

Bitu Paka Talk PNGAA

Avinun ladies & gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to give this address today. PNG is a place that I have been involved in for most of my adult life, indeed I have just returned from the 3 November Kokoda commemorations and my 67th crossing of the Kokoda Track. **(Speak about how you got into going to PNG).**

This year marks the 80th anniversary of Australia's darkest hour-1942. On 23 January, Rabaul fell to the Imperial Japanese, by 3 February Japanese bombs were dropping on Port Moresby, the following month between 8-13 March, the Japanese invaded mainland New Guinea, landing at Salamaua-Lae. In May they had attempted to take Port Moresby by sea only to be turned around at the battle of the Coral Sea, before landing on the north-coast of Papua and attempting to take Port Moresby by way of an overland track-Kokoda. Subsequent battles fought at Milne Bay (25 August-7 September) and the Northern Beachheads November to January 1943.

However, today I am going to take you back **before** the heroic deeds of the Australians and New Guineans in the Second World War and back before the horrors of Gallipoli & the Western Front, to Australia's very **first** battle of the Great War and in my opinion one of our most **significant**.

The battle of Bitu Paka fought in the jungles of New Guinea was much closer to home, both in terms of distance and as we shall learn, to our very own state of Victoria.

In 1914 the Australian fleet commanded by Vice Admiral George Patey, comprised the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia*, the light cruisers *Melbourne*, *Sydney* and *Encounter*, the small cruiser *Pioneer*, the destroyers *Parramatta*, *Yarra* and *Warrego*, and the submarines *AE1* and *AE2*.

The first task of the Royal Australian Navy, 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.

Through a sophisticated network of wireless stations, the beforementioned locations could provide intelligence, communication, and logistic support to the German fleet based in Tsingtao, China. The enemy squadron, commanded by Vice Admiral Maximilian Von Spee, comprised the armoured cruisers SMS *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* and the light cruisers SMS *Emden*, *Nürnberg* and *Leipzig*.

Australia's major effort was to seize the German wireless stations in the Pacific. To achieve this objective a volunteer force known as the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) was hastily raised in early August 1914. It comprised eight companies of infantry mainly from NSW and 500 sailors, mainly naval reservists drawn from all over Australia.

The converted passenger liner *Berrima* carried the contingent which departed Sydney on 20 August 1914, a little over a week since some men had volunteered to fight. On route the *Berrima* stopped at Palm Island where the men had the opportunity to rehearse landing ashore by boat and to hone their musketry and field skills.

Many of the military members had little or no experience in the army, the men of the naval forces were, in comparison, disciplined, well drilled in musketry, cutlass skills, field gun use and general field work, all of which was to place them in good stead for their impending mission.

By 7 September, the men were bound for Rossel Island and a rendezvous with HMAS *Australia*.

On board the flagship, Admiral Patey, discussed with the military Commander, Colonel William Holmes, the final plans for the attack on German New Guinea culminating in the release of an operational order for an attack. Two points had been chosen for the landings, one at Rabaul, the seat of Government, the other at Herbertshöhe on the Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain.

It was decided that the naval contingent should undertake the landing at Herbertshöhe. Patey's orders were that should a preliminary reconnaissance of Blanche Bay reveal it to be empty of enemy ships, *Parramatta* was to examine the jetty at Rabaul and report whether *Berrima* could berth there.

Sydney, which had embarked 50 men of the naval contingent prior to sailing, would meanwhile transfer 25 of them to the destroyers *Warrego* and *Yarra* for landing four miles east of Herbertshöhe. The remaining 25 remained in *Sydney* to be landed at Herbertshöhe along with a 12-pounder gun. From there they would proceed inland to locate and destroy the enemy wireless stations

Prior to the landing, Captain Brian Pockely penned this letter to his family (**pp 62, 63**)

While Pockley was writing to his family, LTCDR Charles Bingham Elwell had been writing to his fiancée and offered his writing pad to his colleague LTCDR Gilliam who was leading the landing party. Gilliam later recalled the following conversation (**p64**).

As we will see Elwell's premonition would sadly become a reality.

At 6:00am *Australia* escorted *Berrima* into Karavia Bay, where the former lowered her picket boats to sweep for sea mines. On completion *Australia* returned to sea to protect the approaches to the bay and cover the unfolding operation ashore.

