

Gallipoli? Where's That?

Part I

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*"Gallipoli? That was a bloomin' balls
up, wasn't it?"*

—Trooper Jack Hawthorne
1st Australian Light Horse

On April 25, 1915, British, Australian and New Zealand forces landed on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey. From that point, everything went downhill, and the operation born amid high hopes ended as an unmitigated disaster that cost more than 100,000 British and Commonwealth casualties with nothing to show for their sacrifice.

But what does a firefight that took place

100 years ago, one in which the Marine Corps played no role, have to do with today's Marine Corps?

Plenty.

As with most things, the best place to start is at the beginning. That beginning was in early 1915, when the Western Front of World War I in France devolved into a stalemate. Neither side—the British and French Allies, nor their German counterparts—could break out of the fortified lines that stretched from Belgium to the Swiss frontier. Battle after battle accomplished nothing beyond an ever-expanding roll call of the dead.

It was then that Winston Churchill, Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, (a position comparable to that of Secretary of the Navy) proposed a plan that was

highly promising. What Churchill's plan envisioned was an attack on Germany's ally Turkey through "the back door." Put a landing force ashore on the Gallipoli peninsula, the northern boundary of the Strait of the Dardanelles, the waterway that connects the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. With the passage of the Dardanelles now open, attack Turkey from the seaward side. Draw off German troops from the Western Front to come to Turkey's aid and create an opportunity for a decisive Allied offensive in the West.

Churchill's plan was inspired. The execution of that plan, however, was a catastrophe. Why? The success of the Gallipoli campaign rested upon the success of an amphibious operation. In 1915, no one had the foggiest idea of how to





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Above: An illustrated map of the Dardanelles, drawn by G.F. Morrell in 1915. The map shows the location and landings of troops during the Gallipoli campaign.

Left: Marines crowded together in a Higgins boat headed toward the island of Tarawa in November 1943. (USMC photo)

conduct such an operation. In the military thinking of the day, an amphibious operation was nothing more than a simple ferrying exercise; put men aboard ship here, let them off there.

The foremost result of the failure of the Gallipoli campaign was the unanimous conclusion that amphibious operations were impossible. Later events, however, would create an entirely new international situation, one that never before had existed; a situation which would require serious study. When WW I ended with Germany's defeat in November 1918, Germany's Pacific Island possessions were mandated to Japan by the League of Nations. The strategic implications of this transfer of territories were not long in making themselves known. Eventually, they would confront America with the need to conduct a form of warfare that was without precedent in all of history: amphibious warfare.

The former German territories of the Carolines, the Marshalls, and the Palaus covered vast expanses of the western Pacific, the largest body of water on earth. Early in the 1920s, it became apparent that the new overseer of those island chains, Japan, was fast taking steps to transform them into advanced naval bases. Bases of

that nature would be invaluable should the Japanese choose to further project their presence into the southern and central regions of the Pacific. A barrier of fortified island defenses could transform much of the Pacific into a Japanese lake.

This potential was quickly recognized by Major General John A. Lejeune, 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, who, as early as 1920, began to focus his staff on preliminary planning for a possible war in the Pacific. Foremost among the officers involved was Lieutenant Colonel Earl Hancock "Pete" Ellis, who produced Operation Plan 712 "Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia," which was eerily prophetic of events that would take place 20 years later.

An officer with a distinguished combat record in France, Pete Ellis had the complete trust of MajGen Lejeune, who in 1921 consented to allow Ellis to undertake a clandestine mission to the Japanese-mandated island territories. All of Ellis' official records were removed from normal storage and kept in MajGen Lejeune's personal safe along with Ellis' pre-dated letter of resignation. For all intents and purposes, Ellis the Marine ceased to exist.

