

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TURKS AND THE EVACUATION

AFTER the attempts to seize Hill 60 had ended with the capture of about half of it, the Anzac and other brigades on the northern flank were relieved by the 54th British (Territorial) Division, consisting of troops from the eastern counties—Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk, Bedford, London—and a Hampshire battalion. The activity was now mostly in bombing (which gave—or perhaps had already given—the hill its Turkish name) and mining. On November 20th a big mine there, dug by the Welsh Horse, had to be prematurely exploded; its crater was rushed and seized by the Turks. But despite this activity, Zeki Bey told us, “it was far quieter there—quite different from the Australian front”.

The blizzard which descended on Gallipoli on November 27th was felt much more severely in the lower parts of the line than on the Anzac heights. Trenches and valley beds, previously dry, became flooded and turned into channels for swirling streams. In Zeki Bey's sector, “a number of the men of the battalion holding the line were drowned,” he told us. “My regiment was then out at rest. It had to reoccupy the line there at once and dig it out again.” It so happened that the blizzard coincided with the last phase of one of the strangest operations undertaken by the First A.I.F., the so-called “Silent Stunt” of November 24th-27th. This had been devised by Brigadier-General Brudenell White, then chief of the General Staff of the Anzac Corps. Word had just come through, most secretly, that Lord Kitchener's conference

with the commanders at the Dardanelles had recommended that the Allies should abandon the Peninsula. The matter had been discussed in the House of Lords in London, and it was certain that the Turks would be on the alert. Accordingly, to foil their vigilance, General White proposed that there should be periods of complete silence at irregular intervals so that if, and when, the final silence came, it would appear to the Turks as nothing unusual. These silences began at once with a most thorough-going cessation of fire for more than three days. Our troops as far as possible remained hidden and there occurred many strange incidents, in which the Turks were not resisted until they were almost—or sometimes actually—in contact.¹ Zeki Bey told us that they were at first puzzled—as indeed was obvious to us at the time. In the end “we put it down,” he said, “to your wanting a quiet period [after the blizzard] to dig out your front trenches also. We were, however, ordered to send out patrols and get into your trenches. Every unit had to send a patrol, but every patrol reported your line held.”

Readers of the history of the campaign will remember that on December 6th, after a period of astonishing indecision, in which the fate of the Salonica campaign also was involved, the British and French Governments determined that Anzac and Suvla should be evacuated. Provisional preparations had already been begun. The final order reached the front, although the troops there did not know it, on December 8th. From that time onward those who could best be spared were continuously sent away by night, their transports vanishing before daylight, but some reinforcements and stores being landed by day and fresh tents being added to the hospitals as if in preparation for winter. By this means the force at Anzac had, by December 18th, been reduced from 41,000 to 20,000 and

¹ See Vol. II, pp. 842-5.

the guns there from 105 to 19 of the older pieces.² The 50,000 troops and 91 guns at Suvla were reduced to almost the same extent. The final evacuation was carried out after dark on the two nights of December 18th/19th and 19th/20th. At Anzac the Turks by fighting their way forward for only 300 yards could have looked straight down on North Beach, where an extra pier was built leading to the steamer *Milo*, specially sunk to provide a breakwater. Such conditions made it necessary at Anzac to hide all signs of evacuation until the last moment. This was done—on General White's insistence—by holding the whole Anzac-Suvla front until late on the final night, even though with a skeleton screen of troops, who by various devices kept up the appearance of a normal night. *Normality* was the catchword of the whole operation—a policy for which Brudenell White was responsible, General Godley, then corps commander, backing him stoutly in his opposition to any exception to this rule. In the end a demonstration at Cape Helles on the last afternoon was the only deviation that army headquarters permitted.

