

Transportation of Australian Convoy and Troopship Mail in World War 1

History

The First World War is often described as The Great War. When hostilities were declared on the 4th of August 1914, Australia greeted the news with enthusiasm and quickly announced their support for England, promising a first contingent of over 20,000 soldiers.

The Naval Board of Administration formed a committee on the 6th August to prepare troopship transports for the Australian Expeditionary Force. A list was prepared of all ships in port or approaching the Australian coast and arrangements were made for their inspection and measurement. Every assistance was rendered by the shipping agents and owners of the vessels.

Fitting for their new role as troop transports was commenced at once. It was evident that time and expense would be saved if the main features of fittings were standardised. Horse stalls, deck houses for various purposes such as galleys, latrines, hospitals, and troop deck fittings were carefully thought out. History shows that the equipment of the troop transports fitted in Australia was better than the corresponding work performed elsewhere.

The first troopships were the "Berrima" and the "Kanowna", despatched to New Guinea in August 1914 as part of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. They were hastily assembled and the mistakes learned in fitting these ships helped the fit outs of the twenty ships of the First Convoy. A standardised process was maintained throughout the rest of the war.

The convoys travelled across three major routes. The earliest convoys for the Gallipoli Campaign sailed via the Suez Canal. After the threat of the German raiders were destroyed, the troopships for the Western Front were sent via the Cape of Good Hope to England. Finally, the opening of the Suez Canal a week after war was declared provided another option. This route was only taken by a couple of convoys from late 1917 and appeared to be experimental to assess the time differentiation versus the Cape of Good Hope route.

Purpose and scope

This exhibit of the Australian Convoys and Troopships in World War 1 examines the nation's preparation and engagement from a postal and social history perspective. The postal history is represented by the postal markings in Australia and abroad throughout the war with references to key texts published on the subject. Many of the censor cachets are rare with as few as ten or less recorded for many of these handstamps. Important extracts from the soldiers are highlighted in italics and convey the personal feelings of the troops, the hopes of the soldiers and those of a nation. In addition, there are photographs and maps which provide further insight to the carriage of troops on the transports. Those items which are boxed in bold represent items of rarity or historical interest.

Treatment

An arrangement of this exhibit in chronological order would provide a disjointed representation of the material which would be difficult to interpret. At the beginning of the war, each gathering of troopships sailed together as a convoy. As the threat of German warships dissipated, troopships generally sailed individually or in small groups with an escort. Some of the convoys, especially later in the war, are loosely categorised in to specific convoys. Troopship mail has been classified within these convoys.

Relative rarity of the material

Identification of Australian mail from the troopships can be relatively scarce, especially identifying and assembling the different censor cachets to the various troop transports. Whilst some convoys had a large number of vessels, others with only three or four ships are very difficult to obtain. Many later convoys, especially via Africa and Panama, embargoed the soldiers from going ashore, hence mail from these stopovers is very rare. The survival rate of letters, postcards and photographs reflect this research.

Principle references:

"*Australian Imperial Forces Postal History 1914-18*" by Bob Emery (1983) and the supplement (1988)

"*British Empire Campaigns and Occupations in the Near East, 1914-1924*" by John Firebrace (1991)

"*Cachets & Transports of the A.I.F. in WW1*" by Tony Finlayson (2005)

The Australian War Memorial Archives

1. Convoy Routes

The routes of the Convoys

Aside from the New Guinea campaign, there were three convoy routes which were predominantly located in Europe and the Middle East. At the beginning of the war, the threat posed by the German East Asia Squadron forced the First Convoy to be escorted by a number of warships, including H.M.A.S. "Sydney". After the German raider S.M.S. "Emden" was destroyed by the "Sydney" in November 1914 and the rest of the German Squadron sunk at the Battle of the Falkland Islands in December, it opened up three major routes to the European and Middle East conflicts.

