

AE2 – treasure of the Sea of Marmara

On a sunny September day in 2007, an expedition, aptly named 'Silent ANZAC' took over the only hotel in Karabiga, a small fishing village about 80 km to the north-east of Gallipoli in Turkey. The group of Australians, including divers, scientists, administrators, documentary makers and supporters, was abuzz with excitement. After nine months of planning they were finally ready for their historic mission – to survey the wreck of Australian submarine AE2.

BY VECIHI AND HATICE BASARIN

THE VILLAGERS gathered as usual in coffee shops at Karabiga's harbour side, drinking their coffee and playing tavla (backgammon). They all knew that there was a wreck offshore: the fisherman's nets snagged on it from time to time. They assumed that there must be treasure in the submarine. Why else would people come all the way from Australia to seek her out?

They were correct in the sense that AE2 is a national treasure for Australia and Turkey. It is the only submarine of its class to have survived. Moreover, the material, equipment, artefacts, documents, personal belongings and many other things left inside the submarine from 1915 make it a time capsule.

On the moonless, calm night of 25 April 1915, the Western Australian soldiers of the 11th Battalion had rowed quietly towards the beach of Anzac Cove. They were the first wave of invaders on that fateful day. At the same time, Australia's only remaining submarine, AE2, was negotiating its way through the heavily mined and fortified Straits of the Dardanelles towards the Sea of Marmara.

Built in the United Kingdom, AE2, with her sister submarine, AE1, had sailed to Australia,

completing the longest journey ever made by submarines at that time. Her captain, Irishman Henry 'Harry' Stoker, commanded a crew of British and Australian sailors. Only a matter of months after arriving in Sydney on 24 May 1914, the Great War broke out. Both submarines took part in the capture of the German Colonies in the Pacific. During these operations AE1 was inexplicably lost with all hands somewhere off Rabaul; her fate remains unknown to this day.

On 31 December 1914, AE2 left Australia for the last time, escorting a convoy of ships leaving for Egypt. She was one of thirteen Allied submarines sent to support the

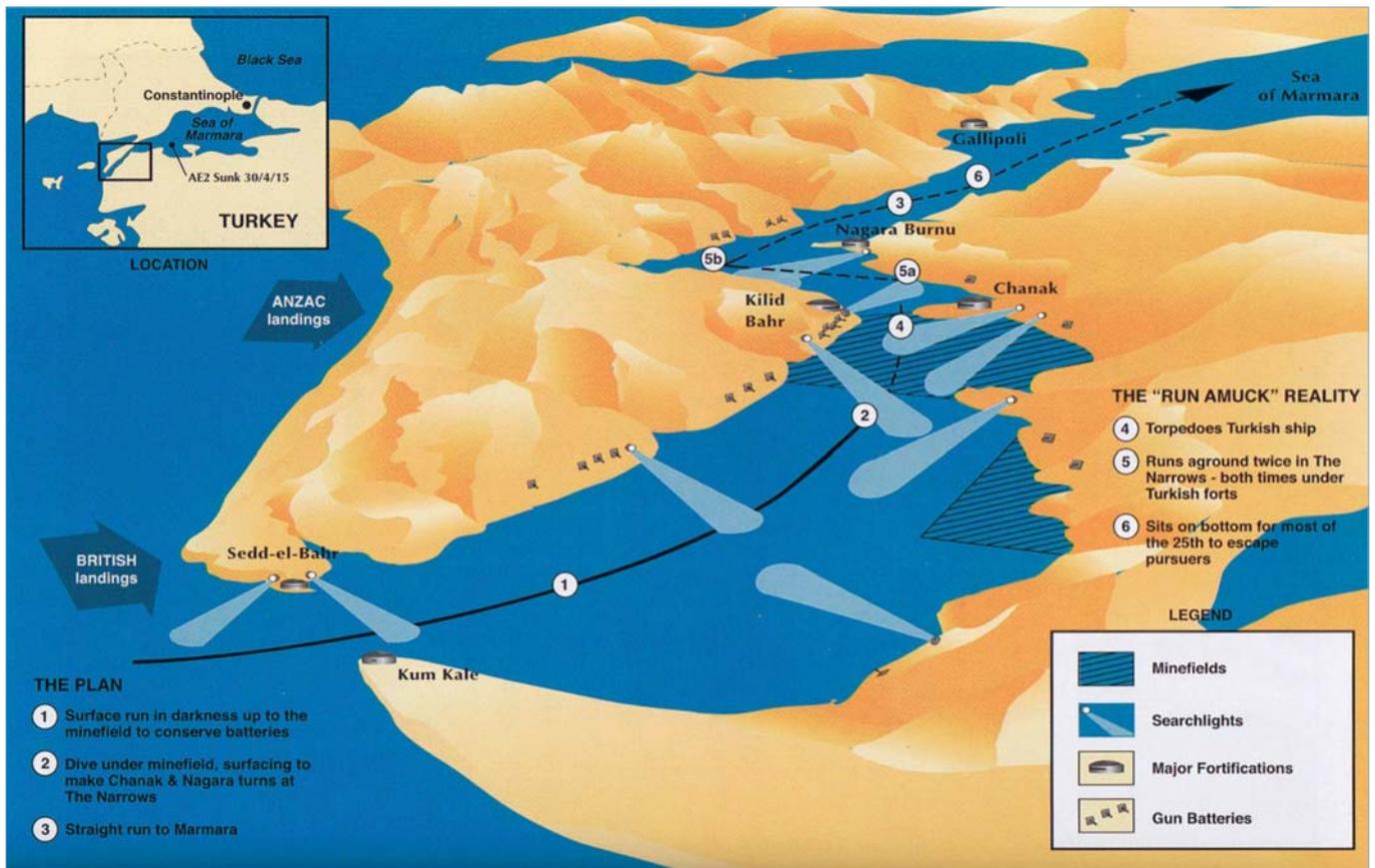
Gallipoli campaign. She was ordered to pass through the Dardanelles and then "generally run amok", disrupting the supply lines from Istanbul to the Turkish forces on the Gallipoli Peninsula. After a first attempt on 24 April 1915 was foiled by mechanical failure, she tried again the next morning.

