



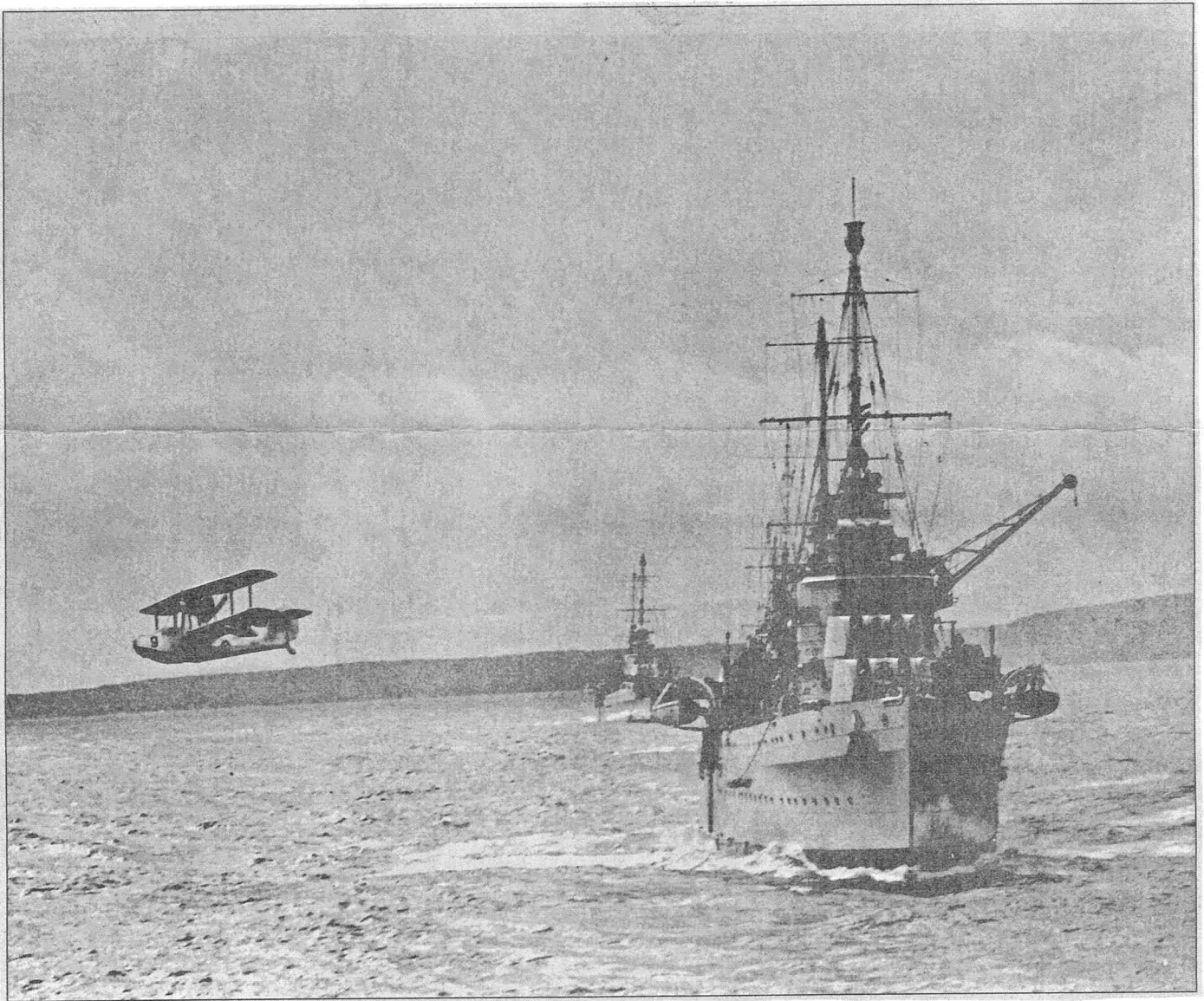
THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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HMAS SYDNEY



