

Myths are largely invention. History is made of sterner stuff. In an ideal world the myth of Gallipoli and its history belong to separate accounts. But in an age of information overload the boundaries are often fudged.

There is no denying the importance of the Gallipoli campaign to the national psyches of Australia and New Zealand. As the myth and history of this epic event become more confused the need to re-evaluate and do away with the false prophets becomes more important.

In April 2000 I was in a party of about 500 Australians from most states who were taking part in the ANZAC millennium cruise organised by Kompas Holidays of Brisbane.

We sailed in a Greek ship from Piraeus through the Dardanelles with the Australian flag flying and anchored off Canakkale where we took a ferry to the Gallipoli shore and a bus to Anzac Cove. We were accompanied by Veterans' Affairs historian Dr Richard Reid.

Dr Reid was the Australian representative on a committee that reached agreement with the Turks and others for a new memorial at the North Beach site. The new memorial was built to relieve the pressure at the traditional Dawn Service site at the Ari Burnu war cemetery. Included in the agreement was the wording of the inscriptions for the new memorial.

The ANZAC Dawn Service was big business. More than 10,000 people were expected to attend the 85th anniversary service that would see the official unveiling of the North Beach memorial.

When we visited the site, the day before the Dawn Service, we found the area of about a kilometre around the new memorial totally occupied by backpackers. They were a cheerful lot, mostly young, with some odd ideas about history.

Some told me that they were there to celebrate the victory over the Turks.

If they had bothered to read the plaques of the new memorial below the rocky outcrop that our soldiers called the Sphinx they would have seen that there wasn't much of a victory to celebrate.

At the 85th anniversary service Prime Ministers John Howard and Helen Clark came to Gallipoli to dedicate the first project in the newly created Gallipoli Peninsula Peace Park.

In a joint statement the two prime ministers said:

" The Peace Park is dedicated in its widest sense-not just to the cessation of hostilities- but the active pursuit of harmony, understanding, tolerance and freedom. It is an ideal that the Australian and New Zealand people share with Turkey and with all other democratic nations."

How important were these words? Would prosperity remember them? They didn't get much play back home.

As far as the people in the aftermath of the North Beach Dawn Service were concerned there was little in their surroundings to suggest a Peace Park. The place was littered with backpacker detritus as old and young people struggled to sort out themselves in an effort to catch a bus or find their belongings.

There was an occasional flash of good humour and display of old fashioned mateship but by and large the place looked like the leftover of a media circus.

Veterans in their 80s were left abandoned in their buses kilometres from the memorial site. According to the Australian Veterans' Affairs Minister's office the Turkish Jendarme had ignored the agreed traffic plan and had diverted the bus traffic onto secondary roads to accommodate the VIP traffic.

Those fit enough to leave the buses and walk to the site found it difficult to get their night vision because of the television lighting. The Minister's adviser wrote:

" I agree the television lights were obtrusive, but I accepted, as did most of who were there, that the potential for millions of Australians to see the service live from Gallipoli outweighed the disadvantages."

Sending the right pictures back home was what it was all about. Closeted in their living rooms no doubt Australians and New Zealanders felt proud. It was a different feeling up on the slopes overlooking North Beach.

The television lights pinpointed the memorial site in the dark. The press of the crowd forced the late arrivals up the slopes until the spotlighted ANZAC Commemorative Site became nothing more than a glow in the night. A loud speaker system supplied the words and hymns.

We stood alone on the slopes with our own thoughts remote and unconnected. The eastern sky turned pink and a grey shadow crept across the sea. There was a strong smell of fennel and rosemary in the air as the birds twittered. Then the sun caught the peak of the Sphinx as the Last Post sounded. At last I knew I was standing on historic ground.

Later when I began to inspect the plaques at the ANZAC Commemorative Site I became less detached and more involved with what was happening. I met Richard Reid who later told me back on the ship.

" You know Australians and New Zealanders often get the Gallipoli story wrong."

He had an impish grin the product of his Northern Ireland background. He did not volunteer any more information.

I began to read the plaques.

" A good army of 50,000 men and seapower-that is the end of the Turkish menace. Winston Church, British cabinet minister, 1915."

