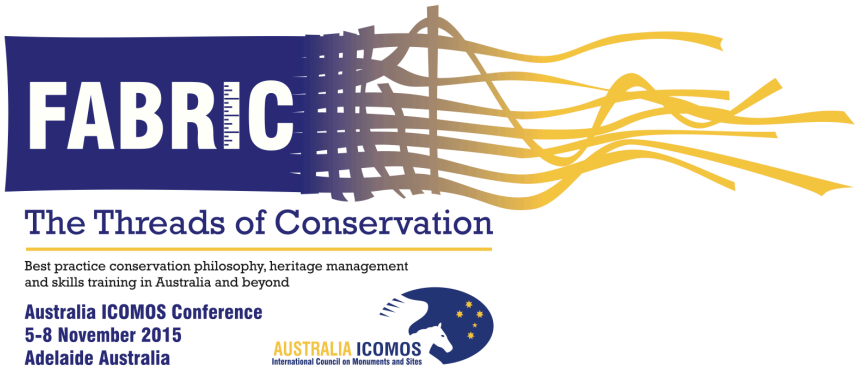
# Gallipoli 100 years on – memory, commemoration, myths and facts

Peter Dowling

Proceedings of:



**Gallipoli 100 years on – memory, commemoration, myths and facts**

## Introduction

Next month, December 19th, 2015, marks 100 years since the evacuation of military forces from the Anzac & Suvla Bay area on the Gallipoli Peninsula. It marks the end of an international military campaign in which Australia played and important role and one whose people had never experienced before.

The Gallipoli campaign has often been seen as a defining moment in our history. Its place in the Australian psyche was strongly confirmed on April 25, 2015 when record crowds attended services across the country. An overwhelming example was the 120,000 people who attended the dawn service at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. (50,000 had been expected).

On April 25, 1915, the 3rd Brigade of the newly formed AIF was the first to land at the place now known officially as Anzac. We are all left with the picture of young Australian men leaping out of open boats in the early dawn and storming up steep slopes under devastating fire from a desperately defending enemy. Taking the slopes and the higher ranges inland was the objective of the attack. That the Anzacs did not do this and were confined to a rather small area of land on the Gallipoli Peninsula for the rest of the campaign does not seem to matter much at all in the defining nationhood narrative that has since been created. While acknowledging the other countries that took part in the struggle, particularly the New Zealand forces, it is perceived as a battlefield of our own – Australia's own bloodstained battlefield.

Much has been written about the Gallipoli campaign on various scholarly and popular levels and with various degrees of proficiency and exactitude. But I'm not going to discuss or give an opinion on these aspects of the campaign in this paper other than to say that recent research

directions and methods, particularly those using translated Ottoman documents and records, will add greatly to the historiography of the Gallipoli campaign in future publications.

What I want to do here is consider, that if we as a nation are going to go down the defining nationalistic route riding on the back of the Gallipoli campaign (and our political leaders are constantly doing this) then perhaps we and they (our political leaders) should begin to separate the dichotomies of myth and fact that have so often muddied our perceptions.

I cannot possibly discuss all the myths and misconceptions that still abound – that would take a book or two and some indeed have already been published (Stockings 2010) – but I will consider a few in my opinion that should be either cast out or certainly better understood.

I have chosen the ones that I learnt at school and continued to regard as facts for many years.

**Myth: They landed at the wrong place.**

The debate about the initial landing place, Anzac Cove, still goes on today among historians, the media and the public. It is clear that much of the 3rd Brigade as the covering force first landed in the confines of Anzac Cove beach and experienced great confusion when they faced a steep and convoluted landscape –not what they expected. I learnt at school that there was an undetected current off the coast of Gallipoli that swept the landing craft north of the intended landing area, just south of Anzac Cove. This was first suggested by the official historian Charles Bean, but has since been rejected by most military historians – no current exists off the coast, which could have affected the landing (Frame 2000, 2015). Yet this myth still persists today.

