

Gallipoli The Human Face

Major Darryl Kelly OAM

As we study tonight's topics, delivered by a range of presenters, let's pause for just a few minutes to remember the human side of the Gallipoli campaign, in particular our own brethren – the Australian Gunner.

In August 1914, the recruiting depots were filled to overflowing with eager recruits. For a variety of reasons, these men were ready to take up arms and travel to the other side of the world and fight. These men came from all walks of life, from the wealthy to the dirt poor and everywhere in between. They included university students, shearers, labourers, drovers and clerks. Luckily, there was also a sprinkling of professional and semi-professional soldiers, from the permanent Army and the Militia. It fell upon these individuals, to turn civilians into soldiers.

25 April 1915 – and the heavily laden landing boats cut away from their tows and the troops took to the oars. Amongst the lead elements of the first wave were a number of Forward Observation Parties. Their mission – observe fire for the naval ships waiting off-shore. These parties were commanded by a number of young officers, who were recently graduated (ahead of time), from the Royal Military College – Duntroon. Lieutenant's Clowes, Vowles, and Goodwin¹ were about to take their first steps in creating a legend.² Others from the class held positions within a number of the batteries, who were waiting to get a crack at the enemy.¹ Lieutenant Clarence Wolfenden was one who wouldn't make it off the peninsular.¹

19 year old Sergeant Ron Cavalier had an interesting first day. He was a Gun Sergeant - from 4 Battery and around mid afternoon on the 25th of April, he brought the first of the Australian guns ashore. On arrival at Anzac Cove he was ordered to reload the guns and return to the ship. He reluctantly carried out his orders. The barge, carrying the two guns, had no sooner reached the vessel, only to be ordered to return to Anzac Cove with all speed. Sergeant Cavalier had his gun ashore by 1730 hours and with the aid of about 100 infantrymen, manhandled the gun onto the southern most point of Anzac Cove, now known as Queensland Point. At 1800 hours, Cavalier fired the first of 62 rounds, engaging a concealed Turkish gun far to the south on Gaba Tepe.² Ron Cavalier was to survive Gallipoli and deploy to France and Belgium,⁵ but not before he'd received a surprise visitor to his gun platform – his father. Dad hadn't informed his son that he'd enlisted in the AIF and decided to surprise him instead.

The next day a number of guns were brought ashore. The first were guns from the 1st and 4th Batteries. These were quickly dragged into action and the detachments started to engage the enemy at a range of just 400 yards. By the end of the day, they had fired over 800 rounds between them.⁴ Even more perilous was the fact that the guns were actually in the infantry's forward trenches and could have easily been overrun and captured, if the Turks counter-attacked.

Ammunition resupply proved demanding, as the rounds had to be carried by hand from up to a kilometre away - with the journey made additionally difficult by troublesome Turkish snipers. Young, 20 year old Dorian King, a clerk from Kew,

went without sleep for four days and four nights, moving ammunition by hand, and when available, by mule to the forward guns.⁶ What the gunners needed most was High Explosive (HE) rounds, instead of the shrapnel rounds they were issued. The HE would not reach Gallipoli until June and then only in a trickle. King was to survive Gallipoli and later as a Captain, earn a Military Cross on the Western Front.⁷ His personal diary, is contained in the Australian War Memorial, and is a feast of first hand information and accounts of his time at Gallipoli.

In total 14 Guns landed on the 26th but the problem still existed – not enough suitable gun platforms or battery positions to accommodate the guns. Lieutenant Jeremiah Selmes⁸, from 2 Battery, finally made it to shore with a section of 18 pounders, only to bellowed at with ‘Who told you to come in; get to hell out of here; bloody guns are no use here, at present!’ Disgruntled, he returned to the ship with his men and guns.⁹ As he stepped onto the ship he was heard to mutter – *‘Bastards can’t make up their bloody minds!’*

Lieutenant Walter Urquhart was a Gun Position Officer, he was also one of the graduates of the recent First Duntroon Class, holding RMC Staff Cadet Number - One.¹ His old Commandant, General Bridges, was now commanding the Australian 1st Division. Bridges would often tour the front and bump into his old charges. In May, he was visiting Urquhart at his Battery Command Post, in Shrapnel Gully. As he left to continue his tour, Bridges stepped out from the protection of the sandbags, where a Turkish sniper fired a single round, mortally wounding the General. In later years, Urquhart would often comment that he was the first cadet to see his commandant as he entered Duntroon, and now he was the last to see him as he was carried away on a stretcher. Brigadier Urquhart, was guest of honour at the 1984 RMC Graduation Parade, he was the last surviving member of that first graduating class.¹

