

The battle for Bitapaka



The AN&MEF, HMAS Warrego and Yarra, a naval contingent landing at jetty from ship's boats, to proceed to Bitapaka to capture the wireless signal station there. In background are the volcanic cones of The Mother and South Daughter. Australian War Memorial, Image No. ART 08010.



The advance towards Bitapaka, showing enemy dispositions at 9am on the 11th September 1914. (The Australians at Rabaul - German Possessions in the Southern Pacific. MacKenzie, S. 1938 Angus & Robertson Ltd, Sydney).

The battle for Bitapaka

The AN&MEF continued their mission without the Kanowna and the Dirty 500. In the early hours of 11 September 1914, they arrived off Kabakaul Bay. By 7am, Lieutenant Roland Bowen and his landing party of 24 men, landed on the breakwater pier at Kabakaul. Their orders were to occupy the German wireless station at Bitapaka.

In the battle that followed, the AN&MEF lost six men, killed or who died of wounds, and four soldiers were wounded. The Germans suffered 1 killed and 1 wounded and the New Guineans, 30 killed and 11 wounded.



Staff on board HMAT Berrima watching the disembarkment of the Australian Naval and Military Expedition Force at Kabakaul. From left to right: Colonel William Holmes; Lieutenant Colonel William Walker Russell Watson; Colonel John Paton; Captain Sydney Percival Goodsell; Major French Croix de Guerre. Australian War Memorial, Image No 2840.



Studio portrait of Captain (Capt) Brian Colden Antill Pockley, Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC) (ANMEF). Australian War Memorial, Image No H19316.

Under fire and Australia’s first deaths

Initial attacks on the landing party took place as the men made their way along the thick jungle fringed Kabakaul–Bitapaka Road. New Guinean troops, supervised by three German soldiers, opened fire. Returning fire, the Australians killed several New Guineans and one German was wounded. The survivors were taken prisoner.

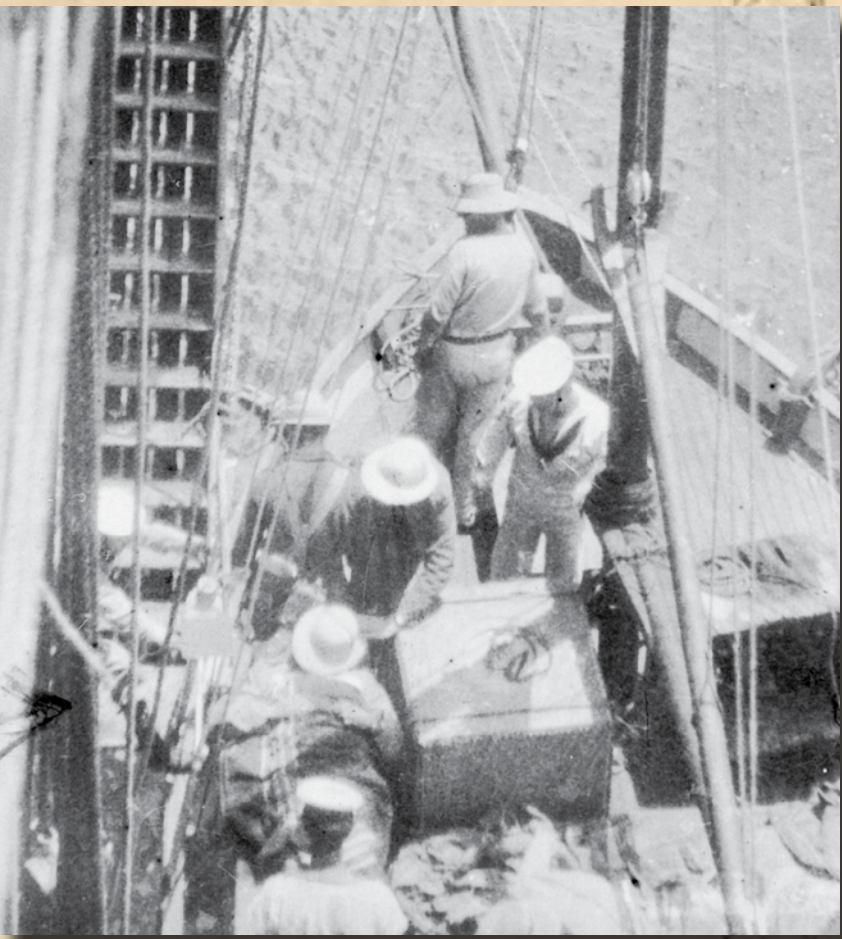
The Australians forced the injured German to walk ahead, shouting for his comrades to surrender. After two German officers and a guide were captured, Australian medical officer Captain Pockley performed an amputation of the wounded German soldier’s hand in order to save his life. According to witnesses, the German’s ‘face did not betray for one second the pain he endured’.