Anzac Cove was in fact part of the selected area for further landings after the initial covering force had made their way inland. So why did the first wave land at Anzac Cove? This is one of the riddles of the campaign that may never be fully resolved. The commanding officer of the Anzac force, General Birdwood, added to the riddle by stating after the campaign to a commission of inquiry that he purposely had not intended to land at Anzac Cove because of the extremely steep terrain (Dardanelles Commission Papers). But later he stated in a letter to the Australian Defence Minister, George Pearce, that the landing at Anzac Cove was his own idea, which he had amended from the plan (AWM 38/6060/249.39). Perhaps this was because he was aware of the heavily defended area south of Anzac Cove and so changed the destination just prior to the attack.

While there are many other stories around the landing site – and it's mainly the Royal Navy this time that gets the blame – the fact remains that Anzac Cove was part of the wider beach area where the landings on the first day were planned to take place over an intended 1500 metre frontage (Roberts 2011).

However, one should remember that the boats carrying the first Australians to the beach were towed in behind twelve powered craft steered mainly by young naval officers. Their orders were to maintain a distance of 150 yards (137m) between them and travel at the same speed over one and a half miles (2km) towards an unfamiliar shoreline to land on the planned area (Bean 1982).

All this had to be done in the dark, done quietly and in synchronisation. It was no easy job – in order to maintain station on another craft they had to keep that craft in visual contact at all times. It is little wonder that with poor visibility they began to bunch up and ended up landing in and around a small point of the shoreline rather than a wider front. That point was of course Anzac Cove.

Other or myths surrounding the landing abound and are often aimed at Royal Navy battle ships initially taking up the wrong positions before discharging their boats; or misplacing marker buoys in preparation for the landings or cunningly moved by Turks just prior to the landing to instate confusion with the landing forces - etc, etc.

The 3rd Brigade was certainly bunched up and in some confusion when landing but this was a case of hasty planning and perhaps an element of bad luck on a battlefield happening just at a crucial moment. It was a misplaced landing (Roberts 2011) rather than the wrong place.

**Myth: They could have succeeded**

A common thread, which is often stated is that, they could have succeeded and nearly did at the beginning and again during the attempted break out attacks in August. That they didn't was partly because of continuing bad luck, so the explanatory myth goes. What the element or elements of bad luck, which stopped success, is not always alliterated other than to say that there is always a high element of luck going one way or the other during a military campaign, no matter how well it is planned. However, in the case of the Anzac area at Gallipoli it is often the rugged terrain, which is cited as being the difference between success and failure. The Anzacs were fighting two enemies – the Ottomans and the terrain.

This allusion – and a popular allusion it is - does not take into consideration the fighting qualities, determination and the leadership of the Ottoman soldiers (Meset Uyar 2015). They were actually, for the first time in several hundred years, defending their empire on their home soil. A loss by Turkey at Gallipoli would mean a loss of the country to invaders and a final end to the Ottoman Empire. There was great incentive by the all soldiers from the command down to the infantry soldier in the trenches to defend his homeland and his family.

This then leads to the most important, and often overlooked aspect relating to the Gallipoli campaign – the battle capabilities of the Ottoman forces. The forces facing the allies at Gallipoli were especially skilled in defensive warfare having been engaged in conflicts during the Balkan wars of 1912 to 1913. At the Anzac area they had a far better knowledge of the terrain, held the high ground throughout the campaign and had the ability to quickly deploy reserve forces from other nearby areas or, if required, further afield from the Asiatic coast or from Constantinople (Crawley 2010).

In contrast the Anzacs were largely inexperienced in battle – most were hastily trained volunteers (almost still civilians) and for most this was the very first time they had been in action and had come under enemy fire. In fact, it could be argued that the Australians were learning how to fight this war while on the job which invariably leads to mistakes being made – mistakes which could not be easily or quickly remedied and which cost lives and losses.

The Anzacs were also hemmed in within the fronts of the Anzac area with the sea at their backs and with little room to manoeuvre and little hope of reinforcements expediently available.

But let's not disparage the Australian soldiers; despite their naivety in battle, on the whole they fought well and learnt quickly.

**Myth: The Australians fought like Lions but were led by (British) donkeys.**

The Lions led by donkeys allusion. 'Lions led by donkeys' was a term used in the First World War to describe the British infantry (the lions) being led by donkeys (the generals). The contention was that incompetent and indifferent leaders constantly sent the brave soldiers to their deaths while sitting safely behind the lines shuffling paper.

