Murdoch's Gallipoli letter, 1915

The Gallipoli letter is an 8000-word private report written by journalist Keith Arthur Murdoch (1885–1952), with the help of British war correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett (1881–1931), after visiting the Gallipoli peninsula in September 1915. It describes the organisation and conditions of the Gallipoli campaign. It was sent to Andrew Fisher (then prime minister of Australia) and Henry Herbert Asquith (then prime minister of the United Kingdom). Murdoch's 28-page letter helped to establish the idea of Gallipoli as a military disaster.

Fisher sent Murdoch to Gallipoli for an honest report on the campaign. Contrary to the rules of censorship, Murdoch wrote and sent his letter without submitting it to the military censors. In the eyes of some, this was a grave betrayal of Murdoch's role at Gallipoli. Murdoch, however, strongly defended his action on the grounds that his letter was not for publication but for the information of the prime minister.

Whether or not Murdoch did the right thing in sending the letter uncensored, it had a serious impact and brought about rapid results. It can be argued that Murdoch's letter led directly to the ending of the Gallipoli campaign, and the evacuation of British and Anzac troops from the peninsula.

In the letter, Murdoch is highly critical of the British officers and the role that they played in the Gallipoli disaster. He is full of praise and admiration for the Australian troops, who he believed were courageous on the battlefield and in the face of death.

It speaks to the tragedy of Gallipoli that the most successful aspect of the campaign was the covert and dangerous withdrawal of troops from the peninsula. Between 8 and 20 December 1915, about 90,000 allied soldiers were secretly withdrawn from Gallipoli. There were very few casualties. Many of those soldiers, however, went on to fight and die on battlefields in Europe and the Middle East.

Murdoch returned home to continue his career as a journalist and eventually to establish himself as one of Australia's first media barons. Throughout his life, he remained a powerful and influential figure on the Australian scene.

Murdoch's description of the young soldiers he met contributed to the myth of the Anzac—the brave, self-sacrificing soldier with a larrikin spirit and a deep sense of mateship. This myth-making has been the inspiration for many creative works, including books, films and television series that try to represent what it meant to be an Anzac.

The National Library of Australia is home to a huge range of First World War memorabilia, including photographs, propaganda material and correspondence. Murdoch's Gallipoli letter provides an insight into one aspect of a mighty and terrible war.

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Sally Hopman, 02 6262 1704 or 0401 226 697

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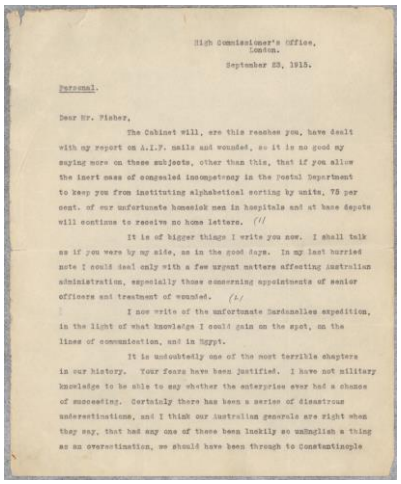

High Commissioner's Office,
London.

September 23, 1915.

Personal.

Dear Mr. Fisher,

The Cabinet will, ere this reaches you, have dealt with my report on A.I.F. mails and wounded, so it is no good my saying more on these subjects, other than this, that if you allow the inert mass of concealed incompetency in the Postal Department to keep you from instituting alphabetical sorting by units, 75 per cent. of our unfortunate homesick men in hospitals and at base depots will continue to receive no home letters. //

It is of bigger things I write you now. I shall talk as if you were by my side, as in the good days. In my last hurried note I could deal only with a few urgent matters affecting Australian administration, especially those concerning appointments of senior officers and treatment of wounded. //

I now write of the unfortunate Dardanelles expedition, in the light of what knowledge I could gain on the spot, on the lines of communication, and in Egypt.

