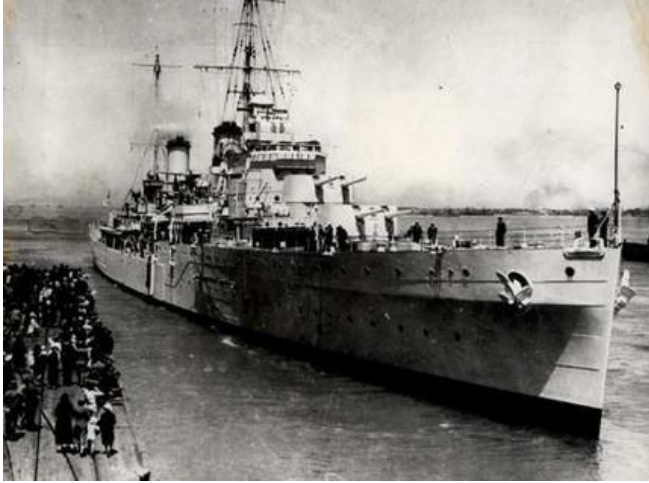


The Last Fight of the HMAS Sydney

Encounter



The captain was calm.

“They will come by, say many thanks, wish us bon voyage and see you later,” Korvettenkapitän Theodor Detmers told the officers around him on the bridge of the *Kormoran*. They all had reason to be worried. Approaching across the blue ocean water was the curved bow of the HMAS *Sydney*, a cruiser of the Royal Australian navy and the very type of warship designed to hunt and destroy their ship.

The *Kormoran* was a German commerce raider—an innocent-looking freighter outfitted with a hidden but lethal

arsenal of guns and torpedoes. Their role in the enormous cat-and-mouse game of naval dominance was to surprise and sink Allied merchant shipping. But now they were suddenly playing the role of the meek mouse.

When the raider’s lookouts first spotted the topmast of the enemy cruiser on the horizon, Detmers ordered his ship, currently disguised as a Dutch freighter, to flee to the west as fast as it could at 14 knots. The *Sydney*, approaching at a top speed twice as fast, was closing the distance rapidly.

It was late afternoon on November 19, 1941 and the two ships were converging at a spot in the Indian Ocean 150 miles off the coast of western Australia. So far this corner of the world had seen little action during the two-year old global conflict. All of the war’s major naval battles—the River Platte, the hunt for the *Bismarck*, Operation Pedestal—had occurred in the Atlantic or the Mediterranean.

But in three weeks this geographical imbalance would suddenly shift. Japan would launch its surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor, Hong Kong, and Singapore—shattering the Pacific calm and pushing back the beaten Allied navies to the distant shores of California and East Africa. Australia, its northern ports bombed and its coastline threatened with invasion, would endure as a beleaguered outpost. It would take the United States six months to stop the Japanese advance, and two more years re-arm for an offensive to reclaim its lost possessions.

But these future events were unknown to the one thousand officers and men aboard the *Kormoran* and *Sydney*, as was the notion that their decisions and actions that day would leave behind one of the great mysteries of World War II.

Aboard the Australian cruiser *Sydney* Captain Joseph Burnett, 41, likely watched from the bridge as his ship overtook the slower freighter. He probably saw the Dutch flag flying from the strange ship’s mast, but the vessel’s position far from normal shipping lanes and attempt to evade would have heightened his suspicions.

Burnett was a member of the first class of Australia’s homegrown naval officers, having enrolled in 1912 as one of the original cadets at the Australian Naval College. He graduated four years later and served as a young officer in the closing years of the First World War, and then remained stationed with the Royal Navy in Britain, excelling at rugby, tennis and also

naval gunnery. He qualified as a gunnery officer in 1922 and quickly scaled the officer ranks aboard Australian and British warships during the inter-war years. In 1938 he became the third naval college graduate to reach the rank of captain. Although many of the *Sydney's* officers and crew were veterans of hit-and-run battles against the Italian navy in 1940, Burnett was not. He spent the beginning of the war ashore on the Australian naval staff and assumed his first command aboard the cruiser when it returned to Australia in May 1941.

As the *Sydney* approached the starboard beam of the larger *Kormoran*, the cruiser used a daytime searchlight to flash the signal "NNJ," the maritime code ordering the merchant ship to identify herself. After a delay, the *Kormoran* ran up the signal flags of the Dutch vessel *Straat Malaaka*, although their location ahead of the freighter's single large funnel purposefully made it difficult for the *Sydney's* spotters to read. The warship requested the freighter to re-position the flags, and as German crew slowly complied, the distance between the two ships, still sailing due west, shrank to a mile.

