Dreadnoughts and Crosses – How battleships brought the ANZACS to Gallipoli

Part 1 – The South American Arena

4.00 am on Sunday, 20 December 2015 marked the centenary of the last man leaving ANZAC cove at the end of the Gallipoli campaign. By the time the Allies evacuated the peninsula after just over eight months of fighting, each side had lost just under 60,000 dead. By the military standards of other battles in World War I these losses were small. Despite this, for three combatant countries, the young dominions of Australia and New Zealand and the yet to be born Turkish Republic, the battle was a seminal national event.

For this reason the details of the battle itself are well known and have been repeatedly re-enacted in print, video and film. What has received slightly less attention is how the Allies and the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire came to be enemies in the first place. The Ottoman Empire was not part of the deadly twin daisy chains of alliances and obligations that dragged all the other great imperial powers of Europe into an involuntary state of war in the days after the Austro Hungarian Empire chose to attack Serbia. The Ottomans had the luxury of choice. They could join the Allies, or they could join the Central Powers. Or, they could not join in at all – the eminently sensible option favoured by the then Sultan, Mehmed V.

The convoluted and sometimes ridiculous story of how the Ottoman Empire eventually did get involved on the side of the Central Powers, and thus became one of New Zealand’s ‘enemies’, makes for interesting reading. It involves pride, greed, incompetence, insubordination, brilliant opportunism and desperate decisions made in haste with little information. Above all it involves battleships, the great floating fortresses that so disastrously possessed the minds of men both great and small in the first decades of the twentieth century. Battleship mania was a truly global phenomenon. Thus this story begins not in Europe or Asia, but in South America some eight years before the First World War broke out.
At the beginning of the twentieth century the four-cornered battleship building race between Germany, Britain, the USA and Japan was well established. With their greater shipyard capacity, this was a race that the USA and Britain should have won comfortably. However, they were hampered by their political systems. The governments of Germany and Japan, where democracy was tightly delimited, were able to pursue their naval build up steadily and in a carefully planned manner. In the USA and Britain public opinion and short-term political expediency made this impossible. Periods of complacency when shipyards were starved of orders for battleships alternated with periods of panic, when they were literally drowning in them.

This created an intolerable situation in British and American shipyards. Dreadnought battleships were at the limits of the technology of their day. Their construction required massive fixed installations served by enormous and highly skilled workforces that simply could not be assembled and dispersed at will. If a race-winning dreadnought building capacity was to be maintained, somehow the demand for them within these two democracies had to be smoothed out. Then, as now, it was realised that exporting these cutting-edge weapons of war to third countries was one way in which this could be done. As a result, both Britain and the USA became vicious rivals in the international export market for dreadnought battleships. The most skilled and unscrupulous salesman of their day fanned out from the British and American yards, backed by enormous budgets and the full diplomatic capacities of their respective governments.

The happiest hunting ground for these dreadnought salesmen was South America. Nowhere in the World had changed politically as much as this continent had in the nineteenth century. In 1800 the continent was sleepily divided between the declining empires of Spain and Portugal. By 1900 all this had been swept away and replaced by a series of young, prickly and increasingly wealthy republics. The largest of these: Brazil, Chile and Argentina had a particularly volatile relationship with one another, in which diplomatic tension, military posturing and sporadic minor actions created an ideal environment for battleship selling.

In Part 2, the activities of the international dreadnought salesmen across three continents create a ludicrous but potentially explosive situation.
Once they had identified South America as the prime market for British and American battleships, the Edwardian dreadnought builders got straight to work. By various adroit manoeuvrings, the British and American sales representatives succeeded in selling no less than seven dreadnoughts to these three countries in less than three years. The process started with Brazil agreeing to buy three dreadnoughts from Britain in 1906; with two to be constructed immediately, and a third to be laid down once the first two had been completed. Argentina and Chile promptly responded by each ordering two larger ships: Chile’s from Britain, and Argentina’s from the United States.

However, the fever rapidly abated, and by 1908 the South American ardour for battleship building was cooling in the face of the staggering costs and risks of escalation. In the case of Brazil, an additional chill was provided by a major naval mutiny and the collapse of the rubber and coffee export commodity markets that had been expected to pay for the ships. As a result Brazil attempted to extricate itself from its commitment to build the third ship that it had ordered. The British fought hard to avoid this, and eventually their efforts were successful. However, the witches’ brew of conflicting commercial and political agendas that eventually preserved the deal also produced what was the most ridiculous design ever executed in the dreadnought era.

