Brief history of the Royal Australian Navy during World War I

When the Australian Government declared war on Germany on 4th August 1914, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Fleet comprised of one battle-cruiser, six light cruisers, six destroyers, two submarines and numerous support and ancillary craft. The total number of personnel serving in the Permanent Naval Forces was 3,800 (all ranks). The Reserves provided a further 76 officers and 2,380 sailors for home service, and 51 officers and 1,775 sailors for service overseas. The ships and men of the RAN operated as an integral part of the Royal Navy and served in all naval operational areas in World War I. The Royal Australian Navy's first task was to protect Australia's ports, shipping and trade routes. The first wartime operation for the RAN took place on the night of 11th August 1914, when the three black-painted destroyers HMAS *Warrego*, HMAS *Yarra* and HMAS *Parramatta* swept into Simpson Harbour in German New Guinea with orders to torpedo any German warships they discovered. The harbour was found to be empty.

On 12th August 1914, HMAS *Encounter* (old light cruiser) intercepted and captured the steamer *Zambezi*, an ex-British vessel under German control in New Guinea waters and was the RAN's first wartime prize

The light cruiser HMAS Encounter capturing Zambezi in August 1914. Painting by Phil Belbin (Naval Heritage Collection)

As part of securing Australia's maritime frontiers, the RAN took part in the first amphibious assault of the war when it played a major role in the capture of the German colonies in the Pacific. The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) was mobilised in the first week of the war and ordered to capture and occupy Germany's New Guinea colonies. On 19th August 1914, the auxiliary cruiser HMAS Berrima left Cockatoo Island, Sydney, bound for New Guinea. She was carrying men of the AN&MEF, consisting of 500 RAN Reserve personnel from South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland as well as a battalion of 1,000 infantry soldiers from New South Wales. On 11th September 1914, shore parties landed unopposed at Rabaul and nearby Kabakaul, where a patrol of 25 Australian naval reservists pushed inland to the wireless station at Bita Paka. There they were engaged by a composite force of German reservists and Melanesian police.

In this action, Australia suffered six dead and five wounded and took possession of the wireless station. The enemy casualties were 31 dead and 12 wounded. This was the first Australian land battle of the First World War. Those Australians killed during the battle of Bita Paka were the

first of 61,720 Australians who died (*all causes*) in the four-year conflict. This successful engagement witnessed Australia's first wartime casualty (*29 year old Able Seaman William Williams from Northcote, Victoria*) and the award of the first decoration for bravery (*Lieutenant T. A. Bond RANR – Distinguished Service Order for his courage and quick-thinking*).

Photo of Able Seaman W.G.V. William.
(from RAN website - http://www.navy.gov.au)

In the aftermath of the occupation of Rabaul, the RAN maintained patrols to prevent German warships from making a successful counter-attack. On 14th September 1914, the Australian submarine HMAS *AE1* was 'lost at sea' with her entire complement of three officers and 32 sailors whilst engaged on one of these patrols. This was the RAN's first major tragedy. She remained lost for 103 years. In December 2017, the vessel *Fugro Equator* located the wreck of *AE1* in 300 metres of water off the Duke of York Island group.
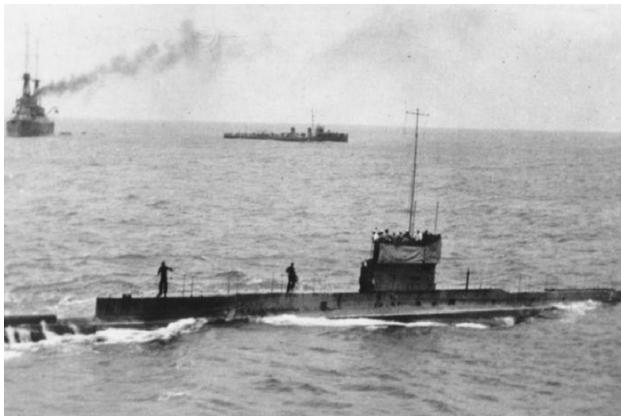
The last known image of Australia's first submarine, AE1 with HMAS Yarra and HMAS Australia in the background, taken on 9th September, 1914.
*(Image from Sea Power Centre)*

