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## SEMINAR SUMMARY

# *Securing Australia's neighbourhood in 1914: a brief history of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force*

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*This paper summarises the Institute's Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) Centenary Seminar held on 30 September 2014. Following a preliminary amphibious raid on Rabaul by the Australian Fleet on 11 August, from September to December 1914, the ANMEF seized Rabaul and then occupied other German possessions in the south-west Pacific. The campaign has enduring strategic and operational lessons for Australia.*

**Key words:** Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force; ANMEF; German New Guinea; Bitapaka; Herbertshöhe; Rabaul; Madang; Nauru; German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron; Australian Fleet; Sir George Patey; Colonel William Holmes; Dr Eduard Haber.

Australia's first military campaign in World War I was the seizure of Rabaul and occupation of German New Guinea by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, the ANMEF, from September to December 1914. In this, it was supported by the Australian Fleet, which, in preliminary naval operations in August, had raided Rabaul and supported the New Zealand occupation of Samoa.

The ANMEF campaign has been largely overlooked in the public arena where the national focus has been on the later Great War campaigns in Gallipoli, Palestine, France and Flanders, but it is timely to revisit the ANMEF campaign now as this year marks its centenary.

### **The Strategic Situation**

By 1914, Germany was operating a naval squadron in the Pacific and its ships posed a threat to Australian and British maritime trade through the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron operated out of a fortified naval base at Tsingtao (Qingdao) in north-eastern China and was served by various coaling ports and a network of wireless stations across the western Pacific. It was commanded by Vice-Admiral Count Maximilian von Spee and included two armoured cruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and four light cruisers *Nürnberg*, *Leipzig*, *Emden* (detached to undertake independent raids in the Indian Ocean on 14 August), and *Dresden* (joined the squadron as it approached South America in October).

Also operating in the Pacific were the powerful Imperial Japanese Navy; British naval squadrons based on the China (Hong Kong), East Indies (Trincomalee, Ceylon) and Canadian Pacific (Esquimalt, Vancouver Island) Stations; and the Australian Fleet (Sydney).

The German Squadron, lacking a battle cruiser, was no match for the new Australian Fleet (Odgers 2003: 42),

which was to function in wartime as a fleet unit of the Royal Navy and was referred to by the Admiralty as the Australian Squadron. His Majesty's Australian Fleet, barely a year old, was commanded by Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey, RN<sup>2</sup>. It was a modern, blue-water force and, although still under training, was ready for action when war was declared. It consisted of the battle cruiser, HMAS *Australia*, four light cruisers (*Sydney*, *Melbourne*, *Encounter*, and *Pioneer*), three destroyers (*Parramatta*, *Yarra* and *Warrego*), two submarines (*AE1* and *AE2*), and support ships (*SS Aorangi*, a supply ship; *SS Waihora* and *SS Whangpe*, colliers; and HMA Ships *Upolu* and *Protector*, submarine depot ships).

Germany also had colonial possessions dotting several of the island chains of the Pacific and, as already noted, some of these had a wireless station. These wireless stations linked the colonies together and, when combined with a cable station as at Yap, linked them to Germany. They enabled Germany both to control its own warships and to intercept wireless traffic from its opponents' ships – potentially allowing it to attack merchant targets and to keep tabs on allied warships.

On 29 July 1914, Britain informed the dominion governments that war was imminent. New Zealand, Canada and Australia quickly offered contingents for service overseas, even though Australia was in the middle of a double-dissolution election campaign. The Australian Fleet was ordered to Sydney, was coaled and supplied and then ordered to its pre-arranged war stations around the coastline. Australia initiated recruitment of volunteers for a 20,000-man military expeditionary force for service in the Middle East and Europe, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) (Grey 1999: 81).

On 5 August 1914 (Australian time), Britain declared war on Germany and Australia did likewise. Two days later, London requested that Australia and New Zealand "seize and destroy the German wireless stations in the south-west Pacific" (Firkins 1971: 35). This was intended to deal a fatal blow to German naval activities in the Pacific. Australia was to occupy Nauru, the Caroline Islands and

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<sup>2</sup>Later Admiral Sir George Patey, KCMG, KCVO, RN – promoted to Vice Admiral on 21 September 1914 when the Australian Squadron became an allied one with the addition of the French cruiser *Montcalm*.



