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90 YEARS ON: RABAU AND SYDNEY/EMDEN, 1914

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) baptism of fire both at sea and ashore during the period September-November 1914. Just three years after the new fleet unit arrived in Australia the RAN made a substantial and significant contribution to Imperial security in the Pacific region. The diverse events that took place during this short period, although now largely forgotten in the annals of Australia's military history, formed the cornerstone on which the RAN's enduring tradition of achievement has since been built.

At the outbreak of war in August 1914 the Australian fleet consisted of the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia*, the light cruisers HMAS *Melbourne*, HMAS *Sydney* and HMAS *Encounter*, the small cruiser HMAS *Pioneer*, the destroyers HMAS *Parramatta*, HMAS *Yarra* and HMAS *Warrego*, and the submarines HMAS *AE1* and HMAS *AE2*. The Commonwealth also possessed some old gunboats and torpedo boats from the colonial navies. The permanent strength of the RAN in August 1914 comprised 3800 personnel, of whom some 850 were on loan from the Royal Navy. The naval reserve forces provided another 1646 personnel.

The first task of the RAN following the declaration of war was to seize or neutralise German territories in the Pacific stretching from the Caroline and Marshall Islands in the north to New Britain and German New Guinea in the south. The British War Office considered it essential that Vice Admiral von Spee's East Asiatic Squadron of the Imperial German Navy should be denied the use of German facilities and, if possible, brought to battle. Based in Tsingtao in China, the squadron comprised the armoured cruisers SMS *Scharnhorst* and SMS *Gneisenau* and the light cruisers SMS *Emden*, SMS *Nürnberg* and SMS *Leipzig*. The German possessions represented a formidable network capable of providing intelligence and logistic support Spee.

On 30 August 1914, in Australia's first coalition operation, *Australia* and *Melbourne*, in company with HMS *Psyche*, HMS *Philomel*, HMS *Pyramus* and the French cruiser *Montcalm*, escorted a force of 1400 New Zealand troops to occupy German Samoa. Faced with this force the colony surrendered without a fight. *Melbourne* was then ordered to the German territory of Nauru to destroy its wireless station. On 9 September *Melbourne* landed 25 personnel without opposition, arrested the German administrator and destroyed the already disabled wireless equipment. This lack of opposition, however, was not to last.

Australia's major effort was now directed at seizing German interests in New Guinea, particularly New Britain. To

achieve this, during August a volunteer force known as the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF), consisting of a battalion of 500 naval reservists and time-expired Royal Navy seamen and a battalion of 1000 infantry, was hastily raised and trained. As the whereabouts of Spee's squadron was still unknown, strict orders were given that the expedition was not to proceed without a strong naval escort. On 7 September the force, consisting of *Australia*, *Sydney*, *Encounter*, *Parramatta*, *Warrego*, and *Yarra*, *AE1*, *AE2*, a store-ship, three colliers, and the transport *Berrima* (with the ANMEF embarked), sailed for Rabaul and Australia's first joint operation. Intelligence indicated that two enemy wireless stations were operating in the area, one inland from Kabakaul at Bitapaka and the other at Herbertshöhe.¹ Consequently, two parties of naval reservists were ordered to capture them. The initial landings took place at dawn on 11 September 1914.

Under the command of Lieutenant Bowen, RAN, 25 sailors landed at Kabakaul to seize Bitapaka. They immediately struck inland to secure their objective and a scouting party, having deviated from the main road, soon found itself directly in the rear of the German first line of defence. The German in charge was shot and wounded and, after a short skirmish, ordered his natives to surrender. The captive was then directed to march ahead of the main force and announce in German that 800 troops had landed and that his comrades should surrender. Bowen's deception was rewarded, for word filtered back to the commander of the German defences that a superior force had landed. Believing himself outnumbered, he consequently ordered a withdrawal of his forces inland, resulting in the break down of the entire scheme of German coastal defence. This left only Bitapaka's defenders offering active resistance.

Bowen called for reinforcements but continued to push on towards his objective. His party encountered a series of enemy trenches and came under fire from snipers positioned in the trees. It was here that *Australia* suffered its first casualties of the war.² At 1000 reinforcements arrived under the command of Lieutenant Hill, RNR of *Yarra*. Hill's group comprised 59 men drawn from the crews of the Australian destroyers, variously armed with rifles, pistols and cutlasses. Bowen and Hill swiftly agreed on the next phase of the operation and began outflanking the enemy. However, as the new advance began Bowen was wounded by a sniper, leaving Hill to take command, whilst at the same time calling for additional reinforcements. At 1300 a company of naval reinforcements arrived under the command of Lieutenant Commander Elwell, RN who immediately took command, ordering Hill to take charge of



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the flanking movement on the left whilst he took charge on the right. Elwell was killed leading a bayonet charge on the German defences, leaving Hill to continue the attack with Lieutenant Gillam, RANR, whose timely arrival with a small band of reinforcements carried the day.

The now overwhelmed defenders reluctantly agreed to the unconditional surrender both of the German forces and the wireless station. Lieutenant Bond, RANR, was ordered to advance and secure the wireless station. Following several small skirmishes, during which more casualties were incurred, the last German resistance was quelled.³ For his efforts Bond became the first Australian decorated during World War I, receiving the Distinguished Service Order.

