

**Address to the commemorative service for the centenary of the
Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force's
Departure from Sydney
by
Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, AO, CSC, RAN
Chief of Navy
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Prime Minister, the Hon Tony Abbott; Mr David Elliot, representing the Hon Mike Baird, Premier of NSW; Mr Bill Harrigan, representing the NSW Branch of the RSL; Mrs Gina Parelli, President's Representative of the War Widows Guild of NSW; Members of naval and military associations; Navy and Army cadets who have paraded so well; Ladies and Gentlemen.

I ask you to imagine yourself, one hundred years ago today – here on this site – at this very time and possibly in this weather.

Imagine.

War had been declared only a fortnight before. Australia has been asked to undertake 'great and urgent Imperial service' for the mother country by seizing German possessions in the Pacific. Powerful German naval forces are suspected to be around the islands to our north-east. The very young Royal Australian Navy, whose first fleet has only arrived in Sydney the previous October, is already deployed forward, searching for them around the different German colonies in the Pacific Ocean.

What our predecessors did not know at the time is that the German Fleet has sailed away from our nation, across the Pacific, because they fear the capabilities of our new Fleet Flagship, the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia*. In the absence of this knowledge, there is an air of great uncertainty and anticipation. In this young nation, battle was both sought and anticipated, at sea and on land.

One hundred years ago this island was a hive of activity. The P&O liner *Berrima* was alongside the dockyard being converted for military service. It was being prepared to transport an expeditionary force which was rapidly being assembled: over 1500 men, soldiers and sailors, all volunteers and, as we have heard, from all walks of life. These sailors and soldiers did not hesitate to step forward to serve the nation and, like the cadets today, they were brought to the island by ferry, together.

The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) consisted of about 500 sailors and 1000 soldiers under the command of Colonel William Holmes. They were escorted by the Australian Fleet commanded by Rear Admiral William Patey. The Navy and the Army off to war together in the ANMEF. Its mission was to take control of the German communications post at Bitia Paka, near Rabaul on the island of New Britain, in what is now Papua New Guinea. And so, at about noon on the 19th of August 1914, the newly commissioned HMAS *Berrima*, proceeded through Sydney harbour and turned north to rendezvous off Brisbane with the cruiser HMAS *Sydney*, which was tasked to protect her from the still unlocated Germans

By early September 1914 the ANMEF arrived in theatre and the action commenced. The operation to shut down German communications at Rabaul was to be one of the first major military operations conducted by Australia's military forces. One can say that it was our first notable amphibious operation and was one successful part of a much broader, and equally successful campaign, to secure Australian waters and our region at the outset of the First World War. This success enabled Australia's economy to keep functioning and our military forces to contribute to the war effort in Europe. It also led to some of our first casualties in the Great War that was to claim so many Australian lives. Let it also be said that this first battle for Australia in the First World War in the jungles around Rabaul is often forgotten, as is our first naval casualty, the submarine *AE1*. In September I will be present at the commemorative service at Bita Paka, where we will remember the actions of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force; its successes and its losses. A few days later in the same place we will commemorate the loss of *AE1*.

Today, it is my honour to join with everyone here to mark their departure. We meet to remember them, and all those who have served and risked so much for us. We meet to remember their families who loved them, missed them and supported those who returned; and, as we sit in these dockyard surrounds, we meet to remember all those who worked so hard to prepare them for operations.

The sailors and soldiers who departed from here a century ago did great service for Australia: they exemplify the way the Australian military fights – together, at sea, ashore and in the air. They were first to fight for Australia as a nation in the First World War and we have many reasons to remember their service. They are a part of our history and a part of our memory: a memory which continues to guide and inspire us.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at the start I asked you to imagine the scene here in Sydney, one hundred years ago when the soldiers and sailors prepared to sail together to conduct our first wartime joint operation as a nation. I now ask you, briefly, to consider the arrival in Sydney of the new amphibious ship, HMAS *Canberra*, later this year, just a little over a century since the ANMEF was formed. The sailors, soldiers and airmen who will form her crew, her air wing and her embarked forces, will serve and, if required, fight together if the nation demands them to. I consider them to be the modern-day custodians of the legacy left for us by those who served in the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in remembering the members of the ANMEF, their service and their sacrifices, we thank them. Lest we forget.