



TRAIL *of* POPPIES

GALLIPOLI TO YORKSHIRE
BY BICYCLE

Phil Brotherton

Trail of Poppies by Phil Brotherton.

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“You going far, mate?”

“No, not really. I’m going back home to East Morton, just over t’ hill.”

“Where’ve you come from then? It looks like you’ve been out a while.”

“Well, I started in Turkey, in April.”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“Erm, no! Here, have a card.”

The man was just having a nice summer’s walk with his family, when I happened to be cycling up the last steep hill before home.

That short conversation made me stop for a while on top of Baildon Moor, to think about and realise how far I'd actually gone!

Looking north from the hill, I could see a track that leads onto Rombald's Moor. It's one of my favourite places, where we walk our dog most evenings. Just down the hill from the track is our little house, where my wife & dog were waiting patiently for my return.

To my left on the moor, was the place where my Dad's ashes were scattered, I wished that he could've been there to see what I'd done...

Looking south, back the way I'd come, brought a tear to my eyes. My mind visualised my route: Fourteen countries, mountains, valleys, flat plains, but most of all, the battlefields where millions died a century ago.

They were the reason why I did that long journey. It wasn't my journey, it was theirs...

1.

From an early age I've always been adventurous, but also a bit of a loner. Don't get me wrong, I do have friends & I can get on with anybody, I can also be quite sociable at times, but you can't beat being alone in the wilderness with only yourself to rely on.

It was a speech by the Prime Minister David Cameron in 2012 which first made me consider doing something to commemorate the centenary of the Great War. He ended his speech with the following two passages:

"Our duty towards these commemorations is clear: to honour those who served, to remember those who died, and to ensure that the lessons learnt live with us forever. And I think that is exactly what we can do with these commemorations."

"I mean what I said about wanting ideas; I think we have a good framework here of national commemorations, the Heritage Lottery Fund, I think, can fund a lot of local activity but I am sure there are still some great history or commemorative projects that can be brought to book, so I hope people can come up with them."

The speech inspired me & I began to think of ideas. I should add that it felt like an impossible dream in 2012, as I was still ill with Epilepsy. I had developed this illness in the years following a serious head injury which occurred in 2003. It still wasn't under control and I was out of work, with a lot of time on my hands. The mind is a strange thing and I think that planning and ultimately completing my journey has had a big part in helping me to get my illness under control.

My first plan was to follow the Western Front by joining the dots up between the war cemeteries. I was planning to walk this and consulted Google Earth to help formulate my route. Whilst doing that, I discovered that quite a lot of the trenches which once stretched nearly

across Europe were still there. My plans changed and somehow my little journey got a bit bigger. It then morphed totally out of control into something that at the time seemed completely out of my reach, but I just had to make it work, so Trail of Poppies was formed.

Unfortunately, despite his speech about wanting to encourage people to think of ideas to commemorate the centenary of the war, not many people or organisations were interested in my little plan. I could write a book listing all of the rejections and setbacks which occurred during the planning stage, but it's irrelevant now. Although I never did get a reply to an email that I sent to David Cameron and it turned out that the Heritage Lottery funding which he talked about didn't apply to me, as my project was happening abroad.

Quite early on in my planning, I had decided that I might as well try to raise a bit of money for charity. This was probably a mistake, as it put added pressure on me to publicise my journey. I chose to try to raise a bit of brass for two worthy organisations, the Royal British Legion whose Skipton Branch supplied the poppies for my journey and the volksbund deutsche kriegsgräberfürsorge (German War Graves Commission.)

Surprisingly at the time, the Volksbund were more supporting of my aims than the Legion and they were happy to try to publicise it, as well as setting up a fundraising page. Unfortunately the Royal British Legion just didn't seem that bothered. They publicised it on their Facebook page once, but that was it. I still don't understand why they seemed so cold about my plans?

