

A profoundly emotional day at Gallipoli



Justine Tyerman, 61, is a New Zealand journalist, travel writer and sub-editor. Married for 36 years, she lives in rural surroundings near Gisborne on the East Coast of New Zealand with her husband Chris. In this piece she describes a profoundly emotional day at Gallipoli.

I wanted Anzac Cove to be grey and cold and bleak, like the old newsreels and photos we are so accustomed to seeing. The sunshine and bright colours took me by surprise and jangled at my senses. One tends to forget that the Gallipoli peninsula faces the beautiful Aegean Sea where sapphire waters wash pebbled shores.

The 391 marble head stones were stark white against the vivid green of the lawn cemetery, waves lapped the tranquil beach, and a huge tree cast a cool shadow over the graves on a perfect, cloudless summer day. It was all too picturesque, quite at odds and discordant with how I had perceived this place of remembrance to be.

I had expected sombre monotones, the seriousness of sepia, less of a normal beach where you might have enjoyed a family picnic, a swim, splashing and laughter.

The prettiness made it difficult to visualise how it must have been 101 years ago, when 16,000 New Zealanders and Australians of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force came ashore in the early hours of April 25, 1915 and found themselves on the wrong beach.

When I studied that thin sliver of flat land at Anzac Cove and the formidable height of the deeply-gullied hills behind us at Chunuk Bair, I shivered at the thought of how our men would have felt as dawn broke — the sick realisation that they had been put ashore a mile north of their intended landing site, the horror of the hopeless task ahead, the first of many mistakes that proved so costly for our soldiers. I felt desperately proud of the courage they showed... knowing the Turks in the trenches above held all the high-ground cards.

The tears came as I read the inscriptions on the headstones of soldiers as young as 18, and saw poppies and New Zealand and Australian flags scattered among the flowers, such powerful, evocative emblems for our small group of Kiwis and Aussies.

The inscription on the grave of one young man read: 'Believed to be buried in this cemetery, 8/803 Private R.G. Taylor, NZ Otago Regt. 30 April, 1915 Their glory shall not be blotted out.'

This was a standard epitaph for the Kiwi soldiers. There was little comfort for his family, not even knowing if the remains buried there were indeed his.



A huge tree casts a cool shadow over the Anzac Cove cemetery on a cloudless summer day. Image credit: Justine Tyerman.

The legendary Anzac soldier, Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick, 3rd Field Ambulance, Australian Army Medical Corps, famous for his donkey-back rescues of the wounded, also rests here.

It was a profoundly emotional day, Kiwis standing arm-around-shoulder with Aussies, as it had been for our boys back in 1915.

The tragedy of the deaths felt personal and I found myself angered by the injustice of it. Those young men entrusted their lives to commanders whose strategies and decisions were later found to be fatally flawed, based on inadequate maps and intelligence, false assumptions, miscalculations and poor decisions.

The time at this special place was all the more meaningful thanks to the presence of our hugely knowledgeable Turkish guide Mehmet Kaplan who completed the triangle of nationalities.

Mehmet showed enormous respect for the bravery of the Anzacs and told us of the strange friendship that developed between the Anzacs and the Turks during the eight and a half months of the Gallipoli campaign.

"These young men were told they were coming to fight Abdul, and were painted a caricature of a Turkish man with an ugly face, thick lips and a big moustache, like a monster," Mehmet said.

"The Turks had the high ground and the men were in trenches so for weeks they never saw 'Abdul'.

"Then on May 19, they came face-to-face. The Turks came out of their trenches and attacked. Many soldiers on both sides were killed. The weather was hot and there were dead and wounded lying between the trenches. So on May 24, the Anzacs and Turks established a truce and worked together to identify and bury their dead.

"They came to see each other as human beings and a camaraderie developed between the enemies. The Turks had dried fruit and tobacco and the Anzacs had canned meat, so they tossed food to each other and exchanged notes. "One old Turkish batman was regularly allowed to hang out his platoon's washing on the barbed wire, undisturbed." Mehmet took us up to Chunuk Bair to view a huge bronze statue of two soldiers, a Turk carrying a wounded Anzac. The Anzac soldier had been screaming in agony so the Turkish soldier went to his rescue. He waved an item of white underwear on a stick to stop the firing and then carried the soldier back to the safety of the Anzac trenches. The fighting then resumed.

Such episodes, soldiers behaving like human beings, convinced the commanders that the trenches were too close to each other.



The Australian Memorial at Lone Pine. Image credit: Justine Tyerman.

We visited the Australian Memorial at Lone Pine and also viewed the towering statue of Turkish hero Lieutenant-Colonel Mustafa Kemal, commander of the 19th Turkish Division at Gallipoli in 1915, who later became Ataturk, "Father of the Turks", the founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey.

The "elder statesman" on our tour — a former Royal New Zealand Navy man in his late 80s — placed a New Zealand flag and a poppy at the monument honouring the members of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force who had come to serve from "The uttermost ends of the earth."

More tears...

I scanned the sea of 850 names at the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing and studied the site at Chunuk Bair heights courageously held by New Zealand and later British troops from the dawn of August 8 until the dawn of August 10 when Mustafa Kemal rallied his troops for a major attack.

I was late back to the bus that day, a misdemeanour usually greeted with noisy teasing by the Aussies, but there were no jokes. The mood was quiet and reflective.

A generation who had not been to war, we were all moved by the significance of where we had been and the resonance of our shared history. We know Aussie men don't cry but there were some shiny eyes among the male contingent.

It was good that our time at Gallipoli came towards the end of the 10-day Ancient Kingdoms Classical Turkey tour when strong bonds had formed among the 19 members of the group. The solitary non-"Kiwaussie", a delightful American woman, was given honorary Anzac status for the occasion, a title she was thrilled and humbled with, she said.

The words spoken by Ataturk in 1934 were familiar to me, but reading them on the stone monolith above the Anzac Cove cemetery, they seemed deeply meaningful and struck a maternal cord in my heart. I felt the grief of the mothers as they received the news their sons were never coming home.

"Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives . . . you are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side now here in this country of ours . . . You, the mothers who sent their sons from faraway 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 have become our sons as well."

I came away feeling our boys were indeed resting in a good and peaceful place.

Fact file:

The Gallipoli campaign lasted 8 months, 2 weeks and 1 day, from April 25, 1915 until January 9, 1916.

The plaque at Anzac Cove tells us that of the 391 buried at the Anzac Cove Beach Cemetery, 295 are Australians, 22 are New Zealanders, 50 from the United Kingdom, three from Ceylon and 21 unknown. Other sources have slightly different figures.

Of the 56,000 Allied soldiers who died in the Gallipoli campaign, 2721 were New Zealanders and 8709 were Australian. Turkey lost about 86,000 dead. (Fewster, Basarin & Basarin, Gallipoli - The Turkish story, Allen & Unwin, 2003, Sydney)

Justine Tyerman travelled on an Ancient Kingdoms Classical Turkey tour with [The Innovative Travel Company](#).