

Violent Lessons: Was the Gallipoli campaign central to the growth of tactical competence in the AIF?

The backbone of a thorough military training is the careful and gradual instruction of the individual, officer or soldier, in every duty he may be called upon to fulfil, and the development to the utmost of his mental and physical powers. But such development is impossible unless free play is given to individual intelligence and initiative.¹

Introduction.

The legacy of the Gallipoli Campaign has long been a source of controversy and dispute among and between historians, politicians and the wider community. Many claims are made about the military performance on the Peninsula, both in comparative terms between different national groupings of combatants and in qualitative terms in assessments of relative military effectiveness. One area that, surprisingly, has received little analytical attention, is the contribution if any that the campaign made to improving the tactical military skill and ability of those inexperienced troops whose introduction to combat happened on that unforgiving Peninsula. This is particularly true for the real amateurs of the Gallipoli campaign, the Australian and New Zealand citizen soldiers.

General Sir Richard Haking, commander of British Army's XI Corps for the Battle of Fromelles in July 1916 and, in Australian popular memory, one of the biggest villains of the British Generals' club, quite accurately explained there was no substitute for actual battle experience in developing combat skills.² Long pilloried for his remark after Fromelles that the 5th Australian Division would be the better for their experience,³ analysis of the infantry's performance during that battle compared with subsequent battlefield performances suggest that he was probably correct. If you take Hakings' observation at face value, clearly there was no contribution to the AIF's tactical competence from its exposure to combat on Gallipoli. Jumping to a quick and simple finding on such a complex question is, though, fraught with danger.

As analysis has shown that at least 80% of the Australian infantry at Fromelles did **not** have Gallipoli experience, it could be argued that the Gallipoli experience was too thinly spread to have any impact. With only 20% of its infantry being battle-experienced, the Division was essentially raw, and thus Haking's comment is still valid. However, that is again too simplistic. The outcome of the 5th Division's attack differs markedly from that achieved by the 1st Division at Pozières two days later. Time unfortunately does not permit the inclusion of the Pozières action in this evaluation but a brief possible explanation could be that the percentage of Gallipoli veterans in the 1st Division was significantly higher than that of the 5th. If this was correct, then Hakings', and indeed the common wisdom, would be correct. Yet, those responsible for the doubling in size of the AIF and for the formation of the 4th and 5th Divisions claimed this was not the case. Brudenell White and C.E.W. Bean both claimed that Gallipoli veterans were spread evenly across the new formations. If they

¹ Field Marshal Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief, 'Preface,' War Office, *Infantry Training (Provisional) 1902*, London: HMSO, 1902) p.2.

² Commander XI Corps Minute to Divisional Commanders dated August 1916. General Staff XI Corps. War Diary, August 1916, WO 95/881 TNA.

³ His critics think he was merely being coldly dismissive of the 1700 dead suffered by the 5th during that ill-fated attack. See for example, Robin Corfield, *don't forget me, cobber: The Battle of Fromelles* (Melbourne: Miegunyan Press, 2009) p. 24.

are correct, the only conclusion possible is that combat experience is only one part of the complex tactical competence equation. Other factors, including leadership, planning, training (both individual, including staff training, and collective), combat support and that great unsung determinant of battlefield success, luck, must also play a critical role in combat performance. Or perhaps White and Bean were lying and 1st Division was over endowed with battle hardened Gallipoli veterans?

This is a topic that requires considerably more analysis and time to expand upon than can be tackled in a paper of this length. In the time available, I will be focussing on the infantry experience, as evidenced through both individual and collective skills. Analysing any contribution of the Gallipoli experience to AIF tactical efficiency requires two 'precursor' questions to be addressed: how tactically competent was the AIF on Gallipoli, and how tactically competent was it in its first battle on the Western Front.

Tactical competence on Gallipoli.

Military historians generally agree that the Australians were brave but deficient in basic individual military skills, enthusiastic but poorly led and aggressive but lacking tactical competence. If this perception is true, then it could be argued that any experience on Gallipoli would have had to be beneficial to the development of their tactical skill. But before examining the AIF's tactical performance on the morning of 25 April 1915, it is essential we set the context in which they performed.

