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The Australian landings on Gallipoli: myth versus reality

Squadron Leader Hugh Dolan



This paper is based on Dolan's 2010 book, 36 Days: the Untold Story behind the Gallipoli Landings¹. In the paper, Dolan examines a number of myths about the landings at ANZAC Cove on 25 April 1915 which together make up the Australian Gallipoli legend. He demonstrates, with the aid of research into primary sources, that the reality was quite different. Far from being a disaster, the ANZAC landings constituted a successful, daring and unorthodox amphibious assault without precedent in modern warfare which achieved its strategic objective.

Key words: Gallipoli 1915; ANZAC; Australia; myths; William Bridges.

Nearly a century after the landings at ANZAC Cove in the pre-dawn of 25 April 1915, the narrative of that day as commonly told in Australia has become a legend underpinned by many myths. It tells of gallant Australian soldiers being put ashore on the wrong beaches in the face of lethal Turkish guns in an ill-planned assault ordered by incompetent British commanders. Indeed, this ANZAC legend is more reminiscent of the British landings further south at Cape Helles than it is of the Australian landings at ANZAC Cove.

In this paper, I will expose the more prominent of those myths and, drawing on the evidence I have gleaned from maps, intelligence reports, operation orders, war diaries and similar primary sources that were compiled during the preparatory phase of the campaign and from the immediate after-action reports of the landing itself, will explain what really occurred.

Myth 1: The Australians were led by incompetent British commanders

General Sir Ian Hamilton, commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, was no fool. Indeed, he was the best of the British generals. He produced a first-class plan for a series of amphibious assaults on the Gallipoli Peninsula, which included deception manoeuvres by the Royal Naval Division in the north and the French Navy in the south; and the employment of the Australian 1st Infantry Division mid-coast near Gaba Tepe to draw off the Turkish 19th Division (the Turkish 5th Army Reserve) in order that it would not interfere with the main British coup-de-main assault to be carried out by the 29th Infantry Division in

the south at Cape Helles. Planning and execution were completed in just 36 days – an incredible feat of complex staff work and preparation.

Hamilton delegated to his subordinates responsibility for the tactical planning and execution of the assaults in their respective sectors. In the case of the Australians, this responsibility fell primarily to a very able Australian, Major-General W. T. Bridges, General Officer Commanding the 1st Australian Infantry Division of the Australia-New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). The British officer in command of the corps, Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood had delegated the planning to Bridges as his division was ordered to assault the beachhead. So, rather than being led by incompetent British commanders, the Australians, in fact, were ably led by their own officers.

Myth 2: The Australians entered the battle 'blind', knowing little about the enemy or the terrain

Allotted by Hamilton in support of the ANZAC assault on Z Beach were: HMS *Ark Royal*, an aircraft carrier equipped with six seaplanes and four wheeled aeroplanes of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and an observation balloon accommodated on HMS *Manica*. Further, No. 3 Squadron, RNAS, was deployed to Tenedos, an island off the peninsula, to conduct reconnaissance, naval gunfire correction, aerial photography and bombing in support of all military operations.

During the preparatory phase prior to the landing, the aeroplanes flew daily reconnaissance missions – 192 sorties in all – and carried Army intelligence and staff officers as observers. The reconnaissance data gathered provided the Australian commander and staff with accurate information on the terrain, and on the enemy order of battle on the Gallipoli Peninsula, including the deployment of his guns and infantry formations. The deployment data were updated progressively during the course of the preparatory phase as the Turks adjusted their dispositions. In contrast, while the British flew 18 photographic

¹Hugh Dolan (2010). *36 days: the untold story behind the Gallipoli landings* (Pan Macmillan Australia: Sydney) 445 pp. This book is reviewed on page 31.

missions over their beaches, they did not fold this information into their planning or their orders for the landing.

