

Jump TO Article



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The 1915 Gallipoli August Offensive Centenary Commission of Inquiry

a summary of the Commission of Inquiry held on 29 September 2015 prepared by

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The 1915 August Offensive was designed to break the stalemate that had existed on the Gallipoli Peninsula since the initial landing on 25 April. Despite some of the bloodiest fighting since the landing, its result was an enlarged beachhead 'cage' for the Allied forces. The Inquiry concluded that the Allies were out-generalled by their Turkish opponents. The extraordinarily difficult terrain; the poor state of the troops; inadequate logistic, medical and fire support; and the inability to control the battle given the technology of 1915; were contributing factors. There were mistakes and failures at many command levels within the Allied forces.

Key words: Gallipoli; Australia; August Offensive; Anzac Breakout; Sari Bair; Chunuk Bair; Suvla Bay; Lone Pine; Liman von Sanders; Mustafa Kemal; Sir Ian Hamilton; Sir Frederick Stopford; Sir William Birdwood; Sir Alexander Godley; John Monash.

The August 1915 Allied offensive, including the ANZAC breakout (also referred to as the Battle of Sari Bair), was designed to break the stalemate on the Gallipoli Peninsula since the landings on 25 April. To mark the centenary of the August offensive, the Royal United Services Institute's Military History Special Interest Group staged a mock Commission of Inquiry into the failure of the offensive. Drawing on evidence from both sides which has come to light since the official histories were written, the Commissioner, assisted by Counsel Assisting, examined witnesses representing the senior officers from the Ottoman and Allied sides with a view to eliciting the causes of the failure of the offensive. Witnesses were encouraged to make use of the latest scholarship, especially in Turkish archival sources (Broadbent 2015; Erickson 2015), rather than confine themselves to what was known a century ago.

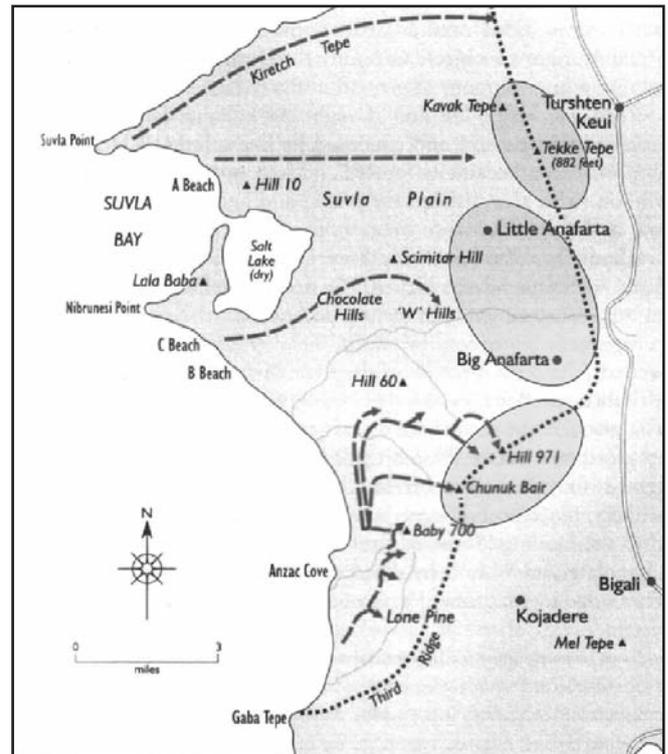
The Situation at the Start of the Offensive

Lieutenant Colonel Peter Sweeney RFD (Ret'd) provided the Inquiry with a report on the situation up to the start of the August offensive. The operational intent of General Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, for the Dardanelles land campaign was to dominate the forts at the Narrows by capturing the Kilid Bahr Plateau. Hamilton's opponent was General Liman von Sanders, commanding the 5th Ottoman Army. The landings in April had resulted by the end of May in stalemate and very high casualties – typical of all attacks in 1915 against trench lines. From June onwards, Ottoman intelligence and British security lapses had given early warning of a renewed Allied offensive, including new landings, but the exact locations were uncertain.

From August, Hamilton switched emphasis to a single thrust from Anzac², which was to be enlarged northwards across the Suvla plain³ to create a base for the allotted reinforcements. The Cabinet decision to send three New

Army and two Territorial divisions was not confirmed until 5 July (Badsey 2013: 71 – 75).