Believing more opposition waited ahead, Bowen detailed several men, including Billy Williams, to remain behind to ferry messages and direct reinforcements as they arrived. Bowen then pushed on.

As Williams and his comrades moved along the road, he noticed several New Guineans in a plantation just off the road. He called Stoker Kember to investigate, but he saw nothing suspicious. But, as Williams turned to continue, a shot rang out from the trees hitting him in the chest. Kember picked up his stricken comrade and carried him towards the beach.

When Pockley heard that Williams had been wounded, he went immediately to assist. Realising William’s wound was fatal, he ordered Kember and another man to carry Williams to the beach. Wanting to provide safe passage, Pockley removed his Red Cross brassard and tied it to Kember’s hat.

As Pockley moved to re-join Bowen’s party, he was shot through the stomach by a marksman hidden in the trees. He was carried to Williams’ position and the two men were transferred to the Berrima. Pockley died a little before 2pm and Williams soon after.



Members of the AN&MEF bringing Captain Brian Colden Antill Pockley, the medical officer, on board HMAT Berrima, his face is covered by his pith helmet. Australian War Memorial, Image No PO 3078.004.

Further attacks and casualties

Initial reinforcements from the Berrima were fired on by both hidden marksmen and from a well sited and heavily defended trench dug across the road. During this engagement, Bowen sustained head injuries, but survived his wound.

Further reinforcements began landing at Kabakaul around 10am, including No.3 and No.6 Company, intelligence, and machine gun and medical sections. Australian scouting parties soon came under fire and Able Seaman John Courtney was shot and killed. He became the first Australian serving in an Australian force to be killed during the First World War (Pockley and Williams died at 2pm). Two more sailors were wounded shortly after and Able Seaman Robert Moffat died the following day.

By 1pm the reinforcements had reached a clearing 80 metres from the German controlled trench. Men were ordered to fix bayonets and charge the trench. Lieutenant Commander Charles Elwell was shot and killed instantly leading the charge before German fire forced the remaining Australians to take cover.

The German officer soon realised he was outnumbered and surrendered the position. Eight Germans and approximately 20 New Guineans were taken prisoner. The German officer and an interpreter were then ordered forward to convince the remaining German troops to surrender.

A further 3 kilometers up the road, another trench, this one guarded by three Germans and up to 35 New Guineans was encountered. After some random firing, this position was also surrendered to the Australians.

