

THE SILENT ANZAC: AUSTRALIAN SUBMARINE AE2 AT GALLIPOLI

Graham Seal

As the Anzacs landed on the beaches of Gallipoli on April 25, 1915, one of Australia's first submarines torpedoed a Turkish warship on the other side of the peninsula. *AE2* was the first submarine to penetrate the treacherous currents and deadly minefields of the Narrows, the courage of her commander and crew becoming one of the foundations of the Anzac legend.

AE2 was built in Britain for the Royal Australian Navy and in early March 1914 began a record-breaking three-month voyage to Australia. At just over 54 meters in length she was one of the first submarines to be fitted with wireless equipment, an innovation that was to have important consequences for the later Gallipoli campaign. She was commanded by Irishman Lieutenant Henry Hugh Gordon Dacre Stoker, RN, and crewed by 31 Australian and British submariners, including a West Australian, Charles Suckling.

After leaving Albany with the second contingent of the First AIF on December 31, *AE2* joined British B class submarines patrolling the Dardanelles Straits early in February 1915. The allies needed to penetrate the heavily mined area of the Straits known as 'The Narrows' to allow the allied fleet into the Sea of Marmara. This would threaten the Turkish capital Constantinople (Istanbul) and interfere with their confrontation with Russian forces on the Caucasus.

Submarines were an untried weapon, but Stoker was keen to be the first to force the Dardanelles. On the morning of April 25 he took his tiny metal container and crew into the jagged narrows and minefields. They 'entered the straits at about 8 knots', Stoker later wrote in his official report, with Turkish searchlights 'sweeping the straits'. *AE2* had been ordered to 'generally run amok' in the Narrows as a diversionary action to cover the landings. Around dawn, *AE2* was fired on from a gun battery on the northern shore. She dived, then crept through the minefield and as

Stoker recalled: 'During the ensuing half-hour or so the scraping of wires against the vessel's side was almost continuous, and on two occasions something caught up forward and became loose and scraped away aft'.

After escaping the mines the enemy opened fire on *AE2* from their forts along both sides of the strait. As he narrowly avoided being rammed by a Turkish destroyer, Stoker fired off a bow torpedo, disabling a small cruiser. But then *AE2* grounded beneath Fort Anatoli Medjidieh, fortunately too close inshore for the fort's guns to bear. Crewman AB Knaggs wrote in his diary that 'Fire was opened on us from all sides, the captain said the sea was one mass of foam caused by the shells fired at us but luckily we were not hit'. He went on to recall 'we could hear inside the boat the shrapnel dropping on us like a lot of stones'.

They managed to get *AE2* off, only to ground again on the opposite bank. Stoker dragged his boat off again knowing she was now too badly damaged to fight 'but as I considered my chief duty was to prove the passage through the straits to be possible, I decided to continue on my course'. Recollecting these events crewman AB John Wheat wrote 'Nobody knows what a terrible strain it is on the nerves to undergo anything like this'.

Pursued by Turkish warships, *AE2* settled to the bottom, narrowly escaping underwater explosive devices. Not until 9pm was it safe to surface, recharge the batteries and replenish the fetid air inside the submarine after sixteen nerve-wrenching hours of confinement. Stoker ordered the 23 year-old wireless telegraphist William Falconer to signal their success. Falconer transmitted but was unable to receive a reply, continuing to send the signal in the desperate hope that it would be picked up.

It was. The news that an Australian submarine had penetrated the Dardanelles and torpedoed a Turkish warship provided a much-needed morale boost to the faltering Gallipoli landings when the commanding General Sir Ian Hamilton received it in the grim early hours of April 26. Instead of agreeing with the shore commanders' suggestion that the landing forces withdraw 'at once', Hamilton informed them of *AE2*'s success and urged them 'to dig yourselves right in and stick it out'.

After *AE2* entered the Sea of Marmara her lead was quickly followed by the British submarine *E14*. The two vessels met and arranged to rendezvous at 10am on April 30. *AE2* arrived at the meeting point only to find a Turkish torpedo boat, *Sultanhisar*, approaching. *AE2* dived and waited, a tactic she had successfully used to avoid being shelled and rammed. But half an hour later for no apparent reason she went wildly out of control and began rising to the surface where she was easy prey for the waiting torpedo boat. Frantically flooding a forward tank caused *AE2* to dive but she could not be controlled and sank to well below her 100-foot maximum depth where she was in danger of being crushed by the pressure. Stoker ordered full astern and *AE2* now began to rise stern first as uncontrollably as she had sunk.

Breaking the surface, *AE2* presented an unmissable target. *Sultanhisar* fired into her pressure hull and engine room. Without deck guns, *AE2* had no chance of fighting back and she was beginning to sink. The stricken submarine was scuttled though all her crew were rescued to spend the rest of the war as prisoners, four of them dying in captivity. A little before 11am 'AE2 just slid away on her last and longest dive', as Stoker later wrote, disappearing into 55 fathoms of water.

AE2 remained lost until 1998 when Turkish maritime historian Selçuk Kolay found her after years of persistent searching. She was lying upright on the bottom, wreathed in old fishing nets and weed. The Australian government has recently provided funds for a feasibility study into the raising of *AE2*. Whether this proves possible or not, there is no doubt that the Silent Anzac and her brave crew played a pivotal role in the Gallipoli campaign.