"Where bound" came the second signal flashed by the *Sydney*.

"Batavia" was the reply from the *Kormoran*, indicating the capital of the Dutch colony of Java lying over a thousand miles to the north.

Aboard the German raider, Detmers and the bridge staff watched the exchange of signals anxiously and urged the enemy cruiser to sail away and leave them alone. Their fear rose when they saw the *Sydney's* crew prepare to launch the spotter plane from the amidships catapult. The plane, once airborne, would easily spot the hundreds of naval mines strewn about the *Kormoran's* high deck, giving away its identity as a raider. But the launch crew apparently received new orders and returned the plane to its storage position. According to the recollections of Heinz Messerschmidt, a 26-year-old lieutenant commander aboard the *Kormoran* at the time, Detmers turned to his officers and reassured them again, "Ah, it's tea time on board. They'll probably just ask us where we are going and what cargo and then let us go on."

By luck and guile the *Kormoran* had survived for almost a year by preying on isolated Allied merchant ships. But this was its first encounter with a warship brandishing guns of equal firepower. Still playing on its disguise as a helpless merchantman, the *Kormoran's* radio operator began broadcasting the alert signal "QQQQ" meaning "suspicious ship sighted." The anxious signal likely confused the *Sydney*, whose radio operator would have received the transmission, as did a wireless station 150-miles away in the Australian coastal town of Geraldton.

As the parley continued, the distance between the two ships shrank to less than a mile. Lookouts on the *Sydney* scanned the freighter for suspicious markings or signs of weapons. But carefully concealed behind special screens and tarps on the *Kormoran's* decks was an arsenal of naval guns, torpedo tubes, and anti-tank guns, all manned, loaded, and trained on the unaware cruiser. Later investigations would attempt to determine why Captain Burnett approached so closely to the *Kormoran*, or if he was lured into false sense of security. Although both ships possessed guns of similar caliber, the *Sydney's* fire control system and experienced turret crews only would be an advantage at longer ranges. Whether by inexperience or trickery, the *Sydney's* vulnerable position would soon turn perilous.

Over an hour after the cruiser first sighted the freighter on the horizon and gave chase, Burnett ordered the *Sydney* to flash the signal "1K"—one half of the secret Allied call sign for the *Straat Maalaka*—across the short gap between the ships. The actual Dutch freighter of that name had a codebook with the corresponding two-letter response. The *Kormoran* did not. Detmers realized that the time for hiding was over. He ordered the Dutch flag taken down and the German naval ensign run up the mast as the camouflage screens fell away to reveal the line of gun barrels trained on the *Sydney*. The *Kormoran's* 5.9-inch guns fired first,

while the rapid-fire anti-tank and machine guns opened up on the officers visible on the cruiser's bridge. It was shortly after half past five in the afternoon.

Combatants

The voyage of the *Kormoran* began almost a year before when she slipped into the Atlantic Ocean in December 1940 disguised as a Russian merchant ship. Launched from Germany's Kiel shipyard in 1938 as the freighter *Steiermark*, she was re-named *Kormoran* and overhauled to become one of the nine "Hilfskreuzer," or auxiliary cruisers, whose mission was to attack and disrupt the trade of the British Empire. She was a large ship at 8,700 tons; and with a top speed of 18 knots, she was the fastest of the Kriegsmarine's commerce raiders, although chronic engine trouble plagued her career. The *Kormoran's* armament of six 5.9-inch guns removed from obsolete battleships, as well as two 3.7cm anti-tank guns and five rapid-fire 20mm anti-aircraft guns surpassed the weaponry of any destroyer and equaled most light cruisers like the *Sydney*. In addition to her guns, four trainable torpedo tubes were positioned on either side of the ship's superstructure, while two secret fixed tubes were located below the waterline. On the raider's decks were over three hundred mines, two Arado 196 floatplanes, and two motor speedboats. Despite this arsenal, the foremost weapon of a raider was surprise, which required strict discipline and smart attention to the ship's appearance. And because many merchant ship victims radioed for help before being captured or sunk, the *Kormoran's* long-term survival depended on quickly vanishing into the open ocean after each ambush.

