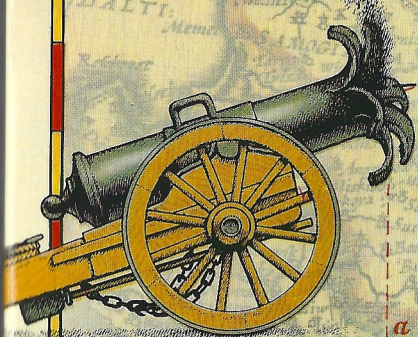


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Failure to Adapt *The British at Gallipoli, August 1915*

THE GREAT CHANCE

IN APRIL 1915, when the Allied armies in France and Flanders were already experiencing the frustrations of trench warfare that were to render them practically immobile for the next three years, some 70,00 British, Australian, New Zealand, and French troops were launched against Turkey in an attempt to circumvent the bloody deadlock on the Western Front. Their destination was the Gallipoli Peninsula, where they were to help the Royal Navy force a passage through the Dardanelles against Turkish guns; the prize was Constantinople and, beyond it, access to the West's beleaguered ally, Russia. As well as knocking Turkey out of the war and unlocking a supply route to the massive but underequipped Russian armies, the Gallipoli campaign, if successful, also seemed to offer the chance of gathering useful allies from among the Balkan states and so, in Lloyd George's celebrated phrase, "knocking the props from beneath Austria-Hungary." Two years later, during the post mortem into the failure at Gallipoli, the former prime minister H. H. Asquith lamented a lost opportunity. "If we had succeeded . . . in my judgment it would have produced a far greater effect upon the whole conduct of the war than anything that has been done in any other sphere of the war."¹

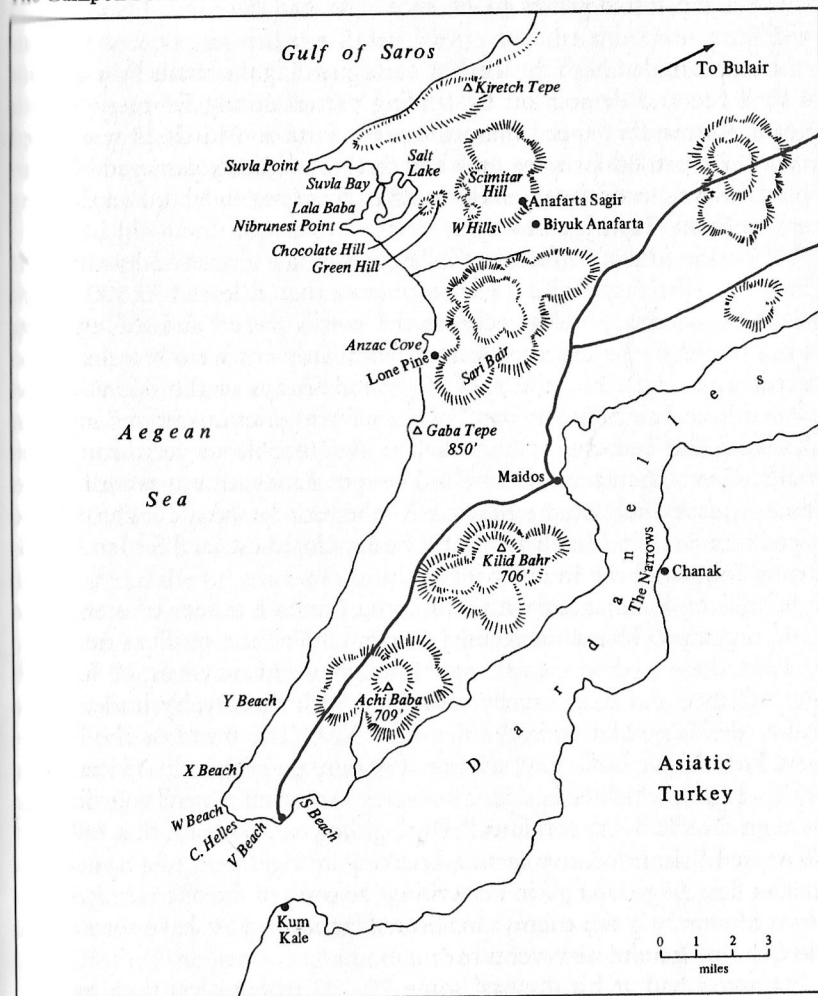
After the venture had ended in failure, the disgraced commander of the expedition, General Sir Ian Hamilton, opined that the fate of his force had always hung in the balance. "No man in Europe could have foretold whether the landing of April 25th was to be a success or a dreadful disaster," he wrote. "Too many of the factors were unprecedented under modern conditions for any forecast to be made."² The poet John Masefield, who saw action at Gallipoli, took a somewhat different view of the failure at Suvla Bay in August 1915. He believed that success had been almost within the Allies' grasp but that, in the words of the nursery rhyme, "for want of a nail, a battle was lost." "In war, as in life," he wrote, "the unusual thing, however little, betrays the unusual thing, however great." In this case what could have turned a defeat into a victory were "two fresh battalions and a ton of water."³

Hamilton's somewhat gloomy assessment contrasts strongly, however, with the mood of buoyant optimism that predominated at all levels before the first landings took place, a mood that owed much to a failure to consider exactly what an amphibious operation might entail and not a little to a deeply entrenched attitude of racist superiority toward the Turkish people in general and the Turkish army in particular. The notion that British troops—any British troops—must be superior to their Turkish opponents was the counterpart of the notion of prestige as the basis of British imperial rule.⁴ It was widespread throughout all levels of British society, and the expedition's commander was deeply impregnated with it. "Let me bring my lads face to face with Turks in the open field," he begged his diary some three weeks before Suvla Bay. "We must beat them every time because British volunteer soldiers are superior individuals to Anatolians, Syrians or Arabs and are animated with a superior ideal and an equal joy in battle."⁵ Hamilton valued each British soldier as worth several dozen Turks; at Suvla Bay the cold statistics suggest that every Turk was the equal of ten Britons.

At its outset the Gallipoli campaign lacked a clear operational design. Adopted to solve a variety of diplomatic and strategic problems and launched largely as a result of the passionate advocacy of Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty and political head of the navy, it was first to be an attempt by battleships to rush the narrows at Gallipoli and break into the Sea of Marmora. When the admiral on the spot was asked his advice, however, he recommended a longer-drawn-out operation to force the straits by means of methodical bombardment and mine-sweeping combined.

Overwhelmed by Churchill's persuasive oratory, and imprisoned by a concept of service that made them passive instruments of naval adminis-

The Gallipoli Peninsula



tration rather than active participants in naval policy, the senior admirals in Whitehall endorsed the plan although the serving head of the Royal Navy, Admiral Sir John Fisher, had gone on record ten years earlier opposing any such venture. "Any naval officer who engages a fort worthy of the name fort deserves to be shot!" he had declared. "Nelson said this!"⁶

Attempts to demolish the Turkish forts guarding the straits by a mixture of shell fire and demolition by landing parties during February were a failure; a second attempt to knock out the forts on March 18 was halted when three battleships were sunk and three more badly damaged.⁷ At this point the weight of the operation shifted from sea to land, and the long path to Suvla Bay began to open up.

When the idea of attacking Gallipoli was first discussed by the War Council on January 8, Kitchener intimated that at least 150,000 troops would be necessary.⁸ Gradually, as the weeks passed and the excessive hopes placed in the efficacy of naval bombardment were revealed to be far too overoptimistic, the role of ground troops in the operation expanded from being "in support" of the navy to joint operations and then to seizing the peninsula if the navy proved unable to get through the straits. Given the situation on the Western Front, troops were hard to come by, but after some hesitation Kitchener released a division for the expedition, and on March 12, 1915, he appointed General Sir Ian Hamilton to command the military forces.

A brilliant commander who was also a first-rate trainer of men and a good organizer, Hamilton seemed to combine all the qualities necessary to make the expedition a success. Although an infantryman, he had "all the brilliance and dash usually associated with the cavalry leader."⁹ He had made his reputation in the first Boer War (1880) and on the Northwest Frontier of India and cemented it during the South African War (1899–1902), which he ended as an acting lieutenant general coordinating thirteen mobile flying columns.¹⁰ During the years of peace that followed he revised British infantry tactics, breaking up rigid lines of advance into smaller flexible groupings; in his writings he stressed the overriding importance of attacking the enemy. In short, Hamilton must have seemed the ideal choice for the new venture.

