

KEH

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## YESTERDAY'S WRONG TURNING

**The world of today, in an upheaval of antagonisms heading toward destructive war, was not inevitable. Russia need not have fallen to the Bolshevists, Germany to the Nazis, Italy to the Fascists. The United States need not have entered the World War. Two millions of men slain in battle need not have died. These consequences resulted from a decision of a few men during the World War.**

**O**NE GROUP sat around a small table in a vessel anchored in a Mediterranean cove. Another sat in a government office in London. Both weighed the decision gravely, though unaware that they were deciding the destiny of a century. They did not consider bolshevism and fascism, words which meant nothing at that time. Nor did they discuss the lives of two million men whose fate they were sealing.

They talked about an experience of a certain day, a naval engagement, one with gains and losses, which they had to measure. They measured them. They marshaled the factors they knew about. They spoke still more of the factors they didn't know about.

The small, low-ceilinged cabin on an admiral's flagship was lighted behind its drawn blinds. These men were not physically in the dark. But they were in the dark in every other way. So were the officials of government in London. The eyes of a navy, an army, any war machine, are its intelligence service as well as its airforce and lookouts. And these men were blind; they sat, conferring, groping for knowledge they did not possess. By the end of their sober discussion they had to guess.

It was forthright, honest guessing, the kind that passes for being wise because it is reasonable. But it was wrong. It turned out to be a guess which would determine the kind of world that now exists, an embittered world of warring ideologies, hurtling headlong toward disaster.

This is the story of a wrong guess that changed history. I tell it because I happen to have had the precise

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knowledge which would have made the right guess possible. Not that I could have helped the men in the admiral's cabin or in the London office. I wouldn't and couldn't have. Geographically I was near enough at hand, less than twenty-five miles away from the conference on the admiral's flagship. But I might as well have been a hundred thousand miles away, for I was on one side of a war and the conference was on the other side. And I was not a spy. I was a neutral observer, an American newspaper man.

The guess that was wrong was the decision not to force the Dardanelles in March, 1915, by naval action. It was reached following the greatest and most spectacular action of warships against land fortifications in history. The wrong guess was that the attempt, which was begun, should not be continued. That it had to be resumed in collaboration with a landing force, prepared for stern resistance.

The attempt with naval forces alone could have succeeded. I make that statement with as much certainty as one can muster about a hypothetical proposition.

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If it had been made, Turkey would have been crushed in a few weeks. The flank of the Central Powers, reaching from the North Sea to the Bosphorus, would have been turned. Germany and Austria-Hungary would have been exposed to fresh forces on the Eastern Front. Russia, munitioned through the Dardanelles, would not have collapsed. It would not have succumbed to the bolsheviks in 1918. The war would have ended by the end of 1916. Probably it would have ended in "a peace without victory," for the poison of the last two years of fighting had not yet corroded men's souls.

It is completely reasonable to assume the war would have ended two years sooner. And all the speculation as to what then might have happened rests on what those final two years cost. America's entry was one. Russia's collapse was another. The sacrifice of two million lives. The blockade of Germany, which made sixty millions go hungry. The terrible lust for vengeance, which resulted in the peace that humiliated Germany. Economic exhaustion, which rotted the social fabric of Europe.

Admirals, generals and war councils cannot debate their decisions with such considerations in view. They must talk only of the immediate chances of victory. But they did know that this magnificent lunge into the



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Straits of the Dardanelles was playing for big stakes.

One man in particular knew it, for he had conceived it. He was Winston Churchill, British First Lord of the Admiralty. It was his plan. Thanks to him, the British and French fleets had gathered in the Eastern Mediterranean, and troops were ready to land on Turkish soil for the march on Constantinople. Churchill was sure *he* was going to win the war. But even Churchill did not know what would happen to the twentieth century if the plan was not carried through.

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On the morning of March 18, 1915, sunshine gleamed from the white minarets of Chanak Kalé and sparkled on the waters of the Dardanelles Narrows.

I had been a resident of Chanak Kalé for nearly a month. The British and French fleets were still at anchor around Tenedos, and I could see their smoke twenty miles away. Now and again during the month a warship had crept into the Straits and done a gingerly job of peppering at the howitzer batteries in the hills.

But there had been little to cable about, and for a month I had wasted my time and the money of my newspaper. My only profit had been to polish up my German with the German officers and gunners in the forts. These Germans were restless, too. They had volunteered "for hazardous service, place unspecified," and had made the unexpected trip to far-away Constantinople. But all they had experienced of hazard had been at a card table.

