

GALLIPOLI - BIRTH OF THE AUSTRALIAN ETHOS

By Peter Cleary

7 August 1915

GALLIPOLI - BIRTH OF THE AUSTRALIAN ETHOS

Charles Bean (Australia Official War Correspondent) was nearby when the Australians began their charge at the Nek on 7 August 1915. Bean had just been shot. He was limping to a casualty clearing station when *“there burst from the ridge above a sudden roar of musketry and machine gun fire, like the rush of water pouring over Niagara”*. Bean shuddered.

THE NEK BATTLE

Bean never forgot his visceral response to the “dreadful roar”. He wrote his Official History generally in a measured, sober style. The emphasis was on facts, not fervour. However, his account of the 10th Light Horse at the Nek was an exception:

“But as the men rose above the parapet (the roar) instantly swelled until its volume was tremendous. . The 10th went forward to meet death instantly.....”

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THE NEK BATTLE

“..... With that regiment went the flower of the youth of Western Australia, sons of old pioneering families , youngsters – in some cases two and three from the same home – who had flocked to Perth at the outbreak of the war with their horses and saddlery in order to secure enlistment in a mounted regiment of the AIF.

Men known and popular, the best loved leaders in sport and work in the West, then rushed straight to their death. Gresley Harper and Wilfred, his younger brother (who) was last seen running forward like a schoolboy in a foot-race, with all the speed he could compass; the gallant Piesse , who struggled ashore from the hospital ship; two others , who had just received their commissions, Roskams and Turnbull – the latter a Rhodes scholar.”

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THE NEK BATTLE

More than half a century later these words struck Peter Weir, an Australian who was yearning to create a special, gripping story about Gallipoli.

He had been grappling with this project for years. He had visited Anzac Cove. He had traversed the trenches. He had tossed around plenty of ideas, various angles, numerous drafts. But none had proved ultimately satisfying; none was compelling enough for the film he wanted to make.

He was still striving to find a way to shape his film when he read again Bean's account of the Nek.

When Peter Weir came to the description of how Wilfred Harper died, its potential suddenly jumped out at him.

That sentence of Bean's – *'like a schoolboy in a foot-race, with all the speed he could compass'* – became a motif for his film.

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THE EFFECT OF THE FILM – *GALLIPOLI*

The film was released at a strange time. The Vietnam War and the divisions that it had created within the community were still fresh in the public's mind and old war stories did not seem to be much in demand.

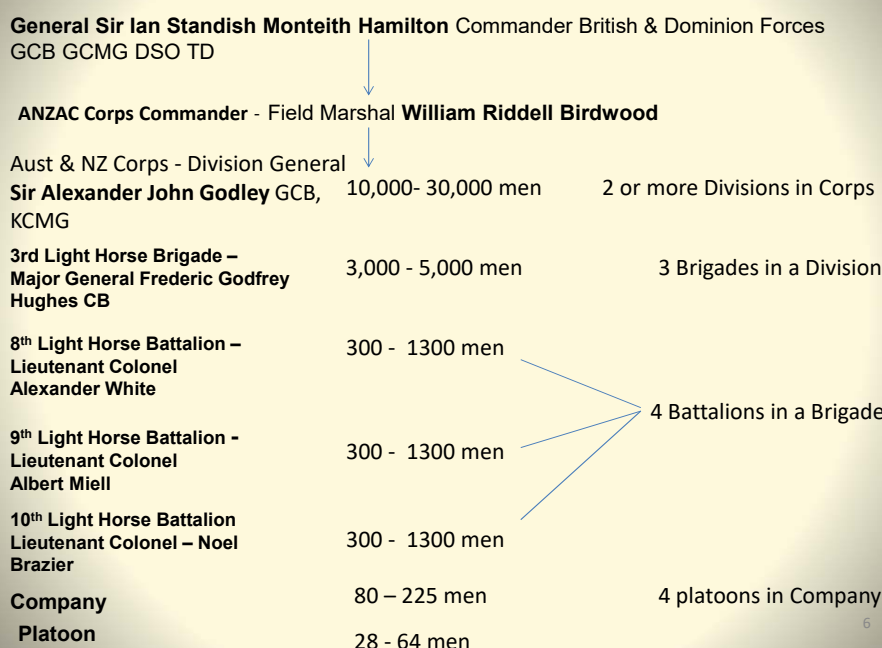
In 1981, with the release of the Australian film *Gallipoli*, interest in the Nek was revived.

Gallipoli reached an enormous Australian audience, was distributed overseas and was even shown in Turkey. Today many Australians draw their images of the 1915 campaign from Weir's influential film.

