

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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AIR POWER IN THE BALKANS, 1912-13

Gallipoli is well known to most Australians as the place where the original ANZACs fought a dogged but ultimately unsuccessful campaign against the Ottoman Turks. Indeed Anzac Day, which commemorates the Gallipoli landings of 25 April 1915, is deeply imbedded in the Australian national memory. While there has been growing awareness in recent times of the aerial dimension of the 1915 Dardanelles campaign, there is limited knowledge about the part that aviation played during the First Balkan War of 1912-13 between the Greeks and the Turks—much of it also fought in the Dardanelles area.

On 8 October 1912, Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire and over the next ten days the other members of the Balkan League (Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece) followed suit. The Balkan League forces, numbering 750 000 men, rapidly advanced on all fronts against the 420 000 Turks in the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Despite stiffening Turkish resistance, the Bulgarians managed to advance through Thrace to the outskirts of Constantinople (Istanbul), cutting off the Turkish forces in the Gallipoli peninsula, and besieging the garrison in Adrianople (Edirne). At the same time, the Greeks conducted a series of successful maritime operations in the eastern Mediterranean, defeating the Ottoman Navy in the Aegean Sea and blockading the Turks at the Dardanelles.

The First Balkan War ended on 30 May 1913 with approximately 270 000 casualties on both sides. In eight months, the Ottoman Empire had lost most of its remaining European territory, including all of Macedonia, Albania and the islands of the north eastern Aegean. To the people of the Balkans, the war was clearly not a minor

conflict—even if that is how it was perceived in the rest of Europe, both at that time and subsequently.

Interestingly, both sides in the war had made use of the new technology of aviation to aid the efforts of their forces. Inspired, no doubt, by their conflict with the Italians in Libya (see Pathfinder 152), the Turks had formed an Aviation Commission within the War Ministry late in 1911—thereby providing, incidentally, the basis for celebrating the centenary of military aviation in Turkey this year. During 1912 eight Turkish officers were sent to France for flying training, an Air Academy

was opened at Constantinople, and efforts were stepped up to acquire aircraft. These measures ensured that the Ottoman Air Service was able to field 17 aircraft over the course of the Balkan conflict.

Early establishment of an aviation arm also enabled the Greek military and naval forces to achieve decisive strategic victories in the war. In 1911

the Hellenic Government had hired French experts to establish an Air Service. Six Greek officers were posted to France to train as pilots, while the first military aircraft were ordered from the French aviation firm, Henry and Maurice Farman. These aircraft arrived in Greece in early 1912 and the first Greek Army Air Company was formed, as part of the Hellenic Army, at Larissa in late September 1912.

The activities of a few Greek aviators influenced events on land and at sea to a far greater extent than their relatively small numbers and flimsy machines would suggest. On the very first day of the war, Lieutenant Dimitrios Kamperos conducted an air reconnaissance mission over Turkish positions at Elasson, in Thrace.





Henry Farman biplane named Daedalus, first flown in Greece on 13 May 1912, and now in the War Museum in Athens.

More reconnaissance missions followed and they soon included light bombing raids. Even though such bombing caused little significant physical damage, the raids were effective in weakening Turkish morale. On the Epirus front, the mountains initially prevented flying operations but the Greeks acquired more powerful aircraft, and from December 1912 they dominated this front as well.

During the remainder of the land war, Greek aircraft were used to observe Turkish forces between Nicopolis and Ioannina, also dropping improvised bombs on the Bizani strongholds and carrying out airdrops of food supplies and newspapers to the besieged population of Ioannina.

The Greeks formed a naval air arm in mid-November 1912, when the first Maurice Farman MF.7 hydroplane, *Nautilus*, entered service with the Royal Hellenic Navy (RHN). Following its defeat in the Naval Battle of Lemnos on 18 January 1913, the Ottoman fleet withdrew from the eastern Mediterranean into the Dardanelles. Early the next month the RHN sent *Nautilus* on its first long-distance flight to the island of Tenedos off the Gallipoli peninsula, in preparation for flying a reconnaissance mission over the Dardanelles to gain intelligence on the enemy's whereabouts. Coming from the direction of Gaba Tepe, the Greek crew spotted the Turkish fleet at anchor off Nagara Point. After dropping four light bombs on some of the ships, the pilot maintained position overhead while his observer prepared a detailed diagram of the fleet's dispositions. Although their bombs scored no hits, this was the first recorded naval-air battle in history. The Turkish press expressed

surprise and concern over the apparent defencelessness of the Dardanelles, and Gallipoli, against air attack.

The Greeks and the Turks both learnt considerably from their experiences during the First Balkan War, especially regarding the value of aircraft in the intelligence surveillance reconnaissance (ISR) role. Most outsiders, however, seemed to dismiss the notion that anything new had emerged from this conflict. The war was well covered by foreign journalists reporting on it for the international media, but they were generally disappointed that the conduct of 'war had not been revolutionised'.

Many of Europe's leading military powers were also represented by observers eager to glean whatever lessons the war had to offer. Most of these apparently felt that air power in the Balkans fighting did not produce the dramatic results that they had envisaged. In early 1914 General Sir Ian Hamilton, Britain's commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, expressed the belief that air reconnaissance had proved 'deceptive' and 'of little value'. Just over a year later, when the Allies confronted Turkey at Gallipoli, Hamilton was forced to learn the value of military aviation—the hard way. The importance of aviation during the First Balkan War is still little known, and perhaps this is to be expected when the role of aviation in the 1915-16 Gallipoli campaign is also largely neglected. Today a few scholars are trying to redress this imbalance.

- *Both the Greeks and Turks utilised aviation in support of operations during the First Balkan War, providing an early example of basic air power roles—especially ISR.*
- *The Greeks fought the first naval-air battle while on a reconnaissance flight over the Ottoman fleet in the Dardanelles in 1913.*
- *The experiences of small to medium-size nations with air power are often as valuable as the experiences of great powers.*

The Balkans produce more history than they can consume locally.

Winston Churchill



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