

Presentations

GALLIPOLI 1915

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‘A good army of 50,000 men and sea power—that is the end of the Turkish menace.’

Winston Churchill to Lord Grey, the Foreign Secretary, 6 September 1914.

As the cold, grey light of dawn began to break the darkness over the Gallipoli Peninsular on the still morning of 25 April 1915, the leading assault troops of the Royal Fusiliers approached the foreshore of Cape Helles: a narrow, rocky little beach backed by steep cliffs. All was quiet save the gentle creak and splash of the oars pulling the wooden, open boats carrying these troops to battle. Shortly before they reached the shore, the calm was shattered as Turkish defenders on the clifftops opened rifle fire upon the boats below. The assault troops were now in very dangerous position, without cover and dominated from above, but, immediately, out of the darkness behind them, a storm of fire erupted upon the enemy: the broadside of the battleship HMS Implacable, which had come in so close behind the landing boats, a mere 400 metres offshore, that her keel was aground on the seabed and she took casualties on her upper deck from Turkish rifle fire. Her 12”, 6” and 12 pounder guns swept the enemy from their positions and the Royal Fusiliers got ashore without a single casualty, their successful landing helping to turn the tide for another battalion having great difficulty just around the headland.¹ As the troops from both landings met up and consolidated their position, the Implacable, without instruction, lifted her fire onto targets further inland, helping to break up any counter attack. Given the circumstances of the day, it was a master-class of amphibious warfare at unit level. Unfortunately, it was, that day, just about the only such model.

Despite the bravery and endurance of those who took part, the campaign at Gallipoli and the Dardanelles from February 1915 to January 1916 was among the most incompetent combined operations ever undertaken by the forces of the British Empire. This paper aims to explain why that was, concentrating on the combined and joint amphibious aspects of the campaign rather than the pure sea or land fighting. It will start with a very brief narrative of the campaign to set the scene, and then identify some of the most important failings of planning and conduct, principally at the strategic and operational levels. It concludes with a brief consideration of the withdrawal, which, ironically, was a complete success.

The idea of forcing a passage of the Dardanelles and occupying Constantinople was conceived towards the end of 1914, although similar thoughts dated back to the turn of the century, when relations between Britain and Turkey had previously been strained.² They were resurrected in the early months of the First World War, before the Ottoman Empire had even

¹ Corbett J. S. *History of the Great War, Naval Operations Volume II* (London, Longmans, 1921) (Hereafter Naval Operations) p. 326.

² Coates T. (Ed), *The World War I Collection, Gallipoli and the Early Battles, The Dardanelles Commission* (London, The Stationery Office, 2001) (Hereafter Dardanelles Commission) p. 32.

declared war on the Entente allies: Russia, France and Britain, but was clearly leaning towards an alliance with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria. The aim was to coerce the Turks away from the Central Powers. That, in turn, would keep open an all-weather route to Russia, neutralise the threat to the Suez Canal and the Middle Eastern oilfields, deter Bulgaria from joining the Central Powers, and turn the flank of the western front, which had become entrenched and deadlocked by the end of 1914. At first it was conceived as a joint operation, involving both naval and military forces. Then the concept became a purely naval undertaking. As ideas and circumstances developed, however, the need for land forces became apparent once again and the joint plan was resurrected. Then the French joined in and the expedition became combined as well as joint.

The naval attack began in earnest on 19 February 1915 and quickly ran into a barrier of sea mines closely overlooked by forts, mobile artillery batteries and shore-fired torpedoes on both sides of the Dardanelles. After the final attempt to breach this defence by naval means alone was defeated, with the devastating loss of 6 battleships, on 18 March³, it was decided that a strong land force would have to seize the Gallipoli Peninsular. That force would finally silence the Turkish batteries and secure the Peninsular, allowing the Navy to pass through the Dardanelles. By that time a landing force of British, French, Australian and New Zealand troops was already being assembled and the invasion took place on 25 April.

The British 29th Division landed at Cape Helles, at the south western tip of the Peninsular, with orders to advance some 5 miles to seize commanding heights on the first day. In fact they only managed to secure 2 small beachheads that day and a slow, hesitant advance against ever increasing opposition began in the days following the landing.

The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) landed some 15 miles north east of the British, near the fortified headland of Gaba Tepe. From there they were meant to advance quickly through a valley running across the Peninsular to reach the western shore of the Dardanelles, outflanking Turkish resistance to the British and preventing any reinforcement down the Peninsular. In fact they were landed in the wrong place in the darkness. There, they found themselves at the foot of precipitous cliffs. They managed to secure a small beachhead, but were contained within it by a desperate Turkish counter attack. They spent most of the campaign defending their precarious foothold.

The French 1st Division of the Corps Expeditionnaire d'Orient (CEO) mounted a diversionary landing on the Asian side of the Dardanelles and remained there for a day before crossing to Cape Helles and taking a sector on the right of the British.

The British Royal Naval Division made a seaborne diversion in the Gulf of Saros before being divided and redeployed by brigades to reinforce the Cape Helles and ANZAC beachheads. They did not fight as a formed division until May—on the Cape Helles front.

The campaign then descended into an entrenched stalemate, with both sides reinforcing. The allies formed two corps, the British 8th and the French CEO, on the Helles front and made a little progress there with repeated frontal attacks, at great cost in casualties. However they never came close to achieving even the objectives they had set for the first

³ Naval Operations pp. 218-223.

day. On 7 August 1915 a new British force, the 9th Corps, landed at Suvla Bay, some 5 miles north east of the ANZAC beachhead, in a renewed attempt to outflank the Turkish defence. At the same time, the ANZACs, by then reinforced by two divisions, attempted to break out of their beachhead, but with only partial success. The new landing failed to advance quickly enough and entrenched stalemate was soon resumed on all fronts. In early December 1915, a decision was made to withdraw. The ANZAC and Suvla beachheads were abandoned later that month and Cape Helles on 9 January 1916. Nothing had been achieved and of the 500,000 allied troops deployed over the duration of the campaign, over half had died or been wounded. The Turks suffered on much the same scale.

