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The not-so-distant war

The war began on Australia's doorstep, eight months before Gallipoli. To defend their own country, ports and sea lanes, and the Empire of which they were an integral part, Australians promptly clashed with nearby German forces on sea and land. Why did Australia see the Kaiserreich as a threat, and how did hostilities break out in our region? Was the Great War really Australia's war?

Compared to the coming fury on the western front, our first shot fired in anger was almost a practical joke. On 5 August 1914, a German steamer left Port Melbourne in a last-minute dash for the open seas. After a warning shot from a coastal fort, the cargo ship stopped and was seized just inside Port Phillip Bay.

Within days, however, Australian warships went after the real thing – a ferocious naval battle. They came to the great harbour of Rabaul, the capital of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland (German New Guinea) – for here, according to the latest report, German armoured cruisers were at anchor. In the dead of night, torpedo-armed Australian destroyers slipped into the harbour; the intention was to sink the most powerful ships in Admiral Graf von Spee's squadron ...

Australia lost no time in getting involved, and launched serious actions on land and sea, against Imperial Germany. At first glance, this seems highly improbable. Australia was a self-governing, progressive little democracy of 4.9 million people; and the mighty Kaiserreich was run by an anti-democratic militarist elite. But it was 15,000 km away, had just got into a colossal war with its powerful European neighbours, and presumably had no compelling reason to focus on the South Seas. *So why did distant Australia so quickly*

clash with Germany? The answers lie in Australia's active role in the British Empire's defence scheme, in Germany's South Pacific colonies and ambitions, in its Pacific Naval Force under Admiral Spee, and in the global crisis that arose in mid-1914.

In the last days of July – as Chapter 2 shows – the blackest of war clouds suddenly gathered. The big European powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia) quickly reached the brink of war. Unless it could be stopped, their enormous, heavily-armed conscript armies would unleash hitherto unimaginable carnage. In this emergency Britain's Foreign Minister, Sir Edward Grey, made peace-saving proposals, but in vain – and he was deeply alarmed by some of the responses. The war Grey had long feared was about to start. From 1 August, it was spreading across the European continent, and the issue now facing Grey, and the Liberal Cabinet, was whether Britain and the Empire should – or even could – stay out of it.

By 1914, some liberals (believers in reform and the classic freedoms) thought that big wars were all in the past, banished by the grand era of progress. The British “Liberal” government revered the late Mr Gladstone, their four-term prime minister, who loathed militarism. For many decades, the “Liberals” and “Conservatives” had avoided continental trouble, and by 1914 most Europeans hadn't seen a British soldier since Napoleon's Waterloo, 99 years earlier. But in July-August 1914 the Great War shattered the idea of making war obsolete. Instead, Liberal ministers were facing a question some could hardly bear: should they send the (small) British army across the Channel?

As Grey assessed the situation, he knew some Cabinet colleagues and lots more Liberals disliked any such involvement. But Grey understood that neutrality was a false refuge. If Britain and the Empire didn't help, he told parliament, France would be “beaten to her knees” – and then, the formidable Germans could switch their strongest forces eastward, to slaughter Russia's peasant soldiers. Europe would henceforth be dominated by the Kaiserreich.¹

All this evoked an old axiom: any single power that dominated western and central Europe was a mortal threat. On this basis

Britain, a century earlier, defied the vast ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte. Now it was the Prussian-German militarists, making their bid for both continental supremacy and imperial expansion. For this was not only the most colossal European war: from the start, this war was global. No ocean would be free of marauders, no continent immune.

The decision – Britain and the Empire

If this German bid for supreme power succeeded, the British concluded that their days as a free nation (and quite possibly those of Australia and New Zealand) were numbered. It is easy to see why. The Kaiserreich had the world's second-best battle fleet. Once Berlin controlled all the ports, shipyards and industries of western Europe it could (if necessary) outbuild the British navy.²

Britain and the Empire would be subject to the whims of a modern European superpower – run by the unelected, politically obsolete, Prussian militarist oligarchs. These men hated the democratic idea of government by elected representatives, they hated Britain's navy, and were jealous of its maritime empire.³

Australia itself would have been vulnerable to the imperial hunger of Germany, whose island colonies and bases in the Pacific were within easy reach of Australian ports and coastal cities. German imperial thinkers and naval officers had long been explaining why a victorious Kaiserreich should claim, as spoils of war, the imperial jewels of the South Pacific – the developed, prosperous Australia and New Zealand.

By 1914 there was a popular notion that any European war would be short. Grey didn't believe it. He thought this war would be an appalling ordeal, but despite that, he could see why Britain could not remain aloof. At first his complacent colleague, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, was caught on the back foot. He'd privately told a young confidante there was "no reason why we should be anything more than spectators". Only days later, having been brought up to speed, he had a different view: "We were on the eve of horrible things".⁴

The civilised Asquith hated the whole idea of a vast, mechanised war, but he had found Grey's case unanswerable. Now, his unenviable task was to persuade the Cabinet (including sincere isolationists) to put aside their parochial view of "the continent" and weigh the great issues carefully. Britain had no military alliance with any European power; relations with democratic France had never been so good, but there was no formal Anglo-French alliance.

This was why, when Germany sent France a harsh ultimatum, Grey was not free to give the French ambassador support. A group of Cabinet ministers remained unmoved – until the long Sunday meetings of 2 August, when a decisive swing occurred. One turning-point was the plight of Belgium, which was facing a German invasion. For liberals, this raised Gladstone's principle of protecting Belgium's sovereignty, which for 75 years had been guaranteed by British, Prussian-German and other powers. On the same day, most ministers comprehended the predicament of France, the target of Germany's march through Belgium. These matters were discussed fully, but two immovable isolationists still resigned from Cabinet. Others wavered, and eventually stayed in.

