

An Unsung RAN Hero - Lieutenant Commander Henry (Dacre) Stoker DSO,
RN, Commanding Officer HMAS AE2

'Now, if you searched the whole world over I doubt that you would find a much more unpleasant spot to carry out a submarine attack than this Narrows of Chanak. Half a mile wide, with a current of three to five knots, it is certainly not an ideal place for manoeuvres in a comparatively slow-moving and difficult to turn submarine. Also, the thought that we ourselves might meet one of these floating mines hardly added to the entertainment the day was likely to provide for us. ... But as it turned out, this new order was going to have a far-reaching effect on our after life.' ⁱ

Stoker's reaction to being order to 'run amok' in the narrows of the Dardanelles – presuming he survived the minefields, was typically philosophical. History shows that Stoker and his small submarine with a crew of 32 (a mixture of RN members on loan to the RAN and native born Australians) had a dramatic impact on the landings - possibly tipping the finely balanced battle in favour of the Anzacs.

Today his leadership, courage and contribution are largely unremarked in our naval history or memorials. I believe the 2015 centennial is the time to right this situation, let me set out my arguments for doing so. ⁱⁱ

AE2 Heads For The Action

Following the loss of *AE1* and the departure of the German Pacific Fleet Stoker wasted no time in writing to the Australian Naval Board and calling on the Minister for Defence, proposing that *AE2* should proceed to the Mediterranean or British waters. His proposal was accepted and *AE2* sailed from Sydney on 19 December 1914 to escort the second AIF convoy across the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. She arrived in Port said on 28 January 1915 having covered just over 30,000 miles in the first 12 months in commission.

AE2 ran aground off the entrance to Mudros harbour on the Island of Lemnos, the assembly point for the Allied forces attacking Turkey after a navigation light had been extinguished without advising *AE2*. Necessitating an unplanned trip to Malta for repairs at which time Stoker arranged for *AE2* to be fitted with a cable cutter and mine jumping wires to assist in negotiating nets and minefields. These measures undoubtedly saved their lives several times on the morning of 25 April 1915.

Stoker had already written to the naval commander, with a plan to attempt the passage of the Dardanelles. The Chief of Staff, Commodore Keyes who reviewed it, was so impressed that he took Stoker directly to see Vice Admiral de Robeck, the Fleet Commander to discuss the scheme.

Stoker proposed to start on the surface under cover of darkness, dodging between the loom of searchlights until forced to submerge, then to a dive to

21m (70 ft), beneath the known and estimated minefields, surfacing for one or two navigational fixes in the mine fields before finally penetrating the 1,400m wide, eddy swept Narrows.

Between *AE2*'s repairs at Malta and her arrival back at Mudros on 21 April the de Robeck and Keyes discussed Stoker's plan with the recently arrived Commanding Officers of *E15*, *A14* and *E11*. *E15*'s CO agreed an attempt was feasible and he was selected for the next attempt. *E15* was swept ashore and lost on 17 April, the CO and six crewmen were killed and the remainder taken as prisoners of war. This demonstrated the difficulty of the passage, following on from the loss of the French submarine *SAPHIR* on 5 January 1915. (By the campaign's end 7 of 18 submarines involved would be lost.)

So it was that subsequent to *E15*'s demise that de Robeck, on Keyes' advice, accepted Stoker's high risk proposal for the third attempt to force the Dardanelles. *AE2* sailed from Mudros on 24 April, after a test dive and a W/T communications check by the tender's radio staff, Stoker sailed with a one page typed Sailing Order No. 27ⁱⁱⁱ. His stark and simple orders were:

- *'to inform the Dardanelles Division guarding the Straits when he would pass through the patrol,*
- *to proceed to the vicinity of Gallipoli, attack vessels lying off the port and watch the approaches until further orders,*
- *to attack any vessel in the vicinity of Chanak (that is Cannakale today),*
- *that a W/T guard ship would be detailed after 2000 with a strict signalling period of 40 to 50 minutes past the hour on the night the passage was attempted, and*
- *to signal if his passage plan was successful for other submarines to follow'.*

