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The 1915 Dardanelles Campaign

Stephen Chambers

Military historian and battlefield guide¹



In late 1914, when Turkey closed the Dardanelles to foreign shipping, Britain and France determined to open it by military force to knock Turkey out of the war and re-establish the warm-water route to Russia. Contrary to the tactical wisdom of the day, a naval-only campaign was launched in February-March 1915. While it achieved some early successes, the heavily mined passage leading to the Narrows could not be overcome and the attempt was abandoned with heavy losses of men and ships.

Key words: Dardanelles; Gallipoli; 1915; Turkey; Britain; France; Enver Pasha; General Weber Pasha; Winston Churchill; Vice-Admiral Sackville Carden; Vice-Admiral John de Robeck.

No part of the Dardanelles, from its Aegean entrance to its junction with the Sea of Marmara, was free of defence. From the days of Xerxes, Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire, this stretch of strategic waterway had been fought over. By 1915, the combined defences of the Dardanelles comprised of not only forts with large calibre guns, but minefields, shore-based torpedo tubes, mobile howitzers and field guns, the main concentration of which was at the Narrows. This natural bottleneck was the key to opening the Dardanelles.

Both Britain and Germany had been energetically wooing the Turkish Government during 1914; if Turkey and its Ottoman empire could not be kept neutral, its presence as an ally, however shaky its military capacity, was essential to interests in the east. The German military mission in Turkey was charged with modernising the Ottoman Army under the lead of General Liman von Sanders. Similarly, a British naval mission in Constantinople, under Vice-Admiral Arthur Limpus, had the task to prepare the Ottoman Navy. Two new generation dreadnoughts, named *Sultan Osman I* and *Reshadieh*, were under construction at this time in British shipyards. They had been largely purchased by nationwide street collections and special taxes in Turkey that paid for their completion.

The Prelude to War with Turkey

What happened next was an act of *realpolitik*. Just before Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, seized both Ottoman ships, renamed them HMS *Agincourt* and HMS *Erin*, and added them to the British Grand Fleet in the North Sea. Although it was a logical decision, its insensitivity outraged the Turks, and both

political and public opinion swung towards Germany. This was dreadful timing for the British on the eve of war. It did not take long for Germany to exploit this.

Already running the Mediterranean gauntlet was the German battlecruiser *Goeben* and the light cruiser *Breslau*, under the command of Rear-Admiral Wilhelm Souchon. Through guile and British incompetence, Souchon had successfully evaded the Anglo-French Mediterranean Fleet embarrassing the British. Having arrived off the entrance of the Dardanelles, the Turks allowed the Germans safe passage through, and onto Constantinople for all to witness. Now the Turks had two new ships that showed that Britannia did not rule the waves.

In direct contravention of international law, German General Weber Pasha, swiftly closed the Dardanelles and began making desperate efforts with the Turks to strengthen the Dardanelles' defences. Turkey then progressed plans to attack Russia in the Caucasus, to regain her former territory, and to attack British interests in Egypt, namely the Suez Canal, with a view to severing Britain's connection to India and the Far East. There was also another threat. When the Sultan called for a *Jihad*, Britain had concerns that this could stir up Islamic agitation against Britain, particularly in Egypt and India. If Britain could teach the Turks a lesson, this would weaken their Muslim prestige and thus reassert British power.

The triumphant Souchon was quickly appointed head of the Ottoman Navy. Britain was not blind to what was happening, and protested that the ships should be impounded and the German crews sent home. Turkey nevertheless maintained her 'armed' neutrality, and still would not commit to war. This inertia, however, did not last for long. Under the direction of Enver Pasha, the Ottoman Minister of War, the *Goeben* and *Breslau* (renamed *Yavuz Sultan Selim* and *Midilli*) were dispatched with a rag tag fleet of Turkish cruisers, destroyers and torpedo boats to raid the Russian Black Sea ports. On 29 October they began bombarding these ports, which clearly showed where Turkey's

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allegiances lay. Britain and France sent an ultimatum to Turkey that night and then severed diplomatic relations. On 2 November 1914 Russia declared war on Turkey.