After running aground twice and avoiding searchlights, mines, anti-submarine nets, coastal batteries and Turkish warships, AE2 penetrated the Dardanelles and became the first Allied submarine to enter the Sea of Marmara. Her radio message that she had succeeded was received during a conference of senior officers aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*.



AE2 in the Sea of Marmara, 1915, surfacing amongst local fishing boats. Painting by Gordon Bryant. Sea Power Centre, Sydney, Australia.

Our Heritage



AE2's amazing journey through the Dardanelles. Drawing by Simon Dance.

Its arrival may have influenced General Ian Hamilton's decision to order the Allied troops to "dig, dig, dig until you are safe", rather than withdraw.

Over the next five days, Captain Stoker certainly tried to 'run amok' with AE2, but although he used seven of its eight torpedos he was unable to damage or sink any

Turkish ships. Turks however were disconcerted by the presence of a submarine in their backyard and sent in six warships to hunt down AE2.



The torpedo boat Sultanhisar capturing AE2. Painting by H Tengiz. The original is hanging in the Istanbul Naval Museum.

On 30 April, AE2 was finally caught by the French-built torpedo boat, *Sultanhisar*, captained by Ali Riza. After a brief struggle, AE2 was holed three times by gunfire from the *Sultanhisar*. Stoker decided to scuttle his vessel rather than hand it over to the Turks. As the submarine slowly disappeared into the depths, *Sultanhisar* saved all of the 32 crew of AE2.

Ali Riza greeted Stoker and shook his hand, saying "Do not despair, this is war and these unfortunate things do happen". After thanking him for saving

their lives, Stoker asked "How did you manage to catch us?" Ali Riza responded "I was trained by the English navy in anti-submarine warfare!"

When the war ended in 1918, all the surviving crew of AE2 returned home after three-and-a-half years of captivity. Four men had died from illnesses that were prevalent in Turkey at the time. Three of the deceased were British sailors, whose bodies were reburied in a military cemetery in Northern Iraq. The fourth was Michael Williams, born in 1894 in Dunkeld, Victoria. When he fell ill in 1916, he was taken for treatment. His death was not announced, his grave remains unknown and he was left behind. To date there is no formal acknowledgement of Michael Williams' service or his death in Turkey, an oversight which hopefully will soon be corrected.

Curiously, although both captains had survived the war and wrote memoirs that were well-received in their home countries, the story of AE2 and *Sultanhisar* remained largely unknown both in Australia and in Turkey.

It was not until 1998 that Turkish diver and researcher Selçuk Kolay discovered the submarine after three years of searching in the Sea of Marmara. She was sitting upright beneath 72 metres of water, half-buried in silt, with the bow and the conning tower clearly visible. She remains there today, her metal surfaces covered in anemones, sponges and crustaceans. The entry hatch of the submarine was slightly ajar, providing an inviting darkness in which a conger eel had taken up residence.

Finding old ships at the bottom of the sea is nothing new in Turkey. The wreck of a small ship dating from the 5th Century BC was recently located off Tekbas Burnu in



The bow of AE2 today, under 72 metres of water. Photo by C. Howell, courtesy of the AE2 Commemorative Foundation.

the Aegean Sea. So, in Turkey, the wreck of a submarine dating only from 1915 was no great cause for excitement.

But in Australia it caused a considerable stir amongst submariners, navy buffs, divers and diving enthusiasts, historians and the children and grandchildren of the crew. Finally, an organisation was formed dedicated to dealing with AE2 matters – the AE2 Commemorative Foundation (AE2CF).

The 2007 Silent ANZAC expedition found that the wreck of AE2 was remarkably preserved. Though it had sustained some damage from fishing nets and anchors, the low oxygen content of the water had greatly reduced corrosion of the hull. The silt-free interior of the submarine is like a time capsule, with everything left as it was when Stoker and his crew hurriedly abandoned ship in 1915.

The results of the survey expedition have been presented to both the Australian and Turkish governments outlining management options for the wreck of AE2. Although the most important and cost effective option

seems to be *in situ* preservation and protection, a final decision has yet to be made.

The Gallipoli campaign was an extraordinarily tragic event that is now regarded as a defining moment in the formation of national identities for both Australia and Turkey. This shared experience has created a powerful bond between the two countries that has grown over time. The wreck of the AE2, resting on the bottom of the Sea of Marmara, is a reminder of the common heritage and strong friendship between Turks and Australians.

The Authors

Vecihi and **Hatice Basarin** have co-authored five books, mostly relating to the Gallipoli campaign, which provide a Turkish perspective to the tragic events of 1915.

Further Reading

Beneath the Dardanelles; The Australian Submarine at Gallipoli by Vecihi and Hatice Basarin, Allen & Unwin, 2008.

Stoker's Submarine by Fred and Elizabeth Brenchley, Harper Collins, 2001.

AE2 Commemorative Foundation website: www.ae2.org.au ◆