

The six brothers who all came back home



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Gosport

By Nigel Peake

Summary:

Many mothers passed anxious years waiting for news of their sons in the Forces, but probably none more so than Martha Porter. A widow from Westbourne, the county's most westerly village, she saw all six of her sons go off to war. Four served in the Royal Navy and two in the Army – and all returned, one with the Distinguished Service Medal and one with wounds and malaria.

Introduction:

The part played by the Porter family came to light while I was researching material for a book on Westbourne during the First World War. The odds against all six coming home safely must have been enormous, especially given the exploits in which two of them were involved.

For a family rooted in the agricultural tradition of Sussex, it may have seemed that the future was mapped out for the Porter children. The six boys could have been expected to follow their father George and grandfather William on to the land. The four girls would have seen themselves helping their mother Martha at home until they were old enough to enter domestic service.

As they grew older, however, the young men had other ideas. Britain's unequalled Royal Navy was at its most powerful during the late Victorian years, and its home base of Portsmouth was only a short distance from Westbourne. It had already provided an escape route from rural life for quite a few village lads, and in March 1888 – just a few months after his 18th birthday – George Alfred Porter, the eldest son, followed them, signing on for 12 years.¹

He must have found the life to his taste and shared his experiences with the family, because four years later his younger brother William Henry made the same journey, enlisting for a similar period.² Two years after that, they were joined by Frederick,³ who became another "12-year man", and the naval quartet was completed in 1897 when Frank signed on, again for 12 years.⁴

At that time, the idea of a global conflict that would claim millions of lives must have seemed as remote to the brothers as the idea of flying. And William particularly could never have guessed that he would take part in one of the most daring submarine exploits of the first world war, which resulted in gallantry medals for every member of his boat's crew.

He served in a variety of ships before transferring to submarines, and by the spring of 1915 was a chief stoker in E14, which was off the coast of Turkey supporting allied landings during the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign.

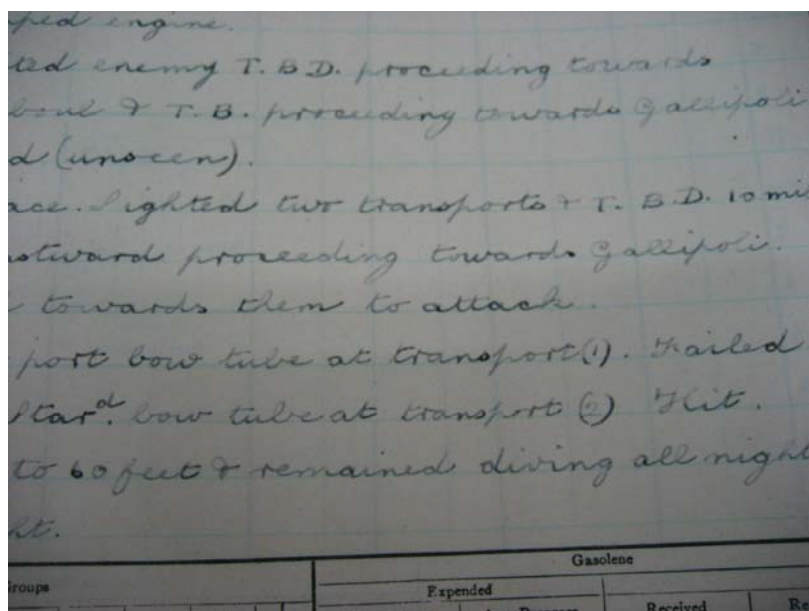
In his search for enemy ships, E14's captain, Lieutenant-Commander Edward Courtney Boyle, took eight hours to pass through the dense minefields of the Dardanelles straits, surfacing every hour to reconnoitre.

He finally passed through the gate in the boom thrown across the Straits. Having safely made it, E14 went deep into enemy territory in the Sea of Marmara and stayed there for several weeks, often spending the entire night on the seabed to avoid detection. The submarine's final tally was one Turkish gunboat and one troopship sunk, and another warship disabled.

