Troop landings in Gallipoli, Turkey, in 1915. In one of the most disastrous campaigns of World War I, British, French, Australian, and New Zealand troops disembarked at Gallipoli in an attempt to invade mainland Turkey, seize control of the Dardanelles Strait, and link up with Russian forces. The Allied forces met stiff resistance and finally withdrew, having suffered heavy casualties.

(Image © Billie Love)

Summary Article: Gallipoli Campaign (1915–1916)
From The Encyclopedia of War

A naval and military campaign fought between the Ottoman Empire and the attacking forces of the British and French empires between February 1915 and January 1916.

The campaign was conceived in London, where the stalemate on the Western Front led to considering other options. One suggestion, championed by the first lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, was that a naval attack be made against the Ottoman Empire at the Dardanelles. The aim of the attack was to destroy enemy control of these straits, allowing the fleet to steam on to Constantinople where, it was hoped, the Ottoman Empire would surrender. Besides knocking one of Germany's allies out of the war it might encourage the Balkan states to join the British—French cause, would aid Russia and, moreover, the attack could be made by older ships not required for main fleet duty.

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The Ottoman defenses consisted of established forts with suitable guns, several barriers of naval mines, and mobile batteries of guns which protected both. A combined British and French fleet commenced bombarding the shore emplacements on February 19, 1915. This was followed on March 18 by a concerted effort to force the narrows and destroy the Ottoman forts, during which the 18 battleships and the attendant escorts proved unable to overcome the defenses. Three battleships were sunk by mines and another three were seriously damaged. The naval attack was called off.

In the meantime, plans had developed regarding the landing of troops as a way to deal with the forts and mobile batteries. This obviated the attractions of a purely naval attack, but, the argument went, if the troops secured the straits, the mines could be cleared and the fleet could continue to its goal of Constantinople. By finding two British divisions and one French division, and making use of the
Australian and New Zealand troops (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps—ANZAC) then training in Egypt, a force of seventy thousand was cobbled together. Labeled the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, its commander was General Sir Ian Hamilton.

After a period of rapid planning and preparation, the landings were made on the Gallipoli Peninsula on April 25. The British 29th Division landed at five beaches around the southern tip of the peninsula at Cape Helles with the aim of advancing along the coast with naval support to deal with the forts. The French division landed on the Asiatic coast at Kum Kale as a diversion and to deal with Ottoman guns there, before a planned reembarkation and redeployment to the side of the British at Helles. The ANZAC troops landed on the Aegean coast to advance across the peninsula toward Midos where, from the high ridges, they would sever Ottoman communications into the region.

The ANZAC troops got ashore against slight opposition but were faced by tortuous, poorly mapped terrain which fragmented the force's efforts. The inexperienced troops and their cautious commanders failed to secure their objectives, and as the Ottoman resistance began to stiffen, they were forced to dig in. The attacking British division suffered heavy casualties in the face of strong opposition at two of its landing beaches but had established a toe-hold by day's end. The next several days were spent trying to expand or eject the beachheads. For both sides the attacks were costly and usually without much benefit. This set the pattern for the coming months as the Anglo-French force, despite reinforcements, was unable to break through to even the initial objectives. For the Ottoman defenders, it was no better; their offensive against the ANZAC defenses on May 19, for example, cost them more than ten thousand casualties for no gain.

In August Hamilton opted to undertake a new offensive from the Aegean flank and the ANZAC positions. Two divisions were landed at Suvla Bay to establish a new base to support these operations. A diversionary attack at Helles by the British was costly and fruitless, and when the Australian and New Zealand troops attacked they similarly enjoyed no sustainable success. Living conditions on the peninsula had never been good and, as the troops became weaker, evacuations due to illness increased. There were some months of handwringing over the campaign's future, but the entry of Bulgaria into the war on the German—Ottoman side, the opening of a new front in Salonika, the looming winter, and the manifest failures meant that when a new commander was appointed, General Sir Charles Monro, he advocated withdrawal. After a confirmatory visit by the British secretary of state for war, Lord Kitchener, this course was chosen. Perversely, this was the best-run part of the campaign and the beachheads were successfully evacuated for virtually no casualties in late December 1915 and early January 1916. Total Anglo-French casualties were about 140,000, and Ottoman casualties are estimated at 250,000. Evacuations through illness are unknown, but probably amounted to more than another 140,000 for the British Empire troops alone.

A complete failure, the Gallipoli campaign was undertaken by too few troops with too few resources, was made over ground which afforded the defenders great advantage, was beset with doubtful operational appreciations about the chances of success, and ultimately served a dubious strategic purpose. There is no evidence to support the idea that if it had been successful the fleet would, even if it had made it to Constantinople, have forced an Ottoman exit from the war. There was no aid to then send to Russia and the Balkan states were more influenced by closer events. Nor did the campaign do anything to defeat Britain and France’s main enemy, Germany.

SEE ALSO: ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps); Churchill, Sir Winston S. (1874–1965);
Kitchener, General Horatio Herbert, 1st Earl Kitchener (1850–1916); Liman von Sanders, General Otto Karl Victor (1855–1929); World War I: Afro-Asian theaters; World War I: Western Front.

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