

Gallipoli

History of World War I

Ian Campbell and Eric Rauchway

2024-10-11



At one time the Ottoman Empire, which as we know was the successor to the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, stretched well across the Balkan peninsula, as well as East into Central

Asia. But by the time you got into the late nineteenth century, it could fairly be described, as Russian tsar Nicholas I did, as a “sick man,” and the tag “sick man of Europe” stuck to this once mighty empire afterward. So you can see here that even at this point in the late nineteenth century you’ve got the Ottoman Empire covering the Anatolian peninsula, extending into the Balkans, South through Lebanon and Syria and what was then called Palestine as well as Arabia, which we will have more to say about later, and East into Armenia, as we’ve already heard from Ian.

You can also see that the weakness of the Ottoman Empire is a matter of potential concern, owing to its strategic location. It dominates the Eastern Mediterranean, and it can threaten passage down through the Suez Canal into the Red Sea and eastwards; it’s also in a position to dominate traffic through the Aegean Sea and into the Black Sea, and thus a matter of concern for Russia; you will remember that this is one of the few ways to approach Russia by sea that isn’t sealed off by ice much of the year.

But this is nevertheless quite a chokepoint; you can see the tiny Sea of Marmara, sealed off by the two vital straits of the Bosphorus, at the northeastern end, and the Dardanelles, at the southwestern end. So you have this tiny little area that on the one hand is a land route from Europe to Asia and on the other is a sea route from the Mediterranean to Russia.

The obvious strategic value of this region has given this area an unhappy history. You may see Adrianople, there; it’s been the site of fifteen recorded battles, ranging from the one in 378 that caused the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West down to the one in 1913, in the Second Balkan War, when the Ottomans repelled a Bulgarian offensive there. Constantinople/Istanbul’s (the latter name was in use, but not official til 1930) religious significance also makes it a tempting target; the Orthodox church would like to reclaim it.

As you’ll remember from Ian’s discussion, in 1908 a group of military officers seized control of the Ottoman Empire from the Sultan, and set up a new constitution that was, as Ian said, much more focused on consolidating Turkey in Anatolia, which they hoped to render more ethnically homogeneous. They also wanted to modernize their army and institutions, which they did by drawing a certain amount of investment from Germany.