The initial landings, in what would become Australia's first joint force operation, took place at dawn on 11 September 1914 when 25 petty officers and men under the command of Lieutenant Bowen, were landed from the Australian destroyers at Kabakaul with instructions to seize the wireless station at Bita Paka. With Bowen were Midshipman Buller and Captain Pockley of the Australian Army Medical Corps. They were soon reinforced by Gunners Yeo and Bacon and ten men sent ashore from *Warrego* and *Yarra* who were put to immediate use maintaining communications between the advancing landing party and the beach.

Bowen's party was soon striking inland through dense jungle to secure their objective when a scouting party, having deviated from the main road, found itself directly in the rear of the German first line of defence comprising three Germans and 20 native soldiers. The German in charge, Sergeant-Major Mauderer, was shot and wounded by Petty Officer Palmer and after a short skirmish the enemy surrendered.

The wounded Mauderer was given first aid before being directed by Lieutenant Bowen to walk ahead of the main body of Australians 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, Captain von Klewitz, that a superior force had landed.

Believing himself outnumbered, Klewitz consequently ordered a withdrawal of his forces inland, resulting in the breakdown of the entire scheme of German coastal defence. This left only Bita Paka's defenders offering active resistance. At this juncture Captain Pockley drew Bowen's attention to the worsening condition of

Mauderer who he subsequently treated in the field, resulting in the amputation of his badly wounded hand.

Following this initial skirmish Bowen reassessed his party's position, sending Midshipmen Buller back to Kabakaul with the prisoners and instructions to send up reinforcements. Fifty-nine men were subsequently drawn from the two destroyers, 14 armed with rifles and the rest with cutlass and pistols under the command of Lieutenant Hill.

This force reached Bowen's group at about 10:00am to find them halted by a series of enemy trenches, under fire from snipers positioned in the trees and with two of their number lying mortally wounded. The first to have fallen was Melbourne man, Able Seaman Williams, who formed part of the communications link between Bowen's party and the beach.

After observing natives in a coconut plantation beside the road Williams called up the man next to him, Stoker Kember, to investigate. As Kember did so Williams covered him. The natives were found to be hoeing among the palms seemingly presenting no threat. Williams then went ahead and was shot in the stomach from a concealed position in the bush. Kember rushed to his aid, carrying him for nearly half a mile back along the road.

Captain Pockley had just finished treating Mauderer when he learned that Williams had been shot. Escorted by Officer's Steward Annear, the two set off to find the injured sailor. On locating him he instructed Kember and another to evacuate the injured man to the rear, at the same time removing his red-cross brassard and tying it around Kember's hat to afford him a measure of protection. Pockley and Annear then set about returning to the front but also came under fire. After taking cover Pockley tried to move forward again but was shot and seriously wounded. Sometime later he was evacuated and transferred to the *Berrima* where both he and Williams died later that afternoon.

Meanwhile Bowen and Hill agreed on the next phase of the operation and set about outflanking the enemy. However, as the new advance began Bowen himself was seriously wounded by a sniper, leaving Hill to take command, and renewing a call for reinforcements.

At Kabakaul, Hill's request for support was received by Commander Beresford who ordered No. 3 Company commanded by Lieutenant Gillam, and No. 6 Company commanded by Lieutenant Bond, of the Naval Reserve as well as a machine gun section under the command of Captain Marcus to land. Beresford

himself then relocated ashore and was accompanied by Captain Travers, an Army intelligence officer.

With LT Bond's was a young Midshipman, twenty-year-old Stanley Veale. Midshipman Veale had only, a month prior, hoisted the signal which caused Fort Nepean to fire the British Empire's and Australia's first shot in World War One. Stopping the SS Pfalz who had tried to leave Port Melbourne. Stan Veale would become a member of East Malvern RSL.

Lieutenant Commander Charles Bingham Elwell, Royal Navy was also landed, taking command of half of No. 3 Company, and pushing ahead at best possible speed. Lieutenant Gillam followed with the other half in support. The conditions ashore were becoming increasingly difficult. The sun was high in the sky, the day windless, the heat stifling and the road dusty which made for hard going in the jungle terrain.

