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Gallipoli's First Day: Turkish documents separating myth and reality

By Harvey Broadbent

The Macquarie University and Australian War Memorial research partnership is investigating previously unexamined documents held in the Turkish archives relating to the Gallipoli Campaign.

Two years ago I wrote in *Wartime* about how intriguing the initial findings of the Gallipoli Centenary Research Project were proving in filling the gaps of knowledge about the ANZACs' erstwhile enemy and how the Ottomans responded to the invasion at Gallipoli. Now we are beginning to use the knowledge gained from the project to pursue some of the grey areas that remain and perhaps begin to clarify where myth and reality separate.

Gallipoli historians still debate a number of evergreen questions—whether or not the campaign had any chance of success especially on the first day, thereby being ill-conceived, whether or not the Ottoman defenders were well-led, whether or not the Ottomans and their German commanders had a true appreciation of the Allied landing plans and how far the failure at Gallipoli was due mainly to poor Allied leadership and organization or superior tactics and organisation of the Ottoman enemy. The research project is working towards clarifying these and other issues so a more comprehensive history can be produced for the Gallipoli centenary in 2015.

Most historians agree that the first day's events set the seal on the stalemate that occurred and as such more information about the enemy's situation and tactics on the first day will shed light on those recurring questions about the campaign. The main factor from which all else spins is the failure of the British and ANZAC force to achieve their first day objectives. For the ANZACs this was

Hill 971, the Third Ridge and ultimately, the hill Maltepe, dominating the shoreline of the Dardanelles to the Narrows at Kilitbahir and its plateau above.

Material that will help to answer questions that flow from the failure to achieve the objectives is now within our grasp. This includes the big one, the one that still excites debate. Were the landings at ANZAC Cove unintended, a mistake of landing boat navigation or were they the result of a late change of plans? Although Turkish reactions to the landings themselves are not helpful in determining this, as would be expected, documents relating to Ottoman defensive planning and tactics carried out prior to the landings, when coupled with British reconnaissance, could add weight to the argument and possibly evidence that a change of landing beach from north Brighton Beach to ANZAC Cove was likely made because it would have been a wise decision.

For example, documents show the Ottoman deployment of its heavy guns was made in response to a conviction that the Kaba Tepe beach area (Brighton Beach), that chosen initially by Allied planners for the ANZAC landing, with the flat plain stretching east to the Straits, was the most suitable for an ambitious amphibious attack. In addition to troop and field gun deployments around the Kaba Tepe beach area the Ottoman response resulted in the positioning of several heavy guns to cover the whole Kaba Tepe beach area to the south on the Palamut Ridge, especially on the hill, Kayalı Tepe. Those planning the landings knew of these deployments well in advance of 25th April.

It is in other more contentious matters that the Turkish documents are also promising to provide more accurate accounts of incomplete explanations of events, including those of Day 1. A case in point is the controversy highlighted in 1993 when serving Australian Army officer, Chris Roberts, lambasted the actions of both Colonel E.G. Sinclair-MacLagan, the 3rd Brigade and Covering Force commander and his superior, Major-General W. Throsby Bridges, commander of the 1st Australian Division, for diverting the 2nd Brigade from

their planned push for the heights at Hill 971 on the ANZAC's left flank in order to reinforce the right flank. (See: *The landing at ANZAC*, Journal of the Australian War Memorial No 22. April 1993 pp.24-34)

The decision to do this is explained and supported by Charles Bean in his Official History of Australia in the Great War on the basis that MacLagan and then Bridges are convinced there was a strong threat to the ANZAC force in this area on the southern flank. The time MacLagan firstly made this decision is not clear from Bean or others, but it seems it was well before 8 a.m., when he confirms it with the 2nd Brigade's McCay. It is probably as early as 6 a.m. or earlier. MacLagan's gives as his reason the large numbers of Ottoman reserve troops arriving. To date there has been no collaborating account of this large Ottoman troop arrival before 7.30 a.m. at the earliest from any other source except Bean. Lt-Colonel Şefik's account states arrival of the first 27th Regiment reserve forces on to the Third Ridge at 7.40 a.m. That's over three hours after the covering force lands. Roberts questions that a serious threat existed and that the decision to dig in on the 2nd Ridge at that point in time caused the stalling of the advance and the failure to reach the Third Ridge and Hill 971. Moreover Roberts and other critics claim the decision to divert the 2nd Brigade to the right and then dig in caused the ultimate stalemate as it gave the Ottoman reserves time to march from their locations kilometers in the rear and deploy strongly on the 3rd Ridge to the east and on Chunuk Bair and Battleship Hill to the north and turn the ANZAC advance into defence.

