

Dardanelles Commission Report: Conclusions

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS.

1. We think that, when it was decided to undertake an important military expedition to the Gallipoli Peninsula, sufficient consideration was not given to the measures necessary to carry out such an expedition with success. We have already pointed out in paragraph 15 that it had been apparent in February, 1915, that serious military operations might be necessary. Under these circumstances we think that the conditions of a military attack on the Peninsula should have been studied and a general plan prepared by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir James Wolfe Murray, special attention being paid to the probable effect of naval gun fire in support of the troops; and that it was the duty of the Secretary of State for War to ensure that this was done.

2. We think that the difficulties of the operations were much underestimated. At the outset all decisions were taken and all provisions based on the assumption that, if a landing were effected, the resistance would be slight and the advance rapid. We can see no sufficient ground for this assumption. The short naval bombardment in November, 1914, had given the Turks warning of a possible attack, and the naval operations in February and March of 1915 led naturally to a great strengthening of the Turkish defences. The Turks were known to be led by German officers, and there was no reason to think that they would not fight well, especially in defensive positions. These facts had been reported by Admiral de Robeck and Sir Ian Hamilton.

3. We think that the position, which in fact, existed after the first attacks in April and the early days of May should have been regarded from the outset as possible and the requisite means of meeting it considered. This would have made it necessary to examine and decide whether the demands of such extended operations could be met consistently with our obligations in other theatres of war. In fact those obligations made it impossible in May, June and July to supply the forces with the necessary drafts, gun ammunition, high explosives and other modern appliances of war.

4. We are of the opinion that, with the resources then available, success in the Dardanelles, if possible, was only possible upon condition that the Government concentrated their efforts upon the enterprise and limited their expenditure of men and material in the Western theatre of war. This condition was never fulfilled.

5. After the failure of the attacks which followed the first landing there was undue delay deciding upon the course to be pursued in the future. Sir Ian Hamilton's appreciation was forwarded on May 17th, 1915. It was not considered by the War Council or the Cabinet until June 7th. The reconstruction of the Government which took place at this most critical period was the main cause of the delay. As a consequence the despatch of the reinforcements asked for by Sir Ian Hamilton in his appreciation was postponed for six weeks.

6. We think that the plan of attack from Anzac and Suvla in the beginning of August was open to criticism. The country over which the attack had to be made was very difficult, especially at Anzac. In order to obtain if possible the element of surprise, the main advance of the Anzac force up the north-western spurs of Sari Bahr was undertaken at night, the risk of misdirection and failure being much increased thereby. The plan, however, was decided upon after a consideration of other plans, and with the concurrence of the commander of the Anzac Corps, who had been in command since the first landing.

7. The operations at Suvla were a severe trial for the force consisting of troops who had never been under fire, but we think that after taking into consideration and making every allowance for the difficulties of the attack and the inexperience of the troops, the attack was not pressed as it should have been at Suvla on the 7th and 8th August, and we attribute this in a great measure to a want of determination and competence in the Divisional Commander and one of his Brigadiers. The leading of the 11th Division and the attached battalions of the 10th Division, which constituted the main body of the attack, was not satisfactory. As explained in paragraphs 108 and 109, the orders given by General Hammersley were confused and the work of his staff defective. Major-General Hammersley's health had in the past been such that it was dangerous to select him for a divisional command in the field, although he seemed to have recovered. We think that the defects that we have mentioned in his leading probably arose from this cause. General Sitwell, the senior Brigade Commander, did not, in our opinion, show sufficient energy and decision.

8. Sir Frederick Stopford was hampered by the want of effective leading above referred to, and the inexperience of his troops, but we do not think he took sufficient means to inform himself of the progress of operations. On August 7th, when he became aware that the troops had not advanced as rapidly as had been intended, we think that he should have asked for some explanation from General Hammersley. In that case he would have been informed of the difference which had arisen between General Sitwell and General Hill, and of General Sitwell's lack of vigour and energy in leading. We think that at this point his intervention was needed. We think that he and his staff were partly responsible for the failure to supply the troops with water on August 7th and 8th. Our detailed conclusions on the water supply will be found below.

