

# Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force

By Philip Payton

**On the outbreak of the First World War, the German presence in the Pacific, in particular its wireless transmitting stations, were seen as a strategic threat to both Britain and Australia. The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, during its short life, made a major contribution to countering that threat.**

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## The German Threat in the Pacific

Before the outbreak of the First World War, [Australia](#) had looked increasingly nervously at what it considered hostile great power activity in the [Pacific](#). In addition to the growing might of the Japanese Imperial Navy, the presence of [Germany's](#) East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron, based at [Tsingtao](#) in [China](#), was considered a strategic threat. Moreover, Australia had recently assumed control of the British colony of Papua, giving it a land border with German New Guinea. To this was added the presence of German [wireless](#) stations in the Pacific, which were assumed to be monitoring Australian activities and passing intelligence to the Squadron at Tsingtao.

When war was declared, Australia feared that it might fall victim to German territorial expansionism in the Pacific. Recognizing the threat, the British Admiralty requested that the Australians and New Zealanders take action to knock out the German wireless stations. An Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) was hastily cobbled together, comprising an [infantry](#) battalion 1,000 strong that had been hurriedly recruited in Sydney, supported by a landing party composed of 500 naval reservists. On 19 August 1914, a mere eight days after recruitment had commenced, the AN&MEF set out from Sydney in the requisitioned Peninsula and Oriental liner *Berrima*, sailing to Port Moresby on the coast of Papua. There it was joined by the capital ships HMAS *Australia* and HMAS *Sydney*, together with other vessels of the Royal Australian Navy, which had just escorted the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on a similar mission to Samoa.

## The AN&MEF in Action

This force arrived off Rabaul, the capital of German New Guinea and the site of several wireless transmitters, on 11 September 1914. At first light, two naval parties, twenty-five men apiece, went ashore nearby to capture the transmitters thought to be located at Herbertshohe and Bitapaka, the latter inland from Kabakaul. In fact, both transmitters were situated near Bitapaka, and their defenders offered determined resistance as the naval reservists closed in. A force of "native constabulary", led by German officers, put up a fierce defence, including accurate sniper fire. Further reinforcements from the Australian warships were landed before the German opposition collapsed, leaving six Australians dead and four wounded. These were the first Australian casualties of the war. Enemy losses included three German officers and about thirty New Guinean police killed.

Meanwhile, the destroyer HMAS *Parramatta* had been dispatched to ascertain whether it was possible to bring the *Berrima*

alongside the harbour jetty at Rabaul, The *Parramatta* reported that berthing was safe, and the *Berrima* was able to disembark its infantry battalion. The soldiers of the AN&MEF landed unopposed at nightfall on 12 September 1914, and found the German colonial capital only lightly defended. It capitulated swiftly, and soon all of mainland German New Guinea, together with Bougainville and the Admiralty Islands, had fallen to the Australians. Nauru wireless station had been destroyed on 9 September while the New Zealanders had captured Samoa. The Caroline and Marshall Islands, however, earlier an Australian objective, had fallen to Japan, which had entered the war on the Allied side on 23 August 1914. The Australians and New Zealanders had acted swiftly and decisively to try to neutralize the German threat in the Pacific, only to find that Japan had moved a menacing step closer. Ostensibly allies, the Australians continued to look upon the Japanese as potential enemies.

The AN&MEF returned home in triumph, with warm congratulations from the [British government](#) and a parade through Sydney in early January 1915 before being stood down. It had been a short but effective campaign, although the loss of the Australian [submarine AE1](#) in mysterious circumstances detracted from the achievement. Moreover, the Royal Australian Navy was frustrated that its support for the AN&MEF landings had allowed the German East Asiatic Squadron – the greater prize, in the Navy's estimation – to escape unscathed. The German ships had fled the Pacific. However, the raider [SMS Emden](#) had been left behind to wreak havoc on Allied [merchant shipping](#), as it did until destroyed by HMAS *Sydney* in an epic action off the Cocos Islands on 8 November 1914. The destruction of the *Emden* effectively completed the work begun by the AN&MEF and ended German power in the Pacific. Later, during the [Paris Peace Conference](#) of 1919, Australia fought successfully to ensure its continued control of German New Guinea as a [League of Nations Class C Mandate](#).

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### Citation

Payton, Philip: Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-01-29. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10542](#).

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