

# Gallipoli

What went right?

by LtCol Cortez D. Stephens

The Gallipoli campaign is traditionally presented as a classic study of how not to conduct an amphibious operation. The Allies made many mistakes during this campaign but I want to emphasize the things that went right. First, numerically inferior British and French forces used amphibious raids and demonstrations to gain numerical superiority at the point of attack. Second, that same numerically inferior force conducted a successful amphibious withdrawal even though it was closely engaged with an adversary. Thus, in one campaign, we find examples of all four types of amphibious operations. Although the Allies failed to achieve their overall objectives at Gallipoli, they did many things right with respect to amphibious warfare. As CAPT W.D. Puletson, USN, a noted historian of the Gallipoli campaign wrote in a 1927 *Proceedings* article:

Officers of armies and navies who know that amphibious war will be their portion should in time of peace realize these inherent difficulties and methodically and resolutely prepare to overcome them.

I would only add that the positive lessons we can learn from Gallipoli are just as valuable as the negative ones.

## Prelude

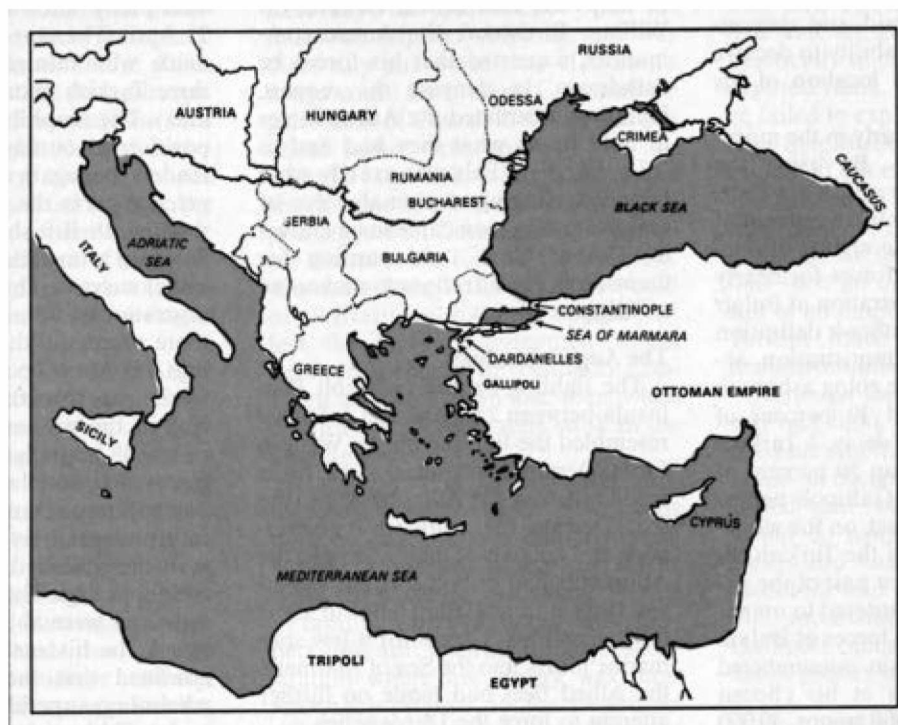
One of the early consequences of Turkish entry into World War I was the closing of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to Allied shipping. (See Map 1.) This not only prevented the shipment of grain from Ukrainian and Black Sea ports from reaching Europe, it also severely restricted the flow of arms and equipment to Russia. Great Britain and France needed Russia to keep Germany occupied on the Eastern Front. By January 1915, however, Russia, which was being attacked by Turkey in the

*>LtCol Stephens' article was first published in the October 1993 issue of the MCG. He was an infantry officer who had served in all three Marine divisions in billets ranging from automatic rifleman to regimental executive officer. When this article was published, LtCol Stephens was assigned to Programs and Resources Branch, HQMC.*

***Few focus on the positives of this early amphibious operation, choosing instead to perpetuate the myth that Gallipoli represented an amphibious nightmare. Reality suggests the need for a more balanced treatment.***