I endorsed Dr Reid's decision to start the ANZAC story with Churchill. My father's generation had little time for the man. They have lived with what they saw as the British betrayal of the so-called Singapore strategy in 1941/42. In my father's case the sense of betrayal went further than that.

When working with Naval Intelligence between the wars my father had come across a little book titled The Dardanelles Expedition, a condensed study written by US Navy Captain W.D. Puleston. The substance of the book was first delivered as a defence paper given to the United States Naval Institute in 1926 and later published for official use only.

At the time Puleston believed that the lessons of Gallipoli were of interest to the US Navy and any plans it might have for conducting amphibian operations in the Pacific.

Puleston concluded his paper by stating:

" It is doubtful if even Great Britain could survive another World War and another Churchill."

Dr Reid's first plaque on the commemorative wall read:

" On 19 February 1915 British ships began a bombardment of the Turkish defences at the straits of the Dardanelles (Canakkale Bogazi). The British wanted to break through to Constantinople (Istanbul), the Turkish capital, and force Turkey, Germany's ally, out of the war. This strategy was designed to enable Britain and France to supply their ally Russia through Turkish waters to open the southern front against Austria-Hungary."

Dr Reid and Captain Puleston were in general agreement about the strategy behind the Gallipoli campaign known by the Turks as the Battle of Canakkale. But Puleston's little book was more inclined to spend more time on the naval phase of the engagement.

Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty believed he understood the Royal Navy and what it was capable of doing. Sadly he did not know much about the Dardanelles.

The need to bring relief to their ally in the east, Czar Nicholas, was daily becoming more pressing. Kitchener, the British secretary of state for War, said the British Army could not spare any men. Churchill offered the Navy.

Puleston wrote:

" British navy and army opinion both condemned an unsupported naval attack on forts and guns mounted ashore, and had prevented Churchill's first proposed attack on the Dardanelles, but Russia's extremity gave the sanguine Churchill a new opportunity; and on January 3 (1915), he cabled Carden (commander of the Eastern Mediterranean British fleet) inquiring whether the Dardanelles could be forced by ships alone even at

a serious loss. Carden replied on January 5 that the straits could not be rushed, but might be forced by extended operations. This was enough encouragement for Churchill."

Churchill led Carden to believe that Churchill had the Sea Lords support for his plan to mount a naval expedition. Churchill lobbied vigorously and finally won over Kitchener and the War Council.

The War Minister, Field Marshall Kitchener, still had reservations about the proposed Gallipoli campaign. He feared that it might develop into a land operation for which he did not have the reserves or expertise.

According to Puleston Churchill was the prime mover and in his enthusiasm for the campaign revealed the following characteristics.

" Brilliant in conception, blithely willing to accept responsibility in matters of which he was ignorant, impatient of detailed analysis or plan, living not only for the present generation but continually posing, almost strutting for his portrait for posterity, he jockeyed the aging Fisher (First Sea Lord) from one position to another, and finally overcame all opposition to the Dardanelles Expedition except that offered by the Turks."

On January 13 the War Council issued the following order.

"The Admiralty should prepare for a Naval expedition in February to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsula with Constantinople as its objective."

The Turks knew that the British and their allies were planning an invasion. Churchill had ordered Rear Admiral Wester-Wemyss to prepare a staging base on the island of Lemnos. The Royal Navy's supply lines were stretched to the limit. Wester-Wemyss and his officers were forced to do business with the local Levantine traders buying sweepers, tugs, lighters and other naval auxiliaries. Turkish spies soon heard of these dealings and passed the information to their masters in Constantinople.

The Turkish fortifications were well established along both sides of the straits. In addition mine fields were laid. The Allies invasion fleet was caught in the crossfire of the Turkish guns and unable to force its way through the straits.

In early March Royal Marines were sent ashore to deal with the guns. The mission failed.

Churchill had promised the War Council to take Constantinople in four weeks. He continued to press Carden to take the initiative. There were limited successes with submarines including Australia's own AE2 but not enough to break through to Constantinople. Kitchener and the rest of the Army High Command viewed these proceedings with alarm.

Kitchener was receiving accurate reports about the naval campaign from General Maxwell commanding the British Army in Egypt. What Churchill told the War Council did not always tally with what General Maxwell was telling Kitchener.

