

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN OF 1915

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of
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Operational lessons learned from the Gallipoli Campaign that are applicable to modern day joint littoral operations are analyzed. Lessons learned from the failure of the Gallipoli Campaign are particularly significant for operational commanders today given the Navy's current emphasis on joint littoral operations. The Gallipoli Campaign offered the opportunity for Allied leaders in World War I to break the deadly stalemate on the Western Front and to open up critical lines of communication between the Western Allies and Russia. Poor planning, a lack of guidance, the failure to communicate clearly the concept of operations, along with poor on scene assessment and follow up were key factors that converged to destroy operational synchronization. This is best illustrated by the events on Y Beach and Suvla Bay, both of which were pivotal junction points in the Gallipoli Campaign. The failure of operational synchronization at these key points marked the failure of the Gallipoli Campaign and a lost opportunity to end the war early. The decisive role that operational synchronization plays in the ultimate success of joint littoral operations and the factors that lead to it are as valid today as they were in 1915.

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Introduction

Synchronization is that vital attribute of combat operations that produces maximum relative combat power at a decisive point by coordinating all the capabilities, elements, and actions of operational forces in time, space, and purpose. The net effect of successful synchronization is synergy of force -- when the capabilities and combat strength of the force exceeds the sum of its parts. The linchpin of successful operations is to translate joint planning into synchronized execution. The tragic repercussions of the failure to do this were strikingly demonstrated during World War I in the Gallipoli theater of operations.

The Gallipoli Campaign of 1915 was a major joint littoral operation and a significant operational failure for Allied forces in World War I. Two pivotal instances in this campaign, where opportunities to achieve operational success were lost, occurred at Y Beach on 25 April 1915 and at Suvla Bay on 6-9 August 1915. The initiatives gained in each of these instances were not exploited due to a lack of operational synchronization.

The loss of the Gallipoli Campaign lay in the planning process itself, which included both developing the initial plans and the on scene assessment of operations. Moreover, the failure of operational leaders to provide adequate guidance and communicate a clear concept of operations proved critical in the inability to achieve operational synchronization.

As the post-Cold War Navy sails into the 21st century, the

new world order has caused it to shift its focus landward to joint littoral operations. In shaping the key characteristics necessary for future success in these type of operations an examination of the failure of the Gallipoli Campaign, conducted eighty years ago, still holds valuable lessons for modern day operational planners.

Background

World War I, which had begun in 1914 as a war of movement, rapidly bogged down into an almost immobile war of position. Western Allies were tied down in trench warfare on the Western Front, while Russia engaged German troops in the East. When Turkey joined Germany as a belligerent and closed the Dardanelles to Allied shipping, it restricted the transfer of grain from Russia and the supply of arms and equipment to Russia. The lack of lines of communication with Russia precluded the effective and total coordination of Allied strength. The 1915 Gallipoli Campaign was planned to break the stalemate on the Western Front, relieve pressure on Allied Russian troops who were also engaged in bitter fighting with the Turks in the Caucasus, and to establish lines of communication with the Russians. In addition, it was hoped that this operation would knock Turkey out of the war and influence wavering Balkan states to side with the Allies. Specifically, the military objective was to gain control of the Dardanelles and then seize Constantinople. Success in this operation would open up a waterway between the western Allies and Russia and facilitate the transfer of grain and munitions between the Allies. The nature of proposed action on the Gallipoli Peninsula went through several

transformations -- from the brief consideration of a naval demonstration, to planning for a naval expedition, and then eventually a full-fledged amphibious assault.

Initial operational planning was conducted for a combined British and French naval expedition, independent of ground force support, designed to force its way through the Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmara and then compel the capitulation of Constantinople through naval bombardment. This reliance on a naval expedition stemmed from a reluctance to divert troops from the Western Front or the Suez and from an underestimation of the capabilities of the Turks. The fleet of warships that attempted the initial assault on the Dardanelles in the first half of March 1915 faced three mutually supporting Turkish defenses: Naval mines, short-range mobile howitzers along the shoreline, and the long-range guns of the forts.¹ Notwithstanding this line of defense, by the 18th of March Allied warships had put the Turkish forts at the entrance to the Straits out of commission through naval bombardment and had incapacitated the forts covering the minefields. The known minefield across the entrance to the Dardanelles had been swept clear.² Despite this initial success, the sinking of three battleships on 18 March, by secretly emplaced mines, put a halt to the naval venture and forced a shift in plans to a combined amphibious landing designed to seize the Gallipoli Peninsula.

