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2016 Winner
Victoria

Felix Cousins
“... each night is a nightmare, the patients’ faces all look so pale with the flickering ship’s lights.”
Sister Ella Tucker, Australian Army Nursing Service, Hospital Ship Gascon, off Gallipoli

Sister Tucker’s account offers a different perspective to the more familiar image of the brave ‘natural soldiers’ who landed on a Gallipoli beach as volunteers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) proudly fighting under their own flag for the very first time. With the landing of the Australian troops on 25 April 1915 the Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (Anzac) legend was born. Australia’s official WWI historian Charles Bean shaped this legend in words: “Anzac stood, and still stands, for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance that will never own defeat.” (2) Whilst the importance of the landing on that first day should not be minimised, and certainly never forgotten, there are other events and experiences from the Gallipoli campaign that also deserve recognition or more attention.

If we admire the ‘Anzac spirit’ displayed at the landing and commemorate the loss of life, then we also need to acknowledge that the Anzac troops fought bravely and sustained heavy losses in offensives and counter offensives throughout the entire eight months of fighting – especially in August. (3) Two iconic battles of the August Offensive – Lone Pine beginning at dusk on 6 August 1915 and The Nek at dawn the next day – were filled with staggeringly courageous acts and resulted in significant losses.

At Lone Pine the Australians attacked and occupied frontline positions against determined Turkish counter-attacks. Despite desperate fighting at close quarters in the Turkish trenches, the Anzacs gained ground and the Turks lost 6,390 men. In five days of fighting at Lone Pine seven Victoria Crosses were awarded for bravery (of a total of nine such medals awarded to the Australians). As one of the few successes of the campaign, Lone Pine is as seminal an event as the landing for the Gallipoli story.

The following morning’s tragic charge at The Nek was a brief and brutal defeat. Immortalised in Peter Weir’s iconic film Gallipoli (4), it involved four waves of Australian soldiers – with 150 in each – charging at two minute intervals towards the Turkish-held trench across a narrow bridge of land. “It cost 372 men, well over half of whom were killed instantly, out of the 600 who charged. The Turks lost hardly a man.” (5) To commemorate this charge that Charles Bean asserted would go down as “one of the bravest acts of the history of Australians at war” (6) the Australian War
Memorial commissioned George Lambert. By his own description, Lambert saw himself as an “artist-historian” recording “events precious to the history of the nation”(7). The resulting painting The Charge of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at The Nek, 7 August 1915(8) illustrates how thick the fighting was in “that strip the size of three tennis courts” (9). It is telling that this and another Lambert oil-on-canvas epic Anzac, the Landing, 1915(10) were commissioned shortly after the end of the war. Clearly, at that time, these two events were together considered most worthy of being recorded in this way. “Each accurately illustrated one of the AIF’s most significant actions during the campaign and was visually stunning and emotionally engaging.” (11)

While the Gallipoli campaign’s failed beginning at the landings has been widely studied and recounted, the most successful event at Gallipoli may have been the withdrawal of the Anzac troops at the campaign’s close in December. The evacuation was an impressive feat of military planning and execution with only two lives lost. As one of Gallipoli’s few Anzac success stories, it is surprising that this event is not referred to more widely in accounts of the campaign. Surely, decisive strategy and actions that spare lives are as worthy of our notice as battles that give rise to loss of life. “It was a wonderful thing to get so many thousands of men, with artillery and stores, away in such a manner,” (12) wrote Corporal Reginald Gardiner on Christmas Day after the withdrawal was completed.

In addition to the Anzacs there were many hundreds of non-combat roles that were crucial to the war effort. In particular, the experience of Australian nurses working as members of the medical units is also often overlooked or given scant attention in accounts of the Gallipoli campaign. More than 3000 Australian women volunteered to serve as nurses in the war. “But still the experience of battle, which was at the heart of the original Anzac legend, was a male one.”(13) In undertaking their vital work, the nurses of No 3 Australian General Hospital (3AGH), who ministered care to the wounded from Gallipoli in Lemnos five hours away by sea “underwent the same heavy privations as the men of the army at the front during this period” (14). Despite the hardships they experienced, the women’s professionalism and dedicated was exemplary. “Thanks largely to their excellence in such nursing essentials as wound dressing, feeding, skin care and ward cleanliness and discipline, 3AGH’s patient mortality rate was a low 2.5 per cent, despite the conditions”. (15)

Many moving personal accounts exist that familiarise us with the experiences of the Anzacs and other English-speaking participants of the Gallipoli campaign. These letters, diaries and memoirs complement official records and have been archived online for ready access. Because of the availability and volume of this material, it is easy to overlook that many other nationalities and ethnic groups, including “Indian, French, Senegalese, and … Russian” were also part of “the fighting force” (16).

On the day of the landings at Anzac Cove, the French made a diversionary landing at Kum Kale to distract the Turkish forces. These troops were made up by French foreign legion troops and the African Algerian/Senegalese Rifles as well as artillery and engineering companies. This neglected and often-forgotten French presence consisted of a force of 79,000 servicemen compared with the 50,000 Australians (17). The French suffered losses on a similar scale as the Australians (although, of course, as a lower proportion of the country’s total population) and participated in important battles during the August offensive. Despite the significant contribution made by French troops to the campaign, their presence at Gallipoli is rarely acknowledged outside of France. (18)

In his diary Private McAnulty notes the many ethnicities, including the Indian-Nepalese Ghurkas: “More troops landed last night ... some Gurkhas having landed. The gullies are swarming with men now, all nationalities.” (19) At the outbreak of the war in 1914, the Indian Army was the largest, independent, all-volunteer army in the world. However, only this year has it been acknowledged that about 15,000 Indian troops – two or three times as many as previously thought – were part of the campaign.(20) Sikhs, Hindus, Punjabis and Gurkhas served at Gallipoli in an infantry brigade, a mountain artillery brigade, medical units and a large contingent of mule drivers. In particular,
it was the mule drivers “who perhaps made the Indians’ most important contribution to the campaign”(21) in both supplying the troops in the frontlines with ammunition, food and water and supplies. The Indians also undertook the critical and dangerous role of stretcher-bearers carrying the most injured away from the front while transporting other casualties to safety by mule. (22) “Front-line soldiers came to admire stretcher-bearers. They had to be strong men, able to be able to carry full-grown men up and down tough terrain, and mature enough to deal with the shocking array of wounds that bullets and shrapnel could inflict”(23). Although the Gurkhas are commemorated on the great memorial to the missing at Cape Helles, there is no other reminder of their presence at Gallipoli. Furthermore, the personal experiences of the Indians have not been documented other than through secondary reference in some British and Anzac written accounts such as diaries, letters and memoirs. “Most Indian troops were either illiterate and didn’t maintain any records, or if they did, those records haven’t survived.”(24)

One hundred years on, the Anzac legend forged on the beaches at Gallipoli still endures. While the landings kicked off Australia’s involvement in the war, and the Anzacs distinguished themselves with selfless bravery, other important events and experiences of the campaign also demand more attention. In remembering war we celebrate military achievement, we recognise extraordinary bravery and we honour those who lost their lives. By this measure at least, the battles of Lone Pine (where the troops made advances and ground was won) and The Nek (where so many made the ultimate sacrifice) must be brought to the forefront in the retelling of significant events from Gallipoli. While our interest is drawn to the Anzacs – either Australian-born or tracing their ancestry to England, Ireland and Scotland – many other men of many nationalities and ethnicities served alongside the Anzacs or, in the case of the women nurses, contributed valiantly to the Gallipoli campaign. We should remember them all.