Gallipoli: The Air War

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From the very beginning the Allies saw the potential value of aerial reconnaissance and artillery observation to the putative Royal Navy operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result HMS *Ark Royal*, a prototype aircraft carrier was sent out on 1 February 1915 which joined the fleet on 16 February.

The *Ark Royal* had been purchased whilst still a skeleton on the stocks in May 1914, and the intended merchantman had undergone a radical redesign. The superstructure, machinery and funnel were built to the aft, clearing the forward part of the ship for the aircraft. It has a strong claim to be the first purpose built aircraft carrier with an internal hangar inside the hull to house the aircraft, which were hoisted by cranes into the water ready for take off. The *Ark Royal* carried two Sopwith tabloid aeroplanes, with one Short, two Wight and three Sopwith Seaplanes. These were found to be woefully under-powered and were severely hampered by adverse weather conditions. Early seaplanes had great difficulty in taking off in anything but the calmest seas and the Mediterranean was lamentably uncooperative particularly when it was whipped up by the prevailing westerly winds. The seaplane engines were unreliable and their lack of power was translated into a disturbingly low ceiling of operations. The *Ark Royal* had also brought along two of the early Sterling wireless sets. These allowed pilots and observers to transmit messages to receiving sets carried on board ships. The extra weight of the Sterling wireless sets did not help the performance of the seaplanes. On 17 February only one of the four managed to get off, a Wight A 1 Seaplane flown by Flight Lieutenant G R Bromet and Flight Commander H A Williamson. They flew across the Straits, reconnoitred the Turkish forts from about 4,000 feet and even dropped a token 20lb bomb which hit the wall of one fort. They returned with seven bullet holes and reports on the entrance forts of Sedd el Bahr and Kum Kale

When the seaplanes managed to claw their way into the air their reconnaissance work was valuable in determining the layout of the various forts and, crucially, in determining the angles and areas that were covered by their guns. Their spotting work was hampered by a variety of problems with the wireless aerials, short circuits, low clouds, confusion in determining what ship was firing which shells, deliberate Turkish jamming of the wireless signals and due to their low flying altitude, harassing rifle fire.

These problems became apparent on 5 March, when they tried to supply aerial observation for the super dreadnought HMS *Queen Elizabeth* as she fired her colossal 15” shells right across the whole Gallipoli peninsula to drop into the Turkish forts from the rear. At 11.00, First Flight Lieutenant W H S Garnett and Flight Commander Williamson took off in their Sopwith Seaplane, but as they climbed to 3,000 feet their propeller fragmented and both suffered minor injuries when their seaplane crashed out of control into the sea. A replacement Sopwith then took off with Flight Lieutenant N Sholto Douglas and Flight Lieutenant E H Dunning. As

they were getting ready to observe the effect of the *Queen Elizabeth's* mighty shells from a height of just 3,000 feet, Sholto-Douglas was hit in the leg by a Turkish rifle bullet and had to return to the *Ark Royal* before anything of use had been achieved. A replacement pilot, Flight Lieutenant R H Kershaw, took over the controls and off they went again at 14.00. A few corrections to the fire were sent by wireless to the *Queen Elizabeth* but it was not long before they ceased fire due to bad light. Although several of the shells had crashed into the fort they had been unlucky as none of the Turkish guns were directly hit and the fighting strength of the fort was unaffected. On 6 March, further attempts to use the *Queen Elizabeth* firing from inside the Straits failed when the seaplanes failed to take off in choppy seas and a last attempt on 8 March failed as the low cloud made it a fruitless exercise.

During the next period the seaplanes concentrated on reconnaissance flights. The Turkish lines at Bulair were investigated, gun emplacements were identified, camps and concentrations of troops were reported. A further duty involved sweeping across the Dardanelles looking for evidence of minefields prior to the naval assault planned for 18 March. Previous experiments had been carried out on mines deliberately sunk at various controlled depths near the *Ark Royal* to test the visibility of mines from various heights, ranging from 1,000 feet to 3,000 feet depending on the time of day. The tests were successful and indeed many mines were subsequently sighted in the Straits between the actual Narrows and Kephez Bay. None however were sighted nearer the entrance where the British ships would be manoeuvring as they fired at the Turkish forts.