Hamilton's plan for the August offensive was a surprise attack to secure the line of the Anafarta hills and the Sari Bair range. He ordered two independent operations: a landing at Suvla Bay to capture the hills; and a breakout north then east from old Anzac (*i.e.* the original Anzac beachhead) to capture the Sari Bair range.



The objectives and routes for the August Offensive
[Source: Wikimedia Commons].

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²When in capital letters the word means the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. In lower case it refers to the beachhead.

³Suvla Bay is some 12km north of Anzac Cove. The plain inland from the Bay is dominated by the Anafarta hills which are a northerly extension of the Sari Bair range.

Hamilton committed two corps. While the British IXth Corps landed at Suvla Bay, two of Sir William Birdwood's three ANZAC divisions would penetrate the Ottoman screens north of Anzac on the night 6/7 August. Hamilton's plan for the offensive involved:

- a feint attack at Helles;
- a feint attack the evening before at the southern end of Anzac at Lone Pine to draw Turkish reserves away from the objectives on the Sari Bair range;
- attacks in old Anzac to remove the threat of enfilade fire across The Nek;
- breakout assaults on the Sari Bair range from Anzac; and
- a landing at Suvla Bay by the British IXth Corps to secure the Anafarta hills and establish a firm base to support further operations.

Because the audience was predominantly Australian, the seminar focused on the Australian role involving four brigades/regiments and the 29th (Indian) Brigade grouped with them. The four British brigades at Anzac and the five at Suvla were given less attention, and the heroic New Zealand participation with two brigade equivalents was inadequately recognised.

Command of the Sari Bair attack was given to Major General Sir A. J. Godley (General Officer Commanding the New Zealand and Australian Division). The New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade would clear the Ottoman outposts in the foothills; while 40th Brigade from the British 13th (Western) Division provided protection on the new northern flank at Demakjelik Bair.

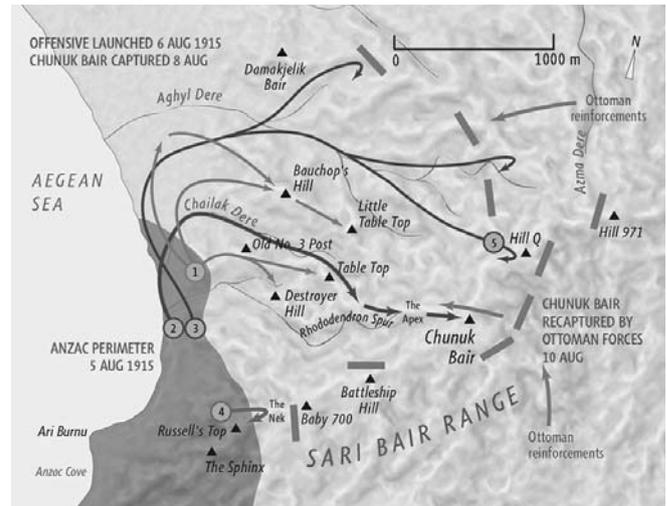
Then two columns from the New Zealand and Australian Division and the 13th Division would break out along the beach north of Anzac; and then turn east to climb the spurs of the Sari Bair range to capture the dominating features – Hill 971, Hill Q and Chunuk Bair – before first light. The left assaulting column consisted of 29th (Indian) Brigade and 4th (Australian) Brigade. The right assaulting column, the New Zealand Infantry Brigade, was to capture Chunuk Bair; and then assault down the ridge attacking Baby 700 from the rear. This exploitation was to be in conjunction with a frontal assault by the 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade onto Baby 700 from Russell's Top (across the Nek); and attacks by the 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade towards the Chessboard and Turkish Quinn's. The routes to the objectives of the two assaulting columns are shown in Map 2.

The 13th Division plus 29th (Irish) Brigade were initially in Birdwood's reserve (apart from the flank guard and two battalions taking part in the attacks by the Australian Light Horse brigades). During 7 and 8 August, this group of four

brigades was allotted to Godley, less only one battalion kept as corps reserve.

The Outcome

Colonel Sweeney detailed how the August offensive was a tactical failure, other than the clearance of the lower slopes north of Anzac and part of the Suvla plain. On the night of 6/7 August, all attacks stopped short of their objectives. Resumed daylight attacks incurred high casualties without permanent results. Between 8 and 10 August, the Ottomans decisively stopped both of Hamilton's corps. The British Cabinet would be notified of the failure of the August offensive on 14 August.



