

Lieutenant-Commander
Geoffrey Saxton
White VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

The Victoria Cross awarded to Lieutenant-Commander Geoffrey White was one of only five bestowed to submariners during the Great War. Furthermore, it was also the first and only time that the prestigious VC has been awarded to two different captains of the same submarine. Both these snippets of military history and human interest add to the immense privilege I feel to be the custodian of this brave man's gallantry and service medals, which I purchased privately in 2016.

Geoffrey Saxton White was born in Bromley, Kent, on July 2, 1886 to William White, a Justice of the Peace and his wife Alice (née Saxton). After his birth he was given his mother's maiden name as an unusual second Christian name. White was educated at Parkfield School in Haywards Heath, Sussex and Bradfield College, Berkshire.

He joined HMS *Britannia* in May 1901, when still only 14, passing out later that year. In 1902, he served on the armoured cruiser HMS *Aboukir* and that November was made a midshipman.

Over the next seven years, White had a variety of postings, travelling all over the world and, after the second of two promotions, obtained the rank of lieutenant in October 1908. In January 1909 he joined HMS *Mercury*, a Portsmouth-based depot ship, for submarine training.

Submarines – defined as watercraft capable of independent operation underwater – had been built as experimental prototypes before the 19th century. However, proper submarine

design only gained momentum during that century, and they were soon adopted by several navies. Their first widespread use for military purposes was during the Great War.

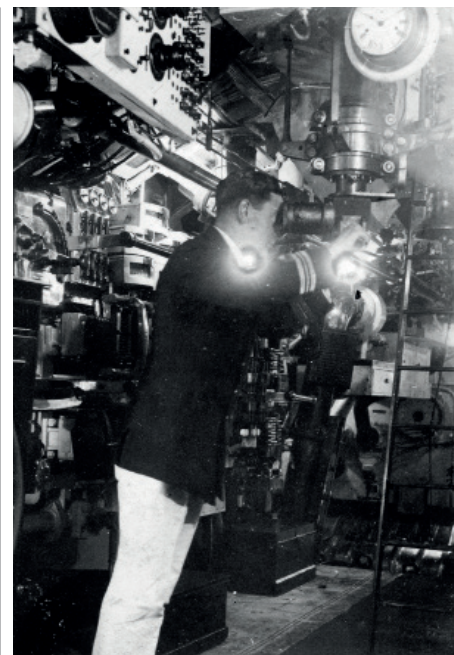
Within two years of his training, White was given his first submarine command, HM Submarine *A11* in July 1911. This initial appointment – followed by a series of further submarine commands – came just a month after his wedding, when he married Sybil Thomas in Plymouth, Devon. The couple went on to have two sons and a daughter.

Otranto Patrols

In April 1914, just four months before the start of the Great War, White's first spell in submarines ended when he was appointed to the battleship HMS *Monarch*. This occupied his time for the early part of the war but in May 1915 he was given the command of the submarine *D6*.

In August 1916, he took command of HMS *E14*, and in October was promoted to lieutenant-commander. Through December, *E14* carried out patrols in the Mediterranean and the following year it was one of four submarines sent to Corfu, Greece to strengthen the so-called Otranto Barrage – the Allied naval

