

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Gallipoli (1981)

Peter Weir

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OVERVIEW

Director Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir then made several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003). The recipient of numerous awards, Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film *Gallipoli* tells the story of two (fictional) young men caught up in a real historical event: the Gallipoli campaign of World War I, in which troops from Australia fought in a disastrous battle against Turkish forces. The film was inspired by C.E.W. Bean's book *The Story of Anzac from the Outbreak of War to the End of the First Phase of the Gallipoli Campaign, May 4, 1915*. Much of the film, though, portrays the main characters' experiences before they arrive at the front. In particular, both characters are competitive runners – a coincidental similarity to *Chariots of Fire*, a hit British film released in the same year.

Background Appearing two years after *Mad Max*, *Gallipoli* was both a second superstar vehicle for Mel Gibson and one of the first Australian films to receive mainstream American distribution (by Paramount). The screenplay was written by David Williamson, one of Australia's most successful playwrights; some commentators have identified a three-act structure in the film and attributed this structure to the writer's experience in the theater. Although Weir has resisted labeling *Gallipoli* a war film, the film's final third offers an unmistakable critique of the human cost of war. Some commentators have speculated that the film could have been intended as a subtle critique of the recent Vietnam War.

SYNOPSIS

In 1915 Australia, a young man named Archy Hamilton works at his family's cattle station, trains with his uncle to improve his already stellar track record in footraces, and tries to figure out a way to join the army even though he is only eighteen. At a footrace, he beats Frank Dunne, a champion sprinter from Perth. Frank has already expressed reservations about becoming a soldier to his friends from his job on the railroad. After various setbacks, Archy, Frank, and Frank's friends all join the Australian military and reunite in Cairo, where they train and explore the local bazaar.

Finally, the young Australian men are sent to the battlefield at Gallipoli, in Turkey. For a while, they simply wait, though bombs explode all around them on a regular basis. When the company to which Frank's railroad friends belong is sent to fight, one of the men is killed outright and one of the others

sustains what appears to be a fatal injury. Frank becomes increasingly concerned, though Archy remains relatively positive. Just before Frank and Archy's Light Horse regiment is sent into battle, Major Barton learns that Archy is a champion sprinter and tries to appoint him as a runner to take messages back and forth between the trench and the command station once the battle begins. Archy convinces him to appoint Frank instead. The battle begins but goes horribly for the Australian troops; Colonel Robinson insists that they continue to carry out their original orders, however, which causes more men to die. Finally Frank secures a message from a higher-ranking official ordering the battle to stop, but he is unable to get the message to the trench in time to stop another wave of men – including Archy – from dying.

CHARACTERS

Frank Dunne – young sprinter who signs up to join World War I
Archy Hamilton – another young sprinter who signs up to join World War I
Jack – Archy's uncle and running coach
Les McCann – neighbor and Archy's nemesis
Zac – Aboriginal friend of Archy's
Billy – works on railroad with Frank and also joins up
Barney – works on railroad with Frank and also joins up
Snowy – works on railroad with Frank and also joins up
Major Barton – military leader at Gallipoli
Colonel Robinson – Major Barton's superior

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Frank Dunne

Frank is a young Caucasian man from Perth, Australia. He works on the railroad with three friends, wins money in footraces, and dreams of opening a bike shop. He meets Archy Hamilton at a race and follows this new friend in going to fight in World War I despite his own reservations.

Determined – Frank continues to be interested in racing despite his defeat by Archy early in the film. Furthermore, he makes a second attempt to join Archy in the Light Horse at Gallipoli even though he failed to pass the riding test in Australia. Finally, once Major Barton engages him as a sprinter to carry messages among officers during the battle, Frank tries as hard as he can to run quickly and to advocate for his comrades when speaking to Colonel Robinson.

Energetic – Frank often runs in the film; he runs races, he carries urgent messages, and he runs just for fun. He and Archy sometimes run and skip like gazelles on their journey across the outback. Frank tries to learn to ride horses, and he energetically explores Cairo when in the training camp there.

Realistic – In contrast to Archy's idealism, Frank already seems disillusioned by reality. His grandfather was killed by the British. He does not think that Australia belongs in World War I. He does join the war out of friendship for Archy, but once at Gallipoli, he is not surprised to see how awful it is.

