

# WHO CALLED FOR A CEASEFIRE? GALLIPOLI 1915

THE BRIEF TRUCE AT ANZAC WAS NEEDED, TRICKY TO  
NEGOTIATE, AND RAISED ISSUES OF PRIDE.

By Mesut Uyar



**T**he truce that went into effect on 24 May 1915 at Anzac (Turkish: Arıburnu) is among the most curious events of the Gallipoli campaign. Both sides initially wanted a ceasefire for sanitary and humanitarian reasons. Moreover, a ceasefire was observed and implemented surprisingly smoothly and amicably, despite a number of minor incidents. After the event, however, recriminations led to friction between some senior allied commanders, and the belligerents soon engaged in a kind of blame game about the origins of the demand for a ceasefire. For obvious strategic reasons, each side attributed the initiative to the other.

The Ottoman Fifth Field Army units' initial objective was to prevent the enemy forces that landed on 25 April 1915 from advancing beyond their beachheads. The Fifth Army succeeded, and soon contemplated counter-offensives to drive the enemy forces into the sea. The newly created Arıburnu front under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Kemal [later to take the name Atatürk] was given this task. Around-the-clock frontal assaults launched by Ottoman troops on 27 April and 1 May ended in failure and at the staggering cost of 14,000 casualties. The officers in the senior command chain, led by the German General Liman von Sanders, eventually realised that frontal attacks would not dislodge the Anzacs from their positions, which were supported by an effective array of naval, artillery and machine-gun fire. The Ottoman commanders then concluded that the only option was to build a network of trenches and strongholds to withstand future enemy attacks. In this attrition strategy they would ultimately succeed.

Meanwhile, impressed by overly optimistic reports and tales of heroism from the battlefield, Enver Pasha and the Ottoman General Staff were convinced that the enemy could be repelled, at least at the Anzac front, with one last push. The 2nd Infantry Division, reputed to be one of the best Ottoman divisions and commanded by Hasan Askeri [Yücekök], was rushed to Anzac. [Surnames in brackets were adopted after Atatürk's 1934 edict requiring all Turks to have surnames.] Supported by the 5th, 16th and 19th infantry divisions, the 2nd Infantry bore the brunt

**Top right:** General William Hiddell Birdwood outside his dug-out at Anzac. Birdwood felt cheated by the Ottomans after receiving a scolding from General Ian Hamilton over the truce. AWM 600761

**Right:** Field Marshal Liman von Sanders, the German commander of the Ottoman Fifth Army. Image courtesy of Tunca Orses.



*The cries of the wounded who could not be retrieved added a psychological burden to the already strained Ottoman troops.*

of a large-scale frontal assault with 42,000 troops on 19 May 1915. The charge was sustained for more than six hours with successive waves of infantry attacks – yet it failed to achieve any of its objectives. Although some units managed to breach enemy positions, they were thrown back by the defenders. Coordinated naval and field artillery barrages, and machine-gun and other small arms fire, took a heavy toll on the Ottoman offensive, resulting in 9,500 casualties, including 3,420 dead. “Having grossly underrated the enemy,” von Sanders would later admit, he and the Ottoman High Command had made a catastrophic error of judgement.

While the Ottoman troops were recovering, the bodies of the fallen lying in no man’s land between the trenches were starting to bloat, producing a stench made worse by hot weather. Life in the trenches on both sides became intolerable as the smell from the decaying bodies attracted millions of flies. Moreover, the cries of the wounded who could not be retrieved added a psychological burden to the already strained Ottoman troops. The need to recover the wounded and bury the dead became a pressing issue not only for the troops in the trenches but also for their commanders. But the Ottomans were reluctant to be the



Below: Senior Ottoman command involved in the truce. Standing from left: Lieutenant-Colonel Fahreddin [Altay], chief of staff; General Esad [Bülkat] Pasha, commander of III Army Corps; Major Kemal Öhrül, chief of operations. Image courtesy of Turkish General Staff Military History Directorate.



first to ask for a ceasefire, fearing such a request might be interpreted as accepting defeat. With a similar mindset, the British and Australian commanders were equally reluctant to make the first move, lest it be construed as weakness.

