

Thursday 5 November 2015

Search Underway for Our Lost Submariners

A search will commence on Friday 13 November to locate 35 lost sailors who perished over 100 years ago in the opening stages of World War I. Australia sent a combined military and naval force to capture a German naval radio station and seize the German colony located at Rabaul on the island of New Britain. The Royal Australian Navy included two submarines to escort the fleet in case it encountered the German Pacific Squadron. On 14 September 1914, Australia's first submarine HMAS *AE1*, vanished without trace. The fate of her 35-man British, Australian and sole New Zealander crew remains the single largest outstanding mystery from this war.

HMAS *AE1* and HMAS *Parramatta* were ordered to patrol the approaches to the harbour where the Australian fleet was anchored. The German Pacific Squadron was a threat to the fleet, and it was thought that the patrolling submarine and destroyer would be able to give warning by radio. *AE1* would then submerge to attack the enemy. HMAS *AE1* was last seen by HMAS *Parramatta* at 1430 in the afternoon off the Duke of York Islands. HMAS *AE1* and her crew were never heard or seen again. The loss of the crew, and the reasons for the demise of the submarine remain a mystery.

A team of experts are preparing to undertake a search off the waters of Duke of York Island. Former submariners and maritime scientists are working together to solve the mystery of what happened to our sailors over a century ago. They believe the submarine sank in deep water, possibly after striking a coral reef late in the afternoon of 14 September 1914. It is thought she filled with seawater and quickly sank with all hands on board. Not a trace of the submarine was found after she went missing. It is likely our sailors still remain at their stations entombed in the depths. It is time we found what happened to our first submarine and locate our dead.

The analysis is corroborated by a story handed down among the local people; it appears that their ancestors witnessed the grounding. Today, HMAS *AE1* crew has many living descendants. They are following this attempt to find the resting place of their loved ones with great interest.

Two of the 35 *AE1* stories recorded in Fred & Elizabeth Brenchley's book, *Stoker's Submarine* 4th edition (ATOM, 2013), are briefly recorded below:

LS Gordon Clarence CORBOULD

As John Foster wrote in his book, *AE1 – Entombed But Not Forgotten*:

Gordon Corbould's loss was one of the really bad luck stories of the tragedy. Petty Officer Arthur Gwynne (see his entry in Stoker's Men) who had been drafted from the AE2 to the AE1, was too ill to go to sea on ... 14 September, so Gordon Corbould volunteered at the last moment, and as a result lost his life.

Gordon Corbould was born on 10 April 1887 to Ernest and Alice Corbould of Strawberry Hills, Sydney. He came from an illustrious background. His grandfather, Richard Chilton

Corbould, and his great uncle, Edward Henry Corbould, were well-known London artists who enjoyed royal patronage. Another great uncle was the eminent naval officer, Admiral Sir James Scott.

Gordon was 5 feet 8 inches tall with light brown hair, grey eyes and a very fair complexion.

In the 1911 UK Census, he was listed as an Able Seaman staying overnight in the Duchess of Albany's Home for Soldiers and Sailors in Portsmouth. Shortly after being rated Leading Seaman on 8 November 1912 and also qualifying as a Leading Torpedo Operator, he signed on with the Australian Naval Forces for a period of 7 years' service. He was rated Leading Seaman on 11 February 1913, and passed his exam for Petty Officer on 7 August 1913.

His luck, however, was running out. He was drafted to submarines on 28 February 1914, joining the *AE1* the day after she arrived in Sydney on 25 May 1914 as spare crew, then becoming an unlucky last-minute substitute on her fatal voyage.

The *Sydney City Mission Herald Magazine* wrote with great emotion on 1 December 1914, about young Gordon's

... frank and open countenance ... beautiful character ... each week he was in England he wrote to his mother, and sent her 5 pounds per month regularly ... he came back to his mother unspoilt, and fully developed in moral and physical character ... a manly son, six feet tall, broadened out, and as handsome as ever ... God-fearing, knowing that at any moment he might be called upon ... He was only a young man when his life came to a close ... but he had given proof of future greatness, and his name will deserve a place in his country's roll of honour.

ERA John MESSENGER

John (Jack) Messenger was born at Ballarat, Victoria on 31 July 1887, the son of John Cameron Messenger and his wife Isabella, of Humphrey Street South, Ballarat East.

Little is known about Jack's early life, but his niece Vera Ryan – the excellent convenor of the AE1 Descendants Group – has a wonderful family anecdote. Apparently, at the age of about 20 in 1908, Jack found himself in trouble. He was a promising young pugilist, and had had a fight in Melbourne's famous Young & Jackson's pub that ended badly. Everyone thought that his defeated opponent would die from his injuries.

