

ALFRED EDWARD SYSON - PART 3 - HISTORY RELATED TO HIS SERVICE IN GALLIPOLI IN 1915



DEPLOYMENT TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

On 6 Feb 1915, Brigade HQ, and the Chatham and Plymouth Battalions embarked for service in the Mediterranean and took part in the earlier (pre April 1915) day landings supporting the Naval Dardanelles operation.

The loading of the Battalions of the RM Brigade (both the 2 earlier Battalions and Portsmouth and Deal) were organised by the Headquarters of the Adjutant General RM and they each embarked as a complete Unit with officers, transport etc.



**RMS GLOUCESTER
CASTLE**

On 24 February 1915, Mabel records that the Colonel (Luard) sent for AES telling him that they were sailing on the GLOUCESTER CASTLE. On 27th she states that telegrams were received saying that AES wouldn't be leaving until 1 March and that AES and his Company left at 2 pm after an early lunch.



RM Officers embarking
for Gallipoli, not
Portsmouth Bn though

The Embarkation for Gallipoli.
Left to Right—Capt. B. King, Major Wain, Major Overton, Lieut. Free,
Capt. Hurst, Capt. Guthrie, Lieut. Gibbs, Lieut. Murchison, Lieut. Deans.

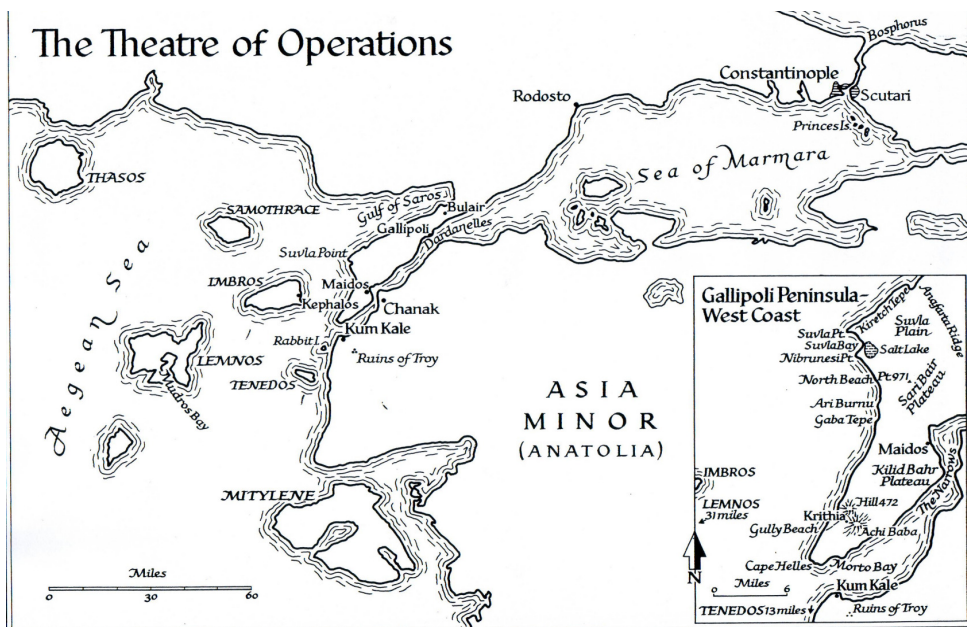
The embarkation of the Portsmouth and Deal Battalions on 1 March or so was for possible service on the Rufiji River in East Africa, with the Portsmouth Battalion embarking in the GLOUCESTER CASTLE at Portsmouth. However they were diverted for use at Gallipoli. These 2 Battalions together with 5 Naval Battalions left from Avonmouth on and assembled at Lemnos early in March (See Map One, page 3). There they practised landing, boat pulling and a certain amount of manoeuvres before moving to Port Said where the whole RN Division was under canvas for 10 days. There they suffered from sand and locusts but got in some useful training. The Division was inspected by the C-in-C, General Hamilton, on 3 April and he was particularly pleased with the RM Brigade. After that the Division re-embarked, looked in at Lemnos, which was full of transports and warships, and then went to Skyros where they made one or two practice landings.

At this stage the principal officers of the Portsmouth Battalion were:

CO Lieutenant Colonel Luard
2 i/c Maj Hoskyns Abrahall
A Coy Capt Stockley
B Coy Major Armstrong
C Coy Captain Syson
D Coy Major Clark

