



ANZAC – Some Random Thoughts

By John Moore | Vice President, NSW Masonic Club

The “One Day of the Year” approaches, the 104th Anniversary of the landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula, a day and a campaign well-entrenched in the Australian psyche.

However, well-entrenched as it may be, there are many aspects of the campaign about which Australians generally have not thought or been aware and thus, in any review of ANZAC, there is advantage in examining the detail in greater depth than the standard media reproductions produced each April.

As a campaign, like most of the elements of WWI, conditions and ultimate casualty rates were horrific and perhaps there is no better description than that portrayed by a poem written by Sapper J.C. Hackney in 1915 after the Australians and New Zealanders had left the shores of Gallipoli behind them:

***What gone! The Australians gone! From ANZAC gone?
The lurid crater where for eight long months
They lived with death, dined with disease,
'Til one in every two fell ill, and one
In every four were shot, and one
In every eight lay dead.
Yes, gone! From ANZAC gone!
And left behind eight thousand graves.***

What more can be offered? This poem sums up the eight-month campaign in eight lines!

As Australians, we think we know a lot about ANZAC and the Gallipoli campaign, but the truth is that Australians know very little about it. Oh yes, we go to ANZAC Day marches and wave flags, and we participate in commemorative services, and increasing numbers are visiting the hallowed ground itself but, as a Nation, as Australians, we know very little about the reasons for the campaign, how it was conducted, and what the end results were.

Generally, it is accepted by Australians that the campaign was a waste of time, that it had very little to offer to the total war effort, and that it was a shambles conducted by incompetent British Officers.

These statements are part of the mythology which surrounds the Australian view of ANZAC and the Gallipoli campaign, and that view, in most cases, tends to be rather emotive.

I recall as a youngster my grandfather offering a tirade against Winston Churchill from whose fertile imagination the Dardanelles campaign sprung; he continually quoted Churchill's words - that "*Gallipoli was a gamble in human blood*" and he, with most of his generation, believed the campaign to be ill-founded and badly conceived. This is a common Australian perception but, is it true? What do the experts say?

No less an authority than Field Marshall Viscount Bernard Montgomery disagrees. He says in his excellent volume, "*A History of Warfare*", that it "*was a campaign with credible objectives but these objectives were not achieved because of incompetent command.*"

Similar views come from several competent military analysts - B. H. Liddell-Hart in his book titled "*Strategy, the Indirect Approach*" and Ian Schott in his book "*Famous Battles*",

It was, perhaps, unfortunate and bad luck too that the forces on Gallipoli encountered two of the best Commanders the World War 1 on the opposition's side - Kamal Ataturk and his German advisor General Von Sanders. However, it was not bad luck, but rather timid and incompetent British command from their aborted naval penetration of the Dardanelles which gave Ataturk and Von Sanders three months advance warning of the landing on Anzac Cove, and they lay in wait for the Australians and New Zealanders to come ashore.

Evidence of, at best, bad management on behalf of the British High Command or, at worst, incompetence, and this was evident at both Gallipoli and on the Western Front.

There is no excuse, of course, for some the heartless and irrational planning, if you can call it planning, which took 60,000 Australian lives during World War I; it was not until Australian General Sir John Monash's influence changed that philosophy in the latter stages of the war, that some competency was exhibited at a senior command level.

These comments of course are made in a general sense only because there were some good and very competent commanders but these, in the main, rarely receive any kudos.

However, without excusing some of the command decisions, the total war situation should be looked at in context. It was, at its time, the most massive and comprehensive war ever conducted and no commander of either side, had experience at planning and managing warfare on such a massive scale.

Further, no Government had experience of managing the war effort nor the management and mobilization of the total national effort required to support it so, the war was totally beyond the experience of Governments, their economies, their industries, and their military services who carried the responsibility of conducting the war.

One aspect of this campaign which seems to be ignored in our history lessons is the question of what eventually was going to happen if and when the campaign succeeded?

Did Australians at Gallipoli realize that they were, in fact fighting, for the Czar of Russia? A political arrangement had already been put in place which ceded Constantinople, the capital of Turkey, to the Russians hence our dead on Gallipoli would have been to ensure that Turkey and other areas of the Ottoman Empire were enshrined within the boundaries of Imperial Russia.

