located.

## Examples of records related to the sinking of HMAS Sydney

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<a href="#">Navy Office War Diary</a>	1939–43	B6230
<a href="#">Registers of German POWs ex Kormoran</a>	1940–46	PP246/2, volume 8
<a href="#">HMAS Sydney – sinking of by German raider Kormoran</a>	1941	A5954, 2400/21
<a href="#">HMAS Sydney – search operations</a>	1941	A11095, 105/30/AIR
<a href="#">Interrogation of German survivors ex raider Kormoran</a>	1941	MP1049/5, 2026/19/6
<a href="#">HMAS Sydney – search area</a>	1941	MP1185/8, 2026/3/452
<a href="#">Dietmar's Diary – account of action between Sydney and Kormoran – decode and translation</a>	1941	B5823, 1
<a href="#">Advisory War Council Minutes – Volume 4 – meetings 16 Dec 1941 to 26 Mar 1942 – Minute Nos 597 to 869</a>	1941–42	A5954, 813/2
<a href="#">Sydney – Kormoran – action, signals etc</a>	1941–45	B6121, 165P
<a href="#">Carley float and corpse recovered off Christmas Island</a>	1942–49	AA1980/700, NID 194/222

A search of archives holdings in the United Kingdom in 2001, as recommended by the Parliamentary Joint Committee report, located a small parcel of papers relating to the crew of the Kormoran that had been forwarded from Australia to the British government during the war. The papers have been digitised and placed on the Department of Defence website.

## **Medical records of the Sydney crew**

In responding to the recommendations of the parliamentary inquiry the Australian government agreed with Recommendation 8, that copies of such medical records as exist of those on board the *Sydney* when it was lost be provided to relatives on request and at no cost. Requests for copies of these records, which may be held by the National Archives or the Department of Defence, should be made to the National Archives' National Reference Service.