Jeffrey Grey has somewhat acidly pointed out that 'the 1st Division was probably the worst-trained formation ever sent from Australian shores.'⁴ General Birdwood, in his memoirs, mentioned that in January 1915 he offered to move the Australians from their camp around the pyramids across the Suez to bolster the defences of the canal from the anticipated Turkish attack. General Maxwell, the GOC Egypt, declined the offer, giving as the reason the fact 'that they were far from fully trained': a statement with which Birdwood fully agreed.⁵ For any General to decline the offer of an additional 20,000 men in a time of emergency is irrefutable evidence of their lack of value as combatants. The obvious question is how on earth did a national contingent deploy for operations so patently ill-prepared for the task?⁶

It was not the fault of either the individual soldier or the Army as a whole – it was the inevitable result of the early internal Australian political debate that had resulted in a Defence Act forbidding the overseas deployment of Australia's part time army. It is often forgotten today that there was an Australian Army already in existence in 1914: one that was going through major upheaval itself but did at least have a structure, command and control arrangements and some basic understanding of tactical skills. Without the existence of this Army, it is highly unlikely the formation of the AIF would have been as efficiently or quickly undertaken. Most of the officers and senior NCOs in the original AIF units came from the peace-time Army,⁷ providing a thin cadre of some basic professional skills.⁸

⁴ Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, 3rd edn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 93.

⁵ Field Marshal Lord Birdwood, *Khaki and Gown: An Autobiography*, (London: Ward, Lock and Company, 1941) p. 257.

⁶ As Stevenson notes, it was planned that the Division would complete its training in Britain before moving to the Western front. Robert Stevenson, *To Win the Battle The 1st Australian Division in the Great war, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.87.

⁷ Most useful were the volunteers from the small professional, full time element, the Administrative and Instructional Corps.

⁸ The efficiency of the pre-war Australian Army should not be overstated, nor should too much credence be given to the impact of pre-war militia experience. Following the Kitchener visit and the move to a conscription-based force, most of the cadre of NCOs and officers of the A&I staff were focussed on basic training of new intakes.

Irrespective of this leavening of pre-war military experience, the AIF of 1914 was not an army – a better description of it would be a proud band of civilian amateurs armed with military weapons. Despite CEW Bean’s myth-making,⁹ recent research has shown that many were not familiar with firearms or knew little about horses.¹⁰ Few had the much vaunted bush survival skills that, according to Dr Bean, rendered them ‘natural soldiers’.¹¹ Given recruiting didn’t start until 10 August, and noting the first elements of the first convoy were supposed to sail on 21 September,¹² it is unsurprising that pre-sailing training was minimal at best.¹³ Simply organising this rush of humanity into organised units and formations was a challenge.¹⁴ Commanding Officers of the first four Battalions were only appointed in the period 13 to 17 August,¹⁵ while the CO of Western Australia’s 11th Battalion did not assume command until 24 August.¹⁶ Before any serious training could commence, training syllabus had to be prepared, instructors had to be found, training areas identified, consumable stores such as food, ammunition and fuel found and some evaluation system agreed upon.¹⁷ Given this period was most notable for shortages of everything, from uniforms to weapons and transport to signalling equipment,¹⁸ it is unsurprising that the battalions focussed on what training was possible: mainly route marching, drill, musketry (if sufficient ammunition could be found) and familiarity with new equipment, such as webbing and puttees.¹⁹

The original sailing date of 21 September was regularly slipped and the convoy did not sail until 1 November.²⁰ Consequently, even basic training plans were constantly disrupted by premature embarkation warnings. The voyage itself did provide some opportunity for basic instruction – mainly lectures and musketry - but the general consensus was that tactics lectures were of little lasting value as there was no opportunity to reinforce the lesson through real-time practice.²¹ It was not until the AIF arrived in Egypt that serious training could commence.

Once in Egypt, a number of new issues arose to exacerbate the familiar ones of no facilities, no stores and shortages of equipment of most types. One critical decision faced by commanders was what type of training was to be conducted as a priority.

The old militia officers had little or no formal training and most of their skills and ideas were elementary, outdated and inadequately understood.

⁹ C.E.W Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. (Hereafter *OH*.) Vol. 1 (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Ltd, 1940) p. 47.

