

Australian Submarine AE2 at Gallipoli

By Michael White

As the terrible tragedy of the ANZACS was being played out on the beach and the heights of the Gallipoli Peninsula in April 1915, an enthralling story of submarine daring and enterprise was taking place in the Narrows behind the Peninsula and in the Sea of Marmora. It involved the AE2, the first Australian naval vessel to be lost in battle.

Churchill's plan had been 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 would attack the Ottoman forts on the shores of the Dardanelles and, once disabled, would steam up the Sea of Marmora and harass Constantinople (now Istanbul). This did not go according to plan as the forts proved resistant to the naval bombardment and the decision was made to land the army on the Peninsula while the fleet stood well off.

While that was happening, on the morning of 25 April 1915, the AE2 penetrated the Narrows and harassed Turkish naval vessels attacking the allied landings until, seriously damaged by Turkish fire, the crew, under their captain Lieutenant Commander Hugh Stoker, scuttled the vessel.

It is a tale scarcely known in the stories of the Gallipoli campaign amongst the Australia public until the publication of Fred & Elizabeth Brenchley's best selling book 'Stoker's Submarine' in 2001.

The story begins in 1910 when the Australian Government resolved to build its own navy. Hot debate occurred over whether, in addition to the light battle cruiser HMAS *Australia*, which would be the flagship, to include what were then regarded as the new-fangled submarines. In the end, Australia bought two E class submarines of which the Royal Navy had ordered many. In early 1914 the AE1 and AE2 (they were given the 'A' designation to distinguish them from the RN E class submarines) steamed and were towed halfway round the world from Britain to Australia. This was a major feat of seamanship for these small boats. Submarines, being small, were affectionately known in the navy as 'boats' as opposed to 'ships'. The three officers were all from the RN while the crew was a mixture of RAN and RN personnel. Many of the RN crew later settled in Australia. The boats arrived in Sydney on 24 May 1914 to much excited public acclamation.

War was declared on 5 April 1914 and the AE1 and AE2 joined the Australian fleet to search the waters around Papua, now PNG, for the German Pacific battle fleet, but disaster struck. On 4 September 1914 the AE1, while on patrol off Rabaul, disappeared and was lost with all 35 crew. No trace has ever been found despite extensive searches over many years led by former naval officer John Foster. AE2 was then sent back to Britain as it could not operate alone to join one of the British submarine squadrons in the North Sea. It was the sole armed naval vessel escorting the second contingent of the First AIF soldiers as their convoy sailed across the Indian

Ocean towards war. As the ships passed through the Suez Canal in January 1915, Australian soldiers already in Egypt guarding the Canal cheered them on.

At Suez the AE2 was diverted, along with many other ships and soldiers, to the naval attack on the Dardanelles. On 5 February 1915 the AE2 joined the three British B class and two French submarines. They witnessed the unsuccessful bombardment of the Ottoman forts by the big battleships and cruisers. (The war was against the Ottoman Empire because modern Turkey was not formed until after the war, in the early 1920's). Several of the allied battleships were sunk or damaged by mines and the return fire from the forts. Lieutenant-Commander Stoker and many of the crew of the AE2 recorded the stirring 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 major landings to clear the forts. It was expected that the fleet could then sail through and complete its task by attacking Constantinople.

The whole world, so to speak, could read in their daily papers of the preparations for the allied landing. When that finally occurred, beginning on the morning of 25 April 1915 the German and Ottoman armies and navies were ready for them.

Earlier Stoker had not been told that the allies had extinguished one of the main lighthouses they relied on and his submarine went aground on 10 March while returning to port. They were sent back to Malta for dockyard repairs. Whilst there, some other E class submarines and a depot ship squadron passed through from European waters as reinforcements. They had experience from submarine operations in the North Sea and the Baltic and advised that steel wires should be welded around the submarine from bow to stern to ward off moored mines. The mine wires would otherwise catch in the forward hydroplanes, drag the mine down, and blow up the submarine. This was done, along with the repairs, and AE2 returned to the submarine squadron.

Stoker was keen to attempt to penetrate the Dardanelles. Already three submarines had been lost in that attempt, including the newly arrived E15, lost only the week before. On 23 April 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 allowed 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 the AE2 anxiously 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 25 April 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 they dived. Almost immediately they were amongst 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 splashes 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 which fell directly amongst the allied landings. Threatened by the presence of the AE2 the battleship left the area for safer waters, granting a respite from its shelling.

