

## *Welcoming the 'Wild Men of Borneo'*

of coming back here to live. You are not welcome." This is, in effect, what our White Australia policy means.

Let me, on behalf of many Australians who differ with our immigration policy, say that we would really like you to come back again.<sup>53</sup>

Reverend Watson's observations served to bluntly highlight the awkwardness involved in the Games' publicity campaigns. Organisers and politicians championed the 1962 British Empire and Commonwealth Games as an opportunity to integrate Western Australia more fully into a global economy – and this necessitated a concerted effort to forge links across the Indian Ocean. But this would not be a straightforward task. Western Australia's geographic isolation combined with awkward legacies of imperialism and highly restrictive immigration laws to ensure that a wide cultural gulf existed between the State's population and the peoples of Africa and Asia.

Understandably, local and international press reports in 1962 focused primarily upon the athletic aspects of the Seventh British Empire and Commonwealth Games. Reporters celebrated the swimming success of Murray Rose and Dawn Fraser of Australia and Linda Ludgrove and Anita Lonsbrough of England. They marveled at the running exploits of Canada's Bruce Kidd, Kenya's Saraphino Antao, and New Zealand's Murray Halberg and Peter Snell. At the Games' conclusion the host population could take great pride in the fact that Australia finished atop the unofficial national results table. The Games were first and foremost a sporting event.

As this article suggests, however, the Perth Games were also a moment when key organisers and supporters of the Games in Western Australia took tentative steps to engage with African and South Asian nations in order to ensure that the State's largest ever sporting event was free from racial controversy and to help reposition Western Australia as an economic powerhouse with financial links across the Indian Ocean. Hence, when organisers called upon Games participants, officials and visitors to 'Meet Us in Perth' they hoped that the resulting experience would not only contribute to political unity within the British Commonwealth, but would also facilitate short-term economic dividends and long-term trade links that would help to secure the State's industrial future.

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53 *West Australian*, 6 December 1962, p. 7.

## Rediscovering an Indian Ocean connection: commemorating HMAS *Sydney* and HSK *Kormoran* on the West Australian coast<sup>1</sup>

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Western Australia's Indian Ocean coast is a region rich in maritime history. From time to time it has also been a place of enormous tragedy. During the twentieth century, one particular date stands out: 19 November 1941, the day of a great battle at sea that ended with the deaths of 645 officers and men on board HMAS *Sydney*. It remains the single greatest loss of Australian naval lives at sea.

For communities along the mid-north coast of Western Australia, particularly Geraldton and Carnarvon, rediscovering an Indian Ocean connection through the story of *Sydney* and her battle with HSK *Kormoran* has been central in staking their claims to a memory of the nation at war. Until 2008, the lack of an identified wreck site allowed several places to be promoted as *the* proper place for a memorial. This was helped along by a strong rivalry between Geraldton and Carnarvon as well as various theories that posited different wreck sites along the coast. Second, local governments in the region began to see the value of war heritage as a tourist attraction, particularly in areas that had suffered job losses as agricultural industries embraced newer and larger technologies that employed fewer people. The third and perhaps most significant factor in this process of rediscovery was the way in which proponents were able to draw on a sense of emotional heritage to make their claims for monuments to be constructed in certain places. The monuments that have been the most successful in attracting construction funds and visitors have been those that

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1 This chapter draws on research conducted in the Australian Research Council Discovery Project *Revisiting Australia's War* (DP1093729) on pilgrimages to Second World War sites. A version of this work, written with Bruce Scates, Alexandra McCosker, Keir Reeves and Rebecca Wheatley, appears in the book *Anzac Journeys*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. I thank my colleagues and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on this work.

have made the loudest claims for having an emotional connection with this sad story of loss on the Indian Ocean.

Scholarly interest in the connections between memory, commemoration, ritual and tourism has grown in recent years.<sup>2</sup> A number of case studies illuminate themes relevant to this essay, particularly those that investigate similar sites relating to the Second World War. Using an analogy of the body, Cambridge archaeologist Gilly Carr looks particularly at the ways in which wartime heritage on Guernsey and Jersey has been employed to heal (and, in some cases, inflame) memories of German occupation between 1940 and 1945.<sup>3</sup> The bunker restoration projects that began on the Channel Islands in the 1970s 'excited' members of the generation that succeeded the one that had actually lived through the war.<sup>4</sup> Although such movements took place independently, they were part of a wider global phenomenon: the first serious efforts to locate *Sydney* and *Kormoran* occurred in Australia during the same decade. There are further parallels, too. As was the case on Jersey and Guernsey, memorials to the two ships began to be built on the West Australian coast from the early- to mid-1980s.<sup>5</sup>

