



'The shape of things to come': the Battle of Hamel, 4 July 1918

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Prelude - a battle little known

Though hardly the immediate basis for a lasting 'special relationship?', a small and very successful battle took place on the Western Front on 4 July 1918 ' exactly one hundred years ago ' which marked the first time British and American forces fought together during the First World War. This attack represented the first stirrings of an offensive spirit which had been all but eclipsed by the demands of repeated German offensives, and one that displayed a number of novel and innovative features.

'The shape of things to come ' [\[1\]](#)

Background

With but few notable exceptions[\[2\]](#), the history of British offensive operations on the Western Front up to the end of 1917 was not a happy one. Too often poor planning, inadequate resources and lack of surprise rendered the set-piece infantry assault a desperate and costly affair for those involved. Repeated attempts to take positions head-on resulted in grievous casualty figures. By the summer of 1918, and in the wake of successive German offensives, the British Army, though backed by massive industrial support, was strictly limited in terms of manpower. In consequence, principles emphasising infantry conservation were evolved and accepted as the only rational approach to subsequent fighting.

The Battle of Hamel

It is sometimes overlooked that the German search for a war-winning breakthrough on the Western Front continued well into the summer of 1918. Five major offensives were made between March and July 1918 on various points of the front. But only a matter of weeks before the very last German onslaught took place[\[3\]](#), the British Army initiated a small-scale operation to the east of Amiens which had far reaching implications for the decisive fighting which would occur in the late summer and autumn of this the final year of the War.

The Battle of Hamel, which took place on the 4 July 1918, a date '*tactfully chosen?*[\[4\]](#) - American Independence Day - represented the occasion when British and American forces first saw action[\[5\]](#) together in the Great War. The attack, planned and led by Sir John Monash's Australian Corps, also saw the first ever attempts in the history of warfare to supply fighting troops on the ground by air.

Objectives, forces and planning:

With the aim of improving Fourth Army's defensive lines on the Villers-Bretonneux plateau and gaining

observation up the Somme valley, Brigades of the 4th Australian Division, with four companies of American infantry[6], supported by 60 tanks, aircraft and precise artillery barrages, undertook a 2,500 yard advance to eliminate the awkward Hamel salient overlooking British positions. Careful and well-concealed preparations[7] underpinned operational success and extensive training programmes encouraged good relations between Australian infantry and British tank crews, who living and working together prior to the attack, developed a genuine camaraderie which did much to allay the Australian soldiers' mistrust of the tank operations stemming from their dispiriting experiences at Bullecourt in the spring of 1917. The mutual respect established between tank crews and infantry was exemplified by the new Mark V tanks going into the Hamel attack displaying, on their armour plating, nicknames chalked by the Australian footsloggers and the painted insignia of the Australian infantry companies they were supporting. Equally important, flying units were clearly instructed in their support role and additional artillery was allocated to the attack frontage. The vital element of surprise was retained by the gunners foregoing a preliminary bombardment, having accurately registered unobtrusively (by aerial observation, flash-spotting and sound-ranging) on their enemy targets beforehand.

The fighting

Assault troops took up their positions during the two nights prior to the attack, and on the evening of 3 July the tanks, under the covering noise of low-flying Allied aeroplanes, were brought forward to their start lines.

At 3.10am the following morning, 4 July, infantry of the 4th and 11th Australian Brigades advanced with their supporting tanks behind the cover of a thick ground mist and devastating 'creeping barrage' - the fearsome accuracy of which so impressed Captain Gale of the American Expeditionary Force: *'The barrage 'was most wonderful' the falling shells of the 18-pounders, exploding as they hit the ground, formed an almost straight line from the north edge of the action at the Somme to as far south as we could see.'*[8] Though a number of British shells fell short and difficulties with uncut barbed wire were encountered in front of Pear Trench, overall, the co-ordinated attack went exceedingly well. The more heavily defended enemy-held localities, Vaire and Hamel woods and Hamel village, were dealt with by special detachments, whilst the remaining attackers pressed on to their objectives.

A notable 'first?': air-dropped supplies to forward troops

During the assault aircraft from 8 Squadron (RAF) and 3 Squadron (Australian Flying Corps) flew low over enemy lines bombing infantry, guns and transport and 205 Squadron (RAF) bombed enemy dumps and bivouac areas. A notable first in the history of warfare occurred when 9 Squadron (RAF) dropped quantities of machine gun ammunition by parachutes - designed and manufactured by 3 Squadron AFC - to supply advanced Australian positions between Vaire and Accroche Woods. The following day the enemy copied this pioneering approach to supply when low-flying German machines threw out rations (without parachutes) to their beleaguered defending garrisons; several of these loads ended up in Australian hands.