In order to make sense of what went wrong at the strategic level, it is necessary to understand the high level structure for managing the war effort adopted by the British Government. In those days there was no Ministry of Defence or Joint Headquarters. The Army was run by the War Office and the Navy by the Admiralty. Although the 2 offices generally cooperated well enough, they were entirely separate departments of state, and both were led by quite erratic Secretaries of State. The Secretary of State for War was, unusually, a former senior serving soldier, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, instead of a politician. Capitalising on his personal military experience and reputation, Kitchener centralised power in his own hands to the extent that even the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the professional head of the Army, Lieutenant General Wolfe Murray, and his staff were effectively sidelined and kept in the dark. Wolfe Murray was not prepared to challenge Kitchener under any circumstances. Despite his self-confidence, however, Kitchener proved unable to handle the responsibilities he took upon himself competently, and the best staff officers in the War Office had been sent off to the British Expeditionary Force in France at the start of the war, so sound professional military advice to Government from the War Office was lacking.⁴

The First Lord of the Admiralty was Winston Churchill, whose evident political and oratorical talents were matched only by a propensity for pursuing impractical schemes and an unhealthy disregard for inconvenient truths of detail. He was the principal driving force behind the Gallipoli campaign. The professional head of the Navy, the First Sea Lord, was Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher, a man of legendary vision, energy and professional competence, who was quite prepared to challenge Churchill, but not in the company of others. This would cause him to acquiesce in flawed decisions if the alternative was to disagree with his political chief openly in Government councils of war. Within the Admiralty, the Royal Navy's war effort was directed by the War Staff Group, a small, tight body comprising only Churchill, Fisher, his Chief of Staff and the Naval Secretary. The other Sea Lords, whose responsibilities included logistics, personnel and engineering matters, were excluded—to the obvious detriment of sound operational advice and planning.⁵

Government direction of the war was exercised by the War Council, a committee of the Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith. Its principal members were the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for India, the

⁴ Dardanelles Commission p. 30.

⁵ Dardanelles Commission pp. 26-27.

First Lord of the Admiralty, the Secretary of State for War and Sir Arthur Balfour, a former Prime Minister and grandee of government, whose supposed wisdom was matched only by his idleness and complacency. He is reputed to have once pronounced that ‘nothing matters very much and few things matter at all.’ The War Council was the only point at the strategic level where the Army and Navy came together formally in a joint context, but the professional heads of the services attended only as advisors to their political chiefs and they were not expected to interject in committee unless their comment was specifically invited.⁶ The Council met irregularly, without formally recording or circulating its proceedings and decisions.⁷ It frequently conducted its business and made decisions to the complete exclusion of the Cabinet, most of whose members appeared content to avoid connection with the responsibility of running the war effort. The Council’s Secretary, and probably its clearest thinker, was Lieutenant Colonel Maurice Hankey. He kept his own private records and tried as best he could to keep the members focused and reminded of the Council’s considerations, but he was not always successful. The War Council proved to be unsuitable for running combined and joint operations, and the Dardanelles Commission, which was convened in 1917 to investigate the disastrous results of the Gallipoli Campaign, commented on the workings of the War Council at the end of 1914 as follows:

‘Thus, for four months, during which time events of the utmost importance were occurring, the machinery employed for designing and controlling the higher operations of the war was both clumsy and inefficient.’⁸

This state of affairs collided with the period during which the Gallipoli campaign was developed at governmental level, and it was to have a detrimental effect on virtually all that followed in respect of the campaign.

The workings of the War Council, as well as lower levels of command, were affected by a paradoxical combination of doubt and over-confidence concerning the Gallipoli enterprise. With regard to whether the operation would manage to break the deadlock on the western front and deter Bulgaria joining the Central Powers, the Official History of the First World War records that: ‘...from its very inception the operation was handicapped by a lack of confidence in its success.’⁹ Nevertheless, it was generally believed in the War Council that the fleet would be able to force the Dardanelles and reach Constantinople, precipitating the collapse of the Ottoman Government.¹⁰ Ironically, this might actually have been the case for a few days immediately following the final naval failure of 18 March 1915. The defenders of the Dardanelles were then almost out of ammunition and demoralised, and the Turkish Government was in a high state of alarm after the intensity of the battle. Had the allied fleet

⁶ Dardanelles Commission pp. 14-31.

⁷ Dardanelles Commission pp. 17-18.

⁸ Dardanelles Commission p. 17.

⁹ Aspinall-Oglander C. F. *History of the Great War, Military Operations, Gallipoli*; (London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1929) (Hereafter Official History); p. 63

¹⁰ Official History p. 69.

returned to the charge quickly, it seems they might well have broken through, but they, too, were low on ammunition and chose to retire and lick their wounds. Meanwhile, realising that the allies had broken off the battle, and with the stiffening of their German advisors, the Turks soon recovered their resolve, repairing and improving their defences against the invasion that they now predicted—correctly—would follow.¹¹ Even if the allied fleet had managed to break through the Dardanelles, its problems would not have been over. Unless the Ottoman Government had collapsed immediately, it would almost certainly have been impossible to maintain the fleet in the Sea of Marmara without the Gallipoli Peninsular being firmly in allied hands. To quote the findings of the Dardanelles Commission:

‘None of the responsible authorities appear to have paid much attention to the course of action which it would be necessary to adopt after the passage of the Dardanelles had been forced...The fact that, even after the passage had been forced, communications with the fleet in the Sea of Marmara might, to some extent, be impeded by such batteries as had not been destroyed, was recognised. But in London, where, according to General Callwell’s (The Director of Military Operations) evidence, the resistance likely to be offered by the Turks had, from the first, been greatly under-estimated, no great importance appears to have been attached to this argument.’¹²