Caucasus Mountains, was in need of assistance. British War Minister Field Marshal Horatio Herbert Lord Kitchener felt that the British Army was too committed in France to undertake an additional operation against Turkey, but he referred the matter to Winston

Churchill, the First Lord of The Admiralty. Churchill planned for a fleet of warships to force its way through the Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmara, then to shell the Turkish city of Constantinople. If this were accomplished, then it only stood to reason that Turkey



Map 1. The eastern Mediterranean. (Map taken from MCG, Oct93, p. 75.)



would probably drop out of the war. (Turkey, at the time, had a new, relatively unstable government.) It was also hoped such an action might result in Bulgaria and Italy joining the war on the Allies side, as well as opening the Bosphorus and permitting Black Sea trade.

On 19 February 1915, a combined British-French fleet, commanded jointly by VADM Sackville Carden and RADM Emile Guepratte attacked the mouth of the Dardanelles with minimal results. A second attack was delayed for 6 days because of bad weather, enabling the Turks to repair the damage from the original attack. Subsequent attacks, however, were successful, and the mouth was cleared by 1 March. (It is of interest to note that small parties of Marines landed unopposed to demolish the remains of the forts that had been guarding the mouth.) The Turkish Government did not assign an army to defend the Dardanelles until the end of March. Before then, only an artillery regiment manned the forts defending the Dardanelles.

Naval attempts to force a way through the rest of the Dardanelles from 1 March to 11 March were thwarted by three mutually supporting Turkish defenses: naval mines, short-range mobile howitzers along the shoreline, and the long-range guns of the forts. On 18 March a string of secretly emplaced mines sank three battleships within a few hours of each other. The sudden loss of three battleships seemed to have unnerved the naval commanders even though the battleships were old and most of their crews were rescued. Thus, RADM John de Roebeck, who had just relieved VADM Carden, abandoned the idea of trying to force the Dardanelles.

Had ADM de Roebeck continued to attack he may very well have made it through to the Sea of Marmara. The Turkish forts were almost out of ammunition, and the morale of the defenders was at a low point. In addition, de Roebeck's civilian minesweepers had been remanned with more effective naval crews. There are two probable reasons for naval timidity at this point. On the one hand, conventional naval wisdom of the day dictated that naval

forces could not subdue standing fortifications. Many naval officers doubted that Churchill's plan would prove successful, and that which is believed to be unachievable is, oftentimes, seldom achieved. The second reason for naval timidity involved the high regard many had for battleships at that time. The loss of even one battleship was considered a national tragedy, more so than the loss of several thousand troops. Whatever the reason, ADM de Roebeck did not resume the attack.

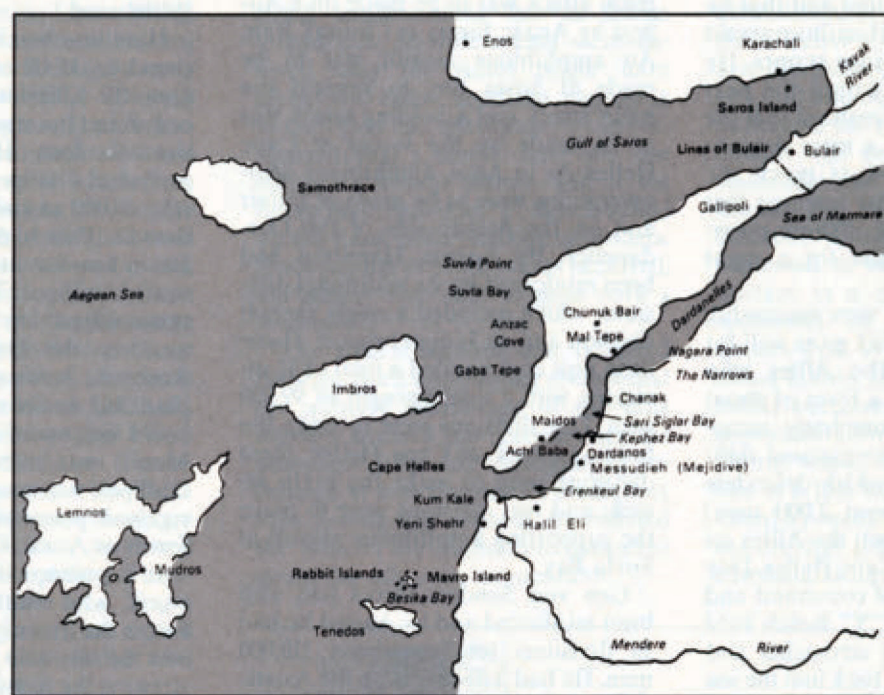
After the failure of the naval venture, it was decided that combined British and French ground forces under British General Sir Ian Hamilton would be landed to seize the Gallipoli peninsula. The forces Hamilton had available were the follow-on forces, which were to be used at Constantinople in the wake of the naval bombardment. The troops and equipment had been loaded aboard ship with little thought given to how they were to disembark. Troops were not embarked with their gear, units were widely separated, and critical supplies were not loaded in an organized manner. The troops and equipment had to be disembarked in Egypt and tactically re-embarked. Hamilton had his forces ready

