

Printed April 18, 2008 01:56am AEST

Lost hero of Gallipoli

Michael White | April 18, 2008

AS the terrible tragedy of the Anzacs was being played out on the beach and hills of the Gallipoli peninsula in April 1915, an enthralling story of Australian daring and success was taking place in the narrows behind the peninsula in the Sea of Marmora involving the AE2 submarine.



The AE2 commanded by Hugh Stoker became the first Australian naval vessel to be lost in battle.

It was Winston Churchill's plan to damage the German war effort with a surprise attack on the eastern front with Russia through Germany's Ottoman ally, Turkey. He proposed that the joint British and French fleets attack the Ottoman forts on the shores of the Dardanelles, steam up the Sea of Marmora and harass Constantinople (now Istanbul).

This did not go according to plan. The forts proved resistant to naval bombardment and the decision was made to land the army on the peninsula while the fleet stood well off. While that was happening, the AE2, under the command of Hugh Stoker, penetrated the narrows on the morning of April 25, 1915, harassed the Turkish naval vessels attacking the allied landings and secured a respite from the shelling.

It remained a little-known Gallipoli success story until the publication of Fred and Elizabeth Brenchley's book *Stoker's Submarine* in 2001.

The story of the AE2 begins in 1910 when the Australian government resolved to build its own navy. In addition to the flagship light battle cruiser HMAS Australia, hot debate ensued whether to include what were regarded as new-fangled submarines.

Australia bought two E class submarines and in early 1914 the AE1 and AE2 (the A designation distinguished them from the Royal Navy E class submarines) were towed halfway across the world from Britain to Australia. They arrived in Sydney on May 24, 1914, to excited public acclamation.

War was declared on August 5, 1914, and the AE1 and AE2 joined the Australian fleet to search the waters around Papua, now Papua New Guinea, for the German Pacific battle fleet. On September 4, 1914, disaster struck. While on patrol off Rabaul, the AE1 disappeared and was lost with all 35 crew. No trace has been found despite extensive searches. As it could not operate alone, AE2 was sent back to Britain to join one of the British submarine squadrons in the North Sea. It was the sole armed naval vessel escorting the second contingent of soldiers from the First Australian Imperial Force as their convoy sailed across the Indian Ocean towards war. As the ships passed through the Suez Canal in January 1915, Australian soldiers guarding the canal cheered them on.

The AE2 was diverted at Suez, along with many other ships and soldiers, to the naval attack on the Dardanelles. On February 5, 1915, the AE2 joined three British B class and two French submarines and witnessed the unsuccessful bombardment of the Ottoman forts by the big battleships and cruisers.

Several of the allied battleships were sunk or damaged by mines and return fire from the forts. Stoker and many of the AE2 crew recorded the events in their diaries.

Due in part to the incompetence of the British admirals, the failing naval attack was called off and the army brought in for landings to clear the forts. It was expected that the fleet could then sail through and complete its task of attacking Constantinople. But when the allied landing finally occurred, beginning on the morning of April 25, 1915, the German and Ottoman armies and navies were ready.

Stoker was keen to penetrate the Dardanelles. Already three submarines had been lost in that attempt, including the newly arrived E15. On April 23, Stoker was given permission to attempt the passage. He sailed in the dark on the surface as far up the Dardanelles as he could before the dawn would allow the shore gunners to see him. At first light he dived, but one of the forward hydroplanes broke and the boat became unmanageable. He surfaced and raced back to safety in the dawn light.

He returned to the depot ship for repairs and was briefed for the landings the next morning and instructed to try again.

In the early hours of April 25, 1915, as the surface ships unloaded soldiers into their boats for the invasion, the AE2 again went on the surface up the Dardanelles. At first light the first fort fired on the submarine and it dived. Almost immediately it was among mines. The crew could hear the scraping of the mine mooring wires down the side of the submarine but, thanks to the newly welded wires, they survived. It was clear weather above and every time Stoker raised the periscope the guns opened fire. All around there were explosions from the shells, making it difficult to see.

Fortunately, no shell put the periscope out of action. Stoker saw a Turkish warship to starboard, turned the AE2, ran in and fired a torpedo. The ship, the *Peykisevket*, was hit and, with the rudder damaged and jammed, ran up on to the beach.