Two passenger liners were requisitioned to support the force: the 11,000-ton HMAS *Berrima*, which was armed with four 4.7-inch guns, fitted out as a troop transport and commissioned as an auxiliary cruiser; and HMAS *Grantala*, which was fitted out as a hospital ship.

On 19 August, the ANMEF sailed from Sydney for Palm Island, near Townsville, where it conducted two weeks of rifle shooting, amphibious landing and jungle fighting exercises before proceeding to Port Moresby to await its naval escorts returning from Samoa. There it was joined by the Queenslanders. Holmes considered them to be inadequately equipped and trained. He subsequently ordered them back to Townsville when the stokers of their troopship, the TSS *Kanowna*, went on strike during the passage from Port Moresby to Rossel Island.

On 23 August, Japan entered the War on Britain's side. It blockaded and bombarded Tsingtao on 23 August and began operations against the German possessions and ships in China and the Pacific.

On 30 August, the New Zealand expedition, which greatly outnumbered the small German garrison, occupied German Samoa without bloodshed under the guns of a multinational squadron comprising the battle cruiser HMAS *Australia*, the French armoured cruiser *Montcalm*, and the light cruisers HMAS *Melbourne*, HMS *Psyche*, HMS *Pyramus* and HMS *Philomel* (Drew 1923: 22-41; Jose 1937: 59).

#### **ANMEF Seizes Bitapaka and Rabaul**

Once their naval escorts returned after escorting the New Zealanders to German Samoa, the ANMEF embarked for Rabaul. It was now a month since the Australian raid on the Rabaul post and telegraph office. The convoy assembled at Rossel Island (Louisade Archipelago) off the south-east tip of Papua. It included the auxiliary cruiser, HMAS *Berrima*, in which the ANMEF was embarked, HMAS *Australia*, the light cruisers *Sydney* and *Encounter*, three destroyers, two submarines, the submarine depot ship HMAS *Upolu*, and a fleet train (*Aorangi*, the collier *Koolonga* and the oiler *Murex*). HMAS *Grantala* followed, unescorted, direct from Australia, a few days later. For the amphibious phases of the operation, Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey, Rear-Admiral Commanding HM Australian Fleet, was the overall commander and Colonel William Holmes, Brigadier Commanding the ANMEF, was the landing force commander.

On its way back from Samoa on 9 September, HMAS *Melbourne* raided Nauru, then known as Pleasant Island, and destroyed the wireless station. It then joined the ANMEF convoy.

On 11 September, the ANMEF convoy<sup>5</sup> entered Blanche Bay about 3.30 a.m. Neither the Bay itself nor Simpson Harbour at its western end contained any German ships. The Germans had not prepared Rabaul for defence. They had deployed what forces they could command to defend the approaches to Toma, the new government

headquarters, and the Bitapaka wireless station, both in the highlands south of Blanche Bay. The German garrison was comprised principally of Melanesian native constabulary commanded by a few German officers and NCOs (Meade 2005: 33-36) and some 50 German military reservists who were drawn in from around the colony.

Patey was unaware of the German dispositions and expected to find the acting German governor at Herbertshöhe, which Patey believed was still the German capital. He knew it had been the headquarters of the German expeditionary force of 125 native troops used as a mobile force to quell uprisings within the colony and understood that a wireless station was under construction about 7 km up the Herbertshöhe-Toma road (Mackenzie 1927: 47).

Patey landed two parties of naval infantry, each of about 25 men, on the south shore of Blanche Bay before dawn on 11 September, one at Herbertshöhe and the other at Kabakaul, the latter with a view to capturing the German wireless station at Bitapaka in the hills 8 km to the south of Kabakaul.

