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The Western Front 1918: an advance towards victory

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1918 has been described as the most dramatic and decisive year in British military history to that time. Defeat stared the Allies in the face early on, yet in the summer the British and French Armies staged a remarkable recovery and began to drive the German armies back. The AIF shared both the crises and successes of that year. In this first of two articles, Philip Carey provides an overview of the dramatic events in the summer of 1918 that began the advance to final victory by the Entente Powers.

Introduction

The history of the First World War is extremely complex and not surprisingly most of us focus on some isolated battles rather than the tedious process of trying to understand the mass of intricate detail; of politics, economics, strategy, tactics and the debilitating effects of national and personal strain that the War imposed. But it is worthwhile trying to come to grips with the importance of what happened and why.

That requires some understanding of the continuum of the War. Late in 1917, the German High Command realised that their gamble in resuming unrestricted submarine warfare had not paid off. Their losses in the Ypres Salient had been substantial and although they could see the Entente Allies were nearing exhaustion, their own position was no better. Convinced of their military supremacy in the light of their defeat of Russia, they took a decision to defeat the Allies on the Western Front before the Americans could arrive in any significant numbers.

Tactical Changes

The Germans' intention was to achieve victory by a highly sophisticated use of artillery which they called the *feuerwalze*, the fire waltz, combined with newly devised infantry tactics based on their stormtrooper concept, which sought to train all infantry divisions in *sturm* tactics converting them into *stosstruppen*, shocktroops.¹ Their appreciation of air power and armoured fighting vehicles was ineffectual and, as a result, their neglect of these capabilities, reinforced by their own hubris and a consequent acceptance of comparatively high casualty levels, led to their own undoing (Marix Evans 2003, 7).

The British on the other hand, well aware of the political and military consequences of heavy casualties, adopted an altogether more intelligent approach and to some extent persuaded their French Allies to follow

their lead. They developed a balanced combination of infantry, artillery, armoured fighting vehicles and aircraft to overcome their enemy in either fixed defences or more open manoeuvre operations (Marix Evans 2003, 7).

The origin this development lies in the policy of the British General Headquarters, dating from early 1916, of analysing every operation to deduce the lessons and disseminating these widely in a series of staff memoranda given the prefix "SS" for Stationery Service. This service under the control of Captain (later Colonel) S. G. Partridge, became the most sophisticated doctrinal service of the War and is credited with enhancing the development of British tactical proficiency (Griffiths 1994, 179-186).

It has been said by some modern historians that by 1918 the British Army had developed into an effective 'weapons system' (Sheffield 2001, 196-197; Wilson 1986, 586). 'Weapons system' is a modern term, probably accurate, but one the generals of 1918 might not have appreciated. However, it is appropriate to say the British Army had evolved into a well coordinated force of all arms – infantry, artillery, engineers, tanks and aircraft.

The Prelude

The long period of the German Spring Offensives known as the *Kaiserschlacht*, from March to July 1918, had a profound affect on both sides. After 21 March, a shocked British Government moved quickly to release reinforcements held back in Britain and recalled 88,000 men on 'Blighty leave'. The reinforcements included the speciously named 'strategic reserve' of 175,000 and a host of new conscripts, many old men and boys. A manpower crisis had threatened in late 1917 and forced the Government into extraordinary measures. In April, conscription was extended to ages 17 to 51 (Holmes 2006, 250).

The reinforcements were vital, but presented a further problem. The British divisions were still understrength. Many of the strategic reserve and all the new conscripts were only partly trained; indeed to less

¹For a comprehensive description of German Artillery and Infantry doctrine, see Marix Evans (2003, 13-17).

than basic level. Their training had to be enhanced before they could take their place in the battle line, but there could be no certainty that they would complete collective platoon and company training before a desperate need called them forward. Consequently, their first battle experience was often disastrous.

Nevertheless, the resilience of the British fighting spirit was dramatically displayed in the way the Army recovered and regrouped after the disasters of March and April to defeat their much vaunted opponents. It was a remarkable achievement in the circumstances.

From the German perspective, their failure was largely due to General Ludendorff's inept grasp of strategic and operational concepts and the Army's own clumsy tactics (Keegan 1998, 434). Ludendorff's impatience and his penchant for blaming his own subordinates created major problems, but the real disaster was manifest in heavy casualties – nearly 550,000 killed, a huge proportion amongst the elite divisions who could least afford them, those containing the highly trained *stosstruppen*.²

By July, the Germans held a huge area, with an extended front, including salients of little tactical value which had vulnerable flanks; and with lines of communication stretching back over a wasteland. They had launched offensive after offensive that had damaged the Allied armies but failed to destroy them. The *feuerwalze* and the *stosstruppen* ultimately failed and Germany lost the initiative (Wilmott 2007, 257; Sheffield 2001, 196).