A Turkish battleship was anchored in the narrows, lobbing shells across the peninsula that fell directly among the allied landings. Threatened by the presence of the AE2, the battleship left the area for safer waters, granting a respite from its shelling.

But strong and uncertain currents running through the Dardanelles, together with the primitive gyro compasses of the day, resulted in the AE2 running aground in the mud so close to Fort Anatoli Medjidieh that the gunners could not depress the guns sufficiently to blow the building apart.

Stoker had to lower the periscope as he was being blinded by gunpowder flashes. The AE2 slid astern into the deeper water and continued up the narrows, running aground on the other side.

Again the boat got off without being hit. By then, numerous destroyers, gunboats, armed fishing vessels and

other craft were pursuing the AE2. They dragged grapnels and wires, fired at the raised periscope and tried to ram when the AE2 was at periscope depth. With great skill and courage from all the crew, Stoker took the AE2 deeper and navigated through the narrows. With the submarine battery almost flat, he bottomed in the Sea of Marmora. There they lay for many hours while the heat of the chase eased. When the submarine finally surfaced the air inside was so foul it barely supported the crew.

With the engines running to charge the battery and change the air, Stoker sent a signal on the newly installed Marconi wireless reporting that they had succeeded in penetrating the Dardanelles.

In allied headquarters on the British battleship HMS Queen Elizabeth, general Ian Hamilton had called an emergency midnight meeting. General William Birdwood, commanding officer of the Anzacs, had signalled that they had suffered horrific casualties and were now so few, he feared they might be wiped out altogether. There was a possibility the survivors would need to be taken to the ships. When the AE2 signal was read to the meeting, the mood became more optimistic, and Hamilton sent back the famous signal to Birdwood that the AE2 had got through and all the Anzacs had to do was "dig, dig, dig" until they were safe.

Back at the submarine squadron, the next vessel, the E14, immediately sailed for the narrows knowing that, despite earlier losses, penetration could be achieved. The AE2 spent the next five days patrolling the Sea of Marmora and fired all but one of its torpedoes. There was no gun on the E class until later, so the AE2 could not surface and sink the numerous small craft by gunfire.

Thousands of Turkish soldiers and tonnes of supplies were being ferried across the Marmora to the battle on the Gallipoli peninsula. This was disrupted by the AE2 and more so after the E14 and other allied submarines arrived in the Marmora.

After the E14 arrived through the narrows into the Marmora, the two submarines rendezvoused south of Marmora Island on April 29. They arranged a further meeting the next day and spent the night charging batteries and getting some sleep. The next day, at the rendezvous, the AE2 was attacked by the Ottoman gunboat Sultanhissar. The AE2 hit a patch of cold, dense water, lost depth and broke surface. The gunboat achieved a hit on the pressure hull. Diving was impossible so Stoker ordered the signal books destroyed and the crew to abandon ship. He and his first lieutenant, Arthur Haggard, scuttled the submarine. They only just got out before it sank and became the first Australian naval vessel to be lost in battle.

On seeing the AE2 abandoned, the Sultanhissar stopped firing and rescued the crew. They spent 3 1/2 miserable years in a prisoner of war camp where four of the crew died.

For 82 years the AE2 rested on the seabed in the Sea of Marmora. Efforts were made to find it and in 1997 Turkish maritime historian, diver and museum director Selcuk Kolay discovered a submarine in 72m of water. A joint Turkish and Australian team, including Mark Spencer, marine archeologist Tim Smith and diver John Riley, joined Turkish colleagues and, amid much rejoicing, their dives confirmed that it was indeed the AE2. Unlike the AE1 and HMAS Sydney, the AE2 is not a war grave, as the crew escaped.

Another joint Australian and Turkish team surveyed the submarine last year and found it in reasonable shape. Dragged anchors and nets from fishing trawlers had damaged some of the casing but the control room was as the crew had left it in 1915.

Another joint Australian and Turkish workshop is to be held the weekend after Anzac Day in Istanbul to discuss what to do with the AE2. Defence ministers from both countries will attend with defence chiefs.

Raising the AE2 would be expensive and technically challenging, but it is hoped a resolution will be reached before the centenary commemorations in Turkey in 2015.

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