

# The Celts at Gallipoli

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## Introduction

When I asked Suzanne what topic might be of interest to those attending tonight she said that something from my work on Gallipoli might be suitable, but added that the Celtic Council is a very broad church. This put me into a bit of a panic. For my work on Gallipoli has concentrated on the Irish who served there, whereas the Celtic Council represents a much broader range of Celtic peoples. But Suzanne's suggestion led me to look further into which Celts did serve at Gallipoli.

Now, most Australians tend to think that only Australians and New Zealanders were there, apart from the Turks, of course. And those who saw Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* know that the English were there. But they did not do much. As you no doubt remember, according to the radio operator in the film they were sitting on the beach drinking cups of tea.

However, the Gallipoli campaign was very much a multinational affair. Apart from the Anzacs and the Turks and the English, there were French from France and from its African colonies; there were Indians, Sikhs and Nepalese; there were soldiers from New Foundland (now part of Canada); there was the Zion Mule Corps, mostly Russian Jewish emigres living in Palestine. On the other side, the troops we generally refer to as Turks were in fact members of the Ottoman army whose soldiers were from various parts of the Ottoman empire: Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Armenians plus their German and Austrian advisers.

And, apropos tonight's talk on the Celts at Gallipoli, the British Army contingent included not only individual Irish, Scottish and Welsh soldiers but whole battalions raised from those nations and, in the case of the Irish and the Scots, whole divisions. Now, as far as I can work out, no units specifically from Cornwall or the Isle of Man served at Gallipoli, though many Cornishmen and Manxmen did serve and die there as part of British military and naval forces. I suspect also Bretons may have served with some of the French units, but I am yet to work out whether any Galicians or Asturians were there.

Of course, among the Anzacs at Gallipoli there were Celts of various kinds, including Albert Jacka, who was awarded Australia's first Victoria Cross of the war at Gallipoli. His family came from Cornwall.

So, tonight in speaking to you about the Celts at Gallipoli, I will concentrate on the Irish, Scottish and Welsh units which served at Gallipoli as part of the British army contingent.

## Overview of the Gallipoli Campaign

Most of you, I am sure, are familiar with the Gallipoli campaign. But let me give you a quick overview. The Gallipoli peninsula in south-west Turkey juts out into the eastern Mediterranean near Asia Minor – the site of ancient Troy. It looks roughly like a sock. The heel juts out into the Aegean Sea. Beyond the instep is the Asian mainland separated by a strait known as the Dardanelles which leads to the Sea of Marmara which leads to another strait known as the Bosphorus, which passes Constantinople (now Istanbul) and leads to the Black Sea and Russia. The idea of the campaign was to open up an all-year-round sea route to our ally Russia and to send a flotilla of British and French naval ships through the Dardanelles, through the Sea of Marmara and into the Bosphorus to

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stand off Constantinople and threaten to blow the city to smithereens unless the Turks surrendered. Sounds simple enough.

The problem was that the Turks had lined the Dardanelles with forts and artillery and had laced the waterway with mines so that, despite numerous attempts, the British and French navies could not get through. And, on one day, 18 March 1915, the Allied naval forces lost three battle ships, sunk by Turkish guns and mines, while three others were badly damaged. So, the high command called on the army to seize the sock – the Gallipoli peninsula – in order to get rid of the forts, the artillery and the mines that were impeding the navy.

The plan provided for the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division to land at Cape Helles, the toe of the sock and advance up the peninsula past the town of Krithia and the high ground behind it (Achi Baba), about where your bunion protrudes from the first joint of the big toe (if you've got one), while the two Anzac divisions would land on the Aegean coast near Gaba Tepe, later known as Anzac Cove or simply Anzac (the heel of the sock) and advance across the peninsula to Midos at the instep, cutting off Turkish reinforcements from the north and preventing the escape of the Turkish forces fleeing the advancing British. The French were to land on the Asian side, as a diversion, and then transfer to Helles to join in the advance.

As we know, it did not quite work out that way. As with the naval campaign the Turks were not willing to play ball. And, as with the naval campaign, the land campaign was all but lost on one day – the very first day, the day of the landings. The British failed to take Krithia and Achi Baba and the Anzacs failed to go across the peninsula. In fact both armies failed to go much beyond the beachhead. And for the next 6 months the allies lost tens of thousands of soldiers trying and failing to achieve what the plan had required them to do on Day 1.

As events turned out, the land campaign took place in four phases: firstly, the landing at Helles (the toe) and at Anzac (the heel) on 25 April 1915; secondly, the advance towards Krithia and Achi Baba (the bunion) from May to July; thirdly, the great offensive in August to break out of Anzac (the heel) and to establish a winter port at Suvla Bay (just above the heel); and, finally, the evacuation in December/January.