Meanwhile, in the time between the failure of the naval effort and the subsequent amphibious landings, the Turks, under the command of General Liman von Sanders, prepared for the defense of

the Dardanelles, specifically the Gallipoli Peninsula.

Planning and Preparation

The British War Council was the primary agency exercising control over the conduct of the war. Specifically, it made key operational decisions relative to the Gallipoli Campaign. The War Council was made up primarily of Cabinet members who dominated the meetings. Service representatives, with the exception of Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, were generally silent unless asked specific questions. The Council neither met regularly nor discussed the day to day conduct of the war.³

Throughout the course of the campaign the General Staff was never asked advice and "ministers were not afforded the assistance of a detailed examination by the General Staff of the various courses within the capabilities of the troops likely to be available in 1915"⁴ The experienced officers of the General Staff were sent to the front with the idea that on scene presence was more important than long range planning in what was expected to be a war of short duration. The officers who replaced them were never able to gain the confidence of Lord Kitchener or the War Council. Consequently, the General Staff was kept in the dark as to the various courses of action under consideration. The War Council proceeded with the Gallipoli Campaign without any consultation with the General Staff on the feasibility of the scheme. Neither was the proposal subject to a staff study or submitted to a combined group of naval and military experts for review. In addition, the initial go ahead for the naval operation was given without the War

Council knowing of the misgivings or opposition of Lord Fisher, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Jellicoe the commander-in-chief of the fleet, and other Admiralty officers.⁵ Recognizing the general hesitation to divert troops from the Western Front to the Gallipoli operation, Churchill merely presented a plan which relied on naval gunfire alone without infantry support. He managed to find support for his plan from Vice Admiral Sackville H. Carden, who commanded the Aegean squadron.⁶

The preceding paragraphs illustrate two critical flaws in the planning process. The first was a disjointed approach that never married up broad operational objectives with a specific operational design - specifically, the "nuts and bolts" of how the operation would be carried out. The real life and real time requirements of the mission itself were never worked out. Consequently, the mission was launched without any preliminary scheme for subsequent action. This lack of preliminary planning and a general plan of operation was further acerbated by the fact that the mission itself went through a steady evolution. The naval demonstration initially called for was changed to a full fledged naval assault - the failure of which led to a land campaign to assist the Navy then to a land campaign assisted by the Navy and finally to an evacuation.

The second critical flaw relative to planning was the tendency to shape planning instead of the mission to available resources and capabilities. For example, the unwillingness to use troops should have resulted in an examination of whether mission success was probable under those conditions rather than proposing a plan that

simply negated the requirement for troops. Effective planning must first and foremost be realistically based on capabilities of both friendly and enemy forces. Throughout this campaign, there were serious disconnects between the men, arms, ammunition, and resources actually needed and those that were allocated.

General Sir Ian Hamilton was appointed to command military forces on 12 March. His orders from Kitchener directed him to undertake land operations only after the fleet had exhausted every effort and was to await the assembly of his full force before doing so. Other than these broad parameters, Hamilton left for Gallipoli the next day with a hastily assembled staff, no general plan of operations, no up-to-date information, inadequate resources, and only half the troops thought necessary for attacking Gallipoli. It was expected that Hamilton, his naval counterpart, and their uncoordinated staffs, would extemporaneously conduct planning.⁷

The Mediterranean Expeditionary Force that Hamilton commanded was originally conceived to be a large landing party designed to occupy and hold the peninsula after the Navy had done the primary job of getting through the Straits. Shortly after Hamilton left for the theater of operations, the Allied naval attack on Gallipoli failed and the operation began its shift from a predominantly naval campaign to a predominantly land campaign. Hamilton was notified to be ready for an amphibious landing in April, while in the meantime, Turkish forces undertook a massive effort to organize and strengthen their defenses - repositioning troops and improving communications and field fortifications.