The characteristically terse entries in E14's logbook disguise the tension and discomfort the men must have endured. Courtney Boyle and his crew entered the Sea of Marmara on 28 April and immediately "dived on account of gunboat". The following afternoon's entry records: "Sighted two enemy destroyers and two TBs (torpedo boats) steaming towards Stamboul (Istanbul). Fired starboard bow – doubtful hit."⁵

A cat-and-mouse chase then ensued. Evading enemy shipping on 30 April, E14 lay on the seabed all night at a depth of 85 feet. The first day of May was particularly busy. At 10.42am, the submarine fired her starboard beam tube and sank a small gunboat. At 11am she sighted another gunboat which had come to rescue survivors and fired two more torpedoes, but recorded simply: "Missed."

With the hunt hotting up for the rest of that day, E14 decided to spend another night on the bottom, this time at a depth of 90 feet. The pattern was repeated on the next two days and would only have added to the discomfort of the 29 men on board. To preserve oxygen, all but those on watch would have been required to move as little as possible during the long hours on the seabed.



A detail from E14's log (The National Archives, ADM173/1230)

The wearing wait paid off on 10 May. Shortly after 6pm, E14 sighted two transports and a torpedo boat ten miles away, making for Gallipoli. She dived towards them to attack. Typically terse entries in her log book read:

7.23pm. Fired port bow tube at transport (1). Failed.

7.28pm. Fired starboard bow tube at transport (2). Hit.
7.30pm. Dived to 60 feet and remained diving all night.

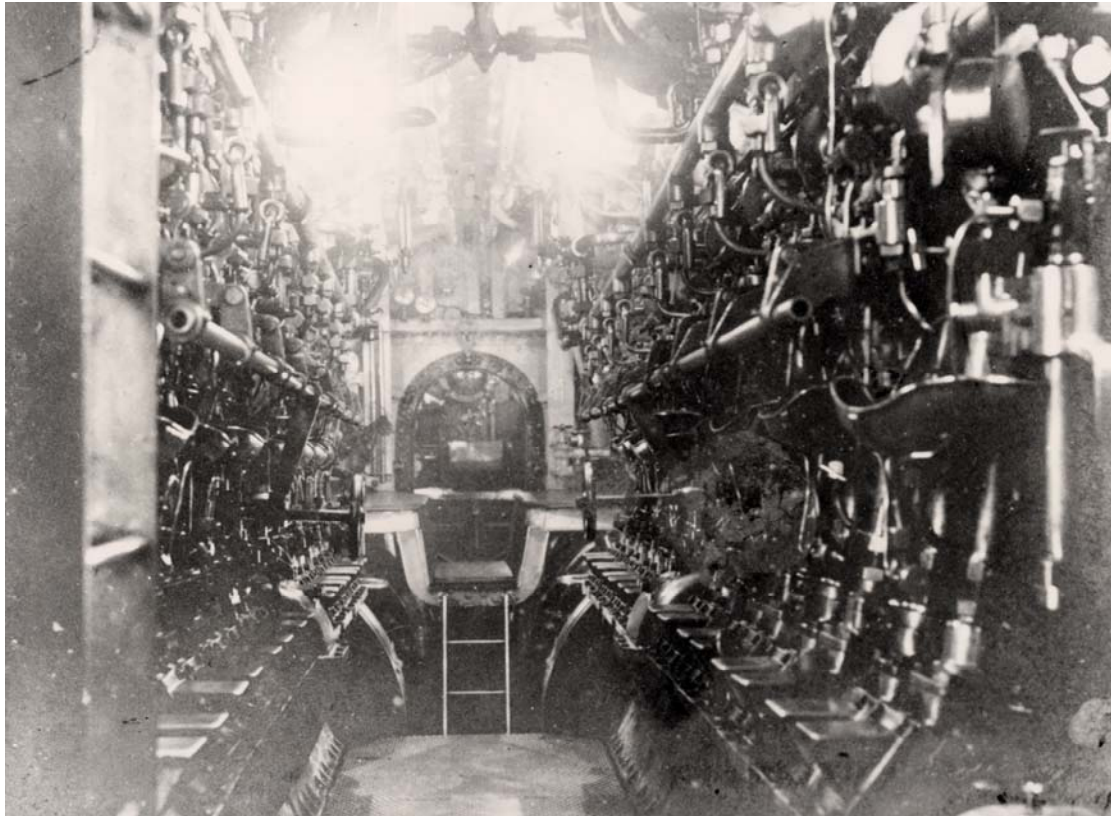
Although Courtney Boyle and his crew did not realise it at the time, they had sunk the large Turkish transport ship Gul Djeml, which was carrying thousands of troops and large amounts of ammunition to Gallipoli.

