

President's Musings – April 2019

We trust Anzac Day fulfilled all your expectations. Unfortunately we were unable to hold our meeting this month but look forward to getting together on May 27th when we will have Captain Mike Oborn CSM RAN with us. Currently CO of HMAS CERBERUS many of us got to know Mike whilst he was XO there from 2011-2014 and are enjoying having him and his family back amongst us. He is an excellent speaker and he surely has got a lot to talk to us about:- from being a Clearance Diver to Commanding HMAS BELTANO, SIRIUS and CERBERUS – his service with the RN's Amphibious Task Group – and him being deployed to Afghanistan – he has certainly got around!!!!

A number of us enjoyed our recent visit to HMAS CERBERUS. It certainly is a fascinating, vibrant busy place, and well worth a visit.

I've received a number of comments re the excerpts we have been including in our THD from Bravo Zulu volumes one and two. These cover the years 1900-1974 and 1975-2014 respectively and I have enjoyed sharing them with you. Ian Pfennigwerth and his team have done a fantastic job! Further detail re Volumes 1&2 of Bravo Zulu are available from <https://www.nautilushistory.com.au/>.

I was delighted to catch up with Mrs Jenny Smyth at the Creswell Oration in March. Jenny was the wife of CMDRE Dacre Smyth AO RAN. Dacre was a great friend of our NHS of A Victoria Chapter, having attended our first meeting in 1971. Upon reflecting on ANZAC day I noted that both Dacre and Jenny were linked to the Gallipoli campaign through their respective fathers, Major General Nevill Smyth VC KCB and LCDR Geoffrey Haggard DSC RN. Both men were serving with our forces in 1915 at Gallipoli, Smyth commanding the First Australian Infantry Brigade and Haggard as the First Lieutenant of our submarine AE2. Haggard was present at the very beginning of the campaign, but Smyth arrived May 1915, and he led the Brigade in the Battle of Lone Pine.

The AE2 story is well worth reading and we commend the account of her exploits as contained in the 21 pages of copy and photographs etc. devoted to it on the RAN website. (www.navy.gov.au/hmas-ae2)

I quote from the web-site:

Service in the Dardanelles: In February 1915 AE2 joined a RN squadron based on the Island of Tenedos in the Aegean Sea. From there she operated in support of the unfolding Dardanelles campaign. Prior to 25 April, AE2's part in the operations was minimal, but when charged by Admiral de Robeck, Commander in Chief, Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, approved plans presented to him by Stoker (AE2's CO) to attempt to force a pass through the 35 mile long, heavily fortified Dardanelles Straight and to enter the Sea of Marmara. If this could be achieved, enemy shipping transiting between the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles could be prevented from reinforcing and resupplying Turkish troops on the Peninsula. All previous attempts by Allied submarines had failed due to an effective sea denial operation mounted by the enemy, fixed and mobile gun batteries, searchlight surveillance and patrolling Turkish warships, coupled with natural navigational hazards,

had made the Dardanelles seemingly impenetrable. The C-in-C remarked that if Stoker and his crew were successful there would be '*no calculating what the result it will cause, and it maybe that you will have done more to finish the war than any other act accomplished*'.

On the morning of 24 April the attempt began, however, the mission was soon abandoned when one of the submarine's forward hydroplanes failed, necessitating AE2 returning to Tenedos to effect repairs. With repairs complete, and with a heightened sense of tension amongst her crew, AE2 set of to try again the following day.

25 April 1915: Lieutenant Commander Stoker RN takes up the story:

'Having proceeded from the anchorage off Tenedos, I lay at the entrance off the Dardanelles until moonset and at about 2.30am entered the straights at 8 knots. Weather calm and clear. As the order to run amok in the Narrows precluded all possibility of passing through unseen, I decided to travel on the surface as far as possible.'

