

## AUSTRALIAN SEA POWER 1914 – 2014

This year the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) will pause to commemorate a number of 100th anniversaries associated with the beginning of, and its early involvement in, World War I. It is also a year that will mark several other equally important anniversaries, each of which holds a significant place in the annals of the Australian Navy. The purpose of this *Semaphore* is to highlight these anniversaries and provide readers with links to previously published information authored by contributors to the Sea Power Centre – Australia's historically focused publications.

Following its arrival in Sydney Harbour on 4 October 1913, the Australian Fleet Unit was engaged in a lengthy training program that included visits to various Australian ports including Port Lincoln, Hobart, Glenelg and Melbourne.

In each of these ports the ships were opened to visitors where thousands of people were welcomed aboard. For many it was the first time they had seen modern state-of-the-art warships up close or had the opportunity to meet those who served in them. For the astute visitor, it reinforced that the economic survival of our vast, thriving island continent was inextricably linked with the sea and that it was these ships that would form the bulwark of maritime security throughout the region.

Meanwhile in England two new *E* class submarines, *AE1* and *AE2*, were in the final stages of fitting out and being made ready for their long voyage to Australia. Both vessels commissioned on 28 February 1914 marking Australia's entry into the embryonic world of undersea warfare. Their arrival in Sydney on Sunday 24 May 1914, having travelled 13,000 nautical miles, 9000 of which was under their own power, completed the Australian Fleet Unit and set an endurance record for a long-distance submarine transit at that time. Each of these dates is considered an important event in the Navy's 2014 historical calendar.

Following the arrival of the submarines both vessels entered a maintenance period leaving their crews little opportunity to hone their skills for the impending war. Further information concerning the history of these two vessels may be found on the SPC - A web pages:

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-ae1>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-ae2>

The Australian Commonwealth Naval Board (ACNB) first received warning of the likelihood of war on 27 July 1914, at which time the fleet, under the command of Rear Admiral Sir George Patey, RN, flying his flag in HMAS *Australia*, was exercising in Queensland waters as part of its winter training cruise. Orders were subsequently given for it to return to Sydney to take on coal and provisions and on 3 August the Commonwealth Government announced that in the event of war the fleet would be placed under British Admiralty control.

When news reached Australia on 5 August 1914 that the British Empire had declared war on Germany the majority of the Australian fleet was back at sea on, or steaming toward, pre-assigned war stations.

This was no coincidence but the result of careful planning and preparation by Commander Walter Hugh Charles Samuel Thring, an experienced Royal Navy gunnery officer who, after choosing early retirement in February 1911, accepted a position in the RAN as assistant to the First Naval Member, Rear Admiral Sir William Creswell, RAN. Thring soon realised that Australia was without a strategy for the naval defence of the nation and advocated an early form of forward defence against Japan. More importantly, he appreciated the necessity for an Australian naval staff, developed a system of naval intelligence and produced a comprehensive War Book that was completed only a few weeks before August 1914. His foresight meant that the RAN entered World War I with a high degree of naval preparedness.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/biography/captain-walter-hugh-charles-samuel-thring>

Orders concerning the initial tasking of the RAN quickly followed. The British War Office considered it essential that the Imperial German Navy's East Asiatic Squadron under the command of Vice Admiral Maximilian Graf von Spee should be denied the use of the sea in the Pacific and if possible brought to battle and eliminated. The seizure of German merchant ships and the neutralisation of enemy facilities, such as wireless networks was also considered a high priority.

The RAN was swift to act. Just minutes after the declaration of war, a quick thinking young midshipman, Stan Veale, serving in the RAN examination service vessel *Alvina* stationed in Port Phillip Bay, signalled Fort Nepean that the German steamer *Pfalz* was attempting to escape. The fort's gun battery responded effectively by putting a shot across her bows enabling her capture. Thus the first shot of World War I was fired.

Several other enemy vessels were captured in the first weeks of war, two by HMAS *Pioneer* in Western Australian waters, and, aware that each would possess secret papers, Commander Thring had the examination services conduct thorough searches of them. The most significant discovery was a copy of the German Mercantile Code used for communications between merchant vessels and warships, copies of which were immediately passed to the British Admiralty.

