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52nd Lowland Division at Gallipoli – A Second Flodden¹

Lieutenant Colonel David Murray (Retd)
Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders

In the early stages of the Gallipoli Campaign 1915-16, the intensity of the fighting and the horrendous casualties suffered by the 52nd Lowland Division², particularly in the battles of 28 June and 12 July 1915, well deserves the description, a "Second Flodden"³.

At the end of 1914, the fighting in France and Belgium had reached a stalemate. An unbroken line of trenches stretched from the North Sea to Switzerland. The British and French were desperate to find some course of action that would enable them to break the deadlock. Turkey had come into the war on the German side. Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, proposed an attack through the Dardanelles with the aim of capturing Constantinople, knocking Turkey out of the war, and easing the German pressure on Russia. Everyone agreed. The French and Royal Navies tried to blast their way through, but were foiled by Turkish shore batteries and mine fields. It was then decided to land an army on the Gallipoli Peninsula to clear the way for the ships to advance.

The initial landings took place on 25 April 1915. The British landed at Cape Helles at the southern tip of the Gallipoli peninsula and an Australian and New Zealand Division landed some six miles north at Anzac Cove. The naval attack had given the Turks a months' advance warning and they were ready and waiting. On the British side, the operation had been hastily conceived, badly planned and was ineptly executed. The Turks, tough and dour fighters, quickly sealed off the landings at Cape Helles and Anzac.

After the initial landings, it was decided to throw good money after bad. Among the reinforcements sent was the 52nd Lowland Division comprised of three brigades, 155th, 156th and 157th. The 155th consisted of the 4th and 5th Battalions, Royal Scots Fusiliers, and 4th and 5th Battalions, King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB). 156th Brigade consisted of the 4th and 7th Battalions, Royal Scots, and the 7th and 8th Battalions, Scottish Rifles. In the 157th Brigade were 5th, 6th, and 7th Battalions, Highland Light Infantry (HLI), and the 5th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Every man in the 52nd Division was a volunteer. This was their first battle.

Major General Granville Egerton, a Seaforth Highlander, commanded the 52nd Division. On its arrival at Cape Helles in early June 1915, the Division came under the baleful command of Major General Aylmer Hunter-Weston, who boasted that he 'cared nothing for casualties'. 52nd Division was committed to the battle piecemeal. 156th Brigade was lent to the 29th Division for a frontal attack in broad daylight on 29 June. There was no time for reconnaissance; there were no maps; nobody knew for sure where the enemy was. The preliminary artillery bombardment went badly wrong. The 8th Scottish Rifles lost 25 out of 26 officers and 448 soldiers literally in five minutes. The attack cost 156th Brigade 1400 casualties of whom 800 were killed. Hunter-Weston was a keen fox hunting man. To Egerton's fury, he described the battle as 'bleeding the pups'. General Sir Ian Hamilton, originally a Gordon Highlander, commanded the Gallipoli expedition. He visited 156th Brigade a few days later. Egerton introduced each battalion as 'the remnants of the...' After the fourth battalion had been described thus, Hamilton formally tore a strip off Egerton. Worse was to come.

At 7.30 a.m. on 12 July, 155th Brigade went into the attack. This time, the enemy trenches had been located, but there was a shortage of shells. 4th KOSB had been ordered to capture three lines of Turkish trenches. The first two the Borderers took in style. The third did not exist. Caught in the open, the 4th lost 18 officers and 535 soldiers in 20 minutes. The total cost to the brigade was 48 officers and 1268 soldiers, killed, wounded and missing. At 4.40 p.m., 157th Brigade attacked over almost the same ground. It lost 39 officers and 938 soldiers. The total 'butcher's bill' for these two days came to 4000 all ranks. One man in three of the 52nd Division was either dead or wounded.

The surviving 12 pipers and six drummers were formed into a Divisional Pipe Band. Although the entire British position was under constant fire from Turkish artillery, the Pipe Band beat 'Long Reveille' regularly; and when the 52nd Division was called on for yet another attack, 14 of the Pipe Band volunteered to fight with their old battalions.

General Hunter-Weston reported sick and was sent home. General Egerton, enraged and bitter, heartbroken at the destruction of his magnificent 52nd Division, eventually broke down from grief, strain and overwork. To the end of his days he never forgave Hamilton or Hunter-Weston. The infamous Gallipoli venture, a muddle and a disaster from the outset, came to an ignominious conclusion with the British evacuation of the peninsula in January 1916. Major C A H Maclean of the Divisional staff composed a slow air, 'The Comrades we left in Gallipoli'; and Pipe Major Willie Ferguson a ¾ Retreat march, 'Farewell to Cape Helles'. Winston Churchill was sacked.

¹An edited version of a paper originally published under the title Gallipoli April 1915 – January 1916 in *Piping Times*. It was submitted to *United Service* by Colonel Donald Ramsay OAM and edited by David Leece.

²6th Battalion (52nd Lowland Volunteers), Royal Regiment of Scotland, is the division's lineage descendant.

³During a war between France and England, a Scottish army led by King James IV of Scotland invaded England and was defeated disastrously at the Battle of Flodden in August 1513. The King and many of the Scots nobility were slain.