

## The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Australian Naval Bridging Train, 1915-1917

The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Australian Naval Bridging Train (RANBT) was a unique unit of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) during the First World War. It served in the Gallipoli, Sinai, and Palestine Campaigns. The RANBT was formed in February 1915, and then stood down in May 1917. It was composed of volunteer members of the RAN Reserve.

On 24 February 1915, Lt. Cdr. Leighton Bracegirdle RAN was appointed to command the RANBT, with Lt. Thomas Bond DSO RANR, as his 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. Both had served with the combined Australian Naval & Military Force (ANMEF), which was responsible for the capture of several German colonies in the Pacific during September of 1914.

By 12 March 1915, the RANBT had grown to over 100 men, by then camped in tents on Kings Domain, Melbourne (now occupied by the Shrine of Remembrance) for training. They would have to wait six weeks for their pontoons and wagons to be built, and as many men as possible would also need to learn how to ride horses.

On 3 June, the RANBT - now consisting of some 301 personnel - was embarked in HMAT A39 *Port Macquarie* for passage to Chatham, England, to be trained in the construction and handling of pontoons. The RANBT reached Port Said, Egypt on 17 July. The next day, they received orders transferring them to the Dardanelles, via the Greek isle of Imbros. While at Imbros, the RANBT had five days of instruction on the use of their pontoons for a forthcoming landing at Suvla Bay by the British Army.

On 6 August, the RANBT was embarked in HMAT A53 *Itria*, which reached its designated anchorage while the landing was well underway. It was not until late that afternoon that they were given the task of constructing a pier at 'A' landing. On the second day at Suvla Bay, the RANBT came into its own, constructing two piers for use by lifeboats evacuating the wounded. The next few days were well spent, constructing more piers, as well as landing troops and supplies, and shifting their base from 'A' landing to what then became known as *Kangaroo Beach*.

On 12 August, the RANBT was assigned the task of looking after the Army's water supply. They also became responsible for all work afloat, or on the beach up to the high-water mark. Other duties undertaken by the RANBT included acting as wireless operators to the force, and draughtsmen for the Army Survey Corp, with Bracegirdle designated as 'Beach Master' of Kangaroo Beach.

The official AIF War Correspondent, Charles Bean, was to later report on the RANBT's activities at Suvla Bay when he wrote: *There they are to-day, in charge of the landing of a great part of the stores of a British army. They are quite cut off from their own force; they scarcely come into the category of the Australian Force, and are scarcely that of the British; they are scarcely army and scarcely navy. Who is it that looks after their special interests, and which is the authority that has the power of recognising any good work they have done, I do not know. If you want to see the work, you only have to go to Kangaroo Beach, Suvla Bay, and look about you. They have made a harbour.*

In November 1915, the British Field Marshal, Lord Kitchener, inspected the Dardanelles as part of his review of the Middle East area of operations. After a short period at Anzac Cove, he instructed the Commanding Officer, Lt. General Birdwood, to begin planning an evacuation of the Peninsula.

Once the decision was made, preparations were put in place to make it appear that units that could be, and would be withdrawn to Mudros, leaving enough troops to defend and hold their positions for winter; while the departing troops would return in spring to begin a fresh offensive. Troops and their equipment started leaving the front and boarding naval vessels from 8 December 1915.

The Chief Army Engineer, Brigadier E H Bland, praised the RANBT for its work in preparing to leave Suvla, writing that: *From when the 1<sup>st</sup> RANBT joined IX Corps all ranks have worked hard,*

*cheerfully, and well. They have rendered most valuable service in connection with the construction and maintenance of landing-piers, beach water supply, and the landing, charge of, and distribution of engineer material at Suvla, and have most willingly given their help in many other directions. Their work has been continuously heavy, and they have done it well.*

Bland also later wrote that the RANBT; *Had set a fine example of endurance, good organisation, and discipline, and could be relied upon to do its best under difficult circumstances Their commanders were indefatigable in anticipating requirements, and assisting where ever and whenever required.*

The RANBT was the last Australian unit to leave the Gallipoli Peninsula; a party of 50 men under the command of Sub-Lt. Charles Hicks was left behind to maintain the wharf over which the evacuating British forces would leave. At 0430 on 20 December, the last British forces filed onto the wharf and into a waiting lighter, with the RANBT personnel being the last on board before the lighter moved out to the waiting transport offshore.

On 17 January 1916, after recuperating at Mudros, the RANBT sailed for Lake Timsah on the Suez Canal, No. 2 Section. Upon arrival on the 21<sup>st</sup>, the RANBT was responsible for manning and controlling existing bridges, building new bridges, control of tugs and lighters, and the distribution of stores to the Anzac forces.

On 4 May, the RANBT was despatched to No. 4 Section of the Suez Canal, the largest of the Canal's sections. As well as manning bridges and small vessels, they were now building wharves and piers, controlling tugs and all military transport crossing the Canal.

During this period, Allied forces were pushing the Turkish forces back from the Canal and into the desert. To obtain better access to their logistic requirements, it was decided that a rail line would be laid by Army engineers. The RANBT was tasked with building new wharves to unload the locomotives needed for these desert trains.

Despite the best efforts of the engineers, the tracks were 25 miles from the town of El Arish, so the RANBT was assigned to manage the landing of supplies on the beach. However, the whole landing area was mined. The Royal Navy would be unable to sweep it without raising the enemy's suspicions of an impending attack. The RANBT's mission was to land on the beach and construct two piers through the minefield. This was one of the few times the RANBT supported other Australian forces in combat.

On 20 March 1917, those involved in the RANBT were told they were to be disbanded. Members were asked to make a choice as to their preferred assignment. The vast number of members elected to remain with the RAN.

During its existence, the RANBT had made two amphibious landings, and lost 25 sailors, either killed in action, or died from illness or disease. Lt. Cdr. Bracegirdle was awarded the DSO, and three Mention in Despatches (MID) for his command of the RANBT. Sixteen sailors were also awarded the MID.

It is therefore considered unquestionable that places of significance to the former service person should be historically factual in an area as sensitive as memorials to service units. The acceptance of incorrect and misleading information in the past has denied those who served in the RANBT their actual service identity, and their rightful place in the history of the RAN, as the most decorated Naval unit of the First World War.

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