In any event, belief in the fleet’s ability to batter its way through the Dardanelles proved to be ill-founded. Over-confidence in the effect of naval firepower originated in the rapid collapse of the Belgian forts at Liege and Namur in the face of heavy German artillery fire in the opening days of the war. The belief that this could be repeated at the Dardanelles was reinforced by the explosion of the Turkish fort at Sedd el Bahir, at the tip of the Gallipoli Peninsular, when it was bombarded briefly on 3 November 1914, just after Turkey had declared war on the Entente allies.¹³ But the Sedd el Bahir explosion proved to be an anomaly due to a lucky shot on an antiquated fort with old masonry walls. The more modern Belgian forts had fallen to heavy, high angle howitzer fire lobbed over the protecting concrete and earthworks. Naval guns, firing high velocity shot on a flat trajectory, had limited effect on similar protection of the newer Dardanelles forts. The Dardanelles Commission commented:

‘We are disposed to think that undue importance was attached to the ease with which the Belgian forts were destroyed and that the extent to which there was any analogy between those forts and the forts on the Dardanelles was over-rated’¹⁴

This over-confidence was further inflated by a commonly-held belief that Turkish soldiers were poor fighters and would collapse in the face of allied naval and military might.

¹¹ Official History pp. 104-105.

¹² Dardanelles Commission p. 60.

¹³ Dardanelles Commission p. 115. Rhodes-James R. *Gallipoli* (London, Batsford, 1965) (Hereafter Rhodes James, Gallipoli) p. 14.

¹⁴ Dardanelles Commission pp. 50-53.

This misconception was due in part to their supposedly poor performance in the Balkan war of 1912 and in some actions in Mesopotamia and Sinai, and in part to an almost comic incident during a small British landing near Alexandretta on 18 December 1914, when Turkish soldiers had actually assisted the British sailors to blow up a railway.¹⁵ The Dardanelles Commission commented:

‘An opinion had prevailed, in consequence of the events of the Balkan wars and some recent fighting in Mesopotamia, that Turkish soldiers had deteriorated as fighting men, but the fighting at Helles and Anzac during the landing and in the following months proved this to be a mistaken view.’¹⁶

It was also widely held that allied submarines would be able to close the Sea of Marmara to Turkish traffic reinforcing and supplying the Gallipoli front.¹⁷ Although the submarines did indeed make movement across the Sea of Marmara difficult for the Turks, and one actually torpedoed a Turkish ship inside Constantinople harbour, they never managed to close that route completely and the Turks managed to circumvent the blockade, albeit by long, hard overland marches.

After the Navy’s defeat on 18 March, reality began to dawn, at least to senior officers in the theatre of operations. Appreciating that he would now have to land in strength, and much more aware of the quality and strength of opposition that faced him, General Hamilton, commanding the allied land forces, wrote privately to Kitchener on 18 March: ‘Here, at present, Gallipoli looks a much tougher nut to crack than it did over the map in your office.’¹⁸ Nevertheless, he took care, as ever, to conceal his doubts from his men and the virus of over-confidence spread to the troops, who then could not wait to get stuck in. ‘Those who formed part of the original expeditionary force were united by an extraordinary sense of exhilaration and adventure, by a thrilling prospect of almost inconceivable possibilities...From the Commander in Chief down, this romantic sense of adventure spread through the whole force’ wrote one. A New Zealander recorded: ‘We were rather keen to have a go, as his poor showing at the Canal gave us a contempt for the Turk’s fighting’ and an Australian went further, writing: ‘Who could stop us? Not the bloody Turks.’¹⁹ Their high hopes would be shattered as the sun rose over the blood-stained beaches on 25 April.

Had anyone really stopped to think how the Ottoman Government and Turkish soldiers, with German advisors, might have responded to an infidel invasion of their homeland, the allies might have taken a great deal more care to get things right at every level of command. As it was, the development of this great combined, joint operation was beset by half-hearted commitment, flawed thinking, sloppy procedure, and poor exercise of command.

Among its most important components, a successful combined and/or joint operation

¹⁵ Dardanelles Commission p 115; Rhodes-James Gallipoli p. 16.

¹⁶ Dardanelles Commission p. 140.

¹⁷ Dardanelles Commission p. 115.

¹⁸ Dardanelles Commission p. 121.

¹⁹ Rhodes-James Gallipoli p. 86.

needs strategic and operational unity of purpose, and to be conceived and planned jointly from the outset. It needs a well-understood and achievable end state translated into a clearly defined mission for those charged with its execution. It needs a robust chain of command, with responsibilities defined unambiguously. It needs experienced commanders, staffs and forces well-trained and properly equipped for their specialist roles. It needs good intelligence and tight security. On a sustained amphibious operation, such as Gallipoli became, the invader must be able to build up and maintain forces ashore quicker than the defender, so he must isolate the battlefield from enemy reinforcement and supply, and he must have a sound logistic structure with a secure, properly equipped base within each. He must link all this with good communications. It needs an exit strategy. Not one of these necessities was present in the arrangements made for the Gallipoli campaign.

In the British Government there was deep division from the outset about the whole concept of the expedition and the forces needed for it. One faction, led by Churchill, viewed the operation as a vital widening of the war effort from the deadlocked western front. Others saw the western front as the essential main point of effort and the proposed Gallipoli campaign as an unnecessary diversion of attention and forces away from it. Consequently, there was drift and a lack of unified purpose at the highest levels of command, aggravated by the flawed workings of the War Council. Churchill first presented his ideas for a naval invasion of the Sea of Marmara to the War Council on 23 November 1914, some 3 weeks after the Ottoman Empire had sided with the Central Powers and declared war on the Entente allies. At that time he advocated a Greek army landing and securing the Gallipoli Peninsular, leaving the Royal Navy free to go on to Constantinople and bring about the collapse of the Ottoman Government. His proposal was rejected, not least because it depended upon the active participation of Greece, a neutral country.²⁰

