

# The Navy and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic

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The world is currently combating the Coronavirus (COVID-19), which originated in China and has now spread throughout the globe. So far, Australia has fortunately been spared the worst of the outbreak, but this is not the first pandemic to reach our shores.

In 1918, towards the end of World War I, the world suffered the worst pandemic since the Black Death (Great Bubonic Plague of 1346–1353, which killed an estimated 75+ million). The 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic killed more than 50 million people worldwide and was erroneously called the ‘Spanish Influenza’ as it was neutral Spain that first reported the outbreak that is now widely accepted as having originated in the United States in late 1917. The disease was taken to Europe by US troops where it spread throughout Britain and France during 1918.<sup>1</sup> There were three waves of the virus as it mutated, and these became more and more virulent as the disease spread worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

In Australia, quarantine measures were enacted in October 1918; however, cases of ‘Spanish Influenza’ began to appear throughout the country. About 40 per cent of the Australian population (then five million people) fell sick, and around 15 000 died as the virus spread throughout Australia.

The first infected ship to enter Australian waters was SS *Mataram*, arriving in Darwin from Singapore, on 18 October 1918. Over the next six months, the

quarantine services intercepted 323 vessels, 174 of which carried the infection. Of the 81 510 people who were checked, 1 102 were infected. In a sign of things to come the troopship *Boonah*, which had left England in October 1918, arrived in Western Australian waters in December with over 300 sick men on board. She was diverted to the quarantine station at Woodman Point where the soldiers disembarked. One of the nursing staff later recorded ‘There was little that could be done for the cyanosis, the croupy cough, the delirium and final unconsciousness’;<sup>3</sup> 27 soldiers and four medical staff died.

During 26–27 November 1918, the federal government held a national influenza planning conference in Melbourne, where state health ministers, the directors-general of their health departments and British Medical Association representatives met to discuss what action was to be taken. The conference agreed that the federal government would take responsibility for proclaiming which states were infected along with organising maritime and land quarantine. The states would arrange emergency hospitals, vaccination depots, ambulance services, medical staff and public awareness measures. All states had quarantine stations, but more were planned in case numbers overwhelmed their capacity. In due course, temporary quarantine stations and influenza hospitals were set up to handle the increasing volume of affected Australians.



Figure 1 Temporary beds at Melbourne’s Great Exhibition Building during the Spanish Flu pandemic. NMA

Additionally, the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories had been established during the war to alleviate Australia's dependence on imported vaccines and developed its first experimental pneumonic influenza vaccine. Between 15 October 1918 and 15 March 1919, over three million doses were given to returning Australian soldiers and sailors and also to the civilian population. The vaccine was deemed to be partially effective in preventing death in inoculated individuals.

In Melbourne, the first recorded case of pneumonic influenza appeared on 9/10 January 1919, but the disease may have reached Victoria before then as there was a delay in the Victorian Government advising federal authorities. Early cases were also so mild that there was confusion about whether the virus was 'Spanish Influenza' or a continuation of the seasonal flu virus from the previous winter. This uncertainty delayed the confirmation of an outbreak by Victorian health authorities, which allowed the infection to spread to New South Wales and South Australia by the end of January 1919. New South Wales was the first state to officially proclaim an outbreak of pneumonic influenza on 27 January 1919, with Victoria declaring the outbreak the following day.<sup>4</sup> In New South Wales, the wearing of masks was made compulsory on 31 January 1919 but with mixed results across the state.

The Royal Australian Navy was both a victim of the outbreak and also a part of the solution. In late 1918, Australian warships operating in the northern hemisphere were struck by the virus with the

destroyer HMAS *Huon*—then in dry-dock in Genoa, northern Italy—suffering five deaths in late October 1918, including two brothers (Stokers Ernest and Reginald Browne from Wollongong who died within a few days of each other).<sup>5</sup> HMAS *Torrens*, a sister ship of *Huon*, lost only one of her ship's company, 30-year-old Lieutenant Reginald Farmer who died at Messina, Sicily on 9 October 1918. The light cruiser HMAS *Brisbane*, arriving in the eastern Mediterranean in late November 1918, was also greatly affected with 183 of her ship's company of 400 men contracting the disease with three dying as a result.

The battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* and the light cruisers HMA Ships *Melbourne* and *Sydney*, then in English waters, were also affected, but the death toll was lower as they had access to better medical facilities. Among the dead was 35-year-old Chief Yeoman of Signals Thomas Moylan, from Australia, who died in the Naval Sick Quarters on the island of Guernsey on 16 February 1919.

The troopship HMA *Barambah*, departing Australian waters in early September 1918, allegedly in a filthy state from her previous troopship voyage to Australia, had an outbreak of influenza on board while off the west coast of Africa. More than 20 soldiers and four Royal Australian Navy (RAN) personnel died. The naval casualties were Engineer Lieutenant Norman Davies, Stoker Petty Officer William Craddock, Stoker George Nye and Stoker Albert Thatcher whom all died between 19 October and 1 November 1918. Nye and Thatcher died in hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone, while Craddock and Davies died on board *Barambah* and were buried at sea.



Figure 2 NSW medical staff at Surry Hills Depot during Spanish Flu pandemic 1919. NSW National Archives

Following the Armistice of 11 November 1918, the RAN ships overseas began to return to Australia, however, many sick personnel were left behind in hospitals in Britain where some died. The battlecruiser *Australia* was one of the last ships to return to Australia, arriving in Fremantle on 28 May 1919 for a four-day visit. Due to the city's relative isolation and effective state border quarantine control, Perth had effectively avoided pneumonic influenza, but an outbreak occurred in June 1919. There is a possibility that the battlecruiser may have brought the contagion to Western Australia and Perth experienced a spike in infections after crowds gathered to celebrate Peace Day on 19 July 1919.

Sub-Lieutenant (later Vice Admiral) John Collins was one of the few RAN personnel remaining behind in England after the Armistice. He was appointed to the new destroyer HMS *Spencer* and recalled the ship carrying the bodies of influenza victims from England to Holland for burial.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the RAN suffered 284 deaths between 4 August 1914 and 31 August 1921 (the Commonwealth War Graves Commission official period for commemoration) of which 35 can be directly linked to the influenza pandemic. The illness potentially exacerbated another 15 deaths, thus making one in every six members of the RAN who died during World War I a victim of the pandemic. Hundreds more were hospitalised, and, at times, ships were unable to proceed to sea due to the lack of fit crewmembers. The RAN's major training base, Williamstown Naval Depot in Victoria, was also placed in quarantine with 345 personnel affected.<sup>7</sup> Those who died were often young fit men, although the oldest was 44-year-old Lieutenant Commander David Ross, who was a senior Naval Transport Officer in Sydney, and is believed to have contracted the disease while visiting a returning troopship in June 1919.

The Australian navy was also part of the solution to the pandemic. In late November 1918 news was received in Australia that the influenza pandemic had struck the South-West Pacific islands of Samoa (a former German colony now controlled by New Zealand), Fiji and Tonga (both British protectorates). All three outbreaks were linked to infected people arriving by ship and quarantine procedures not being enforced. Britain and New Zealand requested immediate assistance from Australia (the influenza pandemic had struck New Zealand in October 1918 resulting in several thousand deaths and overwhelming the nation's health systems). The Australian government acted quickly and the light cruiser HMAS *Encounter* was directed to embark navy and army medical personnel, equipment to set up field hospitals and

all necessary medical equipment and supplies to combat the scourge.

