

Chunuk Bair

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'Those heroes who shed their blood and lost their lives, you are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. ... You, the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries wipe away your tears, your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they become our sons as well.'

- Kemal Ataturk.

A young nation still finding its way in the world, sacrifices its young men on the shores of a distant land, for an empire that will not see the century out. Sounds like a horror story, but its not, for many New Zealand families in the years after the end of World War One it was reality. And the worst of it was, so many of these bright, clever young men went gladly across the oceans to a fate that they undoubtedly saw as not happening to them. They wanted to see the world beyond their small nation, and all too many of them only got to see the inside of an unmarked grave.

It seems all too far away. They are only smiling young men in fading photographs with the air of tragedy about them, because we know, from all the great wisdom that over ninety years gives us, that many of them would never see New Zealand's shores again.

Of all the battles and victories that New Zealand soldiers had in this theatre of war that engulfed so many nations, it's ironic that the one we remember most was a defeat. Stranger still that in a way this defeat defined New Zealand, knocked the edges off us, made us a little less new in the eyes of the world. When we emerged on the other side, we finally had shared something as a nation, a real and tragic loss. No family would be unaffected, no person could be isolated. A strange thing about humanity is that the death we do not witness personally is somehow made heroic. There would be many heroes remembered and otherwise made on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, in the country Turkey, and on the peninsula called Gallipoli.

New Zealand was not there alone of course. With the forces of Australia, we formed the Australia and New Zealand Army Corp, and the two nations would be bound together in a shared tragedy that is with us still. ANZAC day is a day of remembrance on both sides of the Tasman Sea, and well it should be. 25th April 1915 was the day the ANZACs and other allies landed.

The terrain was a rough strip of beach backed by range upon range of unforgiving mountains, on which many men thousands of miles from home would die. In truth the Turks had barely bothering defending the area, as it was almost impossible to imagine anyone trying to attack from this direction. But the ANZACs went where they were sent.

25th April 1915 the attack began, and as soon as the allied forces had entrenched themselves in the peninsula, the long hard struggle against the Turks began. It must have seemed exciting at first, but when the fighting reduced down to trench warfare, it was a struggle just to stay alive and sane. Anyone putting their head up was likely to be shot by snipers, the rations were mainly a barely nutritional bully beef, when summer came there was a maddening plague of flies brought on by the unburied dead, and there was a constant lack of enough shells and bullets. It would be another eight months before the obvious became clear, the allies could not win here, and the order to withdraw was given.

In that time, there would be acts of compassion, cruelty and bravery. For New Zealand the greatest of these was Chunuk Bair.

The Wellington Infantry Regiment was commanded by Captain William Malone, who at fifty six was the oldest soldier in his unit, but also one of the most capable. He was a farmer from Taranaki, but his practical nature and strict discipline had been making an effect on the New Zealand forces since they had arrived in Gallipoli. He wanted his regiment to be the best, and though he didn't make any friends among them for driving them so hard, but he must have thought it was their only hope.

Chunuk Bair is an uncompromising ridge of stone rising 860 feet above the beach, if the regiment could take it, they could command the vital Dardenelle straight. On 8th August, Malone led his regiment to the top of Chunuk Bair with very little resistance from the Turks. The 7th Gloucesters and the Wellingtons dug in, but it was not a good position. They were unsupported, on a ridge just below Turkish emplacements, and yet they did not retreat. With one machine gun that they had cobbled together from four wrecked ones, they held on doggedly under heavy fire.

At midday some members of the Auckland Battalion managed to get forward forward to the Wellingtons. By five o'clock that day Malone had been killed. And by the time more reinforcements arrived, there were only 70 of the 760 men in the regiment left.

But they could not hold Chunuk Bair, and when the allies were forced to retreat Captain Malone and his regiment got their unmarked graves where they fell.

War is full of 'if-onlys'- and Gallipoli is no exception. And even as we lose those people who remember the war, we can still learn from it. Perhaps Chunuk Bair and Gallipoli remain in New Zealand's consciousness because they are how we wish to be seen; determined, stoic and brave. A pity we had to sacrifice men to it though. We should not lose sight of what those soldiers that did survive Gallipoli and other battles, have etched in their hearts, the fruitless waste of life that is war.

'There's a torn and silent valley;

There's a tiny rivulet

With some blood upon the stones beside its mouth.

There are lines of buried bones:

There's an unpaid waiting debt:

There's a sound of gentle sobbing in the South.'

-from Leon Gellert's "Song of Campaign"

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