



AUSTRALIA'S FORGOTTEN ANZACS

Lost images from Australia's first conflict: the fall of German New Guinea

Lost and found

Thomas James Rodoni's glass plate and film negatives were discovered under a house in Speers Point by Rodoni's son Bill, and then gifted to the University of Newcastle's Cultural Collections in early 2014.

The collection was very broad in scope, but an important segment was found to depict Australia's first military engagement of World War I: the lesser known capture and occupation of German New Guinea in 1914 by the Australian Forces.

It has been a fascinating and exciting process to recover and restore many of these images, while learning more about the elusive man behind the camera, Thomas (TJ) Rodoni. I was fortunate in meeting Bill, his youngest son,

and I thank both him and artists Chris and Frances Fussell, for bringing this collection to the University's attention.

In the broader context of ANZAC Centenary commemorations, this exhibition brings both personal stories and national history to light; a tribute to Rodoni and the Australian forces that contributed to the war effort. The University of Newcastle is honoured, as a part of its 50th anniversary, to invite students, staff and visitors to see these extraordinary images for the first time in March 2015.

- Gilleen Shaw, Art Curator, University Gallery

Unearthing the negatives

The glass plates collected from the Rodoni family filled around four archival boxes. Some negatives were in relatively good condition, others were in a terrible state: water damaged, mouldy, dirty, and stuck (blocked) together. In the hands of our Conservator they underwent a thorough conservation and preservation treatment involving documenting their condition, cleaning, separating damaged plates. Then the collection was digitised before being re-housed in new archival boxes.

This image collection potentially contributes new knowledge about the Australian Forces in World War 1 from 1914 onwards, particularly those forces who served in the Pacific. Recent historical research has enabled us to build a more comprehensive story.

This exhibition will be the first opportunity for the wider community to engage with the photographs and we hope possibly contribute valuable information about people and place from the pre-war years to post-World War I.

- Gianni Di Gravio, University of Newcastle Archivist

Thomas James Rodoni: unofficial photographer

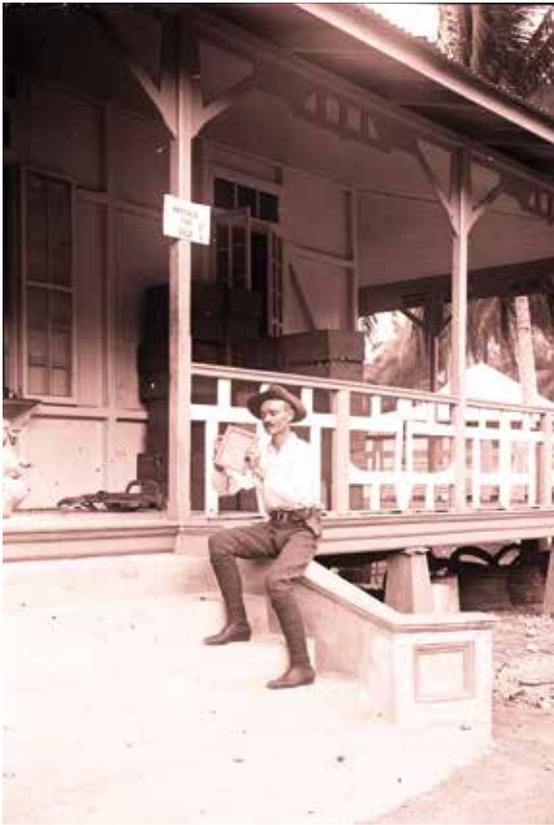
Thomas James Rodoni was born in 1882 at Hotham East, Victoria, to Swiss and Irish parents. While living in Sydney in August 1914, Rodoni joined the first Australian Force that would engage in the Great War: the Australian Naval & Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF). A week after enlisting, Rodoni's company embarked on the HMAS *Berrima* and sailed to German New Guinea among a fleet with orders to seize two wireless stations and to disable the German colonies there. Rodoni was 31.

Rodoni's unofficial photographs – many of them “candid” shots, captured in the moment – are a rare glimpse of this pivotal moment in Australia's history. He has documented the energetic atmosphere of pre-war Sydney and surrounds, focussing on civilian and military marches, Naval ships docked in Sydney Harbour, and the crowds of people brought together for these special events. His camera voyaged with him on the expedition to the Pacific region, taking images both from the ship's deck and then again on dry land after disembarking.

Rodoni was stationed in New Guinea for five months with the AN&MEF after the successful capture of territory from the German forces. His striking images are a testament to his talent with the camera. The ease of his fellow servicemen around this avid amateur photographer is also apparent. His camera enabled him to record daily events and significant moments in the expedition, along with several group portraits of the officers and soldiers in his company. His images also suggest a genuine curiosity for the foreign people and places where he was stationed during this early war period.

After leaving New Guinea with the AN&MEF and returning home to Australia in late January 1915, Rodoni left the force to work in a Small Arms Factory manufacturing munitions for the war. He soon married and settled in Newcastle with his wife, Catherine Annie Wilson, and had four children: Thomas, Mary, Jim and William (Bill). Rodoni lived and worked in the Newcastle area until he died in 1956 as a result of a local car accident.

