

The Gallipoli campaign was a failure!

Introduction:

We all know of the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign of 1915. It took the lives of 2400 New Zealanders and 5500 Australians. There are 34000 allied war graves on the Peninsula. Over 70,000 Turks Died.

Paradoxically, there was one stunning success - the evacuation that ended the campaign. Gill is going to tell us of Success in Defeat.

Speech:

After 8 months the Gallipoli campaign was at a stalemate. Both sides had suffered huge losses and both lacked equipment. If the Turks had had enough artillery they would have blasted the Allies off the Peninsula. Now though, Bulgaria had entered the war and would be aiding the Turks.

The allies too lacked equipment for a winter offensive. With storms and snow expected in late December the landing of stores and troops might only be possible a few days a month. Sick and injured might have to remain on the peninsula for up to two weeks. The allies needed winter quarters, hospitals and more supplies.

A decision had to be made on whether to advance or withdraw but the British Cabinet was unable to decide. Lord Kitchener, who was part of the War Cabinet, came out to see for himself and he was appalled at the primitive conditions. He too vacillated over the next few weeks.

A small group of military and naval officers at the headquarters in Lemnos outlined a plan for evacuation. They planned it for 3 stages.

Firstly.... To reduce the force to the numbers required for a winter defensive campaign. This could start without Cabinet approval.

Secondly With Cabinet approval 3000 men nightly, along with guns, vehicles and animals would be withdrawn.

Thirdly Withdraw all troops as fast as possible.

The aim was to deceive the Turks. But as there were many spies around they had to deceive their own officials and troops too. So false orders were given that the troops were to be rested over winter in the Greek islands. The plan left the final stage of the withdrawal to the corps commanders on the ground.

There were 100,000 men, 5,000 horses and mules, 2,000 vehicles and 200 guns to be withdrawn from under the eye of the enemy who also numbered 100,000. Some of the front lines were only 300 yards apart but the Turks could not see the beach. Casualties were expected to be up to 40,000.

Stage 1 of the plan was well underway when a blizzard hit the peninsula on November 27. Nearly 300 men froze to death, 10,000 were evacuated with frostbite and illness.

As a result on 8 December the Cabinet agreed to a withdrawal.

By the second week in December the evacuation was well advanced. Every night flotillas of small craft would creep into Anzac Cove and Suvla Bay and 3,000 were withdrawn. By morning the seas were empty. In the daytime men worked on trenches and dugouts. Tents were kept standing and guns kept up a regular rate of fire.

The commanders ordered a regular routine of silent nights, where the front was silent for several nights in a row. The Turks became suspicious and launched local attacks that were firmly repulsed. The Turks accepted this was a new feature of the war.

The enemy doubtless heard the noise from the convoy of mule carts bringing ammunition back to shore. But they had heard the same noise for months as supplies were taken nightly out to the flanks, they could not know that the order was now reversed. By dawn the ships were gone. Empty supply boxes along with troops were landed as usual during the day.

The third and most dangerous part of the withdrawal at Anzac Cove was under the command of Lt Col White, an Australian. He insisted it should only take two nights, December 18 and 19. By December 18, 40,000 troops were left.

Since December 3 Australian engineers were making piers. Rumours were rife. The troops leaving on December 12 gave rousing cheers as they left. So the next day troops were told of the evacuation.

They were shocked at the news. Others were bitter that their hard work of shoring up defences was pointless. The men hated to leave their dead comrades, and in groups of two and three, visited the cemeteries.

The final two nights were planned in minute detail. Superb timing was needed to avoid congestion and confusion. There were 4 piers at Anzac cove and troops were taken in batches to waiting vessels that came at 7 and 10pm and 3am.

The second night was slightly different. The men on the extreme flanks were to be picked up close to their positions. The other point was the final defence of the beach would fall to 1500 men.

The officers and men believed a large part of the rear guard would be killed or captured. Yet in every unit officers were besieged with men wanting to be in the last parties. Every man in the last party was given a card with instruction on where he was to be, at what time, and the route he was to follow.

The tracks were marked with salt and flour to show the way. To avoid noise the men had socks or bags over their boots, the wooden trenches were lined with blankets and coats. Guns were set to self fire occasionally through the night..

As darkness fell the men began to converge down the gullies to the beaches. There was a system of traffic officers to point the way. They were picked up by small craft and taken to transport ships. By 4am there was no one left on Anzac cove.. .

Three hours later the Turks discovered the withdrawal. It hit them like a thunderbolt. They reacted with mortification. and relief.

White's vision and judgement secured the success of the operation without the loss of one life. One thing he had no control over was the weather. On the nights throughout the operation the sea was calm. 16 hours after the last men left a huge storm blew up, destroying the piers. If the withdrawal was one day later, or the storm one day earlier thousands of men would have been lost.

The Gallipoli campaign was a failure. It was ill conceived and ineptly executed. The withdrawal was a brilliant success.