The origin of the phrase actually pre-dates the First World War and most likely comes from an ancient Arabian saying – 'An army of sheep led by a lion would defeat and army of lions led by sheep' [no offence meant to sheep of course). In terms of the Gallipoli campaign the real reason for the Anzacs not succeeding is often blamed on very poor leadership, planning and decision making by British Generals. In this case the donkeys were often seen as British officers.

The allusion of lions led by donkeys was promoted in the 1981 Australian film 'Gallipoli', directed by Peter Weir. The closing segments feature the battle at the Nek during the August offensive. The Australians are being sent out of the trenches in waves directly into Turkish rifle and machine gun fire. Each successive wave is being mowed down. Lieutenant Colonel Brazier, commander of the 10th Light Horse Regiment, attempts to have to have the 3rd wave stopped. The movie depicts a 'Col. Robinson' speaking with a British accent refusing the request and stubbornly saying:

> "Your orders are to attack and you will do so immediately. The British at Suvla must be able to get ashore. Is that clear?"

Brazier replies,

> "It's cold blooded murder."

Robinson strongly commands,

> "I said push on!"

And so the movie shows more young Australians ordered to and attack, only to be mowed down. In the final scene the young hero, Archie Hamilton, just 18 years of age, meets his death in front of Turkish machine guns in a dramatic way. So here we have a myth in the making of Australian lions being led by a British donkey who is safely out of the firing line but has no real understanding of what is happening.

Most of this cinematic depiction is close to actual events apart from the fact that the 'British' officer was in reality Colonel John Macquarie Antill, a second generation Australian from New South Wales, serving as temporary commander of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade. It was an Australian who gave the order to other Australians in the 3rd wave.

But in some defence of the decisions made during the engagement, it should always be acknowledged that most if not all those on the Allied side, who participated in planning and implementation of the Gallipoli campaign, as well as those who fought on the ground, had little experience in the type of warfare that they were about to face. And tactical mistakes in the heat of battle (or the fog of war as it is sometimes referred) will always be made.

**Myth: Simpson and his donkey saved hundreds of lives**

Then there is the almost eulogising of the god-like Simpson and his donkey, casting personal danger aside, braving the bullets, bombs and shells, rescuing and saving the lives of hundreds of soldiers. We all learnt about Simpson at school, and the deeds he did in the first days of the Gallipoli campaign. In fact when I was young he was the only person I could name who was in the First World War (I didn't even then know about my grandfather).

Simpson and his donkey (in fact he used several donkeys) is a focus for the Australian tourist doing the battlefield tour. When taking tour groups over the Gallipoli battlefields I was always asked, 'take us to Simpson's grave.' Once there the cameras come out and posed photographs kneeling next to his headstone are taken, red poppies are left on his grave. After leaving the battlefields I believe that Simpson is still the only person most tourists would remember.

Simpson was indeed a brave man doing his job at Gallipoli, but he was only one of many in the medical corps doing the same job – trudging up Shrapnel Valley or Artillery Road to the front lines to find and bring back wounded to the aid posts in the beach areas. It was a very

dangerous job, often exposed to enemy gun and shellfire and required teamwork to find and bring the wounded down to the beach areas. But Simpson worked alone; in fact he largely brought back only those who had upper and lower limb wounds who were able to stay on the back of a donkey – he was selective in choosing who to rescue (Wilson 2012). So, did he save 'hundreds of lives'? I suspect that other stretcher-bearers working as teams saved more.

An example is Earnest Albert Corey from the 55th Battalion. In early 1917 while fighting in France his brigade suffered heavy casualties. During the conflict he volunteered as a stretcher-bearer and worked for 17 hours in no-man's-land bringing in the wounded. He was awarded the Military Medal. Young Ernie became a regular stretcher-bearer and continually showed great courage and devotion to duty until September 1918 when he was severely wounded and evacuated. For his continued efforts over 14 months as a stretcher-bearer he was awarded three bars to his Military Medal – that's the equivalent of four separate Military Medal awards – no Australian soldier achieved that during the war (Fielding 1981). Yet, his achievements, although recognised in a display in the AWM, have not had the recognition in the public commemorative narrative that Simpson has had and continues to have. The reason is probably that Ernie Corey did not serve at Gallipoli, didn't have a donkey, survived the war and spent the rest of his employment as an unskilled cleaner of government offices in Canberra. Not really the stuff of heroic myth. But there is no doubt whatsoever that Ernie saved many lives during his time as a stretcher-bearer.

