

Australian government celebrates WWI seizure of German colonies

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High-level Australian government and military officials travelled to Papua New Guinea this month to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the battle of Bita Paka, near Rabaul—the first significant military engagement by Australian forces in World War I.

The event, which was given extensive media coverage, is part of Canberra's four-year WWI centenary program, a repulsive multi-million dollar promotion of militarism and nationalism. The Bita Paka battle on September 11, 1914 was, according to one media report, the “young nation's first taste of war, the first shedding of blood by those serving an Australian force, led by Australians and given its orders by an Australian government.”

Six Australians died in the brief military encounter against a heavily outnumbered German force defending a nearby radio transmitter. One German officer and 30 natives under his command died in the battle. The Australian military subsequently seized *Kaiser Wilhelmsland* or German New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Nauru and other South Pacific German colonies long coveted by the Australian ruling class. Japanese imperialism took control of Germany's Asia Pacific colonies north of the equator.

The centenary service, addressed by Minister for Veterans Affairs and the Centenary of Anzac Michael Ronaldson, Australian navy chief Vice Admiral Tim Barrett and various other speakers, was broadcast live by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Ronaldson declared that the six Australians “did not die in vain” and “their sacrifice was in defence of values they held dear.” The centenary event, he later told a press conference, was “about educating young Australians about the enormous price paid for the freedoms that we enjoy today.”

No speaker could refer to the real reasons for the predatory military expedition—the capture of colonial possessions, new markets and resources and geo-political

advantage—nor the immediate consequences for those living in the former German colonies following the Australian takeover.

The Melanesian and Pacific islands peoples certainly gained no “freedoms.” In fact, the transfer of one imperialist master for another led to more ruthless and harsher forms of exploitation.

This month's “celebration” involved the deliberate suppression of what actually happened. A day after the ceremony, Ronaldson angrily denounced the ABC's Radio National for broadcasting a recently discovered audio interview, recorded about five decades ago, with a Kabakaul village elder who witnessed the events at Bita Paka.

The elder stated that Australian soldiers executed two German soldiers and scores of native police. “They shot all the men who were lined up on one side. Only one boy was alright, a young boy such as this, he ran away. So they all died and the trench they dug was full with dead bodies,” he said.

The ABC story, Ronaldson declared, was “insensitive and totally inappropriate.” Australian War Memorial curator Michael Kelly joined in, demanding that the ABC apologise for “tearing down the AIF [Australian Imperial Force].”

What occurred at Bita Paka has never been subject to an independent investigation. But the audio interview, recorded in the 1960s by a plantation owner who lived near Rabaul, adds to the evidence of war crimes committed in New Guinea by the Australian military in 1914.

Where Australians Fought—The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles, published in 1998, raised similar claims. The book noted the higher number of native forces killed compared to Australian and German personnel. It asserted that the larger number of Melanesian fatalities “were the result of the Australian

practice of bayoneting all those that fell into their hands during the fighting.”

A Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) broadcast this month also alleged that the Australian military breached the rules of war when it used a wounded German officer as a human shield in the battle. The officer was reportedly forced to walk ahead of advancing Australian troops, calling out to German soldiers to surrender.

The report was based on a 1988 interview with Basil Holmes, who in 1914 was an aide de camp to his father, Colonel William Holmes, the leader of the Australian military intervention. Other violations occurred during Colonel Holmes’ four-month command of the occupation.

Three weeks after the Bitu Paka battle, five Australian soldiers attacked Rabaul’s Roman Catholic mission, holding two priests at gunpoint as they looted money, liquor and cigars. About a month later, Australian military police raided a home in Rabaul’s Chinatown looking for opium. They dragged the Chinese homeowner outside, demanded his keys and stole 5,200 German marks.

While Colonel Holmes officially condemned these actions, he responded with his own brutal methods to allegations that four German planters beat up a local Methodist priest. Holmes dispatched troops to capture the planters and had them publicly flogged, without trial, as punishment. He claimed to have had nowhere to lock them up.

The flogging occurred on November 30 in Rabaul with Australian troops—“half a battalion”—lined along three sides of Proclamation Square and all German male residents ordered to make up the fourth side. A 20-year-old Australian soldier who witnessed the punishment told the press decades later about the cruel procedure.

Holmes declared that Melanesians could not attend, the witness said, because “it would have been bad for morale to see a white man flog another white man.” Dozens of the postcard prints, however, were produced of the event and sold as souvenirs.

The four Germans, including a teenage boy, were lined up near a flag pole in the centre of the square and whipped one by one. The purported German ringleader was stretched across a travelling trunk, his hand and legs chained to the ground.

Before initiating the punishment, Holmes made a speech, which ended with him pointing to the flag and declaring: “This is a British flag. Under this flag you shall be given protection ... and you shall also be flogged. Order, commence flogging.” (More details can be

read here and here.)

Holmes, who was never officially reprimanded for his actions, was promoted to command the 5th infantry. The public flogging of the German planters—“white men”—set the tone for even harsher treatment meted out to Melanesian natives by Australian colonial authorities in the ensuing decades.

Australia’s participation in WWI sought to ensure that the South West Pacific came under its economic and political control. As Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper bluntly admitted on August 12, 1914, just eight days after the declaration of WWI: “We have long since realised that we have a Pacific Ocean destiny... By virtue of the European war an unexpected path has been opened to the furtherance of our ambition [for] the foundations of a solid Australian sub-empire in the Pacific Ocean...”

Ten days after the Bitu Paka battle, all German soldiers and their Melanesian troops surrendered. German New Guinea remained under Australian military control until 1921 when Canberra was given a League of Nations special “Class C mandate” to govern them.

Apart from a short-lived Japanese occupation during WWII, Australia ruled Papua New Guinea (PNG) until its formal independence on September 16, 1975, plundering its mineral and other natural resources while keeping the overwhelming majority of its population in poverty.

Australian banks, mining and other corporations continue to have significant stakes in the oppressed, underdeveloped country. Moreover, Canberra has frequently intervened in PNG politics to secure Australian economic and strategic interests.

Relations between the two countries were on display during the centenary commemoration. The PNG government not only rolled out the red carpet for Australian politicians and military officials at Bitu Paka, but mobilised several hundred school children to attend the event. Like his Australian counterparts, Deputy Prime Minister Leo Dion, who addressed the ceremony, made no mention of the real history of Australia’s military seizure of the country or the brutal colonial rule that followed.



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