There matters lay until 2 January 1915, when a request was received from Russia for an allied 'demonstration' to divert Turkish pressure off the Russian Army in the Caucasus. Churchill's proposal was resurrected along with several others. All were rejected except the Dardanelles idea, which was considered a possibility, but only as a 'demonstration,' implying that it could be called off in the face of unforeseen opposition. Preparations for a demonstration would have to be fairly obvious if they were to attract the attention of the Turks and divert their effort. Conversely, the preparation of an invasion would require tight security to achieve surprise. Development of the Gallipoli campaign fell between these two stools. In any event, Kitchener advised then that a full scale landing and occupation of the Gallipoli Peninsular would require an army of 150,000 men, but he refused to offer any British troops due to pressure on the western front. Churchill then decided that the Navy would go without the Army. The following day, 3 January, without informing the War Council, he signalled Vice Admiral Carden, commanding the British East Mediterranean Squadron, seeking his views on the feasibility of a strong force of battleships penetrating the Dardanelles and reaching Constantinople without military support. A week later, Carden replied that he believed it could be done by a methodical, phased action to sweep the mines in stages once the forts covering

²⁰ Dardanelles Commission pp. 34-35.

them had been silenced. On 13 January, Churchill presented Carden's concept to the War Council, which approved it in principle. Fisher, the First Sea Lord, did not agree but declined to interject in order not to be seen to disagree with Churchill in public. The Council instructed the Admiralty to 'prepare for a naval expedition to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsular with Constantinople as its objective.'²¹ This was the nearest the Council came at any stage to issuing a mission statement, but it was ambiguous and unrealistic. Asquith, the Prime Minister, understood it to go no further than authorising preparation, while Churchill and General Callwell, the Director of Military Operations, took it as the order to go ahead. Churchill, Callwell and Lord Grey, the Foreign Secretary, understood that no substantial military force would be included.²² In the absence of a land force, however, it was clearly unrealistic to expect the Navy to 'take' the Gallipoli Peninsular to secure their lines of communication, or to occupy Constantinople, which would undoubtedly have been required once the Turks had capitulated. The Dardanelles Commission commented:

'It is almost inconceivable that anyone, whether military, naval or civilian, could have imagined for one moment that Constantinople would be captured without military help on a somewhat large scale'²³

That, however, is exactly what the War Council did, perhaps still under the impression that a 'demonstration' could be withdrawn if it was seen to be impractical. Two weeks later, on 28 January, the Admiralty was directed unambiguously to go ahead with the operation without troops. Fisher almost resigned but was persuaded not to by Kitchener.²⁴ No sooner had the order been given, however, than the need for troops became increasingly apparent. At a War Council meeting on 16 February, the Royal Naval Division, the ANZAC Corps and the 29th Infantry Division were identified as likely participants, although the Council was still then holding out for a naval operation without substantial military forces in support. Four days later, however, by which time naval operations in the Dardanelles had already started, Kitchener cancelled the 29th Division due to pressures on the western front.²⁵ Nevertheless, he alerted General Birdwood, commanding the ANZAC Corps, then in Egypt, as well as General Maxwell, commanding the British garrison in Egypt. He instructed Birdwood to visit Admiral Carden at the Dardanelles to assess the potential military requirement. On 5 March, Birdwood reported back that troops would undoubtedly be needed to seize and hold the Peninsular and that the military strength currently proposed (presumably without the 29th Division) would not be adequate. The 'demonstration' was beginning to turn into a major commitment, with all that that change implied. On 10 March, Kitchener reversed his cancellation of the 29th Division. As the Dardanelles Commission commented:

²¹ Dardanelles Commission p. 46.

²² Dardanelles Commission pp. 47-48.

²³ Dardanelles Commission p. 48.

²⁴ Dardanelles Commission pp. 57-59.

²⁵ Dardanelles Commission pp. 64-65.

‘The decision of 16 February, the execution of which had been suspended on 20 February, again became operative on 10 March. In the meantime, three weeks of valuable time had been lost.’²⁶

That time was given to the Turks to strengthen their defences, while being denied to the allied troops in preparing for a demanding combined, joint operation.

It was only on 11 March that the Army General Staff in the War Office were warned that major military operations were even being contemplated. The following day, a military Commander in Chief, General Sir Ian Hamilton, was finally appointed to command the land forces. He was to be, however, only a single service commander, with no authority over the fleet on which he would rely for all manner of essential support throughout the forthcoming operation. He was given a thoroughly inadequate briefing by Kitchener in the War Office with no mission, because there was, as yet, no clearly agreed idea of what precisely his force was to do in support of the Navy in the Dardanelles, or at Constantinople, or both. A full scale landing at Gallipoli was still considered unlikely. Kitchener, having once said that a force of 150,000 men would be needed, assigned just 75,000. By that time, the Turks already had that number of men entrenched on the Peninsular, but Kitchener had no intelligence of that. Hamilton had no opportunity to choose his staff; indeed by the time he arrived at the Dardanelles on 17 March with a small operations staff, no administrative staff had even been appointed by the War Office.²⁷

There was no meeting of the War Council between 19 March and 14 May so it is impossible to say precisely when a decision was made to carry out a full scale landing. Hamilton and Vice Admiral De Robeck, who by then had relieved Admiral Carden in command of the East Mediterranean Squadron, however, were convinced by 19 March, the day after the defeat of the Navy’s final single service attempt. The change from a ‘demonstration’ to a full scale invasion, from which withdrawal was not contemplated appears to have happened without any deliberate consideration at the highest level. As General Callwell said in his evidence to the Dardanelles Commission: ‘We drifted into the big military attack.’²⁸

Of this meandering at the highest levels of war direction the Dardanelles Commission commented:

‘It is impossible to read all the evidence, or to study the voluminous papers which have been submitted to us, without being struck by the atmosphere of vagueness and want of precision which seems to have characterised the proceedings of the War Council.’²⁹

A telling memorandum, written in frustration by Lieutenant Colonel Hankey, Secretary of the War Council, to the Prime Minister on 16 March, is reproduced in full as an Appendix to illustrate the scale of the War Council’s negligence.