Having caused havoc among enemy shipping, E14 then made her way back through the Dardanelles, with the narrowest of escapes. This time she missed the gate and hit the boom at a depth of 80 feet. The impact was so great that the submarine was lifted up almost 40 feet, but eventually crashed through the net.

By 11 June, the submarine and her crew were back in the Sea of Marmara, immediately being fired on by an enemy gunboat. The following day, E14 sank a steamer, provoking heavy fire from shore batteries. And on June 13 she chased a steam vessel which made for the land at top speed. Her log added: "Vessel turned out to be enemy gunboat. When two miles distant, she turned and opened a hot fire, many shots being quite close. Dived 21 feet." ⁶



E14's crew on return from the Sea of Marmara. Age and uniform details suggest that William Porter is standing on the far right. Reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Navy Submarine Museum, Gosport.



The engine room of E14, "home" to William Porter and his stokers during their perilous voyage. Reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Navy Submarine Museum, Gosport.

These exploits resulted in a Victoria Cross for the captain, a Distinguished Service Cross for the other two officers, and a Distinguished Service Medal for every man in the crew. Lieutenant-Commander Courtney Boyle later went on to become a rear-admiral. William Porter went back to surface ships, serving as a chief stoker in a depot ship and two cruisers before being demobilised in February 1919.

Prize money claim

There were several intriguing sequels to the story of E14. For sinking the first gunboat on 1 May, the submarine's crew had been awarded £375 prize money, which was divided among the crew. In November 1918, the now-promoted Commander Edward Courtney Boyle decided he and his men should receive something for the sinking of the much larger Gul Djmel.

He presented a claim in the Prize Court for a massive £31,000, on the grounds that the transport ship was a permanent unit of the enemy forces, and such units were usually believed to be armed with four six-pounder guns. It was known that at the time of her sinking, Gul Djmel was carrying 6,000 troops in addition to her crew of 200, as well as six field guns and several thousand rifles. The ten-volume history *The Great War* later observed coldly: "The sinking of such a vessel (the loss of life was said to have been considerable) was a most desirable and highly useful operation."⁷

Away from the heat of battle, however, Courtney Boyle found himself up against the dry world of semantics. The claim was refused, mainly on the ground that the mounting of four light guns did not make Gul Djeml an armed ship. The court ruled that within the meaning of the Prize Act, an armed ship was "a fighting unit of the fleet, a ship commissioned and armed for offensive action in a naval engagement".⁸

The decision was accepted without demur, although one Service newspaper commented caustically: "If the Turk had carried a bare crew of, say, 250 and half a dozen four-inch guns, E14 would have received £1,250. As she only carried 6,000 troops with field guns, rifles and ammunition, the whole cargo being believed lost, she gets nothing."⁹

After her exploits in the Sea of Marmara, E14 went on to further glory. A later captain, Lieutenant-Commander Geoffrey White, also won the VC, again in the Dardanelles, during a gallant but abortive attempt to sink the Ottoman Navy's flagship in January 1918. Forced to surface when air began to run out, the submarine immediately came under heavy fire from both sides of the strait. White was killed by a shell while trying to beach the boat in an attempt to save the crew. Twenty five men died with him, but seven managed to escape before E14 sank.