The shifting nature of the operation as well as the total lack of "nuts and bolts" planning on the operational level, particularly in regards to operational logistics, was evident. The limited number of troops in theater were not combat ready and the random battalions arriving were without field packs. The medical staff had not left England and key units were several weeks away. Guns arrived without limbers and shells without primers.⁸

The army was short of artillery, the artillery short of ammunition and no one had sent out the necessities of trench warfare - periscopes, grenades, and trench mortars - or even vessels for holding water, so essential in the heat of Gallipoli.

In order to convert the troops into combat ready units a complete unloading, sorting, and reloading was necessary. Since no adequate advance base had been developed close to the theater of operations -- transports had to be rerouted to Alexandria, 700 miles away to accomplish this task. This, along with the requirement that the entire force be assembled prior to engaging the enemy, resulted in a critical loss of time and initiative. In addition, the extra time eaten up by the failure to provide an adequate, close-in staging area and to ship out combat-ready units left no time for staff organization, thorough planning, tactical rehearsal, or organization of beachhead logistics.¹⁰

Operations at Y Beach and Suvla Bay

The Turks took advantage of the time between the failure of the naval attack and the first major amphibious landing by reinforcing their combat strength and positional advantage. A force of 84,000 men - six Turkish divisions, under General Sanders

was positioned to defend the Dardanelles. Two divisions were placed in the northern part of the peninsula near Bulair, two in the southern part of the peninsula - one at Krithia and the other near Kilid Bahr, and then two divisions at Kum Kale. Sanders expected the main thrusts to be at either Bulair, where he was located, or Kum Kale. It would take 72 hours to reinforce his thinly held center.¹¹

The Allied plan, set for execution on the 25th of April, envisioned feints against Bulair and Kum Kale, with the main effort directed to simultaneous landings at Gaba Tepe and Cape Helles. The attack at Gaba Tepe would draw off those troops defending Kilid Bahr, while troops landing at Cape Helles, divided into five separate landings at Y, X, W, V, and S beaches would drive to Kilid Bahr. Hamilton's plan provided the potential for an effective exploitation of Sander's weak points and ultimate victory if Allied assault forces were strong enough to win a 72 hour race to Kilid Bahr.¹² The plan itself was a good one but the planning process and the command and control set up provided the roots of disaster. Planning was conducted in utmost secrecy to the extent that it prevented close reconnaissance of the hostile shore. Consequently, leaders did not know that artillery from one Turkish division commanded Gaba Tepe or that all the machine guns from another division covered Beach V, where combat supplies would go ashore. Hamilton's obsession with secrecy precluded pre-landing army-navy practice and kept him from explaining his plan to his brigadiers and battalion commanders.¹³

Hamilton delegated planning and tactical control of the main assault to General Hunter-Weston. Hunter-Weston, on board the H.M.S. Euryalus, expected to control the entire movement personally as if it was a conventional land campaign. Each flank battalion was directed to wait for the main body to move up Gallipoli and then join the advancing line. The net effect of the command and control set up left those who knew or understood Hamilton's overall plan on ships out of touch with landing forces, and those in charge of landing forces constrained to a rigid plan with neither the direction nor the authority to exploit advantages:

No emphasis was accordingly laid in the orders to the 29th Division on the vital importance of moving inland rapidly after the disembarkation; the orders to individual commanders were so detailed on trivialities that they were almost incomprehensible, while at the same time they were excessively vague on the really important points, and left no margin for the unexpected, with the result that they inevitably¹⁴ seriously damped the initiative of individual officers.