As Elwell's party advanced Able Seaman John Edward Walker (who enlisted and was known at the time as Able Seaman John Courtney) was shot dead near a sharp bend in the track, becoming the first Australian to be killed in action during the Great War. Two of Gillam's men, Signalmann Moffatt and Able Seaman Skillen were also hit, Moffatt succumbing to his injuries the next day.

It was around this time that Gillam's men also discovered the presence of wires laid through the bush that was correctly assumed to lead to a land mine buried beneath the road on which they were advancing. The wires were subsequently cut and a serious threat to the advance removed. Later it was discovered that the native soldier assigned to climb the tree and detonate the mine was taken ill on the day in question, suffering from malaria.

At about 1:00pm, Elwell's party arrived at Hill's position who was receiving enemy fire coming from a trench positioned ahead of him. There Elwell assumed command ordering Hill to take charge of a flanking movement on the left while he took charge of a similar movement on the right.

Elwell slowly led his men forward until they were less than eighty yards from the German positions. Elwell after drew his sword and ordered his men to fix bayonets. The command charge followed and in the face of rapid enemy fire. Elwell, still with his sword in hand, was shot and killed. Hill continued the attack with Lieutenant Gillam, whose timely arrival with the remainder of No. 3 Company carried the day.

The now overwhelmed defenders reluctantly agreed to the unconditional surrender of both the German forces and the wireless station. This was negotiated by Lieutenant Commander Beresford who then called for Lieutenant Bond, with No. 6 Company to be brought up to advance with Captain Marcus and his machine gun section to secure the wireless station. Also in their company were Captain Travers, the intelligence officer, and two German prisoners, who preceded the party carrying a white flag of truce.

During their advance to the wireless station, Bond's party encountered a series of enemy trenches. They successfully used the German speaking captives to negotiate the surrender of two of these but met resistance at a third constructed at the top of a steep cutting at the side of the road. There, one of the German captives, Ritter, attempted to rally those who had already surrendered, and a brisk exchange of fire followed during which two of Bond's men, Able Seamen Tonks and Sullivan were wounded and Able Seaman Street killed. Ritter and several of the natives fighting for the Germans also died in this exchange.

Leaving Marcus and his machine gun section to cover his advance, Bond accompanied by Captain Travers, Corporal Eitel, an interpreter from the machine gun section, and the remaining German, Kempf, walked on towards the wireless station. On the way they captured a German cyclist carrying a message to the Bitapaka garrison, and a horseman who was ordered to go ahead to the wireless station with news of the German surrender and a message that further resistance was futile.

At a police barracks 1000 yards from the wireless station a group of eight Germans and twenty native troops was encountered. The Germans were armed with magazine pistols and the latter with rifles. Through Kempf they were ordered to surrender but they refused to comply. At this point Lieutenant Bond warned Travers to stand by with his revolver before turning quickly towards the Germans and snatching their pistols from their holsters. So surprised were they by Bond's sudden and daring action they were unable to defend themselves. The immediate surrender followed, and the prisoners marched off toward the wireless station which was found to be abandoned.

For his courage and quick-thinking, Bond became the first Australian decorated during World War I, receiving a Distinguished Service Order.

News of the successful capture of the wireless station did not reach Admiral Patey until 1:00am on 12 September. At 3:00pm on 13 September the British flag was hoisted at Rabaul. The ceremony was held in an open space overlooking the harbour where the Australian fleet could be seen riding at anchor.

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.

Sadly, 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, the wreck of which discovered in December 2017 in 300 metres of water off the Duke of York Island group.

About discoveries post the battle, the location of the radio station at Bita Paka had been lost in time, the late Peter Ramm whom some of you may know, a Lark Force descendant, rediscovered the site in 2013, a year before the centenary commemorations.

If you remember at the start of my address, I mentioned that the Battle of Bita Paka was one of our most important battles of the First World War. I say this because Japan had been on the side of the Allies, they had escorted our troop ships to the Dardanelles. During negotiations at Versailles in 1919, the United States President Woodrow Wilson advocated rewarding Japan by ceding all former German colonies in the Pacific to Japan.

Our Prime Minister Billy Hughes objected and fought hard to prevent Japan obtaining German New Guinea. Instead, German New Guinea became the mandated territory of Australia. Some twenty odd years later, on 23 January 1942, Japan captured Rabaul and from there launched attacks on mainland New Guinea including the Kokoda campaign. Things may have been different had we not fought that one day in September 1914.

Lest We Forget.