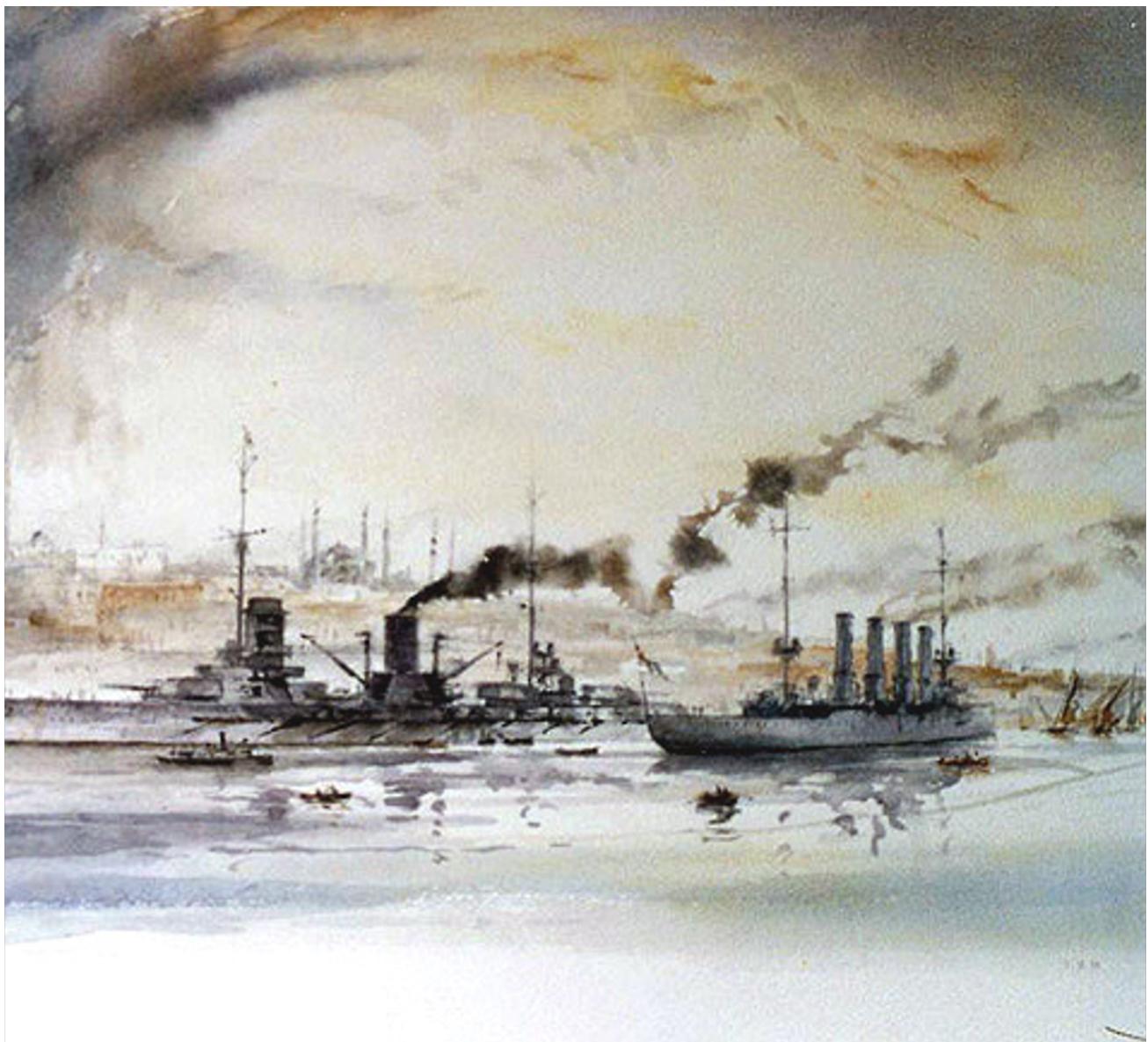
And then in 1913, there was a further coup, in which the three pashas installed themselves as the new government of Turkey.

All that attention from Germany to a new, modernized Turkey somewhat alarmed the Russians, for reasons you might find obvious from the map. At first, other empires—particularly Britain—were not especially bothered. The British have Malta, which is off the left of the map, and Cyprus, as well as Egypt below it, so they have reasonably secure control of their strategic interests in the area. Moreover, they were fine with the Ottomans, backed by Germany, serving as a check on Russia.

But then the war came, and the British didn’t want too much power getting concentrated in Turkish hands, because the Turks were funded by the Germans and the British were at war with the Germans. So the British seized two ships that were being constructed in British

shipyards for the Turks almost as soon as war broke out, even though Turkey was not yet in the war.

German ships to Constantinople



The Germans, for their part, sent two ships, the Goeben and the Breslau, to take up station off Constantinople in August 1914, and they were able to get there despite the British navy

patrolling the Mediterranean. With them there, and with the Germans scoring a series of victories on the Eastern Front against Russia, as we've heard, the Turkish government decided to enter the Great War, declaring war on Russia at the end of October 1914. The *Breslau* and the *Goeben* then obligingly ran up the Turkish flag, and—

<http://www.jrusselljinishingallery.com/pages/marshall-pages/cruisers-pages/marshall-goeben-breslau.htm>



and then ran basically due north from the Bosphorus to the port of Odessa, on the Black Sea, and bombarded it at the end of October, 1914. At the same time the Turks attacked the Russians on the Caucasus, in the East. As always, it turned out to be a bad idea to attack Russia at the start of winter, and the Turks ended up losing 80,000 soldiers or so in their campaign against the Russians.

The British then made a deal with Russia that the Brits would fight the Turks, too, to force them into a two-front action, and said that after winning, they would yield Constantinople as a prize to the Russians.

Winston Churchill



The strategist behind the British arrangements here is someone you might know a bit about: Winston Churchill, who is at this point First Lord of the Admiralty, which for Britain is something like Secretary of the Navy for the United States. That's him there in 1915; it's hard to say he looks a lot different than he would thirty years later.