Via Suez Canal

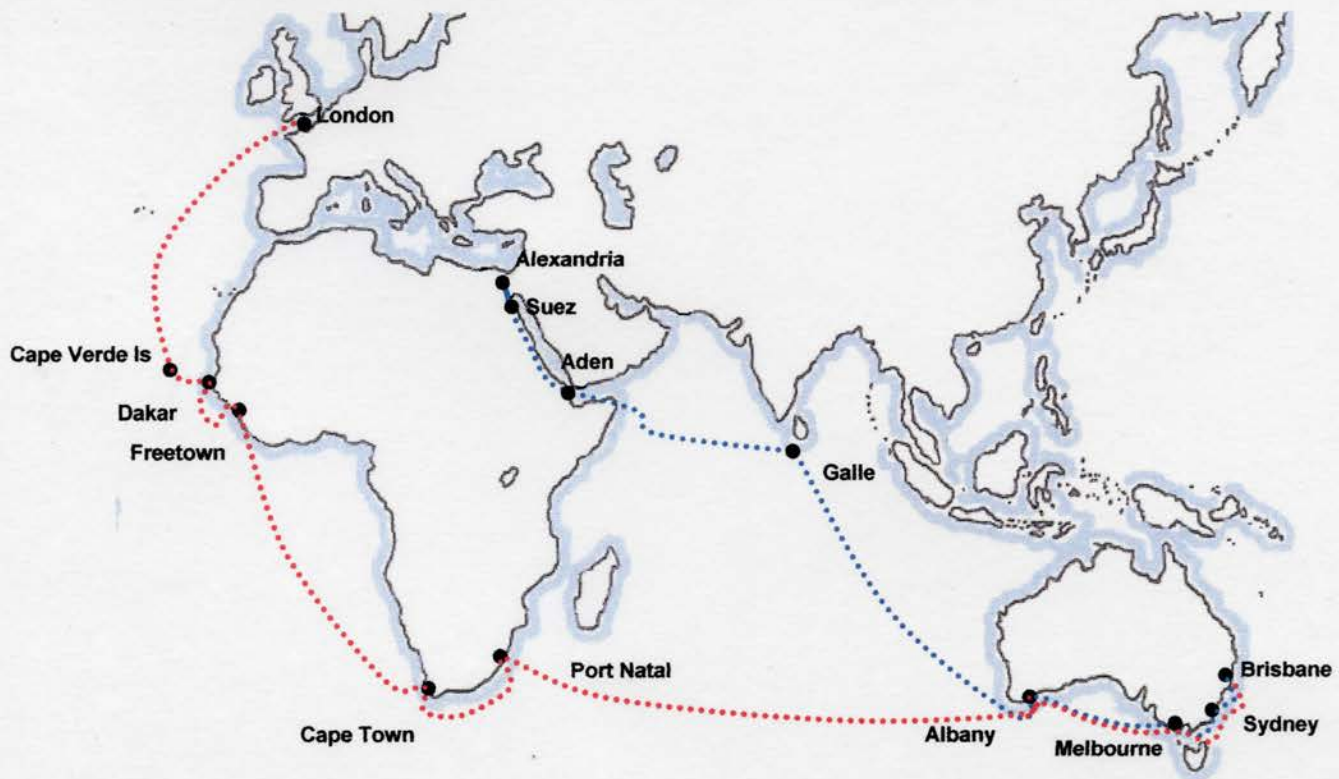
The major route for the first twenty convoys was via the Suez Canal. This was the original mail route plied by the P&O Line in from the 1840's. There was generally a couple of stopovers along the route, including Colombo in Ceylon and Aden, before docking at Suez and continuing up the Red Sea until the Suez Canal, terminating in the Egyptian port of Alexandria.