Social – Frank makes friends easily and cares a great deal about them. He is friends with all three of his colleagues from his work on the railroad, consistently expressing happiness to see them and concern for their welfare. He also makes friends with Archy even though Archy defeated him in a race and even though the two men disagree about the war.

Archy Hamilton

Archy is a young Caucasian man living with his family on a cattle station in rural Australia. He is a champion sprinter, being trained by his uncle. When World War I breaks out, he finds a way to join the fight despite his family's objections and his underage status.

Determined – Like Frank, Archy demonstrates determination. He leaves home to try to join the war effort even though his family disapproves. Although initially rejected from the military for being under 21 years old, he tries again and is successful, thanks to Frank's contribution of a fake birth certificate and fake facial hair.

Energetic – Another trait Archy shares with Frank is being energetic. He, too, is a sprinter who has won many races. He takes on a challenge from another man early in the film to race barefoot against a horse. Later, he insists that he and Frank walk fifty miles across the outback rather than waiting two weeks for another train.

Idealistic – Unlike Frank, Archy is idealistic – a combination of innocence and optimism. He believes that Australia should participate in World War I, and that doing so will fend off German aggression and gain Australians the respect of the world. Up to the last minute, he reassures a fellow soldier that their commanding officers would not send them pointlessly into danger.

Generous – Archy twice tries to help Frank join the Light Horse, first by teaching him to ride and second by simply asking his commanding officer to admit Frank. Most importantly, though, Archy essentially dies in Frank's place: when Major Barton proposes that Archy participate in the Gallipoli battle as a sprinter to carry messages rather than as a fighter, Archy nominates Frank instead.

THEMES

Friendship Friendship (or what Australians might refer to as “mateship”) is arguably the most prominent theme throughout *Gallipoli*. Early scenes show the two main characters, separately, interacting with friends: Frank talks with Barney, Billy, and Snowy, while Archy defends his friendship with an Aboriginal man against the taunts of a neighbor. The Aboriginal man only appears early in the film as he does not join the military. But Frank's three friends are present at various points, and they obviously all care a great deal about each other. They work together, train together, explore Cairo together, and are hurt when they feel one has betrayed another—and all of this happens before the ultimate bonding activity of being in a war zone together. But the greatest friendship is between Frank and Archy, who are adversaries in a race and disagree about the war but nevertheless bond almost instantly. They frequently help each other; Archy helps Frank get across the outback; Frank helps Archy pretend to be old enough to join the war; Archy helps Frank get into the Light Horse; and finally, Archy gives Frank his position as sprinter-messenger at Gallipoli so that he will not have to fight. Frank screams when he realizes Archy will die.

War Although Weir has insisted that *Gallipoli* should not be understood as merely a war film, armed conflict is nonetheless a key theme. The viewer learns early on that the year is 1915, and early scenes show characters reading newspaper articles about the war. It becomes clear that the war is a frequent topic of conversation in Australia at this time; while some people express the opinion that Australians should participate, others barely know that a war is taking place and wonder what a conflict in faraway Europe could possibly have to do with them. Archy and Frank, respectively, represent these two different perspectives. Frank ultimately does see the war as an opportunity for him to rise in status, while Archy sees it as a chance for Australia to perform on the world stage. Frank is very aware of the dangers of war and looks concerned as soon as they arrive at Gallipoli. Archy, by contrast, smiles when he first hears artillery fire and expresses eagerness to get on the battlefield. Ultimately, the final third of the film takes place at Gallipoli and strongly argues that this campaign was unjust and pointless in addition to being horribly deadly.

Colonialism By the film's setting of 1915, Australia was fairly independent from Great Britain. After years as a penal colony where the British would send convicts, Australia had been granted more and more privileges of self-government in the second half of the nineteenth century. It became a “commonwealth” under the British crown in 1901, after which point it operated largely independently. Nevertheless, British colonial prejudice against Australians (white and Aboriginal) lingered. The film depicts this prejudice. Once Frank, Archy, and the other Australian characters join the military and arrive at the training camp in Cairo, they encounter British officers. Some of these officers act snobbishly toward

the men, treating them like boys and expressing shock at their bad manners. Once the Australian forces arrive at Gallipoli, it becomes clear that their purpose is to create a diversion so that a British force can arrive safely. The high number of Australian casualties likely to result from this operation is not a concern to the officers. Clearly, British lives matter more than Australian lives. Some commentators have argued that the film paints the British as villains in the Gallipoli campaign in a manner unjustified by the historical record; whether or not this is true, the film rightly points to the importance of the colonial legacy at the time when the film takes place.

