

# The New Zealand occupation of Samoa, 29 August 1914

## Introduction

Information on the New Zealand involvement in the First World War normally consists of the units serving on Gallipoli, the Western Front, Egypt and Palestine. Less well known is the occupation of Samoa on 29 August 1914, which was the first military action to be performed by the newly established New Zealand armed forces.

## Mobilisation of the New Zealand Army

New Zealand's response to the outbreak of war on 4 August was quick and wholehearted. Compulsory military training had begun in 1912 and had already yielded some 29,500 Territorials and 26,500 senior cadets. In addition, there were 10,000 reservists, or over 66,000 men in all.

## The occupation of Samoa, 29th August 1914

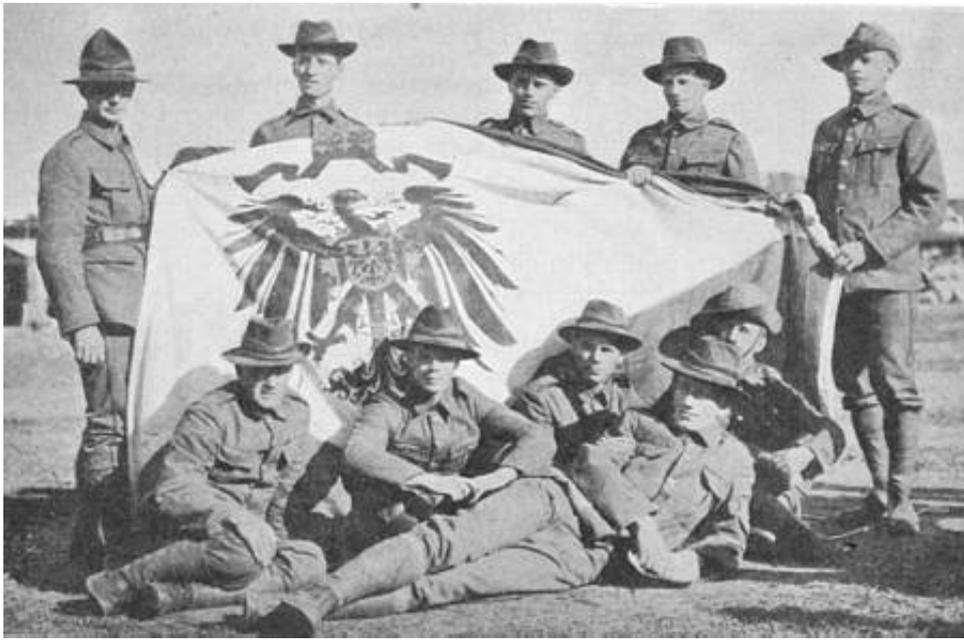


Map 1: The South Pacific Ocean.

From Statistics of Samoa (Nation Master)

No Imperial role for the New Zealand military forces had been decided before the war, but on the night of 6 August 1914, a message from the Secretary of State for War was received by His Excellency the Governor: "*If your Ministers desire and feel themselves able to seize the German wireless station at Samoa, we should feel that this was a great and urgent Imperial service ...*"

This was approved next day, and four days later a mixed force of 1,413 [1](#) men plus six nursing sisters was equipped and ready.



*New Zealand Expeditionary Force with captured German flag from Samoa.*  
From [FirstWorldWar.com](http://FirstWorldWar.com).

On the 15 August 1915 the Samoan Advance Force left Wellington, picking up 10 more infantrymen, some naval details, and guides and interpreters at Fiji, and on the 29 August 1915 it landed unopposed at Apia, the main island of Western Samoa.

In March 1915 the Samoan Relief Force of 358 men took over, and by the end of the war another 298 men were supplied to maintain the garrison.

### **Photographic references**

The Alexander Turnbull Library, the research library within the National Library of New Zealand, holds a number of photographs from the landing and later.

### **The Samoan Advance Force**



*Colonel Robert Logan* [2](#)).

The landing force was commanded by Colonel (temporary) Robert Logan of the New Zealand Army. In 1914, Colonel Logan (1st Regiment Otago Mounted Rifles) was commander of the Auckland Military

District; he became full colonel in October 1915.

The infantry element consisted of c.1,000 men from the 3rd (Auckland) Regiment (Countess of Ranfurly's Own) and the 5th (Wellington Rifles) Regiment.

The force included 4 light guns, probably from the 'D' Mountain Battery (Captain Anderson).