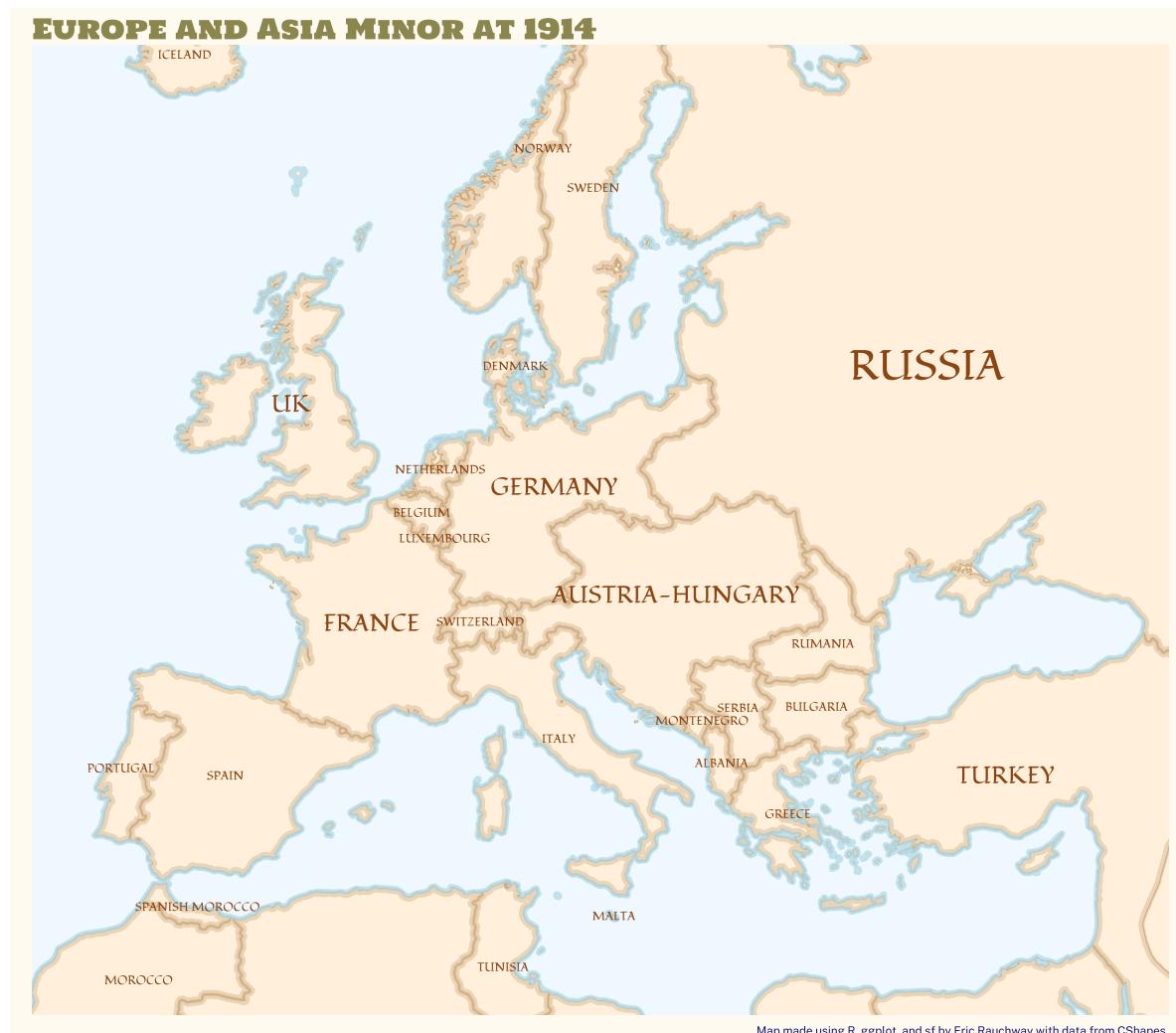
Anyway, as soon as Turkey declared war, Churchill sent the British Aegean squadron to bombard the Dardanelles, in early November 1914. This was a modest success: the shelling exploded a magazine, disabling the big guns on the point. The British squadron then sailed away. Churchill was convinced this showed that the Dardanelles was vulnerable to naval power, and as the Western Front descended into stalemate, he began to think it would be a good place for an amphibious landing, to open a flank assault on the Central Powers.

