

The Rock of Gallipoli

The Leadership of Mustafa Kemal



Maj. Eric Venditti, U.S. Army

I am not ordering you to attack. I am ordering you to die. In the time that it takes us to die, other forces and commanders can come and take our place.

—Mustafa Kemal, 25 April 1915

When the Ottoman Empire joined Germany and the Central Powers against the Allies, a bad situation became worse. With Germany mere miles from Paris and the Russians losing whole armies in the field, the Allied powers knew they could not long withstand a protracted war. They attacked on several fronts all along the Ottoman borders—Russians in the Caucasus and the British and French in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Those efforts were succeeding but

too slowly to have an effect. The Ottomans threatened to starve the Russians; the only yearlong seaport available was on the Crimea, and the only access to the outside world ran straight through Istanbul and the Dardanelles. First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill proposed a daring plan to simultaneously secure the waterways to Russia and strike at the heart of Turkey. The Allies would invade a small

spit of land called Gallipoli that controlled access to the Dardanelles, the Ottoman capital, and on to Russia itself.

The preparations started with the fleet bombarding the forts along the coast in March.¹ The invasion began a month later. The Turks went to sleep on the night of 24 April with the Allied fleet on the horizon. They awoke at dawn to find an army already on the beaches and with more on the way.² The entire campaign hinged on the first few hours—success or failure could come down to a single misstep on either side. However, fortune favored the Turks on this day; they had a competent commander with a brilliant mind and a powerful will. Mustafa Kemal, commander of the 19th Division and the entire 5th Army's reserve, stood at Boghali, seven kilometers away from landings at Ari Burnu.³ He was in the right place with the right tools at the right time, but that in itself did not guarantee victory. It came down to the leader and how he led.

Of the six activities of the commander in the operations process, Kemal executed the first five with the greatest effect, motivating his own troops and halting the enemy.⁴ Kemal's grasp of these commander's activities saved the battle for the Turks in the first hours of the Battle of Gallipoli. He *understood* a chaotic situation, *visualized* the conditions necessary for success, *described* them to his subordinates, *directed* his units, *led* the battle, and constantly *assessed* his position against a brave but battered enemy.

Kemal lacked any intelligence and instruction concerning the invasion. For the first two hours after the initial landings, he received no guidance from his corps commander—only intermittent reports from the commander of the 9th Division.⁵ Khalil Sami Bey's division held the defensive line in the south along Cape

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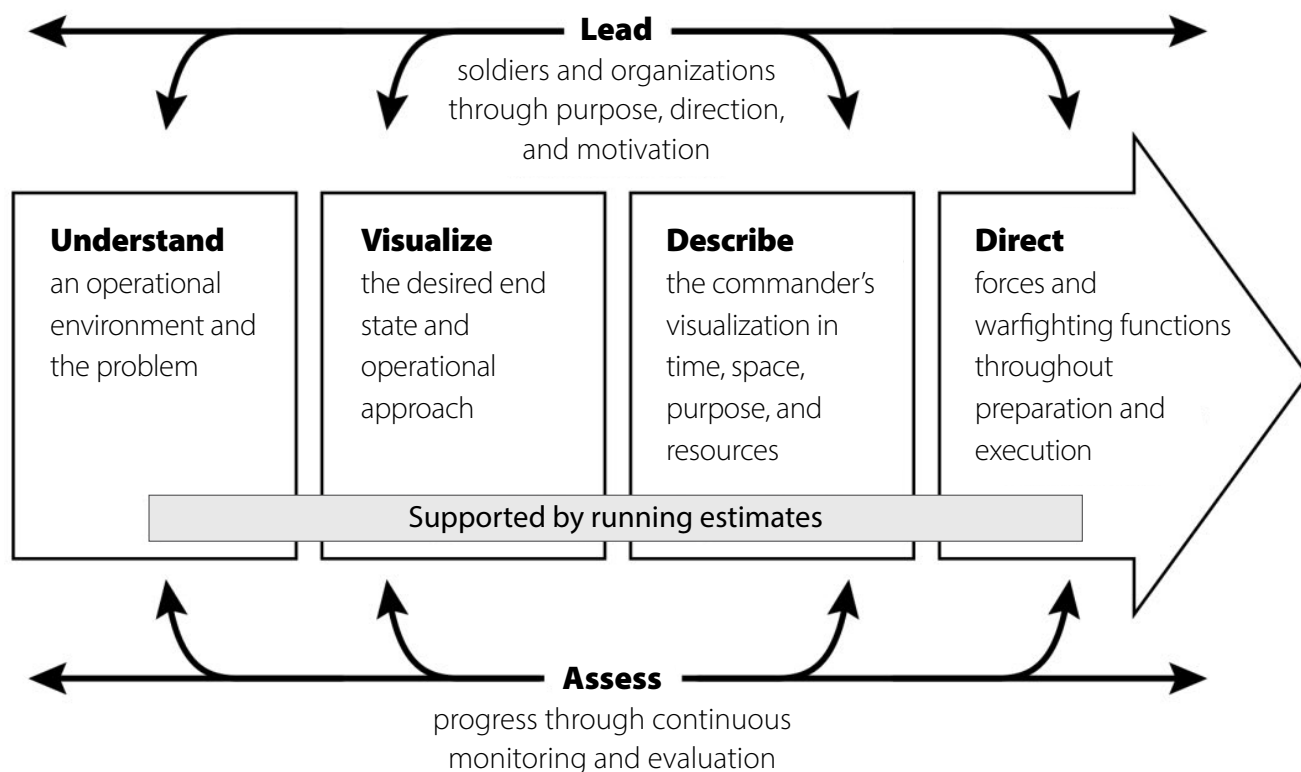