In explaining the motivation for the renewed emphasis on war heritage in the Channel Islands, Carr likens the new monuments on the landscape to a form of 'commemorative "acupuncture"'.<sup>6</sup> They demonstrate a belief that to remember is to bring about some form of healing or reconciliation, a belief that is central to the Indian Ocean connection analysed here.<sup>7</sup> It is in the pervasiveness of this idea that the intersection between national, local and personal politics is located, one that has become powerful in making arguments about the appeal of monuments as tourist attractions. But in commemorating the past in this manner, there is always more at work than the pursuit of the tourist dollar. As South African tourism researcher Sabine Marschall has observed, '[h]eritage is always purpose driven; it is tied to group identity or other societal discourses – apart from more mundane economic motivations'.<sup>8</sup> In the examples looked at here, those discourses are plainly evident. They encompass mourning as a

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- 2 See, for instance, Ruben C. Lois González, 'The Camino de Santiago and its Contemporary Renewal: pilgrims, tourists and territorial identities', *Culture and Religion*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013, pp. 8-22; Avril Maddrell, 'Moving and Being Moved: more-than-walking and talking on pilgrimage walks in the Manx landscape', *Culture and Religion*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013, pp. 63-77; Sabine Marschall, "'Personal Memory Tourism" and a Wider Exploration of the Tourism-Memory Nexus', *Journal of Tourism & Cultural Change*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2012, p. 321.
  - 3 Gilly Carr, 'The Slowly Healing Scars of Occupation', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 249-65.
  - 4 *ibid.*, p. 254.
  - 5 Gilly Carr, 'Occupation Heritage, Commemoration and Memory in Guernsey and Jersey', *History and Memory*, no. 1, 2012, pp. 98-9.
  - 6 Carr, 'The Slowly Healing Scars of Occupation', p. 258.
  - 7 The emphasis put on remembrance in late modernity is thrown into relief by studies by historians such as Scott Sowerby, who has demonstrated the role of historical amnesia in attaining political reconciliation following periods of strife. Scott Sowerby, 'Forgetting the Repealers: religious toleration and historical amnesia in later Stuart England', *Past & Present*, vol. 215, no. 1, 2012, pp. 85-123.
  - 8 Marschall, "'Personal Memory Tourism" and a Wider Exploration of the Tourism-memory Nexus', p. 330.



civic duty and a source of community cohesion, in addition to the notion that to undertake a voyage to a place of loss works to heal personal wounds.

In the sections that follow, I trace the patterns of mourning that have developed around *Sydney* and *Kormoran*, beginning with a brief account of the battle that destroyed both ships. The essay develops chronologically, charting the ways in which public memorialisation of *Sydney* in particular moved from being a stoic, familial and clerical practice, to one that is civic, regionally-focused and designed to encourage affect.

### Victory and loss

In November 1941, HMAS *Sydney* was the pride of the Australian fleet. During the previous year she had distinguished herself in the Mediterranean by sinking the Italian cruiser *Bartolemeo Calleani* in the battle of Cape Spada. She returned to Australia in early 1941 to adoring crowds. As her officers and men sat down to lunch during a civic reception in Sydney town hall, the German raider HSK *Kormoran* rounded the Cape of Good Hope and entered the Indian Ocean. *Kormoran* would undergo several changes of disguise during the following months she spent on this part of the sea, harassing and sinking Allied shipping.

After her triumphant return to Australia, *Sydney* was occupied with escorting and patrol work in an area that stretched from the waters off Melbourne, to New Zealand, Suva, and across to Singapore and Sunda Strait. In the months prior to Japan's entry into the war, these were mostly routine operations. After one such voyage to the Dutch East Indies, *Sydney* returned to Fremantle where she was ordered to prepare to escort the troopship *Zealandia* in late October 1941.<sup>9</sup> Owing to an industrial dispute in Sydney, *Zealandia's* departure was delayed, meaning that she and *Sydney* did not leave Fremantle until 11 November. It was during this period that *Sydney* made her third and final visit to Geraldton, on 19-20 October. In time, these visits would be cited by proponents of the memorial in Geraldton as justification for the site's location in their town.<sup>10</sup> After travelling north towards her rendezvous point in Sunda Strait, where *Zealandia* was entrusted to HMS *Durban*, *Sydney* once more changed course for Fremantle and signalled that she expected to be back in port late on 19 November, or in the early hours of 20 November. They would be the last radio signals received from the Australian ship.