Via Cape of Good Hope

With the major threat of the German raiders removed, other options were explored to transport troops quickly to the European theatre of the war. The 21st Convoy was the first to embark via the Cape of Good Hope. There were stopovers at South Africa, generally at Cape Town or Port Natal, with further docking ports at Freetown in Sierra Leone, Dakar in Senegal and the Cape Verde Islands, before disembarking in England. Mail from these west African ports is very scarce.

Via Panama Canal

The Panama route was only used on a couple of occasions during the war. The Panama Canal was opened on the 15th August 1914, less than two weeks after the declaration of war. Given it was not a traditional route to England, it's option was not considered until late 1917 with the 33rd Convoy being the first Australian troopships sent via this route. Occasional stopovers were in the Pacific Islands, notably Fiji, Colon in Panama, before docking in England. Only three Australian convoys are recorded via the Panama Canal.



Via Suez Canal

The first twenty convoys were sent via the Suez Canal with only intermittent sailings after that. This was the quickest route for the Gallipoli and Light Horse Campaigns in Egypt and Syria. With the German naval forces destroyed, they posed little threat to the troop convoys and many were unescorted.

Via Cape of Good Hope

From mid 1916, the Western Front was the most important campaign and nearly all the Australian troopship convoys were sent via Cape of Good Hope to England, with the exception of a couple of convoys via Panama. Stopovers for coaling were the major ports in South Africa, with further docking ports at Freetown, Dakar or Cape Verde Islands. Troops were unable to disembark on the west African ports.

2. Processing the mail of the Australian Convoys and Troopships in World War 1

2.1 Postal rates

From the outbreak of the war on the 4th August 1914, prepayment of postage had to be paid on mail originating from Australian troops. For the First and Second Convoys, since postage stamps were not available on the troopships, most of the soldier's mail was endorsed "On Active Service" or "No Stamps Available", and postage was to be collected by the recipient on delivery. In many cases, given the patriotic fervor for the embarking troops, the postage deficiency was not collected.

After the 15th of February 1915 and from the Third Convoy until the end of the war, soldiers on active service were able to send letters and postcards without the pre-payment of postage, so long as the postal item was endorsed "On Active Service".

