



MASTERS OF WAR: THE AIF IN FRANCE 1918

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KEYNOTE SPEAKER – CHRIS CLARK
AUTHOR OF *THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF AUSTRALIA'S BATTLES*



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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT
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“Never Forget Australia”: Transformation at Villers-Bretonneux

Ross McMullin

If you visit Villers-Bretonneux today and you go to the local school that was rebuilt thanks to donations from Victorian schoolchildren, you'll see — as many of you will know — in each classroom and outside on the roof of the shelter-shed the words “N’oublions jamais l’Australie” (Never Forget Australia). The aim of this talk is to explain why those words are there.

In my view what the AIF accomplished in 1918 is all the more remarkable considering the context. 1917 was the worst year in Australian history since European settlement. Australia had more casualties in 1917 than in any other year of this or any other war. Australians in 1917 spent their longest periods in the front line, incurred their worst defeats, and lost more prisoners captured than in any other year of the war.

After more than three years of this terrible conflict, it seemed that an end to it was as far away as ever. The war seemed like a raging juggernaut of destruction, indiscriminately smashing men and women, hopes and dreams. Back home the nation had been left bitterly divided after the 1917 conscription plebiscite. In fact, Australia has never been more bitterly and profoundly divided than during World War I.

At the end of this harrowing year Pompey Elliott, Australia's most famous fighting general, wrote to his wife Kate:

“Here it's the last day of this sad old year 1917. I think it has held more of sadness and disappointment than any other year of my life. I am particularly in the blues today. It is bitterly cold and there is nearly a couple of feet of snow on the ground. There have been no home letters for more than a month ... It is very sad not getting any letters ... I expect there will be a big fight as soon as things get a bit drier ... I am big heap lonely for you.”

Information from prisoners confirmed that an immense German offensive was indeed imminent. It became increasingly likely that the German assault would not begin where the AIF was located, so most Australians realised that their task would be to stop enemy infantry advancing across terrain that would probably be relatively open. Many had enlisted, at least in part, to stop the Germans rampaging across Europe, and it was satisfying to feel that this would now be their role, instead of the usually ill-conceived attacks the AIF had been making one after the other for years. The Australians were confident they were superior to the enemy as soldiers, and some openly welcomed the German advance. In fact, Pompey Elliott observed that there “is a feeling in the air that we are all glad he is coming”.

This attitude was typified by Charles Bean, the Australian official correspondent (who was to become the official AIF historian). When the Germans launched their offensive on 21 March 1918, Bean was jubilant:

“My heart and spirits jumped up 100 degrees. So the German was attacking after all — he was really going to do it. The bombardment was on a front of over 50 miles! ... One hoped almost beyond hope that they would ... [try to] end the war by an offensive this year. And they are doing it. One does not for a moment believe that they will succeed. The attack always loses more men than the defence; they will get 5, 10, perhaps 15 miles ... But at the end of it their army will be brought up against an unbroken wall ... It is not an easy time for the actual battalions in the line ... But one cannot help rejoicing.”

Delight soon turned to concern, however, and then alarm. The Germans succeeded in driving the British well back. Day after day came news of ominous advances, particularly in the Somme region. British formations were retiring in disarray. Even the strategically important city of Amiens looked under threat. Amiens was more than 40 miles from the pre-offensive front line, but there was still no sign of the unbroken wall that Bean had confidently expected. The Commander-in-Chief publicly described the situation as “a crisis”. After years of hideous casualties that would blight a generation, a grim prospect loomed: Vera Brittain, the British nurse who was to become one of the most celebrated memoirists of the era, emphasised in her famous book *Testament of Youth* “the crushing tension of those extreme days” when “into our minds had crept for the first time the secret, incredible fear that we might lose the War”.

The Australians were rushed to the rescue. Pompey Elliott’s 15th Brigade was directed to occupy the village of Hedauville after an all-night tramp, but found a collection of British stragglers in occupation who were reluctant to leave. Pompey had to threaten to evict them by force before they departed.

Just hours later, though, another emergency required Pompey’s brigade to proceed immediately to Corbie, a town close to Amiens. Pompey was soon cracking the whip in characteristic fashion. He was appalled to find some British officers were more interested in “looking for what they could loot than [in] fighting the enemy”. With the officers out of control, it was impossible to discipline their men. When a British captain was apprehended in Corbie with a mess cart full of looted champagne, Pompey decided that enough was enough. He circulated a notice declaring that the next officer caught looting would be summarily and publicly hanged in the Corbie market square, and his body would be left swinging as a deterrent. Looting ceased immediately. Pompey (who was a solicitor in civilian life) concluded that “None seemed inclined to make of themselves a test case”.