Although Britain was not officially at war with Turkey, on 3 November, in a rapid response to Souchon's unprovoked attack on the Black Sea ports, Churchill ordered the navy to bombard the outer forts that guarded the mouth of the Dardanelles. This was to be a demonstration only and, to reduce risk to the Anglo-French fleet, it would be conducted at long range. As one admiral² remarked at the time, "*a little target practice from 15 to 12 thousand yards might be useful*". HM Ships *Indomitable* and *Indefatigable* bombarded the forts at Sedd el Bahr on the European side, whilst the French ships *Suffren* and *Verite*, targeted the forts at Kum Kale on the Asiatic side. After ten minutes of negligible return fire, a lucky shot detonated the magazine at Sedd el Bahr, killing eighty-six Turkish defenders and destroying large parts of the fort.

For this early British 'success' there was much criticism amongst the Admiralty. Vice-Admiral Sackville Carden was accused of 'lunacy', 'irresponsibility' and for making an 'unforgivable error' of judgement, giving the game away. Although partly true, this was a bit of an over-reaction as for three months the Germans and Turks had been improving the defences. Additionally, where else were Britain and France going to attack, if not at the Dardanelles? That aside, any surprise the Entente may have had, was now gone. Worse still, and in defiance of prior ships versus forts wisdom³, it gave the navy confidence that their guns could destroy forts, and force the Dardanelles by ships alone. On 5 November, Britain and France declared war on Turkey.

Strategic Considerations

Apart from blockading the entrance to the Dardanelles, and a little submarine activity with varying results, the area ceased to be a focus for the British. However, on 2 January 1915, Russia asked Britain and France for a diversionary attack to help release the pressure on the Caucasus front. Even though Russia had decisively defeated a Turkish attack there, the strain on Russia's military war machine was evident. It was this request that brought the Dardanelles back to the attention of the War Council. Kitchener immediately latched onto the idea of a tactical naval demonstration in the Dardanelles, as long as no troops were involved. France was also supportive, and offered a naval squadron to help.

Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, stated: "*The attack on the Dardanelles was agreed on the*

express condition that it should be a naval operation only; it was under no circumstances to involve the use of troops If it did not succeed, it was to be treated as a demonstration and abandoned" (Ellison 1926: 38-39). It was on these conditions that Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, agreed to the operation. The Admiralty was also suitably stocked with shell, and if this could be won by ship alone, a cheap and easy victory would be welcomed. Kitchener had spoken and nobody, not even the British Cabinet questioned him. The elderly First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, impressed by the young Churchill and intimidated by Kitchener, openly agreed to this naval operation. Only older ships were allocated to the Dardanelles, thus Fisher could retain the main fleet to counter the German threat to the United Kingdom across the North Sea.

The plan was to send the fleet up through the Dardanelles and into the Sea of Marmara from where it would create havoc, paralysing all Turkish movements in the area. The fleet would then proceed to Constantinople. It was hoped that the sight of this great armada would be enough to get the Turks to transfer their allegiances to the Triple Entente.⁴ If not, the navy would destroy the city. The plan did have its flaws. Sustaining an operation here would be a problem without military support to keep the Dardanelles open for re-supply. Co-operation with Russia would also have been necessary, so control of the Bosphorus could be affected. Putting all this aside in the short term, it was a risk that Britain and France were willing to take to knock Turkey out of the war and re-establish the warm-water route to Russia, along which she exported half of her goods, including nine tenths of her grain. It was also hoped that this show of might could influence Greece, Bulgaria and possibly Romania to join a Balkan coalition against the Central Powers. If it went wrong, however, the effect was unthinkable.

