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SEMINAR SUMMARY

Securing Australia’s neighbourhood in 1914: a brief history of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force

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This paper summarises the Institute’s Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) Centenary Seminar held on 30 September 2014. Following a preliminary amphibious raid on Rabaul by the Australian Fleet on 11 August, from September to December 1914, the ANMEF seized Rabaul and then occupied other German possessions in the south-west Pacific. The campaign has enduring strategic and operational lessons for Australia.

Key words: Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force; ANMEF; German New Guinea; Bitapaka; Herbertshöhe; Rabaul; Madang; Nauru; German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron; Australian Fleet; Sir George Patey; Colonel William Holmes; Dr Eduard Haber.

Australia’s first military campaign in World War I was the seizure of Rabaul and occupation of German New Guinea by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, the ANMEF, from September to December 1914. In this, it was supported by the Australian Fleet, which, in preliminary naval operations in August, had raided Rabaul and supported the New Zealand occupation of Samoa.

The ANMEF campaign has been largely overlooked in the public arena where the national focus has been on the later Great War campaigns in Gallipoli, Palestine, France and Flanders, but it is timely to revisit the ANMEF campaign now as this year marks its centenary.

The Strategic Situation

By 1914, Germany was operating a naval squadron in the Pacific and its ships posed a threat to Australian and British maritime trade through the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron operated out of a fortified naval base at Tsingtao (Qingdao) in north-eastern China and was served by various coaling ports and a network of wireless stations across the western Pacific. It was commanded by Vice-Admiral Count Maximilian von Spee and included two armoured cruisers, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, and four light cruisers Nürnberg, Leipzig, Emden (detached to undertake independent raids in the Indian Ocean on 14 August), and Dresden (joined the squadron as it approached South America in October).

Also operating in the Pacific were the powerful Imperial Japanese Navy; British naval squadrons based on the China (Hong Kong), East Indies (Trincomalee, Ceylon) and Canadian Pacific (Esquimalt, Vancouver Island) Stations; and the Australian Fleet (Sydney).

The German Squadron, lacking a battle cruiser, was no match for the new Australian Fleet (Odgers 2003: 42), which was to function in wartime as a fleet unit of the Royal Navy and was referred to by the Admiralty as the Australian Squadron. His Majesty’s Australian Fleet, barely a year old, was commanded by Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey, RN. It was a modern, blue-water force and, although still under training, was ready for action when war was declared. It consisted of the battle cruiser, HMAS Australia, four light cruisers (Sydney, Melbourne, Encounter, and Pioneer), three destroyers (Parramatta, Yarra and Warrego), two submarines (AE1 and AE2), and support ships (SS Aorangi, a supply ship; SS Waihora and SS Whangape, colliers; and HMA Ships Upolu and Protector, submarine depot ships).

Germany also had colonial possessions dotting several of the island chains of the Pacific and, as already noted, some of these had a wireless station. These wireless stations linked the colonies together and, when combined with a cable station as at Yap, linked them to Germany. They enabled Germany both to control its own warships and to intercept wireless traffic from its opponents’ ships – potentially allowing it to attack merchant targets and to keep tabs on allied warships.

On 29 July 1914, Britain informed the dominion governments that war was imminent. New Zealand, Canada and Australia quickly offered contingents for service overseas, even though Australia was in the middle of a double-dissolution election campaign. The Australian Fleet was ordered to Sydney, was coaled and supplied and then ordered to its pre-arranged war stations around the coastline. Australia initiated recruitment of volunteers for a 20,000-man military expeditionary force for service in the Middle East and Europe, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) (Grey 1999: 81).

On 5 August 1914 (Australian time), Britain declared war on Germany and Australia did likewise. Two days later, London requested that Australia and New Zealand “seize and destroy the German wireless stations in the south-west Pacific” (Firkins 1971: 35). This was intended to deal a fatal blow to German naval activities in the Pacific. Australia was to occupy Nauru, the Caroline Islands and

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2Later Admiral Sir George Patey, KCMG, KGVO, RN – promoted to Vice Admiral on 21 September 1914 when the Australian Squadron became an allied one with the addition of the French cruiser Montcalm.

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German New Guinea (Map 1). New Zealand was to occupy German Samoa for which it had developed contingency plans pre-war.

**Preliminary Operations**

On 10 August the Australian Squadron (HM Australian Fleet) became part of the Imperial Fleet controlled from Whitehall. The Australian Government, however, concerned about the German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron, initially kept the battle cruiser, HMAS Australia, in home waters and the Australian Naval Board argued that the Australian Squadron should find and eliminate the German Squadron. The Admiralty vetoed this, preferring that the Australian ships be used to escort the forces despatched to occupy the German Pacific colonies.