Hamilton had at his disposal some 70,000 troops—less than half the number Kitchener had thought necessary, but the demands of the Western Front made it impossible to release any more. They also meant that the Gallipoli expedition went short of artillery and ammunition; British divisions should have had 304 guns but Hamilton's had only 118, and there was an almost total lack of howitzers, trench mortars, grenades, and high-explosive ammunition. Had he landed his force on the peninsula in

mid-March, it would have faced perhaps 25,000 Turks.¹¹ But on March 26, alarmed by the second British attempt to force the narrows, the Turks had given the German general Liman von Sanders overall responsibility for the defense of the peninsula and some 60,000 troops. Liman split his forces into three equal parts. One, at Besika Bay, protected the Asiatic shore; a second guarded the Bulair Lines; and the third was posted on the Gallipoli Peninsula.¹² On the eve of the landing, Hamilton reckoned that he faced 40,000 Turks.¹³

Lacking adequate resources, Hamilton also lacked adequate guidance and even up-to-date information. No general plan of operations was worked out by the general staff in London, on the assumption that Hamilton and his naval opposite number, Vice Admiral Sackville Hamilton Carden, would do that on the spot, thereby leaving much to extemporization between staffs which were uncoordinated. When Hamilton's chief of staff, General Walter Pipon Braithwaite, asked the War Office for information about his foes and his destination, the Intelligence Department gave him "an out-of-date textbook on the Turkish army and two small guidebooks on western Turkey."¹⁴ Later Hamilton bewailed both the lack of a plan of operations and the lack of lucidity in Kitchener's orders; but at the time he accepted the situation uncomplainingly.¹⁵

The Gallipoli landings took place on April 25, 1915. A successful deception operation in the Gulf of Saros, involving a naval bombardment of the coast and the presence of transports loaded with troops, kept Liman's attention away from the southern end of the peninsula for twenty-four hours—though the Turks later claimed that only one of the three Allied landings (by the Australians, at what became known as Anzac landing) took them by surprise.¹⁶

Due to the narrowness of the beaches, a shortage of boats from which to land the troops (primitive landing craft had been constructed but were not available), and the lack of room to maneuver troops from a single point, Hamilton chose to attack the peninsula at three different points near its southwestern tip. The attack was based on two assumptions, both of which turned out to be unwise: that the only really difficult part of the operation would be getting ashore, after which the Turks could easily be pushed off the peninsula; and that the main obstacles to a happy landing would be provided by the enemy.

When the day dawned, and the sun shone straight into the eyes of the attacking troops, dazzling them and thereby giving the Turks a small but important advantage, British inexperience and Turkish resilience confounded both these expectations. Ships lost their way; troops were landed in the wrong place; arrangements for soldiers to land by way of improvised temporary wharves failed; and supporting firepower proved either

inadequate or nonexistent. The enemy posed yet more obstacles. The Turks defended and counterattacked with unexpected ferocity. Against the Anzac landing, which they estimated at 12,000, the Turks launched regiments totaling 4,000 men. After twenty-four hours they had suffered 50 percent casualties.¹⁷

Fierce Turkish resistance stopped the Anzacs' progress; and it also put up what proved to be an impenetrable barrier in the south, where general Hunter-Weston had put the 29th division ashore at four different landing places. But at the third landing site—"Y" beach—2,000 men embarked without a hitch, meeting no opposition. What happened next was—with hindsight—a pointer to the fate of the whole expedition, for a golden opportunity went begging. Aylmer Hunter-Weston, preoccupied with the stiff fight going on at the toe of the peninsula, ignored "Y" beach. The troops there, lacking any order to press forward at all costs, first dug themselves in and then, next morning, began to drift back down to the beaches. Hamilton saw what was happening, but did not intervene.¹⁸ His passivity—so great a contrast with his reputation for boldness—resulted from his conception of command, which we shall explore later. The consequence was a minor tragedy: Bereft of any clear orders, and discovering that an extemporized embarkation had already begun, the local commander permitted it to gather pace. After twenty-nine hours of unfettered freedom, during which they could have carved a sizable hole in the improvised Turkish line, the British troops pulled out.

When the first day at Gallipoli ended, the Allies had footholds in three places on the peninsula and faced the task of expelling a ferocious opponent from one of the finest natural fortresses in the world. Hamilton, showing the mixture of overoptimism and misunderstanding characteristic of his entire period of command, cabled the Anzac commander on the evening of April 25, "You have got through the difficult business, now you have only to dig, dig, dig until you are safe."¹⁹ Short of sufficient strength from the outset, his forces had suffered some 12 percent casualties in the first three days. The deficiency could not immediately be made good because Kitchener had refused to supply the extra troops normally allotted for wastage. Over the next three months the Allied troops struggled to enlarge their foothold against the opposition of Turkish machine guns and the difficulties of the terrain, while their commander telegraphed home for more divisions and more artillery ammunition. Men were easier to find than shells, and with them Hamilton planned to make a major effort at the start of August to surge to the crests of the hills which dominated the Gallipoli peninsula. Once held, they would put the Allies in a commanding position from which to bombard the Turkish positions, sup-

port the navy against Turkish batteries strung out along the narrows, and clear the peninsula. All that would remain would be a triumphant advance on Constantinople, already terrorized by the appearance of Allied battle-ships off the Golden Horn. Excitement at the prospects offered by success, and frustration at the failure of the April landings, added a heavy burden of hopes to the new venture.

A LOST OPPORTUNITY

The battle that took place on the peninsula from August 6–9, 1915, provides one of the most striking examples in modern military history of the failure of an organization to seize and secure a success that, to both contemporaries and subsequent historians, looked to be there for the taking. Confronted by what seems to have been a golden opportunity to achieve a local success of major dimensions, the result of taking the Turks completely by surprise at Suvla Bay, British troops failed to see and to take full advantage of an opportunity presented to them by considerable enemy weakness. Thus the Suvla Bay landing presents exactly those major characteristics we have identified as indicative of true military misfortune: the failure of one party to do what might have been reasonably expected of it, and widespread shock at the outcome once the true scale of the lost opportunity became known. Winston Churchill, deeply involved in the genesis of the campaign and with much to justify—as well as much to conceal—allowed his pen free rein when he came to write his personal account of the war.

The long and varied annals of the British Army contain no more heartbreaking episode than that of the battle of Suvla Bay. The greatness of the prize in view, the narrowness by which it was missed, the extremes of valiant skill and of incompetence, of effort and inertia, which were equally presented, the malevolent fortune which played about the field, are features not easily to be matched in our history.²⁰

Though they lacked his magisterial powers of self-expression, others shared Churchill's view. One officer who was present at the battle held that Suvla Bay "will always remain one of the great failures of the war, and a black page in the history of the British Army."²¹ And Alan Moorehead, a later historian, set out very clearly the two sides of the puzzle to be solved:

Somewhere, one feels, there must be some missing factor which has not been brought to light—some element of luck neglected, some supernatural accident, some evil chain of coincidence that nobody could have anticipated. And yet it was quite unlike the April landing. One does not have the feeling that it was touch and go at Suvla, that some slight shifting of pattern would have put things right again. There is instead a strong sense of inevitability; each event leads on quite inexorably to the next. . . .²²

To understand what went wrong, and to be able to chart the pathways to misfortune such historians as Moorehead have perceived, we shall first examine what was expected to happen and then test the contemporary explanations for the failure. Only then shall we be in a position to construct our matrix and identify the root causes of the failure to cope with a golden opportunity.

