Britpolitics Fact Sheet – The First World War- Gallipoli

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# 25 APRIL 1915 – 9 JANUARY 1916

Ottoman Turkey had joined the war on the side of Germany. Turkish forces were fighting against Russia in the Caucasus and against British led forces in the Middle East. In January 1915 Russia asked its allies to attack the Turks. With deadlock on the Western Front the British agreed to launch a naval offensive against Turkey, a plan supported by First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Winston Churchill.

The British believed that by capturing the Turkish capital Constantinople (Istanbul) and removing Turkey from the war, Germany’s position would be weakened. A new supply route to Russia would be opened via the Black Sea. British interests in the Middle East would be protected and it might even persuade Bulgaria, which had still to decide which side it was on, to join the Allies.

Access to Constantinople was via a narrow seaway, the Dardanelles Straits, which were under Turkish control. In February 1915 a combined British and French fleet began a naval bombardment of Turkish fortified positions along the Straits as they tried to reach Constantinople. On the 18 March the fleet sustained heavy damage from Turkish mines as they attempted to force the Narrows.

It was decided that a land based attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula was necessary to destroy the Turkish defences and take control of the Straits, before the naval assault on Constantinople could take place. General Sir Ian Hamilton was placed in command of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

# Gallipoli Landings

On the 25 April 1915 men of the British 29th Division and Royal Naval Division landed at five beaches, S,V,W,X and Y, around Cape Helles to the south of the peninsula. The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) went ashore further to the north at Ari Burnu, a beach later renamed Anzac Cove. The French landed soldiers at Kum Kale in an action designed to draw some of the enemy fire away from the Cape Helles landings.

# Anzac Cove

The first of the ANZAC units, crowded into small boats, landed early in the morning under the cover of darkness. They landed in the wrong place, a mile to the north of their target, onto a narrow beach at the base of a much steeper cliff. Under fire from Turkish infantry the Australians made their way to the cliff and began the climb to the top.

Throughout the day the ANZAC forces were subjected to varying degrees of rifle and machine gun fire as they approached the shore. Turkish field guns and artillery shelled the beach and the transports, which interrupted the landing of the Indian Mountain Artillery’s gun batteries. 12,000 men had landed at Anzac Cove by the middle of the afternoon.

The ANZAC forces fought their way across the top of the cliffs and headed inland. The situation became confused as some of the infantry commanders changed their original plan of attack. Units became separated in the rocky, scrub covered terrain making communication and co-ordination difficult.

The Turks sent in reinforcements, launching repeated attacks against the ANZAC forces which had now fallen back to establish a line a short distance inland from the beach. Although incurring heavy casualties they continued to put up a strong defence during the night, holding their line. The situation had been so perilous that General William Birdwood, on the advice of his senior officers, had requested the evacuation of the ANZAC forces by sea. Sir Ian Hamilton had told him evacuation was impossible and they had no choice but to ‘dig in’

# Cape Helles

At 5am a squadron of battleships and cruisers began a 30 minute bombardment of Turkish positions. The men of the landing force were transferred to small open boats to be towed ashore.

At V beach an old collier the River Clyde was to be deliberately run ashore. The two thousand soldiers inside the Clyde were to rapidly disembark using lighters (a type of barge) positioned alongside as a gangway between the ship and the beach.

As the Clyde and the first of the small boats reached the beach the Turks opened fire. Machine gun and rifle fire swept the beach and the landing craft. The men of the Dublin Fusiliers in the small boats and the naval crews suffered severe casualties while still in the boats.

The Turkish fire and strong currents hampered efforts to bring the lighters alongside the Clyde. Many naval personnel were killed or wounded trying to manoeuver them into place. Commander Edward Unwin and Able Seaman William Charles Williams were both awarded the Victoria Cross for standing in the water under heavy fire and helping to get the lighters into position.

The soldiers waiting inside the Clyde were ordered to disembark. Over half of the men who left the Clyde were killed or wounded before they could reach cover at the top of the beach. Many of those that went in to the water drowned under the weight of their equipment packs. Finally, realising the futility of the situation, no more men attempted to disembark from the Clyde. One thousand men were still inside. They eventually left the Clyde under the cover of darkness with far fewer casualties.

The landings at the other beaches were more successful, but delays in advancing and strong Turkish opposition prevented any significant progress inland.

Due to the nature of the operation many senior officers and their staff had to land on the beaches with the troops. Several were killed during the landings and in the initial days of fighting, which made co-ordinating the operation more difficult.

