

THE OUTSTANDING AND RARE GREAT WAR 'V.C. ACTION' D.S.M. GROUP AWARDED TO CREWMAN OF H.M. SUBMARINE B11. IN WHAT WAS A REMARKABLE FEAT OF ENDURANCE AND GALLANTRY, B.11, WITH A CREW OF JUST 16, ENTERED THE DARDANELLES AND DIVING UNDER FIVE ROWS OF MINES, TORPEDOED THE TURKISH BATTLESHIP MESSUDIYEH, ON 13 DECEMBER 1914, IMMEDIATELY ASSAILED BY GUN-FIRE AND TORPEDO BOATS, B11'S ESCAPE WAS JUST AS REMARKABLE, FOR THE SUBMARINE LOST THE USE OF ITS COMPASS AND GROUNDED SEVERAL TIMES IN SHALLOW WATERS, ALL THE TIME EXPOSED TO ENEMY FIRE BEFORE FINALLY ESCAPING. THIS ACTION RESULTED IN THE AWARD OF A VICTORIA CROSS TO LIEUTENANT N. D. HOLBROOK, THE FIRST V.C. FOR A SUBMARINE ACTION. THE ENTIRE CREW OF THE B11 WERE ALSO DECORATED FOR THEIR GALLANTRY, WITH THE SECOND IN COMMAND BEING AWARDED THE D.S.O. AND THE REST OF THE 14 MAN CREW, THE D.S.M.



DISTINGUISHED SERVICE MEDAL, G.V.R. '232229 N. L. RAE. A.B., H.M. SUBMARINE. B.11.', 1914-15 STAR '232229, N. L. RAE, A.B., R.N.', BRITISH WAR AND VICTORY MEDALS '232229 N. L. RAE. A.B. R.N.'

V.C. London Gazette 22 December 1914: Lieutenant Norman Douglas Holbrook, Royal Navy

'For most conspicuous bravery on the 13th December 1914, when in command of the Submarine

B.11, he entered the Dardanelles, and, notwithstanding the very difficult current, dived his vessel under five rows of mines and torpedoed the Turkish battleship Messudiyeh, which was guarding the mine-field. Lieutenant Holbrook succeeded in bringing the B.11 safely back, although assailed by gun-fire and torpedo boats, having been submerged on one occasion for nine hours.'

D.S.O. London Gazette 22 December 1914: Lieutenant Sydney Thornhill Winn

'In respect of his services as second in command of Submarine B.11 which torpedoed the Turkish battleship Messudiyeh in the Dardanelles on the 13th December 1914.'

D.S.M. London Gazette 1 January 1915: Able Seaman Norman Lester Rae, O.N., 232229, in a joint citation with the 13 remaining members of B11's crew:

'For service in the Dardanelles in Submarine B.11 on the 13th December 1914.'



Lieutenant Holbrook and his crew on board B 11.

Norman Lester Rae was born in Basingstoke on 19 August 1888 and joined the Royal Navy as a Boy Second Class on 15 September 1904. Advanced Able Seaman on 24 April 1908, he served during the Great War in the submarine B.11 under the command of Lieutenant N. D. Holbrook. Following the outbreak of the Great War, H.M. Submarine B.11, a rather primitive vessel launched on 21 February 1906, with a crew of two officer and 14 ratings, was redeployed from Malta to Tenedos, an island just south of the entrance to the Dardanelles, joining the fleet monitoring the entrance of the Dardanelles.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_B11

When Britain formally declared war on Turkey on 5 November 1914 it was decided to probe the Straits from here, although they were known to be heavily defended by minefields and shore batteries, while fierce currents made them hazardous to navigate. On 13 December 1914 B.11 submerged a mile off Cape Helles at the western end of the Straits and, having dived under five rows of mines through uncharted currents, eventually reached Sari Sighlar Bay, south of Chanak on the Asian shore. Here she discovered the Turkish battleship Messudiyeh at anchor, which was carrying more than 700 men. firing a single torpedo from a distance of 750 metres, the torpedo hit the ship's stern, causing her to

capsize and sink, with the loss of 10 officers and 27 other ranks. Despite very heavy Turkish fire B.11 succeeded in returning safely to Tenedos; the return journey taking over eight hours, with any attempt to use the periscope resulting in heavy fire being brought to bear on her.



