

The Frank MacDonald MM Memorial Prize

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Question 2: Every April, Australians and New Zealanders pause to remember the Anzacs landing at Gallipoli. Is there another event from the Gallipoli Campaign that is equally deserving of commemoration? Explain your choice with reference to primary source evidence.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART07965

Fig.1: The charge of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at the Nek, 7 August 1915 by George Lambert, 1924 AWM ART07965, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/gallipoli/august-offensive/the-nek>

Word Count: 1,500

The fateful landing at Anzac Cove on the dawn of April 25th, 1915, has undeniably become a national legend. It was the moment in which the Anzac spirit was ‘forged’ and ‘unveiled’ in all its strength. A uniquely unifying comradeship, built on mateship, courage, and self-sacrifice.

Yet, on a later dawn a much smaller battle took place on a modest ridge called the Nek. One that encapsulated the same contradiction of heroism and horror that was unmistakably present at the Anzac landing. A *contradiction* that all too well defines the nature of war.

It is my belief that, although it was not as large or famous as the Landing or Lone Pine, this smaller battle that played out on August 7th, is equally deserving of commemoration.

On the early morning of August 7th, in the midst of the August offensive, six-hundred Australian Light Horsemen of the 3rd Brigade were ordered to make a charge on a little sweeping ridge, narrowly linking the two high-grounds of Russel's Top and Baby 700. This ridge was called the Nek. This, however, was not to be an invasive attack, nor was it to be on horseback. Instead, it was intended to divert Turkish focus away from the other key assaults taking place at Chunuk Bair and Hill 971. The plan was for it to follow a naval and artillery strike in order to give the Anzacs a fighting chance in this Turkish-occupied territory. Tragically though, the plan was a disaster. The strike ended seven minutes too early, allowing the Turks to swiftly return to their trenches with their rifles and machine guns, waiting for the Australian soldiers.¹

Then, at 4:30 am, the whistle blew for attack. The Victoria-raised 8th Light Horsemen charged into an unrelenting barrage of bullets. An official account by historian Emma Campbell notes that "immediately they were shot down by Turkish rifle and machine-gun fire. Many were killed just metres out of the trench. The second line, also from the 8th, scrambled over the dead and wounded to make their attack, and suffered the same fate."² Despite the massacre, Lt. Col. Jack Antill who was commanding the brigade decided to continue the attack, having been given false intel that some Australians had already reached the Turkish lines. As he ordered the 10th Light Horsemen forward, the brave soldiers were once again cut down. Then tragically, a fourth wave continued through, this time without orders, and they too were annihilated.³

By the end, according to the DVA "The casualties of the action were devastating. Of the 600 Australian troops involved, 234 were killed and 138 were wounded".⁴ Charles Bean, who was Australia's official war historian and present at the attack, described the battle as "one of the most tragic actions on Gallipoli" and argued it would "go down as

¹ AAP, "How Anzacs' Battle at Nek Went Wrong," SBS News, July 25, 2015, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/how-anzacs-battle-at-nek-went-wrong/14cnmbuuv>.

² Emma Campbell, "Revisiting the Charge at the Nek | the Australian War Memorial," Awm.gov.au, September 27, 2011, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/revisiting-the-charge-at-the-nek>.

³ Campbell, "Revisiting the Charge at the Nek."

⁴ Department of Veterans' Affairs, "Battle of the Nek 7 August 1915 | Anzac Portal," [anzacportal.dva.gov.au](https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/gallipoli/august-offensive/the-nek), March 11, 2020, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/gallipoli/august-offensive/the-nek>.

one of the bravest acts in military history”.⁵ His official diary notes on the event create a chilling image: “The Nek could be seen crowded with their bodies. At first here and there a man raised his arm to the sky, or tried to drink from his water bottle. But as the sun climbed higher ... such movement ceased. Over the whole summit the figures lay still in the quivering sun”.⁶

After the war, people like Lieutenant Cyril Hughes were tasked with battlefield burials. At the Nek, Hughes reportedly “found and buried the unidentifiable remains of more than 300 Australians”.⁷ Thus, this former ridge that Charles Bean described as “the size of three tennis courts” was transformed into a horrific graveyard of irreversible loss.

However, numbers alone can only offer a small part of the story. To truly remember the Nek, we must turn to the voices of those it impacted.

