



OCCASIONAL PAPER 15

September 2017

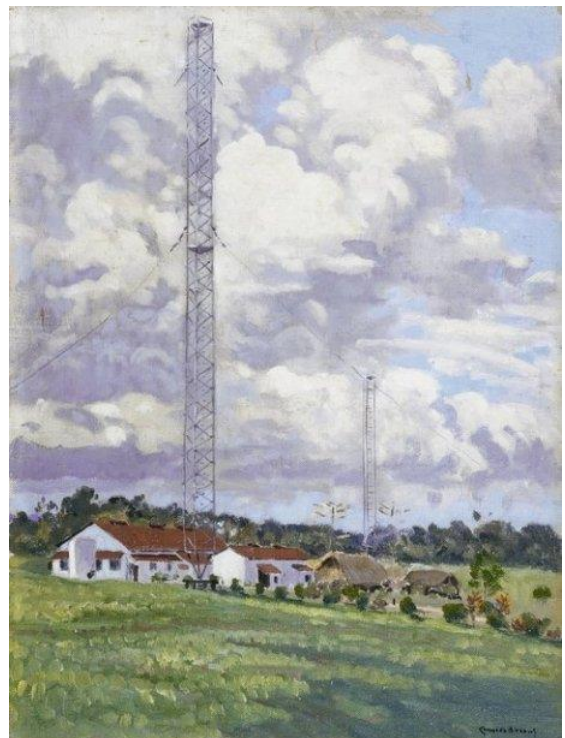
The Naval Historical Society of Australia



Battle of Bita Paka 11 September 1914

The Battle of Bita Paka (11 September 1914) was fought south of Kabakaul, on the island of New Britain, and was a part of the invasion and subsequent occupation of German New Guinea by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force shortly after the outbreak of the First World War. Similar to New Zealand's operation against German Samoa in August, the main target of the operation was a strategically important wireless station—one of several used by the German East Asiatic Squadron—which the Australians believed to be located in the area. The powerful German naval fleet threatened British interests and its elimination was an early priority of the British and Australian governments during the war.

The Australian Naval & Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) was formed on 6 August 1914. Its sole purpose was to destroy German wireless stations, operating in the Caroline Islands at Nauru and New Britain, which were communicating with the German East Asian Cruiser squadron operating in Pacific waters. The ANMEF was raised separately from the Australian Imperial Force, and comprised 1,500 militia infantry and 500 naval reservists and ex-sailors



Bita Paka Radio Station Painting by Charles Bryant, AWM

The RAN Brigade, supported by men from Australian warships, landed at Kabakaul, German New Guinea, (New Britain), to seize the German wireless station there. HMA Ships AUSTRALIA, SYDNEY, ENCOUNTER, PARRAMATTA, YARRA, WARREGO, AE1 and AE2 supported this landing, and stood by to repel any German warships.

After an unopposed landing the Brigade forced their way inland and encountered strong resistance from German native troops, led by German Army Reserve officers, as they advanced to seize the German wireless station. LEUT T. A. Bond, RANR, distinguished himself in the advance by single handedly capturing 30 native troops, and was later awarded the DSO, which, although not gazetted until 1916, was technically the first decoration awarded to an Australian during WWI

The battle was Australia's first major military engagement of the war and the only significant action of the campaign; in its aftermath the remaining German forces on New Britain fled inland to Toma. Following a brief siege there the German garrison capitulated, ending resistance to the Australian occupation of the island.



Five RAN and RN naval personnel were killed or died of wounds;

- LCDR C. B. Elwell, RN;
- AB W. G. V. Williams;
- AB J. E. Walker;
- AB H. W. Street;
- Signalman R. D. Moffatt;

Also killed was Captain B. C. A. Pockley of the Australian Army Medical Corps. AB Williams was the first to be killed, and thus had the dubious honour of being the first Australian to be killed in action during WWI.



Able Seaman
Billy Williams



Able Seaman Robert
David Moffatt RANR

The Australian War Graves Commission maintains in the RABAU (BITA PAKA) War Cemetery a memorial to members of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force who died during the operation to capture German New Guinea and the radio station at Bita Paka in particular. There is no memorial in Australia to the six servicemen killed as a consequence of the Battle of Bita Paka.



AUSTRALIA'S EARLY CONTRIBUTION TO THE ALLIED CAUSE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR (4 AUGUST 1914 TO 11 NOVEMBER 1918) WAS THE FORMATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN NAVAL & MILITARY EXPEDITIONARY FORCE (AN&MEF) WITH 1000 SOLDIERS AND 500 SAILORS. THE SIX MONTH OBJECTIVES OF THE AN&MEF WERE THE CAPTURE OF GERMAN POSSESSIONS IN THE PACIFIC (SEE MAP), INCLUDING THE RADIO STATIONS AND COAL SUPPLIES SUPPORTING THE GERMAN NAVY.

THE AN&MEF WAS RECRUITED PRINCIPALLY FROM SYDNEY (ARMY) AND MELBOURNE (NAVY), THEN HURRIEDLY TRAINED AT PALM ISLAND NEAR TOWNSVILLE BEFORE SAILING FOR NEW BRITAIN.

AT DAWN ON 11 SEPTEMBER 1914, ALMOST 100 MEN, MAINLY NAVAL PERSONNEL, LANDED AT KABAKAUL AND KOKOPO (SEE MAP) TO CAPTURE AN INLAND GERMAN RADIO STATION, THOUGHT TO BE NEAR BITA PAKA. A NUMERICALLY SUPERIOR GERMAN FORCE STOPPED THE AUSTRALIAN KABAKAUL FORCE ADVANCING THROUGH THE DENSE JUNGLE. AFTER REINFORCEMENT, HOWEVER, THE AUSTRALIANS TOOK THE RADIO STATION THAT EVENING.

THE GERMANS, BY THEN GREATLY OUTNUMBERED, WITHDREW TO HEADQUARTERS AT TOMA, LEAVING RABAU UNDEFENDED. THIS ENABLED THE AN&MEF TO FORCE THE SURRENDER OF THE WHOLE AREA ON 17 SEPTEMBER 1914.

AFTER THIS REGIONALLY SIGNIFICANT VICTORY, THE AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE (AIF) AND EUROPE BECAME THE NATION'S FOCUS

25/05/20

Memorial Proposal

A Proposal has been submitted by David Cable and David Michael to the War Graves Commission to create a memorial on a Moffat family plot in Waverley.

Extract:

“The Australian War Graves Commission maintains in the RABAUL (BITA PAKA) War Cemetery a memorial to members of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force who died during the operation to capture German New Guinea and the radio station at Bitia Paka in particular. There is no memorial in Australia to the six servicemen killed as a consequence of the Battle of Bitia Paka. This Project is significant as the Battle of Bitia Paka was the first engagement of the enemy by Australian Forces during World War I and few Australians know about it.

The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) consisting of 1,000 soldier and 500 sailors was formed with the six month objective of capturing German possessions in the Pacific. At dawn on 11 September 1914, almost 100 men, mainly naval personnel landed at Kabakul and Kokopo to capture an inland radio station thought to be near Bitia Paka. The radio station was captured by evening. Six ANMEF personnel lost their lives as a consequence of this action including Able Seaman Robert David Moffatt who died of wounds on board HMAS Australia on 12 September. He was buried at sea.”

Further Reading:

Heroes before Gallipoli: Bitia Paka, and that one day in September by Kevin Meade

<https://www.navyhistory.org.au/erle-alwin-greglach-boyd/>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/biography/chief-petty-officer-erle-alwin-greglach-boyd>

<https://sites.google.com/site/simpsonhafen/bitia-paka-1914>