Fearing that Jack might possibly be facing a murder charge, his uncle spirited him away down to the Melbourne docks, enlisting him as a deckhand on the first available cargo ship – one departing the same day for England. Luckily for Jack, his opponent later recovered, and no charges were laid.

Jack arrived in England where he worked, and later presumably qualified as a tradesman, possibly a fitter and turner or a mechanic, because in the UK Census on 2 April 1911 he was recorded as serving in the Royal Navy aboard the cruiser HMS *Pyramus* on the Australia Station, as an ERA 4th class. His Australian Service Record Card shows that he then joined the RAN as an ERA 3rd class on 12 November 1912, signing on for a 5-year engagement. He was drafted to HMA London Depot, and on the same date was assigned to HMAS *Penguin* for submarine *AE1*, and he returned to Australia in the *AE1* after six years away from his Australian family.

Jack Messenger was 27 years old when he died in *AE1*. He was unmarried, and his next of kin was his mother, Mrs Isabella Messenger of Ballarat.

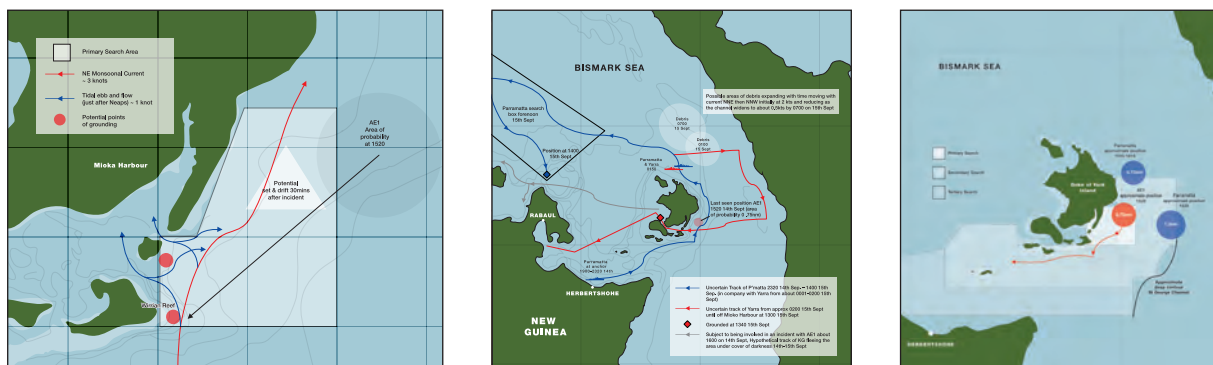
The search for our lost crew is supported by the Government of PNG, endorsed by the Royal Australian Navy and is being supported financially by the Australian National Maritime Museum, Submarine Institute of Australia and a number of Australian companies and individuals. It is thought that the stricken submarine settled in deep water. So a state-of-the-art, high-definition multibeam echo sounder is being leased from a Singapore-based company, Sea and Land Technologies, and fitted to a specialist survey vessel, a 17m Cairns based catamaran owned and operated by Taylored Offshore Pty Ltd.

The search for our missing crew has attracted specialist help. A French-based company (IX-BLUE) and its Australian subsidiary, IXSURVEY Australia, is sponsoring the search by providing its services free of charge. The team is made up of many volunteers including the team leader, Retired Rear Admiral Peter Briggs, other experienced Australian submariners and offshore industry experts. The hunt for HMAS *AE1* is an international effort; freighting of equipment to PNG will be undertaken by IJS Global and Arthur J Gallagher will provide insurance cover against the various risks involved. A number of other companies are offering support through reduced costs or free services, including Fugro Satellite Positioning and Met-Ocean Services Ltd.

The search for our missing crew starts on Friday 13 November 2015. The survey will search the waters East of the Duke of York Island. It is hoped that any likely-shaped contacts found on the sonar will be examined by a drop camera provided by Total Marine Technology, a Perth-based company.

These 3 diagrams are based on the analysis undertaken to prepare for the search and are extracted from the book *Stoker's Submarine*.

(Click thumbnails to open large versions in your browser.)



The primary search area will be searched in November, with a high probability of locating the submarine should it be intact and lying within the 200m depth contour. Further details along with updates on the search are available at findae1.org.au.

The Search Director, retired Rear Admiral Peter Briggs, is available until his deployment to Kokopo, PNG, on Tuesday 10 November. Thereafter media updates will be posted as circumstances and communications in the search area allow.

Media queries to Hugh Dolan: 0421 686 312.

BELOW: *AE1* & HMAS *Parramatta*'s movements on 14 September 1914, reconstructed by Darren Brown from original sources