The following day Herbertshöhe and Rabaul were secured without opposition, following a bombardment by *Encounter*, and the remaining German forces in the field subsequently surrendered. Within a few weeks most of the German territories in the area, including Bougainville and the Admiralty Islands, had been occupied without further opposition, at a cost of six dead and four wounded.⁴ The success of the operation was marred by the disappearance of *AE1* on 14 September while patrolling the narrow St George's Strait between New Britain and New Ireland - the first RAN unit lost in wartime. No trace of the submarine or its 35 crew has ever been found.

The next major challenge for the RAN was the apparent disappearance of Spee's squadron into the vastness of the Pacific. This, coupled with news that the German raiders *Königsberg* and *Emden* were at large in the Indian Ocean, caused grave concern for the safety of the troop transports assembling in Australian and New Zealand ports to convey the ANZAC expedition to Europe. Tensions eased on 30 September when news was received that Spee's cruisers had raided Tahiti on 22 September, thus placing them well to the east. This allowed the Australian and New Zealand troops to commence embarkation and proceed to their convoy assembly point at Albany, Western Australia.

During this period other vessels of the RAN were steadily engaged in capturing or detaining German merchant shipping in the Bismarck Archipelago, home waters and in Australian ports. Whilst this important work was taking place a decision was made to dispatch *Melbourne* and *Sydney* to Western Australia to counter the threat building in the Indian Ocean, and form part of the escort for the first ANZAC convoy assembling at Albany.

Of particular concern was the light cruiser *Emden* under the command of Captain von Müller. In just six weeks Müller had captured or sunk almost 100,000 tons of merchant shipping, destroyed oil tanks at Madras and, in a daring raid on Penang, sunk the Russian light cruiser *Zemtchung* and the French torpedo-boat destroyer *Mosquet*. With *Emden* at large in the Indian Ocean the scene was now set for the RAN's first epic sea engagement.

On 1 November 1914 the first ANZAC convoy, comprising *Melbourne*, *Sydney*, HMS *Minotaur*, the Japanese battlecruiser *Ibuki*, and 38 transports, sailed from Albany for the Middle East. On the morning of 9 November the convoy was in the vicinity of the Cocos Islands when it intercepted distress signals indicating that a 'strange warship' was

approaching the islands. *Sydney*, under the command of Captain Glossop, RN, was immediately detached to investigate and within a few hours sighted *Emden* close to Cocos Island. Müller soon realised that he would have to fight and, leaving behind the shore party that had landed to destroy the international cable and wireless station, steamed out to meet the enemy.

Sydney was faster than *Emden* and possessed superior firepower, but Müller opened the engagement with rapid and accurate long-range fire, attempting to inflict as much damage as possible at the outset. All of *Sydney's* casualties occurred in the opening stages of the battle, from hits to the control platform and the range finder located on the upper bridge. Using his ship's superior speed and armament, Glossop soon caused hits to be scored on *Emden*. After forty minutes *Emden's* fire control positions, forward funnel and foremast were gone, and the ship was holed all over and burning fiercely fore and aft. Realising that *Emden* was at *Sydney's* mercy, Müller ran his ship onto the reef at North Keeling Island in order to save the lives of his surviving crew. Glossop then broke off the engagement to pursue and overhaul the *Emden's* collier *Buresk*, which had appeared during the action, but the crew scuttled their ship before it could be seized.

On returning to North Keeling Island Glossop observed that *Emden* had not struck its ensign to indicate capitulation. Confused signals were exchanged between the two vessels, but the ensign remained flying until after *Sydney* fired a further two salvos at the wreck. The ensign was consequently struck, heralding the end of Australia's first and decisive naval engagement. As a result of the destruction of *Emden* the Indian Ocean was freed from the threat of Spee's squadron.⁵

Ninety years after the events of late 1914 the RAN is still participating in joint and coalition maritime operations, in the Pacific and further afield. As in 1914, the RAN is a comparatively small force, yet it is now acknowledged as a world class medium-power navy and a diverse force multiplier whose presence is welcomed in the pursuit of world-wide maritime security. While the threat of enemy cruisers preying on Imperial merchant shipping and troop convoys is now only a dim memory, the RAN remains a significant contributor to security in the Pacific region.

¹ It was subsequently discovered that both were located at Bitapaka – one was the primary station and the other a secondary station.

² Able Seaman C.V. Williams and Captain B.C.A. Pockley (Australian Army Medical Corps) were mortally wounded and died later that day. Williams has the distinction of being the first Australian wounded in action in WWI.

³ For reasons now unclear, apart from a single machine-gun section, the ANMEF infantry company took no part in the fighting in Rabaul.

⁴ Able Seaman J. Walker (enlisted as Courtney but re-buried under his real name by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) and Able Seaman H.W. Street were killed in action. Able Seaman R. Moffatt was mortally wounded and died the next day. Lieutenant R.G. Bowen, Able Seaman D. Skillen, Able Seaman T. Sullivan and Able Seaman J.H. Tonks were wounded but subsequently recovered.

⁵ *Königsberg* had withdrawn into the Rufigi River in East Africa in late September 1914 to repair serious engine defects, and was blockaded by Allied cruisers, including HMAS *Pioneer*, until destroyed by the monitors HMS *Severn* and HMS *Mersey* on 11 July 1915.