The Allied plan in 1915 was to penetrate the Sea of Marmara with a surface force of battleships and attack Istanbul to eliminate the Ottoman Empire from the enemy's Central Power bloc. This failed on 18 March 1915 with devastating and demoralizing Allied losses in the heavily mined and fortified Dardanelles. This resulted in the hastily prepared amphibious landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula in April 1915. Immediately it became an imperative to prevent reinforcements arriving rapidly by sea. Given the ongoing impotence of the Allied surface ships in the face of the Ottoman defences, submarines represented the only option to attack the critical lines of supply in the Sea of Marmara and were to provide an invaluable contribution in the finely balanced situation between the attackers and defenders. The implications of a submarine passage of the Dardanelles were not lost on de Robeck:

'If you succeed there is no calculating the result it will cause, and it may well be that you will have done more to finish the war than any other act accomplished'.^{iv}

AE2's first attempt to force the narrows was abandoned in the approaches; when commencing to dive the forward hydroplane shaft fractured. Stoker was

undeterred; a repair was quickly effected and as night fell de Robeck again sent for Stoker, commended him for having penetrated as far as he had and authorised a second attempt, on 25 April, the amended date for the landings.

Stoker now had two additional verbal directions:

- de Robeck stated that *'naval aircraft from Tenedos had sighted minelayers at Chanak and since heavy units were to enter the Dardanelles in support of the amphibious landing Stoker was instructed to attack these minelayers'*,
- As Stoker departed from the flagship de Robeck's Chief of Staff, CDRE Keyes, told Stoker *'to generally run amuck (sic) off Chanak'* near the port of Gallipoli to create a diversion and cause havoc with troop reinforcements.

These instructions considerably complicated an already difficult task; instead of slipping past the narrows unseen, *AE2* was to attempt the difficult task of attacking any minelaying ships found in the narrows:

'Now, if you searched the whole world over I doubt that you would find a much more unpleasant spot to carry out a submarine attack than this Narrows of Chanak. Half a mile wide, with a current of three to five knots, it is certainly not an ideal place for manoeuvres in a comparatively slow-moving and difficult to turn submarine. Also, the thought that we ourselves might meet one of these floating mines hardly added to the entertainment the day was likely to provide for us. ... But as it turned out, this new order was going to have a far-reaching effect on our after life.'

'In order to comply with the revised order to attack mine-droppers it was necessary to keep the periscope up for a considerable time to take stock of the situation: the surface of the water was absolutely flat and oily calm, and a heavy fire opened from the forts on either side'.

With considerable good fortune, skill and courage Stoker navigated *AE2* through the minefields and eddies, avoiding scraping mine mooring lines and occasionally, mines that were drawn down onto the submarine and bounced along the superstructure without exploding.

'For nearly an hour ... the rappings and scrapings on the hull of the boat by the mooring wires of the mines, Seemed most damnably continuous. On two occasions something hard – much harder than the wires - hit the bows and rattled away astern ... And once some object seemed to catch up forward and remained knocking insistently for several minutes, before it broke away and followed the rest of our enemies astern.'

AE2's gyro compass failed shortly after exiting the minefield, considerably complicating the passage and *AE2* was twice swept heavily aground and to the surface, by currents and eddies. Fortunately, *AE2* grounded so close to forts their guns could not be depressed sufficiently to target her, but the hull

and deck fittings were peppered and the sea around the submarine boiled with shrapnel.