It is undoubtedly one of the most terrible chapters in our history. Your fears have been justified. I have not military knowledge to be able to say whether the enterprise ever had a chance of succeeding. Certainly there has been a series of disastrous underestimations, and I think our Australian generals are right when they say, that had any one of these been luckily so unEnglish a thing as an overestimation, we should have been through to Constantinople

Sir Keith Arthur Murdoch (1885–1952)
Gallipoli letter from Keith Arthur Murdoch to Andrew Fisher 1915
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NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

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at much less cost than we have paid for our slender perch on the cliffs of the Peninsula.

The first two efforts, those of the fleet alone and of the combined forces in April-May, failed miserably mainly because London expected far too much from floating artillery. It is only now being recognised that the naval guns, with their flat trajectory, are of little avail against the narrow Turkish trenches. The last great effort, that of August 6-21, was a costly and bloody fiasco because, in addition to wretched staff work, the troops sent were inadequate and of most uneven quality.(3) That failure has created a situation which even yet has not been seriously faced - i.e., a choice between withdrawal of our armies and hanging on for a fresh offensive after winter.

Unfortunately I was not in time for any of these big operations, but I visited most parts of Anzac and Suvla Bay positions, walked many miles through the trenches, conversed with the leaders and what senior and junior officers I could reach, and was favoured in all parts with full and frank confidence. I could not visit Helles, where we have about 25,000 men and many animals and cars (armoured cars hidden helpless in trenches !). We have abandoned our intentions of taking Achi Baba by frontal assault. This was always a hopeless scheme, after early May, and no one can understand why Hamilton persisted with it. Achi Baba is a gradual, bare slope, a mass of trenches and gun emplacements, but so little did the General Staff know of its task that it expected to storm it with ease. Indeed, the General Staff sent our artillery horses and ambulance transport with our landing parties in April, as if the Australasian

Army Corps could get astride the peninsula in a few days, I assure you that if our landing had been at Gaba Tepe as proposed, only a few broken remnants of our magnificent force would have reached the first defensive line. Having at last abandoned his expensive design to storm Achi Baba, Hamilton is keeping his divisions at Helles merely to hold a corresponding body of Turks. Helles is therefore the most quiet of the three zones, though even there, every yard of ground is commanded by the enemy's guns, and even the beaches are frequently shelled.

A strong advance inland from Anzac has never been attempted. It is broken, rough, scrubby country, full of gullies and sharp ridges, and it is all within easy range of the guns of the Turkish forts at the Narrows, and their artillery on Achi Baba and round about. No serious advance could be made direct inland from this quarter. Our men were I found immensely proud of their little progress on the plateau on our right - Lone Pine Plateau, Walker and Whyte thought it brilliant and wonderfully successful. But I found that we had paid 2500 men for this advance, on a short front, of 300 yards ! That is the only sort of advance we can make from Anzac proper. The Lone Pine affair was partly in the nature of a holding movement, and it certainly succeeded in holding a large body of Turks, who maintained a series of fierce counter-attacks for 82 hours, during which the Suvla Bay operations were in progress.

Suvla Bay is a shallow, open indentation in the thickest part of the peninsula, about two miles and a half to the left of Anzac. The flat country leading from the beach consists mostly of a marsh called Bitter Lake, which in winter becomes a

great morass. After heavy rains the flat is inundated.

On this flat in August nearly 90,000 men were landed. They were New Army and Territorial divisions. They had spent a fortnight on the water, in transports which even the most careful arrangements could not make wholesome. I was on the lower deck on one of these, and the place was putrid. The men could not be allowed on shore at ports of call. One or two regiments were given route marches, but the long spell of ship life was surely in every case weakening. Those which were to land first were given landing practice at Mudros (advanced base) and Imbros (headquarters base), but many were set ashore direct from their ships at Suvla. In addition to the ordinary weakening effects of troopships was the nervous strain of expectation of submarines. Most of the men ignored this, but I was on the Beltana when a submarine was sighted and fired at, and I know that this strain did exist.

