

CHAPTER II

AFTER GALLIPOLI

INSPIRED by a flash of genius which was unfortunately accidental and fleeting, the Gallipoli operations were marred from the outset by impulsive politicians, vaingloriously trying their prentice hands in the art of war. During the eight months of the occupation all that could be done by uplifted resolve, by dazzling, self-sacrificing valour, by cheerful suffering, was done in the hope of retrieving what Moltke refers to as an initial error in distribution. Splendid young manhood never lavished itself with less reserve. With a magnificent indifference to the cost, every possibility was gladly exploited by the men of Anzac and Helles to attain to the goal which seemed so near at hand. But from first to last the effort of the soldier was foredoomed to failure.

A remarkable personal note ran through the effort at Anzac. Never in all the history of war, perhaps, was there a campaign in which the individual soldier, fighting far away from his native soil, was so deeply pledged and consecrated to his mission. Never was an invading force withdrawn from alien soil with its officers and men more borne down by grief at their failure. In some measure this feeling was due to the strong sporting instinct of the young men of Australia and New Zealand. But the real cause had a deeper and nobler origin. Anzac was the first great battleground of these sister Dominions. The men who fought had a profound, if unexpressed, sense of the significance of their enterprise. By their work at Anzac would the world know them, and not only them, but the two new nations which had sent them forth into ordeal of battle among the old warring Powers. By their work would the standard of valour be set for all time in lands destined some day to breed many-millioned nations. Conscious of the prestige they enjoyed as the descendants of a race whose victories were world-wide on a thousand fields, these children of spacious young countries were impelled by the vision of their assured and splendid future. They strove to

do honour to the ashes of their fathers in a land that was old, and to set the stamp of glory on their children in a land new and hitherto untried.

They fought with all the might and resource of their proud exuberant manhood; but in vain they flung themselves at the overshadowing enemy stronghold. The hopes of youth are high, its disappointments keen; and the grief they knew at their failure was deeper and sharper because of the comrades whom they abandoned by withdrawal. Old countries, accustomed to the inevitable passing of each successive generation, accept the tragedy of death with more philosophy than lands which are new. Experienced campaigners develop a merciful indifference, if only in a relative degree, to the death of their comrades in arms. But the young men of Anzac were the children of a virgin unblooded country, unused to the tragedies of battle. They sorrowed greatly for their dead, and that sorrow was intensified when the time came for those who had fallen to be deserted and surrendered to the enemy. Very sore at heart were the Anzacs as they stole away in the night, leaving their dead, and their enterprise unfulfilled.

They re-embarked in wretched condition. Haggard, ragged, and unkempt, their bodily depression was increased by the bitter disappointment in their minds. But they were still a force high in moral qualities. Gallipoli was not a soldiers' failure. The fighting men had not blundered or faltered. They had strained human endeavour to the breaking point. The failure was higher up. The tragedy of Gallipoli lies to the discredit of Whitehall. Its fate was the common fate of so many subsidiary operations in the war. It received only the casual remnant of the British Cabinet's attention, and, what was infinitely worse, at times the casual remnants of generals who were sent out, as at Suvla, to conduct critical operations.

The rank and file knew these things, and this knowledge explains the stout spirit, and the strong disposition for further participation in the war, which shone out of every bedraggled unit as the transports cleared the *Ægean*. Uppermost in the men's minds was the conviction that on the Peninsula they had not been given what the soldier terms a "fair spin," and they looked forward to other war ventures under conditions

which might yield to them and to the Empire some tangible reward for their endeavour. This trend of thought was particularly strong in the regiments of the Australian Light Horse. These men had gone to Gallipoli twice volunteers. They had enlisted in Australia for the mounted service; but, when the infantry had sailed from Egypt for the Peninsula, the light horsemen had urged upon their leaders and the Australian Government that they should be permitted to leave their horses behind and go to the support of the sorely tried men at Anzac. The work of the light horse, when fighting as infantry in Gallipoli, has been fully treated in another volume of this history, and need not be touched upon here. From May, when the first dismounted regiments went ashore at Anzac Cove, down to the Evacuation they had their full share of the fighting. They were of the same stock and, in numberless cases, of the same families as the doughty infantry, and throughout they displayed the same high qualities of battle discipline, resource, initiative, and fiery daring.