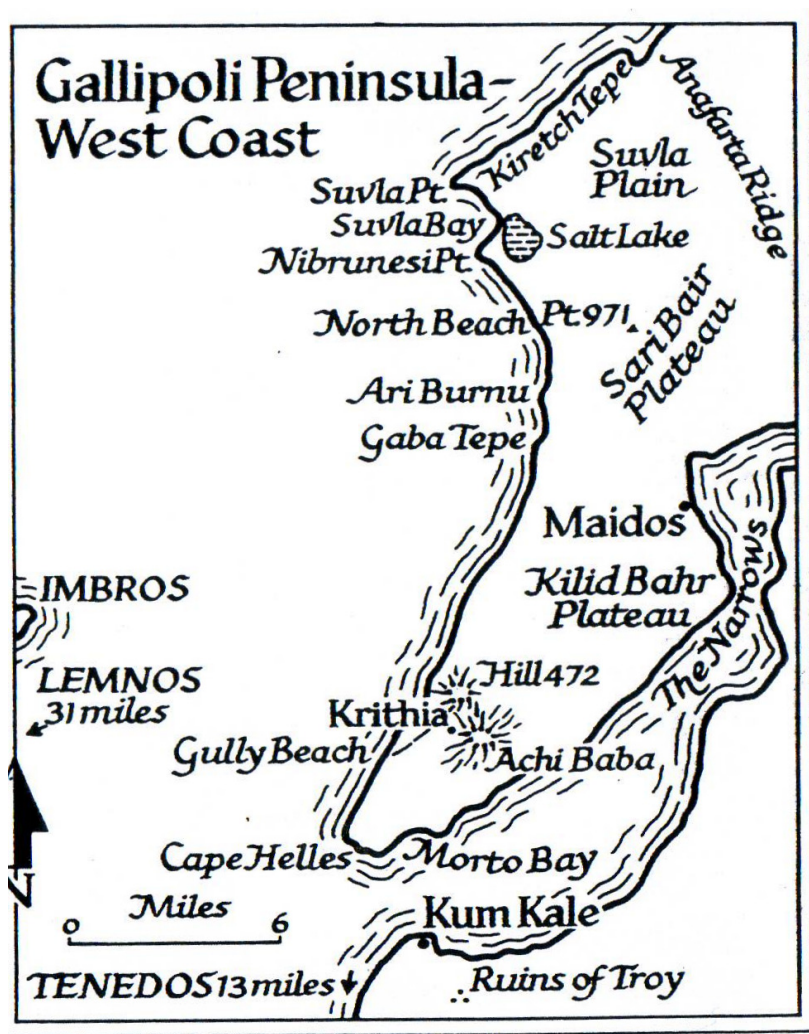


**AES and Captain
Stockley en route
to Gallipoli**



Map One

Map Two





Map Three

25 APRIL GALLIPOLI LANDINGS

The main landings at Gallipoli (Maps Two and Three - above) took place on and before first light on 25 April at Cape Helles by 29 Division (plus some others) and at ANZAC by the ANZAC Corps (comprising 1 Aus Div and the Aus and NZ Div). The ANZAC Area is shown on Map Two as Ari Burnu/Garba Tepe. Plymouth Battalion landed on 25 April in the Cape Helles area at Y Beach. The remainder of the Division appear to have been in reserve.

AES's ship took part in a diversion steaming up to the Suvla Bay area, but without landing.

The ANZAC Corps had had a very difficult time on landing. They ended up a mile further North (see Map Four page 6) than had been intended on a very small beach (Anzac Cove) with a very steep hillside. They initially advanced quite far but were then driven back after Mustafa Kemal's Division had counterattacked. By 28 April (see Map Five) they were holding a small triangular area, from about 2,000 yards South of Anzac Cove thence NNE along Pine (Second) Ridge to the Western side of Lone Pine Plateau, thence through Courtney's and Quinns Posts to within 500 yards of a hill called Baby 700. From there the line was not continuous, because of the broken terrain and Turkish snipers. A better established line then ran West from Russell's Top starting at a point 400 yards short of the Nek, running along Walker's Ridge to the sea.

The landing a mile too far to the North is generally blamed on poor Naval navigation going ashore and a Northerly set of the stream, which had not been anticipated. Certainly Brighton Beach was better and wider than ANZAC. However my Turkish guide to the Gallipoli Beaches, suggested that the beach change was intentional not an error. The reason being that the Southerly beach (Brighton) was overlooked from the Turkish position at Gaba Tepe, which could have fired directly into the landing area.