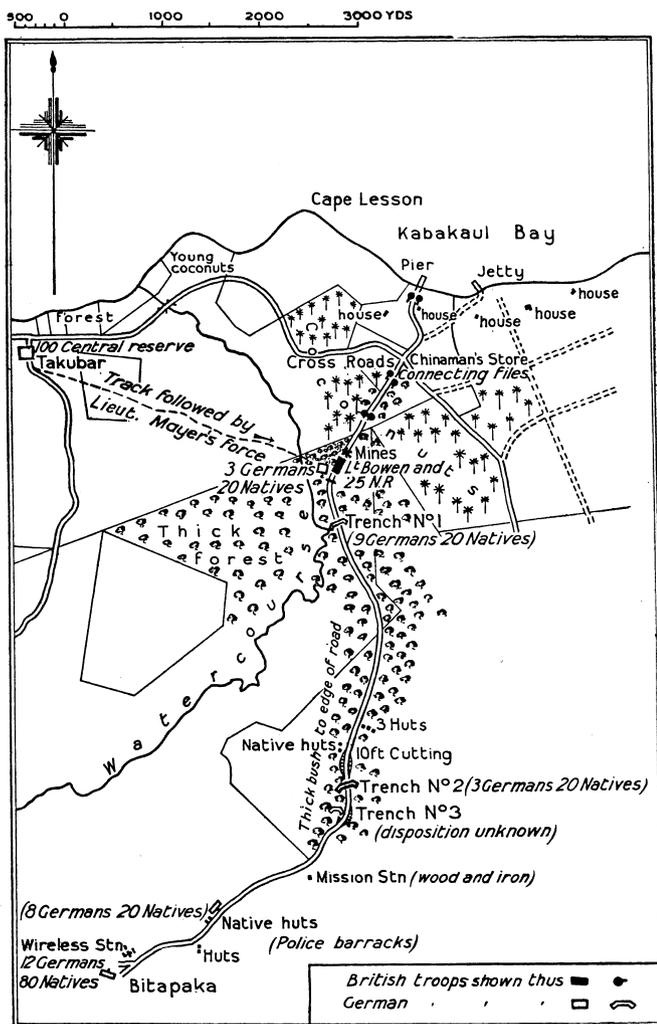
The Herbertshöhe party, led by Sub-Lieutenant C. Webber, RANR, found the town largely deserted and, despite pressing inland and uphill for several kilometres up the Toma road as far as Gire Gire (about half-way to Toma), found no sign of any wireless station or of German defenders. It returned to Herbertshöhe by nightfall without incident (Mackenzie 1927: 52).

The Kabakaul landing party, led by Lieutenant R. G. Bowen, RAN, also found Kabakaul largely deserted. Although Bowen did not yet know it, the enemy had established three major delaying positions between Kabakaul and Bitapaka (Map 3), and had mined the track and deployed ambushes forward of the first position. Bowen quickly ran into opposition and called for reinforcements. There were several brief, but bloody, skirmishes in the dense jungle, causing casualties on both sides during which the Australians lost one man killed and four wounded, three fatally.<sup>6</sup> The Australians unexpectedly proved to be adept at jungle fighting, wherever possible moving in extended line through the dense jungle on both sides of the track rather than in file on the track as the Germans had expected. They bypassed the mines and ambushes and eventually closed on the first defended position.

While planning to attack the first position, Lieutenant Bowen was seriously wounded and Lieutenant G. A. Hill, RNR, who had arrived earlier with 59 reinforcements from HMAS *Yarra*, assumed command. By 1 p.m. Lieutenant Commander C. B. Elwell, RN, the second-in-command of the Naval Brigade, had arrived with the Brigade's No. 3 Company. Elwell ordered the position to be attacked simultaneously from both flanks. He led the bayonet charge from the right flank, with sword drawn. Elwell was shot dead, but the bayonet charge unnerved the native defenders and carried the day.

<sup>5</sup>The landing force and its naval escorts (*Australia*, *Sydney* and the destroyers) – the fleet train and its escorts (*Encounter*, *AE1* and *AE2*) and *Melbourne* arrived on the 12<sup>th</sup> and *Grantala* on the 13<sup>th</sup>. It is a measure of Patey's confidence that he launched the assault without awaiting the arrival of *Melbourne* which would have given him more options had von Spee materialised.

