



MASTERS OF WAR: THE AIF IN FRANCE 1918

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POMPEY ELLIOTT MEMORIAL HALL
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KEYNOTE SPEAKER – CHRIS CLARK
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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT
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The last year of the war

Dr Chris Clarke
Keynote Address

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel greatly honoured to have been asked to deliver this opening address to our conference today. Not am I only a recent member of MHHV, and only a slightly longer resident of Melbourne, but I do not attempt to claim the depth of knowledge of World War I, nor the breath of detail, as possessed by the array of speakers present here.

The invitation to speak first up this morning, I imagine, derives from the understanding of the battlefield history forged by Australia's soldiers over multiple conflicts from the mid-nineteenth century, including the Great War of 1914-18, which I began to develop 20 years ago. Of course, with age, one begins to forget as much detail as one remembers, and for that I ask your indulgence. But I feel confident with offering some background, context and perspective for viewing the events of 1918, in the hope of providing a grasp of the bigger picture as armour against that inevitable moment when you feel your brain has become saturated with detail.

From the vantage point of a century after the event, 1918 was incontestably the last year of what would initially become generally known as the "Great War", or to later generations the "First World War" or "World War I". Although what to call the conflict became something of a problem for later writers, the date range was never in dispute.

When volumes of Australia's official war history edited by Charles Bean began appearing from 1921, these were published under the series title of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Regardless of what it was called, the war was universally recognised as the worst and most destructive known in world history. For many survivors it was hopefully referred to as the "War to End All Wars", for precisely that reason.

From surprisingly early on, however, some called it a "World War"—because of its global magnitude and scale, involving multiple theatres of fighting and a far-flung list of participants. But not until the international community entered a second global-scale conflict, barely two decades after the first ended, did the terms "World War I" or "First World War" enter into general usage.

As calendars across the globe clicked over to 1 January 1918, it certainly was not obvious that the Great War would come to an end within the next twelve months. Indeed, as Bean would later point out in Volume 6 of his official history (p.485), until as late as June 1918 it was fully expected that the war would continue at least into 1919, and possibly even 1920.

As a consequence of such assessment, from September 1918 Australia even found itself playing host to a visiting French Economic Mission comprising an entourage of businessmen. This delegation was originally led by a former Minister of Labour, until that gentleman died en route at San Francisco in August, whereupon the one-armed veteran of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, General Paul Pau, took over.

It was Pau who continued delivering his government's message of thanks to the people of Australia for all the assistance given to France thus far in the war, with the hope that this help would continue until victory was eventually achieved. He was still touring the country when the sudden declaration of an Armistice in November brought the need for his mission to an end.



General Pau at Kalgoorlie railway station, 19 September 1918.

While nobody at the start of 1918 could have predicted an abrupt termination of hostilities before the year was out, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the men at the front lines, in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, were in for much hard fighting over the ensuing twelve months. The events of 1917 had laid the basis for a new phase in the struggle already three years old.

In Europe, the situation on the Western Front had largely settled into a deadlock, following the German decision to abandon their positions on the Somme in March and withdraw behind the formidable multi-layered defensive barrier which they called the "Siegfried Line" and the Allies the "Hindenburg Line".

The Allies closed up to this new front line, triggering many hard fought actions (like Bullecourt for the Australians). But faced with a stalemate situation the Allies had looked for a breakthrough elsewhere along the front, fixing on Flanders in the north, with a view to capturing the German submarine base at Bruges which was within 50 kilometres of the Allied line. Removal of this facility had notionally become of importance after the Germans announced in February they were instituting a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare against all shipping bound for Britain.

