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Against All Odds – Australian Submarines in the First World War

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The Anzac legend is one of determination, courage, mateship and ingenuity, and above all, attempting the near-impossible, to be achieved against all odds. Although the Anzac legend is one of Australia's proudest histories as a nation, there are definitely voices missing from this commemoration. Australia's submariners of the First World War are amongst these forgotten voices. These men volunteered for largely untested and dangerous work in submarines, and were able to use this new equipment to great effect, especially during the Anzac invasion of Gallipoli. A single Australian submarine succeeded in penetrating the uncharted narrows of the Dardanelles, where every other attempt had failed, 'leading the way' in the Anzac campaign against Turkey.¹

Australia's submarine AE2 took an important and impressive, yet little-known part in the Anzac landings in Gallipoli. As the date for the landings at Gallipoli drew close, Allied commanders realised the importance of disrupting Turkish military shipping in the Dardanelles. With this in mind, AE2 was given orders to attempt to navigate the waters of the Narrows, and 'generally run amok', causing as much disturbance to Turkish shipping as possible.² This feat had never been achieved before, and the vessel would sail blindly through uncharted and heavily-mined waters.³ Prime Minister John Howard once said that the Anzac legend is about 'great valour under fire, unity of purpose and a willingness to fight against the odds'⁴, which was clearly demonstrated by the willingness of AE2 to attempt the incredible feat of a voyage where everyone else had failed. At 2:30 am on April 25 1915, the first Anzac Day, AE2 entered the narrows of the Dardanelles as the Anzac Corps prepared to land on the beaches of Gallipoli⁵, and both forces attempted what many others had thought impossible.

There are many similarities between the actions of AE2 and the Anzac Corps on that day forever remembered by Australians. Like the Anzac Corps, the crew of AE2, under the command of Captain H. S. Stoker⁶, set-off on a mission against all odds, demonstrating courage, bravery and determination

¹ *THE AE2*, Gallipoli and the Anzacs, 2008, retrieved on 9 December 2009, <<http://www.anzacsite.gov.au/5environment/submarines/ae2.html>>

² Ibid.

³ The Australian Navy, *The AE2*, Australian Navy Ship Histories, 2009, retrieved on 9 December 2009, <http://www.navy.gov.au/HMAS_AE2>

⁴ D. Downie, *The Anzac Legend*, Australian Beers, 2005, retrieved on 9 December 2009, <www.australianbeers.com/culture/anzac.htm>

⁵ *The AE2*, loc. cit.

⁶ The Australian Navy, loc. cit.

as they boldly attempted the near-impossible. The vessel grounded a number of times, and could be heard scraping against the ropes holding down mines⁷, yet the crew ‘endured against overwhelming odds’⁸ in the Anzac spirit as they continued through the straight. According to author Peter Firkins, ‘Australian soldiers have always achieved success out of proportion to their numbers’⁹, and the crew succeeded in their goal, torpedoing the Turkish ship *Peykisevket*, and reaching the Sea of Marmara¹⁰. While the Anzacs scaled the cliffs of Gallipoli, Stoker relentlessly harassed Turkish shipping, before finally sustaining heavy damage while under fire from the Turkish ship ‘Sultan Hissar’. The crew spent the rest of the war in captivity. The submariners, however, continued to show the legendary Anzac spirit, never giving up, as they attempted multiple escape attempts under the leadership of Stoker, who won a Distinguished Service Order for his efforts¹¹. This Anzac spirit would ‘help define what it means to be Australian’¹². Thus, while the Anzac legend was born on the shores of Gallipoli, on that same day, a small experimental Australian submarine achieved what was thought to be near-impossible, showing courage and determination in the true Anzac spirit. This incredible achievement, however, is little-known in the legend that has been remembered by Australians.

The Anzac Legend is mainly associated with the ‘digger’; the typical Australian or New Zealand infantryman or Light Horse. Demonstrating remarkable courage, these men charged with bayonet and achieved incredible feats through ‘blood, guts and the stuff of legend’¹³. These men, however, were not alone, and had support from the navy shelling the beaches¹⁴, nurses attending to the wounded on the ships¹⁵, and from submarines, such as AE2, none of whom are remembered in the legend. The Australian landing in April 1915 in fact wasn’t the first Allied push at Gallipoli in the campaign. In late October 1914, French and British warships attempted ‘a triumphant procession through the narrows’¹⁶, however lost many ships to Turkish mines¹⁷. AE2’s penetration of the narrows showed Allied commanders that a naval push through the straight was indeed possible, leading other British submarines to follow. Submarines caused disruptions to Turkish shipping, and created panic amongst Ottoman forces. After a Turkish ship containing ‘6,000 troops and a battery of field guns, all bound for Gallipoli’¹⁸ was sunk, Turkish re-enforcements were forced to be taken overland, which took far longer¹⁹. According to a German assessment, ‘If communications by sea had been completely severed, the Turkish Army would have faced catastrophe’²⁰. Clearly, the support of submarines was vital assistance for the Anzacs fighting on the beaches and cliffs of Gallipoli; however their part in the campaign has been forgotten in the modern legend.