As one of the few soldiers to survive, Lieutenant Charles St Pinnock recounted the ordeal soon after in a harrowing letter to his mother: “You can imagine what it was like. Really too awful to write about. All your pals that had been with you for months and months - blown and shot out of all recognition. There was no chance whatsoever of us gaining our point. Roll call was the saddest.....only 47 answered their names out of close on 550 men. When I heard the result - I simply cried like a child.”⁸

⁵ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, vol. II: *The Story of Anzac* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1924), 621. Bean writes “a deed of self-sacrificing bravery which has never been surpassed in military history – the charge of the Australian Light Horse into certain death at the call of their comrades need during a crisis in the greatest battle that has ever been fought on Turkish soil.”

⁶ Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, vol. II, 617.

⁷ Department of Veterans' Affairs, “Battle of the Nek.”

⁸ Australian War Memorial Collection, “Anzac Day 2015: Pre-Dawn Service Readings by Corporal Dan Keighran vc | Australian War Memorial,” [awm.gov.au](https://www.awm.gov.au), April 25, 2015, <https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/speeches/pre-dawn-reading-3-2015>.



Fig.2: (Above) 1916 photograph H13635 with Charles St. Pinnock (far right) and fellow officers, AWM, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10264111>.

Another testimony comes from Sister Lydia King who was serving as a nurse aboard the ship HMHS Sicilia during this time: “I shall never forget the awful feeling of hopelessness on night duty. It was dreadful ... [I] shall not describe their wounds, they were too awful. One loses sight of all the honour and the glory in the work we are doing.”⁹

⁹ Australian War Memorial Collection, “Anzac Day 2015: Pre-Dawn Service Readings.”

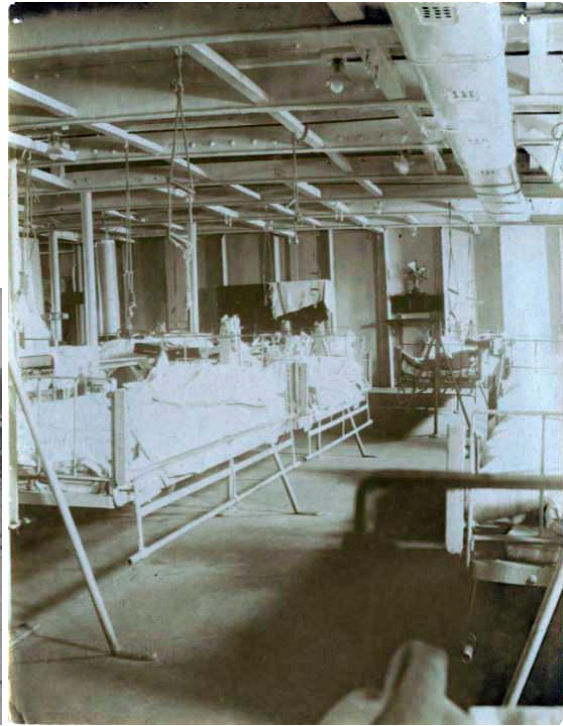


Fig.3: (Above left) Lydia Kathleen King and her husband Herbert Gordon Carter, they met while serving at Gallipoli. (Above right) "C" Ward HMHS Sicilia - Libraries Tasmania's Online collection.

Even captains like Frank Anderson couldn't help but reflect on the horror and futility of the event: "At dawn the first line was ordered out but were mown down before they had gone more than 20 yards. From then on God only knows what happened...the trench was full of dead, dying & wounded, some of the second & third lines went out together, only to feed the enemy's machine guns. Still no orders came for us & the suspense was awful. Then the fourth and some of the third [waves] got over the parapets, but not one got more than 15 yards away and very few got back."¹⁰

¹⁰Jeannine Cook, "The Art of Facing Extreme Danger - Gallipoli, 1915.," Jeannine Cook, January 23, 2014, <https://www.jeanninecook.com/blog-jeannine-cook-silverpoint-artist/tag/10th+Light+Horse+Regiment>.



Fig.4: (Left) Frank Anderson, Saltash, Cornwall, 1915,

<https://www.jeanninecook.com/blog-jeannine-cook-silverpoint-artist/tag/Gallipoli>

These voices break away the illusion of war, an aspect of humanity that is all too often mythologised. They speak of hopeless orders, mateship through it all, and honour at its most bare. The testimonies here show us how these once ordinary men faced extraordinary horror and did so with integrity to the Anzac spirit. It is undeniable that the Nek was a tactical disaster, but it was also a moral crucible. This battle might not have been the Gallipoli campaign's bloodiest, but it was certainly its most revealing. As Charles Bean would write, there has been no braver charge.