Lieutenant Shirley Goodwin¹ landed at Gallipoli as a Forward Observation Officer. He went for days without sleep, calling in naval gunfire support, in a vain attempt to silence the well deployed Turkish Gun Batteries. Recognising his talents, he was later reassigned to a new role, that of an airborne observer. On one of his first flights, his plane was forced down behind enemy lines. He was captured uninjured and suffered the hell of a Turkish Prison Camp. Plagued with Malaria and a range of other illnesses,¹ he was a shadow of his former self when he was finally released three and a half years later.

Amongst the 4th Battery ranks was a young 25 year old Melbourne Motor Mechanic – Harry Wilson.¹⁰ During a savage Turkish counter battery bombardment, he continued to man his gun. Even when seriously wounded by shrapnel, he stayed at his post and continued firing. For his actions he was mentioned in despatches, and was one of the first recipients of the new Military Medal for Bravery in the Field.¹¹ But his bravery also cost him his left leg.¹⁰

Captain Walter Leslie, 27¹² resigned from the Militia to enlist in 3 Battery. Standing alongside him was his brother, Les, who was destined to serve with the guns. Walter Leslie was one of the most respected officers in the battery. He was to loose his life to counter battery fire, near Shell Green. Fate dealt the Leslie family a cruel blow, his brother Les was later killed on the Western Front.

League level footballer, 22 year old Syd Taylor, whom everyone called 'Mick' was a valuable addition to the ranks of 8 Battery. He joined up with his brother Phil, who was also allocated to the artillery. Mick rose quickly through the ranks and was a Gun Sergeant at Gallipoli. When his gun was hit by a Turkish 75mm shell, help was rushed to his aid *'never mind about me, I'm only scratched'*¹³ he said– he was more concerned with his detachment, than himself. Gunner Doug Barrett – Lennard was Mick's Number 2¹³ and had just celebrated his 21st Birthday. Unfortunately, he wouldn't see 22. The round had shattered his thigh and arm and he succumbed to the injuries later that night. The No3, Stan Carter¹³, a draper from Freemantle had his back torn away and was in terrible agony, but right up until he died, he was more concerned with the damage to his gun, than his own wounds. He was buried alongside one of the main tracks leading towards the front line with his mate Doug Barrett-Lennard, laid to rest nearby. 'Mick' Taylor survived the blast but the scratch he referred to was the loss of a leg. He was later awarded the Military Medal, for his actions on the peninsular¹⁴. Phil Taylor, Mick's brother was later killed on the Western Front.

Turkish counter-attack was an ever present danger and the gunners were reluctant to allow their beloved guns fall into enemy hands. On the night of 26-27 April - 7 Battery was in such a fight and only repelled the enemy by firing shrapnel rounds set to detonate soon after leaving the barrel. This destroyed the massed enemy attack. At first light the gunners could admire their handy work with pellet ridden bodies and bits of bodies scattered across the battlefield, a mere 25 metres in front of the guns.¹⁵ Major Gus Hughes,¹⁶ the battery commander of 7 Battery, surveyed the carnage inflicted by his guns and ushered a one word expletive under his breath, which said it all. That scene would haunt him for years to come. A similar scene confronted a group of gunners in South Vietnam, 53 years later. This was at a Fire Support Base, named 'Coral'.

Gunner signallers were kept busy, repairing broken telephone cables. This task was vital in order to keep the communications open between observer and guns. If communications failed, then the signallers themselves ran the gauntlet of Turkish sniper fire to deliver the corrections and fire orders by hand. Their life expectancy was measured in hours and minutes, as they were a prime target for the Turks. If you could only ask 19 year old Gunner George Fox,¹⁷ or Bombardier Percy Hooppell,¹⁸ 19, both of whom, never left the peninsular.

