

The Royal Australian Navy in 15 Objects

Object 7

The Carley Raft from HMAS *Sydney II*



The carley raft from HMAS *Sydney* is the poignant item in the Navy in 15 Objects. It symbolises the fierce battle between the light cruiser *Sydney* and the German armed merchant raider *Kormoran* in the Indian Ocean on 19/20 November 1941; some 200 kilometres off the coast of Western Australia.

Both ships sank as a result of the battle. *Sydney* was lost with her entire ships company of 645 men; while many of *Kormoran*'s crew were later rescued. This is the largest loss of life for the RAN in a single battle. This was mainly due because *Sydney* sank rapidly due to serious damage and bad weather while the crew of *Kormoran* were able to abandon ship in life-boats shortly before their ship blew up. *Sydney* had destroyed a dangerous enemy vessel that was soon to lay mines in Australian waters - but it had been a very bitter victory for the RAN.

The subsequent Navy and Air Force search for the crew of *Sydney*, off the Western Australian coast, found only a single inflated but empty RAN lifejacket and this empty battle damaged Carley Float (a life-raft named after its American inventor Horace Carley and used extensively by Allied navies during both World Wars). The float was donated by the RAN to the Australian War Memorial in 1943 and has been on display at the Memorial ever since. The loss of *Sydney* subsequently generated many books and theories as to what had happened to the ship and her crew.

The Carley float is a simple construction of steel tubing in a lozenge shape, with several internal water tight sections - so that if one section is holed the water does not flow throughout the entire raft. The tubing is covered with slabs of cork to assist with floatation and then finally covered by canvas painted grey. The floats had a wooden grating type bottom which could be raised or lowered as required and up to 15 men could fit inside the raft with others hanging onto lifelines attached to the outer shell of the raft. There was no canopy to protect the survivors from cold or heat and the rafts did not normally carry any survival stores such as food, water, medical supplies or flares to attract attention. They were very basic, but effective, life-rafts although they could sink if too many of the water tight compartments were holed – and when the wreck of *Sydney* was found in 2008 several very badly damaged Carley Floats were found on the sea bed.

This Carley float however was not the only one found from *Sydney*. In early February 1942 another Carley Float was found off Christmas Island several hundreds of Kilometres from where the cruiser sank. This battle damaged raft was however not empty - it contained the body of deceased naval rating wearing blue overalls who was subsequently buried ashore, at Christmas Island, as an unknown sailor. His remains were recovered by the Royal Australian Navy in 2006 and in 2008 he was buried as an unknown serviceman from HMAS *Sydney* at Geraldton War Cemetery (the closed Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery to the 1941 battle). In 2021, after many years of research by a dedicated Navy team, forensic DNA testing was eventually able to identify this unknown sailor as 21 year old Able Seaman Thomas Clark, from Brisbane, Queensland who had served in HMAS *Sydney* as an anti-Submarine detection sailor. In late June 2022 his unknown headstone was replaced with one bearing his name, rank and service number. Lest We Forget.

Location: The Australian War Memorial.