On January 6, 1941, a month after leaving port, the *Kormoran* sunk her first victim, the Greek steamer *Antonis*, in the central Atlantic. Ten more merchant vessels fell prey to the raider over the next nine months as she crossed between the southern Atlantic and Indian oceans. On several occasions the *Kormoran* rendezvoused with replenishment ships, U-boats, and even the pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer* to obtain supplies and materials to repair her troubled engines.

Life aboard a raider was difficult: crews endured lengthy voyages and the constant fear of encountering the enemy warships tasked to hunt them down. Commanding officers like Detmers were chosen for ability to operate independently, and maintain high standards of crew discipline over many months. Detmers joined the navy as a teenager in 1921 and climbed the career ladder in the small navy of torpedo gunboats and destroyers. Well liked by his crew, but highly authoritarian, Detmers was the youngest and lowest ranked officer selected to captain a raider, being just a Korvettenkapitän (commander). In 1997 the British historian Richard Lamb described Detmers as a "brilliant and aggressive skipper," and a "brilliant tactician." Some writers have tried to portray Detmers as a fanatical Nazi, inclined to be ruthless to his opponents. More grounded accounts, however, claim he exhibited a strong drive to succeed and remarkable battlefield ingenuity. German naval officers were not required to belong to the Nazi party, and there is no evidence that Detmers did, even if he did show some nationalist sympathies. Detmers could also be called ambitious; the *Kormoran* had destroyed 70,000 tons of Allied shipping when it encountered the *Sydney*, and some historians claim that Detmers wanted to reach 100,000 tons to receive the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross that rewarded such a feat.

The HMAS *Sydney* underwent a similar shipyard identity change at the start of her life. Originally laid down in 1933 as HMS *Phaeton*, a modified Leander Class light cruiser, she was purchased while building by the Australian government, and launched as the *Sydney* in 1934. She was the Australian navy's second warship of that name, the preceding one having compiled an impressive record during the First World War. Armed with eight 6-inch guns in four twin turrets divided fore and aft, four 4-inch dual-purpose anti-aircraft guns and a cluster

of Lewis machine guns, she was 562 feet long, displaced 7,000 tons and achieved a top speed of 32 knots during trials. Eight torpedo tubes in quad mounts fitted amidships on both sides finished her armament along with a single Walrus spotting plane.

After patrolling Australian waters during the first six months of the war, *Sydney* sailed to the Mediterranean in late May 1940, just before Italy declared war on a reeling France and Britain. Two months later she surprised and chased an Italian flotilla northwest of Crete, using long-range fire from her 6-inch guns to cripple the light cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, which was later sunk by British destroyers. For the rest of 1940 the *Sydney* took part in numerous patrols and bombardments in the Eastern Mediterranean before departing for Australia in January 1941. Captain Burnett took over command in May 1941, and at the time his ship encountered the *Kormoran*, the *Sydney* was returning to western Australia after escorting troop ships to Indonesia.

Battle

The first two 5.9-inch salvos from the *Kormoran* missed the *Sydney*, according to reports from the German gunners. But the third volley crashed into the bridge and gun director tower, crippling the cruiser's ability to return accurate fire just seconds into the battle. Meanwhile, the raider's anti-tank and machine guns raked the *Sydney's* bridge, presumably killing or wounding many of the officers standing there. Other guns sprayed the exposed portside 4-inch gun mounts and torpedo tubes, preventing their crews from manning them. According to German witnesses, the gap between the two ships was between 1,000 and 1,500 yards—a distance more appropriate for the muzzle-loading cannons of Trafalgar than the rapid-fire guns and high explosive shells of the Second World War.

The *Sydney's* first response was a salvo of 6-inch rounds that passed over the now exposed raider. However, the next shells from the *Kormoran* smashed into the cruiser's forward "A" and "B" turrets and put them out of action. Another German shell exploded the spotter plane amidships, spilling burning aviation fuel over the decks and black smoke billowing into the sky. *Sydney's* "X" and "Y" turrets located in the rear of the ship continued to fire under local control for a few more minutes, but only the crew of "X" achieved hits, sending three rounds into the high-sided freighter. One shell struck amidships, and another punched into the engine room. But the third shell tore through the raider's funnel, severing the oil warming lines and sending burning fluids cascading down into the motor room to ignite a major fire.

At about this time the *Kormoran* reportedly launched two torpedoes; at least one struck the *Sydney* between the mangled "A" and "B" turrets tearing a huge gash in the bow and igniting even more fires. Locked together like two wavering boxers, the warships exchanged constant blows that crippled them both within a few minutes. A storm of shells swept across the water as impacting rounds blossomed into fireballs and pillars of smoke from burning fuel climbed into the evening sky.