On each occasion Stoker calmly maneuvered AE2 back into deeper water:

'During all this the Captain remained extremely cool, for all depended on him at this stage. It is due to his coolness that I am now writing this account. Nobody knows what a terrible strain it is on the nerves to undergo anything like this, especially the captain, as all depends on him.'^v

He attacked and sank what he believed was a minelayer at Chanak at great risk to the submarine:

'Anchored abreast Chanak I observed an old battleship hulk, from which mines might be dropped. Higher up the Narrows, approaching at great speed, were a number of destroyers and small craft. ... I found hurrying out behind the old battleship, a small cruiser. ... the kind of vessel that would be fitted as a mine-dropper, ... obviously better quarry than the old battleship, and at a range of 300 yards I fired the bow tube at her. One of the destroyers was now very close, attempting to ram us on the port side, so at the moment of firing I ordered 70 feet. A last glance as the periscope dipped showed the destroyer apparently right on top of us, and, amidst the noise of her propeller whizzing overhead, was heard the big explosion as the torpedo struck home.'

Whilst moving slowly past Chanak the submarine was tracked and struck repeatedly by wire and chain snares. The Ottoman naval forces gathering in the narrows to provide naval gunfire support to the defenders had commenced to bombard the landing beaches and approaches. These ships had the capability to cause major damage and delay to the landings, by 0935 their fire was becoming dangerously accurate and had already caused the transports landing troops and supplies to move further offshore. The alarm attending the arrival of AE2 in the narrows forced these ships to move away.^{vi}

With an exhausted battery Stoker bottomed AE2 to wait out the searchers. When searching craft had ceased their activity he surfaced after over 16 hours dived to recharge his batteries, replenish the foul air inside the submarine and send the historic signal of his success. This was to have a significant strategic impact on the unfolding drama ashore.

The Impact of AE2's Success

AE2's wireless reception appeared to be defective and her WT guard ship could not be heard. Stoker did not know until repatriated from incarceration as a POW that HMS JED, stationed 30 miles to the north-west in the Gulf of Saros, had picked up AE2's fluctuating transmissions, retransmitted repeatedly beyond the rigid transmission schedule to ensure the essential gist of the message got through and had passed this message before midnight to HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH, the Commander in Chief, General Sir Ian Hamilton's HQ.

Prior to the receipt of AE2's signal in the flagship the scene at Anzac Cove was chaotic at best. By late in the afternoon the naval beach master, Captain Vyvyan RN, had to deal with the clutter of fighting paraphernalia that piled up with little order on the narrow beachhead. He had to commandeer incoming craft to ship out the wounded amounting to some 1,700 and by evening incoming troop arrivals had to clamber over about 300 dead. In error and prior to 1800 the first much needed heavy artillery that could not be immediately manhandled off the beach had been sent back to their transport! More dramatically a bizarre influence was accumulating at the beachhead, in the soaking late afternoon Mediterranean rain and rising sea.

It took the form of between 600 and 1,000 disoriented and exhausted troops who had either lost contact with their units or were escorting wounded mates and were straggling back from the lines and resting or falling asleep in full view of the beach headquarters staff officers in their makeshift dugout. The same staff officers were beginning to build up a false picture of the morale and fighting stamina of their troops now in the fiercest fighting for the first time in our federated nation's history.

Anticipating a worsening situation with an expected massive counter-attack from the Turks, the beach HQ asked General Birdwood, the ANZAC Force Commander, who had been briefly ashore and was now back at sea, to return urgently ashore. Shortly before 2200 Birdwood came ashore with Rear Admiral Thursby, the naval support commander for the ANZAC force. Birdwood, somewhat unsettled by the beach scenes and staff advice, as well as the rounding up of stragglers, signed an urgent message that Thursby took to HMS *QUEEN ELIZABETH* at about midnight, as AE2's signal, having been passed from HMS *JED*, was being processed:

“ Both my Divisional Generals and Brigadiers have represented to me that they fear their men are thoroughly demoralised by shrapnel fire to which they have been subjected all day after exhaustive and gallant work in morning. Numbers have drifted back from firing line and cannot be collected in this difficult country. Even New Zealand Brigade, which has been recently engaged, lost heavily and is to some extent demoralised. If troops are subjected to shell fire tomorrow morning there is likely to be a fiasco, as I have no fresh troops with which to replace those in firing line. I know my representation is most serious, but if we are to re-embark it must be at once.”