In August, Von Spee's whereabouts was unknown and the threat posed by his squadron to troop convoys assembling in Australia and New Zealand was of great concern. Based on intercepted wireless transmissions Rear Admiral Patey concluded that if the German squadron intended to attack Australia and its trade routes, then any attack would most likely be mounted from a port in the Bismarck Archipelago. It was further considered that Simpsonhafen, the harbour of the German colonial

capital Rabaul, would be the most likely staging point. Available intelligence seemed to support this.

Previous papers in the *Semaphore* series detail the operations that ensued which saw Australia sustain its first casualties of the war, win its first decorations and battle honours and lose its first vessel when HMAS *AE1* disappeared without trace during operations in New Britain.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-august-2003>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-september-2004>

Following the operations to secure Germany's possessions in New Guinea and the Pacific the RAN turned its attention to providing a means of transporting the 20,000 strong Australian Imperial Force, its horses and equipment safely across the Indian Ocean to the Middle East. At that time Australia had neither the troop ships or experience for such an undertaking and it fell to Captain William Clarkson, RAN to oversee the selection, requisition and fitting out of vessels to enable this to take place.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-april-2008>



*Boy Seaman Tom Williamson was one of many young men to serve in the RAN during the first year of World War I. In November 1914 he was wounded during the action between HMAS Sydney (I) and SMS Emden. Inset: The 1914-15 Star awarded to those who saw service between 5 August 1914 and 31 December 1915.*

Arguably one of the most significant dates that will be commemorated this year will be the RAN's first victory at sea when HMAS *Sydney* (I) defeated the German cruiser SMS *Emden* in a hard-fought duel at sea off the Cocos Keeling Islands group on 9 November 1914. This action proved pivotal in securing sea lines of communication between Australia and the Middle East and it is notable that following the action troop convoys were able to cross the Indian Ocean without escort for more than two years, and no soldier was ever lost to enemy action while in transit.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-november-2009>

Since then there have been three further RAN warships to carry the name *Sydney* each of which has added to the impressive tally of campaign awards and battle honours earned by ships to have carried the name of Australia's largest city.

While World War I will be the focus of many commemorations this year there are others that are of equal importance to the naval family. This February will mark 50 years since the tragic collision between the destroyer HMAS *Voyager* (II) and the RAN flagship HMAS *Melbourne* (II) while exercising off the New South Wales coast on 10 February 1964. The loss of 82 of *Voyager's* crew dealt a hammer blow to the RAN and it remains the greatest peacetime tragedy that it has suffered. The *Voyager* disaster continues to serve as a reminder of the perils associated with daily life at sea and this February the men and women of the RAN will pause to remember those men who lost their lives.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-voyager-ii>

This year also marks the 40th anniversary of Operation NAVY HELP DARWIN that saw the RAN deployed quickly to aid Darwin in the wake of the devastation caused by Cyclone Tracy in December 1974. The arrival of the fleet brought urgently needed relief to the 'top end' city and forged long-lasting bonds between the Navy and the citizens of the Northern Territory's capital. Further information concerning the relief operation can be found here:

<http://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-december-2004>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/videos/operation-navy-help>

On a more contemporary note, this year will see the commissioning of HMAS *Canberra* (III) the first of two amphibious ships being built for the RAN. As with HMAS *Australia* (I) one hundred years ago, *Canberra* will assume the mantle of flagship of the RAN later this year. Presently she is fitting out in Williamstown, Victoria and is expected to begin sea trials in the first quarter of 2014. *Canberra* will be the third RAN warship to carry the name of our nation's capital city and the histories of previous ships to be so named may be found on the following links:

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/ships-named-canberra>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-canberra-i>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-canberra-ii>

While burying oneself in the past is a practice best avoided, it is important that we should not lose sight of the hard-learned lessons history can teach us or the sacrifices made by our naval forebears. It is equally important to look ahead and prepare our navy, and our thinking, for the future in a century in which the world's economies are becoming increasingly reliant on a globalised, maritime centric trading system. The fate of that system hinges on the maintainance of good order and security at sea, safeguarded by our Navy and those of our allies.

**John Perryman**



Sea Power Centre - Australia  
Department of Defence  
PO Box 7942  
Canberra BC ACT 2610  
AUSTRALIA  
seapower.centre@defence.gov.au  
www.navy.gov.au/spc/