The landing at Y Beach illustrates the critical nature of this shortcoming. At Y Beach 2,000 men landed without a hitch and unopposed. The actual point chosen for the landing place contained two breaks in the steep scrub-covered cliffs allowing for a comparatively easy access to the summit. The nearest Turkish troops were two platoons of infantry more than a mile to the south and no preparations had been made by the Turks to guard this particular landing site.¹⁵ The Allies were positioned on the exposed right flank of the initial Turkish defenders, about 2,000 men, who were pinning down the Allies on the other beaches at Cape Helles.¹⁶ Hunter-Weston who was preoccupied with the fierce combat

going on at the other beaches, ignored Y Beach. The troops, lacking any order to press on, first dug in then began to drift back down to the beach. An extemporaneous evacuation of the beach began. Despite "twenty-nine hours of unfettered freedom" during which they could have broken through the Turkish line, the British troops pulled out.¹⁷

The fighting between the Allies and Turks stalemated after the April landings. In an effort to break the deadlock, another major operation was planned. The new operation would shift emphasis from the Cape Helles and Achi Baba area in the southern part of the peninsula, to the center of the peninsula. The objective was to gain possession of the heights of the Sari Bair Ridge leading to Chunuk Bair which was the key to commanding the high ground of the peninsula. The plan consisted of a main attack at Anzac Cove, where troops positioned on the beachhead would break out of the North bridgehead by night and assault Chunuk Bair and the crests of the surrounding hills.¹⁸ Troops on Cape Helles would continue to exert heavy pressure on the bulk of the Turkish Army which was bottled up on the tip of the peninsular. In addition there would be a new landing at Suvla Bay to support the main attack at Anzac Cove. Once the hills were taken, the combined force would push through the four miles to the Narrows.¹⁹ The three main Turkish battle groups were positioned at Bulair in the North, opposite Anzac Cove, and in the south at Cape Helles. At Suvla Bay only three weak battalions were stationed.²⁰

Lieutenant General Stopford was placed in charge of the

landing force for Suvla Bay. Stopford learned of the plan fifteen days before he was scheduled to execute it. His instructions referred to subsequent moves after securing the area around the bay that included a move southeastward to give flanking assistance to the main attack on the heights of Sari Bair. The instructions undermined the primary importance of cooperating with the offensive on Sari Bair by stating it was "hoped" that circumstances would permit his troops to do so.²¹ Hamilton himself looked at the Suvla Bay landing as playing just a subordinate role in the push for Sari Bair and made no provision to expand it if circumstances permitted or to capitalize on local success.²²

The urgency of seizing key positions quickly was watered down; the lack of precision in the orders was magnified; and what were perceived as important geographical positions simply disappeared from the orders put out to the fighting units as they filtered down the chain of command.²³

In addition, poor staff work resulted in a serious and unnecessary shortage of water for the troops. The landing arrangements for other supplies were also botched leaving troops inadequately prepared for battle. The landings themselves were characterized by confusion, with companies, battalions, and brigades mixed up together with hardly anyone where they were supposed to be.²⁴ Despite these and other problems in coordination, 20,000 troops had landed on Suvla with very little opposition. On this first day they held a massive ten-to-one superiority against Turkish forces in the area.²⁵ Sanders mistakenly believed that Suvla was the main point of attack and began shifting reinforcements to the area. However it would take

48 hours before this could be accomplished. Meanwhile, citing a lack of artillery and the exhausted and thirsty condition of his men, Stopford postponed any further attack for 24 hours and even then did not pursue aggressive action against Turkish forces. During this time Hamilton was on the island of Imbros, one hour's steaming time away. Early on Hamilton received reports that Stopford was not pursuing the attack despite enemy weakness, yet he did not actively intervene until late in the second day of the attack. Hamilton's belated intervention to order a brigade to attack took most of the night for the brigade to sort itself out sufficiently to execute.²⁶ By then it was too late, Turkish reinforcements had seized the commanding heights. They held Chunuk Bair and foiled the Anzac attack. The Allies never regained the initiative, and by January 1916 all troops were evacuated. Certainly Stopford did not demonstrate the qualities of leadership necessary for this operation. Yet the "fail-safe" for this breakdown was in the assessment stage where Hamilton could have intervened earlier to ensure that the initiative gained was not lost and that action necessary for operational success was taken. The failure to comprehensively and clearly identify the goals of the operation at the outset and the failure to assess -- and then, most importantly, act on that assessment contributed to the breakdown of synchronization at the critical moment on Suvla Bay.