It is sometimes claimed that Belgium's plight was just a moral pretext for Britain's strategic war aims. The Belgian issue did make public support simpler for the government, but Britain went to war for four interlocking reasons – to defend France, to repudiate Belgium's violation, and to defend both Britain and the Empire. In any case, these issues were not only for the Liberal Cabinet. If it refused to intervene, Asquith, Grey and the young navy minister Winston Churchill were ready to resign and make a coalition with the Conservatives – who had already pledged to support France.⁵

By 3 August, when the Germans declared war on France and began their move on Belgium (which fought and delayed the invaders) Britain's response was much firmer. On that afternoon, Grey addressed a packed House of Commons: "We are going to suffer terribly in this war," he warned, "whether we are in it or whether we stand aside." But neutrality was a fool's refuge and a shabby one, and Grey signalled what the government would do

if Germany violated Belgium's neutrality. His speech (as usual) wasn't fluent or polished, but on this day the air was crackling: as Asquith's daughter, Violet Bonham Carter, noticed, Grey "had the overwhelming support of the House behind him". But, she added, this was not a "personal triumph" – Grey's supreme purpose had always been "to keep the peace of Europe" and now that purpose had failed.⁶

Straight after the speech, Churchill asked Grey, "What next?" He was told, "Now we shall send Germany an ultimatum to stop the invasion of Belgium within 24 hours." The Germans scornfully ignored it. Their army officers had an old joke about this; if England's pitifully small army came over, a Prussian policeman would be sent out to arrest it. German naval officers were not so cocky: in terms of sea power, the boot was on the other foot. When Big Ben struck 11 pm on 4 August, the morning of 5 August in Australia, the British Empire became the fifth great power to enter a conflict unprecedented in its global impact, its damage, its casualties and its boundless suffering.⁷

Australia's immediate response

What did this imply for Australians? It meant that Australia, a young federal democracy within the British Empire, was thereby involved in a war of global dimensions. On the day of Grey's speech, a Commonwealth minister, Sir John Forrest, had expressed a popular Australian opinion on the matter. Speaking in a country town, the federal treasurer (and former explorer of Western Australia's vast interior) said:

In the past Australians ... shared Britain's victories and triumphs. Justice and reason now demand that we must be prepared to share her difficulties and, if need be, her disasters ... Our fate and hers, for good or ill, are as woven threads.⁸

A disaster for Britain and the Empire was probably unthinkable for most Australians at this time, but Forrest's point about interwoven threads was very widely shared across the country in 1914.⁹

Australia is said to have fired the Empire's first angry shot. Officially, a state of war existed in Australia on the morning of 5 August, and a German cargo ship, the *Pfalz*, was belatedly leaving Port Melbourne. Its captain had loaded extra coal to get him to South America, and he expected to be out of Port Phillip Bay before anyone reacted. He had reckoned without the gunners at Fort Nepean, who had been alerted, and duly fired a close warning shot. With obvious reluctance, the captain stopped. His ship was seized, renamed and converted to Allied logistical duties. This little episode, so far from Europe, quickly illustrated the global dimensions of the Great War.¹⁰

The *Pfalz* episode also demonstrated Australia's automatic involvement as a result of Britain's decision. Such an imperial procedure followed logically, in 1914, from Australia's active part in the Empire's defence arrangements. All of this would be absurd today, but a century ago things were very different. It's true that many Australian ways and ideas have long lives; but it's also true that in 1914, Australians themselves were different. Some of their ideas and practices collide with ours today. As we try to step back into their world, don't be tricked by the very Australian things you'll see, or you won't be able to understand the un-Australian things we'll see. We can't "post ourselves back" to another era. If we had grown up in, say, 1890-1914 Australia, we wouldn't be what or who we are today, because back then "people really did think differently".¹¹

So we will misunderstand them if we assume they're just like us; we won't grasp their views on this war, or their readiness to put such an effort into it, or their support for it long after its dreadful realities were known. Unless we keep this concept in mind, "*the past is a foreign country*".

To most Australians a century ago, the British Empire was natural, right and indispensable: Australia and the Empire were two sides of the same coin. The idea that one might exclude the other made no sense in 1914, when 95 per cent of Australians were of British descent. They were called "British subjects" and were proud

of their self-governing “Dominion” within the Empire. In 1914, one in every seven had been born in the British Isles.¹²

Australians used British concepts of law, government and currency, along with imperial weights and measures. They had countless British traditions, from cricket to snow-laden Christmas cards and singing Auld Lang Syne. They had close ties with their English, Scots, Irish or Welsh relatives and friends. And in all the realities of livelihood – the practical, economic and financial matters – Australia’s network of arrangements with Britain and the Empire meant stability and, normally, prosperity.

Defence and foreign policies were part of these broader Empire structures, but security was not all left to Britain. Australia had regional concerns which it emphasised in London. It passed national defence laws, and was the only Dominion to raise a fleet unit – our own naval force. By late 1913 a new battlecruiser, three light cruisers and three destroyers had appeared together in Sydney Harbour. The appearance of these ships was very timely, and the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* with its 12-inch guns was immediately the most formidable ship in the southern hemisphere. The Commonwealth, in 1909, had also introduced compulsory military training – but strictly for the defence of Australian soil. Both major parties had backed this scheme, and a related agreement that, if any Australian force were to be sent overseas, it would have to consist of volunteers.

German war plans for Australia

By 1914 Australia, with a small navy and a modest defence force, also had its own regional security problems. Although Japan had been Britain’s ally since 1902, its Pacific ambitions worried Australia; but Japan also declared war on Germany, and Australia could focus on the one immediate threat. This came from Imperial Germany, which had a great band of Pacific colonies and bases running right down to the Coral Sea. Colonies closest to Australia included Kaiser-Wilhelmsland (north-east New Guinea, right by Australia’s Papua territory), the Bismarck Archipelago (including

Rabaul), Bougainville, the Solomon Islands, and others. They formed a 1500 km chain of German posts above eastern Australia. At Rabaul, Germany had a naval base boasting an excellent harbour, light rail facilities and a powerful wireless station, all of which served Admiral Spee's German East Asia Squadron. Its best armoured cruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, still outgunned every Australian ship except HMAS *Australia*.