By the light horsemen Gallipoli was never looked upon as anything more than a sporting digression, imposed by the fickle circumstance of war. Their thoughts turned constantly from the Peninsula to their horses in Egypt, and to the mounted work for which they had originally volunteered. They returned to Egypt ignorant of their future, but strong in the hope that when their next campaign opened they would ride out to battle. Despite the bitterness of their disappointment the men of the light horse, like the Anzacs as a whole, viewed Gallipoli in its proper proportions as a subsidiary operation in a great world-wide war. They felt, too, that world-wide strategy had dictated the Evacuation, and that the army, although its purpose had failed, had not been overwhelmed in action, routed, demoralised, or disgraced. That fact must be appreciated if the exuberant self-confidence and high morale of Australia's mounted forces immediately after Gallipoli is to be properly understood.

During many thousands of years Egypt, abundant in riches and yet strategically so defenceless, has been accustomed to the presence of great alien armies. On the sands around the Pyramids, ever since the vague beginnings of history, camp fires have illuminated the faces of the fighting men

of nearly all the great conquering races. The light desert air has been startled by the ribald stories and careless laughter of soldiers of every race and colour. Ethiopians and Arabs, Babylonians and Assyrians, Greeks and Romans, Turks and French, all have had swift, dramatic, but always ephemeral triumphs over the defenceless Egyptians. Nearly all the world's ambitious captains have at some time in their victorious progress led their hosts toward the wealth of the Lower Nile, and then, corrupted and softened by the easily-won riches, have passed away, leaving scarcely more impression upon the character and the breed of the eternal Egyptian than the footsteps of their troops have left upon the desert sands. Egypt and the Egyptians, always so vulnerable and so often prostrated by conquest, have survived ages after their conquerors have faded and almost vanished, and remain still the modern world's one strong, sure link and guide to a civilised existence which was mature and ancient long before the wanderings of the patriarchs of the Old Testament.

But of all the vast foreign armies to encamp upon the desert which borders the fertile mud of the Lower Nile, none was ever so various and significant in its composition and so diverse in its missions as the great battle host of the British Empire which swarmed over northern Egypt in the early months in 1916. When the Evacuation was complete, the British force in Egypt exceeding 300,000 men. It included British Regulars and Territorials from every part of the United Kingdom, Indians from the fighting tribes of British India, infantry and light horse from Australia and New Zealand. The old land rang and throbbed with the disembarkation of troops and the making of camps, with the bustle of re-equipment and the renewed training of men. The hospitals were overflowing with the victims of Gallipoli; and great numbers of troops not actually sick were for a time physically impoverished and in need of a season of rest. But the army of Gallipoli as a whole began at once to show a remarkable revival in condition. The winter season was cool and stimulating. After the hard and narrow rations of Anzac, the Australians were refreshed and strengthened by the rich supplies of Egypt, and the work of the medical units quickly decreased as the men enjoyed again plentiful rations of fruit.

vegetables, and other fresh foodstuffs. There was little thought of rest or recreation. The Gallipoli forces were scarcely settled into camp before each unit was stirred by rumours of new enterprise, and the troops, affected with the restlessness which always goes with campaigning, were alert with expectation.

From the outbreak of war Egypt had been a great British camp. In its central situation between England in the north and India and Australia and New Zealand in the east and south, its commanding position in regard to Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, southern France, and Salonika, its suitability for the accommodation and training of large armies, and its almost unlimited local supplies of many kinds of fresh produce, it combined most of the essentials of a military base on a grand scale.

The evacuation of Gallipoli released a great Turkish force from the Peninsula, and took a heavy strain off the controlling German machine. But it also gave to England a huge force of men for immediate use in other fields. There was no lack of fresh employment for the troops from Anzac, Helles, and Suvla. In February Germany's titanic blow fell upon Verdun, and the whole Allied line in France was urgently in need of reinforcements. British fortunes in Mesopotamia had reached their darkest hour. Townshend fought at Ctesiphon in November, and retreated immediately to Kut, where he was closely invested. Additional troops were imperatively needed, both for East and West. The British Cabinet decided promptly. The great force in Egypt was to be reduced as expeditiously as the re-formation of its emaciated divisions made their embarkation practicable, and they were to be transported without delay to the posts of danger. The Suez Canal must of course be made safe; and enough troops must be held to deal with the elusive, thrusting Senussi on the Western Desert, and with the various tribes which were giving spasmodic trouble in Upper Egypt and in the Soudan. Beyond that, every man must be made ready to embark.