Many Turkish documents now coming to light, such as battlefield messages and signals, contain time indicators and descriptions of battalion and unit movements. Despite issues surrounding timings in Ottoman 5th Army documents it apparent from accounts relating to the first four hours after the landings that Roberts' claim that "Sinclair-MacLagan's covering force, with a strength of around 3500 troops . . . was confronted in the worst case by about 350 Turks, giving him a ten to one numerical superiority." is largely true. Specifically it

appears from Turkish documents that there is a four hour period after the landing when the opportunity was there for the Covering Force to advance to their objectives (Hill 971 and the Third Ridge) against thin opposition from a vastly outnumbered enemy— an opportunity that was not taken. Documents show that the reserve Ottoman 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 27th Regiment did not arrive on the southern end of the Third Ridge until between 8.00 and 9 a.m. and Mustafa Kemal wrote in the 57th Regimental War Diary, which the project has newly translated, that the 57th did not get to the vicinity of Chunuk Bair until 10 a.m. While he was ahead on Battleship Hill,

The regiment was still on the road in column order [i.e. approaching behind]. At that time a scattered detachment, fifteen men strong from the 27th Regiment, was fleeing after being mauled by the enemy. They had no ammunition left. These soldiers were ordered to lie down to take position against the enemy to the south west of Conkbayiri . . . When these soldiers lay down the enemy halted (57th Regimental War Diary)

Up until that time then the documents support Roberts' calculation of ANZAC and Ottoman relative force strengths in the objectives sector.

Sinclair-MacLagan's decision to divert the 2nd Brigade to the south, probably from some time between 6.00 and 7.00 a.m., is a pivotal moment in the ANZAC landing when the ANZAC advance and tactical attack was turned into a tactical defence. But documents are showing that this lost opportunity was not the only one on that first day. Although held up, now according to documents, by a couple of hundred retreating troops on hill Baby 700 en route to Chunuk Bair and Hill 971, the other routes up to the objective were open to the ANZACs within the first three hours. The Ottoman units of platoon strength to the north of ANZAC Cove, North Beach and the first ridge had also retreated after acquiring losses. This was the case on Russell's Top in front of the Australian

11th Infantry Battalion men of the first wave and their soon-to-arrive reinforcements, where the retreating Ottoman defenders numbered only around ten to twenty at the most. This numerical and moral advantage was not pushed to any decisive position.

Farther north on the lower slopes, too, at Fisherman's Hut, after the Ottoman 27th Regiment's outpost, was held by a small number of men albeit likely with a machine gun. But this could have been overrun by a sheer and determined ANZAC numbers and a route opened up to the heights. Then again later, after the arrival on the battlefield of the Ottoman 57th Regiment reserve, the regiment's 2nd Battalion reinforced the Fisherman's Hut area but took serious losses, lost communication and retreated inland up the gullies and slopes towards Chunuk Bair. Again, they were not pursued and the moment passed. Ottoman documents support this. Lt.Col Şefik states in his account that at 6 a.m. "no further obstacle remained in the way of their capturing the Conkbayiri - Kabatepe dominating line which was the British force's main objective"

A third missed opportunity for an ANZAC advance occurred just before noon when 19th Divisional commander, Mustafa Kemal, leading the defence of the ANZAC sector, was told in error by a staff officer that an enemy landing had taken place at Kum Tepe to the south, between Kaba Tepe and Cape Helles. This prompted Kemal to take two of his divisional regiments, the 72nd and 77th, south to meet the non-existent landing, leaving the hard pressed 57th to deal with the ANZACs alone. It kept Kemal and two regiments away from the enemy for four hours or more, an absence that was not exploited by the ANZAC leaders.

