



MASTERS OF WAR: THE AIF IN FRANCE 1918

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POMPEY ELLIOTT MEMORIAL HALL
403 CAMBERWELL ROAD, CAMBERWELL

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MILITARY HISTORY AND
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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT
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The AIF and the Defence of Amiens, March-April 1918

Dr Aaron Pegram

Sergeant Stan McDougall of the 47th Battalion single-handedly broke up a German attack near Dernancourt before dawn on 28 March 1918. The exhausted battalions of the Australian 12th Brigade were stretched out along a railway embankment outside the village where they and elements from the British 35th Division formed a thin defensive screen that sought to blunt German forces advancing on the nearby city of Amiens. McDougall had allowed his men to stand down when he heard German troops moving around in the dark. Running along the top of the embankment, he saw a party of enemy in the half-light, advancing towards his portion of the line.

McDougall roused a nearby Lewis gun team, who were subsequently killed in the opening volley of fire. Snatching up their gun, McDougall began firing from the hip as German troops spilled over the embankment. After a dozen or so sustained bursts, the gun's cooling jacket began to sear itself into McDougall's hand, but he managed to keep it in action until its ammunition ran out – he then collected a rifle and put a bayonet through a German officer levelling his pistol at two Australian soldiers. In the end, concerted and vigorous fire from the 47th Battalion's positions caused the assaulting German infantry to waver in confusion and their attack to fail. But for his actions that morning, Stan McDougall was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The fighting at Dernancourt saw some of the most intense infantry combat involving the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the opening months of 1918. One hundred years on, it is worth considering the actions fought by the Australians during this critical phase in the First World War. Following Russia's withdrawal from the war in the spring of 1918, the German Army had transferred more than a million troops to the fighting in France, and on 21 March, launched a major offensive in the St Quentin sector, south of Arras, that succeeded in ending over three years of trench warfare. Following a five-hour hurricane bombardment firing over 3.2 million shells from more than 60,000 guns and 2,500 mortars across a 100 kilometre front, elite German Stormtrooper units trained in infiltration tactics succeeded in driving back the allied front, ending over three years of trench warfare. British Third Army in the Arras sector and Fifth Army on the old Somme battlefields were caught by surprise; they became divided and were forced to withdraw, allowing German troops to advance on

Amiens. In five days Germans succeeded in recapturing all the ground lost during the battle of the Somme in 1916. Towns and villages where Australians had fought and died throughout the bitter campaigns of 1916 and 1917 were now well behind German lines, including Bullecourt, Bapaume and Pozières.

Known to the Germans as Operation Michael, this major thrust was one of four that materialised in the west in first half of 1918. Michael took place on the old Somme battlefields; Georgette on the Lys and at Ypres; Blücher– Yorck against the French in the Champagne region, with Gneisenau an extension of the latter offensive, seeking to draw in allied reserves and link up with the German troops on the outskirts of Amiens. Michael was considered the main thrust of the overall offensive, and sought to capture the vital supply and logistical hub of Amiens which would effectively sever the British and French armies along the Somme River and allow the Germans to advance to and capture the channel ports.

The British suffered exceptionally heavy casualties in the opening onslaught and the withdrawal that followed, but the AIF was fortunate in that it was spared much of the fighting during this period. The only AIF units then engaged were the airmen of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) whose SE5as and Sopwith Camels bombed and strafed the advancing German columns from sunrise to sunset. Captain Arthur Cobby of No. 4 Squadron AFC described the skies around St Quentin being ‘full of aircraft, and continuously while shooting up the troops on the ground we would be attacked by enemy scouts ... The smoke of battle mixed with the clouds and mist above rendered flying particularly dangerous’.

The infantry were still in Belgium where they had spent the previous winter months recovering from the 77,000 casualties incurred the previous year in bitter fighting at Bullecourt, Messines and in the Third Battle of Ypres. Although this had been a time of relative quiet, the AIF was still badly understrength and reeling from its shocking losses in the fighting at Ypres. The situation was exacerbated by voluntary recruiting being at an all-time low, conscription being twice rejected in bitterly–contested referendums, and the usual winter wastage through illness. All told, the AIF began the final year of the war short by about 18,000 men.

Command of the five Australian divisions had been centralised when the Australian Corps was formed in November 1917 (under British commander, Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood). But such was the seriousness of the situation developing in France that the Australians were sent south to defend Amiens as separate divisions, brigades and battalions attached to a variety of British formations.

