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The Hidden Truth: The Truces and Comradeship which define the Gallipoli Campaign

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Gallipoli - 25th April 1915 through 8th January 1916 – a period of time characterised by war and horrific loss. Turkish soldiers fought viciously to prevent the advance of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. From the initial landing and periods throughout Indian and ANZAC involvement at Gallipoli, there came periods of humanity and mutual respect as well as the blossoming of loyal friendships and alliances. The Gallipoli Campaign is often perceived as the interval of death and conflict from which what we now understand to be the ‘ANZAC qualities’ arose. Beneath this façade, there are a number of events which lay unheeded. The truce that occurred on the 24th of May, 1915 and the involvement of Indian’s, Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other minority groups alongside ANZAC servicemen and women in the Gallipoli Campaign deserve more acknowledgement and recognition over the initial landing itself. The relationships developed demonstrate moments of peace in the midst of war which were able to occur due to mutual respect, faith, trust and unification of humanitarian values. The values exhibited at the time enabled the fostering of now crucial international relationships. Furthermore, the sacrifice of other Commonwealth countries and individuals where imperative to the survival of the ANZACs. These two examples of harmonisation and faith in human nature should be given greater prominence in accounts of the Gallipoli Campaign. More than the initial landing, the behaviour displayed and integrity of relationships established after the commencement of the campaign are more deserving of recognition as they present a more historically significant recount of events, the consequences of which are evident even today.

The first major period of armistice which took place between the Turkish and the ANZACs at Gallipoli coined the “May Truce” was born out of an environment of dehumanising violence. By late 1914, the fighting in Europe had deteriorated to a stalemate and the British War Council resolved to initiate attacks upon Germany’s allies. The purpose of the Gallipoli campaign was to gain control of the Dardanelles and Bosporus straits, capturing Constantinople, and opening a Black Sea supply route to Russia. The fabled erroneous landing under the pitch black sky resulted in the ANZACs and allied soldiers being faced with an impermeable fortress of festooning plants and slippery cliffs. By April, there were 860 confirmed Australian deaths alone (Source 3, 1919). An underlying sense of patriotism, duty and terror bred loathing between opposing forces. Such deeply ingrained hatred carried a major implication: it dehumanised the enemy. As Captain Guy Warneford Nightingale wrote; “we took 300 prisoners and
could have taken 3,000 but we preferred shooting them.” (Bourke, An Intimate History of Killing, p.170, 1999). As evidenced, the context of the truce discussed above pose a stark contrast to usual perceptions and accepted attitudes of soldiers in war. The May Truce deviates from typical perceptions of war and is hence significant and worthy of acknowledgement.

On the 24th of May 1915, a nine hour truce was observed (Larsen, 2008). It was proposed by the Ottoman as a result of prior onslaughts on May the 19th which resulted in approximately ten thousand Turkish soldiers left either wounded or dead (Herbert, Mons, Anzac and Kut, p.58, 1919). Source 4 (unknown, 1915) depicts a Turkish commander being led blind folded through bushes to negotiate this armistice. Furthermore, 620 ANZACs met a similar fate in the battle. One death in particular, that of Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick, left the ANZACs feeling particularly demoralised. The bodies were left in no man’s land with no way to retrieve them under heavy artillery and gun fire from both sides. As a result of this they rotted and began to smell. The Ottoman soldiers particularly suffered as;

“... the dead and wounded lay everywhere in hundreds...No sound came from that terrible space; but here and there some wounded or dying man, silently lying without help or any hope of it under the sun which glared from a cloudless sky, turned painfully from one side to the other...” (Bean, The Story of Anzac, Vol 2, p 161).

The truce occurred as a result of loss on both sides and need to respect and honour the deceased; “At this spectacle even the most gentle must feel savage, and the most savage must weep.” (Herbert, 1930 via DVA and BOSTES NSW, 2015). Out of this terrible slaughter came one of the more remarkable episodes of the four years of fighting; a burial armistice that contributed a newfound understanding between ANZAC and Turkish servicemen and women which defied accepted mindsets of those at war.

