Long way to come to be killed so quickly
V-Beach Gallipoli 1915

by Des Ryan

When the European powers, and Britain, declared war in August 1914 not many people in Ireland had heard of or even knew of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The Straits of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus flow through Turkey and act as a dividing line between Europe and Asia. On what is known as the European side there was the old Turkish capital Constantinople, and jutting out into the Aegean Sea there was a finger of land known as the Gallipoli Peninsula.

Here, on this strip of land, between April and December 1915, 65,000 Allied soldiers lost their lives in an abortive attempt to knock Turkey out, as it was then known, the Ottoman Empire, out of the war. Some of those men, Munster Fusiliers, were from Limerick. They died at a place designated as V-Beach. Cape Helles, on the tip of the peninsula.

There were six points of landing, S, V, X, Y, and Anzac Cove, on the morning of 25 April, 1915; but one of the most murderous took place at V-Beach, where men of the 1st Batt. Munster Fusiliers and Dublin Fusiliers died in a blast of gunfire which came like hailstones from the sky.

V-Beach has been described as being like an amphitheatre, half circle with a series of grassy terraces sloping upwards from the shore, high cliffs to the left, surmounted by a fort, to the right of the beach the village and old castle of Sedd-el-Bahr; there was also a Cambie, i.e. a boat harbour made up of a large rugged mass of stone, near the castle.

As the outbreak of war in Europe, Turkey had remained neutral; even when two of her battle ships, being built in British dockyards, were confiscated. Germany then offered Turkey two of her war ships which she had on patrol in the Mediterranean. Followed by the British Navy they made their way across the Mediterranean and into the Aegean Sea. By 10 August, 1914, the German ships, having given the British the slip, entered the Dardanelles.

Behind the diplomatic scene British Naval Intelligence had tried to bribe Turkey to stay out of the war but it didn’t succeed. Turkey closed the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to Allied shipping in October 1914. Now, allied with the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary), Turkey was at war with Britain, France and Russia. Between February and March 1915, the British Navy, in an attempt to knock Turkey out, and open a path to Russia, tried to force their way through the Dardanelles but was unsuccessful. British armies had even landed at Sedd-el-Bahr a number of times. In the meantime plans had been drawn up for a combined naval/military assault. This led to the recapture of the 1st Batt Munster Fusiliers from service in Burma and the Andaman Islands to take part in the attack, as part of the 8th Brigade, 29th Division.

Regular battalions of the British Army stationed in India or Burma had to wait to be relieved by a territorial battalion and the Munsters were not relieved until late November 1914. They left Burma for India, travelling to Calcutta and from there, by train, to Bombay (Mumbai). On 4 December they sailed from Bombay on a convoy of ships bound for England. On Sunday, 10 January they arrived at Avonmouth, on the River Severn, near Bristol. Next day they travelled to Coventry and joined the 1st Batt. Dublin Fusiliers, the 1st Batt Lancashire Fusiliers and the 2nd Batt. Royal Fusiliers to form the 86th Fusiliers Brigade of the 29th Division. On 2 February a detachment of Munsters stationed at Fort Blair on the Andaman Islands also arrived. While in Coventry the Munsters were presented with an illuminated address by the City Council and were inspected by King George V as part of the 29th Division. On the night of 15 March they left Coventry on board three trains for Avonmouth, where they embarked on the troop-ships Ansonia, Haverford and Alakna bound for Alexandria, Egypt. The strength of the battalion at the time was 1,030 including officers and men.

After spending several days training in Alexandria, the Munsters with the 1st Batt Lancashire Fusiliers and the Anson Battalion of the Royal Naval Division boarded the troop carrier Calabria for the port of Mudros, on the island of Lemnos, in the Aegean Sea and not far from the Turkish mainland. Following their arrival on 10 April they spent every day practising trans-shipping by means of a rope ladder, from one ship to another, while at sea.

The ‘River Clyde’, a rusty ten year old coal boat, had been selected to land the men at V-Beach; the plan being that the naval fleet would bombard the Turkish defences for half an hour after which three companies of the Dublin Fusiliers were to be towed towards the beach in rowing boats. They were expected to land at 3.30 p.m., secure the beachhead and provide covering fire for the main landing from the ‘River Clyde’ which was to be grounded as near as possible to V-Beach by 6.30 p.m.