Then, the strong and uncertain currents running through the Dardanelles together with the primitive gyro compasses of the day took a hand. The AE2 ran aground in the mud so close to Fort Anatoli Madjedieh that the gunners could not depress the guns sufficiently to blow it apart. Stoker had to lower the periscope as he was being blinded by the gunpowder flashes. The AE2 slid astern back into the deeper water and then continued up the Narrows but ran aground on the other side. Again the boat got off without being hit. By now, numerous destroyers, gun boats, 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 of the crew, Stoker took the AE2 deeper and finally navigated through the Narrows. With the submarine battery almost flat, he bottomed in the Sea of Marmora. There the submarine lay for many hours while the heat of the chase lessened. When the boat finally surfaced the air in the submarine was so foul it barely supported the crew's breathing.

While the engines were running to charge the battery and change the air, Stoker had the signalman send a signal on the newly installed Marconi wireless that he had succeeded in penetrating the Dardanelles. In allied headquarters on the British battleship HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, General Sir Ian Hamilton had called an emergency midnight meeting. General Birdwood, commanding officer of the ANZACS, had signalled that they had suffered horrific casualties and were now so few that he feared they may be wiped out altogether. There was, accordingly, a real possibility that the survivors would need to be reembarked onto the ships. The AE2 signal was read out aloud to the meeting. The mood became more optimistic and, in the end, Hamilton sent back the famous signal to Birdwood that the AE2 had got through and all the ANZACS had to do was to 'dig, dig, dig' until they were safe.

Back at the submarine squadron the next submarine, the E14, immediately sailed for the Narrows, now knowing that, despite earlier submarine losses, penetration could be achieved. The AE2 spent the next five days patrolling the Sea of Marmora and fired all but one of her torpedoes. There was no gun on the E class boats until later, so the AE2 could not surface and sink the numerous small craft by gunfire. Thousands of Turkish soldiers and tons 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 in support. As for the AE2, it seemed to Stoker and the crew that every Ottoman naval vessel that was afloat was chasing them! It was not far from the truth.

After the E14 arrived through the Narrows into the Marmora the two submarines rendezvoused south of Marmora Island on 29 April. They arranged a further meeting the next day and spent the night charging batteries and getting some sleep. The next day, 30 April 1915, at the rendezvous the AE2 was attacked by the Ottoman gunboat the *Sultanhissar*. The AE2 hit a patch of cold dense water, lost depth and broke surface where the gunboat achieved a hit on the pressure hull. Diving was now impossible so Stoker ordered the signal books destroyed, the crew to abandon ship, and he and the First Lieutenant, Arthur Haggard, scuttled the submarine. They only

just got out before it sank. (Haggard later settled in Australia and has descendants here). On seeing the AE2 abandoned, the *Sultanhissar* stopped firing and rescued the crew. They then spent three and a half miserable years in a POW camp during which four of the crew died from sickness. After the war the prisoners were released and some went home to Britain and some to Australia.

But what of the AE2 itself? For 82 years it rested on the seabed in the Marmora. Efforts were made to find her and, finally, in 1997 the Turkish maritime historian, diver and maritime museum director, Selcuk Kolay OAM did so in 72 metres of water. A joint Turkish and Australian team, including the Australians Dr Mark Spencer, the marine archaeologist Tim Smith and the diver John Riley, joined with Turkish colleagues led by Mr Kolay and, amidst 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 all the crew escaped. A further joint Australian and Turkish team surveyed the submarine in 2007 and found it in quite reasonable shape except that dragged anchors and nets from fishing trawlers had damaged some of the casing. A remote camera steered down the conning tower hatch showed the control room was as the crew had left it in 1915.

The question is what now to do about the AE2 to honour those involved in its adventures on both the Australian and the Turkish sides? Over several years workshops have been held and submissions made to government but no decisions have been taken. A further joint Australian and Turkish workshop is to be held on 26 and 27 April this year in Istanbul. The Defence Ministers from both countries will open the conference and many others, including some of the Defence chiefs, will be there. This has been organised on the Australian side, by the Submarine Institute of Australia, led by retired submariners Rear Admiral Peter Briggs, Commodore Terry Roach and Captain Ken Greig. On the Turkish side, the Turkish Institute of Nautical Archaeology is the organising body and its team includes Selcuk Kolay and Savas Karakas. It is hoped that the workshop will achieve sensible proposals to put to the two governments. Raising the AE2 would be expensive and technically challenging but leaving it and doing nothing would allow it to be further damaged. It is hoped that an outcome satisfactory to both Turkish and Australian interests will be in place for the centenary celebrations in Turkey in 2015.

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