Tactical Considerations

So who was to command the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet? When the British Naval Mission in Constantinople was wound up in September 1914, there was consideration given to appointing Admiral Limpus, with his vast knowledge of Turkish defence matters. However, he was consigned to supervise the dockyard at Malta. Almost incredibly, it was thought that to appoint him to command operations against his old friend, Turkey, would not be 'sporting'. Vice-Admiral Sackville Carden was chosen.

Demonstrations apart, Fisher and Churchill had in mind a major naval attack. Carden was asked if he thought the scheme was practical by using naval gunfire against the forts, and he replied yes, as long as

²Vice-Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, a former Director of Naval Intelligence.

³This refers to a centuries-old Admiralty debate on whether ships alone could reduce forts. There was a saying: "*A ship's a fool to fight a fort*". Thus, tactics were changed when fighting land batteries. John Ericsson (maritime engineer and inventor) stated: "*A single shot can sink a ship, but a hundred salvos cannot silence a fort*".

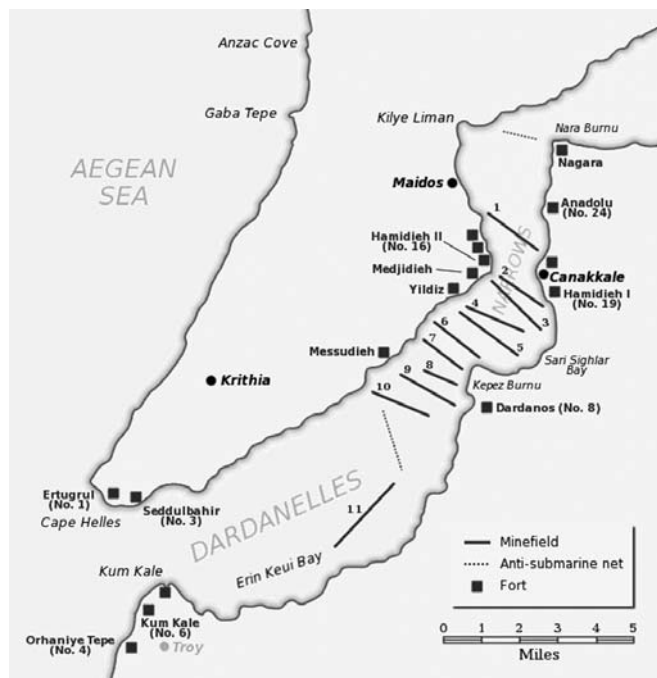
⁴The Triple Entente was an alliance linking the Russia, France and Britain in opposition to the Central Powers, Germany and Austro-Hungary.

he had sufficient ships and time. He should have known better as since the days of Lord Nelson all knew that ships and forts do not mix. To give the operation the best chance of success it was necessary to occupy both sides of the Narrows, and all at the Admiralty knew this. In 1906, the Committee of Imperial Defence had written a feasibility study on this very operation, and why a combined operation⁵ was vital to success. This, however, appears to have been conveniently forgotten. In 1911, even Churchill declared that forcing the straits by ships alone would fail. Theory aside, in 1807 Rear-Admiral Sir John Duckworth's fleet experienced untold problems with the forts when forcing this same waterway, but this would be nothing compared with what faced the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet in 1915. The defences of the Dardanelles were now more than just a few old guns.

Back in London, Jacky Fisher was now having second thoughts and was concerned how quickly the operation had gathered pace. *"Damn the Dardanelles! They will be our grave."* The more concerned he was, the more uncooperative he became, eventually falling out with Churchill and resigning. Carden's support was resolute; and, because of this, the War Council allowed the operation to continue. If it failed, it would be treated as a demonstration only.

Carden's plan was to destroy the outer forts, unsuitably awakened on 3 November 1914, and then:

1. reduce all defences, permanent and semi-permanent, up to and including the forts at the Narrows;



The Dardanelles Straits in February 1915 showing the locations of the Turkish forts and minefields
[Map: Wikipedia Commons]

2. sweep the minefields from the entrance of the Straits as far as the Narrows; and
3. silence the forts above the Narrows and proceed into the Sea of Marmora.