RM LANDING AT ANZAC

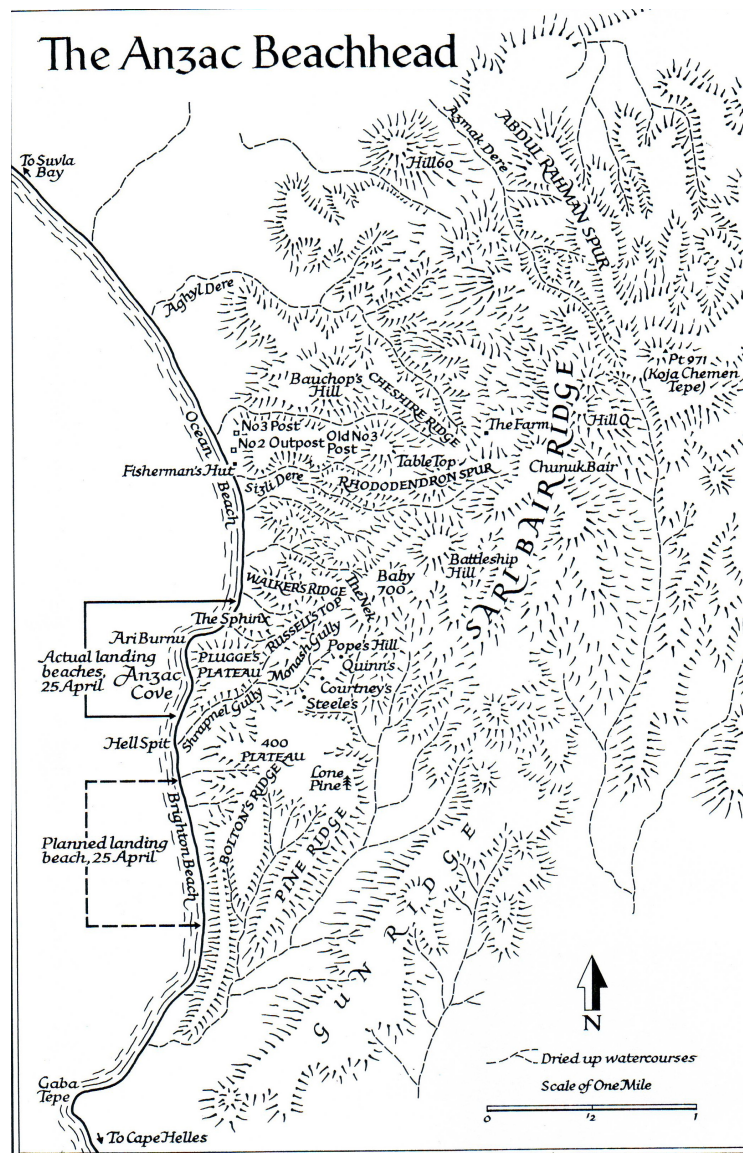
Because of the problems encountered by the ANZAC Corps, 4 Battalions of the RN Division under the command of Brigadier Trotman, Commander of the RM Brigade, were landed to support the Australians and allow them to reorganise. Brigade HQ, Chatham and Portsmouth Battalions with Number 1 Field Coy (RE), and the Bearer Div of 3 Field Ambulance landed at ANZAC Cove on 28 April, with the landing completed by 2000. The landing was planned to last 48 hours so they took no stores and no kits, but in fact they were ashore for 14 days. Portsmouth Battalion was the first to land.

The brigade was put under the command of Gen Bridges, GOC 1 Australian Div. They were ordered to take over Number 2 Sector of the Defence to relieve 1 and 2 Australian Brigades on Mclaurin's Hill and the Northern Part of Lone Pine Ridge.



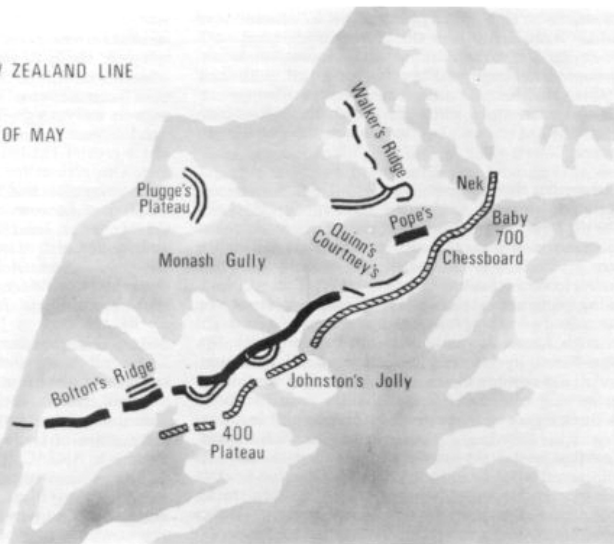
ANZAC Beach from
the sea

Map Four



ANZAC THEATRE

BRITISH/AUSTRALIAN/NEW ZEALAND LINE
 — END OF APRIL
 — END OF MAY
 --- TURKISH LINE END OF MAY



Map Five



Looking North
along ANZAC
Beach in 2009



Looking South
along ANZAC
Beach in 2009



Three images of ANZAC
Beach, date not known
but probably later than
April/May 1915



Troops landing at
ANZAC Beach by
pulling cutters



Looking down on
ANZAC Beach



Picture of a Gallipoli
Beach, not necessarily
at ANZAC

During Syson's time ashore from 28 April to 6 May when he was wounded he was involved in 3 separate operations:

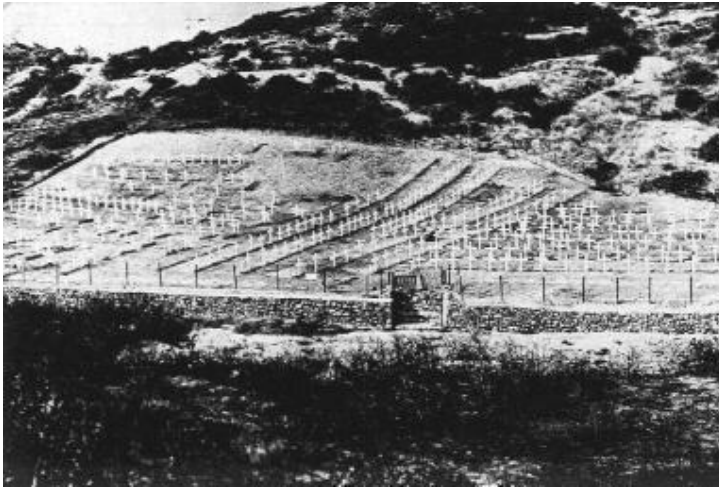
- Holding the line at the Western edge of Lone Pine Plateau from 29 April to 2 May
- The 3 May attack up Monash Valley and holding the ground at the top
- Holding Number 3 Sector – Pope's Hill on the left, Quinns in the centre and Courtneys on the right from 3 May to 6 May.

PHASE ONE – 29 APRIL to 2 MAY

Initially only Portsmouth and Chatham Battalions and Brigade HQ landed. Once ashore they were taken up Shrapnel Valley to a well defined ridge (See Map Six page 13). Their Australian guide led them up but lost his way, so at one stage they had to retrace their steps. They would have had to take a right fork from Shrapnel and then go up Bridges Road. To get to Lone Pine Plateau they would then have had to go right again up a very steep path. The relief of the Australians was complete by 0400.



Shrapnel valley cemetery today,
from where the advance to Lone
Pine started



Shrapnel Valley Cemetery
shortly after the end of the
First World War



Looking from the
Shrapnel Cemetery up
Shrapnel Valley, up
which AES took his
Company on the night
28/29 April



Looking down the hill up
which AES and his
company scrambled on
the night of 28/29 April.
4th Bn Parade Ground
cemetery is at the top
left

The two Battalions deployed with Chatham on the left (North) and Portsmouth on the right. Presumably Chatham were on McLaurin's and Portsmouth on the North side of Lone Pine Plateau. At this time it would appear that most of Lone Pine was held by the Turks with the Commonwealth troops holding only the Western edge. Because of lack of troops, the RM Brigade couldn't relieve all the Australians and 9 and 12 Aus Battalions remained in the centre trenches, presumably between the 2 RM Battalions.

Chatham Battalion had C, A, B and D Coys in line from left to right with the Machine Gun (MG) sections either side of B Company and Battalion HQ behind B Coy. Portsmouth were in the same formation, but whether that means that Syson's Company were on the extreme left (north) of the Battalion I am not sure.

It is very difficult to work out, either from a map or on the ground where AES's Company or Portsmouth Battalion were during this first Phase. On the ground it is made more difficult because there is a huge Memorial on Lone Pine Plateau. The book "Sea Soldiers" says that the Brigade occupied McLaurin's Hill and the North side of Lone Pine Plateau. But the general histories make it clear that the Turks held Lone Pine from shortly after the initial landings on 25 April till August. Hence my assumption that AES' Battalion was holding the just the Western edge of Lone Pine.



Lone Pine
Memorial

For Chatham Battalion it is a bit easier because we know that they were attacked up Wire Gully by the Turks. Wire Gully is marked on the map at the South end of McLaurin's Hill.

So as far as I can make out the line wound its way North from the Western side of Lone Pine Plateau, then to the West of Johnson's Jolly which was in Turkish hands, then up McLaurins Hill to Courtneys and Quinns. Courtneys and Quinns were positions on the Western edge of the flatter ground, immediately east of Monash Gully.

During 29 April, the Battalions (Portsmouth and Chatham) were occupied in improving the trenches and they were also subjected to small attacks all along the front line. The trenches were pretty poor at this stage, just shallow scrapings. Some had reasonable fields of fire up to 400 yards, in others no field of fire. Some of the trenches were only a few feet from the edge of the slope (presumably to the west down behind them to Bridges Road etc). The trenches were quite isolated with 30 or 40 yards of open ground between them and under accurate and close range fire.

Remains of a
Trench line on the
Commonwealth
side in the area to
the North of Long
Pine, near Wire
Gully



Rebuilt trench on
the Turkish side



Map Six

Legend:

- Probable advance of Ports Bn (Green line)
- Approx Front Line (Red line)
- Bn posns (Blue ovals)

Key locations and features on the map:

- ANZAC COVE
- RM Bde landing 28 Apr
- Deal Bn from 30 April
- Chatham Bn
- Ports Bn
- Russell's Top
- The Sphinx
- Courtney's Post
- Dead Man's Field
- Lonesome Pine
- Plateau 400
- Phillips Top
- White Valley
- McKay's Hill
- Dawkins Point
- Clarke Valley
- Hell Green
- Sapper's Post
- Bolton's Hill
- Point Rosenthal
- Snipers Ridge
- Surprise Gully
- Weir Ridge
- Wanless Gully
- Legge
- Brighton Beach