Why were Germany's Pacific territories a dangerous strategic asset? As we'll see, the Kaiserreich was not content with a peaceful future within the status quo. At war, its Pacific cruisers and destroyers could wreak havoc in Australia's sea lanes. As Capt. Hans Grapow had advised Berlin back in 1901, the Germans would soon be able to conduct "ruthless warfare" against Australian shipping and harbours.¹³

And as the Rabaul historian MacKenzie explained:

Germany's strategic position in the Pacific was greatly strengthened by [the] wireless stations erected for the purpose of placing Samoa, Nauru, New Guinea ... in communication with naval headquarters [and] into direct touch with Berlin ... In the event of war the value of this chain of stations, working in conjunction with a naval squadron, was incalculable ...¹⁴

There was every reason for Australia and New Zealand to take this seriously, because Germany's frustrated colonial ambitions were no secret. Yet within them, there *were* secrets: the Germans had already identified Australia's wheat and wool shipments, its naval flotilla, its ports and seaward defences, as significant targets in the coming war. And a network of German citizens in Australia had been busy for over a decade, carrying out espionage and doing assessments – as historian Dr Peter Overlack discovered, from the network's own files in the German archives.¹⁵

This impeccable evidence shows us a circle of prominent Germans who, after 1901, developed and ran a relatively large, competent system of covert intelligence gathering – spying – in every Australian state. "Germany was preparing to implement cruiser warfare," Overlack found, and its planners "expected that

Australasian trade would be paralysed". The Kaiserreich's Pacific warships intended, as one document put it, to create "public panic" in Australian cities and "great disruption" of trade and vital transport all the way from Sydney to the Suez and Cape Town.¹⁶

The Australian response to the war

Given this evidence, which Chapter 4 reveals (with identified agents and activities) it's clearer than ever that Australia's involvement in the Great War was not a case of buying into other people's wars, as that hack phrase suggests. It was a global war and from the outset the Kaiserreich was an authentic threat to Australia's vital interests. One aspect of this, in August 1914, was the danger on Australia's own doorstep. This was why, eight months *before* Gallipoli, Australia's first military clashes took place so close to home. Australian naval and military operations were carried out against the warships, raiders, bases and radio stations of the Kaiserreich. With these resources, the Germans had been hoping to cripple Australia's shipping and paralyse its war effort.¹⁷

By Australia's own constitution and defence preferences, Britain's declaration of war included Australia – but the intensity and extent of that war effort were for Australia to decide.¹⁸ And from the outset, men and women in every state gave almost unanimous support to the war effort. In a land of free opinions, of course, there were people who objected to any war, for religious, moral or other reasons. But in 1914 such voices were drowned "in the deluge of enthusiasm for the war".¹⁹

And a clear majority always supported the war effort, even when the conscription issue became so bitter and divisive. In the dark days of 1917, with no end in sight and awful casualty lists coming in, this essential support was reiterated when Australian voters gave the "Win-the-War" Party a sweeping victory in the federal election.²⁰

The previous election campaign, of 1914, was in full swing when the Great War clouds suddenly appeared – and the two major parties made identical pledges. Before the outbreak, the

Commonwealth Liberal Joseph Cook said: “Whatever happens, Australia is a part of the Empire to the full [and] all our resources [are] for the Empire.” On the same day, Labor’s Andrew Fisher expressed “the kindest feelings towards the mother country now”. While hoping this “disastrous war” would not happen, he vowed that “should the worst happen ... Australians will stand beside our own ... to our last man and our last shilling.” Later, in a bipartisan spirit, he said: “We stand united against the common foe”. Fisher defeated the incumbent Cook and became (for a third time) Prime Minister in September. And in the new wartime parliament he repeated his “last man and last shilling” pledge.²¹

The newspapers, full of the social Darwinism of the era, were talking about Australia’s opportunity to prove itself “worthy” to stand alongside Europe’s historic nations and armies. Fit men needed no such prodding. They were hurrying to recruiting depots in a bid to enlist before it was all over – sharing the 1914 belief that the war would be short. Archie Barwick, from northern NSW, “rushed down to Sydney to join up, frightened that they would have enough before I got there”. The same idea drove a host of distant volunteers because, at first, all the recruiting centres were in coastal cities. Archie McBurney, 24, a Queensland stockman, was determined to join the Light Horse. Riding a borrowed horse for 40 km, he walked the next 80 km and enlisted in Brisbane on 25 August. Many of the early volunteers took on hard, solitary journeys on foot, and 200-km walks were quite common.²²

Initially, the Australian Commonwealth arranged to send 20,000 soldiers, the limit determined not by any lack of willing men but by equipment problems and the assumed need for great haste. Boys as young as thirteen and men over 70 tried to enlist, and even those of the right age – from nineteen to 38 – had to meet rigorous physical standards. They had to be at least five feet six inches (c.168 centimetres) tall, which was then an average young man’s height. So men of average height in 1914 were among the *shortest* in their unit, though common sense allowed some shorter men to enlist; a fit farming man like Barwick, strongly built but two inches short,

was accepted without any fuss. But generally, the 1914 recruits created unusually tall formations. Their eyesight also had to be very good and in these early months, even false or defective teeth, or fillings, could rule a man out. One keen volunteer, barred twice for imperfect eyesight, got through with a £2 bribe.²³

These tall troops, with their fitness and swagger, would soon make a strong impression overseas. Famously, at Gallipoli, they were praised by the English poet John Masefield, but his mixed compliment is usually misquoted. The Australians were only *among* the soldiers he called “the finest body of young men ever brought together in modern times” – in which he included the New Zealanders (no surprise there) but also the Royal Naval Division, which is surprising. After the landing, the Diggers thought Britain’s RND troops were lightweights; the British commander at Anzac Cove thought them “children under untrained officers”. Masefield’s *Gallipoli* looked back sentimentally on the campaign as a splendid idea that deserved to succeed, and he depicted its battles in a Romantic light. His imagination soared when he said the Anzacs and the RND “walked and looked like the kings in old poems”. He didn’t stay long on Gallipoli, and arrived *after* the savage August battles of Lone Pine (see Chapter 7) and Chunuk Bair. By then, months of summer heat, extreme dehydration, horrible diet, dysentery, brutal battles and haphazard medical care would have left few Anzacs walking like kings – unless the poet had met fresh reinforcements.²⁴

A different observer was the Scottish author Compton MacKenzie (of later *Whisky Galore* fame). He was on General Sir Ian Hamilton’s staff, and he saw the Australians at their best. It was four weeks after the April landing, and only days after the Diggers had wiped out wave after massive wave of Turkish attacks. With other GHQ officers, MacKenzie wanted to see these formidable Antipodeans, and he walked among them from the beach up to their perilous Quinn’s Post. To MacKenzie they looked magnificent: the “litheness and power” of these “tall” and sun-bronzed men, in nothing but shorts (the GHQ party was sweltering in uniform)

astonished him. He knew his Greek classics, the legendary Troy was nearby, and for MacKenzie these Australians were just like Trojan War heroes: “There was not one of those glorious young men I saw that day who might not himself have been ... Hector or Achilles,” he enthused. Just then, his new heroes started poking fun at General Hamilton’s secretary (a colonel) and mocked him cruelly for failing to return their satirical salutes. “They really were rather difficult,” sighed MacKenzie, “but so, no doubt, was Achilles.” MacKenzie had seen, at Quinn’s Post, that the parapet was largely “made up of dead bodies,” and it took him a fortnight to get the death stench out of his nostrils. The Australians he admired were all living in this atmosphere, a fact which no doubt contributed to his toleration of their insubordinate antics.²⁵

