

The Reunionese of Dardanelles

In the French war literature, we talked a lot about the Verdun fronts or the Lady Path. Obviously because they're situated in France...

But those which took place on the Front of the East or in Greece, if they are less known were equally terrible. But it was exactly where those who came from the islands were sent to wage war.

The battle of Dardanelles took place started in February 18th, 1915 and ended in January 9th, 1916.

The peninsula of Gallipoli delimits the Dardanelles strait in the west which permits an access to the Black Sea.

Winston Churchill, (the Lord of admiralty), defends the idea of an expedition in the Dardanelles strait, so as to take possession of Istanbul, to raid over Turkey, and to open a maritime access to the Russian harbors positioned in the Black sea. France agreed with this operation.

On April 25th, 1915, a Franco-British army corps landed on the Gallipoli peninsula (Canakale in Turkish), in the entrance of the Dardanelles strait, in Turkey. This was a fiasco and the allies lost against the Turkish enemy.

Despite all the efforts made in 1915, the Allies failed and the fronts went to a halt at the Greek and Turkish borders.

Numerous Reunioneses called up

Numerous Reunionese soldiers took part in the Dardanelles expedition. Almost two-thirds of them were sent in order to defend their country during the First World War.

For some Reunionese, this expedition was perceived as an unfair debt that they had to pay back to their motherland, just like a gift to France. Because lots of them were recruited: men, fathers, sons.. while the wives and the mothers were praying and crying of distress somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean..

It's after a halt in Madagascar, then in Marseille that they were sent to the front of the East, in the Dardanelles. To gather a maximum of soldiers and combattants, the generals stir up the curiosity and the bravery of the Reunionese promising a trip to a warm country and the discovery of a new country and indirectly expressing his duty to drag them away from their ignorance.

The most important contingents of our soldiers were then sent to the Dardanelles, just because they were supposedly said to be adapting more easily to the climate and more resistant to diseases because they were considered to be stronger than other troops. Indeed, the natives from a tropical area where the malaria is present, were considered as stronger and more able to fight in this country where the epidemics were actually hitting. Unfortunately, they were greatly disappointed.

The disastrous living conditions

In 1915, when our soldiers landed in the Dardanelles, they had to face very low temperatures due to a really cold winter. It's a completely difficult situation for them, because they had never experienced a winter like this one. It was the beginning of a long battle in deeply deplorable conditions, where the soldiers would suffer physical and psychological pain, diseases, some will die and above all of them have to bear the responsibility of a failure and will feel ashamed .

J.OULEDI is a Reunionese caporal who took part in the Dardanelles. In his letter to his brother on July 19th,1915 he shortly described the harsh reality of the soldier's life. The standard of living in which the soldiers were evolving was insurmountable. The lack food, the rotten water and the heat led to a continual exhaustion. This resulted to major epidemics such as cholera, heavy cold, and dysentery... Without taking into account the fact that the malaria that they have to face was actually more serious and dangerous that they had imagined. Therefore our soldiers suffered as much as the others.

Letter from J.OULEDI to his brother, the July 19th 1915.

Some soldiers were dispirited and weakened, while others were not spared by the harshness of the fighting. Their deaths were terrible: they were physically and mentally destroyed, ripped apart by the bullets the machine guns, dismembered and scattered on the battlefield.

A catastrophic Assessment

Among the 30 000 French soldiers who perished, many Reunionese died, a lot were injured or they have been declared missing at the Dardanelles because their bodies have not been recovered yet, on the Gallipoli peninsula.

Some of them were considered as heroes thank to their role and their courage during the battle.

However the nouns' list isn't complete at all, so all the dead aren't identified. It's the most deadly battle for the Reunionese population. Their father's, brother's or even son's deaths in a similar place of/to Reunion by its sky and its nature, make this battle a painful and memorable battle in Reunionese minds.

A rarely mentioned battle

On the side of the Gallipoli peninsula, huge cemeteries with many crosses which stestify of the endured pains by this forgotten military corps of Dardanelles and Salonika.

Australia and New-Zealand also celebrate each year the ANZAC Day (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps). Indeed, on the April 25th, they commemorate the memories of the soldiers who fell during the Gallipolis's landing. In France, this battle is barely mentioned even almost forgotten, probably because it was a real failure, an undeniable shame for France.

Nevertheless, 180 000 of its soldiers were involved that's why it has left its mark on the history for ever.