For their great gallantry in attacking and sinking the *Messudiyeh*, all the crew of the B.11 were decorated; her captain, Lieutenant N. D. Holbrook was awarded the Victoria Cross; which the first award of a Victoria Cross for a submarine action during the Great War. B.11's second in command, Lieutenant S. T. Winn, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order; and all fourteen ratings (including Rae) were awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. They were also awarded £3,500 of prize money, with Holbrook receiving £600; Winn £480; the Petty Officers £240; and the seamen £120. For Rae and the other seamen this was the equivalent of almost three years' pay.

PRESENTATION WATCH

The medals are sold with a finely engraved presentation pocket watch, by J. W. Benson, London, the outer silver case engraved with Rae's initials; 'NLR' on one side, and '*Sunk by B11. "Messudiyeh" Dardanelles, Dec. 13. 1914*' on the other. It is almost certain that the rest of the crew were also presented with similar engraved pocket watches, for the National Museum of the Royal Navy holds a similar engraved pocket watch in its collection which belonged to Able Seaman George Read DSM, reference number is RNSM 2015/1/1. Who commissioned these presentation watches has yet to be established.

The following is the full crew list of Submarine B.11 and their awards:

Lieutenant Norman Douglas Holbrook, Royal Navy – V.C.
Lieutenant Sydney Thornhill Winn – D.S.O.
Petty Officer William Charles Milsom, O.N., 182452- D.S.M.
Petty Officer Thomas Henry Davey, O.N., 215464- D.S.M.
Chief Engine Room Artificer, 2nd Class, John Harding, O.N., 270410- D.S.M.
Engine Room Artificer, 1st Class, Anthony Douglas, O.N., 270773- D.S.M.
Stoker Petty Officer Patrick McKenna, O.N., 284570- D.S.M.
Leading Seaman Alfred Edmund Perry, O.N., 234677- D.S.M.
Leading Seaman Wilfrid Charles Mortimer, O.N., 219476- D.S.M.
Able Seaman George Read, O.N., 231010- D.S.M.
Able Seaman Edward Buckle, O.N., 237869- D.S.M.

Able Seaman Norman Lester Rae, O.N., 232229- D.S.M.

Able Seaman Tom Blake, O.N., J.1383- D.S.M.