While the negatives concerning the Gallipoli Campaign could continue ad infinitum, there was one significant positive and we rarely hear it mentioned. The “withdrawal” from the Peninsular was a brilliant and innovative initiative and it was planned and commanded by an Australian.

That Australian was Colonel [later General] Cyril Brudenell White and he had the task of withdrawing 80,000 allied troops from the Dardanelles.

80,000 you ask? Surely not!

Surely Yes! It usually comes as a shock to Australians when told that there were more British, French and Indian troops at the Dardanelles than there were Aussies and Kiwis

However, the “withdrawal” from the Dardanelles - it is the shining light of the whole campaign, it was extraordinarily successful and carried out despite some strong “ridicule” from the British high command; General Hamilton for example, forecast that at least half of the troop numbers would be killed.

The withdrawal was mooted when it became obvious that the campaign had reached a stalemate.

The problem however was immense. 80,000 troops and their equipment had to be withdrawn without the Turks knowing and, given that some of the opposing trenches were only 10 or 20 yards apart, this was going to be difficult.

Compounding the difficulty was the fact that equipment had to be evacuated with the troops and as a measure of the difficulty, the “stores” list consisted of 200 guns, 2000 vehicles, 5000 horses and mules, and a great stack of other stores.

Brudenell White, generally regarded as the finest staff officer to emerge from WW I on either side, developed a plan which would have the withdrawal conducted over stages - half the garrison of about 40,000 men would be off the Peninsular by 18 December leaving about 20,000 at each beach head; it was planned that the final 40 thou would withdraw over the nights of 18 and 19 December.

Strict secrecy was required, and the critical factor was that the Turks had to be convinced that everything was normal; news of the pending withdrawal was kept from the allied troops as late as possible to avoid any breach of security and to prevent the spread of rumours.

Brudenell White's plan was meticulous in its detail and this, it could well be said, was an innovation for military campaigns up to that time.

In addition to the need to develop a deception plan to fool the Turks, it called for stringent procedures for the actual operation – these innovations are now part-and-parcel of all withdrawal procedures for any modern Army.

As an aside, later in the War on the Western Front, the tactics developed by Sir John Monash were also revolutionary for the time, and they too now comprise the basic planning principles of modern warfare hence, Australia has made a significant contribution to the art of the planning and conduct of war.

However, back to the withdrawal from the Gallipoli Peninsular.

There had to be a deception plan and Brudenell White incorporated two elements - the first was to develop a pattern of movement which would be accepted as "normal" by the Turks, and second, then a pattern of artillery and rifle fire for a similar reason; such patterns had to commence well in advance of the movement from Gallipoli; in order that they would be recognised as the "norm" by the Turks and be considered "usual" as the numbers decreased over the three-day withdrawal period - no rifles were to be fired at night, no tins or dixies were to be clashed and, in general, all night noise was to be minimised

To keep up a pattern of rifle fire during the day, ingenious ruses were incorporated including "unmanned" rifle fire - rifles were set up across the Australian defensive area but all were unmanned; cans filled with water dripped into an empty can attached by cord to the rifle trigger and when the empty can filled, its weight pulled the trigger and caused the rifle to fire so, by having these scattered around the area, there was a spasmodic pattern of rifle fire despite the fact that there were no troops in the area.

Cricket matches were held on the beach in sight of the Turks to give the impression of normality.

Supplies were delivered each day and packages and drums were carried ashore as was usual but, the packages and drums were empty.

The actual withdrawal procedure, innovative for the time, is now standard practice.

Withdrawal routes were marked with salt or flour, guides were appointed for each group, feet were bound with hessian to prevent noise; the guides led each group along these marked trails aided by specially-designed lamps well shielded from Turkish view.

It took 20 minutes for the forward troops to reach the beach on the last night but over, the three days, the enemy had no inkling that the Allied troops had withdrawn.

Despite the early forecasts of disaster from senior British officers, there were only two casualties - one soldier wounded in the leg and the other in the arm by stray bullets.

It has since been written that “the leaving had a precision the way the landing had panic”.