On 29 April at about 2000, Brigadier Mercer with HQ 1 RN Brigade and the Deal and Nelson Battalions landed. Nelson Bn went into reserve, but Deal Bn went up into the line South of Portsmouth. Three Companies (D, A and B) went up Victoria Gully (400 yards South of Shrapnel Valley) and C Company went up Wantiss Gulley (further South again). By 0330 on the 30th they had relieved the Australians holding the southern part of the Western edge of Lone Pine Plateau

By the night of 29/30th, most of the Australians had been relieved at which time the Brigade had taken over the positions:

- Chatham and Portsmouth in positions formerly held by the 3 Aus Bde on McLaurins Hill (including the important position of Courtneys Post) and that of 19 Bn on the western edge of the north part of Lone Pine Plateau. If the positions include both McLaurins to the North and Lone Pine to the South, they must also have been on the Western edge of the Johnston's Jolly Plateau as well. My guess is that C Coy's position was somewhere along the western edge of Johnstone's Jolly.
- Deal Battalion holding the South part of Lone Pine
- General Trotman's Bde HQ was at Scotts Point, which is at the head of Bridges Road on the saddle between Bridges Road (held by Commonwealth troops) and Wire Gulley on the Eastern side, held by the Turks. However this may not be accurate as it looks awfully close to the front line.

The ground held by the RMLI included half the Eastern front at ANZAC and was too long for those Battalions. They worked hard at improving their trenches, but those on the plateau were under heavy shellfire and little improvement was possible. "Sea Soldiers" says that the ground in front of Deal fell away into hollows and ravines in which the Turks had formed for their attacks about 100 yards in front of the British lines. Note that this is a bit difficult to understand if they held just the western side of the plateau, unless they faced south west as well.

Turkish Attacks during the period Friday 30^h April to 2 May

On 30th the Turks, who had massed in Wire Gully, renewed their attack and pressure from Courtneys Post to the South became very great. The 14 Aus Bn had to take over Courtney's Post from the RM Bde and the RM supports were brought up. It was found that the trenches at the head of Wire Gully could not be occupied because of Turkish Machine Gun fire.

At 1700, an attack was made on Chatham Bn and part of B coy were driven out of its trenches, but they held on to the edge of the slope. B Coy was one from the South, so this may have been in the area of Scotts Point, if the Turks had advanced up Wire Gully. The Company Commanderd was killed trying to retake the position, but a Major Graham, whose D Coy was now in reserve, saw what was happening and got his people up the "Rifle Sling" pathway to reinforce. The position was then retaken. D Coy had been relieved earlier in the afternoon, which is why they were in reserve.

Two of the Platoons of C Coy (AES Coy) of Portsmouth Bn amounting to about 60 men, were holding one of the isolated trench on the Lone Pine Plateau, which they did with the greatest gallantry. The Platoon Commanders were Lts Empson and Alcock. Empson was in overall command of the 2 platoons. The platoons held their trenches for 4 nights and 3 days (presumably the nights of 29, 30 March, 1 and 2 April) during which time they received no food or water, before eventually withdrawing. Empson was wounded early on the 30th and was killed the next day. Alcock was awarded the DSC. The position was apparently in front of Chatham Bn (which seems a bit strange) and was 400 yards in front of the other trenches and without a communication trench. Perhaps it was on the Northern side of Johnstone's

Jolly overlooking Wire Gully, with Chatham on McLaurin's. This does though reinforce that probably C Coy were the Northerly of the Portsmouth Bn Coys.



Lance Corporal Parker VC

It was in this same area, also in AES company area, that Lance Corporal Walter Parker of Portsmouth Bn won the first RM VC of the war. Parker was a Battalion Stretcher Bearer. On the night of 30 April/1 May the Platoons commanded by Empson requested water, ammunition and medical stores. AES detailed a party of NCOs and Privates to take forward water and Small Arms Ammunition. Parker volunteered to join them with Medical Stores. The party had to advance the 400 yards to the Platoon position. By the time that they emerged it was already daylight and of the party only Parker reached the platoon position, the remainder being killed or wounded. Parker remained with the Platoons for the next 2 days giving medical support to the wounded, despite the fact that he himself had been wounded. He eventually withdrew with the remainder of the Platoons on 2 May.

On Saturday 1 May the Turks attacked again at about 0400, but this was broken up by fire. Another attack was made at 1600 along the front of Quinns Post and Lone Pine Trenches. The attack came across Johnstone's Jolly (probably South to North) and 1000 Turks attacked Chatham Bn, who opened rifle and MG fire and broke up the attack when about 200 yards off and by 1800 the enemy had retired.

On the night of 1/2 May, Lt Col Bendyshe CO of the Deal Battalion was killed while going round the trenches.