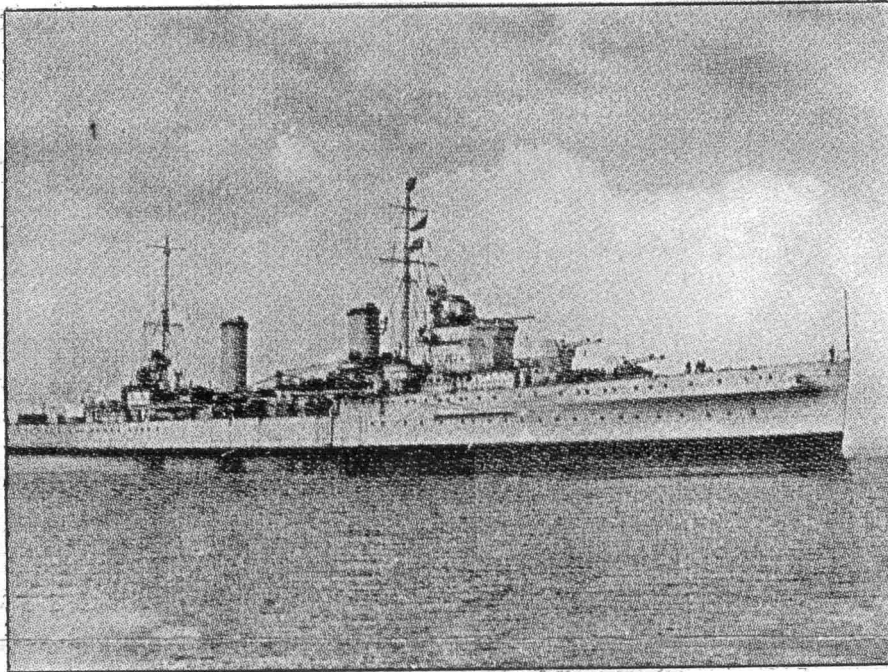
Manoeuvres on the eve of World War II . . .

HMAS Sydney off Jervis Bay in 1939.

Just launched was the Supermarine Seagull V seaplane which was part of the ship's equipment. It was stored on its catapult situated between the funnels when not in use.

(Syd. Morning Herald Photo).

For more than 60 years, there was speculation about the loss of the light cruiser, HMAS *Sydney* during the second world war.



HMAS SYDNEY

On Monday 17 March 2008 the announcement was made that the wreck of HMAS *Sydney* had been found on the seabed off the coast of Western Australia.

This followed the finding of HSK *Kormoran*^{*} five days earlier.

The November - December 2008 issue of *Reveille*, Vol 81, No. 6, published by the New South Wales Branch of the Returned and Services League of Australia in association with Acumen Publishing Pty., Ltd., of Sydney, featured an article,

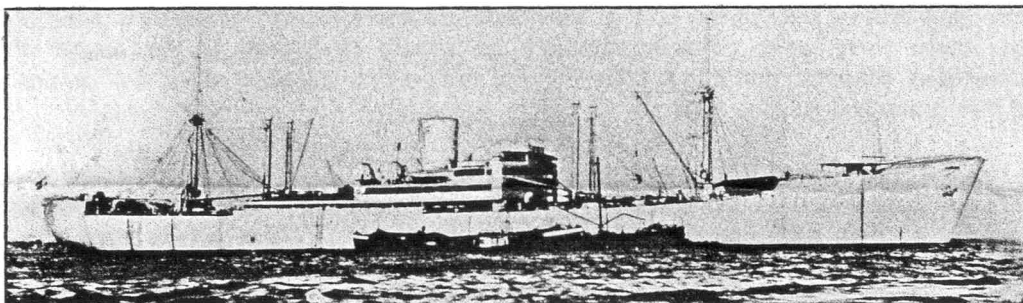
The Finding of HMAS Sydney by Professor Tom Frame, a former Naval officer and currently Director of St. Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra.

Much of the detail of the naval operations is taken from this article with grateful acknowledgement.

^{*} HSK is the abbreviation for the German word Handelsstorkreuzer meaning Commerce Disruption Cruiser.

The sinking of the light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* off the West Australian coast on 19 November 1941 stands alone in the annals of Australian naval history. Not only did the close quarters exchange with the German Armed Raider HSK *Kormoran* claim 645 lives, making it the nation's greatest naval loss; no other event has been so shrouded in mystery and surrounded in controversy. As *Sydney* was sunk with all hands and disappeared virtually without trace, what could be reliably established about the ship's final engagement and subsequent sinking was frustratingly limited.

We know that *Kormoran*, a vessel designed as the cargo ship *Steiermark* and converted for wartime raider operations, sank more than 68,000 tons of shipping in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in the 11 months after she first put to sea. On the night of 19 - 20 November 1941, *Kormoran* was heading towards the West Australian coast to lay a pattern of mines in Shark Bay. At 5 pm, as the sun lowered in the sky, *Sydney* was returning from Sunda Strait where she had escorted the troopship *Zealandia*. The Australian ship observed *Kormoran* on the horizon. While the disguised raider attempted to pass herself off as a Dutch freighter, *Sydney* closed to a range of just 1200 yards. By then the cruiser had given away a considerable tactical advantage.



