

WAS IT POSSIBLE TO RENEW THE NAVAL ATTACK ON THE DARDANELLES SUCCESSFULLY THE DAY AFTER THE 18TH MARCH?¹

Piotr Nykiel

Page | 1

The above is one of the most common questions appearing in almost all books concerning the Dardanelles Operation, written by men who took part in it and later on by historians. Practically all western authors (including even some German officers who served in Turkey during WWI) give the positive answer. However, a careful examination of the Dardanelles forts, as well as research in Turkish sources and western publications which I made in recent years, allow me to share the opinion of the Turkish side, which, since the beginning of the naval operations in the Dardanelles, strongly believed and still believes that ships alone couldn't get through the Narrows.

Let me support this statement with some essential facts, which – I am sure – are well known to almost everybody acquainted with this, though perhaps are not enough appreciated.

As early as the 20 September 1914, the commander of the Dardanelles Fortified Zone, col. Cevat (Çobanlı) sent to the General Headquarters in Istanbul a report concerning the condition of the defence system in the Dardanelles. In the document, this Turkish officer pointed out all possible scenarios of a future assault on the Narrows. The report is astonishing: as the first variant Cevat Pasha describes an attempt made only by the navy which in every detail was the same as the plan accepted by the British Admiralty almost four months later, in January 1915. However, Cevat Pasha didn't take it too seriously, because he didn't believe that the Allies would take such a risky plan into consideration. In the defence plan finally drawn up by Cevat Pasha, the main burden of defence was put on the so-called "Central Forts" situated around Çanakkale and Kilitbahir. On 22 October 1914, a special commission headed by the delegate from General Headquarters, vice-adm. Merten, was set up in Istanbul to work out the defence plan for the Dardanelles. The finalised plan became identical to the remarks made a month earlier by Cevat Pasha. The will of the High Command was that the forts defending the Southern entrance to the Narrows (Ertuğrul, Seddülbahir, Orhaniye and Kumkale) show only minimal resistance. Everybody in Çanakkale and Istanbul knew very well that, due to their location on the shore and short firing range (in comparison to the Allied ships), those forts were destined to fall, and a strong resistance would be only a waste of ammunition – supplies of which were so short that the German commander of both straits, adm. Guido von Usedom, took a risky decision to move all shells for heavy guns from the Bosphorus forts to the Dardanelles. The Turco-German side realised very quickly that the only chance to beat the enemy's fleet was to let it get into the Narrows, because there the difference in the firing-range between ships and forts was not as big as at the open sea at the entrance.

¹ This text is the revised version of the paper published in *The Gallipoli Campaign International Perspectives 85 Years On, Conference Papers 24-25 April 2000, Çanakkale 2001*

The support to the forts and mines laid in the Dardanelles was to be assured by some 40 howitzers of a calibre of 150 mm. and 120 mm., scattered on both sides of the Narrows. These batteries were well hidden behind hills and co-operated with a number of false guns, which, by firing salvos of black powder, occupied the attention of the Allied ship gunners. The howitzers alone of course couldn't sink any battleships but – as the events between 26 February and 18 March 1915 showed – together with other flat trajectory, small guns they made minesweeping impossible. As we can see in the example of HMS *Majestic*, even big ships couldn't disregard the potential threat created by these batteries. On 26 February 1915, the above-mentioned ship engaged true and false howitzers near Halileli. Two shells from 150 mm howitzers exploded under the waterline close to her and forced the ship to retire taking in water.

One of the most common arguments used by those historians who claim that the main attempt of the fleet to get through the Dardanelles could have been successful if renewed on the 19th March, was that the forts were extremely short of ammunition. It is of course true if we count only the shells of the new type, of which the reserve on the eve of the 18th March was only 267. This figure however relates only to the long barrel guns with a caliber of 355 mm. and 240 mm. If we count the new type of ammunition for the other heavy guns in the Narrows (including 8 pieces of 150 mm. in the Dardanos and Mesudiye batteries), the amount increases to 1.063 shells. To this we have to add 3.265 pieces of old type ammunition, which in total makes 4.328 shells. The consumption of the 18th March was only 444 (349 of these were new type shells). Comparing these figures, we can see that the Dardanelles forts could have continued the exchange of fire for about 9 days! One can say that the old type shells included in this calculation were useless because the range of guns firing them was much shorter, and even with the use of new type ammunition the forts were outranged by the Allied ships. Such a statement is true, but only partially. Before I get down to justification of that statement, let me make a short digression and explain the term "barrel length" which will be used below and, I am sure, is not clear to everybody.