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Prompted by this dramatic message a 'council of war' was convened with Hamilton's senior staff officers. Thursby emphasized it would take at least two days to collect sufficient small craft to recover the 15,000 fighting troops then ashore. As Hamilton was in discussion, LCDR Brodie, was given AE2's recent but slightly garbled signal. Realizing its importance Brodie forced his way into the meeting and gave the message to Keyes. Keyes immediately exclaimed:

‘... this is an omen. An Australian submarine has done the finest feat in submarine history, and is going to torpedo all the ships bringing reinforcement, supplies and ammunition into Gallipoli! Sir Ian, who had

started to write directly Thursby had given his opinion, looked up, nodded and went on writing, and a few minutes later read his reply to Birdwood, which the resolute Thursby at once took ashore.’^{viii}

Brodie reports that after a short interval Keyes came out excitedly to the gathered junior officers beaming *‘It’s done the trick!’*^{ix}

This is compelling evidence that AE2’s signal reached Hamilton as the decision was being finalized. Clearly at that moment Hamilton had received the only good news of the day’s peninsula fighting and with an explanation by Keyes of its significance it reinforced his determination to direct Birdwood that the ANZAC force must remain on the beachhead. He stressed the success of AE2 in his fourth sentence knowing that other submarines would follow, enemy reinforcements and counter attacks would be slowed and a breathing space was now assured for exhausted front line troops at both Anzac Cove and Cape Helles. The importance of AE2’s action in Hamilton’s mind is reflected in his message:

‘Your news is indeed serious. But there is nothing for it but to dig yourselves right in and stick it out. It would take at least two days to re-embark you as Admiral Thursby will explain to you. Meanwhile, the Australian submarine has got up through the Narrows and has torpedoed a gun-boat at Chanuk (sic). Hunter-Weston despite his heavy losses will be advancing tomorrow which should divert pressure from you. Make a personal appeal to your men and Godley’s to make a supreme effort to hold their ground.

Ian Hamilton.

P.S. You have got through the difficult business, now you have to dig, dig, dig, until you are safe. Ian H.’^x

Richard Arundel’s conclusions drawn from these events appear well founded:
^{xi}

‘As the reference to AE2 is at the beginning of his order and before mention of the main strike force at Cape Helles, it is more likely than not that the new tactical element introduced by AE2 followed on from Thursby’s compelling argument that not enough small craft were available inside 2 days. Hamilton’s message ties the two naval aspects together and emphasises to the ANZAC HQ both as a challenge and a fillip, the feat of their countrymen. As Keyes stated it was AE2’s signal that ‘did the trick’ in firming Hamilton’s resolve to make his command decision not to withdraw. LCDR (later RADM) Brodie’s record of the intimate debate at Hamilton’s ‘council of war’ supports this important interpretation.

The senior ANZAC HQ staff officers who had sought advice as to whether they should remain or withdraw had been answered unequivocally and given a morale boosting demonstration by their

brothers in arms in AE2. They had been relieved of any responsibility for a withdrawal decision. There was a new found HQ mettle that built up a renewed spirit. Perhaps non-military analysts may be forgiven for not fully comprehending the dynamics of the day.

This key decision was to be the start point for legends that the disastrous troop losses and ultimate withdrawal never quenched. The ethos, myth and parables of ANZAC were in full gestation. Despite AE2's loss several days later her very last received signal was pivotal in confirming to the Allied Command that the enemy could be attacked by sea right to his heart (Constantinople). Properly supported, submarine warfare had more than come of age at a time when Allied surface forces were stalled.'

Within hours of receipt of Stoker's signal the Commanding Officer of HMS E14 was ordered to the flagship and briefed by Keyes. At 0300 on 27 April HMS E14 also successfully penetrated the Dardanelles, repeating the feat now shown as possible by AE2. By the Campaign's end ten submarines operated in the Sea of Marmara and destroyed 242 enemy ships and transport vessels.