Despite the passage of time, changing perceptions and the disappearance of the veterans, the Anzac story remains an enduring Australian legend. The charge at the Nek is a central component of this story. It possesses a grand heroic quality, despite also being a testament to the tragedy of war and a reminder of the terrible cost in human lives upon which military legends are built.

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COMMAND STRUCTURE ON GALLIPOLI PENINSULA



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OFFICERS & COMMANDS

General Sir Ian Standish Monteith Hamilton GCB GCMG DSO TD (16 January 1853 – 12 October 1947) was a general in the British Army and is most notable for commanding the ill-fated Mediterranean Expeditionary Force during the Battle of Gallipoli.



Hamilton attended Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 1870, the first year that entrance to the army was by examination rather than by purchasing a commission. In 1871 he joined the Suffolk regiment but shortly after transferred to the second battalion Gordon Highlanders stationed in India, taking part in the Afghan War.

Kitchener appointed Hamilton to command the Allied Mediterranean Expeditionary Force to gain control of the Dardanelles straits from Turkey and capture Constantinople in March 1915. Hamilton was not given a chance to take part in planning the campaign. Intelligence reports were poor and grossly underestimated the strength of defending forces and their willingness to fight. It was conceived that a force of 70,000 men would be adequate to rapidly overpower the defenders.

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OFFICERS & COMMANDS *cont*

On 3 January 1915 **First Sea Lord, Admiral Fisher** presented a plan to the War council for a joint naval and military attack, using 75,000 troops, but only if the attack could be launched immediately. Churchill himself, as First Lord of the Admiralty, had initially suggested in September 1914 that the support of 50,000 men would be needed.

An attempt was made commencing 19 February to take the strait using naval power alone. For the large ships to approach and shell the forts, the mines had to be cleared. The mines could not be cleared because of inadequate minesweepers, and the ongoing shell fire from the forts. The plan had been conceived with the idea of only sending second-rate ships which were considered expendable. On 18 March the British and a squadron of French ships mounted a more determined attack, with the result that three were sunk and three disabled by undiscovered mines. There was little effect on the defenders, except to cause them to expend the majority of their ammunition. Churchill ordered admiral John de Robeck to continue the operation, but De Robeck, replacing the intended commander of the fleet, Admiral Sackville Carden (who had become ill) saw no sense in losing further ships, and withdrew. It was then decided that an invasion by troops would be required.

Hamilton became responsible for organizing armed landings. He had no specialized landing craft, the disparate troops he had been given had no training and supplies for the army had been packed in ways which made them difficult to access for landings. Hamilton believed that the navy would make further attacks during his landings. The navy, realising likely losses and fundamentally opposing the idea that tactical losses of ships was acceptable declined to mount another attack. The Turks had been allowed two months warning from the first serious navy attack to prepare ground defenses before the follow-up ground landing could be mounted, and they used the time effectively.

Following the failure of the Dardanelles expedition, **Hamilton** was recalled to London on 16 October 1915, effectively ending his military career.

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OFFICERS & COMMANDS cont

Field Marshal William Riddell Birdwood, 1st Baron Birdwood, GCB, GCSI, GCMG, GCVO, CIE, DSO (13 September 1865 – 17 May 1951) was a British Army officer. He saw active service in the Second Boer War on the staff of Lord Kitchener. He saw action again in World War I as Commander of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps during the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915, leading the landings on the peninsula and then the evacuation later in the year,



In November 1914 **Birdwood** was instructed by Kitchener to form an army corps from the Australian and New Zealand troops that were training in Egypt. [Kitchener instructed General Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, to carry out an operation to capture the Gallipoli peninsula and placed Birdwood's ANZAC Corps under Hamilton's command.[1] Hamilton ordered Birdwood to carry out a landing on 25 April 1915

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OFFICERS & COMMANDS cont

Major-General William Bridges and **Major-General Alexander Godley**, the divisional commanders, were both of the view that the Allied forces, dealing with stiffer-than-expected resistance, should be evacuated ahead of an expected attack by Turkish forces.[18] Nevertheless **Hamilton** ordered them to hold fast.

He launched a major attack on the Turks in August 1915 (the Battle of Sari Bair) but still failed to dislodge them from the peninsula.[1] Notwithstanding this he was the only corps commander opposed to abandoning Gallipoli.[9]

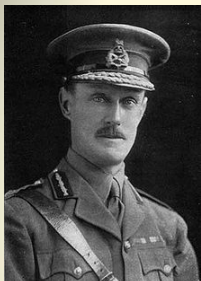
The one outstanding success of the campaign was the evacuation led by **Birdwood**, which took place in December 1915 and January 1916, when the entire force was withdrawn before any Turkish reaction.[9]

General Sir Alexander John Godley GCB, KCMG (4 February 1867 – 6 March 1957) was a senior officer in the British Army. He is best known for his role as commander of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and II Anzac Corps during the First World War.