Just a pause here to talk about interpretations. Ian and I aren't taking the "lions led by donkeys" interpretation, but we do think there's something to the idea that a lot of mistakes were made in the Great War, just as we didn't really take the "war by timetable" approach, but there's not nothing to that either, we think.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/churchills-first-world-war>

Test

Europe and Asia Minor



So if you consider the big picture of the theater of battle, we know that the Russians and the Germans are fighting along their border; the Russians and the Turks are fighting along their border. The main strength of the British and French armies are concentrated along the Western Front with Germany, where they're dug in. The main force of the Allied Navies is patrolling the North Sea, in the hope of keeping up a blockade against Germany, so the Germans may be starved out. Meanwhile, the Germans are trying to elude this blockade, and also to disrupt shipping traffic across the Atlantic to the Allies.

And so now Churchill is proposing to open another Allied front, against Turkey, at the Dardanelles.

Each of the existing operations requires massive resources. If you want to send ships and troops to the Dardanelles, it's going to mean taking ships away from the North Sea and troops away from the Western Front. Joffre in France says no troops. Kitchener in Britain says, "We have no troops to land anywhere." Admiral (Jacky) Fisher in Britain says well, maybe: if we hit Turkey right now this minute, using only battleships so old that we don't care what happens to them, okay.

Because you can see the appeal. There is stalemate all along the West. Traditional military strategy says, if you can't break through at the front, find a flank. But there is no flank in the West. You have to zoom way way out, and then if you squint, you can kind of imagine the Dardanelles could serve as the point to establish a flank on the Western Front.

But Fisher's plan for a quickie was not adopted, and the War Council continued to discuss it. As a result, Churchill was able to begin persuading people that as long as they weren't going to rush the Dardanelles plan, they should have "extended operations with large numbers of ships". This appealed to Churchill, because he wanted to command an enormous part of the British Navy in a major military maneuver.

Ultimately, in January 1915, the British War Council agreed to a Dardanelles invasion, on the idea that the Western Front was an obvious disaster, and victory somewhere else might be nice. There was still little likelihood that a victory in the East would defeat Germany. If Turkey fell, there was no easy flank: the Balkan mountain ranges—the same ones Princip had to toil over to get to Sarajevo—stood in the way, and could be readily reinforced.

Some of the British leaders, like Kitchener, remained concerned that the Muslim leadership of Turkey could stir up the Arabs and perhaps even Muslims in the further East and disrupt the British Empire. Turkey might cut off the Suez Canal. But they were being pretty well contained by the Russians for the moment and so that was not a major concern yet.

Still, at this point, the cabinet gave the go-ahead for an attack, using clapped-out ships and a small number of men.

Super-dreadnought



But for Winston Churchill, it wasn't enough to have castoff ships. He wanted the good stuff. And eventually, through endless campaigning, he secured the brand-new super-dreadnought, the Queen Elizabeth, which had 15-inch guns and was the logical next step in the existing naval arms race. So now he's got the best and biggest new battleship, plus some old pre-dreadnoughts that Jacky Fisher let him have. And the British Army told Churchill he could

have a base on the Greek island of Lemnos, and from there could launch an invasion using the 29th Division, of overseas imperial troops,



and he could also have the fresh Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, or ANZACs. They were, at the moment, in Egypt, on their way west from the antipodes to Britain, and so could readily be at Churchill's disposal.

So, from modest beginnings, Churchill now had a substantial force of soldiers, and a larger and more impressive fleet than anyone had initially conceded.