²⁶ Dardanelles Commission pp. 63-66.

²⁷ Dardanelles Commission pp. 67-68 and 117-120; Official History pp. 88-89.

²⁸ Dardanelles Commission p. 60.

²⁹ Dardanelles Commission p. 46.

Consequent to all this muddle, when they were finally assigned, the forces were not properly prepared for the operation. The first troops allocated were the Royal Naval Division, a makeshift infantry formation composed of sailors and marines not required in the British Grand Fleet. The Division had almost no integral combat or service support units and was thus not self-sufficient. Its rifles were of an earlier model than those issued to other British Empire troops and could not use their ammunition. Its one advantage over British divisions was its machine gun battery mounted in armoured cars. The Division had been badly mauled in the defence of Antwerp in 1914 and had been reinforced with large numbers of barely-trained replacements, who were certainly not adequately trained for a complex joint amphibious operation. Nevertheless, some units of the Royal Naval Division had been sent out to the fleet at the Dardanelles at the start of naval operations to provide small landing parties for the final destruction of Turkish forts disabled by bombardment.

The 29th Infantry Division was properly established for its intended role on the western front and was made up of regular British Army units, but they had been drawn from across the Empire and had not trained together as a formation. They had no experience of amphibious warfare. All the British land forces were sent by sea, loaded administratively and haphazardly, and had to be disembarked in Egypt, organised and re-loaded tactically before they would be in any fit state to land against opposition.³⁰

The most effective allied land formation was the ANZAC Corps, which, although newly formed, had been acclimatising and training in Egypt and had seen some action against Turkish raids on the Suez Canal. The Corps was manned by tough, confident and resourceful soldiers and had, in its Commander, General Birdwood, the most competent senior Army officer of the campaign on the allied side, but it, like the other formations, had no amphibious training.

Throughout the British Empire land forces, artillery, signals, engineer, logistic and medical facilities were all in very short supply and there was no trench fighting equipment. General Hamilton's Headquarters had no signal company at the start of the operation.³¹

Rather like the British 29th Division, the French 1st Division comprised regular units recently drawn together, in the French case, specially for the operation. Consequently the French suffered many of the problems that beset the British but they were rather better equipped with artillery, having an adequate outfit of the famed French 75mm field gun.

On the naval side, most of the battleships involved were obsolete and particularly vulnerable to mines and torpedoes. The exception was the combined fleet flagship, HMS Queen Elizabeth. Just completed, she was the newest battleship in the Royal Navy and the most powerful warship in the world at that time. She had not yet, however, calibrated her gunnery control systems, and was obliged to do that against the Turks instead of firing at targets off Gibraltar as planned. The minesweepers essential to the operation were nothing more than fishing trawlers manned by civilians and barely able to stem the strong currents in the Dardanelles. The British and French Navies had had no experience of combined fleet action since the battle of Navarino in 1827 or of amphibious operations since the Crimean

³⁰ Official History pp. 116-117.

³¹ Official History pp. 119-120.

War of the 1850s. Although they were available in Britain, no proper landing craft were assigned, Fisher retaining them for operations he hoped to mount on the north coast of Europe. As an expedient improvisation, one merchant ship, SS River Clyde, was specially converted to land troops by beaching herself. Otherwise the soldiers, their equipment and supplies were to be put ashore in rowing boats and towed barges, and the ports of the eastern Mediterranean had to be scoured for suitable craft. The allies provided just a few sea planes and obsolete fighter aircraft, which were barely capable of effective operations.³² Thus, in many respects, at Gallipoli in 1915, little had changed in British amphibious methods since Wolfe's Army landed at Quebec in 1759.

The time available to pull this force together and prepare it for a complex amphibious operation was pitifully short. The need for a proper land force was only finally agreed on 10 March and, even then, its precise role remained uncertain; its commander had not been appointed and half its troops were still in Britain. The landing, a major combined, joint operation, took place just 6 weeks later.

The senior commanders were separated until the last minute. The original naval Commander, Vice Admiral Carden, commanding the East Mediterranean Squadron, had to be withdrawn, sick, the day before the final naval attempt on 18 March. He was relieved then by his Second in Command, Rear Admiral De Robeck. The land Commander, General Sir Ian Hamilton, only appointed on 12 March, did not arrive at the Dardanelles until 17 March. On arrival in the theatre of operations Hamilton wisely placed himself, his Chief of Staff and principal operations staff officers alongside Admiral De Robeck in HMS Queen Elizabeth. They evidently cooperated well, which was fortunate, since no Joint Commander, with overall responsibility, had been appointed. Hamilton, however, did not have with him any administrative, logistics or medical staff. They did not even arrive in Egypt until 7 April.³³ Moreover, the combined fleet flagship, herself directly engaged in the fighting, did not have adequate office space, even for the much reduced land force staff. There was certainly no joint command centre.

Problems arising from the separation of Hamilton's operations and administrative staffs were aggravated by the lack of a suitable forward operating base. The British managed to obtain the use of the Greek island of Lemnos, some 40 miles from the mouth of the Dardanelles, which had a large sheltered anchorage at Mudros but absolutely nothing else with which to support the force. Until adequate facilities could be constructed there, all the land forces had to be sent to Alexandria, some 50 hours' steaming away, to prepare for the landing.³⁴ Hamilton moved to Alexandria with his small operations staff on 24 March to complete planning with his subordinate commanders and to supervise the re-loading of the troops. This move, though necessary for military purposes, separated him from the naval command at a crucial stage of final preparation and loading. The land force administrative and logistic staffs arrived at Alexandria on 7 April, but, the following day, Hamilton sailed to rejoin De Robeck at Mudros,

³² Official History footnote p. 87.

³³ Dardanelles Commission p. 129.

