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Official Press Releases

Press Conference Transcript (17th March 2008)

ANNOUNCEMENT ON THE FINDING OF THE HMAS SYDNEY AND GERMAN VESSEL, KORMORAN.

**INTERVIEWEES: KEVIN RUDD, PRIME MINISTER; TED GRAHAM, FINDING SYDNEY FOUNDATION;
VICE ADMIRAL RUSS SHALDERS, CHIEF OF NAVY**

Location: Canberra
Date: 17th March 2008
Time: 9.20AM AEST

KEVIN RUDD:

This is a historic day for all Australians, and it's a sad day for all Australians, as we confirm the discovery of HMAS Sydney.

Last night, the Deputy Chief of Navy Admiral Crane informed the Minister for Defence, Science and Personnel that the HMAS Sydney wreck had been found.

I'm advised the HMAS Sydney was found some 12 nautical miles from the Kormoran, some eight nautical miles from the scene of the principal battle site, and at a depth of some 2470 metres.

I'm advised that the hull of the HMAS Sydney, based on initial sonar findings, has been determined to be largely intact.

The Australian Government hopes that the discovery of HMAS Sydney brings some closure to the families of the 645 Australian Defence Force personnel who lost their lives bravely in this naval action in World War II.

The Australian Defence Force have also informed me that they'll be using their own communications systems to make sure that the surviving family members of the crew of HMAS Sydney are informed of this discovery as soon as is practically possible.

This will be a hard day for family members associated with the Sydney. This is over 65 years ago, but pain and family loss, even at 65 years removed, is still pain and very deep pain.

So, on behalf of the Government, I would say to all those members of the families of the brave members of the crew of the HMAS Sydney that the Government extends to them our condolences for the loss of these brave young men.

Further, I wish to confirm that under the Historic Shipwrecks Act, that the Minister for the

Environment has informed me that he is in the process of issuing an interim protection declaration in relation to both vessels; that is, the German vessel, Kormoran and the HMAS Sydney.

And again, I would thank the Finding Sydney Foundation and the crew members of the Geosounder, together with the Royal Australian Navy, for the support that they have provided to the very detailed and complex task which this has involved.

I conclude by saying this, this is a day of - which begins a process of closure for many families of the crew of the Sydney. It's also a time for the nation to reflect on the bravery of all of those who gave their lives in defence of their country in this particularly bloody and brutal naval engagement.

If I could ask Ted Graham now to brief you on the details of what the Geosounder has found and then turn to the Chief of Navy to add to those remarks before taking any questions.

TED GRAHAM:

Thank you very much, Prime Minister. In 2001, we established HMAS Sydney Search as a not for profit company run by five volunteer directors to locate HMAS Sydney. Over the years since then, we have raised funds and we have been primarily funded by the Australian, the West Australian and the New South Wales governments.

We started the search for the Sydney at the end of February. We confirmed we had located the Kormoran last Friday and we confirmed we had located the Sydney, as the Prime Minister has just mentioned, yesterday.

So far, we are ahead of time and under budget, which is a good thing, so we do have some more funds to go ahead and do some photographic work on the hulls.

Our intention now is that the Geosounder will come back into Geraldton on Thursday or Friday this week. We will then mobilise a deep water, remotely operated vehicle which has high resolution cameras on it. We will go out and we will go, at this stage, to both the site of the - or sites of the Kormoran and the Sydney and the battle site.

I should just mention that we are going to be working in de... very deep water with high technology, and sometimes things don't quite go to plan, so it might take us a while to get some proper photography back. But - and that will obviously come from the vessel ashore and be distributed by the normal processes.

Prime Minister, thank you very much and thank you to our navy colleagues, the new minister, and to our patrons, Tim Fischer, Professor Geoffrey Blainey and Rear Admiral David Holthouse, and I'd like to thank my fellow directors, Don Pridmore, Glenys McDonald, Bob Trotter and Keith Rowe for their support and help over the years, and also the - David Mearns and John Perryman and the team on board the Geosounder.

I just also like to pass my best wishes to the families of both the Kormoran and the Sydney on this historic day. Prime Minister, thank you.