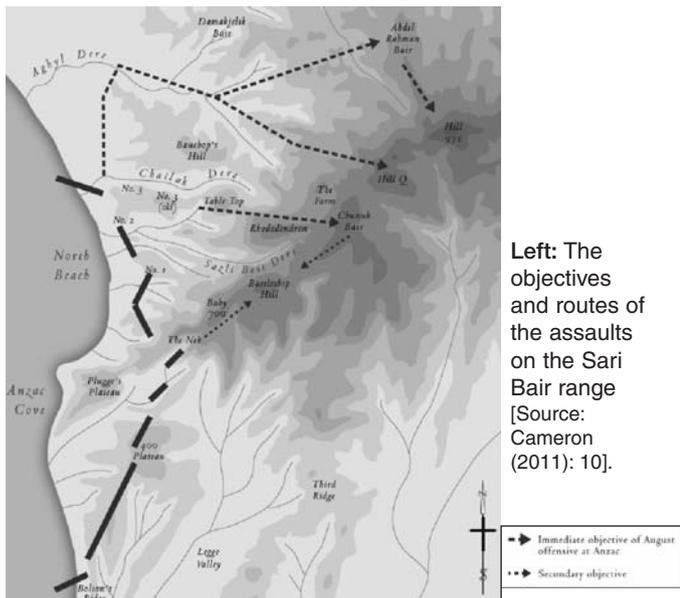
The Sari Bair offensive, August 1915⁵

1. Preliminary operations by the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade to clear the Ottoman outposts in the foothills.
2. The advance of the right assaulting column (New Zealand Infantry Brigade) to Chunuk Bair.
3. The advance of the left assaulting column (4th Australian and 29th Indian Brigades) towards Hill 971 and Hill Q.
4. 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade charge at the Neck.
5. 29th Indian Brigade assault on Hill Q.]

Opening Address by Counsel Assisting

Counsel Assisting the Inquiry was Colonel Andrew Morrison, RFD, SC. After summarising Colonel Sweeney's situation report, Colonel Morrison summarised the witnesses' statements and how he proposed to question the eight witnesses. Each had provided a detailed written statement but was asked orally if he wished to briefly correct or supplement Counsel's summary of his role and what went wrong. In addition, the Commission also had written statements from:

- Major-General H. B. Walker (Commander 1st Australian Division),
- Brigadier-General F. E. Johnston (Commander New Zealand Infantry Brigade) (advance to and attack on Chunuk Bair),
- Colonel J. J. T. Hobbs (Commander Royal Artillery, 1st Australian Division) – a report on artillery and naval gunfire; and



Left: The objectives and routes of the assaults on the Sari Bair range [Source: Cameron (2011): 10].

⁵Source: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/sari-bair-offensive-map> (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, New Zealand), updated 14 August 2014. Map produced by Geographx, with research assistance from Damien Fenton and Caroline Lord, and first published in Fenton (2013).

- Colonel N. R. Howse (Assistant Director of Medical Services, 1st Australian Division) – a report on health and medical services.

Colonel Morrison's edited summary of the written and anticipated oral evidence of witnesses follows.

General Otto Liman von Sanders

General von Sanders followed sound military practice in holding back the bulk of his reserves until he could see where the attack would take place. He must be asked whether Lone Pine confirmed the Allied intentions. In not defending forward, he was at odds with his subordinate, Mustafa Kemal, but was ultimately proven to be correct. He took two major gambles, both of which succeeded. Whether his reserves could reach a threatened area in time was problematic. He gave command of a group of five divisions plus a regiment to a relatively junior officer in Mustafa Kemal, whose drive and determination led to the defeat of the Allied offensive (and ultimately the campaign).

Lieutenant-Colonel Mustafa Kemal (later Kemal Atatürk, President of the Turkish Republic)

Lieutenant-Colonel Kemal was initially Commander of 19th Turkish Division, and from the night of 8/9 August, of the Anafarta Group of five divisions. By noon on 9 August, he judged that he had nothing more to fear from the British at Suvla, but was becoming concerned about Sari Bair. He, personally, led the attack which finally pushed the British troops off Sari Bair at dawn on 10 August. By midday on 10 August, there was no single height of any importance at Suvla or Anzac in Allied hands. Ottoman command situational awareness, and the discretion given to local commanders, was vastly superior to that on the Allied side.