The Earl Hancock Ellis who did exist

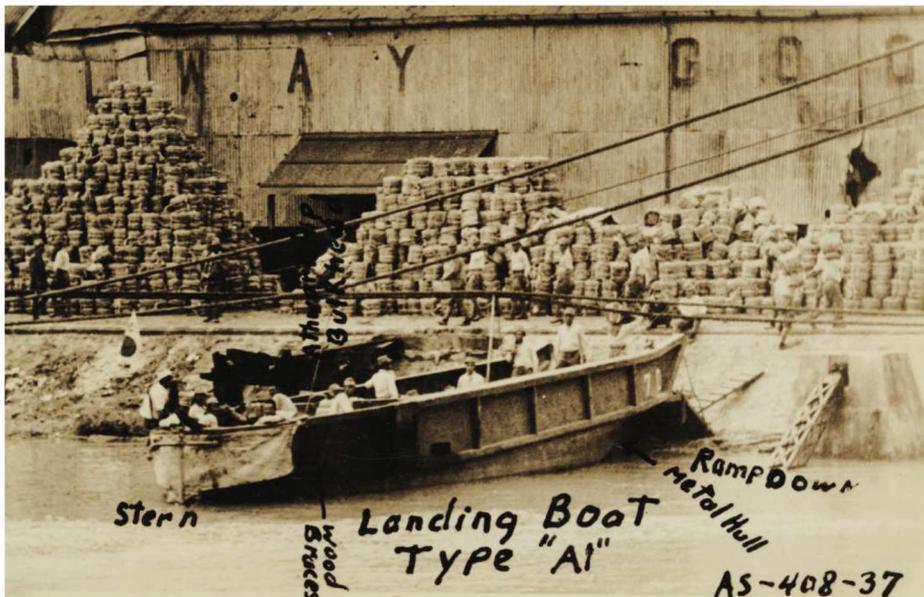


USMC

LtCol Earl H. Ellis

was a civilian employee of Hughes Trading Company, whose vice president, John Arthur Hughes, known casually among Marines as "Johnny the Hard," had been a fellow officer before being medically retired due to wounds received in France. As a representative of Hughes Trading Company, Ellis conducted clandestine information collection before dying under mysterious circumstances on the Japanese-held island of Angaur in the Palau Islands.

These events, coupled with Japan's increasingly belligerent and aggressive actions in Asia, caused far-seeing minds



COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

in the Marine Corps and Navy to consider the disturbing possibility of a clash between America and Japan in the Pacific. Such a conflict, should it come to pass, would in no way resemble previous wars at sea that had been comparatively limited in scale, fought between ships and quickly concluded.

A war in the Pacific would be entirely different; a war unlike anything in all of history. From pre-history onward, wars had been fought on land masses. A war across the Pacific would require America to project forces over thousands of miles of open ocean and overcome prepared defenses on countless islands. By its very nature, success in a war in the Pacific would rest upon the ability to conduct amphibious operations, yet the failure at Gallipoli had caused military thinkers around the world to conclude that such undertakings were impossible.

Whether or not America wanted it, the impossible would be what would confront America should war come to the Pacific. The question then became how could the impossible be overcome? The immediate answer was that there would have to be an entirely new doctrine, one that would solve the problem of introducing forces from the sea on a hostile shore. With nothing in all of history to draw upon, the development of that doctrine would have to start from zero.



COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

That wasn't an entirely correct conclusion, though. Actually, there was a positive starting point. That starting point was the Gallipoli campaign itself. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps was in no position to start. Starved for cash and strained almost to the breaking point by

While stationed in China in 1937, Victor Krulak, left, sent a photographer to observe Japanese troops and their landing vehicles. Evidence of Krulak's surveillance included handwritten notes on photos labeling definitive parts of the boat as seen above.

expeditionary duties throughout decade of the 1920s, there was neither money nor personnel for anything other than the essentials.

That situation began to ease by the early 1930s, when Congress, under the forceful prodding of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, always a believer in a strong Navy, made increased funding available. In 1933, with additional money on hand, but no gain in Marine Corps strength, the 15th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Major General Ben H. Fuller, directed that a special board be convened at Quantico to produce a "Tentative Landing Operations Manual."

The personnel to produce such a manual would be drawn from an unusual source, the staff and students at Quantico's officer professional education institutions. All classes for Academic Year 1933-34 at the Senior School (today's Command and Staff College) and the Junior School (today's Expeditionary Warfare School) would be suspended. Instead of academic study, the entire body of staff and students

would spend the full year producing the Commandant's desired manual.