in April, but by then the Turks, through their intelligence network, knew that an amphibious assault was imminent.

Although the entire campaign has lessons of interest to Marines, I will concentrate only on certain aspects of it: the initial amphibious landing of 25 April (a landing that featured two amphibious demonstrations and an amphibious raid); the amphibious landing of 6 August, which also included an amphibious demonstration; and the amphibious withdrawals conducted during December 1915 and January 1916.

## The Initial Landings

The Turks took advantage of the time between the failure of the Allied naval effort and the landing of the Allied ground forces to prepare for the defense of the Dardanelles, in general, and of the Gallipoli Peninsula in particular. (See Map 2.) They dispatched an army of 84,000 men (6 Turkish divisions) under Liman von Sanders, a German general officer, to defend the Dardanelles. Sanders placed two divisions in the northern part of the peninsula near Bulair, two in the southern part of the peninsula, and two on the Asiatic side of the Dardanelles. He



Map 2. Gallipoli and the Dardanelles. (Map from MCG, Oct93, p. 75.)



considered the three most likely landing sites to be Cape Helles on the tip of the peninsula, Gaba Tepe about 12 miles farther north, and Bulair on the neck of the peninsula. Of the three, he considered Bulair to be by far the most critical. He, therefore, planned a flexible defense that emphasized rapid reinforcement wherever the Allies landed and exercised the Turkish forces by making long marches that would enable them to react more quickly when the invasion finally came. Since Sanders considered Bulair to be the most likely landing site, he located himself there.

Hamilton, the Allied commander, did not possess a numerical superiority over his enemy. To face six Turkish divisions he had five divisions: one British division (the 29th), two Australian-New Zealand (or Anzac) divisions, the Royal Navy Division (sailors not needed in the fleet), and a French colonial division consisting of 11,000 African troops. In sheer manpower Hamilton was outnumbered by 78,000 to 84,000. Hamilton's plan was to use the 29th Division (British Army regulars) in his main attack at Cape Helles with the primary objective being Achi Baba, a 200-meter piece of high ground that dominated the farthest point on the Dardanelles reached by the fleet on 18 March. This was a complicated assault that involved landings at five separate beaches around Cape Helles (Y, X, W, V, and S Beaches). A supporting attack was to be made by the Anzac corps slightly north of Gaba Tepe with its objective being Mal Tepe, a piece of high ground dominating Nagara Point in the Dardanelles. At this time, due to a lack of accurate maps, the Allies did not realize that the high ground that dominated the entire southern portion of the Gallipoli peninsula was Chunuk Bair, which was 250 meters high. The Turks, however, knew this from the outset and centered their defense on this key terrain feature.