General Sir Ian Hamilton

Hamilton, in his post-operational report, concluded that the vital ground of the August offensive was the summits of Sari Bair. It could be argued that their capture would have left the force well short of any position from which a subsequent advance could successfully be made to dominate the Kilid Bahr Plateau adjoining the Narrows, Hamilton's campaign objective (Ekins 2013b: 81). It is appropriate to ask whether Chunuk Bair was really the vital ground.

In his witness statement, Sir Ian noted that naval gunfire had negligible effect on destroying barbed wire entanglements. The Navy had limited heavy ammunition. He sought but did not receive air reconnaissance. He said his artillery resources were inadequate.

He noted that inadequate supplies of potable water and fresh rations caused the Gallipoli Force to become debilitated; the shortage of small vessels to take casualties from the beach to the hospital ships; and the failure at Suvla Bay to exploit inland and engage the covering forces of about a regiment minus. Yet he did not dismiss Stopford until 15 August.

Questions for Sir Ian will include whether the complexity of the operation in such difficult country made the chances of success poor; whether the task was physically beyond the capacity of his troops; why the diversionary operations at Cape Helles failed to divert; whether his place of command on a Greek island left him unable to manage the battle; and whether Generals Stopford and Godley were up to their respective tasks.

He must also be asked about the fighting qualities and professionalism of the Ottoman forces. They were likely to

defend their own territory well. There was pre-war intelligence from the British Embassy in Constantinople and the Consul at Chanak that the Ottoman Army had benefited greatly from its combat experience in the Balkan Wars (Crawley 2015). Why did he claim that he had no intelligence? He should be asked whether the training, commitment and professionalism of the Ottoman Forces should not have been more apparent, particularly given their performance from 25 April onwards.

Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Stopford

Stopford, commander of the landing at Suvla Bay, had told Hamilton he lacked sufficient troops at Suvla Bay to support the Anzac breakout. Hamilton accepted this and his orders did not require Stopford to do so. Prior (2009) has argued that Stopford became the scapegoat for a failure beyond his control. It can, however, be suggested that Stopford, in failing for 36 hours to push inland from his successful and relatively lightly opposed landing to secure the Anafarta hills, left his position far less secure than it should have been. Hamilton also complained of Stopford's failure to communicate.

Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood

Birdwood, General Officer Commanding the ANZAC, had earlier proposed a surprise left sweeping flank attack onto the Sari Bair ridge to secure Chunuk Bair to Third Ridge – his original objectives for the April landing at Anzac. By 2 July, Hamilton had informed him of the greatly widened operational scope of the August offensive.

Birdwood issued an outline plan which included feints on 6 August against Lone Pine and nearby, to deceive the Turks as to the direction of attack and to draw their reserves. His real attack was to be a strengthened version of his northern breakout but with Hill 971 added.

Despite representations from Major-General Walker and Lieutenant-Colonel White (1st Australian Division), he insisted on the daylight zero hour for the assault on Lone Pine and the supporting attacks elsewhere. The attack on Lone Pine was partially successful, but the other attacks failed with heavy casualties. Walker persuaded him to cancel another attempt.

Questions for Birdwood must include whether Lone Pine merely alerted the Ottomans and why he allowed the attack at The Nek to go ahead even though aware the New Zealand Infantry Brigade could not participate. An attack across The Nek had been considered hopeless except in conjunction with a brigade attack from the rear at the same time. Birdwood must be asked if his intervention was not both pointless and catastrophic.

Major-General Sir Alexander Godley

Godley, General Officer Commanding the New Zealand and Australian Division, was also given command of the 13th Division and 29th Indian Brigade in the breakout from Anzac, but his role in the planning was quite limited. Godley later wrote that it was an error to include Hill 971 because it weakened the concentration of effort to capture Chunuk Bair. He notes there was no simultaneous zero hour for the assaults, but the expectation was that the main attacks would take place before or at first light.

The zero hour for the attack on Baby 700 was set by Birdwood for 0430 "unless orders are given to the contrary". It was planned to be in conjunction with the New Zealand Infantry Brigade attack down the ridge from Chunuk Bair and attacks by 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade nearby. The New

Zealand Infantry Brigade was close to Chunuk Bair but had not reached it by 0430. After consultation, Birdwood ordered these attacks to proceed to assist the New Zealanders even though they were unable to provide support (Prior 2009: 176). The attack at The Nek largely destroyed two regiments of the 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade. In Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*, the attack is wrongly said to have depended on support from the British at Suvla Bay. Moreover, the film implies that a British officer made the decision to continue the attack at The Nek. In fact, it was the Brigade Major, the Australian Lieutenant-Colonel John Antill, who insisted because only his brigade commander (Brigadier-General Francis Hughes) could cancel the orders (Burness 2007).