Nevertheless, Australia had been monitoring German naval radio traffic but did not know where the German Squadron was. About 9 p.m. on 11 August, the Australian Squadron searched Blanche Bay at the north-eastern tip of New Britain, where Rabaul, the capital of German New Guinea, was located (Map 2). They did not find the German Squadron. The warships returned at daylight on 12 August. Two Australian destroyers entered Simpson Harbour and put a landing party ashore at Rabaul. This party found the town largely abandoned and discovered that the German administration had decamped into the hinterland. It then raided the Rabaul post and telegraph office, destroying the telephones and telegraphic equipment with sledgehammers before withdrawing (Jose 1937: 11; Meade 2005: 1-3). The Australian Squadron was then diverted from searching for the German Squadron to escorting the New Zealand Expeditionary Force to German Samoa and the ANMEF to New Guinea.

**Raising and Training the ANMEF**

To occupy German New Guinea, Australia raised the ANMEF as a separate force to the AIF which was being recruited concurrently. Colonel William Holmes, DSO, VD, a citizen soldier and Boer War veteran, was appointed to command it on 10 August. Recruiting began on 11 August and was completed in a remarkably short 7 days. The ANMEF was an infantry force, initially 1500-strong, consisting of (Mackenzie 1927: 23-25; Jose 1937: 74-75):

- a 500-man Naval Brigade commanded by Commander J. A. H. Beresford, RAN, and consisting of six companies of naval infantry recruited from naval reservists and ex-seamen in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia;
- a 1000-man infantry battalion, designated the 1st Battalion ANMEF, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel W. W. R. Watson and consisting of eight rifle companies; supported by
- two machine-gun sections; a signals section; and an army medical detachment commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel N. R. Howse, VC.

The five military units were recruited in Sydney. A 500-man infantry battalion, designated the 2nd Battalion ANMEF, was added to the force for a brief period when it reached Port Moresby. It consisted of four rifle companies of volunteers for overseas service recruited from a Queensland militia battalion then garrisoning Thursday Island.

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*The German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron was at Pagan in the Caroline Islands preparing to steam across the Pacific to South America and thence back to Germany by way of Cape Horn. On 1 November 1914, it would unexpectedly run into and defeat a Royal Navy squadron in the Battle of Coronel (central Chile). Then, on 8 December 1914, it would be surprised and destroyed by a powerful British cruiser force in the Battle of the Falkland Islands, only Dresden escaping (Grey 1999: 82-83; Odgers 2003: 42).*

*Later Major-General William Holmes, CMG, DSO, VD, commander ANMEF 1914-1915, 5th Infantry Brigade 1915-1916, 4th Australian Division 1916-1917; killed-in-action at Messines, Flanders, 2 July 1917. At the time of his appointment, Holmes was commander of the 6th Brigade, a New South Wales militia infantry brigade, and in civil life was Secretary (chief executive) of the Sydney Water and Sewerage Board (Mackenzie 1927: 25).*
Two passenger liners were requisitioned to support the force: the 11,000-ton *HMAS Berrima*, which was armed with four 4.7-inch guns, fitted out as a troop transport and commissioned as an auxiliary cruiser; and *HMAS Grantala*, which was fitted out as a hospital ship.

On 19 August, the ANMEF sailed from Sydney for Palm Island, near Townsend, where it conducted two weeks of rifle shooting, amphibious landing and jungle fighting exercises before proceeding to Port Moresby to await its naval escorts returning from Samoa. There it was joined by the Queenslander. Holmes considered them to be inadequately equipped and trained. He subsequently ordered them back to Townsend when the stokers of their troopship, the TSS *Kanowna*, went on strike during the passage from Port Moresby to Rossel Island.

On 23 August, Japan entered the War on Britain's side. It blockaded and bombarded Tsingtao on 23 August and began operations against the German possessions and ships in China and the Pacific.

On 30 August, the New Zealand expedition, which greatly outnumbered the small German garrison, occupied German Samoa without bloodshed under the guns of a multinational squadron comprising the battle cruiser *HMAS Australia*, the French armoured cruiser *Montcalm*, and the light cruisers *HMAS Melbourne*, *HMS Psyche*, *HMS Pyramus* and *HMS Philomel* (Drew 1923: 22-41; Jose 1937: 59).

**ANMEF Seizes Bitapaka and Rabaul**

Once their naval escorts returned after escorting the New Zealanders to German Samoa, the ANMEF embarked for Rabaul. It was now a month since the Australian raid on the Rabaul post and telegraph office. The convoy assembled at Rossel Island (Louisaade Archipelago) off the south-east tip of Papua. It included the auxiliary cruiser, *HMAS Berrima*, in which the ANMEF was embarked, *HMAS Australia*, the light cruisers *Sydney* and * Encounter*, three destroyers, two submarines, the submarine depot ship *HMAS Upolu*, and a fleet train (*Aorangi*, the collier *Koolonga* and the oiler *Murex*).  *HMAS Grantala* followed, unescorted, direct from Australia, a few days later. For the amphibious phases of the operation, Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey, Rear-Admiral Commanding HM Australian Fleet, was the overall commander and Colonel William Holmes, Brigadier Commanding the ANMEF, was the landing force commander.