After the general surrender of the New Guinea territories on 22 September 1914, the next task for the RAN was the vital role of escort for the many convoys of transport ships that carried the Australian soldiers to the Middle East and Europe. It was whilst escorting a convoy that the light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* was detached to investigate the sighting of a strange warship. This ship turned out to be the German light cruiser *Emden*. In the ensuing battle, *Sydney* destroyed the *Emden* and thus won the RAN's first sea battle.
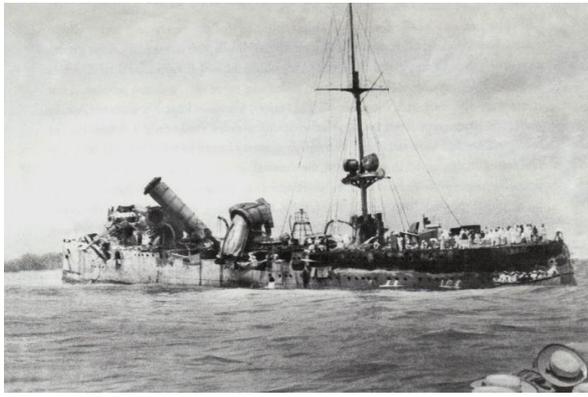
The HMAS Sydney boarding party closes the stricken Emden to evacuate the wounded in November 1914 .
(Image from Sea Power Centre)

RAN submarine HMAS *AE2* was deployed to the eastern Mediterranean in December, 1914, where it joined the British flotilla patrolling the Aegean Sea to prevent the escape of Turkish warships.

In January 1915, the old light cruiser HMAS *Pioneer* was despatched from Western Australia to German East Africa. There, *Pioneer* took part in the ultimately successful operations against German cruiser *Konigsberg* which had been cornered by the British in the delta of the Rufiji River. Mid that year, *Pioneer* and HMS *Challenger* bombarded Tanga and a month later, she took part in the attack on Dar-es-Salaam with HMS *Vengeance* and HMS *Hyacinth*.
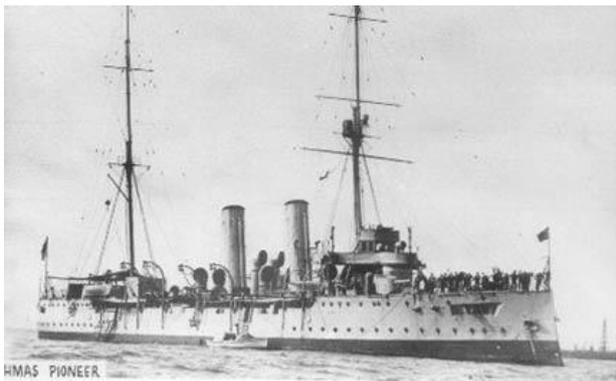
Light cruiser HMAS Pioneer at anchor.
*(Image from http://www.navy.gov.au)*

Having chased the German East Asian Squadron across the Pacific, the flagship of the RAN, HMAS *Australia* (battle-cruiser) deployed to European waters in early 1915 and became the flagship of the British Grand Fleet's 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadron. During this time, she conducted a succession of sweeps, patrols, and convoy escort tasks across the length and breadth of the North Sea.

On the night of 24th April 1915, HMAS AE2 was the first allied warship to break through the Dardanelles Strait (that connects the Blacks Sea to the Mediterranean Sea) and into the Sea of Marmara which was described at that time as the "finest feat in submarine history". After sustaining battle damage and expending all her torpedos with no guns to defend or attack the enemy, the Commanding Officer ordered the boat to be scuttled on 30th April 1915. The Turks captured all of the crew who then became prisoners of war for the remainder of the war.

The RAN played a supporting role in the Gallipoli campaign. The RAN Bridging Train (RANBT) served at Suvla Bay where they built pontoons, bridges and jetties for the landings

and evacuations of the troops. A small group of the 1st RANBT were the last Australians to be evacuated from the Gallipoli Peninsular at 4.30am on 20th December 1915. The RANBT was the most highly decorated RAN unit during World War I with no less than 20 awards for bravery or good service were made to this unit for service at Gallipoli and in the Sinai during 1915-17.