Briefly, we can say that as long the barrel was, that length was the firing range of the cannon. The barrel length is usually the multiple of the gun's calibre. For example, when we say that the 280 millimetre cannon had a barrel length of 22 calibre, it means that its length was approximately 22 x 280 millimetres. In the Çanakkale Fortified Region the barrel length was a factor of higher importance than the calibre. For instance, the Dardanos battery was not dangerous because of its guns' calibre, which was only 150 mm., but because of the barrel length of 40 calibre – thanks to which it had one of the longest firing ranges of all batteries and forts in the Dardanelles. Another example: the heaviest cannons in Rumeli Mecidiye fort had a calibre of 280 mm., but a barrel length of only 22 calibre and that's why they didn't fire a single round on the 18th March. Instead, in the same fort the Turks used lighter, 240 mm. guns, because their barrel length was 35. This situation is reflected in the official Turkish reports of the ammunition consumption on that day. It also proves that the famous Koca Seyit couldn't have lifted shells of the approximate weight of 276 kilograms – as is claimed in the official Turkish history – because such heavy ammunition was used for the 280 mm. canons, which, as is stated above, didn't fire a single round on the 18th March. On that day Koca Seyit would have carried only shells to the 240 mm. cannon, and those weighed – depending on the type – between 140 and 215 kilograms.

Now, let's return to the main topic.

The range of the 355 mm. and 240 mm. guns with barrel length of 35 calibers was between 18.000 and 16.000 meters with the use on the new type ammunition, and between 11.000 and 10.800 m. with the old shells. The range of the other "short barreled" guns with a caliber between 280 mm and 150 mm varied according to the type of ammunition between 16.800 and 6.700 meters. Let us remind ourselves of the example of the French ships – fire from both sides became effective only when the distance was reduced to at least 10.000 meters. In the last stage of the bombardment (Rumeli) Mesudiye battery was shelled from the distance of only 5.000 meters and even then the fire was not accurate! The other forts, despite statements in western studies, suffered quite insignificant damage in comparison to the Allied efforts. The best example is of course the Dardanos battery, which during the whole naval operations up till the 18th March was the subject of around 4.000 shots. Only 3 of them were accurate and none of the battery's 5 guns were hit.

The problem for the fleet was not only lack of accuracy – which was mainly a result of the fact that the ship's guns were worn and the targets hardly visible from a distance – but also the "softness" of the Dardanelles forts. A quantity of unexploded heavy shells found in their surroundings after the 18th March, as well as the kind of damage, show us that these outdated forts were, paradoxically, perfect to defend against the heavy, flat trajectory artillery of the Allied fleet. Good evidence for this is Çimenlik and Rumeli Mecidiye forts. In one of the ammunition stores of Çimenlik, we can still see a hole made most probably by a 381 mm. shell from the HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Despite reports both in English and Turkish memoirs, the shell didn't blow up the contents of the store, but just ripped off its corner. The fact that there was no explosion of the shell itself, and the store as well, is proved by a photo taken by somebody from the British Occupation Forces in 1918. It shows clearly that the corner of the ammunition store, together with the covering earth, simply collapsed and certainly wasn't blown away. To be more exact we can say that there was no reason for the explosion, because all ammunition stores in the Çimenlik fort were empty, most probably since the 16th March 1915. According to the diary of major Selahattin Adil, Chief of the Dardanelles Fortified Zone Headquarters on that day, the 355 mm. gun was moved from Çimenlik to Anadolu Hamidiye fort and the rest of Çimenlik's armament had been put out of service to be used as a source of spare parts for the guns of other forts. Therefore, the heavy bombardment of the above mentioned fort on the 18th March was just a waste of ammunition, and the huge explosion seen by the Allies was not inside the fort but immediately North of it, where – in the place where the *Nusret's* replica now exists – the light guns protecting the minefield had been deployed.

As I mentioned earlier, the other example of little damage caused by ship's fire was the most important fort on the European coast, the Rumeli Mecidiye, which on the 18th March suffered only 3 direct hits! One of them damaged a gun and the two others – just like in Çimenlik – ripped away the corners of two ammunition stores (the repairs made by Turks after the 18th March are still visible). The other Allied shells fired on that day "landed" at the ground parapet of the forts or their surroundings, creating chaos but nothing more.

If we look at the statistics, on the 18th March the Turks lost only 14.7% of their heavy

artillery equipment but the Allied fleet had been seriously reduced: three ships sunk and the other three out of action for a long time made the third part of the whole Anglo-French naval potential in the Dardanelles. In this condition, the Allies were unable to renew the attack the day after. The new, professional minesweeping flotilla was not ready until the 22nd March. The new battleships that were to compensate the losses didn't arrive till that day. Even if the forts had been silenced, there was still the minefield to deal with. The protection of it was ensured by small caliber guns and howitzers which – as I have already said – against the minesweepers was a strong enough countermeasure. On the 18th March the howitzers fired 1.465 rounds of ammunition and the reserve for the following days was 4.065 pieces – all of the new type. And how difficult the sweeping of the Dardanelles was, even in the peacetime, we can see even now. Mines still emerge from the water. The last one was found near Kepez in September 1999.