The vicissitudes of the campaign in Sinai, Palestine, and Syria, in which the Australians played a part so pronounced and decisive, become more easy of understanding if the policy of the British Cabinet in relation to the war with Turkey is

clearly appreciated. Britain's three great campaigns against Turkey—in Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, and Palestine—were all more or less accidental in their origin and half-hearted in their conduct. All were opposed by powerful elements. They found no favour with the British High Command in France, which believed the Western Front to be the critical and decisive theatre. The French were hostile to them on the same ground, and upon other grounds suggested by obvious political suspicion. French statesmen very naturally looked with dissatisfaction upon a distribution of Allied strength which tied the French armies to the unprofitable Western Front, while permitting England by the exercise of her sea power and the employment of expeditionary forces to add indefinitely to her Empire abroad. The British Cabinet, unfortunately situated, followed a middle course, the worst policy of all. The campaigns were sanctioned and undertaken without the enthusiasm, resolution, or military strength necessary to ensure their vigorous prosecution. Neither in Gallipoli nor in Mesopotamia, nor yet in Palestine at any time before 1917, was there a deliberate and concentrated effort to destroy the enemy forces and achieve decisive success. Weak, spasmodic thrusts with inadequate forces were launched in plenty. But there was nothing which showed that the Cabinet was seized of the first principle in warfare—the complete destruction of the enemy.

In France, such a consummation was impossible, either for the Allies or for the Germans. But on other fronts it was not only possible but practicable. Germany did it again and again. In swift, overwhelming campaigns she destroyed Serbia in 1915 and Roumania in 1916. She shattered the Russian armies by the employment of the same resolute, decisive methods, and in 1917 she almost forced Italy out of the war. Contrast this masterful strategy and decisive action in subsidiary campaigns with the feeble performances of the Allies. With the single exception of the conquest of some of the German colonies, which was little more than a round-up of greatly inferior forces, Britain in all of her campaigns outside France nowhere forced a decision until the great enemy collapse came on all fronts in 1918.

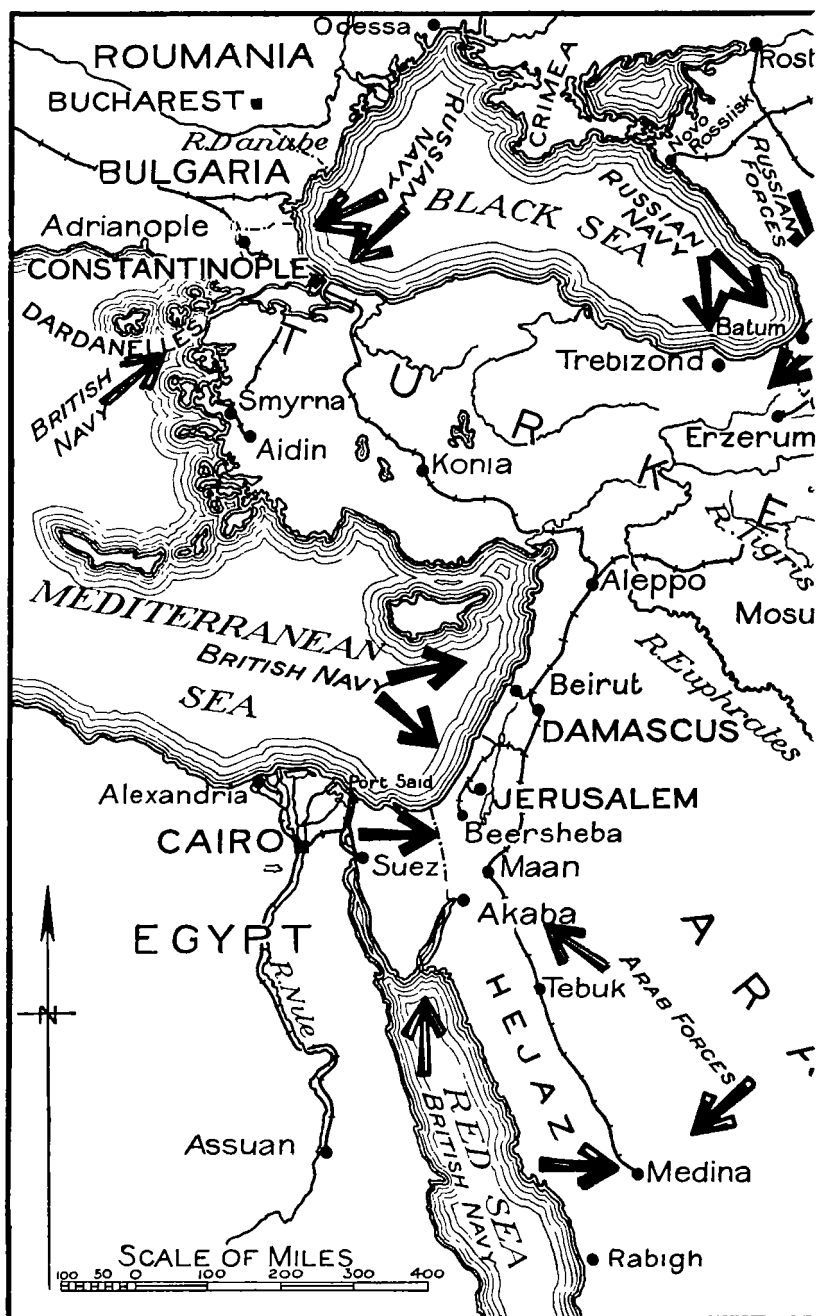
It is necessary to emphasise this tragic indecision and half-hearted enterprise at Whitehall, in order that justice should be done to the unfortunate British commanders of the various oversea campaigns, and to the armies they led. Sir Ian Hamilton at Gallipoli, Sir Archibald Murray¹ in Palestine, and various British leaders in Macedonia, Mesopotamia, and East Africa, suffered the same disability. For years such men were a mere afterthought of the Cabinet. They and their campaigns were subordinated in an extreme degree to the war in France and Flanders. When France was fully furnished, they received the overflow; when the Western Front called for any of their divisions, they were required immediately to release and embark them, regardless of the consequence to their own operations. Bitter indeed was the lot of the commanders-in-chief of these subsidiary armies. But the British policy had this sure result—it played from first to last into the hands of Germany. It accomplished during a number of years very little good for England or harm to her enemy abroad; but it kept not less than a million British soldiers out of France during many desperate struggles on a colossal scale.