Australian submariners daringly risked their lives implementing an untried technology. Australia’s first two submarines, AE1 and AE2, and were the newest of their kind, giving Australia the most

7 AE2 passing to Sea of Marmara, Turkey Wrecks, 2008, retrieved on 9 December 2009, <<http://www.turkiye-wrecks.com/ae2pass.html>>

8 Downie, loc. cit.

9 Ibid.

10 Australian War Memorial, *AE2 (1914-1915)*, AMW online, 2009, retrieved on 9 December 2009, <http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_10760.asp>

11 Ibid.

12 Downie, loc. cit.

13 T. Stephens, *Blood, guts and the stuff of legend*, Sydney Morning Herald online, 24 June 2007

14 L. Carlyon, *Gallipoli*, 1st edn, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2001, p. 47

15 Ibid.

16 P. Firkins, *The Australians In Nine Wars*, 3rd edn, Pan Books, Adelaide, 1982

17 Ibid.

18 The AE2, loc. cit.

19 Ibid.

20 T. Frame, *The Shores of Gallipoli*, 1st edn, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 2000



modern submarine fleet in the world²¹. Submarines were experimental craft, like tanks later in the war, or helicopters later in the century, and were largely untested in battle. There was a high chance that something could go wrong with the vessel, which is evident in when AE1 disappeared, along with its crew of 35²². Tacticians had little idea of how to effectively use submarines, and submariners bravely risked their lives diving into the depths of the water in an untried craft.

Australian submariners not only demonstrated enormous boldness and courage, but also ingenuity in pioneering a modern technique of warfare. Australians in AE2 showed how submarines could be used as an effective technology in modern warfare, and led the way for submarine use in the future²³. After seeing the success of the Australians, British Admiral Sir John Fisher realised the ‘immense impending revolution which the submarine will affect as offensive weapons of war’²⁴. According to Prime Minister Paul Keating, the Anzac legend is one of ‘courage and ingenuity in adversity’²⁵. Such ingenuity is often associated with this Anzac legend, such as when soldiers created self-firing guns to evacuate Gallipoli²⁶, or in the Light Horse Charge of Beersheba²⁷, however is rarely associated with submarines. The ingenuity and bravery of Australian submariners boldly led the world into a modern era of naval technology, but has been forgotten by the Anzac legend.

After the disastrous first days of the Gallipoli landings, Australian commander General Sir Ian Hamilton was faced with a decision; to continue a flawed campaign at Gallipoli, or to withdraw the Anzacs from the front. At this time, a radio message was received from AE2, informing him of Australia’s success in penetrating the narrows. Hearing of this success Hamilton immediately stated ‘*An Australian submarine has gotten through the narrows ... hold your ground ... and dig, dig, dig*’²⁸. The legendary Anzac spirit is one that is remembered and commemorated by all Australians, and is at the heart of Australia’s values as a nation. Many Australians aspire to display mateship, determination and courage like their forefathers at Gallipoli, who sacrificed their lives so that we could live ours. Australian submariners had a pivotal role in the creation of the Anzac legend, however their immense courage, extraordinary determination and genial ingenuity has been largely forgotten by the legend commemorated in the modern era.

21 The AE2, loc. cit.

22 Australian War Memorial, AE1 (1914), AMW online, 2009, retrieved on 9 December 2009, <http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_10759.asp>

23 P. Yule & D. Woolner, *The Collins Class Submarine Story*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2008

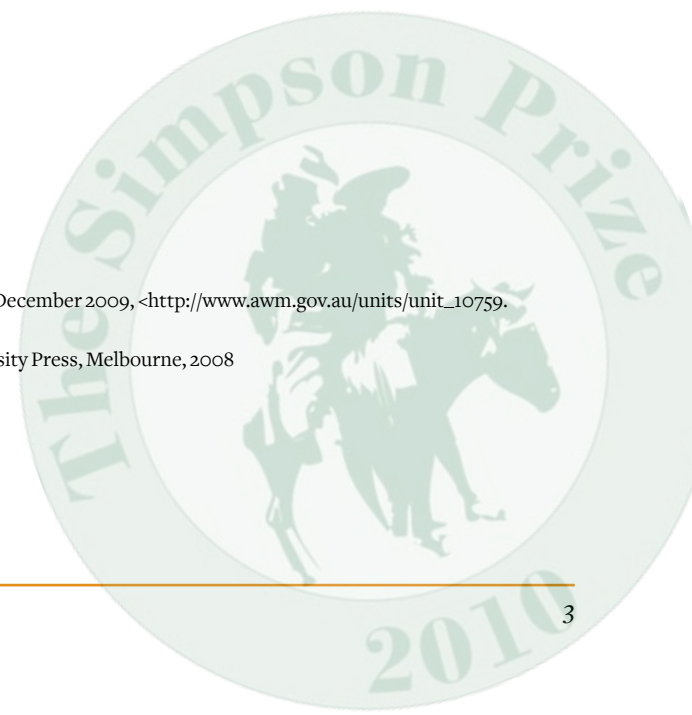
24 Ibid.

25 Downie, loc. cit.

26 G. Odgers, *100 Years of Australians at War*, Ken Fin Books, Melbourne, 1999

27 Odgers, loc. cit.

28 Carlyon, op.cit., p. 178



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