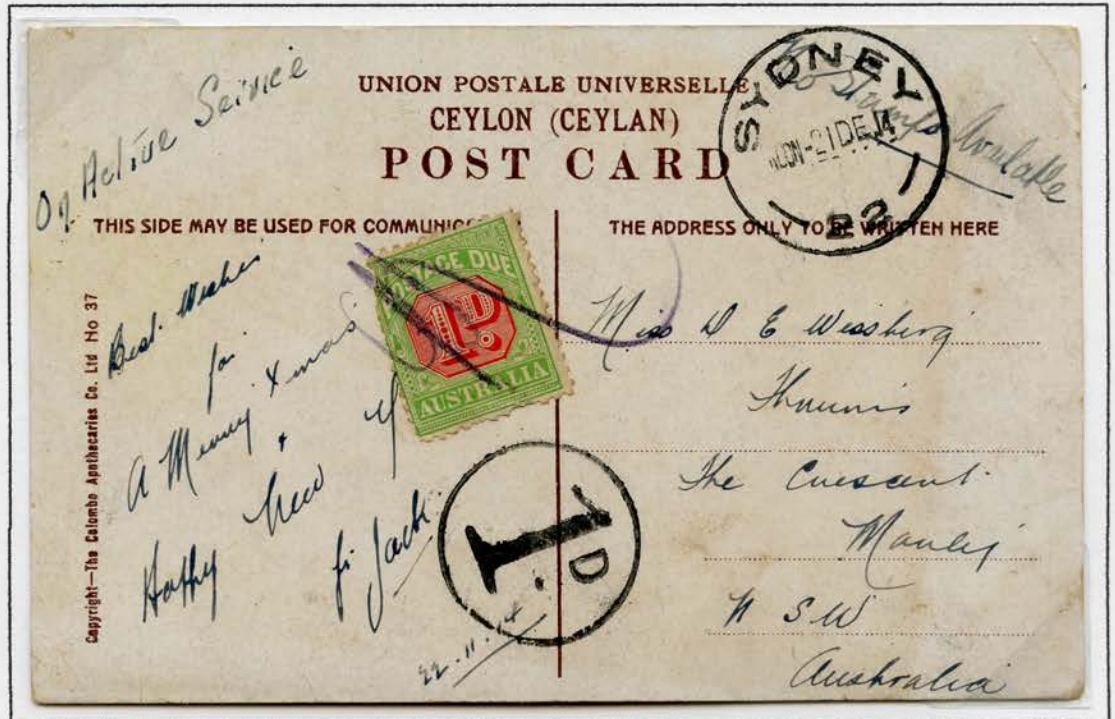
First and Second Convoys

First Convoy - Single rate:

No prepayment of 1d for a postcard to Australia and taxed on arrival at Sydney.

Postal markings:

"1D" tax handstamp applied at Sydney for unpaid postage
Postage Due: A 1d postage due applied confirming the postage paid by the recipient.



First Convoy: Used from Aden 22.11.1914 to New South Wales

Note: For the first two convoys, mail had to be prepaid at the standard Australian postal rates for delivery. Given the soldiers had virtually no access to postage stamps, most of the mail sent was stampless and therefore attracted the appropriate fines and postage dues.

Succeeding Convoys

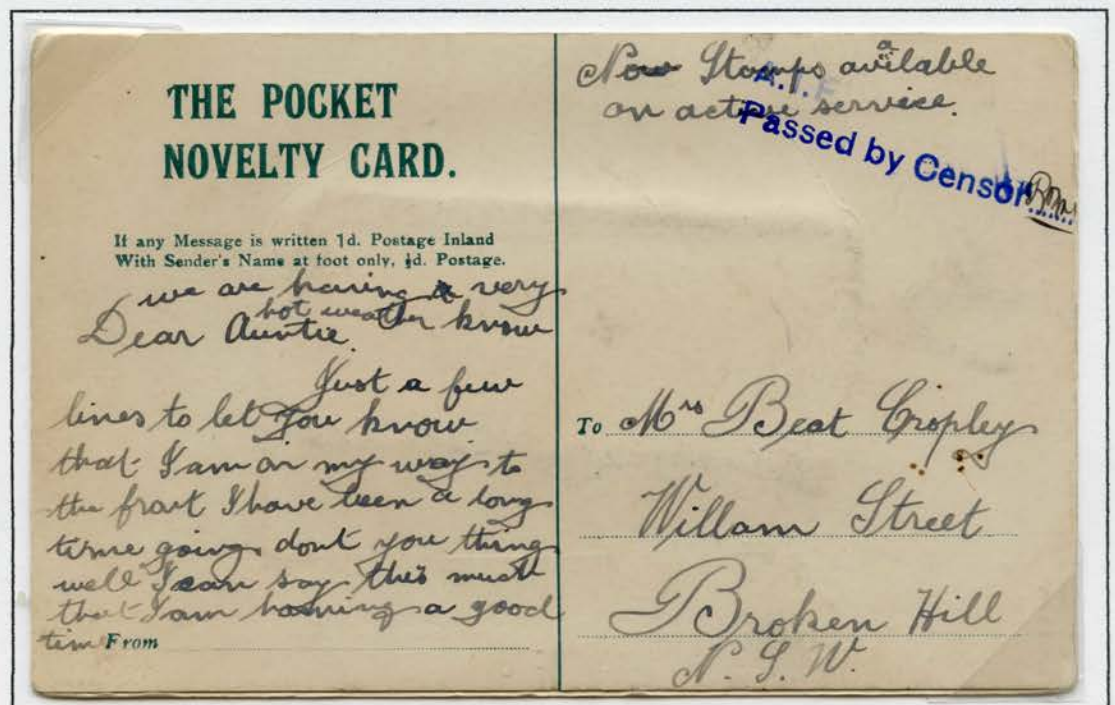
12th Convoy - Single rate:

No prepayment for a postcard to Australia.