As a Civilian Instructor with the Air Cadets, I came up with a plan to try to get cadet organisations from across the world involved. Unfortunately I only received a response from the New Zealand Cadet Forces as well as our own Air Training Corps and I quickly decided to quietly shelve this plan so that I could concentrate on everything else. After all, one man can only do so much!

A few people and organisations did support me, though, and I will always be grateful to them for this. There was the outdoor equipment manufacturer, Kathmandu, who very kindly sent me some free clothing and equipment and Cycle-Recycle, who, as their name suggests, recycle old bikes. I bought my bike from them for about £50 but after looking into my trip, they decided to refund my money.

Then there was Carl at Icon Web Design. I'm not very good with technology, but I knew that it would be essential to have a website if my little plan was going to be a success. I tried using

one of those DIY website builders, but the results were rubbish, I then saw his advert in a free local magazine and saw that he built free websites for charities, so I cheekily asked if he'd do me one. I'd have paid if he'd had said no, as I was getting a bit desperate. Hopefully this little mention will help him as much as he helped me. Carl also found another company 3zero Graphics who designed my logo free of charge.

Then there was my wife, Ruthy, who encouraged me from the beginning, although at the time she probably thought that I would never actually do it. My journey would have been impossible without her help.

Last, but by no means least, was an old school friend, Gill Marsden, who also tried to get me some publicity. Unfortunately she had exactly the same result that I got: zero interest from the national press, although some local newspapers did show an interest.

One other thing that I did in order to try to fund the journey was to offer people the chance to "sponsor a poppy." If I had gained enough publicity, then this would have raised a fair bit of money for the Royal British Legion, as well as making sure that I was well fed throughout my journey. It wasn't to be though. Out of the 2015 poppies that I left on my route, only 74 were left on behalf of the few people who supported my journey. Thank you to each and every one of them, as it wouldn't have been possible without your help.

It was a massive setback to be refused any funding for what could have been a great long term project of Remembrance and inspiration to young people, but I just changed my plans again and got on with things. It also meant that I had total control over every aspect of my journey. I could also do it to remember the dead from both sides. This was important to me, as the Germans, Austro-Hungarians, Turks and Bulgarians were just doing the same thing that our lads were doing, they just happened to be on the losing side. But I believe that their sacrifice shouldn't be recognised any less. There were also a lot of civilian casualties in the countries which were blighted by the war. These were the true victims, especially in Belgium and Serbia. (Approximately 25% of the Serbian population lost their lives during the war!)

Some estimates put the total number of casualties at 38 million killed, wounded or missing. That seems a lot, but I think that it could be higher. Two of my Great Grandfathers were gassed during the war; both died in their 50s due to lung problems. They weren't classed as war

casualties, but in the end, they probably were. How many more were like that? I did my journey for every single one of them: man, woman or child...

Packing.

I'm the first to admit that I'm fairly useless at getting sorted for anything and this was no exception, I'm still amazed that I managed to get everything done in time. I got a giant cardboard box that bikes are delivered to the shops in, intending to fit everything that was going with me into it. Thus followed a frustrating day trying to fit everything in.

It all did fit (just!) but only due to a roll of gaffa tape which held the 'slightly' bulging box together. The maximum weight for a single piece of luggage for flying is 30kg, I didn't find out until check in that it weighed over 32kg. Fortunately they agreed to take it, as I don't know what I could have taken out, I was down to the bare minimum as it was. Most people would shudder at the thought of going away for a weekend, never mind three months with the clothes & equipment that were contained in my box.

Below is a short list of my equipment:

- Twenty odd year old, 21 geared, rigid mountain bike with big knobbly tyres.
- Small bag of bike spares, tools & lights.
- Summer grade sleeping bag.
- Hooped bivi bag. (Imagine a very small coffin like tent.)
- Tarp.
- Hammock.
- Pan & spoon. (No stove. I made small wood burners from empty food tins instead.)
- Head torch.
- Penknife.
- Survival knife.
- 2 water bottles and purification tablets.
- Sjambok whip. (My trusty dog stick.)
- Spot tracker for emergencies.
- Phone, camera, solar panel & battery pack. (Plus chargers.)

