THE AUSTRALIANS AT JUTLAND

By Greg Swinden

No Royal Australian Navy (RAN) warships took part in the Battle of Jutland, but many Australians did and ten men paid the ultimate price in ensuring British sea power remained supreme; and ultimately contributed to the Allied victory in 1918.

The Battle of Jutland on 31 May – 1 June 1916 was the major naval battle of the First World War. For less than 24 hours the British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet came into contact with each other for the only time during the war; in the North Sea off the Danish west coast known as Jutland from which the battle derived its name (although the Germans called it the Battle of Skagerrak). Over 240 ships, ranging from 1000 ton destroyers to 25,000 ton battleships and 60,000 men were involved; and at the end of the battle over 8,500 British and German sailors were dead and 25 ships (14 British and 11 German) were sunk and dozens more badly damaged.

While this was the largest naval engagement at sea during the war it has been considered by many, historians and naval personnel alike, as inconclusive. Germany initially claimed a tactical victory due to the simple arithmetic of 11 ships sunk and 2,500 men killed compared to the British losses of 14 ships sunk and over 6,000 killed. Strategically the Germans lost. Their naval forces never again attempted to contest Britain’s control of the North Sea and the British naval blockade of Germany literally starved the country of the food, fuel and resources it needed to wage war. This ultimately led to revolution in Germany and forced their Government to negotiate for an Armistice in 1918. Germany was beaten militarily on the Western Front but more so economically by Allied sea power.

Over 600 books have been written on the Battle of Jutland and the 100th Anniversary of the battle has led to more analysis of this event. Those interested in a blow by blow account of the battle have no shortage of written material to choose from. This article will constrain itself to the part played by Australians in the battle.

Due to a twist of fate, some five weeks before the battle, no Australian ships were present at Jutland. In early 1916 the ships of the RAN were scattered across globe from Australia, South East Asia, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, southern Africa and the Caribbean. Only the 18,500 ton-battle cruiser HMAS Australia, with a crew of 820 men, was operating in the North Sea with the British 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadron.

On 22 April 1916 the squadron consisting of Australia and HM Ships New Zealand and Indefatigable were at sea patrolling off the Danish coast when thick fog was encountered. The ships had been zig-zagging regularly, due to a possible submarine threat, and at the prescribed time Australia altered course to conform with previous orders; New Zealand did not. As a result of the collision that followed Australia was badly damaged and was sent to the Naval Dockyard at Devonport for repairs; these were not completed until early June and thus she missed the battle.

Following on from the collision Rear Admiral William Pakenham, RN, who commanded the 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadron, shifted his command from Australia to New Zealand and took his signals staff with him. This included several Australian sailors such as 22 year old Sydney born Petty Officer Telegraphist Donald McKenzie. Despite her name HMS New Zealand was
a British warship and there were actually few New Zealanders serving in the ship; thus at Jutland there were more Australians in the battle cruiser New Zealand than New Zealanders!

In late May 1916 British signals intelligence forewarned the Royal Navy that the German Battlecruiser Squadron, under Vice Admiral Franz Hipper, would sail north from its base at Kiel, on the morning of 31 May 1916, to attack merchant ships carrying iron ore from neutral Norway to Britain. This iron ore was vital for British industry. The British decided to send the entire Battle Cruiser force, under the command of Vice Admiral Beatty, from its base at Rosyth in Scotland to intercept them.

Additionally the main British Grand Fleet, under Admiral Jellicoe, at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands would also be sailed to assist Beatty’s battle cruisers. The British forces sailed east from their bases late on the night of 30 May – several hours before the German ships departed port. However the same British signals intelligence had failed to advise that the entire German High Seas Fleet, commanded by Admiral Scheer, was proceeding to sea that day and not just the battle cruisers.

At 3.45 pm on the 31st the two opposing battle cruiser forces met in the North Sea and the fighting commenced. The German forces comprising five battle cruisers, and several cruisers and destroyers, turned south to draw Beatty’s force towards Scheer’s battleships and a fierce running gun battle ensued. German gunnery was exceptionally good and HM Ships Lion, Indefatigable and Queen Mary were all hit with devastating outcomes; the latter two ships blew up with huge loss of life. The reason being that to improve the rate of fire the British ships had removed the safety doors in their gun turrets; to speed up the supply of ammunition from the magazine to the turret. When the turrets were hit the exploding shell flash reached all the way to the magazine and ignited the ammunition with fatal consequences.

Quick thinking by men onboard Lion allowed the magazine to be flooded to prevent an explosion but Indefatigable blew up with only two of her crew of 1019 men being rescued. Half an hour later, at 4.30 pm, Queen Mary suffered the same catastrophe with only 18 survivors from her crew of nearly 1300 men. Amongst those killed were Midshipman Phillip de Carteret (Born in Sydney in 1898 and who left Australia in 1907 to join the Royal Navy), Chief Petty Officer Ernest Catt (British born but whose wife resided in Randwick, NSW), Armourers Crew Edward Hatton (British born but whose parents lived in Tasmania) and Engine Room Artificer Andrew Brown from Merrylands, Sydney who was working in England when war broke out and joined the Royal Navy.