On 18 March the seaplanes took off every hour to report on the effects of the British and French naval bombardment on the Turkish forts. They accurately reported the damage to the forts, the fact that some were no longer manned and the declining rate of return fire. It was difficult, however, to determine whether these effects were permanent and whether the actual guns had been destroyed. Furthermore, although they also reported the fire of mobile howitzers it was extremely difficult to pin down their location in the hills and gullies that led down to the Straits. In the end it was irrelevant as a minefield laid overnight in Eren Keui Bay caused crippling losses and forced the Allied Fleet to retire defeated.

Reinforcements were evidently needed and 3 Squadron, Royal Naval Air Service were sent out to arrive at Tenedos on 24 March. (See Brad Kings's PDF File attached article) Commanded by the irrepressible Commander Charles Samson, they flew a variety of aircraft including Henri Farmans, Maurice Farmans and BE2s from their base ashore at Tenedos. They made their first flight on 28 March and had a serious reconnaissance role in preparing for the landings that were now essential after the failure of 18 March. The possible landing beaches around the Gallipoli Peninsula and Kum Kale on the Asiatic side of the Straits were surveyed and the detailed reports were supplemented by aerial photographs taken by Flight Lieutenant C H Butler. Turkish defensive arrangements were obviously of the greatest interest and their burgeoning preparations were logged on a daily basis. The area inland was examined as far as possible and at least some corrections to the inaccurate maps were possible. However, the ground in places was just too complicated to get a clear picture from

the air and the photographs could not resolve the confusion. Whenever they got the chance, the aircraft bombed the Turkish camps and batteries. The aircraft also took over the role of correcting the naval fire on the identified Turkish batteries.

Meanwhile between 31 March and 17 April, the *Ark Royal* sailed off to cover the more distant coastlines in the Gulfs of Adramyti, Smyrna, Enos and Xeros with the aim of misleading the Turks as to where the landings were intended.

A third element of the aerial forces amassing in the Eastern Mediterranean was HMS *Manica*. This former cargo vessel had been purchased in March 1915 and rapidly converted into a kite balloon ship specifically designed for the aerial observation of gunfire. The *Manica* arrived at Mudros on 9 April and first spotted for a shore bombardment carried out by HMS *Bacchante* on 19 April.

> *The enemy were not aware of the presence of a balloon ship and had taken no special precautions against being overlooked. The consequence was that when Manica put up her balloon, the first sight which greeted the observers was a sleeping camp, neatly arranged in a dip in the ground, out of sight of Bacchante but within easy range of her guns. Through their excellent field glasses they could see an occasional dot moving about but for the most part the camp was not yet astir. If there were sentries, they doubtless regarded the distant balloon hanging in the sky as a harmless form of amusement for the jaded English and saw no connection between it and the long guns of the Bacchante that were nuzzling round towards them. But the boom of the cruiser's forward turret opened their eyes and a rude awakening followed when the top of a hillock some 100 yards beyond the camp was hurled into the air. No reveille ever blown commanded so instant a response. Every tent burst into life and the ground was soon swarming with running specks. A second shot burst on the northernmost fringe of the camp and a third right in the midst of the tents. Bacchante had the range to a nicety and began to fire salvoes of 6-inch. A scene of indescribable confusion followed. Tents were rent to pieces and flung into the air, dust sprouted in huge fans and columns, and brightly through the reek could be seen the flashes of the bursting shells. Like ants from an overturned nest, the little brown dots swarmed and scattered. Across the plain galloped a few terrified mules and in an incredible short time the wreckage was complete. Of the once orderly camp nothing remained but torn earth and twisted canvas, no movement was to be seen*[1] Squadron Commander John Mackworth, HMS Manica

The beauty of the kite balloon was ability to stay in the air for as long as the gunners required. They provided a steady platform for observation, communication back to the guns was impeccable and they were not dogged by the mechanical vagaries of the unreliable seaplanes.