- 3,000 paper poppies from the Royal British Legion. (They took up more room than anything else!)
- Laminated pages from a European road map & Google Earth printouts.
- Laminated Google Translate descriptions of my journey in 8 languages. (Only the French one made any sense!)
- 50 Litre rucksack, a small frame bag, handlebar bag & seat bag. (No panniers.)
- A small diary & pencil.
- Four months worth of Epilepsy medication.

My clothing.

- 2 pairs of trousers.
- 2 long sleeved t-shirts.
- 1 t-shirt.
- 3 pairs of underwear.
- 3 pairs of socks.
- Fleece bodywarmer.
- Small down jacket.
- Hooded windproof smock. (Instead of waterproofs. I would regret this!)
- Army surplus boots. (I needed footwear that was both rugged but easy to ride in.)
- Neoprene gaiters. (I soon got rid of these.)
- A pair of fleecy gloves for the mountains.
- A neck warmer thingy which doubled as a hat.

Well that was it. I learnt to cope with not having much, but I really missed not having a gas stove. It would've made cooking a lot easier than lighting a fire, (especially in the rain!) But I didn't have the room and finding gas would have been a right pain in some places!

We just about managed to fit the box into the back of Ruthy's small car and get to the airport. Saying goodbye to Ruthy was difficult, we've had our ups and downs over the years (mostly my fault!) But we're a good team and I felt really sad when she left...

The Start. (Almost!)

The start of most foreign journeys & expeditions is nearly always when you get off the aircraft at your destination. Unfortunately for me, the true start of my little journey was a few hundred miles from the airport, a couple of day's worth of cycling at the other side of the sea of Marmara.

Istanbul's Ataturk airport was a bit of a shock to say the least. Reality had come along and kicked me up the arse. I was thousands of miles from home, in a strange country, with a rubbish map, not much idea of what my journey would entail and the only way that I was getting home was lost somewhere in Istanbul airport. My big box! Everybody else from the flight had collected their luggage, whilst I was left on my own with the obligatory battered suitcase going round and round on the conveyor belt. I just needed a marmalade sandwich to complete the picture, as I truly felt like Paddington bloody Bear!

"Come on Phil, you idiot, snap out of it and get it sorted!"

Eventually, I found an airport worker who spoke some English and twenty minutes later I was reunited with my slightly battered looking box. I'll never know what they'd been doing with it, but it was going to cost me some time over the coming months...

So there I was, dragging a massive box through Turkish immigration and customs. I must have looked harmless and not at all like a terrorist or smuggler, as nobody asked me to open it. (Thank ye gods!) Finally, I made it through customs and my first thought was "I need a cig." Bad mistake, as it turned out that once you've left the building, there's no going back in. So there I was, standing at a taxi rank with a big box, in the middle of the night in a strange city, with nowhere to stay. "Oh hell, what've I done?"

Well, there was no going back, so I found a well lit but quiet area and proceeded to unpack and rebuild my bike.

It took me a couple of hours, with a few failed attempts. Like putting the back wheel on the front and the seat where the handlebars go, etc. (I was tired!) It was then that I discovered that they really had been throwing my box around. They'd gone and bent the big sprocket thing for my chain near the pedals. I was now down to 14 gears and I hadn't even started yet! Bloody swines!

I'm not afraid to admit that I was now 'bricking it.' Istanbul is a big scary city, especially at night. So instead of going off into the dark, I sat on a bench outside the airport and waited for first light.

I didn't see much of Istanbul, which is a shame as it's supposed to be a beautiful city, but it was overcast and looking like it could rain. I'm also not very much of a city person anyway.

There were two route options now. I could have ridden west around the Sea of Marmara and down towards Gallipoli, but as that would mean going back on myself after Gallipoli, I got the ferry across the Sea of Marmara to the city of Bandirma.

The Start. (Nearly!)