Over the next 4 days Stoker attacked Ottoman warships and troop transports, disrupting the flow of men, ammunition and stores during the crucial first days of the landings. To add to the confusion Stoker deliberately exposed the submarine on the surface, flying a large white ensign, forcing the diversion of Ottoman surface ships to search for AE2 and causing ongoing alarm and uncertainty. AE2's actions had the desired effect; on 28 April Stoker observes that:

'Throughout the remainder of the day, not a ship was sighted, not even a fishing smack, and it seemed as if already our presence was having a most marked effect.' ^{xii}

Onshore, the news of AE2's feat was perhaps the only bright spot for the beleaguered Anzacs. A notice stuck to a stump read on the track up from the beach:

"Australian sub AE2 just through the Dardanelles. Advance Australia!" ^{xiii}

Leadership, Determination and Courage In The Face of The Enemy

Having completed the passage, caused a major diversion during the critical first day of the landings, torpedoed a potential minelayer and with a damaged submarine Stoker had essentially completed his orders and could have honourably turned for home and ridden the strong outbound currents clear of the Ottoman defences:

'Our orders laid down no definite plan for action in the Marmora.'

The temptation could have been a strong one; he clearly gave no thought to it, deciding instead to pursue the enemy with unremitting determination and vigour:

'Our first duty was to prevent the passage of enemy troops and supplies to the Gallipoli Peninsula. AE2 carried no gun ...only a very limited number of torpedoes; such as we had were not of the most modern type. The failure of the wireless receiving instruments left us in doubt as to whether any other submarine would be sent to join us. How, then, could we best fulfil our duty? It seemed that we must endeavour to utilise the morale effect to its utmost. Great care must be exercised in the expenditure of torpedoes, and all ships not fired at must be frightened as much as possible.'

A submarine is heavily and uniquely dependent on the character and ability of her Commanding Officer; in action his are generally the only eyes to use the periscope and evaluate the situation. There is little opportunity for a second opinion or support in decision making from his crew who respond without question to his orders. So it was in *AE2* on 25 April. Following the second grounding and after several hours on the bottom, Stoker endeavoured to move clear of the searching forces. Water leaking into the submarine as a result of damage sustained in the second grounding could not be pumped out for fear of oil mixed with the bilge water revealing the submarine's position to searching Ottoman forces. It was moved by buckets to an amidships bilge to reduce its impact on the delicate trim of the boat. This action proved insufficient however and, as Stoker endeavoured to come off the bottom, the submarine slid rapidly out of control past its maximum diving depth – Stoker calmly drove the submarine aground on the bank again and then back up the bank to a safe depth, there they remained for the remainder of a long day as the search went on above them.^{xiv}

Despite the strain of being continually hunted by patrol boats, Stoker maintained his aggressiveness. Early on the morning of 29 April Stoker approached Gallipoli harbour and then returned up the strait, deliberately attracting the attention of a gunboat to the passing periscope to give the impression that another submarine had entered the Sea of Marmora. Stoker returned deep and out of sight to Gallipoli, to attack a transport and gunboat with torpedoes. Once clear of this attack, *AE2* surfaced to recharge the battery and sighted a force of six destroyers escorting three small transports approaching from the direction of Istanbul. With only one torpedo remaining Stoker staged a show – he remained on the surface and closed the range until one of the destroyers opened fire at a range of 800 yards forcing Stoker to seek the safety of the depths.

With one torpedo remaining he proposed to *E14* on 29 April that they should attack Istanbul and was only prevented from doing so by direction of *E14*'s CO (the senior of the two) to await orders overnight. The rest is history!

On the morning of 30 April *AE2* was surfaced waiting to rendezvous with *E14* when forced to dive to evade an approaching patrol boat. The submarine experienced a series of uncontrolled depth excursions well beyond the normal

operating depth, followed by uncontrolled broaching as the crew struggled to gain control and avoid being crushed or sunk by the gunboat. The latter prevailed and *AE2* was hit and holed in the engine room. Unable to dive and with no weapons to effectively engage the gunboat Stoker made the correct decision to save his crew. With the crew safely clear of the submarine, Stoker returned below with the executive Officer, Lieutenant Haggard opened main vents to scuttle the submarine, preventing it from falling into enemy hands – he escaped only seconds ahead of the intruding water.

