

Wales and the Gallipoli Evacuation: 100 Years Later

One hundred years ago this month Welsh troops were being evacuated from Gallipoli after the failure of the ill-fated campaign to open up the Dardanelles and create a passage to Russia through the Black Sea. **Rhys David** reports

This year thousands have gathered on the beaches of Turkey seeking a passage to Europe, mirroring events that happened exactly one hundred years ago but in very different circumstances. In December 1915 it was British soldiers who were trying to escape the area, including many thousands of Welshmen serving with the British Army.

Four months earlier in August 1915 men of the 53rd (Welsh) Division had landed at Suvla Bay after a three-week sea trip, to re-inforce British, French, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian and Indian soldiers fighting to seize the Gallipoli peninsula, one of the worst killing grounds of World War One, responsible for well over 100,000 deaths among Entente and Ottoman combatants.

The 53rd was one of 14 Territorial divisions formed as part of Army reforms in 1908, principally for home defence but with the possibility that it could be used abroad in the event of a national emergency. As such, it predated the other better-known Welsh Division of World War One, the 38th. This was formed as part of the New Army in the November following the outbreak of war, and served in France, famously in the first Battle of the Somme at Mametz Wood.

The 53rd brought together men from all over Wales, including contingents from the Royal Welch Fusiliers and the Welch Regiment, as well as others serving in border regiments, the Cheshires and Herefordshires. On July 3rd 1915 the officer in charge of the 53rd, Major-General John Lindley, had been told to prepare his men for the Mediterranean. The hope was that fresh troops could break the stalemate that had followed the blood-soaked landings by Entente (Allied) forces on the peninsula on April 25th. An attempt by the British and French to force the Dardanelles Straits between Gallipoli and the Turkish mainland and seize Constantinople (now Istanbul) with the use of naval forces had already failed in March when several vessels in the task force had been sunk by mines.

The Turks, whose army was stiffened by a large number of German officers, had prepared well for the combined naval and military operation, which they realised would follow this naval setback. In a series of battles the Turco-German force prevented the British and Empire divisions under the overall command of General Sir Ian Hamilton from gaining more than a tenuous foothold at their two chosen landing sites – Helles and what came to be known as Anzac Cove, the beach where Australian and New Zealand forces famously landed. Occupying the peninsula's heights, the Turks were able to mow down the forces as they landed.

The 53rd, one of nine new divisions dispatched that summer by the British War Council, was sent to Suvla Bay, a site north of Anzac, as part of a new plan by Hamilton for seizing the heights above the straits. The aim all along had been to open a passage

through the Black Sea and bring relief to Russia, which, like France and Belgium, had been attacked by the Kaiser's forces. It was feared that if Russia was unable to export its grain through the Black Sea, where its navy was now bottled up, and on into the Mediterranean it would not be able to afford to remain in the war. It would be forced to sue for peace. Equally importantly, a campaign in the East – fiercely opposed in Cabinet by those who wanted to concentrate on the Western Front in France but strongly supported by David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill – was regarded by its proponents as vital to thwart German attempts to undermine the British Empire.

The Germans had for a number of years been seeking to promote a destabilising jihad among the British Empire's Muslim population in the Middle East and particularly Egypt, and in French possessions in North Africa. They had also promoted an ambitious scheme to create a railway line from Berlin to Baghdad which could have linked with the Ottoman Empire's own line to Medina, raising the possibility of German troops being positioned in the Gulf opposite India, another British territory with a large Muslim population. Britain's ability to pursue the war in Europe faced with these challenges would have been severely compromised.

The new plan by the British military was for the troops landed at Suvla Bay in August to attack Turkish positions in the centre of the peninsula and to be joined by Australian forces coming out of Anzac Cove. A diversionary attack would also be mounted at the southern tip of the peninsula at Helles to keep Turkish forces tied down. Fighting raged for the best part of a month but the Turks managed to hold firm. The British reinforcements, including the newly-arrived Welsh were not battle-hardened, communications between units were poor, and lacking maps the men and their commanders often did not know where they were, where the units they were supposed to join were, or where the enemy was concealed. In addition, they were short of ammunition, lacked water and faced summer temperatures of more than 35C, plus the discomfort of millions of flies and other pests. The 53rd had landed at Suvla Bay without artillery, too, which had been assigned to France.

The chaos of the situation is described vividly in a report from Kenneth Taylor, one of the junior officers in the 53rd's 158th Brigade. Describing the attempts made during the assault to reach a ridge 150-200 yards away, he wrote: "We started off again in waves with big intervals, and the first 50 yards was a hell for leather race, no cover and every chance of striking eternity, We were getting a bit tired by now and the Turk was having the best shooting he could wish for, unworried by fire from us as we could see nothing to shoot at.

"That 50 yards accounted for a good many and my only recollection of it was the splendid way the men behaved. And so we arrived at the bank and had another breather. Evidently there had been some dirty work here as there were some ghastly sights of charred bodies. It looked as though they had been wounded and overtaken by a scrub fire." In this action the Colonel Jones of the 6th Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers was among those killed.

Trench warfare now took over until weather intervened. Heavy rain and even snow fell in late November, and large volumes of water collected in the barricades formed by the Turks in previously dry watercourses. When these burst the water came down and flooded the British trenches, forcing some of the men of the 53rd to bivouac in open sand dunes in the snow.

One 17 year old Welsh sapper in the Royal Engineers, Dewi David, writing home to his parents in the Splott suburb of Cardiff describes the three day storm as very fierce with awful rain and the ground ankle-deep in slush. “The wind was so strong you could hardly stand. Most of our chaps had their dug-outs swamped out and waist-deep in water, which took some baling out, but fortunately we had plenty of corrugated iron on our roof which kept us fairly dry so we took in about a dozen homeless chaps whose dug-outs were untenable. We were like sardines in a tin in our place. We are just recovering from the experience and it has been very cold since.”

The Official History of the campaign paints an even grimmer picture, “The rain turned to a blinding blizzard and then to heavy snow which was itself followed by two days of exceptionally bitter frost. The severe cold following the floods proved an unbearable strain to men whose health had already been undermined by the hardships of the summer campaign. Hundreds were dying from exposure all over the plain, streams of utterly exhausted men were struggling back to the beach, many collapsing on the roadside and freezing to death where they fell.”

In total some 200 men were drowned or frozen to death and there were 5,000 cases of frostbite among British and Empire soldiers following the storm. This, combined with the knowledge that several more months of winter weather were now ahead led to the decision to evacuate and to accept that Britain and its allies could not take the peninsula and would therefore not be able to force the Straits and open up a route through to the Black Sea.

Evacuation – 205,000 British and Empire troops and 47,000 French - followed in December and was completed with only small further losses. The 53rd after its long period in the line had been considered for the honour of being last to leave the peninsula but its numbers were so reduced and their physical fitness so compromised their commanding officer recommended instead they be sent speedily to a healthy climate to recuperate, be brought up to strength, and provided with artillery.

The 53rd was sent to Egypt, where, after a period guarding the Canal against German and Turkish attack, they were on the move again. Their journey took them through the Sinai desert, where three bloody battles had to be fought in order to capture Gaza and open the road through Palestine to Jerusalem. Two years after the failure of Gallipoli the 53rd was one of the two divisions that joined hands in the Holy City in December 1917 at the end of General Allenby’s successful campaign to drive the Turks out of their Ottoman Empire possessions in the Near East.

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