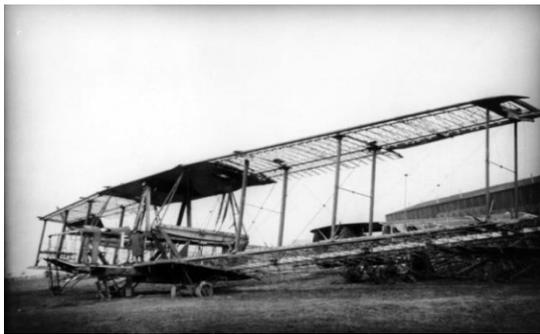
Accordingly, the two great attacks on the Western Front in 1917 were set in train—that at Messines in June earning the description of a brilliant success; the subsequent thrust against

Passchendaele, dubbed the Third Battle of Ypres, was a months-long disaster fought through mud and ceaseless rain that achieved only trivial gains for 250,000 Allied casualties.

Only the battle for Cambrai in November offered a glimmer of hope, after tactics for breaching the Hindenburg defences were tried and initially proved successful—but only until the Germans revealed that they had also been working on tactics that would prove equally effective in capturing or recovering ground.

Elsewhere in the European theatre, a sudden and decisive attack by combined Austro-German forces at Caporetto in October took Italy to the brink of disaster with more than 800,000 casualties. Nowhere, it seemed, was there any good news to be had for the Allies, and the new year potentially offered only more mixed fortunes.

Britain itself was under heavy attack, by both sea and air. The unrestricted submarine campaign begun in February 1917 fairly quickly began to bite on the British war effort, matched by a renewed, largely psychological onslaught launched by German twin-engined bombers against London from June 1917, conducted by both day and night.



Giant five-engined Gotha bomber not completed before the Armistice, discovered at Bickendorf airfield near Cologne. (AWM C04521)

The counter-measures to both these developments were profound but took time to implement. In the matter of aerial defence, the answer decided upon was to amalgamate the air services maintained by the British army and the Royal Navy into a single Royal Air Force. This streamlined organisation, brought into existence by April 1918 would prove not only more effective in providing for the air defence of the British homeland, but was to have a separate strategic strike arm—the so-called “Independent Air Force”—charged with taking the war into German national territory from bases in far northern France.

It can be incidentally noted that, as part of this build-up of Allied air power on the Western Front, the number of Australian combat air squadrons in existence had been increased from one to four, and all three of the new units were sent to England to complete their organisation and training, before transferring to France in the last quarter of 1917.

In instituting a campaign to blockade Britain by sea and effectively starve the British into submission, Germany knowingly took a gamble that this measure risked bringing the

previously-neutral United States into the war on the side of the Allies, once American vessels fell prey to U-boats.

A clumsy effort in January 1917 to manoeuvre Mexico into mounting a military campaign along the southern U.S. border spectacularly backfired following public disclosure, leading America to declare war on Germany on 6 April—with a similar declaration against Austria-Hungary in December.

Thereafter, Germany faced a substantial challenge to strengthen its position on the Western Front, and even to get in some sort of knockout blow, before a huge number of American troops and vast quantities of U.S. armaments arrived to irrevocably tip the balance against it.



American troops arriving in France, July 1917

Although few American troops had reached Europe before the end of 1917, by the following May there were about a million Americans stationed in France. By then, they were desperately needed. As result of a popular revolution in November 1917 the imperial government of Russia had collapsed and the new Bolshevik rulers took the country out of the war amid chaos and civil disorder.

Germany rapidly began transferring troops and equipment from its Eastern Front to bolster its position in France and Belgium. Few doubted that the German military leadership would seek to exploit the change in strength, and it was widely expected that with the return of better Spring weather on the Western Front the Allied forces there would be tested by a new offensive.

And let us not forget the Middle East front, from the battle lines of Palestine to Mesopotamia. The exit of Russia from the war equally presented the Ottoman Empire with a unique opportunity to solidify its position. Although the Turks chose to partly squander that opportunity with military adventures in the Caucasus, they remained a formidable presence in Palestine, Jordan and Syria, and there was little reason to doubt that this theatre, too, presented major challenges to Allied force of arms.

Here, at least, significant progress during the course of 1917 presented some better prospects of Allied success. Victory at Beersheba at the end of October had paved the way for the fall of Gaza the following month, after two previous attempts at capture had failed, and enabled the occupation of Jerusalem in December. Yet the hope of further exploiting these successes

was placed on the back-boiler in anticipation of a major German offensive in France, with the local commander, General Edmund Allenby, forced to strip his garrisons of units required to reinforce the Western Front until the latter half of 1918.

