

Frank MacDonald MM Memorial Prize

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Question: Discuss the following statement – ‘We, as the nation of Australia, are so transfixed by the Gallipoli Campaign that we have failed to look at what was happening elsewhere during the First World War.’



(Wikipedia, 24/04/2010)

As a nation, we have been so transfixed on Gallipoli campaign that we have all but forgotten other key aspects of the war, as we have solely based our entire national identity on this singular campaign. This campaign is taught in classrooms, commemorated at ceremonies, and talked about it in folklore. However this fixation has led us to forget earlier examples of Australian bravery, autonomy, persistence, and leadership that have completely gone unnoticed. Such as Australia's first battle which demonstrated all if not most of these qualities.

The battle of Bitia Paka and the campaign in northern New Guinea had the main goal of seizing German New Guinea as this was the first priority of both the Australian and British government due to the strategic importance of the region. The strategic importance of the region in Northern New Guinea was a radio station on the island located there. This radio station posed a massive danger to British and Australian interests due to the East Asian Squadron, a German fleet in the area that could do serious damage to Australia and with the close proximity of the colony to Australia it posed a serious risk if left unchecked. So Australia had assembled an army known as the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force or better known as the AN&MEF it was a force containing roughly 1000 to 2000 men with the goal of taking the wireless station and the colony from Germany. The Australians had planned to land in Neu-Pommern (now New Britain) and Neu-Mecklenburg (now New Ireland) as the station was located there. As Australia was conducting the operation by themselves with little British involvement, this would grant Australians with a great deal of autonomy. This shows that Australia had a great deal of autonomy even before the Gallipoli campaign and didn't just get it granted to them in one single campaign.

There was relatively no resistance when they had first landed however this changed as the Australian's went inland as they would find that the German and Melanesian resistance would be stronger than they had anticipated. As Roy Malcom a scout and able seaman had described the battle in a letter to his father, "The enemy firing was hidden above in trees. We received orders to advance in the firing line, and we then found that our guides had led us into a trap, and we were surrounded by the enemy," (Roy Malcolm, 1914). Lucky for the ambushed Australians someone had managed to evade enemy gun fire and had ridden back to the shore on horseback and had alerted the Australians there. With this information 200 Australian's were sent to aid the ambushed Australian's and they had just arrived in time to save the ambushed soldiers. As Roy Malcom also described in his letter, "A German scout was about to set off a mine when he was shot, and from that time matters looked serious. Now blood was shed; shots rang out on all sides of us as the enemy were closing in all round, and every moment I expected to see them charge over our trenches. We knew our position and were determined to do our duty and fight to the last," (Roy Malcolm, 1914). The battle would then be won by the Australians in a decisive victory. However from this engagement we can already see a problem that would grow, and that problem would be incompetence from the Entente commanders. The incompetence here was hiring unreliable guides as the ones they had hired led them into an ambush as described in the letter, "and we then found that our guides had led us into a trap," (Roy Malcolm, 1914), this had revealed incompetence, I believe this happened due to wanting a quick victory, so they didn't properly vet the guides and had blindly trusted them. Also in this battle we also would see another trait that would be shown by Australian's and that trait was mateship. This trait would be shown from soldier to soldier and even commander to soldier. As Martin Edward Fowell a Tasmanian commander was described, "Martin's wartime comrades remembered him as being of a reserved, even retiring disposition, yet a man who weighed problems carefully and resolutely stuck to a course of action. He 'zealously maintained' the welfare of those who served under him," (Australian Dictionary of Biography).

Ultimately the want for a quick victory would be a main driving factor for incompetent moves and decision made by entente commanders. Also a great deal of mateship and friendship were already seen early in the war and not just in Gallipoli but due to Australia's fixation on the Gallipoli campaign we have forgotten this.

Also there was a great mystery surrounding the campaign for quite some time, this was the disappearance of the AE1. The AE1 was a submarine, and it was on patrol near Bitia Paka while the battle was taking place. However while out on patrol the AE1 and her 35 crew members never returned to the harbour. The events surrounding the disappearance of the ship had remained a mystery with many theories speculating about what had happened to the lost ship and her crew. There were 4 big theories that were presented by Stroker known as Stroker's theories. The first theory states that the ship had broken down and was blown away by the currents, however this theory was discarded because there were no bodies or pieces of the submarine suggesting that this had not happened. The second theory states that the ship had been sunk by the Germans in combat, this theory would also be discredited due to no sightings of German ships in the area and if the Germans had shot the ship from land another ship on patrol would have been alerted to this due to the loud sound that would have occurred. The third theory had some similarities with the 1st theory in that the submarine had something go mechanically wrong however it was different in how it disappeared. The third theory states that the submarine suffered an internal explosion, but this theory was also dropped as there were no evidence that an explosion had taken place. The fourth theory suggested is that it had struck a reef while taking a practice dive and that caused a string of machine failures that caused it to sink. Although there was a possibility this could have occurred it was dropped due to a lack of evidence. However in 2017 a team of expeditioners had found the submarine and the cause of why she had sunk. The reason it had sunk was due to a not fully shut ventilation point in the submarine. So when the submarine took a dive the not fully shut ventilation point on the left side of the submarine would have caused water to flood into the submarine, causing the submarine to go below the maximum depth point and causing the left side of the submarine to implode. Which then caused the quick death of her crew and the disappearance of the submarine. This mysterious and tragic event has been all but forgotten by our nation due to our fixation on the Gallipoli we have failed to commemorate or even recognize this tragic event.

To conclude, as a nation we have failed to look elsewhere during the first world war due to our hyper fixation on the Gallipoli campaign. We failed to look into the first major battle we fought against the Germans a battle that was so close to home and a battle that also gave us a great deal of autonomy. Our fixation also led us to forget where the traits that were so brilliantly displayed in Gallipoli had originate from and due to fixation, we as a nation also failed to even commemorate one of Australia's most tragic and greatest naval mysteries. Because of our fixation on Gallipoli no one even bats and eye or even gives recognition to this battle and the tragic events surrounding it.

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