³⁴ Dardanelles Commission p. 130.

leaving them behind in Egypt. Consequently, last minute but significant changes to the landing plan had to be made when the transport ships rejoined the rest of the fleet at Mudros on 10 April, and the administrative and logistic staffs did not catch up until 18 April.³⁵ Even then, they were largely sidelined by the operations staff, who had shouldered administrative planning up until then and saw little need to hand it over.³⁶ In any case, by that time, although Hamilton had rejoined De Robeck in the flagship, most of his staff was embarked in the liner *Arcadia*, virtually incommunicado and separated from the naval staff.

Security in Alexandria was virtually non-existent. The arrival and activity of troops was evident to the public and little or nothing was done to conceal what they were there for. Mail from London even arrived through the civilian postal system addressed to the 'Constantinople Field Force.'³⁷ The Navy's efforts around the ports of the eastern Mediterranean to procure craft suitable for landing troops and equipment had advertised the nature of forthcoming operations. Moreover, during the early naval attacks a number of small daylight landings had taken place on the shores of the Dardanelles to complete the demolition of Turkish forts damaged by naval bombardment. Thus all surprise was lost. The defenders now knew the enemy forces they faced, which beaches were likely to be used for landing, how to deny them to the invader and how to prepare their counter attack. They were given the period from 18 March to 25 April completely uninterrupted by any allied offensive action, in which to improve their defences, and they did not waste a moment of it. Conversely, allied intelligence of Turkish strengths, dispositions and plans was minimal. Reconnaissance was limited to a few passes along the coast in destroyers and the occasional, very hazardous over-flight without cameras. All that was known was that the Turks were well entrenched on the high ground overlooking Cape Helles as well as covering all the usable beaches, which were clearly defended by wire entanglements. An over-confident faith was placed in the ability of naval gunfire to destroy these defences.

Nevertheless, in many ways Hamilton's tactical landing plan was quite imaginative, the ANZAC outflanking operation being intended to isolate the main effort at Cape Helles from counter attack. It did not, however, win the confidence of his subordinate commanders.³⁸ They objected to the dispersion of the landing force but Hamilton observed correctly that connectivity between the various landings would be achieved by allied naval mobility and domination of the sea separating them.³⁹ This was good joint thinking. It might seem strange that Hamilton apparently committed just one division to his main effort while sending a complete corps on the outflanking operation. However, the beaches at Cape Helles could only accommodate landing one division at a time—and then only just.⁴⁰ Once the French and Royal Naval Divisions had re-deployed to Cape Helles and been reinforced, the numerically strongest force would be there. Nonetheless, Hamilton's expectations of the 29th Division for

³⁵ Official History p. 128.

³⁶ Rhodes-James Gallipoli p. 87.

³⁷ Official History p. 110.

³⁸ Rhodes-James Gallipoli pp. 81-82.

³⁹ Naval Operations p. 309.

⁴⁰ Official History p. 119.

the first day were hugely over-optimistic, given the inadequate beaches and amphibious craft available to them. As things turned out, the main body of 29th Division landed into a deadly trap on two small beaches overlooked by the enemy and well covered by wire and entrenched defences. The result was little short of disastrous. The Division suffered very heavy casualties and was only just able to secure one of those beaches properly on the first day. Even when the usable beaches at Cape Helles had been brought into use, their limited capacity and exposure constrained operations on the Helles front throughout the campaign. Detailed beach reconnaissance and the earlier involvement of his logistic staff might have alerted Hamilton to these problems.

Like Hamilton, General Hunter Weston, commanding the 29th Division, sensibly placed himself aboard HMS Euryalus alongside the naval officer responsible for landing his Division, Rear Admiral Wemyss. He also employed outflanking forces close behind the Turkish defences of Cape Helles, while his main landing took place on the two small beaches actually at the tip of the Cape. Both outflanking parties landed successfully with orders to secure their beachheads and await the arrival of the main body of the Division advancing from Cape Helles. However, when the Division ran into serious trouble on the beaches at the Cape, Hunter Weston failed to order his outflanking parties to help the main body by attacking the Turkish defence from the rear, so they contributed nothing and one of them actually withdrew without authority in the confusion. Although his own communications were inadequate, Hunter Weston could have used the warships' radios to pass his orders. It is fairly evident, however, that he became transfixed by the plight of his troops on the main beaches and failed to consider the options open to him to help them. For his part, Hamilton, although aware of the situation, declined to interfere in what he considered to be Hunter Weston's battle, thus allowing the debacle to continue.

At Gaba Tepe the disastrous misplacement of the ANZAC Corps was caused by a naval night-time navigation error, which put the landing force about a mile north of where it should have been. Given the navigational technology of the time, the error is understandable. However, it could have been avoided by detailed reconnaissance and the use of a covert advance force for guidance of the assault craft.

The consequences of Hamilton's separating his operations and administrative staffs, as well as the inadequate beaches and arrangements for ship-to-shore movement soon became clear. Despite the submarine effort in the Sea of Marmara, the allies' rate of logistic build-up and reinforcement failed to outpace that of the Turks. Thus, once the fighting ashore had become entrenched, the allies could never muster sufficient strength to overcome the opposition. Medical facilities, in particular, were wholly insufficient to begin with, resulting in large numbers of wounded men being left untreated or dying unnecessarily en route back to hospital in unsuitable, unhygienic shipping. The allies never secured enough space ashore to establish field hospitals, and only when they had been set up on nearby islands and adequate hospital shipping provided, did the situation improve.

British artillery support remained inadequate throughout the campaign, due not only to the general shortage of artillery and ammunition suffered by the British in 1915, but also to a mistaken belief that naval gunfire could provide a satisfactory substitute. Armed,

however, mainly with high velocity, armour-piercing ammunition, and lacking good ship-to-shore communications, the capacity of the fleet to support the trench fighting ashore was very limited, particularly in the 'bowl' of low ground inland of Cape Helles, which was out of sight of gunfire observers afloat.⁴¹ A notable exception was that of HMS Implacable, supporting the landing of the Royal Fusiliers at Cape Helles on 25 April.