The logistic plan was grossly inadequate, but the casualty evacuation planning appeared adequate. In his view, the breakout failed because of: the difficulties with terrain; stronger enemy resistance than had been expected; the unfit condition of most of the troops; failures of water supply; and problems with casualty evacuation. Questions for Godley include whether, in those circumstances, the tasks imposed were reasonable and why the attacks were uncoordinated. Why, given their performance since 25 April, was so much underestimated?

Major-General H. V. Cox and Brigadier-General J. Monash

Cox commanded the attacking force on Hill 971 and Hill Q, including the 4th Australian Brigade (commanded by Monash) and 29th Indian Brigade. Monash's task was to advance to and attack Hill 971.

Monash says that the members of his brigade were exhausted, demoralised, and suffering from dysentery, gastric problems, bronchial infections and weight loss. Reinforcements were little better. He doubted that the men could climb Hill 971. Navigation proved extraordinarily difficult for both Cox's and Monash's Brigades. He felt that Cox unreasonably intruded on his command prerogatives. Monash concluded that his brigade performed magnificently and suffered heavier casualties than the other Australian troops. Concentration on the vital ground of Chunuk Bair would have been more likely to succeed.

Monash was subject to significant criticism after this action, principally by Bean (1944). Monash's principal defence is that control of his brigade was taken out of his hands by Cox. The night march required of 4th Brigade (double the distance of the right assaulting column) was never reasonable. However, both commanders need to explain why it was not predictable that, on a night march in difficult terrain in hostile territory with poor reconnaissance, their allowance for time past a point was inadequate. Given the limitations on the available guides, was it not always a high risk that the assaulting columns would never reach their correct assembly areas and deploy in appropriate time to complete the attacks before dawn? How did Monash's brigade end up at the wrong ridge, yet the Ghurka assault on Hill Q find the correct spur in the bewildering maze of ravines?

Monash should be asked to explain why his reliance on telephone communications with his commanding officers was not always at high risk of being broken, leaving him without adequate command and control of his brigade. Monash, I anticipate, will say that there were significant shortcomings in command, control and planning, yet he was co-located with Cox's headquarters and the rear link to Godley's headquarters. Monash, while critical of Cox's interference in the

brigade command, says that Godley did not intervene enough and seldom left his headquarters at No. 2 Outpost, while Birdwood was effectively a silent spectator.

Counsel Assisting's Conclusions

This Commission of Inquiry is to identify causes of failure. Understandable lack of ground reconnaissance, lack of air reconnaissance, the extraordinarily difficult and complex terrain, the poor state of the troops, inadequate logistic support, inadequate medical support, inadequate fire support, the inability to control the battle given the technology of 1915, poor decision-making in respect of daylight attacks across open ground without adequate fire support, a well-dug-in and well-led enemy, and tasks which were always likely to be beyond the troops committed, combined to make success unlikely. The plan was far too complex. The failure of the deception plans must also bear some responsibility.

Underestimation of the Ottoman army is hard to justify given available intelligence before the war about its high standard of intelligence gathering, staff work, training, combat experience in the Balkan wars, aggressive commanders, and flexibility of grouping. The experience since April 1915 confirmed that the troops were well trained and commanded. Good command and control put a superior Ottoman force in position to retake Birdwood's vital ground on the morning of 10 August and the breakout from Anzac failed.

The Commissioner's Findings

In his introductory remarks, the Commissioner, Brigadier The Honourable Alan Abadee AM, RFD, QC (Ret'd)⁴, had stated that the terms of reference included "eliciting the causes of the failure of the Allied Offensive in August 1915" and that "the events should be judged by the standards, values and knowledge at the time and not by today's standards, values and knowledge". An edited summary of his findings follows.