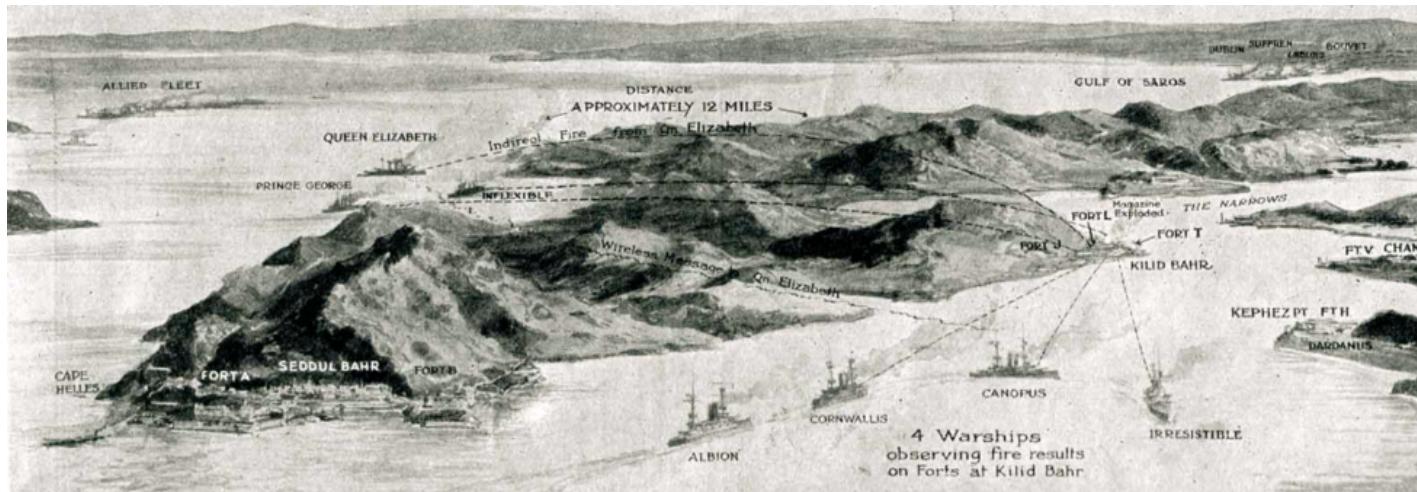
So his plan now was to use the fleet, led by the Queen Elizabeth, to bombard the Ottoman fortresses guarding the Dardanelles, and only then for the troops to go ashore. The QE,

together with the warship Inflexible, would move in with smaller ships alongside, escorted by minesweepers who would ensure their safe passage.



So for another look at this, you can see Gallipoli is the little peninsula here. Lemnos is the first substantial gray island there, slightly west of southwest of the straits. The main forts are on the East side of the peninsula, overlooking the straits. Churchill's plan is for the Allies to send their biggest ships with the heaviest firepower up the West side of the peninsula, and fire overland at the forts on the East side, with smaller ships sailing up under the guns and firing from closer in. If you could destroy the onshore defenses, you could then stage a swift amphibious landing and get your troops ashore to overwhelm the defenses.

Plan of attack



In conception, that looks something like this. You're looking North through the Dardanelles, so over the peninsula, off to the left, you can see the big ships, led by QE, coming up to bombard the forts over the hills and the peninsula. And on the lower part, in the middle, you see the smaller ships coming up to approach the fortifications directly.

Shelling of Gallipoli

STARTS AUTOMATICALLY We do have a brief newsreel of the shelling. You can see the warships lined up, and there's a brief shot of Constantinople from the water here, then you can see them pounding away—then also, you can see them sailing away. So what happened? The fleet encountered mines, which the sweepers had not cleared. An explosion hit one of the French warships, Bouvet. It would sink. Then Ocean, Inflexible ... and others. By the end of the day, a third of the ships had been sunk. The fleet pulled back, and nearly four hundred mines remained in the straits, and so many of the onshore batteries also remained intact.

