

## Lest we forget, the cost of being 'British'

ANZAC Day, April 25<sup>th</sup>, commemorates the landing at Gallipoli in 1915 of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps of the British Empire.

The landing itself was hailed the world over as a masterful military feat, a brilliant display of the fighting qualities of the raw colonial troops from Australia and NZ, whose legend would forever be branded with British commander Sir Ian Hamilton urging to the ANZACs, "You've got through the difficult business. Now you only have to dig, dig, dig until you are safe."

What followed was an Australian tragedy, seven months of military debacle, a bloodbath which left 45,000 British, French, Indian, Australian and New Zealander troops dead, as well as 86,000 Turks, and for what?

The Dardenelles campaign was the brainchild of Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, who saw it as a master move on the chessboard he viewed as Europe at war—draw the Turks away from the Russians, so the Russians could be freed up against the Germans, and Britain could emerge supreme after the destruction of Germany and the Ottoman Empire.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, six weeks into the campaign, Churchill lauded the united colonial efforts on behalf of the British Empire:

"The loyalty of our Dominions and Colonies vindicates our civilisation, and the hate of our enemies proves the effectiveness of our warfare... See Australia and New Zealand smiting down, in the last and finest crusade, the combined barbarism of Prussia and of Turkey. See General Louis Botha holding South Africa for the King. See Canada defending to the death the last few miles of shattered Belgium. Look further, and, across the smoke and carnage of the immense battlefield, look forward to the vision of a united British Empire on the calm background of a liberated Europe."

However, the campaign was already going badly—the objective was proving

to be tactically impossible, and the one genuine breakthrough was botched by the tardiness of the British General, Sir Frederick Stopford (a 61-year old who'd never commanded in battle in his life, but owed his position to "seniority"), to follow up his unopposed landing at Suvla Bay on August 7—a tardiness which allowed the Turks to reinforce their position with all the men and guns they needed to resist.

for the British Empire was a glorious sacrifice—it fueled his faith that the British couldn't be beaten.

By mid-September, when the entire British war cabinet was finally convinced the only option was withdrawal, Churchill protested that the size of the sacrifice in human lives so far could only be justified by victory: "It would be very hard to explain, particularly in the case of Australia, a sacrifice which had been incurred with no result."

Unwilling to let go, he grew more strident, demanding the use of the new chemical weapon—gas—upon the Turks, and an even greater sacrifice, but his was a lone, crazed voice.

On November 15, Lord Kitchener advised the Gallipoli campaign should be abandoned; in his resignation speech to the House of Commons that same day, Churchill protested, "But it seems to me that if there were any operations in the history of the world which, having begun, it was worthwhile to carry through with the utmost vigour and fury, with a consistent flow of reinforcements, and an utter disregard of life, it was the operations so daringly and brilliantly begun by Sir Ian Hamilton in the immortal landing of the twenty-fifth of April 1915."

Churchill later claimed history would vindicate him, "particularly as I intend to write the history myself"; it seems then, that Churchill must be one of the authors of the subsequent glorification of the Gallipoli bloodbath to generations of Australians—a glorification taken to unprecedented heights under the recent leadership of John Winston Howard.

The real tragedy of Gallipoli is not Churchill's fanatical imperialism, and the bloodbath it produced, but its reflection in the outlook of Australia's population: 15 years earlier,

Australians had eschewed becoming a sovereign republic, and opted for federation under the Crown, to remain part of the "British Empire of the white races".

That's why we were there.

[References: Churchill and Australia, by Graham Freudenberg, Pan Macmillan Australia, 2008]



Clockwise from top: Gallipoli recruitment poster; First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill; ANZAC Beach, Gallipoli Peninsula.

Churchill had drooled over the early reports of the bloody fighting: "Quarter was neither asked or given; parties of Australians cut off were killed to the last man; no prisoners wounded or unwounded were taken by the Turk."

To Churchill, being cannon-fodder