'An anxious shout from above: 'Hurry, Sir, she's going down!' '

Once again Stoker's coolness and courage under fire and stress saved his crew.

During his 3.5 years as a prisoner of war Stoker maintained his sense of purpose and initiative. He twice succeeded in escaping, only to be recaptured - despite some ingenious disguises it proved impossible to blend in with the locals!

Stoker's skilful and courageous leadership was to remain unreported and in obscurity, until his repatriation by which time the Eastern Mediterranean Squadron had either disbanded or moved with their senior reporting officers to other tasks and the Allied nations had lapsed into demobilization mode.

Conclusions

Stoker's mission to penetrate the Dardanelles was no accident of history - despite the earlier losses of *SAPHIR* and *E15* he actively sought out the opportunity and tackled it with unflinching courage, brilliance and daring.

His calculated, cool courage, bravery and leadership under fire over a protracted period was the principal factor in saving the submarine and its crew during the minefield penetration. His daring attack in the narrows in the face of a determined counter attack by the escort, both groundings, the depth excursions on the 25 and 30 April and the many interactions with searching forces, ensuring success where others had failed.

He successfully discharged and exceeded his challenging orders, achieving a major impact on the Ottoman defences, thereby reducing Allied casualties, gaining a critical breathing space for the hard pressed Anzacs and making an inestimable contribution to the Anzac legend that was forged in the harsh crucible of Gallipoli. He led the way for a submarine campaign that was to deny the Ottoman forces free use of the Sea of Marmora for resupply, preventing them from achieving the preponderance needed to throw the Allies back into the sea, thereby preventing a debacle turning into a disaster.

Lieutenant Commander Henry (Dacre) Stoker, Commanding Officer of the RAN's first ship lost in battle is truly worthy of recognition as an RAN hero for conspicuous bravery. His is a name that stand proudly and of equal standing

with those of Waller, Sheean and Rankin - a fitting name for one of Australia's Future Submarines perhaps?

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RADM RAN Rtd

ⁱ Stoker, Henry, *Straws in the Wind*, London, 1925, p106

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to those whose research precedes mine in recounting this story, in particular I wish to single out Fred & Elizabeth Brenchley and their fine book, 'Stoker's Submarine', Dr Michael White, *Australian Submarine – A History*, Captain Richard Arundel's short, unpublished paper *The Gallipoli Campaign and AE2's Last Signal*, July 2007. I have drawn heavily on these works in preparing this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ ADM 137 Sailing Order 27 dated 23 April 1915

^{iv} Stoker, Henry, *Straws in the Wind*, London, 1925, p100

^v Wheat, John Harrison, *Diary of AE2*, (unpublished). Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ID No. 3DRL/2965

^{vi} Bean, C E W, *The Story of Anzac – from the outbreak of war to the end of the first phase of the Gallipoli campaign, May 4, 1915*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935, page x, xi.

^{vii} Hamilton, Sir Ian, *Gallipoli Diary*, New York, 1920, vol 1 p144

^{viii} Keyes, Sir Roger, *The Fight for Gallipoli*, London, 1941, p128

^{ix} Brodie, C G Rear Admiral, *Forlorn Hope 1915 – The submarine passage of the Dardanelles*, London, 1956, p67

^x Hamilton, Sir Ian, *Gallipoli Diary*, New York, 1920, vol 1 p144

^{xi} Arundel, Richard, *The Gallipoli Campaign and AE2's Last Signal, July 2007*

^{xii} Stoker, Henry, *Straws in the Wind*, London, 1925, p130.

^{xiii} Jenkins, Tudor, *The Examiner*, 1 May, 1965. Article by Tudor Jenkins who saw such a notice

^{xiv} Wheat, John Harrison, *Diary of AE2*, (unpublished). Australian War Memorial, Canberra ID No. 3DRL/2965, p10.