

OCCASIONAL PAPER 55

Call the Hands

Issue No. 31

June 2019

Reuben Mitchell DSM, RAN – Survivor of HMS E14

The following story is of an Australian Able Seaman whom some military historians believe should have been awarded the Victoria Cross for his courage and compassion while under enemy fire from Turkish guns in the Dardanelles during World War I. The most senior survivor was Petty Officer Coxswain Robert Perkins, DSM who wrote in a report, 'Reuben Mitchell acted most gallantly. He was on the conning tower with three officers, passing orders below to the helmsman. All the officers were swept off the bridge by shellfire and he was left all alone. Although the enemy had the exact range and he was clearly visible, he stuck to his post and took charge of the boat until it sank. When in the water, he then rescued the wireless operator who was unconscious from head wounds. There was no senior officer left to recommend him for his outstanding gallantry, and his only reward was the self-evident fact that he had done his duty.'

Reuben Joseph Edward Mitchell was born in Ballarat, Victoria on 28 July, 1894. Having joined the Royal Navy based on the Australian Station, he served on several ships before joining HMS *Challenger* and sailing to England on the ship's return in 1913. It was while at Portsmouth that he volunteered for submarines and on completion of his training at HMS *Dolphin* based on Fort Blockhouse, and at HMS *Vernon*, which included training in HM Submarines *A6*, *A13* and *E4*, he joined HMAS *AE2* to return to Australia as an Able Seaman.



The complete crew of HMAS AE2, taken in the UK in 1914.
Mitchell is second from the right in the top row

When *AE2* was deployed to the Mediterranean, Mitchell found himself transferred to spare crew on a submarine repair ship when *AE2* undertook her sortie up the Dardanelles in April, 1915.

On 27 January 1918, Able Seaman Mitchell was included in the crew of HMS *E14* under the command of Lt-Cdr G.S. White, RN, when they set out to torpedo the German battle cruiser *Goeben*, which had been damaged by a mine and run aground off Nagara Point in the Dardanelles.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H10318

