

Naval Gunfire Support at Gallipoli

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Amphibious operations are among the most complex of military endeavours, calling for well defined command responsibilities and close collaboration between the services. In the lead up to an assault, naval forces are expected to provide sea control and deliver the land forces safely to their objective in a combat ready state. The special naval tasks after a landing are to provide direct tactical support to land forces until they break out from the beachhead and shape conditions to ensure that the flow of supplies and reinforcements exceeds that of the enemy.

At Gallipoli, the most immediate naval support came through the provision of fire from the sea, and this contribution's effectiveness has since been the subject of considerable adverse comment. As early as 9 May 1915, Lord Kitchener, who before the assault had envisioned the Turks swept away by the navy's guns, was expressing his disappointment regarding the actual effect produced.¹ At the same time, the naval commander, Vice Admiral John de Robeck, was noting that, '...when it is a question of trenches and machine guns the Navy is of small assistance, it is these later that have checked the Army.'² Australia's official historian, Charles Bean, was unequivocal, writing that naval gunfire was useless on the peninsula; the ships being unable to 'fire over impossible angles at undiscoverable targets'.³

Gallipoli's topography was undoubtedly troublesome. Naval fire control equipment and heavy guns were optimised for use against other ships, with battleship turrets allowing a maximum elevation of just 20 degrees. Across the peninsular, often only the outer edges of an enemy position were exposed to direct fire and, as the campaign drew on, ever deeper and more elaborate fortifications made the relatively flat trajectory of naval artillery less effective. Fuses too, were found to be inadequate, particularly against targets on reverse slopes. High explosive ammunition required a large angle of impact to detonate and with the landscape's undulating nature proving so tricky, de Robeck was soon requesting a more efficient fuse, capable of detonating shells on graze.⁴

Continuous problems were also experienced with visually identifying targets ashore, correcting the fall of shot, and then having to apply these corrections in a constantly moving gun platform. Although 'really good shooting' might be achieved at anchor, the commanding officers of the smaller warships were usually unwilling to stop within range of active Turkish artillery.⁵ As it was, observation from the sea on occasion resulted in fire striking friendly troops, while communications with the observing officers ashore and spotting aircraft and balloons above, were often slow and unwieldy. These troubles were compounded by multiple further hurdles, including the narrow gap between the opposing trenches, widespread inexperience among the users, shortages of equipment, underpowered seaplanes and fragile wireless sets.⁶

Yet, although none would suggest that naval gunfire support at Gallipoli was without fault or difficulty, the story was never wholly negative and any balanced account cannot ignore either its specific contribution to the campaign or to the advance of joint warfare techniques more generally. With equipment priority going to the forces in

France and Belgium, the Dardanelles expedition was always seriously undergunned, while the ammunition supply was never calculated on the basis of a prolonged occupation of the peninsula.⁷ Hence, throughout the campaign the land commander, General Sir Ian Hamilton, had little option but to rely on the covering warships for adequate firepower.⁸ That he could do so for the full nine months of the occupation, must already be marked as a significant achievement.

Arguably more important in the long term, however, were the lessons learnt and the continuous improvement achieved with joint procedures, doctrine and equipment. Those commanding the expedition faced an entirely novel situation. Gallipoli was the largest British amphibious venture in more than a century, and called for unprecedented levels of naval and military cooperation. Not an easy task to begin with, particularly when both services embraced totally different cultures and traditions. Furthermore, if Bean's assessment is accurate, naval staff work and planning were far inferior to the army's.⁹ Then there were the simple difficulties caused by differing terminology. As late as 1 December 1915, the commanding officer of the cruiser HMS *Grafton* had to apologise to General Brudenell White after his ship was required to leave task early, explaining that in the navy 'morning' referred to the specific period 0400-0800, and not to the hours before midday.¹⁰

At the same time, modern technologies were proliferating, bringing a succession of new and untried equipment, and problems that were often unexpected. For example, broad area networking – linking firing ships, spotting aircraft and forces ashore – initially performed poorly not due to any intrinsic conceptual flaw, but rather because of a lack of common doctrine, limited training opportunities and the unreliability of individual systems.¹¹ Hence, the fundamental lesson was not that the concept was flawed, but instead that these challenges must be met and overcome.