Early in the evening of 19 November, *Sydney's* crew spotted a vessel flying a Dutch merchant flag near Shark Bay, on the Western Australian mid-north coast. It was *Kormoran*, disguised as the Dutch merchant vessel *Straat Malakka*. *Sydney's* captain drew his ship in too close to the merchantman, losing all the tactical advantage that came with being an armoured cruiser. With his guns trained on *Sydney's* bridge, *Kormoran's* captain struck the Dutch colours and raised the German naval flag. Moments later, the Germans opened fire and scored direct

9 *Zealandia* was carrying troops of the 2nd AIF's 8th Division, many of whom would become prisoners of the Japanese following the fall of Singapore in February 1942. Wesley Olsen, *Bitter Victory: the death of HMAS Sydney*, University of Western Australia Press, 2000, p. 2.

10 Glenys McDonald, *Seeking the Sydney: a quest for truth*, University of Western Australia Press, 2005, pp. 204-205.

hits to the nerve centre of the Australian ship, killing many of her officers and severely damaging *Sydney's* capacity to return fire with accuracy. *Sydney's* crew were strafed with small arms and anti-aircraft guns and in short time the teak decks caught fire, causing even more devastation. In evidence tendered to the 2009 inquiry into *Sydney's* disappearance, defence experts calculated that up to 70 per cent of the Australian ship's crew became casualties in the first few minutes of the battle, which lasted approximately half an hour.<sup>11</sup> The Australians nevertheless caused sufficient damage to *Kormoran* to cause her captain to give the order to set scuttling charges and abandon ship. The 315 surviving Germans and 3 Chinese laundrymen took to their life boats and watched *Sydney* drift towards the south east. They would later see the glow of a large explosion after their opponent made her way over the horizon. The 2 ships eventually settled on the sea floor 12 nautical miles from one another.

### **Early commemoration**

During the war, and immediately after, very little official or community emphasis was placed on commemorating the Australian ship and her crew in the region in which she sank. Commemorations that did occur took place in harbours and cities far from the scene of the battle, closer to the places in which *Sydney's* crew had danced, drank, and paraded. Mourners were consoled with the message that in death, the missing sailors would rise to new life. In St Andrew's Anglican cathedral, Sydney, a solemn memorial service was held on 4 December 1941 in memory of the 'Officers and Men of HMAS Sydney and HMAS Parramatta', the latter sunk by a German U-boat in the Mediterranean on 27 November 1941.<sup>12</sup> The gospel of St John was incorporated in prayers: 'I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet he shall live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die'. In 1945, the day before the fourth anniversary of the battle, there was a service in St John's Anglican church, Fremantle, attended by 'many relatives and friends of the ship's company'.<sup>13</sup> The assistant chaplain to the Mission to Seamen reminded those assembled that they were 'not pagans without belief, but upholders of the Christian belief that there was no death'.<sup>14</sup> Commemorating *Sydney* also took place in annual services organised by the Ex-Naval Men's Association at St Andrew's cathedral, which were held to remember naval men killed in both world wars.<sup>15</sup>

Commemorating *Sydney* in the two decades after her disappearance incorporated two major forms of remembrance. It took place, first, in ritualised acts of remembrance in church services and on particular 'Days' of the calendar (Anzac, Trafalgar and Remembrance Days) and, second, in the memoriam notices in the major metropolitan dailies. The depth of feeling endured by those left

11 Terence R. H. Cole, *The Loss of HMAS Sydney II*, Department of Defence, 2009, p. 16.1.

12 A copy of the order of service can be seen in Tom Frame, *HMAS Sydney: Loss and Controversy*, Hodder & Staughton, 1993, opp. p. 144.

13 *West Australian*, 19 November 1945, p. 6.

14 *ibid.*

15 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 1947, p. 5.



behind after *Sydney* was sunk is hinted at in newspapers all over Australia, on or about each 19 November. Stoker JRK Stuart's widow wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of her wish for her missing husband's return:

If I could have my dearest wish,  
All earth's treasures, too;  
Ask of heaven what I might,  
Keith, darling, I'd ask for you.  
Sadly missed by his ever-loving wife Nell.<sup>16</sup>

The stoicism exhibited by Nell Stuart and others like her continued during the 1960s and 1970s. It was typified by short messages in metropolitan newspapers that recalled the memory of individual crewmembers as well as the ship itself. On the twentieth anniversary of *Sydney's* disappearance in 1961, Mervan Hass's mother Florence once again expressed the extent of her grief in the pages of the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*: 'Always in my thoughts. Sadly missed. Rest in peace'.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in Sydney, Ted Matheson's parents let it be known that their 'dear son', who was 18 when he died, was 'Never forgotten'.<sup>18</sup> Ten years later they published a similar notice in the city's broadsheet, this time remembering him as a 'son and brother'.<sup>19</sup> In 1961 Chief Petty Officer James Sturla's sisters recalled their brother's 'duty nobly done' in two world wars.<sup>20</sup> In 1971 the two women reprinted the message, this time with the added declaration that their brother was 'never forgotten'.<sup>21</sup>

