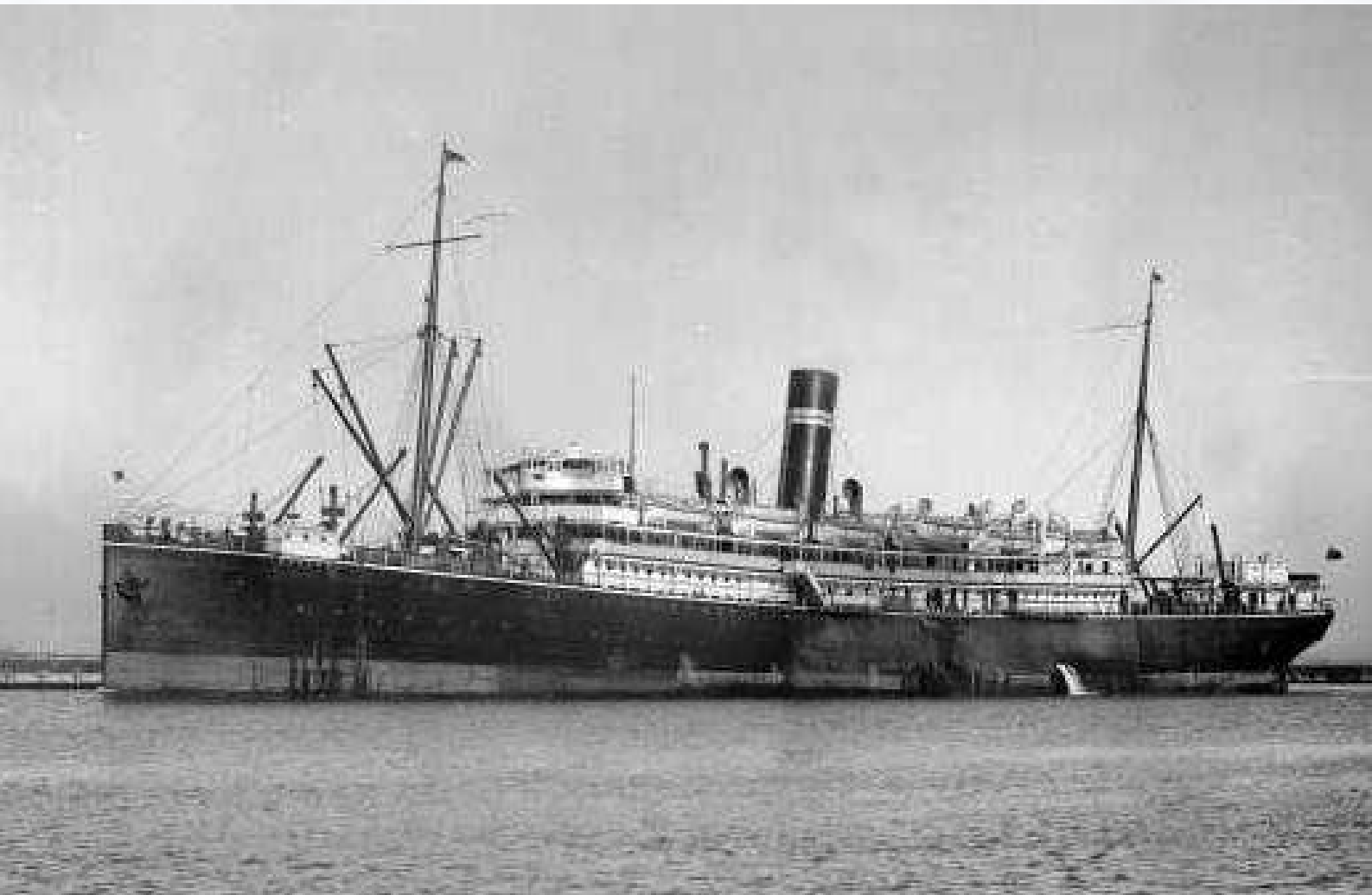# The 'Kanowna'

Australia's First Involvement in World War I

1914

The 'Kanowna'

Australia's First Involvement in World War I

When war was declared in Australia on August 5, 1914, the most immediate military threats lay to Australia's north in German New Guinea and on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait. The Germans had wireless radio stations located on islands in the Pacific, allowing for direct contact with its powerful naval fleet and their nation's capital, Berlin. Breaking the strategic communications network was critical, as was defending Australian territory.

The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) was formed in Sydney to take down German wireless radio stations in the South Pacific. A 1500-strong "Tropical Force Troop" from Sydney headed straight for German New Guinea.