Born in England in 1867, Godley joined the British Army in 1886. He fought in the Boer War. In 1910 he went to New Zealand as Commandant of the New Zealand Military Forces.

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OFFICERS & COMMANDS cont



During the Battle of Gallipoli, Godley commanded the composite New Zealand and Australian Division, before taking over command of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps for the final stages of the campaign. Promoted to lieutenant general, he had a brief period in command of I Anzac Corps

On the day of the landing at Gallipoli, 25 April 1915, Godley came ashore on Gallipoli at midday. Consulting with Major General William Bridges that afternoon, Godley was of the view that the Allied forces, dealing with stiffer than expected resistance, should be evacuated ahead of an expected attack by Turkish forces the next morning.[12] Although Bridges agreed with Godley, the commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, Sir Ian Hamilton, ordered them to hold fast.

Godley (centre) confers with fellow generals Harry Chauvel and William Riddell Birdwood, Gallipoli, 1915



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IMMEDIATE COMMANDERS – Decisive Decisions

Major General Frederic Godfrey Hughes CB (26 January 1858 – 23 August 1944) was an Australian Army Major General in World War I.

Frederic Godfrey Hughes was born on 26 January 1858 in the Melbourne suburb of Windsor, the son of a grazier. He was educated at Melbourne Grammar School.

Hughes became involved in local politics and in 1898 Hughes was elected a St Kilda City Councillor. He had various business interests, including directorships of Dunlop Rubber and South Broken Hill

Hughes was appointed to the First Australian Imperial Force as a colonel on 17 October 1914 and given command of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade.

Like most militia brigadiers, Hughes was given a regular officer as a brigade major, in his case, Lieutenant Colonel Antill. Although not an easy man to get along with, Hughes relied heavily on Antill.

Godley ordered Hughes to attack the Turkish positions at the Nek at 0430 on 7 August 1915 with a bayonet charge in support of the New Zealand attack on Chunuk Bair. The attack stalled from the very beginning, when the artillery lifted some seven minutes early according to watches on Russell's Top. Then wave after wave of light horsemen charged the Turkish trenches at the Nek, only to be cut down.

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Hughes mismanaged the battle. He left his headquarters around the time the second wave of 150 had attacked in order to try to observe the attack, thereby isolating himself from Antill and the rest of his headquarters. After the third wave had been slaughtered, Hughes gave orders for the attack to be discontinued, but not in time to save the fourth wave. He seems to have become completely rattled



Above: Central characters in The Nek drama on the slopes of Walker's Ridge, near the 3rd Light Horse Brigade's headquarters. The divisional commander, General Godley (left), is speaking to Colonel Hughes (centre, light jacket) and Lieutenant Colonel Antill (right). (AWM J02715)

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TRAGEDY of the NEK – Gallipoli Main Characters

- Major General Frederic Godfrey **Hughes** –
Commander of the 3rd Light Horse Battalion
- Lieutenant Colonel John **Antill** –
Major Brigade of the 3rd Light Horse Battalion
- Lieutenant Colonel Noel **Brazier**–
Commander of the 10th Light Horse Battalion

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HISTORY OF ANIMOSITY

The animosity between Hughes, aged 45, and Antill on the one hand and Brazier goes back to October 1914 when Hughes and Antill journeyed from Melbourne to Western Australia to meet officers and inspect the WA companies.

Antill, true to his reputation – *“He had a reputation as a fire-eater”* - made no concession for the men who were still very aware that they had offered their services voluntarily. He became widely known as “Bull” Antill. A 9th Light Horse officer many years later recalled that, rather than “Bull Antill”, the name was pronounced “Bullant hill” This is confirmed in the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Alexander White, who was 32 at the time, who consistently refers to Antill as “Bullant”

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HISTORY OF ANIMOSITY continued

The poor opinion which Hughes and Antill had of Brazier was reinforced on the sea voyage to Egypt when Antill sailed on the “Mashobra” with the West Australians.

The antipathy which developed between Hughes and Antill and Brazier set the tone for their future relationship.

In the few months that the Brigade was in Egypt, relations between Hughes and Antill and three commanding officers deteriorated.

In May 1915, when the Brigade was ordered to prepare to go to Gallipoli, Hughes and Antill conveniently ordered Brazier to command the troops remaining in Egypt to care for the horses of the Brigade.