At 0100 on Sunday 2 May, the Turks attacked as soon as the moon rose. The attack swept past the left of the Australian's on Bolton's Hill and then attacked Deal Battalion. At 0200, masses of the enemy were seen in front of D coy on the right of the Battalion. The Battalion withheld fire till they were close and only a few reached the parapet, where they were shot down. Attacks were also made on A and C Coy and they were able to enfilade the attack on Ports Bn

AES Description

Describing the overall period on 29, 30 and 1st, AES noted how difficult it was. Because of sniping and shelling neither the Brigadier nor the COs could see the area properly in daylight. They were constantly hearing of a trench full of Australians that needed to be relieved. Over the period 29, 30 and 1 they were constantly shelled from all sides and were subjected to rifle and MG fire, so couldn't improve their

trenches. The attacks came to within 60 yards, but never near enough to have to withdraw, as had happened to Chatham.

AES indicated that A and D companies suffered badly, especially in NCOs. He described the position as a broad horseshoe with a very irregular inside edge representing the tops of the various gullies they were holding (so on the edge of the higher ground). The open part of the horseshoe was the sea. The Turks were in gullies further on. The Turks could enfilade all the top parts of the horseshoe where the Marines were and in some cases almost bringing reverse fire to bear.

Relief by Aus Brigade

On the morning of Sun 2 May, the RM Brigade was relieved in the trenches by 1 Australian Brigade and the RM moved into bivouacs. The Deal Battalion went down to the beach at the bottom of Victoria Gully and were then ordered to dig trenches in Monash Valley.

Chatham and Portsmouth had sustained 337 casualties (about 15%) and Deal about 40

AES' description indicates that, just before daybreak on 2 May, when they were relieved by the Australians, Portsmouth went a little way back to funk holes on the hillside. These were probably on the side of Shrapnel Valley or Bridges Road.



Painting of Australian troops digging in and moving on an ANZAC hillside. The Portsmouth Bn Funk Holes must have been similar

PHASE TWO – ATTACK UP MONASH VALLEY ON 3 MAY AND HOLDING THE GROUND ON THE TOP

At 2000 on 2 May 4 Aus Bde made an attack on Pope's Hill at the head of Monash Valley (see Map Seven page 18). The Bde comprised 13 and 16 Bns, Otago Bn (NZ) with Nelson Bn in support. The attack met with only limited success. 13 had had to follow 16 Bn before deploying to their left, but this deployment was never completed. Only a couple of trench lines were taken. The attack developed into 3 isolated eccentric attacks: two Nelson Coys were involved to the left of 16 Bn. The Australians were holding on precariously to the edges of the slopes and in places were driven off the edge.

At 0200 on 3 May, the RM Bns were ordered to dig in behind 4 Aus Bde and support them at the head of the Monash Valley. They moved off at 0330 and proceeded to the head of the gully to support the Australians in the advanced trenches. Portsmouth moved along the Eastern Ridge and Chatham along the Western. The Battalions advanced in single file and were issued with picks and shovels as they advanced.

The Advance by Portsmouth Bn

Portsmouth had been ordered to entrench in the Australian support line. D Company (Maj Clark) led but on approaching the Support line, the trenches were observed to be crowded, D Coy were therefore ordered to move off to the right. A Coy (Captain Stockley) however passed through with entrenching tools.

As it got light, messages came from the front that they were in difficulties, but the CO of the Portsmouth Battalion's (Lt Col Luard) instructions were: clear to entrench in the support line on the side of the hill. So he decided to adhere to his orders and allotted areas to his Coys. Suddenly the men in the firing line were observed to be coming out of the trenches about 40 yards ahead and retiring into the ravine below. So despite the fact that only D and A were in sight, Luard ordered the Charge and the Marines at once charged up the slope, many of the Australians charging with them, thus probably averting a panic in the crowded ravine below. When 16 Bn were driven out of their trenches, they carried part of the Portsmouth Bn with them, but these were gallantly rallied by the Brigade Major (Festing) and led up again to the charge.

The Battalion were met by a withering fire of shrapnel and Machine Gun fire, which caused heavy casualties. Of those who reached the ridge, some advanced and gained the trenches out of which the Australian's had come. The men of D Coy were directed to incline to their left, and continue their advance from the left of the ravine, where a projecting spur (probably the end of Pope's Hill) gave some cover from enfilade fire. A Company had already taken up the charge in this direction and C Coy from further below, gained the spur further to the left. The Bn MG Section were in position on the extremity of the spur. B Coy (Major Armstrong) moved up the edge of the slope (probably on the Right Hand Side)] known as the Razor Back (Deadman's Hill). The Deadman's Hill name came from members of the Ports Bn who were killed and whose bodies were held up in the trees/shrubs and could not be withdrawn. Eventually one of their comrades climbed up at night and let the bodies down to the valley below where they could be buried.

The trenches were found to be untenable as they were overlooked by the Turkish Machine Gunners and the men were withdrawn during that and the following night.

The Portsmouth CO (Luard) was wounded so Maj Clark OC D Coy took over command of the Bn. The 2i/c, Maj CH Hoskyns-Abrahall, had already died of wounds. The Bn strength had been reduced to 7 officers and 350 Other Ranks. The Bn were reorganised into two Coys: Number One (Armstrong) and Number Two (Syson).

