

Combined arms or not? Artillery and the 1915 approach to war¹

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A theme that runs through my 2014 book, *Climax at Gallipoli*, is that while the Gallipoli campaign was fought against a different enemy in a different theatre, with contrasting terrain and less resources, it was very much like the offensives – in style, objectives, and results – waged on the Western Front. Gallipoli does offer some unique ‘lessons’, for want of a better term, including the command system in joint and combined operations, the state of naval gun fire support for an army ashore, and the peculiarities of sustainment in an expeditionary operation.

But, in all, it was not unique. 1915 was a year of failed offensives, and Gallipoli, a sideshow from the main theatre of war, was just another example of this: an example of ‘the greatest amateurism, blundering and fumbling’, as Paddy Griffith called it, of the first two years of the British war effort.ⁱ Almost everything you can see happening on the Western Front was also happening at Gallipoli, and I’ll touch on some of these this afternoon.

The purpose of my paper today is to look at how artillery was to be used, doctrinally, and how it was being used practically in 1915. I’ll do this through a very brief comparison of the battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915 and the August offensive.

Picking up on one of the themes of this seminar series – combined arms – an approach that integrates multiple arms to complement each other – was Gallipoli a case study of combined arms, of the artillery, infantry, and other arms complementing each other, or was it the case of one supporting the other? The answer is clear, and it lay in doctrine.

Artillery doctrine

In 1915 British doctrine and operational theory viewed artillery as an accessory (and subsidiary) to the infantry, rather than an autonomous arm. Its function, as made clear by *Field Service Regulations*, was ‘to assist the other arms in breaking down hostile opposition’. The emphasis on assisting tended to mean that fire support had to mold and adapt to the infantry’s plans, rather than those plans being developed in accordance with the strengths and weaknesses of the fire-support resources available. Indeed, it was not until 1917 that the British realised the full potential of artillery and adapted their planning process accordingly.

Artillery in practice: Neuve Chapelle

¹ This paper includes excerpts from Rhys Crawley, *Climax at Gallipoli: The failure of the August Offensive*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2014. References can be found in that publication.

The lessons of March 1915 at Neuve Chapelle, which showed that concentrated fire and detailed artillery preparation was essential for initial success, were ignored for the August Offensive. At Gallipoli, plans developed without due consideration of the firepower situation and irrespective of the opinions and concerns of the artillery experts – and then the secrecy kept details of the artillery requirements from the brigades until the day before the offensive: no time for ammunition stockpiling or registration of fire.

Many similarities appear if comparisons are made with Neuve Chapelle. In both instances the 18-pounders were used to destroy the wire entanglements, the howitzers to fire on the trenches, and the heavy artillery to bombard distant targets and engage in counter- battery work. The artillery plans were also similar, both containing numerous phases and new roles for the artillery as the offensive progressed. Despite the conceptual similarities of the two offensives, however, the fire support available was significantly different.

Artillery in practice: the August offensive

I don't want to delve into the tactical use of fire power at Gallipoli any more than I have, as MAJGEN Paul Stevens will do that, except to say that fire support at the Dardanelles was peculiar. The amphibious nature of the campaign, and the complexity of the terrain that confronted the Allies, necessitated an array of fire support techniques. This was especially evident during the August Offensive, in which artillery tactics differed markedly between the various sectors. Helles was, like the Western Front, experiencing a type of siege warfare; the terrain at Anzac (and Sari Bair) highlighted the need for high-angle howitzer fire; and, being a new amphibious landing, Suvla Bay was initially entirely dependent on the navy for its fire support. Rather, I want to look at a number of different aspects, generally at the operational level, taking in the three sectors of the August offensive: Cape Helles, Anzac/Sari Bair, and Suvla Bay.

In terms of artillery allocation, the proportions of artillery for the August offensive were skewed. They did not match the proportion of troops. Helles, the least significant sector of the August offensive, had 36% of the troops and 55.5% of the artillery pieces; Suvla was roughly proportional with 20% of the troops and 17.8% of the artillery; Anzac, though, where the main effort was to be made, had 44% of the troops and only 26.7 % of the artillery.

In spite of being a smaller operation than the August Offensive, there were more artillery pieces available for Neuve Chapelle. With approximately 340 artillery pieces to support four divisions (only three brigades were actually involved in the initial attack) the fire support at Neuve Chapelle was 11 percent in excess of establishment (compared to the 13 percent deficiency, using conservative calculations, at the Dardanelles, which had 270 artillery pieces on the peninsula).