*Encounter* sailed on 24 November 1918 visiting all three islands and medical teams disembarked at Samoa and Tonga to combat the disease. These teams effectively brought the disease under control but not before hundreds had died. The sloop HMAS *Fantome* had operated in the Pacific for most of the war and provided support to a New Zealand medical team in Fiji even though 67 members of her crew were suffering from disease (although none died). *Encounter* returned to Sydney on 17 December 1918, and her crew were immediately placed in quarantine which lasted until 26 December. The naval and army medical teams left in Samoa and Tonga returned to Australia during January–February 1919.<sup>8</sup>

Maritime quarantine also played a significant part in containing the spread of the virus until its virulence lessened. The RAN also assisted with this activity. HMAS *Sleuth*, a former patrol vessel attached to the training ship HMAS *Tingira*<sup>9</sup> moored in Rose Bay (Sydney), was utilised as a patrol vessel off the North Head Quarantine Station during the first few months of 1919. Her task was to monitor the ships that had been quarantined after entering Sydney Harbour, and prevent passengers and returning soldiers from 'breaking out' from the ships and the North Head Quarantine Station. Some of the soldiers had been away from Australia for many years and escape attempts by boat or swimming ashore had to be prevented.

The task of quarantining these returning soldiers should not be underestimated with over 160 000 Australian military personnel returning from Europe and the Middle East from December 1918 until September 1919 (in 147 troopships). Many of the men who had served on the Western Front had married in England and were bringing wives and children with them. In addition, there were several thousands more Australians who had served in the various British forces also returning to Australia from the epicentre of the virus.

The various measures employed in each state (i.e. mandatory wearing of masks and prevention of mass gatherings) did not stop the disease but did dramatically slow its spread, and by the end of 1919, the influenza pandemic was over. The 'Spanish Flu' had a devastating effect across the globe, killing at least 50 million people. In Australia, the estimated death toll of 15 000 people was still high, but it was less than a quarter of the country's 62 000 service personnel who died as a result of World War I.



The greatest number of deaths occurred in the capital cities of the Australian states where the population was more densely housed, particularly in the working class 'slums' with lower standards of health, hygiene and diet. RAN warships were also susceptible to higher infection rates due to overcrowded mess-decks and lack of fresh vegetables and fruit when at sea. Overall, however, Australia's death rate of 2.7 per 1000 head of population was one of the lowest recorded of any country during the pandemic.

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### Notes

1. A number of counterclaims have been made that the influenza (H1N1) was 'brought' to Europe by members of the Chinese Labour Corps who had transited via Canada in 1916–17 (following an outbreak of virulent influenza in southern China) and who subsequently served on the Western Front. This theory was first proposed in 1942 by Australians Frank MacFarlane Burnett and Ellen Clark in *Influenza: A Survey of the Last 50 Years in the Light of Modern Work on the Virus of Epidemic Influenza* (published by Macmillan and Co. Ltd of Melbourne) and further detailed by Christopher Langford in September 2005 (*Population and Development Review*) and 2014 by Mark Humphries from the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. Counterclaims have also been made by the Chinese Medical Association in their Journal, stating that members of the Chinese Labour Corps suffered from the disease only after they had arrived in France and also after the disease had affected other troops. This article will not delve into this complex issue.
2. In New South Wales, 50 deaths were recorded as attributable to the virus during January–March 1919, during March to May 1919 there were 1 542 deaths and during May to September 1919 the state recorded 4 302 deaths.
3. Plowman, P. *Across the Sea to War*, Rosenberg Publishing Pty Ltd: Dural NSW. 2003. p. 73.
4. A returned soldier who had disembarked from a troopship in Melbourne before travelling by train to Sydney was the first reported case in NSW (on 24 January 1919) with seven other soldiers, who also disembarked in Melbourne, soon falling ill at the No 4 Military Hospital at Randwick.
5. The entire ship's company of 70 personnel was affected to various degrees by the virus and hospitalised.
6. Macdougall, A. *Collins of the Sydney*, Clarion Editions: Mudgee NSW. 2018. p. 99.
7. HMAS *Encounter* was located at Williamstown from early 1919 onwards as the RAN's sea-going training ship, and an infected member of her ships company may have spread the virus to those at the training depot.
8. For more information, refer to *Influenza in Samoa* by Surgeon Lieutenant Francis Temple Grey, RAN in the *British Medical Journal* 1919; Volume 1.
9. Despite the threat of influenza, the training ship HMAS *Tingira* continued to recruit boys aged between 14 and 16 throughout the pandemic. Those recruited spent up to two weeks at the recruiting processing buildings at Lyne Park before going on board the ship.