Churchill's Lost Submarine

A British submarine which was lost in action over 90 years ago in the Baltic Sea has just been found. Submarine HMS E18, part of an extraordinary naval operation authorised by Winston Churchill at the outbreak of the First World War, never returned from a routine patrol in May 1916. As no one witnessed her sinking, no trace of her was ever found – until now.

For 10 years, a group led by Swedish historian-explorer Carl Douglas has been researching the operations of the Royal Navy Submarine Squadron that fought in the Baltic in World War 1. Having found many of the ships sunk by these submarines, they turned their attention to the one British submarine lost in the Baltic: the HMS E18.

Through the unique collaboration with an Australian descendant, the submarine has been located. Melbourne-born Darren Brown's great-grandfather was the telegraphist on the ill-fated submarine. Listening to the stories told by his grandmother, he started to look into the history of E18. He became drawn into the fascinating story of bravery and daring (heroic daring). For years he spent much of his spare time delving into the historical archives from Britain, Germany, Estonia and Russia.

Armed with this information, Swedish survey company MMT sent the MV Triad to a designated search area off the Estonian island of Hiiumaa last week. Using side-scan technology, the first contact with the submarine was made in an area known to have been mined by Germany during WWI. A remotely operated vehicle (ROV) was then deployed and pictures of a submarine not seen since 1916 made their way to the surface.

'Without a shadow of a doubt, they show an E-class submarine and certain details indicate that it is probably E18,' said expert David Hill on examining these first pictures.

The Baltic campaign is a long-forgotten episode of the First World War but, according to naval historian Eric Grove, it was the most successful submarine campaign of the war undertaken by the Royal Navy. Its impact was out of proportion to the number of submarines deployed (in total 5 E-class subs and 3 C-class subs), causing the Germans to completely rethink their use of the Baltic. They introduced the convoy system to ensure vital iron ore supplies from Sweden made it through the Baltic to Germany. The British submarines' main role was to support the Russian Navy's efforts in the Baltic and, since the crews spent much of the war in Russia, they became unwitting witnesses to one of the greatest upheavals in world history: the Bolshevik revolution.

E18 was the only one of this flotilla of submarines to be lost in action; the others were all scuttled to prevent them falling into the hands of the Germans when the Russia war effort collapsed in 1917. Their crews made it home to Britain but, for the men and officers of HMS E18, their's was a different fate in the cold waters of the Baltic Sea in May 1916. Thirty-three men were lost, including three Russians serving on the E18 in a liaison capacity. E18 was captained by Lt Cdr R C Halahan, and the last known sighting of her was on the 28th May 1916 returning from a mission where she is reported to have torpedoed the German destroyer V100. Lt Cdr Halahan was awarded by Tsar Nicholas II, Russia’s highest military honour, the Order of St George never normally awarded posthumously.

Churchill's Lost Submarine is a forthcoming documentary, a joint production between Mallinson Sadler Productions of Glasgow and Deep Sea Productions of Stockholm, Sweden.