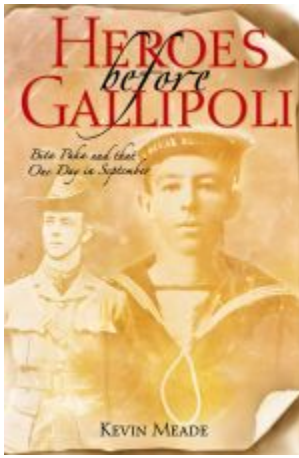


Heroes before Gallipoli: Bitu Paka and that One Day in September by Kevin Meade. Milton, Queensland: John Wiley & Sons Australia, 2005, pp. xiv + 138, AUD \$29.95 Paperback, ISBN: 1740311175.



The firefight at the Bitu Paka radio station outside Rabaul on 11 September 1914 was Australia's first significant military engagement of the Great War. In terms of human losses it was a modest event with 6 Australians, 1 German and 30 German New Guineans killed and 4 Australians and 11 German New Guineans wounded. But the strategic consequences of the Australian victory were enormous. Knocking out a nodal point in the German military radio network in the Pacific was a vital primary objective. But above and beyond that, all of German New Guinea came under Australian control. At one stroke the Australian border was effectively pushed up to the equator, the German threat was removed from the region, and a million souls added to the British Empire.

It was a nasty little encounter. A small Australian naval party of 25 men, an officer and a military doctor landed in Blanche Bay and pushed inland about eight kilometres along the dusty road to Bitu Paka, with almost impenetrable jungle hemming them in on either side. Able Seaman Billy Williams, a 29-year-old electricity works employee from Northcote in Melbourne became the first Australian serviceman killed in action in the Great War when he was hit in the stomach by a treetop sniper's bullet. The doctor, 24-year-old Captain Brian Pockley AAMC from Wahroonga in Sydney, was killed by another bullet as he tried to assist the wounded, having selflessly given away his Red Cross brassard to his orderly. Eventually reinforcements arrived and, after a suicidal and initially unsuccessful rush by the Australians at a German trench that barred the road, the German officer in charge of its 20 New Guinean defenders conceded defeat. Two more defended trenches stood between the Australians and the radio station. Using the captured German officer as interlocutor, Lieutenant Thomas Bond RANR from Brisbane, now with some 30 men and a heavy machine gun section, parleyed surrender terms with the remaining Germans. There was one edgy moment when four German officers with holstered pistols appeared on the brink of offering resistance. Bond, however, rushed up and swiftly disarmed them, thus winning the first Australian decoration of the war, a DSO. So, in one day's fighting, did all of German New Guinea fall into Australian hands.

This was the sharp end of the encounter; but strategically speaking much more was going on. The German heavy cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were thought to be in Rabaul. Hence the RAN sent a major naval force to oppose them, consisting of the battlecruiser *Australia*, cruiser *Sydney*, three destroyers, the armed troopship *Berrima*, and two submarines. Colonel William Holmes, a citizen soldier and Boer War veteran who was secretary of the Sydney Water Board in private life, had over 1000 men under his command in the grandly named Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. Rear Admiral George Patey RN commanded the fleet and was the ranking officer. With all of this firepower at their disposal, and the two German cruisers nowhere to be seen, the Australian force far outnumbered and outgunned the German garrison and strategic success was assured.

There are, however, some curious elements to the affair. Why was a lightly-armed naval party deployed initially and the decisive firepower of the machine gunners held back? Meade does not say so, but it is likely that Patey persuaded Holmes to let the navy have first crack. This was a tactical mistake and may have cost lives. Or was it that the advance party exceeded its orders? Some other matters should be noted. However worthy his justification in terms of protecting his own men, Lieutenant Rowland Bowen RAN undoubtedly breached the Geneva convention when he forced a German POW to walk down the road ahead of the Australian party and towards the German trench, though Meade argues otherwise. Also, the Germans planted two big mines under the road that the Australians blithely walked over. Had not the German officer in charge been absent ill with malaria, the mines almost certainly would have been set off by the New Guineans who manned the plungers and many more Australians killed. And then there is the unexplained mystery of the disappearance off Rabaul with all hands of the Australian submarine AE1 three days after the fighting. A month later some renegade Germans on New Ireland flogged a British Methodist missionary as a spy and were later flogged themselves at Holmes's orders. Finally, there is the strange case of the German Captain Hermann Detzner who eluded captivity in the Saruwaged Mountains of the Huon Peninsula on mainland New Guinea until after 11 November 1918, literally keeping the Kaiser's flag flying in a string of remote villages.

Queensland journalist Kevin Meade has written a spirited and very readable account of the exploits of these almost forgotten heroes recently memorialised with plaques at the Bita Paka cemetery and outside Northcote RSL club. For many years, as Meade readily acknowledges, a small ceremony has taken place each anniversary at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance. The last survivor of the Bita Paka firefight, Bill Gothard, died in 1992.

CARL BRIDGE
King's College London