Getting off the ferry in Bandirma felt like stepping back in time. Not too far though, I couldn't quite figure it out at the time, but looking back now, it felt like how I remember Spain in the 1980s. Most of the cars were fairly old, it was very dusty (not dirty) and the inhabitants didn't seem effected by our health & safety culture. In short, it was a bit rough around the edges. It was 'proper' Turkey and I liked it. If somebody from Bandirma came to Bradford, they'd probably think similar thoughts, except they wouldn't feel as safe!

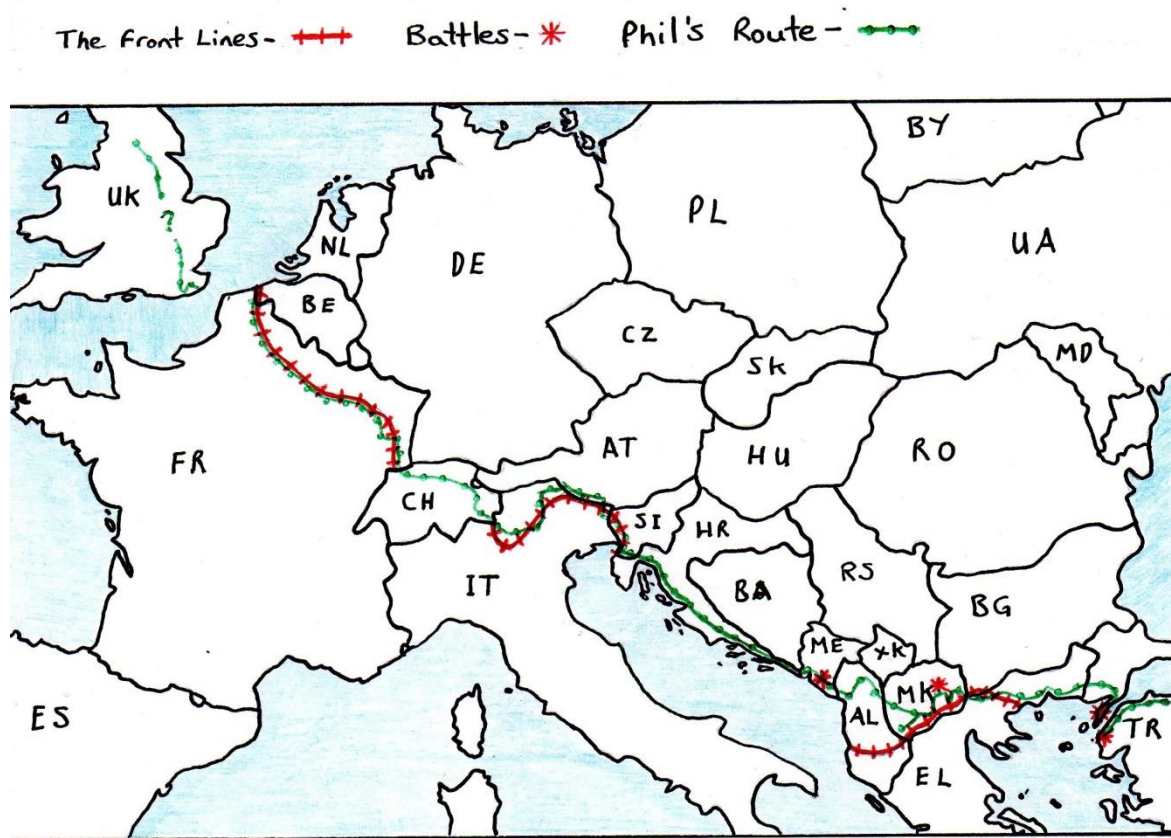
Before my journey started, I was worried about the parts of Turkey that I would be travelling through, but never once did I feel threatened. (Yes, there was a bit of a problem with stray dogs chasing me, but that wasn't unique to Turkey and I could deal with that.) Everybody that I met in Turkey was friendly and curious about my journey.