Documents are inevitably emerging that relate to the events in the Cape Helles sector, which mainly involve the British and French forces, but at some pivotal points, too, Australians and New Zealanders. Questions about lost opportunities

are also applicable to the Helles sector. One need only remember the pronouncement of Admiral de Robeck's Chief of Staff, Commodore Roger Keyes, a later Admiral of the Fleet, on visiting Helles after the war. He stood on Alçitepe (Achi Baba), the main British first day objective, which like Hill 971 remained a long way off throughout the campaign. Being unable to see the forts alongside the Straits, Keyes declared Achi Baba to be a fraud! So in assessing essential strategic questions and even the wisdom of embarking on the campaign we need more information to assist with outstanding issues.

These include how well the Ottomans anticipated the major landings at Cape Helles as well as at ANZAC. We know Liman von Sander's strategy was to have lightly manned front positions on the likely landing beaches with the main regiments placed in the rear for advance when the landing places became clear—giving the British even more space and opportunity to establish themselves ashore than they afforded to the ANZACs.

The relevant question, then, associated with the faltering of the ANZAC and British advance is how the Ottomans came to be in a position that would allow the amphibious invaders to gain a foothold on the ground in the first place. What was von Sanders available information and how adequate and accurate was it? If it was inadequate, as it seems to be, what are the reasons for this? Von Sanders' calculation was that once landing places were known whole regiments could be rushed from reserve positions and push the enemy back into the sea. But we have had no real basis for explaining how this strategy failed to materialise early enough allowing the ANZACs and British to gain a foothold, slim as it was, on the Peninsula.

When we put diverse documents together an overall account of the actions and elements in the Ottoman reaction is emerging, which explains such things and at the same time is revising previously held ideas about campaign events. One example is the common belief that 19th Divisional commander, Mustafa Kemal,

on hearing of the landing at ANZAC Cove, immediately disobeyed his orders and set off with his 57th Regiment to stem the Australian advance on Battleship Hill. Documents confirm that far from moving out instantly, Mustafa Kemal seemed to be so slow in moving part of his 19th Division, the 57th Regiment, from their base at the village of Bigalı (Boghali) towards the Australians.

Moreover, the documents show the reasons for this: his initial reluctance to move without orders, prevarication by his superiors, his reaching a point of impatience where his judgement of crucial time factors regarding the enemy and moving his own troops could restrain him so that he finally moved out a whole regiment and battery instead of one battalion. Then the column made slow progress because of the direction chosen through difficult country with inadequate maps. Moreover the documents show further that Lt.Col Şefik's 27th Regiment, the first main body of troops that confronted the Australians earlier than Kemal's columns, were also slow for certain reasons.

The documents are adding information to other campaign issues such as the extent to which the Ottoman defensive strategy emanating from von Sanders was the cause of friction between the German command and the Ottoman officers who had to carry it out. They confirm that this was part of a pattern of dispute that existed before and throughout the campaign, with implications for operations. Moreover, the picture emerging is not one of mere dispute but an active lack of overall respect for German commanders amongst Ottoman high-ranking officers, something which was generally reciprocated. Where politics is concerned of course it is not always possible for the soldier to choose his allies. He often has them thrust upon him.

It is expected that emerging documentation will provide clarification of other uncertainties that have surrounded the events of those first hours after the landings as well as later first day events. In particular they are showing the effect of 5th Army high command decisions, such as the defensive strategy, in

the tactics adopted by the units appointed to carry out the strategy and in the outcomes of their actions—the successes and failures. In other words a more comprehensive history of the campaign.

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The Gallipoli Centenary Research Project

Macquarie University and the Australian War Memorial with funding assistance from the Australian Research Council are jointly operating the innovative Gallipoli Centenary Research Project. The aim is to reveal the last major source of un-researched documentation of the campaign located in Turkish military archives and private sources. It is planned to publish the findings periodically, and then produce and publish the fullest possible comprehensive history of the campaign to mark its centenary in 2015.