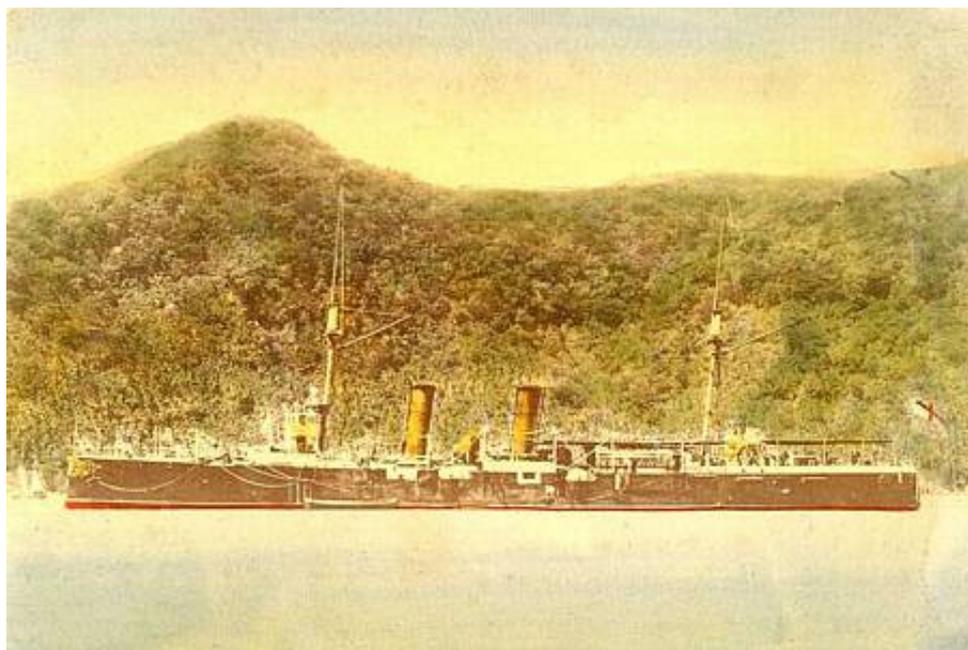
The engineer element consisted of a field company, a railway engineer company (Captain Keenan) and a signals detachment

Further, detachments the New Zealand Medical Corps and New Zealand Army Service Corps were included in the Samoan Advance Force.

### **The naval contribution**

The expeditionary force was transported in two ships from the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand [3](#)) - the S/S MOERAKI (4,392 gross tons; built in 1903) and S/S MONOWAI (3,433 gross tons; built in 1890).

The naval contingent, commanded by Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey, consisted of three obsolescent "P" class cruisers - HMS PHILOMEL, HMS PSYCHE and HMS PYRAMUS; joined by HMAS AUSTRALIA, HMAS MELBOURNE and the French cruiser MONTCALM at New Caledonia.



*HMS PSYCHE or HMS PIONEER, c.1912.*

From a contemporary coloured postcard seen for sale on Ebay.

HMS Philomel was a Peal class Third Class Cruiser (1890). A photo of HMS Philomel is found at World War 1 Naval Combat.

HMS Psyche and HMS Pyramus were of the Pelorous class (1900). See Pelorous Class Third Class Protected Cruisers (World War 1 Naval Combat).

HMS PHILOMEL was transferred to the New Zealand Government in 1914 and commissioned at Wellington on 15 July 1914. With its complement augmented by 60-70 New Zealand reservists, the PHILOMEL escorted first the Samoan force and then the main New Zealand Expeditionary Force to Egypt.

Refer to Source 5 for further information on the PHILOMEL, which served in the New Zealand Division

of the Royal Navy (from 1941 Royal New Zealand Navy) in various capacities until 16 January 1947.

## The German colony of Samoa



*The Governor's orderly  
of the Fita-Fita,  
the Samoan paramilitary  
police force.*

Cigarette card No. 96 in  
the Waldorf-Astoria series  
German Naval and Colonial  
Forces. (Source 6)

Samoa became officially a German colony as of 1 March 1900, based on a treaty between Britain, the United States of America and Germany [4](#).

Unlike most other German colonies, Samoa had no military units, but only a small police force [5](#).

In 1914 the force consisted of some 30 Fita-Fita (Samoan for paramilitary police constables) and 20-25 local police constables (Landespolizisten), all headed by a German Chief of Police (Polizeimeister).



*Native paramilitary police  
constable from New Guinea  
(Kaiser-Wilhelms-Land).*

Cigarette card No. 94 in

the Waldorf-Astoria series  
German Naval and Colonial  
Forces. (Source 6)

The Fita-Fitas were recruited from sons of native chiefs and influential families; they served mostly as orderlies for Government establishments and as guards. The local police constables served in various native villages and at two police posts, known as Cana and Saluafáta.

Apparently, the Fita-Fita could not to be trusted under all circumstances, since the bolts of their rifles were withdrawn during an internal unrest in 1909.

Paramilitary police from the German colony New Guinea [6](#) (Kaiser-Wilhelms-Land) as well as a naval landing party were brought in to quell the unrest.