Lt. Col. Mustafa Kemal (*lighter uniform at left*) and his commanders on the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Helles.⁶ One company from the 27th Regiment defended Ari Burnu at the far northern flank of his line. Sami reported that the 27th made contact with a battalion from the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) moving northeast toward the high ground of Chunuk Bair.⁷ Sami believed it was only part of a feint, but he requested Kemal release one of his battalions to reinforce the 9th Division's north line.⁸ Kemal immediately realized that if an Allied battalion was attacking, then they must have had more forces in support—far more than a feint required.⁹ Kemal reasoned this was a main landing zone for the Allies.¹⁰ He also knew the terrain well enough that whoever controlled the three ridgelines running southwest-northeast along Chunuk Bair controlled access to Maidos, the nearest city and a command node for the Turkish defense.¹¹ From those heights, the ANZAC could break out from its beachhead, seize the city, cut the 5th Army in half, and defeat the Turkish defenders in detail.¹² He did not know how many ANZAC soldiers he would face, but he knew what forces he had to stop them.

With the barest amount of intelligence but the fullest amount of understanding, Kemal ordered his division into action. The situation was dire. ANZAC forces attacked along the first and second ridgelines to seize the key terrain of Chunuk Bair in order to divide the peninsula in two.¹³ The loss of that key terrain would mean failure for the defense and the loss of Gallipoli. Kemal visualized his end state. Turkish forces had to hold their defensive line—there was no room for retreat and no ground to give. The enemy could not establish a position on or beyond the ridgelines overlooking the beaches—a hill could become a strongpoint and would allow the ANZAC to expand its lines, making room for reinforcements to press the Turkish defenses. His division had to contain the ANZAC to the beach. Most importantly, the high ground must remain in Turkish hands, whatever the cost. With that singularity of purpose and with all deliberate speed, Kemal briefed what forces he had and led them to the heights.

The 19th Division was the 5th Army's entire reserve for the Dardanelles defense. Committing his regiments required their release from 5th Army Commander Gen.



(Graphic from Army Doctrinal Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*, July 2019)

