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BOOK REVIEW

Heroes before Gallipoli: Bitu Paka and that one day in September

by Kevin Meade

John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd: Milton, Queensland; 2005; 138 pp.; ISBN 978170311175 (paperback); RRP 29.95; Ursula Davidson Library call number 570.14/35573



In September 2004, journalist Kevin Meade wrote a feature story about the Battle of Bitu Paka for *The Australian*. This led John Wiley & Sons to invite him to write a book on the capture of Rabaul and this book is the result.

The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) whose centenary we commemorate this year, was raised by Australia at the request of Britain at the beginning of World War I to “seize and destroy the German wireless stations in the south-west Pacific, on Yap, Nauru and in the region of New Guinea”. The primary task was to capture Rabaul, the capital of German New Guinea, which was located in Blanche Bay at the north-east tip of New Britain. Rabaul was at the western end of Blanche Bay. Its wireless station was located nearly 50 km to the south-east at Bitu Paka, 8 km inland from Kabakaul on the southern shore of Blanche Bay.

Recruiting for the ANMEF commenced on 11 August and the force was embarked on HMAS *Berrima* on 18 August in the remarkably short time of 8 days. Yet, while the force was embarking, the Defence Minister, Senator Millen, rebuked Colonel Holmes for taking so long in organising the ANMEF!

The book covers the raising of the ANMEF; its embarkation; its training at Palm Island; the operations on 11 September 1914 when it seized the Bitu Paka wireless station; the occupation of Rabaul; the loss of Australian submarine *AE1*; the German surrender; the subsequent occupations of Madang and New Ireland; and the establishment of a military government. Meade being a journalist, the story is well told and is easy to read. Meade’s original reference was Volume X of the Official History. Although the story of the fighting along the road to Bitu Paka is also related in Volume IX, Meade has not commented upon the subtle differences between the two accounts.

The story of the battles along the road to Bitu Paka shows how the command of the vanguard of the advance changed five times during the day from Lieutenant Bowen till he was wounded, to Lieutenant Hill then to Lieutenant Commander Elwell until he was killed, back to Lieutenant Hill and finally to Lieutenant Bond. Lieutenant Hill and his 59 sailors were not part of the ANMEF, but from the crew of two destroyers which were part of the ANMEF’s Naval escort. The smooth changes of command kept the pressure on the German defenders with aggressive action and allowed the

momentum of the advance to be maintained.

On page 48 in the description of Courtney’s death, the author comments that he “was sailing under an assumed name, as many naval men did at the time”. A comment on the percentage of naval men serving under an assumed name and the reasons for this practice would have added interest to the story.

On page 58 is recounted the story of the capture on 11 September of the cyclist carrying the message from the German governor, Dr Haber, to the troops who were guarding the wireless station instructing them to dismantle the station and “retreat to Toma, 16 kilometres east of Bitu Paka”. Both of the volumes of the Official History use the expression “retire on Toma” and do not provide any distance or direction in the order. Toma is west of Bitu Paka. The map after page xi shows the positions of both Toma and Bitu Paka but the author, in trying to assist the reader, has caused confusion.

The book tells the story “warts and all”. It includes the conviction of four military policemen for armed robbery; and covers the ‘flogging’ of German civilians. The media made more of Colonel Holmes’ punishment of the men than of their crime: an assault on a British missionary. Meade, like other writers, does not question why the Belgian planter, Charles Wienand, was drinking with the German civilians on 26 October. By then German forces had occupied Brussels and atrocities had commenced in Belgium.

A deficiency of this book is the lack of a suitable map of the track from Kabakaul to Bitu Paka showing the locations of the incidents described in the text. The Australians did not have any maps of the country inland from the coast when they landed. The first two German officers who were captured were carrying maps of the road and the German defensive layout. A reproduction of one of these maps would have been useful.

The Battle of Bitu Paka is poorly understood within Australia. The occasional brief newspaper articles usually fail to accurately state even the number of Australian casualties. In 2013 there were two new books released in Australia that contained significant sections about Bitu Paka. The information in these two books, though, does not surpass that in *Heroes before Gallipoli*. If someone is going to read only one book about the Battle of Bitu Paka, I recommend that *Heroes before Gallipoli* be that book.

John Hitchen