### Competing connections

Beginning in the early 1980s, a considerable amount of competition developed between groups in Geraldton and Carnarvon over which place had the strongest connection with the story of *Sydney* and *Kormoran*. Carnarvon could rightly lay claim to being the closest town to where several lifeboats containing *Kormoran's* survivors had landed. In the days after the battle they had arrived tired and thirsty on the coast, the western boundary of Quobba station. Through the white heat, their view to the east was one of limestone country dotted with saltbush and grazing sheep. It was to Carnarvon that *Kormoran's* men were taken after their arrest by Australian military authorities before being transferred to Perth via Geraldton and, eventually, to prisoner-of-war camps in Victoria. In contrast, Geraldton had developed a connection with *Sydney* and her crew during three visits that the ship made there in the time before she disappeared. School children were welcomed on board the cruiser. For the adults, dances and

16 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 November 1952, p. 16.

17 20 November 1961, p. 20; HMAS *Sydney* II Memorial, 'Mervan Loui Wallace Hass,' available at <http://www.sydney memorial.com/registrydetails.asp?ID=246>, accessed 8 December 2013.

18 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1961, p. 60.

19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 November 1971, p. 30.

20 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 November 1961, p. 18.

21 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 November 1971, p. 30.

picnics were held in honour of the visiting officers and crew. *Sydney's* last visit had been in late October 1941, only a month before the battle with *Kormoran*.



Figure 1: Climbing the Quobba cairn. *Carnarvon Heritage Group Inc.*

By the time of the fortieth anniversary of the battle in 1981, the first monument to *Sydney* in the mid-north of Western Australia was being erected at Quobba (and was dedicated the following year) (Figure 1). Over the next two decades, memorial building continued at a steady rate around Carnarvon and the surrounding area: a stone commemorating lives lost on both ships was placed near the port in 1986, a wall containing the names of the ship's dead appeared in 1991 and a memorial drive on the outskirts of town was opened in 2001. Memorial building in Geraldton started later but eventually overtook Carnarvon in prominence and amount of money raised (Figure 2).





Figure 2: 'The Waiting Woman' at the HMAS *Sydney* memorial, Geraldton.  
ABIS Morgana Ramsey/Department of the Defence © Commonwealth of Australia 2011.

The Geraldton monument is the latest (and largest) memorial to *Sydney* on the Indian Ocean coast. It now constitutes the national memorial to *Sydney* and it is easy to see why. The prominence of the site and its unashamedly evocative sculptures invite moments of catharsis (and, sadly, vandalism).<sup>22</sup> There are five main 'elements' arranged close to one another, all designed by West Australian sculptors Joan and Chris Smith. At the centre is a 'dome of souls,' made of 644 stainless steel silver gulls that sits high enough for people to walk freely underneath (Figure 3). A memorial wall records the names of *Sydney's* officers and crew while a large stele replicates the ship's bow. An Australian flag flies from a pole at its top. Looking out to sea is a life-sized bronze statue of the 'Waiting Woman', her dress blown back by the breeze and a hand holding her hat. She represents the mothers, wives, girlfriends, and sisters who never again heard from their menfolk after the disappearance of *Sydney*. These four elements were unveiled on the 60th anniversary of the battle in 2001. In 2011, three years after the wreck was discovered, a fifth and final element was added. It constitutes a large silver gull, two metres across, in flight over a map of Western Australia situated at the bottom of a 'pool of reflection'. The gull dips

22 'Graffiti attack on HMAS Sydney memorial', *West Australian*, 24 January 2011.



its wing at the location on the map where the ship sits on the sea floor, much closer to Carnarvon than Geraldton.