The archival records suggest the matter was first raised on 19 May when the commander of the ANZAC Corps, Lieutenant General William Birdwood, sent a written request to General Ian Hamilton, the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, to begin negotiations with the enemy for the evacuation of the dead and wounded soldiers. There is no evidence in Birdwood's letter that the Ottomans had initiated the conversation. In reply, Hamilton ruled out any negotiations with the enemy, but wrote that if a request came from the other side, permission might be granted to bury the dead and evacuate the wounded, provided necessary precautions were taken to prevent it becoming a reconnaissance exercise by Turkish forces. At this point, it is evident that Hamilton and his staff were principally concerned with imperial prestige and preventing the Ottomans from taking military advantage of any ceasefire.

Meanwhile, Birdwood, apparently overwhelmed by requests from units under

his command to bury the dead, decided to write to Hamilton, detailing the terrible conditions. His letter complained of Turkish indifference towards their dead and wounded, and argued that the situation would become unbearable in the front line, where bodies were piling up in the vicinity of trenches, unless the Ottomans took the initiative. Birdwood handed the letter to one of the intelligence officers on the staff of the New Zealand and Australian Division, Aubrey Herbert, a journalist in civilian life and a member of the British parliament. Birdwood wanted him to explain the situation to Hamilton in person. After Herbert had done so, he volunteered for the role of mediator in negotiations with the Ottomans. Preparations were then made to respond to any move by the other side to evacuate their casualties under the flag of the Red Crescent. Hamilton reiterated his orders that no subordinate commander was authorised to negotiate any kind of ceasefire or truce, unless the Ottoman side requested it first. He had no objection to allied officers' throwing letters into the Ottoman trenches, advising them that they could recover their dead and wounded without interference; but Hamilton cautioned his subordinates against hoisting any white flags or engaging in any official talks in the process.

While the British-Australian and New Zealand side was struggling to tackle the rapidly deteriorating situation, the Ottoman regiments in the front line initially attempted to retrieve the wounded and dead secretly. After such attempts proved futile, Red Crescent and Red Cross banners emerged out of the trenches on both sides on the afternoon of 20 May – without the authorisation of the high commands on either side. A sergeant, Emin [Çöl] Efendi, who was in the trenches at that time, admits in his memoirs that “we wanted the ceasefire, lest the British evacuate our martyrs.” The 19th Division's Chief of Staff, Major İzzettin [Çalışlar], on the other hand, notes in his diary that a Red Cross flag appeared first, and then others in the afternoon of 20 May; but it is not clear whether he was referring to flags of both sides. The subsequent negotiations with the Anzacs resulted in a window of opportunity to collect the wounded and to bury at least some of the dead bodies

that were close at hand. But this window closed abruptly when shots were fired by the Anzacs, and skirmishes continued throughout the evening.

Both the British and the Australian official histories concur with İzzetin's account. The acting commander of the 1st Australian Brigade, Colonel Robert Owen, had used his discretion to raise the Red Cross flag. The appearance of this flag caused confusion at first and drew fire, but it was immediately followed by the raising of Red Crescent flags from the Ottoman trenches. Soon stretcher-bearers were busy picking up first the wounded and then the dead. The acting commander of the 1st Australian Division, Brigadier Harold Walker, arrived to observe the unofficial ceasefire. Birdwood, who had not been informed of the situation until later in the day, intervened to end the ceasefire on the grounds that it was now getting



*Officers dressed in privates' uniform were busy gathering intelligence on the weaknesses of the other side.*

late and they should wait until the next day to conclude the task. Having failed to grasp Birdwood's true intentions, Walker sent a letter, signed by his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant R.J.A. Massie, to request the Ottoman side to send a negotiator to the Anzac lines around noon next day. This unofficial ceasefire preceded a heavy exchange of fire; the resumption of hostilities unsettled both the allied and Ottoman high commands.