AES Description

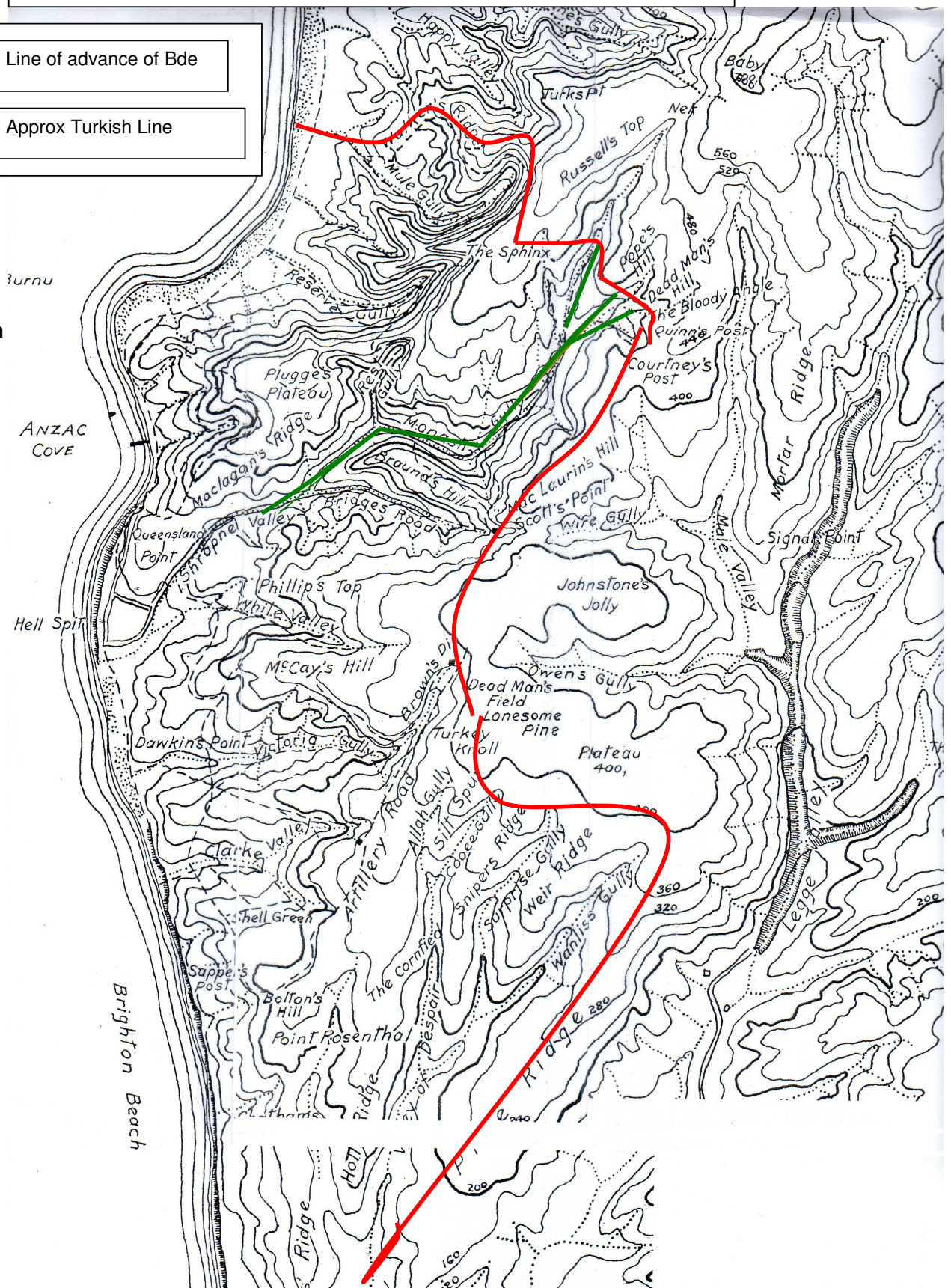
"The Gully [Monash Gully] opened up into 3 other gullies some of the ridges of which were held by the Commonwealth troops and some by the Turks. Dead and wounded Australians were lying all over the slopes and many were being carried down from the trenches. There was a very badly fire swept zone which we were to avoid digging in. No sooner had A Coy had gone forward than troops began to give way on the edge of the gully. This started to develop into a rush downhill of men with fixed bayonets who seemed regardless of trampling on killed or wounded. Col Luard gave the order to charge. Charge we did as we came up to that point and A and D

RM BDE PHASE TWO – ATTACK UP MONASH VALLEY – 3 MAY

Line of advance of Bde

Approx Turkish Line

Map Seven





Looking South
across the top of
Monash Gully up
which the
Portsmouth Bn
charged and
where so many of
the Bn were
casualties. Lone
Pine Cemetery is
in the background.