Moreover, even at Gallipoli there were marked successes. Early in the campaign enemy trenches were still very shallow, only knee high or a little deeper,¹² and sources on both sides point to the good results achieved by deliberately controlled fire from the sea.¹³ Just two days after the landing, Rear-Admiral CF Thursby, embarked in the flagship, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, and responsible for naval support at Anzac could report that the covering ships,

had by now got to know the best position from which to fire and had become accustomed to working with the spotters on shore. A central control over all the covering force fire had been organised with General Cunliffe Owen, on General Birdwood's staff, directing it on board *Queen* by which definite objects, rate and duration of fire, etc were regulated, which added greatly to the efficiency of the fire and prevented waste of ammunition.¹⁴

It should be recalled that *Queen Elizabeth* carried eight 15-inch guns and that her shrapnel shells contained some 15,000 heavy bullets. An Australian colonel, writing at the same time as Thursby's report, observed that just one these shells 'had wiped out a whole Turkish Regiment'.¹⁵ Ottoman records agree that their early counter-attacks sustained heavy losses and demoralisation in the face of this devastating fire, and afterwards the Turks appear to have made no further attempts to advance by daylight over ground that was in direct view of the supporting ships.¹⁶

The point here is that even when unable to penetrate the Turkish trenches, naval artillery still ensured that the enemy's heavy guns were suppressed, their logistics disrupted and the movement of their reserves hindered.¹⁷ As General Otto Liman von Sanders, head of the German military mission to the Ottoman Empire, admitted after the war, '...the artillery effect of the hostile battleships constituted a support of extraordinary power for the landing army. No heavy land artillery can so easily change position and direct its fire on the enemy's flank and rear as was possible to the guns of the ships.'¹⁸

The Allies' heavy naval guns were also instrumental in preventing enemy warships supporting their own troops. Using aerial spotting and indirect fire over the peninsula, it normally took only one or two salvos to force Turkish heavy ships to withdraw back up the Narrows, and none appeared after 21 May.¹⁹ Indeed, the mere presence of the whole range of naval support vessels was of immense reassurance to Allied troops. It is little wonder then, that the loss of the battleship HMS *Triumph* to a U-boat on 25 May was regarded by the men at Anzac as being 'like an old friend gone'.²⁰ If the British official history is to be believed, the troops expressed a willingness to subscribe a month's pay all round towards salvaging her.²¹ The torpedoing of the battleship HMS *Majestic* two days later and the subsequent departure of the battleships, transports and stores ships to netted harbours was no less heartening to the enemy. As Hamilton reported to Kitchener, '...the temporary withdrawal of our battleships owing to enemy submarines has altered the position to our disadvantage; while not of the highest importance materially this factor carries considerable moral weight.'²²

That the material effect was not insufferable, had more to do with the fleet's inherent ability to alter its disposition and adapt to new circumstances than it had to any assessments that naval gunfire was failing. While awaiting the arrival of additional anti-submarine nets and the new 'monitors', fitted with anti-torpedo 'bulges' and armed with heavy guns and howitzers, de Robeck instituted a policy of using his battleships only when necessary. In the meantime, pairs of British destroyers continued with the daily provision of covering fire for the flanks; in addition to ordinary targets being tasked to knock out concealed observation stations.²³ The situation was less than ideal, as de Robeck had insufficient destroyers and they were not supplied with shrapnel shells, but procedural improvements were already allowing the smaller warships to apply their firepower more effectively, meaning that the ability to provide direct support never wavered unduly.

By the time of the August offensives, three mixed squadrons of cruisers, monitors and destroyers operated independently to support the land forces at Cape Helles, Anzac and Suvla Bay. For the support of operations on 6-7 August, the commanders at Anzac had access to nine warships, further divided into three groups and together mounting, two 14-inch, four 9.2-inch, thirty 6-inch, twenty 12 pounder and twelve 6 pounder guns, and two 4.7-inch howitzers.²⁴

On the right flank at Anzac, an hour long preparatory bombardment of enemy trenches and dugouts was assigned to the heavy cruiser *Bacchante* (2 x 9.2-inch, 12 x 6-inch, 12 x 12 pounders), with up to three monitors designated to engage the enemy's artillery. Of these, *Humber* (2 x 6-inch, 2 x 4.7" howitzers) and *M33* (2 x 6-inch) dealt with the guns between Gaba Tepe and the Olive Groves. The larger

Havelock, with two 14-inch guns and bulges incorporated into her hull, operated with a balloon ship. In addition to firing on the 600' contour, she remained ready to engage any enemy warship that might yet attempt to fire from the Narrows. Once the assault on Lone Pine began, *Bacchante* lifted her fire to the valleys and gullies approaching the Turkish trenches and thereby aimed to interfere with the advance of the enemy's reserves.²⁵ The cruiser *Endymion* (2 x 9.2-inch, 10 x 6-inch, 12 x 6 pounders) and another monitor had similar responsibilities on the left flank, and on the hour an observer assigned to each flank was tasked to determine whether or not the Anzac line had changed and then send this information direct to the ships.

The third group of supporting warships consisted of the destroyers *Chelmer* and *Colne*, each armed with four 12 pounder guns, and both allocated for 'Special Missions'. These missions included engaging specific gun pits and trenches, directing their search lights onto targets in cooperation with howitzer fire, and more general harassment of enemy positions.

Despite some shortages of ammunition among the fleet, and de Roebeck's direction to limit expenditure – 30 rounds per 14-inch monitor, 60 rounds per 6-inch monitor - Turkish Battle Reports admit that Allied artillery 'effectively pounded' their units holding the high ground and caused a great part of their fatalities.²⁶ Describing the fighting at the Nek, the 18th Regiment commander recorded that '...the enemy batteries and ships at sea fired salvos with utmost ferocity and filled the approaches with earth, destroying trenches and the supporting locations'.²⁷

Demonstrating how accurate observed fire had become, is this vignette from Lieutenant Colonel Selahattin Adil on 9 August:

Pleased by the successful outcome of battle, I asked for my tent to be erected on Tekketepe where all the battlefield could be viewed for the night, ordered a coffee in order to relieve my fatigue and sat down on the chair beside my portable table. ... Just as I started to enjoy my coffee, an explosion very close by brought down the tent. Since the battle had gone quiet, we could not understand it at first. This was followed a few minutes later by a second explosion a little further away from us. We observed a balloon flying from one of the ships in the harbour and understood that the tent had become a target for the naval artillery. Since the tent was destroyed and the target now gone, the firing had stopped after two or three shells. We got through the danger with my horse being blown apart and one soldier receiving wounds, but we were compelled to find a safer observation post.²⁸

Once the Allied attacks had been repulsed and the situation settled back into stalemate, commanders ashore would either request bombardment of a feature on a daily basis, or requisition fire as the situation dictated. The peninsula had been divided into 1000 yard squares and when an artillery attack was to take place a ship would be ordered to fire slowly into the square until satisfied that she was on target. Salvoes would then be fired to either destroy the observed target or sweep the entire area for hidden ones.²⁹ Unless engaged in a special bombardment, individual ships might routinely operate for either 48 or 72 hours on task and then retire to Mudros for a similar period for the replenishment of ammunition and stores.³⁰

Practical experience continued to bring improvements in naval tactical support. In December, the land forces attributed the rapid success of an attack at Cape Helles mainly to effective fire from the sea. Despite poor weather preventing aircraft spotting, a subsequent staff report complimented the accuracy and value of fire from the cruisers and supporting big gun monitors, concluding that, ‘the chief point is that cooperation in an attack has now become a practical reality, and that a system has been established which with further development will prove a powerful factor in both attack and defence.’³¹ According to Commodore Roger Keyes, de Roebeck’s chief of staff, the level of cooperation was by this stage, ‘far ahead of anything contemplated at home’:

The enemy’s batteries, trenches, bivouacs, etc., were fixed by aerial photography and other means, and excellent maps were issued to the firing ships. Indirect fire was developed to a high degree of accuracy, with the aid of aerial and shore observation. Mark buoys were laid, and aiming points, ranges and deflections were registered on to any position on which fire was required by the Army; indirect fire could then be opened at short notice without waiting for aerial observation.³²