The work began with a detailed study of every aspect of the failure at Gallipoli. One particular element of that failure, the lack of any suitable means to put men ashore on a hostile beach, was not long in being identified. War in the Pacific against a modern enemy would call for more than ships' landing parties in whale boats as at Samoa in 1899. Neither could such a war be fought by loading soldiers aboard an antiquated freighter, then running the old rust bucket aground while the soldiers disembarked via makeshift ramps, only to be massacred in the process—exactly what happened at Gallipoli.

To avoid repeating the mistakes of Gallipoli, there would have to be a better manner of bridging the all-important ship-to-shore gap. There would have to be an entirely new type of landing craft, nothing the likes of which existed at the time. That challenge would be overcome by the timely arrival of three men, two of whom, Andrew J. Higgins and Donald Roebeling, were civilians. The third was an obscure lieutenant of Marines, Victor H. Krulak, who was stationed in China. Individually and collectively, they would produce the means of conducting an entirely new form of warfare, that of putting large numbers of men ashore in the face of a prepared adversary.

From his company headquarters in New Orleans, hard-driving Andrew Jackson Higgins, a self-made man if ever there was one, made boats. In particular, Higgins made shallow-draft small craft specifically designed for use by oil drillers and trappers working along the Gulf Coast and lower Mississippi River. With their momentum provided by a propeller mounted in a recessed hull, Higgins' water vessels were ideally suited for use in relatively shallow waters where the propeller couldn't be entangled by underwater obstacles.

In addition, the boats featured a "spoon-bill" bow that allowed the vessel to be run up onto a riverbank and easily be retracted. Continual refinement and redesign had resulted in a boat capable of high speeds that was able to turn on its own length. (In addition to oil men and trappers, Higgins' boats were much sought after by bootleggers and rum runners during those years of Prohibition. "If you have a Higgins boat, you have the best" was an accepted wisdom among those who trafficked in illegal alcohol.)

In 1926, hearing of the Navy's possible interest in a new type of landing craft, Andrew Higgins built a 36-foot version of his popular craft that he called a "Eureka" boat. At 36-feet, the Eureka was 6 feet longer than Higgins' original design, but a



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Two of Andrew Higgins' Eureka landing boats, with a tank-carrying adaptor mounted between them, carry a 7-ton Caterpillar tractor during a demonstration near New Orleans in May 1941.

more powerful engine allowed the Eureka to outperform its predecessor.

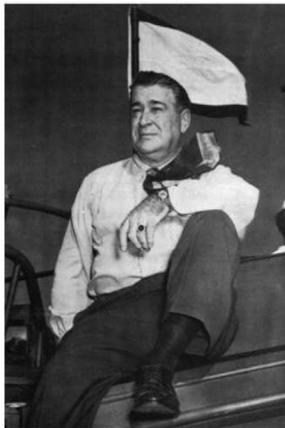
The Navy wasn't interested. With assault transports still years in the future and the concept of amphibious operations still confined to landing parties from warships, the Eureka boat was 6 feet too long to be handled by davits aboard warships which were standardized at 30-feet throughout the Navy. While the Marine Corps was enthusiastic about the Eureka boat, there was the problem of assault troops being able to disembark only by clambering over the sides while cargo had to be man-handled ashore. Andrew Higgins went

back to building boats for oil drillers, trappers and rum runners.

A decade later in 1937, First Lieutenant Victor H. Krulak was the assistant intelligence officer for the 4th Marine Regiment in Shanghai, China. The Chinese and Japanese had been at war for six years. Now, the war had come next door to Shanghai. Learning of an upcoming Japanese amphibious assault on Chinese defenses in the Liuhou area near the mouth of the Yangtze River, Krulak requested permission to be present as an observer. After receiving approval from the Marines, the Navy and, astonishingly, the Japanese, Krulak set out on a Navy tug accompanied by a Navy photographer. What Victor Krulak saw and recorded would prove to be the key piece of the amphibious doctrine puzzle.