“All sorts and conditions of men”

Back in Melbourne, the aspiring young Hectors and Achilles of Caulfield Grammar’s AFL football team had volunteered as a group in 1914. Absurdly, several of them were turned down.²⁶

Groups of “old boys” of many schools enlisted and often kept up links with each other, during and after the war. The legion of former Sydney High School boys was a good example of this practice. There was also a very big response from the old boys of well-known private schools. Over 1360 Old Melburnians enlisted, as did more than 1200 Old Scotch Collegians (including John Monash). Sydney Grammar’s 1775 volunteers were the equivalent of twenty senior classes. These young men turned up in every theatre but were most prominent on the western front, where large numbers of them were killed and wounded.²⁷

In our folklore, such recruits have been less familiar than everyday Aussies – graduates of the school of hard knocks – and large numbers of them were among the early volunteers. Some enlisted out of simple patriotism, some for adventure, some for good wages, perhaps many for all three; and others were evading domestic or other troubles. Frank Parker, an artful dodger from Port Melbourne, recalled: “When they brought compulsory [military]

training in, I was too fond of cricket ... and football [and] I didn't fancy this [wasting of] a Saturday afternoon." When finally caught, he was sentenced to a "detention" – but before he served it, the war started and as he later recalled, he "couldn't get in the army quick enough" to avoid his 42 days in jail.²⁸

Age was easier to adjust than height, as Bill (Leopold) de Saxe recalled, but he used his wits because he was "very proudly Australian", and persistence paid off: "In those days you had to be above five feet five inches. Well, I was just on the bloody minimum [height]. I was rejected on account of my height, not medically, [so] I walked right round to the other end of the other line, went up and was passed." His enlistment sheet, perversely, recorded his height as five feet 4½ inches. Hundreds who were too young tried to get in. Many told imaginative lies, and often succeeded if they looked sturdy enough, or if an official was none too fussy. One fifteen-year-old Sydney boy who got away with it, Reg Cunningham, had his age recorded as a ludicrous 22¼ years, and served in the artillery for two years. When finally discovered and sent home from France, he took himself back to school at Sydney Grammar, which must have seemed very safe, if tame.²⁹

Such stories are not here to sanctify every Australian who put on a slouch hat. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF), with around 330,000 men overseas, contained the full scope of human virtue and vice; and dubious motivations were particularly numerous among 1914 volunteers, before the lethal realities of industrial war became obvious. But at the war's sharp end, young men were far from most civilising influences, were trained to kill, and were soon confronted by violence and horror. If they went on leave, many failed to adjust to the constraints of civilisation. It should not be surprising that, beyond larrikinism and boozy larks, there were violent incidents and serious crimes. The recruitment of volunteers involved no adequate character test. In 1914, many a loafer and waster rolled up for a free trip and plunder; so did some "hardened criminals who never joined the army for any good purpose". Such men did their best to avoid combat. Some mean-spirited thieves

even stole from solid Diggers like Archie Barwick. The worst did time in military prisons, and/or were sent home and thrown out of the AIF. Some of them were already brutal, while the war brutalised others. But did that excuse such criminals? Every Digger's heart and mind was seared by the war, yet most kept their simple code of integrity.

If there were black spots in every battalion, many shades of grey were more common. But the hard-drinking Digger who tangled with the military police could also be a veteran of hand-to-hand horrors like Lone Pine or Pozières. And men who caught a venereal disease were deemed to have committed a military offence. This included about 15 per cent of all Diggers given leave in England. Had these troops got sound advice and prophylaxis, all concerned might have been better off. But those who needed treatment had the offence put on their record; they totalled 7 per cent of the entire AIF overseas – more than an infantry division. Treating sex as a crime showed a poor understanding of young men whose future hung by a thread. Some of those, feeling lucky to have survived the last action, reckoned they might be due to “go west” in the next one. This, combined with long-deferred natural desires and an urge to have a memorably good time in places like Paris and London, did nothing to restrain carefree and reckless attitudes.

A noted Australian sin was drunkenness. On duty, this was an offence; on leave, it often depended on whether the tipsy trooper was good-natured or aggressive. A Pozières VC later testified that grog was essential on duty, especially in the winter trenches. Small amounts of rum were issued, but most Diggers welcomed an extra swig, or more, of any grog that was going. In sum, legions of Diggers who were “crimed” at some point included a host who had fought well, never shirked a battle and were either killed or left to cope with memories and nightmares.³⁰

These included highly decorated soldiers. Lieut. Joe Maxwell VC, MC, DCM had big blots on his file, like assaulting the London police while drunk and disorderly. Though short, at 165 centimetres, and weighing less than 60 kilograms, Maxwell was a born

fighter who could dash through heavy fire to attack machine-gun posts.³¹

Another offender was the gregarious George Mitchell. George loved wine, women and song, and his file contains obvious but non-violent transgressions. This quick-witted South Australian also had a gift for finding grog, cigarettes and other booty, which he freely shared; at a 1918 rest-and-leave camp for AIF battle veterans, he coolly expropriated the army's cash to handsomely pay those Diggers who had been denied fair funding. Mitchell, too, was a superb fighting soldier. His defiance in the inferno of Bullecourt, and another extraordinary incident in 1918, earned him the DCM and the Military Cross.³²

The first contingent of 20,000 – from a population below five million – seemed at the time to be plenty, especially for a conflict which was supposed to be over soon. They were the first soldiers of the AIF. Four years later, however, the original 20,000 had become about 5 per cent of the total enlistment, and by then the very demanding criteria had been revised several times. By June 1915, the age range had become eighteen to 45, and the minimum height had been reduced by 10 centimetres. Despite some further broadening of the criteria in 1917, however, Australian fitness standards remained comparatively high, in a war where manpower shortages became more and more acute.³³

To the German islands

While the first AIF division was being created, Australia had already acted to eliminate the German threat in New Guinea and the South Pacific. From Rabaul, Nauru, Samoa and other islands, powerful German radio stations informed and directed the warships of their cruiser squadron. They could also intercept radio messages from shipping in Australasian and Pacific waters, and give this information to their warships – which would be able to locate and sink merchant ships, keep track of Allied warships, and sink them as well when the odds were favourable.³⁴