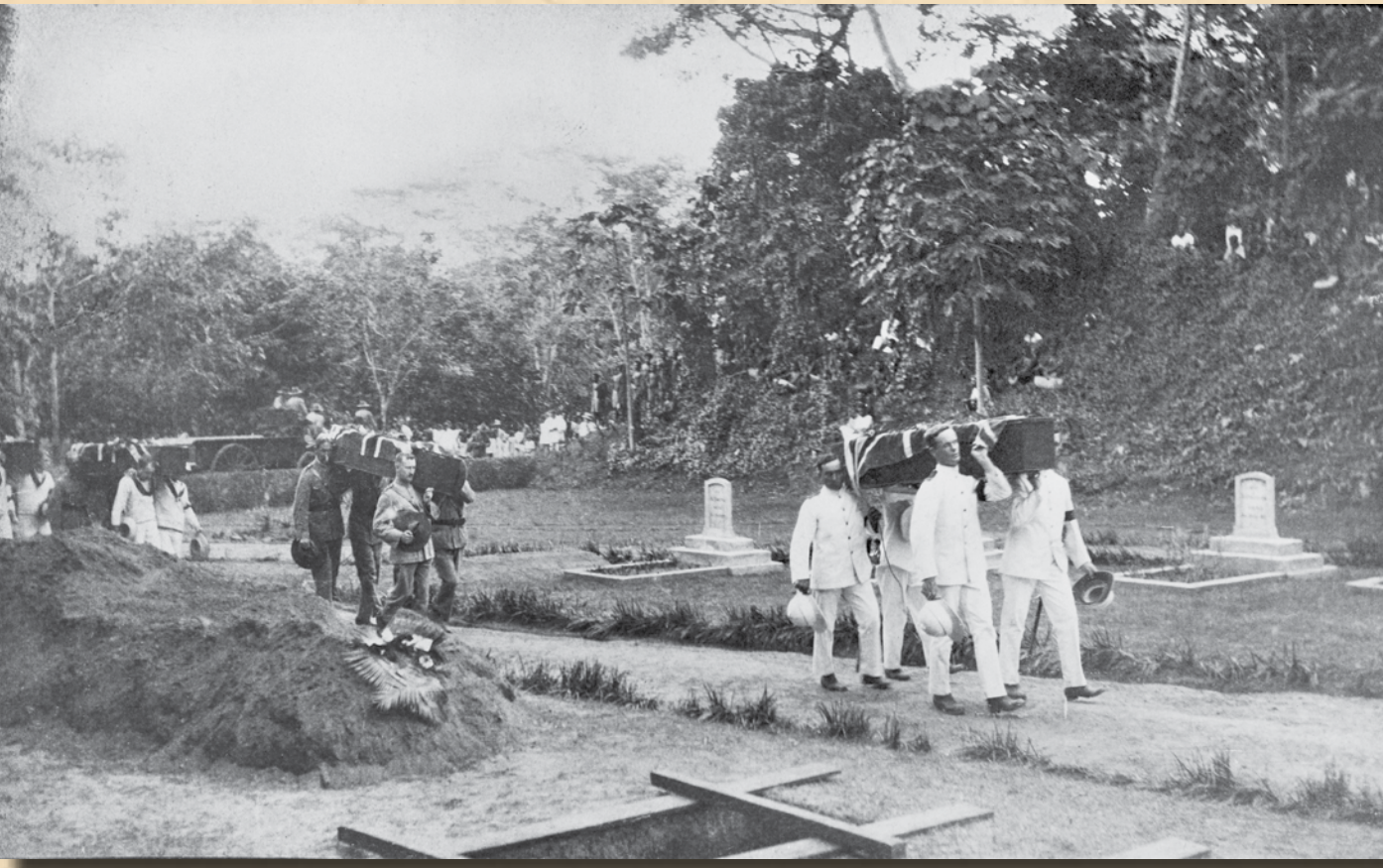
The prisoners were ordered back to the beach under armed escort. As the men moved off, a New Guinean began pointing at the bushes to one side of the road. An Australian later recalled “before I could give warning, firing started in the bush to my left and behind me.” As the Australians returned fire, the German and New Guinean Prisoners tried to escape. Several New Guineans were killed and others wounded. One German was wounded and the translator was killed. Three more Australians were wounded and Able Seaman Harry Street died before he could be carried back for treatment.

The Australians continued their push towards the wireless station until they came to a barracks a kilometre away. Initially, 8 Germans and 20 New Guineans refused to surrender. It took a daring feat from Bond, a German speaking member of the machinegun section, who walked towards the Germans as they conferred and disarmed them by taking their pistols from their holsters. The New Guineans also surrendered. Bond was later awarded a Distinguished Service Order for his bravery.

By 7pm the fighting was over and the radio station had been taken. In the days following, Rabaul was occupied and the German Governor, Dr. Eduard Haber formally surrendered at Toma on 17 September 1914.



German New Guinea local troops at drill, being trained by German Reservists, shortly before the arrival of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF). Australian War Memorial, Image No: A02544.



Naval and Military personnel carrying coffins to the grave site prior to the burial of five unidentified members of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF). Note the coffins are draped with Union Jack flags. Australian War Memorial, Image No. PO2766.013.

The wireless mast (radio station) at Bitapaka was an important strategic goal to be taken when the AN&MEF force took New Guinea from the German authorities. It also formed a key part of the Australian administration of Rabaul during the war. Australian War Memorial, Image No: P10509.043.001.