*A German naval rating,  
equipped for landing party  
duties in the tropics.*

Cigarette card No. 43 in  
the Waldorf-Astoria series  
German Naval and Colonial  
Forces. (Source 6)

### **On the eve of the invasion**

The German wireless station on Samoa, which more or less was the reason for the New Zealand operations, opened just weeks before the invasion, on 2 August 1914. Until then, telegrams had to be shipped from New Zealand, including the telegram with the information on the Murder at Sarajevo, 28 June 1914.

The threat of this wireless station must be seen in the context of the German East Asia Squadron [7](#) based at Tsingtao. The Squadron included the modern cruisers SMS SCHARNHORST, SMS GNEISENAU and SMS NÜRNBERG.

When the war broke out, a small number of Germans formed a citizens' force (Bürgerwehr), consisting c. 50 men, organised in 3 detachments - one guarded the wireless station and the other two took turns serving as coastal guards.

The governor held a council of war with owners of some large plantations, business men and government officials; the conclusion was that any form of military resistance would be meaningless and just lead to unnecessary bloodshed.

## The German surrender

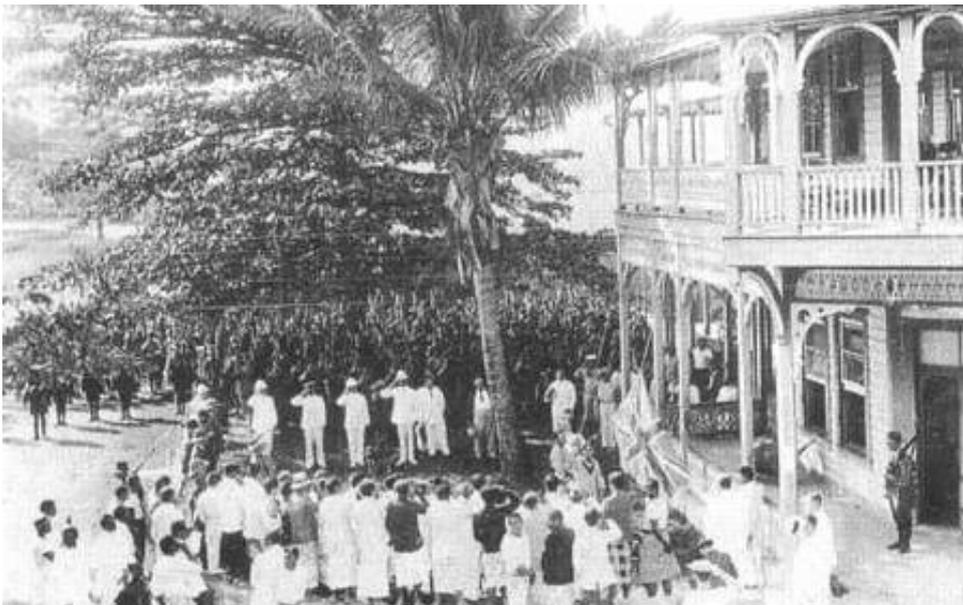
In the early hours of 29 August 1914, the Samoan Advance Force steamed closed in on the harbour of Apia; two small steam boats searched the harbour for mines and a small boat, carrying a white flag transported two naval officers to the Bismarck Jetty.



*The landing at Apia, Samoa, 29 August 1914.*  
From New Zealand in the Great War (Digger History).

The first British Commonwealth officer to land on enemy territory in World War I was Lieutenant Edward Church, paymaster of HMS Psyche, who was instructed to carry the Admiral's demand for unconditional surrender to the German representatives. [8](#)

The German Governor, Erich Schultz-Ewerth, had left town to "*attend a conference of orators and chiefs*", thus leaving an acting governor to receive the request for surrender. Negotiations commenced, but in the end the Germans had to accept the New Zealand occupation, and did so under protest.



*Hoisting the Union Jack, Courthouse, Apia, Samoa, 30 August 1914.*  
From New Zealand in the Great War (Digger History).

The radio station in Apia was dismantled by the Germans to keep it out of British hands, and the members of the citizens force dismissed themselves.

The Union Jack was hoisted approximately 08:30 on 30 August 1914; the ships' guns saluted from the harbour.

## **The New Zealand occupation**

Although, the Governor had been promised to be deported to Fiji, he was taken to Auckland, New Zealand as a prisoner of war on 2 September 1914, together with his secretary, Mars, and the director of the wireless station, Hirsch.

My sources to the New Zealand occupation is very anti-New Zealand (Sources 8 and 9), but it stands out that the Germans on Samoa was not in any way impressed by the New Zealand troops in their heavy woollen uniforms, more useful for warfare in Europe than in the Southern Pacific. Further, the soldiers seemed very young and lacking in military training.

