



# All Quiet on the Dardanelles: Century Later Brave Gallipoli Dead Remind Us Of The Stupidity Of War

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A century ago one of the most important battles in the Great War began. On April 25, 1915 allied forces landed in what is typically called the Gallipoli or Dardanelles Campaign (Battle of Canakkale by Turkey). London admitted defeat and withdrew its forces eight and a half months later. The fight offered another horrid highlight to the insane paroxysm of violence eventually known as World War I.

More than 30 cemeteries fill the Gallipoli Peninsula. As many Turkish and allied troops died in this one extended battle—perhaps 120,000, though Turkish figures are incomplete and probably low—as did Americans in the entire conflict. Turkey is a land of contrasting cultures, histories, and religions. But there is no more moving, even holy, site than what Turks call Gelibolu, named after the peninsula's largest town.

Gallipoli suggests idyllic rural life—green, rolling hills dotted with flowers, overlooking narrow beaches and deep blue water. Homes dot the countryside and picnickers sit by the road. Children swim in the brilliant, clear water. That's in peacetime. The peninsula sits between the Aegean Sea and the Dardanelles Straits (Canakkale Bogazi in Turkish) and in war is a strategic plot of land.

History and myth in the region go back 5000 years. Persians fought here; Alexander the Great crossed the Straits. Rome conquered the region. Byzantium ruled, challenged by Arab and Crusader invasions. Ultimately the area became part of the Ottoman Empire, which reached into southeastern Europe. The fortress of Cimenlik, now a military museum, dates back to the 15th Century.

For reasons that seem sadly frivolous today, all of Europe's major powers, including the Ottoman Empire—the tottering “Sick Man of Europe”—went to war in 1914. No conflict is pretty, and World War I was particularly dreadful, as gruesome gridlock through increasingly complex trenches descended on the Western Front in France. As an alternative to “chewing barbed wire in Flanders,” in the words of Winston Churchill, Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, the Entente forces decided to attempt to force the Dardanelles, seize Istanbul, and open the Bosphorus Straits into the Black Sea. Their goal was to put Turkey out of the war and open a new supply route to isolated Russia.

The battle commenced in February 1915. The British fleet first tried to push through the Straits but was halted by shore batteries and mines. After significant delay, during which Turkey prepared for attack, the allies commenced an amphibious operation. Although soldiers from Britain, France, and India (a British colony at the time) were involved, men from Australia and New Zealand, grouped in the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps, played a leading role.

Months of bitter warfare commenced. Entrenchments limited maneuver, as on the Western Front in France. Successive landings only led to successive stalemates, as death and disease stalked soldiers on both sides. By January 9, 1916 the allied forces were withdrawn. In a war noted for bloody futility, Gallipoli stood out as an example of purposeless killing.

The battle was the Ottoman's greatest victory in a losing effort. Final defeat led to the dissolution of a ramshackle empire, conflict with Greece, and creation of the current Turkish state.

Only a sideshow for Britain and France, Gallipoli was a searing experience for Australia and New Zealand, where Anzac memorials are common. Indeed, April 25 is Anzac Day. Turkey has turned an intensely nationalist experience into an international commemoration. Gallipoli's Anzac memorial, erected in 1934, displays the words of Mustafa Kemal, a 34-year-old divisional commander and later founder of modern Turkey, when he added the name Ataturk: “You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehments to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours.”

For an American Gallipoli provides the same haunting feeling as visiting Antietam or Gettysburg, or Arlington Cemetery. It is the scene of heroism and tragedy, the formative experience in the destruction of one nation and creation of another.

Gallipoli isn't easy to get to, about a five-hour drive from Istanbul. The Park is cluttered with visitor centers, trenches, museums, ramparts, memorials, pillboxes, and, of course, cemeteries. The museum is filled with the implements of war, from the dramatic to the mundane, weapons to cooking pots. Trench tools, clothes, watches and pipes. There are even bullets which hit each other in flight, a testament to the fury of the fight. And the bones of combatants, including a skull stuck with the bullet that ended a life.

The most dramatic setting is Alcitepe, with a more than 120 foot high monument to Turkish soldiers. Four towering stone pedestals with reliefs reach skyward to a simple roof. The

monument sits on a bluff overlooking both the Aegean and Dardanelles. A mall and cemetery lie behind it, a museum beneath it.