Postal markings:

"No Stamps Available, On Active Service" in black manuscript.

A standard postcard sent by a soldier complying with the postal regulations for free postage with the endorsement "On Active Service".



2.2 Stationery used by the soldiers

Postcards used by the troops

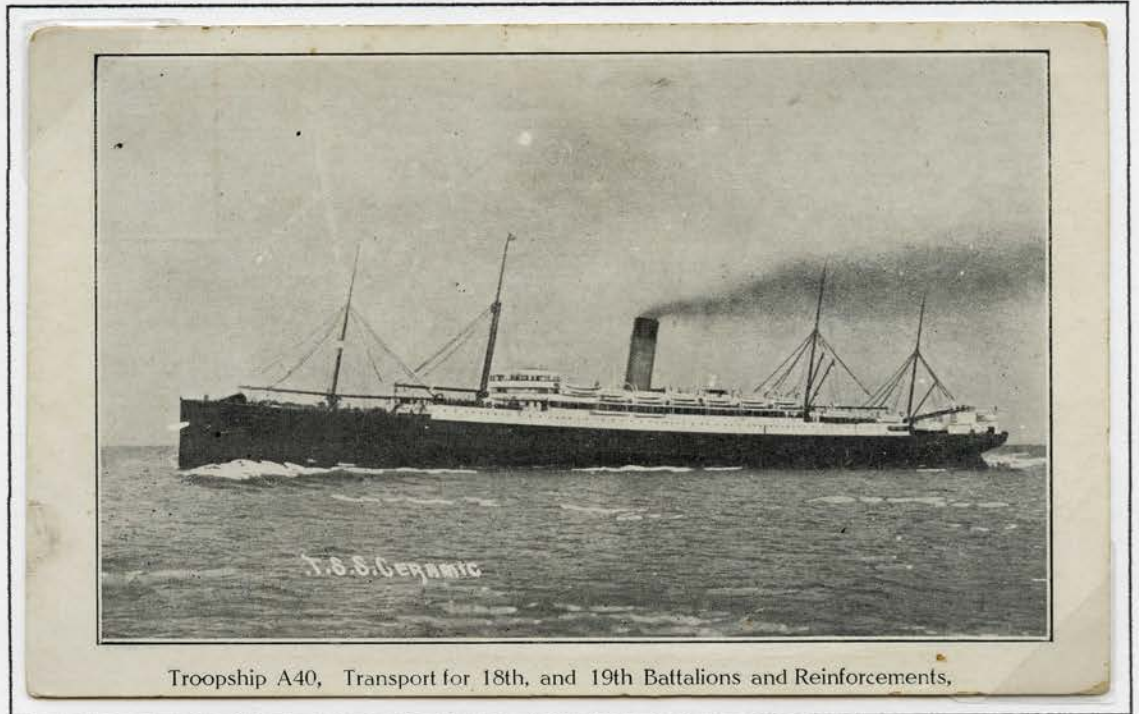
The most common form of stationery used by the soldiers were postcards. They were a quick and informal method of communication. Less frequently encountered are letters from the troops.

Postcards of the troopships

Many of the cards that were used to send messages home are postcards of the troopships. A number of these were provided by the ships pursers from stock left over from civilian days when the ships plied the global sailing routes with passengers.

Rarely encountered are postcards specifically identifying a troopship with their "A" number. These were postcards from the civilian days overprinted from the port of embarkation with the troopship number and the Battalions or Reinforcements being transported. Examples are seen from the First Convoy to late in the war and these postcards contravened censorship laws. Occasionally, these cards were censored by indelible pencil, scratching out the offending text, or cutting the text out of the postcard.