The realisation of the profound impact of war upon the Turkish on their home front further contributed to greater empathy and understanding towards the situation of the previously faceless enemy. Fearing the outbreak of disease, time was prioritised to the care of the wounded and identification of deceased comrades during the truce. Additionally, many took advantage of this brief reprieve to meet each other, as well as exchange drinks, cigarettes and small tokens. “The time was taken up by making friends with the Turks, who do not seem to be a very bad sort of chap after all. After today most of our opinions on the Turks were changed ...” (De Vine via Gammage, The Broken Years, 1990, p.104). The most predominant result of this fraternisation between opposing forces was increased empathy. More so than the initial landing, it is this event which is more illustrative of the characteristics and spirit displayed by the ANZACs at Gallipoli. Consequently, this peaceful interaction between the two sides would have contributed to an easing of tensions and introduced a propaganda free perspective (State Library of Victoria, 2015). In wartime, truces provide a period of respect and reflection of the sacrificed of the deceased and further allow soldiers to experience short episodes of peace and humanity in the midst of war. Events such as the May Truce require more recognition in the recount of the Gallipoli Campaign as it differs from usual perceptions of war.

The focus on the ANZAC landing at ANZAC Cove supplants the importance of the involvement of other groups in the Gallipoli Campaign. Indian military involvement is often neglected predominantly due to the reason why the Indians were involved. India’s military contribution as there was no independent political resonance to support it. An example of this exclusion is Source 2 (Lambert, 1924) which shows Australian and Turkish soldiers in the Battle of Chunuk Bair where the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade and the Indian Mountain Artillery Brigade also participated (Monash and Cutlack, War Letters of General Monash,1935, p.61). In actual fact, the Indian contribution had a substantial input in operations and were faithful allies to the ANZACs. All in all, in the recounts of the Gallipoli Campaign, India’s contribution is
often unheeded due to the initial reasoning behind it. India is simply one example of a country that was also heavily involved in the campaign alongside our ANZAC servicemen and women whose contributions are often ignored in historical recounts.

The death of Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick on the 19th of May 1915, was the death of a hugely symbolic and spirited man. He is often associated with bravery and selflessness in the face of great dangers. Professor Stanley advocates that “the donkeys were most likely given over to the Indian mule handlers after his death” (Stanley, 2014). This act is representative of the close dependency and bond between the ANZACs and other groups. The Indian Mule Corps suffered heavy losses in their efforts to keep the Anzacs well equipped with food and water. Shelling intensified in the areas in which the Corps operated but it was decided that this depot must be maintained as it was an important store for men in the southern Anzac trenches. As a result of this close relationship, Australia and India now have a good relationship. Dudley Walford (1914 via Stanley, 2014) of the thirteenth battalion observed:

“Throughout the Gallipoli campaign the Indian Mule Corps played an important part for it was to them that we trusted all our supplies of ammunition, water, food and necessary timbers being punctually brought to the firing lines... We daily awaited their arrival & their cheerful Indian leaders whom we called Johnny...”

This is further evident in Frederick Burgis’s recount; “They and the Gurkhas have a very good opinion of our men, and in speaking we say “Hulloa Johnny”. They say likewise. So that we are all Johnnys.” (Burgis, Burgis War Diary, 1915, p.25). Along with their role in providing supplies, Indian soldiers were also well trained making their contribution more significant. Source 6 (unknown, 1915) shows Indians carrying a stretcher - emphasising their importance to the campaign. India’s contribution to the success of the Gallipoli Campaign is significant because it shows perseverance, comradeship formed amidst the violence and most importantly, trust.

Trust and mutual respect were imminent throughout Australia’s military involvement in World War One during the Gallipoli Campaign. They are imperative to the story of Australian military history because they emphasised humanity in the midst of warfare and introduced new perspectives, cementing mutual respect between opposing forces. This is significant as it symbolises the flowering of civilised ideas in the midst of war. In modern society, often a focus is placed upon Australian involvement at Gallipoli while the contributions of other countries and minority groups to the commonwealth effort is neglected. In particular, India’s involvement in the Gallipoli Campaign is often undermined where in reality, their contribution is much more significant than originally perceived. The May Truce which took place on May 24th stemmed from trust and faith in the opposition. These extraordinary displays of empathy highlight the qualities displayed by ANZAC servicemen and women in difficult circumstances. War is often related to hatred and vehemence but these events depict a unique perspective, a side that deserves to be acknowledged in the accounts of the Gallipoli Campaign. More so than the initial landing, it is the disposition displayed by the ANZACs and the integrity of their relationships with other groups established after commencement of the campaign which are truly significant in historical accounts of World War One.