The core of Gallipoli is the battlefield. The landing spots of Ari Burnu and Anzac Cove, where Anzac forces stormed ashore. Gun Ridge, which the Turks retook and held to contain the invaders. Shrapnel Valley, the allied supply route under constant Turkish bombardment. Lone Pine, the site of a bitter five-day fight, with Australians overrunning Turkish trenches, but moving no further.

Quinn's Post, where the conflicting trenches were separated by barely 45 feet. The Nek, a narrow ridge over which the two sides fruitlessly attacked throughout the duration of the campaign. Chunuk Bair, part of the dominating Sari Bair Ridge and site of a successful allied attack that was soon overwhelmed by a Turkish counterattack under Ataturk's command. And Suvla Bay, where the allies launched another amphibious assault four months after the first landings, only to find themselves again contained.

What a fight Gallipoli was. Incessant bombardments. Courageous landings. Desperate combat. Bayonet charges. Reinforcements arriving. Both sides entrenching. But the Turks would not break. The allies grew frustrated with the stalemate and finally retreated.

Only after the deaths of thousands and thousands of brave men, however. Brave young men. Most of whom are buried near where they fell.

The cemeteries, big and small, give Gallipoli its majesty and tragedy. For instance, the Beach Cemetery is final home to 379 allied soldiers. There is 21-year-old private A.L. Simpson of the New Zealand Wellington Regiment, killed on June 11, 1915. And 41-year-old private T.J.B. Machray, of the New Zealand Canterbury Regiment, killed on April 28, 1915. Most of the dead were in their early 20s, cut down with so most of their lives before them.

Nearby lies Ari Burnu cemetery. Its 253 dead are from all over—Australia, Britain, India, New Zealand. The graves are set in even rows, running down to the Aegean Sea, shimmering in the sun. The beautiful cove, with beach stretching off into the distance, contrasts sharply with death. But death was no respecter of person. Lots of privates died. So did a Sergeant Major and a Lieutenant Colonel. A driver joined many riflemen and troopers in the ground.

The French have their own resting grounds, one topped by a soaring pillar and mausoleum. Common soldiers fill the sloping grounds. "They died for France," intone the gravestones, though the conflict in which the men were killed served the interests of no nation. Number one is Louis Martinez. Number 2239 is Jules LeCopte. Another 12000 soldiers who could not be identified lie in five other cemeteries.

So many rest unknown in graves, or are known to have died but the location of their bodies is unknown. At Lone Pine one mausoleum represents the 5000 dead Australians and New Zealanders who died during the Ari Burnu landing. Of the 1167 soldiers actually buried in the mausoleum, 499 were not identified.

Every one of them involved a human tragedy affecting others. At Lone Pine 25-year-old Private C.H. Spencer rests, an Australian infantryman who died between August 6 and 9, 1915. His memorial notes: "The only loved son of A.J. Maher."

Turkish mothers and fathers lost children too. Among Alcitepe's dead was a 15-year-old, Hasanoglu Ahmet, from nearby Canakkale. The cemetery for the 57th division, commanded by Ataturk, also contains many neat rows of tombstones, capped by a three-tier tower monument. It may best exemplify the tragedy of the entire conflict: buried together are a Brit and Turk, found in a deadly embrace. They had killed each other.

The battle settled nothing militarily. After the allied withdrawal the conflict went on for almost another three years. But First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill lost his job as a result, and departed to command a battalion that was "chewing barbed wire" on the Western Front, where the war eventually was decided with American aid. Britain went on to spur an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Out of the wreckage emerged a new Turkish state headed by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, as well as a gaggle of artificial nations, some of which are dissolving before our eyes today.

Not only was the Gallipoli campaign futile. So was the entire conflict. Competing blocs of imperial powers battled for dominance after an act of state terrorism in the Balkans triggered a war that reached Asia and North America. The entry of the U.S. was particularly mad, a reckless act by an arrogant president who believed that he had been anointed from above to reorder the globe. Alas, he failed. As a result, tens of thousands of Americans died to enable the Europeans to plunder the defeated, including the Ottomans. The Versailles Treaty became but an armistice for a generation, leading to the far more destructive World War II.

Today Gallipoli is peaceful, though not a typical tourist stop. Instead, it is a place for study, reflection, even reverence. Any military buff should enjoy following one of the most celebrated, yet ill-fated, campaigns of the 20th century. A student of history should wallow in the might-have-beens, a formative moment in a nation's history that brought forth to prominence its future leader. Anyone who thrills to the human spirit should ponder those tragic moments that simultaneously expose the basest and best of human beings. The momentous events of the Dardanelles remain alive even though a century has passed.

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