As this summary of the position at the beginning of 1918 would indicate, there was little to feel especially optimistic about Allied prospects in the forthcoming year. If this was the beginning of the lead-up to victory over the next twelve months, it did not appear that way to many observers. As previously noted, to most, the trend of events seemed to indicate that the conflict would persist well into 1919, at least.

In March 1918 the expected German offensive was duly launched, with spectacular and seemingly unstoppable success until it was eventually halted, virtually within view of the major road and rail centre of Amiens, having re-won much of the ground previously occupied on the Somme in 1916. The divisions of the Australian Corps played a particularly notable role in stemming the German advance, most notably at places such as Dernancourt, Morlancourt, and Villers-Bretonneux.

There followed some of the great battles celebrated in Australian military history: Hamel on 4 July (about which we will hear a great deal more today, according to the program), and battles following the operation launched on 8 August referred to as the battle of Amiens (Third Battle of the Somme). It was Amiens which was acknowledged by General Erich Ludendorff as the German Army's "Black Day" of the war, the point at which the conflict's final outcome became inevitable.

Still, victory could have been some way off, as the Allies rolled back the gains of the March offensive with victories such as Mont St Quentin at the start of September 1918. But these operations still only brought the Allied formations back against the Hindenburg Line, only now deepened and strengthened by incorporating the old British lines formerly facing the German positions, as an extra layer to the overall defences. The challenge remained of piercing the enemy's defences and driving him out of France altogether.

It was at this juncture that the Allies struck their major blow in Palestine, with Allenby launching the battle of Meggido on 19 September. A spectacular breakthrough was achieved beside the Mediterranean coast which allowed Australian light horse and other mounted formations to ride deep into the Turkish rear before quickly causing the collapse of the enemy's defence. The Turkish capitulation came at the end of October, by which stage a separate offensive launched from Salonika in Greece had already cut Turkey off from support of the Central Powers by forcing Bulgaria to surrender unconditionally on 30 September. At the same time Italian resurgence against Austria led to an Austrian collapse and appeal for an armistice on 30 October.

Germany was now fighting on its own, alone. Yet still it seemed conceivable that the German defence in northern France could hold firm against Allied attempts to breach the Hindenburg defensive line. Notionally there was the prospect that German army resistance would

continue against any Allied attempt made, once the Hindenburg Line was finally breached, to advance into and through the German heartland.

The Allies were in the process of preparing for that great, final challenge when the end came on the Western Front also, with Germany suing for an Armistice in November. Significantly, however, that outcome arose not through outright defeat of enemy forces on the battlefield, but as a result of social unrest, popular despair and economic hardship within Germany itself.

It was as much the prolonged and dire conditions of the German civil population, involving mass starvation in many parts of the country, combined with the severe depletion of Germany's manpower and industrial reserves, which brought about the final capitulation. Allied troops at the front had seen the evidence of this situation themselves, with the discovery of the extreme youth of many reinforcements sent to bolster German military strength during 1918, and captured letters which described the deprivation endured by loved ones at home.



A boyish German prisoner described as 'average' of the type captured in the Somme area April-May 1918. (AWM E02306)

In reality, the situation in the German trenches of the Western Front was just as bad. Exhaustion, shortages and low morale following the failed offensives had prompted widespread desertion across the army, as well as mutiny in the High Seas Fleet. While troops still manned the trenches and stood by their guns, there was little enthusiasm for continuing the fight. It was recognition of this that the generals who had run Germany throughout the war finally handed power back to civilian politicians, while the Kaiser fled the country for neutral Holland just ahead of the Armistice.

While declaration of the Armistice gave rise to universal relief that the misery and killing of the previous four years was at an end, the circumstances which prompted this sudden turn-around contained a particularly disturbing portend for the preservation of future peace in Europe—if only people had recognised it at the time.