### **First Phase: The Landing**

Let us look firstly at the landing and the part played by the Celt units of the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division at Helles. In fact one half of the 29<sup>th</sup> division's 12 infantry battalions was drawn from the Celtic nations of the United Kingdom: three from Ireland (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion **Royal Munster Fusiliers**, 1st Battalion **Royal Dublin Fusiliers** and 1st Battalion **Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers**); two were from Scotland (1st Battalion **King's Own Scottish Borderers** and 1/5th Battalion **Royal Scots**) and one was from Wales (2nd Battalion **South Wales Borderers**). This unit was made famous in the movie *Zulu* in the defence of Rorke's Drift back in 1879, for which it received seven Victoria Crosses.

The landing beaches at Helles were designated by letters from "S" (at about the nail of the big toe) through to "Y" at about the ball of the foot. Where the Anzacs were to land was called Z Beach (at the heel).

At S Beach, also known as Morto Bay, three of the four companies of **South Wales Borderers** landed with light casualties. They held their position for three days before being relieved by the French who had transferred from the Asian side. So far, so good.

However, at V Beach (the tip of the big toe) the Dublins and the Munsters were smashed as they launched their attack on the Sedd-el-Bahr fort above the beach, suffering far more casualties there than the Anzacs did at Z Beach. It is estimated that more than half of the Irish troops who tried to get ashore that morning were killed or wounded. It was reported that the sea in the bay was red with blood. Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander-in-Chief of the whole campaign, acknowledged the disaster in his memoirs when he wrote: 'Would that we had left [V Beach] severely alone and landed a big force at Morto Bay, where we could have forced the Sedd-el-Bahr Turks to fall back'.

Badly mauled, the Irishmen were unable to move beyond the beach until night fall. On the day after the landing Corporal William Cosgrove of the **Munster Fusiliers** was awarded a Victoria Cross for his part in the fighting to capture Sedd-el-Bahr village. So heavy were the Irish losses, that for three weeks after the landing the Dublins and the Munsters ceased to exist as separate units, being amalgamated into a composite battalion nicknamed the 'Dubsters'.

The **Royal Scots** were fortunate to avoid a similar fate for they were scheduled to follow the Irishmen on to V Beach. However, when it became obvious that the beach was too hot they were switched to W Beach (under the toes), which by then had been subdued, though with heavy losses by the Lancashire Fusiliers whose job it had been to capture W Beach. In fact six Victoria Crosses were awarded to the men of the Lancashire Fusiliers. Hence, the regiment's proud boast that it had won six VCs before breakfast. One of those VCs was awarded to an Irishman Private William Keneally of Wexford.

Other VCs were awarded that day, including four to the crew of the *River Clyde* the ship ferrying the Irish troops to V Beach. One of them was a Scot, George McKenzie Samson from Carnoustie in Angus.

The **Inniskillings** were more fortunate than their fellow-Irish regiments, landing in a supporting role at X Beach (the crease between the toes and the ball of the foot) and not meeting serious opposition until they moved inland.

The **Scottish Borderers** and a company of **South Wales Borderers** landed with the Plymouth Battalion from the Royal Naval Division at Y Beach (the ball of the foot). There they had a most amazing experience.

Y Beach was basically opposite Krithia (where your bunion lines up with the ball of your foot). The soldiers got ashore without opposition and then proceeded to sit on the top of the cliff above the landing beach for 11 hours, waiting for the main force (from the toe) to come up to meet them. In the meantime, two officers from the Plymouth Battalion walked inland and found Krithia unoccupied. The Y Beach troops could have occupied Krithia or, more importantly, could have headed south to take the Turkish defenders in the rear and relieve their comrades at V and W beaches. But by late afternoon it was too late. The Turks had reinforced the area from the north and had laid siege to the Scots and the Welshmen at the cliff top. The next morning, after an excruciating night fending off the Turks, they withdrew to the beach and were evacuated by ship. Had the commanders exercised some initiative that first morning, perhaps the Helles landing might have turned into a success.

### **Second Phase: Advance towards Krithia and Achi Baba**

After a few days consolidating their beachheads at S through to X beaches, the British at Helles began to advance. Over the next three months the British made three all-out and three limited attempts to seize Krithia. All failed. For the second all-out attack in May,

the British were joined by the 2nd Australian Brigade and the New Zealand Brigade transferred from the Anzac sector. In the fighting the Australians lost one half of their 2000 strong force. The survivors returned to Anzac unimpressed with General Aylmer Hunter-Weston, the British commander at Helles.

On 28 June the 29th Division attacked along Gully Ravine (along the underside of toes). They had some success, particularly on the left of their line where the Irish regiments were engaged, but the Turks mounted a massive counter attack. In the vicious hand to hand fighting that followed two **Inniskilling Fusiliers**, Captain Gerald O'Sullivan and Corporal James Somers, were awarded the Victoria Cross for recapturing a trench taken by the Turks.