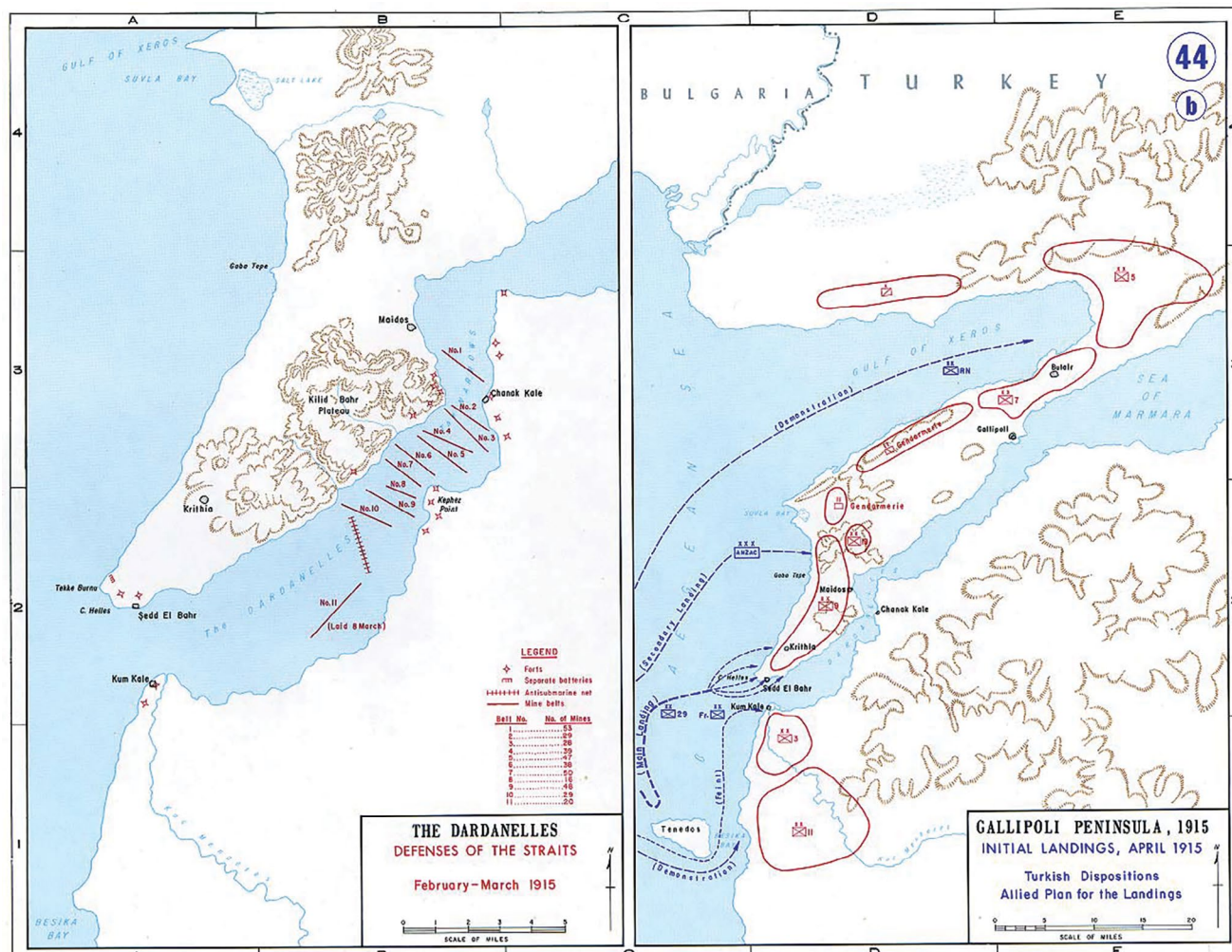
The Commander's Role in the Operations Process

Liman von Sanders or at least III Corps's Essat Pasha. At this point in the battle, and with ANZAC forces closing in on the heights, Kemal knew there was no time to wait for orders.¹⁴ There was not even enough time to muster his men. Kemal wired headquarters of his intentions and gave the order to attack. He briefed the commanders of the 57th and 77th regiments, leaving the 72nd in reserve. His chief of staff assumed the task of assembling the 77th.¹⁵ The 57th Regiment was already in the field for a training exercise, so Kemal joined with them.¹⁶ He briefed his subordinate on his mission: attack the ridge at Ari Burnu and push the ANZACs into the sea. Kemal spoke clearly. They were the first responders, and they could not let the Allies take any part of the ridgeline. "There is no flight from the enemy. There is [only] fighting with the enemy. If you have no ammunition, you have your bayonets."¹⁷ Reinforced with a mountain battery of artillery, the regiment moved west across the peninsula.

Kemal traveled with the advance guard toward Hill 700 and Battleship Hill. During the approach, they

encountered men of the 9th Division's 27th Regiment retreating from the fight.¹⁸ Kemal pressed his men. The regimental commander lost contact with his force while negotiating the difficult microterrain, so at the point of friction, Kemal himself gave the orders to the battalion commanders.¹⁹ The first battalion would attack southwest down Hill 700 and Mortar Ridge. The second battalion would attack north-northwest over Hill 700 and down the Nek. The third battalion was the reserve. The mountain battery emplaced on Scrubby Knoll to the rear east of the regiment.²⁰ Having seen the broken disposition of the 27th south of his forces, Kemal wired his headquarters at Boghali to send the 77th into the gap between the 57th and the fragile 27th lines. This left the 5th Army with a single regiment in reserve—the others committed without higher approval.²¹

Kemal had to meet with his corps commander. He went back to Maidos to brief Essat Pasha and to make clear his concern that this was the Allied main force. In his first confirmation of the day, Essat validated



(Image by Edward J. Krasnoborski, Frank Martini, Raymond Hrinko, and Jeff Goldberg, Department of History at the U.S. Military Academy West Point)

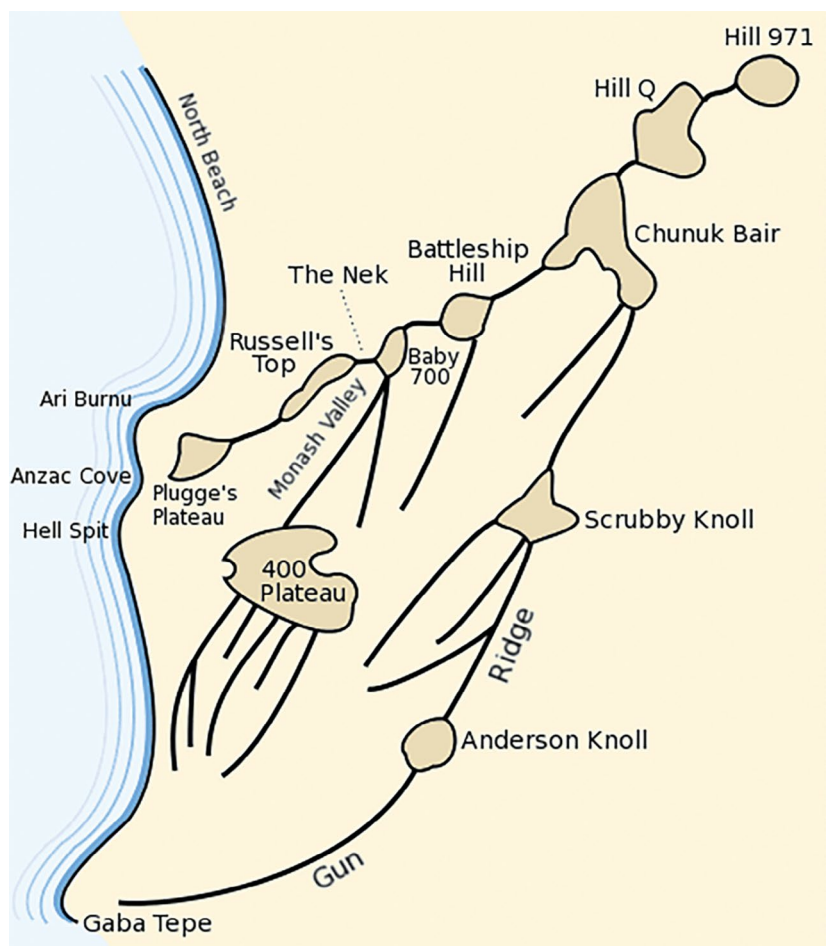
The Allied and Ottoman Dispositions Prior to and on the Day of the Landings

Kemal's actions, giving the latter tactical command of the 27th and releasing the last reserves for the battle.²² Kemal held the 72nd at Boghali until he knew where, when, and how to employ them. In the initial hours of the battle, Kemal's clear and concise instructions carried the fight at Ari Burnu.

Kemal hurried back to the front to direct the combat. Up to this point, his application of the warfighting functions sought to maximize one thing: protection. Looking at what Kemal actually had at his disposal suggests he did as much as he could with what little was available, and he succeeded because he did it at the right time. Kemal had virtually no intelligence or guidance from his higher echelon commanders in the initial

stages of the battle, and he had very little actionable intelligence from Sami's 9th Division. Kemal did get a distance, direction, and an approximate disposition of the advancing ANZAC force, but more importantly for Kemal, he knew the terrain. He understood the quality of the key terrain dominating the area, and he visualized the Allied plan of action; in the absence of clear enemy intelligence, he based his maneuver plan on that.