Fifteen minutes after firing began, the stricken *Sydney* made a sudden turn to port, passing close behind the *Kormoran* and allowing the raider's rear guns to engage the previously sheltered starboard side of the cruiser. But the *Sydney's* turn also permitted her crew to launch a spread of four torpedoes at the raider, all of which missed. By this time the fires in the *Kormoran's* engine room had spread to destroy the machinery, causing the freighter to stop in the water. The *Sydney* limped slowly away to the south still under fire, down severely at the bow and burning ferociously. Around six o'clock the now immobile *Kormoran* loosed a final torpedo from an underwater tube at the fleeing *Sydney* that apparently missed. The 5.9-inch guns on the raider continued to engage the cruiser for another half hour as the range increased and darkness fell. The Germans' last view of the

Sydney came a few hours after sunset—a burning glow on the distant southern horizon that slowly flickered and faded away.

Detmers soon realized that the *Kormoran's* uncontrollable fires threatened the hundreds of volatile mines stored on the deck. He ordered his crew to set scuttling charges and abandon ship. Without panicking, the German crew launched lifeboats and watched as the charges detonated along the ship's keel shortly after midnight, sinking the *Kormoran* on her 352nd continuous day at sea. Of the raiders crew of 397 officers and men, 317 survivors reached the Australian coast over the next few days. And in an outcome that has fueled controversy ever since, neither the *Sydney*, nor her crew of 645 officers and men, were ever seen again.

Aftermath

The *Sydney's* overdue status at Fremantle did not immediately raise an alarm. She was due to arrive on November 20, but it wasn't until November 23, three days after the battle, that the Australian navy began to frantically call for the missing warship over the radio.

The next day the British tanker *Trocas* found a rubber raft 125 miles off the coast carrying 25 German survivors from the *Kormoran*. The tanker captain radioed the Australian navy office to provide the first indication that the *Sydney* might have been involved in a battle. A day earlier the troop-carrying ocean liner *Aquitania* had picked up 26 sailors from the scuttled raider in nearby waters, but according to the official history, the captain of the *Aquitania* did not break radio silence to report his discovery until the liner arrived to port on November 27.

The report from the *Trocas*, and concerns that it might be linked with the overdue *Sydney*, spurred the Australian navy and air force to conduct surface and air sweeps of the waters off Western Australia during the remaining days of November. The searchers located several more boats with German survivors, but the only evidence recovered from the *Sydney* was two lifebelts and a damaged navy-issued Carley life raft.

To suppress rumors during the search, the navy's Chief Publicity Censor ordered that newspapers and radio make no references to the *Sydney*. But the navy's gag order, followed by several more censorship notices, immediately raised suspicions that something dreadful had occurred and had the opposite effect. When German survivors began landing in life rafts on the Australian coast on November 25, the rumors quickly assumed the conspiratorial cast that would shadow this incident for decades.

After four days of scouring the ocean, and with the cruiser still missing and no survivors found, the search effort ceased on November 29 as officials prepared for what would become the worst naval disaster in the history of the Australian navy. Prime Minister John Curtin officially announced the *Sydney's* loss on November 30 three days after the next of kin were notified by telegram that their loved ones were missing. Meanwhile, intelligence officers began to arrive in Western Australia to interrogate the German survivors. With the *Sydney* gone, and the ocean yielding few clues, the *Kormoran's* crew became the only witnesses to what had happened.

Mystery

Sixty-four years have passed since the *Sydney* and *Kormoran* fought their duel, but the controversy over the battle remains a sensitive topic in modern-day Australia. The story has fueled hundreds of newspaper articles, a stack of history books, and even an official inquiry by the Australian parliament. These investigations pondered many questions, but one stands out: How could a first-rate warship like *Sydney* be lured close enough to the disguised raider to be attacked unawares and sunk?

Attempting to provide answers are a host of conspiracy theories inspired by the empty spaces in the historical record and a visceral distrust of the battle description given by the

Kormoran survivors. One of the more sensational alternatives suggests that a Japanese submarine working in concert with the *Kormoran* torpedoed the *Sydney* as it stopped to inspect the suspicious freighter. This account was inspired by Japanese propaganda broadcasts that took credit for the *Sydney*'s sinking in the months after war was declared in December 1941. Another scenario claims that Captain Detmers pretended to surrender the *Kormoran* under the white flag, and then crippled the Australian cruiser by attacking it using the raider's underwater torpedo tubes. The discrepancy between the hundreds of German survivors and the disappearance of the *Sydney*'s entire crew is explained with the accusation that the *Kormoran* or its accomplices machine-gunned the Australian sailors after they abandoned their ship.

