

The spark gap signal that changed ANZAC history

*Telegrapher William Wolseley Falconer, RAN
Australian Submarine HMAS AE2*

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The year 2015, saw Australians & New Zealanders commemorate what can only be described as one of the most militarily important events in both nations somewhat short histories, the Centenary of ANZAC. But how many amateurs are aware of the fact that it was all down to an Australian Submarine HMAS AE2 which first breached the Dardanelles to enter the Sea of Marmora only hours before the ANZACs actually landed on the beaches of Gallipoli at 4:28Am on the morning of April 25th 1915. Sadly in the scheme of the greater ANZAC Legend, these gallant Officers and Sailors of the HMAS AE2 have been somewhat pushed from the limelight to the shadows of history. Yet their role in the Gallipoli campaign, as the first submarine to successfully negotiate the strong currents, shore batteries and sea mines of the Dardanelles, did in effect change the course of Australian and New Zealand Military history. Of the 37 crew members who served under Lt. Commander Henry Stoker, only 14 were born in Australia, 21 crew members were born in Great Britain, one in Brazil, and yes one in New Zealand to see it as a truly ANZAC operation.

The Dardanelles is a well-protected stretch of water some 35 miles long, with a swift fresh water current running one way, and a strong salt water current running in the opposite direction below it. Add to this, Ottoman gun batteries that line each side of the shore, and sea mines that lurk for a good length of the journey before you reach the Sea of Marmora. Now you

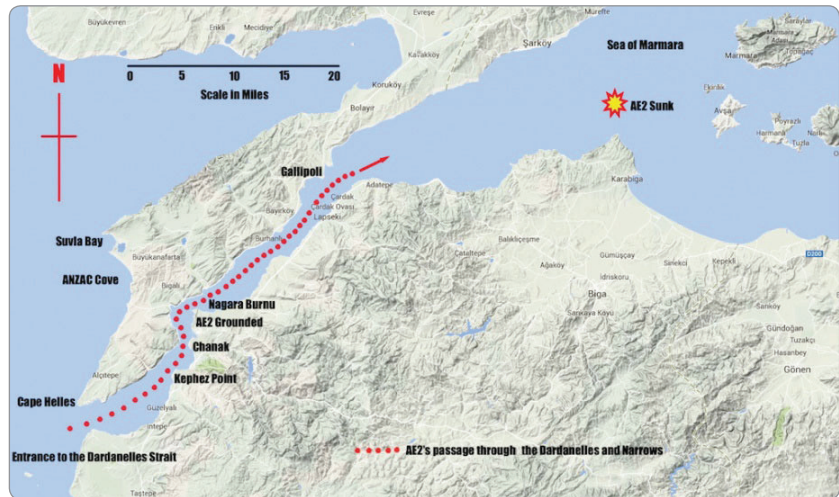


Figure 1: HMAS AE2 in the Sea of Marmora.

Photo 1: HMAS AE2.



"Telegraphist William Wolseley Falconer's use of the Morse key was about to have a profound impact on the discussions taking place in Queen Elizabeth, and forever cement AE2's place in the history of the Dardanelles campaign."

have some idea of what only can be described by many as a Suicide Mission. It was into this labyrinth of death that sailed the gallant men of HMAS AE2 with disaster their companion at every moment along the way.

When it comes to the Gallipoli landings, the fact is that this April 25th 1915 event had not gone well for the ANZACs. Stiff opposition from a determined enemy defending his homeland had seen the rumoured "Sick Man of Europe" present stiff opposition. Nor were they the "Push-over" everyone said they would be. After some 14 hours of hard fighting it was "Re-embarkation" that was being strongly considered by the ANZAC Commanders. To this end, General Birdwood sent a delegation to General Sir Ian Hamilton aboard the Flagship HMS Queen Elizabeth. They arrived around midnight to put the case forward for an immediate evacuation due to heavy losses.

Admiral Thursby was also present at this meeting, and he expressed the view that it would take three days to re-embark the already landed ANZACs. Thursby added words to the effect that, the Turks would probably not just standby and wave handkerchiefs as the ANZACs departed to fight another day. General Hamilton listened intently to both sides of the argument while considering what should be done. At about the same time that this crucial meeting was in progress, the AE2 had surfaced in the Sea of Marmora to recharge her batteries. Next the wireless antenna was erected, only to find that their receiver was inoperable and the transmitter was also playing up. Regardless of this, Captain Stoker ordered that the report be sent off to the Flagship. This was despite the fact that it could not be confirmed if the signal had in fact been transmitted, or for that matter if anyone had received their signals.

The task of sending the signal confirming that the HMAS AE2 had successfully breached the

Dardanelles fell to the submarine's Telegrapher, William Wolseley Falconer. Young Falconer had been born in Richmond, Victoria, and enlisted into the Royal Australian Navy at the age of 18 for a seven years stint. The Wireless equipment carried by the AE2 was the Marconi Type 10 Spark Gap Transmitter. I have found a reference to this particular set with details showing frequency range of 375 kHz to 1400 kHz, with a reliable transmitting range of 120 miles.