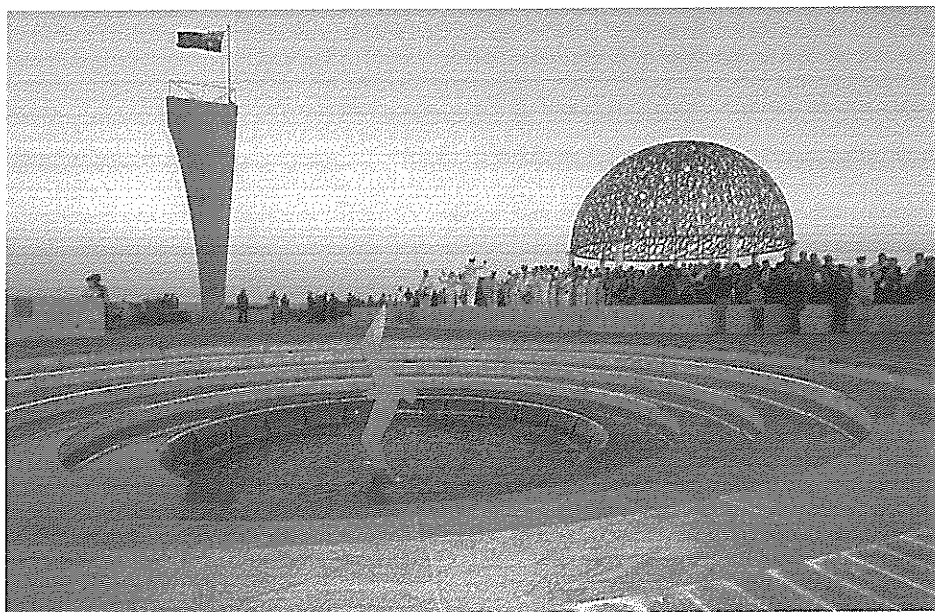


Figure 3: The dome of souls and pool of remembrance, HMAS *Sydney* memorial, Geraldton.  
ABIS Morgana Ramsey/Department of the Defence © Commonwealth of Australia 2011.

### **National, local and personal**

To visit the mid-north today is to be reminded regularly of the awful scale of loss suffered by families throughout Australia as a result of the loss of HMAS *Sydney*. In complete contrast with the first thirty years after the ship's disappearance, it has been through the last 35 years that successive attempts have been made to re-establish a direct connection between mid-north communities and this terrible battle of the Second World War.

Building a connection of this sort had a three sided dimension to it: the personal, local and national were coalesced in the context of the greatest global conflict in the history of humanity. The things that motivated groups and individuals in this activity varied, of course, and were occasionally contested. In 1986, during the International Year of Peace, Carnarvon councillor and ex-serviceman Keith Hasleby suggested the creation of a joint *Sydney-Kormoran* memorial in the town. Commemorating *Kormoran's* dead, however, was such a sensitive topic that the monument was eventually situated on Babbage Island, near the former Carnarvon whaling station, and was created without any written text. Services held in Carnarvon to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the battle in 1991 took place without any reference to the Babbage Island memorial. The Naval Association of Australia's Carnarvon sub-section and the local sub-branch of the RSL focused their attention instead on a new wall containing the names of *Sydney's* 645 dead, built behind the town's main war memorial.

The timing of the Quobba cairn and the memorials that followed in the region can be put down to several key factors: the boom in publishing on *Sydney* that followed the release of Commonwealth records from World War II, the interest that regional communities began to show in heritage as a tourist attraction, the disputed locations of the wrecks and the notion that visiting a memorial helps to bring about 'closure' for those whose emotions have been wounded.

When British scholar Tony Walter assessed the reasons behind the rapid growth in visitations to Great War cemeteries in the 1980s, he identified three contributing factors. The first was a significant demographic change in Britain in which older people, particularly retirees, found that they were able to travel overseas far more easily than their parents or grandparents. Mass tourism and package deals made pilgrimage possible in a way that it had not been before. A second factor was the increasing tendency for people to testify to grief that they had suffered, rather than stoically avoid the subject in public or in the company of others. Memory scholars will be all too aware of the arguments that have been made about the part that testimonies by survivors of the Nazi concentration camps are said to have had on bringing about this cultural shift. Moreover, Walter argues, the increasing popularity of war grave pilgrimage was aided by television producers on the lookout for significant anniversaries around which to build stories. Anniversaries make good television by virtue of the fact that they can be researched, written, edited and packaged for broadcast as news in advance of the date. The effect of this was to beam more and more material about the nation at war into people's lounges at the very moment that families had shown themselves increasingly willing to talk about grief.<sup>23</sup>

In Australia these factors also helped to raise the general level of awareness of the nation at war during 1939 to 1945, as well as in earlier conflicts. Stories of Australians at war proved successful in attracting popular audiences (*The Sullivans*, 1915) and they made good film (*Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant*). Publishers too found that readers were hungry for particular stories of the nation's military past. While the 1980s was a moment well-suited to interrogating Australia's military past, it also saw the appearance of a rash of books and films that revived earlier tropes of military myth-making. Victimhood was reinscribed on the Anzac legend. In 1987, Robin Gerster made the epicurean observation that '[f]or those who like their legends served up in easily digestible chunks and unseasoned by the intellectual salt of historical research, coffee-table compilations of military anecdotes have proliferated in the last ten years'.<sup>24</sup> Anecdotal books of that type helped to feed an interest in *Sydney* that went well beyond the immediate circle of family and friends of the crew. Putting a greater emphasis on the mid-north

23 Tony Walter, 'War Grave Pilgrimage', in Ian Reader and Tony Walter (eds), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, Macmillan, 1993, pp. 69-70.

24 Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting: the heroic theme in Australian war writing*, Melbourne University Press, 1987, p. 256.

at war became much easier to make once that cultural change had started to take place.