This would be achieved by long-range bombardment, direct and indirect, followed by a bombardment at closer range with secondary armament. There was a likelihood of mines, especially floaters, which would be dealt with by rifle fire or being netted and towed away. Moored mines would be cleared by minesweepers.

The Operation

Phase 1: Reducing the Defences

Using twelve capital ships, four French and eight British, a long range bombardment began at 10 a.m. on 19 February 1915 against three forts guarding the entrance of the Dardanelles: Sedd el Bahr, Kum Kale and Orkanie. The shelling was from seven miles away, which kept the fleet out of range of the forts' guns; but it also introduced problems. The guns of the fleet were powerful enough; the fire could blow away huge chunks of earth and stone, but was not so good destroying the guns that were positioned behind. There were also concerns with accuracy, and only a small proportion of shells actually hit their targets. This was not surprising as the targets were barely visible at such a long range. Many shells missed and sank into the soft earth, and the damage of those that hit was difficult to calculate at that range. The fleet closed in to survey the damage, and even though all three forts were in ruins, the Turks still fired back. With failing light and an enlivened defence, Carden retired the fleet for the day.

Bad weather then frustrated the operation. It was not until 25 February that the bombardment could be recommenced. This time, the ships of the fleet, under the command of Rear-Admiral John de Robeck, were brought in closer to target the batteries between Kum Kale and Kephez, but the Turks almost immediately struck back, hitting HMS *Agamemnon* several times, killing three men. Although the damage was superficial, it did highlight how vulnerable these battleships were when anchored, or near to the shore. HMS *Queen Elizabeth* came forward and for an hour focused its fire on Sedd el Bahr, eventually putting its guns out of action by direct hits. But to gain a direct hit took skill and a little luck, and it was not going to be any easier with the other forts.

For the first time at Gallipoli, feet were put upon the ground. Small parties of sailors and marines landed the following day to survey the destruction and to destroy any remaining guns, mountings and searchlights in the Kum Kale, Orkanie and Sedd el Bahr forts. These raids were initially successful, a Victoria Cross⁶ was won, and the parties withdrew without casualties. However,

⁵A 'combined' operation, in modern parlance, is a 'joint' naval and military operation.

⁶Lieutenant-Commander Eric Robinson, VC, Royal Navy.

when this was repeated on 4 March, the marines and sailors were met with resistance, and a fire-fight took place in the Kum Kale and Orkanie forts. This mission failed with 17 killed and 24 wounded. The raid on Sedd el Bahr fared a little better, but a premature withdrawal also had to be called when resistance strengthened.

Although hampered by the weather, the plan was progressing, with at least three of the outer forts put out of action. Carden optimistically reported that he hoped to be in Constantinople in two weeks. This encouraging news of an impending victory was supplemented when a German wireless message was intercepted indicating that the Ottoman forts were running low on ammunition, which was subsequently proven inaccurate. The outer forts may have been put out of action, but the inner forts, most of which were out of view, still needed suppressing – not to mention the howitzers and torpedo tubes. A howitzer was perfect for destroying the smaller minesweepers, and although they posed no threat to the larger capital ships, the torpedoes and mines certainly did. Without these being destroyed, the fleet could not progress.

Phase 2: Minesweeping

Whilst the forts were being bombarded, the minesweepers, mostly requisitioned North Sea trawlers with civilian crews, were directed up the Dardanelles to sweep for mines. The trawlers worked in pairs, dragging a steel cable under water across the minefield. Early efforts had been unsuccessful, mainly due to these little boats having trouble reaching the minefields, which were some five miles up the Straits. Against the strong currents and Turkish fire, they were not given an easy time. Despite some superficial armour to protect the crew, the boats were vulnerable to howitzer fire and the field guns concealed along the shoreline. One trawler was reported as being hit 84 times!

