



DID THE LEINSTERS FLEE AT CHUNUK BAIR?

By Professor Jeff Kildea

In August 1915 the Allies attempted to break the stalemate at Gallipoli by a daring attack on the Sari Bair range above Anzac Cove, including the high point of Chunuk Bair. The attempt failed; and a few months later the Allies, admitting defeat, evacuated the peninsula. The action at Chunuk Bair mostly involved troops from New Zealand. But among the attacking forces were Irish battalions of the 10th (Irish) Division, including the 6th Battalion The Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians). New Zealand historian Christopher Pugsley, who described the battle in 'Gallipoli: The New Zealand Story' (Auckland 1984; 5th edition 2014), refers briefly to the Leinsters, claiming that at a critical time they fled in the face of a Turkish

counterattack. But contemporary accounts tell a different story. In this centenary year of the Gallipoli campaign the record should be set straight.

In the early hours of August 8th, 1915, New Zealanders of the Wellington Battalion seized the summit of Chunuk Bair. But theirs was a feeble foothold, for the Turks began to pour a withering fire onto the position and onto Rhododendron Ridge, a spur running from the crest towards the Aegean Sea. The companies of the Wellington Battalion clinging to the summit were soon wiped out, leaving their support companies holding a trench just below the crest.

For a day and a half the New Zealanders held on until they were relieved by two English battalions on the night of August

9th-10th. The next morning the Turks counterattacked in force, sweeping the Englishmen off the summit and rushing down Rhododendron Ridge scattering all before them into the gullies and ravines. The Leinsters, who were part of the 29th Brigade, 10th (Irish) Division, had been brought up in reserve during the night of August 9th. According to Pugsley, in the early hours of August 10th, the Leinsters relieved the Auckland Battalion at the Pinnacle, a feature on Rhododendron Ridge. The Pinnacle was marked by a line of shallow trenches two hundred metres in front of another feature called the Apex, which was the location of the New Zealand Brigade headquarters.

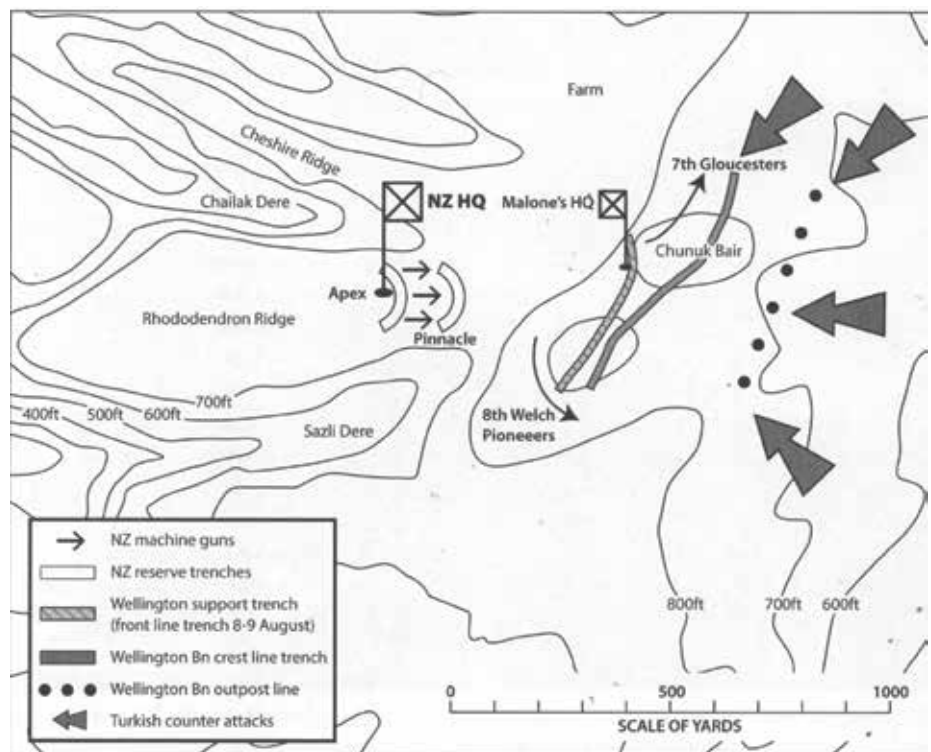
Describing the Turkish counterattack, Pugsley wrote: 'Any determined defence

might have held, but the 6th Battalion Loyal North Lancashires did not resist but broke and ran, as did the Wiltshires below them. Only the New Zealanders forward showed any fight.' He then added: 'Panic spread and the Leinsters at the Pinnacle also fled'. But this statement contradicts the account of the battle given by Major Bryan Cooper in 'The Tenth (Irish) Division in Gallipoli' (London, 1918). After describing the overwhelming of the Loyal North Lancashires and the Wiltshires, Cooper wrote: 'But on the right the Leinsters stood their ground. At last the moment had arrived to which they had so anxiously looked forward. Turk and Irishman, face to face, and hand to hand, could try which was the better man. ... In spite of the odds, the two companies in the front line succeeded in checking the attack, and at the crucial moment they were reinforced by 'B' and 'C' Companies from the support line. ... Shouting, they flung themselves into the fray, and drove the Turks back after a desperate struggle at close quarters'.