Hamilton's plan went on to include an amphibious demonstration by French forces at Besika Bay and an amphibious raid, also by French forces, at the Turkish fort at Kum Kale. Another amphibious demonstration was to be conducted by the Royal Navy Division at Bulair.

The purpose of these maneuvers was to delay the Turks from reinforcing the two divisions on the southern part of the peninsula. Even though Hamilton knew he was outnumbered, he had the advantage of knowing exactly where he wanted to make his main attack. The importance of the raid and demonstrations lay in their ability to deceive the enemy as to the location of his main attack.

The Allies landed early in the morning of 2 April 1915. By using the French in Besika Bay and Kum Kale, Hamilton was able to use 5 percent of his forces to delay the arrival of one-third of von Sanders forces for nearly 12 hours. The demonstration at Bulair (which, unlike the textbook definition of an amphibious demonstration, actually involved a force going ashore to light off flares) used 10 percent of Hamilton's forces to delay two Turkish divisions, thus tying up 50 percent of the defenders on the Gallipoli peninsula for 24 hours. In fact, on the morning of the 25th, one of the Turkish divisions on the southern part of the peninsula was actually ordered to march north to reinforce the forces at Bulair. At this point, Hamilton outnumbered the Turkish defenders at his chosen point of attack by 21,000 troops—49,000 to von Sanders' 28,000. In his memoirs, von Sanders remarked that Hamilton's plan was excellent and that he did not expect that Hamilton would attempt so many landings at once. He recalled that it wasn't until the next morning that he fully realized that the Bulair operation was a mere demonstration. He suspected as much the previous afternoon after learning that British ships remained offshore, possibly awaiting the signal for a night landing.

Although the feints were successful, the rest of the day didn't go as well for Hamilton's forces. The Allies who landed at Y Beach, a force of about 2,000 troops, were completely unopposed and were on the exposed right flank of the initial Turkish defenders (another force of about 2,000 men) who were pinning down the Allies on the other beaches at Cape Helles. Due to an unusual lapse of command and control, the Allies at Y Beach held their position without

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advancing and were eventually driven back into the sea that evening by Turkish reinforcements.

The early occupation of Chunuk Bair by the Turks compounded Hamilton's problems. This enabled the Turkish forces, although initially outnumbered, to keep the Allies from achieving their objectives. This was especially true for the Anzac forces.

25 April 1915 was the first time Australian and New Zealand forces (which included Maori troops) had ever been in combat. Things were so desperate that British General Sir William Birdwood, the Anzac commander, requested that his forces be withdrawn. In denying the request, Hamilton instructed the Anzac forces to hold on to what they had and to "dig, dig, dig." This was exactly what they did, clinging to a small piece of real estate that soon came to be known as "Anzac Cove" and earning for themselves the affectionate nickname of "diggers."

## The August Landings

The fighting on the Gallipoli peninsula between 25 April and 6 August resembled the fighting on the Western Front. Despite costly attacks, the Turks could not drive the Allies back into the sea. Despite the stubborn perseverance and tenacity of their attempts, the Allies still had only a toehold at Anzac Cove and at Cape Helles to show for their efforts. Except for a few submarine forays into the Sea of Marmara, the Allied fleet had made no further attempt to force the Dardanelles.

To break the deadlock, Hamilton planned another major operation. The main attack was to be made on 6 August by Anzac forces at Chunuk Bair. An amphibious assault was to be made at Suvla Bay to support the main attack and a holding attack was to be made by the forces at Cape Helles. As in April, amphibious demonstrations were to be made at Bulair and on the Asiatic side of the Dardanelles. By August Hamilton had been reinforced by six additional divisions, which included a single French division and an Indian brigade. Hamilton now commanded a total of 11 divisions with a total strength of 99,000 men. Five divisions were to

make the holding attack at Cape Helles, three divisions were to make the main attack, and two divisions were to make the supporting amphibious assault at Suvla Bay.