Meanwhile during the first of the last two nights half the troops were withdrawn in batches before dawn. On the following night the remaining half were taken off by almost the same steps and in the same small craft. In the small hours of December 20th the whole line at Anzac was held by only 2000 troops. At 1.30 a.m. the line on Zeki Bey's front at Hill 60 was abandoned and the emptying extended progressively southward until at 3.14 the last of our front-line garrison, facing The Nek, withdrew. Sixteen minutes later three mines there including "Arnall's Tunnel" were exploded; though we had then about twenty mines under important parts of the Turkish front, none but these three were to be fired unless the Turks actually attacked. It was the explosion of these

² For details of the plan and how it was carried out, see *Vol. II, pp. 853-906*. For the events that led up to the decision, see *pp. 763-97*.

that first announced to our side that the Evacuation was practically complete. At 4.10 the last man left the Beach.

There had been no interference whatever by the Turks, and it was obvious they had been completely deceived. At dawn, 6.45, they bombarded part of the Old Anzac front,³ and I myself from the bridge of H.M.S. *Grafton* saw them rushing the trenches with fixed bayonets at 7.15. We had left at Anzac eleven demolished, valueless guns, our hospital tents, and stacks of stores which could not be removed without betraying our intention to evacuate. But at the cost of half a dozen casualties the force at Suvla and Anzac was clear after an operation which at one time had been expected to entail the killing, wounding or capturing of a third of the troops. The transports, trawlers, fleet sweepers, minelayers and other craft carrying them were safe either in Imbros Harbour on the horizon ten miles from Anzac, or on their way to Lemnos.

What had the Turks seen of all this? What had they anticipated? When had they discovered the Evacuation? And what happened when they discovered it? Zeki Bey gave us the answers. "In the summer," he said, "we had been told that sickness—we understood that malaria was meant—would drive your men off the Peninsula. We ourselves had some sickness, but not much. After the fighting at Bomba Tepe [Hill 60] the papers and news agencies began to talk about evacuation. There was a doubt in the air; some thought that you were going, some that you would attack, some that you would go on as we saw you doing, digging for the winter.

"The general view was that you would leave the Peninsula. Towards the end a lot of movement was noticed, but we couldn't make out if you were landing troops or taking them away. Orders had been given to observers to watch the ships and so forth. It was reported, first, that the number of tents was decreasing; second, that

³ This bombardment in the dark is shown in *Vol. XII, plate 159*.

the guns were firing less and that fire was being undertaken by the ships instead; third, that there were some days of silence. It was thought that you were abandoning some of the advanced trenches and orders were given to make strong reconnaissances. The report was that everywhere you were holding the front line.

"In spite of the rumours of an intention to leave the Peninsula we were ordered, first, to undertake all sorts of work for the winter, and, second, in consequence of a decision that came to us from Germany, to prepare a very strong attack. As to the winter preparations, the trenches were drained by a gutter inside or out.⁴ Dugouts were made deeper and stronger. Fires were generally prohibited because the camouflage of our trenches and stores was of dry brushwood." Presumably the cooks were allowed to make fires in the places provided, for Zeki Bey told us that the food on that side consisted of meat and beans, mainly beans.

Concerning the great attack to be planned, Zeki Bey said that very strict secrecy was maintained. "Some preparations were made in the back area, and orders were given to study the best points of attack and to make plans. But the decision as to the place of attack was not made known; even the ammunition which arrived came labelled so that only those who had to deal with it could read the cypher. The attack would not have been made immediately—not before a month, anyway.⁵ An Austrian battery had arrived and been emplaced in prepared positions. Observation posts were at Chunuk and Abdel Rahman Bair; it had four or five observation posts and its fire was well regulated. The first projectiles were fired after the snow, at targets west of Ismail Oglu Tepe ["Hill of Son of Ismail"—the W Hills], and by Lala Baba [at

⁴ Similar steps were being taken on the Anzac side, and the Mission found that the drains had been effective in preserving trenches, terraces, and paths.

⁵ I take my note of Zeki Bey's statement as meaning not before a month from the day on which we left Anzac, that is, not before January 20th.

Suvla Bay]; and one day either this or another battery fired on your position just west of Chunuk Bair [The Apex or Cheshire Ridge].”