Distressed French civilians, vacating homes threatened by the German advance, reacted with delight when they realised the AIF had arrived in their district. Some Australians distributed nonchalant reassurance: “Fini retreat madame, beaucoup Australiens ici” (No more retreat madame, many Australians here). Many civilians, confident that the Australians would resist

the Germans, turned around, retraced their steps, and reoccupied their homes amid rapturous cries of “Vive l’Australie!”

This is the climax of the biggest war there had ever been, and Australians are playing a significant role, bolstering resistance in vulnerable sectors despite the demoralised disarray they mostly encounter. Although the German advance is beginning to overextend, the Australians’ resolve and resourcefulness are influential — and in a nationally distinctive way. They are aware they are different and aware they are making a difference. Non-Australian observers notice this and acclaim it. And yet this is happening straight after the worst year Australia has ever known — the worst casualties Australia has suffered in any year in this or any other war.

Remarkably, what the AIF did in 1918 — in both these weeks of desperate defence and also the contrasting phase in the second half of the year, when they spearheaded the prolonged offensive that brought eventual victory — what the AIF did in 1918 prompts the conclusion that Australians were influencing the destiny of the world in 1918 more than Australians had ever done before or have ever done since. And the culmination of the Australians’ contribution during the earlier phase of desperate defence was the celebrated exploit at Villers-Bretonneux.

We make a big fuss of Gallipoli, and that’s understandable because it came first, but we should make a much bigger fuss of 1918 than we do. What the Australians did in 1918 should be much better known than it is.

Pompey Elliott’s morale had been very low at the end of 1917, just a few months earlier, but all his drive and verve returned as his brigade became front and centre in dramatic events in this climax of the war. What he wrote at the time reflected his transformed morale:

“The AIF have hitherto accomplished nothing to be compared in importance with the work they have in hand just now.”

“I was never so proud of being an Australian as I am today ... The gallant bearing and joyous spirit of the men at the prospect of a fight thrills you through and through. You simply cannot despair or be downhearted — whatever the odds against you — when you feel their spirits rising the more the danger seems to threaten. It is glorious indeed to be with them.”

Pompey wrote these stirring words at his brigade’s headquarters at Blangy-Tronville in front of Amiens. His brigade was in reserve, not far away from Villers-Bretonneux, the elevated town that was the key to the city of Amiens and its strategically vital railway network. If you go to Villers-Bret today, and you visit the Australian national memorial on the hill alongside the town, you can see in the distance the city of Amiens, and it’s very evident that if you had control of Villers-Bret and that hill, your artillery would be able to imperil the defence of Amiens.

The commander of the British Fourth Army, General Henry Rawlinson, had instigated a rearrangement that took effect on 20 April 1918. Under this rearrangement the British Third Corps was allocated the task of safeguarding Villers-Bretonneux. Pompey was convinced that

the Germans would make another attempt to capture Villers-Bret. He was also coming rapidly to the conclusion that when the Germans attacked, the British would be unable to hold the town, and his nearby brigade would be called on to recapture it. This perception was reinforced when he found that the 8th British Division under General Heneker, which had arrived to safeguard Villers-Bretonneux as part of Rawlinson's rearrangement, was doing so with faulty dispositions that endangered Pompey's men in the process.

Pompey objected forcefully to his immediate superior, General Hobbs, the commander of the Fifth AIF Division. Hobbs was sympathetic, and raised the matter with the British Third Corps, only to be informed that General Butler was aware of the dispositions and approved of them. This reinforced Pompey's misgivings about the British: such a decision "forbade us to hope that any intelligent military action could reasonably be expected from any of them from the Corps commander down". Pompey and Hobbs quietly agreed that a new trench should be excavated, ostensibly for "communication", but in fact to protect Pompey's men. While this trench was being constructed, Pompey urged all officers in his brigade to scrutinise a contoured model of the sector that a talented corporal on his staff had created.

Early on 24 April, just after 4am, Pompey Elliott was notified that the Germans were bombarding Villers-Bretonneux. He immediately informed all his battalions that the expected German attack was probably under way, and dispatched liaison officers to neighbouring brigades. He then issued a stream of counter-attack orders, putting into effect the plan he had devised in the expectation that the British would be driven out of Villers-Bretonneux. What he had in mind was envelopment, which he had previously used successfully during the war. He directed his battalions to advance in different directions and then meet up east of the town, cutting off the enemy inside it in the process.

