

Australian government “celebrates” first WWI military action

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Australian government and military officials held the official commemoration of the country’s first World War I operation on Sunday with marches and speeches in Sydney and Melbourne.

The ceremonies—among the countless public events scheduled over the next four years—celebrated the 100th anniversary of the departure from Sydney of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) and its seizure, a few weeks later, of German New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and other German South Pacific colonies.

“Our first World War I heroes finally honoured,” the *Daily Telegraph* trumpeted yesterday. “They were the nation’s first deployment of troops in World War I. Its first engagement of the enemy on foreign soil. Its first casualties. Its first taste of victory ... the true first chapter in our tragic World War I tome of brutality, mateship and an unbreakable spirit.”

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Navy Chief Vice Admiral Tim Barrett addressed the gathering at Sydney’s Cockatoo Island dockyard, from where the troops set sail on 19 August 1914. The event attracted only 170 people, the overwhelming majority of them senior military officers and other invited guests, including a handful of ANMEF relatives. They were joined by around 60 cadets drawn from Sydney schools, who had marched through the centre of the city. The low attendance points to the contrived character of the WWI celebrations as a whole.

The “first shot fired by the British Empire in the Great War,” Abbott told those at Cockatoo Island, was by an Australian gun battery—a reference to the capture of a German ship in Melbourne’s Port Phillip Bay within days of Britain declaring war—and “the first successful British Empire military campaign was Australia’s capture of German New Guinea.”

By the end of the planned four-year-long WWI centenary commemorations, Abbott said, Australians “should know all our Great War stories better, starting with the capture of German New Guinea, Gallipoli, the Western Front and the capture of Jerusalem and Damascus by Australian troops as part of General Allenby’s army.”

Admiral Barrett, former head of Australia’s so-called Border Protection Command, claimed that the ANMEF expedition should “be remembered” by all Australians as “part of a much broader and successful campaign to secure Australian waters and our region at the outset of the First World War.”

Contrary to Abbott’s claim, the WWI celebrations are not about education, but miseducation. Sunday’s event was a striking example. Neither Abbott nor Barrett provided any details of this first engagement, and deliberately misrepresented its purpose. The dispatch of Australian troops to German New Guinea was not to defend Australia or “democracy” but to further the longstanding ambitions of the Australian ruling class to expand its colonial possessions in the Pacific, underscoring the imperialist character of WWI as a whole.

As Henry Parkes, one of Australia’s “founding fathers,” declared in 1891: “Australia ought to be the mistress of the Southern Seas. The trade, the commerce ... of these groups of rich islands ought to centre in our ports; and with these advantages, we ought to hold mastery of the hemisphere.” The Australian ruling elite used WWI to seize New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Nauru—territories that Germany had acquired in the late nineteenth century.

Official Australian war histories and the media—past and present—falsely insist that Germany’s Pacific territories and their associated radio communications

facilities were a serious threat to Australia. This claim is absurd. The military forces stationed in these colonies were minute. Rabaul, the main administrative town in German New Guinea, was practically deserted when ANMEF troops arrived in September. The settlement was easily taken by the poorly-trained and equipped Australian troops, and the German radio transmitter was destroyed in just 20 minutes.

The only significant fighting occurred on September 11, at Bitapaka, near Rabaul, the site of another German radio transmitter. The hopelessly outnumbered and outflanked German forces—just 40 reservists and 110 Melanesian troops—were defeated after 24 hours of fighting. Six Australian soldiers, one German officer and 10 Melanesian soldiers were killed in the conflict. The remaining German forces were ordered to surrender throughout the region. In the weeks that followed, Australian troops destroyed or disabled the rest of the German radio transmitters.

Germany's South Pacific territories were placed under Australian military command until 1921, when Australia was given a "mandate" from the League of Nations to govern them. The decision to send tens of thousands of young men to their deaths in WWI—"to the last man and last shilling" in the words of Labor Party leader Andrew Fisher—was the price paid to secure new colonial territories for Australian imperialism.

Australia retained its colonial control over what became Papua New Guinea until 1975, enabling Australian companies to extract large profits from its raw materials. The country was left economically backward and lacking in elementary social services. Even after formal independence, Australian corporations continue play a substantial role in the economy, particularly the lucrative mining sector, and the Australian ruling elite still regards it as part of its sphere of influence in the South West Pacific.

One aspect of the military mobilisation against Germany's Pacific colonies, and one that Abbott, Barrett and the corporate media failed to mention, is the Kennedy Regiment—the "Dirty 500." The 500-strong totally untrained contingent from northern Queensland volunteered to join up with the ANMEF forces heading for Rabaul. Aged between 18 and 60, they were accommodated on the ship Kanowna in Port Moresby harbour. They were provided with only one set of

clothing, no bunks or hammocks, no mosquito nets, no tables to eat from, and in the tropical heat only allowed just over two-and-a-half litres water for washing and drinking per day.

A few hours after sailing from Port Moresby to join the ANMEF troops, the Kanowna's stokers and other crew members mutinied over the horrendous conditions on board the ship. The "Dirty 500," as they were later known, were sent back to Australia and quietly discharged from the military. Kanowna's crew were put on trial for mutiny, but eventually acquitted.

Two more services commemorating the ANMEF's seizure of German colonies are planned for September—this time in Papua New Guinea. One can be sure that the Kanowna mutiny, the first indication of the barbaric conditions facing Australians sent into military service—will not be mentioned by government and military speakers. That would defeat the purpose of the millions of dollars being spent to "celebrate" WWI, namely to brainwash a new generation of youth in preparation for new and even bloodier conflicts.



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