On a sector basis, Helles was largely at establishment – with 150 pieces it had a deficiency of 3.8%; Suvla with 28 pieces (plus another 20 at Anzac destined for it) was substantially worse, with a deficiency of 44.2%; Anzac was the worst, with 72 pieces and a deficiency of 62.1%. Despite this, the allies still outgunned the Ottomans who, overall, had 163 guns and howitzers in August – but superiority in numbers did not mean superiority in practice.

With a frontage of two thousand yards, or one artillery piece for every six yards of trench, Neuve Chapelle had the heaviest concentration of British artillery fire at the time, and was not surpassed until 1917. This ratio of pieces per yard employed during Neuve Chapelle was considered an optimal amount for a preliminary bombardment that aimed to “crush and demoralise the enemy’s infantry,” yet numbers alone did not ensure success.

The preliminary bombardment at Neuve Chapelle, while successful in destroying the majority of wire entanglements, was less successful in hitting the German trenches. The British infantry was eventually successful in obtaining its first phase objectives, but as a result of artillery limitations (primarily the lack of preregistered targets), communication difficulties, and the defensive resilience of the Germans, the offensive could not proceed beyond this phase. Neuve Chapelle showed that target registration and powerful artillery support was essential for offensive operations. Neither of these, however, was available at the Dardanelles.

The fire support available for the Helles operations equated to one piece per twenty-eight yards of front (a ratio similar to that later employed at Loos). At Anzac/Sari Bair, it was worse with one piece for every 111 yards of frontage. The situation at Suvla was absolutely dismal. For the first three days of operations, there was one piece ashore for every 833 yards of frontage. With the arrival of additional pieces, the ratio improved, but only to one for every 416 yards. With the example of Neuve Chapelle in mind, from an artillery perspective, it is small wonder the August Offensive failed to achieve even the first phase of its objectives.

Despite the deficiencies in artillery pieces available in the Dardanelles, it is important to note that the MEF’s artillery, as a percentage of *total* British artillery, was roughly proportional to the percentage of *total* British troops sent to the Dardanelles. In other words, the Dardanelles represented approximately 7 percent of both the total British troops and artillery. The MEF, however, was proportionally lower in terms of heavy batteries. Of the ninety-three heavy batteries on all fronts, the four at the Dardanelles accounted for *only* 4 percent. Furthermore, the proportion of personnel to man the MEF’s guns was deficient. With an effective strength of 9,976 artillery personnel, the MEF’s artillery strength represented a mere 3.3 percent of the total British artillery manpower. Such comparisons show that the MEF was *never* given adequate resources – whether in troops or guns – for the task that was expected of it (however, the same can be said of the BEF on the Western Front). With

only 7 percent of total British artillery resources, the August Offensive, and indeed the Gallipoli Campaign as a whole, was drastically understrength in terms of gunnery.

Then there was the problem of the guns themselves - early models of previous wars, inaccurate and subject to breakdown. The 10-pdr mountain guns, for instance, dated from the Second Afghan War of 1879 and were described by one senior artillery officer as 'of an obsolete [sic] pattern and hopelessly inaccurate'. But it was still in service due to the lack of an alternative. Six of the 12 guns of 7th IMA Brigade had to be exchanged before August owing to wear. Their replacements from India were old and worn. Incredibly, four of the 7th IMA Bde discarded guns were used to bring the 4th Highland Mountain Artillery Brigade up to strength for the August offensive. There were other examples: the 60pdrs and 15pdr BLC come to mind.

And, to go back to my point about not considering artillery limitations, or even strengths, in the overall plans, I'll give one example: cutting communications during the second and third phase of the offensive. Notwithstanding all the difficulties of actually hitting a target with indirect fire, at this stage of the war, and with the inaccurate maps (i.e. grid references), and problems with spotting that you would have heard about last seminar, there are the following points to make: The challenge of getting the guns into position during the subsequent phases.

One artillery officer, commanding 18pdrs in the Anzac sector, believed that it would require at least 1000 men to drag an 18pdr onto the Sari Bair Ridge. But even then, their targets were out of range. This left only the 60pdr, itself unreliable, and few of them (none at Anzac).

Weighing 4.5 tons, moving it onto the Sari Bair Ridge would have been impossible. Indeed, it was deemed too difficult to move the four at Anzac along the beach to Suvla. The problem can be appreciated further if you compare the terrain with that at Suvla. In late August it took 150 men to move two 60pdrs 600 yards on the relatively flat ground at Suvla. With an average incline of 9.6 percent, and a maximum of less than 20%, it was deemed too steep for the horses; the route to Sari Bair was four times greater than this, with an average incline of 12.5% which increased at times to 77%. It was not going to happen.

Like those on the Western Front, the August Offensive represents the very beginning of the development of a new Allied way of fighting in the First World War, and that is how it should be examined.

ⁱ Paddy Griffith, *British Tactics on the Western Front*, p. 11.