Securing an Armistice rather than unconditional surrender of forces enabled the rise of a later myth claiming that the German Army had never actually been defeated on the field of battle, but was betrayed—‘stabbed in the back’—by disloyal elements of Germany’s civil society, especially Jewish financiers and industrialists determined to protect the vast profits they had made from the war.



The ‘stab in the back’ myth sprang up immediately after the war, as this cartoon from a 1919 Austrian postcard shows.

Propagated by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime, this was a line used to justify the rise of militarism in post-war Germany. Combined with the severity of the peace settlement imposed during treaty negotiations at Versailles in 1919, the myth helped provide the genesis of a new European conflict which would eventually ensure that the Great War indeed became only a *First World War*.

The disintegration of first the Russian empire, followed by the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and German empires by the end of 1918, marked the emergence of a new world order. The fragmentation of imperial control saw a redrawing of borders across Europe and the Middle East. Newly independent states sprang up from the ashes of the old, such as Finland, Poland, Czechoslovakia; even Austria and Hungary became separate countries.

Beyond the military and geopolitical consequences of 1918 was the impact of the intervention in the war of the United States, an aspect of lasting importance which can still be appreciated a century later. It was in January 1918 that U.S. president Woodrow Wilson had delivered to the American Congress his fourteen point speech in which he outlined his plan for world peace post-war.

As one commentator recently observed: ‘That Wilson—the president of a nation more than 4800 kilometres from the closest battlefield, a nation directly involved in the war for less than a year at that point—presumed to dictate conditions for peace at all was remarkable ... it presaged the outsize role the US would soon take on.’

Throughout 1918 there had been other global “game-changers” hovering in the wings. Though its impact was felt far away from the main battlefronts, the onset of the global

pandemic known as Spanish Flu—first evident during the first half of 1918 in parts of Europe, the US and Asia, before then spreading globally—ultimately proved more deadly than the war itself.

Whereas the war had caused an estimated 35-40 million casualties, including around 16 million deaths (9-11 million military personnel, and 5-6 million civilians), by the time the influenza pandemic ran its course in 1919 an estimated 500 million people had been infected worldwide (about one-third of the planet's population) and 5-10 per cent of its victims had died from its effects.

While the focus of this conference is on the *military* events of 1918, and especially the contribution of Australian forces to the Allied war effort, the effect and importance of the background and context already outlined should be continually borne in mind. These were factors which few of the men in the trenches or elsewhere at the battlefronts of 1918 would probably have been fully aware of, or if they were, would have been in a position to change or influence, though they lived (or died) on a daily basis as a consequence.

It is a truly disturbing thought that there were millions of people in uniform, men and women, none of whom who masters of their own fate in this war—merely cogs in a vast military machine that appeared to grind on regardless of conscious human intervention.

So who were the “Masters of War” alluded to in the title chosen for this conference? Ordinarily we might have expected to see speakers asked to focus on the military figures—senior commanders mostly—deemed most proficient in demonstrating mastery in the conduct of military campaigning. But a glance at the program quickly discloses a different intent on the part of this event's organisers.

In a sense, the masters referred to here were the armies and other branches of service who in 1918 manned the front lines in Europe, this being the key crucible in which it was expected that victory would ultimately be won. Although the focus today is on the Allied side, and even more narrowly the Australian Imperial Force and its components, the reference to ‘masters of war’ might be extended quite fairly to the forces of all contending powers in the conflict.

By 1918 all the armed forces of the powers involved were immensely more experienced and battle hardened after three years of war. Gone were the proud but rigid standing armies maintained in the tense decades before 1914—swept away in the horrendous casualty lists of a multitude of inept campaigns in the war's early stages—their place taken by volunteer (and often conscripted) mass armies enlisted directly from civilian populations, many of them (including the AIF) initially a bit shambolic and poorly disciplined.

Through sheer necessity, these had evolved into highly professional and skilled organisations, capable of rapidly absorbing new technologies, tactics and methods and incorporating them into operations in often highly-innovative ways. This transformation was evident at many

levels within nearly all the forces involved, among senior commanders, their staffs, formation and lesser headquarters, and so on down to the men in the front line.