What the AIF lacked in numbers it made up in confidence, with the men of the 3rd and 4th Australian Divisions said to have been beginning to ‘strain on the leash’ upon hearing the news of the fighting in the south. The 4th Australian Division was rushed by bus to Hermaville, northwest of Arras, with its 4th Brigade sent to relieve the shattered remnants of the British 19th Division defending the village of Hébuterne where a gap had opened on the Third Army front. The 4th Brigade was attached to the British 62nd Division, and on 27 March, repelled multiple attacks where German field guns blazed away in the open and infantry advanced in waves in short rushes through long grass. For the men of the 13th Battalion, holding the line at Hébuterne was ‘purely bayonet work’. ‘The holding of it for the first few strenuous days was as purely rifle work, for not only had we no artillery, but our ammunition supplies were so short that we could not afford to use machine–guns freely; and our bomb supply was soon exhausted’. Despite this, German attempts to exploit their successes at Hébuterne were dashed by the defenders which included the Australians. Such was their success that the British commander of IV Corps was unwilling to entrust the defence of Hébuterne to anyone other than the 4th Brigade.

Having arrived on the Western Front in late 1916, troops of the 3rd Division under Major General John Monash had never been to the Somme. They were bitterly disappointed to receive orders on 25 March to move to Ypres where it was initially planned for them to be held in reserve, but at the last hour the division was ordered to move south by rail to Doullens. They arrived to secure the town while a particularly tense conference between British and French High Command took place over plans to stem the German breakthrough. No sooner had the conference ended, a crisis developed on the VII Corps front immediately south of Albert. Unexpected troop movements attributed to the misinterpretation of orders left a 16km stretch of ground in the bare, high triangle defined by the rivers Somme and Ancre undefended beyond a scratch force holding the old Amiens defence Line. Monash’s troops were immediately sent to plug the gap, finding themselves the only traffic moving forward towards the Germans. French civilians and British soldiers streamed past in the opposite direction. Time and again they were told by passers–by that they had no chance of stopping the advancing German Army. By mid–morning on 27 March, the 3rd Division’s 11th Brigade relieved the few exhausted British troops on the northern banks of the Somme, while the 12th and 13th Brigades from the 4th Australian Division took over from the exhausted Scots of the British 9th Division at Dernancourt on the River Ancre.

The two Australian divisions clashed with German troops in the following days with mixed success. At noon on 28 March, Monash’s troops, in the triangle between the two

rivers, carried out an assault towards Morlancourt village that sought to add depth to the existing British defences and shore up positions from which a further attack could be launched. Drawing on battalions from two brigades, the plan ultimately lacked cohesion and adequate artillery support. 40th Battalion on the left conducted a formal assault while 42nd and 43rd Battalions on the right sought to bite off ground through aggressive patrolling. The latter attack started late, leaving the 40th in the drizzling rain without support when it bumped into two advancing German regiments. On the right, 44th Battalion received instructions to slip off the heights to capture Saily–Laurette, where it was hit by German troops about 270 metres short of its objective. Within hours, the 3rd Australian Division had lost around 300 men for a relatively modest gain.

The two brigades of the 4th Division near Dernancourt had more success, albeit under a very different set of circumstances. Set up along the railway embankment outside the village, the 47th and 48th Battalions poured devastating fire on German troops who succeeded in infiltrating parts of the Australian positions and threatened to roll up their flanks in the early hours of 28 March. Stan McDougall played a pivotal role in destroying the enemy probe that advanced across the railway crossing, but the main German attack hit the 47th Battalion further north along the line. Captain George Mitchell of 48th Battalion described ‘lines of grey–clad men doubled out of the sunken roads towards us. Waist–high over the bank we met them with rapid fire’:

Our Lewis gunners, disdainful of the frontal attack, hammered with staccato bursts to the right, where black masses moved to the 47th. Weaker and weaker became the advancing lines before our flailing fire, till at eighty yards all movements ceased. Our Lewis guns still chopped away at the right, where the main attack was. I was blazing away with a rifle, having a lovely time, sending a swear word with each bullet.

Advancing German troops had penetrated 60km into British territory and were almost within striking distance of Amiens. Even though the outer suburbs of the city were on fire from long–range shelling by German rail guns, by 28 March, it was clear the German drive towards Amiens was beginning to lose momentum and had no chance of success. Germany’s rapid advance across the devastated Somme battlefields strained logistical infrastructure, with bottlenecks caused by a shortage of horses and lack of motorised transport making it difficult to bring up stores and supplies. Casualties among German units were exceptionally heavy, especially among the skilled and experienced junior officers and NCOs who led the offensive

from the front. The long-term effects of the war were also playing on the advancing German infantry who plundered British and French supply depots after years of material shortages, wartime rationing and ersatz foodstuffs. German attacks were nowhere near as formidable or successful as they had been over the previous days. On 30 March, for example, men of the 11th Brigade on Morlancourt Ridge broke up a concerted German attempt to penetrate the British line near Sailly-Laurette.