Nevertheless, Simpson has been to Australians the most popular and recognised person taking part in Gallipoli and in the First World War. Perhaps this is because he was somewhat a non-conformist to military discipline and chose not to be part of the medical team – a bit of a larrikin, something that engenders itself to the Aussie psyche. In a recent discussion on Anzac, however, the Director of the Australian War Memorial, Dr Brendon Nelson, referred to Simpson as an 'ideal' (Nelson 2015); I rather see him as a 'caricature'.

**Myth: There were no Australian women at Gallipoli**

What about the nurses? The commemorative narrative often overlooks or understates the role of the Australian women who were part of the Gallipoli campaign. During the campaign Australian nurses from the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), together with other civilian medical services, were based in hospitals and medical centres in Cairo, Alexandria, and on the Mediterranean island of Lemnos from where the landing was launched on 25th April. These nurses treated and cared for the many wounded and sick soldiers fighting on the Gallipoli Peninsula during the whole campaign and after.

However, others volunteered, or were posted to the hospital ships, which embarked wounded directly off-shore of the fighting and transported them to hospitals. Even though none of these women stepped foot on Turkish soil during the campaign, they were often in perilous situations with the threat of submarine attack or their ship hitting explosive mines.

But they also came under fire from enemy positions ashore on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Sister Madeline Wilson who had been treating Gallipoli wounded in the military hospital at Heliopolis, near Cairo volunteered for front line work (Frost 1990). In July 1915 she found herself on the British hospital ship *Neuralia.* Between 12 July and 16 November 1915, the ship made nine trips to and from the Gallipoli Peninsula anchoring off Cape Helles, Anzac Cove and Suvla Bay. On 11 August, after embarking wounded while anchored off Anzac Cove, Sister Wilson wrote wearily in her diary:

> Went to bed about 3 pm after 24 hours non-stop, up at 6 am on duty another 24 hours, British gun boats firing day & night, Turks firing heavily on trawlers bringing out wounded. MG s [Turkish machine guns] turned on us while boarding wounded, some killed on deck, boat packed with wounded, one shell landed 12 feet [3.6 metres] from side of ship (Wilson 1915).

A fragment of that shell went through her dress. One soldier was wounded again from shore fire as Sister Wilson passed him a drink of water while on the open deck. It was a narrow escape for her.

This is just one account in the diary of one Australian nurse – there are several others who describe coming under shellfire while anchored off shore of the Gallipoli Peninsula.

**Discussion**

These beliefs, assertions, stories or myths abound about Australians at Gallipoli; and still more are associated with the Australians on the Western Front and the desert campaigns in Sinai and Palestine. In the business of military history they are referred to as 'Zombie Myths'. Like the zombies we know, they are just not quite right, they should be dead, but they are not, and they keep coming back 'sustained by various and unusually nefarious forces in a more or less cataleptic or automotive state' (Stockings 2010). We see and hear of them time and time again and the more we hear the more we believe in them.

So, if these myths are like zombies, or the 'undead', then we should see them as 'untruths'.

But what are myths? There are several definitions:

> The Oxford dictionary:
>
> A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon … a common or shared historical experience
>
> Or
>
> A widely held but false belief or idea
>
> Or
>
> A fictitious or imaginary person, thing or event

Or

An exaggerated or idealized conception of a person, thing or event.

All these seem to fit in our myths.

Why do they arise and continue? And they have certainly been back in vogue during this past year. I see two explanations.

I will suggest that they have arisen and then been sustained by our seemingly deep desire to commemorate the deeds of our past military actions, particularly those of the First World War and its links to nationhood. From this need to commemorate, which I think is right and proper for us as a nation, has come the need to venerate those who served – this I think is the real genesis of the Zombie Myth and why it is sustained.