Social class Archy's family owns a cattle station, which grants him a higher-class status than that of Frank, who lives in a smaller house and works on the railroad. The class difference does not interfere with Frank and Archy's affection for each other. It does interfere with their ability to stick together, though; Frank has never learned to ride a horse, so he is unable to join the Light Horse with Archy (despite Archy's attempt to teach Frank to ride). Once the characters leave Australia, several scenes depict conversations among officers who are clearly of a higher social status than both Frank and Archy. Most of the officers clearly see themselves as inherently superior to the men serving under them. Only officers are allowed at the farewell ball, and most of the officers do not actually fight despite their willingness to sacrifice their men's lives. One exception is Major Barton, who strongly protests the continuation of the pointless assault and, when unsuccessful in his attempts to stop it, joins the last wave of fighters himself on the grounds that he cannot ask his men to do what he would not do himself. He dies as a result.

Power Power shifts throughout the film. Archy and Frank are fairly evenly matched; Archy barely wins their first race, while Frank barely wins their second. For example, it is Archy who knows how to survive in the wilderness, but it is Frank who knows how to forge a birth certificate that will gain Archy entry into the military. Ultimately, Archy holds the power of being the more famous runner, which gains him Major Barton's offer to be a sprinter instead of a fighter at the battle. But Archy uses that power by giving it to Frank, which leads to Frank's survival and Archy's death. Throughout the film, Archy and Frank use their power to help each other. By contrast, the military officers in the film use their power to issue orders that defy logic and to ignore the protests of people who are below them in the military hierarchy. The men of the infantry and Light Horse ultimately have no power to save themselves. Major Barton tries to use his limited power to save them; though unsuccessful, he, like Archy, does choose to die with them even though his status does grant him the power to avoid going onto the battlefield.

International relations Throughout the film, the Australian characters discuss and debate their relatively new country's role in the world as a whole. Some characters express isolationist opinions or simply do not see what relevance any other country could have to Australia. Other characters, like Archy, see Germany and its allies as a true threat to Australia even though they are far away. Archy and some other characters also see the war as an opportunity for Australia to debut on the world stage, to demonstrate that they can participate in international conflicts and can fight just as well as Europeans can. One of Frank's friends, Billy, takes his role as an Australian abroad particularly seriously. Although many of the other Australian soldiers clearly view Egyptians with as much disdain as many Europeans did in this period, Billy states that he is a kind of ambassador for his country and should act accordingly. When he, Frank, Barney, and Snowy confront the Egyptian shop owner who they believe swindled Barney, Billy speaks politely and diplomatically. The other men berate the shop owner and damage his goods; it turns out that Barney did not even identify the correct shop, but they do nothing to rectify this error.

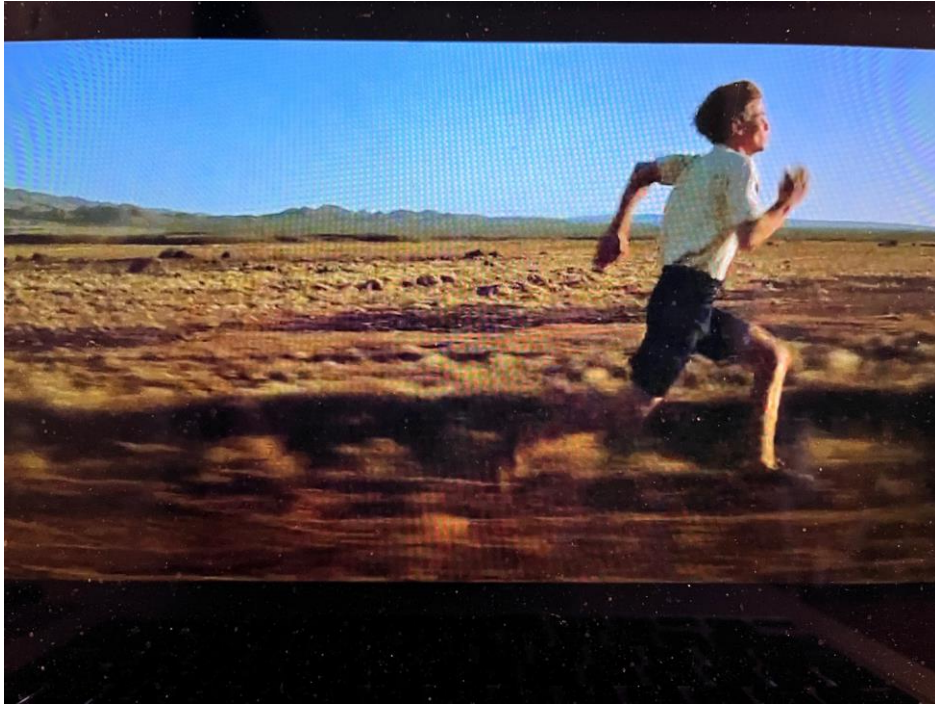
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. During the many scenes in which Frank, Archy, and sometimes other characters debate whether they should fight in the war, did you find yourself picking a side? If so, do you think your opinion was based on the characters' arguments, your own experiences, or both?
2. The film indicts military officers (both British and Australian) for sacrificing Australian lives to protect British ones. Some commentators have argued that the film's portrayal is unfair to the British—that, in fact, it was New Zealand troops for whom the Australian soldiers were supposed to provide diversionary protection, and that all the officers in question were themselves Australian. Do you believe the film's portrayal, and do you think it matters whether the film is totally accurate?