In the first week of the war, German signals suggested that

Admiral Graf Spee's East Asia Squadron might be at Rabaul, and this was where the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) force went looking for them. On the night of 11 August, as Admiral Patey's orders show, he was expecting to find the armoured cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, the light cruiser *Nürnberg*, and perhaps two smaller ships. Patey, on the battlecruiser *Australia*, had with him the light cruiser *Sydney* and three torpedo destroyers, painted black: *Warrego*, *Parramatta* and *Yarra*. A ferocious battle was thought to be "almost certain". On the darkest of nights, the destroyers led the way into Rabaul's great harbour. Vigilant men strained their eyes for any sign of the enemy, and tried not to think about German mines, explosive shells or the claustrophobic horror of being trapped in a burning or sinking ship.³⁵

The tension was slowly relieved as it became clear that none of Spee's ships were at home. They had quit the area, but remained in the south-west Pacific for several weeks. Patey, correctly, wanted to pursue and destroy Spee's squadron, but was repeatedly diverted by new orders. This lost opportunity had a tragic conclusion. By November Spee had sailed, untroubled, to the South American coast at Coronel, where he found a weaker British squadron and sank its two outdated cruisers. Over 1500 British sailors went down with those ships. Shocked and embarrassed, the Admiralty sent out a much stronger force, which caught Spee's squadron in the South Atlantic a month later. There, at last, the German cruisers and other ships were destroyed.

Spee's departure from the Pacific ended Germany's thirteen-year project (for which the espionage was mainly conducted) to launch a "ruthless" cruiser war on Australian shipping and ports. In dealing with the immediate threat from the German cruisers, the 1913 unveiling of HMAS *Australia* and the new fleet unit had played a vital part. So had the Japanese, if incidentally, by declaring war on Germany. That decision made Tsingtao, the Kaiserreich's north Chinese naval base, untenable, and the Japanese soon stormed it. But below the equator, the Germans had good bases at Rabaul and other island posts, for attacks on Australian shipping.

Spee, however, realised that the *Australia*, with its 12-inch guns, had too much firepower: as he wrote to his wife, the *Australia* was “such a superior opponent that it must be avoided”.³⁶

This made Rabaul untenable as well, and the German squadron eventually abandoned the south-west Pacific. The new RAN ships had been a superbly effective deterrent to that cruiser war which the enemy had long planned for Australia’s sea lanes.³⁷

Patey, meanwhile, had been diverted from his Spee-hunting by fresh orders to seize German bases and wireless stations at Yap (past the equator), Nauru and Rabaul. This was folly when Spee was still at large, for it was only Spee’s squadron that made these island bases dangerous, and sinking Spee would have erased their strategic value; ordinary ships could have been used later to occupy these islands. So the guns of the *Australia* were never trained on Spee, who was permitted to avoid that battle. He was also handed the chance to sink weaker British warships at Coronel. As Australia’s Governor-General frankly pointed out to London, “Loss of [British] cruisers off the Chilean coast is the climax of a long bungle in the Pacific ... The maxim of seeking out the enemy’s ships and destroying them has been ignored.”³⁸

Who was responsible for Patey’s muddled orders? Jose, the official historian of the Australian navy, pointed out that:

No one knew where the big German cruisers were [and yet] somebody in London was pressing the Pacific Dominions to send off little expeditions into unsearched and dangerous waters ...

MacKenzie tells us the “somebody” was the Colonial Secretary Lewis Harcourt. In the hectic days that produced Britain’s decision for war, Lord Harcourt had got out of his depth by attempting to champion neutrality. On 29 July, he recorded his “determination” to leave Cabinet if it chose war. Yet when some Liberals resigned over this, somehow he did not. Was he simply a moral coward (he had some very unsavoury pursuits) or had he, during Cabinet debates, realised how naïve he had been? At any rate, he was still the Colonial Secretary in the Cabinet which declared war on Germany.

By 6 August, Harcourt was catching up with his urgent responsibilities. His business with Dominion governments included the following telegram to Australia. In his insouciant style, the word “urgent” looks misplaced; and his poor geography looks like a typically parochial error:

If your Ministers desire and feel themselves able to seize German wireless stations at *Yap in Marshall Islands*, Nauru ... and New Guinea, we should feel that this was a great and urgent Imperial service.

Yap, in the Carolines, was about 3000 km away from the Marshalls.

As Jose notes, this idea of quickly occupying the German islands emerged from a British Defence subcommittee which considered Spee’s destruction as a precondition – yet that priority got lost, while more pressure was exerted from sources in London. The Admiralty should have known better, but instead wired that New Zealand’s expedition to German Samoa was almost ready; it was to have an escort of “at least one cruiser”, and Patey himself was ordered to “guard against interference by the enemy”. So much for the condition that the enemy cruisers be hunted down first. Instead, Patey was burdened with escorting the New Zealand mission and subsequent Australian expeditions.³⁹

There was, of course, an imperial dilemma. The Japanese, poised to enter the war, would make Tsingtao, Germany’s north China base, their first target. But having recently annexed Taiwan (1895) and Korea (1910) Japan wanted those German islands above the equator: the Marianas, Carolines and Marshalls. Japan had a golden opportunity, with its status as Britain’s ally, to supplant the Germans throughout the north Pacific. This occurred to the British, too. It was their desire to forestall the Japanese, where possible, that explains why the Yap-to-Rabaul task was called an “urgent imperial service”. But this was allowed to overrule the more urgent strategic priority of destroying Spee’s cruiser force.