Other theories attack the navy, including the charge that the *Sydney* was not ready for battle because one of her forward turrets was inoperable. Another charge, based on the statements of a pilot involved in the search effort, claims that the search started right after the liner *Aquitania* discovered the first German raft, a day before the official history claims. These accusations have led some to believe that the government's account is a cover-up of something much more sinister. Giving voice to that theory is the thrilling plot of a 2005 novel which suggests an American secret agent, working under orders from the British and American governments, suppressed details of the *Sydney*'s loss to keep the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on track and allow America's entry into the war.

To address the growing public interest in the mystery of the lost cruiser, and to deflate some of the embarrassing conspiracy theories, in 1997 the Australian Minister for Defence, Ian MacLachlan, asked a parliamentary sub-committee to conduct an inquiry into the battle and its aftermath. Their task was to investigate the evidence and opinions relating to the battle and discover the most plausible explanations for what happened. The committee did not seek to create a new academic work on the subject, but to review the historical record and offer "comments and conclusions" on important elements of the controversy.

The committee's inquiry lasted for two years. In addition to holding public hearings in five major Australian cities, they solicited assistance from the governments of Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, made contact with the "HSK *Kormoran* Survivor's Association" in Germany (two men responded), and collected more than 201 official statements from sources ranging from serious scholars to amateur enthusiasts.

In March 1999 the committee released their *Report on the Loss of HMAS Sydney*, a gargantuan work totaling 19 volumes and 4,710 pages, with an additional six volumes of transcripts from the public hearings. The weight of material suggests that the parliament sub-committee hoped their inquiry to be the final word on the matter, even if they suspected that it would not. To make their findings accessible the committee also released a condensed 192-page report summarizing the evidence and submissions, as well as the committee's own conclusions.

For the most part, the parliament's report confirmed the account of historian G. Hermon Gill, who was given access to classified files in the 1950s to write the official history of Australia's World War II naval service. Gill, an intelligence officer during the war, wrote his description of the battle using the statements of German survivors, claiming, "no room was left for doubt as to [their] accuracy." The committee likewise saw no reason to suspect the *Kormoran* survivors had been deceptive, a common accusation of the conspiracy theorists. Supporters of the Germans' veracity point to the remarkable consistency among survivors' who were interrogated at different times and places and without having met. Still, Gill's account of the battle spans only fourteen pages of his 686-page book, and he acknowledged that many questions might never be answered.

Adhering to Gill's official history, the Australian parliament's 1999 report rejected many of the more prominent conspiracy theories. The involvement of a Japanese submarine was

dismissed for lack of “hard evidence” that a submarine was operating in the area at the time. Other theories fell before the testimony collected by the committee, including the idea that *Kormoran* launched a motor torpedo boat to machine gun *Sydney* survivors in the water, a theory they described as not only speculative, but also “distressing to family members of those lost on *Sydney*.”

The parliamentary inquiry also attempted to understand why *Sydney* approached so closely to *Kormoran* as to place itself in danger. They looked at several factors mentioned in Gill’s account and repeated by other historians. One explanation suggests that since *Sydney* encountered the *Kormoran* late in the afternoon on November 19, perhaps Captain Burnett wanted to determine the identity of the freighter before the end of the day. The sun set on November 19th a little before 7:00pm, with nautical twilight, the point at which the ocean is completely dark, occurring an hour later. This left at most three hours for *Sydney* to approach and identify the suspicious freighter, and perhaps encouraged her captain’s decision to close the distance so quickly. Burnett might also have wanted to prevent the freighter from scuttling itself, as had occurred with other cornered ships.