Conclusion

The Gallipoli Campaign represented one of the great Allied failures of World War I. Some military analysts used the

experience of Gallipoli to support the proposition that daylight assault was impractical against a beach defended by modern weapons.²⁷ Yet, the events on Y Beach and then on Suvla Bay illustrate how close the Allies came to victory in this operation. The fundamental flaw of the Gallipoli Campaign was not in its concept but in the short falls of its planning process and the consequent lack of operational design. This in turn led to the failure to achieve operational synchronization and synergy.

The haphazard, ultra-secretive planning process was not conducive to developing a clear operational design. Poor planning was further acerbated by the constantly shifting nature of the operation itself. The resulting lack of operational design undermined the capability of operational forces to achieve synchronization and synergy. This in turn led to the failure of the operation at those critical moments on Y Beach and then Suvla Bay when Allied troops held the initiative but did not pursue it.

Modern operational planners are likely to be faced with similar scenarios reflecting rapidly changing environments and evolving missions. In order to offset the negative repercussions of this type of planning environment, planning must be an ongoing evolution. It needs to address not only the most likely scenarios but alternate contingencies. The planning process must balance legitimate security considerations with equally legitimate "need to know" considerations. Communication of the plan in a clear and precise manner is a critical link in operational success. It is fundamental that commanders on the beach - those that must

spearhead the execution of the operational plan - need to know what the plan is. Excessive and unnecessary concerns regarding secrecy as well as inappropriate concerns over guarding service "turf" must not get in the way of the development of plans that represent the most effective employment of forces and resources. Operational designs that realistically and comprehensively address the factors necessary for the integration and then synchronization of assets are most likely to arise in open planning environments. Finally, the critical role of assessment must be recognized. In the heat of battle an operational design can not be created where none existed -- but both Y Beach and Suvla Bay proved how decisive this opportunity for guidance and corrective measures can be in achieving operational success.

The failure of the Gallipoli Campaign was a tremendous set back for the Allies. At Gallipoli they squandered their chance to break the stalemate of the Western Front and achieve a decisive and quick end to the war. The critical failures at Y Beach and Suvla Bay represented lost opportunities which would have altered the ultimate outcome of the Gallipoli Campaign and consequently the entire course of the war. An examination of the events at Y Beach and Suvla Bay illustrate the key role that synchronization and synergy play in operational success and the factors that are necessary to achieve them. They are lessons that are as timely and as crucial to operational planners entering the 21st Century as they were to Allied operational planners in 1915.