Gen von Sanders' forces had also been reinforced, and by August he had 16 divisions totaling about 110,000 men. He had 3 divisions on the Asiatic side of the Dardanelles, 3 divisions near Bulair, and 10 divisions on the southern part of the Gallipoli peninsula. Of the 10 divisions in the southern part of the peninsula, only 3 faced the Anzac corps. In July, he began to receive intelligence reports that an Allied amphibious operation was imminent. Bulair was still von Sanders' most sensitive point, and as before, he ran the operation from there.

The results of the battle on 6 August were pretty much the same as those on 25 April. The amphibious assault was made with minimal resistance (only three Turkish battalions defended the area). The amphibious forces were in position to outflank the Turkish defenders, but again timidity and incompetence got in the way. This time fault rested with British Gen Sir Frederick Stopford who failed to follow up his initial success. The amphibious demonstration at Bulair was perhaps even more successful than the earlier landings in April because Turkish reinforcements from the north failed to arrive in the primary battle area until nearly 48 hours later. Since the Allied forces that had landed at Suvla Bay had still not advanced, the Turkish reinforcements arrived in time to ensure that the Allies did not accomplish their objectives. The Turks held Chunuk Bair and were able to foil the Anzac attack. In his memoirs von Sanders admitted that the Allies had overwhelming superiority at Suvla Bay and could have won the day had they not delayed.

## Withdrawal

Hamilton was relieved of his command on 15 October 1915, and British Gen Sir Charles Monro was given command because he wanted to withdraw the force. His estimate after his arrival at Gallipoli was that it would take 40,000 casualties to effect a withdrawal. This

high estimate caused a stir in London and Kitchener himself visited Gallipoli. The British Admiralty considered having the fleet try again to force the Dardanelles. ADM de Roebeck, however, was against the plan. He was convinced that the fleet could not make it through, and Gen Monro was likewise convinced that Gallipoli was untenable. He therefore received permission to withdraw the forces at Anzac Cove.

It is perhaps ironic that Gen Birdwood, who wanted to withdraw his forces the first night they went ashore, was the one who had the task of withdrawing the first forces from Gallipoli. It is even more ironic because, by then, Birdwood did not want to go. He favored staying on and fighting it out.

In developing his withdrawal plan, Birdwood discarded the idea of withdrawing his entire force at one time. He wanted to deceive the enemy with the appearance of normal operations while secretly withdrawing his forces at night over an extended period of time. Aided by the bitter winter weather, the Anzacs carried out Birdwood's plan. Boats arrived daily with troops visibly crowding the decks to make it appear to the Turks as if the Allies were actually reinforcing Anzac troops. No tents were struck and all the fires were kept lit at night. Normal nighttime artillery firing ceased so the Turks would grow accustomed to the lack of firing. The decision was made to leave large quantities of supplies and material rather than risk compromising the deception by attempting to evacuate it.

By 18 December, only 40,000 Allied troops were left ashore at Anzac Cove. That night 20,000 were taken off. Self-firing guns were rigged to delay the Turks. Landmines, boobytraps, and timed explosives were set everywhere. Even though some of the Anzac positions were only 12 yards away from Turkish lines, on the night of 19 December all of the remaining troops were safely evacuated from Anzac Cove. The only casualties suffered were two wounded. Liman von Sanders did not know of the Anzac withdrawal until 0400 the next morning.

Needless to say, after the successful withdrawal of the Anzac forces, things



did not look good for the remaining Allied forces at Cape Helles. By early January there were 4 Allied divisions at Cape Helles facing a total of 21 Turkish divisions. Monro requested and received permission to withdraw from Cape Helles, but before he could carry out his plan he was reassigned, and Gen Birdwood assumed command. The withdrawal of forces from Cape Helles went on in much the same manner as the withdrawal from Anzac Cove. By 7 January, there were only 19,000 Allied soldiers left on Gallipoli. That night, von Sanders staged a full-scale attack on the Allied lines. The attack was a disastrous one for the Turks as it was soundly repulsed with only a few Allied casualties. This convinced the Turks that the Allies were not leaving Cape Helles any time soon. Yet on the next night all remaining troops were evacuated from Cape Helles with no casualties whatsoever.