The eponymous campaign in Gallipoli was in many ways the first great international test of Australia as a nation. However, despite their relative inexperience, these brave soldiers brought with them to this unfamiliar land a uniquely Australian amalgamation of endurance, courage, mateship, and above all: loyalty. A stark combination of values that would one day become known as "The Anzac Spirit". In this way the Gallipoli campaign contributed great pride to our nation, but in many other ways it also did not. Gallipoli also became a striking canvas of futility. The vast majority of these soldiers' time was not filled with the glory of battle but with the muddy stench of gullies and trenches, the grip of disease, the burn of the heat, and the sight of bodies upon bodies, many of which would have once belonged to their fallen friends. This can be seen in Sergeant A.L. de Vine, 4th Battalion's reflection "[...] the whole business has been a very sorry mess up and a sheer waste of men & material".¹¹ The Anzac's time in

¹¹ Sergeant A.L. de Vine, 4th Battalion, quoted in "Anzac Day 2015: Pre-dawn service readings by Corporal Dan Keighran VC," Awm.gov.au, April 25, 2015

Gallipoli was not marked with any key victories, nor was it a major tactical success. For most of these soldiers all that remained after the evacuation was over and the guns were put down, was the bitter pride of having endured hardship for their country together. Thus, this paradox of mateship and pride paired with suffering of course marked many moments throughout the campaign in question, but one could argue they were *particularly* prevalent at the well-known Landing at Gallipoli and the lesser-known charge at the Neck. These two battles expose what can be seen as the human dimension of war: not the glory of conquest but the unforgettable loyalty and loss of our countrymen.

The fact remains that even today when Australians bow their heads at dawn on the 25th of April, it is those idealised values of “The Anzac Spirit” that they are honouring. As such, the events we remember often come from the great feats that *did* paint this campaign, such as the Anzacs finally making it to land on Gallipoli, or when they successfully held ground at Lone Pine for days under attack. However, among these celebrated tales of heroism, there lies a vital but quieter counterpart in less scalable tragedies. A perfect example of these other kinds of tragedies is that fateful battle at the Nek. Despite its relative obscurity, the Battle of the Nek is no less important than its more famous counterparts. In fact, it serves to act as a lens on the Anzac myth. Here were simple soldiers ordered to charge to their almost certain death, yet still displaying those same Anzac values we admire today. If we argue that events like the Landing and Lone Pine truly showcased the Anzac values, then the Nek must be the battle that truly tested them. It demonstrated these values in their most concentrated form, and that is why it is so important for it to be commemorated. In the words of Australian War Memorial historian Peter Burness, Australians connect with the Nek “because it’s on a scale we can grasp, and all the folly and valour we can accept”.¹² We continue to commemorate these battles today to teach our future generations about the nature of war, where it comes from, and the devastation it brings, so as to ensure that they do not fall into its trap and take their *own* peace for granted. But these generations cannot understand war unless they connect with it or accept it, and they will not avoid it unless they are able to comprehend it. Commemorating the Nek is thus a significant step towards ensuring both.

In the end, the reason that the Battle of the Neck deserves this place in our nation’s remembrance was perhaps best put by Peter Burness when he explained “The Nek was such a heroic failure it almost epitomises the First World War”¹³. In that tragically brief charge: a hopeless melee of men against an unforgiving mob of machine guns, we see the Great War at its very core. Its unmistakable senselessness, and the spirit of the Anzac that led these soldiers to fight on anyway.

¹² Peter Burness quotes in: Campbell, “Revisiting the Charge at the Nek.”

¹³ Peter Burness quotes in: Campbell, “Revisiting the Charge at the Nek.”

To the Australians of today, the Nek offers us a lesson. The battle reminds us that war is comprised not of glorious fireworks and explosions, but of real lives. Real families. We remind ourselves with Pinnock and Bean that our soldiers cried out not for glory, but for their fallen mates. We remember that soon after the first bullets were fired “movement ceased” among the fallen bodies. In commemorating this battle we promise to never forget the soldiers they belonged to, nor the survivors who tended to them.

Thus, to truly remember Gallipoli we *must* remember the Neck, not to romanticise it, as no war campaign should be done that dishonour, but to salute the defiance and devotion of those who died, understand what their contributions mean for our national identity, and comprehend the *true* cost of war. This battle stands as a testament to Australia’s important story, a nation not built on lone victories, but on shared suffering and loss.

In immortalising that haunting sunrise, we honour the Anzac spirit in its purest form and bring ourselves closer to the values our nation holds dear.

“Values of courage. Values of compassion. Values of steely resilience. These are Australian values.” – Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd

“Only the dead have seen the end of war.” – Philosopher George Santayana

Lest we forget.

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