3. A follow-up question to the one above: what do you think of the film's portrayal of the British colonial legacy in Australia in general? In addition to the sequences after the characters arrive in Gallipoli, you might consider the treatment of the Aboriginal character, Zac, as well as Frank's discussion with his father about fighting for the British Empire.
4. If you have been in the military yourself, in what ways did the film remind you of your own experiences? In what ways did it conflict with your own experiences?
5. Discuss the film's portrayal of friendship.
6. If given the choice between waiting two weeks for a train or walking fifty miles across the outback (as Archy and Frank are), which would you choose, and why?

SCENES/PLOT

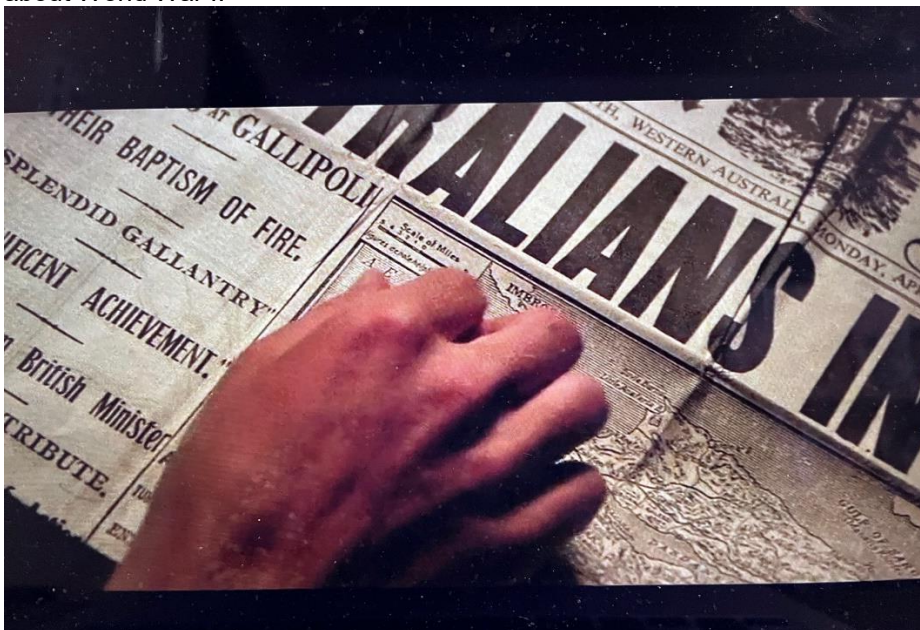
Running – A young man and an older man stand in a field. The older man gives the younger man a pep talk. Then on the older man's whistle, the younger man sprints toward a makeshift finish line. The older man looks at a stopwatch and reports the time as nine and five-eighths seconds, which makes them both smile.