The ‘Clyde’ had been specially modified to carry the Munsters, a company of the Dublin Fusiliers, half a battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, the West Riding Field Company and other units, in all about 2,000 men. She had been painted in camouflage colours, although her name was still visible on her bows and stern. Large holes – sally ports – from which the men could emerge quickly, were cut in her sides, and special built gangways, supported by ropes that would run along the sides and dip towards the bow. The men were to run down these onto pontoon bridges made out of barges, which the ‘Clyde’ would have in tow, and then onto the beach. On the deck of the ship the bow was sand-bagged; there were also eight machine guns on the deck.

At 1 a.m., on Sunday, 25 April, the ‘River Clyde’ left her mooring at the island of Tenedos, near Turkey, in the Aegean Sea, and headed for Gallipoli. Some of the men could be seen below deck, playing ‘House’ (bingo), while every shudder of the engine brought down a cloud of coal-dust on them. At 5 a.m. the naval bombardment of the Turkish defences began. The destroyer ‘Albion’, which had been detailed to cover the landing from the ‘Clyde’, and other warships, pounded the little beach and the village of Sedd-el-Bahr behind it. Meanwhile those on the deck of the ‘Clyde’ could see two small trawlers manoeuvring around the fleet-sweepers ‘Clacton’ and ‘Newmarket’ from which the Dublin Fusiliers were transshipping. This was when things started to go wrong. The transshipping had taken half an hour longer
than was expected. As three companies of soldiers arranged themselves into six tows, each tow being made up of four open boats, and a steam vessel known as a Picket or Pinnace boat. Although the sea was calm as this flotilla of small boats headed for V-Beach, a strong current, coming down the Straits, slowed their progress. They also had to contend with trawlers (carrying the South Wales Borders on their way to S-Beach) cutting across their path. Vital time was lost as they tried to catch up with the 'Clyde'.

In an attempt to allow the Dublin Fusiliers to catch up or pass him Commander Unwin slowed down the 'Clyde'. He cut across the front of one vessel, and narrowly missed the back of another. Then, finding two minesweeping destroyers in his way, he steered between them and, only just in time, did one of them drop her sweep-wire to avoid it being caught up in the 'Clyde' propeller.

As the ship and open boats came closer to the beach, the naval bombardment stopped. The officers on the 'Clyde' scanned the area with their binoculars: the beach, 300 yards long and about 10 yards wide, was deserted. The castle of Sedd-el-Bahr had been hit a number of times but not destroyed. On the horizon the onion-shaped dome of the mosque in the tiny village of Sedd-el-Bahr could be seen. As the officers scanned the area again they could see that the barbed-wire entanglements at the edge of the beach, and which criss-crossed the slopes, remained virtually intact. What they didn't know was that the barbed-wire was of a new and stronger type, with larger spikes, and much harder to cut. The Turkish soldiers stationed there had withdrawn, far behind the village, and when the bombardment had stopped they made their way back to their trenches on the high ground which overlooked the shore. They also made their way into the battered castle and the fort, where they remained concealed until the boats and the ship had landed. About fifty yards from the beach the open boats, with the Dublin Fusiliers, were released by the steam vessels and were rowed in the rest of the way by the sailors on them.

At 6.20 a.m. the 'Clyde' was run ashore, on the way in she was hit a number of times from the guns sited across the Straits, but there were no casualties. At about the same time the flotilla of boats carrying the Dublin Fusiliers reached the beach. A staff officer on the 'Clyde' noted in his book: "6.22 a.m. Ran smoothly ashore without a tremor".

Private J. Walters of the Munsters describes what happened before the ship was grounded: "We got the order for all hands (to go) down below in the holds while the steamer was ploughing up along the beach. It reminded me of the way shipwreck comes along through the air, the way she ran through the rocks".

By this time all hell had broke loose on the beach. The three platoons of Turkish soldiers defending it had just been given orders to open fire. The Dublin Fusiliers in their open boats were slaughtered.

Some of the boats had been hit with incendiary shells and the men lay burning as they died. Other boats were riddled with bullets and were taking in water; the soldiers jumped over the side and tried to wade in but were shot down in the water. Many of those wounded in the boats were suffocated under the bodies of their dead comrades. The sea ran red with blood for one hundred yards out. Those that reached the beach alive took shelter behind a four foot high ridge of ground that ran along the shore, others took shelter near the Camber.