Brazier finally got to Gallipoli to take command of the 10th Light Horse Battalion during the August 1915 offensive.

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THE TOPOGRAPHY

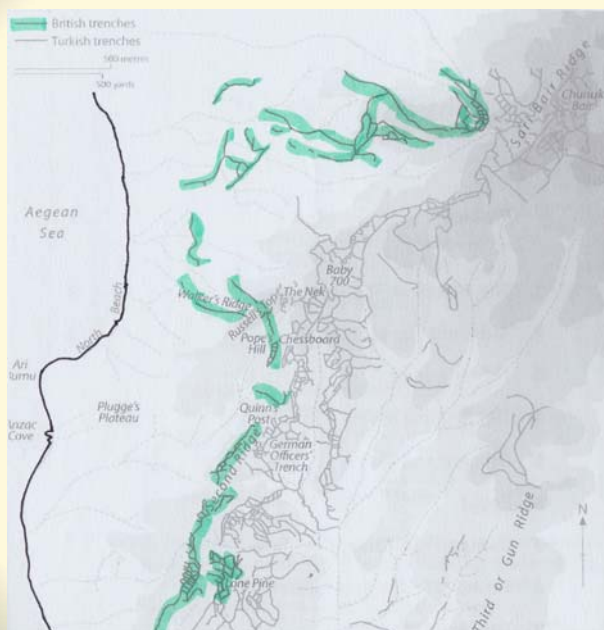
The distance between the opposing trenches was reckoned to be about 40 metres. Since these were not parallel lines, the gap was greater at some points but smaller at the centre. The land between was rough and broken.

The Australians had to charge up a slope over ground covered in parts by thick low scrub, in some places stripped by machine-gun fire or burnt by flames, and concealing dips and holes and an old sunken gravel track.

The 3rd Light Horse Brigade was ordered by Field Marshal William Riddell Birdwood, as part of the assault on the hill called "Baby 700", the 3rd Light Horse Brigade was to take a forward high position called "The Nek". The planning had many weaknesses from the start. The Brigade was to charge rushing with rifle and bayonet the enemy trenches.

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TRENCH LINES AT ANZAC



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THE BATTLE

- The Turkish troops were prepared for the assault and to make matters worse for the Australians the bombardment ceased 7 minutes prior to the appointed time for the assaults to begin. The Turkish troops had 7 minutes to set up, such things as, machine-gun placement ready for the assaults which they knew were to come.
- The 8th Light Horse Battalion was to charge first in 2 waves. Lieutenant Colonel Alexander White (White), contrary to military practice, led one of the 2 charges. Before proceeding to the enemy trenches White was killed.
- The 10th Light Horse Battalion was to be the 3rd and 4th charge. Brazier had seen the massacre of the 8th Light Horse Battalion and knew his company would have the same fate if the charges were not called off.

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THE CONFUSION

Brazier was greatly troubled by what he had seen of the destruction of the Victorians' two lines and could not give the order. A young staff officer rushed up to ask why he had not sent the waiting line. He replied that he would not do this without first seeking confirmation.

It was fully daylight as Brazier pushed his way back down the lines of trenches to the temporary brigade headquarters. There he found Antill and told him of the futility of continuing. Antill replied that a flag had been seen on the Turks' parapet and the attack must proceed. Brazier said that he had not been able to see a flag or any sign to indicate that a trench had been taken.

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THE CONFUSION continued

Antill was furious at the impertinence of this troublesome and argumentative officer who had left his post to query orders which had so firmly been given. Brazier claimed that Antill responded to his appeal by roaring, "*Push on!*" He then had to return to the front line where he gravely announced:

"I am sorry lads but the order is to go."

Hughes had not taken proper command. When he left his headquarters to find an observation spot, he unwittingly split the control of the brigade. Antill had no hesitation in giving orders to keep the attack going, as he believed he was correctly interpreting the commanders' instructions.

After the third line had left, Hughes realised that another effort could not succeed, so he called off the attack. However, as orders were emanating from two points, there was inevitable confusion.