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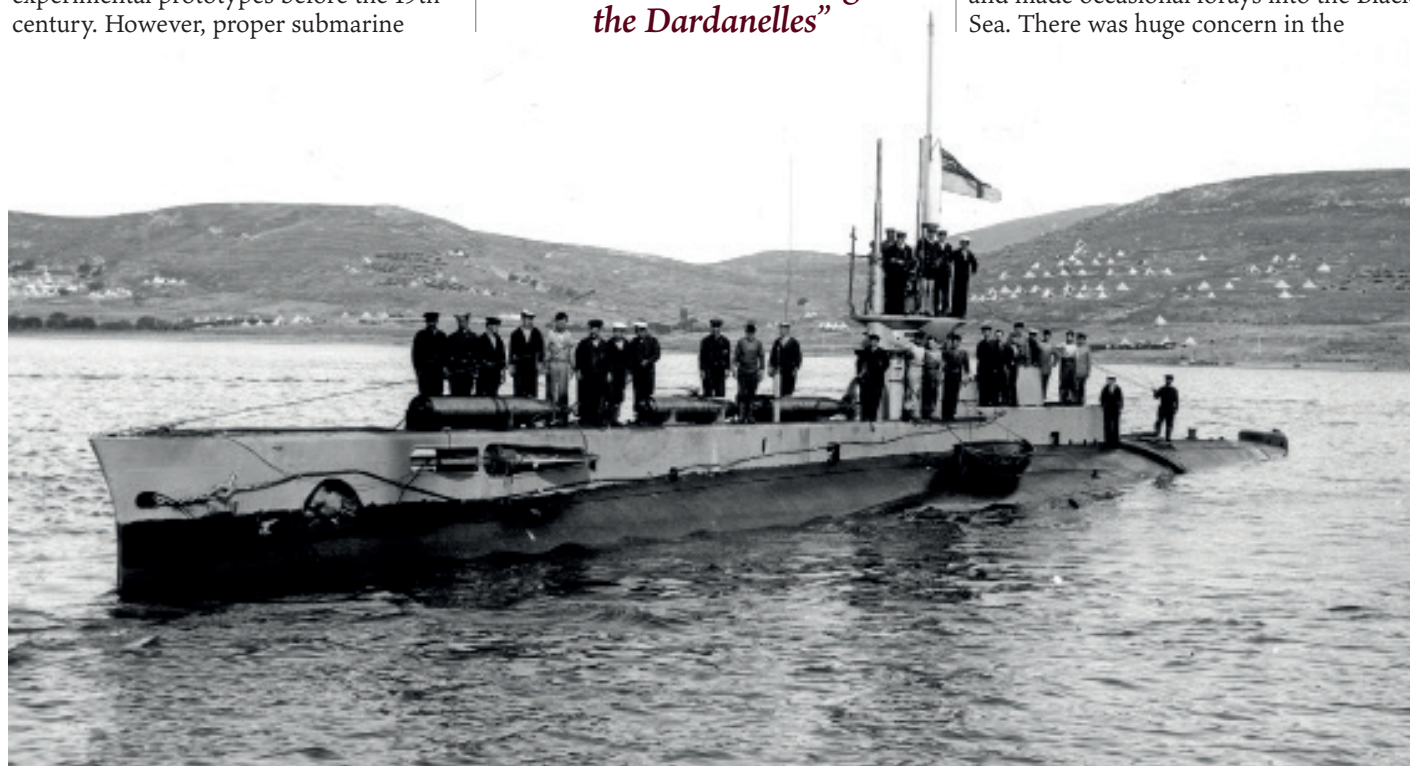


A REMARKABLE PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN INSIDE HIS SUBMARINE SHOWS LT-CDR WHITE – THIS IS BELIEVED TO BE THE ONLY IMAGE OF A GREAT WAR SUBMARINE COMMANDER AT THE PERISCOPE VIA LORD ASHCROFT

blockade of the Otranto Straits between Brindisi, Italy and Corfu.

