In the early hours of the morning of 25 April 1915 waves of Allied troops landed on the beaches of the Gallipoli peninsula. Their arrival signified the beginning of an attempt to break through the Dardanelles and seize the Ottoman capital of Constantinople (Istanbul). Within hours of the dawn assault the war was already over for hundreds of Australian soldiers who had fallen victim to Turkish machine gun and rifle fire as they attempted to traverse the beach and scale the scrubby hillsides with which they were confronted. By the end of that day the war was also over for four other Australians: Bugler Frederick Ashton, Private Reginald Lushington, Sergeant William Elston, and Captain Ron McDonald. Unlike their comrades these four men had not been killed or wounded. Instead they had been captured by their Turkish enemy, earning them the distinction of the first Australians to be taken prisoner in the war.¹ During the course of the conflict 192 more Australians joined Ashton, Lushington, Elston and McDonald as prisoners of the Turks.

Historian Joan Beaumont states that POWs are often “among the forgotten victims of war”.² This is certainly the case for the Australians held as prisoners by the Turks. Despite these men being among the first Australians to experience sustained captivity at the hands of a wartime enemy and suffering a relatively high death toll (fifty-four men), they have, as Peter Monteath states, been “neatly erased from the collective memory” of the First World War.³ They are rarely discussed in general analyses of Australia’s involvement in or experience of the war, except in footnotes or appendices to denote battle casualties. The father of Australian military history, Charles Bean, mentions them

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¹ Despite the ethnic pluralism of the Ottoman Empire the vast majority of those who fought in its army were Turkish. See Edward J. Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), xvi. In keeping with Erickson’s argument and the ways by which the Australians referred to their captors, Ottoman forces will be referred to as the Turks for the remainder of this chapter.
sparingly in his frontline-focussed official histories, while more generic POW histories are equally as limited in their discussions.

There are a number of pragmatic reasons that explain why these prisoners have been overlooked in Australian narratives of the war. Their numerical significance was undoubtedly one of the greatest factors contributing to their immediate neglect, as their small group size was quickly consumed in the sheer scale of the tragedy of the war. Out of a population of approximately five million, 417,000 Australians volunteered for overseas active service with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the four years of the conflict. 60,000 of these were killed and over 150,000 wounded. It is understandable that, in a nation consumed with grief and the unprecedented problem of dealing with thousands of disabled, maimed and psychologically damaged returned servicemen, the imprisonment experiences of just under 200 men were overshadowed. Moreover, the act of surrendering and becoming a prisoner of war sat awkwardly alongside the developing legend of the Australian fighting man. In the lead up to the First World War Australian masculinity was closely linked to perceived natural qualities of strength, courage and a ‘never say die’ attitude; captivity, an essentially subject state that relegated a man to the sidelines of the war, presented a major challenge to the national myths of masculine agency and fighting prowess.4

The minimal literature available which is concerned with the prisoners of the Turks usually centres on themes of mistreatment, brutality and neglect and, in Australia at least, comparisons are often made between their experiences and those of the POWs of the Japanese a generation later. This idea has been challenged by Jennifer Lawless who, in a study of the literature generated by the Australian ex-prisoners captured on Gallipoli, argues that ideas of ill treatment developed over time as a result of the body of work produced by those who returned.5 Lawless asserts that, when checked against Turkish sources, analysis of the POWs’ experiences demonstrates that their time in Turkey was marked less by the institutionalised brutality usually associated with Japanese prison camps of the Second World War, and more by simple maladministration. These ideas need further development. Even if the prisoners’ claims have been proved to be overly sensational, the fact remains that many