There has grown up in recent decades what amounts to virtually a tradition, that the fate and the lives of Australia's soldiers in France during 1916-17 were shackled to 'deficient generals' and their 'abysmal strategies', and that the diggers' later victories, bracing but costly, were won on their own merits. As usual, history defies such simplistic analysis. The truth of the matter is that all ranks, at every level, needed to learn their stock in trade.

While there is undoubtedly a case for arguing that by the time John Monash succeeded to command of the Australian Corps in May 1918 the general "needed" the AIF to cement his place in history more than the AIF needed Monash, the reality is that both sides gained by the arrangement, as the last half of the year demonstrated. While the AIF was recognised as a formidable battle force, it still required a commander who had absorbed the necessity for planning highly-orchestrated all-arms attacks combining artillery, armour and air support to win ground at least cost.

Although Australians have become used to identifying qualities of high tactical competence as typifying their own expeditionary force, the AIF, it is important to recognise that the standard had come to apply equally to other national forces. The reputation of the Canadian Corps, for example, was in no way second-rank to the Australians, and although the New Zealanders fielded only one complete division on the Western Front the standing of that formation was, in many circles, ranked higher than any other.

Getting better at the business of war had not been achieved easily or quickly. Change-bringing experience had only been won through a heavy cost in human lives and the attrition of national manpower reserves. It might almost be argued that becoming more proficient and effective in battle was a product of having to do as much, or more, with less.

In the AIF, for example, the reduced flow of reinforcements and replacements, caused by a shortage of new recruits back home, was the result of two failed referendums (in October 1916 and December 1917) over the introduction of conscription. Maintaining the AIF as an all-volunteer army had the ultimate effect by September 1918 of requiring seven entire battalions to disband, and amalgamate with similarly depleted units, prompting soldier "strikes" which were rightfully regarded as mutinies.

Gone were the days in 1914-15 when battalions, brigades and divisions stood at full establishment strengths; for example, battalions that notionally should have 1000 men were operating by mid-1918 with just a few hundred. Units at every level were so reduced that Monash's planning for Hamel was forced to incorporate newly-arrived American troops to bolster the strength of the brigades participating in the attack.



Pictured on 8 August 1918, this platoon of B Company, 29th Battalion, was operating at about half strength—like the rest of the AIF. (AWM E02790)

It might also be suggested that it was from such circumstances that all sides developed the resilience to seize and exploit battlefield opportunities as soon as they were revealed during both the German Spring Offensive of March 1918 and the Allied response in August, having learnt to cope with the tempo of operations at times when attacks and advances were occurring at almost bewildering speed.

Equally, there can be found an explanation for the origin of the notable ANZAC tactic of ‘peaceful penetration’, or what has also come to be called ‘stealth raiding’. This entailed the use of quite small parties to patrol and conduct trench raids into enemy-held positions, for the purpose of gaining intelligence, demoralising the opponent and seizing ground at minimal cost.

Stealth raiding undoubtedly reflected the value placed within the AIF upon individual initiative and resourcefulness, but it also reflected the reality that AIF sub-units were so small by mid-1918 that this positively encouraged the Australians to resort to such tactics in preference to large set-piece battles. It is also worth noting that stealth raiding was not only practiced by Australians, but the New Zealanders too.

Since my purpose in this opening session was to provide context and background for today’s conference, I naturally do not wish to intrude too far into the subject matter of the speakers to follow. So at this point, I would like to conclude by returning to the point I made at the outset and to leave it with you as a main theme, if you like.

If we could return to that imaginary vantage point from which to survey the probable course of events as they appeared at the start of 1918, the picture that emerges was one of immense uncertainty on all sides. Nothing that occurred over the spring and summer months could be predicted as guaranteeing that the war would end before the year was out. That 1918 would prove to be the ‘last year of the war’ is something that can be safely asserted only from the assurance of 100 years of hindsight.