Exhausted, German troops were able to muster one final drive towards Amiens, with fifteen divisions assaulting the British north of Albert and towards the Avre River on 4 April. Senior German commanders made the decision to strike at the outermost defences of Amiens that centred on the town of Villers-Bretonneux. From Hill 104, just north of Villers-Bretonneux, German artillery had a direct line of sight on Amiens and could shell it with long-range guns, hampering the vital railway hub that played such a prominent role in British and French operations in northern France. Days earlier, Australian troops of the 9 Brigade (3rd Division) had been sent to bolster the British 61st Division positions east of Villers-Bretonneux, falling in between the 14th Division to the north and the 18th to the south. On 30 March, the 9th Brigade carried out a successful but costly bayonet assault against German troops who had gained ground near Hangard Wood, and on 4 April, were in the thick of the fighting when two divisions of German infantry hit the 35th Battalion's positions after deluging Villers-Bretonneux with gas and high-explosive:

From the thick mist masses of German infantry appeared. We were ready for them and every rifle, Lewis gun and machine gun came into action instantly. We had no wire or defences but the German troops sagged and withered under our fire... All was going well when the troops on our left started to retreat and went back at the run, abandoning everything.

Faced with overwhelming odds, British troops of the 41st Brigade melted under the German fire, creating a gap in the line that stretched to the village of le Hamel and the River Somme some three kilometres away. With their left flank fully exposed, the men of 35th Battalion were forced to withdraw to a support line occupied by 33rd Battalion on the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux; there they held ground against repeated German attacks until the gap was filled with British cavalry. Australian field guns on Morlancourt ridge there then able to pour devastating fire on all remaining German units in the area, preventing them from spilling through to Villers-Bretonneux.

The fighting at Villers–Bretonneux had been a near run thing, but it was not the only crisis developing in the approaches to Amiens. No sooner had the rattle of rifle fire began echoing in the woods around Villers–Bretonneux, two and a half German divisions hit the 12th and 13th Brigades holding the railway embankment outside Dernancourt in what was probably the heaviest attack experienced by the AIF on the Western Front. Utilising the cover of a thick mist that had settled in the flats before dawn, German storm troops silently probed the Australian positions between the two brigades and succeeded in infiltrating the thin defensive screen set up along the railway embankment. They made their way towards a chalk quarry further up the hill, where the gunners of the 21st Machine–Gun Company were positioned to deal with any further German attacks developing in the area, but had received orders not to have their guns set up for fear of being observed and subject to bombardment. The gunners were captured without firing a shot: ‘The Germans had surrounded the chalk pit and had full command of the only entrance to it. We surrendered, there was no alternative. The Germans motioned us to move out of the pit, and on towards Dernancourt’.

With the key to the Australian defences disabled, two and a half German divisions attacked the railway embankment and overran parts of the 12th Brigade’s positions, killing and capturing the defenders and causing troops on their flanks to withdraw. Striking for the Albert–Amiens Road, they came under sustained rifle and machine–gun fire from 45th Battalion occupying the main line of defence several hundred metres behind the railway embankment, and later that day, carried out a successful counter–attack that prevented the Germans from reaching the road. His position having been spared the brunt of the German assault, Stan McDougall gave almost a repeat performance of his Victoria Cross action just days earlier by snatching up a Lewis gun, racing to an exposed position and pouring fire on assaulting German units as they spilled over the embankment. When a bullet pierced the gun’s cooling jacket, McDougall crawled 180 metres under intense fire to retrieve another gun which he got into action, then later led his platoon in a counter–attack where they helped to stop the Germans from advancing up the hill. For this latter action, McDougall was awarded the Military Medal (originally being recommended for a Distinguished Conduct Medal). An excerpt from his citation described him as ‘absolutely fearless’ and ‘his contempt of danger ... amazing’.

The attacks of 4–5 April marked the end concerted German efforts to strike Amiens. Although they had captured important ground that threatened the stability of the allied front, their attacks had been costly in men and materiel amid stiffening resistance from British and French formations. For the Australians, the 2nd and 5th Divisions still in the north

were brought down to bolster British defences between Albert and the Lucre River. As the line began to settle, Australia troops of the 5th and 6th Brigades clashed with German troops over the possession of Monument, Lancer and Hangard Wood south of Villers–Bretonneux.