Kennedy Regiment marching to SS Kanowna 8 Aug 1914

The Kennedy Regiment was called on to help. Men were called to two distinct places. They went to either Kissing Point at Townsville, or they went to Norman Park in Cairns. It was there they signed to join the volunteers. The group consisted of 1,000 men aged between 18 to 60, largely from north Queensland rifle clubs.
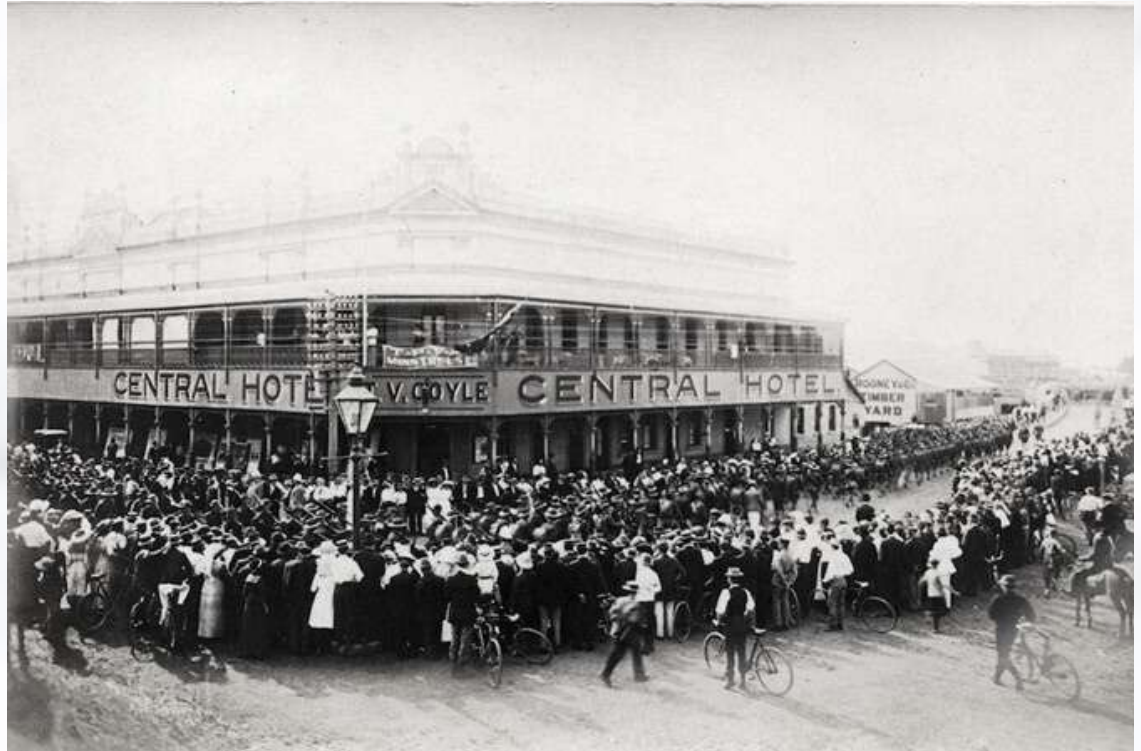

Kanowna at Townsville 8 August 1914

500 of these volunteers were from Townsville and surrounding areas including Mackay, Bowen, Ravenswood and Charters Towers. The biggest contingent actually came from Charters Towers, which had 200 men volunteer. The volunteers boarded the 'S.S. Kanowna' and departed from Townsville on August 8, 1914.
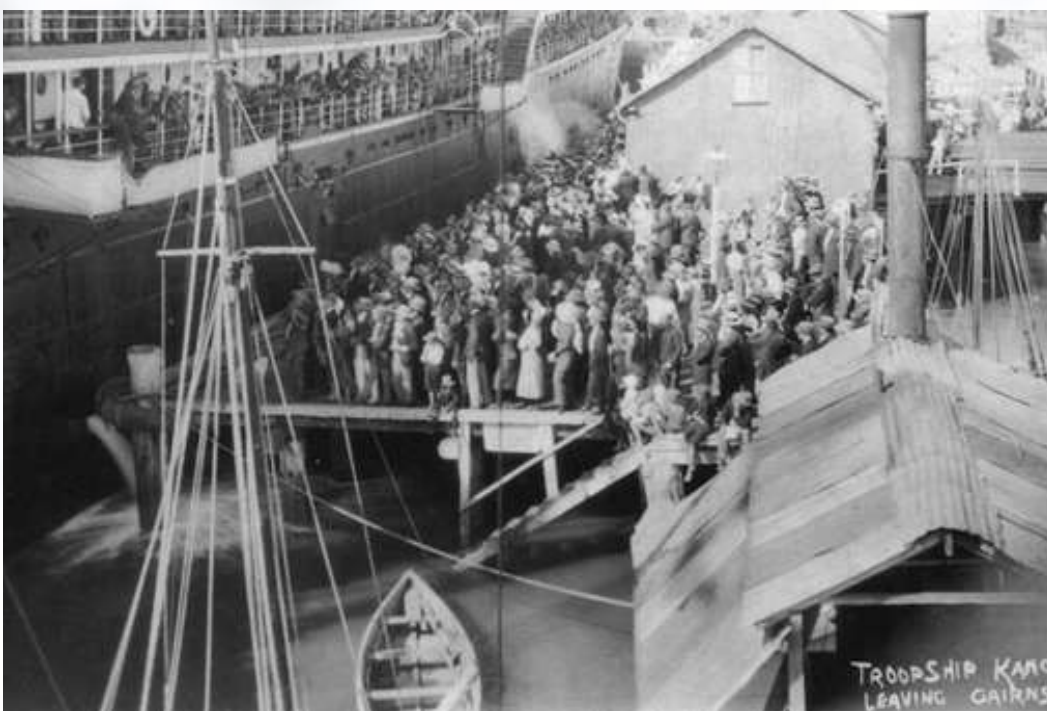
The 'Kanowna'

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The 'Kanowna' then stopped at Cairns to pick up the final recruits - a further 500 men coming from areas including Atherton, Yungaburra and Herberton.