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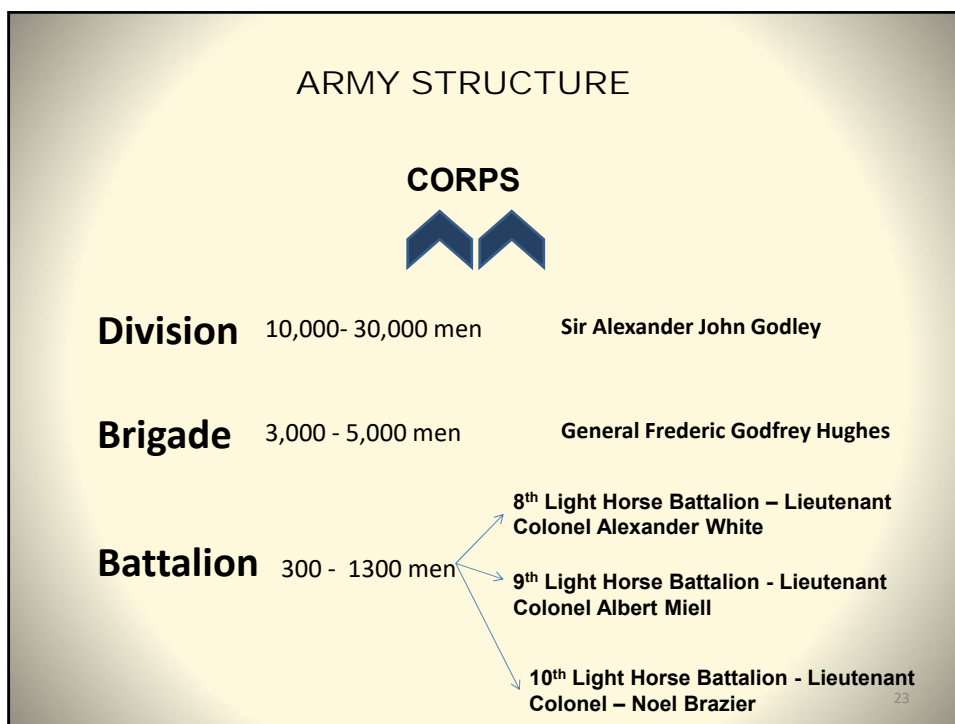
THE CONFUSION continued

The actions of other officers had also compounded the problems. While Brazier was chasing around trying to have the attacks stopped, Lieutenant Colonel Carew Reynell second of the 9th Light Horse Company, was encouraging Antill to continue.

Hughes was neither a fool nor a coward. But he was not a battle-hardened commander and there was nothing in his training or background which could have prepared him for the situation he had to face. He did not even share the experience of previous campaigns with most other officers at his level. Most importantly, the burdens of command and the physical exertions of holding on at Anzac were too much for a man of his age.

Antill had been opposed to the attack from the start and had quite correctly, made his opinion known. However, once he had been given his orders he believed that it was his responsibility to carry them out to the letter.

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ROLL OF HONOUR FOR THE BATTLE AT THE NEK
(7 August 1915)

No official list of casualties at the Nek has been found. The names of the Australians fallen have been compiled from the regular AIF casualty reports and confirmed against war graves and memorial registers.

8th Light Horse Battalion: 12 officers and 142 men

(Lieutenant Colonel Alexander White, commander of the **8th Light Horse Battalion**, was killed when leading his men in a charge at the Nek on 7 August 1915)

10th Light Horse Battalion: 7 officers and 73 men

In all 234 Australian men died as a result of suicidal charges in approximately 30 minute of charges at the Nek in the early morning of the 7th of August 1925.

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George Washington Lambert

George Lambert was born in St Petersburg, Russia in 1873. He migrated to Australia in 1887 and died 29 May 1930 at Cobbity, NSW, Australia.

Lambert was officially appointed in late 1917 as Official War Artist. Attached as an honorary lieutenant to the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), who were then fighting the Turks, he left London on 25 December for the Middle East. His seventy-six drawings were produced during 1918. Many are portraits of the officers and men who were based in Egypt and Palestine.

Lambert was reappointed in 1919, now as honorary captain, and travelled to Gallipoli and the Middle East with Charles Bean to record the battlefields, as well as make preparatory drawings for the planned large commissioned paintings. One of the commissioned works, ANZAC, the landing 1915, is the largest and one of the most important paintings in the Memorial's art collection. Often reproduced, it has been continuously on display since the Memorial first opened in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne in 1922. Other battle paintings he produced include *The charge of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at the Nek*, 7 August 1915 and *The charge of the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba*, 1917.

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The charge of the 3^d Light Horse Brigade at the Nek



A sergeant of the Light Horse is a 1920 painting by Australian artist George Washington Lambert. The portrait depicts an Australian soldier in Palestine during World War I.

The sitter for the portrait was Thomas Herbert (Harry) Ivers, a sergeant with the 1st Signal Squadron of the Australian Light Horse.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Peter Burness: The Nek – A Gallipoli Tragedy; Pen & Sword Books Ltd; 1996.
- Wikipedia

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