In their book "Stoker's Submarine", Fred & Elizabeth Brenchley said of Falconer:

If one man could claim to have influenced the course of history with a single deed, it would be AE2's Telegrapher William Falconer. It was Falconer's message on the night of the ANZAC offensive that figured in the midnight meeting aboard the flagship, on whether the ANZACs should be withdrawn. Captain Stoker wrote, *'At nightfall we again commenced to establish wireless communications with the fleet, but with no more success than before. Every possible test and overhaul of our instruments was carried out, but to no avail'*. However history shows that the message got through. Falconer was never acknowledged for the feat it actually was, but it was known about. Captain Francis Haworth Booth, the RAN representative in London, wrote to Naval Command in Melbourne on the 17th of December 1917. John (Tiny) Kerin, Stoker, and William Falconer were both nominated for awards, but sadly the Naval Board (Admiralty) rejected this because they (the Admiralty) had not proposed to take similar action for their personnel. As a prisoner of war in Turkey, Falconer was interned first at Afion Kara Hissar, then Belemelik. His technical expertise made him a valuable asset to the German engineers contracted to build the railway through the Taurus Mountains. Falconer survived these bitter years, and after his release returned to London by the end of

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73,
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1918. He arrived back in Australia in April 1919 and was demobilized at his own request in September 1919.

HMS Jed

Back at the entrance to the Dardanelles was the Royal Navy Destroyer HMS Jed. She had been sent there on wireless watch for any signals on the submarine guard frequency, from HMAS AE2. Thus, the signal sent by William Falconer from HMAS AE2 was picked up by HMS Jed and relayed to HMS Queen Elizabeth. Whilst aboard HMS Queen Elizabeth, no resolution had been reached, when out of

the blue Lieutenant Commander Brodie entered the room with the signal from HMAS AE2, relayed from HMS Jed. Admiral Keys took the signal from Brodie, and then announced to the room words to the effect "Gentlemen, an Australian submarine has achieved what no other submarine has done. It has breached the Dardanelles and is now in the Sea of Marmora". Hamilton asked for the signal and read it for himself, before telling the room, words to the effect, "The troops have gotten through the hardest part of the landing, and now all the need to do is to dig, dig, dig, until they are safe".

Thus the ANZAC legend that we know and commemorate today had its origins in the Spark Wireless signal transmitted by Telegrapher William Falconer on the Marconi Type 10 MF transmitter from the Australian Submarine HMAS AE2.

The reign of terror that HMAS AE2 caused to Turkish shipping in the Sea of Marmora led to serious delays in bringing up much needed reinforcements and supplies. Everything now had to come by way of a much longer route by road. This gave the ANZACs a pause for breath that saw them establish themselves at ANZAC Cove in a much more fortified defensive position. Sadly for everyone aboard the submarine, it only lasted five days. On 30 April 1915, HMAS AE2, whilst attempting to rendezvous with the Royal Navy Submarine, HMS E14, was confronted with the Ottoman Torpedo boat "Sultanhisar". As AE2 attempted to dive to safety it encountered mechanical problems which forced it to surface once again. It was then attacked by "Sultanhisar" and critically damaged. Stoker realized the game was up and now focused on sinking the AE2 so it would not fall into Ottoman hands. He ordered the Executive Officer, Lieutenant Geoffrey Haggard RN, to open the sea cocks to flood the vessel internally. The rest of the Officers and crew were ordered to



Photo 2: Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Haggard DSC & Commander Henry Stoker DSO.

abandon the submarine. Everyone got off safely and the crew went into captivity for the next three and a half years.

For his gallantry, Lieutenant Commander Henry Stoker was awarded the Distinguished Service Order from the hand of King George the Fifth in 1919. The truth be known, Stoker deserved the Victoria Cross, as did his Executive Officer, Lieutenant Haggard, let alone gallantry awards for the rest of the crew as well. But sadly by the time the war ended, some of the crew had already died in captivity. And worst of all, by 1919 Gallipoli was a dirty word in the halls of power. Nobody wanted to talk about this grand debacle cooked up by Winston Churchill to placate the Russians back in early 1915. So it was that Commander Stoker was awarded the lesser Distinguished Service Order, being robbed of his true recognition of courage, the Victoria Cross. His XO, Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Haggard received the Distinguished Service Cross, also robbed of a Victoria Cross for gallantry in HMAS AE2.

Creation of VI4AE2

With the announcement that both Australia and New Zealand would be propagating the Special call signs, VK100ANZAC and ZL100ANZAC, I began to feel that somehow the whole story of Australia's involvement in the Gallipoli campaign was not being told. With all this in mind I decided to apply for a special event call sign, from the ACMA here in Australia. I decided on VI4AE2, and it was duly approved. All I needed now was a few other fellow amateurs who felt as strongly about the HMAS AE2 operation as I did. The team ended up as Mike Paterson VK4MIK ex RAN, Dave Wescombe-Down VK5BUG ex RAN, Alan Shannon VK4SN ex RAAF, Peter Hewitson, ex Commercial Telegrapher in England and Australia, Bob Beck VK4RJ former P29 operator and ex-Rabaul Plantation Manager and myself Mike Charteris VK4QS ex RAN. From here I created a webpage on qrz.com under the call sign VI4AE2, with the overall story and as much information and photos I could find. So pop along to qrz.com and look up VI4AE2 and you will observe all that is presented in "Their Name".

