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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.

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