On March 4 Kitchener cabled General Birdwood commander of the ANZAC force training in Egypt and General Maxwell:

" Unless the navy are convinced they cannot silence the guns in the straits without military co-operation on a large scale, in which case further orders will be issued, there is no intention to employ troops to take the Gallipoli peninsula."

Kitchener's soldiers were fully engaged on the Western Front. The only British regulars left were the 29th Division. There was the Indian Army, the Newfoundlanders, the Australians and the New Zealanders. South Africa was not yet a fully committed contributor to the war effort but France was prepared to offer ships and colonial troops.

The Allied troops held in reserve numbered about 100,000. If necessary the Turkish Army could call on a force of 500,000. An invasion of their homeland would clearly provide the Turks with strong motivation. Kitchener and his staff did not like the odds.

Churchill's belief in the rightness of the campaign continued to ignore the reality of the field. Reluctantly Kitchener was forced to give ground but he never had his heart in the campaign. He failed to give the commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, General Ian Hamilton, any aircraft support or purpose-made amphibian landing ships or boats.

Ian Hamilton's invasion plan was in the words of the Oxford Companion to Australian Military History "an imaginative plan-possibly the best that could have been devised in the circumstances." He arranged for diversions to what was then called the Gulf of Xeros in an effort to put the Turkish land forces off the scent. Ian Hamilton's main force, made up of men of the 29th Division, was assigned to the area at the tip of the peninsula called Cape Helles. The ANZACs were the secondary force intended to provide relief for the main force in its effort to silence the guns along the north shore of the Dardanelles.

It was Kitchener himself who laid the foundations for the new Australian army that was about to be bloodied for the first time. The short period of service meant that the men were poorly trained. In Egypt, according to Puleston, each soldier had drummed into him "you must keep going until the third crest is captured."

Puleston continues the story:

" Although called a secondary attack, Hamilton assigned the Anzacs Mal Tepe as an objective; it was over three and one-half miles from the beach and three ridges and much difficult country intervened. The Third Australian Brigade was first to land, and its first echelon, two companies each of the Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh Battalions, shoved off from the attendant ships at 03.30 am. The flotilla, consisting of 12 tows of one steam launch and four pulling boats each, took an approximate formation and headed for the beach; in the 20 minute run to the beach some tows were displaced, the front of the landing force narrowed to one-half mile and the formation was set about one-half mile north of the intended landing."

According to Puleston this initial error saved the ANZACs some immediate losses by avoiding heavily defended Turkish positions. But it made the capture of Mal Tepe an impossibility. MacLaurin, commanding the Third Brigade, soon saw the hopelessness of their task. The commander of the First Australian Division, General Bridges, came ashore at 07.30. On the high ground the lightly defended Turkish defence line was causing trouble but it was the nature of the country that was the biggest problem. The ridges and narrow ravines made it impossible for the invading force to move forward on a united front.

The ANZAC commanders decided to dig in on the second crest. With poor maps and inadequate communications the fighting men were unable to co-ordinate their effort. Puleston commented:

" The impression has gone abroad that the brave but undisciplined Anzacs disregarding orders, pushed into a wilderness and were lost. Actually the farthest point any soldier reached was only one-third of the way to the ambitious objective assigned by Hamilton and his hopeful staff. The country would have split the best disciplined troops into small groups; this dispersion was increased by the orders dinned into the Anzacs in Egypt that they must keep on going at all costs even if their comrades on both sides were held up."

There is some doubt that Hamilton and his staff, on board the Queen Elizabeth out of range of the Turkish guns, held any high hopes. Early reports from Y,X,W and V beaches in around the Cape Helles area all indicated stiff opposition and little success in pushing inland. The Turks were expecting the men of the 29th. There were some initial successes but nothing of substance.

The Xeros Bay " demonstrations" or feints succeeded in detaining the Fifth and Seventh Turkish Divisions for about 12 hours.

By noon of that first day at ANZAC Cove the Indian Mountain batteries were in position shelling the Turks on the third ridge. The Turks hit back employing the guns of the cruiser Torgad Reiiis on the other side of the peninsula. The Indian battery was forced to take cover.

Mustapha Kemal, the Turkish commander of the ridges above the ANZACs, quickly called up reinforcements. After the Turkish artillery had done its best to soften up the invader's beachhead, a Turkish counter-attack re-took most of the territory gained by the ANZACs.