His Honour found that the primary cause of the failure was the superior Ottoman intelligence, generalship and training. Hamilton's optimism throughout the campaign was unwarranted as he conceded to the Dardanelles Commission of 1916-1919 (Rhodes James 1999: 93). The Ottoman command was not deceived by the deception plan (the feints at Helles and Lone Pine). The landing at Suvla Bay confirmed the location of the anticipated Allied offensive, but its execution posed them no threat. Due to the nature of the terrain, the Ottoman forces could always reach, reinforce and supply the heights quicker from their side. They had plentiful fresh water and ready access to villages and rear areas along relatively good roads.

In contrast, the Dardanelles Commission of 1916-1919 concluded that the failure at Anzac was "due mainly to the difficulties of the country ... especially at Anzac". Birdwood recognised that a night operation (which he favoured) risked that some units would lose their way in such country. This materialised. As Godley also observed, the difficulties of terrain and the unhealthy and unfit condition of most of the troops from old Anzac meant the assault columns lost momentum well short of objectives. Too little time was

⁴Brigadier Abadee is a former Justice of the Supreme Court of New South Wales and a former Deputy Judge Advocate General of the Australian Defence Force.

allowed. Many of the attacks planned for pre-dawn became disastrous, inadequately supported daylight attacks, because of the miscalculation of time and space.

The fitness of the troops was poor and the medical support very limited. Monash in his evidence referred to “his medically unfit troops being ordered to fight entrenched Turks”. Monash and Godley rightly doubted that the objectives were realistic, considering the health and condition of their troops. Yet they were expected to undertake a most complex night march over difficult terrain, debilitated by poor rations, inadequate drinking water and widespread dysentery (as well as typhus and other fly-caused diseases). The importance of adequate water supplies was illustrated by the failure of the troops at Suvla to move forward without adequate water supplies. Godley also specifically raised the issue of water problems for his troops fighting in high summer.

Machine-gun and rifle fire from entrenchments could not be suppressed or destroyed because of the limitations of artillery technology, communications from observers to guns, and limited supplies of guns and shells in 1915. It was difficult to position and support guns in this terrain. Colonel Hobbs, Commander Royal Artillery 1st Australian Division, stated that he had a reasonable number of guns, but there was never enough ammunition, especially high explosive required against dug-in troops. At Sari Bair, there was limited preliminary bombardment and field artillery could only fire unobserved inadequate fire missions. He identified that the biggest problem of naval gunfire support was the “problem of relative survey fixation, orientation and altitude”. He considered it more of “a hazard than aid”. The Dardanelles Commission, in its conclusion, added: “We think that the operations were hampered throughout by the failure to supply sufficient artillery and munitions ... due to ... demands proving much larger than was expected when the operations were undertaken and to demands which had to be met in other theatres of war.”

As Stopford said in his statement, due to Hamilton's secrecy requirements, he only received an initial briefing on the plan for Suvla Bay on 22 July and final orders on 29 July, leaving little time for the issue of orders from corps down to company level. Stopford's failure to press inland had significant adverse consequences for his force, but ultimately made no difference to the failure at Anzac. Ottoman reserve divisions had arrived by the time Hamilton intervened some 36 hours after the landings. The evidence proved lack of leadership and initiative at Suvla, and inertia and lack of vigour in some of the military leaders.

Of Chunuk Bair, Hill Q and Hill 971, the capture of Hill 971 appears to have been the most important, but Monash, in his statement, thought that capture of Hill 971 was “never humanly possible”. The Allied forces never had the *entire* Sari Bair range under their control. For a brief time, troops occupied two points along the ridge: near Hill Q, until driven off by friendly artillery fire; and Chunuk Bair, until driven off by Turkish forces. Neither point was captured and secured. By the end of August, the Turkish defenders still retained their firm hold on every strategically advantageous feature on the Peninsula (Prior 2013: 49).

Without the greatest good fortune and/or without irrecoverable mistakes by the Ottomans, the August Offensive was not likely to achieve its aim. Even if it had succeeded, it is far from clear that the subsequent operational aim of dominating the Narrows was achievable.

His Honour concluded: There may have been mistakes

and failures at many command levels, but no-one should doubt the courage and fighting performance in circumstances of extraordinary difficulty by troops on both sides of the hill.

The Author: Brigadier Bryce Fraser is a former Army Reserve infantry officer who rose to command the 4th Battalion, Royal New South Wales Regiment, and the 5th Brigade. In civilian life he was the CEO of a major health insurance organisation. Since retiring, he has gained a PhD in military history from the University of Wollongong. [Photo of Brigadier Fraser: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson, MC]

Acknowledgements

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