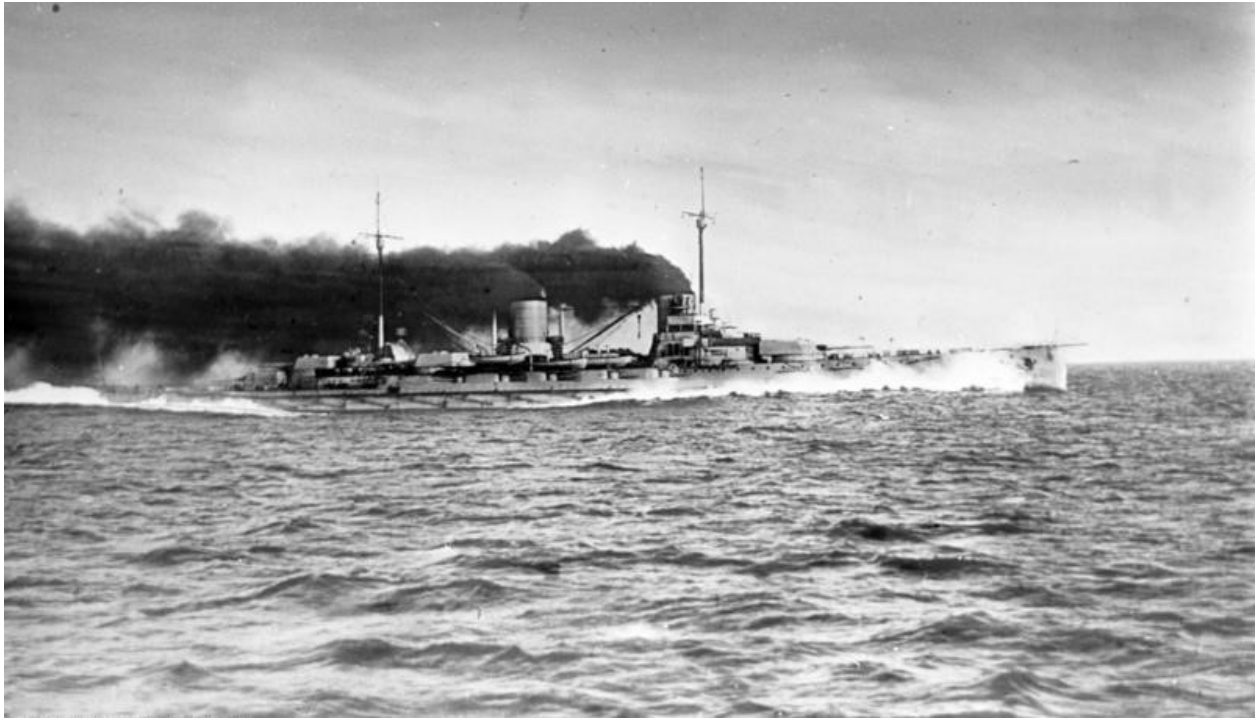
HMS E14

The source for most of this story was written by Mitchell himself in a report which was recently found in a file located in the Sampson Collection on Spectacle Island. It is reproduced here verbatim.

Mitchell's own account

'HM Submarine *E14*, Lieutenant Commander White, RN, left a naval base on the evening of 27 January with an escort as far as the entrance to the Dardanelles. At 3 am 28 January, we forced our way through the first line of nets without resistance. All went well until about 6 am, when we ran aground and were caught in the nets, which we could not clear, so we surfaced, and the Captain went out and cleared the obstacle. We believed it to be the nets, but the Captain did not say. Before going out, the Captain left orders for the Lieutenant to dive at once should he whistle or sing out, and to 'look after himself as there were 31 men inside; never to mind him.' While the Captain was on the surface, he found the gates of the Narrows, and that we were at Chanak. He did not hear a shout or anything and came inside the boat and went astern into deep water, and got away without being seen. These were the last nets we felt.

Now the search for the *Goeben* started and I believe we went on for two miles past Nagara Point and found the *Goeben* had gone. We found out during our capture that she was taken away six hours before, this we got from a Turkish naval man, who helped get her off. When the Captain found that she had gone, he went back for home, but at Chanak, there was a large German liner which we believed had ammunition for the *Goeben*.



SMS Goeben

We fired one torpedo at her and a heavy explosion took place. Our boat came to the surface and a heavy fire came from all the forts. Many pieces of shrapnel hit the boat, then a large shell hit the conning tower and did a bit of damage. The captain was pleased at the moment with the behaviour of the crew, not a man moving from his station. Several shells were then heard to pass overhead, but luckily they did not drop a depth charge.

After a time, the boat got out of control, and as we had only three bottles of air left, the Captain thought it would be best to surface. At once we could hear heavy fire and we could hear pieces hit the hull of our boat. As a result of a hit in the centre of the boat, it could not dive again. We ran the gauntlet for half an hour under murderous fire from all round, only a few hitting the hull of the boat. Our wireless operator was badly wounded in the mouth and the left hand, and fell unconscious. The Captain, seeing it was hopeless ran the boat towards shore. His last words were, 'We are in the hands of God, my men. Do your best to get ashore'.

Captain killed

A few seconds later, I saw his body mangled by shellfire, roll into the water and was taken under. The same shell killed the Navigator, and left me by myself, and other shells killed nearly all the hands.

Had the Turks stopped firing as soon as they saw us sinking, with a few wounded on deck, many more might have been saved. It must have been half an hour before they put out for us. Amid the cries of the wounded men in the water, several voices were heard saying 'Goodbye, goodbye all'. Their hands went up and they disappeared for the last time.

Only nine survived

It was hell; when I look back at that fatal half hour, it haunts me. As no boat seemed to be coming out to pick us up, we made for Kum Kale, and were picked up only a few yards from the shore. Soon after the Turks got hold of us, all our clothing was taken from us, and we had to walk through Kum Kale naked. It broke our hearts when we saw only nine had been saved out of 32 officers and men. The three wounded were in a very bad state and unconscious when I saw them last.

On arrival at a small hut, a short pair of trousers, all patchwork, was given to us to put on, which we found to be full of lice. No underclothing was given to us. A small fire was made in a room, and we were very glad to get it as we were very cold; and shortly a filthy-looking Turk brought us some hot tea without milk or sugar. That is all he gave us to bring us round again.

In the evening, we were sent to Chanak and handed over to the Germans, and here we remained for two days. Here we were sent to a small room for the night, feeling very tired and hungry, as the crew had nothing while submerged in the Dardanelles and it was midnight when a Turk came with some black barley and maize bread and a dish of beans boiled in olive oil which we could not manage to eat. This was our daily meal; two meals a day and one maize loaf and a bucket of water. During our time at Chanak many visits were paid by newspaper reporters and Germans of high rank.

