

The Ottoman Artillery at Anzac during the August Offensive

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Before talking about the Ottoman artillery at Anzac, I would like to give a short introduction about the Ottoman artillery corps in order to give you a better understanding of its strengths and weaknesses.

Starting with the military reforms of Sultan Selim III during the late 18th century, the Ottoman artillery corps became the best trained and armed branch of the army and remained so until the final collapse in 1918. It was a general policy to man the artillery units with selected officer candidates and recruits. The Ottoman Military Engineering School (Mühendishane-i Berri Hümayun) in İstanbul provided high quality engineering education to officer candidates according to the French model whereas NCOs and recruits passed through intense German style training.

Like Germany, the Ottoman artillery corps was divided into two branches; field (including horse) artillery and foot (better known as *kale* [fortress]) artillery. There was, however, no strict career separation and so officers generally rotated between branches especially during early years in their career. Consequently Ottoman artillery officers did not have prejudice against heavy guns and howitzers, unlike their British and French counterparts.

Although the Ottoman army suffered a series of defeats at the hands of Russians during the 19th century and more recently against the Balkan armies between 1912 and 1913, the artillery corps always functioned better than the others. Not surprisingly the artillery officers took the lead of intense and confronting discussions to draw lessons from the Balkan defeats. Unlike their European counterparts, the Ottoman officers were aware of the deadly combination of entrenched infantry, barbed wire, machineguns and artillery. Tactical and technical shortfalls –including ammunition supply - limited artillery effectiveness during the war. Batteries were frequently used alone, or even split into sections: therefore there were seldom enough guns concentrated to decisively influence a battle.

The artillery officers discovered to their dismay that battlefield circumstances had changed drastically. It was no longer possible to position guns in sight of the enemy in order to provide accurate and instant direct fire to infantry because batteries would often be fighting for their survival as well as supporting infantry. They learnt the value of protection by digging in and defilading positions. I do not want to get into all the details of lessons learned during the Balkan Wars but it's suffice to say that the Ottoman artillery gained valuable lessons before WW1 and these were quickly adopted and disseminated.

At the beginning of WW1, two of the most significant problems confronting the artillery corps were lack of modern guns and shortage of ammunition. During the disgraceful retreats and surrenders of the Balkan Wars, hundreds of guns and heavy equipment were lost and a considerable amount of ammunition was consumed. The Ottoman economy collapsed under the heavy burdens of wars and following political crises. Contrary to expectations, the alliance with Germany did not provide a relief.

Therefore the establishment numbers of batteries and guns had to be reduced and obsolete guns that had been discarded were reintroduced.

In 1911 the Ottoman army replaced the well-established square division structure (two brigades each with two regiments) with a division comprising three regiments each with three battalions. This new structure eliminated both brigade headquarters and a regiment. Consequently the divisional field artillery brigades were transformed into three-battalion artillery regiments. After the Balkan Wars, however, the number of battalions and batteries had to be reduced due to shortages of guns and equipment. According to new establishment, each divisional field artillery regiment would have two battalions each with two batteries. One battalion would be field artillery equipped with eight 75mm Krupp Feldkanone L/30 M1903 and the other would be mountain artillery equipped with eight 75mm Krupp Gebirgskanone L/14 M1904. Nevertheless there were not enough guns to equip batteries even according to this lean establishment. To address this shortfall, 87mm Krupp Feldkanone L/24 M1885 (better known as *mantelli* in the Ottoman army), 75mm Krupp Gebirgskanone and some other guns were introduced as replacements. Howitzers and heavy artillery units, generally, were placed under the corps or field army artillery groups. Similarly, a general lack of howitzers and heavy artillery kept these formations weak.

The Dardanelles Straits and Gallipoli Peninsula had been part of an organised fortress command from very early times. Throughout this period, defence of the area remained largely the responsibility of the Ottoman artillery corps. In fact, almost every artillery officer, particularly the heavy artillery branch, served at least one term in the Dardanelles Fortified Zone Command (*Çanakkale Müstahkem Mevki Kumandanlığı*) prior to 1914. This defence arrangement was changed when the WW1 started. First, III Army Corps in Tekirdağ (Rodosto) moved to the Gallipoli Peninsula to carry out defence against amphibious landings on 2 November 1914 and then Fifth Army was activated under the command of LTGEN Liman von Sanders (a German officer) and took over the defence responsibility on 26 March 1915.

The Ottoman Fifth Army in comparison to other field armies was lucky. Not only İstanbul, the main production and transportation hub, was near but also the Dardanelles was part of Fortified Zone Command. That means there were various mobile batteries in the theatre already.

During the initial landings on 25 April 1915, the Ottomans quickly learned that naval gunfire was ineffective against entrenched units.

After the initial landings more and more batteries from the Fortified Zone Command were transferred to Fifth Army. Although most of these borrowed batteries were deployed to the Southern Group (Helles) – due to close proximity to the Strait fortifications - this gave opportunity to Liman von Sanders, commanding general, to station his organic army and corps artillery troops to the Northern Group.

Between 25 April and 20 May, Liman von Sanders and the Ottoman High Command expected to repulse the Allied troops from their fragile beachheads. When a series of large scale Ottoman counterattacks and following Allied attacks failed miserably, the ensuing stalemate turned into trench warfare. The Ottoman artillery

played critical roles during attacks and counterattacks but most of the structural changes took place after 20 May.

Ferik (LTGEN) Esad Pasha was assigned as the commander of the Northern Group with four divisions (5th, 9th, 16th and 19th). The deployment of the Northern Group just before the August Offensive was, from north to south: the 19th Division (all four regiments at the front), 16th Division (all four regiments at the front) and 9th Division (one regiment at the front other two regiments in reserve). The 5th Division (two regiments) was corps reserve.

The Suvla region was covered by two independent detachments which were Anafartalar Detachment (four battalions) to the north and Ağildere Detachment (14th Regiment). Both of them put weak screening forces at the coastline and kept strong reserves.

Due to terrain, previous experiences and availability of non-organic artillery reinforcement, Esad Pasha changed the composition of the artillery units drastically. He assigned batteries with modern field guns to divisional artillery regiments (enhancing their mobility) and positioned batteries armed with old or heavy guns at specific fixed positions. These (fixed) batteries were given under the tactical command of the division which was responsible for that sector but they were to remain in their positions regardless of the rotation of the divisions. His corps artillery commander was tasked to carry out coordination and supply of ammunition. Division commanders and their artillery regiment commanders remained in charge of their sectors.

Most of the artillery batteries were positioned at Gun Ridge (Topçular Sırtı).

In conclusion, the Ottomans protected their guns well by digging and preparing well-fortified and concealed positions with alternatives to be used when necessary. Lacking the necessary resources and technical means to break the deadlock, the British army and allies at this stage had no answer for an enemy in good defensive positions. Essentially to crack open the Ottoman fortifications and well protected gunnery positions, the British and allied artillery should have adopted siege tactics and techniques. This would have meant more heavy guns –especially howitzers-, more suitable ammunition types and large quantities of ammunition and a methodical approach. Unable to get more and better guns the British, however, had no choice but to use shrapnel in an attempt to suppress the Ottoman guns.