A40 "Ceramic": A real photo postcard of the A40 "Ceramic" overprinted at base with reference to the 18th and 19th Battalions, contravening censorship laws.



Real Photo Postcards



A70 "Ballarat": A real photo postcard of the A70 "Ballarat" dated the 18.2.1916 and published by Josiah Barnes of Melbourne, an official troopship embarkation photographer.

2.3 Maritime censorship

Censorship of the First and Second Convoys

The First and Second Convoys handled the censorship of letters by embargoing the delivery and shipment of mail until the ships had left harbor. All the major texts on convoy mail state that there were no censorship markings for these two convoys. However, new discoveries confirm at least two censor cachets for the First Convoy and a new allocation of the Second Convoy censor label unmask these theories, and are explained in more detail in each of these sections.

The introduction of maritime censor handstamps from the Third Convoy until the end of the war

The Naval Board introduced ship-based censorship in February 1915 and this was applied to transports in the Third and subsequent convoys. Whilst some cachets included the transport's A number, many did not, with a number of others inserting the A number in manuscript.

The primary type of troopship censor handstamps - Type 1 - Broken middle stroke of "A"

A number of different types of "A.I.F./ Passed by Censor No....." cachets were manufactured with a variety of combinations of punctuation marks to separate the "A", "I", and "F" in the top row of the handstamp. The registration of the "AIF" with the "Passed by censor No....." in the lower row has two distinct settings. The first has the "I" above the "Ce" of censor, whilst the second setting has the "I" above the "n" of censor. Hence, the primary troopship censor cachets are allocated under the following Finlayson classification:

MCM 1/A	stop, stop, comma (I/CE)	MCM 1/B	stop, stop, comma (I/N)
MCM 1/C	stop, comma, comma (I/CE)	MCM 1/C	stop, comma, comma (I/N)
MCM 1/E	comma, comma, comma	MCM 1/F	stop, colon, comma
MCM 1/H	comma, stop, stop	MCM 1/J	stop, stop, stop
MCM 1/K	stop, colon, stop		

The Type 1 primary censor cachet's are recorded from the 3rd to the 24th Convoys. After this, the Type 2 or 3 cachet was used.

Insertion of manuscript numbers in to the censor cachets

In nearly every example of this cachet is the insertion of a manuscript number. These numerals represented the troopship number allocated by the naval authorities. This was another form of censoring the mail. Occasionally, a signature of the ships censor officers are used instead, however, this form of censorship is not very common.

Troopship censor cachet type MCM 1/J



A7 "Medic": Used to Runderdale, South Australia

Postal markings: "A.I.F./ Passed by Censor No." cachet unusually in blue (Finlayson Type MCM I/J). "7" inserted in manuscript, representing the A7 "Medic".

2.4 Maritime censorship

The primary type of troopship censor cachets - Types 2 and 3

Introduced from the 22nd Convoy, the Type 2 and 3 primary troopship censors were retained until the end of the war. Very little has been documented regarding these censors, and they are considerably scarcer than the Type 1 censors.

The most significant feature of the Type 2 censor is the straight middle serif of the "A" in A.I.F. The Type 1 censors have an interrupted serif.

The key to the Type 2 censor are the placement of the word "Censor" under the "I" of "A.I.F." and the measurement in millimetres at the top and the base of these letters.

Type 2 and 3 characteristics - Straight middle stroke of "A"



The Primary features of the Types 2 and 3 censors is the straight line serif in the "A" of "A.I.F."

In addition, there are different sub-types of the positioning of the word "censor" over the "I" of "A.I.F.". This example is "I" over "en" and is identified as MCM 2/K.