This engagement also saw the introduction of the Scottish **52nd (Lowland) Division** to the Gallipoli campaign. The division's units had begun their journey to Gallipoli in mid-May. But disaster struck even before they left Scotland, for on 22 May a train carrying half the 1/7th **Royal Scots** crashed near Gretna Green, killing 210 soldiers and injuring many more. Fewer than 70 men out of 500 survived the crash unscathed. When the Scottish division finally got to Gallipoli its casualty rate was almost as bad, particularly in early July when the 52<sup>nd</sup> led an attack on Krithia. Poor planning by the Corps commander General Hunter-Weston led to the loss of more than 30 per cent of the Scottish troops engaged. Soon after the battle the incompetent Hunter-Weston was sent home.

### **Third Phase: August Offensive**

By now, both sides had fought themselves to a standstill at Helles and the focus of the campaign shifted to the Anzac sector, where it was hoped the Anzacs could break out from the line they held just above the beaches, seize the high ground of the Sari Bair range, including the hill top called Chunuk Bair (the ankle), and push across the peninsula as they were supposed to do on Day 1. In addition, it was decided to make a further landing at Suvla Bay (along the Achilles tendon) in order to establish a port for the winter.

The Anzacs would be reinforced for the attack by British formations, including a brigade of the **10th (Irish) Division** and the 13th (Western) Division, which included three Welsh battalions: 8th **Royal Welsh Fusiliers**, 4th **South Wales Borderers** and the 8th, **Welsh Regiment**.

The landing at Suvla Bay was to be carried out by Britain's IX Army Corps, comprising troops from an English division and the two remaining brigades of **10th (Irish) Division**. Over the next few weeks IX Corps would be reinforced by the 29<sup>th</sup> Division brought up from Helles, which as we have discussed included 6 Celtic battalions.

For Australians the most famous battle of the August offensive is Lone Pine, where the Australian 1<sup>st</sup> Division was assisted by the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion **Connaught Rangers**. Celt units also assisted the Australians at Quinn's Post and Courtney's Post, the most dangerous places at Anzac, where the opposing trenches were less than 10 metres apart. Here men of the 6<sup>th</sup> **Leinster Regiment** and the 8<sup>th</sup> **Royal Welsh Fusiliers** served alongside the Australians.

For the New Zealanders the most famous battle of the August offensive is Chunuk Bair, where many Celtic units took part. After the New Zealanders had seized the summit of Chunuk Bair they were relieved by British units including the 8<sup>th</sup> **Welsh Regiment**. When the Turks counter-attacked and pushed the British troops off the hill and

threatened to charge all the way down the ridge to the sea (the ankle to the heel), it was the 6<sup>th</sup> **Leinster Regiment** which stood firm, assisting the New Zealanders to prevent that happening.

Meanwhile fierce fighting was taking place on a small plateau just below Chunuk Bair called the Farm, where British troops were trying to force an alternate route to the summit. Charles Bean recorded in the Australian Official History that after the war bodies of men of the 6<sup>th</sup> **Royal Irish Rifles** were found within 20 metres of the crest of Chunuk Bair.

While the Anzacs with the support of Irish and Welsh units were fighting for control of the Sari Bair range, down at Suvla two brigades of the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division was landing. The Irish division would suffer severely during the Suvla campaign, being not only inexperienced, but also ill-equipped and under strength. Nevertheless, the 10th had an early success on the first day, when five of its battalions took part in the seizure of Chocolate Hill, after having advanced across open ground under intense Turkish fire in the heat of the day and without adequate supplies of water. Apart from this success, the 10th Division had little else to show for their sacrifice.

The Suvla force was soon joined by the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, with its six Celtic battalions. They too suffered badly in the battle for Scimitar Hill. During the battle, the continuous shelling set the undergrowth ablaze and many of the wounded were burnt alive where they had fallen. Having failed to dislodge the Turks from Scimitar Hill, the action was called off with more than a third of the attacking force, some 5300 men, having been killed or wounded.

The battle for Scimitar Hill marked the end of British attempts to advance beyond Suvla Bay. As elsewhere on the Gallipoli peninsula the opposing forces had fought themselves to a standstill after suffering and inflicting huge losses.

An officer of the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division later wrote, "The 10th Division had been shattered, the work of a year had been destroyed in a week, and nothing material had been gained."

#### **Fourth Phase: Evacuation**

After a few months of stalemate, the Allies decided to withdraw from Gallipoli. Anzac was evacuated in December and Helles in January. As you know, the evacuation was the most successful phase of the campaign, achieved without loss of life.

#### **Conclusion**

Gallipoli was a severe defeat for the military forces of the British Empire. For the young nations of Australia and New Zealand, eager to impress the mother country of their worthiness, Gallipoli, despite the cost, had a salutary effect on the nation-building process. For the older Celtic nations, it was just another disastrous campaign in the many they had fought over the centuries as part of Britain's imperial endeavours.

So, from now on, each April when we commemorate the Anzacs who fought and died at Gallipoli, spare a thought for our Celtic cousins who also shed their blood there but who have largely been forgotten.