You can imagine, then, that these fresh, raw, untried troops, under amateur officers, homesick and apprehensive, were under normal in morale when the day of landing approached. They had to be packed like sardines on the trawlers and small destroyers and vessels for the actual landing, and were kept like this for most of an afternoon and the whole of a night. Before this embarkation, they had each received three days' supply of iron rations - biscuits and bully beef - and had filled their water bottles - one bottle to each man.

Then in the early hours came the landing, when the life of man is at its lowest.

I do not say that better arrangements could have been made. But I do say that in the first place to send raw, young recruits on this perilous enterprise was to court disaster; and Hamilton would have some reasonableness behind his complaints that his men let him down, if he and his staff had not at the same time let the men down with grosser wrong-doings.

The landing was unopposed; the Turks were taken completely by surprise. But with great celerity they galloped their artillery round, and opened fire also from their forts. Before the new troops had advanced any distance they were being racked with shell fire.

I am informed by many officers that one division went ashore without any orders whatsoever. Another division, to which had been allotted the essential work of occupying the Anafarta Hills, was marched far to the left before the mistake in direction was noticed. It was then recalled, and reformed, and sent off towards the ridge. As a practical man, how much water do you think would be left in these thirsty English boys' bottles by this time - after the night on the seas, and the hot march out, march back, and advance ? Of course, not a drop. And yet the staff professes surprise that before noon the men were weak for want of water. The whole army suffered intensely from thirst during the next three days. There were many deaths from thirst. One general even assured me that the collapse on Anafarta Hills was due to thirst. Certainly these hot-blooded young men, scions of the thirstiest race in the world, were sent out into tropical heat with food calculated to engender fierce thirst, and without water. The divisional commanders

Department of Defence,

Melbourne, 9th July, 1915.

Dear Sir,

In view of numerous complaints which have reached the Commonwealth Government regarding the non-delivery of letters and cables to members of the Australian Imperial Force in Egypt. amd the difficulty experienced by persons in Australia in obtaining information concerning wounded and sick relatives, it is thought that the public uneasiness in these matters would be allayed if a report by some persons unconnected with the Forces could be obtained as to the arrangements that have been made in Egypt for these services. The Government has accordingly authorised Mr Keith Murdoch, an Australian journalist, who is on his way to England, to make enquiries when passing through Egypt with a view to furnishing me with a report upon the matters alluded to.

Any assistance which you can see your way to render Mr Murdoch in connection with his enquiries will be very much appreciated by my colleagues and myself.

Yours sincerely,

(Sgd) G. F. PEARCE.

Minister for Defence.

G.O.C. in Chief,

EGYPT.

My dear Birdwood

This gentleman is duly authorised —

Help him in any way you can.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE.

No.

MELBOURNE. 13th July, 1915.

Yours ever

Ian Hamilton

Dear Sir Ian Hamilton, 2.9.15.

Mr Keith Murdoch, Pressman of Sydney and Melbourne, is on his way to London to fill an appointment there and has been asked by this Government to make certain enquiries in connexion with postal facilities at the Base in Egypt, and as to the disposition of wounded. It might just happen that circumstances will favour him to the extent of meeting yourself and, in case this should be so, I have much pleasure in giving him this letter of introduction.

Yours sincerely.

G. F. Pearce

General Sir Ian Hamilton. G.C.B. D.S.O.
General Officer Commanding in Chief.
Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

Arundel Hotel,
Victoria Embankment.

September 25, 1915.

The Right Honourable H. H. Asquith, P.C., M.P.,
Prime Minister.

Dear Sir,

Mr. Lloyd George has suggested to me that I should place at your disposal whatever knowledge I gained of the Dardanelles operations while an Australian civilian representative there.

I therefore take the liberty of sending to you a copy of a private letter I have addressed to Mr. Fisher, in conformance with his request that I should write him fully on the subject.

This letter was, of course, intended only for Commonwealth Ministers, and contains references which will have no interest to you. But I feel justified in sending it to you, because if it adds one iota to your information, or presents the Australian point of view, it will be of service in this most critical moment.

I write with diffidence, and only at Mr. Lloyd George's request. In any case, you will know that my motive is one of affectionate regard for our soldiers' interests.

I have the honour to be,

Your obedient servant,

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