All this was provisional, as it was not yet clear whether the British had been driven back, and so it was not certain that a counter-attack would be necessary. Pompey, though, had no doubt that it would. Before long it became clear that he was right. Informative messages from the liaison officers he had stationed made it disturbingly clear that the Germans had quickly taken control of the town and were proceeding to spread out beyond it. This was alarming news, and Pompey, predictably galvanised, phoned Hobbs to obtain authorisation for the counter-attack he had provisionally put in motion and his men were all set to launch. Hobbs was not against this, but insisted that Pompey's brigade could not operate in the British area unless he received an "urgent request" from the British.

The upshot was a protracted delay. Information from the 8th British Division was minimal, even after Hobbs rang Heneker directly in an attempt to find out what the British were doing. Hobbs said this: "Your troops have retired and our flank is in the air. Enemy is advancing from Villers Bretonneux towards Fouilloy ... Can we shell Villers Bretonneux? Are you going to make a counter attack?" But the 8th Division headquarters had lost touch with their units and could not say whether they would be counter-attacking.

Hours passed. The delay was immensely frustrating. The Germans would be consolidating in and around Villers-Bretonneux, making the task of dislodging them increasingly difficult, and Elliott and Hobbs were both convinced that Heneker's men would be unable to rectify the situation themselves. Yet they had to wait while the British worked out whether they would attempt a counter-attack. Meanwhile Pompey was pacing around his headquarters like

a caged lion waiting for permission to strike. As he wrote afterwards, “it was sticking out as plain as a pikestaff that we should have to counter attack sooner or later”. He ensured that his brigade derived some benefit from the delay by directing that as many officers as possible should go forward and familiarise themselves with the ground ahead.

Heneker eventually authorised a counter-attack by his own men. Pompey advised his battalion commanders: “Stand fast as British are endeavouring to restore line themselves, but be ready for instant action”. However, this British counter-attack did not eventuate, and nor did a series of other counter-attacks that Heneker ordered various battalions in his division to undertake. The status quo continued: the Germans had control of Villers-Bretonneux, and were no doubt continuing to strengthen their positions in and around the town as rapidly as they could. Heneker and his 8th Division were unable to remove them, yet kept obstinately rejecting offers and suggestions of assistance.

Lest it be thought that there’s an excessively anti-British tone in all this, I’d like to point out that I’m telling the story straight here, it’s what happened, but I’d also like to emphasise that the British at Villers-Bret had endured an undeniably harrowing ordeal. The German bombardment had been ferocious, and followed up by tanks, and the young British reinforcements positioned there as a result of General Rawlinson’s unwise rearrangement had a terrifying experience.

Meanwhile, while Heneker and his headquarters were dithering, and Pompey was pacing around his headquarters like a caged lion, the situation was energising other headquarters further up the military hierarchy, where the news that the Germans had driven the British out of Villers-Bretonneux had caused consternation. Even General Foch, at the very top of the hierarchy as Generalissimo of the combined French and British forces, told General Rawlinson bluntly that the immediate recapture of Villers-Bretonneux was an urgent priority. Rawlinson was well aware of this already, of course: he wrote a letter that afternoon saying “We *must* get it back whatever happens”. As for Haig, he reacted to the unpalatable news by proceeding directly to Rawlinson’s headquarters himself. Rawlinson had already taken action of his own, directing the 13th Australian Brigade to march to Villers-Bret immediately; when this order arrived, the 13th Brigade was located in reserve eight miles away north of the Somme.

This pressure from above added to Heneker’s difficulties. His division was still unable to organise an effective response of its own, yet continued to ignore the offered assistance from nearby Australians. In the end Heneker became rattled, and phoned his superior, General Butler, to confess that it was “Impossible to arrange counter-attack as we don’t know where we are and where enemy is”. Heneker had wasted a lot of invaluable time arriving at that despondent conclusion; he was even contemplating a withdrawal of his own headquarters.

But with that admission it was at least now clear that the necessary counter-attack could not be carried out by Heneker’s 8th British Division, and would therefore be undertaken by the Australians. But how would they carry it out? Who would do it? By what means? Working out a viable plan, and all the precise consequential arrangements, proved no easy task. There were protracted deliberations and discussions involving Butler, Hobbs, Heneker, various brigadiers including Pompey, and numerous staff officers. Eventually a plan crystallised during the afternoon (that is, the afternoon of April the 24th). Pompey’s 15th Brigade would advance around the north of Villers-Bretonneux, while the newly arrived 13th AIF Brigade under General Thomas Glasgow would carry out an equivalent advance south of the town;

these two pincers would join up east of Villers-Bret, with the Germans caught inside this pincer movement trapped and vanquished. It was essentially the envelopment manoeuvre that Pompey had been vigorously advocating and itching to launch since before dawn, with the one significant difference that whereas he had envisaged his brigade forming both pincers — north and south — under the plan finally agreed, Pompey's brigade would form the northern pincer only, while the 13th AIF Brigade would form the other pincer advancing around the south of the town.