Here was an early example of the muddle that often characterised Asquith’s government (see Chapter 4). Whether or not

Harcourt's "urgent" telegram was cleared by Asquith, or considered in a Cabinet context, the top priority was Spee's destruction. Overruling it proved, in any case, quite futile. The Japanese still got the Carolines, and all the German islands above the equator. The Australasian expeditions were delayed by a shortage of all-purpose ships, the need to arm them, the Admiralty's constant alterations, and Patey's insistence on adequate escorts as long as Spee's location was unknown. Apia was seized on 31 August, Nauru on 9 September, Rabaul on 11 September.⁴⁰

Bitá Paka: the fight on Australia's doorstep

Nauru and Apia involved no fighting, but German New Guinea was likely to be different. When Patey first went to Rabaul on 11 August, only to find that Spee had fled, he ordered a quick search for the radio station. One armed party landed at Rabaul jetty, another at Herbertshöhe nearby. The installation was nowhere to be seen, and the locals revealed nothing. A third armed party was sent to destroy Rabaul's telegraph and telephone facilities. It was a curious scene. While uniformed Vandals wrecked his post office, the philosophical postmaster shared a bottle of good German beer with their Australian officer. With that done, Patey departed. Apparently, the radio station was inland, and was probably defended. To find it, conquer it and occupy Rabaul would require a specific task force. Meanwhile, Patey was anxious to get on with finding and sinking Spee's squadron.⁴¹

The Australians came back in force on 11 September, when the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) sailed into the wide Blanche Bay and its northern pocket, Simpsonshafen, where Rabaul lay. The ANMEF had been raised to capture and garrison Rabaul, and occupy the German New Guinea mainland. It was an impressive force: the *Berrima*, a converted passenger liner, carried most of the men: 500 naval reservists, an entire ANMEF battalion of 1023 men, machine-gunners, signallers and a medical detachment. Just in case Spee's cruisers doubled back, *Berrima* had a powerful escort. There were two light

cruisers (*Sydney* and *Encounter*), the destroyers *Parramatta*, *Yarra* and *Warrego*, submarines *AE1* and *AE2*, and supply ships. Above all there was the battlecruiser *Australia*, with Patey in command. Once established on land, the task force was to be commanded by Col. William Holmes, an experienced soldier.

Patey and Holmes planned to disembark the troops at the main occupation centre, Rabaul, subject to a pre-dawn search of the harbour – which found no German warships. By Patey's best information, there were two radio stations (one under construction inland) accessible by road from Herbertshöhe and Kabakaul. These coastal villages were about 20 to 30 km down the bay from Rabaul, and roughly 10 km apart. At both places, parties of about 30 men apiece were landed at 6 am. Both groups were naval reservists (with medics and telegraphists), with orders to seize the radio installations. The party from Herbertshöhe had an uneventful day, but the journey from Kabakaul to Bita Paka, the main radio site, turned out very differently.

There was success at the end of this road, but only after a desperate day of improvising, fighting and casualties. Though small in scale, this clash of infantry was Australia's first in the Great War – seven months before Gallipoli, and against the Germans on our own doorstep. Ten Australians on the track to Bita Paka became the first battle casualties, dead and wounded, in the 1914-18 war.⁴²

Lieut. Rowland Bowen, leading the Kabakaul party, was in no mood to be obstructed, and when some locals wouldn't show him the track to Bita Paka, he changed their minds at gunpoint. Bowen's party advanced cautiously, keeping to the scrub and off the road. Within 2 km they circled around a heavy belt of jungle. This move outflanked an unseen defence line and after a skirmish in which a German Sergeant, Mauderer, was shot in the hand, his local troops, Melanesian police and militia either dispersed or gave up. Gun in hand, Bowen persuaded the unlucky Sgt. Mauderer to walk up the road, shouting to hidden comrades to surrender because 800 Australians were coming. This flushed out the local German commander, another officer, a guide and some useful

maps of the whole Bita Paka route; but their local defenders had melted away, to join others in better positions up the road. Still, those who retreated also carried with them the “information” that 800 Australians were coming, which caused doubt and confusion among the Germans further back.

While Capt. Pockley (the army doctor) treated Mauderer, Bowen sent back his prisoners and a call for reinforcements. Down at Kabakaul, Cmdr Cumberlege of the *Warrego* hastily bundled off 59 sailors to support Bowen. Many weren't in uniform, several had no boots, only fourteen had rifles and about 40 carried a cutlass (the brutal naval sword once used by Caribbean pirates for close fighting). Among these Bita Paka buccaneers, with his apron rolled round his waist, strode a ship's cook – a Long John Silver lookalike, complete with pistol and cutlass.⁴³

Such sights must have frustrated the hard-pressed Bowen, whose men were being fired on from treetop snipers. Seaman Billy Williams was mortally wounded and Capt. Pockley, after attending to Billy, met the same fate. Bowen himself, while renewing the advance, was badly wounded and Lieut. Hill, with his ill-equipped pirates, had to take over. Wisely, he sent for more firepower. Two naval companies, No. 3 and No. 6, the latter with an army machine-gun section, eventually came. Lt. Cmdr Elwell's No. 3 Company (with no machine-gun) advanced and joined Hill. Instead of waiting for the No. 6 company's machine-gun, they cheered and launched a wild charge. Elwell, sword in hand, was killed instantly, but the defenders soon raised a flag of truce.

Lieut. Kempf, the senior officer, eventually signed an unconditional surrender statement. He and his Sgt. Ritter, as interpreter, were then taken forward by naval Lieut. Thomas Bond (with army intelligence officer Travers and the machine-gun section) to confront German-led forces closer to Bita Paka, and demand complete surrender. After a white flag appeared over yet another trench, treacherous firing broke out and three Australians were hit. Mayhem ensued and the sailors shot ten of the hostile militia. While order was being restored, Bond saw Ritter inciting

another militia group, and promptly shot him down, ending the skirmish. A German-Australian machine gunner, Cpl Eitel, now became the interpreter, and Bond moved on. Reaching the barracks near Bita Paka, his group approached eight Germans and another twenty militia. When the dutiful Kempf told them to surrender, a bush lawyers' row broke out as the Germans, forgetting Bond, hotly debated the case for surrender or resistance. Cool as you like, Bond walked among the squabbling Germans and deftly took their pistols while Travers, revolver at the ready, watched Bond's back. It was done in a few seconds: the Germans and then their militia surrendered. The radio station had been abandoned, and became a makeshift prison until reinforcements arrived to relieve Bond's party.

The glaring question about this Bita Paka action (which its official narrators, Jose and MacKenzie, did not touch) is this: *why were small parties of naval reservists, fresh from civilian life, sent on missions that were soldiers' work?* Hard fighting was probable, and a whole battalion was nearby. Patey and Holmes expected the strategic radio station to have a significant defence, yet Patey chose navy reservists for the task. Why didn't he allow Holmes to send some infantry, with a machine-gun, up each road? Instead, each route got only 30 lightly-armed and untrained reservists; the Bita Paka group was soon in trouble, and support arrived in small units without proper weapons. This, the classic way to be gobbled up piecemeal by a stronger enemy, would not have been recommended by Holmes (a noted Boer War veteran who later commanded an AIF division). But Patey, at this point, was in charge. The Admiral was determined to destroy Spee's radio system, but perhaps a little too keen to see the senior service do it.