During the first week in March, Keyes now concentrated efforts on sweeping the mines by night. The Turkish defences were still good; and on most nights the minesweepers were spotted by the searchlights, followed seconds later by intense fire. It was paramount that the Turks kept the minefields secure at any cost. Throughout this period, no mines were destroyed; and more often than not the Turkish fire kept the minesweepers away. Despite the best efforts by the British and French, little headway was being made.

Churchill was getting impatient with the lack of progress since February, and urged Carden on. It was not long before Kitchener saw the need to send troops to the Dardanelles, and on 12 March General Sir Ian Hamilton was appointed as the commander of this new Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. He would arrive on the eve of the main all-naval assault scheduled for 18 March 1915. Before this, however, there would be another setback. Admiral Carden, suffering a nervous

breakdown, announced that he could not continue. Although Rear-Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss succeeded Carden, he willingly allowed the now Acting Vice-Admiral John de Robeck to continue the operation as commander of the fleet.

The plan was to attack with 16 battleships, 12 British, four French. The first line would be the most modern, their task to again bombard the forts, to be followed by four French ships firing at shorter range. The third line would be more aged British ships which would press home the attack.

The minesweepers would again be the key to the operation. Clearing the minefields caused huge problems for the specially converted fishing trawlers and their volunteer civilian crews. Bolstered by Royal Navy crew, these small vessels were not designed for speed, and could only achieve about six knots. With up to a four-knot current running against them, they were practically sitting ducks and easy prey to the howitzers. On 13 March, they attempted to clear a path under the cover of darkness, but they were spotted by the Turkish searchlights and, despite the protection of the cruiser HMS *Amethyst*, had to be withdrawn under heavy fire, losing two of their number. Four further trawlers and two picket boats were damaged. *Amethyst* was also damaged and suffered the loss of 27 sailors killed and 43 wounded. Sweeping continued each night with varying success until 18 March, but despite the brave and almost suicidal efforts of these men, the three-week effort only accounted for twelve mines destroyed. Without a path through the minefields, the operation was doomed to fail.

Phase 3: The Main Assault

The 18 March attempt to force the narrows was an unmitigated disaster. The Anglo-French fleet's intentions were clear in the bright sunlight, which enabled all those ashore to view this great armada, as clear as the Naval Review at Spithead in July 1914. Leading the first wave in HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, de Robeck steamed up to the Kephez minefield and began a long range bombardment of the Narrows forts at Chanak and Kilid Bahr. Eight miles away, the Narrows forts could not reply, but the coast and mobile-based artillery could, hitting all of the ships in this first line (*Queen Elizabeth*, *Agamemnon*, *Lord Nelson* and *Inflexible*), along with their flank protection (*Prince George* and *Triumph*). The damage was superficial, but nevertheless, during this initial 90 minutes of action, it showed that the Turks were still full of fight.

Just after midday, de Robeck signalled forward his second wave, which was comprised of Admiral Émile Guépratte's French squadron (*Bouvet*, *Charlemagne*, *Gaulois* and *Suffren*), supported by HM Ships *Majestic* and *Swiftsure*. This line began well and laid down such a bombardment that the forts almost fell silent. One Ottoman account suggested that by 2 p.m. "*all telephone wires were cut, all communications with the*

forts were interrupted, some of the guns had been knocked out in consequence the artillery fire of the defence had slackened considerably". The third wave was then signalled forward, which consisted of HM Ships *Albion*, *Irresistible*, *Ocean* and *Vengeance*, and now events started to go wrong for de Robeck.