HMAS *Melbourne* and HMAS *Sydney* formed part of the North America and West Indies Squadron in 1915-16 which maintained a series of patrols in the West Indies with Jamaica as the centre point. By the later part of 1916, both ships were transferred to the British Grand Fleet's 2nd Light Cruiser Squadron and HMAS *Sydney* became the squadron's flagship.
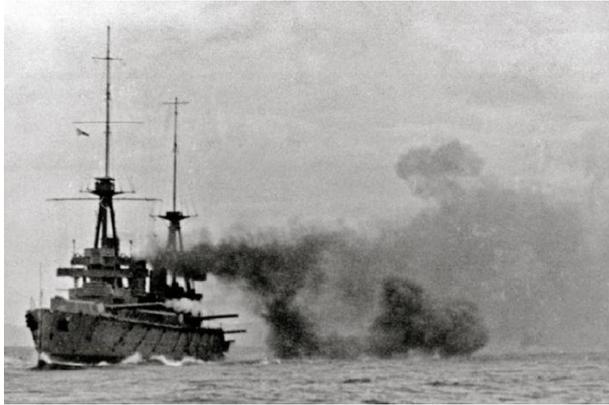
The battler cruiser HMAS Australia fires a broadside from her 12-inch guns.
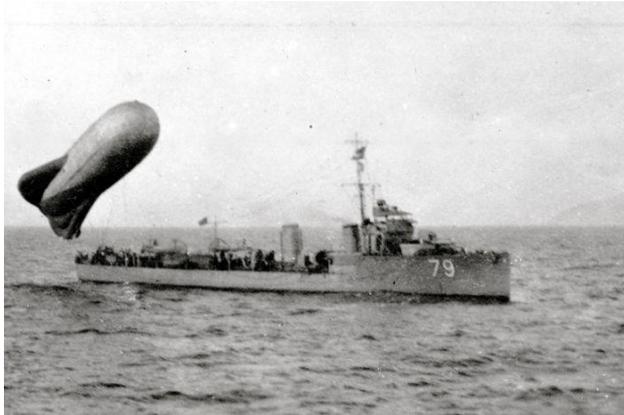*(Image from Sea Power Centre)*

Among the least well-known of Australia's wartime campaigns was the operation to prevent the Germans raising revolts within Allied territories in the Indo-Pacific region. Using arms and equipment sourced from the then neutral United States and Dutch East Indies, the Germans planned to supply and encourage local independence movements that sought the removal of colonial powers. From 1915 to 1917, the RAN provided up to seven warships (destroyers and the two older light cruisers) to the British Far East Patrol based first at Sandakan (Borneo) and later at Singapore. Through a combination of boardings and patrols, the British Far East Patrol disrupted German communications and successfully prevented any enemy plot from gaining traction.

The Australian Torpedo Boat Destroyer flotilla at Brindisi.
(Image from http://www.navy.gov.au)

In May 1917, following a request made by the British Admiralty, the Australian Government agreed to the transfer of the Australian Destroyer Flotilla (that consisted of six Torpedo Boat Destroyers) to the Mediterranean and was based at Brindisi, Italy. The flotilla was tasked with the responsibility, in cooperation with the British and French destroyers, to prevent the passage of enemy submarines through the Adriatic Narrows into the Mediterranean and to give safe transit to the passage of Italian transports to and from Albania. During the early period of their tour of duty, the enemy, whose submarines were based on Pola at the head of the Adriatic, was very active and detection and the subsequent hunt was a common occurrence.

Later, however, the enemy's effort diminished and eventually the patrols became routine uneventful steaming. *Huon*, *Parramatta* and *Yarra* were fitted with captive observer balloons whose object was to detect the lurking submarine while another destroyer stood by ready to act as the 'killer'.