Throughout AE2's passage, searchlights continually swept the straight but she avoided detection continuing unmolested until 4.30am when gun batteries opened fire from the northern shore. Stoker immediately dived, beginning an underwater passage through the minefields. Mooring wires tethering the mines continually scraped along AE2's sides for the next half hour. Twice Stoker surfaced in the minefield to make navigational observations and at 6:00am AE2 was within two miles of the Narrows at Chanak, submerged at periscope depth with the sea flat and calm. Forts on both sides of the Narrows then sighted her and soon opened heavy fire. Meanwhile, Stoker, watching through his periscope, observed a number of ships and quickly determined to attack what he thought to be a small cruiser of the Peik e Sheltrek type.

'At a range of 300-400 yards I fired the bow torpedo, at the same moment ordering 70 feet in order to avoid a TPD(Torpedo Boat Destroyer) which was attempting to ram on the port side. As the vessel descended the TBD passed overhead close, and the torpedo was heard to hit. As the cruiser, dead ahead might be expected to sink almost immediately I altered course a point to starboard to avoid becoming entangled with her. At the time I believed the vessel to be in the centre of the straight. About 4 minutes later I altered back to the original course, and ordered 20 feet. As the vessel was rising she hit bottom and slid up on the bank to a depth of 10 feet at which depth a considerable portion of the conning tower was above water. Through the periscope I saw that the position was immediately under Fort Anatoli Medjidieh.'

The fort opened fire and for some minutes shells fell on all sides until efforts to refloat her succeeded. AE2 then slid back into the safety of deep water. The relief on board the submarine was palpable but short lived, for the AE2 then grounded on the Gallipoli shore, again exposing herself to the enemy.

'Through the periscope I judged the position to be immediately under Serina Burnu, and further observed two TBDs, a gunboat, and several small craft standing close off in [the] Strait firing heavily and a cluster of small boats which I judged to be picking up survivors of the cruiser. In this position we remained for 5 minutes'.

'As my vessel was lying with inclination down by the bows I went full speed ahead. Shortly afterwards she began to move down the bank, gave a slight bump, gathered way and then bumped very heavily. She, however, continued to descend and at 80 feet I dived off the bank. The last bump was calculated to considerably injure the vessel, and probably impaired the fighting efficiency, but as I considered my chief duty was to prove the passage through the Straits to be possible, I decided to continue on course.'

'In connection with these two groundings, I have to report that the behaviour of the crew was exemplary. In these two highly dangerous situations it was only their cool and intelligent performance of their duties which enabled the vessel to be refloated'.

Shortly afterwards AE2 again rose to periscope depth where Stoker established his position as approaching Nagara point. On all sides he was surrounded by pursuit craft and each time he showed AE2's periscope the pursuing destroyers turned to ram. Consequently, in an attempt to shake off the enemy, Stoker bottomed the submarine on the Asiatic shore to await developments. At approximately 9:00pm Stoker blew ballast tanks and surfaced having been submerged for over 16 hours. All signs of shipping had vanished and the opportunity was taken to recharge the batteries and send a signal to the C-in C notifying him of the successful passage through the 'Narrows' and past Nagara Point.

At that time a council of war was taking place on HMS Queen Elizabeth. Sir Ian Hamilton was in conference discussing the situation and the signal from AE2 proved to be of great significance in relation to the decision subsequently taken. Lieutenant General Birdwood had recommended an immediate evacuation. The council of war was dramatically interrupted when one of Hamilton's aides handed a copy of Stoker's signal to Commodore Roger Keys who announced, *'Tell them (the troops on the shore) this. It is an omen. An Australian submarine has done the finest feat in submarine history and is going to torpedo all the ships bringing reinforcements, supplies and ammunition into Gallipoli'*

This was a tremendous fillip and in his response to Birdwood, Hamilton wrote, *'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 gunboat. Hunter-Weston, despite his heavy losses, will be advancing tomorrow which should divert pressure from you. Make a personal appeal to your men....to make a supreme effort to hold their ground. P.S. You have got through the difficult business, now you have only to dig, dig, dig until you are safe.'*

Yours Aye!

Rex Williams.