Suvla Bay is a long, curved stretch of sand backed by a flat plain from which rise several low hills. Some four and a half miles north of the main Allied positions, it lies at the end of the chain of mountains that command the center of the Gallipoli Peninsula. It was for the possession of this chain, and particularly of the heights of Sari Bair, that Hamilton was about to launch his main attack from the Anzac landing. Until the beginning of August, Suvla Bay had escaped the fury of battle, neither side perceiving its importance in the struggle to escape from the fringes of the peninsula and gain control of the commanding high ground. The idea of operating in the bay area was first raised at the end of July when General Sir William Riddell Birdwood, commanding the Anzac landing, proposed attacking Sari Bair with two divisions and added that if he had a third he would send it to Suvla Bay.²³ Herein lay the first seed of failure: Always perceived as a secondary operation, Suvla Bay never got the full attention it merited from Hamilton's headquarters staff.²⁴

The difficulties inherent in the kind of operation Lieutenant General Sir Frederick William Stopford was about to undertake were sadly underrated. On the eve of the April 25 landing, Hamilton had been forcibly struck by "the amount of original thinking and improvisation demanded by a landing operation."²⁵ Twenty-seven years later, when American marines landed on Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942, they had expected six months' grace to train for their first Pacific operation but were given only six weeks. However, unlike Stopford's men, they had the benefit of such prewar innovations as combat loading to ease their task.²⁶ Stopford's force lacked any such body of doctrine and technique; it lacked experience; and it lacked time.

To command IX Corps, which was to be entrusted with the landing, Hamilton asked for an experienced general from France. He requested General Sir Julian Byng or General Sir Henry Rawlinson, but was denied either by Kitchener and left with a choice between two senior but retired generals—"dug-outs," in the parlance of the day. His choice fell on Stopford. The novelist Compton Mackenzie, meeting Stopford shortly before the attack, was forcibly struck by his shortcomings:

He was deprecating, courteous, fatherly, anything except the commander of an Army Corps which had been entrusted with a major operation that might change the whole course of the war in twenty-four hours.²⁷

This assessment of Stopford may well have benefited from the wisdom of hindsight; but the new corps commander certainly did not have a high reputation inside the army, where he had made his career chiefly as an administrator, and Hamilton chose him only because he had the necessary seniority over one of the divisional generals he would have to command, Lieutenant General Sir Bryan Mahon. A less passive commander might have pressed harder for an officer he felt suited to the difficult task at hand; but Hamilton can certainly be faulted for failing to take steps to keep a close watchful eye on a general he suspected was not up to the job.

Stopford first learned of the Suvla Bay plan on July 22, fifteen days before he was scheduled to carry it out.²⁸ His orders laid down the main objective as the "capture and retention of Suvla Bay as a base of operations for the northern army"; to do this he was to capture the low hills in the basin behind the bay quickly and then take the heights on its northern and eastern sides. Subsequent moves would "depend upon circumstances which cannot at present be gauged," but it was "hoped" that Stopford's troops would then be able to move southeastward to give flanking assistance to Birdwood's main attack on the heights of Sari Bair.²⁹ These instructions were faulty in that they insufficiently emphasized the primary importance of cooperating with the offensive on Sari Bair; nor did they alert the commander to the vital need to take every advantage of opportunity. A more aggressive commander might not have needed to be told so bluntly what to do—but Stopford was not such a commander, and Hamilton had good reason to suspect as much. As the task of planning passed down the chain of command, Stopford now began to take a personal hand, yet further closing down the opportunities to profit from surprise and success.

Within four days of receiving his orders, Stopford began to emphasize nonexistent difficulties. Leaning heavily on current experience in France—which bore little resemblance to Gallipoli—he argued that without a large number of howitzers, troops could not be expected to attack an organized system of trenches.³⁰ Hamilton did not have the howitzers—but neither did the Turks in the bay area enjoy the luxury of a Western Front-style organized trench system. Rather than point out what aerial photographs showed to be the weak positions occupied by the few Turks in the area, Hamilton's staff officers left IX Corps to discover for itself that these fears were groundless. Revised instructions issued by Hamilton on July 29 emphasized that the primary objective of Stopford's force was to secure Suvla Bay as a supply base for all forces operating in the northern part of the peninsula; this might require all the troops at Stopford's disposal, but if he had troops to spare they should be used to help the main Anzac attack.³¹

In view of all the charges subsequently leveled at Hamilton, Stopford, and others for failing to capitalize on a golden opportunity, we may pause to note that the commander in chief—the source of all direction and authority—apparently never perceived the Suvla Bay landing as playing any more than a subordinate role in the push for Sari Bair and made no provision to expand it if circumstances favored such a course. For him, the greatest possibility held out by possession of the bay was that a light railway could be run up to the troops on Sari Bair more effectively from there than from the narrow and crowded beaches at Anzac Landing.³² Looking further ahead to operations in 1916, he saw Suvla Bay as an ideal winter base for the troops on the northern part of the peninsula.³³ Hamilton had failed to develop a scheme that accommodated the idea of capitalizing on local success, thereby putting a heavy burden on the troops when opportunities later presented themselves.

Hamilton's failure to perceive and emphasize the broader possibilities inherent in the operation encouraged Stopford to give further vent to his naturally pessimistic frame of mind. Writing to his commander on July 31, he warned that attaining "security" in the bay was likely to be so demanding a task as to make it "improbable" that he would be able to give Birdwood any assistance; if, however, the opposition was sufficiently slight as to allow him to free some of his troops, "you may rely upon my giving him [Birdwood] every assistance in my power."³⁴ This attitude bespoke a reluctance or inability to perceive opportunities that boded ill. It was magnified as orders were passed down from general headquarters through corps and divisional staffs to the brigades that would do the fighting. 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.³⁵ A combination of pessimism in command and deficient staff work—evident in the chaotic arrangements for unloading water, stores and equipment on the beaches—resulted in Stopford's taking command of a battle for which his troops were inadequately prepared.

The landings on the shore of Suvla Bay, which began just before dawn on August 7, quickly bogged down in confusion. Mistaking the shoreline in the dark, the navy landed one brigade in the wrong place; the direction of attack was altered by one of the divisional commanders not once but several times; and men began to pile up on or near the beaches in confused masses. The early omens looked good; one member of the naval landing party recorded hearing

intermittent firing accompanied by some cheering going on ashore, so that already some of our troops were in action and judging by the slackness of the fire, it looked as if we had taken the Turks by surprise.³⁶

More ominously, the same eyewitness noticed that troops met little opposition until they had penetrated about a mile inland, where they began to be held up by snipers. The demoralizing effect on the troops of a handful of Turkish sharpshooters was exacerbated by the growing heat of the day; eventually temperatures mounted until they stood at 90°F. in the shade. Over the next forty-eight hours thirst began to determine the attitudes and then the actions of many of the troops.

During the first day Stopford put some 20,000 men ashore. His force enjoyed a massive ten-to-one superiority, for it faced an opposition that amounted to no more than 2,000 Turks under the command of a determined Bavarian, Major Willmer, backed by eleven guns. Willmer's men fought well, using to full effect the advantage of defending ground that was clothed in dense, thorny ilex scrub. The odds were heavily against them; the outcome of the battle depended on one commander reacting faster and more effectively than the other to the unexpected.

A general Allied attack on the enemy line, which had started the previous day, distracted the Turks' attention from Suvla for a while, but on August 7 Liman von Sanders decided—wrongly—that Suvla Bay was the main British objective. By misunderstanding his enemy's plan, he put himself in a position to snuff out the unexpected opportunity offered to Stopford. But his quick mental reaction was not matched by physical action: Turkish reinforcements were 30 miles away at Bulair, and the local commander, Feizi Bey, was listless and incompetent. On August 8,

Liman replaced him with the energetic but as-yet-unknown Mustafa Kemal (later, as Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey) and ordered an attack the following morning. Reinforcements were ordered up on the double, and meanwhile Kemal prepared to defend to the last. For forty-eight hours, though, the way to the heart of the Gallipoli peninsula was there for the taking, barred only by a handful of resolute Turks.³⁷

On August 7, the British lines should have been alive with movement and activity. Instead, they were a picture of tranquility. An anonymous artillery officer recorded being "struck by the restfulness of all around. There appeared to be little going on, a good many infantrymen sitting about or having a bathe."³⁸ Stopford lay off shore on board the *Jonquil* and there he stayed throughout the day. He sent one telegram to Hamilton at 7:30 A.M. reporting that one of the hills in the plain behind the bay—Hill 10—had not yet been captured, ending his message "As you see, we have been able to advance little beyond the edge of the beach." Hamilton—one hour's steaming away on the island of Imbros—received this message about noon; some four and a half hours later his chief of staff replied to Stopford: "Chief glad to hear enemy opposition weakening, and knows you will take advantage of this to push on rapidly. . . . take every advantage before you are forestalled."³⁹ At the front, his commanders were getting into a hopeless tangle. Major General Frederick Hammersley of the Eleventh Division ordered one of his brigadiers, W. H. Sitwell, to support an attack on another of the objectives that had originally been labeled vital—Chocolate Hill—by Brigadier General Hill. Sitwell promptly began to dig in. Hill arrived and failed to get any support from Sitwell for his attack. After a dispute between the two brigadiers over Hammersley's orders, Hill began the weary trudge back through the sand to divisional headquarters in search of a ruling.⁴⁰ When, at length, an attack was launched on Chocolate Hill, none of the three units involved was accompanied by its brigadier.