The *Rio de Janeiro* was built for show. The Brazilian government were determined that if they were going to have to pay for this unwanted battleship, then it should be the most impressive yet seen in South America. The choice lay between bigger guns or more turrets. Turrets won the day, and the *Rio de Janeiro* shipped seven, in a period when every other nation was standardising on four. This meant a big ship, but Brazil’s maintenance facilities were limited, which meant that the big ship had to be narrow and tremendously long. Finally the capacity for the officers to entertain in style and live in comfort had a far higher priority than other navies. The *Rio de Janeiro* had far larger internal spaces and far fewer watertight bulkheads than her equivalents. All of these requirements, plus a respectable top speed, meant that something had to give, and that something was armour. *Rio de Janeiro* had armour that was barely more than half the thickness of her contemporaries.
Perhaps as the Rio de Janeiro took shape on the slipway it became increasingly obvious that she looked more ridiculous than imposing. Whatever the reason, the Brazilian government decided to get rid of her. In late 1913 she was put up for sale while still incomplete, and sold to the Ottoman Empire for just under six million dollars – a respectabe sum for that time. The Rio de Janeiro became the Sultan Osman I. The Brazilians, no doubt highly relieved, departed from the scene. The deal may have been facilitated by the fact that the ever-active British dreadnought salesmen had already sold another larger and far more capable dreadnought, the Reşadiye, to the Ottomans two years previously.

Although Sultan Osman I was the weaker unit of the two new Turkish ships, the situation within the Ottoman Empire at the time of its acquisition endowed it with a much greater political importance to the Turks. The Ottoman Empire, the ‘sick man of Europe’ had been in retreat for half a century. Provinces in the Balkans and North Africa that had been Turkish for centuries had fallen away. The retreat had been accompanied by a sequence of mass murder and ethnic cleansings that had left millions of Turks dead and millions more displaced and destitute within the areas that are now modern Turkey.

The Turks were aware that this process was not complete, and that the Ottoman Empire’s neighbours harboured further expansionist ambitions that would potentially leave the Turkish nation partitioned and bereft of any territory or secure identity. This was a national rather than simply a government realisation. As the government was both chaotic and destitute, the Turkish nation raised the money to buy the Sultan Osman I, largely by public subscription and a myriad of small collections in coffee shops and the like. Special ‘navy donation medals’ of various grades were struck and given to larger donors. It was an act that both presaged and represented the popular will that would lead the Turks to victory at Gallipoli in 1915 and to a secure independence in 1923. The significance of the gesture was reinforced by the name that was given to her – that of the Ottoman Empire’s founder.

*In Part 3, British misjudgements over the sale of the two battleships turn a possible ally into a potential foe.*
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Part 3 – The two steel symbols of Turkey’s pride

The nine months between the sale of the Sultan Osman I to the Turkish Empire, and the outbreak of war passed in a frenzy of dreadnought building. By August 1914 Great Britain had established a lead over Germany of 29 operational capital ships to 17. Nevertheless, this numerical advantage brought no comfort to the British Admiralty, who found themselves in a novel and terrifying position. For over 300 years the Royal Navy had relied upon the ‘combat superiority’ of its personnel to deliver a consistent string of victories and eventual maritime domination, despite equipment and numbers that were often markedly inferior to their opponents. This combat superiority was based upon officers and men who spent their entire lives at sea, mastering ships and weapons that changed only incrementally over several lifetimes. The Royal Navy’s combat superiority had reached its zenith at Trafalgar, over 100 years earlier, when a battle-hardened force of British officers and men had shattered a larger Franco-Spanish force, using skills honed over two centuries of almost continual life and combat at sea in ships that differed only in detail from those sent against the Armada by Elizabeth I.

In August 1914 that comfortable British combat superiority was gone. Dreadnoughts had only existed for eight years, and their nature and capabilities were utterly different to any warship that had gone before. Within the lifetimes of the admirals that led these new fleets, guns had advanced from devices that could waywardly deliver a cricket ball sized solid shot to a few hundred yards, to guns that could accurately deliver high explosive shells that weighed more than a tonne to a target some fifteen miles away. Nelson had approached Trafalgar with an assurance built upon a deep experience of combat command involving ships and crews with whose capabilities and frailties he was intimately familiar. Jellicoe, his successor in command of the British Grand Fleet, had no such luxury.

While his German opposite number, von Ingenohl, was equally inexperienced, their positions were utterly different. A beginner’s mistake by von Ingenohl that led to the defeat of the German High Seas Fleet would not affect Germany’s position in any significant way. An equivalent mistake by Jellicoe would lead to the immediate and total defeat of all the Allied
nations. Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, remarked that Jellicoe was: “…the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon”. Churchill was also aware that Jellicoe, through no personal shortcomings of his own, was perfectly capable of doing exactly that.

