

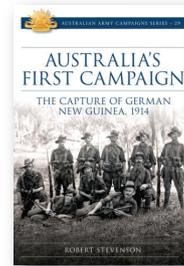
BOOK REVIEW:

Australia's first campaign: the capture of German New Guinea, 1914

Australian Army Campaign Series – 29

by Robert Stevenson

Big Sky Publishing: Newport, NSW; 2021; 202 pp.; ISBN 9781922387721 (paperback); RRP \$19.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 578 STEV 2021



This book provides a concise description and assessment of the capture and initial occupation of German New Guinea in 1914 by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) supported by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). It was the first naval-military expeditionary campaign solely conducted by Australia.

Dr Robert C. Stevenson served in the Australian Army from 1977 to 2011, before becoming a professional historian and writer. He has published two military histories previously: *To win the battle: the 1st Australian Division in the great war, 1914-18* (Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2013); and *The war with Germany* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2015).

At the outbreak of the Great War on 4 August 1914, Great Britain requested that Australia seize the German wireless stations at Yap, Nauru and New Guinea which Germany used to control its East Asiatic Squadron commanded by Vice-Admiral Maximilian von Spee which operated in the Indian and Pacific Oceans from Qingdao in northern China; and to occupy (not annex) German New Guinea.

The forces that Australia assembled for the operation consisted of: the RAN Fleet Unit comprising the battle cruiser HMAS *Australia*, three light cruisers, three destroyers, two submarines and several auxiliary/supply vessels, all commanded by Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey KCVO RN; and the ANMEF consisting of a battalion of naval infantry (comprised principally of naval reservists), two infantry battalions (comprised mainly of untrained volunteers), two machine-gun sections and a medical section, all commanded by Colonel William Holmes DSO VD, a citizen soldier and Boer War veteran.

German New Guinea consisted of the German colonies in north-eastern New Guinea (Kaiser Wilhelmsland), the Admiralty and Western Islands, New Britain, New Ireland, and the northern Solomons. It was administered from the Rabaul on the north-east tip of New Britain and included a wireless station at Bita Paka. It was protected by a small force of German settlers (colonial militia) and some 670 Melanesian police, including a 250-man police expeditionary force based in Rabaul. The defenders were led by Captain Carl von Klewitz, a cavalryman.

The capture of German New Guinea initially involved an amphibious operation to seize Kokopo on the south shore of Blanche Bay and the wireless station at Bita Paka in the jungle 8km south of Kabakaul (5km east of Kokopo);

followed by the occupation of Rabaul on the north shore of Blanche Bay.

At dawn on 11 September 1914, a company of the naval battalion landed at Kabakaul and shortly after the 1st Battalion ANMEF (1ANMEF) landed at Kokopo (then known as Herbertshöhe). During the day, the naval battalion advanced to Bita Paka, initially against stiff German resistance, but by nightfall had captured and destroyed the wireless station. Casualties on both sides were moderate. Meanwhile, 1ANMEF occupied Kokopo unopposed and pushed a patrol inland to look for a supposed second wireless station, but none was found.

On 12 September, 1ANMEF occupied Rabaul unopposed and the next day Colonel Holmes raised the British flag there. The Acting Governor of German New Guinea, Eduard Haber, however, still held out in the hinterland at Toma, some 13km west of Bita Paka. On 14 September, HMAS *Encounter* shelled the Toma ridge, 1ANMEF advanced to Toma and Haber agreed to surrender. Holmes then negotiated with Haber the surrender of all of German New Guinea. Haber signed the Terms of Capitulation on 17 September and the remaining German forces in New Britain formally surrendered to Holmes at Kokopo on 21 September.

Holmes, with Patey's assistance, then began to occupy the remaining German possessions: Madang, 24 September; New Ireland, 17 October; Nauru, 6 November; Admiralty and Western Islands, 19 November; and Northern Solomons, 9 December. On 8 January 1915, Holmes handed over administration of German New Guinea and command of the ANMEF to Colonel Samuel Pethebridge. Holmes returned to Australia the following day to join the Australian Imperial Force.

Stevenson's analysis of the strategic and tactical performance of both sides, especially the leaders, is generally well done. A weakness, though, is his assessment of the Terms of Capitulation that Holmes negotiated with Haber. Holmes did a masterful job that probably only someone with his knowledge of military and administrative law coupled with his vast experience of public administration could have pulled off, especially as his political and military superiors in Australia appeared not to understand the vital distinction between military occupation and annexation¹.

The book has excellent maps prepared specifically to illustrate the text. While it has a selected bibliography, it lacks literature citations (end notes) to validate the evidence presented which I assume is drawn from secondary sources.

The book's limitations notwithstanding, it is otherwise an excellent, well-written, concise presentation and analysis of the campaign. I recommend it to anyone interested in Australia's naval and military history.

David Leece

¹See *William Holmes: the soldier' general* by Geoffrey Travers (Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2020) reviewed in *United Service* 71 (4), 20 (December 2020).