<sup>6</sup>Able Seaman W. G. V. Williams, about 9.30 a.m., and Captain B. C. A. Pockley, Australian Army Medical Corps, about 10 a.m., were wounded and died on the *Berrima* that afternoon. Around noon, Able Seaman J. E. Walker, RANR (served as J. Courtney) was shot dead (the first Australian to die), and Signalman R. D. Moffatt, RANR, was fatally wounded, dying the next day.



Map 3: The advance towards Bitapaka, showing enemy dispositions at 9 a.m. on 11 September 1914  
 [Map: Mackenzie 1927, opposite p. 60]

The advance, on a gradual uphill grade, was resumed by a smaller force – a half-company of No. 6 Company and a machine-gun section – led by Lieutenant T. A. Bond, RANR. The second German defended position surrendered when Bond called on it to do so, but approaching the third position a German prisoner, Sergeant Ritter, led a resistance among the natives who had just surrendered. In the firefight which followed, two Australians were wounded and Able Seaman H. W. Street, Ritter and several Melanesians were killed. The third position offered no further resistance.

Approaching the Bitapaka police barracks 1 km forward of the wireless station, Bond came on eight Germans and 20 Melanesian troops. Displaying quick-thinking and courage, Bond single-handedly snatched the Germans' pistols before they could react, and, placing the Germans between him and the troops, forced the troops to surrender.

Bond's small force finally reached the Bitapaka wireless station by nightfall where they found the station abandoned and its wireless masts cut through, but the radio equipment and machinery were still intact. By then, the defenders were withdrawing along the ridge towards the new German seat of government some 30 km to the west at Toma (Mackenzie 1927: 52-67).

During the fighting for Bitapaka, the Australians had lost two officers and four men killed; and one officer and three men wounded. The defenders lost one German NCO and about 30 Melanesians killed, and one German and ten Melanesians wounded.

On 12 September, the Australians occupied Rabaul unopposed; and on the 13<sup>th</sup>, Colonel Holmes raised the British flag there, formally proclaiming the Australian military occupation of German New Guinea even though the German governor had not yet surrendered (Meade 2005: 37-74).

### Toma Surrenders

On 14 September, Australian submarine *AE1* failed to return from a patrol in St George's Channel east of Rabaul during which it had been protecting the ANMEF's sea flank, by watching for German reinforcements from the New Guinea mainland. Searches failed to find any trace of her or her three officers and 32 men. Her loss remains a mystery (Odgers 2003: 43).

Meanwhile, the German defenders held out briefly in the highland interior around Toma. The acting German governor, Dr Eduard Haber, apparently still hoped that the German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron would come to his rescue. Holmes, now in command ashore at Rabaul, ordered a battalion of four companies with a 12-pounder naval field gun to advance from Herbertshöhe to Toma on 14 September to arrest Dr Haber. The advance was preceded by a demonstration of naval power – the bombardment of a ridge near Toma by HMAS *Encounter*. Dr Haber did not wait to be arrested. He immediately requested talks with Holmes with a view to surrendering. These occurred on 15 September. Haber signed the resulting armistice on 17 September and it came into force on 21 September (Mackenzie 1927: 67-89).

Forty Germans and 110 Melanesians surrendered. Holmes granted the Germans full military honours. The governor was permitted to return to Germany on parole to take no further part in the war. Civilians who swore an oath of neutrality were permitted to stay in their homes, but those who refused were interned in Australia. The Melanesian native constabulary was transferred to the new administration (Firkins 1971: 37).

### Subsequent Operations

On 22 September, Patey and Holmes sailed from Rabaul to Madang on mainland New Guinea with a combined force of army and naval infantry in HMAS *Berrima*, accompanied by the battle cruiser, HMAS *Australia*, the destroyer, HMAS *Encounter*, and the French armoured cruiser, *Montcalm*. On arrival off the town on 24 September, the warships trained their guns on the town in a demonstration of naval power. Patey sent an envoy ashore under a flag of truce and demanded the unconditional surrender of Madang, which was immediately forthcoming (Meade 2005: 79-82).

In November, a search of the Sepik River by Australian destroyers did not find the German forces said to be massing there (Jose 1937: 138 – 145).