KEVIN RUDD:

Thank you.

Chief of Navy.

RUSS SHALDERS:

Thank you, Prime Minister. As has been said, this is a very historic day. For 66 years, this nation has wondered where the Sydney was and what occurred to her. We've uncovered the first part of that mystery. We now know where she is or where she finished. The next part of the mystery, of course, is what happened, and that will take some time.

It will be helped, of course, by the ROV, remotely-operated vehicle activity, which we hope will occur next week, but it will take some time to try and ascertain exactly what happened that day over 66 years ago.

It is an exciting day, as well as an historic day for the Royal Australian Navy. HMAS Sydney has always - there has always been an HMAS Sydney in our navy, and I suspect there always will be. The current ship, Sydney, is the fourth in the line, and the third of the air warfare destroyers will also be named Sydney.

It's an historic name and we've added to the history of that name over the weekend. Thank you.

KEVIN RUDD:

Good. Happy to take your questions.

QUESTION:

Mr Rudd, considering there hasn't been any photography taken yet of the wreckage, how has it been confirmed that it is the Sydney, considering it's lying in such deep waters.

KEVIN RUDD:

I'll turn to the Chief of Navy on that. I've got to say, one of our reasons for spending through the Defence - Minister for Defence, Science and Personnel, and with navy last night, was to ask, and ask again, and to ask again, and to seek confirmation, and confirmation and confirmation again, before making this morning's statement. It's very important that these things are got right. But I'll turn to Chief of Navy and, if necessary, Ted as well.

RUSS SHALDERS:

The Geosounder is fitted with a couple of high resolution imaging sonars. These are sonars which are towed in a sled behind the ship, and obviously at great tow length because of the depth of water.

The initial indication of what we thought might be the Sydney was taken from a low resolution sonar, or one of the systems which does not have it's hi... such high resolution.

In the course of investigating that contact, we had to - the Geosounder exchanged the system they had down at that time to put the high resolution sled down. And by looking at the images which are transmitted back from the sonar, you can ascertain the length, the height and the width of any contacts that you might have.

By comparing those dimensions with the designs and drawings that we had, we were able to confirm, firstly, that the Kormoran was the Kormoran, the bow section of the Kormoran is quite distinct, and then during the course of yesterday afternoon and last evening, we were able to confirmed that the second contact was, in fact, the Sydney.

David Mearns has indicated that there is no doubt that this contact is the Sydney.

QUESTION:

There's no risk it could be another vessel?

RUSS SHALDERS:

David Mearns, who is our search leader, and has conducted a number of these high resolution runs, indicates that there is no doubt that this is the Sydney.

QUESTION:

Admiral, are you or Mr Graham able to hypothesise, from what you've seen so far, what might have actually happened? Has it told you anything new about the battle or the fate of the Sydney?

RUSS SHALDERS:

Not at this stage. It's too early to conduct that sort of hypothesis. What we do know is what we've seen. We have the site of the battle with some battle debris. We have the site of the Kormoran, and we have the site now of the Sydney. How those three sites interconnect, we'll really have to wait until we're able to take some more detailed photographic imagery.

QUESTION:

[Indistinct] surprised that the two ships are so close together?

RUSS SHALDERS:

No, in fact, the disposition of the wrecks is as it was reported by the survivors of the Kormoran at the time, surprisingly so.

QUESTION:

Were they right all along?

RUSS SHALDERS:

It seems so, yes.

QUESTION:

What implications do you draw from the hull being int... I think you said, entirely intact, or largely intact?

RUSS SHALDERS:

The hull is reported as being largely intact from the dimensions that we've been able to gain. I'm not sure you can draw too many inferences at all from that, until we get closer to it and are able to have a good look.

QUESTION:

Prime Minister, the Environment Minister's protection order; can you tell us what that will mean? Can the ships be touched at all or...

KEVIN RUDD:

I'll - the Environment Minister will be issuing a full statement on this a bit later in the day. No, but I'm advised that it provides immediate and early protection of the sites against any unauthorised intrusion. And - but the provisions of the f... of the Historic Shipwrecks Act come into force as a consequence of that interim order. It is the protection mechanism which we have available to us under Australian law through that Act of the Parliament, which was enacted in 1976.