The wider collection of glass plate and film negatives – over 600 in total and with many views of Newcastle and its surrounds – is an incredible legacy from Thomas Rodoni and his family.



Thomas James Rodoni, *Self-portrait on the steps (New Guinea), 1914*



Rodoni's personal equipment: including camera, binoculars and handheld compass



Recruitment for the Great War

Volunteer Brigades were common and met on a regular basis across New South Wales before the outbreak of WWI. It is likely that groups such as 'Rifle Clubs', Naval Brigades and Civillian Militia engaged in training and drill exercises, intensifying in preparation for the looming war. Many of Rodoni's images show contingents of men in marching formations and official parades from the Sydney area, as well as what appear to be recruitment drives across Sydney and Newcastle.

Recruitment and enlistment for the Australian Naval & Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) began in August 1914; just days after Britain declared war on Germany. They were the first Australian force to engage in this early stage of the war, and crucial in securing and maintaining Imperial Security in the Pacific region.

LEFT: Thomas James Rodoni,
*Parade - "Domain Artillery off to the
Front", 1914*

RIGHT: Thomas James Rodoni,
*Marching troops, bearing the
Leichhardt flag, 1914*



Preparations and sailing to the front lines

Rodoni photographed the Australian fleet in Sydney Harbour in late 1913, making multiple images of the HMAS *Australia* battlecruiser. Small crowds of people watch the huge ship from the docks or their private boats, suggesting excitement surrounding the spectacle. At this time the public was not yet fully aware of the imminent conflict.

The first volunteers working for the Red Cross accumulated various goods and equipment for the AN&MEF troopship HMAS *Berrima*: Rodoni's passenger ship to New Guinea. The nurses shown in Rodoni's images may have been with the Red Cross or been part of the Voluntary Aid Detachment working alongside doctors and nurses during the war. On the front lines they supplied hospital bags, medical relief, and comfort to sick and wounded Anzac soldiers.

LEFT: Thomas James Rodoni,
*People in boats watching the HMAS
Australia in Sydney Harbour, 1913*

RIGHT: Thomas James Rodoni,
Anzac troops and nurses, 1914



Arriving in New Guinea - the first war front

The fleet carrying the AN&MEF arrived in New Guinea in early September 1914. After a short stop at Palm Island, North Queensland, to await further instructions. Australia then suffered its first military casualties of the war, following a brief battle to seize the low-power wireless station at Bita Paka, near Rabaul, more intense fighting resulted in six Australian, two German and thirty Melanesian deaths.

Rodoni's photographs from the expedition provide an interesting picture of the side-by-side formal and informal atmospheres created by the campaign. Several depict the beginnings of an Australian military administration in the area: officers and troops standing to attention, sailors performing official ceremonies on board the ship, and soldiers overseeing the Indigenous Police force. Wide angled shots of naval ships or the dense tropical landscape on the shoreline give a sense of the marked contrast between the expanse of the ocean and the hot and unfamiliar jungle scape.

LEFT: Thomas James Rodoni, *Standing group of ANZACs and local soldiers (New Guinea), 1914*

RIGHT: Thomas James Rodoni, *Ship docking (New Guinea), 1914*



Engagement and occupation

On 21 September 1914 the German/New Guinean forces surrendered to the AN&MEF. Within weeks most German territories in New Guinea were occupied by Australian troops under the British flag. Rodoni's regiment was stationed there for five months before being relieved in January 1915 by the Special Tropical Forces.

Rodoni took group portraits of the officers and soldiers in his company, arranged both formally and in relaxed atmosphere. Images of the officers with their white uniforms were in glaring contrast to the surrounding landscape. The troops casually lying in the long grass, Rodoni captures both the strangeness of the foreign land. Rodoni also took several striking images of the local Indigenous Communities, suggesting complex negotiations and engagement between cultures during this time. Tribesmen stand together in close-up portraits and near towering tree huts, or are photographed from afar on the Sepik River in their elegantly carved canoes.

LEFT: Thomas James Rodoni,
*Group of men - troops messing
around (New Guinea), 1914*

MIDDLE: Thomas James Rodoni,
*Local New Guineans in canoes
beside a boat, 1914*

RIGHT: Thomas James Rodoni,
*Two uniformed men seated (New
Guinea), 1914*



One hundred years after their creation, Rodoni's glass plate and early film negatives are considerably rare as there are few wartime collections taken by non-official photographers during WWI. As a visual diary, they hold great social and historical value. Although damaged, unlabelled and somewhat incomplete, they have the potential to enrich the narrative of Australia's early engagement in the Great War.

The University Gallery and Cultural Collections acknowledge the support of the late Bill Rodoni, Ian Rodoni and their family, along with Chris and Frances Fussell, in bringing this extraordinary collection to light.

ABOVE: Thomas James Rodoni, *Group of uniformed soldiers (New Guinea)*, 1914

FRONT COVER: Thomas James Rodoni, *Group of soldiers (G.M.P Madang N.G.1914)*, 1914



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

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1965-2015