

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Hunt for AE1: Scouring the seabed for navy's holy grail

James Hunter with the decommissioned HMAS Onslow at the Australian Maritime Museum in Sydney. Picture: John Feder

EAN HIGGINS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 16, 2017

A new hunt has begun for the Australian submarine AE1 and the final resting place of the 35 men aboard, whose mysterious loss while stalking Imperial German Navy warships off New Guinea marked Australia's first naval tragedy in World War I.

The crew of the ship Fugro Equator, one of the vessels involved in the failed underwater search for Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, is planning to deploy its sonar imaging equipment on Monday or Tuesday to scan for the wreck off Duke of York Island.

The new survey seeks to find one of the holy grails of naval lore, and follows several earlier inconclusive searches based on various leads including oral history among the tribal Mioko Islanders of a sighting at the time of AE1's disappearance of a gigantic "devil fish" said to resemble a submarine.

"It's cool, it's really awesome," one of the maritime archaeologists involved in the project, James Hunter from the Australian - National Maritime Museum, told *The Weekend Australian*.

The museum's curator for Royal Australian Navy maritime archaeology added: "The thing about this is, it's Australia's first submarine, it's their first naval loss."

AE1 and its sister Australian submarine, AE2, were the most technologically advanced boats of their day, built in Britain barely a year before the outbreak of the war with recently developed gyroscopic inertial navigation systems.

They had been part of the Australian expeditionary naval force that captured a critical German naval radio telegraphy station in what was then German New Guinea, and the town of Rabaul, in the early weeks of the war.

Dr Hunter said the Australian commanders were fearful that the Germans, who had several colonies and a powerful fleet in the Asia-Pacific, would launch a naval counter-attack to retake Rabaul.

The AE1, commanded by a seconded Royal Navy officer, Lieutenant Commander Thomas Besant, and the captain of the destroyer Parramatta, the RAN's Lieutenant W.H.F. Warren, were ordered to patrol around the Duke of York Island group.

"The orders were: if they found anyone who looked suspicious, investigate, and if it turned out to be an enemy, engage them," Dr Hunter said.

The last time AE1 was heard from was a signal during foggy conditions at 2.30pm on the afternoon of September 14, 1914, when AE1 asked Parramatta, "What is the distance of visibility?", to which the destroyer's crew replied, "About five miles."

The two vessels patrolled in different directions, with strict orders to return to Rabaul by 8pm.

“Parramatta came back, and AE1 didn’t,” Dr Hunter said. Despite an extensive search by Australian warships launched almost immediately, no trace was found of the submarine or its crew.

The new hunt, costing \$1 million, is a collaborative venture between the museum, the navy, corporate donors and associations mostly representing ex-submariners, and the private funding was matched by the federal government.

In announcing the \$500,000 government contribution, Defence Minister Marise Payne said, “We owe it to the men of AE1, their descendants and the entire navy community to continue to look for those who are forever on patrol”.

Museum foundation chairman John Mullen said hunting for shipwrecks was something the institution did, although more often for older vessels. But primarily, Mr Mullen said, “it’s a human story”.

“Thirty-five brave young men lost their lives for this country and their families don’t have closure.”

Mr Mullen, who is also the chairman of Telstra, said more funds were being sought from donors to carry on research on the findings of the search mission.

One of the Australians who perished on the AE1 was Ballarat-born John Messenger, a fitter and turner who held the rank of engine room artificer on the submarine.

His niece, Vera Ryan from Sydney, told *The Weekend Australian*: “The AE1 had been forgotten about in the Australian community, except by submariners. The loss of 35 men was nothing when in the first few months you had thousands and thousands of people being killed.”

The value of the search mission, she said, was to find out how the men died — whether by a cataclysmic event that destroyed the submarine quickly, or the even more horrifying possibility that it sank in shallow water with a ballast tank pierced on a coral reef, for example, but with the pressure hull intact.

In the latter scenario, Ms Ryan said, “the men would be in a watertight boat for hours waiting for the oxygen to be exhausted”.

The Fugro Equator’s mission will last no more than a fortnight.

The ship will deploy an autonomous underwater vehicle — a torpedo-like robot that can be programmed to run a search mission on its own — with side-scan sonar, and a multibeam echo sounder that can produce a three-dimensional image.

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