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THE RAN BRIDGING TRAIN: NAVY RESERVES AT GALLIPOLI

Ninety years ago Australia made its mark in the eyes of the world. The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps landed at Gallipoli and a legend was born. Every year, around the world, Australians celebrate the tragedy that was Gallipoli. What few know is that the Royal Australian Navy was also present in the form of the RAN Bridging Train. Little is recorded about the exploits of this team of Navy reservists and how they contributed to the support of military forces ashore and the withdrawal of those forces after they spent eight months at Suvla Bay, just north of what is now known as Anzac Cove. It is opportune to remedy this oversight and highlight the skill, dedication and ingenuity of this band of servicemen.

Formed on Federation when the Commonwealth assumed control of the colonial naval forces, the RAN Reserve paralleled the enlistment and maintenance practices of the Royal Navy Reserve. When hostilities began in 1914, the RAN Brigade, as it was then known, numbered over 1600, plus over 3000 under training. The role of the Brigade at that time was primarily to undertake inspection of ships and cargo; maintain port signal stations and look-outs; operate auxiliary craft for coastal patrol purposes; provide guards for ships and wharves; undertake some intelligence and censorship duties and later, perform mine-sweeping operations. It also provided, from within its own ranks, a contingent for service in German New Guinea; personnel for service with the AIF; gun-layers and signallers for duty in merchant ships; Officers and other ranks for service in seagoing Navy roles as well as other more routine war-work. It is the Bridging Train, that was intended for service in Flanders, but diverted to Gallipoli, however, that deserves special mention.

In early 1915, the Australian Government offered Great Britain a naval unit qualified in engineering and technical support to assist the Royal Naval Division in Flanders. The offer was:

one Bridging Train in accordance with Imperial War Establishments including personnel and their equipment, vehicles, and horses. Personnel will be Royal Australian Naval Reserve and trained in bridging¹

The offer was accepted on 18 February and the unit formed under the Command of Lieutenant (later RADM) Bracegirdle. Training began in Melbourne; however, very few in the unit knew anything about bridging and the equipment required to conduct that training had to be built. In addition, most of the personnel recruited into the Train had to be taught how to ride and handle horses. It is apparent from the Unit's Nominal Role that most members were city residents unlike many in the AIF who had horsemanship skills.

Given the urgency of war and before their training was completed, the unit was embarked for transport to England on 4 June. The list of those embarked in the *Port Macquarie* records nine Officers and Warrant Officers (including a 'surgeon for vet duties') and 348 other ranks. In addition, 412 horses, 50 pontoon and trestle wagons and eight other vehicles were loaded. It was intended that training in pontoon construction would be provided on arrival in England.

By the end of June, at which time the Unit had been diverted to Bombay, 79 horses had died from infection or heat exhaustion. All horses were disembarked, thus saving them from the extremes of a voyage through the Red Sea. The Unit, now with out its horses sailed for Port Said where it was diverted from its original destination and sent to the Dardanelles; the Admiralty having handed control of its operations to the British Army. It is ironic, perhaps, that this unit should suddenly find itself detached from the Navy and flung into pontoon construction; the one task in which its members had not yet been trained.

It is reported in the Official History of Australia in WWI² that after being attached to the British Ninth Army Corps on 25 July 1915, the Train commenced discharging equipment from the *Port Macquarie* in preparation of the Army Corps' landing at Suvla Bay on 7 August. From 27 July to 6 August, the Train's members unloaded their equipment and undertook five days' and nights' instruction in the management and use of pontoons after which they were 'flung into the muddle of the Suvla Bay attack'³. Bean records that:

lifeboats engaged in taking off the wounded . . . could not get within 100 yards of the shore; could the Australians put up as soon as possible a pier from which embarkation could proceed? At once the necessary pontoons and superstructure were prepared and rowed two miles . . . under continual shrapnel fire; a pier 120 yards long was erected in twenty minutes from the time of arrival, and was in full use five minutes later⁴.

It is clear that their five days of training paid immediate dividends. The days that followed saw the Train continue with pier construction.



British soldiers on the shore at Suvla Bay (1915). The ordnance dump and beach pontoon built by the RANBT can be seen behind them (original housed in the Australian War Memorial Archive Store - P01326.001).

During the initial stages of the landing it is reported that the supply of water to the landed troops was managed badly so on 12 August, the Bridging Train was given the task of supplying all water from the ships to shore, for the construction of storage tanks and for the distribution of the water supplies; this was in addition to their normal construction duties.



Towards the end of August, the Train was also tasked 'to carry out any work afloat . . . that the Navy might require'. A report from Bracegirdle is quoted to highlight the range of duties that the Train was tasked to perform:

The principal duties allotted to the unit by the Royal Navy were . . . water supply, care of landing piers, discharging of stores . . . lighterage of same to shore, salving of lighters and steamboats wrecked . . . disembarking troops with their baggage . . . and of all munitions and stores . . . The duties allotted by the IX Army Corps were . . . control and issue of all engineer and trench stores and materials, care and issue of all trench bombs and demolition stores, . . . erection of high-explosive magazines, dug-outs, cookhouses and galleys, assembly of hospital huttings, . . . and the manning and control of the steam-tug *Daphne*⁵.