HMAS Yarra lowers her balloon to allow the observers to change over. (Image from Sea Power Centre)

Despite the removal of German warships from Australia's regional waters in 1914, converted and disguised merchant raiders returned to the Pacific and Indian oceans in 1917 to disrupt British trade and counter their Blockade of the region. One of these, the German commerce raider *Wolf* which was responsible for the loss of 25 Allied vessels (13 captured, 12 sunk and 3 damaged by mines it laid during its 15 months voyage around the world), laid several minefields in the coastal waters off Australia and New Zealand. HMAS *Brisbane* conducted patrols in the Indian Ocean and provided operational assist in the hunt for the *Wolf* but was not successful in locating the raider

Great advances in aviation were made during the war years and one of the most innovative was the successful operation of wheeled aircraft from light cruisers and larger ships. The transfer of a Sopwith Baby seaplane from the seaplane carrier HMS *Raven* to HMAS *Brisbane* early in 1917 was the RAN's first involvement in naval aviation. *Brisbane* was transferred to the western Pacific in October 1917 and conducted patrol duties for the remainder of the war.

In November, 1917, the light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* became the first British warship to be fitted with a revolving aircraft launching platform. The aim was to have an aircraft in the air within two minutes of an alarm. On 1st June 1918, HMAS Sydney's Sopwith Camel achieved a first in aviation history when it intercepted a German seaplane following an attack on the British formation

In April 1918, the Australian destroyers based at Brindisi, Italy became part of the British 5th Destroyer Flotilla and continued their anti-submarine duties. On 8th August 1918, *Yarra* collided with *Huon* and as a result both ships were docked for repairs. *Huon* did not leave the dock at Genoa until 10 November 1918 (the day before Armistice Day).
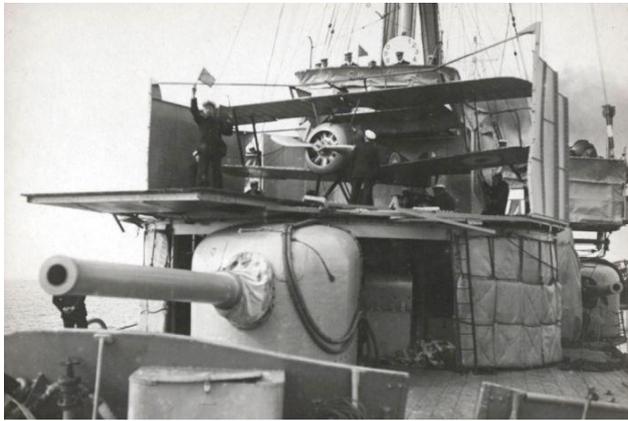
HMAS Sydney prepares to launch a Sopwith Camel from its deck during WWI.
(Image from Sea Power Centre)

On 2nd October 1918, Swan took part as one of the ships used to screen the forces at the bombardment of Durazzo on the Albanian coast, carried out by combined Italian, British, French and American forces. On 17th October, the 5th Flotilla left Brindisi to join the Allied Squadron at Mudros, Lemnos Island, leaving Swan and Warrego of the Australian Flotilla behind. On 25th October, these two destroyers were ordered to Port Said to assist the Japanese naval forces escorting troopships to Salonica in Macedonia (Greece).

In November, the Allied Squadron at Mudros joined another Allied Squadron at Constantinople and on 25th November 1918, passed the Bosporus en route to Sebastapol (Republic of Crimea) where the Allied group took over some Russian ships on behalf of the anti-Bolshevik forces.

After the war, all of the RAN ships returned to Australia except for the two submarines which sank in enemy waters.

Sources obtained from the following websites:

1. RAN at http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/ran-brief-history

2. First to fight by Michael Kelly at https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/first-fight

3. Australian War Memorial at https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/AWM-Media-kit-The-action-at-Bita-Paka.pdf

4. Navy Blue ANZACS. The Royal Australian Navy in World War I at https://www.tracesmagazine.com.au/2013/10/navy-blue-anzacs-the-royal-australian-navy-in-world-war-i/

5. RAN at http://www.navy.gov.au/fleet/ships-boats-craft/available-ship-histories

6. ABC net news – Australia's Navy during World War I: 100 years of history, by Harvey Broadbent http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-13/history-of-royal

7. National Museum of the Royal New Zealand Navy at http://navymuseum.co.nz/worldwar1/ships/hilfskreuzer-wolf/