On its way back from Samoa on 9 September, *HMAS Melbourne* raided Nauru, then known as Pleasant Island, and destroyed the wireless station. It then joined the ANMEF convoy.

On 11 September, the ANMEF convoy entered Blanche Bay about 3.30 a.m. Neither the Bay itself nor Simpson Harbour at its western end contained any German ships. The Germans had not prepared Rabaul for defence. They had deployed what forces they could command to defend the approaches to Toma, the new government headquarters, and the Bitapaka wireless station, both in the highlands south of Blanche Bay. The German garrison was comprised principally of Melanesian native constabulary commanded by a few German officers and NCOs (Meade 2005: 33-36) and some 50 German military reservists who were drawn in from around the colony.

Patey was unaware of the German dispositions and expected to find the acting German governor at Herbertshöhe, which Patey believed was still the German capital. He knew it had been the headquarters of the German expeditionary force of 125 native troops used as a mobile force to quell uprisings within the colony and understood that a wireless station was under construction about 7 km up the Herbertshöhe-Toma road (Mackenzie 1927: 47).

Patey landed two parties of naval infantry, each of about 25 men, on the south shore of Blanche Bay before dawn on 11 September, one at Herbertshöhe and the other at Kabakaul, the latter with a view to capturing the German wireless station at Bitapaka in the hills 8 km to the south of Kabakaul.

The Herbertshöhe party, led by Sub-Lieutenant C. Webber, RANR, found the town largely deserted and, despite pressing inland and uphill for several kilometres up the Toma road as far as Gire Gire (about half-way to Toma), found no sign of any wireless station or of German defenders. It returned to Herbertshöhe by nightfall without incident (Mackenzie 1927: 52).

The Kabakaul landing party, led by Lieutenant R. G. Bowen, RAN, also found Kabakaul largely deserted. Although Bowen did not yet know it, the enemy had established three major delaying positions between Kabakaul and Bitapaka (Map 3), and had mined the track and deployed ambushes forward of the first position. Bowen quickly ran into opposition and called for reinforcements. There were several brief, but bloody, skirmishes in the dense jungle, causing casualties on both sides during which the Australians lost one man killed and four wounded, three fatally. The Australians unexpectedly proved to be adept at jungle fighting, wherever possible moving in extended line through the dense jungle on both sides of the track rather than in file on the track as the Germans had expected. They bypassed the mines and ambushes and eventually closed on the first defended position.

While planning to attack the first position, Lieutenant Bowen was seriously wounded and Lieutenant G. A. Hill, RNR, who had arrived earlier with 59 reinforcements from *HMAS Yarra*, assumed command. By 1 p.m. Lieutenant Commander C. B. Elwell, RN, the second-in-command of the Naval Brigade, had arrived with the Brigade’s No. 3 Company. Elwell ordered the position to be attacked simultaneously from both flanks. He led the bayonet charge from the right flank, with sword drawn. Elwell was shot dead, but the bayonet charge unnerved the native defenders and carried the day.

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1The landing force and its naval escorts (*Australia*, *Sydney* and the destroyers) – the fleet train and its escorts (*Encounter*, *AE1* and *AE2*) and *Melbourne* arrived on the 12th and *Grantala* on the 13th. It is a measure of Patey’s confidence that he launched the assault without awaiting the arrival of *Melbourne* which would have given him more options had von Spee materialised.

2Able Seaman W. G. V. Williams, about 9.30 a.m., and Captain B. C. A. Pockley, Australian Army Medical Corps, about 10 a.m., were wounded and died on the *Berrima* that afternoon. Around noon, Able Seaman J. E. Walker, RANR (served as J. Courtney) was shot dead (the first Australian to die), and Signalman R. D. Moffatt, RANR, was fatally wounded, dying the next day.
The advance, on a gradual uphill grade, was resumed by a smaller force – a half-company of No. 6 Company and a machine-gun section – led by Lieutenant T. A. Bond, RANR. The second German defended position surrendered when Bond called on it to do so, but approaching the third position a German prisoner, Sergeant Ritter, led a resistance among the natives who had just surrendered. In the firefight which followed, two Australians were wounded and Able Seaman H. W. Street, Ritter and several Melanesians were killed. The third position offered no further resistance.

Approaching the Bitapaka police barracks 1 km forward of the wireless station, Bond came on eight Germans and 20 Melanesian troops. Displaying quick-thinking and courage, Bond single-handedly snatched the Germans’ pistols before they could react, and, placing the Germans between him and the troops, forced the troops to surrender.