For today’s ADF, Gallipoli’s legacy should not be seen simply in terms of the casualties suffered. Although ultimately a defeat, the campaign provided a wealth of shared joint operational experience. The lessons of both success and failure thereby informed the development of amphibious doctrine, techniques and equipment between the wars and paved the way for the succession of amphibious assaults that brought victory in 1945. These foundations still underlie our ideas of modern maritime power projection. ‘We are far from being beaten’, de Roebeck wrote after the evacuation, ‘...in fact we have learned a great deal and will know what to do in the future’.³³

1 Telegram, Lord Kitchener to General Hamilton, 9 May 1915, AWM 51/46.

2 Telegram, Vice Admiral de Roebeck to Admiralty, 10 May 1915, AWM 51/46.

3 CEW Bean, *The Story of ANZAC*, Vol. I, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1921, p. 393.

4 Telegram, de Roebeck to Admiralty, 10 May 1915, AWM 51/46.

5 Letter, Commanding Officer HMS *Grafton* to General White, 1 December 1915, AWM 25 367/26.

6 R Crawley, *Climax at Gallipoli: The Failure of the August Offensive*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2014, p. 102.

7 Telegram. War Office to GHQ Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, 5 May 1915, AWM 51/46.

8 Telegram, GHQ Mediterranean Expeditionary Force to War Office. 4 May 1915. AWM 51/46.

9 Bean, *The Story of ANZAC*, p. 234.

10 Letter, Commanding Officer HMS *Grafton* to General White, 1 December 1915, AWM 25 367/26.

11 D Stevens, ‘Network-centric Warfare in 1915’, in *Gallipoli 90th Anniversary Tribute*, *Navy News*, 21 April 2015, p. 11.

12 H Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Defence*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2015, p. 161

13 Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Defence*, p. 392; RR James, *Gallipoli*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p. 151.

14 Report of Operations, Rear Admiral Thursby, Queen Elizabeth, 4 May, AWM 51/46.

15 R Keyes, *Naval Memoirs 1910-1915*, Thornton Butterworth, London, p. 319.

16 Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Defence*, pp. 86, 168; Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, p. 313.

17 Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Defence*, p. 211.

18 OL von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey*, reprint by The Naval & Military Press, Uckfield, 2012, p. 71.

19 JS Corbett, *Naval Operations*, vol. III. Longmans, Green and Co. London, 1923, p. 101.

20. Corbett, *Naval Operations*, p. 30.

21 There appears to be no mention of this generosity in Bean’s history. Nevertheless, several Anzacs evidently gained some consolation from the discovery of the wardroom wine, washed ashore on 15

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- June. Bean recorded that two men were given 'six months' as a result. See, K Fewster, *Gallipoli Correspondent*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983. p. 130
- 22 Telegram, Hamilton to Kitchener, 2 June 1915, AWM 51/46.
- 23 HMS *Talbot*, 'Summary of Reports from Gabateppe Destroyers 7th to 11th July 1915', AWM 25, 367/95.
- 24 'Arrangements for Support of operations', undated, AWM 25, 367/40.
- 25 Corbett, *Naval Operations*, p. 91.
- 26 Crawley, *Climax at Gallipoli*, p. 99; Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Defence*, p. 406.
- 27 '7 August 1915, Battle Report', cited in Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Defence*, p. 271.
- 28 'Lieutenant Colonel Seahattin Adil's Experiences on 9 August in the Suvla Bay Action', cited in Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Defence*, p. 416.
- 29 If sweeping an area, fire would continue either for a particular period or until the ammunition allowance was expended. Memorandum, Senior Officer 3rd Squadron to Ships concerned, 9 December 1915, AWM 25, 367/26
- 30 Memorandum, Senior Officer 3rd Squadron to HM Ships of Third Squadron, 20 September 1915, AWM 25, 505/2 367.
- 31 Corbett, *Naval Operations*, pp. 219, 221.
- 32 Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, p. 491
- 33 Letter, de Roebeck to General Birdwood, 3 February 1916, AWM 3, DRL 3376, Item 8 A