Sleep was out of the question that night. Many questions were asked of us concerning England. They were under the impression that England was in a very bad state, as the submarine menace was hitting us hard. On the following day, we were sent to Constantinople, and when we arrived were taken on board a German liner, used as German Headquarters. Here we went before a court of German and Turkish officers, one at a time, and many jokes were passed.

At 5.30, we were taken over to the Turks and were taken through Istanbul thinking we were going to a British camp, but found ourselves behind prison bars, for what reason I do not know. We were housed in filthy compartments, among some of the biggest criminal prisoners in Turkey, sitting in a room with huge chains and handcuffs on.

The place was full of lice and bugs. We remained there for two days and then went to another room with 150 of the same kind of criminals, some dying of cholera and dysentery. When we arrived we asked for bread which was not brought to us until 36 hours after. A man named Firuze Hanzandian, an Armenian subject, bought four loaves of bread with one Turkish pound and then gave them to us. He got a flogging for it and was not allowed to talk to us. He said, 'I am not a rich man, but I am a man.'

Time went on and we were getting very bad; no clothing to cover us up at night, and nothing to lie on but the cold bare floor. We complained of the filthy rooms in which we had to eat and sleep, suffering the same punishment as the criminal offenders who were guilty. After this, another room was allotted to us, which was quite as bad, the smell and stench being abominable. Owing to this, fever and dysentery broke out, which eventually became so bad that two men lay weak on the floor. A doctor was asked for; he came 24 hours after, and the two men were sent to hospital. During our time in prison, no bedding or any covering was given to us. Drinking water had to be obtained from the urinals.

British camp

We eventually saw two British officers and told them of the conditions we were living under as prisoners of war. Pressure having been brought to bear, we were sent to British camp at Samatrya and that consisted of a school room with 150 English (servicemen), some with arms and legs off, waiting to be exchanged. We had no fires unless we could buy our own fuel; no books or anything to read, and hardly any food, only two meals a day and one loaf of bread. I remained in the camp two days and was sent to hospital with typhus fever and dysentery. Weak as I was, I had five miles to walk, arriving almost dead and hungry. A Turk was turned out of one bed and I was told to get in it. I refused and was handled roughly, and given another bed, which

was just as bad. The bed and clothing was covered in lice and not many hours after I was covered with vermin.

The following morning I was sent to the typhus ward, and there I found one of my comrades. I was put in the next bed but one, after turning a Turk out, and getting into his clothing. I was in this ward for about two weeks, and left it like a bag of bones and my body almost black with lice. On three occasions the Dutch Embassy gave two ½ lb tins of milk and a third one to go between three Englishmen. My meals were mostly baked wheat or spinach, and that was what I pulled around on.

At times the Embassy used to bring us a little food, about three parcels for all the English, and you got a little tea, sugar, butter, jam, just enough for one piece of bread. What food you received from the hospital was no good. At last we asked to be discharged and weak as we were, we were sent to a working camp.'

After the War

Mitchell returned to London after being liberated at the end of the war where he was able to recuperate from his time in prison. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal on 12 December, 1919. He returned to Australia where he married and raised three children. He passed away on 16 August 1954, aged 60.

Victoria Cross

In a footnote to the above, the Commander of the E14, Lt-Cdr Geoffrey White RN, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, gazetted on 24 May, 1919 for his part in the action in the Dardanelles, which had started the day before the boat set out.

He flew as a passenger in an aircraft during the aerial bombing of *Goeben* to see her position for himself and to plan his method of attack.

The award of the Victoria Cross to White created a record as HMS *E14* is the only vessel in the history of the Royal Navy in which two different commanding officers had won the Victoria Cross, the other Commander being Lt-Cdr Edward Courtney Boyle, RN, who was presented his Victoria Cross on 1 March, 1916 for actions during the 1915 Gallipoli campaign. when the submarine went on a sortie through the straits and past minefields into the Sea of Marmara.



Wreck identified

The wreck of HMS E14 was identified in 2012 found lying at a depth of 65ft at an angle of almost 45 degrees with sand covering nearly all the 181ft vessel.

At least one shell hole was visible near the bows, but that appeared to be the only one.