Bond’s small force finally reached the Bitapaka wireless station by nightfall where they found the station abandoned and its wireless masts cut through, but the radio equipment and machinery were still intact. By then, the defenders were withdrawing along the ridge towards the new German seat of government some 30 km to the west at Toma (Mackenzie 1927: 52-67).

Subsequent Operations

On 22 September, Patey and Holmes sailed from Rabaul to Madang on mainland New Guinea with a combined force of army and naval infantry in HMAS Berrima, accompanied by the battle cruiser, HMAS Australia, the destroyer, HMAS Encounter, and the French armoured cruiser, Montcalm. On arrival off the town on 24 September, the warships trained their guns on the town in a demonstration of naval power. Patey sent an envoy ashore under a flag of truce and demanded the unconditional surrender of Madang, which was immediately forthcoming (Meade 2005: 79-82).

In November, a search of the Sepik River by Australian destroyers did not find the German forces said to be massing there (Jose 1937: 138 – 145).

ANMEF detachments were gradually deployed to occupy other German possessions, sometimes in
captured German vessels, as follows: New Ireland on 17 October; Nauru on 6 November; the Admiralty Islands and the Western Islands on 19 November; and Bougainville and the German Solomon Islands on 9 December.

Meanwhile, Japan had occupied the Marshall and Caroline Islands on 7 October; and the British and the Japanese had captured Tsingtao on 7 November. For diplomatic reasons and much to Australia’s consternation, the planned but overly delayed Australian occupation of former German possessions north of the Equator (the North-West Pacific Expedition by the specially raised Tropical Force), particularly at Angaur and Yap in the Caroline Islands, did not eventuate after a deal was struck between the British Government and the Japanese Government, whose forces remained in possession of them (Mackenzie 1927: 30, 158-159; Jose 1937: 132-136). Australia was to rue this decision two decades later.

Subsequent Administration of German New Guinea

Holmes established a military administration in the captured German territories which he based in Rabaul and garrisoned as follows: Rabaul 100 troops; Herbertshöhe 50; Madang 50; Káwieng (New Ireland) 25; Kieta (Bougainville) 25; Nauru 25; and Manus Island 12 (Mackenzie 1927: 178). His force was progressively relieved between December and February by Tropical Force, the force originally raised to occupy the Caroline Islands, and Holmes handed over command to its successor, the force originally raised to occupy the Caroline Islands, and Holmes handed over command to its commander, Colonel Samuel Pethebridge on 18 January 1918 of Rabaul. Pethebridge’s military administration governed the territory, still under German law (it remained German territory, occupied by but not annexed to Australia), until replaced by a civilian administration in 1919. This civil administration, in turn, continued in place (except for the period of Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945) until Papua New Guinea was granted independence in 1975.

Honours and Awards

Lieutenant Bond was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his leadership and gallantry during the advance to and capture of Bitapaka, becoming the first Australian decorated in World War I. Holmes repeatedly recommended other awards for members of the ANMEF but none were approved.

In 1927, the 1st and 2nd Infantry Battalions, Australian Military Forces, were designated the lineage descendants of the ANMEF and were awarded the battle honour ‘Herbertshöhe’. Today, it is carried by their lineage descendant, the Royal New South Wales Regiment (Maitland 2001: 25-29).

On 1 March 2010, the naval units that participated in the campaign were awarded the battle honour ‘Rabaul 1914’ and it is carried by their lineage descendants (e.g. HMAS Yarra IV).

Conclusion

Several strategic and operational lessons of enduring significance for Australia emerge from the ANMEF campaign. At the strategic level, the situation in August 1914 demonstrated the vulnerability of Australia to interdiction of its maritime trade routes and to isolation from its allies. It also demonstrated the importance of a friendly neighbourhood and, in order to achieve this, the need for Australia to adopt a credible maritime strategy to underpin its diplomacy to this end.

The value of contingency planning also emerged. Australia was forced to organise the Rabaul operation ‘on the fly’. New Zealand, in contrast, had been planning its occupation of German Samoa for 2 years and had a battalion group equipped and trained for the task when war was declared. Despite the incredible administrative achievement of raising and despatching the ANMEF in 7 days, Australia was very lucky that the Germans at Rabaul were not better organised. Further, had our pre-war contingency planning extended to the occupation of the German possessions north of the equator, their occupation by Japan, which Australia opposed and was to her detriment 20 years later, may have been avoided.

At the operational level, the ANMEF campaign demonstrated the importance to an effective maritime strategy in our archipelagic neighbourhood of maintaining a credible, trained amphibious force, deployable at short notice, and supported by both a naval escort force and suitable merchant ships available to be taken up from trade at short notice. Finally, in their skilful employment of their forces, Patey and Holmes demonstrated the flexibility and utility of an amphibious force and the effective use of amphibious demonstrations, raids and assaults as part of an amphibious campaign.

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