This veneration is strongly linked into our sense of national identity – and we do need a national identity and within that identity we do need heroes. What we don't seem to need is to view those who engaged in the conflicts as just ordinary people doing extraordinary things in extraordinary situations. Sometimes they achieved great things but often they did not succeed in what they had set out to do and that is not the stuff of heroes. Hence the Zombie Myths arise again and again and overshadow any close scrutiny of our warriors in order to produce the narratives we like to hear.

The second explanation relates to a need, which on the part of an individual is to understand and explain an important event - or, on the part of a group (in this case, a nation) to find a common point, which binds us together as a community or society. The need to stay together in a group, a structured society, or biological entity is very common in many species. In fact it is often fundamental to a species' existence.

The need to stay together therefore exists before the myth that has arisen to fulfil the need. The need is continuous so therefore the myth is continually fulfilling the need. So a myth may be needed to explain the historical event in a way which all can acquaint to and understand and feel good about. Need and myth therefore feed off each other; and like our Zombies, the myth never quite dies.

Then along comes the historian (or scientist or archaeologist) who deals with evidence-based interpretation and explains events in a different way. A way in which directly challenges the core beliefs of the myth and threatens to undermine its veracity with facts. In the face of such a challenge it is often safer and more comfortable to retain and strengthen the myth that binds. Facts can indeed get in the way of a good story line.

So, to finish, perhaps we historians, or should I say 'Myth Busters', are being too optimistic and pedantic in challenging the myths surrounding Gallipoli and Anzac. Should we, for the sake of some accuracy at least, keep continuing our campaigns of righting the wrongs and misconceptions – keeping the zombies at bay? I will leave that up to you to decide.

I personally believe that we owe it to all those who served in the conflicts to tell it how it really was – to tell it accurately and as close to the truth as we can be.

**Conclusion**

Zombie Myths, like the archetypical zombies we know today, seem to be impossible to kill and are sustainable far beyond that of other myths that have just faded away over time. Our Zombie myths of military history and the exploits of the Anzacs are surrounded and sustained from our deep desire and need to keep alive a thing called the Anzac Spirit. And I bet, long after this paper has reached the uttermost ends of the earth, they will continue.

**References**


Bean, C.E.W. 1981 (1921) Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Vol I – The Story of Anzac, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia; also https://www.awm.gov.au/histories/first_world_war/AWMOHWW1/AIF/Vol1/

Birdwood, W. R., Letter to George Pearce, AWM 38/608/249.39.

Crawley, R. 2010 in Stockings, C. (ed) *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History,* University of New South Wales, Sydney.

Dardanelles Commission Papers, AWM PRO CAB45/233.

Fielding, J.P. 1981, 'Corey, Earnest Albert' (1891-1972), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/corey-ernest-albert-5781

Frame, T. 2000, *The Shores of Gallipoli: naval aspects of the ANZAC Campaign,* Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney.

Frame, T. 2015, *A most necessary footnote: navigation and the grounding of the Gallipoli campaign,* conference paper delivered at 'Gallipoli 1915: a centenary on, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Frost, A. 1990, 'Forbidden to Dance', *Defence Force Journal no. 81, pp 24-29.*

Meset Uyar, 2015, *The Ottoman Defence Against the Anzac Landing,* Australian Army Campaign Series 16, Army History Unit, Canberra.

Nelson, B. 2015, Opening Address, 'Gallipoli 1915. A Century On' conference, Canberra, ACT.

Roberts, C. 2011, *The Landing at Anzac 1915,* Australian Army Campaigns Series 12, Army History Unit, Canberra.

Stockings, C. (ed), 2010, *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History,* University of New South Wales, Sydney.

Weir, 1981P. *Gallipoli,* Associated R & R Films, Commemorative Edition, (2015) Fox Movies.

Wilson, G. 2012, *Dust, Donkeys and Delusions: The Myth of Simpson and his Donkey Exposed,* Big Sky Publishing, Newport.

Wilson M. 1915 Biographical notes of Sister Madeline Alice Kendall Wilson, AANS, AWM PR86/326

---

**Acknowledgements**

The author and the Australian Council of National Trusts thank the Australian Government (Department of Environment) for funding received under the National Trust Partnership Program.