At first, the relationship was tolerable but during the next few months, and culminating around Christmas 1914, things turned out rather bad.

In the middle of September 1914 however, the situation changed when the German cruisers SMS SCHARNHORST and SMS GNEISENAU appeared at the mouth of the bay leading to the harbour in Apia. All Germans hoped that the occupation would soon be over, but in the end it turned out that the cruisers had more important things to do, and a message with this statement was delivered to Colonel Robert Logan from the German naval commander, Vice-Admiral Graf Maximilian von Spee. The German morale sunk accordingly!

According to Source 8, several hundred New Zealand soldiers, bored by having nothing to do on this remote island, broke into some warehouses at the harbour on 26 December 1914 and "liberated" large quantities of alcohol, from which they have been barred since the occupation began.

According to Source 9, the situation went quite out of hand, and Colonel Robert Logan had to invent a threat from the German battlecruiser SMS VON DER TANN was observed in the Pacific Ocean heading for Samoa - a situation similar to the appearance of SMS SCHARNHORST and SMS GNEISENAU - in order to regain control of his force. This threat sobered up the soldiers and they were ordered into the hills surrounding Apia to dig trenches and other fortifications.

In March 1915 the Samoan Relief Force relieved the Samoan Advance Force. This new force consisted of more mature men, many being veterans from the Boer War, and this eased the tension between the Germans and the occupational force.

## **In conclusion**

The New Zealand involvement in Samoa lasted until 1962. After the First World War, Samoa was a New Zealand mandate of The League of Nations [9](#), and later a trusteeship from the United Nations. In 1962, the former German colony became an independent nation under the name of Western Samoa, from 1997, Samoa.

Many of the young New Zealand soldiers serving with the Samoa Advance Force went to Gallipoli afterwards. Many never came back ...

## **Sources**

1. The Concentration of the Expeditionary Force in The New Zealanders at Gallipoli by Colonel Fred Waite, Whitcombe and Tombs, Christchurch, New Zealand 1919 (New Zealand Electronic Text Centre).
2. The New Zealand Expeditionary Force in the First World War (Te ara - An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, 1966)

3. The Navy (Te ara - An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand).
4. Before Gallipoli - Australian Operations in 1914, Semaphore - Newsletter of the Sea Power Centre Australia, Issue 7, August 2003.
5. Record of HMNZS Philomel, Appendix 8 in *The Royal New Zealand Navy* by Sydney David Waters, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington 1956, Part of *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945*.
6. *Uniformen der Marine und Schutztruppe, Waldorf-Astoria Zigaretten, Munic 1933 (Preußische Geschichte und Militärgeschichte (Großer Generalstab).*
7. *Das Deutsche Koloniallexikon, 1920 (Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main).*
8. *Erste und letzte Tage Deutsch-Samoas - Schutzmacht und neuseeländische Okkupation im Wechsel* by Robert Vandergast (Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und Überseetruppen).
9. *Samoa im Weltkriege based on Sturm- und Sonnentage auf Samoa* by Dr. Arthur Berger, Verlag Deutsche Buchwerkstätten 1923 (Jaduland).
10. *Military Badges of the British Empire 1914-18* by Reginald H.W. Cox, The Standard Art Book Co. Chicago Illinois 1983, ISBN 1-84342-384-7.

Per Finsted

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### Notes:

- 1) The official website of the New Zealand Army gives the number as 1,382 New Zealand volunteers.
- 2) From Robert Logan (1863-1935) (*Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*).
- 3) See Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand and S/S MOERAKI (*The Ship List*). A photo of S/S MOERAKI and S/S MONOWAI about to leave Wellington's Clyde Quay as troop transports on 15 August 1914 is included in the aforementioned photographic collection at the Alexander Turnbull Library (identified via New Zealand Maritime Index).
- 4) For the colonial history of Samoa, see Samoa by Chris Dale (*Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz-und Überseetruppen*) and Samoa (*World Statesmen.org*); the latter link includes a good map and a list of governors etc.
- 5) For information on German colonial uniforms, see *German Colonial Uniforms* (by Horst Hübner). The Samoa section includes a photo of a red sash similar to the one worn by Fita-Fita. Further, the Samoa Police badge is illustrated.
- 6) See also *Schutzgebiete, Südsee (Bilddokumente zur deutschen Polizeigeschichte)*.
- 7) See *Vice-Admiral Graf Spee's Cruiser Squadron (World War 1 Naval Combat)*.
- 8) Information on the German surrender derives from 29th August 1914 by Christine Liava'a (*Great War Forum*).
- 9) For the early part of the New Zealand administration of Samoa, refer to *The Native Department under New Zealand administration* by Te'o Tuvala (*New Zealand Electronic Text Centre*).