Steel tomb on the ocean floor

The fate of Australia's first submarine may soon be known, reports Kevin Meade

ON an idyllic island off Rabaul in Papua New Guinea four years ago, retired Royal Australian Navy commander John Foster listened intently as a group of islanders told him a story passed down from their ancestors.

One of Foster's hosts, a man who claimed to be 102 years old, said he had heard the story from his father. They told of an incident almost 90 years before, when some islanders, terrified by the sound of loud explosions, sought refuge in a cave. Looking out to sea, they saw a strange apparition approaching them.

"They saw what they described as a monster," Foster recalls in an interview with Inquirer. "They called it a 'devil fish'. It was a long black shape coming towards them." The "devil fish" stopped near a reef, pulled back slightly, then disappeared. Foster is convinced the monster that frightened his islander friends all those years ago was Australia's first submarine, the AE1, which disappeared off Rabaul in 1914 during the nation's first military campaign of World War I.

The AE1 was lost without a trace while on a routine patrol during the Rabaul campaign, an all-but-forgotten military adventure in which a force of 1500 Australian soldiers and sailors captured German New Guinea. The fate of the AE1 and its crew of 35 men has long been one of the most baffling mysteries of Australian naval history. Finally, however, there is hope the mystery may soon be solved.

Assistant Defence Minister Bruce Billson said last week he was "cautiously optimistic" the submarine had been found off the island of New Britain. Using sonar equipment, the navy survey ship Benalla has detected an object on the sea floor. Billson says further investigation, using a remotely operated underwater vehicle with imaging equipment, will be necessary to positively identify the object.

When operational commitments permit, the navy is planning to deploy a mine-hunting vessel to the area to enable the identification. To protect the site in the meantime, the navy is not releasing precise details of the object's location.

The search was mounted at Foster's instigation. The retired navy man, who was aboard the Benalla when the sonar discovery was made, first became interested in the AE1 mystery in 1976, when he was posted to Port Moresby. He has investigated the disappearance ever since.

He has undertaken several private searches off Rabaul and says the stories he learned from the islanders may have provided vital clues in his quest to unravel the mystery. Foster has detailed his investigations in a new book, AE1: Entombed But Not Forgotten (Australian Military History Publications).

The AE1 and its sister submarine the AE2 were built by the Vickers armaments company in Lancashire, England. The two subs were commissioned on the same day, February 28, 1914. In August 1914, they were assigned to the Australian naval and military expeditionary force, which was assembled after the outbreak of war and ordered to travel to what was then known as German New Guinea and capture Rabaul.
On September 11, 1914, a small force of Australian sailors captured a wireless station at Bita Paka, across Simpson Harbour from Rabaul, in a decisive battle that paved the way for the capture of all of German New Guinea. Six Australians became the nation's first casualties of the war when they were killed in the battle of Bita Paka. The battle also claimed the lives of one German and 30 New Guineans under German command.

On September 14, three days after the battle, the AE1 set sail from Herbertshohe (now Kokopo), near Bita Paka, in company with the destroyer Parramatta. Its orders were to search St George's Channel, between New Britain and the Duke of York islands, for any sign of German warships.

On the same day, the guns of the Australian ship Encounter bombarded a ridge near Toma, an inland town to which the German governor and the bulk of his forces had retreated soon after war was declared. Foster believes it was the sound of these guns that sent the ancestors of his islander friends scurrying to the cave for shelter.

The AE1, under the command of Englishman Thomas Besant, was last seen by the Parramatta at 3.30pm. It was never seen again.

Australian ships searched the area in an extensive sweep during the next three days, but no trace of the missing sub was found. How the crew spent their last moments remains a mystery that may be finally solved when the object found last week is identified and examined.

Announcing the loss of the AE1, the naval board issued a statement saying: "It was thought that she might have sighted an enemy and given chase; but the result of a thorough search has now caused this hope to be abandoned. The water in the vicinity of the place where she was last seen is very deep and there is no hope of relocating the wreck."

"If she has sunk there, we may be thankful that the water is deep as the hull of the vessel would be unable to withstand the pressure and death would be mercifully sudden."

In Australia, theories and rumours abounded as to the sub's fate, including claims it was sunk by a German ship.

But in The Official History of Australia at War, 1914-1918: The Royal Australian Navy, author A.W. Jose concludes that enemy attack was unlikely and the AE1 most probably sank accidentally.

The AE2, meanwhile, went on to play a significant role during the Gallipoli campaign, torpedoing a Turkish destroyer. But the sub sustained heavy damage and commander Henry Stoker was forced to sink it in the Sea of Marmara and surrender on April 30, 1915, five days after the first Gallipoli landing.

Stoker, who spent the rest of the war in Turkish captivity along with his crew, later wrote that it was only a matter of luck that his sub did not suffer the same fate as the AE1.

"There seemed to me," he wrote, "but a straw in the wind 'twixt AE2 at anchor in Rabaul harbour and her sister ship, the steel tomb, hundreds of fathoms deep."