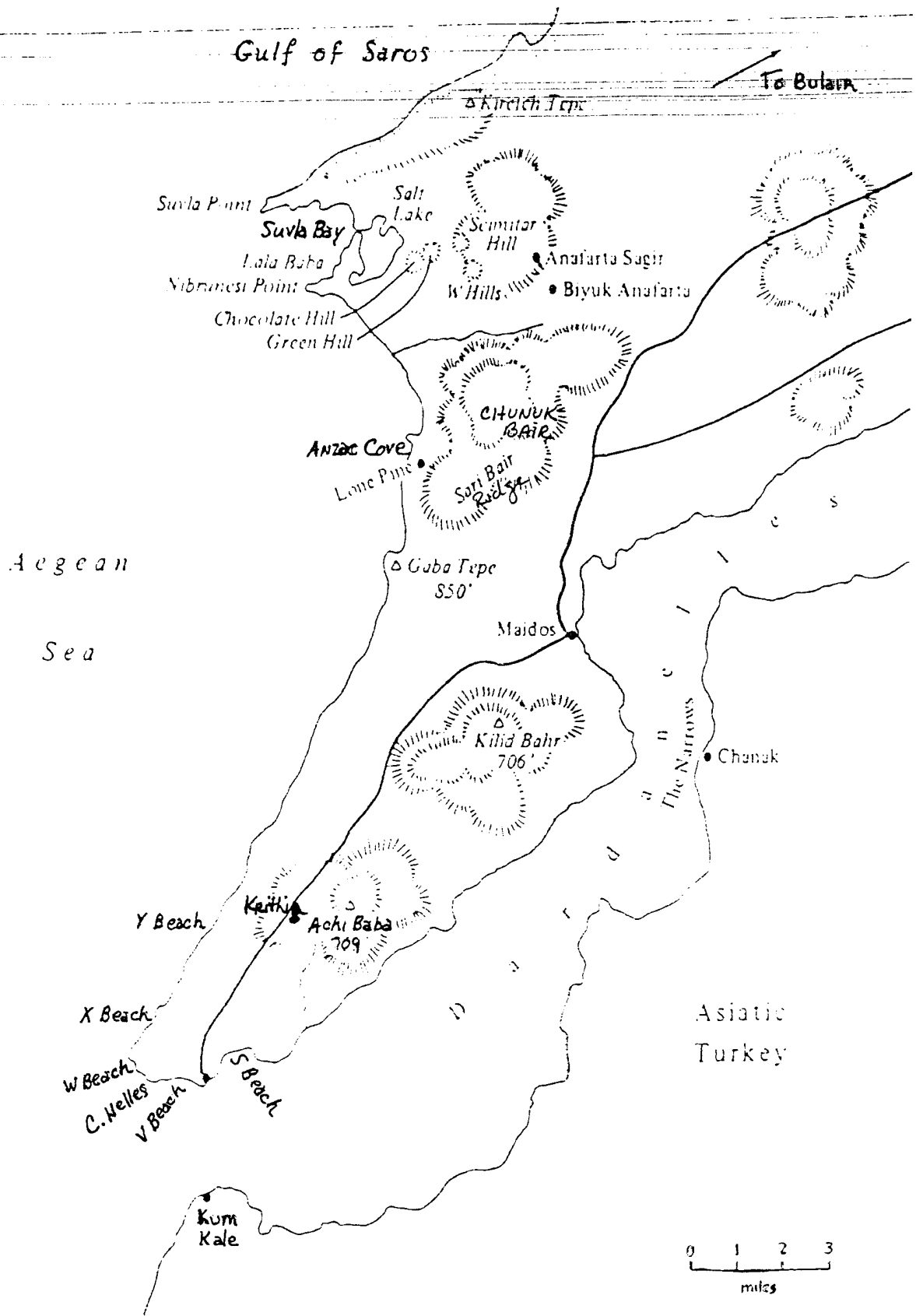
ENDNOTES

1. LtCol Cortez D. Stephens, "Gallipoli - What Went Right?," Marine Corps Gazette, October 1993, p. 74.
2. Martin Gilbert, The First World War: A Complete History (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), p. 136.
3. Robert Rhodes James, Gallipoli (London: B. T. Batsford LTD, 1965), pp. 24-25.
4. C. F. Aspinall-Oglander, compiler, History of the Great War: Military Operations, Gallipoli: Vol. I Inception of the Campaign to May 1915 (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1929), p. 46.
5. Bernadotte E. Schmitt and Harold C. Vedeler, The Rise of Modern Europe: The World in a Crucible, 1914-1919 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1988), pp.105-106.
6. E. B. Potter and Chester W. Nimitz, ed., Seapower - A Naval History (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1960), p. 414.
7. Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 136-137.
8. Potter, p. 421.
9. Schmitt and Vedeler, p. 109.
10. Potter, p. 421.
11. Ibid., p. 422.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. James, p. 89.
15. Aspinall-Oglander, p. 201.
16. Stephens, p. 76.
17. Cohen and Gooch, p. 138.
18. The term "Anzac" refers to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps as well as the beach or cove, just below Ari Burnu, where they landed.

19. Alan Moorehead, Gallipoli (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), p. 240.
20. Ibid., p. 247.
21. Cohen and Gooch, p. 141.
22. Ibid., p. 142.
23. Ibid., p. 143.
24. Moorehead, pp. 266-267.
25. Cohen and Gooch, p. 143.
26. Ibid., p. 144-146.
27. Potter, p. 431.

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Modified Map of Gallipoli Peninsula from Cohen and Gooch, p. 135

Appendix I