On the evening of August 7 Stopford wanted to press on but was told by his two divisional commanders that their men were exhausted and short of water and that any further movement was impossible for the time being. Accordingly, he postponed any further attack for twenty-four hours. His troops, far from being in a position to seize the hills surrounding the bay, were barely masters of the plain. Stopford lacked the resolution to push them forward. His first priority was the safety of the landing place, and he issued orders early the following morning to select and entrench the best possible covering positions; his intentions were first to consolidate his position and then to land much-needed stores and supplies.⁴¹ Later that same morning he urged his troops to "push on as far as possible" but not to launch frontal attacks on positions held in

strength.⁴² As yet, no enemy position confronting him was held in any strength.

On the second day of the Suvla Bay landing, after first dispatching an unjustifiably optimistic congratulatory telegram to the *Jonquil*, Hamilton began to grow perturbed at the lack of progress and sent a staff officer—later to become the official historian of the campaign—to find out what was going on. The scene that met Colonel Aspinall's eyes was later summed up by Churchill thus:

the placid, prudent, elderly English gentleman with his 20,000 men spread around the beaches, the front lines sitting on the tops of shallow trenches, smoking and cooking, with here and there an occasional rifle shot, others bathing by hundreds in the bright blue bay where, disturbed hardly by a single shell, floated the great ships of war. . . .⁴³

Seeing Stopford still aboard the *Jonquil* and little happening on shore, Aspinall sent an urgent wireless message to GHQ: "Feel confident that golden opportunities are being lost and look upon the situation as serious."⁴⁴ At last Hamilton decided to go and see for himself, but by one of the many malevolent twists of fate that seemed to scar the face of this battle, the ship the navy had allotted him had to put out her boilers to make repairs and was unable to take the commander in chief anywhere.

At 4:30 P.M., after a five-hour wait, Hamilton finally found a ship to take him to Stopford. Once there, he learned that Stopford planned to attack the following day but felt unable to get his troops moving any sooner due to a lack of water and of artillery. Pressed by Hamilton to attack that day, he demurred. Hamilton then went ashore—unaccompanied by Stopford, who excused himself on the grounds that he had a bad knee.⁴⁵ Once there, Hamilton heard the divisional commander, Hammersley, report that no advance was possible until the next day; his troops were too scattered, the ground in front of them was unreconnoitered and bad, and orders could not be passed around in time for junior officers to be able to study them. "Hammersley's points," Hamilton recorded,

were made in a proper and soldierly manner. Every general of experience would be with him in each of them, but there was one huge danger rapidly approaching us . . . we might have the hills at the cost of walking up them today; the Lord only knew what would be the price of them tomorrow.⁴⁶

In a belated attempt to impose a sense of drive and purpose on a battle that had so far been conducted without either, Hamilton ordered Hammersley to attack the heights of Tekke Tepe that night with one of his

brigades. No one told Stopford of this change of plan. In the event, it took the brigade selected for the task most of the night to sort itself out, and when it finally launched its assault on the hill early on the morning of August 9, it was too late; Kemal, reinforced by troops who had carried out an exhausting forced march, attacked first. Seizing the heights, he caught the advancing British troops spread out below him on the steepest part of the hillside. The British attack was easily broken, and with it went all hopes of leveraging the Turks off the commanding heights of the peninsula. A major attack at Suvla launched twelve days later in an attempt to redeem the situation proved totally fruitless. The "outstanding opportunity of the whole campaign," which had presented itself on August 7 and 8, had been wasted.⁴⁷

THE MATRIX

In the failure matrix for this chapter (Fig. 6-1) the horizontal axis identifies the three functions of paramount importance that fell to army commanders: supplying the means of combat, identifying goals, and control and coordination. Along the vertical axis we have five levels of command activity. The first level comprises the high command in London, embodied in the person of the secretary of state for war, Lord Kitchener. On the second level we have the expedition's military commander, General Sir Ian Hamilton. At the third level we have the commander charged with overall responsibility for land operations at Suvla Bay, General Sir Frederick Stopford; at the fourth level, the division and brigade commanders who directed the fighting on the ground; and finally at the fifth level we have the fighting troops.

Although errors were made at the highest command level, the matrix shows that none of them contributed directly to the failure we are analyzing; indeed, their indirect contribution is not enough to make them the source of any secondary pathways to misfortune. Nor, contrary to what we might expect, are the critical failures to be found where eyewitnesses commonly sighted them: in the shortcomings of the troops themselves. Failures certainly occurred at this lowest level, but they contribute only secondary pathways to misfortune.

The matrix shows that the primary pathways to misfortune originated at two separate levels: with the expedition and operation commanders. Hamilton's failures to identify goals comprehensively enough and to exercise full control over his subordinate contributed directly to Stopford's

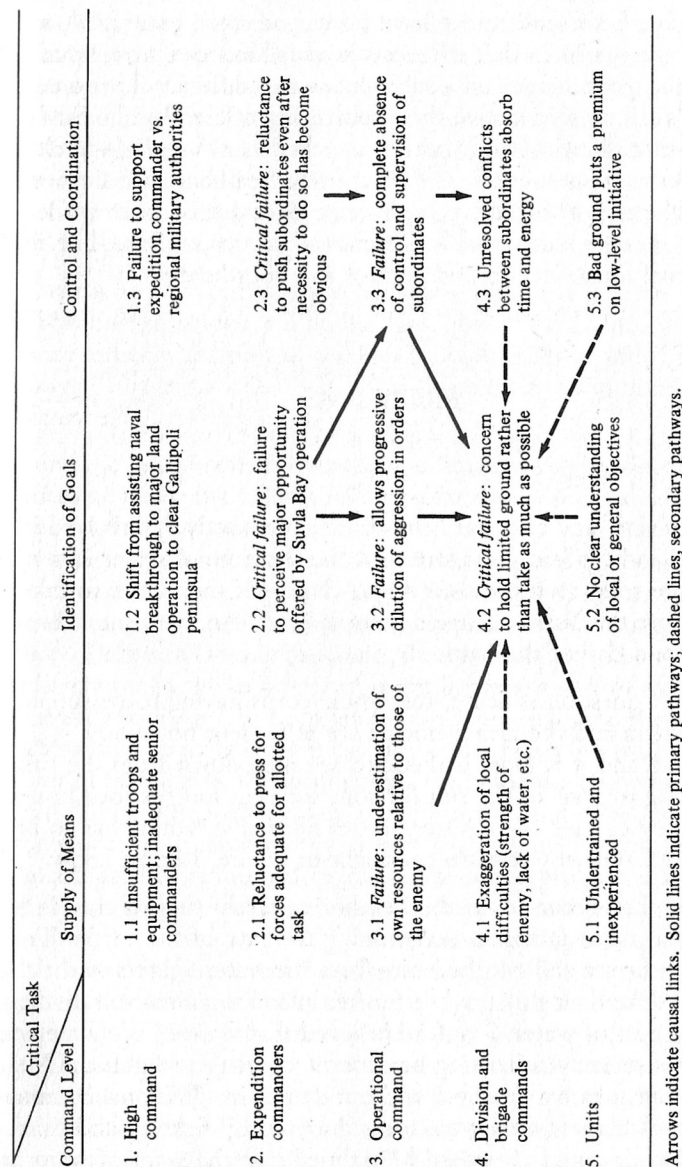


FIGURE 6-1. Matrix of Failure

own failures. Had Hamilton applied a corrective force to overcome his subordinate's excessive caution, two of Stopford's failures would have been less significant and might have been eradicated entirely. A second feature of the matrix is that it reveals how failures can cross boundaries to have a malign influence on a subordinate in a different functional area. Hamilton's failure to perceive the opportunity offered by the Suvla Bay venture meant that Stopford was not impelled—or *compelled*—to alter his policy of leaving his subordinates an entirely free hand. Finally, we may note that the weight of failure in this case does not lie in an inadequate supply of means—a reasonable commonsense supposition—but in the realm of goal identification and control and coordination.

