

From Beef Tea to Battleships

William Greenall Coe, Mariner and Submariner 1912-1917

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The rather unusual title follows the all-too-brief naval career of a young Engine Room Artificer who joined the peacetime Navy in 1912, serving initially in surface ships, primarily battleships, then volunteering for submarines soon after the war broke out, by means of his many letters written to his parents from the time he joined up to his untimely death from illness. His submarine time was spent mostly in HMS *E1*, primarily in the Baltic.

Each year of Coe’s career is introduced by a very useful date time line of significant events during that year, which the author has woven skilfully into the narrative primarily given by the letters. Coe writes with a nice turn of phrase, in a delightful style, and with well-informed opinions on what is going on wherever his ships are operating. Before the war he was able to write uninhibitedly about where the ship was, what she was doing, and various runs ashore. One particularly interesting comment was that he often went ashore in Malta with an automatic pistol in his pocket due to frequent problems with the populace. Once war was declared, with censorship immediately imposed, the letters sadly can no longer comment on what his boat was doing and where she was. Content often refers to problems with receiving the mail, particularly parcels, which sometimes took months to arrive, what social activities as were possible in the Baltic, and with requests for various articles to be sent out to him. He was hospitalised ashore with suspected consumption, and sadly died very quickly in March 1917.

There is a very interesting comparison of pay scales of various rates and ranks – Engine Room Artificers were very well paid by comparison with non-technical ratings. A number of interesting service documents are illustrated: several relate to Coe’s various qualifications as he gained experience; his Naval Allotment Form sending regular payments to his mother; and the all-important Service Certificate, showing what ships he had served on, with the final chilling endorsement “DD (Discharged Dead) Hospital, Reval, Russia”

There is a nicely researched chapter on the politics of the early gestation of the Submarine Service, and a final chapter on the sad demise of the Baltic flotilla as the Russian Revolution progressed.

Archives of letters from well-informed ratings of this period are rare. The book flows well, the background research is excellent, and it is well worth the modest price. Highly recommended.