¹⁰ The War Diary of the 1st Battalion noted ‘[musketry] result were poor as most (subsequently crossed out) men unacquainted with rifles.’ War Diary, 1st Australian Infantry Battalion. Entry for 9 September 1914. AWM Series 4, Australian War Memorial. (Hereafter AWM4.)

¹¹ For a more detailed critique of Bean’s claims, see Stevenson, *To Win the Battle*, p.84-85.

¹² Bean, *OH*. Vol. 1, p. 86.

¹³ Stevenson, *To Win the Battle*, p. 85.

¹⁴ Promotions of lieutenants to captains to be company commanders was still happening as the convoy was leaving Australia. War Diary, 1st Australian Infantry Brigade. Entry for 31 October 1914. AWM4.

¹⁵ Bean, *OH*. Vol. 1, p. 82.

¹⁶ Walter C. Belford, *“Legs Eleven” Being the Story of the 11th battalion (A.I.F.) in the Great War of 1914-1918*, [original print: 1940] (Perth: John Burridge, 1992) p. 14.

¹⁷ Initially, the AIF elements in Sydney were also competing with the AN&MEF being raised concurrently for service in German New Guinea.

¹⁸ Bean, *OH*. Vol. 1, p. 84.

¹⁹ Few recruits completed even the basic musketry course. F. W. Taylor and T.A. Cusack, *Nulli Secundus. A History of the Second Battalion AIF 1914-1919*, [original print: 1942] (Perth: John Burridge, 1992) p. 34.

²⁰ Many component parts of the first convoy, the Queensland contingent for example, sailed from their home ports from mid-October.

²¹ Some practical skills were well-developed during the voyage, such as signalling with lamp and semaphore lamps and weapons maintenance. Non-tactical skills, especially knowledge essential for officers and NCOs, such as military law, orders preparation, field hygiene etc. was also developed on board. Unfortunately also, some battalions gained practical experience in the conduct of courts-martial with genuine cases being heard aboard ship.

There were two types of training that were urgently needed. The first was individual training, such as how to shoot, operation of basic equipment, navigation on a battlefield and survival in the field. A subset of individual training was command and staff training – how to develop critical command and staff skills that made an Army work. The AIF's (and Australia's) deficiencies in capable staff mirrored the rest of the Empire, which had been slow to adopt the European model of a highly professional corps of staff officers. Second was collective training; the skill to work together as part of a larger organisation. Collective training was the means by which a large group of individuals learned to function as a mutually supporting team, which also ties into effective command and staff skills. Collective training needed to occur at every level of organisation, from the soldier's basic section of 10 men up to the Division with 12,000 infantry (plus artillery and other combat support troops).²²

Given the whole force was dangerously deficient in both individual and collective skills, it was a dilemma confronting the AIF command: which one should they focus on? Without reasonable individual skill levels, there was little value in collective training at any level and without basic collective training, the mass of manpower were just a gathering of amateur would-be soldiers: a battlefield liability, not an asset. Bridges himself was less than decisive on this problem. In December, he issued a training schedule which set out one month for sub-unit training, with 10 days then for unit training followed by 10 days of formation training. However, the brigade war diaries suggest collective training was primary focus. They show the training sequence followed was company and battalion level collective training in January and most of February 1915 with brigade level training from the end of February and into March. Even so, this was woefully inadequate time to prepare a force of this size for an operation of this complexity.

Essential command and staff skills were in an even more parlous state. Bringing in Birdwood and his team from the Indian Army was in part an attempt to compensate for organic deficiencies in both but again, the capacity for the few officers with relevant skills to lift the overall standard was very limited: trained and competent staff officers and commanders were in very short supply across the British Armies. Unfortunately, poor command and the failures of the staff on 25 April helped doom the Gallipoli operation from the outset.

It is important also to emphasise the difference between training and rehearsal. For the Australian Army of today, this amount of time would arguably be adequate to prepare for an operational deployment. Today's army already has high levels of individual skills, junior leader skills and staff skills, with a constant cycle of individual and collective skill training. None of these prerequisites were in place in early 1915 so, despite the cheery assessments in official documents and in individual battalion histories to the contrary, it was extremely unlikely that the Anzac Corps could attain anything close to battlefield tactical competence in such a limited period. The ultimate objective assessment of the Corps battle preparedness would of course occur at dawn on 25 April.