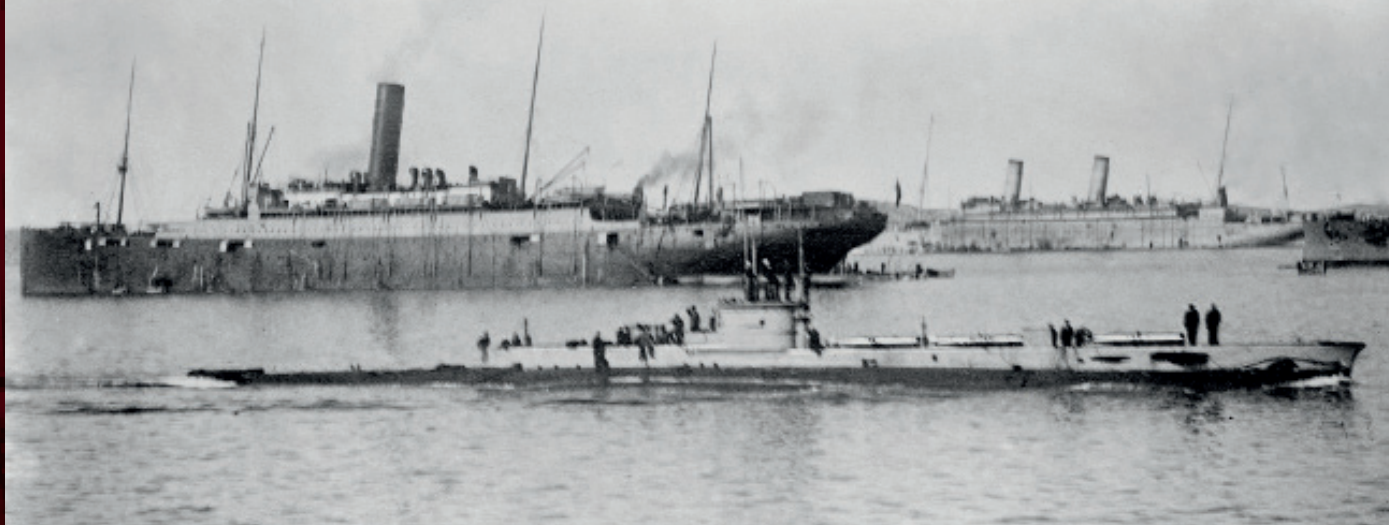
The cordon was intended to prevent the Austro-Hungarian Navy from escaping into the Mediterranean and threatening Allied operations there.

As war broke out in August 1914, two German warships, *Goeben* and *Breslau*, succeeded in escaping from the Mediterranean through the Dardanelles. They based themselves in Constantinople and made occasional forays into the Black Sea. There was huge concern in the



MARMARA RAIDER: WHITE'S FUTURE COMMAND, HMS *E14*, AT MUDROS IN 1915 HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

HMS E14 BEGINS A PATROL IN THE SEA OF MARMARA WITH EXTRA TORPEDOES LASHED TO HER CASING
TOPFOTO



Admiralty that *Goeben*, in particular – a 25,000 tonne modern battlecruiser with ten 11in guns – would slip out of Constantinople and be able to wreak havoc in the Mediterranean and, possibly, beyond. Indeed, these fears were a forerunner to those experienced by the Royal Navy in World War Two when it was desperately anxious that the formidable *Bismarck* would slip out from northern Germany and cause mayhem among the Atlantic convoys.

Heaven-Sent Opportunity

In November 1917, following the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia withdrew from the war. This freed up the *Goeben* – now flying the Ottoman flag – and her cruiser compatriot to sail through the Dardanelles on January 20, 1918, with the intention of attacking the British base at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos. However, after successful attacks on two British ships, both raiders struck mines and, while *Breslau* sank, *Goeben* limped back to the Dardanelles. Despite striking a second mine, *Goeben* would have made it to safety were it not for the miscalculation of her captain who, as the ship neared Nagara Point, mistook a buoy and ran her aground. This presented the Royal Navy and the Royal Flying Corps with a heaven-sent opportunity to sink the capital ship.

Initial air attacks failed but after considerable careful planning, including air reconnaissance, White and his crew were tasked with finishing off *Goeben*. The submarine set sail from Mudros on January 27 on a dangerous journey through mined seas and enemy shore

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batteries. White travelled by night to reach Nagara Point the next day. At 5.30am on January 28, having negotiated the minefield safely, *E14* advanced beneath the waves but soon she found her path obstructed by an unidentified object. White brought his submarine to the surface and climbed out to investigate, but only after giving strict instructions that the submarine must dive if attacked – leaving White himself to a certain death.

White guided the submarine clear of the mysterious obstruction and went below, confident he now had his bearings. It was light by 7am and White took a fix through his periscope. Nagara Point was clearly visible to him but there was no sign of *Goeben*: unbeknown to the British, the ship had been refloated some 24 hours before *E14* embarked on its ill-fated mission. White took the submarine further up the Straits in the hope of spotting his target but, with no sign of *Goeben*, he faced the unappealing prospect of a dangerous return journey on depleted submarine batteries.