Kemal committed his battalions and regiments piecemeal, but that was a risk he was willing to undertake—he based his scheme of maneuver less on the principles of concentration or massing of fires and more on immediacy.²³ It was not the ideal plan, but at that point in the battle, the Turks simply needed men. The 57th spearheaded



(Graphic by Gsl via Wikimedia Commons)

Named Terrain Features and Ridgelines on Which the Turks and ANZACs Fought/Mustafa Kemal's Area of Operations

the move; the purpose of its defense was to gain time for the rest of the division to join the battle. Kemal gave orders that were simple and direct: frontal attack across the ridge, push the Allies into the sea, maximize surprise, simplicity, and violence of action. They had no ground to give and no room to retreat. Kemal deployed his mountain battery of artillery from Scrubby Knoll—its inclusion in the vanguard proved critical. The battery rained effective fires on the invaders, suppressing ANZAC units and halting their advances. At one point, the commander of the 57th realized how spread out his forces became—they were vulnerable to an ANZAC exploitation.²⁴ The battery's position presented them a clear field of fire along the entire front, and the 57th commander called in

artillery against the ANZACs opposite his 1st Battalion. The fires gave him the time to consolidate and reform parts of his force for a bold counterattack.²⁵

Kemal committed his reserves to fill the gaps in his lines, reinforce the defenses, and link with the 27th to his south. Again, all these maneuvers maximized protection of the division's position. Every time Kemal committed a reserve, its purpose was to reinforce a position or strengthen his lines. The 3rd Battalion of the 57th completed the lines between the other two, denying the Allies a potential salient.²⁶ The 77th connected the 57th's southern flank with the 27th's northern line.²⁷ Kemal ordered the 72nd, last to arrive late in the day, to finally reinforce the 57th's decimated line.²⁸ All of his attacks enabled the division to secure itself in its defense. More importantly, Kemal knew that his defense was the linchpin for the entire Turkish force. A failure here meant the exploitation of the lines and a clear road to Maidos. The ANZACs could cut the defenses in half and defeat the Turks in detail. Almost half a century before, Col. Joshua Chamberlain faced a similar situation on Little Round Top. He knew his position anchored the flank of the Union line—if he failed, the

Confederates would roll up the flank and give Gen. Robert E. Lee the battle. Much like Chamberlain, Kemal knew that the integrity of the entire Turkish defense depended on his stand at Ari Burnu.

Kemal was a leader and a good one at that. He knew what his commanders required of him, he knew what his men needed to do, and he knew how to get them to do it. In all of his orders, Kemal gave his soldiers clear direction, a sense of purpose, and the motivation to inspire them to act. Nowhere is this clearer than in the order to the 57th Regiment: "I am not ordering you to attack. I am ordering you to die."²⁹ True to his words, the men of the 57th carried out his order. They threw themselves into a vicious,

hand-to-hand counterattack. Out of ammunition and armed only with bayonets, they repulsed the Allied attack against the hilltops overlooking the beaches but at great cost. The 57th fought to the last man and ceased to be a unit by the end of the day.³⁰

No man willingly goes into a suicide mission unless there is some other factor weighing on his mind. In this case, the Ottoman culture had a sort of code of honor for soldiers: a man either returned home a victor or he died gloriously as a martyr.³¹ Any war for the Ottoman Empire, the seat of Islam, was cast as a holy war, and its soldiers were holy warriors. Kemal appealed to this attitude more than once during his various commands, from the campaigns of the Great War to the fight for the Turkish Republic. Of all his battles

and all his appeals, the order to the 57th on 25 April on the slopes of Baby 700 and Battleship Hill wrought the bloodiest and most successful result. In the end, his words led to the annihilation of the regiment, halted the Allied invasion, saved the battle, and cemented Mustafa Kemal as the great victor of Gallipoli.

The fighting on 25 April ended after nightfall.³² Both sides fought to exhaustion. Gen. William Birdwood, the ANZAC commander, requested his corps withdraw from the sector.³³ His superior, Gen. Ian Hamilton, refused. Nine months of brutal hand-to-hand trench warfare followed. In January 1916, the Allies evacuated the peninsula and ended their Dardanelles Campaign.³⁴ The Ottomans withstood the full force of the Allies on their home soil and stood



(Graphic courtesy of Ngā Tapuwāe Trails and the New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage [Manatū Taonga])

Terrain from the Allied Landings at Anzac Cove on the First Day of the Invasions, 25 April 1915

firm—a lone victory that overshadowed the series of defeats on other fronts throughout the Ottoman Empire. Winston Churchill, the main proponent of the Dardanelles Campaign, lost his job over the fiasco. Kemal, the hero of Gallipoli, went on to lead men in the defense of the Turkish Republic after dismantling the Ottoman Empire. He became Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey and the first president of the republic. The U.S. and British navies applied the lessons learned at Gallipoli to amphibious assaults in Europe and the Pacific in the next world war.³⁵ Those were the fates and lessons left to the survivors—most of the men who fought did not leave that small spit of land overlooking the Dardanelles. When the battle finally ended, almost half a million men had become casualties at Gallipoli.³⁶

Kemal's grasp of the commander's role in the operations process serves as a persisting lesson for the leaders of today. His knowledge of the terrain and its effect on the likely enemy approach is still the basis for the intelligence preparation of the battlefield used by today's commanders. More important is what Kemal did with that knowledge. Since he lacked any detailed intelligence on the Allied forces in his sector, he focused on the heights overlooking the beaches. He did not know what the Allies were doing, but he knew what he had to do to stop them from succeeding. The lesson here is, in the absence of intelligence, attack the terrain. If we attack the terrain, we can find the enemy and maintain the initiative.