Another rationale put forward was that Burnett was mindful of appearing too cautious in approaching a potential enemy vessel. As a member of the Australian naval staff in early 1941, he likely knew of the criticism leveled against his former academy classmate, Captain Bruce Farncomb. Farncomb was patrolling the Indian Ocean in March 1941 in command of the heavy cruiser *HMAS Canberra* when he engaged a German supply ship. The *Canberra* fired more than two hundred 8-inch rounds at the enemy ship at a range of 19,000 yards. The cruiser’s great expenditure of ammunition resulted in an admonishment from the navy office. Did the *Sydney*’s Captain Burnett approach to within a thousand yards of the *Kormoran* to avoid the same rebuke made against Captain Farncomb? We will likely never know. As historian Tom Frame wrote in his 1993 book on the *Sydney*, “those with an interest in the loss of this proud Australian ship must learn to live with the unknown, and the unknowable.”

Search

Just as the evidence at a crime scene often reveals key details about the events that took place there, many historians believe that the answers to the critical questions about the battle between the *Sydney* and *Kormoran* lie with their wrecks on the ocean floor. Attempting to find these lost warships is not a new idea. The last quarter century has seen the efforts of more than twenty expeditions operating from platforms ranging from fish trawlers, to sophisticated survey ships, to military aircraft equipped with magnetometers. None of these expeditions ever found traces of the wrecks.

Last year, however, saw the launch of a multi-million dollar search effort to locate and commemorate the missing warships. Hoping to complete the “unfinished business” of this World War II tale, the HMAS *Sydney* Search Party Ltd. began a campaign in late 2004 to raise the AU\$4.5 million necessary to outfit a high-tech underwater search. As a not-for-profit trustee organization, the HMAS *Sydney* Search Party has two years to raise tax-deductible contributions to finance the expedition. The fund raising has been slow so far, but the organizers are confident that they can raise the funds in time.

Adding substantial underwater experience to the new search team is David Mearns, a British deep water explorer whose UK-based Blue Water Recoveries discovered the North Atlantic resting place of the famed battlecruiser *HMS Hood* in 2001. Dr. Michael “Mack” McCarthy, a maritime archaeologist from the West Australian Maritime Museum in Fremantle, is pleased that the latest search effort “combines Australian input and overseas proven expertise.” After consulting the reams of research available on the battle between the *Sydney* and *Kormoran*, Mearns decided to search a new location 120 miles southwest of the

coastal city of Carnarvon. One of the factors suggesting this spot was a previously unread German account of the battle that Mearns discovered in British naval archives.

Since more information exists from German witnesses as to the final location of the *Kormoran*, the expedition will first attempt to find the German raider, and then use its location to trace the probable resting place of the *Sydney*. The *Kormoran*'s search area is a 256-square mile box off Shark's Bay in which the wreck is thought to lie one to two miles below the ocean's surface. Although the search area for the *Sydney* and *Kormoran* will be larger than Mearns' previous projects, organizers hope new technology will play a key role. The team will employ a side-scanning sonar to identify possible sites for the wrecks, and then use a remotely-operated vehicle (ROV) to investigate the contacts. To save cost, some of the scanning equipment will be borrowed from oil companies conducting explorations in the region at the same time. McCarthy is hopeful that the search will succeed. "This is a big issue for Australia," he explains, "it reverberates for everyone in the country."

Memorial

The expedition planned by the Finding Sydney Foundation and David Mearns represents the best chance to discover the wrecks of the *Sydney* and the *Kormoran*. But realizing that the wrecks might never be found, the 1999 parliament report recommended the creation of a physical memorial to the lost *Sydney* and set the goal of the 60th anniversary of the duel, November 19, 2001, as the completion date.

One day before that anniversary thousands of Australian citizens gathered to dedicate a somber memorial for the ship and her crew on the summit of Mount Scott above the coastal city of Geraldton. The *Sydney* had docked at Geraldton less than a month before the battle with the *Kormoran*. The memorial effort was led by the local Rotary Club and received funds from the government, as well as donors from across the country. Although the loss of the *Sydney* was a national tragedy, Western Australia has always felt a special kinship with the fate of the cruiser. Many members of the crew hailed from local towns and cities, and the warship fought its last battle not far from the continent's western coast.

The Geraldton memorial consists of a 30-foot tall dome supported by seven pillars and constructed of 645 interlocking stainless steel gulls, each representing a life lost aboard the *Sydney*. Underneath the dome lies a podium where wreaths can be placed, and on which an inscription reads, "In memory of the men lost on HMAS Sydney November 19, 1941." Outside the dome, gazing over the blue-green water of the Indian Ocean is a bronze statue known as The Waiting Woman. She stands exposed to the elements, her right hand raised to shield her eyes from the setting sun, as she looks seaward for the return of a warship and crew, who even if discovered on the ocean floor, that will never be back.

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