

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



Jump TO Article

The mystery of AE1: Australia's lost submarine and crew

by Kathryn Spurling

Missing Pages Books: Chifley, ACT; 2014; 200 pp.; ISBN 9781760044466; RRP \$34.00 (paperback)



The loss of HMA Submarine *AE1* with her entire complement of 3 officers and 32 sailors was the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN's) first major tragedy and it marred an otherwise successful operation to seize the German possessions in New Guinea in the opening weeks of World War I. It is not known what caused *AE1* to disappear without trace.

Australia's first submarines, *AE1* and *AE2*, entered Sydney Harbour in time to join the celebration of Empire Day, 24 May 1914, after a long voyage from Britain that *The London Times* declared: 'manifestly the most remarkable yet performed by a submarine'. Australians were fascinated by their submarines and proud that their young navy was bravely at the forefront of such technology.

Britain declared war against Germany on 4 August 1914 and the British Admiralty despatched the Australian fleet to capture German New Guinea and destroy the German Pacific fleet. On 14 September *AE1* left Rabaul Harbour with orders to patrol east of Cape Gazelle and was seen off the Duke of York Islands in St George's Channel. Then *AE1* simply disappeared. An ensuing search found no trace, and for the families of the 35 officers and men on board *AE1* life would never be the same.

The Mystery of AE1 traces the beginnings of Australia's navy and searches for answers to the questions that continue to be asked: Who or what contributed to the loss of Australia's first submarine? What killed the crew of *AE1*? Where do they lie? And why has Australia neglected them and their descendants?

Dr Spurling is currently a visiting scholar at the School of History and Social Sciences, Australian National University in Canberra. She served with the Australian Navy. After attaining her PhD she taught history and strategic studies at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. Dr Spurling is the author of *Cruel Conflict: the triumph and tragedy of HMAS Perth* and *A Grave Too Far Away: A Tribute to Australians in Bomber Command Europe*, both published by New Holland.

Since 1914 several searches have been conducted to establish the whereabouts of *AE1*. Regrettably none of these have been successful. Most recently, between 6 and 9 September 2014, HMAS *Yarra* undertook another search, around the Duke of York Islands, prior to a memorial service for the centenary of the submarine's disappearance. Although numerous sonar 'contacts of interest' were made during the search, most were identified as natural terrain. One sonar contact, however, has been marked for further investigation.

The Mystery of AE1 is lavishly illustrated and contains a large number of quotes from diaries and letters. There is a biography on each of the crew members. As is typical for Spurling's work there are extensive notes, a good bibliography and comprehensive index.

I commend *The Mystery of AE1* to all those that have an interest in the early years of the RAN as well as the relatively unknown Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force campaign in the Pacific in September 1914.

Marcus Fielding