The atmosphere of naval apprehension caused Churchill to make a fateful decision. On August 5, the day after war finally broke out, he ordered that all dreadnoughts under construction in the UK for foreign powers were to be acquired immediately and added British fleet. Two countries were affected. The Chilean battleship the Almirante Latorre was purchased and renamed HMS Canada on more or less amicable terms as the last gasp of the South American dreadnought race. The incomplete Reşadiye was seized on the slipways in a smooth paperwork manoeuvre and renamed HMS Erin.

The takeover of the Sultan Osman I was a far messier affair. The ship was complete and had finished her sea trials. The Turkish crew was already in Newcastle working with the ship prior to an official handover. On hearing that this was not going to happen, the Turkish Admiral in command stated that he and his crew would board the ship and depart with her. Churchill ordered that any such attempt was to be resisted with deadly force if necessary. The matter was resolved without bloodshed, the Sultan Osman I became HMS Agincourt and the Turkish admiral and his crew departed empty handed. Nevertheless, the humiliated Ottoman government refused to accept a refund of their completed payment for the two ships, holding them to be stolen property.

The seizure of the two dreadnoughts caused great anger in the Ottoman Empire, but it did not lead immediately to war. By August 1914, the highly factionalised Ottoman government was already largely pro-German. This was an outcome of a greater German diplomatic, military and economic investment over some four decades. Three days before Churchill’s seizure order, a powerful faction within the Ottoman administration had signed an agreement with Germany that committed the Ottoman Empire to declare war on Russia within 24 hours of Germany doing so. The aging Sultan, Mehmed V, refused to ratify the agreement, but the seizure of the two ships by the British led to intense pressure upon him to do so – which he resisted. The Ottoman Empire was thus balanced upon the brink of war. It would be the activities of yet another dreadnought that would push her over the edge and into open conflict.

In Part 4, the German battlecruiser ‘Goeben’ evades the Royal Navy and brings Turkey to the brink of war.
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Part 4 – The Iron Houdini

A major plank of German naval strategy leading up to the war was to keep their dreadnoughts concentrated in one fleet – something the Royal Navy could not do due to its global commitments. This reduced the odds against Germany if a fleet action were to occur. Battlecruisers, ships that carried battleship-sized guns but sacrificed armour for speed, acted as the scouts for the main battle fleet on both sides, and the German units in particular were perhaps the most formidable units of the day. Carefully designed and superbly built, they were capable of outrunning anything they could not outfight, and there was not much that they could not outfight in any case. The Goeben and her sister Seydlitz were especially troublesome to the Royal Navy, as they had turned out to be considerably faster than their German designers expected – faster even than their far more lightly armoured British counterparts.

It was thus a matter of some considerable irritation to the German naval high command when the Kaiser decided to detach one of these two brand-new and very highly valuable units, the Goeben, for service in the Adriatic in 1912. The Goeben and her consort, the light cruiser Breslau, formed the German Mediterranean division under command of Wilhem Souchon, one of the Kaiserliche Marine’s most outstanding flag officers.

The German naval high command’s irritation with the Goeben’s situation progressively turned to alarm as war became imminent. Unless the nations surrounding the Adriatic joined the coming war in exactly the right order, Goeben would be caught in this narrow sea without access to a friendly port. Although she was a fine ship, faced by the numerous capital units of the French and British fleets, she could not hope to survive. The only alternative, to seek refuge and internment in a neutral port, would save the crew, but also meant the loss of the ship for the duration of the war. The Kaiser’s belief that Goeben could transit the Strait of Gibraltar and the English Channel in the face of the Royal Navy and return home to Germany after war was declared was plainly absurd. However, increasingly desperate pleas by the German high command would not sway him – Goeben stayed where she was.
When war came between Austria-Hungary and Serbia on 28 July 1914, Souchon and his ships were at Pola (now Pula, Croatia). Knowing that only days remained to him before both France and Britain became hostile; he extricated his ships from the Adriatic and awaited events/orders off the coast of North Africa. The Kaiser ordered the ships to transit the Strait of Gibraltar, but the chief of the Kaiserliche Marine, Alfred von Tirpitz instead issued the order: “Alliance with CUP [pro German faction of the Turkish Government] concluded August 3. Proceed at once to Constantinople.”

Tirpitz issued the order early on 4 August. Britain declared war later on the same day, and then the hunt was on. By a series of adroit manoeuvres Souchon avoided the superior British forces sent to destroy him under Admiral Milne. He was assisted by Milne’s belief that the Germans were heading for Gibraltar. Souchon’s ships reached the safety of the Turkish guns covering the Dardanelles on 10 August, with the funnel smoke of Milne’s pursuing squadron visible on the horizon behind them. The Royal Navy’s failure to catch the Goeben was to cost Milne his job. It was to cost many other people considerably more than that.