The renewed emphasis on *Sydney* in particular was brought about for another significant reason. It began as Australia was emerging from the shadows of the Vietnam War. Not since the days of the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917 had Australia seen such division at home during a period of overseas military action. Domestic support for the war was strong at the outset but declined by the late 1960s once President Nixon announced that the number of American troops in Vietnam would be drawn down. By the time of the December 1972 election, the ALP went to the polls with a policy of withdrawing Australian combat troops knowing that it had the support of the people to do so.

Vietnam was a humiliation for the United States and its ardent supporters in Australia. Those in the military who demanded an explanation from their civilian masters for what had gone wrong on the battlefield began to look around them for other instances of official 'cover-up'.<sup>25</sup> *Sydney* seemed to be the perfect example. Why were there no Australian survivors? Why had no signals been received from the ship? Were the holes in *Sydney's* Carley float, retrieved after the battle, evidence that her crew had been machine-gunned in the water? Surely a loss on this scale could only indicate the involvement of a Vichy French or Japanese submarine (albeit before the attack on Pearl Harbor), and so on. Theories of a government conspiracy to conceal the truth abounded to fill a space that the official record could not. One of the earliest and most well-known books to make judgements of this type, based on the flimsiest evidence, was by Michael Montgomery, the son of *Sydney's* navigator.<sup>26</sup>

Imaginative speculation did much to raise the profile of particular authors willing to pass judgement in the absence of a wreck, but it offered little comfort to other descendants of *Sydney* men seeking answers to what actually happened to their loved ones. There were many besides Montgomery all too willing to provide those along with new questions about the veracity of the official account of *Sydney's* demise.

### Search and delay

The conjecture over *Sydney's* fate only intensified during the 1990s. This was, after all, the decade of 'Australia Remembers' – an official program of national and community commemoration in 1995 that was timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The 1990s was also the time during which associations of *Sydney* II men (those who had served on the ship but who did not take part in the battle with *Kormoran*) were amalgamated into associations of *Sydney* III men, many of whom were Vietnam veterans.<sup>27</sup> The Vietnam men extended life memberships and home assistance to their comrade veterans of the Second World War. Those among the former group, who were

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25 On the *Sydney* Research Group, founded in mid-1980s, see Tom Frame, *HMAS Sydney: loss and controversy*, Hodder & Staughton, 1993, pp. 186-9.

26 Michael Montgomery, *Who Sank the Sydney?*, Cassell Australia, 1981.

27 Scates et al., *Anzac Journeys*, p. 188.



battling for recognition of their active service in Vietnam, were now joined by association with a group whose ship had become a by-word for betrayal and cover-up. It was a potent combination.

As the partnership between *Sydney* men of different eras was developing, interest in the mystery of the older ship's disappearance intensified at a local level around Geraldton. Among members of the tourism industry, such as caravan park operator and chair of the Batavia Coast Maritime Heritage Association, Glenys McDonald, *Sydney's* story held strong appeal. From the mid-1990s, McDonald worked with local residents who testified to having seen the battle off the coast south of Geraldton.<sup>28</sup> There developed from the work of McDonald and others a theory that *Sydney's* wreck was located in the so-called 'southern sector', well to the south of where the German survivors of the battle said they had last seen the Australian ship.

In the midst of the 'Australia Remembers' campaign of 1995, a group of West Australian citizens equally determined to locate the wreck of *Sydney* founded the HMAS Sydney Foundation Trust. The trust's directors had two principal aims: to find the wrecks, and to create a virtual memorial online, featuring technical information on the ships, their crews and the search for the vessels. In their submission to the Australian Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, the directors stated that the "Trust considers this a matter of honour, and aims to achieve a "spiritual homecoming" for those whose whereabouts for so long remained a mystery".<sup>29</sup>

The HMAS Sydney Foundation Trust was successful in lobbying for a parliamentary inquiry into *Sydney's* sinking, but not in locating the wrecks. This was partly a matter of circumstance (one of its directors died), but its efforts were also impeded by the persistence of those who believed that the wrecks were located in the southern sector. The strength of feeling from those like McDonald, who were convinced by the testimonies of those from the Geraldton area, ran counter to the research done by members of the trust, which posited that the two ships were located further north (in the area that the German survivors had said the battle took place). Such was the impasse between the two groups that a wreck location seminar held in Fremantle in November 2001 resulted in a stalemate. No unanimous agreement could be reached on where exactly a search should be conducted. Neither the Commonwealth nor the Navy were willing to proceed without such agreement, which the trust had estimated would cost between \$3.3 and 5.1 million. Ironically, the search was delayed for nearly a decade by the strength of feeling that those in the southern group held to the idea that the naval action had taken place in their part of the Indian Ocean.