The plan was certainly audacious. Two independent spearheads were to be launched deep into German-held territory in the dark, with meagre artillery assistance and instructions to join up with each other. Glasgow's 13th Brigade was unfamiliar with the ground, and would be going into action after marching eight miles that afternoon just to get to the rear of the battle zone before they did anything else. And Pompey's brigade would be undertaking a complicated manoeuvre involving three changes of direction in the dark.

It was an exceptionally risky enterprise, as many anxious insiders realised. Among them was Charles Bean, on the scene as usual when a significant AIF operation was in the offing. That night he felt very pessimistic, as his diary confirms: "I don't believe they have a chance ... Went to bed thoroughly depressed ... feeling certain that this hurried attack would fail hopelessly". Many of Pompey's men agreed. One felt that the operation had not even "the remotest chance of success". To another, it seemed "an almost impossible proposition".

The draining effect of prolonged suspense was another factor, which a stretcher-bearer in Pompey's brigade, David Whinfield, emphasised:

"Since 10 last night we have been rigged up all ready to march off to support[,] and now it is to counterattack[,] for some ground lost by the Tommies this morning. We were moving off at 10 last night, 4am, 9am, 1pm, 5 and now 7. It is a terrible time. How will men hang on at this awful cruelty? Nerves are being shredded. Men's future strength is being heavily drawn from. My nerve is weak. It is too much for mortals."

However, despite his dread of the looming counter-attack, he managed to steel himself to participate so effectively that he was awarded the Military Medal.

As for Pompey himself, what he wrote afterwards about that memorable day, April 24th, was this:

"I submitted the plan for recapture of a town. I was told not to bother as the British corps concerned were doing it themselves and it was out of my area ... [So] for 14 hours we delayed whilst the Bosche strengthened his position. [Eventually] I was solemnly handed over to the British corps concerned [together] with another Australian brigade — no means of communication with each other was provided — by this time it was pitch dark and raining, and we were launched, and our meeting place fixed within the enemy's lines — and we were left to find each other. Everyone expected the whole thing to fail, but something desperate had to be done."

It was a stressful night for commanders like Pompey, as they worried and waited for news. To ease the tension, he wrote a rambling response to a recent newspaper article. This might seem a strange thing to do, he conceded, "but when one has just given an order, the result of which — no matter what care or thought has been given to the preparations — means the

certain death ... of many a dear friend, the concentration of effort required to write the essay dulls one's senses a little to what is going on".

What was going on while he was writing his essay? Well, things were not going according to plan in his brigade. A company proceeding to its forward position at the start point lost direction after being warned to make a detour to avoid a gassed area; after waiting in vain for this company to turn up, Pompey's reorganised brigade eventually set off without it almost two hours late. They hurried forward in the dark to make up for lost time, silent and resolute, taut with anticipation, excitement and dread — who would be the unlucky ones this time? Many were aware that it was now past midnight, so it had now become the third anniversary of the original Anzac Day, and they had an opportunity to commemorate it with a special exploit. They were "tugging and straining at the leash", an officer noted. They pressed on up the slope to their first objective, where there was a brief pause while the leaders checked positioning and direction, and scouts were pushed out in front as a protective screen.

These scouts detected enemy soldiers close ahead, and the 15th Brigade line was adjusted accordingly, with some minor tweaks. But this movement was evidently detected, as German flares went up, and then an enemy machine-gun started firing. In response Captain Eric Young, a 23-year-old 59th Battalion officer from St Kilda, gave the order to charge. All the pent-up nervous energy that had accumulated during this long, suspense-filled day was unleashed, and Pompey Elliott's men charged with an impromptu, uninhibited, terrifying yell. It wasn't just the 59th. The 60th and 57th men joined in, as the whole line surged forward with exhilarating, irresistible momentum. There was a desperate hail of machine-gun and rifle fire from the Germans, but the raw spontaneous roar in the dark alarmed them, and their shooting was generally inaccurate (the Australians were charging up a slope, and much of the German fire sailed overhead). Many Germans were caught by surprise and overwhelmed, as Pompey's men penetrated deep into enemy-held territory.