They were a breezy lot. They manned the five long-range guns of the Dardanelles defenses, fourteen-inch cannon which fired from behind earthworks, clumsy old weapons, and fourteen nine-inch, equally old guns with shorter range. The Turks had, in all, ten forts, but only three of any pretensions, and only these nineteen guns were worth the concern of a modern fleet. All nineteen were in charge of these pleasant, impatient Germans.

While these gunners were sure their biggest guns could sink a battleship at 14,000 yards, they did not believe they could hold the Narrows against a determined attack. On that score there was no pussyfooting. The job, as they saw it, was to make the attack as costly as they could.

It was no secret that the forts were short of ammunition. The fact wasn't advertised, but we newspapermen knew it. We knew that shells had been ordered, but in good Turkish fashion were slow in coming. We



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fashion were slow in coming. We knew that the supply on hand was hardly large enough for one day's good fighting.

But all of us, Germans and Turks and neutrals, had begun to doubt that the Allies were coming. Their activities were certainly not being pushed. Mine-sweepers worked at night, often drawing fire from the batteries in the hills, which would thunder distantly in the night. But the Germans were elated because it wasn't aggressive work. They had come to think that they had frightened the British naval leadership.

On this morning of March 18 my only American colleague (George Schreiner of the Associated Press) and I had breakfasted together and then walked to the water front, to pay our daily visit to the Germans in Fort Cheminlik. This lay beyond the old stone fort which commanded Chanak.

With its heavy walls and round tower, the stone fort was an antique symbolizing the warfare of two hundred years before. In the fortress-yard still stood piles of stone shot, big as pumpkins, which had been fired from wide-mouthed mortars. In those days the Straits could be held by dropping these crashing stone balls upon sailing ships if they tried to steal past.

Now iron, chemicals, armor-plate, sixteen-inch shells were needed to force an entry. And though here was the cradle of history, where man, the great warrior, received his first fame, the price of conquest had steadily risen. Fifteen miles away lay the abandoned acre which holds all that is left outside the lines of Homer of the city of Troy. Today's *Agamemnon*, a British battle-cruiser, lay smoking at anchor beside the blue mound of Tenedos low on the horizon, waiting as one of sixteen great warships to seize the gateway to Asia and the traditional key to world power.

But as far as the Germans knew, the *Agamemnon* and its fellow ships that morning would remain at anchor. In their long barrack behind Fort Cheminlik the officers so told us, as we sat with them sipping coffee.

And then a shell burst far down the Straits. We rose. Another shell. An orderly ran up, stiffened to salute, reported the first arrival of enemy warships within the Straits. Commands were shouted. I rushed out to the adjoining wall of the old stone fort and looked toward the sea.

The Allied Fleet was steaming in in single file, firing at objectives far



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below. Through my binoculars I watched them come, still not believing the awaited attack had begun. The fleet steamed closer, it began maneuvering in a vast circle, small specks playing follow-your-leader. I could see puffs of smoke as the ships fired, then puffs as the shells exploded on distant hillsides, and then many seconds later could hear the booms of explosions.

Here at last was action, even if it did not reach the Narrows. Then a shell burst at Dardanos, a few miles below, another at Fort Hamidieh, still closer. In another moment a shell burst in the water directly in front of me. A geyser fountained up, and shell-fragments screeched over my head.

The naval gunners were getting their range. Next shell fell just in front of Cheminlik, and instead of a geyser of water sent up an upheaval of earth and smoke. Shell followed shell. I ran to the round stone tower, clambered to its top, and there watched the magnificent spectacle.

The ships were in closer, still in that one-line circle, firing broadside after broadside. On both sides of the Straits the hills blossomed with explosions. The din became terrific. And now the shells fell all about Cheminlik and went beyond, into the village. Houses spouted up, filling the air with timbers, tile and stone.

The *Queen Elizabeth*, firing sixteen-inch guns, caused the worst havoc. Its shells, distinct from those of the *Agamemnon*, *Lord Nelson*, *Inflexible*, *Triumph* and *Prince George* were like a thunderclap that strikes the house.

I watched from my round tower only a little while. It was no place for a noncombatant. I decided to make a run for it through the village, so as to gain the hills behind the town, where the view would be both good and safe. Houses came down ahead of me as I loped along the cobblestones.