### Civic connections

From the early 1980s, civic involvement by local government figures and community groups had always been a feature of commemoration in Geraldton

28 McDonald, *Seeking the Sydney*.

29 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 'The Loss of HMAS *Sydney*', Australian Parliament, 1999, Submission no. 60, p. 797.

and Carnarvon, overseen by the Naval Association and the RSL. By the time of the 60th anniversary in 2001, that situation had begun to change. The avenue of 645 palms proposed for Carnarvon and the Mount Scott memorial in Geraldton were drastic departures from the style of memorial previously adopted, which had been variations on the cenotaph. Moreover, responsibility for raising the money to build these monuments and for conducting services was assumed primarily by those without a direct connection with service in wartime. In Carnarvon, the change that had taken place over the previous ten years was notable. In 1991, the service at Quobba and at the new memorial wall in town had been overseen by the two ex-service organisations, conservative in character and monarchist in outlook (the national anthem sung was *God Save the Queen*). By 2001, the local chamber of commerce and the local shire played a much larger role in promoting and conducting the commemorative events, which included the opening of the avenue of honour by the Western Australian Minister for the Gascoyne. This was a much more conciliatory moment, marked as it was by the presence of Fritz Engelmann, a surviving member of *Kormoran's* crew. As a 19-year-old, he had taken part in the battle with *Sydney*, loading ammunition into his ship's gun. This time he returned to the mid-north coast as an honoured guest, carrying with him a donation from the German Naval Federation towards the cost of building the palm avenue. In that spirit of reconciliation (and with HMAS *Sydney IV* fighting alongside German forces in the NATO-led invasion of Afghanistan), it was only proper that civic and business authorities take a much greater role in commemoration than they had previously. The memorial avenue's location on the town's southern entrance was tacit acknowledgement of the way in which Carnarvon's Indian Ocean connection was being oriented towards heritage tourism (Figure 4). No longer tucked away on an island, a sheep station, or behind the main war memorial, Carnarvon's connection with the Second World War was positioned for all (particularly visitors) to see.





Figure 4: HMAS *Sydney* memorial avenue, Carnarvon. *Rebecca Mayo*.

It was a similar situation in Geraldton. During the late 1990s, McDonald began speaking to community groups such as Rotary about the need, as she saw it, for a large memorial to *Sydney* in order for the relatives of the ship's crew to attain 'closure'.<sup>30</sup> She was willing to concede that there were already smaller memorials to *Sydney*, such as the 'simple rock cairn' at Quobba, and the listing of the names of the crew on the walls of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and the Anzac Memorial in Sydney. Something bigger and entirely devoted to *Sydney* was required. In McDonald's opinion, 'as the sixtieth anniversary of this loss approached ... more needed to be done to achieve any hope of closure for the relatives'.<sup>31</sup> In this case, size really did matter. With Rotary onside, and the Shire of Greenough and the City of Geraldton willing to allow Mount Scott to be used a memorial location, so began the more difficult task of raising funds for its design and construction.

30 McDonald, *Seeking the Sydney*, pp. 204-206.

31 *ibid.*



As McDonald was willing to concede, Geraldton's claim to the *Sydney* story was one based on deep emotion – on feelings that had been engendered during the ship's visits to the town in the months and years shortly before her demise. But there was also a promise of future emotional healing: that wounds made 60 years before would be salved by a memorial, if only it was of a large enough size and in a suitably prominent location. It was at about this time that the parliamentary joint select committee made a recommendation that a memorial to *Sydney* be situated in Fremantle.<sup>32</sup> This, after all, had been the ship's last port of call and was the place in which members of its crew had also formed lasting connections, in some instances, even marrying local women. The advocacy displayed by the Geraldton committee, however, won the day over Fremantle. It would not be until 2002 that a bronze relief to *Sydney* would be unveiled there by the Western Australian Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, at the summit of Monument Hill (Figure 5). It was dedicated to the memory of the ship's crew and 'honours the memory of the women who gathered here ... to watch and wait in vain for her return to Fremantle'.



Figure 5: HMAS *Sydney* memorial, Fremantle. *Damien Williams*.

32 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 'The Loss of HMAS *Sydney*', Australian Parliament, 1999, 9.15.