The August landing at Suvla Bay was, again, an imaginative attempt to outflank the Turkish defence, but it was undone by poor selection of troops, weak command, poor intelligence and a lack of aggression. By then, the Navy at the Dardanelles had been equipped with purpose-built landing craft. The beaches were much more suitable than those used in April, being less heavily defended and having much greater capacity to support subsequent operations. Once again it was all important that the landing force advanced rapidly once ashore to seize dominating high ground some 5 miles inland before the Turks could get there in strength. Well trained, well led troops might have succeeded, but the 9th Corps, which was given the task, consisted of newly recruited, barely trained men of Kitchener's 'New Army.' They were commanded by Lieutenant General Stopford, an elderly man who lacked the aggression needed for the task. Hamilton's orders to Stopford were unclear, suggesting that he need only secure the immediate area of the beachhead on the first day, rather than the high ground that dominated it, and Stopford took the easy interpretation. Lack of detailed reconnaissance and guidance by an advance force resulted in landing craft grounding on unmarked shoals and troops being landed on the wrong beaches in the dark. By the time the subsequent confusion had been sorted out and the advance begun, the opportunity to seize the vital high ground had passed and the Turks were there in strength. Once again, the attempt to outflank the Turkish defence had failed and the battle returned to one of entrenched stalemate.

On 7 December 1915, after much debate, a decision was finally made to withdraw from Gallipoli. By that time, General Hamilton had been recalled and General Birdwood, previously the ANZAC Commander, led all the land forces on the Peninsular. The allies by then had over 130,000 men, 390 guns and 14,000 animals ashore. After previous thinning out, the Suvla and ANZAC beachheads were to be abandoned on 20 December. The Helles beachhead was to be maintained at first but was then abandoned on the 9 January 1916.

It is widely held in military circles that withdrawal is the most difficult and dangerous operation of war. When it has to culminate in re-embarkation in view of the enemy, it becomes especially hazardous. Birdwood viewed the prospect with distaste at the waste of life and effort it admitted, and dread of the outcome, estimating that the Allies might lose a further 50% casualties making the exit. Once again, he and De Robeck were given very little time to plan the operation and this time security was paramount. Only senior commanders and their closest staff officers were to know what was happening.

Nevertheless, planning was completed jointly and in meticulous detail. Under the cover of a wide range of deception and concealment measures, the land force was gradually thinned out until, by 19 December, just 10,000 men remained in each of the Suvla and ANZAC beachheads. Concealment measures included the re-landing in daylight of some of the men

⁴¹ Dardanelles Commission pp. 122 and 141.

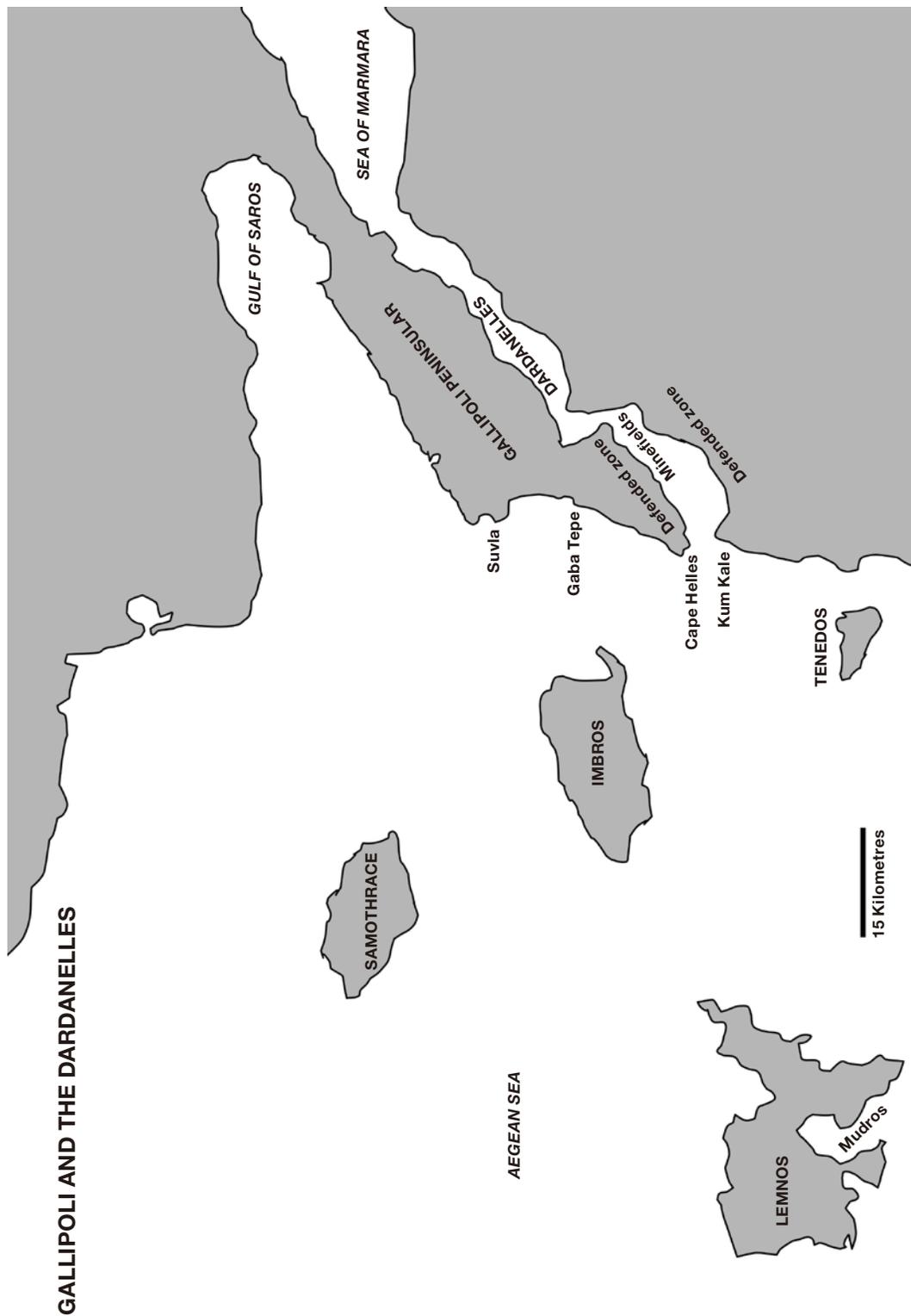
previously taken off by night, landing of empty boxes by day and the removal of full ones by night, the gradual substitution of naval gunfire for artillery and the setting of fire patterns that would conceal the final withdrawal, the improvisation of self-firing devices for rifles left behind by the last troops to leave, and the use of ships' searchlights to blind the Turks' night vision. Over 100 transport ships and 50 hospital ships were provided, their movements carefully timed so that they remained well out of sight of the beaches in daylight to avoid Turkish observation. On the night of 19/20 December, the Suvla and ANZAC beachheads were finally evacuated with just one man wounded. The following month, in the days leading up to 9 January 1916, the operation was repeated equally successfully at Cape Helles, this time with no casualties at all. Ranking among the most successful amphibious operations in history, it was the product of outstanding joint staff-work, proper provision of forces, tight security, cunning deception and good luck with the weather. It seems that the Turks remained unaware of what was happening, although it has been suggested that they actually allowed the Allied invaders to go unmolested, glad just to see them leave. That may have been the case in some places at a very low level, but the German Commander of the Turkish 5th Army, defending Gallipoli, General Liman von Sanders, knew that every allied soldier who left the Peninsular in fighting condition would probably find his way to the western front to fight his fellow Germans. It is unrealistic to believe he just allowed the allies to get away without a fight.

