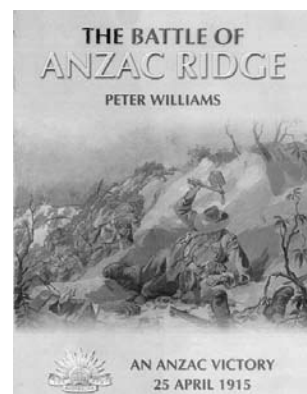


The Battle of ANZAC Ridge: 25 April 1915.

Peter Williams

A review essay by John Donovan



In *The Battle of ANZAC Ridge* Peter Williams presents a re-interpretation of events on the first Anzac Day. In many ways this re-interpretation rings true, but he might, perhaps, have paid a little more heed to the quote by Sir Ian Hamilton (so beloved by subsequent military historians) that he places at the start of Chapter One:

On the actual day of battle naked truths may be picked up for the asking: by the following morning, they have already begun to put on their uniforms.

The author quickly disposes of the issue concerning the incorrect landing place. He dismisses the suggestion that an (unrecorded) last-minute agreement between Birdwood and Admiral Thursby, commanding that part of the naval force, deliberately changed the intended location. He also accepts Tom Frame's argument that an offshore current was not the cause of the error. Williams places the blame on an error in navigation aboard HMS *Triumph*, possibly of as little as 100 metres (less than a ship's length). Such a distance might be considered large by today's standards of satellite navigation, but would have been insignificant by the standards of the day. Williams reminds readers that the history of amphibious landings during World War II is also replete with errors in landing sites, even when the landings took place in daylight.

The intent of the landing is ably clarified. Williams describes how grandiose rhetoric about crossing the Peninsula to Mal Tepe was toned down successively in orders at each level of command, to become a plan to draw the Ottoman reserve onto the ANZACs around Sari Bair and Third Ridges. This was essentially a diversion, to attract the Ottoman reserve against the Australians and New Zealanders to allow the British 29th Division to land at Cape Helles, advance to the Kilid Bahr Plateau, take the Ottoman forts from the rear, and clear the way for the Royal Navy to pass through the Dardanelles.

The author thus sees Mustafa Kemal's decision to commit the Ottoman reserve against the Australians and New Zealanders at the Ari Burnu landing as falling into the trap set by the Allies. If, however, the Ottomans had ignored the ANZAC landing and sent their reserve south against the main landing at Helles, then the ANZACs could have advanced across the Peninsula, cut off the Ottoman force and achieved the desired effect indirectly. Ultimately, Kemal's decision

did not have fatal consequences for the Ottoman cause. The 29th Division failed in its endeavours at Helles while the commitment of the Ottoman reserve against the ANZACs prevented their advance across the Peninsula.

Williams shows clearly that while the intelligence available to the Allies was not perfect, it was adequate to identify the principal forces likely to oppose the ANZAC landing. One key error was the incorrect identification of a two-regiment sized camp south east of Gaba Tepe. This probably contributed to Sinclair-MacLagan's decisions to divert the 2nd Brigade to the southern flank of the landing, and to halt the advance on the Second Ridge (called ANZAC Ridge by the soldiers of the time, and by Williams) rather than the Third (or Gun) Ridge.

This halt provided time for the ANZACs to prepare, at least a bit, for the first Ottoman counter-attack in the morning, and particularly for the second, late in the afternoon. Diverting the 2nd Brigade, however, weakened the left flank. The failure to capture Battleship Hill, or to hold positions further inland than the Nek (after the loss of Baby 700), caused difficulties during the entire ensuing campaign. To this extent, Sinclair-MacLagan's decision was, if not fatal, certainly severely damaging to ANZAC hopes and intentions.

The maps used for the landing are also shown to be adequate by the standards of the time, although major difficulties were caused when it was found that the Razor Edge was impassable, preventing access from Plugge's Plateau to Russell's Top. The broken country of the Ari Burnu area was considered by Birdwood to give the untrained ANZAC troops better opportunities for defence than the more open terrain of Helles, across which it was hoped that the 29th Division, with its eleven battalions of regular troops (and one of Royal Scots territorials) could advance.

Williams (probably correctly) focuses on the defensive phase of the first day as the critical period, after a successful landing had been made. Once the Ottoman reserve was committed to a counter-attack against the ANZACs, it could not be disentangled in time to intervene at Helles on the same day. Another important point made by Williams relates to the quality of the opposing sides. The ANZACs were a recently recruited force with limited training. Their Ottoman opponents were regular formations in an army with recent battle experience in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913.

However, while the Anatolian regiments were reliable, those from other parts of the Ottoman Empire were less so, though Anatolian soldiers were perhaps too quick to criticise Arab regiments, some of which performed well. Overall, Williams considers that seven of the Ottoman battalions fighting near Ari Burnu were superior to the Australian and New Zealand infantry, while six others (in two Arab regiments) were not. This superiority, combined with the Ottoman advantage in artillery, proved sufficient to deny ANZAC success, but was not sufficient to drive it back into the sea — although Williams considers that it should have been.