Throughout this period there was little or no sign of any Turkish or German aircraft. The only airfield located was at Chanak, and this was badly damaged in a concerted attack on 18 April when six 100lb bombs destroyed the main hangar and the German aircraft it contained.

On 25 April the aeroplanes were responsible for covering the landings at Helles and Kum Kale whilst the *Ark Royal* and *Manica* were stationed off what was to be known as Anzac. The No 3 Squadron RNAS aircraft were in the air almost continuously with the intention of spotting the fall of shot for the close inshore naval bombardments of the Turkish beach defences. Unfortunately the naval ships were too overwhelmed with the targets they could spot themselves to pay any attention to the wireless messages from above. As Commander Charles Samson flew in a Maurice Farman above W Beach he had a unique perspective of human courage in adversity.

> *Just before the tows were slipped the Turks started firing and I saw Hell let loose. The sea was literally whipped into a foam by the hail of bullets and small shells, It seemed practically impossible that the boats could get in through that tornado of fire; but still they came on and we saw the troops jump out and reach the beach. I saw the men fall the moment they reached the shore ; but others charged, some going straight ahead up the slope, others making for the cliffs on the left flank. I didn't see much more, as our principal job was to find the Turks in order to signal their position to the ships. They were not easy to find; but we located some Turks and guns quite close to the beach. Osmond signalled their position; but the ships disregarded our message and kept their fire to far inland…. My next glance at the beach showed it covered with bodies of our dead; but I could see that the landing had been mad e good.*[2] Commander Charles Samson, 3 Squadron, RNAS

Shortly after they returned to Tenedos. As they did so, they passed above the disaster of V Beach.

> *I could see the landing was held up. The* River Clyde *was fast ashore; but the lighters ahead of her were not in the right position, apparently and gaps occurred. These lighters were full of corpses; the beach and the water close to the shore were strewn with bodies. It was an appalling sight for us to look down at from our safe position in the air. … The sea for a distance of about 50 yards from the beach was absolutely red with blood, a horrible sight to sea.*[3]
> Commander Charles Samson, 3 Squadron, RNAS

Meanwhile, off Anzac, the observer in the *Manica* kite balloon carried out a marathon stint aloft from 05.21 to 14.00 watching over the right flank of Anzac in cooperation with HMS *Triumph*. When the Anzac transports were twice harassed by the cross-peninsula salvos of the Turkish pre-dreadnought battleship *Turgud Reis* stationed in the Narrows. Alert to the danger, the balloon observer brought down counter-fire from the 12" shells of the *Triumph* which soon forced the *Turgud Reis* to move away. The seaplanes were less effective and

found it almost impossible to locate the Turkish positions and batteries in the tangled countryside. However, it was noticed that when they were in the air the Turkish gunners were naturally chary of opening fire. This in itself was a boon to the suffering Australian infantry as they fought their way inland.

Once the troops were established ashore at Helles and Anzac the aerial operations swiftly settled into a pattern. Their roles had been clearly defined.

The reconnaissance information provided by the RNAS continued to be invaluable to GHQ. One significant early example was the intelligence provided by Flight Commander R L G Marix of the arrival of another Turkish Division at the port of Ak Bashi Liman on 17th May. This was confirmed by Samson who also bombed the port that day and caused considerable panic amongst the troops. As a result of these reports GHQ realised that the Turks planned a major infantry attack at Anzac and warnings were issued on 18th May. Thus the 'Surprise' Turkish night attack of 19th May was repulsed with terrible losses to the Turks when in other circumstances it might well have succeeded. Later in the campaign air reconnaissance also provided the largely accurate reports of the Turkish forces and dispositions at Suvla before the landing. In the days that followed they monitored the movements of the Turkish reserves as they approached the crucial heights that surrounded the new landing area. Unfortunately intelligence is of no use if it is not used and the advantages created by Hamilton's bold August offensive were frittered away as his subordinate generals failed to realise the necessity for speed and determination if they were to achieve their objectives.