But while these preparations were going on, the watch for signs of withdrawal was constantly keen. The Turkish forces opposite Suvla and Anzac at that time were, I gathered, as far as Zeki Bey could remember them (from north to south):—

- 12th Division
- 11th Division
- 9th Division
- 6th Division (16th, 17th and 18th Regts)
- 7th Division (20th Regt on Kaiajik Dere)
(21st Regt on Asma Dere)
- 8th Division (23rd and 24th Regts)
- 19th Division (27th Regt at Nek)
(57th Regt south of it)
- 16th Division (125th Regt at Johnston's Jolly)
(15th Regt and surviving battalion of
47th)
(48th Regt)
- 77th Regiment

The order to all local commanders, Zeki Bey said, was that any one of them, upon discovering a withdrawal, should order his troops to attack boldly. This order gave many headaches to the local commanders including Zeki Bey at Hill 60. “It would be impossible,” he felt, “to precipitate yourself upon an unknown position, full of wire, unknown trenches and possibly mines.” He therefore, after much anxious thought, had decided that his action in such case would be, “to make a demonstration with small arms fire and possibly thus pin down the last of the retiring troops and complicate their operation. I found out later,” he said, “that wire *had* been put out by you, and it would have been most dangerous to throw

ourselves on your rearguard, especially at night—Turkish troops might even have met and fought each other.

“What specially impressed me,” he added, “was that your men were reported to be constructing wire entanglements. They did so nearly to the end. Some nights before the last they were out at midnight working. I had a machine-gun playing on those wiring parties; it was firing that night. I thought that your men were possibly putting out the entanglement by pushing it over the edge of their trench.

“It was reported that your tents were becoming less numerous. But some of us, even at the end, thought that you were preparing to attack. On the last night your troops at Cape Helles made a demonstration. This gave the idea that at Ari Burnu and Suvla something was happening—the idea was possibly awakened in that way.⁶ At all events on that evening thirty-five vessels were seen to be gathered at Imbros, with smoke rising from them. The order was given to keep a very good watch. But the first real sign of the Evacuation was the blowing up of the mines at Jessaret Tepe. They killed about seventy men. Why did you blow them up?”

I fancied there was a hint of reproach in Zeki Bey's voice as he said this. I think he meant: “You had completely succeeded in your object—we had come to the end of a long and honourable campaign. Was it necessary to kill these?” I too had often wondered as to that; but the decision whether to fire the mines had been left in the discretion of an officer who, I suspected, must have felt like a child with a huge firework. It was almost inevitable that these mines should be fired; from the purely military point of view there was no reason to hesitate.

“Probably it was to force you to be cautious in following up,” I said.

⁶ The demonstration began at 2.30 p.m., but the firing, which as sometimes happened could be heard at Anzac, lasted till after dark. Zeki Bey's statement shows how wise was General White's resistance to all “abnormalities”.



63. MINE CRATER AT THE NIF BLOWN AT THE EVACUATION

It was the firing of this mine and two others at 3:30 a.m. on December 20th that first routed to the Turks that Anzac had been evacuated. Sixty Turks were killed. The Turkish monument marks the point where all attempted advances up this part of the range (Baby 706) from the evening of April 25th onward were stopped by the Turkish soldier.



64. THE VILLAGL OF KOJA DERE

A.W.M. photo, C.1804

"Well, it was this explosion that really told us of the Evacuation," he said. "I asked my friends on the staff, 'What gave you the first notion?' 'It was the mine that first made us certain,' they said.

"Immediately, a regiment from reserve was pushed up there to occupy the crater," he said, "and these troops got lost and wandered on into your trenches and found them empty. This was reported. Then the fires occurred at Suvla" (two British engineer officers at 4 a.m. set light to the huge stacks of stores on Suvla Beach) "and this gave the show away really.