I needed somewhere safe to sleep as I still wasn't sure about things, so I diverted off my route a bit towards the seaside resort of Erdek. This was a bit more modern than Bandirma and after checking into a cheap hotel, I went for a walk to try to become a bit more familiar with the Turkish way of doing things. It didn't take long; they've got a chilled out way of life and (they'll hate this) it felt just like Greece!

The following day was the first proper day's cycling that I'd done in years. (I hadn't bothered training on a bike beforehand, instead I relied on my fitness gained from hillwalking. I was fine!) It was about 80km from Erdek to Biga, which was an interesting and extremely busy town. A few miles out of Erdek, I had my first experience with a pack of dogs, who decided to say hello in their own way (either that or they were hungry!) I was very pleased that my dog stick did its job and I left them looking rather nervous at the side of the road.

After another night in a cheap hotel, I set off on the slightly longer (approx 100km) journey to Canakkale, which I didn't reach until after dusk. Unfortunately every man and his dog were in Canakkale due to the Gallipoli centenary "celebrations" which were taking place a couple of days later. So I slept on a quiet (ish) beach.

2.



The Start. (Yes Really!)

Whilst everybody else was planning to commemorate the Centenary of the start of the Gallipoli campaign actually on or off the coast of the Gallipoli peninsular, I had another plan.

Just before the invasion, the Ottomans (Turks) were convinced that the main attack would happen on the Anatolian (Asian) side of the Dardanelle Strait, therefore the vast majority of the Ottoman 5th Army was kept there. To keep them there whilst the main invasion on the Gallipoli peninsular went ahead, on the morning of 25th April, the French landed two companies of infantry near the small village of Kumkale. They were supported by three French and one Russian battleship that shelled Kumkale whilst the landing took place. That night, there

was also a dummy landing by the French about 10km to the South at Besika Bay. The idea was to convince the Ottomans that the main invasion would happen on the Asian side. The ruse worked and the Ottoman troops that were detained in the area weren't able to join the fight on the Gallipoli peninsular until the 29th. The French withdrew their forces on the 27th after counterattacks by the 39th Ottoman Regiment nearly forced the French to surrender. The total losses for this unknown but significant action were 1,735 for the Ottomans and 786 for the French. I should also mention that in February 1915, a small force of Royal Marines landed at Kumkale to destroy the coastal artillery which was threatening the British warships in the area.

So, I headed off to the battlefield of Kumkale, hoping to camp there until the morning of the 25th. Whilst the rest of the world watched the services at Helles and Anzac bay, there would be a lone Englishman having his own dawn service in the peace and quiet on the forgotten battlefield of Kumkale.

It didn't exactly go to plan, but it worked out ok in the end.

The ride down to Kumkale was pleasant enough. On the way I met a Canadian couple, who were doing a cycling tour of Turkey. They couldn't believe what I was wearing to ride in and expressed shock at the state of my luggage system. They seemed to understand a bit more after I explained that I was equipped for the mountains which I would encounter later in my journey. (The only cycling thing that I had was the bike itself.) They were heading to the fabled remains of Troy which are near Kumkale, so I joined them on the ride down. There's a bit of a dispute over whether it actually is Troy or not and I suppose nobody will ever know. I definitely won't, as I lost the couple and never found Troy. Oh well, I had other places to go to.

The village of Kumkale was interesting. It looked just like any other remote Mediterranean village, except for the spoils of war which were dotted around the place. I spent a few minutes inspecting the mortars and field guns before carrying on. The road (if you can call it that) got very rough after the village, as it wasn't worth their while to replace the ancient cobbles with tarmac. They weren't like the nice smooth cobbles that you get in the west though, they were big and horrible to ride a bike on, so I pushed instead.

After crossing a bridge the going got a bit better and the cobbles had been replaced by sand. (At least I could ride.) As I passed some locals, who were working in a field, they waved and

I waved back. They were probably wondering what the heck I was doing there, as it wasn't exactly on the normal tourist route.

