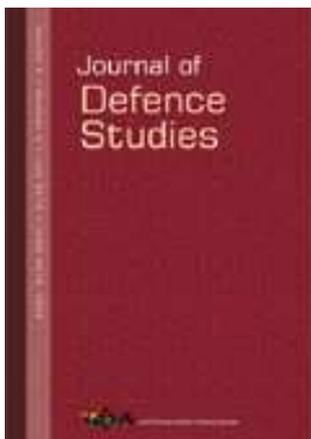


Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



Journal of Defence Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>

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To cite this article: Peter Stanley (2014): Indians, Anzacs and Gallipoli, 1915, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 8, No. 3, July–September 2014, pp. 21–30

URL http://idsa.in/jds/8_3_2014_IndiansAnzacsandGallipoli1915.html

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Indians, Anzacs and Gallipoli, 1915

*Peter Stanley**

As one of the world's most populous nations, India today has one of its largest armies, which stands ready to defend the nation. A century ago, India's army was similarly large but was used to defend the British empire as well as Britain's Indian possessions. In 1914, the Indian Army (a force of about 200,000 men) provided a vast reservoir of trained military manpower, one immediately used by Britain as it entered the Great War. In the war's earliest weeks, from August 1914, the Indian Army was mobilised for service, and within months the first Indian troops saw service against imperial Germany, in East Africa, but also on the Western Front in France and Belgium.

Before the war's end over a million Indians had volunteered to serve the King Emperor, and over 60,000 had died fighting in Europe, the Middle East, Mesopotamia, Africa and on Gallipoli, in Turkey. The first books about the Indian contribution to the Western Front appeared during the war, while the disasters of the Mesopotamian campaign (fought in present-day Iraq, which became India's major responsibility) became notorious at the time. But the Indian involvement in the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 remains almost unknown. Only a handful of articles have appeared about it, and the scale of India's contribution, and its significance, has remained a subject known only to a few specialists, such as Squadron Leader Rana

* Professor Peter Stanley of the University of New South Wales, Canberra, has published 26 books and is one of Australia's most productive military historians. His forthcoming book—*Die in Battle, Do not Despair: The Indians on Gallipoli, 1915*—will be published next year.

ISSN 0976-1004 print

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Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 8, No. 3, July–September 2014, pp. 21–30



Chhina, the author of one of those articles and the instigator of a recent historical conference in New Delhi, the first event marking the centenary of India's part in the Great War.

In 2015 the first book devoted to the experience and impact of India's part in the Gallipoli campaign will be published in Peter Stanley's *Die in Battle, Do not Despair: the Indians on Gallipoli 1915* (to be published by Helion Books, UK, and expected to be available in India). An associated website funded by the Australian Department of Defence will allow Indians and others to read about the Indian contribution to the campaign and perhaps stimulate further research in India into one of the Indian Army's hardest and, possibly, most futile military ventures under British command.

What was the Gallipoli campaign, and what was it intended to achieve? In November 1915 the Ottoman empire entered the war against Britain (and its ally imperial Russia) and immediately imperiled British interests in the Middle East. Turkish troops threatened the vital Suez Canal (and in January 1915 actually attacked it), and British India became embroiled in what proved to be a long and costly campaign in Mesopotamia, an Ottoman province. Russian requests for help in its winter campaigns against the Ottomans in the Caucasus prompted British strategists Winston Churchill and Lord Kitchener to propose a naval operation against the Ottoman capital. Using the powerful British and French advantage of sea power, they planned for a fleet to force a passage through the Dardanelles, the strait linking the Aegean Sea, the Ottoman capital, Constantinople, and the Black Sea. At first aimed at bringing relief to a hard-pressed Russia, the operation soon took on a momentum of its own, and the failure of a purely naval attack led to the idea of landing an army (the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force) on the shores of the Gallipoli to 'take the Gallipoli Peninsula, with Constantinople as its object', as Churchill directed. The invasion, in April 1915, committed the British and French army—including contingents from Australia, New Zealand and India—to a protracted and, indeed, disastrous campaign lasting for the whole of 1915.