The southern pincer, the 13th AIF Brigade, also had a difficult start. Their progress was severely hampered by enemy machine-guns in the trees on their left. The 13th Brigade's leaders had been told that this wooded area had been cleared that afternoon by Heneker's 8th Division, but this assurance soon proved clearly incorrect as casualties accumulated. In fact this impediment threatened to stop the brigade's advance on the left, until a 51st Battalion detachment went directly into the trees to deal with the machine-gunners; Charles Bean described this dashing and successful initiative as "extraordinarily bold". Its leader, Lieutenant Cliff Sadlier, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The 13th Brigade encountered further obstacles on their way forward — more machine-gun posts, barbed wire, other strongpoints — and casualties were significantly higher than in the 15th Brigade, but the survivors persevered. Some of them got close to their final objective, but the leaders decided that the most prudent course of action in the circumstances was to fall back and consolidate a position south of the centre of Villers-Bretonneux. So the two pincers didn't quite manage to connect during the night, but by dawn it was clear that each formation had done enough to ensure the overall success of the daring counter-attack, confounding the misgivings of even informed insiders like Charles Bean. As the news spread, widespread anxiety dissolved into rapturous relief.

In supplementary operations on April 25th, Pompey directed the 57th Battalion to deal with the mopping-up inside Villers-Bretonneux and to extend the new line south to connect with the 13th Brigade. The 57th proceeded to round up so many German prisoners inside Villers-

Bretonneux that there were too many to supervise, but fortunately a British unit materialised to take over this task, and the 57th was able to connect up with the 13th Brigade later that day.

The success of the counter-attack not only confounded the widespread anxiety and pessimism about the perilous operation. It also denied the enemy a tactically vital objective that was never threatened again — the dangerous German thrust towards Amiens was stymied for good. This outstanding feat, based on the plan devised by Pompey Elliott, was acclaimed by numerous commanders all the way up to Generalissimo Foch, who raved about the “altogether outstanding valiance” of the Australian brigades.

Pompey felt distinctly proud:

“Birdwood and the French general said that nothing like it had been done in the war ... Birdwood really tried to be nice to me yesterday when he came round about the splendid way my boys had behaved, but he rather looked as if I had made him swallow a bit of green apple. I wore my old Australian jacket and looked as disreputable as I could too. It’s a joke on these spick and span soldiers to show them that Australians have a few brains sometimes.”

General Monash, who had nothing to do with the battle himself, declared that “this counter-attack, at night, without artillery support, is the finest thing yet done in the war, by Australians or any other troops”, and he wasn’t the only one to draw this conclusion immediately afterwards. Later in 1918 the Australians accomplished other feats that might have been even better than Villers-Bret, but it is striking to consider what well-credentialed observers wrote about Villers-Bret even years later. General Grogan VC, a brigadier in Heneker’s 8th British Division, described this “successful counter-attack by night across unknown and difficult ground, at a few hours’ notice”, as “perhaps the greatest individual feat of the war”. Grogan’s staff captain felt it was “the most wonderful performance” he was familiar with in his entire war experience.

Another English officer, Neville Lytton, was a highly capable front-line officer who had senior responsibilities at Haig’s headquarters for much of the war, including April 1918. He was very well placed to assess Villers-Bret’s significance. After the war he wrote a book that included this:

“[T]he importance of Villers-Bretonneux cannot be over-estimated ... The Australians ... made a counter-attack at night which was completely successful ... one of the most astounding manoeuvres of the war ... Even if the Australians had achieved nothing else during this war but the recapture of Villers-Bretonneux, they would have won the right to be considered among the greatest fighting [nations] of the world.”

One of the battalions in Heneker’s 8th British Division had an officer, Hubert Essame, who became a general in World War II and later a military historian. He had extensive knowledge and personal experience, including his involvement at Villers-Bretonneux, when he wrote a book about 1918 over five decades later that included this: “the personal ascendancy of the Australian soldier on the battlefield ... made him the best infantryman of the war and perhaps of all time”.

One more quote, a special one. Australia’s first official war artist, Will Dyson, was with Charles Bean at Villers-Bretonneux, and the counter-attack consolidated Dyson’s reverence for Australia’s soldiers. Soon afterwards he wrote a letter home to his brother in Melbourne:

“The boys are more eager, cheerful, bucked up and full of fight than ever before. Weather is good, food is good and they are at the height of their reputation. What they have done is in so striking a contrast to what the others did not do ... God alone knows what terrible things are coming to them, but whatever they are they will meet them as they have met everything in the past. These bad men, these ruffians, who will make the life of Australian magistrates busy when they return with outrages upon all known municipal byelaws and other restrictions upon the free life — they are of the stuff of heroes and are the most important thing on earth at this blessed moment.”

So that’s the story, that’s why the words “N’oublions jamais l’Australie” (Never Forget Australia) are prominent today at the school at Villers-Bretonneux.

Commemorating what happened at Gallipoli in 1915 is understandable. Remembering what happened at the Western Front in 1918 is fundamental.