A race – Several men on horseback round up some cattle. The young man from the previous scene gives an order, which one of the other men, Les, carries out grudgingly. The young man, now called Archy, and a young aboriginal man, Zac, wash up together. Les comes up to them and chides Archy for preferring the company of “Blacks.” After a series of taunts, Les and Archy agree to race, with Les riding a horse bareback and Archy running barefoot but allowed to take a shortcut to make it fair. Archy wins the race, but his uncle, Jack, (the older man from the first scene) is angry about what Archy has done to his feet by running a long race outdoors barefoot just three days before a big race.



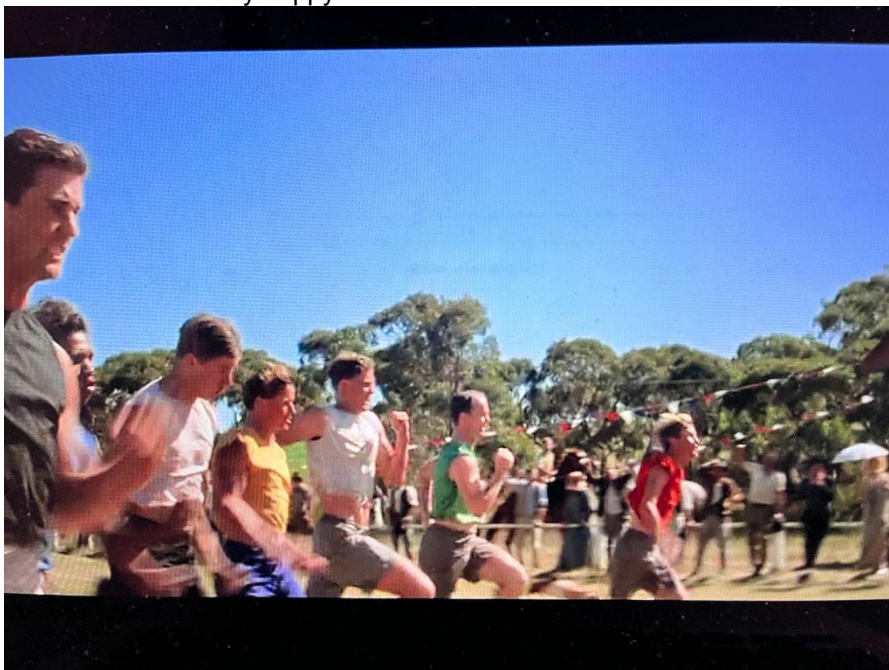
Home – Archy, Jack, and Archy's parents and younger siblings eat dinner and discuss Archy and Jack's upcoming two-day trip for Archy's race. After dinner, Jack reads from *The Jungle Book* to the children. The children go to bed, and Archy does too, accompanied by a newspaper clipping conveying news about World War I.



Discussion – Four men sitting outside between a railroad track and some tents read a newspaper together containing an article about a battle at Gallipoli against Turkish forces. Two of the men state that they plan to join up; another expresses doubts. The fourth man, called Frank, also demurs, but he says he nevertheless wants to leave his job with the railroad. When a train comes by, the four men all jump on it.



Competition – Men run around a track. Frank watches them. He finds an official and asks if he can enter race later in the day. The man says it's too late, but he then realizes that he recognizes Frank from a race somewhere else and lets him enter. He warns him that Archy Hamilton, possibly the fastest kid in Western Australia, will be running against him. The race takes place; Archy beats Frank, barely. He is given a medal and looks very happy.



Attempt to join military – Some distance away from the track, soldiers on horseback try to gather a crowd and give them information about enlisting. Archy listens, and he tells Uncle Jack he is not going to go home. Jack says that he is not surprised but expresses doubts that Archy will be accepted given that he is not yet 21 years old. Nevertheless, Jack gives Archy some money; they shake hands and part ways. Archy goes to the military officials and tells them that he is 21. He mounts a horse to demonstrate his riding skills just as Les steps out from the line and announces that he knows this person to be only 18 years old.