Indian troops, a large force of which had been sent to Egypt to help to defend the Suez Canal, were a part of the invasion force from the start. With the exception of a division of British regulars (withdrawn from the garrison of India in 1914) Indian troops were the only professional soldiers available. The Mediterranean Expeditionary Force's commander, Sir Ian Hamilton, specifically asked for Indian troops to join the British regulars,

the Australian and New Zealand ('Anzac') citizen-soldier divisions, and French troops. Hamilton, who had served in India, wanted a brigade of Gurkhas because he recognised that the terrain of the Gallipoli peninsula resembled that of the North-West Frontier, where the Gurkhas trained and served.

In fact, the Indian force allocated to Hamilton's force comprised a brigade of mountain artillery (used to support the Anzacs), a brigade of infantry (eventually comprising five-and-a-half battalions), and a large Supply and Transport organization, which was perhaps India's most important contribution.

The Indian force reflected the composition of the Indian Army at the time, largely drawn from what were regarded the 'martial' peoples of India—Sikhs and Muslims (*Musalmans*, as the army quaintly termed them) from the Punjab and especially the Gurkhas, mercenaries from Nepal. The force's composition reflected both Ian Hamilton's desire to have troops experienced in mountain warfare, but also the religious politics of the war. The brigade originally sent to Gallipoli (arriving on 1 May) included two battalions of Punjabis, half of whom were Musalmans. Fears that Muslim troops would be reluctant to fight their Ottoman co-religionists led to the withdrawal of the two Punjabi battalions and their replacement by two more Gurkha battalions, meaning that the 'Indian' infantry force comprised a Sikh battalion (the 14th Sikhs) and three Gurkha battalions. It seems plausible that Hamilton exploited the fear of the Punjabis' reliability to obtain the Gurkhas he had wanted from the start. By June, the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade comprised the 14th Sikhs and battalions of the 5th, 6th and 10th Gurkhas.

The mountain artillery brigade's two batteries (composed of Sikhs and Punjabi Musalmans) landed with the Anzacs on 25 April 1915, and served alongside them for the entire campaign. The Indian gunners helped to hold the Anzac lines against Turkish assaults. One of their British officers recorded that the Australians admitted that 'they could never have stopped in Quinn's Post [one of the most precarious positions] if it had not been for them.'

Though the Anzacs and the Indians had little shared language, Hindi and Urdu speakers were found among Australians who had lived in India, and Indian troops learned English as they lived with and fought alongside the Anzacs. Soon men of the various forces were sharing meals and conversations—and trenches in which death and wounds came to them equally. What one of their (British) officers called 'an entente most

remarkable' grew between the two forces. Men from a profoundly racist society (which had enacted a 'White Australia' policy) came to respect and admire their Indian comrades.

Sergeant Fred Aspinall, an Australian signaller, recorded how he made friends with Subedar-Major Paktar Singh of the mountain artillery. The two chatted at Aspinall's signal post and Aspinall established that Paktar Singh hailed from Ludhiana. The subedar wrote his name in Aspinall's notebook; apparently the only handwriting by an Indian soldier on Gallipoli that has survived. Gunner Frank Cooper, a New Zealander, recalled the Indian gunners especially as 'the finest type of coloured men'—a patronizing judgment but sincerely intended.

Meanwhile, on the British sector of the Gallipoli peninsula, Cape Helles, the Indian infantry provided a skillful, professional force, which for two months held the vital coastal sector of the British line. The Indian infantry brigade made an impression soon after arriving. In mid-May, the 1-6th Gurkhas attacked and seized a strong Ottoman position on a coastal headland soon named 'Gurkha Bluff' in their honour. The Gurkhas took the hill using exactly the tactics they had learned on the ridges of India's North-West frontier, though hardly a man of the battalion had seen action previously.

The Indians' value was also seen in the way they took part in a series of major, though ultimately unsuccessful attacks as Ian Hamilton's force



Figure 1 Indian wounded evacuated from Gallipoli

Source: Sydney Mail.

attempted to break out of the beach-head. In the attack at Gully Ravine on 4 June, the 14th Sikhs lost heavily as its men repeatedly tried to force their way through strongly held Turkish trenches.

The Sikhs attacked in two waves, separated by 15 minutes, most along the bed of the ravine, between the Gurkhas on the left and British troops to the right. The British novelist-turned-staff-officer, Compton Mackenzie, listening to the reports as they came into Hunter-Weston's headquarters, described what he imagined as the messages arrived. 'The Sikhs...came into the full cross-fire of rifles and machine-guns as they moved over the exposed slope...the day went badly for the Sikhs.'