A precise timetable

According to Monash's original plan the battle should have been completed in 90 minutes; in fact it took a little longer. Defined objectives were gained in approximately 93 minutes, at a cost of around 1,400 Australian and American casualties.[9] German casualties were considerable and well over a thousand enemy prisoners, and much equipment, were taken.

Writing about the battle, Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash commented on how smoothly everything went, exactly to timetable (it took 93 minutes) and free from glitches. He called it *"the perfection of team work"*[10].

The precedent

Though the total troop numbers involved (Australian, British and American) were not large, their conjunction in this minor enterprise resulted in a stunning Allied success and one achieved at small cost in lives. The action demonstrated that infantry manpower could be conserved by meticulous battle planning, painstaking training and the effective exploitation of new weapons and technologies. It has come to represent an ideal prototype of an 'all arms' assault, in which little was left to chance ' a model in which tanks and artillery were allocated pre-eminent roles in forging a way forward for the infantry. The academic historian C R M F Cruttwell, who had served on the Western Front as an infantry officer, perfectly summed up the significance of this largely unknown battle: *'This little action was the true begetter of the great attacks of the following months, for it taught most important lessons. It proved that really systematic co-operation between tanks and infantry economizes men to a surprising degree.'*^[11]

A precedent had truly been set which would be followed successfully, and on a far grander scale, at the tide-turning **Battle of Amiens** the following month.

References:

- *'The Australian Victories in France in 1918'*, Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash, Imperial War Museum & The Battery Press, Nashville, 1993 (originally published 1920)
- *'Military Operations'. France and Belgium, 1918'* (Volume III), Brig-Gen Sir James Edmonds, London, Macmillan, 1939
- *'The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918'*, Vol VI (The AIF in France: May 1918- The Armistice, C E W Bean, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1942
- *'Command on the Western Front. The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson'*, Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, Pen & Sword, 2004 (first published 1992 by Blackwell Publishers

Online references

- Battle of Hamel chapter in the Australian Official History <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416794>
- 'Hamel ' the text-book victory? <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/hamel>
- Photograph of supply drop parachute on the battlefield, 4 July 1918, Hamel <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1319?image=2>
- Photo of an actual parachute dropped by 9 Squadron RAF at Hamel, 4 July 1918 <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C155083> Exhibit held by the Australian War Memorial

----- NOTES -----

[1] With due acknowledgement to the title of H G Wells' *'The Shape of Things to Come'*, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1933. Chapter 7 of the first section of this prophetic epic constitutes a distinctive analysis of *'The Great War of 1914-1918'*. See: http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0301391h.html#chap1_07

[2] These would include: the dawn advance of 14 July 1916 (Bazentin Ridge) on the Somme; initial assaults at Arras in April 1917 (including Vimy), Messines in June and the early tank-led success at Cambrai in November 1917.

[3] Ludendorff's Reims-Soissons offensive ' the so-called 'Peace Offensive' ' was begun on 15 July 1918 as a last

desperate attempt to draw in Allied reserves, preparatory to the renewal of his Flanders' campaign

[4] By Fourth Army Commander, General Rawlinson: '*Military Operations. France and Belgium, 1918*' (Volume III), Brig-Gen Sir James Edmonds, London, Macmillan, 1939, p.197.

[5] American troops first saw action on the Western Front working with the French Army, on 28 May 1918 when units of the 1st US Division, attacked at Cantigny, west of Montdidier.

[6] Four companies of the American 33rd Division were '*distributed by platoons among the troops of the three Australian Brigades who were to carry out the attack.*' Monash, p.52 Sir Douglas Haig had originally pressed for the inclusion of American troops and initial planning had been based on a ten company involvement. Last minute anxieties about the inexperience of his troops expressed by the C-in-C of the American Expeditionary Force, General John Pershing, resulted in a very late reduction of the American commitment from ten companies to four.

[7] Haig's admiration for Monash's powers of organization was evidenced by his diary entry for 1 July 1918 (after a visit to Australian Corps HQ): 'I spent an hour with Monash and went into every detail with him of an operation he is shortly to carry out with the Australian Corps. Monash is a most thorough and capable commander who thinks out every detail and leaves nothing to chance. I was greatly impressed with his arrangements.' *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919* edited by Robert Blake, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952, p.316

[8] 'The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918?', Vol VI (The AIF in France: May 1918- The Armistice, C E W Bean, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1942, p.284

[9] 'The casualties of the Australians in the main operation were 51 officers and 724 other ranks; of the Americans, 6 officers and 128 other ranks. Five fighting tanks were disabled and put out of action; Five aeroplanes did not return,' *Military Operation. France and Belgium, 1918*' (Vol III), Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, London MacMillan, 1939, p.208

[10] 'The Australian Victories in France in 1918?', Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash, Imperial War Museum & The Battery Press, Nashville, 1993 (originally published 1920), p.56

[11] *A History of the Great War 1914-1918*, C R M F Cruttwell, Oxford, 1934, p.532

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