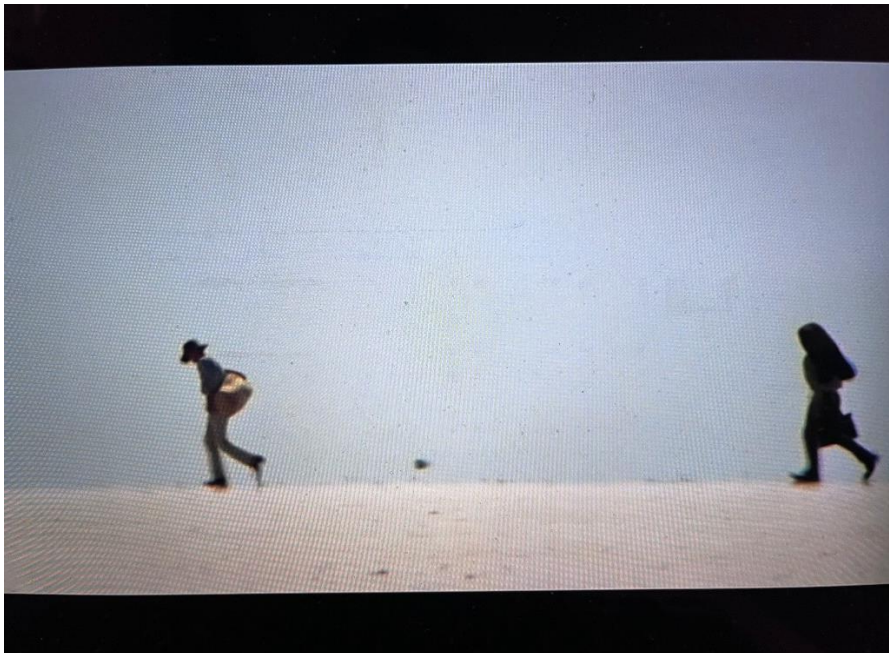
Becoming friends – Archy is eating breakfast in a restaurant. Frank comes in. The two men shake hands and congratulate each other on a good race. Frank says he should have been more gracious the day before but was surprised to lose, as he had won every race he had entered in Perth. Archy replies that he simply got lucky in beating Frank. Archy reveals that he tried to join the military but was rejected for being underage. Frank suggests that he try again in Perth.



Riding the rails – After nightfall, Frank and Archy hop on a freight train. But although Frank is certain that the train is headed to Perth, in the morning they wake up in the outback. The man at the tiny station says that it will be two weeks before they can get another train. “Unless you’re game enough to cross the lake,” he says, laughing. Archy sets off into the desert, followed by a protesting Frank, while the stationmaster laughs that they will have to walk for fifty miles.



Walking and talking – As they walk, Archy insists that he will be able to find water because at sunset, the cockatoos will lead them to it. Frank laughs in disbelief but keeps walking with Archy. During the journey, Archy and Frank argue about whether or not to join the military. Archy asks why Frank had not tried to join the Light Horse regiment. Frank replies that he is not joining the military at all because the war is an English war and has nothing to do with Australians.



“What war?” – Frank and Archy come upon a man walking with a camel. The man gives them some cooked meat and says they have about ten miles to go to get to civilization. When Archy tells the man that he will be off to the war, the man asks, “What war?” Archy tries to explain what the conflict is and why Australians have joined, but the man is unconvinced. Archy says that the Germans must be stopped or else they could end up in Australia. The man looks around and says, “And they’re welcome to it.” Frank laughs.



Polite conversation – Frank and Archy arrive at a large house and are invited to spend the night there. They discuss their journey with several well-dressed people who live in the house. These people express approval at Archy’s decision to join the Light Horse and fight in the war. Later, privately, Frank tells Archy of his dream of starting a bike shop. But he expresses curiosity about the Light Horse, saying that unlike the infantry, it at least has “a bit of class.” Archy is excited, suggesting that they join together. But Frank admits that he does not know how to ride a horse. The next day, Archy tries to teach Frank to ride before they take the train to Perth.



Frank's house – Arrived at Perth, Frank sits at a table and alters a birth certificate, asking Archy what he would like his fake name to be. Frank also puts artificial facial hair on Archy to make him look older, over Archy's amused protests. An older man comes into the room, addressed by Frank as "dad." He asks Frank why he wants to join an English war, given that the English killed his grandfather. Frank insists that he will not be fighting for the British Empire but will keep his head down and come back an officer.



Frank unsuccessful – Archy, under the fake name Lasalles, approaches the sign-up table for enlistment. He is allowed to proceed, as is Frank. Archy passes his riding test so will officially be joining the Light Horse. He surreptitiously gives Frank tips before Frank's test. Frank mounts the horse, but when he tries to get the horse to go forward, it stands still. Men watching laugh; Frank dismounts and is told to leave. Archy and Frank sadly part.



