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Anzac Doctors¹

by
S.Due²

Abstract

This paper outlines the significant events of the campaign on the Gallipoli Peninsula from a medical point of view and records the exploits of the medical officers who served there.

Significance of Anzac

In the Gallipoli campaign the Australian soldier established a unique identity and an enviable reputation. The official Australian war historian, C.E.W. Bean, and the official medical historian A.G. Butler, both celebrated the 'digger spirit' - tenacious, democratic, courageous - which emerged during the fearsome baptism of fire of the First AIF.¹⁻³

The attacks on the Gallipoli Peninsula were made by sea from the island of Lemnos. It was intended to take control of the Dardanelles from Turkey, and so open a sea passage to the heart of enemy territory. Two landings were made on 25 April 1915, one at a beach which became known as Anzac Cove, on the western side of the peninsula, and one at Cape Helles, the southernmost tip.⁴

Medical personnel

AIF medical personnel during this campaign consisted of about 35 Regimental Medical Officers, with approximately a further 60 doctors in seven field ambulances (precise numbers varied with circumstances). At Gallipoli, additional medical officers served in the Clearing Hospital (on the beach) and two Stationary Hospitals (on Lemnos and at sea), which had about eight medical officers each. There were three AIF General Hospitals (in Egypt and on Lemnos), which had about 20 medical officers each, including some of Australia's leading specialists.

These doctors were responsible for the health of the AIF in the Middle East. Most of them, however, were civilians without military or public health experience. In addition to the expected problems of casualties and communicable diseases, they had to learn military methods and to overcome substantial deficiencies of military medical organisation. During the Gallipoli campaign, the Australian Army Medical Corps developed *in vivo* as it staggered from crisis to crisis, evolving in the process its own independent system of medical administration. The chief actor in this drama was Colonel N.R. Howse VC, the senior Australian medical officer at Anzac. Fearless in action, Howse was also relentless in his pursuit of solutions to organisational problems.⁵ These problems were discussed in detail by Butler and were recently reviewed by Tyquin.⁶

Medical officers at the landings

The 3rd, 2nd and 1st Australian Brigades landed at Anzac Cove at 5:00, 6:30 and 9:30 am respectively. It would be interesting to know who was the first medical officer to land - presumably, he was one of the RMOs of the 3rd Brigade. The attackers quickly came under enemy fire. Some men were shot in the boats as they approached the shore, others as they struggled through the water to the beach. Turkish rifles and machine guns were soon supplemented by shrapnel. One of the first medical officers ashore, Captain Brennan, 11th Battalion RMO, recalled:

'As you can imagine, there was no time wasted in getting out of the boats and across the beach... I heard an officer sing out "Fix bayonets lads, and up we go..." and with a yell they started up the hill, which was

very steep. More men were coming all the time ... I followed them up, dressing the wounded and leaving them to be picked up by the bearers.'⁷

The men were soon engulfed in a maze of scrubby ridges and gullies leading up from the cove to Turkish positions on the heights above. RMOs had trouble keeping in touch with their bearers and the men of their units. By nightfall, however, the troops were entrenched on the ridges.

'Of course, all the units were fearfully mixed up by this time,' wrote Brennan. The firing was continuous and very heavy... The men in the trench with me had their bayonets fixed all night, and I had my revolver ready. I had already taken off my red cross, as it was not much use in such a situation. We were all very glad when morning dawned.'⁷

Meanwhile, the stretcher-bearers of the field ambulances had gone ashore in the wake of their brigades, the remaining ambulance personnel waiting on the ships to receive casualties. Captain Archie Aspinall, of the 1st Field Ambulance, described the scene from a troopship as the ambulance bearers landed:

'At 10 am Captains Welch, Wassell and Kay [all doctors], with 108 stretcher bearers, went ashore in a torpedo destroyer, whilst the remainder of us watched with anxiety to see if they would land in safety, as the beach was under incessant shell fire, and the bodies of men killed at the first landing could be seen, with the aid of glasses, lying on the beach near the shattered lifeboats... The sound of rifle fire reminded me of the croaking of thousands of frogs... and above all the mechanical rattle of machine guns could be heard.'⁸

Captain Welch, in the landing party, recorded his impressions of the same scene:

'We had some casualties amongst our own men whilst landing, and found collections of dead and wounded and "stove in" boats all along the shore. We had no distance to go before finding casualties, and so were able to feel our way and gradually [sic] adapt ourselves to the novel circumstances.'⁹

At about the same time, the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Hospital landed. Captain Corbin recalled the dangerous approach to the beach as one of the most uncomfortable [journeys] I have ever undertaken'.¹⁰ This unit, renamed the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station, was established hard against the cliff for protection from enemy fire. The work of the Station in these early days has been comprehensively described by Butler and Tyquin and was recently reviewed by Pearn.¹¹ The continuous flow of wounded men coming down the gullies from the firing line on the ridge above caused overcrowding on the beach and at the Station itself. Captain Corbin noted:

'We could not get any wounded off the beach until night [on 25 April], as all the boats and tows were needed to bring in supplies and troops. We began to evacuate them at 5 pm and got about 600 off by 8 pm. They lay, during the day, all along the beach, for several hundred yards... Many were hit by shrapnel while lying there.'¹⁰

Casualties were taken off the beach in a variety of small craft, mainly lifeboats and barges, and towed out to the ships waiting in the roads. On the night of 25-26 April, 1,700 wounded men were evacuated from the beach in this manner.³ Colonel Howse, who was responsible for establishing the Casualty Clearing Station, and for clearing the beach, attributed the appalling situation there to 'criminal negligence' on the part of the military authorities - an opinion undoubtedly shared by many of the medical officers.

Transport of wounded by sea

At the landing there was one hospital ship (Gascon) with a capacity for about 550. Therefore troopships, staffed by personnel of field ambulances and stationary hospitals, were used to take the bulk of the wounded from Anzac to

base hospitals in Egypt. When these hospitals were full, wounded men were sent to Malta or England, or retained in hospitals established on the island of Lemnos. The troopships used for this purpose were not painted white, as hospital ships were, and displayed no red cross. Consequently, they became known as 'Black Ships' - and they were black in more ways than one. Captain Deakin, of the 2nd Australian Stationary Hospital, described conditions on one of these ships:

'Picture to yourself the hold of a ship, the port-holes open, a few electric fans revolving, scattered electric lights overhead, the mess tables and benches previously used by the troops still in position, the floors, benches and tables covered with wounded, some on blankets, others on bare boards ... and all the time a stream of wounded coming down the steps or being lowered down the gangway on slings...'¹²

Medical officers who worked on these ships, when describing their situation, generally expressed themselves circumspectly. Thus Captain Aspinall simply wrote: 'A description of the voyage to Alexandria and the condition of the ship would serve no good purpose'. Captain Moran, however, who served on a recently converted cattle carrier, was more direct. The stalls of a cattle ship, though newly whitewashed, are poor accommodation for men who laid their world aside and went dutifully in the red ways of war; but the crushed and broken human beings, who limped or were swung on board, found there a grateful peace'.¹³

Early days at Anzac

According to Bean, 16,000 troops landed at Anzac Cove on 25 April, with 2,000 casualties. According to Butler, casualties among the Australian Brigades by 30 April amounted to 4,000 wounded and 1,000 killed, and by 2 May 6,000 wounded and 2,000 killed.³ After the first few days the troops were entrenched in an arc extending about a mile and half along the shore and 1,000 yards inland.

Early in May, concerted efforts were made to wrest high ground from the Turks. On 2 May, an assault on an important hill called Baby 700 resulted in 1,000 casualties but achieved nothing of significance.³ On 4 May an attack by a small force on Gaba Tepe proved equally unsuccessful. In this operation, Captain Brennan, RMO, went with his battalion, which assaulted Turkish positions on Gaba Tepe from the sea:

'It was a repetition of the first landing,' Brennan wrote, 'only worse. About 150 rifles opened up on us when we were about 40 yards from the shore... On crawling to the top of the bank (behind the beach] we found there was 40 ft of barbed wire between us and the Turks on the point... covered by a machine gun... As there were some severe wounds, I was kept pretty busy... We signalled to the destroyers to send a boat to take off the wounded, which they did, and though the range was only 150 yards, the Turks let us carry them across the beach... which was very decent of them, as they could have got us all quite easily.'¹⁴

Extricating themselves proved more difficult for the RMO and his bearers- a mad scramble to the boats under heavy fire.

