Facts and Figures

Early in the Second World War, on 19 November 1941, the Royal Australian Navy cruiser HMAS Sydney, commanded by Captain Joseph Burnett, engaged in battle with the German auxiliary cruiser Kormoran off the Western Australian coast. The battle lasted only an hour with both ships crippled and seriously damaged.

The Sydney steamed slowly away and sank losing the full complement of 645 crew. The Kormoran drifted for several hours before her crew, commanded by Captain Theodor Detmers, abandoned ship with 80 lives lost and 317 rescued.

Failure to observe correct censorship procedure led to leaking of information to the public on 25 November. Official news of the action and the presumed loss of the Sydney was released by the Prime Minister, John Curtin, on 3 December. The lack of information led to suspicion of a cover-up or conspiracy.

Very little information on the explanation for and details of the disaster was available until the official history of the Royal Australian Navy in the Second World War was published in 1957.

The loss continued to trouble Australians and an official government inquiry into the circumstances of the sinking was set up in 1997 by the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. The report was tabled in June 2000 placing on the public record the history of the events. Another government inquiry is underway in 2008.

On 17 March 2008, the Australian Government announced that the wreckage of the HMAS Sydney was found 112 nautical miles off Steep Point, Western Australia. It has been declared protected as an historic shipwreck and will remain where it lies.

Websites and References

Books

- Australian War Memorial Wartime Magazine Issue 43.
Websites

Department of Veterans’ Affairs
www.ww2australia.gov.au  .......................................  Australia’s War 1939 - 1945
www.ww2roll.gov.au  ..................................................... World War II Nominal Roll

National Archives of Australia

Australian War Memorial
www.awm.gov.au/roh ....................................................... Roll of Honour

Finding Sydney Foundation
www.findingsydney.com ................................................... Locating the Sydney

Seapower Centre Australia
www.navy.gov.au/Sea_Power_Centre_Australia ........................................... Background information

Parliamentary Inquiry Report June 2000

Teaching Activities

1. Read about the sinking of the HMAS Sydney on the National Archives of Australia website. With no survivors, how have historians pieced together the story of the sinking? What sources were available to them and how credible were these sources?

2. How did the German cruiser Kormoran get within firing range of the Sydney?

3. Two relics were found following the sinking; a lifebelt and the Carley Float, a life raft now on display at the Australian War Memorial. What questions does this relic raise and what is known of any survivors? Go to www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/hmas_sydney/carley_float.asp

4. Print the telegram to the Prime Minister on the Second World War website at www.ww2australia.gov.au/waratsea/HMASsydney.html. Why do you think the government of the day was guarded in releasing information to the general public?

5. Go to the Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour advanced search and place HMAS Sydney under the unit. This will give you the names of the navy crew and No9 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force who died. You can now research an individual’s service details.

6. What decisions did the commander, Captain Joseph Burnett, make in the hours leading up to the engagement that contributed to the outcome?

7. Research some facts about the German prisoners of war and their stories of the sinking through the National Archives of Australia website.

8. The Finding Sydney Foundation located the resting place of the Sydney. The ship has been protected under the Historic Shipwrecks Act. Do you think that protecting the ship is important? Why or why not?

9. How important was the finding of the HMAS Sydney in 2008 to the relatives of those who died in this event?

10. The HMAS Sydney poster can be found at www.dva.gov.au/commemorations/education. Look at the photograph taken on 19 July 1940 featuring the Sydney crew. How does the image help us to commemorate the service of those who died on HMAS Sydney? How does it make you feel to know that many of those in the photograph lost their lives?