Pope's Hill off the
picture to the left



Looking part
down Monash
Gully, a bit
further left
than the upper
picture



Looking across
the top of
Monash Gully
from the other
side

Coys again suffered very severely. But the panic was averted. Imagine to yourself charging up a very steep slope whose surface is loose, with an occasional bush here and there, rifle and MG fire and shrapnel just raining down and the formation on the ground so puzzling that one couldn't tell where the enemy's fire was coming from. We were very widely separated by this time and mixed up with Chatham, who had had to do much as ourselves"

Chatham

Chatham had made a fine attack on the trenches in front. B, C and D advanced up the minor gullies leading off to the east of the main gully. The Adjutant (Richards) led a charge up the Razor Back Hill and gained the ridge. Richards was killed but the MGs made it to the top. Two lines of trenches were taken and held at first, but as no support was forthcoming they were eventually driven off the ridge by enfilading fire from the left and they had to go back to their old positions. Chatham lost 300 casualties in the attack.

THIRD PHASE – HOLDING NUMBER THREE SECTOR – POPES, QUINNS AND COURTNEYS

Later on 3 May, Brig Trotman was ordered to take over Number 3 Sector with the Chatham and Portsmouth Bns (now 1100 strong) and 4 Aus Brigade, the freshest of the Aus Bdes. They held this Sector for 9 days until 12 May. The position comprised Popes Hill on the left, Quinn's Post in the Centre and Courtneys on the right. Between 4 and 8 May the trenches were reorganised and improved but casualties still continued. Maj Armstrong was killed on the 6th and Syson was wounded on the same day.

Chatham were involved in an attack in the area of Quinns so must have been holding that area.

AES Description

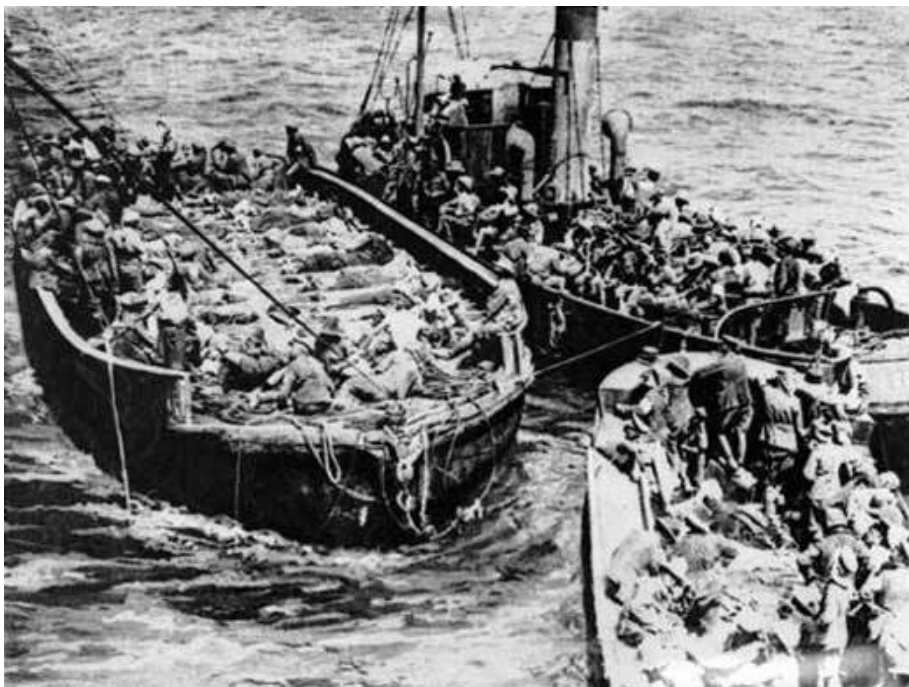
"About noon (on 3 May) , our support being no longer necessary, we withdrew under Armstrong [another Coy Comd] about another ¼ mile and dug ourselves in on a small feature as reserve to the 2 positions in front. To show you how precarious was our hold on the ridge of these gullies, we slept in those reserve trenches each night with bayonets fixed and magazines empty in case the Turks rushed them out of their fire trenches.

"Next day we reorganised into two Coys and were to take over one of the posts in front of us relieving each other every 48 hours. Armstrong, in taking his Coy up, was hit in the neck by shrapnel from our right rear and we couldn't save him. On the morning of the 6th, I was sniped at daybreak, a plain bullet wound but it hit a nerve and I can't yet feel or use my hand much yet."

RELIEF FROM THE ANZAC AREA

On 12 May, Chatham and Portsmouth were relieved by the Australian Light Horse Brigade from Egypt. They re-embarked in the CAWDOR CASTLE, were transferred to the Helles Sector and rejoined the RN Division.

The re-embarkation state of Ports Bn was 7 officers and 424 Other Ranks (down from 1,000).



Casualties being embarked from the ANZAC area

Portsmouth Casualties 25 April to 13 May were the highest in the Bde and were:

	Officers	Other Ranks	Total
Dead	10	98	108
Wounded	7	305	312
Missing		28	28
Total	17	431	448