As the ANZAC front stalled, it was decided to throw additional resources at the British front further to the south, at Helles. The 2nd Australian Infantry Brigade were re-embarked at Anzac Cove and landed at Helles. The Australian and Kiwi batteries still yet to be landed at Anzac Cove, were also diverted to support the British. Their mission was to capture the strategic village of Krithia. The attack, launched on 6 May, was a total failure and cost hundreds of Australian lives.¹⁹ These losses were not confined to the infantry, the gunners also suffered, as the observer parties were right alongside their 'gravel crusher' mates. The saddest part was that on day one, Krithia was undefended and ripe for the taking, a British officer even walked down its deserted, main street unhindered. But the British high command failed to exploit the situation and seize the opportunity to hold and defend this key terrain.

Helles was far better terrain for artillery, as the wider, deeper beachhead gave room to manoeuvre. The fields of observation were much better for the gunners, who could observe the Turkish front lines and beyond. The only problem was – the Turks had just as good a view of the British and Australian positions and wreaked just as much carnage. Australians, both infantry and gunner alike are represented in almost every cemetery at Helles. Men such as Captain Rob Crocker²⁰ 27 and 35 year old Syd Aubrey²¹, Perc Gibbs²², Henry King²³, both 20, Major John Mills ²⁴, 45, lay at rest in the lush soil, shaded by Jacaranda and Olive trees. It's heart breaking to realise that these Diggers are rarely visited, as their cemeteries are often overshadowed by the more popular battlefields at ANZAC.

In early May, two 8 Battery guns were dragged by over 160 men, to a position just short of the skylines of the 400 Plateau. In the first two days of fighting, they suffered 22 casualties. The guns were now to be used on a specific mission, to take out some troublesome Turkish defences being constructed to their front.²⁵ The Battery Commander, Major Alfred Bessell-Browne²⁶, already a seasoned and highly decorated soldier after two tours of duty in the Boer War, crawled forward and peered towards the unsuspecting Turks. He realised that given the position of his guns and the short engagement range of less 400m, he'd have to move them forward and engage the target by direct fire. Bessell- Browne briefed his two detachment commander's - Sergeant James Braidwood²⁷ and Sergeant W.D. Wallis,²⁸ both farmers from Western Australia on the plan.

Back at the guns, 18 year old Gunner Merv Hobbs²⁹ wiped a final smear of oil over the breach of his 18 pounder. His dad, Colonel Hobbs, was in command of all Australian Artillery at Gallipoli. The guns were now ready, the plan was for the infantry to open up with prolonged rifle fire, then for the detachments, support by additional infantry, to drag the guns forward into the forward infantry trenches. Once there, they were to send as many rounds as possible into the Turks. Then they would pull the guns back to their original pits, before the enemy could retaliate.

Bessell-Browne looked at his watch – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 – Go. Braidwood and Wallis performed brilliantly, both earning the Military Medal for Bravery³⁰ and got their guns into position. Within minutes, they started firing. The Turks were caught totally off-guard. At the given time Bessell-Browne gave the order to cease firing and withdraw.

Reaching their original positions, the Gunners quickly passed line and oriented the guns ready for action. As the smoke cleared, orders came down from higher to repeat the action. Bessell-Browne questioned the order, as he believed the second action to be unnecessary and foolish. But the order stood. This time the Turkish artillery was ready for them and retaliated with a savage bombardment. With moistened eyes, Colonel Hobbs looked through his binoculars knowing that his son, was on the receiving end of the fire.

In these short few minutes, it is impossible to tell every story – but to sum up this brief chapter, which concluded around May 1915; during the campaign, 879 Australian Artillerymen were wounded in action at Gallipoli, whilst 109 were lost. Our fallen Gunners now occupy their own little piece of ground in almost every cemetery from Helles to Suvla.

What's the greatest lesson we can take away from this presentation. A little over two weeks ago, we couldn't pick up a paper, switch on the TV or listen to the radio, without hearing of the pride of the 100th anniversary of the ANZACs, but by the 27th of April, we heard nothing. We need to remember that every day, between now and 20 December, there is a 100th Anniversary whether in deed, action or in loss of brave Australian soldiers. Now, more than ever - is the time to remember.

UBIQUE and Lest We Forget!

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- 23 National Archives of Australia B2455 298 H.J. King (b 1894)
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- 26 National Archives of Australia B2455 Major A. Bessell-Browne (b 1877)
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- 29 National Archives of Australia B2455 3526 John Mervyn Hobbs
- 30 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914-1918 War