After passing a small wood of stunted and wind-blown pine trees, I came to the Turkish cemetery of Kumkale-Osmanli Mezarligi. It was located on a small hill which had a commanding view over the western side of Kumkale and was where the Turks positioned themselves during the three day long battle. It looked like the Turkish dead had been buried where they fell, as there was no organisation to the cemetery. The white, stone grave markers were haphazardly placed all over the hill with the remains of the trenches weaving around them. A brand new, bright red Turkish flag was flying on a huge flagpole placed on the top of the hill, which showed that despite the untidy appearance of the cemetery, the local population were respectful and mindful of their sacrifice. Yes it was untidy, but so is war. It was a very fitting memorial to their dead. Later on my journey, I found it difficult to imagine what the soldiers had gone through, as the majority of the cemeteries on the Western Front have been cleansed of any trace of their suffering. Not so at Kumkale and that is a better memorial to both the dead and the folly of mankind...

Leaving the cemetery behind I headed south, following the coastline towards another small hill which used to hold a battery of Turkish guns. This was my intended camping spot for the night, but unfortunately it didn't happen. About halfway there, I came across some dogs- a lot of dogs and they were really mean and nasty. There was no way that I was getting past them in one piece, so I turned back and despite them following me a little too closely, I made it back to the relative safety of the Turkish cemetery. (It had a fence and gate.)

As I sat under the shade of a stunted tree, I developed a backup plan. I was bitterly disappointed to have to change my plans so early in my journey, but there wasn't much choice, as getting eaten by a pack of wild dogs wasn't exactly on my bucket list! I could handle a few dogs, but not twenty odd of the buggers and what would happen when it got dark? (This type of situation would come back to haunt me later in my journey!)

No, there was no option but to head back up the long hill towards Canakkale. On my journey to Kumkale that morning, I had noticed what looked like a quiet stretch of beach and coastline to the south east of Canakkale, so I headed there.

It was a good location but despite this, I was still slightly spooked from my dog encounter in Kumkale, so I chose a section of beach next to a Turkish Army camp. Being not too far from possible help would make sleep a little bit more possible. I needn't have worried though, as there were quite a few families and groups of people who had the same idea.

After I'd put my tarp up and got prepared for the night, a kind man invited me to sit around his family's fire for some coffee. Now I don't normally drink coffee, but how could I refuse? His name was Mustafa and, like a lot of Turks, he had been named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey and the commander of the Ottoman 19th Division during the Gallipoli campaign. I don't remember the names of his wife or three children but they were a happy, amusing family with a strong understanding of history. Mustafa spoke perfect English and I enjoyed an entertaining couple of hours listening to his stories and waiting patiently whilst he translated mine to his waiting family. They were especially interested in the reasons why I was doing my journey. I gained a greater understanding of those reasons too, as I had to elaborate a bit further, instead of just saying that I wanted to do something to commemorate the centenary of the Great War.

I'd never really thought about my reasoning before, as I'd just concentrated on the planning and the doing of it. Yes, of course I was there to commemorate the centenary of the Great War, as that's what was and will be on all of our minds until the centenary of the Armistice in November 2018. This wasn't my only reason though. Lots of people were doing something to mark the centenary, but I noticed that they were just doing it in remembrance of the dead from one side; our side, the 'winning' side. I felt and still do think that it's more important to remember everybody who was killed, wounded or just disappeared during that horrible conflict. Not just soldiers, but civilians too. Throughout my journey, I therefore made a conscious effort to visit the sites and cemeteries of my Great Grandparents' enemies, even if it meant missing out our own. (I have purposely not said 'our enemies', as they are not.)

Whilst sitting with Mustafa and his family something amusing happened, although I'm not sure if they found it funny? As Turkey is an Islamic country, they do their call to prayer over a loudspeaker. It takes a bit of getting used to, but it was just normal for me by that point. Unfortunately, this wasn't the everyday call to prayer that I was used to hearing. It was coming from the Turkish army barracks nearby. For some reason, they were letting what sounded like young lads (probably recruits) do it and they were really taking the piss by wailing stupidly

and laughing. I didn't know what to do so I just looked out to sea, trying not to laugh. In the last light of dusk, I could see another group of people further down the beach shaking their heads and waving their fists towards the barracks. Mustafa then turned to me and just said, "Boys will be boys" before laughing. Phew! The tension went out of the air...