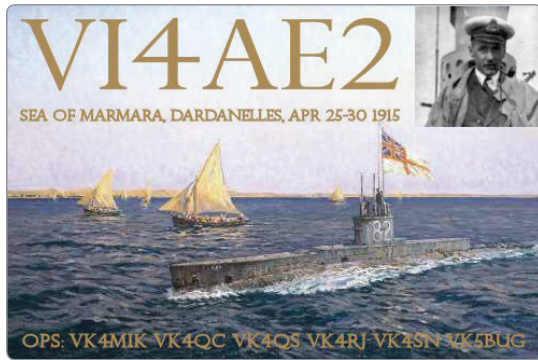


Photo 3: The VI4AE2 QSL card.

VI4AE2 operations and publicity

Together a schedule of operation was worked out so that it played to each operator's strengths and time frames regarding work and family. The time frame for having VI4AE2 on air was from 25th April to 30th April, which corresponded with the operations of HMAS AE2 in the Dardanelles and the Sea Of Marmora. During the course of the next five days we, as a group, achieved over 2500 contacts worldwide. What we also achieved was a unique "World First" by way of VI4AE2 being the first ever operational Special Event call sign to go to air and make contacts on 630 m in Australia, if not the world. This honour was shared by both Peter Hewitson and Dave Wescombe-Down with contacts into Queensland and South Australia on this band. By definition Peter VK4QC made the first CW contact ever, using VI4AE2 on 630 m with Roger VK4YB, on 472.5 kHz, at 0638Z on 25th April 2015. The trail blazing by these two amateur radio operators on 630 m was indeed very special in regards to the transmission mode and frequency of operation for the signal sent by Telegrapher William Falconer aboard HMAS AE2.

Publicity for VI4AE2 was emailed to the WIA, ARRL, RSGB and NZART, to appear on their websites and in their magazines with good responses and little news articles about our event. I can only thank them for their efforts to propagate

our message when it came to the impetus of the Special Event station VI4AE2. The results of a social media campaign on Facebook and other media lead to a contact with the President of the Lilydale RSL, who in turn put me in personal contact with Mrs Jenny Smyth. Jenny is the daughter of Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey

Haggard, the former Executive Officer of the Submarine HMAS AE2. I have since spoken to Jenny many times on the phone, and exchanged gifts with her of a naval nature. Specifically so, the book she wrote about her father, "*The Long Silence*". Now an amazing friendship has been formed, just one person removed from the actual Executive Office aboard the AE2.

Operating VI4AE2 on air

When it came to firing up VI4AE2 on 20 m SSB by Bob Beck or 20 m CW by Alan Shannon and Peter Hewitson, I am told that the best description was a cacophony of signals desperate to work VI4AE2.

These guys really had their hands full every time they sat down to operate in the name of these gallant submariners from 100 years ago. A big mention in despatches must go to Mike "Banjo" Paterson VK4MIK for lighting up North Queensland and beyond with VI4AE2 by way of his AM/CW on ANZAC Day till 30th April. This concept, Mike tells me, is growing each year with more operators making the effort to set up in a former military area and operate old equipment, often ex-military by way of Amplitude Modulation and Morse. As for myself, well I probably had it the easiest run out of everyone by way of taking on operations on the 80 m band each night. It was probably also the most enjoyable, as I could discuss the men and the events behind VI4AE2. The other point is that VI4AE2 acted

as a catalyst for others to share their own and their families experiences of the military kind. Whether it was about the service of the operator himself, or his grandad who served at Gallipoli and later in France and Belgium, people shared. And that in essence is what it was all about, allowing people to talk about what the Centenary of ANZAC meant to "Them". It was also such a privilege to submit an article to Navy News on the HMAS AE2 and VI4AE2. Through this article we told the readers that the story of HMAS AE2 was being taken to the world for five days through amateur radio and our special call VI4AE2 in this centenary of ANZAC year 2015. (NAVY NEWS, Edition, May 21st, 2015, is available as a download from the Net).

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all five Gentlemen Operators for their excellent radio skills, personal time and generosity when it came to every aspect of this event. And let's not forget every person who worked us, or visited the VI4AE2, QRZ website in honour of the Officers and Men of HMAS AE2. I would also like to thank the Wireless Institute of Australia for their approval of the special call sign, and their support in promoting VI4AE2 as part of their overall ANZAC Centenary celebrations. Finally a very special "Thank you BZ" to Alan Shannon VK4SN, without whom this project would never have been as successful as it turned out to be. For if it was not for his patience, computer skills and radio operating abilities we would never have got off the mark from day one.

References

- "*Stokers Submarine*" by Fred & Elizabeth Brenchley.
- The Royal Australian Navy webpage, HMAS AE2 <http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-ae2>
- The AE2 Foundation.
- Images courtesy Royal Australian Navy, with permission.