With Amiens now a forlorn hope, senior German commanders were able to keep momentum going by launching Operation Georgette further north against the British positions along the River Lys in Flanders on 9 April, seeking to capture the important railway junction at Hazebrouck. With the main assault hitting the inexperienced 2nd Portuguese Division around Neuve Chapelle, the line collapsed, causing German troops to spill through to the already–shattered British 40th Division and beyond. Armentières, Fleurbaix and the positions the Australians had recently occupied at Messines were abandoned, bringing the Germans to within striking distance of Hazebrouck. No sooner had the 1st Australian Division arrived in Amiens to join the Australian Corps on the Somme, it was ordered to return to the north, taking up positions outside Strazeele where the 1st and 2nd Brigades repulsed wave after wave of German infantry throughout 13–14 April. According to one man from the 3rd Battalion, it was like ‘firing into a haystack – one could not miss’. In the end, French troops arrived to bolster the allied defences, and after further attempts to try and penetrate further to the north at Kemmel, German forces were unable to exploit their breakthrough any further. Just like Michael, Georgette had also failed.

Over the following weeks, the Australian divisions bolstered their defences in their respective sectors to thwart any further German progress. The 5th Australian Division was moved south of the Somme River, with the 15th Brigade at Blangy–Tronville to the west of Villers–Bretonneux and the 14th Brigade occupying positions on the ever–important Hill 104. Villers–Bretonneux was occupied by British troops of the 8th Division, which had suffered exceptionally heavy casualties during the fighting in March and had been replenished with recruits who had been rushed across the English Channel having received little to no real training. While the Germans lacked the manpower and resources to make one final thrust on Amiens, they attacked Villers–Bretonneux and the important high ground that led to the heights of Hill 104. With the town now reduced to rubble, it was deluged with gas and high explosive before German troops assaulted Villers–Bretonneux through a dense fog on the morning of 24 April. Their attack was spearheaded by thirteen A7V tanks, which clashed with British tanks on the outskirts of town and caused the young and inexperienced soldiers of the 8th Division to break. By mid–morning, the Germans held the southern end of Hill 104 and Villers–Bretonneux, and to the south, both Monument Farm and Hangard Wood.

Australian troops were involved in the recapture of the town, with Brigadier General Harold ‘Pompey’ Elliott’s 15th Brigade (5th Australian Division) assaulting from the north while Brigadier General Thomas William Glasgow’s 13th Brigade (4th Australian Division) attacked with British troops from the south in a pincer-like manoeuvre. It was a defining moment in the Australian battle experience on the Western Front, but by the time the Australians set off British troops had already borne the brunt of the German attack and German units in and around Villers–Bretonneux were exhausted from fighting earlier that day. Private Walter Downing of 57th Battalion described how ‘German flares of all kinds shot into the air’ as thousands of Australian troops emerged from the fog with rifle and bayonet:

A snarl came from the throat of the mob, the fierce, low growl of tigers scenting blood. There was a howling as of demons as the 57th, fighting mad, drove through the wire... The wild cry rose to a voluminous, vengeful roar that was heard by the 13th Brigade on the far right of Villers–Bretonneux... They killed and killed. Bayonets passed with ease through grey–clad bodies, and were withdrawn with a sucking noise. The dozen English we had with us, mere boys, and without arms till they could find a rifle, were fighting with fists and boots, happy so long as they knew where to find the Australian put in charge of them.

The counter-attack was a resounding success, with both brigades linking up on the eastern side of Villers-Bretonneux in the early hours of 26 April. Despite the French Moroccan Division assaulting further to the south in an attempt to shore up the line, their attack failed, and Monument Wood remained in German hands. Villers-Bretonneux had nevertheless been spared a second time, and with that, Amiens was no longer under threat.

The AIF lost heavily in the battles of March and April 1918, suffering over 18,400 battle casualties, including 3,500 dead across five already depleted infantry divisions. British and French forces, which included the Australians, had defended Amiens and prevented German forces from achieving any further breakthrough, but the Australian Corps lacked manpower and was forced to disband battalions within three brigades to bring others up to fighting strength. While these losses had significant consequences for the Australians and their ability to withstand further losses in 1918, they had not been as severe as those within British formations that had borne the brunt of the German offensive. The British had suffered

a staggering 255,000 casualties during Operation Michael and a further 82,000 during Georgette, with the certainty of much harder fighting in the months to come.

The series of actions fought by the AIF in France throughout March and April 1918 are little known in Australia today – perhaps reflecting the disparate series of battalion and brigade actions they fought in support of British formations across a considerably wide front. Costly though these actions were, they helped thwart any further German attempt to achieve a decisive breakthrough.