Sir Archibald Murray, who on the 10th January, 1916, took over command of the Eastern Expeditionary Force (as well as that of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, in which he succeeded General Sir Charles Monro²), was perhaps the chief victim of this wretched policy. General Murray was a British officer of marked distinction. Born in 1860, he had fought with credit as a battalion commander in the South African War, and in the decade before 1914 had attracted notice and advanced rapidly in his profession by his capacity as an organiser and his deep knowledge of strategy. He was Sir John French's first Chief of Staff in France, and the Field-Marshal was unstinted in appreciation of the quality of his services during the famous retreat from Mons and the subsequent fighting of the first seven divisions. Murray possessed some great qualities as a soldier, and many charming qualities as a man. But he was the wrong man for Egypt at

¹ Gen. Sir Archibald Murray, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., C.V.O., D.S.O. p.s.c. Officer of British Regular Army; b. Sutton, Surrey, Eng., 21 April, 1860.

² Gen. Sir Charles Monro, Bt, G.C.B., G.C.S.I., G.C.M.G., p.s.c. Officer of British Regular Army; b. 15 June, 1860. Died, 7 Dec. 1929.

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that time. Between the date of his appointment, early in 1916, and his withdrawal in July, 1917, he accomplished important and enduring work for the Empire; but he possessed weaknesses which marred his performance as a leader and were prejudicial to his own personal interest. His political sense was very shrewd. His strategic conceptions in Sinai and southern Palestine were bold and sound. So far as he failed, he failed mainly because he was a bad judge of capacity in others, and because of his personal generosity. He was too generous in his attitude to the Western Front, too generous in his obedience to the War Office, too generous in his confidence in his chief subordinates. His generosity, indeed, rather than his mistakes was his undoing in Egypt. Only a leader of independent, even selfish, aggressive, and persuasive character had a reasonable chance of success in any of England's subsidiary campaigns. An unselfish man like Murray, compliant to the wishes of the Cabinet, was almost certain to sacrifice his professional reputation.

Immediately after the return of the Gallipoli army to Egypt, General Murray's command was, as we have seen, little more than a great reinforcement camp. The British troops in the Balkans, who had their base at Salonika, were also under his direction; but then and for a long time afterwards there was no thought of that force becoming actively aggressive. Britain was not disposed to undertake a rigorous campaign against the Bulgars and their allies, nor apparently was her understanding with the French in regard to the Balkans satisfactory enough for joint Anglo-French operations. In Egypt, though the people were restless, there was no actual disturbance. The Senussi campaign was virtually over. Except for the defence of the Canal, Murray's one active concern was with the training, equipment, and embarkation of troops to France and Mesopotamia.