By the time I reached the hills, the forts were returning the fire, and for the rest of the afternoon I witnessed the most remarkable engagement, for an onlooker, of the war. Winston Churchill has written that spectators found it "a scene of inconceivable majesty and crisis."

I had my glasses on the French ship *Bouvet* when her magazine exploded, and I saw her sink in the incredible time of two and a half minutes. I was too far away to see the sixty of her six hundred men who were saved, run over the hull as it overturned in the water, like squirrels



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on a revolving cage. I saw the *Inflexible* list, then the *Irresistible*, finally the *Ocean*. The *Gaulois* steamed away to beach itself outside the Straits. By five in the afternoon, after six hours of continuous thunder, the ships retired. After dark the *Irresistible* and *Inflexible* sank. The day had cost three vessels sunk, one beached, the rest damaged, though not seriously.

I went back to the ruined village with fears for the comrades in Cheminlik and Hamidieh, for their fire had ceased before the fleet had withdrawn.

But I found them unscathed, save for minor injuries. In all the twenty forts, 150 casualties were reported. But the Germans were downcast. Only two of the long-range guns remained in action, and ten or eleven of the shorter guns might be remounted before morning. But *not enough shells remained for another full day's defense*.

Orders were issued to the correspondents by the German commandant. At dawn we were to be ready, packed, for retreat into Anatolia. The fleet would return, the last guns and shells would be fired. That would be the end of the story.

So the next morning we waited. The day was overcast but dry, and the sea was calm. But the fleet did not return. Early in the afternoon Constantinople passed on the London official bulletin. Due to inclement weather, it said, operations could not be resumed that day. The weather was not inclement. The operations were never resumed. The next Allied attack was months later at Gallipoli, a tragically different story.

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Not coming back—that was the guess that was wrong. And it was based on meticulous calculation of what was known: four ships lost; and of what was not known: how they had been sunk.

It now is officially on record that on March 8, a small Turkish ship, the *Nousret*, had laid a new mine-field in Eren Keui Bay, far down from the Narrows. It had operated at early dawn, when it might have been seen. We knew it had laid the mines. But mine-sweepers had not found the field. Nor had airplanes detected it, at a time when the Allied commanders believed that a plane could be relied on to spot a mine field. (Now it is known that a plane can only see a mine field that is close to the surface.) This mine field accounted for two of the warships, perhaps also the *Bouvet*, though she may



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have been sunk by a shell, as was believed on the *Queen Elizabeth*, and by the gunner in *Cheminlik* who told me he fired the shell.

It now is officially on record that the forts had less than enough ammunition to fight for two days more, and even this is an overstatement. I was told they had about twenty rounds per gun, without any secret being made about it.

But the Allied officers, who weighed what they did not know, suspected that the Turks had been floating free mines down the Straits, that they had secret land torpedo tubes (they had one in plain view and out of service on March 18) and perhaps other mysterious means of counter-attack. Hence they considered the danger too great.

It is officially on record that the Turks had two regiments, between 6,000 and 7,000 men, on the Peninsula. The Allies had a landing force three to four times that number. Once the Straits were forced, landing parties could have captured the howitzer batteries in the hills, while the fleet cut off the Turkish regiments from the rear. Constantinople then was defenseless.

In London, Churchill expected the attack to be resumed. He so suggested in a tactful cable. He was willing to wait while the damage of March 18 was repaired. But his instructions had been, in effect, to go ahead, lose ships and men, that London would accept the responsibility.

On March 22, Admiral DeRobeck, British commander in chief of operations, after consulting with his officers, called a conference with Sir Ian Hamilton, General Birdwood, General Braithewaite and Captain Pollen. The army men naturally were concerned about the prospects of co-operation. But they had agreed before the conference to let the sailors decide.

To their amazement, DeRobeck told them as soon as they sat down "that it was quite clear that he could not get through without the help of all my troops," as Sir Ian wrote in his diary. The troops' transports had to turn back to Egypt, and everything be rearranged for landing against bitter resistance.

Churchill was dumbfounded, but in London Lord Kitchener, and even Lord Fisher, deserted him. London, too, was afraid of what it did not know.

Meanwhile, General Liman Van Sanders was given command of preparing the defense of Gallipoli. Before the Allied troops returned, he had an



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army of 50,000 men on the Peninsula. The rest, as they say, is history.

But it is not inevitable history. It is what can follow a wrong guess.



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