Leaving Australia – Frank drinks alone in a bar. The three men with whom he used to work on the railroad appear and they happily greet each other. Soon enough, they have arrived at an army training camp on the outskirts of Cairo. They play a game of rugby. Sitting down to rest afterward, Frank and one of his friends, Billy, look at a pyramid. Billy muses that this was man's first attempt to beat death. Later, after the next rugby match, Billy gazes up in wonder at the Sphinx.



Cairo – Briefly released to enjoy leisure time in Cairo, Frank and two of his friends sit at a table indoors and look at pictures of naked women. One of them expresses discomfort at the images. The fourth, Barney, then joins them, pulls out a small replica of a mummy, and announces that it is over a thousand years old but only cost two pounds. Billy then pulls an identical object out of his pocket and says he only paid five shillings.



Rampage – Barney, furious, leads his friends into the bazaar, points at a shop, and says, “That one, I think.” The four men go in. Billy talks first, beginning with a speech about Egypt being an old country and Australia a new country. One of the others encourages him to hurry up, but Billy insists that they are diplomats for their country and should act accordingly. The proprietor insists that this object was not his, but the Australian men protest. Frank knocks over two of the store’s shelves, destroying their contents. The proprietor caves and hands over two pounds. Once outside, though, Barney looks at a shop across the way and remarks that he’d identified the wrong shop.



War games – The soldiers participate in an exercise in which several men from the Light Horse play the role of the enemy. Frank discovers that Archy is one of the men involved from the Light Horse; they happily embrace and stop engaging in the exercise. An officer questions them, but they simply explain that they are friends. Frank and Archy spend time in Cairo together after the exercise.



Frank's joining the Light Horse – Frank and Archy go to Major Barton and ask whether Frank could join the Light Horse because they are friends and because they will not actually be riding any horses at Gallipoli, so Frank's failure of the riding test will not matter. Major Barton at first refuses, but when they mention that they trained together as runners, he becomes interested. Hearing of Frank's speed, he says he will see what he can do. When Frank subsequently approaches Snowy, Barney, and Billy, wearing a Light Horse uniform, the other men do not seem pleased. "Infantry not good enough for you?" Snowy asks. Frank leaves.



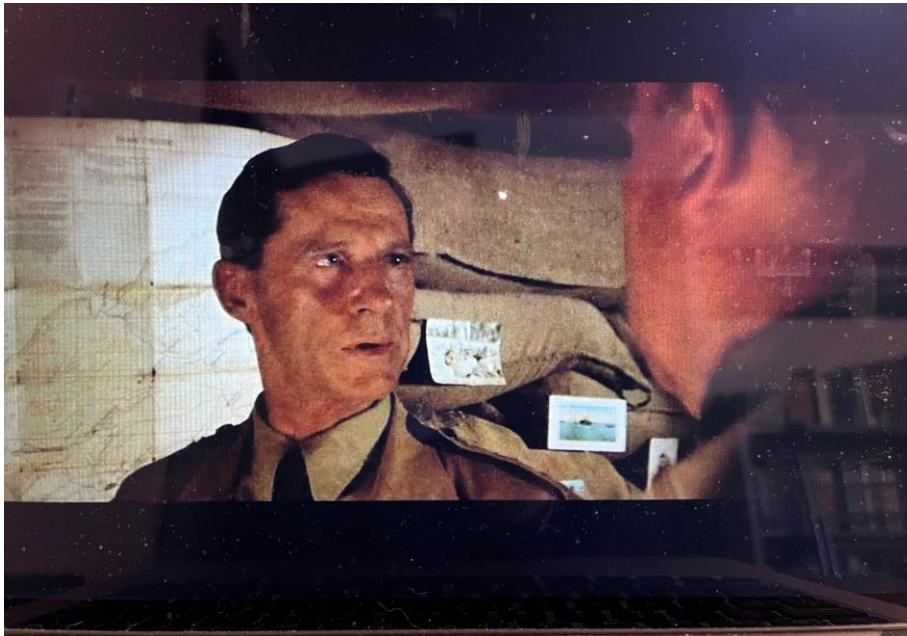
Arriving at Gallipoli – A bright light appears on a dark body of water. Boats full of soldiers glide along. Frank and Archy, in one of the boats, look at the approaching coastline, where they see and hear artillery. Archy smiles; Frank does not. The men get off the boats and walk onshore, ducking for cover.