PROBLEMS

Shortage of Water

Both at the time and afterward the commanders actively involved in the Suvla Bay landings laid great stress on the shortage of water as a major cause—some tried to suggest *the* major cause—of the failure to take the heights before the Turks occupied them in force. An eyewitness recorded on the second day of the battle:

The water question is acute, the whole corps having to be supplied from lighters and the arrangements are at present hopelessly inadequate and it is most pathetic to see men down from the firing line having to wait in the sun for sometimes as long as four hours before they can get their water bottles filled. Everything has to be improvised and why it wasn't thought of before, I don't know.⁴⁸

The scenes that occurred at the beaches certainly suggest that lack of water was a major factor in determining the fate of the battle: Troops rushed into the sea and cut the hoses from the water lighters to the shore in order to slake their thirst, while further inland some units undoubtedly went very short of water. Stopford believed that want of adequate water supplies was severely restricting his troops' capacity to fight; on August 8, as has been seen, he accepted without demur his divisional commanders' reports that their men were too exhausted by fighting and thirst to push on that day, and afterward he claimed that the want of water was so bad that men were reduced to drinking their own urine.⁴⁹

After the campaign Hamilton held that shortage of water had not been

a problem, and his view was backed up by evidence from Hammersley and his two brigade commanders, Sitwell and Haggard. Sitwell, who had lived in Rhodesia, pointed out that there were Turkish wells in the area and that with a little effort water could be found. However, no proper arrangements had been made to look for it.⁵⁰ To some extent the shortage of water suffered by the troops was their own fault; it is unlikely that Australian or New Zealand troops would have allowed such conditions to develop without doing something. One of the witnesses to the Dardanelles Commission of Inquiry, Lieutenant Colonel A. J. A. Hore-Ruthven, V.C., put the contrast in attitudes between the two armies well:

if there is any water to be got anywhere they [the Anzacs] will get it. The English soldier, till he has had a bit of experience on active service rather waits till the water is brought to him, and if it is not he says "I have no water." It is just those little things that make the difference.⁵¹

Behind the disagreements over the significance of the water shortage for the outcome of the battle lay a failure to exercise command responsibility adequately. Stopford assumed that his responsibility for water supply only began once water had been landed on the beach, as did Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General Major-General Poett.⁵² Until then, the two saw the problem as one to be solved jointly by Hamilton's headquarters and the navy. Delays in landing the mules that were to carry the water to the front line, an inadequate supply of water lighters, a lack of receptacles to receive water once it had been landed on the beach, and the absence of any alternative arrangements in case the mules failed to arrive all bespeak a failure of foresight and coordination. Hamilton and Stopford failed to sort out the issue in advance, and at the front Hammersley took no steps to secure or even to ascertain the source of his supply.⁵³ A cavalier attitude and incompetence combined to make the water problem appear much more serious than it really was—with unhappy consequences.

The way Birdwood prepared for the Anzac landing on April 25 shows how differently things could have been managed. He began to make arrangements to secure his water supplies nearly two months before the attack, buying 2,000 kerosene tins and a number of donkeys to carry them. He also ensured that special parties of field engineers were detailed to search the gullies for water as soon as the landing had taken place; the result was that within forty-eight hours twenty wells had been sunk and were providing 2,000 gallons a day.⁵⁴ In his general plan for the attack on Sari Bair in August, Birdwood made equally careful provision to secure his water supply.⁵⁵ His example could easily have been followed and

his experience utilized, but his advice was never sought. British generals preferred to rely on their own blinkered interpretations of administrative responsibility at different levels in the military hierarchy. As a result, a difficulty was magnified until it assumed the proportions of a major setback—and, later, an explanation for failure.

Shortage of Artillery

In March and May 1915, British attempts to break the German lines on the western front at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge failed. The official explanation for both of these failures was that the necessary quantities of heavy guns and high-explosive ammunition with which to pound the German trenches to pieces had been lacking.⁵⁶ This experience produced an “artillery fixation” in the minds of British generals, who became convinced that success or failure—at Gallipoli and elsewhere—hinged on the possession and use of large amounts of artillery. In fact, conditions at Gallipoli did not demand a “Western Front” style of operations: This was a different theater, with different problems. But a preoccupation with the need for lots of guns and heavy preliminary bombardments to soften up enemy trenches blinkered local commanders so that they were unable to perceive and then follow up an opportunity when it occurred. In its analysis of the causes for the failure at Gallipoli, the Dardanelles Commission concluded that the absence of artillery “must have materially contributed to the failure at Suvla.”⁵⁷ This conclusion reflected the opinions of many of their witnesses—and, no doubt, their own prejudices. Brigadier General R. P. Maxwell, commanding a brigade in Hammersley’s division, told the commission, “Even at the end I think if we had had enough howitzers we should have forced the Turks out.”⁵⁸ In fact the shortage of artillery was probably not a critical factor on August 7 and 8; Stopford had more guns than the Turks who opposed him, but in any case the broken ground, thick cover, and scattered position of the enemy (whose lone snipers did much damage) suggest conditions artillery could have done little to ameliorate. However, the critical fact is that Stopford’s self-confidence—such as it was—was sapped by the belief that the means allotted to him were inadequate to the job.

From the moment of his arrival off the peninsula Stopford was afflicted by a tendency to compare conditions at Gallipoli with those on the Western Front, where it was believed that with heavier artillery bombardments the German line could be broken. Visiting Birdwood at the Anzac landing, Stopford was inclined to consider that a preliminary bombardment

was necessary before any attack and disregarded his host’s suggestion that he trust to surprise.⁵⁹ His orders of July 22 reflected a concern over the likely role of enemy artillery, which he believed was emplaced on the hills overlooking Suvla Bay; and his preternatural caution was fully evident in a letter he wrote to Hamilton on July 26, which led to a revision in his orders three days later. “The whole teaching of the campaign in France,” he wrote, “proves that troops cannot be expected to attack an organized system of trenches without the assistance of a large number of howitzers.”⁶⁰

Stopford’s conviction that the success of his attack required a massive artillery barrage was given more support by his chief of staff, Brigadier General H. L. Reed. V. C. Reed had been attached to the Turkish army in the Turco-Bulgarian war and had formed a very favorable view of the resistance that Turkish troops could put up on the defensive; and he came to Gallipoli from France, where he had been imbued with the artillery ethos being built up there.⁶¹ Aspinall later described Reed as

obsessed with the difficulty of fighting without lots of howitzers . . . he gave me the impression that he did not think the plan could succeed. He never said so, but he had the whole air of a man who does not think he is going to perform his task.⁶²

With such half-heartedness at the top, it is scarcely surprising that negative forces triumphed over positive ones during those hot August days at Suvla Bay.

Once again, however, as in the case of the water shortage, a minor problem—though one that exercised a strong psychological effect—conceals a different but related problem that posed a major threat to the chances of success. The real difficulty was summed up by a New Zealand soldier some three weeks before the attack on Suvla Bay; lamenting a failed attack, he added, “With a stock of mills bombs and trench mortars we could have gone to Constantinople.”⁶³ What was desperately needed in the hand-to-hand combat amid the scrub, thorns, gullies, and ravines, were infantry weapons that could suppress local opposition quickly and accurately without needing a sighting. For this task rifles were all but useless and grenades essential, yet the troops were always short of them. At the end of May there were only twelve grenades per company, and in June only four trench mortars in the whole of the Anzac position. The mortar problem was never solved, and not until August 29 were there enough grenades to supply attacking troops with two per man. A week before this, one regiment had been ordered to attack “with bomb and

bayonet" even though its commanders knew it possessed no bombs at all.