One of these reconnaissance sorties proved to be of particular value. ANZAC's intelligence officer, Major Charles Villiers-Stuart, made an aerial reconnaissance over ANZAC Cove on 14 April with a pair of binoculars and a 1/40,000 scale map. He was able to determine the strength and position of the Turkish forces on the ridges behind ANZAC Cove and the breadth of Z Beach. At a subsequent intelligence briefing, Villiers-Stuart told his superiors that Hamilton's assumptions about Z Beach being relatively unprotected were wrong. The 6,500 yard frontage of Z Beach (between Gaba Tepe and Fisherman's Hut) was defended by several batteries, barbed wire and entrenchments. This led to a re-appraisal of the Australian plans. Instead of landing and advancing across the Gallipoli Peninsula to bisect the roads connecting the port of Midos (modern day Ecebat) on the Dardanelles as originally intended by Hamilton, Birdwood and Bridges gained Hamilton's permission to change their orders. Their new objective would be to land and hold, drawing Turkish forces onto them, giving the British the breathing space to land the main attacking force at Cape Helles.

Myth 3: The Australian assaults were badly planned

The Australian assaults, in fact, were carefully planned by Bridges and his chief-of-staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Brudenell White. They decided to undertake a silent assault (that is, one without naval gunfire support) by night so as to achieve tactical surprise. Z Beach offered a large frontage, a fact exploited by Australian planners. Grid reference landing points were deliberately kept from the orders so as to offer flexibility during the dangerous amphibious approach in rowing boats. From naval orders it is clear that heavy resistance was to be avoided, as orders allowed the tows to vary their approach to land so as to avoid casualties. Bridges allowed for the Corps intelligence officer, who had flown over Z Beach on 14 April, to select the rendezvous point for the following waves of troops.

The after-action report made on 28 April 1915 indicates that the initial landing achieved complete tactical surprise, the assaulting force was not opposed by enemy machine-guns and the beachhead was secured in darkness in less than fifteen minutes.

The Australian plans may be contrasted with those of the commander of the British 29th Infantry Division at Cape Helles, Major-General Aylmer Hunter-Weston, who did not employ aerial reconnaissance, had a poor knowledge of the terrain and enemy as a consequence, and planned a conventional assault supported by naval gunfire to be undertaken in

daylight, commencing at dawn. His assault completely lacked the element of surprise and his assaulting troops suffered extremely heavy casualties from Turkish machine-guns as they attempted to secure the beachhead.

Myth 4: The Australians landed on the wrong beach

The evidence from maps and operations orders prepared and issued prior to the amphibious assaults clearly show that Bridges planned to land between Gaba Tepe and Fisherman's Hut, a 6,500 yard frontage. ANZAC Cove is equidistant between these two points and is in the centre of arc. Z Beach was divided into eight sectors (Z1 to Z8) with 3rd Brigade, the covering force, landing in sectors Z1 – Z4 and with the following 2nd Infantry Brigade landing on the covering force's left, in sectors Z5 – Z8 inclusive of ANZAC Cove.

The myth of the wrong beach stems from the initial mix up of the first 36 boats carrying 1500 troops which landed jumbled across the cove in darkness. This initial hiccup was immediately corrected with the landing of 2500 troops from six destroyers who landed on a much larger frontage, including the base of the 400 plateau on the far right of arc in sector Z1. The following brigade, landing in daylight, landed on the left of the covering force as required in Bridges's orders.

ANZAC Cove was selected as a suitable beach rendezvous by a Corps staff officer who sent a note directly to Birdwood after dawn at 0525 hours: "Suitable landing place for rest of troops (in ANZAC Cove) sheltered from fire by steep slopes inland". The cove was selected after dawn rather than a "mistake made good" as the legend contends.