Although the early aerial photographs had been blurred, as the aerial cameras rapidly improved the peninsula gradually came into focus and a photographic map of the battlefields was created. Although photographic interpretation was in its infancy, much useful information could still be gained that helped explain the tangled topography and revealed at least some of the Turkish dispositions and defence works.

The kite balloons of the *Manica* continued to be a thorn in the flesh of the Turks. Turkish batteries were destroyed, harassed and forced to move; new Turkish entrenchments were blasted to pieces almost as soon as they had been dug; transports unwise enough to show themselves within range of the naval guns firing across the Straits were pursued and even in one case sunk by indirect fire at a range of seven miles. The *Manica* was joined by HMS *Hector* in July 1915 and the two kite balloon ships continued to perform yeoman service off the coast of Gallipoli.

Samson's squadron had been renamed 3 Wing and based at Imbros on 4 August where they were joined later that month by 2 Wing. The two Wings were placed under the overall command of Colonel Frederick Sykes. The quality of aircraft improved with Morane Parasols, BE2 Cs, Bristol Scout and even a couple of the nimble Nieuport 11 Scouts. Given the state of signalling technology in 1915, spotting for the naval guns continued to be a largely thankless task for the aircraft and seaplanes.

> *Spotting you had to do in a two seater. You had to have an observer. We had a wireless telegraph transmitter, it could transmit in code. You had to keep coming back towards the ship every now and then because she laid out strip signals on the deck to tell you when she'd finished and you could go home. I used to fly circles round the target and then fly an extended sweep round over the ship to see if she'd laid out anything. On one occasion instead of flying a big circle round the ship I did a figure of eight and crossed the line of fire. I wasn't high enough above because a 15" shell passing underneath me created such a disturbance that my machine went down like a stone, I think I dropped five hundred feet.*[4] Flight Sub Lieutenant Donald Bremner, 2nd Wing, RNAS

Different signalling systems were tried but most failed and many pilots became excessively frustrated as flight after flight ended with nothing tangible achieved.

> *Captain Collett he was going round and round in circles over the top there. He didn't dare go to high or he'd have got in the way of the shells. He was firing Verey Lights to indicate where the shells were going. Green was right on target, red was too far and so on. After about two hours he came down. He said, "The Navy don't like us, they're not taking a damn bit of notice of me at all.* [5] Leading Aircraftman Arthur Beeton, 3 Sqdn RNAS

The mood of the pilots was not helped when the infantry, for whom all this effort was being expended, took it upon themselves to join in the fray in an absolutely indiscriminate fashion. All aircraft were treated as nothing more than a jolly interesting target. .

> *We did once see an aircraft and I think everybody fired at it. I don't think anybody knew whether it was Turkish or English. It was such an extraordinary sight that people seemed to think it was the thing to shot at. I think they treated it as a joke!*[6] 2nd Lieutenant Malcolm Hancock, 1/4th Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment

As Turkish and German aircraft began to appear in small numbers above the Peninsula from June onwards it became essential to try and prevent them observing the details of the British positions and offensive intentions. Regular ‘scout’ patrols were undertaken and the first decisive aerial combat occurred on 22 June when a German aircraft was shot down by a Voisin from 3 Wing flown by Captain C H Collett. His observer R E T Hogg, who was only armed with a rifle, had great good fortune as he hit the German aircraft in some vital point of the engine. It was forced to land near the looming mass of Achi Baba. The French artillery were quick on the uptake and soon destroyed what remained of the aircraft.

Bombing operations were also undertaken and given the concentrated nature of the Gallipoli campaign targets were numerous not far behind the front lines. Concentrations of troops, gun batteries and camps were all relentlessly bombed by the British pilots. The Turkish lines of communication were vulnerable and crucial facilities such as railway junctions, bridges, port

installations and troop transport ships were all attacked. Although the bomb loads were tiny from any modern perspective, they could still cause considerable damage and panic when they hit their targets. This was amply demonstrated when Turkish and German aircraft also began to bomb any visible Allied concentrations of troops and facilities. The British troops certainly did not appreciate the arrival of this aerial threat that was, of course, completely new to them.