We cannot endorse Sir Ian Hamilton's condemnation of the orders given by Sir Frederick Stopford on the morning of August 8th, 1915, whether the account of them given in Sir Ian Hamilton's despatch or that in Sir Frederick Stopford's report to him be accepted. According to the evidence of Sir Bryan Mahon and General Hammersley they were not deterred from advancing by those orders.

On the evening of August 8th we think that Sir Frederick Stopford's difficulties were increased by the intervention of Sir Ian Hamilton. Sir Ian Hamilton seems to have considered Sir Frederick Stopford lacking in energy in the operations between August 9th and August 15th. As this opinion is based more upon general conduct than upon any specific acts or omissions, we are not in a position to pronounce upon it. We realise, however, that importance attaches to the impressions of a Commander-in-Chief on such a subject.

9. As regards Sir Ian Hamilton it is inevitable that the capabilities of a commander in war should be judged by the results he achieves, even though, if these results are disappointing, his failure may be due to causes for which he is only partially responsible.

In April, 1915, Sir Ian Hamilton succeeded in landing his troops at the places which he had chosen: but the operations that were intended immediately to follow the landing were abruptly checked owing to a miscalculation of the strength of the Turkish defences and the fighting qualities of the Turkish troops. This rebuff should have convinced Sir Ian Hamilton that the Turkish entrenchments were skilfully disposed and well armed, and that naval gun fire was ineffective against trenches and entanglements of the modern type. We doubt, however, whether the failure of the operations sufficiently impressed Sir Ian Hamilton and the military authorities at home with the serious nature of the opposition likely to be encountered.

During May, June, and July severe fighting took place, but its results were not commensurate with the efforts made and the losses incurred.

During July a plan of combined operations was elaborated, which was carried into effect early in August. Sir Ian Hamilton was confident of success, but was again baffled by the obstinacy of the Turkish resistance. Moreover, the failure of night advances in a difficult and unexplored country, which formed part of the plan, led to heavy casualties and temporarily disorganised the forces employed.

Sir Ian Hamilton was relieved of his command on October 15th.

We recognise Sir Ian Hamilton's personal gallantry and energy, his sanguine disposition, and his determination to win at all costs. We recognise also that the task entrusted to him was one of extreme difficulty, the more so as the authorities at home at first misconceived the nature and duration of the operations, and afterwards were slow to realise that to drive the Turks out of their entrenchments and occupy the heights commanding the Straits was a formidable and hazardous enterprise which demanded a concentration of force and effort. It must further be borne in mind that Lord Kitchener, whom Sir Ian Hamilton appears to have regarded as a Commander-in-Chief rather than as a Secretary of State, pressed upon him the paramount importance, if it were by any means possible, of carrying out the task assigned to him.

Though from time to time Sir Ian Hamilton represented the need of drafts, reinforcements, guns and munitions, which the Government found it impossible to supply, he was nevertheless always ready to renew the struggle with the resources at his disposal, and to the last was confident of success. For this it would be hard to blame him; but viewing the Expedition in the light of events it would, in our opinion, have been well had he examined the situation as disclosed by the first landings in a more critical spirit, impartially weighed the probabilities of success and failure, having regard to the resources in men and material which could be placed at his disposal, and submitted to the Secretary of State for War a comprehensive statement of the arguments for and against a continuance of the operations.

10. The failure at Anzac was due mainly to the difficulties of the country and the strength of the enemy. The failure at Suvla also prevented any pressure being put upon the Turkish force in that direction, and success at Suvla might have lessened the resistance at Anzac.

11. We think that after the attacks ending on August 9th had failed, the operations contemplated could not have been successfully carried out without large reinforcements. The fighting after General de Lisle replaced Sir Frederick Stopford was really of a defensive character.

12. We think that after the advice of Sir Charles Monro had been confirmed by Lord Kitchener the decision to evacuate should have been taken at once. We recognise, however, that the question of evacuation was connected with other questions of high policy which do not appear to us to come within the scope of our enquiry.

13. We think that the decision to evacuate when taken was right.