Sudden Blast

At 8.45am, White pushed up the periscope to take a fix and spotted a Turkish merchant ship within easy range. Perhaps to ease the disappointment of

WHITE'S ELUSIVE TARGET, THE BATTLECRUISER GOEBEN (ALSO KNOWN AS YAVUZ) IN THE SEA OF MARMARA IN 1919 USN/NHHC





THE VC AND CAMPAIGN MEDALS
AWARDED TO LT-CDR WHITE
LORD ASHCROFT

his failed mission, he decided to attack. However, just 11 seconds after the second torpedo left the submarine's bow tube, *E14* was rocked by a massive explosion. She was lifted up some 15ft and the conning tower rose out of the water. The forward torpedo hatch sprang open, enabling hundreds of gallons of seawater to enter. To this day it is not known what caused the blast, but a torpedo may have struck a mine or exploded prematurely.

Immediately after the blast, shore batteries opened up on the stricken submarine, which received several hits. Nevertheless, White gained control of *E14* sufficiently well to submerge and assess the damage. For the next two hours, she limped along towards the open sea, with White hopeful that all was not lost.

However, a sudden surge of water then sent *E14* plunging down to 165ft and, with virtually no control of the submarine, White was forced to bring her to the surface and run the inevitable gauntlet of coastal guns. In a final attempt to guide his submarine and its crew, White climbed on to the casing soon after she surfaced. With the conning tower flooded and its hatch jammed, he was forced to emerge from the fore-hatch.

By now the situation was hopeless as Petty Officer Perkins, who survived the debacle, later detailed. He said: "The captain was the first one up on deck, and then the navigator [Lieutenant Drew, RNVR], I followed to connect up the upper steering gear. We found the spindle to be shot in half. Orders were given to steer from below. We ran the gauntlet for half an hour, only a few shots hitting us... The captain, seeing it was hopeless, ran towards the shore. His last words were, 'We are in the hands of God', and only a

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few seconds later I looked for him and saw his body, mangled by shellfire, roll into the water and go under.

"The last shell hit the starboard tank, killing all [in the area] I believe. By this time the submarine was close to the shore. Soon afterwards she sank..."

The fire had come from batteries on Cape Helles and Kum Kale, and Perkins was convinced that Lieutenant Drew had been killed by the same shell that claimed White. The Turks picked up only nine of *E14*'s 31-strong company, including Perkins and, after the war was over, they described the bravery of their commander and other men.

Chance of Survival

White's VC was announced on May 24, 1919. His citation ended: "Lieutenant-Commander White turned [his submarine] towards the shore in order to give the crew a chance of being saved. He remained on deck the whole time himself until he was killed by a shell."

Two survivors, Able Seaman Reuben Mitchell and Signaller Charles Timbrell were both awarded the Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) for their bravery in keeping a badly wounded comrade afloat until help arrived. Eight months later, on January 22, 1920, Petty Officer Perkins was also awarded the DSM, while Telegraphist William Prichard was awarded a Bar to his DSM. Two other crew were also awarded the DSM: Stoker

1st Class W E Reed and Engine Room Artificer R W Milburn.

White's VC meant that *E14* became the only vessel in Royal Navy history to have two of its commanders awarded Britain and the Commonwealth's ultimate gallantry award. Lieutenant Commander Edward Boyle's VC was awarded for his bravery in the Sea of Marmara, Turkey, when he avoided enemy patrols and mines in rough weather to launch a successful attack on enemy shipping.

Boyle's award had been announced on May 21, 1915 and his citation read: "For most conspicuous bravery, in command of submarine *E14*, when he dived his vessel under the enemy's minefields and entered the Sea of Marmora [sic] on the 27th April, 1915. In spite of great navigational difficulties from strong currents, of the continual neighbourhood of hostile patrols, and of the hourly danger of attack from the enemy, he continued to operate in the narrow waters of the straits and succeeded in sinking two large Turkish gunboats and one large military transport." Unlike White, Boyle survived his VC action and the rest of the war. The two men had been friends.

Quiet, modest, dedicated and much-loved by his crew, White was 31 when he died, and his body was never recovered. His widow, Sybil, received his VC from King George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on June 12, 1919. White's name is remembered on both the Horley Memorial in Surrey and the Portsmouth Naval Memorial, Hampshire. ●

Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II*, was first published in 2016 and is available in hardback

and paperback. For more information, visit www.victoriacrossheroes2.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes and details about his VC collection may be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.