By nightfall the exhausted ANZACs held a crescent-shaped position about three-quarters of a mile deep and one and one half miles wide.

Puleston noted:

" Few Turkish prisoners were taken by the Anzacs. The Turks took none and report that no Anzac would surrender."

It was a bloody engagement with heavy losses on both sides.

General Bridges recommended to General Birdwood that the ANZAC force be withdrawn immediately. At sea on board the Queen Elizabeth General Hamilton was roused from his sleep at midnight to receive a message from Birdwood recommending evacuation. The Navy said it could not get the men off the beaches without heavy losses. Hamilton ordered the ANZACs to dig in.

This position did not change much over the next eight months when the ANZAC force was evacuated without loss of life.

The evacuation was the campaign's finest moment. All beachheads were abandoned according to an elaborately worked out timetable. The last of the ANZACs cleared their beach at 04.00 on December 19. The British High Command's fear that the Turks would bombard the beaches as the troops were withdrawing did not materialise.

Puleston noted:

" There is no good explanation for the Turkish failure to employ artillery on such tempting targets, except ignorance of the British movement."

There is, of course, another explanation. Turkish generosity.

When our party toured the Gallipoli peninsula we were repeatedly reminded of the Turkish generosity of spirit that apparently took no sides in this invasion of their homeland.

As we crossed the Dardanelles for the first time we could see on the slopes an inscription in Turkish that read:

" This earth you thus tread unawares is where an age sank-bow and listen to this quiet mound it is where the heart of a nation throbs."

According to the Department of Veterans' Affairs guide to the battlefields, cemeteries and memorials of the Gallipoli Peninsula the Turks lost 86,692 defending their homeland, the Allies lost 44,072. Among the Allied dead were 8,709 Australians and 2,701 New Zealanders. The heaviest Allied losses were sustained by the British who lost 21,255, followed by the French who lost an estimated 10,000 soldiers.

When our party arrived at ANZAC Cove we read the words of the Turkish president Kemal Ataturk who as Mustapha Kemal had served as a Turkish colonel defending his country against the ANZACs. He wrote:

" Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives you are now lying in soil of a friendly country therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehments to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours... You the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries wipe away your tears, your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well."

For me the most moving monument to be found on the Gallipoli Peninsula was not far from the Kabatepe Museum above ANZAC Cove. The monument was a larger than life statue of a Turkish soldier carrying a wounded soldier in his arms. I assumed that the wounded soldier was a Turk. He wasn't, he was English.

The idea of the statue was based on a story found in Richard Casey's war diaries. Casey served on Gallipoli and later became Australia's Minister for External Affairs and Governor-General.

Casey wrote that during a lull in the fighting the cries of the wounded could be heard in the trenches on both sides. A severely wounded English officer was calling for water. A large Turkish soldier climbed on to the parapet on his trench and went to the aid of the wounded English officer. He gave the Englishman water and carried him to the English lines. He then returned to his own trench. Not a shot was fired.

Prime Minister John Howard and Helen Clark referred to this fellowship that spanned the trenches in their joint statement made during Gallipoli 2000 when the new North Beach memorial was dedicated. They wrote:

" During the Gallipoli campaign, a mutual respect developed between the soldiers of our fledgling nations and the Turks because of common values of courage, endurance and sacrifice observed on the battlefields. That respect grew between the Gallipoli veterans and their legacy remains today the basis of the friendship that endures among our peoples."

This when all said and done is probably the most positive message to come of the Gallipoli campaign. Yet most of us tend to ignore it. We did not, like the Americans, see Gallipoli as an object lesson about what not to do in future amphibian operations, we did not like the British forgive and forget the past and find ourselves a reformed war leader who in Churchill could inspire his people and led them to victory.

Instead we turned a poorly executed minor campaign into the basis of a belief in ourselves and created a superficial kind of nationalism that at the time was probably out dated and is now no longer relevant.

For me this superficial nationalism replaces a true national spirit that is produced by a people when they are honestly engaged in their own affairs. We had no business in Gallipoli. It was a mistake. The sacrifices that were made there need not be forgotten but like most mistakes it is best to put it behind us and move on.

End

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