> *I've quite decided (since this morning) that the worst one of all is the sinister swish of an aeroplane bomb coming down. You feel such a "fearful ass" (in every sense of the word). You can't do anything and there's nowhere to go and no time to get there if there was. Everyone shouts "Bomb Coming" which is a peculiarly fatuous remark.*[7] Major Norman Burge

One young officer had a rather terrible glimpse into the future.

> *The effect of these aerial bombs is much more stupefying than an ordinary shell, as you can see them coming, without the slightest chance of getting out of their way. I cannot imagine why every nation does not possess hundreds of them.*[8] Lieutenant Frank Howitt

One German aircraft launched an attack on a British aircraft that had been forced to land on the emergency landing ground that 3 Squadron, RNAS had constructed behind W Beach.

> *I was checking the valves of one of the BE2Cs that had landed. A Turkish plane came up over the peak of the peninsula and dropped a bomb. He dropped a second one and it was half way between that one and me. I thought well if he's got a third he's here! So I ran like hell of the dugouts. I couldn't get there and I heard this dammed thing coming so I dived into this hole in the ground. Someone collapsed on top of me with maps and that - it was a brigadier. He said, 'I had that hole dug for me', I said, 'Sorry Sir'* [9] Leading Aircraftman Arthur Beeton, 3 Sqdn RNAS

Ironically the Turkish aircraft also used one of the oldest weapons of war.

> *There was an aircraft came over and dropped two boxes of aerial darts rather like cross bow arrows, steel, about a foot long. It pinned through men on the floor, pinned through horses, screams of agony, some were killed some weren't.*[10] Private Edward Robinson

These flechettes were also used to strike at General Sir Ian Hamilton's headquarters at Imbros.

> *One morning at shaving time a Boche aeroplane came over and we didn't take all that much notice of him. Suddenly our sergeant major ran out of his tent*

> *shouting, "Bombs, spears, darts, arrows". True enough this chap had thrown over steel arrows that were falling all over the place and also a bomb. Nowadays it would be laughed at but in those days appeared to be and enormous bomb and it had landed reasonably close to Sir Ian Hamilton's tent.*[11] Corporal Richard Cook, Surrey Yeomanry

However the Turks could show a sporting side to their natures as was demonstrated when an aircraft appeared above the RNAS headquarters at Tenedos.

> *In the afternoon we had a football match officers versus men. The next day you could see all the officers limping. A Turk plane came over in the middle of the match. I was in goal and I was watching this damn Turk going round and round over the pitch. I thought is he going to drop his bombs or what. No! He went across to the sand dunes and dropped them out of the way. A proper gentleman he was.* [12] Leading Aircraftman Arthur Beeton, 3 Sqdn RNAS

A second aircraft carrier HMS *Ben-my-Chree* arrived to replace HMS *Ark Royal* in June. It was decided to use the increasingly powerful and reliable seaplanes to try and interrupt Turkish sea communications through the Mamora. Australian and British submarines had already met with some success in sinking transports but it was decided to try the feasibility of launching torpedoes from the air. On 12th August, a Short seaplane armed with a torpedo and piloted by Flight Commander Charles Edmonds was sent on a mission over the Sea of Mamora. Edmonds sighted a Turkish steamer amidst a group of sailing ships and a tug.

> *I glided down and fired my torpedo at the steamer from a height of about 14 feet and range of some 300 yards, with the sun astern of me. I noticed some flashes from the tug ... so presumed she was firing at me and therefore kept on a westerly course, climbing rapidly. Looking back, I observed the track of the torpedo, which struck the ship abreast the mainmast, the starboard side. The explosion sent a column of water and large fragments of the ship almost as high as her masthead. The ship was about 5,000 tons displacement, painted black, with one funnel and four masts. She was lying close to the land, so cannot sink very far, but the force of the explosion was such that it is impossible for her to be of further use to the enemy.*[13] Flight Commander Charles Edmonds, HMS Ben-my-Chree, RNAS