Meanwhile, as the bullets thumped and ricocheted off the 'Clyde', the steel doors of the 'sally-ports' were opened, and the gangways with their guide ropes fixed into position. The barges which had been towed alongside the 'Clyde', and which were to have formed the bridge between gangway and land, went wide of their mark. A dredger, manned by a Greek crew, had also been towed by the 'Clyde'. The dredger was to be used in getting the barges into place but, due to miscalculation and the strong current, it had been swept aside. On top of that, one of the gangways had been damaged by a Turkish shell. Inside the 'Clyde' an officer passed among the men saying; "Our time has come, boys, and we must not falter. Remember we are Munsters and, above all, remember Ireland".

Commander Unwin, in a frantic attempt to get the barges in place, jumped into the water with a rope, and with the help of some sailors, and possibly some of the Munsters, he managed to get them into position. Unwin, in the water, called to those aboard the 'Clyde' for the landing to begin. Josiah Wedgwood, M.P, who was in command of the machine guns on the 'Clyde' recalled that: "It was the Munsters that charged first with a sprig of shamrock on their caps".

Sedd el Bahr village with SS River Clyde right of castle 1915
Private Walters, who was wounded in the fighting, relates what happened: “We were under very heavy fire at that time. The Turks were pouring shrapnel and bullets on top of us as quick as lightning. Then we got the order to get ashore by companies, so we started our hard task to man the beach. We had a very hard job to get ashore as while we were running along the small boats we were getting knocked down into the sea, so that it made it hard for us to get through with wounded and dead men in the sea, which was about four or five feet deep at that spot”.

Two companies had made the dash for the shore. As they charged down the gangways, one of the sailors, who was with Unwin in the water, was mortally wounded. As Unwin tried to grab him, the barge nearest to the shore broke away and drifted into deep water. The Munsters on it jumped over the side and tried to swim in, many were drowned owing to the weight of their back packs and the ammunition they were carrying. Some of the men from the two companies got ashore and took cover behind the ridge. In front of the ridge were the barbed-wire entanglements.

Observers on the ‘Clyde’ watched as the killing continued. “Even when I looked ashore I saw five Munsters. They had been told to cut off the entanglements. They had left the shelter of the bank, charged fifteen yards to the wire, and there they lay in a row at two yards interval. One could hardly believe them dead. All the time great shells kept hitting the shivering ship and doing slaughter in the packed holds.”

The destroyer ‘Scorpion’ was stopped for a considerable amount of time off V-Beach that morning but was unable to do anything. Strict orders had been issued to all destroyers, within the area of the beach-heads, not to open fire in support of the army: “500 yards away a trench full of Turkish soldiers were firing at our troops. We could see our infantry lying flat on their faces on the beach under withering fire, and every now and then one or two men dashed out to cut the wire in front of them, only to be quickly shot down.”

Newspaper reporters watching the landings through binoculars from ships out at sea asked: “why are so many of them resting?” received the reply, “many of those will never rise again.”

Gradually some of the Munsters worked their way across to where the Dublin Fusiliers had taken shelter. On the deck of the ‘Clyde’ the machine guns rattled away in an effort to protect the men on the beach. Around 8a.m., during a lull in the fighting, another company of Munsters ran the gauntlet of trying to get ashore; this was done with severe casualties. By 9.30 a.m. over 1,000 men had left the ship; not more than half had lived to reach the shelter of the ridge or escarpment on the narrow beach.

It was now clear that any further attempts to land in daylight would be suicidal but that did not stop some of the officers and sailors, and also the battalion chaplain, Rev. Father Harker, from collecting the dead and wounded from the hedges. During this period the Turks withheld their fire. That afternoon an attempt was made by some of the Munsters to link up with the Worcester Regiment, who were to the left of the bay. The Worcestershires had been intended for V-Beach but, due to the heavy fighting, were diverted to W-Beach, where the Lancashire Fusiliers had landed. The attempt to link up with the Worcestershires proved to be futile on account of the heavy fire turned on the Munsters any time they tried to move. Around 4.00 p.m. fifty Munsters dashed down the gangway, making their way along the beach, they ran towards the castle. As they worked their way up through the rocks they were shot.