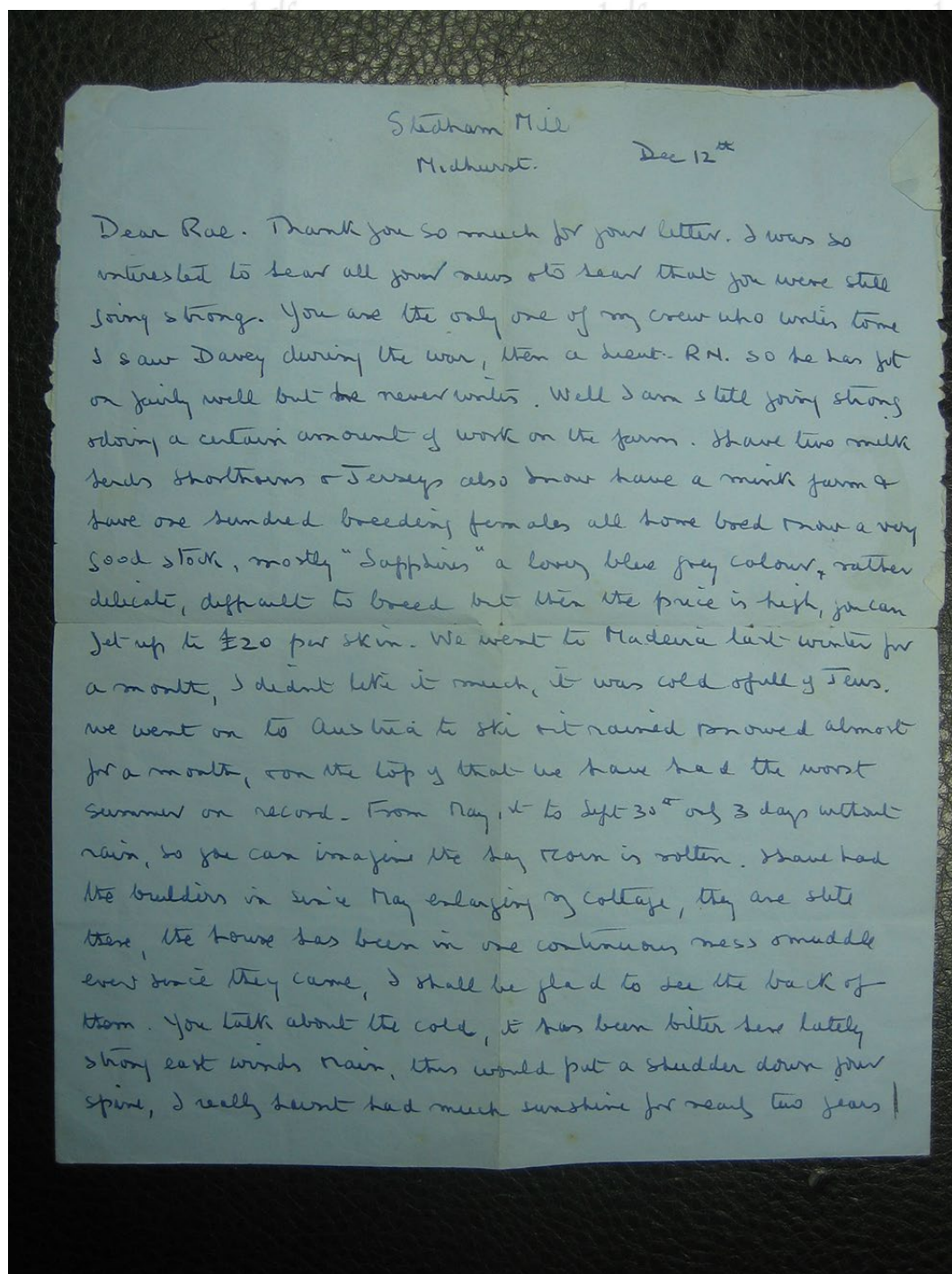
Signalman Frederick George Foote, O.N., J.1862- D.S.M.

Acting Leading Stoker John Henry Sowdeii, O.N., 308448- D.S.M.

Stoker, 1st Class, Stephen James Lovelady, O.N., K.2240). - D.S.M.



Additionally, with the group is a hand-written letter written to the recipient from his former skipper, Commander Norman Holbrook, V.C., dated 12 December 1958.



Rae served in various other submarines and shore-based establishments for the rest of the War, and was shore demobilised on 27 March 1919. He subsequently emigrated to South Africa.

Condition GVF, sold with research (digital), including service papers. None of the other D.S.M.'s can be located from past sales of major auction houses

A really quite outstanding and important Submariners gallantry award

B11 SINKS THE BATTLESHIP MESSUDIYEH

The following, extracted from *Epic Legends of the First World War* by Arch Whitehouse, gives a fine description of the action of Holbrook and B11:

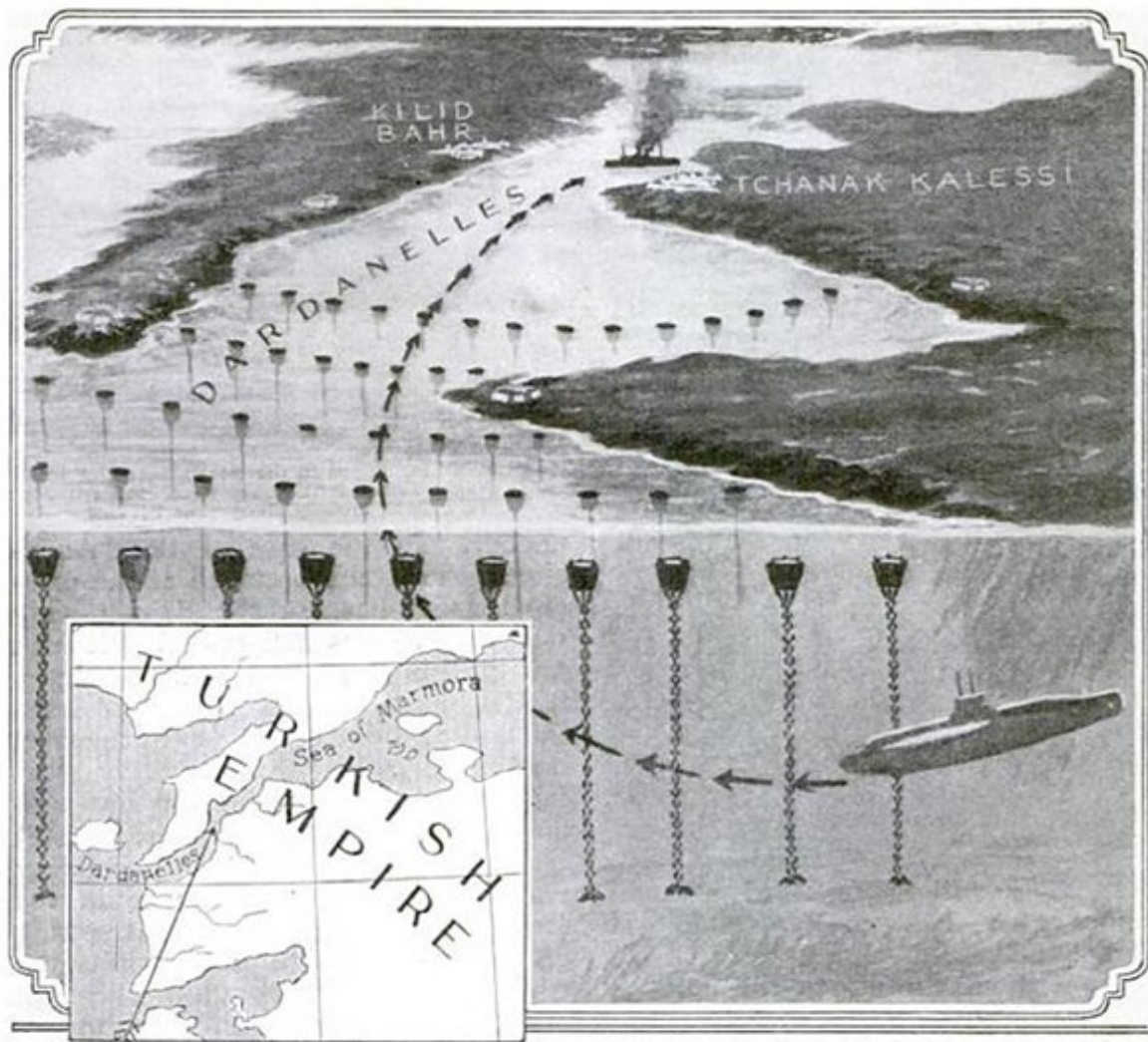
“Western Turkey is separated from the main portion of Asia Minor by the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and a narrow channel known as the Bosphorus that connects the Marmara with the Black Sea. Istanbul, then called Constantinople, is situated at the southern end of the Bosphorus. naval Intelligence had learned that somewhere inside and below the slimmest portion of the Dardanelles, an area known as the Narrows, were five lines of Turkish mines that prevented surface ships from moving into the Sea of Marmara. The Narrows are about twelve miles from the entrance to the strait, and the Turkish capital and its important shipping appeared to be fairly safe.



