

Missing WW1 submarine AE1 found with underwater camera

STEPHEN FITZPATRICK THE AUSTRALIAN 11:09AM December 21, 2017

A bold bid to locate the wreck of Australia's first submarine has been successful, with the final resting place of 35 World War One servicemen off Papua New Guinea captured on underwater camera.

The fate of AE1 has long been a mystery, with a three-day search after it disappeared on patrol in waters between New Ireland and New Britain on September 14, 1914, just seven months into service, proving fruitless.

It can now be revealed the boat suffered a catastrophic failure, probably during a practice dive, and struck a hard rocky bottom southeast of the Duke of York islands group.

Speaking by mobile phone from the search vessel as it neared its return port of Rabaul this morning, Rear Admiral Briggs told *The Australian* it had been a "very satisfying, sad feeling" to discover the location of "35 English, Australian and one New Zealander who died doing their best for the country, it's a sombre moment, but also tinged with a warm glow of success".

He said the initial 18-hour underwater survey had located the vessel's likely resting place within the first hour, but this was not known until the underwater vehicle was retrieved and its data analysed.

The underwater camera was then sent down "and in the first few seconds as it came on to the bow we knew what we'd found", he said.

Rear Admiral Briggs said the discovery was "the end of that chapter, we've found the men of AE1, we've found the wreck, we've got some insight into its condition, and that opens the next chapter: learning exactly what happened to it, it will be quite a detective puzzle, the question of erosion in its own right, what's happened will be an interesting challenge."

Rear Admiral Peter Briggs said the most likely cause of the submarine's loss "remains a diving accident" with the fin guardrails stowed and the upper conning tower hatch apparently shut.

"The submarine appears to have struck the bottom with sufficient force to dislodge the fin from its footing, forcing it to hinge forward on its leading edge, impacting the casing," Rear Admiral Briggs said.



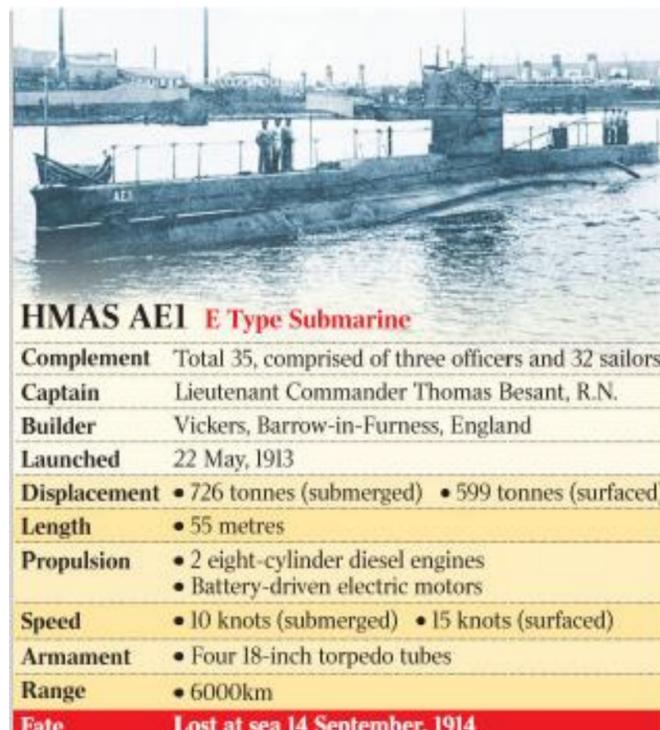
Vera Ryan of Lilyfield, Sydney, whose uncle Jack Messenger was lost when the submarine vanished in 1914. Picture: Giles Park.

He said it appeared to have suffered a "post sinking, high energy event" that would have caused "rapid flooding of

the submarine, probably near the surface”, in order to cause the rate of acceleration likely required to produce such damage.

This could have been caused by any one of the vessel’s eight torpedoes, each fitted with guncotton warheads and high pressure air flask, or by its various high pressure air cylinders.

As a result, he said, “when the end came for the men of AE1 it would have been very fast, they may well have not known what hit them”.



Details on missing WW1 sub HMAS AE1.

The crew was comprised of British and ANZAC servicemen.

“Bottom line (is), we have found our lost submariners, but understanding exactly what befell them is a work in progress and will require further detailed examination of the wreck with a different array of instruments and technology,” Rear Admiral Briggs said.

The \$1 million search, which began on Sunday, was jointly funded by the federal government and by a private enterprise consortium put together by Telstra chairman John Mullen.

Rear Admiral Briggs, who is president of the Submarine Institute of Australia, led the mission aboard search vessel Fugro Equator.

Last known position of WW1 sub HMAS AE1.

The precise location of the wreck, and even details of the time it was discovered, are being kept secret to protect it from unauthorised salvage attempts.

It can be revealed, however, that it was resting at a depth of more than 300 metres.

It was found using a drop camera equipped with colour video and stills capacity as well as lighting, with Rear Admiral Briggs praising the crew’s “great skill to position it over the wreck and manoeuvre the ship to in turn, move the camera, swinging in the current on the cable over 300m below, in the right direction to locate the wreck”.

He said there was “probably little sedimentation to cushion the impact (and) the wreck is on a hard, flat bottom scoured by strong, seasonal currents”.

Rear Admiral Briggs said further investigation would “almost certainly require further, forensic examination of the wreck using different technology”.

It is understood there is no intention of attempting to retrieve the submarine, which is regarded as a war grave.

The initial survey provided visuals only “down the starboard side and up the port side as far as the fin”, Rear Admiral Briggs said.

However he was adamant that the results showed that “beyond a shadow of a doubt this is AE1”, meaning Australia’s oldest naval mystery was one step closer to being solved.

There have been several previous attempts over the years to locate the vessel.

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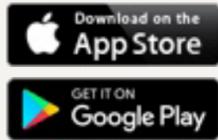


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