His embarrassments began early. The War Cabinet, while insisting upon absolute safety for the Canal and for Egypt, demanded at the same time the release of every man who could be spared for other fields of activity. Murray, with rare loyalty to his old friends in France, and never disputing the fact that in the West lay the decisive campaign, from first to last exercised every endeavour to supply the troops

demanded. At that time neither he nor the British Cabinet had any serious thoughts of an invasion of Palestine; but, in his desire to aid the campaigns in France and Mesopotamia, he consented to reduce his force to a level which made even the defence of the Canal and the policing of restless Egypt a matter of grave concern to himself and his lieutenants.

Late in 1915, when the destruction of the Serbian barrier between the Central Powers and the Near East opened the railroad for the transport of German and Austrian troops and supplies to the outposts of the Turkish Empire, increased attention was given to the defence of the Canal and of Egypt. The whole scheme for guarding the Canal was changed. At the time of Djemal's abortive attack, early in 1915, the defences had rested on the waterway itself, and they remained there until the end of that year. The new scheme was attributed to Kitchener, who is reported to have said, during his visit towards the end of that year, "Instead of you guarding the Canal, the Canal is guarding you." Whether the Minister for War initiated the change may be open to doubt, but the weakness of the old situation is apparent. With the British front line running practically along the banks of the Canal—a clearly defined target—the waterway was always open to damage by long range gun-fire, and a lucky shot, hitting and sinking a large steamer, might have caused a prolonged stoppage to shipping. Moreover, it was, as Djemal had proved, open at any time to a resolute thrust by raiders.

At the beginning of 1916, therefore, these considerations led to the pushing out of the defensive trenches about twelve miles into the Sinai desert. The line was then divided into three sectors, numbered 1, 2, and 3, from south to north, and based respectively on Suez, Ismailia, and Port Said. A number of light Decauville railways linked the trenches with the Canal. At that time there was little or no sign of the enemy, and the defending troops, which included some Australian infantry brigades from Gallipoli, were chiefly engaged in trenching, timbering, and wiring. The desert season was at its prime, with cool, clear days and crisp, keen nights. But the battalions were fully occupied. The barren waste of Sinai is a nursery of strong winds. Its millions of sand-dunes are as mobile almost as the waves of the ocean. The trenches

filled nearly as fast as the men dug them; so fine and pure and dry is the sand that even revetted trenches filled and refilled, and kept the soldiers constantly engaged. It was the beginning of a work which, continuing by day and night, extended nearly all the way across the wide stretch of the desert of northern Sinai.

The war in Sinai and Palestine was to a decisive degree a struggle between the efficiency of two great systems of communications. The battleground was on territory practically neutral, and far removed from the man-power and supplies of the two combatants. The Turk does not live in Palestine any more than the British people live in Egypt. Britain in the struggle probably drew more man-power from Egypt, in the Egyptian Labour Corps, than the Turks drew from Palestine and Syria combined. Turkey obtained supplies of foodstuffs from those two countries, but not on the scale on which England drew upon Egypt; and Egypt was the nearer source.

The Suez Canal is by sea some 3,200 miles from London and 6,700 miles from Australia, and by land 1,400 miles from Constantinople and 2,900 miles from Berlin. It can scarcely be said that the enemy enjoyed what are known as inside lines of communications. From Berlin to Constantinople, on the old international railroad, the war service when established was fairly rapid and efficient. But from Stamboul to the East, over the Baghdad line, trains were always slow and subject to prolonged delays. That line, as far as Aleppo, carried reinforcements and supplies of two large armies, one on the Euphrates and one in Palestine. From Stamboul to Rayak, the junction in the Baalbek Valley between Damascus and Beirut, it was of standard gauge; but the tunnels through the Taurus were not completed until October, 1918, and all transport was in consequence delayed. From Rayak to the south the single line was only of metre gauge, and its capacity was limited. To transport troops from Constantinople to Aleppo during the war occupied from twelve to sixteen days, and from Aleppo to southern Palestine from ten to fourteen days. England therefore probably had, despite the submarine menace and the slow sea-transport it imposed, the better position in regard to communications. And her sea power, enabling her as it did to menace constantly the long enemy coast-line from

the Dardanelles to Sinai with threats of landings which may or may not have been mere feints, enabled her to keep large enemy forces out of action during the whole campaign.