The grand finale of the withdrawal was the detonation of a huge pile of explosives which the engineers had packed in a tunnel underneath the Turkish lines; troops on the beach felt the tremors of the explosion through the sands under their feet and those waiting at sea saw a brilliant red flash as the flame and glare reached skyward almost as a reverse stroke of lighting.

So, the Australians, New Zealanders, British, French and Indians had all been extracted, and the late Les Carlyon wrote in his easy-to-read and factual publication on Gallipoli that “.... an hour later, the Turks were still firing at ghosts!”

Given the shambles of a military campaign - the withdrawal being the shining exception – it is legitimate to pose a question concerning the status of the campaign in the eyes of Australians. Is it, for example, realistic to proclaim that Gallipoli is was the making of the Australian nation”?

The campaign, and the diggers involved are certainly and rightly revered yes, but does all this add up to the “founding of a nation?”

We all learned at school that this was indeed so and the media tell us this at least once a year on ANZAC Day but, it is so?

I, with most of my age, was raised on this theory, this philosophy, but over the years, I have changed my mind. Contrary opinion has been expostulated over the past decade and I support that contrary view – for a succinct view along these lines, I have no hesitation in pointing again to Les Carlyon’s suburb publication, “Gallipoli”.

Let’s look at the facts.

Prior to the outbreak of WW1, Australia, despite its Federation in 1901, remained in real terms, a British Colony – the nation was totally subservient in all respects to Britain.

What happened after the Armistice in 1918?

The pre-war status continued. Australia remained subservient to a British point-of-view and continued to bow and observe Britain’s every wish and command. Australia, remained in the colonial cocoon!

As an aside, I recommend the book “Australia’s Air Defence Scandal” sub-titled “The Fallen Eagle”.

This narrative, commencing in the latter stages of WWI, covers the period up to the commencement of WWII but confines its narrative to the aircraft industry and the Air Force itself. The study details the control Britain exerted on Australia which was not permitted to buy any aircraft other than those which were manufactured in Britain. Australian was prevented from developing modern aircraft manufacturing facilities and, believe it or not, this influence extended to the dismissal of the Australian the Chief of Air Staff because he worked against the British influence in Australia.

As an aside, and given the study of the British preventing the development of Australian interests and industry, there are three prominent Australians who extensively used their influence to prevent the development and expansion of Australian interests and “forced” Australia to remain subservient to the interests of Great Britain – these Australians were Sir Robert Menzies, Lord Casey, and former Australian Prime Minister and, at time under review, Australian High Commissioner in London, Sir Stanley Bruce.

This influence had ramifications beyond industry – in 1919, Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes, stated that the greatest threat to Australia was Japan. However, Japan at the time was an ally of Britain so, Australia was cautioned by Britain was not permitted to reiterate these words into the future.

Given these facts, the question arises, if not at Gallipoli, then when did Australia become a nation?

I believe that it can be accurately identified - it was 1942.

Think back to the events of those dark days of WW II. The fall of Singapore, and Australia was under direct threat. Britain, to suit her own needs, abandoned Australia.

Australia then made an independent decision which enraged Churchill as Britain’s Prime Minister when Australian troops were withdrawn from the Middle East to supplement the defence of Australia.

This action led to a chain of further independent decisions by Australia of which the major focus was an alliance with the USA - an alliance which continues to the current time.

This, I believe, is the real base on which the nation of Australia was founded – this was the time Australia severed its colonial bonds and became a nation.

What then did Gallipoli contribute to the national psyche?

Patsy Adam-Smith hits the nail on the head in her delightful book, “The Anzacs”. Adam-Smith wrote... *“after Gallipoli, there was no known way that this band of brothers could be denied - they were a tribe, a sept, a solidarity”*.

In other words, The Australians were like a brotherhood. It was, in fact, the epitome of the “mateship” philosophy - this was the first time those from former separate, independent colonies had to work together; it was the first time that people across all social classes and walks of life had to mix, and mix in the most intimate manner.

This was not “nation-building” stuff in itself but, what it did do is provide the basis from which independent nation would eventually emerge.

It is a pity that it took another world war to force the issue!