The German crews were now safe, but their ships were not. Turkey was a neutral power, and the ships faced internment after 24 hours unless they sortied to certain destruction at the hands of the British squadron outside. However, furious activity by Souchon and the other German military officers and attaches in Constantinople produced a remarkable solution well within that timeframe. Less than a week had passed since the humiliating seizure of the two Turkish dreadnoughts by the British. It is inconceivable to think that this event did not both suggest and motivate the course of action that was swiftly pursued by the Germans and their Turkish hosts. On 11 August the Ottoman Government announced unilaterally that they had purchased both ships. At that moment the Goeben became the Yavuz Sultan Selim – rapidly shortened to just ‘Yavuz’.

The reaction of the Kaiser to the news that two of his own most modern warships, that he had ordered through the Strait of Gibraltar only days previously, had now been sold to a foreign power in a neutral port over 1,500 miles away from that location is probably better imagined than experienced!

In Part 5, Goeben and her crew force Turkey into the war, and the boots hit the beach at ANZAC cove.
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Part 5 – The reckoning

The Turkish payment to the German Empire not only secured the two ships; it secured the services of their crews as well. On 23 September, Admiral Souchon officially became commander in chief of the Ottoman Navy. His officers and men also remained at their posts. But with a gesture worthy of a ‘Carry On’ film, they exchanged their German naval caps for Turkish red fezzes. Nothing else changed on board the ships, but ashore in Constantinople all was very different. Up to that point German influence within the Ottoman army had been matched by British influence within the Ottoman navy. Now the Germans had a clear run at influence at all levels. The highly capable German cadre worked hard on the factionalised Ottoman government to push them towards war. They worked equally hard to precipitate incidents that would commit the Ottoman Empire to war involuntarily.

On 27 October they finally engineered their opportunity. Admiral Souchon was given a credible order to sortie into the Black Sea. He wasted no time. Two days later the Ottoman squadron attacked the Russian town of Odessa over three hundred miles away, causing immense damage and loss of life. Shortly afterwards the major port of Sevastopol was also attacked. The Russian reaction was predictable: war was declared on November 1. Two days later, on 3 November, French and British naval units attacked the Turkish forts in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli. Two days after that, on 5 November, these two powers also declared war on the Ottoman Empire. A week later, on 12 November, the Sultan finally bowed to the inevitable, and as Caliph officially declared war (Jihad) on Russia, France and the British Empire.
From Britain’s point of view, the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the war at this moment was a far more serious matter than it would have been three months earlier. The shattering defeat inflicted upon the Russian Empire by the Germans at Tannenberg in August 1914 meant that the Russian armies were not able to put pressure on the Ottoman Empire from the north in the expected manner. This allowed Ottoman forces to be moved south to threaten British positions in Persia and around the critical Suez Canal. The emerging bloodbath on the Western Front meant that few British troops were able to be immediately spared to counter these forces.

And then there was the Goeben/Yavuz, a far more formidable unit than either of the two dreadnoughts that the British had requisitioned from Turkey the previous August. Her speed, power and superb crew meant that she was superior to any individual Allied unit then in the Mediterranean, and thus posed an immediate danger to the convoys ferrying men and materials through the Suez Canal.

French and British efforts to force the Dardanelles, capture Constantinople and eliminate the Yavuz were therefore unrelenting from the moment war between the three powers was declared. However, purely naval efforts to silence the Dardanelles shore forts using battleships proved both futile and highly expensive in terms of both man and material, culminating in a particularly heavy defeat on 17 March 1915. This setback led to the initiation of planning to land a major military force on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The use of land forces was strongly supported by Churchill, who seems to have enjoyed a prominent role throughout this entire story. Just over a month later, the Anzacs came ashore and the shooting began.

Churchill subsequently wrote that the Yavuz was responsible for: “more slaughter, more misery, and more ruin than has ever before been borne within the compass of a ship.” He was right. In terms of ‘influence per ton’ the Yavuz was perhaps the most successful capital ship ever built. To continue the superlatives, it is equally likely that by Churchill’s measure the other two ships of this story’s trio, the otherwise undistinguished Sultan Osman I / HMS Agincourt and the Reşadiye / HMS Erin were the most disastrously expensive capital ships ever delivered.

Yavuz would enjoy her distinction even if she had done nothing more than bring the Ottoman Empire into the war, but her career continued. She was an infernal nuisance for both the British and Russians to the end of that war, and she sank several major units of both these nations’ navies. Her service to the new Turkish Republic continued between the wars, and she remained the most formidable unit in the Black Sea throughout World War II. After sixty years
years afloat, *Yavuz* finally went to the breakers in 1973, and only her central propeller now survives in front of the Istanbul Maritime Museum. As this object, far more than any of its British equivalents, propelled the ANZACS to Gallipoli and New Zealand to a new sense of national awareness, it is perhaps worth paying it a visit the way through to Anzac Cove.