QUESTION:

Are there any more plans to try and raise the wrecks eventually?

KEVIN RUDD:

I'll turn to...

RUSS SHALDERS:

Thanks, Prime Minister. No, for a start, they're in very deep water, and secondly from my point of view and from the foundation's point of view, they contain the remains of many people, and our view is firmly that they should be left alone.

QUESTION:

What about pieces of the wreck, like bells or wheels or that sort of thing?

KEVIN RUDD:

Can I say, it's important - I mean, I wanted to have those who are conducting the search to respond to that first. It's very important to understand that this is a tomb, and there are 645 Australian soldiers - Australian sailors entombed there, and they include within their ranks six members of the Royal Australian Air Force. And I think the good thing about Australians is that we treat our war dead with respect and these war dead will be treated with complete respect.

QUESTION:

How soon are we likely to see imagery, and once you've got the imagery, how do you go about analysing what might have happened in that battle?

RUSS SHALDERS:

We anticipate we'll be out on location probably around Tuesday or Wednesday next week. The remotely operated vehicle will be - we will be putting down transmits back to the vessel, and then it's a process of transmitting that photography ashore. And then, the way our agreement with the Government works, it comes from the vessel to the RAN and then is distributed through there, through their systems.

QUESTION:

Mr Graham, just - the closeness of the ships means that the vessels, the allied vessels that rescued the Germans and their lifeboats must have passed close to the area where the Sydney sank. Is the Sydney - is there any indication that it's turned over? Is it lie - is it lying upright or...

TED GRAHAM:

Admiral, you've - upright?

RUSS SHALDERS:

At this stage, we believe that the hull is largely intact, as I mentioned, and sitting upright on the floor of the ocean. Was there another part to your question?

QUESTION:

Well, the - there's sort of, added poignancy to this whole thing, because presumably, the ships that rescued the German sailors from their lifeboats would have passed through the area where any Australian survivors from the Sydney might have been. Is there any sort of, have you got any ideas on how that might have happened?

RUSS SHALDERS:

No, I don't, but I would say that that only trace of the Sydney of course, was the life raft, which is now in the War Memorial, and a life jacket. Those two artefacts were found about seven days

after the action by one of the search vessels, HMAS Heros. We were searching at that time, seven days after the event, but all that was found from the Sydney was that one Carley float and one life jacket.

QUESTION:

And does this have any implications for the identity of the body on Christmas Island? Does it still fit that that body may have floated to the island on the Carley float from this particular battle site?

RUSS SHALDERS:

Yes, it does. At this stage, we are almost certain that the body at Christmas Island, which is not yet identified, is a crew member from HMAS Sydney, and therefore the raft that he floated to Christmas Island on was also from the Sydney. The raft of course over there, is long gone. And we're still in the process of trying to identify who that sailor might be.

QUESTION:

Can I ask in addition to any protection under the Historic Shipwrecks Act, would the Government consider making this some kind of memorial, permanent memorial, this whole area at sea?

KEVIN RUDD:

During the course of the week, we intend to, with our friends in Defence and elsewhere, look at how best the brave crew of the Sydney are best further commemorated as a consequence of this discovery. And we will make a subsequent announcement on that, because it's very important that we also deal with surviving family members and how these things are best done with decency, in a proper way. The only other thing I'd say, by the way, on your question before is - I'm no naval historian, but the... some vessels go down with all hands and in quite extraordinary circumstances, and others do not. And the history of naval engagements is a bit like that but...

QUESTION:

[Indistinct] contact have you had with the Germans over this?

KEVIN RUDD:

The - because the Kormoran obviously is a German raider, the Government advised our embassy in Berlin over the course of the weekend to ensure that the German Government would be appropriately informed. And as I understand it, those communications were made. Furthermore, yesterday morning, as an added precaution, we advised the German Ambassador to Australia of the same. Okay? Thanks very much.

end.

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No Comments

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