A submarine rediscovered

With her unique record as the only Royal Navy vessel to boast two VCs, E14 lay undiscovered on the seabed until June 2012, when two Turkish historians and divers achieved their long-term goal of locating the submarine. Photographs showed her largely intact, but with a large shell hole near the bow. The British government sought to have the site preserved as a war grave.

The three other Porters at sea had a less eventful but equally useful war. By 1914, George was 44 and already a naval pensioner, living in Southsea with his wife and widowed aunt. He immediately rejoined the service at his old rank of stoker petty officer, this time in the light cruiser *HMS Venus*, which was part of the 11th Cruiser Squadron. He stayed with the ship until October 1917, visiting Egypt and Singapore, and then spent a few weeks in the armoured cruiser *HMS Euryalus* before being transferred to a shore base. He was demobilised in January 1919.

Fred, who had been a labourer before taking the road to Portsmouth Dockyard, started his naval career as a Stoker 2nd Class. By 1912 he was a chief stoker on *HMS Hindustan*, a pre-Dreadnought battleship that became part of the Grand Fleet's 3rd Battle Squadron at the outbreak of war. In November 1914, she was detached to reinforce the Channel Fleet, and then returned to the Grand Fleet until the spring of 1916, when she transferred to Nore Command. Fred stayed with the ship until February 1918 and ended his service in the training ship *HMS Achilles*, being demobilised in February 1919, at the age of 44.

Frank re-enlisted in 1909 when his original 12-year term was up and spent the war as a chief stoker in the battleship *HMS Iron Duke* and then the battlecruiser *HMS Dido*.

Wounded on the Somme

Of the remaining two brothers, Herbert was a 33-year-old married labourer when he went to Portsmouth to join the 16th Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment in November 1915.¹⁰ Posted to France as a lance-corporal, he was one of tens of thousands wounded in action on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916. Having been shot in the neck, he was invalided to England, where he spent 19 days in hospital and a further ten days on leave.

He rejoined his battalion in December 1916 and by the following year was in Salonika, where he was again admitted to hospital, this time with malaria. Recurrent bouts of the illness meant that by April 1918, his record was marked: "Not to be sent to a theatre of war other than France or Italy".

He was duly transferred, and in September 1918 joined the 16th Sherwood Foresters in France. Three days before the Armistice, he changed to the 6th Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers as a corporal. He was demobilised in February 1919.

The youngest of the Porter brothers, Horace, as he was known, or Edwin Horace Arthur, as he was baptised, was a dairyman before serving with the East Surrey Regiment in France from the summer of 1915. The following spring, he was in hospital in London after being burned by a mine explosion. No record of his Army service survives, but this basic information was obtained from Westbourne parish magazine for the war years.

Physically, the Westbourne to which they all returned had changed little. But just over a year after the Armistice was declared, a new feature stood beneath the 500-year-old yew avenue in the churchyard of St John the Baptist. Beneath a Celtic cross were inscribed the names of 55 men whom war had claimed from this one small corner of Sussex. In the cemetery at the other end of the village, five more were commemorated. In common with so many other communities throughout the land, the heart had been ripped out.

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- ¹ ADM188/203/144479 Royal Navy service records, National Archives
 - ² ADM188/271/166939 Royal Navy service records, National Archives
 - ³ ADM 188/443/278355 Royal Navy service records, National Archives
 - ⁴ ADM188/459/286210 Royal Navy service records, National Archives
 - ⁵ ADM173/1230, E14's log book, The National Archives
 - ⁶ ADM173/1230, E14's log book, The National Archives
 - ⁷ Volume 10, pp 114-118, The Great War, The Amalgamated Press Limited 1918, edited by H.W. Wilson and J.A. Hammerton
 - ⁸ Volume 10, pp 114-118, The Great War, The Amalgamated Press Limited 1918, edited by H.W. Wilson and J.A. Hammerton
 - ⁹ Volume 10, pp 114-118, The Great War, The Amalgamated Press Limited 1918, edited by H.W. Wilson and J.A. Hammerton
 - ¹⁰ Ancestry.co.uk, British Army Service Records 1914-1920