General Sir Ian Hamilton reported Allied casualties (excluding the French) in the first ten days of the campaign as 602 officers and 13,377 other ranks killed, wounded or missing.

In the first weeks of fighting little territory was gained and attempts to capture Krithia failed. The Turks had brought in reinforcements and were now occupying strongly fortified positions across the peninsula. The fighting on Gallipoli soon developed into trench warfare.

# LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

The terrain on the Gallipoli peninsula was largely inhospitable. The ground was rocky with very little vegetation and there were numerous steep sided cliffs and ravines. In the summer the intense heat left the land dry and dusty. In November torrential rain flooded the trenches. By winter the weather had turned cold and many of the men suffered from trench foot and frostbite.

There was very little fresh water on the peninsula. Water was transported by sea, transferred to containers on the beaches where it was then carried up to the trenches. Supply ships also brought in the food, which mostly consisted of tinned bully beef, hard biscuits and tins of jam. Food and water were strictly rationed and the men’s health suffered from the limited quantities and monotony of their diet.

No Man’s Land was littered with decomposing bodies which could not be recovered and buried. The men were plagued by swarms of flies which fed on the dead bodies and then crawled all over the men and their food. Just as in the trenches on the Western Front, lice were also a problem. These unsanitary living conditions led to a dysentery epidemic. Illness and disease were responsible for an estimated 145,000 British casualties during the Gallipoli campaign.

# SUVLA BAY

In August 1915 a new offensive was launched in an attempt to break the deadlock and open up access across the peninsula. Three New Army Divisions had been sent to Gallipoli as reinforcements.

The ANZACs, reinforced with fresh troops of Kitchener’s Army, would capture the Sari Bair Ridge near Anzac Cove. At the same time IX Corps would land at Suvla Bay, just to the north of Anzac Cove and gain control of the Anafarta Hills. The Allied forces would link up and push eastwards, cutting off the southern end of the peninsula and ultimately gain control of the Dardanelles Straits.

On the afternoon of the 6 August, an attack was launched at Helles to divert the Turks away from the landings at Suvla Bay. They came under heavy fire from the Turkish defenders and casualties were high. The attack failed to make any significant gains.

At Anzac Cove, Lone Pine was captured. An artillery bombardment preceded a charge by the ANZAC units across open ground towards the Turkish trenches, which they successfully captured. They incurred heavy casualties during several days of sustained hand to hand fighting, but held their ground. Other attacks on the ridge were less successful, though not through a lack of determined effort on the part of the men involved. With strong Turkish opposition, exhausted troops, thousands of casualties and with no assistance available from IX Corps the fighting came to an end.

On the evening of the 6 August, IX Corps landed on the beaches at Suvla Bay. They encountered little opposition from the Turks but failed to capitalise on their advantage. General Sir Frederick Stopford in charge of IX Corps, although of retirement age, had no battle experience. After landing at Suvla Bay the men were given time to rest and consolidate their position. There was also a lack of strong, clear leadership which contributed to the delay and gave time for the Turkish reinforcements to arrive. Subsequent attempts to advance failed with serious losses.

There was another attempt to link the forces at Suvla Bay and Anzac Cove later in the month, with attacks on Scimitar Hill and Hill 60, but without success.

# EVACUATION

The Government were still divided over what to do about the Gallipoli campaign. Some advocated withdrawal from the peninsula and believed that British forces were best used on achieving a breakthrough on the Western Front. The alternative was to send more reinforcements to Gallipoli and hope that this would be enough to break the deadlock and defeat the Turks.

Sir Ian Hamilton had been relieved of his command of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and replaced by General Sir Charles Monro who had arrived at the end of October. General Monro recommended that Gallipoli be evacuated.

In November the British Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener, who was in favour of continuing the campaign, arrived in Gallipoli to witness the situation first hand. Having seen the appalling conditions the men were living in, their poor state of health and what they were up against, Lord Kitchener decided that evacuation was the only option.

Detailed plans were drawn up to try and convince the Turks that everything was carrying on as normal. As the evacuation progressed the remaining men went around all areas of the camps lighting fires and showing signs of activity, making it seem that they were still fully occupied.

If the Turks had realised that an evacuation was in progress it was feared that they may have used the opportunity to launch an attack. As it was the evacuation was a complete success with almost no casualties during the whole operation. Anzac Cove and Suvla Bay were evacuated by the 20 December. The last troops left the Gallipoli Peninsula on the 9 January 1916.