A few French Submarine commanders had enlivened their dull patrol work in the Aegen sea by penetrating the Dardanelles and running wild against the Turkish fleet. These exploits were noted by Lieutenant Commander Pownall who was in charge of the British submarine base, and he suggested that his boat commanders might play the same game. Lieutenant Holbrook, who was keen to give it a try, pointed out, *"My boat, B-11, is the only one that could do it. I have a new battery, and if I restricted my speed to two knots, I might be able to run submerged for almost twenty-four hours."*

Only by comparing distances, space and other features of the Dardanelles against the performance of those early 1914 submarines, can one have any conception of what Lieutenant Holbrook was talking on. When submerged, the speed of these vessels was between five and six knots, but this could be maintained for only about two hours; by the end of that time they would have to surface and recharge the batteries by running the Diesel engines. To forestall this, Holbrook planned to move at his slowest speed and thereby have electric power for a full day's submerged sailing. These submarines had no anti-mine gear, no metal blades that could sheer off mine-mooring cables or nets; on the contrary they bore all sorts of jagged projections that invited entanglement with mine-mooring ropes or cables. With this in mind, Holbrook rigged some temporary mine guards, and his B-11 was ready for one of the first great submarine exploits of modern warfare by Saturday, December 12, 1914.

At 4.15 the next morning she was on the surface three miles from the entrance to the Dardanelles. The Turks had mounted searchlights that swept the strait continuously during the night, and in order to use his battery as economically as possible, Holbrook waited until dawn when these lights were extinguished. Then he moved on the surface as far as he dared. About a mile from Cape Helles on the southern tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula he trimmed and began to dive. In these old subs the conning tower was not shut off from the main boat hull during submerged sailing, for the inner end of the periscope was located there, and the commander had to stand inside to observe and control his vessel when the hull was under water. While hazardous, this arrangement had one advantage, for the commander, without changing his position, had a view through the conning tower ports when the submarine was forced suddenly to surface, and this factor was an important feature in B-11's exploit.



Arrangement of Mines in the Dardanelles and Location of the Turkish Battleship "Messudieh" When Sunk at Anchor by the British Submarine "B-11": In Performing This Remarkable Feat the Submarine Was under Water Continuously for About Nine Hours.

Commander Holbrook moved along the northern shore, which was fairly straight, at a depth of between sixty and eighty feet. Any enemy mines would be moored between sixty and eighty feet where they would entangle surface craft, and if all suppositions were correct, if Holbrook's mine guards worked, there was a fair chance of his getting through. B-11 had proceeded about a mile when tell-tale vibrations told the crew that their mine guard had fouled in some manner. Coming to the surface, Holbrook discovered that the guard on the port forward hydroplane had twisted around, forming a hook that would collect mines rather than evade them. The young commander had to unbolt this mine trap quickly and proceed without it.

Progress was slow over the next four hours, but by 9.40 a.m. Holbrook decided that he was somewhere near the Narrows, and on making an observation through the periscope saw that he was right. Off his starboard beam was a large two-funnelled, grey ship, flying the Turkish ensign and bristling with naval guns. Knowing that a good torpedo shot would be difficult in the strong current, Holbrook decided to move up as close as possible before attacking. He dipped his periscope depth again and found he had been swept down by the current, so, closing in gradually, he moved to get into a position for a shot from his starboard torpedo tube. The current held him fast and he had to increase his battery output to get his nose around to draw a bead on the Turkish man-of-war. Then, risking being seen, he gave his orders: "Stand by !...Fire !"

