On 4 August 1914 the British War Office requested that Australia seize the German colonies in Nauru, the Caroline Islands and New Guinea. The primary reason for this request was to prevent enemy wireless stations from passing information to the German East Asiatic Squadron of the Imperial German Navy, commanded by Admiral Graf von Spee, that might hinder British efforts to bring it to battle. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) acted swiftly to eliminate the enemy threat to the Empire’s shipping. On 11 August the destroyers HMAS Parramatta, HMAS Yarra and HMAS Warrego, covered by the light cruiser HMAS Sydney, prepared to launch a torpedo attack on the German anchorages in Simpsonhaven and Matupi Harbour, New Britain, but found the enemy squadron gone. Landing parties were placed ashore at Rabaul and Herbertshöhe to destroy the wireless station, but when it was learned that the station lay inland it was clear that an expeditionary force would be required. Meanwhile, the battlecruiser HMAS Australia was scouring the Pacific for Von Spee’s squadron. Von Spee was aware of the threat, recording in his diary on 18 August that ‘the Australia is my special apprehension – she alone is superior to my whole squadron.’

On 29 August 1914, in Australia’s first coalition operation, a New Zealand Expeditionary Force of 1400 troops landed at Apia, Western Samoa, covered by the guns of Australia, and the cruisers HMAS Melbourne, HMS Psyche, HMS Pyramus, HMS Philemon and the French Montcalm. With no troops to defend the islands, the German Administrator surrendered on 30 August. The wireless station and harbour facilities were thereafter denied to Von Spee’s squadron.
against the German Pacific colonies by destroying the German wireless station at Angaur in the Palau Islands.

While these operations were in progress other RAN vessels were contributing to the war effort by capturing German merchant shipping. HMAS Pioneer captured the steamers Neumunster and Thuringen off WA; HMAS Protector the steamer Madang off New Britain; and the launch Nusa the steamer Siar and the schooners Matupi and Senta off Kavieng.

On 1 November 1914 the first ANZAC convoy sailed for Egypt from Albany, WA. The escort comprised the cruisers Melbourne, Sydney, HMS Minotaur and the Japanese Ibuki. On the same day as the Australian Government received notification that the Empire was at war, Von Spee had detached the light cruiser SMS Emden from the East Asiatic Squadron for independent operations in the Indian Ocean. By early November Emden, under Captain von Müller, had sunk or captured 22 ships, thoroughly disrupting shipping operations, forcing up insurance premiums, and drawing warships away from other theatres. On 9 November 1914 Emden landed a shore party at Direction Island to destroy the cable station. The operators managed to get off a warning signal before the station was closed down. The message was picked up by the convoy and Sydney, commanded by Captain Glossop, was detached to intercept. Better armed, faster and more manoeuvrable, Sydney caught the German cruiser by surprise, forcing von Müller to abandon his landing party. Despite a fierce resistance the outcome was a foregone conclusion—the Australian ship pounded Emden into a burning hulk, and von Müller drove his ship up onto North Keeling Island to save his remaining crew. Sydney suffered four killed and eight wounded, Emden 115 killed and 80 wounded. Sydney then intercepted Emden’s collier Buresk, which scuttled herself as the cruiser approached. The 50 strong landing party from the Emden, led by Lieutenant Commander von Muecke, seized the station’s schooner Ayesha and escaped, eventually reaching Germany after various adventures.

The destruction of the Emden freed the shipping routes of the Indian Ocean from raiding warships. However, the German East Asiatic Squadron remained at large, a continuing threat to shipping in the Pacific Ocean. On 1 November 1914 Rear Admiral Cradock, commander of the North American station, encountered Von Spee’s squadron off Coronel. In a battle fought in deteriorating weather conditions the old armoured cruisers HMS Monmouth and HMS Good Hope were sunk with all hands by the armoured cruisers SMS Scharnhorst and SMS Gneisenau, and light cruisers SMS Dresden, SMS Leipzig and SMS Nürnberg. The blow to British naval prestige could not be ignored, and the Admiralty redoubled its efforts to hunt down Von Spee. The battlecruisers, HMS Invincible and HMS Inflexible, under the command of Vice Admiral Sturdee, were detached from the Grand Fleet to lead the hunt. Australia was ordered to the American Coast, rendezvousing on 29 November with the Japanese cruisers Asama, Iizumo and Hizen. On 8 December Von Spee decided to raid the British coaling station at Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, in preparation for his return to Germany. Unfortunately for him, Sturdee’s force was already anchored in Port Stanley. When Von Spee’s ships were sighted Sturdee raised steam as quickly as possible and set out in pursuit. Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, Leipzig, Nürnberg and the colliers Baden and Santa Isabel were sunk by Invincible and Inflexible, the armoured cruisers HMS Carnarvon, HMS Kent and HMS Cornwall; the light cruisers HMS Glasgow and HMS Bristol; and the auxiliary merchant cruiser HMS Macedonia. Dresden and the supply ship Seydlitz were the only German vessels to escape the battle. Seydlitz was interned in Argentina and Dresden scuttled herself when run to ground at the Chilean island of Mas a Fuera on 14 March 1915. With the major German threat in the Pacific and Indian Oceans now eliminated, Australia’s newer warships could be reallocated to the Atlantic and Mediterranean theatres of operations, while lightly escorted ANZAC troop convoys could sail un molested to Europe and the Middle East.

In the last five months of 1914 Australian forces, particularly the RAN, participated in a series of successful actions which, at the cost of ten dead, assisted in sweeping the Indian and Pacific Oceans clear of enemy warships and seizing all German colonies in the South Pacific. In comparison to these actions, the land campaigns of World War One would provide Australia with a harsh introduction to modern warfare – one that would scar and shape the nation.