

WHY GALLIPOLI?

The Kaiser had developed friendly relations with Turkey before the war, and Turkey had long seen Russia as an enemy, so unsurprisingly she entered the war on Germany's side. This was a worry for Britain as the Turkish Empire threatened her control of **Egypt and the Suez Canal**, the vital sea route to her Indian Empire. Meanwhile on the Eastern Front the huge but poorly armed and poorly led Russian army had been pushed back out of Poland by the German/Austrian advance. Serbia too was suffering invasion by the Austrians. These were the factors which gave rise to the Gallipoli campaign.



The Dardanelles [Source – C. Mair Britain at War]

The basic idea, put forward by **Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty**, seemed strategically sound. If a force could drive through the Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmara and capture Istanbul, Turkey might be knocked out of the war. A sea route could be opened to Russian ports on the Black Sea, allowing arms to be shipped in. A new front could be opened driving up through south-east Europe to assist the Serbs against the Austrians. On March 18th 1915 a joint British and French fleet launched an attack to destroy the Turkish forts defending the Dardanelles Straits. However, the Turks had mined the channel. After six of the battleships struck mines, with three sunk and three more badly damaged, the remains of the fleet withdrew.

It was now decided that a land attack should be made on the **Gallipoli peninsula**, to capture the Turkish forts from the rear. On 25th April British and French troops landed on beaches at **Cape Helles**, while the ANZACS – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps came ashore further north at **“Anzac Cove”**. However, the Turks had had plenty of warning of what was coming and time to strengthen their defences, while on the British side poor organisation and communications bedevilled the campaign. In theory, once the troops had landed they would advance rapidly across the peninsula to the Dardanelles Straits. But it did not work out like that. The Turks put up a fierce resistance; and even where the Turkish resistance was poor, too often junior officers, who were not encouraged to act on their own initiative, waited on the beaches they had captured for further orders. **General Hamilton**, the commander-in-chief, was on a battleship off-shore, so communications were slow. This gave the Turks time to organise their defences. Add to

that inaccurate maps which had shown easy ground where there were steep hills, a shortage of equipment, especially heavy artillery and ammunition and the fact that all the supplies from guns to drinking water had to be brought ashore under the fire of the Turkish artillery. The fighting became bogged down and trench warfare set in. By now the summer was fiercely hot, and in the insanitary conditions in the trenches, flies swarmed everywhere. Inevitably dysentery, typhoid and enteric fever broke out causing many casualties.

The fighting dragged on through the year with mounting casualties. Another landing in August, at **Suvla Bay** also got stuck. Then winter set in with freezing temperatures and snow. Men got frostbite or died of exposure. It was clear that withdrawal was necessary. Surprisingly, the evacuation of the armies was the one real success of the campaign. Troops were gradually withdrawn under cover of night. Various ruses were used to convince the Turks that trenches were still occupied such as lighting extra camp fires and leaving a few rifles rigged up to fire themselves at random intervals. Some 117,000 men were evacuated in this way without the Turks realising what was happening. Supplies that could not be removed were destroyed or blown up as the last boats left. By 3.45am on January 9th 1916, the last troops had left; the Gallipoli campaign was over. It had cost the British and their allies over 55,000 killed and some 250,000 casualties in total, nearly half as a result of disease. The Turks had suffered similar losses.

Bulgaria entered the war against Serbia in September 1915, sealing its fate. Despite determined fighting the Serbs were overrun. Although **Greece** entered the war on the Allied side allowing the British and French to use Salonika as a base, they achieved little to help the unfortunate Serbs.



Blown up supply train at Gallipoli



Y Beach with Cape Helles in the distance