At Cape Helles

Meanwhile, at Cape Helles, British forces were similarly stalled. For the new offensive of early May, the 2nd Australian Brigade, accompanied by the stretcher-bearers of its field ambulance, was taken there from Anzac Cove. Attacking across open ground against unseen enemy positions on 8 May, the brigade suffered 1,000 casualties (50 per cent) in under an hour.³ On a black ship at Cape Helles, Captains H.R.G. Poate and A. Aspinall, assisted by five junior RAMC doctors, took on over 800 men, many severely wounded, in 30 hours:

'We set to work to try and fix some of them up', Poate recalled, 'and both Aspinall and I were operating all day long on the worst ones... The RAMC chaps were busy, two giving anaesthetics for us, the others going round the cases.'¹⁵

Stalemate

By the middle of May at Anzac the invaders were in relatively strong defensive positions. On 19 May Turkish troops attacked all along the line and were slaughtered in thousands. On 24 May there was an armistice to bury the dead. Positions remained unchanged in June and July. In August the British mounted an all-out offensive on the peninsula. There was a disastrous landing by British troops to the north at Suvla Bay. At Anzac, there was a successful but costly attack on a Turkish position known as 'Lonesome Pine', and an unfortunate, far more costly attack on 'the Nek', in which wave after wave of the dismounted Australian Light Horse were mown down by machine guns. Meanwhile, at the north end of the Anzac line, the 4th Brigade fought its way up the Aghyl Dere towards the high ground of Sari Bair. Colonel Beeston, commander of its field ambulance, sent his bearers ahead with the troops and established his dressing station in a dry creek:

'All day we were treating cases and operating till late at night...At daylight, we could see our men fighting their way through the scrub over Sari Bair, the warship firing just ahead of them to clear the scrub of Turkish infantry. The foremost men carried flags, which denoted the furthest point reached... as a direction to the ship. With the glasses one could see that the bayonet was being used pretty freely; the Turks were making a great stand, and we were losing a lot of men. They could be seen falling everywhere.'¹⁶

After the August offensive, a stalemate again ensued, during which the medical staff fought their own battle against epidemic disease, particularly dysentery, which spread rapidly among the debilitated troops. All British forces were secretly evacuated from the peninsula in December, in the most successful operation of the campaign. The 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station was the last medical unit to leave Anzac; the last doctor to leave was Captain A.S.D. Barton, the medical officer of the rearguard covering party.

In memoriam

The first Australian doctor to lose his life at Gallipoli was Lieutenant Muir Paul Smith, a young Sydney man serving as a signaller with the 4th Battalion. He was wounded in the knee, but returned to the firing line and was killed soon afterwards.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ The first death among medical officers of the AAMC was that of Captain G.C.M. Mathison, who died of wounds received while acting as RMO 5th Battalion at Cape Helles in the second last week of May.²⁰⁻²¹ Mathison, who was in his early twenties, was reputed to be a brilliant medical scientist.²² In July, Captain S.J. Campbell, RMO 8th Light Horse Regiment, died of wounds received at Anzac,²³ and Major S.J. Richards, from the Casualty Clearing Station, died of pneumonia.²⁴ Captain K.M. Levi, also in his early twenties, was killed while acting as RMO for the 2nd Battalion, Hampshire Regiment, early in August.²⁵⁻²⁶ On 25 August Captain J.F.G. Luther, RMO 15th Battalion, was killed.²⁷ Also in August, the young Archibald Scot Skirving, who had joined the RAMC, and was serving with the 5th Royal Irish Fusiliers, died of wounds received at Suvla Bay.²⁸ Early in September Captain A. Verge, RMO 6th Light Horse Regiment, having contracted dysentery at Anzac, died of the disease in Egypt.²⁹ At the end of November Major F.M. Johnson and Captain H.F. Green, both of the 6th Light Horse Field Ambulance, were killed at Lone Pine.³⁰ On 21 December, the day after the evacuation, Captain J.D. Buchanan of the 2nd Light Horse Field Ambulance, died at Heliopolis of dysentery contracted at Anzac.³¹

The above list includes Australian doctors who were killed at Gallipoli, or who died during the campaign or soon afterwards of wounds received there or illness contracted there. Butler in the official history lists only AAMC doctors,³² and I have therefore added the names of Muir Paul Smith and A. Scot Skirving.

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