ANMEF detachments were gradually deployed to occupy other German possessions, sometimes in

captured German vessels, as follows: New Ireland on 17 October; Nauru on 6 November; the Admiralty Islands and the Western Islands on 19 November; and Bougainville and the German Solomon Islands on 9 December.

Meanwhile, Japan had occupied the Marshall and Caroline Islands on 7 October; and the British and the Japanese had captured Tsingtao on 7 November. For diplomatic reasons and much to Australia's consternation, the planned but overly delayed Australian occupation of former German possessions north of the Equator (the North-West Pacific Expedition by the specially raised Tropical Force<sup>7</sup>), particularly at Angaur and Yap in the Caroline Islands, did not eventuate after a deal was struck between the British Government and the Japanese Government, whose forces remained in possession of them (Mackenzie 1927: 30, 158-159; Jose 1937: 132-136). Australia was to rue this decision two decades later.

### Subsequent Administration of German New Guinea

Holmes established a military administration in the captured German territories which he based in Rabaul and garrisoned as follows: Rabaul 100 troops; Herbertshöhe 50; Madang 50; Kãwieng (New Ireland) 25; Kieta (Bougainville) 25; Nauru 25; and Manus Island 12 (Mackenzie 1927: 178). His force was progressively relieved between December and February by Tropical Force, the force originally raised to occupy the Caroline Islands, and Holmes handed over command to its commander, Colonel Samuel Pethebridge<sup>8</sup> on 18 January 1915 (Mackenzie 1927: 184). Pethebridge's military administration governed the territory, still under German law (it remained German territory, occupied by but not annexed to Australia), until replaced by a civilian administration in 1919. This civil administration, in turn, continued in place (except for the period of Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945) until Papua New Guinea was granted independence in 1975.

### Honours and Awards

Lieutenant Bond was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his leadership and gallantry during the advance to and capture of Bitapaka, becoming the first Australian decorated in World War I. Holmes repeatedly recommended other awards for members of the ANMEF but none were approved.

In 1927, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalions, Australian Military Forces, were designated the lineage descendants of the ANMEF and were awarded the battle honour 'Herbertshöhe'. Today, it is carried by their lineage descendant, the Royal New South Wales Regiment (Maitland 2001: 25-29).

On 1 March 2010, the naval units that participated in the campaign were awarded the battle honour 'Rabaul 1914' and it is carried by their lineage descendants (e.g. HMAS *Yarra* IV).

<sup>7</sup>Designated 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, ANMEF – its later reliefs were designated 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, ANMEF.

<sup>8</sup>Later Brigadier-General Sir Samuel Pethebridge, KCMG, Military Administrator of German New Guinea 1915-1918 who died in office on 25 January 1918 of malaria.

### Conclusion

Several strategic and operational lessons of enduring significance for Australia emerge from the ANMEF campaign. At the strategic level, the situation in August 1914 demonstrated the vulnerability of Australia to interdiction of its maritime trade routes and to isolation from its allies. It also demonstrated the importance of a friendly neighbourhood and, in order to achieve this, the need for Australia to adopt a credible maritime strategy to underpin its diplomacy to this end.

The value of contingency planning also emerged. Australia was forced to organise the Rabaul operation 'on the fly'. New Zealand, in contrast, had been planning its occupation of German Samoa for 2 years and had a battalion group equipped and trained for the task when war was declared. Despite the incredible administrative achievement of raising and despatching the ANMEF in 7 days, Australia was very lucky that the Germans at Rabaul were not better organised. Further, had our pre-war contingency planning extended to the occupation of the German possessions north of the equator, their occupation by Japan, which Australia opposed and was to her detriment 20 years later, may have been avoided.

At the operational level, the ANMEF campaign demonstrated the importance to an effective maritime strategy in our archipelagic neighbourhood of maintaining a credible, trained amphibious force, deployable at short notice, and supported by both a naval escort force and suitable merchant ships available to be taken up from trade at short notice. Finally, in their skilful employment of their forces, Patey and Holmes demonstrated the flexibility and utility of an amphibious force and the effective use of amphibious demonstrations, raids and assaults as part of an amphibious campaign.

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