"At first it was thought that the mine might have been a signal for some action on your part; and even when your trenches were entered it was not yet certain that all the trenches had been left. I had an officer in your trenches by 4 o'clock, and myself went later. The order was given at once to look after the sick, for we saw that you had left a hospital; but we soon found that there were no sick. At first only the [front] companies were ordered to advance; later the troops, some of them, went in without orders. On the first day they were everywhere. Stores abandoned by you were ordered to be collected—sandbags and other material for the trenches were sent to our troops at Helles, but the soldiers at Anzac helped themselves to these very largely. Your booby-traps caught very few men. Some on the right of my regiment were caught by a mine, but none of my regiment. The ships' fire next day did little damage."

Zeki Bey repeated that the limitation of the effect of naval fire on the land was part of the experience of the campaign. "We found that the ships' fire was not so terrible as at first we had thought that it would be. At first we thought that all towns like Maidos would have to be evacuated;⁷ but we found that Kurija Dere was

⁷ Conceivably Zeki Bey meant "as Maidos was"; but I think he meant that even Maidos proved habitable.

quite habitable.⁸ The howitzers which you afterwards obtained were very much worse.

"A German cinematographer had just come out to take some pictures" (the Turks themselves, Zeki Bey told us, had no provision for amenities for their troops), "but you had gone and he lost his chance. The authorities wanted exact reports of whatever material was left by you, so as to be able to judge whether you were hurried in your withdrawal or had carried it out easily. The quantity of food abandoned was taken as evidence that you had not got away easily. South of Bomba Tepe [Hill 60] there were 10,000 boxes of biscuits, jam, meat, tea, sugar. Besides these there were some mules which had been left by a doctor with his baggage—this gave the impression that you had withdrawn hurriedly. An order for the Evacuation was found—it allowed for food etc. being left behind."

Zeki Bey found in the Aghyl Dere, quite close in front of his own sector, a considerable dump—evidently the stores which had been left in Australia Valley in a "keep" established there against emergency. He also saw, later, at Suvla "the remains of a great fire"; possibly other stores had been removed from there by the Turks. "Boxes of rubber, all sorts of stores," he said, "were found." Actually the policy of our command had been to avoid imperilling the operation by any attempt to withdraw those stores or guns whose removal might betray the secret; the few guns left were destroyed and at Anzac the stacks were to be set on fire by shelling, after the withdrawal of the troops. The Navy fired at them, but not much seems to have been burnt.⁹

"No one regretted," Zeki Bey told me, "that we hadn't known of your intention to withdraw." Ignorance relieved the local commanders of a very troublesome

⁸ The Mission, however, found this village largely destroyed.

⁹ A photograph of Turks on the abandoned Anzac Beach is given in *Vol. XII. plate 160.*

problem. The Turks at Helles, of course, asked them constantly how it was they had failed to turn the Evacuation into disaster for the Allies. The Turks at Anzac retorted: "Well, you know now that there will be a withdrawal from Helles. So—do what you want to do there." Later everyone knew that we would leave Helles, and the Turks there tried to stop it but failed.¹⁰ The British vanished in one night, that of 8th January 1916.

After the evacuation of Anzac "troops were ordered at once to fortify the places you had left. Possibly this was done in order to occupy the soldiers and not allow them to walk all over the abandoned area." The work then done at Anzac included the construction of the wire entanglement which the Mission had noted on its first day, just above the Beach. But though the Turks apparently at one time feared, or at least considered, the possibility of the Allies' attempting to land again in the same region, the Anzac battlefield had been practically unchanged since we left it in 1915; new trenches were hardly noticeable, and the old ones, wandering everywhere still deep, with their white parapets not yet overgrown, provided us with the constant necessity of jumping them on horseback, a game at which, Lambert wrote, "I am pleased to boast that I more than hold my own, though my gee-gee don't like it." Happily the jumps were narrow and no horse was hurt; I dreaded the thought of an explanation to our good friends of the 28th Division, but, in fact, there was no alternative to jumping; the risk to the horses would have been greater if we had tried to lead them.

¹⁰ See *Vol II*, p 905, and *British Official History, Gallipoli, Vol. II*, pp. 472-3