It is hard to express a conclusion to this sorry tale better than a quote from the Official History:

'The well-known axiom—that it is hardly possible during the course of a campaign to repair errors committed in the original concentration—has seldom been better illustrated. In every sphere of human activity, and above all in war, the foundation of success may be said to lie in thoughtful preparation. Even in the case of minor enterprises a neglect of this precept is the most fruitful source of failure, whilst to embark upon the most difficult of all military operations—a descent on a hostile beach—before every detail of the plan has been carefully weighed, is to court, and to deserve, disaster.'⁴²

Hamilton and his men never stood a chance of success after the muddled, ill-disciplined thinking and processes of the War Council, the Admiralty and the War Office in London during the development of the operation.

⁴² Official History p. 108.



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APPENDIX—MEMORANDUM BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL MAURICE HANKEY, SECRETARY OF THE WAR COUNCIL, TO THE PRIME MINISTER, 16 MARCH 1915

1. From the point of view of the War Council the situation as regards the attack on the Dardanelles is far from clear. As recently as the last meeting the War Council were informed by the First Lord that the Navy still hoped and expected to get through the Dardanelles without the assistance of military forces. Now, however, as was anticipated by most naval officers who were acquainted with the locality, the fleet is held up by a combination of mines and howitzers. In order to overcome these obstacles, the employment of a considerable land force is contemplated.

2. It must be borne in mind that up to the present time the employment of military forces has been proposed only to clear up the situation *after* the Dardanelles have been forced. Now, therefore, so far as the War Council is concerned, we are faced with a very formidable operation to be carried out by the land forces.

3. Is it not desirable that the War Council should ascertain definitely the scope of the operations contemplated, and the extent of the preparations made to carry out these operations? In this connection it must be remembered that combined operations require more careful preparation than any other class of military enterprise. All through our history such attacks have failed when the preparations have been inadequate, and the successes are in nearly every case due to the most careful preparation beforehand. It would appear to be the business of the War Council to assure themselves, in the present instance, that these preparations have been thoroughly thought out.

4. It must be remembered also that one of the greatest advantages to be obtained from this class of operation, namely, surprise, has been lost. If a large force of troops had been sent at

the very outset, secretly and unobtrusively, and fully equipped with boats and everything they required, so as to be available the moment the outer forts had fallen, it is by no means unlikely that, assisted by judicious feints to confuse the enemy as to their intended objective, they might have captured the plateau over-looking the forts at the narrows by a *coup de main*. Instead of being announced as a mere demonstration, as was contemplated by the War Council, even the first bombardment of the outer forts was announced as an attack, and at no time has any attempt been made to conceal our intention to force the Dardanelles at any cost. Now that the fleet has been held up by the minefields, the enemy knows exactly the point at which our attack must be directed. He has had as much time as he requires to entrench this point, to emplace his artillery, to pour reinforcements on to the land on both sides of the Straits, and to make every sort of preparation. The military enterprise, therefore, will be of a most formidable nature. It is suggested that the War Council ought to cross examine the naval and military authorities on the extent of the preparations, and particularly with regard to such points as the following:

- a. The number of troops it is proposed to employ.
- b. The arrangements made for the supply of boats and tugs.
- c. The preparations made for the provision of landing piers, pontoons etc.
- d. The arrangements for the supply of water and provisions.
- e. The hospital arrangements. Is it contemplated to use nothing but floating hospitals, or will there be field hospitals ashore?
- f. Is it expected that the Dardanelles will be carried by a *coup de main*, or is the possibility of siege operations contemplated?
- g. In the latter event, what siege guns will be available, and what arrangements have been made for landing them and their ammunition?
- h. Possibly, it is proposed that the men-of-war should supply the necessary heavy artillery to overcome the enemy's heavy movable artillery. If so, are the military authorities satisfied that the projectiles available in men-of-war are suitable for this purpose, and that they will be able to search the valleys in which the howitzers are likely to be found?
- i. What arrangements have been made for the supply of the very large amounts of ammunition that may be required for the operation?
- j. What arrangements are contemplated for the transport from the landing place to the army, of supplies of ammunition, food, water, etc., over a rough country with very few roads in it, bearing in mind that these roads will probably be broken up by the enemy before evacuating them?

5. Unless details such as these, and there are probably others, are fully thought out before the landing takes place, it is conceivable that a serious disaster may occur.