



ANZAC Day: A Commemoration, not a Circus

Description

Today, on ANZAC Day, I present an article I originally wrote back in 2008 about my own very personal pilgrimage to Gallipoli, and my quest to seek out a very particular grave at Lone Pine. During my adventure, I was arrested by the Turkish Army, held at gunpoint and accused of being a spy. If you want a ripping yarn, ask me some time...

The author at Lone Pine, at the grave of Stan Stafford of the 2nd Battalion, 1st AIF.

Seeing our TV Screens full of Australasian [backpackers flooding](#) onto the Gallipoli peninsula is an ineluctable and annual staple. “Good on them”, we think. The commemoration of that singular event in our history which gave birth to our national identity is carried to a new generation by young people picking up the mantle saying “Lest we forget”. If we look a little closer, we note that those making the pilgrimage to the sacred site don’t always pick up their [rubbish](#), some look a little worse for wear, and sometimes the gravity of the occasion has been [lost a little](#). Most have made an overnight coach trip from Istanbul, which is nearly 300km away, stay to see a compressed guided tour of the ANZAC precinct, and head back the same day. Those seeking the historical flavour might sit through The [Gallipoli movie](#) with their package tour group the night before the trip. Few, if any, actually make it to the town called Gallipoli (Gelibolu, to the locals), which is some distance from ANZAC Cove.

Every year I see those pilgrims, I’m filled with pride that so many people continue to be motivated to travel to what’s still quite a remote spot to stand with other Aussies and Kiwis and blow on the coals of remembrance. My own son has a Gallipoli veteran as an ancestor, on his mother’s side. Every Australasian should make this trip at some point in their life.

But I’m also filled with a lot of sadness, because they’re robbing themselves of the best and most moving ANZAC experiences. Let me share my Gallipoli story...

I was fortunate enough to travel to Turkey a few years ago. Making my way from Ankara, 750km away, and with no fine command of Turkish, all I decided to do was keep saying “Gelibolu” at bus depots and sea ports and then go in the direction people were pointing. For simplicity, my plan was a 10 out of 10. For accuracy, as my five-year-old says: “minus zero”. Not that it mattered. I was mesmerised. Every

waypoint was a palimpsest of history. Getting lost was a pleasure. Beneath the modern city of Istanbul lay the Ottoman's den. Beneath that, the Roman city of Constantine. Beneath that, the Greek's Byzantium, and beneath that, a Phoenician Seaport. As I was crossing the Dardanelles by boat, I was dreaming of those young, brave souls from country NSW or outback Queensland, about to set foot into hell. But I could have as easily dreamed I was Paris of Troy, or Alexander the Great, or Xerxes, or the Apostle Paul, all of whom made the same journey over the same stretch of water.

Unfortunately, my geography wasn't quite as good as my history. Shortly after my triumphant arrival in the actual *town* of Gallipoli was the news that, sorry, Gallipoli isn't actually anywhere near, well, Gallipoli. Only a minority of ANZAC pilgrims end up there, although there must have been enough; the local lodgings were called "*ANZAC House*". Ah, ANZAC House... where the toilet (right next to my bed, and whose interior surface was black with exotic encrustations), ran all night, while the showers wouldn't. Long story...

Now those that know me well will expect me at this juncture to tell my [*How I Got Arrested By the Turkish Army Story and Held at Gunpoint*](#) story, and perhaps I will... another time. I want to make a different point.

You see, all those well meaning pilgrims attending the ANZAC Day dawn service are missing out on an enormous part of the Gallipoli experience. It's like going to the Louvre and staying half an hour... it's just not on. Certainly, there is a unique feel to being there with so many other people, but my own experience was far more moving because of how I found myself there. Here's what happened.

I wasn't travelling in the area at ANZAC time. It was early April, weeks out from ANZAC Day. My poor navigation landed me in a fishing village bearing the name of my destination but unfortunately not the co-ordinates. There's something charming about being an accidental tourist, and I got to see somewhere that a lot of people don't, even those who come back saying "*I've been to Gallipoli*".

Fortunately, as a result of losing myself, I was approached by a charming local man, Gurkay, who negotiated a price to drive me down the peninsula in an ancient Combi and show me personally all the sites I wanted to see, such as the Gallipoli museum, Lone Pine, ANZAC Cove, and all the various monuments one would expect; a trip which would last a long day. I had my own personal guide! He thought he was rorting me blind for AU\$100, and I thought I was getting a bargain. He had a little English and I had only a little Turkish (limited to the phrases for "*I love you, my darling*", "*get well soon*", or "*thank you*"... again, long story). We were firm friends by the end of the day.

Further, I had a mission. A dear family friend in his nineties had heard I was going to Gallipoli. He explained that his older brother, Stan, had died at Lone Pine and that in all the years since, he had never seen as much as a photo of his brother's grave. Wow. Challenge accepted!



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Stan Stafford, born in Lithgow.

When I made it to ANZAC Cove and Lone Pine; when I walked the partially reconstructed trenches, and when I went bush-bashing a bit just to see what it felt like to climb a hillside in Gallipoli with no railing or path, I was able to think in silence, by myself. I think I sat there and thought for a long time. A really long time. It was a sunny, breezy day, and birds were chirping, but I think that only by sitting there quietly for half an hour allowed me to hear the faint echoes of the fallen, and what they were trying to say to me.

When I found the grave I was looking for, the depersonalising effect of contemplating the mute and serried dead was all washed away. Courtesy of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website, [I had located](#) one of nearly *a hundred thousand* graves. Yet, this one was special. I arranged it with an Australian flag I had brought for the purpose, took photos and video of the area, and yes, I cried. I cried

for a man who had not had a single soul to cry by his grave in 84 years.

If you're contemplating a trip to Gallipoli, don't settle for the prepackaged "back to the bus in 15 minutes", shrink-wrapped, cattle-class version. See it *properly*. See it with time to sit quietly and contemplatively somewhere, by yourself. If it's just an item on your itinerary and someone is holding your hand the whole way, then it isn't a pilgrimage- it's just a trip.

(Click [here](#) for the full Flickr set of photos associated with this story- my Gallipoli photos.)

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1. Uncategorized

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