Although it is now considered that in fact this ship may already have been sunk by the submarine E14, the implications of this first aerial torpedo attack on a ship were still considerable - especially as Edmonds and another pilot Flight Lieutenant G B Dacre claimed similar successes five days later. The torpedoes could have been a lethal threat to the Turkish sea lanes, but it was soon discovered that the weight of the 14" torpedoes meant that the Short Seaplane could only get them into the air given a perfect combination of calm seas, light breezes and an engine running to its absolute limits. The torpedo carrying aircraft was a weapon for the future…

In October, Bulgaria entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. Their successful invasion of Serbia had the effect of re-opening the possibility of a continuous railway line from Berlin to Constantinople which would allow the free flow of munitions and the heavy artillery pieces which threatened to blast the Allies from their shallow beachheads. It was therefore considered imperative to try and sever this link. In November several bombing raids were launched attacking the railway line at vulnerable points. These raids involved a flight of some 200 miles for the aircraft from Imbros, while *Ben-My Chree* could sail to within 120 miles of the target. This was a long flight for the seaplanes and aircraft further encumbered by the weight of the two 112lb bombs that each carried on the missions. They did cause damage to the bridge piers, embankments, permanent way, junctions and stations along the line, but it added to little more than an inconvenience to the Bulgarians and Turks.

The campaign was effectively doomed after the failure of the August offensive, but aerial operations carried on right up until the last day. It remained crucial to deny Turkish or German aircraft any chance to examine exactly what was going on behind the Allied lines, particularly once the evacuation preparations had begun. This screening role was made more difficult following the arrival over Gallipoli of the dreaded Fokker Monoplanes. Flight Sub Lieutenant Bremner and his Observer Midshipman H E Burnaby were easy meat in their two seaster Voisin.

> *On one occasion I'd been spotting and my observer wanted to see something a bit further up the Peninsula. Suddenly I found this Fokker behind me. I only had the Lewis gun which my observer could fire forwards and downwards, he tried to get it to bear but couldn't. I had several bursts at me from behind and then made off. I tried to see where he was going but found my engine revs were dropping, he'd put bullet holes through most of the cylinders. The engine revs were dropping rapidly so I couldn't get home so I landed on the emergency aerodrome on the Peninsula. I cleared the front line trenches by about six feet and just popped down on the aerodrome. They'd got a dugout there, which was really a slot in the side of the hill, which would just take an aeroplane and would prevent direct hits. As soon as I landed the mechanics rushed out and pushed me in there. I tried to destroy the machine, but they wouldn't let me set fire to it because they were evacuating that night. They didn't want any fire occurring that might have indicated that we were destroying stores and were about to leave. I was sent down to W Beach and went onto a lighter. I sat there from about 6 o'clock that evening, till about one o'clock the following morning. I embarked on SS* Partridge *which was the second last ship to leave the Peninsula.* [14] Flight Sub Lieutenant Donald Bremner, 2nd Wing, RNAS

The RNAS continued their valuable work in the Eastern Mediterranean and over the new Salonika battlefields but the Gallipoli Campaign was over. It had been a strange aerial campaign. Never before or since had seaplanes to work so continuously over land and perversely never again would aircraft spend so much time operating above the waves. Yet

despite all the difficulties the fledgling Royal Naval Air Service had earned its wings amidst the overall failure of the campaign.

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1. J D Mackworth, 'The First Naval Kite Balloon', (London: Blackwood's Magazine, 1927) April

[2] C R Samson, 'Fights and Flights', (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1990) pp233-234

[3] C R Samson, 'Fights and Flights', (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1990) pp234-335

[4] Bremner, IWM SR 4

5. Beeton, IWM SR 8323.

6. Hancock, IWM SR 7396.

7. Burge, IWM DOCS, letter dated 22nd June 1915.

8. Howitt, IWM DOCS, diary, 18th August 1915.

9. Beeton, IWM SR 8323.

10. Edward Robinson, IWM SR 10733

11. Robert Cook, IWM SR 7397.

12. Beeton, IWM SR 8323.

13. Roskill, *Documents Relating to the Naval Air Service*, I, p222.

[14] Bremner, IWM SR 4