The bombardment of the ANZAC position by Ottoman artillery is discussed in detail. He confirms that 44 Ottoman artillery pieces were involved, not the figure of 24 usually accepted. Williams also concludes that ammunition expenditure, compared to the duration of the bombardment and the length of front, was of similar intensity to attacks on the Western Front at around the same period. Finally, Williams exposes starkly the partial collapse of morale among the ANZACs under this bombardment, suggesting that as many as 2000 men might have ‘straggled’ from the firing line back to the beach and nearby gullies.

After allowing for battle casualties and the stragglers, as few as 6000 rifles might have been available to hold a front of some six kilometres against the main Ottoman counter-attack by some 8500 men supported by around 40 artillery pieces (four having been put out of action by then). Of the 6000 ANZACs available, only about 1000 were on the Sari Bair Ridge and north to the Fisherman’s Hut, while some 5000 held the southern part of the front, along ANZAC and Bolton’s Ridges. Williams concludes that only about 3000 of the ANZACs engaged the counter-attackers. On the left, the ANZAC forces were driven back across the Nek, while on the right Ottoman forces recaptured part of the eastern side of the 400 Plateau (Johnston’s Jolly and Lone Pine).

Williams puts some effort into estimating ANZAC casualties on 25 April, and concludes that they were at least 5000 (about 1200 dead), substantially above the figure of around 2000 used in the British and Australian Official Histories, and about a third of those landed that day. This is close to the losses of the 5th Division at Fromelles (also in a single day), but was from a larger force engaged, and not all were Australians. Despite this level of loss, and the failure of some soldiers during the Ottoman bombardment, the ANZAC remained in action and held a line against the second counter-attack.

For comparison and wider context, a chapter is also devoted to briefly describing operations at Cape Helles on 25 April. There, the landings took place after dawn, to allow a naval bombardment and enable clear identification of the landing beaches. In contrast, due to the terrain, naval bombardment was likely to be less effective at Ari Burnu, while Birdwood thought that the cover of darkness was more important for his untrained troops. At Helles a similar

intelligence error as at Ari Burnu inflated a camp near Krithia to regimental size. This might have caused some hesitation about advancing too far inland before this (actually much smaller) reserve was committed. If so, the results were not as fortunate at Helles as at Ari Burnu.

British opportunities at Helles were increased by an Ottoman error when Halil Sami, commanding the Ottoman 9th Division, committed two battalions against the isolated bridgehead at Y-Beach, leaving only three battalions available to oppose the remainder of the 29th Division elsewhere, principally at W and X-Beaches. Williams considers that by about 1330 hours there were only some 1000 Ottoman defenders in front of W and X-beaches, opposed by seven British battalions, only one of which had suffered very heavy casualties. However, no general advance was attempted.

As well, Williams notes that in response to a request from Hamilton for an appreciation of the task before the attack, Hunter-Weston (GOC of the 29th Division) had stated that there was ‘not ... a reasonable chance of success’. This assessment may have weighed on his mind that day, leading him to take a cautious approach. Hunter-Weston did not land on 25 April, and all three of the brigade commanders in the 29th Division, who did, were wounded, probably causing some command hesitation.

Williams concludes that the failure by the British to make a general advance at Helles was the worst decision taken that day, eventually costing the Allies the campaign. He notes that of 16 Ottoman battalions that fought on 25 April, three quarters fought against the ANZACs in the Ari Burnu area and only four against the 29th Division at Cape Helles. Moreover, 44 artillery pieces were used at Ari Burnu but only 12 engaged the British.

This may be so and the picture of gallant Anzacs engaging the enemy while the British waited on the beaches at Helles may be correct. However, this seems too close for comfort to the popular Australian image of the subsequent British operations at Suvla Bay in August 1915. The best that can probably be said is the Scottish verdict ‘Not Proven’.

There are a few problems with the book. It is particularly annoying that Kum Tepe, mentioned frequently in the text, does not appear on any map, and its location can only be deduced after careful reading of the text (or, more simply, by referring to Bean’s Volume I). There are also some textual or explanatory anomalies concerning people. Harold Elliott is better known by his nickname Pompey, Henry Bennett by his middle name, Gordon; and Joseph Hobbs normally used his third name Talbot and is better known as such.

Overall, this book proposes a thought-provoking thesis. It is well worth reading but not alone when studying the first day of the Gallipoli campaign. ♦

Peter Williams, ‘The Battle of ANZAC Ridge: 25 April 1915’, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2007, Casebound and jacketed, 221pp., RRP \$A45.00 (free postage if purchased from the publisher).