

Ten health issues soldiers had to deal with at Gallipoli

By Tom Decent

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Australian soldiers at Gallipoli faced death in battle on the frontline, but there were also serious health issues that debilitated battalions and forced soldiers to come home early.

Rhys Crawley, a First World War historian from the Australian National University, explains some of the main illnesses and health problems the soldiers experienced.



While honouring the courage and mateship of those who fought in the trenches of Gallipoli, we shy away from the brutal realities of warfare. *Credit: Australian War Memorial, A02025*

Trench foot

Trench foot is caused by exposure to cold and damp conditions, which reduces the amount of blood and oxygen supplied to the feet.



Men of the 1st Divisional Signal Company about to land at Anzac Cove on April 25, 1915. *Credit: Australian War Memorial, A02781*

Bare flesh becomes exposed which leads to blackened, rotting feet. Toes can also be lost.

"It's an unfortunate reality of trench warfare when it's cold and muddy and you can't leave," says Dr Crawley. "It's not unlike what you see when people climb [Mount] Everest who have lost toes. That puts men out of action who can't be in the trenches and fight, some of whom won't rejoin the fighting forces.

"It has effects on the army, not just the morale of the men."

Dysentery



Australian troops went to Mena Camp, Egypt, an AIF training base, before the Gallipoli landings. *Credit: Australian War Memorial*

Dysentery was the biggest problem at Gallipoli and the cause of numerous deaths.

Dysentery is an infection of the intestines that results in blood and mucus forming in severe diarrhoea. It is caused by poor sanitation. This pulled more men from the front line than anything else at Gallipoli.



A member of the 7th Australian Light Horse Regiment having a bath in the desert in preparation for returning to Gallipoli. *Credit: Australian War Memorial*

"Everything at the start of Gallipoli happened in a real hurry... They did not go to the toilet properly or burn food waste," says Dr Crawley.

"The weather then heats up ... and there's not much washing of hands. It's simple sanitation [that] we take for granted."

Post-traumatic stress disorder

A hundred years ago, there was no such thing as PTSD and men often came back shattered and unsupported. The harrowing experiences of war often stuck with soldiers who were unable to overcome the impact it had on their lives.

But as Dr Crawley points out, there is a misconception that everyone who fought in the war has been psychologically scarred as a result.

"They're not all broken men," he says. "A whole lot came back to life and functioned normally and carried on.

"We see them all as victims; it's the bronzed or the broken digger, they're the two ends of the stereotype."

Shell shock

By the end of the First War, there were 80,000 cases of shell-shock, caused from the traumatic stresses of combat. It is seen by some psychologists as related to PTSD, but shell shock relates to the immediate effects of battle, not the longer-term effects of conflict that emerge as PTSD.

"If you're not getting sleep because you're always on duty, or because it's noisy or it's not the conditions to get rest, you waste away. If you don't sleep for a day you generally can't function as well as you did the day before."

Lice

Lice spread rapidly through the force when trench life began.

Although lice did not contribute specifically to serious illness or disease, there was an annoyance factor which sent soldiers crazy.

"When you get to the Western Front, they used chemicals to kill the lice and fleas," Dr Crawley says. "At Gallipoli, they [didn't] have that; they [tried] to pick them out with their hands."

Flies

Few flies were bred in the first month of landing, but after the Turkish attack of May 19th, they became an enormous health problem because they fed off dead bodies as well as human and animal faeces.

There are stories of soldiers opening their bully beef tins and to find huge flies breeding inside their food.

"They are big blowflies like we get in Australia, but they bite," he says. "They are feeding off the dead, they are feeding off faeces, rotten food and they are going in men's mouths when they are trying to eat. They're just everywhere."

Sexually transmitted diseases

Thousands of men picked up sexually transmitted diseases from prostitutes in Egypt before getting to Gallipoli, which meant they had to be sent home before they saw a shot, to the annoyance of their superiors.

There were even special hospitals to treat STDs because they became so widespread.

"This [sexually transmitted diseases] really annoys the military forces. You have some leave, have some money and want to have a good time.

"There are rest areas in villages and women... So they [soldiers] do what you can imagine they do. Soldiers liked to enjoy themselves and there were consequences."

General illness

Until May 1915 the health of troops at Anzac was described as "perfect" but by July, there were as many troops debilitated by sickness as there were men placed out of action through injury.

"Most of the sickness comes as a direct result of the war; it's wounds, it's exhaustion," says Dr Crawley.

"At Gallipoli you have to send them off the peninsula and ship them onto an island to recuperate, so it's not like in France where you can put them on a train and move them way back."

Dental issues

There were few men originally listed who had poor dental hygiene, but as the war went on, the standard dropped remarkably.

Cracked teeth, bad breath and rotting teeth were the most common symptoms of soldiers who rarely had the luxury of brushing their teeth.

"There was a relaxing of the conditions." Dr Crawley says. "It was partly because of their diet; from grinding away on hard biscuits as rations. It wasn't until August that dentists started appearing to help."

Rats

There are stories of rats the size of small dogs hanging around the trenches, but flies and lice were more problematic overall.

"The military tried to keep things as clean as possible, but it was hard with decomposing bodies everywhere."