Birdwood bent the facts in his later official report to General Hamilton on 20 May in order to avoid giving any impression of disobedience of his chief's orders. In his reconstruction of the events, he claimed that a substantial number of unarmed Turks carrying Red Crescent flags approached the Anzac lines in the afternoon and asked for permission to bury their dead and evacuate the wounded. They were told to send a representative the next day around noon, as it would be impossible to do the work properly in darkness. Birdwood blamed the other side for initiating the skirmish that broke the unofficial ceasefire. He simply repeated what he had included in his detailed letter sent to Hamilton that same day, and highlighted the humanitarian and

sanitary considerations which led him to propose that allied troops should hold their fire while the Turks were evacuating their dead and wounded from the battlefield. Nevertheless, he again stressed that he was against a formal ceasefire.

The commander of the Ottoman III Corps, General Esad [Bülkat] Pasha, in his unpublished memoirs, presents the Ottoman perspective on the ceasefire process initiated by Colonel Owen. He recalls that he immediately realised the opportunity when he saw the Red Cross flag over the Australian trenches, and called General von Sanders at once for permission to raise Red Crescent flags and to start negotiations. Disregarding established protocol, Esad Pasha preferred to treat the letter signed by General Walker's aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Massie, rather than by the general himself, as an official request for a ceasefire and wanted to take up the opportunity. After securing von Sanders' approval, he notified the other side that he had accepted the proposal and his representative would be available for negotiations the next day as requested.

General Staff Major Kemal [Ohrili], who was proficient in French and German, had been authorised by General Esad Pasha and greeted the delegation designated by Birdwood on the shore below Kabatepe on 21 May. Aubrey Herbert was left as a



**Above:** Australian troops burying Ottoman and Australian dead at The Nek during the truce on 24 May 1915. AWM P02648.007

hostage in exchange for Kemal. The latter was blindfolded to avoid compromising allied positions and led along the coast to the Anzac HQ (at one point, to avoid trip wires, carried over the sea in a stretcher by naked soldiers who had been bathing). Similarly, Herbert writes in his memoirs that he was also taken on a tour blindfolded and then held in a tent. Major Kemal and Anzac staff officer Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Skeen drafted the terms of the ceasefire in French after making a brief courtesy call on Birdwood. When he had seen it, Esad Pasha made some minor modifications and signed the final version after gaining von Sanders's approval.



*The Ottomans gained relatively more from the truce ... by recovering a substantial number of working weapons.*

While the whole process ran swiftly and smoothly on the Ottoman side, Hamilton was unhappy with the draft agreement and Esad Pasha's changes, forwarded to him by Birdwood. He concluded that the proposal for a ceasefire did not originate from the Ottomans but from among his own subordinates, contrary to his express orders. Hamilton was concerned that the Germans would turn this matter into a propaganda victory which would anger the British government and the public, whose wrath would possibly turn against him. Birdwood apologised in writing as soon as he received Hamilton's accusatory remarks. He claimed that he had made a mistake because of a poor translation of Esad Pasha's letter. More significant was Birdwood's claim that he had been tricked by the cunning Turks. He promised to be more cautious in future. Armed with Hamilton's official advice, he amended the draft, transforming it into a new agreement to be signed by the respective army commanders-in-chief, Hamilton and von Sanders, rather than by himself and Esad Pasha. For political and diplomatic reasons, naval operations were excluded from the terms of the truce.

The following day, when Kemal went to the rendezvous point to exchange the signed copies of the truce, Lieutenant Colonel Skeen explained the new situation to him and delivered the revised draft. The Ottoman side did not raise any objections to the new conditions,

and they were given a verbal assurance that the Royal Navy would also observe the ceasefire. Von Sanders signed the letter as requested and designated Esad Pasha's chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel

Fahreddin [Altay], to serve as his representative on 22 May. After the draft was modified yet again to reflect the final revisions demanded by the British and the Ottomans, on 23 May Fahreddin met with Skeen and signed the agreement that formally approved the ceasefire.