The volunteers were farwelled at a large parade in Cairns. They departed from Norman Park, Cairns on the 'SS Kanowna' on 11 August, 1914.

Farwell Parade in Cairns

The citizens' forces were made up of men from Queensland's rifle clubs. They were a very active part of communities in the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF). Before embarking on the 'Kanowna', they had not undergone any formal military training.

Troopship 'Kanowna' Leaving Cairns

The 'Kanowna'

Australia's First Involvement in World War I

For many years Australia had a garrison that was stationed on Thursday Island. It was the citizens' forces that were called on to strengthen the small defence force that existed there. As they were only enlisted to fight on Australian soil, they were able to deploy to Thursday Island. That was where the 'Kanowna' took them.

SS Kanowna leaving Cairns for Thursday Island in August 1914 with men of the Expeditionary Force in WWI.

While on Thursday Island, the main tasks for the troops consisted of managing Fort Milman, which had been part of Australia's front-line defence since 1893, and patrolling the rest of the island.

Within five days of their arrival on the Island, they were asked if they wanted to sign on for active duty overseas. Around 500 men signed on, becoming part of the 2nd Battalion, ANMEF.

Those that remained on Thursday Island spent their days digging trenches, building fortifications and on guard duty before returning to home soil in November the same year.

Without knowledge of their next destination, the 500 re-enlisted men of the 2nd Battalion again left on the 'Kanowna' the next day, heading to Fairfax Harbour, Port Moresby, where they arrived the following morning, August 18 1914.

For two weeks, troops waited there for the Australian naval fleet to arrive, all of them eager to play their part in the Great War. During this time, the men undertook training exercises, drill duties and received lectures on scouting and skirmishing.

Finally, on September 5, 1914, Colonel W. Holmes, commander of the ANMEF from Sydney, joined the men on board the 'Kanowna' to inspect the Queensland troops before their expected departure to New Britain.

The 'Kanowna'

Australia's First Involvement in World War I
Commander declared troops unfit for service

Col Holmes was unimpressed with what he saw and recommended troops be returned to Townsville.

According to accounts the conditions on the 'Kanowna' were far from ideal:

- *"The troops were equipped with only one set of clothing, which they'd been wearing for weeks without a change, they had no bunks or hammocks, and were sleeping on the decks of the ships."*
- *"They had no mess tables so they had to collect their food from the kitchen and sit on the decks to eat it."*
- *"The men had very little water available for washing.*
- "The Kanowna had no facilities for condensing steam from the ship's boilers to make fresh water, so it was totally dependent on the water that it carried in tanks that had been refilled in Australia before they set out," he said.
- They were allowed two pints of water a day for washing and drinking (there were 2 cups in a pint so they were allocated 4 cups for washing). In addition to that they got one pint (2 cups) of tea at each meal. So in all their allocation of water in the tropical climate was far from adeqauate.

The 'Kanowna' troops decided to persevere, but there was more trouble ahead for them. Not far from Port Moresby the 'Kanowna' fell behind the rest of the convoy, with the ship's master signalling to the HMAS Sydney that his crew had mutinied: the boiler stokers and firemen had stopped work.

Claims were made that the mutiny was because these men refused to leave Australian waters, other claims state that the troopship was on short rations of food and water because of the delays sailing north and only minimal resupply in Port Moresby, but the stokers and firemen were requesting more water to remain hydrated in the hot boiler rooms and to wash off coal grime. They refused to work until this demand was met.

The workers were taken into the custody of a party of soldiers, and the force's commander ordered the 'Kanowna' to return to Townsville, with soldiers volunteering to keep the ship running.

The 'Kanowna'

Australia's First Involvement in World War I

Troops return home without fanfare

On arriving back in Townsville, the 'Kanowna' troops were discharged on September 10, 1914 without fanfare or acclaim.

"When they got back they were disappointed - they had badly wanted to continue to Rabaul and they felt that they had had a raw deal because they were the ones who had got to Port Moresby first and they didn't like to see the Sydney people continue on to do the fighting."

The Australian Commonwealth Naval Board conducted an inquiry into the mutiny, even though as a civilian vessel, the 'Kanowna' technically wasn't under their jurisdiction. The state of the supplies was seen as a major contributing factor to the sailors' actions.

Later they became known as the "Dirty 500" and despite this many of the men from North Queensland re-enlisting in the First Australian Imperial Force, where they went on to fight at Gallipoli and on the Western Front.

Some of the men from the Dirty 500 Expeditionary Force in World War I. (Credit: The Caruse of the Kanowna)

Even though the 'Dirty 500' were not engaged in combat, it is still important to acknowledge that they chose to serve Australia and leave their communities, not knowing what they were to face.

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