To enable the troops to do their job, the high command needed to equip them with the necessary means. The full value of bombs and mortars was not yet recognized by the generals—though it was by the troops themselves—but instead Hamilton took comfort from the fact that Stopford would have naval artillery to support his attack. In common with Vice Admiral John de Robeck, Stopford seems to have felt that naval guns were completely ineffective against deep trenches. The weapon he favored to crack this nonexistent nut—for there were no such lines of trenches facing his troops at Suvla Bay—was not available. Even more corps artillery might not have turned failure into success. A year later the real requisite was more readily apparent. "Had we had half the mortars (I mean trench mortars) we have here," wrote Major General Sir A. H. Russell from France, "I am sure we could have won our way across the Peninsula without difficulty and the whole history of the war been altered."⁶⁴ Yet even without the missing weaponry Stopford and his men might have done better. The gap between success and failure was not one that only a particular item of equipment could have bridged.

Natural Obstacles

It is difficult now to grasp the extent to which contemporaries were ignorant of the physical problems the Gallipoli expedition would have to overcome. Maps of the peninsula were few and poor, were only gradually improved as better ones were obtained from Turkish prisoners,⁶⁵ and marked only the main spurs across which the troops would have to fight. New Zealand troops expected to find "good grazing" land confronting them; but when the Australian war correspondent C. E. W. Bean saw the peninsula at firsthand on the morning of April 25, he realized at once how misleading the maps had been.

The place is like a sand-pit on a huge scale—raw sand-slopes and precipices alternating with steep slopes covered with low scrub—the scrub where it exists is pretty dense.⁶⁶

Facing what seemed to be an endless series of ravines and knife-edged ridges that often bisected each other like a maze and were clothed with scrub so thick that a man standing 5 yards away was invisible, the Anzacs' attack halted at the end of the first day in "country which would have been well-nigh impassable even in peace manoeuvres."⁶⁷

The hills surrounding Suvla Bay—up which Hamilton proposed to launch a night attack on August 8–9—were equally forbidding:

... rough stony ground, cut up into a tangled succession of steep ravines. Everywhere there was a strong growth of dwarf ilex of ancient growth, with limbs frequently as thick as a man's arm, and with foliage through which it was impossible to force one's way. Here and there were narrow winding openings forming natural paths, only broad enough to allow one man to pass at a time.⁶⁸

In country such as this a few determined snipers could put up serious resistance against attacking troops who could all too easily lose their way and wander out of reach of support: On August 12 the commanding officer of a battalion of the Norfolk Regiment together with sixteen officers and 230 men disappeared into this bush in an attack, and none of them were ever seen again.

Hamilton argued afterward that steep, broken ground such as that facing the troops at Suvla Bay was no easier to defend and no more difficult to attack than flat ground in France.⁶⁹ He certainly did little to help his troops overcome these obstacles. Reconnaissance was ruled out because he wished to keep the Turks in the dark;⁷⁰ and an excessive concern for secrecy meant that maps of Suvla Bay were only handed out after midday on August 6. As a result, on the night of the landing "many officers of the 11th Division had never seen a map of the area in which they suddenly found themselves."⁷¹ This failure to provide the best possible information and intelligence was the more inexcusable because Hamilton knew well by then that maps were misleading, that mere visual reconnaissance from the bridge of a passing warship was inadequate, and that actual physical features often turned out to be quite different from the results of either.⁷²

Like Stopford and Reed, Hamilton saw the problems presented by the physical features of the Gallipoli Peninsula in terms of trench warfare. Despite the superficial similarities between the two theaters, attacking on the Gallipoli Peninsula was often more akin to hill warfare, and it is noticeable that the units that did best were those, such as the Gurkhas, who had combat experience in similar conditions and knew, for example, that attacking troops should avoid the apparent safety of the ravines and instead pick their way up the spurs, retaining control of the high ground.⁷³ To do this successfully, the troops needed the most accurate knowledge they could get about the kind of ground over which they had to fight. This was denied them by their commanders, who thereby made a further contribution to the likelihood of disaster.

TRAINING AND INITIATIVE

Shortly after he had been sent out to Gallipoli by the prime minister and had witnessed the Suvla Bay attack, Lieutenant Colonel Maurice Hankey telegraphed a brief and pithy explanation of the failure to Asquith: "Troops lately sent from England unfortunately failed completely, owing partly to water difficulty, but mainly to bad staff work and want of dash and drive."⁷⁴ The latter feeling—that they had been let down by the quality—or lack of it—of the troops allotted to them was shared by a number of senior commanders. Stopford was very disillusioned with the territorial divisions he had been given; "they not only showed no dash in attack but went back at slight provocation, and went back a long way." Hamilton shared the view that the troops, rather than their commanders, were at fault:

It was general want of experience and the youth of the men. The New Army were fine men but there was a want of savvy about the whole proceedings. They were all raw; there was no one to show them the way.⁷⁶

In his opinion, an Indian division or one with experience in France would have "walked on to the hills at once."

Hamilton had been persuaded to use troops fresh from England for the attack—not the seasoned Twenty-ninth Division, which had taken part in the original landings on April 25—on the grounds that little opposition was likely, and that even if stiff resistance was encountered, a new division was likely to give as good an account of itself as one weakened by the effects of three months' continuous fighting. This reasoning was mistaken; and the error was compounded by inadequate training and preparation, the ineptness of the timetabling for the landing, and the failure to pay sufficient attention to the need for good leadership by junior officers.

With no previous experience of amphibious landings against opposition, troop training in Britain in 1915 had no fund of experience on which to build. Divisions were trained with a view to fighting in France; in Hamilton's opinion this predisposed them to dig in at the first opportunity.⁷⁷ In any case peacetime training lessened the very sense of individual initiative that conditions on the Gallipoli Peninsula put at such a high premium.⁷⁸ This imposed an extra burden on commanders, which, as we shall see, was not recognized and catered to. Training in Egypt would probably have done little to improve matters, being "frankly admitted to be Boer War stuff."⁷⁹ In any case, in the novel conditions of warfare on

the peninsula, lack of training was compounded by lack of a prior taste of battle. "It was experience, not training, which we lacked," remarked one of the Eleventh Division's colonels. In France, newly arrived divisions were introduced to the rigors of the front gradually and were given time to accustom themselves to their task before being called upon to undertake a major offensive. At Suvla Bay, Hamilton committed raw troops to a task that required especially effective leadership if underlying deficiencies were not to prove insuperable. Such leadership was not forthcoming.

The likelihood that Stopford's force would be able to cope successfully with the task confronting them was further diminished by the mismanagement that preceded the attack. Some troops had been kept on board ship since July 11 and had been given little opportunity to exercise and regain their full level of fitness. Other units were not rested before the attack; instead, normal duties were carried out until nearly midday on August 6, when the men were informed that they were about to take part in a major operation. Marched to the boats during a hot afternoon, they were unable to gather their strength for the task ahead; when the first troops reached the beach some had already been on their feet for seventeen hours. By the second day of the battle, besides being short of water and food, many of the men had had no sleep for fifty-two hours.⁸⁰ In these circumstances even seasoned regulars might have found it difficult to summon up the reserves of energy and determination necessary to push forward. Stopford's men found it impossible.

The problem of lack of training and experience was exacerbated by the fact that the new divisions lacked effective leadership at the lower levels of the chain of command as well as higher up. On the first day Turkish snipers took a heavy toll of officers. Losses among senior officers and company commanders were particularly heavy, and as a consequence, command fell on the shoulders of very young junior officers who often had less than a year's military experience. As a result of the excessive secrecy of the high command, many junior officers found themselves leading attacks without knowing what their objectives were and unable to take the kind of elementary precautions that seasoned fighters would have. Some unwisely disdained to take cover under fire, adding to the scale of losses.