Japanese troops were put ashore from an entirely new type of landing craft capable of being run ashore and easily retracted, one from which troops could disembark by way of a unique bow ramp. With reels of film, still photographs and his own drawings, Krulak produced a meticulous report of the operation that featured extensive details of the Japanese landing craft's features and capabilities. The report was forwarded up through the chain of command to Headquarters, Marine Corps, where it was neatly filed and forgotten.

If Andrew Higgins was a self-made man, Donald Roebeling was a man who had everything from the day he drew his first breath. Donald Roebeling's immigrant great-grandfather Johann (John) Roebeling, educated at Germany's finest engineering schools, began erecting bridges almost as soon as he settled in America. Donald Roebeling's grandfather, Washington Roebeling, built the Brooklyn Bridge



COURTESY OF USN

Andrew Higgins built his own legacy by creating the very efficient Higgins boat, making him a household name. Higgins, above, on July 23, 1944 at a celebration for his factory's 10,000th boat.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

A Florida man, Donald Roebing designed the Alligator so that it could easily traverse the swampy Everglades, and manage to climb back onto shore. Above is one of Roebing's early 1936 versions, while below, a 1937 prototype is being tested.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

and created the immense wealth of the Roebing Wire Rope Company, whose braided steel cable held up most of the suspension bridges in America from New York's East River to San Francisco's Golden Gate. Young Donald Roebing never had to get down in the dirt and struggle for anything; whatever he wanted was his for the asking.

It wouldn't be right, however, to picture Donald Roebing as a spoiled ne'er-do-well rich boy. It was just that nothing much interested him, nothing, that is, except anything mechanical. If something had moving parts, Donald Roebing couldn't rest until he had taken it completely apart, studied the components and put them back together.

With all the time in the world and a hefty share of the world's money, Donald

Roebing had a lavishly equipped machine shop built on his estate at Clearwater, Fla. It was there, after learning of the terrible loss of life during the Lake Okechobee Hurricane of 1928 that claimed more than 2,000 victims, that Donald Roebing began tinkering with an idea. Many of those thousands who died in 1928 actually died of untreated injuries after the hurricane had passed for no other reason than that there was no means of reaching them.

Couldn't there be some means of overcoming that situation? That question set Donald Roebing to thinking of some new form of rescue vehicle. It would have to be something that could make its way through the bewildering terrain of the Everglades, move through water too thick to swim in, too thin to walk on, function in over-your-head water or on

the countless hummocks of dry land in that vast swampland. It would have to be something that didn't exist at the time. It would have to be an amphibious vehicle.

Donald Roebing began experimenting, discarding design after design after each proved impractical. With a single-minded determination not usually associated with a man who had everything life could offer, Roebing set himself to pursuing the idea of a rescue vehicle that could function on both land and water. He began spending hours and days in his machine shop. What all that time spent on model after model eventually produced was a true amphibian, one that had a boat-like hull that would keep it afloat on water, and cleated caterpillar tracks to move it on water and land alike. He called his unusual vehicle an "Alligator."

After many attempts and disappointments, Donald Roebing had his Alligator. What he didn't have was a means to produce it in sufficient numbers to make it commercially successful. He would need more than his sole hand-produced prototype. Although his machine shop was more than likely the most superbly equipped and expensive privately owned facility anywhere in America, it was nowhere near large enough to mass produce. If he was going to turn out Alligators in assembly-line fashion, Donald Roebing would need a business partner; he would need a full-fledged factory and he would need those assets soon.

As the decade of the 1930s gave way to the 1940s, world events were racing at an ever faster pace. Europe was at war. Germany's *blitzkrieg* had rolled over Poland in less than two weeks in September 1939. France, which had fought valiantly for four years in WW I, quickly fell before the German onslaught in the spring of 1940. The situation in the Pacific was growing more ominous with each passing day. The entire world was becoming a more dangerous place. Even for America, safe behind its two oceans, time was growing short.

Editor's note: Read Part II of "Gallipoli? Where's That?" in the November issue of Leatherneck to find out more about how the WW I battle had a long-term impact on the Marine Corps' amphibious doctrine.

Author's bio: Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as on an exchange tour with the French Foreign Legion. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