At 4.40 pm Beatty’s force, unexpectedly, sighted the German High Seas Fleet and so turned north to draw the Germans towards Jellicoe’s large force of battleships. The action over the next few hours is often described as confused as gun and funnel smoke obscured the two forces and communications, often by flag hoists, was difficult. A torpedo attack by German destroyers at around 6 pm caused little damage but did disable the destroyer HMS Shark who had onboard Surgeon (Probationer) Robert Walker from Fremantle, WA. Walker had grown up in Fremantle and was educated at Adelaide University. In 1912 he travelled to Scotland to train as a doctor and when war broke out joined the Royal Navy. The disabled destroyer was later attacked and sunk by German warships and Walker was not amongst the few men recovered from the icy waters. One of Shark’s survivors later stated that Walker had last been seen wounded, but still carrying out treatment of his injured shipmates.

By 6.15 pm Jellicoe’s Grant Fleet sighted and engaged the German High Seas Fleet and Scheer decided to turn his fleet away to avoid the superior British force. Over the next few hours the battle raged and several German warships were hit and sunk. The British forces were more aggressive in their attack but German gunnery was superior in defence. At 6.20
pm the armoured cruiser HMS *Defence* was hit and blew up killing all 903 men onboard. Amongst her dead were Sub Lieutenant Joseph Mack, RAN from Berry Bank, VIC and Sub Lieutenant George Paterson, RAN (British born but serving in the RAN). Also killed were Able Seaman William Furneax whose parents resided in South Yarra, Melbourne and Stoker Mortimer Froude from Balmain, NSW. Froude had joined the RAN in 1912 and was serving in HMAS *Australia* when he deserted in 1915, in England, to join the British Army – rejected due to his height (or lack of it) he joined the Royal Navy instead.

Then at 6.30 pm the battle cruiser HMS *Invincible* was hit and blew up (again the problem of removal of the safety doors in the turrets allowed the flash of exploding shells to penetrate to the magazine). Of her crew of 1026 there were only six survivors of which one was Able Seaman Ernest Dandridge. Ernest was British born but his mother and six siblings had immigrated to Australia in 1908 and his elder brother, Sapper William Dandridge, was serving in the 1st Australian Imperial Force in France at the time Jutland was fought. Ernest Dandridge later served on loan to the RAN in the 1920s and, after service in the Royal Navy during World War II, retired to Gosford, NSW.

At 7.20 pm the Germans decided to break off the action and Scheer turned his forces for home. The British forces pursued and as night fell the fighting became more confused with a concerted British destroyer attack, with heavy losses amongst the British ships, and single ships engaging targets at random. In some cases German warships escaped attack as the British were unable to confirm if they were friend or foe. Towards midnight the armoured cruiser HMS *Black Prince* encountered the German battleship *Rheinland* and engaged her but was quickly sunk with her entire crew of 857 men. Among them was Able Seaman Charles Dolphin who although British born grew up in Australia and his parents lived in Artarmon, NSW. Also killed was Maltese Steward Giovanni (John) Micallef whose great grandson is the Australian comedian Shaun Micallef.

Other Australians also served in British warships at Jutland. Chaplain Patrick Gibbons was the Roman Catholic chaplain in *Australia* and, following the collision, was loaned to the old battle cruiser HMS *Indomitable* and later ministered to the wounded and dying. Captain John Saumarez Dumaresq, born in Sydney, commanded the armoured cruiser HMS *Shannon* and commanded *Australia* later in the war. Warrant Officer (Gunner) John Gill, from Port Adelaide, SA was on loan to the Royal Navy and served in the battleship HMS *Benbow* which engaged both German battleships and battle cruisers with limited success. Rear Admiral Ernest Gaunt, born in Beechworth, VIC in 1865 joined the Royal Navy, aged 13, and served at Jutland onboard the battle ship HMS *Colossus* in command of the 1st Battle Squadron.

Many other Australian born sailors, or those with close family connections, are believed to have served at Jutland amongst the British ships, but due to the collision with HMS *New Zealand* the *Australia* missed the battle. Perhaps this was a ‘good thing’ due to heavy losses amongst the battle cruiser force although *New Zealand* emerged from the battle unscathed.

By 7.30 am on 1 June 1916 the German High Seas Fleet was safely back in port, at Kiel, to lick its wounds. The British Grand Fleet was also reaching port and the initial reaction was the Jutland was a German victory, but the Germans never again attempted to contest the Royal Navy in the North Sea and reverted to the use of U-Boats to carry the naval war to the Allies. In late October 1918 when the German Navy decided to undertake another major sortie into the North Sea, to bring the British Fleet to action, the sailors of the German Navy mutinied and helped bring about the collapse of Imperial Germany a few weeks later.