Lack of experience, coupled with the lack of energy and drive that command should have supplied, magnified the troops' natural tendencies to sit down and wait for orders rather than using what initiative they had. Hore-Ruthven noticed this phenomenon: "An Australian, even if he did not get the order, if he thought it good business to go on, would

go on.”⁸¹ Many contemporaries noted the combination of willingness and passivity that seemed to characterize the troops of the New Armies raised by Kitchener in 1914, and that contrasted so markedly with the Anzacs' enterprise and boldness. The Australian official historian believed that his countryman was “half a soldier before the war.” Driving bullocks, gathering sheep for shearing, and particularly fighting bush fires had prepared him for combat; “fighting bush fires, more than any other human experience, resembles the fighting of a pitched battle.”⁸² By no means all the Anzacs were products of the Outback; but the social attitudes of the Australian soldier made him much better at overcoming the hostility of the battlefield than his inexperienced and undertrained British companion-in-arms.

EXPLANATIONS

Having examined the actual course of events and the reasons most frequently given for the failure at Suvla Bay, we are now in a position to return to our matrix and explore the “pathways” to this particular misfortune. The first thing to note is that errors made by the highest authorities, although important in general terms, had no direct role to play in contributing to disaster. Kitchener allowed Hamilton only half the number of men generally reckoned to be necessary to carry out the operation and denied him the customary 10 percent extra for wastage on the grounds that doing so would lock up troops needed in France.⁸³ In practice this was irrelevant, because at Suvla Bay for some 48 hours Stopford enjoyed a ten-to-one advantage over his local opponent—ample time to have brought off what might have been one of the major victories of the war. Kitchener's refusal to allow Hamilton the corps commanders he wanted probably did have a significant, but indirect, effect on the battle. However, once Hamilton knew they were not going to be released to him, it was his responsibility to take steps to compensate for this deficiency. He failed dismally to rise to this task.

As the matrix makes clear, critical failures by the expedition's commander in chief contributed directly to the subsequent failure of the troops in combat. Hamilton's failure to perceive the possibilities inherent in the operation, and his failure to insist that primacy of place in the action be given to the attack on the hills rather than the occupation of the bay area, magnified the unaggressive tendencies of his local subordinate, which in turn percolated down through the chain of command on

the ground. The explanation for this lies in Hamilton's hands-off concept of military command. The view that the commander's role was to set the general objectives and then leave his subordinates and their staffs to work out all the details was well established in the upper echelons of the British army, and Douglas Haig adopted it throughout his period as commander in chief in France.⁸⁴ Hamilton did show some inclination to intervene on the spot when he realized that things were not progressing as fast as he wished them to: At “Y” beach on the second day of the Gallipoli landing he felt “inclined” to take a hand when he saw troops drifting off the crest of a hill but was talked out of doing so by his chief of staff, Lieutenant General Sir Walter Braithwaite.⁸⁵ Thereafter, following both his natural inclinations and the decided views of his staff, he lapsed back into quiescence. At the time of the Suvla Bay landing, his headquarters was located on the island of Imbros, some distance from the mainland. In a very revealing comment to the commissioners who conducted the inquiry into the Dardenelles venture, Hamilton justified the distance he had put between himself and his subordinate by explaining that “General Stopford was within an hour's run of me and knew perfectly well that I should be delighted to see him at any time.”⁸⁶

“Many a general has been saved by his subordinates,” remarks Robert Rhodes James in his study of the campaign. “In the Gallipoli campaign, Hamilton was often badly let down by them.”⁸⁷ While this judgment undoubtedly contains a deal of truth, it fails to emphasize the cardinal fact that the failings of Stopford and others were not simply their own responsibility but also their commander's. Hamilton believed that the Suvla Bay venture needed an energetic and experienced commander. When he failed to secure one and settled instead for a “dug-out” of pre-First World War vintage, he did nothing to alter his command arrangement to compensate for that fact.

Stopford's restful conception of command—staying on board the *Jonquil* during the better part of the battle and leaving his divisional commanders to get on with things and his brigadiers to squabble—was the counterpart of Hamilton's aloofness. Yet this was by no means the ruling pattern of behavior on the peninsula. Hunter-Weston, the general in command on the southern tip of the peninsula, also left his subordinates to get on with things, but Birdwood at Anzac Landing was conspicuous by his eagerness to get out and about among his troops.⁸⁸ Had Stopford been instructed or encouraged to do the same, some of the problems that bedeviled his troops might at least have been diminished, if not resolved.

The problems facing the troops were further magnified by the muddles surrounding the orders issued to divisional and brigade commanders, and

by the misconceptions that flowed from them. Hammersley, entirely misunderstanding the intentions of the high command, believed that the attack launched by Birdwood's troops at Anzac was intended merely as a distraction to divert the Turks' attention from the main operation at Suvla Bay.⁸⁹ His natural combativeness was watered down by Stopford and impeded by his brigadiers. Hill's brigade knew nothing of the ground or the task facing them until the last minute, and twenty-four hours before the battle started they were encamped on the island of Mytilene in an elaborate attempt to deceive the pro-Turkish ruler of the island that the forthcoming attack would be launched against the Asiatic mainland.⁹⁰ Sitwell's inertia meant that his brigade completely lacked proper direction.

With control weakening progressively from general headquarters down through corps and divisional commanders and their staffs, there was no force to counteract the personal deficiencies of elderly and flustered brigadiers—one of whom had had a nervous breakdown before the war—as they tried to divine the enemy's strength and interpret the high command's intentions. It was at this level that personalities had their greatest effect in making an already difficult task even more difficult for the troops on the ground. One participant, referring to the two brigadiers most directly involved, put the matter with perceptive simplicity: "Sitwell was incapable of giving an order, and Hill was incapable of obeying one."⁹¹ In circumstances such as these, command culpability rises above the level of the two individuals mentioned to embrace divisional, corps, and ultimately expeditionary force commanders.

There is no doubt that the troops called upon to carry out the Suvla Bay attack suffered from certain significant weaknesses. Countless contemporary observers remarked on their inexperience, lack of initiative, and dependence on their leaders. Though some of these observers were hostile to the British army as they saw it at Gallipoli, others were sympathetic. General Sir Charles Monro, who arrived at the end of October to examine the feasibility and desirability of evacuation, reported that the troops on the peninsula, "with the exception of the Australian and New Zealand Corps, are not equal to a sustained effort owing to the inexperience of the officers, the want of training of the men and the depleted condition of many of the units."⁹² Although two more months of grinding combat had passed since August, and although his comments were not directed at the troops involved in the Suvla Bay episode, at least two of his critical comments apply to them.

Given the weaknesses of the instrument to hand, the staff could have taken a number of steps to fit the troops more adequately for the task at

hand. An excessive concern for secrecy diminished the volume of information and intelligence available when it should have had the highest priority. The inexperience of the troops placed a premium on effective command at all levels; in the circumstances, since new company commanders could not simply be manufactured out of thin air, and once Hamilton had taken the decision not to exploit the seasoned Twenty-ninth Division, unity of conception, absolute clarity of orders, and the close monitoring of progress on the ground became vital. As we have seen, no steps were taken to secure or improve any of these requirements. Nothing was done to counteract the tendency of troops to stop halfway before objectives were reached, as "excitement and surprise at being there and alive . . . drowned all other feelings at the moment."⁹³ Perhaps most extraordinary of all, given the acknowledged reputation of the Anzacs as the best fighting troops on the peninsula, is the fact that Birdwood's advice on the Suvla Bay enterprise was never sought; offered once, it was brushed off.⁹⁴

An efficient communications system is of the greatest importance in directing and controlling raw or inexperienced troops in combat. For most of the battle, Hamilton was on an island an hour distant. Stopford was offshore on one ship with his administrative staff on another, and apparently he was quite content with a situation in which staff came and went from the shore in motorboats to deliver instructions and bring back reports. The trip, he later remarked complacently, took only five minutes.⁹⁵ What he overlooked—or ignored—was the fact that, unless his staff were continuously bustling to and fro (a slow and imperfect way to transmit orders and receive information, and one that would divert them from other tasks), his ability to communicate could be only limited at best. Communications were in fact so poor that, as one commentator has suggested, "it is tempting at times to ascribe almost the whole cause of the fiasco to the absence of any efficient form of combat net radio."⁹⁶

While a modern radio net would certainly have put into the commanders' hands the means to exercise direct tactical control over small units and receive time-urgent intelligence about the state of enemy resistance, it is a mistake to lay too much weight on its absence as an explanatory excuse for the fiasco at Suvla Bay, for the means existed to do far more in this regard than was actually done. For decades, the British army had been using heliographs as an effective means of communication in colonial wars; no thought seems to have been given to their use at Gallipoli—which is particularly surprising, given Hamilton's vast experience of such campaigns. In addition, scientific developments had made a new medium

available. Ever since 1910 the Royal Navy had been equipping its ships with wireless telegraphy, an almost instantaneous means of communication, and indeed this was the means used to pass Hamilton's messages to Stopford on board the *Jonquil*.⁹⁷ Had the commander in chief been inclined to send more messages to Stopford, more messages would have reached him. The major obstacle was psychological, not technical.