Another lesson is to know what motivates soldiers. Kemal appealed to heroism, honor, victory, and religion to push his men to do the impossible against overwhelming odds. As leaders, the task we have is to understand what inspires our troops.

By doing so, we can tailor our words and deeds to arouse in our soldiers that spirit of purpose and stir the hearts of men into action.

The third lesson we gain from this case study of Kemal is to understand where we as leaders fit in the organization. Kemal realized early on that his sector was too important to concede time or ground. As the reserve, he could not commit to battle unless ordered to do so by his superiors. He charged forward anyway and with good reason. Once he identified the Ari Burnu sector as a main landing zone and the heights of Chunuk Bair as key terrain for the fight, he knew that his line would become the linchpin of the entire Turkish defense. That is why he continued to push into the meat grinder—he had to hold, whatever the cost, not just for his division but for the entire 5th Army. Chamberlain learned the same lesson at Gettysburg, and it is a lesson we need to learn as well. We cannot lose focus of the big picture and simply settle in on our narrow task. We are part of the whole. Everything we do helps to achieve a higher goal. We are the tools our superiors use to accomplish their mission. The failure of any part could spell catastrophe for the greater whole. Like the old proverb says, a kingdom was lost for want of a nail.³⁷ It is too easy to lose sight of that fact, but leaders must understand and make certain that their purpose extends beyond themselves to benefit the whole. Despite the changing face of war and the means by which we wage it, the same principles of leadership transcend the generations. So, even a century after the first shots fired on Gallipoli, we still find the lessons of the battle and the men who fought it as applicable today as they were then, and we can be certain they will remain guiding principles of leadership in the years to come. ■

Notes

Epigraph. George W. Gawrych, "The Rock of Gallipoli," in *Studies in Battle Command* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 89.

1. Eric Bush, *Gallipoli* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), chap. 8.

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 9.

3. N. E. McCluer, *The Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff School [CGSS], 1932), 2.

4. Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, July 2019), 2-13–2-16. "Commanders drive the operations process through understanding, visualizing, describing, directing, leading, and assessing operations."

5. McCluer, *The Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division*, 2.

6. *Ibid.*

7. George W. Rice, *A Study of the Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division on 25th April, 1915* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CGSS, 1933), 3.

8. McCluer, *The Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division*, 2.

9. Rice, *A Study of the Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division on 25th April, 1915*, 3.
10. McCluer, *The Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division*, 3.
11. Ibid.
12. Gawrych, "The Rock of Gallipoli," 87.
13. Ibid., 88.
14. McCluer, *The Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division*, 3.
15. Gawrych, "The Rock of Gallipoli," 87.
16. Rice, *A Study of the Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division on 25th April, 1915*, 3.
17. Gawrych, "The Rock of Gallipoli," 88.
18. Rice, *A Study of the Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division*, on 25th April, 1915, 4.
19. Ibid.
20. McCluer, *The Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division*, 3.
21. Ibid.
22. Gawrych, "The Rock of Gallipoli," 89.
23. Ibid., 88–89.
24. Rice, *A Study of the Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division on 25th April, 1915*, 5.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. McCluer, *The Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division*, 4.
28. Rice, *A Study of the Counterattack of the Turkish 19th Division on 25th April, 1915*, 6.
29. Gawrych, "The Rock of Gallipoli," 89.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 90.
33. Ibid.
34. Bush, *Gallipoli*, chap. 25.
35. Ibid., 313–14.
36. Ibid., 318.
37. *Farlex Dictionary of Idioms* (2017), s.v. "for want of a nail," accessed 20 August 2020, <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/for+want+of+a+nail>. The proverb by an anonymous author means, "Due to a minor inconvenience or mishap, something much worse has happened." The full proverb is "For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the horse was lost. For want of a horse the rider was lost. For want of a rider the battle was lost. For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail."

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