The local opposition was badly under-estimated. Lieut. Bowen was a quick-witted and tenacious officer, but his party was not equipped to fulfil its mission without needless losses. Bowen's first piratical reinforcements were ill-equipped to fight against emplaced rifles. This led to more delays, a rash charge, and unnecessary deaths. The élan of the navy lads was superb, but with inadequate

numbers, equipment and training, the danger of heavier casualties was barely avoided. At least 125 militia riflemen were defending the Bita Paka track. Drilled and led by German officers, they had concealed trenches, treetop lookouts, snipers and even two deadly mines buried under the road (which, fortuitously, were not activated). Heavier Australian losses were avoided mainly by quick wits, dash, a large chunk of luck and the enemy's own blunders. The Germans had also subdivided their men into penny packets, and this mistake was exploited by Bowen and Bond.

Breakdown of the German strategy

To defend their coastal settlements, as well as Bita Paka and an inland redoubt at Toma, the Germans had about 300 armed men. These included nine officers, 52 other Germans and some 240 Melanesian police and militia. During the fighting, 75 were taken prisoner, while 42 became casualties. For the Australians, the Bita Paka clashes had left six men dead. Able Seaman Billy Williams, 28, of Northcote, Victoria, was the first man in Australian uniform to be mortally wounded in the Great War. Another four Australians were wounded. The capable Lieut. Bowen lost a lot of blood and came close to death after a bullet ploughed a permanent trench along his scalp – which, happily, was to fascinate his grandchildren one day.⁴⁴

In a first quick despatch, Holmes reported the Bita Paka success and named Pockley, Bowen, Elwell, Bond and Travers for having “acted in a very gallant way”. The mopping up was soon accomplished. Bond had found the radio machinery intact, but Patey and Holmes thought Bita Paka was too isolated to maintain. Bond (who later received the DSO for his daring and decisive role) was ordered to destroy the station and bring in any useful instruments. The colony's acting Governor, Dr Haber, was eventually persuaded after some impressive naval gunnery to come in from Toma, to stop quibbling, and to sign the very fair surrender terms. For these, Holmes was later criticised by people who did not understand that his job was to occupy, but not annex, the

entire territory of German New Guinea.

To complete that task, Holmes had to occupy other German settlements, especially Kaiser-Wilhelm's Land (the north-east quarter of the whole New Guinea island). Its main settlement was Friedrich Wilhelm Harbour (Madang) where Holmes promptly appeared in force, presented occupation terms and left a garrison. Such formalities were repeated in other German islands south of the equator. These occupations were largely free of trouble – apart from Bita Paka and, only three days later, the dreadful tragedy of the *AE1*. This 55-metre vessel, Australia's first submarine, vanished without a trace in the deep waters near Rabaul. Its entire crew of 35 Australian and British submariners was lost. *AE1* had set off at 7 am with the *Parramatta*, which last saw the submarine at 3.30 pm, when nothing seemed unusual. When the *Parramatta* got back to Rabaul at nightfall, there was no sign of the *AE1*. A search began, with flares and lights, and was greatly extended in the morning, but not a single clue was found.

The *AE1* has never been located, but it may have struck an obstacle such as the jutting reef below Rabaul's entrance channel or had a mechanical failure – always a possibility in such early submarines. By 17 September, when the Rabaul surrender was signed, the price paid by Australian and British servicemen (submariners) had gone beyond the casualties from Bita Paka. The fate of the *AE1* meant that the Rabaul campaign had cost 41 dead and four wounded, and Australia had also lost its first submarine. In the RAN's honours, the *AE1* has the battle honour "Rabaul 1914".⁴⁵

By late 1914 the German flag had been hauled down on every South Pacific island, with special attention to those which had recently provided radio facilities, services, supplies, and fuel for Spee's warships. This result marked the complete failure of the Kaiserreich's plan to conduct a cruiser war against Australasian ports and sea lanes. Its entire effort in the Pacific had gone for nothing: the colonising of numerous island groups from New Guinea and the Solomons to the north Pacific; the construction of a powerful Oceanic radio system, with island bases and supplies;

and the stationing of a naval squadron under Admiral Graf von Spee. Also rendered futile, of course, were thirteen years of careful German espionage in Australia, which had provided Spee's squadron with valuable intelligence – for that cruiser war which was narrowly averted.

Along with the Australian and allied efforts, the German Admiralty itself had contributed to all this failure. Tirpitz, its strategist, with the Kaiser's crucial patronage, put the bulk of his huge budget into monstrous North Sea battleships which, in the event, seldom left harbour to fight. A few more cruisers and destroyers could have done vital damage overseas, made Rabaul a formidable objective, and dragged British warships away from other important stations. If given a single battlecruiser, Spee could have begun the war with naval supremacy in the South Pacific. The Japanese, to judge by their lukewarm effort as allies, might well have been loath to risk their ships on Australia's behalf. This would have placed heavier demands on British warships, partly to protect ships bound for Suez and Britain. Valuable cargoes, and Anzac troop convoys, would have required stronger escorts.

Instead, Tirpitz's battleship obsession helped to ensure that a cruiser war against Australasia did not eventuate. Ships on coastal routes and the Indian Ocean were seldom troubled, except by solitary raiders. And troopships took 425,000 Australian and New Zealand soldiers safely across the Indian Ocean, and beyond it, to the battle zones. Most of these troops went to the western front, where they distinguished themselves as first class adversaries of the German army. In a more democratic structure than the Kaiserreich, Tirpitz would have had to convince people brighter and wiser than Wilhelm II, before he wasted a staggering fortune on his flawed strategy.

While the most immediate and obvious dangers had been eliminated by late 1914, Australia was not yet beyond the reach of the Kaiserreich, which had other irons in the fire. The *first* of these was the activity of "surface raiders" – disguised warships, or modified cargo steamers, with hidden weapons. These wolves

in sheep's clothing could sink or capture merchant ships, causing great confusion and delay in major ports and sea lanes, attack shore facilities, and even sink warships. Those abilities were vividly demonstrated in September 1914, when the light cruiser *Emden*, suitably disguised, began its amazing career of destruction in the Indian Ocean. In barely two months *Emden* destroyed or captured 28 merchant ships, sank two Allied warships and attacked harbours in India and Malaya. This caused havoc – of the kind which the German navy had been hoping to wreak on a much bigger scale.