The Sikhs' losses were staggering. Of those who took part—15 British officers (including Captain Herajee Cursetjee, the battalion's Parsi medical officer), 13 Indian officers and 450 sepoy, no fewer than 12 officers, 11 Indian and 371 sepoy were killed or wounded. The battalion suffered losses of 80 per cent, most within a few hours. With Cursetjee wounded and evacuated, the battalion's sub-assistant surgeon, Jemadar Bhagwan Singh took over until a new medical officer arrived, for which he was awarded the Indian Order of Merit.

The debacle had several effects. The losses of 4 June crippled the 14th Sikhs for months. Heavy casualties among its British and Indian officers, and Sikh 'other ranks' led to Hamilton seeking to use the Sikh Patiala Infantry, one of the units of the Indian princely states serving in Egypt.



Figure 2 Sikh Infantry (probably Patiala) on Gallipoli

Source: Australian War Memorial.

In July and September, half of the Patiala Infantry's companies reinforced the 14th Sikhs. Though British officials assured the Maharaja of Patiala that his regiment would be recognized, in fact the Patialas became part of the 14th Sikhs and their contribution remained largely overlooked. The other effect was to stimulate Sikh recruiting, which previously had lagged under the influence of nationalist activists.

After a brief rest on the nearby island of Imbros (within the sound of gunfire on the peninsula) the 29th Indian Brigade returned to the battle, from early August in the Anzac sector. There it formed part of the spearhead of what became known as the August offensive, the invaders' final chance to break through the Ottoman defences and resume the advance on Constantinople. The offensive involved diversionary attacks at Helles and Anzac, a complex plan involving advances over the rugged Chunuk Bair range north of Anzac and a large British landing at Suvla Bay, to the north. (The Suvla landing was intended to create a base for further operations: the advance on the range was the core of the plan.) The 29th Indian Brigade, reinforced and rested, was one of three attacking brigades. The other two were the 4th Australian and the New Zealand brigades, whose men were exhausted from four months on the peninsula and seriously weakened by diarrhoea. The Indian mountain artillery supported the attack, the climax of the campaign.

On the night of 6-7 August, while Australian troops launched diversionary attacks on the Turks at Anzac, the three attacking columns marched north from Anzac, along the beach and coastal plain, before turning right and climbing the tangle of gullies and ridges leading to the range. While Ottoman resistance was light (they had few defenders on the ridge), the columns became lost in the rough country and by daybreak were far from its crest. Over the next two days Indian infantry (the 14th Sikhs and three Gurkha battalions) and the Australians and New Zealanders made unavailing attempts to gain the summit. Meanwhile the Turks, realising that the ridge needed to be held, sent reserves toward it. The New Zealanders lost heavily in attempting to seize the heights, while after heroic efforts a small party under Major Cecil Allanson of the 1-6th Gurkhas, supported by some British troops, approached the summit. Again, the Gurkhas' mountain warfare skills enabled them to attempt an assault that, had it been better planned and supported, might have brought success, if not victory.

At dawn on 9 August, Allanson's men—hillmen from Nepal and men from the industrial counties of England—reached the crest, for a few



Figure 3 A rare photograph of Gurkhas in action during the August offensive

Source: Gurkha Museum, Pokhara.

minutes. Then, artillery shells began to fall among Allanson's party and they were driven off, as the Turks rallied and counter-attacked. They had briefly been able to look down on the Narrows in the distance, the goal of the entire campaign. The shell-fire, long thought to have come from British warships, was actually from Anzac artillery firing on pre-arranged bombardment in ignorance of the attack. The rest of the offensive died down amid allegations of sluggish command and lost opportunities. It was the last chance for the invaders' victory, and the Indian Army was central to it.

For the rest of the campaign the Indian infantry, growing to five-and-a-half battalions by the arrival from the Western Front of the 1-4th Gurkhas, held the trenches around Demakjelik Bair, lines overlooked by the Ottoman troops. In August, they and a mixed bag of empire troops (Australians, New Zealanders, Connaught Rangers and South Wales Borderers) became embroiled in savage fighting for an inconsiderable hillock called Hill 60, in which hundreds of empire and Ottoman soldiers died for no real purpose. As autumn and then winter set in, Indian troops endured bitter cold, and in early December hundreds of men were evacuated with frost-bite, costing men toes, feet and in some cases their lives.

