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The Scots at Gallipoli

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Scotland has as much reason to mourn its dead on Gallipoli as Australia. Scotland, however, does not have an Anzac Day (25 April) on its calendar. Both were countries with similar populations in 1914, just over 4 million. Both suffered from bungled generalship at Gallipoli. The Australians were led initially by a Scotsman, General Sir Thomas Bridges, who was born in Greenock, Scotland, and there were plenty of Australian soldiers of Scots descent.

A Second Flodden

Scottish historian and piper, Lieutenant Colonel David Murray, in an article in *The Piping Times*, observed that: "The intensity of the fighting and the horrendous casualties suffered by the infantry of the (52nd) Division, particularly in the battles of June 28 and July 12, 1915, well deserved the description, a 'Second Flodden'" (Murray 2008).

My great-grandfather, a Scot of Australian antecedents, George Wilson, from mid-September 1915 served as a reinforcement at Cape Helles². He had hoped for a brigade, but was posted to command the 4th Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers. They were holding about 200 metres of the firing line of the Crithia Nullah. At one point in his diary, referring to the action that Colonel Murray calls a 'Second Flodden', he says: "This unfortunate regiment, having lost between 500 and 600 men on July 12 out of 800 it went into action with, it is now 288 strong, and rifle strength is 170. Both C.O. and Adjutant were missing. Total officer casualties – five killed, seven missing and five wounded."

29th British Division

As the Australians and New Zealanders were landing at what was to become Anzac Cove, the British landed at Cape Helles. Among the formations involved was the 29th British Division, including the 1st and 4th (Territorial Army) Battalions, King's Own Scottish Borderers, and the 5th (Queen's Edinburgh) Battalion, Royal Scots.

The naval attack had given the Turks a months' advance warning and they were ready and well prepared.

On the British side, the operation had been hastily conceived, badly planned, and was ineptly executed. The Turks proved to be tough and doughty fighters. The 1st Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers, lost 296 killed and wounded on the first day of their landing. It was then decided to throw good money after bad. Among the reinforcements sent was the 52nd Lowland Division.

The Turks quickly sealed off the landings at Cape Helles and Anzac, and no further advance proved possible. In an effort to break the stalemate, a further two British Divisions landed at Suvla Bay on 7 August. The

Turks also sealed this off and little progress was made in the ensuing months.

52nd Lowland Division

David Murray records that the 52nd Division comprised three brigades: 155th, 156th and 157th. The 155th consisted of the 4th (Ayr) and 5th (Wigtown) Battalions, Royal Scots Fusiliers; and the 4th (Border) and 5th (Dumfries and Galloway) Battalions, King's Own Scottish Borderers. 156th Brigade comprised the 4th (Queen's Edinburgh) and 7th (Leith) Battalions, Royal Scots; and the 7th and 8th Battalions, Scottish Rifles from Glasgow³. In the 157th Brigade were the 5th, 6th, and 7th Battalions of the Highland Light Infantry, all from Glasgow; and the 5th Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, from Greenock. Every man in the 52nd Division was a volunteer. This was their first battle (Murray 2008).

Major General Granville Egerton had commanded the 52nd Division since 1913. A Seaforth Highlander, he had come to know the 52nd and its officers and soldiers well. On its arrival at Cape Helles at the tip of the Gallipoli peninsula in early June 1915, his Division came under the unfortunate command of Major General Aylmer Hunter-Weston, who boasted that he 'cared nothing for casualties'.

The 52nd Division was committed to the battle piecemeal; 156th Brigade was lent to the 29th Division for a frontal attack in broad daylight on 28 June⁴. 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 in five minutes. The attack cost 156th Brigade 1400 casualties of whom 800 were killed. The medical arrangements were primitive and the wounded suffered accordingly.

Hunter-Weston, nicknamed Hunter-Bunter, was a grim fox hunting man. He described the battle as 'bleeding the pups'. General Sir Ian Hamilton, originally a Gordon Highlander who had fought in the 1st and 2nd Boer Wars, commanded the Gallipoli expedition. Just after the Cape

¹Christopher Dawson served as a subaltern under Lieutenant Colonel David Murray in the 4th/5th Battalion (Territorial Army), The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, from 1961 to 1966.

²From the diary kept by Lieutenant Colonel G. B. T. Wilson, DSO, on Gallipoli – Colonel Wilson was a Boer War veteran.

³On the way to Liverpool to embark for Gallipoli the 7th Royal Scots had been involved in the great railway disaster at Gretna Green in which 214 soldiers had been killed. The battalion had to be made up to strength with drafts from other regiments (Murray 2008).

⁴The 4th Royal Scots of the 52nd Division and the 5th Royal Scots of the 29th Division had together formed the old Queen's Edinburgh Rifle Volunteer Brigade. By chance, the 4th and 5th Royal Scots fought side by side on 28 June.

Helles battle he visited 156th Brigade. Egerton introduced each battalion as 'the remnants of the ...'. After the fourth battalion had thus been described, Hamilton dressed him down.

Worse was to come. At 0730 hours on 12 July, 155th Brigade (Fusiliers and Borderers), went into the attack. This time, the enemy trenches had been located, but there was a shortage of shells. The 4th King's Own Scottish Borderers 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, including 15 pipers.

At 1650 hours, 157th Brigade (Highland Light Infantry and Argylls), attacked over almost the same ground. 157th Brigade lost 39 officers and 938 soldiers.

In each of those three attacks, the Lowland soldiers had attacked the enemy without hesitation. 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.

Major C. A. H. Maclean of Pennycross, a keen piper, was serving on the 52nd Division staff. At his suggestion, the surviving pipers and drummers were formed into a Divisional Pipes and Drums under Pipe Major Willie Ferguson, 7th Highland Light Infantry. There were 12 pipers and six drummers. Although the entire British position was under constant fire from Turkish artillery, the Pipe Band beat 'Long Reveille' regularly. Such was their spirit, that when the 52nd Division was called on for yet

another attack, 14 volunteered to fight with their old battalions (Murray 2008).

Postscript

General Hunter Weston reported sick and was sent home, only to disastrously re-appear on the Western Front. The distraught General Egerton, heartbroken at the destruction of his fine 52nd Division, eventually broke down from grief, strain and overwork. To the end he never forgave Hamilton or Hunter-Weston.

The Gallipoli campaign dragged on for another six months. 'Maclean of Pennycross' composed a slow air, 'The Comrades we left in Gallipoli'; and Willie Ferguson, a 3/4 retreat march, 'Farewell to Cape Helles'.

But the terrible lessons of Gallipoli were taken to heart. Planning for the D Day invasion of June 1944 started 18 months before the first landing craft touched down.

Acknowledgements

This paper was informed in large part by an article by Lieutenant Colonel David Murray first published in *The Piping Times* and subsequently republished in an edited form in *United Service* (Murray 2008). I am grateful to the late Colonel Donald Ramsay, OAM, for drawing it to my attention and for obtaining the author's permission to republish parts of it in *United Service*.

Reference

Murray, Lieutenant Colonel David (2008). 52nd Lowland Division at Gallipoli – a second Flodden. *United Service* **59** (1), 25.