Those on the ‘Clyde’ spotted someone signalling to them from a large window in the castle. They were fourteen survivors of the Dubliners who had landed at the Camber on the other side of Sedd-el-Bahr point. The rest of them had died fighting their way up through the streets of the village.

Between 5.00 and 6.00 p.m. the Turkish batteries across the Straits opened fire, hitting the ‘Clyde’ four times. At 7.30 p.m. another company of Munsters, followed by the remainder of the Dublin Fusiliers and the West Riding Field Company, made their way ashore.

As darkness came the soldiers on the beach were able to relax a bit, and the rest of the men on the Clyde were disembarked and diverted to W-Beach. Most of the wounded had to wait until this was accomplished. A lot of them had been left lying in the hot sun all day. Many crawled to the end of a rock spit which stretched invitingly towards the collier and, as Wedgwood bitterly related: “There they slowly sank and died.” A house in Sedd-el-Bahr was burning brightly and there was a full moon. All around the wounded cried for help and shelter against the bullets but there was no room on the boats or gangway for anything but the men to come ashore. For three hours I stood at the end of the rocks up to my waist in water (helping Munster and Dublin Fusiliers ashore), my legs jammed between dead men. All night long the battle raged. Our men went up the hill through the Turks, and the Turks came down through ours on the beach. Over and past each other they went, sometimes not seeing, sometimes glad to pass on in the darkness. Once there was a panic on the ‘River Clyde’. They thought the Turks were charging on board up the gangways, and everybody started running aft, they knew not why.

Major French of the Dublin Fusiliers wrote: “Never shall I forget that night. Heavy rifle fire incessantly. Drizzling with rain. Wounded groaning on all sides and surrounded by the dead. I admit I thought it was all up. The beaches were covered with the bodies of the dead, and the slopes with limbs, heads and bodics. As daylight broke the warships pounded the village: A very stirring tale is related of a most heroic fight between a handful of Munsters – there were 19 of them all told – and a company of Turks. The Munsters were watching a bombardment by one of the warships when they were suddenly surprised by the Turks in the rear. They saw that the odds against them were tremendous, but they were determined to put up a good fight. They fought like demons, using the bayonets with great effect directly any Turk came to the rear, and very often charging with the bayonet and firing at the same time. In this way they kept the Turks at bay until assistance came. By this stage most of the men were exhausted and under nervous strain; you must remember that for two nights no one had slept. The bombardment hadn't helped either, as it should have been directed towards the fort on the top of the cliff. All those things, exhaustion, nervous strain, and loss of sleep made it harder for the officers to rouse the men. Eventually the troops on the right of the beach were got together, and an assault was made on the castle. Making their way into the courtyard, they cleared the castle of Turkish soldiers. As they fought their way towards the village, severe hand-to-hand fighting developed, and the advance ground to a halt. An intelligence officer, Colonel Doughty-Wylie, who had already been ashore a number of times, realising the critical importance of clearing the village, quickly came ashore again from the ‘Clyde’ with two other officers and took command of the soldiers still taking shelter on the beach. Supported by the rat-tat-tat of the machine guns on the ‘Clyde’ the men moved forward.”

It was during this battle that Corporal William Cosgrove of the Munsters won his V.C. He later recalled: “Some of us, having got to the wire, started to try and cut it with our piers but you might as well try and cut the round tower at Clonyc with a pair of ladies scissors. The wire was of great strength, strained like fiddle-strings, and so full of spikes that you couldn't get the piers between. Heaven! I thought we were done! I threw down the piers from me and roared to the fellows 'pull them up!'. I dashed at one of the upright posts, put my arms around it, and beaved and strained at it until it came up in my arms, the same as you would lift a child. I believe there was great cheering when they saw what I was at
but I only heard the scream of bullets and sawdust rising all around me. Where they hit I don't know or how many posts I pulled up. I did my best and the boys that were with me did every bit as good as myself. When the wire was down the rest of the lads came through like devils and reached the trenches. We won about 200 yards length by 20 yards deep and 700 yards from the shore. We met a brave, honourable foe in the Turks.

The final push to take the village and the fort on the cliff was made by the combined efforts of the Munsters, the Hampshires and the Dubliners. Just before 2 p.m. they had cleared the village, gained the summit of the cliff and had driven the Turkish soldiers from the fort, who were to be seen streaming away in full retreat for two miles.