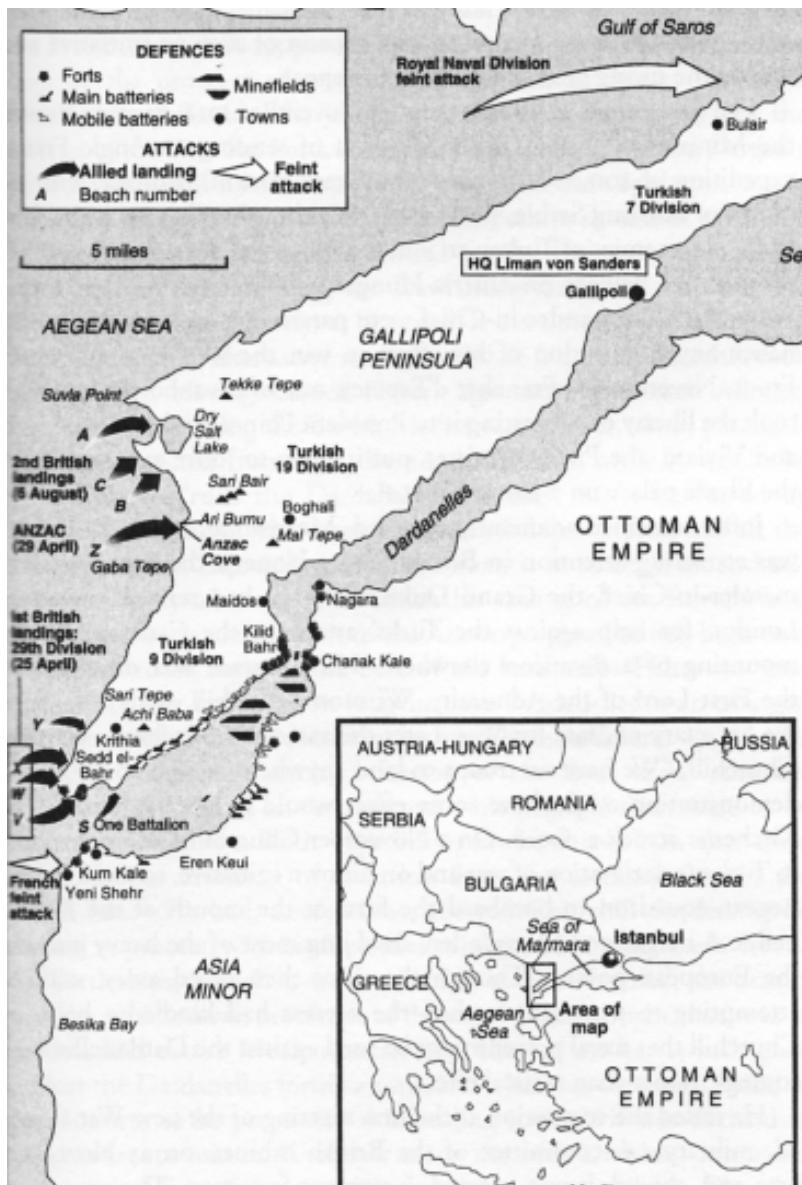
You may have heard the military axiom that a battle plan does not survive first contact with the enemy, and this is a case where that's painfully clear. The entire plan for the Gallipoli landing depended on the destruction of these onshore defenses, and that did not happen.

Turkish guns, intact



But, as also happens in military history, the plan of battle is preserved even though its rationale is no longer valid. Military leaders often go ahead and do what they were going to do, perhaps with a different justification. So here, the plan had been for the navy to bombard the onshore defenses and, having destroyed them, then for the army to land. The navy had bombarded the onshore defenses but failed to destroy them. But the Allied leaders decided the army should land anyway—now, *because* the onshore defenses needed destruction, and the navy hadn't done it, so the army should. This was a decision made by the military leadership, not by the British war cabinet.

Proceeding with the plan



Now, the idea was for a Royal Naval Division to make a landing on the northwestern shore of the Gallipoli peninsula, and for the French *expeditionnaire d'Orient* to make a landing on the Anatolian peninsula—both to draw attention away from the main landings of the ANZACS (with, also, one British division) on the southwestern shore of the Gallipoli peninsula.

The Allies almost certainly did not have the numbers necessary to take the peninsula.

The fleet stood in toward ANZAC cove, as it appears on the map. They had in addition 200 merchant and other smaller ships organized to carry the troops closer to shore, with troop carriers, largely row boats.

Early in the daylight, the big ships began to bombard the shore. They had little intelligence about the lay of the land inland, let alone the disposition of the Turkish troops. But they went ahead, firing their guns. Then the little ANZAC boats went in—about a mile north of the beach they'd selected to bombard. Where the ANZACs actually landed was a small beach surrounded on all sides by high ground. So unless they could get off the beach quickly, they would be overlooked by high ground and enemy fire on all sides. They landed almost unopposed, and went ashore, climbing the ridges. But the reason their landing was almost unopposed was that the Turks had figured nobody would be stupid enough to land there. About 12,000 ANZACs began scrambling up these rocky, thickly overgrown gullies and ravines. If they had been able to get to Sari Bair, there, about two and a half miles inland, they would have been overlooking the straits and within sight of victory. But they didn't. They got about a mile and a half forward, by afternoon, and then came under fire from the Turks.