The German Raider HSK *Kormoran*

After a short and devastating engagement at point-blank range, both ships were mortally damaged. When *Kormoran* was scuttled, six hours later, the Germans observed *Sydney* ablaze and making way slowly over the horizon to the south-west.

Most of *Kormoran*'s crew was recovered from lifeboats several days later, with 314 Germans becoming prisoners of war. In tragic contrast, there were no survivors from the *Sydney*.

The disappearance of HMAS *Sydney* was extremely difficult to explain to a deeply shocked Australian public which had recently celebrated its great operational achievements in the Mediterranean. The only source of information about what had occurred off Carnarvon was the *Kormoran* survivors. The nation wanted to know how such a catastrophic loss of life could have happened to such a capable ship.

Surely the famous *Sydney* was not lost to a mere armed merchant raider? Many more questions were raised in the years that followed. Some were mischievous, others were even malevolent. Eventually only two remained. What induced Captain Joseph Burnett in *Sydney* to forgo his long-range gunnery superiority when he brought his ship so near the *Kormoran*? Why was *Sydney* lost practically without trace when so many Germans had survived?

There has been no shortage of theories and answers to these questions but, to date, they remain unanswered although a thorough examination of the wreck may provide some clues.

The Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales, Most Wor. Bro. His Excellency Lord Gowrie V.C., Governor General of the Commonwealth of Australia said in his address to Grand Lodge on 10 December 1941:

It is true that within the last two or three days Japan, after long hesitation, has definitely ranged itself on the side of our enemies, and, through surprise attacks while negotiations were still being conducted, has scored some initial successes, but the effect of these will be counterbalanced by the fact that we shall now have on our side, in the Pacific at all events, the powerful navy of the United States. It is as yet too early for me to comment further upon this new development, but it must be remembered that we cannot expect to escape occasional strokes of misfortune, and this has recently been brought home to us in Australia by the sinking of two ships of our own navy, the *Sydney* and the *Parramatta*. We need not be unduly concerned about the loss of the vessels themselves, as each by its splendid work had probably much more than repaid its initial cost; but the fate that overtook so many of our gallant seamen is a calamity that must affect us deeply. It seems only the other day that the men of the *Sydney* fresh from their triumphs in the Mediterranean, where among other fine exploits they sent to the bottom the renowned *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, the pride of the Italian Navy, were marching through the streets of Sydney to the sound of tumultuous cheering, and it is a bitter thing to realise that we shall never look on one of their brave young faces again.

I have already, through the Commonwealth Government, conveyed my sincere condolence to the relatives of those who perished but as a considerable number of them were members of our Order - as far as I can ascertain there were nearly twenty from this Constitution alone - I would now like to record my heartfelt sympathy with their nearest of kin, who will, I trust, derive some consolation from the fact that their dear ones died gloriously in the defence of Australia.

And now, as you are no doubt all aware, the people of Australia re being asked to subscribe funds for the construction of a new cruiser of that name, as it is generally felt that there must always be a "Sydney". A substantial sum has already been received, and I would be pleased if Grand Lodge could see its way to grant a liberal amount for this most worthy purpose. May I suggest that the matter be taken up by the President of the Board of General Purposes:

The Board of General Purposes got the message and Grand Lodge voted £500 to the fund for the building of a new *Sydney*.

Bro Don Davis and I set out to try to identify the 'nearly twenty' New South Wales Freemasons referred to by the Grand Master. We identified:

- Biram, Bernard Frank age 34 Petty Officer Cook
Master Mason of Lodge Randwick No. 388
- Friar, Jack Allan age 28 Engine Room Artificer
Master Mason of Lodge Amity No 547
- Fuller, John Albert E. age 41 Warrant Shipwright
Master Mason of Lodge Willoughby No 363