### Summary

Churchill lost his cabinet position because of the Gallipoli failure. Many said he never should have attempted to force the Dardanelles without the support of ground forces. It can also be said that, but for the timidity of de Roebuck, the fleet would have successfully forced its way into the Sea of Marmara. Even if it had, however, there was no guarantee the fleet could have kept the Dardanelles open for follow-on support shipping, nor was there any guarantee that Hamilton's forces could have taken Constantinople. Much of Churchill's plan was political rather than military and involved a large risk. It hinged upon the shock value of a fleet of battleships appearing just off Constantinople to topple the unstable Turkish Government. Any setback the British received would in all likelihood have the opposite effect; the Turkish Government would be strengthened. The Gallipoli campaign may have been lost, then, when the three battleships were sunk in the Dardanelles.

Hamilton's plan for the initial landing made good use of the amphibious raid and amphibious demonstration to gain numerical superiority at the point of attack. He was able to do this by land-

ing where his enemy didn't expect him and conducting his demonstration where his enemy was most vulnerable. Were it not for the success of the raids and demonstrations, the Allies would not have gained a foothold given the Turkish capability for rapid reinforcement. But as things turned out, reinforcements were delayed, and the Allies might have seized the entire southern peninsula of Gallipoli had the Anzac forces recognized that Chunuk Bair was the dominant terrain feature and if the forces that landed at Y Beach rolled up the flank of the Turkish defenders. Since neither of these events occurred, the Allies were able to gain only a foothold.

The trench warfare that occurred between April and August reveals that the military technology of the time strongly favored the defense over the offense. Neither side could gain an advantage. It is to Hamilton's credit that, even during this impasse, he realized the value of the amphibious assault to regain the offensive momentum.

The amphibious demonstrations during the August landings were more effective in delaying Turkish reinforcements than in the initial landings. This time Chunuk Bair was the objective, and the amphibious assault was practically unopposed on the enemy's exposed flank. Gen Stopford, however, failed to exploit this tactical advantage. Stopford's incompetence, however, should not cause us to overlook the effectiveness of the amphibious operations. Stopford threw away a golden opportunity, but the only reason the Allies had such an opportunity was the result of an amphibious assault into the Turkish flank and the amphibious demonstrations.

Although Gen Birdwood wanted to stay and fight, he and his staff developed an amphibious withdrawal plan keyed on deception. It was a well-conceived and well-executed plan that would do equally well at both Cape Helles and Anzac Cove. There was no loss of life and no one was left behind. The successful withdrawal kept the Gallipoli campaign from becoming a much greater tragedy than it was.

The Gallipoli campaign was the largest amphibious venture ever conducted up to that time. Despite its overall fail-

ure, it provides examples of the effective use of all four types of amphibious operations. The amphibious raid and demonstration were used to deceive the enemy, the amphibious assault was used to break out of a stalemate, and the amphibious withdrawal was used to disengage. The Gallipoli campaign, then, could be presented to students of amphibious warfare as a classic example of the successful use of amphibious techniques and as a case study in command failure. But if it were not for the initial successes of the landings, no opportunity for command success or failure would have been presented. This is a fact that is systematically ignored by many who falsely hold to the notion that Gallipoli represented an amphibious catastrophe.

## Further Reading

For an overview of the entire Gallipoli campaign, see Alan Moorehead's *Gallipoli*, Nautical & Aviation, 1982.

For an example of Gallipoli as a case study in opportunity lost and faulty staff work, see Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*, Random House, 1991.

For the first Marine account of Gallipoli, see Col Robert H. Dunlap's classic *Gazette* article, "Lessons for Marines From the Gallipoli Campaign," *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 1921, pp. 237-252.

Finally, for a brief assessment of Gallipoli and what it has meant to the Marine Corps, see Professor William H. Russell's "Gallipoli Lessons Spawned FMF," *Marine Corps Gazette*, May 1963, p. 63.

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