Australia, a “glittering prize” of war

Emden was destroyed by *Sydney* in late 1914 but over time, Germany sent more raiders, including the formidable *Wolf* in 1917-18. This converted cargo ship had torpedoes, guns, mines and even a seaplane. Its main objective, in Capt. Karl Nерger's instructions, was “the grain trade from Australia to Europe”. In an epic voyage *Wolf* eliminated 30 ships. After laying minefields off New Zealand, Nерger crossed the Tasman and laid mines near Green Cape, at Australia's south-east corner. In July 1917, the steamer *Cumberland* struck one of these mines and finally sank. By the time it was evident that a raider was responsible, Nерger was far away. Having seized an Australian ship near Rabaul, he had headed west and crossed the Indian Ocean. *Wolf* got home to Germany after 444 continuous days at sea. Not so lucky were the hundreds of its victims who were drowned, burnt to death or crushed. Twelve months after *Wolf* had laid its mines, one of them still destroyed a steamship near Auckland, killing more civilians.⁴⁶

The *second* danger to Australia, and the greatest, was that Germany might win the war in Europe and dictate global peace terms, including an expansion of its empire. If so, Australia and New Zealand could have become the Pacific jewels in Imperial Germany's crown.⁴⁷

By March 1918 the Kaiserreich had mustered its most powerful army and was poised to make its bid, in the west, for total victory.⁴⁸ It had won the war in the east, and taken rich Russian territories.

Some suggest that with total victory, Germany would have been too preoccupied to be running Australasia. That would have depended on German priorities and decisions; but instead of taking swathes of African wilderness from the British and French, they might have preferred the developed communities, infrastructure, farms and industries of Australasia, to make their South Pacific empire profitable and prestigious. The case for this was continually made: as Germany's Consul-General in Sydney, Richard Kiliani, told Berlin in 1912: Australia was "one of the most glittering prizes" which could be won in the coming war.⁴⁹ Not only consuls and diplomats, but German naval strategists and imperial planners, were promoting these dreams of a German future for Australia.⁵⁰

A victorious Germany might thus have concluded that its finest colonial prize would be Australia and New Zealand. Germany's yearning for imperial prestige, its dissatisfaction with its colonial leftovers, and its envy of Britain's empire in the South Seas, were well known. *Crucially, no military invasion would have been required.* Germany could have claimed Australasia just as the victorious Allies confiscated German colonies in Africa, the Pacific and the New Guinea region. And leverage would not have been lacking. Vast numbers of Allied POWs (including the five Australian divisions and New Zealand's) would have been one guarantee that French, British, and Australasian authorities would accept the German peace terms.

We must remember, too, that no-one knew how the war would unfold; at several points and as late as May 1918, the Germans looked like winners, and thoughtful Australians realised that if the Kaiserreich won, they could lose their freedoms.⁵¹

The large, highly-organised espionage operation shows that the Kaiser's Germany looked at Australia with predatory eyes.⁵² There was, then, only one guarantee against a Prussian-German annexation of this country – the defeat of the Kaiserreich. It made good strategic sense for most of the Anzac forces to fight where they did – on the western front – with the Allied forces, and to play a distinct part in the defeat of the German army.

A *third* but more elusive threat was hostile activity in Australia. Sabotage couldn't be ruled out. Canadian and even neutral US facilities were hit by the Germans. In a colossal bombing at Black Tom (the New Jersey ammunition docks) the whole place was wrecked, with hundreds of Americans injured and some killed. These bombers were caught and the German embassy was found to be involved (West German investigators confirmed this six decades later). Yet no such thing plagued Australia. The settlers of German descent were solidly loyal. Trouble was more likely from numerous young German citizens here in 1914, who as army reservists were sworn to serve the Kaiser in wartime. The government took moderate precautions with them, and also upgraded security at naval bases, fuel depots, ports and munitions factories.

A little espionage was also to be expected – given the proximity of Germany's bases and Spee's squadron – but hardly the sophisticated network the Germans created. For maximum effectiveness, Spee needed full information and continuous briefing about cargo shipping, naval units, shore facilities and improved defences. The Germans detained in 1914-16 included senior maritime businessmen who for years had acquired intelligence for Spee's squadron – which was passed on via the German consulates in every Australian state. Files in the Kaiserreich archives show that this process was under way by 1902. Seven German consulates in Australia (one was in Newcastle) were involved, and so was another in Auckland.⁵³

Today, the revelation of this hostile espionage network is fascinating rather than shocking, and in the strategic context it was logical. In pre-war years, espionage despite its gaffes was becoming essential for every major power. When war came, the German cruisers intended to stop the Australian wheat and supply shipping to Britain; to damage ports, coastal trade and facilities; and even sink troopships and their escorts. Intelligence could make these aims much more effective. It was natural that the Germans – with motive, means and opportunity – would seek to acquire the information they needed. *Had they not done so, they would have*

been uniquely saintly or uniquely dim-witted among the great imperial powers, and they were neither. In the strategic context, some espionage was probable, but the Kaiserreich's papers have now yielded up an astonishingly substantial and competent network.⁵⁴ The details of its work, including its highly-placed, respectable and eccentric personalities, are in Chapter 4.

Australia's first actions, in 1914, were fought on its own perimeter. At the outset of a worldwide conflict, the new Commonwealth had to deal with a close and versatile German threat. This is not well understood. In 1992 the Bondi-born journalist, John Pilger, said this country tends to fight "against those with whom Australia has no quarrel and who offer no threat of invasion". And the 1914-18 war was included in this assertion, which has been repeated ad infinitum.⁵⁵

But this is a monumental misconception of the Great War, based on an unhistorical blindness to 1914's military/imperial realities. In this global and Pacific context, the Kaiserreich was a restless neighbour with a raw appetite. It had adjacent island colonies, a naval force, strategic bases, a powerful radio system, and (we now know) a network of agents in Australia's ports and cities – to help prepare for timely strikes against ports, sea lanes, shipping and even troopships. With this, Australia had a profound quarrel; from this, it faced a serious threat; and behind this lay the ultimate global threat to its self-governing democracy. A century ago, the people of the new young Commonwealth paid an extremely heavy price to oppose the Kaiserreich – because the things they valued most highly, and ultimately liberty itself, were in jeopardy.