A number of Turkish soldiers were captured in the fighting, and the Munsters were mentioned in dispatches for their bravery. By 5 p.m. that afternoon, the Munsters held a position half a mile beyond the village and the old fort. They had also linked up with the Worcesters who were to the left of them. During the night the Turks tried to regain their positions but the attackers were beaten off - so ended the first two days fighting on the Gallipoli peninsula.

On the morning of 27 April the Munsters were relieved by a contingent of French soldiers. Over 500 Munsters had been wounded or killed during those two days. The two battalions, Munsters and Dubliners, were so decimated that they were formed into a single battalion and were nicknamed 'The Dubsters'. One of their first jobs was to bury their dead. The bodies were collected from the beach and from the water and placed on canvas tents. A mass grave was dug at a level place in the sand dunes and there the officers and men were laid to rest. Crosses were fashioned from the wood of ammunition boxes, while the tips of bayonets were reared in little fires. The name and rank of those who died were burned into the arms of the crosses: the enclosure was then fenced off. Those graves are still there today. After the war the wooden crosses were replaced by crosses of stone.

The area is now preserved as a memorial to the men, of both sides, who fought and died there, and that little patch of Ireland, if I may call it that, remains much the same today as it did in 1915. The senseless killing continued for another eight and a half months, and in that time the 1st, 6th and 7th battalions of the Munsters took part in the Suvla Bay operations that August. Between December 1915 and January 1916 the Allied forces were evacuated from the peninsula and transferred to other instrument of death, the 'Western Front'.

On 25 April 1915 the first day of the invasion of Turkey, the following ten soldiers from Limerick were killed:

- Patrick Byrne, St. John's Parish, Limerick
- David Danagher
- Peter Doolan, St. John's Parish, Limerick
- Thomas Duffy, St. Michael's Parish, Limerick
- Edward Long, 42 Clare Street, Limerick
- James Lyons, Cloughkeating, Patrickswell, County Limerick
- Edward McKnight, 29 Upper Henry Street, Limerick
- John O'Sullivan, born in Limerick
- Christopher Powell, St. Michael's Parish, Limerick
- Michael Slattery, Rathkeale, County Limerick

Nine of the ten men were members of the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers, and John O'Sullivan was a member of the 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

In the overall campaign, from 25 April 1915 to 9 January 1916, 93 soldiers and sailors from Limerick were killed or died from injuries. Of this total, 61 served in the Munster Fusiliers, 11 in other Irish regiments, 6 in the Australian Forces and 9 in the Royal Navy.

During this time, the 'River Clyde' remained beached and was used as a dock and breakwater. A field-dressing station, to treat the wounded, was set up in the hull. The ship was hit a number of times by Turkish artillery stationed across the Straits of the Dardanelles. In June 1916, the steering wheel and masthead lamp were presented to the Munster Fusiliers in memory of the landing at Sedd-el-Bahr. In June 1919 the 'River Clyde' was pulled off V-Beach and refloated. By that time the wheelhouse and bridge had been stripped away and there were large shell holes all over the ship. She was taken to Mudros for temporary repairs and from there to a dockyard in Malta. She was then sold to a Spanish ship-owner who renamed her 'Angela'. In 1929 she changed ownership again and was renamed 'Marjua V Aurora'. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) she was captured by Francoist forces and she continued to sail the seas until she was finally scrapped in 1966.

Until recent times the Gallipoli Campaign has been mainly remembered in Australia and New Zealand, where every year on 25 April (Anzac Day) the people of both countries remember their soldiers who fought and died at Gallipoli. In Ireland, the campaign has been largely forgotten to date and hopefully the centenary will rekindle the memory of the Irish men who died.
Endnotes

Limerick Chronicle, June, July and November 1915.
The Irish Soldier, 1918 (n.d. Easons Dublin).
Robert Rhodes James, Gallipoli (London, 1965).

Des Ryan is a native of Limerick city and has devoted much time to researching the history of the city and its people. He is the longest running contributor to the Old Limerick Journal and is an active member of the editorial committee of that journal. His wide range of interests includes Limerick Military history, Jewish Limerick and the Spanish Civil War.