Holbrook watched the torpedo through his periscope as it churned a white streak and sped for its mark. At that instant his boat was caught in a swirl and his periscope went under. The coxswain gradually brought her up again, but before the commander could get another look there was the thud of a great explosion. Everyone aboard B-11 knew that their torpedo had scored. A cloud of black smoke enveloped the ship, and as Holbrook watched, the guns aboard the man-of-war, and others on shore, snarled in revenge. The water about B-11 was churned with the eruptions of the bursting shells; the Turks had spotted him at last.



Holbrook swung away and lowered his periscope after noting the enemy vessel settling by its stern. This was his first victory, but it was immediately tempered with consternation. The man at the helm reported that he could not read the compass as the lens was fogged, but Holbrook was too busy to waste time on that problem. He took one last look around to choose a safe course of escape, but the land had few distinguishing features. The only definite mark was the Turkish Warship, now on fire as she wallowed. As it turned out, however, he had guessed correctly that he was in Sığirci Bay, a gouge in the southern coastline just below the Narrows. But he had been swept in by the current much farther than he had intended, and the course he selected to take him clear was more westerly than he realized and carried him into an area of shoals. There was a sudden bump indicating that B-11 had struck bottom. Her commander knew that the first effect of striking bottom is for the nose to go up, and on that presumption, he ordered full speed ahead, hoping to move into deeper water. There was some satisfactory scraping below and B-11 seemed to be moving into the clear, when she struck another bump and practically came to a standstill. On glancing through the conning tower ports,

Holbrook saw that the submarine was well out of water. Guns that were mounted in nearby forts lost no time in opening fire until columns of spray blotted out everything. Had a chunk of shrapnel from any of these shells even nicked the conning tower the crew would have been interned behind barbed wire. The batteries were still providing power and the screws twirling, as old B-11 slogged along on her belly, yard by yard; it was bump, scrape, waddle, flounder as she fought like a hooked pike for deeper water. The destroyed Turkish man-of-war was later identified as MESSOUDIEH.

As Lieutenant Holbrook's B-11 bumped and bounced over the sand and shale, the Turks hammered away with much noise but little accuracy. At last the bumps and scraping ceased, she floundered into the clear and surged forward, diving as she went. Gradually the conning tower went under and she was fully submerged. The crew breathed a thankful sigh, relieved to learn that the conning tower had not been hit. "How's her head?" Holbrook called down to the men at the control platform. "We can't see, sir. The compass is still blurred." "Tell Lieutenant Winn to have a look."

Holbrook's first Lieutenant could not determine anything from the instrument, and the skipper decided that the shock of shells bursting on the water so close to them had shaken the compass box, but he said nothing and raised his periscope again and searched the horizon for other Turks to conquer. He spotted a Turkish wreck, apparently standing on one end, and he figured that she was on his starboard beam, and if he kept B-11 so, he would be steering toward the northern shore. After about ten minutes of submerged sailing a break in the land appeared on the port side. This was the entrance to the Dardanelles showing up to the south-west, so, putting his helm over, Holbrook steered for it. The passage out was made once more at eighty feet to avoid the minefield, but this time the current was in his favour. It was almost impossible to keep direction without a compass, but Holbrook held her as steady as he could, and by frequent surfacing to periscope depth he made his way to the entrance where he came to the surface. In the excitement the crew had not noticed that the air was becoming foul in their long submergence of nine hours. Their oxygen had been almost used up, as was disclosed when the Diesel would not run until the boat had been completely ventilated. All Turkey was astonished by his feat. How could a British submarine bash its way through their minefield with four miles of shore batteries on each side, and torpedo a warship right under their noses and escape?



When Lieutenant Holbrook was honoured with the Victoria Cross for his submarine exploit, other young bloods soon begged for the same chance. by 1915 the submarine still had to prove itself. Submarine warfare was seen as a form of barbarism that could only result in the destruction of all those that take part.



These underwater boatmen were seen as young adventurers, a breed apart from other military forces; A daring minority group with a strange esoteric excitement of its own determined to prove that it was capable of exploits of which no one had dreamed.”