Unfortunately, neither Pugsley nor Cooper cite a source for their account of the reaction of the Leinster Regiment to the Turkish counterattack, so it is not possible to identify definitively the evidence upon which each relied. It must also be said that each author has written from a particular, but alternate, perspective.

Cooper himself served with the 10th (Irish) Division at Gallipoli and his book was written during 1917. Thus, to some degree, his account might be considered self-serving and influenced by patriotic exigencies that would be irrelevant to a disinterested historian writing long after the event. Cooper admits as much in the Preface: 'It is by no means easy for an Irishman to be impartial, but I have done my best'. Furthermore, Cooper was not present at Chunuk Bair and in writing his book relied on summaries provided by fellow officers of the division. Therefore, his account of the Leinsters does not carry the added weight that might be accorded to an eye witness. Like Pugsley, he has had to reconstruct the event from the testimony of others.

Pugsley, on the other hand, is a New Zealander who was writing a national history of the Gallipoli campaign, as the title of his book indicates. He considers the battle for



Chunuk Bair to be one of the outstanding feats of arms in his country's history and, in the conclusion to the chapter on the battle, he extols in quite fulsome and passionate terms the virtues of his countrymen who fought in it. It is understandable, therefore, that Pugsley's primary research might not have extended to other nationalities and that his writing might not fully or accurately describe their activities. He has neither quoted nor cited Cooper's book and his bibliography suggests he did not consult the war diaries of the 6th Leinster Regiment or the diaries, correspondence and memoirs of its officers and men.

So, the question remains: did Pugsley misrepresent the reaction of the Leinsters?

The Leinster's war diary does not indicate the battalion's precise location on Rhododendron Ridge. However, its account of the action on the morning of August 10th, 1915, gives no indication that the Leinsters fled:

'TURKS attacked about 06:00, several reaching crest of RHODODENDRON SPUR, a firing line was formed and rushed to the top of RHODODENDRON SPUR where they came under a hot fire. The line was withdrawn about 10

yards from the crest, a machine gun then enfiladed the line from the left inflicting several casualties, a sniper on our left also inflicted losses. Lt Figgis killed. Lt Col Craske wounded in left arm. Attack withdrew about 07:45 and firing line was retired to the trench.'

Although the war diary contains neither the detail nor the colour of Cooper's account of the action, it indicates that the Leinsters advanced and then withdrew under orders. The war diary also includes the following: 'On the 23/8/15 Maj Gen Sir A. Godley KCMG, CB sent for the C.O. and complimented him on the work of the BATTALION on the morning of 10/8/15. He also asked after Lt Col Craske (who was wounded) and said your Colonel has done good work'.

This hardly suggests that the Leinsters fled the scene. The Australian Official Historian Charles Bean in his account of the battle corroborates Cooper's account: 'That night the position at Chunuk Bair was entirely in the hands of the New Army battalions. Birdwood and Godley had by then given up the intention of renewing their assault on the following day, and the new garrison was for the moment to stand on the defensive. The Loyal North Lancashire held both the



Stretcher bearers removing wounded at Gallipoli, 1915. (Image Imperial War Museum)

advanced foothold and the Auckland's old half-way position at the Pinnacle. The 6th Leinster occupied the Apex. In other words it was the Loyal North Lancashire and not the Leinsters who were at the Pinnacle when the Turks attacked. This is made clear by one of Bean's maps which shows the Pinnacle and the Apex on Rhododendron ridge occupied by the two units.

Bean's account of the Turkish counter attack includes the following:

'Then the North Lancashire broke, both at Chunuk Bair and at the Pinnacle. When the 5th Wiltshire, who had been digging, saw the Turkish line descending upon their right, they also ran back, down the Sazli Dere. ...On Rhododendron small parties continued to trickle forward, and an hour later Turks even appeared close above General Johnston's headquarters at the Apex, where Captain Wallingford is said to have shot two with his revolver. The 6th Leinster and a company of Auckland infantry advanced with bayonets fixed,

and relieved the Apex of any further threat'.

Bean's account in this regard is supported by that of the British Official History:

'At daybreak on the 10th August, therefore, the British line at the head of Rhododendron Spur was held by three companies of the Loyal North Lancashire (38th Brigade) in the forward trenches, and one company at the Pinnacle. To the right of and far below the Pinnacle were 2½ companies of the 5/Wiltshire (40th Brigade), while the Apex was held by the remnants of the Wellington Battalion, some of the 6/Leinster (29th Brigade) and the massed machine guns of the New Zealand Infantry Brigade....'

Suddenly, at 4.45am, dense waves of Turks came pouring over the sky-line. ... [Soon] the Turks had captured the Pinnacle, but at that point their advance was stopped by annihilating fire from the New Zealand machine guns at the Apex. The Leinsters were rushed into line to hold the Apex position, and this they succeeded in doing for the rest of the day'.

Based on the Leinsters' war diary, the official histories and Cooper, Pugsley's assertion that the Leinsters fled the Pinnacle during the Turkish counter-attack is wrong. Rather, they did their job in defending the Apex, enabling the New Zealand machine gunners to continue to inflict severe punishment on the Turkish forces, thus preventing them from forcing the British Empire troops off Rhododendron Ridge.

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