Throughout the campaign the mule and cart trains of the Supply and Transport Corps transported supplies, overwhelmingly to non-Indian units the length of the invaders' lines. They risked artillery fire and snipers (because the Ottoman observers could generally see their lines) and suffered hundreds of casualties. Their dedication attracted widespread admiration from other empire troops, often the first time that mainly wartime volunteer soldiers from Britain, Australia and New Zealand had seen or spoken to Indian troops. After several months on Gallipoli many Indian soldiers had learned to speak English, and they were able to converse with men they would never have otherwise met but for the war.

To take one example: a surveyor from Tasmania, Archie Barwick encountered 'a good many Sikhs', describing them as 'fine big men' and noting that they dressed their uncut hair in turbans. He was 'on good terms with them and often paid their camp a visit', and must even have offered them something—cigarettes or food, perhaps—because he wrote that they 'will take nothing from you as it is against their religion'. But the Sikhs offered food to Barwick, and he accepted. 'Many's the taste of their curry, jam and chupputties I have had.' Thinking of their 'White Australia' policy, the Indians' British officers feared that Australians would treat Indians badly. Why did the Anzacs not treat Indians on Gallipoli as they would have in Australia? One officer wrote simply that 'I put it down to the fact that "Johnny" [a common nickname for Indians] was as brave as the Anzacs themselves.'

What did Indians think of the Australians they met? Almost nothing is known from their own mouths, though when in the 1970s Indian Great War veterans were asked about how they got on with white soldiers 'the most enthusiastic comments were about the Australians who apparently treated them heartily and with a spirit of equal comradeship.' Because most Indians were illiterate and their few letters have not survived (unlike letters from France they were not censored, which is how we know more about Indian troops in Europe) we know very little how Indian soldiers reacted to the war they fought on Gallipoli.

By this time the British government had decided that the entire campaign was lost and in November issued orders for the evacuation of the peninsula. This was expected to cost huge casualties—how were the troops to withdraw without attracting Ottoman retaliation? By clever ruses, the invaders were able to deceive the Turks (though there is some doubt whether they realised that the evacuation was occurring and allowed them to go.) Indian muleteers, some from south India, misheard



Figure 4 A British soldier's drawing of a wounded Indian muleteer

Source: John Hargrave, *At Suvla Bay*, 1916.

the destination of their evacuation—the island of Mudros—as Madras. When an officer queried their 'pathetic' wish to return to India, one replied 'Does a man want to go to heaven?' The Indian units—infantry, transport and mountain artillery—were among the last to be withdrawn, on the night of 19-20 December 1915. The British evacuated Cape Helles a month later. The campaign had failed to gain any of its objectives.

The Gallipoli campaign had cost about 85,000 Turkish and 57,000 British and French empire dead, including about 1,600 Indians. The Indian dead, mostly Sikhs and Gurkhas were cremated, while Mohammedan soldiers (including many of the Supply and Transport men and the mountain artillery) were buried, though few of their graves were marked or survived. The names of all of the campaign's Indian dead, however, were inscribed on panels on the great memorial to the missing at Cape Helles, and on memorials in Egypt and Malta.

Though a relatively small part of the invading British force, the Indian Army's contribution to the campaign was more influential than its numbers might suggest. The mountain artillery helped to hold Anzac, while the Sikh and Gurkha infantry's attacks at Cape Helles and on Chunuk Bair demonstrated the value of involving a force of regular, trained soldiers.

The supply troops' services, which contributed to maintaining the force on the peninsula, was arguably the most significant. Perhaps the greatest contribution, however, was that the campaign brought together men from all over the British empire, who for the first time met, talked with and grew to understand each other. The 'entente most remarkable' that grew between Anzacs and Indians arguably presaged the situation today, when Indians are Australia's fastest growing migrant group.

While the campaign was a costly disaster which achieved nothing, in 2015 Australians and Indians can look back on a century of shared endeavour and a relationship that has grown—not always easily or steadily—but which can find in the shared ordeal of Gallipoli a common history.