The Gallipoli Experience.

To quote Bob Stevenson, 'The many limitations of the 1st Division's training regime were quickly exposed on Gallipoli. Rushed basic training, the unrealistic, albeit hard collective training in Egypt and its cursory amphibious rehearsals left the division with

²² Ian Kuring, *Redcoats to Cams. A History of Australian Infantry 1788-2001*. (Sydney: Australian Military History Publications, 2004) p. 47.

a shell of experience that did not hold up under the strain of combat.²³ There is any number of scholarly works that support this analysis. Individual private papers from participants often also sustain this assessment.²⁴ Most note that courage and enthusiasm were widely evident but basic military skills were not. There are many reports of un-aimed fire, of troops becoming lost or disoriented in the scrub and of losing contact with their sections. In his diary, then Private Louch described how not having any understanding of what they were supposed to be doing impeded any of them from attempting to exercise any initiative.²⁵ Even General Birdwood noted the alarming tendency for men to rush off into the scrub on their own, not waiting to join their units or for any support.²⁶ As Chris Roberts notes, lack of confidence in the skills of his troops led the commander of the 3rd Brigade, Colonel Ewan Sinclair-MacLagan, to make a series of misjudgements – that is, staff and command failures - on the first morning.²⁷

It was this failure of skills, both individual and collective, that most affected the outcome. The troops' failure to operate as a disciplined force enabled the Turks to repel easily attacks from individuals and small unsupported groups while accounts of the battle for the heights of Hill 971 and Chanuk Bair suggest that the Turks simply outmanoeuvred the scattered and effectively leaderless Australians. Other examples serve to demonstrate the failure of the staff process. Chris Roberts is very critical of the staff command decision-making of 3rd Brigade. The Brigade Major, C.H Brand, an experienced A&I Corps officer, was misused:²⁸ being sent off immediately he came ashore to take tactical control of the Brigade's right front rather than setting up Brigade Headquarters and developing command 'situational awareness' of what was happening. Sinclair-MacLagan was pessimistic about the outcome even before he landed and seemed overly willing to accept advice and information that confirmed his pessimism. His decisions not to advance to the brigade's initial objectives and, more importantly, to divert 2nd Brigade to the south to cover his right flank instead of striking straight on to the high ground lost the campaign at its very beginning. The lack of any overall picture of what was happening could not have helped his decision-making.

When the remaining elements of 1st Division landed, followed soon after by the New Zealand and Australian Division, there seemed little capacity or will to try and correct these initial mistakes. The performance of individual soldiers continued to be a matter of concern and their actions remained uncoordinated and largely unsupported.²⁹ Based on documented evidence, it is impossible to deny the assessment that the AIF was an under prepared inadequately led amateur force. If Gallipoli was the important factor in the improvement of the AIF that many claim, then we must assume their first attack on the Western Front, at Fromelles on the night of 19/20 July 1916, would not contain similar examples of tactical incompetence.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 90.

²⁴ 'We had not been taught, up to that time, that a section was a tactical unit capable of operating independently, and that the job of a section commander was to lead. Looking back on it now, I can think of all the things I might or should have done instead of just sitting pat at the bottom of Wire Gully.' Private papers of BRIG Thomas Steane Louch. (Hereafter Louch Papers.) Private Papers Collection, PR85/363, Part 1. Australian War Memorial, p. 17.

²⁵ Louch Papers, p.14-16.

²⁶ Birdwood, *Khaki and Gown*, p. 259.

²⁷ Chris Roberts, *The Landing at ANZAC 1915* 2nd edn. (Sydney: Big Sky Publishing, 2015) p. 107.

²⁸ Bean, *OH*. Vol. 1, p. 275.

²⁹ In correspondence with the author, Chris Roberts states: 'I can't recall any attacks being made by the Australians on 25 April, except for individual local counter-attacks against Lone Pine, where junior officers rallied retreating soldiers and led them forward again. For ANZAC the 25th of April was a defensive battle with the vast majority of troops occupying a firing line and blazing away.' He also states that the AIF was really capable of conducting a well-coordinated attack, as demonstrated by the disastrous effort by the 4th Battalion on 25 April.