They had to go soon after as their children needed to sleep, so after saying our goodbyes, I went back to my lonely vigil on the beach. Over the flickering light of my own campfire, I watched the lights of a dozen or more ships sail from Canakkale, down the straits and around Cape Helles at the tip of the Gallipoli peninsular. They were the warships and cruise liners which were due to take part in the centenary 'celebrations' at Anzac Bay the following morning. It felt right to be where I was, instead of amongst them...

The following morning, whilst half the world was watching the Commemorations at Anzac Bay and Helles on their TVs, I was trying to figure out why my smart phone had stopped working. It had been fine the day before, when I'd tried charging it directly from my solar panel. I was stuffed without it, so there was nothing else to do but go and find a phone shop in Canakkale. (I'm worse than useless when it comes to dealing with technology.)

Just before I left the beach, I had an urgent call of nature. There were people on the road behind the beach, so I positioned myself behind a bush. So there I was, having a pee whilst facing out to sea. There was a warship sailing back up the straits, but it was a fair distance away so I carried on peeing. HONK, HONK, HOOONK! Either they had their binoculars out, or they were signalling the port? Either way, it made me jump and my automatic reaction was to wave at them (whilst I pissed down my leg!) A great start to the morning, NOT! Trousers off, rinsed in the sea and back on, then off to find a phone shop...

The young lad in the phone shop was really helpful, I had gone in there to buy a cheap phone, but he took one look at my phone and said "let me charge it up, come back in two hours." I waited down by the harbour where it was absolutely heaving with people, the vast majority were Aussies from the cruise ships and some journalists. I found a quiet spot and watched a display by some Turkish Air Force jets. They weren't as good as the Red Arrows, but it was still entertaining. Instead of doing the usual aerobatics, they preferred to scream in at low level from the direction of the sea in order to make as much noise as possible for the crowds watching below. I was really craving peace and quiet again, as I'm not exactly a massive fan of large crowds and big noisy things.

Back at the phone shop everything was alright again. It would seem that the solar panel had somehow drained the power from my phone, I felt like a right numpty! The lad said that charging phones from solar panels was a big no, no. You need to charge battery packs up first and then use that to charge your phone, I knew this anyway, but I was just trying to cut out the middleman. I bought another battery pack from him, as he had been so helpful and kind. I then headed back to the harbour to catch a ferry.

Gallipoli.

On the 2nd January 1915, Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia directly appealed for Britain and France to help Russia fight the Ottomans, who were in the process of conducting an offensive in the Caucasus region. As Russia was part of the Triple Entente alliance along with Britain and France, they didn't have much choice but to try to support their ally. There was only one problem: the Ottoman Empire controlled both the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. To help their ally, Britain and France would have to gain control of both of these before capturing the city of Constantinople. (Istanbul.)

Between mid February and Mid March 1915, the Royal Navy attempted to force their way through the Dardanelles. On the 18th of March, the British lost the battleships HMS Ocean and HMS Irresistible, with HMS Inflexible damaged by mines. Whilst the French lost their battleship Bouvet, with the battleships Suffren and Gaulois badly damaged. The naval commander, Admiral John de Robeck was forced to retreat and save what remained of his fleet. Thus the naval campaign was over and a new strategy had to be devised; hence the ground campaign.

The journey on the ferry was quite short, as the straits are only about a mile wide. I could see why the British and French couldn't get their battleships through; you'd only need a few sea mines to block it and that's just what the Turks did.

The destination for the ferry was Eceabat. I didn't know how to pronounce this, but being British, I just made my own up. 'I see a bat' sounded about right!

I once again had the problem of finding somewhere to sleep, as everywhere was packed due to the centenary, although I needn't have worried, as it turned out that I wasn't the only person who'd decided to go to Gallipoli without booking anything.

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