### Oceans of closure

In February 2001, the year that the first four elements of the Geraldton memorial were dedicated, the successor to the HMAS Sydney Foundation Trust, now known as the Finding Sydney Foundation, started a not-for-profit company to find the wrecks of *Sydney* and *Kormoran*, and to renew its previous attempts at creating a virtual memorial. The company, called HMAS Sydney Search Pty Ltd, was highly successful in attracting state, federal, and private funding to undertake the search for the wrecks, which were discovered in March 2008. McDonald was one of the foundation's directors, who all donated their time and energy to the task as volunteers. The methodology used to mount the search, however, differed markedly from that which she had used in making a case for *Sydney's* location being in the waters off Geraldton. Cognitive scientists Kim Kirsner (a fellow foundation director) and John Dunn had narrowed the search area to a region off Shark Bay. By their calculations, the key to finding *Sydney* was first to find *Kormoran*. The speed with which *Sydney* was discovered, four days after *Kormoran*, vindicated their scientific method, based on a rigorous use of the German accounts. On board the survey vessel at the time the wrecks were located, McDonald's excited reaction to the images that appeared on the sonar screen was: 'That will give people closure!'<sup>33</sup>

During the time that the foundation's directors had been lobbying politicians and donors for support in finding the wrecks, forensic tests were being carried out on the body of the sailor that had floated to Christmas Island on a life raft after the battle and was later buried in a graveyard overlooking Flying Fish Cove. The tests concluded that it was highly likely that the body was indeed a serviceman from *Sydney*, although DNA tests of relatives were unable to match the remains with anyone in Australia. On the balance of probability, it was highly likely that this indeed was a *Sydney* man, the only one whose remains had been committed to the earth. With no relatives able to be identified, the body of the unknown serviceman was interred in the Geraldton War Cemetery on 19 November 2008 in a ceremony attended by the Governor-General, the Chief of Navy, the Minister of Defence, and other VIPs (Figure 6). Geraldton's emotional connection with *Sydney* was now so much more: the burial of the serviceman with full military honours brought one of the ship's own across the Indian Ocean to rest in a properly marked grave. The emotional heritage that had been so instrumental in making a claim on commemorating the ship now had the most physical connection of all: a body.

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33 Mathew Kelley, 'The Hunt for HMAS *Sydney*', Film Australia/Electric Pictures, 2008.



Figure 6: Reburial of the 'unknown sailor', Geraldton War Cemetery.  
ABPH Jo Dilorenzo/Department of Defence © Commonwealth of Australia 2008.

With the shipwrecks found and the Christmas Island body laid to rest, the local efforts of volunteers, the City of Geraldton-Greenough, and Rotary were recognised on 21 May 2009, when the Mount Scott site was listed under the *Military Memorials of National Significance Act 2008*.<sup>34</sup>

At a local level, however, the idea of extending the concept of the 'closure' to the Geraldton memorial itself became a highly contested matter. Local Rotarians championed the idea of 'closing the circle' atop Mount Scott with the addition of a 'fifth element' – a two metre high seagull dipping its wing towards a map showing the location of the wreck. In December 2010, Geraldton-Greenough councillor Graeme Bylund resigned his Rotary membership in

<sup>34</sup> Prime Minister and Minister for Veterans' Affairs, press release, 'HMAS Sydney II declared national memorial', 21 May 2009.



opposition to the club's proposal to construct the fifth element. 'The memorial is all that it was intended to be as it is on Mount Scott', he said during a council meeting in which he moved a motion in opposition to the plans.<sup>35</sup> The president of the Geraldton RSL concurred, asking '[a]re we creating a tourist attraction or does it remain a memorial?'<sup>36</sup> With the support of a majority of councillors, the Rotarians won the day, raising \$400,000 from the federal and state governments, and community organisations to complete the additional element. During its construction, comments made by the visiting federal Shadow Minister for Tourism and Regional Development encapsulated the extent to which local tourism and national commemoration overlapped: 'It is a tourism icon. The memorial is good for our military history, good for tourism and good for Geraldton'.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

The Indian Ocean connections discussed here are particular examples of a more general phenomenon of war commemoration, which has several key characteristics. It is a style of commemoration that reflects a belief in the healing power of monumental architecture and the design of places that invite reflection and catharsis. In a highly secular culture, the expectation that people require such places for their own psychic wellbeing puts great demand on public space for the creation of new monuments and memorials. The West Australian coast is no isolated example in this regard. One only has to look at the great flurry of monument building that has occurred in London in recent years to see how powerful the claims for recognition of Second World War service have been in remaking the city. An argument made in their favour is that they will not only attract mourners, but also those with an interest in the history of war more generally. In the case of HMAS *Sydney*, this was a strong argument, particularly given the growing interest in the circumstances of her disappearance since the end of the Vietnam War. It was even more appealing to communities looking to attract tourists and create job opportunities in that sector, especially where traditional industries employed fewer people. The past had become as valuable a commodity as anything that could be grown on the land or taken from the sea.

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35 'Bylund quits Rotary club over HMAS Sydney II memorial', *Geraldton Guardian*, 27 December 2010.

36 *ibid.*

37 'Fifth element gets support', *Geraldton Guardian*, 28 January 2011.