Fromelles

This was not the case! The attack by the 5th Division on the evening of 19/20 July 1916 remains one of the greatest military disasters in Australia's military history. Apologists for the AIF seek to blame everyone other than the soldiers themselves for this tragic outcome and indeed, many do share in the blame. However, the hard documented evidence, including the personal accounts of many of those directly involved, show that the Gallipoli experience did not prevent the individual soldiers from making the same basic tactical errors as they had done on the Peninsula.

Those of you who know my interest in this battle will appreciate I could fill the rest of the day in a discussion about the tactical errors made but in view of the time, only a quick overview is possible. During the attack itself, troops lost touch with the protective barrage (such as it was), failed to maximise the scant cover available to them in No Man's Land and often went to ground and refused to advance when first coming under fire. Lack of supporting fire left the German defenders comparatively unengaged. Lack of familiarity with their weapons saw many troops not return fire or, in some cases, fire into the backs of their advancing comrades. New weapons were insufficiently understood and became a hazard rather than a help: grenades were thrown without the pins having been pulled – to the annoyance of the German defenders whose records comment on this. For a number of reasons, this was a late afternoon attack which meant those soldiers who did manage to gain their objectives were consolidating the position at night. Many became lost and disoriented. Unit cohesion broke down. Troops lost contact with flanking elements. Basic tactical doctrine was forgotten, if indeed it was known.³⁰

This is not to suggest that all individual performances were poor – far from it. There were many examples of brilliant tactical actions and outstanding examples of initiative and leadership. The problem though is, in warfare of this type on this scale, individuals actions by themselves count for little if the overall mass of troops does not work together. The biggest failure of the Australians at Fromelles, like at Gallipoli, is that their collective skills were found wanting and their staff skills were even worse. Lack of battlefield support both between the infantry elements and from external combat support like engineers and especially artillery made the attack worse than it should have been. Low levels of individual skills in the artillery meant they did little damage to the enemy's defences and failed to provide the essential suppression to enable the infantry to advance. Failures in communications, both individual skills and of the equipment itself further exacerbated the problems. There is no evidence I can find that suggests the performance of the 5th Division on 19 July was any better than of the 1st on 25 April.

Conclusion

While it is difficult to conceive of a force even less prepared for operations than the AIF of 1915, the evidence supports the conclusion that the 1916 version was indeed as underprepared, if not more so, as its predecessor. Because of the rapid and enormous expansion that occurred in the AIF in late 1915 early 1916, the same problems that had confronted it in August 1914 returned. There was again a lack of many essentials from artillery and shells to qualified instructors and training facilities. The British authorities in Egypt tried hard to satisfy many of these essentials but they were a lower priority than France and they could not give what they did not have. Formation training of any relevance for operations on the Western Front was

³⁰ 'To show how new we were, the six Lewis guns were sent over in this attack in the last wave.' Report by 53rd Battalion on the Fromelles attack. Bean Papers, 3DRL606/243B/1, AWM38.

impossible in the absence of the Division's organic artillery. Individual skills preparation for the Western Front was compromised by the rapid developments in weapons and equipment in use of the Western Front but which could not be supplied to troops elsewhere. Even serious survival training, such as anti-gas procedures, was hampered by the absence of relevant equipment. And of course, this situation was even worse for specialised areas such as artillery and logistics, for whom the story of 1915-1916 is even more depressing.

The key factor in all this was time. Nearly all these problems could have been worked around or overcome had sufficient time been available. More time would have enabled the acquisition of sufficient equipment or at least enough to ensure basic familiarity. It would have enabled the establishment of schools in sufficient numbers and with trained instructors to sort out individual and basic collective skills. Time would have enabled more frequent higher formation training, with periods to assess progress and address shortcomings. Most importantly, more time would have enabled the training of sufficient numbers of specialists – staff officers, combat support elements, logisticians and the myriad of newly emerging niche functions (aerial photograph interpreters for example) to support the expanded AIF.

The obvious lesson from this example is, if you under-invest in defence in peacetime, especially in those behind-the-scenes areas of logistics, staff skills and individual combat training, it will cost a lot of blood and many soldiers lives before the essential skills can be re-acquired to enable effective performance in war.