The first casualty was *Gaulois* – having been hit by a shell quite badly below the waterline, it was ordered to withdraw completely. During the retirement of the remainder of this wave, led by *Suffren*, an unknown danger was waiting towards the Asiatic shore. Unbeknown, during the night of 7/8 March, a new string of mines was secretly laid parallel to the shore by Eren Keui Bay by a Turkish minelayer named *Nusret*. This was chosen wisely, as it was here that the battleships were manoeuvring. This one single action would become the turning point of the whole naval campaign.

Following *Suffren*, the *Bouvet* began to move into this danger zone, when suddenly there was a loud explosion. Both surprise and panic followed. When the water spray had cleared, all witnessed the *Bouvet* sinking in less than two minutes, taking to the bottom 95 per cent of its crew. As the third wave then turned, disaster struck again. This time the British ship *Irresistible* hit a mine close to the *Bouvet's* watery grave. The Turkish gunners, with a renewed lease of life, began to target the crippled *Irresistible* which had to be abandoned, the crew being taken off by a nearby destroyer. De Robeck was now seriously concerned, believing that the Turks were floating mines down the Dardanelles. He suspended the attack. Commodore Roger Keyes, in HMS *Wear*, was ordered to tow in *Irresistible* supported by *Ocean* and *Swiftsure*. There was another sudden explosion. *Ocean* had hit a mine and moments later a shell hit her steering gear disabling the ship. The crew from *Ocean* had to be evacuated. Leaving the empty hulks of *Ocean* and *Irresistible* to their fates, *Wear* and *Swiftsure* withdrew. As darkness fell, Keyes returned to sink *Irresistible* and rescue *Ocean* if he could, but it was too late, both had sunk.

Keyes, a passionate believer in offensive action, was keen to continue the attack the following day, despite the loss of three battleships and the *Gaulois*, *Suffren* and *Inflexible* being out-of-action. He was convinced that the Turks had expended vast quantities of ammunition to the extent that some of the main forts were down to their last rounds. This was not wholly true, and although the Turks had expended large amounts and lost about 15 per cent of their heavy guns, this was against the loss of 33 per cent of the fleet. With the current loss rate of capital ships, the attack could not be sustained for more than another day. Both Wemyss and de Robeck had no other option than to cancel the attack.

Conclusion

Witnesses to the failed 18 March operation were General Sir Ian Hamilton (Commander in Chief, Mediterranean Expeditionary Force) and General Sir William Birdwood (Commander, ANZAC Corps) who undoubtedly influenced Wemyss and de Robeck by their presence. It was now clear that the battleships could not force the Straits until the minefields had been cleared. The minefields could not be cleared until the defending guns had been destroyed. These guns could not be destroyed until the army was ashore.

It was a predicament with one clear answer. On 22 March, de Robeck told Churchill that for the fleet to be successful, it needed the army to take the forts from the rear, Aegean side. Kitchener was also of the same opinion now, although he needed an early conclusion to the operation. He could not afford for it to turn into a long-winded campaign and a further drain on military resources which he knew were best placed on the Western Front.

The fleet stepped back from the limelight. All hopes now rested with the army to execute what would be the largest amphibious operation the world had known. However, there would be no victory on the cheap. For the Turks, the failure of the naval attack was a massive boost to their morale; they had defeated the mighty Royal Navy, in what would be its most significant failure of the Great War.

The Author: Stephen Chambers is a military historian and battlefield guide based in south-east England. He has specialist knowledge of the Gallipoli campaign and has also studied British military campaigns from the Crimea to the Second World War. When not writing, he is on the battlefield, continuing his research and guiding groups. His acclaimed published work on Gallipoli includes: *Gallipoli: Gully Ravine* (Pen & Sword, 2002); *Anzac: The Landing* (Pen & Sword, 2008); *Suvla: August Offensive* (Pen & Sword, 2011); and *Anzac: Sari Bair* (Pen & Sword, 2014). Recently published is his co-authored work, *Gallipoli: The Dardanelles Disaster in Soldiers' Words and Photographs* (Bloomsbury, 2015). He is currently researching new material for various Great War centenary projects.

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