Type 2 characteristics

Short Arm to "F"

A - Left of A to F = 26.5mm



B - Base of A to stop = 31mm

Type 3 characteristics

Long Arm to "F"

A - Left of A to F = 29mm



B - Base of A to stop = 35mm

Type 2 Types and sub-types

MCM Type 2 with short arms to the "F":

MCM 2/H "I" over "n": A = 26.5mm; B = 31mm

MCM 2/K "I" over "en": A = 26.5mm; B = 31mm

MCM 2/P "A.I.F." - Colon after "F"
A = 29mm; B = 31.5mm

MCM 2/J "I" over "e": A = 26.5mm; B = 31mm

MCM 2/L "I" over "en": A = 27.5mm; B = 32mm

Type 3 Types and sub-types - All settings are "I" over "e"

MCM Type 3 with long arms to the "F":

MCM 3/M A = 27.5mm; B = 33mm

MCM 3/N A = 28mm; B = 33mm

MCM 2/O A = 29mm; B = 35mm

They have been classified in to eight different censors, although the possibility of other types existing cannot be ruled out. Type MCM 2/P is a new discovery providing potential opportunity for students of these markings.

2.4 Maritime censorship

The secondary type of troopship censor handstamps

A secondary censor handstamps from the Third Convoy onwards have the transport numbers incorporated in to the handstamp. They appear to be used in conjunction with the primary censor cachets, and reason for this is unknown. Most of these are very scarce and were used over a limited number of voyages.

Current literature records nineteen secondary handstamps. However, new research by the exhibitor has identified handstamps from thirty seven vessels, some having multiple types of cachets.

Secondary troopship censor cachet - Type 1 - A46 "Clan MacGillivray"



A46 "Clan MacGillivray": Used to Tasmania on the 22nd Convoy with "A.I.F./PASSED CENSOR 46" handstamp in violet

Secondary troopship censor cachet - Type 2 - A19 "Afric"



A19 "Afric": Used at Alexandria 13.7.1916 to South Australia on the 21st Convoy with "A.I.F./Passed by Censor" cachet in reddish purple.

Note: There are some secondary cachets without reference to the troopship number such as this handstamp from the A19 "Afric".

Note: There are a number of secondary type handstamps, including boxed examples and straight line handstamps.

3. The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force in New Guinea

Historical overview

At the start of the First World War, Australia faced the threat of German Naval power operating on its doorstep. Germany had annexed territories in New Guinea and surrounding islands such as New Britain, the Caroline and Marshall Islands. A series of powerful wireless stations were built with coaling facilities providing freedom of movement to German shipping to China, where the powerful German East Asiatic Naval Squadron was based at Tsingtao.

Assembling the AN&MEF

With the Australian declaration of war with Germany on the 5.8.1914, the government raised a force of 20,000 men for the Australian Imperial Force to support England in the European theatre. A second and more immediate force was raised to seize German New Guinea named the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. This would consist of a military battalion of approximately 1,000 men and a naval brigade of 500.

The naval brigade was raised from South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales whilst the rest of the force was provided by volunteers from New South Wales. On the 18.8, just thirteen days after war was declared, the force was ready to sail aboard the H.M.A.S. *Berrima* which had been refitted as a troopship at Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour.

After training for a week at Palm Island the “*Berrima*” with H.M.A.S. “*Sydney*” were joined in Port Moresby Harbour by the requisitioned civilian liner “*Kanowna*” with 500 volunteers from Queensland’s Kennedy Regiment.

After leaving Port Moresby, the stokers aboard the “*Kanowna*” mutinied. They had not volunteered for active duty and were unhappy about the conditions on board. The ship was ordered home and the men were discharged.

The “*Berrima*” and the “*Kanowna*” were the only designated troopships from the New Guinea campaign.



T.S.S. “**Kanowna**”: A rare real photo postcard endorsed “*Kanowna*” leaving *Townsville* with troops for *New Guinea*”. Very few photographs or postcards have survived from this little known campaign, Australia’s first for the war.

The writer appears to be a nurse who writes “*No luck!!! Our trip is a thing of the past or the future as there in hopes hold girl. I’ll be here on this boat for three more trips yet so I heard today...*”