Even so, it's possible the British might have prevailed, but one of the Turkish commanders made a bold decision.

Another stalemate



The chap on the left is Mustafa Kemal, the lt. col. commanding the 19th Turkish Army division, over by the straits, on Gallipoli. He was from Salonika, which was then Turkish Macedonia. Kemal was a peripheral figure in the Young Turks, and was critical of the revolution. He remained in the army through the Balkan Wars. He didn't want to enter the Great War on Germany's side, as he thought that if Germany won, Turkey would become a satellite to the Reich, and if Germany lost, Turkey would lose everything. But he remained a loyal officer.

Kemal, hearing the sound of the naval bombardment, force-marched his soldiers, leading them himself, to Sari Bair, from which he could see the ANZAC beach. He could see the warships offshore, and some Turkish troops running toward him—it turned out they were out of ammunition, and might have broken, had he and his reinforcements not arrived. He said later,

"the scene ... was a most interesting one. To my mind it was the vital moment of the [campaign]." He ordered the Turkish troops to fix bayonets, and take positions. They held the high ground.

And now the Turks had position, lots of ammunition, and the exhausted ANZAC climbers had no place to go. After nearly a week of fighting, the Turks had lost 14,000, the ANZACs 10,000—but the ANZACS could not afford the losses.

Nevertheless, the Allies dug in, and stayed for months, in another stalemate like the ones the Gallipoli landing was meant to break. So the Gallipoli disaster was unpopular and led to a crisis in the British government in May 1915. Asquith remained PM but now had to do a deal with the conservatives and set up a coalition. Churchill was sacked from the Admiralty. The War Council was renamed the Dardanelles Committee, focused on the Gallipoli crisis. And QE was withdrawn and within the cabinet, those who wanted to refocus on the Western Front regained prominence.

Stuck in



What had been meant as a way to break the stalemate turned into another stalemate itself. Here you see British troops having tea. Trench life on Gallipoli came to resemble trench life on the Western Front, with the same sense of immobility. Except because this theater was an embarrassment, was further away, and now the priority focused once again on the Western Front, they did not have good supplies.

Observing the stalemate



Lord Kitchener—remember him from the “Your Country Needs You” posters?—was concerned that a retreat from Gallipoli would cost the British too much in the way of prestige. He considered further landings there in the fall of 1915, and went to the peninsula himself, as you can see in the picture. He came away shocked by the bad conditions of the army there, and ordered an evacuation.

Ingenuity



To cover the retreat, the Australians invented a self-firing rifle—there was a canister of water set up to drop into a cartridge box which, when it was full enough, put enough weight on a wire to pull a trigger.

The Allied troops also played cricket, specifically to distract the Turks from the preparations for retreat.

As in the whole campaign, they were underresourced, and couldn't get all their supplies out.
So.

Leaving Gallipoli



When the last of them were ready to go, they set the supply dump on fire and sailed away; this photo shows the supplies burning on the shore. While the departing Allies destroyed the bulk of what they had left, the occupation of the cove for so many months meant there had been so many supplies left in various places, that the Turks were able to pick up innumerable boats, telegraph lines, medical supplies, water filters, small arms, munitions, and food.

In the end the Turks lost perhaps 300,000 men at Gallipoli, while the Allies lost about 265,000. But the Turks held the peninsula, and the Allies failed. Perhaps its only success, as in so many of the slow-bleeding campaigns of the war, was in keeping some divisions pinned down here, instead of letting them go elsewhere—to the Caucasus, perhaps, to fight against the Russians, as the Russians feared.

The campaign made the reputation of Mustapha Kemal, who would afterward become Kemal Ataturk. It destroyed—albeit temporarily—the reputation of Winston Churchill, and the memory of it shaped Churchill's strategy in the Second World War, including his wariness of staging amphibious landings against German strength in France.

It also became a central moment in Australian memory. The nation of Australia was a new one, federated out of the six distinct states on the continent in 1901. The men who fought at Gallipoli had been born in New South Wales, in Victoria, or Queensland; but it was Australia that sent them to war, and it was as Australians they left Gallipoli.

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/20-remarkable-photos-from-gallipoli>