Under the agreement, the area between the trenches was divided into three zones: British, Ottoman, and neutral. Each side designated two staff officers (Major İzzettin [Çalışlar], Captain Nazım, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Skeen and Major Thomas Blamey), two medical doctors (Major Hüseyin Hüsnü, Captain Arif Hikmet, Colonel Neville Howse and the New Zealander, Colonel Percival Fenwick), two translators (Tahir, Sadık, Aubrey Herbert and an unidentified British translator) as well as 100 troops to recover the dead and wounded. The truce would start on 24 May at 7.30 am and the evacuation of the casualties would begin after representatives of the two sides had met in the neutral zone at 7.45. The two sides were to transfer their dead and wounded, as well as their weapons and equipment for inspection and demilitarisation (removing the bolts from rifles), to the neutral zone before they were evacuated to the rear. Only designated officers and troops would be allowed to step out of the trenches and they would seek contact with the other side.



**Above:** The Ottoman envoy, Major Kemal Öhrül (blindfolded) led by two Australian officers to ANZAC headquarters for armistice negotiations. AWM A05780

Despite several minor incidents and some firing at the beginning, the ceasefire proved to be uneventful. The two sides acted with respect and in a reserved manner towards each other at first. While the Ottomans were trying to transfer weaponry to their lines secretly, the Australians paid close attention to the removal of their firing mechanisms. In fact, the Ottomans had already carried to their trenches whatever weapons they could find during the previous night. However, as the day progressed, a more relaxed mood replaced the initial caution. Thereafter, the dead and their weapons were taken directly to their respective trenches without going through the neutral zone. Soldiers assigned to the evacuation began to chat and swap personal items and food with each other. Officers dressed in privates' uniform were busy gathering intelligence on the defences and weaknesses of the other side, rather than helping with the evacuation of casualties. Evacuation and clearing of the area was finally completed by 3.45 pm. Officers from both sides conducted final checks and shook hands with their counterparts before heading back towards their own lines. Hostilities were resumed at 5 pm. In the course of the ceasefire, the Ottomans were able to evacuate two surviving wounded soldiers and to bury 2,981 dead. They recovered 2,688 fully functioning and 1,493 demilitarised rifles. Most of the bodies recovered and buried were Turkish soldiers. There had been 628 Anzac casualties during the Turkish attack of 19 May, some 160 of whom died in action or of wounds sustained in the battle.

Thanks to the ceasefire, which was carefully observed by the two sides, the dead were able to be buried decently and the wounded evacuated. It marked the first human encounter between the combatants on both sides. In particular, the Australian troops realised that the Ottoman soldiers they met did not fit the image portrayed by the press at home or by official propaganda. In fact, they began to develop a healthy respect and even some sympathy for their opponents, who were gradually transformed from the Terrible Turk into Johnny Turk, familiarly referred to as Jacko. From the initial landing, the Ottoman officers and soldiers had regarded the Anzacs as "English", but later they learnt that they were not soldiers from the

British Isles. There is evidence that some soldiers began to regard the Anzacs very differently from the British, viewing them sympathetically as unfortunate victims of British imperial politics. So in some sense the feelings were mutual.

But there is no evidence of a corresponding change of heart and mind at the command level on the British–Australian side. Birdwood drew heavy criticism for his performance in handling the ceasefire process and was accused of harming imperial interests. The lesson learned by Birdwood and others within the allied high command was that political and strategic dangers meant that they should avoid contacts of this sort with the Ottoman side from now on. Consequently, although there were other occasions on which a ceasefire was desperately needed, the British–Australian attitude was shaped by this first experience, and reluctance and suspicion marked their response.

It should be granted that the Ottomans gained relatively more from the truce. In addition to collection of the dead and wounded, they turned the opportunity to military advantage by recovering a substantial number of working weapons. Much of the evidence indicates that the Ottoman generals never considered making the first move for a temporary ceasefire. They hoped and waited for the Australians to make the first approach. If the Australians had not made the first move, the Turks would have had no alternative but to let the front line regiments work out local solutions in their sectors. ♦

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Mesut Uyar served in the Turkish Army for 29 years, retiring as a colonel. He holds a doctorate in politics and international relations, and is an associate professor at the University of New South Wales, Canberra.

**Below:** The Turkish envoy who brought the request for an armistice to enable the Turks to bury their dead was blindfolded and carried on a stretcher over the trip wires in the water by two naked bathers. AWM 800988