- Jones, William George age 45 Chief Shipwright
Master Mason of Lodge St Andrew No 7
- Lang, William Hugh age 20 Stoker 2nd Class
Master Mason of Lodge Belmore No 244
- Morris, Edgar Percy age 38 Petty Officer
Master Mason of Lodge United Defence No 606
- Noble, Charles Taylor age 42 Regulating Petty Officer
Master Mason of Lodge Fidelity No 163
- Quin, George Frederick age 37 Petty Officer
Master Mason of Lodge Amity No 547
- Ricardo, John Layton age 37 Petty Officer Butcher
Master Mason of Lodge United Defence No 606
- Shepherd, David John age 40 Chief Petty Officer Telegraphist
Master Mason of Lodge Carlton No 382
- Strugnell, John William age 35 Petty Officer
Master Mason of Lodge United Defence No 606
- Stubbs, Revd George age 56 Chaplain
Master Mason of Lodge Renown No 360
- Wilson, Allan Wallace age 32 Lieutenant Engineer RANR
Master Mason of Lodge Victory Lewis No 491

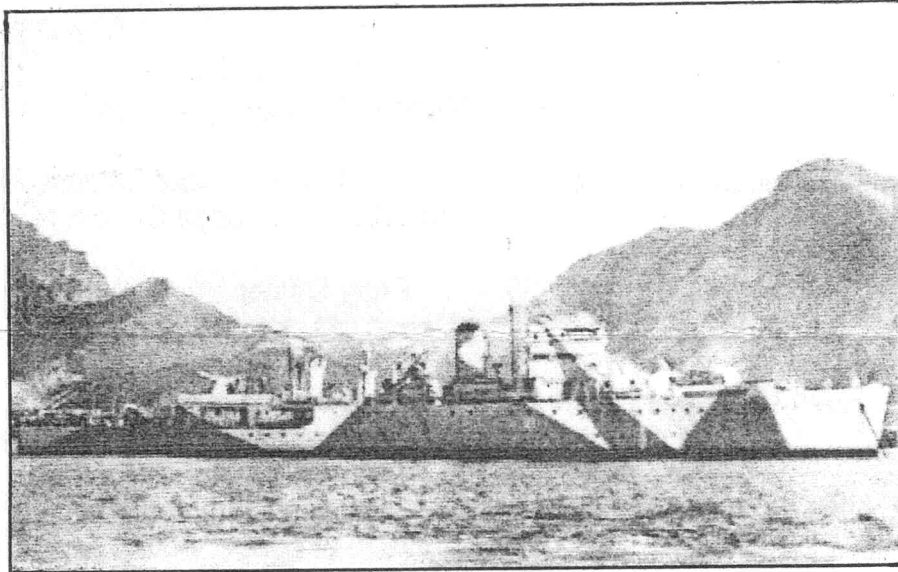
This accounts for 13 of the Grand Master's 'nearly twenty'. Perhaps there are others yet to be identified as members of a masonic lodge in New South Wales.

The remainder perhaps were among 130 lives lost when HMAS *Parramatta* was sunk in the Mediterranean 30 km off Bardia while escorting a convoy on 27th November 1941. She was hit by a torpedo fired from German submarine *U559* which caused the ship's magazine to explode and the ship rolled rapidly and sank within a few minutes.

Of the 130 sailors who were lost, four have been identified as Freemasons belonging to New South Wales' lodges. They were:

- Hunter, Howard William age 26 Chief Engine Room Artificer
Master Mason of Lodge Amity No 547
- Oram, Reginald Philip age 45 CD Engineer
Master Mason of Lodge Temperance No 179

- Purtell, Edward Geoffrey Chief Petty Officer, Writer
Master Mason of Lodge Vacluse No 266
- West, Albert Edward age 32 Leading Cook (S)
Master Mason of Lodge Amity No 547



HMAS Parramatta in camouflage in 1941

In addition, a former pupil of the William Thompson Masonic School at Baulkham Hills, although not a mason was,

- Cox, Harold William age 21 Acting Leading Stoker

The *Masonian* for March 1942 reported his death:

“Harold Cox was a member of the crew of HMAS *Sydney* which was torpedoed and presumably sunk, with all hands, in the Indian Ocean in November last year.

Shortly after leaving the School in 1936, Harold joined the Navy, and was on the *Sydney* when she sank the Italian cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni* in the Mediterranean Sea.

When the *Sydney* returned to her home port, Harold visited the Old Masonians Club and renewed many old friendships, and he was in touch with the School until the ship left on her last cruise.

Just twenty-one years of age, Harold looked upon life as a joyous adventure, and we shall always remember him for his cheerful, happy disposition, and optimistic outlook."



LEADING STOKER HAROLD COX,
H.M.A.S. "Sydney."

In the September 1942 issue of the *Masonian*, Harold Cox was listed as missing. He has now been found.

Lest we Forget

Grahame Cumming
December 2008
