

GOING PLACES

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GALLIPOLI PILGRIMS



There's a date in history and a place in Turkey that hold special significance for Kiwis. The date is a Sunday, early last century. And the place is a stretch of rugged coastline on the other side of the world.

On April 25, 1915, New Zealand and Australian soldiers plunged ashore onto what would become known as Anzac Cove. And the Battle for Gallipoli had begun ...

I don't know if Gallipoli's on your "bucket list", but I'd often dreamed of going there. And when the opportunity came to make a one-day pilgrimage to this World War One site, I didn't hesitate.

My grandfather survived the Great War (only to be stolen from his family by leukaemia, long before I came on the scene). His name was Frank, and I know him mainly through faded brown photos and three battered little war diaries which tell how he left his young bride 96 years ago, and marched off to serve in the trenches of France.

I've read enough about those appalling years to know something of the horror that awaited our 'boys-in-uniform' – on the Western Front *and* at Gallipoli. Shell-shocking gunfire. Flesh-ripping explosions. The screams of the dying and the stink of the dead. The mind-games, the mud, the rain and the rats.

My grandfather was in the thick of it – just like those bravehearts who walked into a hail of bullets at Anzac Cove. And as we approached Gallipoli, it all became chilling and real ...

We'd actually seen the place two days earlier. We'd sailed north through the islands of Greece and Turkey into the famous Dardanelles



IN HONOUR OF
THE SOLDIERS
OF THE
NEW ZEALAND
EXPEDITIONARY
FORCE
5TH AUGUST
1915

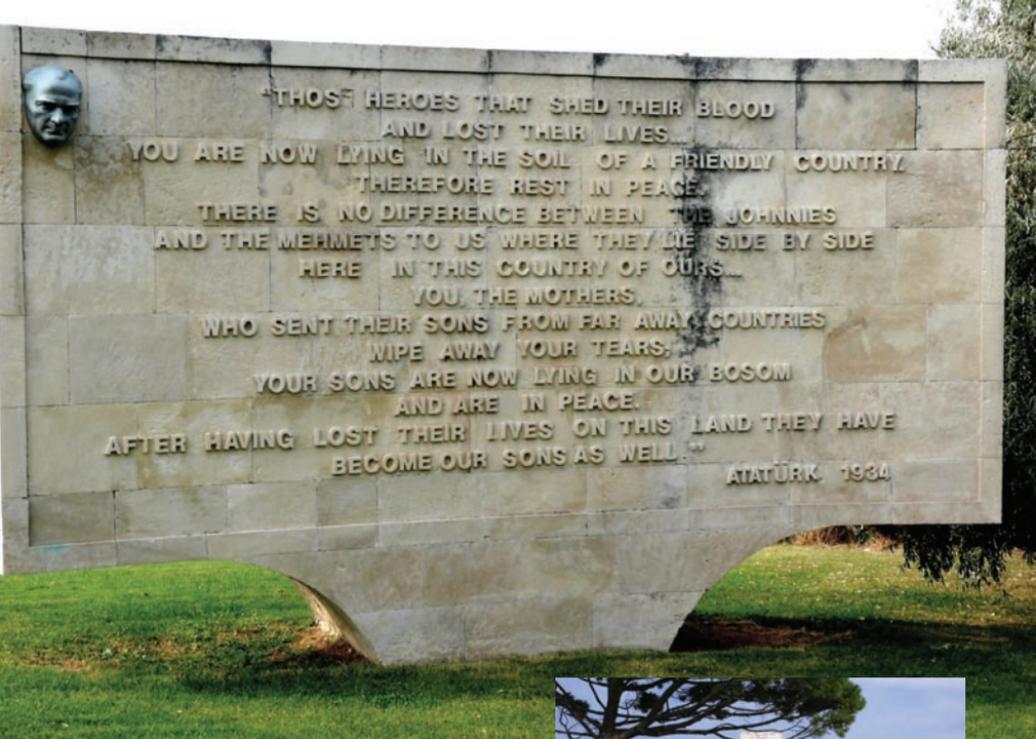
FROM THE LITTERMOST
ENDS OF THE EARTH

Straight. And, as we cruised slowly (and close-up) past those haunted beaches, we had an Anzac Service out on the back deck.

A big crowd (mainly Kiwis, Aussies and Brits) witnessed this moving memorial – which included readings, prayers, hymns, the playing of the Last Post and the dropping overboard of a wreath of red poppies.

We went to bed that night in the fabulous Turkish city of Istanbul (formerly Byzantium, then Constantinople) which featured large in several of the most glorious empires of all time. And we spent the next day poking our noses into ancient mosques, sultans' palaces, and crowded bazaars piled high with carpets, kebabs, ceramics and gold.

No kidding: it was like *'Tales of Arabian Nights'*!



Then we woke the following morning to the sound of *muezzin* calling the faithful to prayer from countless minarets. And, after loading bodies and bags onto a coach, we drove south out of Istanbul along the Sea of Marmara to the Gallipoli Peninsula – arriving eventually at the surprisingly-small, bush-clad area that draws pilgrims in their droves.

There's not much to see, but the names are all there: tiny Anzac Cove, where that fateful first-landing was made ... Chunuk Bair, the high ridge that was fought over so savagely ... Lone Pine, where Turkish trenches were taken at such an appalling price ... the memorial to Turkey's 57th Regiment, not one of whom survived ... monuments, flags and cemeteries all over the place ...



It was here, for eight brutal months, that Allied forces battled the Ottoman army for control of this strategic location – a campaign that ultimately failed, at enormous cost to both sides. Among the dead (officially 131,000, but likely way more) were 2721 Kiwi soldiers – roughly one quarter of the New Zealanders who fought here. And the gravestones of the fallen (so many just teenagers) seem to stretch forever.

The amazing mutual respect felt by soldiers on both sides is reflected in a bronze statue of a Turkish soldier carrying a wounded Australian. And the gracious words of Turkey's wartime leader, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), are especially poignant:

"Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives ... you are now living 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 in this country of ours ... You the mothers who sent their sons from faraway countries: wipe away your tears. Your sons are now living in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well."

It was a moving few hours for us Kiwis as we soaked up these stories and scenes. And, as we laid some Anzac poppies on the NZ Memorial, we were in a thoughtful, sober frame of mind.

It was hard not to think about the insanity of war. And it was hard not to feel proud of those young men, my grandfather included, who tried to make the world a safer place for their kids and grandkids.

We owe them – don't you reckon? ❀



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