Bean, the AIF's Official War Correspondent at the time, later noted that, although the mortality rate amongst members of the Train was low, with casualties amounting to a little over 10 percent, the unit was powerless to retaliate against any Turkish attack⁶. The tasks assigned to the Train did not involve any active combat; rather it remained a target to be shot at and bombed by aircraft and artillery shells. It was reported that when British soldiers were borrowed to assist with the landing of reinforcements, they 'openly looked forward to trench-life and its comparative shelter again as a rest from the heavy work under shell-fire on the beach'⁷.



Spray rises from the impact of a heavy Turkish shell beside a pier constructed by the RANBT at Suvla Bay (original print housed in Australian War Memorial Archive Store – P01326.006).

In December came the evacuation of troops from the Peninsula. At this time, the weather was bleak with driving rain and snow the norm. Soldiers suffering from exposure were accommodated in dugouts lined with bunks that had been erected by the Train's carpenters. At the same time, the Train was busy erecting new piers and making embarking stages from which to evacuate the Army. This necessitated the construction of a long and heavy pier. Bracegirdle's own report typifies the ingenuity displayed by the Train's members in their efforts to procure material for its construction. Although timber was relatively easy to obtain, not so were the large bolts and iron dowels needed to hold it together. The unit, therefore, stripped a wrecked sand-dredge of its metal railings and ladders and crafted, within a few days, the necessary equipment on the beach using portable forges, stocks and dies⁸.

The rest is now history. The evacuation of allied troops from Gallipoli was an outstanding success. With the troops embarked, members of the Train destroyed their equipment ashore and left the beach at 1930. By 0200 on 18 December the Train departed Suvla Bay, thus the men of the RAN Bridging Team were the last to leave⁹.

Although their involvement in the Dardanelles campaign was over, the Train moved on to see service in Egypt and else-

where, where it operated with distinction. In early 1917 the decision was made to incorporate the unit into the AIF. Following a series of misunderstandings about the usefulness of the Train, it was disbanded. About 50 members joined the AIF and the remainder were transported back to Australia, arriving in Melbourne in July 1917. The RAN Bridging Train thus simply disappeared.

It is noteworthy that, although only a few miles separated the Bridging Train from the AIF in Gallipoli, very few Australian soldiers were aware of the Train's existence. Indeed, even those at Suvla Bay did not recognise the Train for what it was. One British Army Officer's diary recorded it as a 'party of regular Australian [army] engineers'. It was certainly neither regular nor Army. Bean noted that:

they are part of a world so separate that I do not think one Australian or New Zealander in a thousand knows that they are there¹⁰.

Even today, 90 years after its extraordinary effort at Gallipoli, the exploits of the RAN Bridging Train remain little recognised. It is hoped that this short summary of what the Train achieved in such harsh conditions and with so little training will serve as a reminder to all the value and traditions of Reserve service. It is fitting that this paper should end with an excerpt from Bean who reported:

There they are to-day, in charge of the landing of a great part of the stores of a British Army. They are quite cut off from their own force; they scarcely come into the category of the Australian Force, and scarcely into that of the British; they are scarcely army and scarcely navy. Who is it that looks after their special interests, and which is the authority that has the power of recognising any good work that they have done, I do not know. If you want to see the work, you have only to go to Kangaroo Beach, Suvla Bay, and look about you. They have made a harbour¹¹.

Notes

1. Commonwealth Government cable 12 February 1915, cited in Bean, C. 1941. *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Vol IX—The Royal Australian Navy: 1914-1918 (9th ed.). Angus & Robertson, Sydney, p 389.
2. Bean, C. *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Vol IX—The Royal Australian Navy: 1914-1918 (9th ed.). Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
3. *Ibid*, p 392.
4. *Ibid*, p 393.
5. Bracegirdle, L.S. cited in Bean, C. op cit, p 395.
6. In appendix 19 to Volume IX of his *Official History*, Bean recounted the story of two Bridging Train members who 'borrowed' rifles and commenced sniping at five Turkish soldiers, killing four, in order to save a British 32nd Field Ambulance soldier wounded and trapped by rifle fire. Bean reported that they did not want their actions to be mentioned because they were 'out of bounds without leave' and would be charged if it became known that they had ventured into the area and that they normally didn't carry rifles.
7. Bean, C. op cit, p 396.
8. *Ibid*, p 574.
9. For a more detailed account of the RAN's involvement in the Gallipoli campaign, including submarine AE2's penetration of the Dardanelles on 25 April 1915 and the RANBT, see Frame T.R. and Swinden, G.J. 1990, *First In, Last Out*. Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW.
10. Bean, C. op cit, p 404.
11. *Ibid*, p 396.

Editor's Note: The preceding account is based on information held in the Australian War Memorial. For a full account of the RAN Bridging Train's activities refer to Charles Bean, 1941, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney. An electronic version of the publication is available from the Australian War Memorial at <http://www.awm.gov.au/histories/index.asp>