From the *Jonquil* a cable was laid to the shore, and from there field engineers ran telephone lines forward to subordinate headquarters. However, this important facility was never fully utilized. When Hill and Sitwell quarreled about whether their divisional commander had or had not ordered an attack, Hill had to trudge back on foot through the sand to Hammersley because neither of the brigadiers had brought out their telephones.⁹⁸ Cables and land lines were a prey to frequent interruption; however, with much less enemy artillery in action than was the case on the Western Front, it is likely that they could have provided a much more continuous means of communication with the front line than happened in France and Flanders. Nor were the field commanders limited to telephone cables to communicate with one another. The instructions given to Stopford on July 29 included the information that he was to be provided by the Royal Navy with two military pack wireless-telegraphy stations and one Royal Marine base wireless-telegraphy station.⁹⁹ Their role in the battle remains a mystery.

The misuse or neglect of communications by commanders at various levels is a good illustration of the main finding of our inquiry into the Suvla Bay affair: that while the men at the front line may fail to achieve goals which seem to be well within their grasp, such failures are not solely—and frequently not even chiefly—the direct consequences only of their own innate deficiencies. Rather, the controlling intelligence which is directing them has failed to make reasonable provision to allow for the maximizing of every chance of success. Such provision is of special importance in war for, as we have seen, coping with unexpected opportunities or setbacks is many times more difficult on a battlefield where chaos, confusion and hostile action or reaction are features of the environment, than it is in the case of civil disasters. In the particular case of Suvla Bay, when the central ingredient for success was absent the likelihood of failure was greatly increased. As Lieutenant Colonel Hore-Ruthven explained to the Dardanelles commissioners: "It was essential to have energy and drive in the higher commands and the staffs with raw troops because, unless they got the energy and push from behind, they would not go on."¹⁰⁰

THE ESSENCE OF ADAPTIVE FAILURE

Perhaps more than any of the other types of failure we are examining, adaptive failure is susceptible to the belief that success was denied by only a small margin. A few more resources, a single change in the chain of cause and effect that apparently led directly to disaster, and the outcome would have been entirely different. Suvla Bay has certainly attracted its share of such beliefs. Winston Churchill believed at first that a mere twist of fate had barred the way to success. "The slightest change in the fell sequence of events," he wrote, "would have been sufficient to turn the scale." Twenty years later he offered a more penetrating, though still somewhat narrow, explanation of the misfortune: "The Battle of Suvla Bay was lost because Ian Hamilton was advised by his C.G.S. to remain at a remote central point where he would know everything. Had he been on the spot he could have saved the show."¹⁰¹ The Dardanelles commissioners, collectively wiser than either man, recognized that the reasons for the failure in August 1915 were more complicated.¹⁰²

In military terms, "adapting" can be defined as identifying and taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by enemy actions or by chance combinations of circumstances to win success or to stave off failure. We have looked closely at a case of "offensive" adapting failure, but we might just as well have examined a case of "defensive" adapting failure, such as the Malayan campaign in 1942, which culminated in the humiliating surrender of Singapore and thereby, according to some historians, signaled the end of the British Empire. In both cases the requirements laid on the people directly involved are the same. Self-organization in the face of the unforeseen or the unexpected is at an especially high premium. Units and small groups must achieve levels of cooperation and mutual self-help that surpass those commonly expected of them or for which they have been prepared. Unexpected tasks must be delegated quickly and efficiently and competing demands resolved speedily and wisely.

All this may seem a lot to ask in the midst of the bloody and destructive world of combat, but it is done with a remarkable degree of success in many cases of civil disaster. People who lack any special training and are frequently unknown to one another cooperate to search for survivors, rescue victims, support the injured, and succor the homeless.¹⁰³ One of the things that best helps to explain how such untrained and inexperienced amateurs can function so well and cope so effectively in these circumstances is the fact that their goals are often very clear—even, indeed, self-

evident. Social ties that usually go unexamined emerge in testing circumstances and offer a clear guide to action, and often a clear set of priorities. The safety of the family is assured, neighbors are checked, friends are sought. In this way adapting builds upward from a myriad of individual actions, coordinated by the civil authorities at a more general level.

From this comparison we can draw two main conclusions about failure to adapt in the military context. The first, and perhaps the more surprising, is that it is not the strengths or weaknesses of those at the front line that are of primary importance but the proper functioning of command. To make the most of the opportunities thrown up in war, or at least not to let them slip by unnoticed, goals must be clearly and unambiguously defined, even where they may be open-ended. For at least a month before the landings on April 25, 1915, Birdwood and all his subordinates dinned into the Anzacs the instruction "Go as fast as you can—at all costs keep going."¹⁰⁴ Without such directions, even fit and enthusiastic troops may falter; with their aid, even ill-trained and inexperienced ones may be able to maximize their potential.

The requirements to adapt to unexpected circumstances tests both organization and system, revealing weaknesses that are partly structural and partly functional, whose full potential for disaster may not previously have been noticed. This is demonstrably true of the British army at Suvla Bay. The organization was a rigidly hierarchical one. It was structured on the basis of strict adherence to the prewar dogma of seniority as the sole determinant of appointment to particular levels of command. Because one of his divisional commanders, Mahon, was a very senior lieutenant general who guarded his status jealously and would not waive it, Hamilton, forced to look higher up the Army List, found himself accepting the unfortunate Stopford.¹⁰⁵ This sort of system magnified the problems associated with Suvla Bay—and may even be said to have created many of them—by forcing the task into the framework of the organization rather than readjusting the organization to meet the needs of the job at hand.

The difficulties this produced were magnified by the system through which the command structure functioned. Two aspects of this system helped produce a failure to adapt by enfeebling command. One was the compartmentalization of the planning process, which isolated parts of the organization when they should have been communicating with one another. Plans were drawn up in an idealistic vacuum since there was no consultation with the administrative and supply branches that would have to carry them out.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps more important regarding Suvla Bay itself was the second feature of the system: the unwritten rule that a senior commander did not interfere with his subordinates once he had set the

general nature of the task they were to fulfill. The influence of his chief of staff, Braithwaite, helped ensure that Hamilton was restrained by this invisible straitjacket; and Stopford, explaining his failure to exert himself once aboard the *Jonquil*, remarked later "I should not like it, if I were a Divisional Commander, to have my orders interfered with by my corps commander."

So great is the dramatic nature of the failure at Suvla Bay that it has reached well beyond the confines of military history to find its way into the literature of systems analysis as a prime example of what not to do. "Unfortunately," says a recent author, "the operation was bedeviled by faulty staff work, an unwarranted faith in naval firepower, and failure to load ships to facilitate amphibious operations." Later, the same writer adds that whatever the motivation, the implementation was poor.¹⁰⁷ At Suvla Bay inadequately prepared troops were called on to carry out tasks that were not clearly defined, while being expected to rise to expectations that were not made explicit. They were inadequately led and poorly commanded, and in these circumstances the innate characteristics of the troops were magnified by the shortcomings of the military organization and the weaknesses of the system. What the example of Suvla Bay makes clear is that failure to adapt to changing military circumstances is a consequence of systemic and organizational weaknesses and not of individual shortcomings. The people at the front line certainly fail, but—contrary to what initial impressions often suggest—the more important failures occur in the rear.