Myth 5: The Australians assaulted at dawn and the assault was seriously opposed

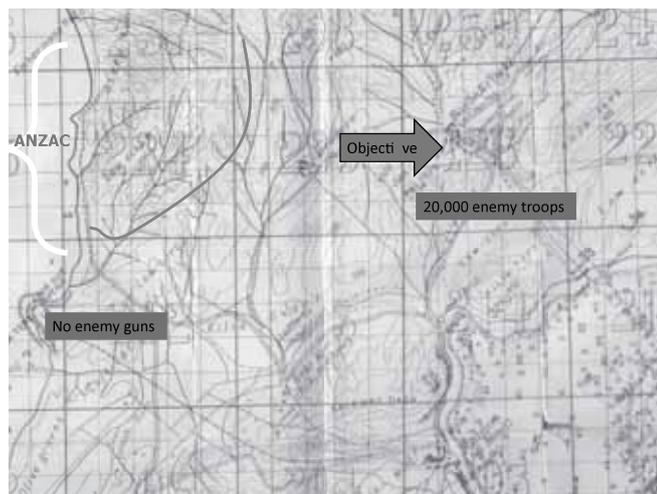
The Australians originally planned to assault silently at midnight to achieve tactical surprise on 19 April. In the event, bad weather forced the amphibious assault to be delayed until 25 April with the later moon setting causing a delay until 0415 hours, still more than an hour before first light. As already observed, it was conducted as planned as a silent night assault. It achieved tactical surprise and was largely unopposed. There were no Turkish machine-guns covering ANZAC Cove and its approaches so Australians suffered few casualties during the landing. The divisional war diary records that at 0415 hours in the darkness "the heights immediately above the shore were immediately rushed". By 0445 hours, still before the dawn, the whole of 3rd Brigade was safely ashore, while elements of the 7th Indian Mountain Battery had also landed. The beachhead was seized. With daylight, batteries began firing from Gaba Tepe

and from the hinterland which caused casualties in the following brigades. This vindicated the initial approach and seizure of the beachhead in darkness.

The British at Cape Helles, in contrast, carried out their assault in daylight commencing at dawn and preceded by a naval gunfire bombardment which proved ineffectual and robbed the assault of tactical surprise. The assault was heavily opposed by the Turkish defenders and the British troops suffered heavy casualties from machine-gun fire in particular. It seems that this British experience, which was quite unlike the Australian one, has nevertheless informed the Australian Gallipoli legend.

Myth 6: The Australians failed to achieve their objectives

Hamilton's initial strategic objective of 13 April 1915 was to cut the road communications along the spine of the peninsula. This was changed with the confirmation from aerial observation that two significant Turkish units were concentrated in the Boghali village and south of Gaba Tepe. Australian orders published on 18 April removed the original objective to advance across the peninsula and cut road communications, and in its place was left orders to secure the third ridge inland and to "hook right" and assault the batteries on Gaba Tepe. This change of orders was Australian realism; the original objective was impossible to achieve given that Mustafa Kemal's 19th Infantry Division was bivouacked in Boghali, directly in the Australian axis of advance. Instead, the seizure of a beachhead would commit the Turkish 5th Army Reserve to battle and keep it from interfering with the British assaults in the south.



The original Australian objective as detailed in Hamilton's orders of 13 April 1915.

The delay to 25 April cost the ANZAC landing four valuable hours of darkness. The Covering Force was halted on the second ridge by its commander in

anticipation of the expected counter-attack by the Turkish 27th Infantry Regiment which hit the right flank about 0700 hours. The Australians held and dug in on the second ridge. Nevertheless, they succeeded in drawing in and pinning down the Turkish 19th Division which advanced from Boghali. As a consequence, both of these enemy units were unable to reinforce the defences at Cape Helles. In doing so, the Australians effectively destroyed 19th Division's premier regiment following repeated assaults against the ANZAC lines. Thus, the ANZAC assault on 25 April did achieve its strategic objective.



The modified Australian objective of 18 April 1915 and the resulting Turkish counter-attacks against the Australian incursion on the day of the landing.

Conclusion

Far from being a disaster, the silent Australian landings on ANZAC Cove in the night of 24/ 25 April 1915 constituted a successful, daring and unorthodox amphibious assault without precedent in modern warfare. The landings achieved their strategic objective which was to draw off two Turkish formations from the British coup-de-main at Cape Helles. The landings should be remembered and honoured as a success. Instead, this triumph has been overshadowed by subsequent events and failures on the peninsula, so distorting the achievements of the initial landing.

The Author: Squadron Leader Hugh Dolan holds a master's degree in history from the University of Oxford and is an intelligence officer in the Royal Australian Air Force. He has served in intelligence postings on headquarters in Australia and overseas; and in an earlier non-commissioned career in the British Army, witnessed the importance of military intelligence in operational planning in Bosnia. He is currently enrolled as a PhD student in military history at the Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales.