

APPENDICES—PART IV.

No. 33.

THE DISBANDMENT OF THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVAL BRIDGING TRAIN.

The fact that the Train, though composed mainly of naval trainees and enlisted as a naval force,¹ was placed in other respects under the military authorities produced awkward results. During the latter months of 1916 certain members of the unit who had not yet worked under fire wearied of their comparatively peaceful duties on the Canal, and voiced their discontent in letters to Australia which came to the knowledge of the Defence Department. Taking these letters as representative, the Department wrote to the Naval Board:—

It appears that the men are engaged on duty which could be performed by any non-combatant unit, and they are very desirous of going to the front to take part in the actual fighting. Failing their being sent to France, they ask that their services should be utilised in manning ships, carrying coal, or anything necessary to the Fleet—as most of them, it seems, are seamen.

The Board replied that the men could not be utilised for reliefs to H.M.A. ships; if no longer required as a Bridging Train, the unit should be disbanded, and its members either sent as reinforcements to the Australian Engineers or Artillery, or brought back to Australia.

The Defence Department referred the matter to the War Office, mentioning the fact that representations had been made that the Train was employed on "non-combatant" work, which could be done by civilians. The G.O.C. Egypt took exception to the term "non-combatant"; the War Office, forwarding his opinion to Australia, said that the unit "had been employed exclusively upon work of an important military nature."

In the unit itself the discontent of some of the new arrivals was no secret, and the C.O. had more than once suggested that they should be transferred to the fighting line; but at the moment it was considered inadvisable to allow transfers in any section of the army, lest they should be used as precedents for other transfers of a more objectionable character. As for the action taken in Australia, he was given no information at all. On the 12th of January, 1917, he was told that the Train was to be relieved of Canal work and attached to the forces advancing into Palestine for duty along the beaches; the El Arish detachment was accordingly ordered to prepare to make a base there for the unit's headquarters, and the rest of January was spent in turning over the Canal work to reliefs and returning stores and material to dépôts and bases. On the 8th of February, however, the C.O. was informed that only part of the existing unit would be required for the beach duties, and was advised to find out how the men could best be redistributed. He therefore asked all detachments to elect whether they would—

- (a) transfer to the A.I.F.,
- (b) transfer to the Royal Navy, or
- (c) remain with the unit, preserving its identity.

76 chose the A.I.F., 43 the Navy, and 130 preferred to stay where they were.

¹ The attestation paper used for the Train enlisted the recruits in "the Naval Forces of the Commonwealth," and was attested by "a Commissioned Naval Officer."

What happened then is not at all clear. On the 18th of February the War Office sent the Defence Department a telegram not easily reconciled with the figures just given:

Recommend that personnel of Australian Naval Bridging Train be transferred to Australian army, with exception of 4 officers and 80 other ratings who will be retained in unit reorganised in two sections—one consisting of skilled engineers and kindred trades, and one of expert pier-builders and shore-workers. Personnel transferred to Australian army would be posted to whichever arm they are best suited. Anyone not accepting transfer to be discharged and returned to Australia.

The Australian Government concurred, adding that it would be pleased if all personnel could be absorbed in Australian Imperial Force or appointed for service in Royal Australian Navy. (Yet the Naval Board had already declined to use the men for seagoing service.)

On the 5th of March, the same day on which this telegram was sent, Lieutenant-Commander Bracegirdle was relieved of his command and appointed O.C. troops in the transport *Willochra*.

On the 20th the Train was accordingly informed that it was to be disbanded, and instead of it a new force, an "Army Troops Company, Australian Engineers, A.I.F.," was to be attached to the expedition advancing against Palestine. The rest must either volunteer for other work in the A.I.F. or return to Australia "for service in the Royal Australian Navy there or elsewhere." When these alternatives were put to the unit on the 22nd, the answer was decisive. The volunteering results were:

For return to Australia to join R.A.N.	..	..	153 ²
For transfer to Australian Artillery	..	..	43
For transfer to Australian Infantry	..	..	4
For transfer to Australian Light Horse	..	..	1
To remain in new Troops Company	..	..	2

On the 27th volunteers were again called for on the following basis:—

Volunteers to be transferred to unallotted reinforcements of any arm of the A.I.F.

Remainder to be returned to Australia for service in the R.A.N.³

The volunteering produced practically a replica of the previous list: about 50 men were willing to join the A.I.F., the rest preferred to go back to service in the R.A.N. On the 29th of May 6 officers and 177 other ratings embarked at Suez; they reached Melbourne on the 10th of July, were distributed to their several States, given leave—and discharged.⁴ The men who returned had been assured that a chance of further naval service would be given them. But on arrival in Melbourne they were informed by request of the Board (which at that time knew nothing about the offer made in Egypt) that

volunteers are required for the R.A.N. for the period of the war. Previous service in either the R.N. or R.A.N. is essential for entry into the R.A.N.

² Note the decrease in numbers volunteering for the A.I.F. as soon as they were offered a chance of joining the R.A.N.

³ Seamen and firemen to the number of 40 were required for river work in Mesopotamia; but this proposal was "purely tentative," and nothing came of it.

⁴ To prevent confusion it must be noted that the numbers given above do not altogether correspond with those found in official documents of the Defence Department. A Defence memorandum of 15 November, 1917, says that 1 officer and 97 ratings accepted transfer to the A.I.F., and 9 officers and 194 others returned to Australia "for disposal."

Those not so qualified—the great majority—were urged by the military authorities to transfer to infantry reinforcements. As soon as the Naval Board was informed of the Egyptian offer for service in the R.A.N., it decided that

volunteers of good character, not selected for the R.A.N. or R.A.N.B. staff, could be sworn in to serve in the Commonwealth Naval Forces for the period of the war . . . to relieve a corresponding number of trainees who are at present serving under Proclamation.

This decision was given on the 16th of July, 1917; but it was not till the end of November that it could be carried into effect, and by that time the remainder of the unit had dispersed beyond recall.