Another reunion – In a trench, Frank and Archy speak to two men who have been in Gallipoli much longer. Archy expresses eagerness to begin fighting; Frank expresses the opposite. The next day, more boats arrive; Frank sees his friends Billy, Barney, and Snowy and greets them happily. They appear happy to see him too. Frank introduces them all to Archy.



A risky plan – Officers in a tent discuss strategy. Major Barton says to Colonel Robinson that it seems like the planned Light Horse and infantry attacks are merely diversions. Colonel Robinson replies that they are vitally important diversions because 25,000 British troops are about to land nearby and must be allowed to get ashore. Colonel Robinson assures Major Barton that their ships will bombard the Turkish forces with artillery before the attacks. The officers discuss the timing of the attack and look at their watches; they do not realize this, but Major Barton's watch is ten minutes behind.



Infantry assault – As Billy, Snowy, Barney, and the rest of the infantry launch their assault, Frank and Archy sit and wait. They hear guns and artillery. Frank looks toward the battle with concern. When wounded men return to the trenches, Frank looks for his friends. He finds Billy, who appears to be fine but tells him that Barney is dead. Frank finds Snowy lying down among other wounded men. Snowy asks Frank to give his diary to his mother and father so that they will know what he did.



Runners – Major Barton finds Archy and tells him he has figured out his true identity as Archy Hamilton, the champion sprinter. He says that he will not turn him in for being underage but instead wants to use him the next day as a runner because phone communications between him and Colonel Robinson and the British will probably break down once the shelling begins. Archy encourages Major Barton to take Frank instead because he is just as fast. Major Barton takes this advice and sends a man to get Frank. Frank and Archy shake hands and say good-bye.



A bad beginning – The artillery fire stops; Major Barton expresses surprise because according to his watch, the barrage has stopped ten minutes too early. He remarks that if the Turks have a chance to regroup, the Australian assault will be a disaster. He waits a couple of minutes, sees Turks regrouping across the battlefield, then calls Colonel Robinson, who says that the attack must proceed anyway.



Communication breakdown – The first wave of men leaves the trenches, but nearly all are shot down immediately. The second wave prepares. Archy stumbles across his former nemesis, Les, who is crying. The second wave goes; they also are gunned down, including Les. Major Barton says he will not send any more men into this. A lieutenant calls Colonel Robinson and says that it is hard to tell whether the attack is succeeding; he states that apparently one of their flags was seen in the enemy's trench, but is then cut off before he can continue speaking. Frank goes to Major Barton and tells him the phone line has broken down; he is given a written message from Major Barton to take to Colonel Robinson.



Disagreements at the top – Frank runs to Colonel Robinson and conveys the message, trying to emphasize that the Australian troops are simply being killed. Colonel Robinson nevertheless insists that the attack must proceed. Frank runs back to Major Barton as the third wave of Australian troops prepares to go. When Major Barton receives the message, he expresses surprise and frustration. Frank suggests that Major Barton go over Colonel Robinson's head; Major Barton agrees and gives him a message to take to General Gardner as quickly as possible. Frank runs as fast as he can through the trenches. He arrives at GHQ, where General Gardner is just being told by another messenger that British troops have already arrived safely. General Gardner tells Frank to tell Major Barton that he is reconsidering the current plan. Frank smiles and begins to run back to Major Barton. Frank's progress is slow because he has to dodge crowded parts of the trench filled with wounded and shocked soldiers.



Attack order – Major Barton and the Light Horse men wait. A man next to Archy asks whether they will really make them go; Archy replies that they will not, because there is no point. The phone, which has apparently been repaired, rings. Colonel Robinson tells Major Barton that the attack must proceed, whatever the cost. Major Barton hangs up the phone and gears up to join the third wave, saying that he cannot ask his men to do what he would not do himself. Archy hangs his running medal in the trench and breathes deeply.



Too late – Frank continues to run, trying to get to Major Barton in time to stop further disaster. A man recites the 23rd Psalm. Archy recites to himself the pep talk he used to get from Uncle Jack before races. Major Barton blows his whistle, which Frank is now barely close enough to hear. Frank screams, “No!” as the men of the third wave climb out of the trench and begin, one by one, to be shot. Archy runs a little farther than most of the other men, but he too is shot in the chest and stops.

