



New Zealand's First World War Centenary Programme

Information Sheet 3 – NZ Occupation of German Samoa

August 2014

This information sheet (number 3) provides an overview of New Zealand's Occupation of German Samoa in 1914.

Why did New Zealand occupy German Samoa?

When war broke out in Europe in August 1914, Britain asked New Zealand to seize the German colony of Samoa as a 'great and urgent Imperial service'.

The Samoan archipelago had been ruled by Germany since 1899.

At the outbreak of war, Samoa was of strategic importance to Germany. The radio transmitter located in the hills above Apia was capable of sending long-range Morse signals to Berlin. It could also communicate with the 90 warships in Germany's naval fleet. Britain wanted this threat neutralised.

What happened?

New Zealand's response was swift. Led by Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Logan, the approximately 1,400-strong Samoa Advance Party of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force landed at Apia on 29 August 1914 – including nurses, chaplains, mechanics, Post and Telegraph Corps and engineers. They met with no resistance from the small number of German officials or the general population.

The following day Logan proclaimed a New Zealand-run British Military Occupation of Samoa. The German flag was lowered and all buildings and properties belonging to the previous administration were seized. In the presence of officers, troops and 'leading Native chiefs', the British flag was raised outside the government building in Apia.

With hindsight, New Zealand's capture of German Samoa was a relatively simple affair. But at the time it was regarded as a potentially risky action with uncertain outcomes. The New Zealand troops were vulnerable as they crossed the Pacific. The transports *Monowai* and *Moeraki*, requisitioned from the Union Steam Ship Company, were slow and unarmed. After sailing from Wellington on the morning of Saturday 15 August, they rendezvoused with *HMS Philomel*, *Psyche* and *Pyramus*. These antiquated British cruisers were initially their only escorts.

The danger to the convoy was real. At the outbreak of war, Germany had two heavy cruisers, *SMS Scharnhorst* and *SMS Gneisenau*, three light cruisers and various other ships stationed in the Pacific. Throughout the two-week voyage to Samoa, the location of the German East Asia Squadron remained unknown to the Allies.

Naval support was strengthened after five days when the New Zealand convoy reached Noumea in French New Caledonia. There they were joined by the Royal Australian Navy's battlecruiser *HMAS Australia*, the light cruiser *HMAS Melbourne* and the French armoured cruiser *Montcalm*.

It was only on reaching Samoa that the weakness of the German defences became apparent: the colony was defended by just 20 troops and special constables armed with 50 aging rifles. It was later discovered that the German administration had received orders from Berlin not to oppose an Allied invasion.

As military administrator, Robert Logan governed a population of around 38,000 Samoans and 1,500 Europeans (including part-Europeans and about 500 Germans). Samoa's inhabitants also included 2,000 indentured Chinese labourers and 1,000 Melanesian plantation workers. German officials were replaced by New Zealand military officers, civilians or British residents, even though some of these lacked the experience or qualifications to do the job.

Germany was stripped of its colonial territories following the First World War. On 17 December 1920 the League of Nations officially allocated German Samoa to New Zealand as the mandate of Western Samoa. Western Samoa gained political independence in 1962. The arrival of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on Samoan shores was the beginning of a long term relationship between the two countries.

Where can I get more information?

More information is available at:

- WW100.govt.nz
- firstworldwar.govt.nz