On top of their casualties, it was as much the destruction and dislocation of the defensive positions that concerned the Allied commanders. Later attacks up to the middle of July continued to disrupt the Allied defensive arrangements. But after 18 July, the Germans were continually beaten back as the Allies recovered their strength. The lead up to the advance to victory is basically the story of that recovery.

Planning the Counter Offensive

Even before Operation *Michael* had run its course on 5 April, the military commanders, with the exception perhaps of Pétain, were considering counter-measures. For the British part, this included the Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, and all his Army commanders, especially Sir Henry Rawlinson who was to direct the battle on the Somme front where the Australians now found themselves.

The most dynamic of the French generals was Ferdinand Foch. At a crisis conference held at Doullens on 26 March, Foch had demanded that there be no more retreat, that the British and French armies should not be driven apart and that the Allies must stand in front of Amiens.

The conference agreed, at Haig's suggestion, that Foch should be charged with 'the co-ordination of the Allied Armies on the Western Front'. At a later conference on 3 April at Beauvais, he was given responsibility for 'the strategic direction of military operations'. He could then issue orders to both Haig and the French Commander-in-Chief, General Philippe Pétain, although they still had a right of appeal to their own governments (Stevenson 2004, 410-411).

Even while the third of the German attacks was being prepared, the Allies were planning their counter strokes. On 20 May 1918, Foch issued Directive No. 3 to the national commanders-in chief. In it Foch proclaimed that, whilst further enemy attacks could be anticipated, the Allies must be prepared to pass from the defensive posture to the offensive. He further emphasised that whilst the ultimate intention was to advance all along the line, preliminary operations would have to be initiated first to clear the German threats to the Paris-Amiens railway and the mines in the area of Béthune in the Lys region of Flanders (Edmonds 1935, Vol III, 339).

The first of these operations would focus in front of Villers-Bretonneux where the Australians held the line and had twice in April mounted decisive counter attacks to secure the town. It was also the area where General Rawlinson had been concerned to drive the German forces away from the high ground above the village of Hamel which dominated the northern approach to the town.³ Progressively through May and June, the Australian divisions advanced their front by small stages by the aggressive technique called 'peaceful penetration' and, by early July, their positions north of the Somme were east of the village. However, south of the river, the high ground and the village were still in German hands. The Australians proposed an operation to straighten their line at Hamel to eliminate enemy observation of the side and rear of their positions north of the Somme (Serle 1982, 332).

The story of the Battle of Hamel on 4 July has passed into Australian legend. An attack by two and a half brigades was a minor operation, and though the concepts must be acknowledged as Rawlinson's, it was planned and conducted with great skill by the corps commander, Lieutenant General Sir John Monash. He was a cautious and meticulous planner and his staff played a decisive part in planning the battle, although major contributions were made by the Tank Corps and Rawlinson and his staff. In just 93 minutes, all objectives were taken with remarkably few casualties. Despite this success, the tactical significance of the battle should not be overstated. It removed a difficulty, enemy observation, and secured the northern approach to Villers-Bretonneux, but its impact on overall operations was slight.

²Statistics of casualties vary notoriously. This figure has been extracted from Marix Evans (2003).

³On 9 April, he had ordered an assault on Hamel by the 5th Australian Division for 11 April, but the operation was cancelled for lack of reserves (Fourth Army War Diary April 1918, AWM 4, 1/14/6 Pt 1).

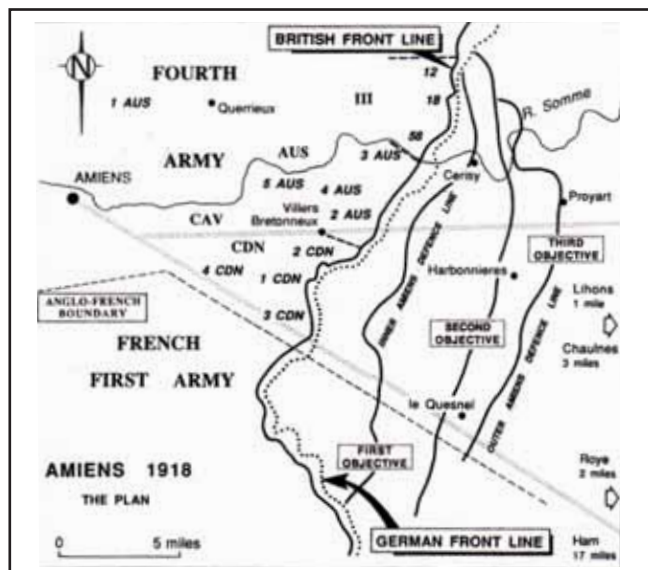
The real importance of the battle lies in its experimental nature and the success achieved. In June, Rawlinson had produced a paper for General Headquarters on revised methods for offensive operations. In it he advocated increased use of machine-guns, Lewis guns, automatic rifles and in the numbers and functions of tanks (Prior and Wilson 1992, 291). With characteristic guile and subtle suggestion, he encouraged his corps commanders to apply his new-found thesis wherever possible. In Monash he found fertile ground for his subtlety.⁴ Both officers based their planning for the operation at Hamel on the effective use of combined arms at the Battle of Cambrai in 1917. It was essential, they recognised, that infantry should be 'relieved as far as possible of the obligation to fight their way forward' (Wilson 1986, 587). Unlike Cambrai, however, where a German counter-attack succeeded because of the British failure to consolidate properly, Hamel provided for extensive consolidation. Two additional brigades were detailed for consolidation once the initial thrust had succeeded.

Infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft, coordinated by a thorough process of planning conferences and superb cooperation by and within the staff at all levels, produced a textbook result. Consistent with the policy of disseminating tactical information, General Headquarters published SS218 on the 'Operations of the Australian Corps at Hamel' (Griffiths 1994, 187).

Meanwhile, further to the south-east, the French Army with support from American and British formations, would soon face the last of Ludendorff's offensives, the *Friedenssturm*, 'peace assault', on the River Marne. On 18 July, the French and Allies counter-attacked, the Germans were driven back with heavy casualties, to the extent that Ludendorff was forced to cancel his final offensive against the British in Flanders, and the entire German war effort was forced onto the defensive. This was the real turning point of the War on the Western Front and Hamel had nothing whatsoever to do with it (Stevenson 2004, 423; Serle 1982, 337).

Initiating the Advance

The Battle of Amiens, from 8 to 11 August, was conceived originally as a preliminary operation to drive the enemy east away from Amiens and secure the Chaulnes railway (see above). Its success surprised everyone, including General Monash, and, instead of a preliminary operation, it became the first stage of the main advance on the Somme Front. Foch, Haig and Rawlinson had been considering a counter-offensive on this front since early April, and with the success of defensive operations up to July, the anticipated change of direction on the Soissons Front, the success of, especially Australian, 'peaceful penetration' and the intelligence gathered on the weakness of German



*Battle of Amiens 8 – 11 August 1918
(after Prior and Wilson 1992, 317)*

defences in the area, Rawlinson put his plans to Haig on 17 July. They were approved, with some modification, and again authorised with modification by Foch on 24 July (Prior and Wilson 1992, 302; Serle 1982, 339; Stevenson 2004, 426-7).

It was launched by three corps: British III Corps north of the Somme; the Australian Corps between the river and south to the Chaulnes railway; and the Canadian Corps, on the Australians' right, between the railway and the Amiens-Roye road. Further south again, the French First Army protected the Canadian right flank.⁵ It was prepared in great secrecy and the movement of the Canadian Corps from Arras was a masterful piece of deception. The 1st Australian Division joined from the Lys front at the last moment. The III and Canadian Corps had the more difficult tasks, with the result that the Australians outran their neighbours and encountered some difficulties on the left flank in the area of the Somme bend at the Chipilly Spur. The entire British Tank Corps of 552 vehicles and the 5th and 9th Brigades Royal Air Force, with over 800 aircraft, provided close support (Coulthard-Clark 1998, 151; Stevenson 2004, 426; Nicholson 1962, Ch XIII).⁶

On a battlefield blanketed by thick fog, massed British guns brought down a creeping barrage behind which the infantry and tanks advanced. The weak German defences in the first line were quickly overcome and, by mid-afternoon, the second line defences were captured. By nightfall, all Allied troops had reached their objectives. It was a shattering defeat for a German Army weakened by its own exertions and Allied determination. It was Ludendorff's 'Black Day of the German Army' (Bean 1942, Ch XIV).

⁴Useful guides to Rawlinson's personality are in Prior and Wilson (1992) and Pitt (1962, 193-194).

⁵This was the modification demanded by Foch and he placed First French Army under Rawlinson's command for the purpose.

⁶See also War Diaries: HQ Fourth Army GS, August 1918, AWM 4, 1-14-10; and HQ Australian Corps GS, August 1918, AWM 4, 1-35-8.

The fighting continued with increasing intensity for three more days as the German lines were strengthened with reinforcements and reserves. Casualties rose and Haig eventually, in accordance with a new more prudent policy, called off the operation.

Conclusion

Much has been made of Ludendorff's hysterical outburst.⁷ It is worth remembering that he had a number of 'Black Days' and the worst was yet to come. 8 August 1918 was certainly a great day of victory for Rawlinson and Fourth Army. All elements had collectively achieved the victory, especially the Canadians, the Tanks, the Royal Air Force, the Gunners, and of course the Australians. Instead of being a preliminary operation, it had developed, as result of the application of a carefully nurtured all arms doctrine, into the first stage of a remarkable advance to victory for Haig, his generals and his troops.

It was not however the turning point many have proclaimed. That honour belongs appropriately to the French. As Geoffrey Serle has written, and Charles Bean knew full well:

'The repulse of the last German attack at Soissons and the French counter on 18 July was the ultimate turning point: the German offensive was over, they could not now win the war' (Serle 1982, 339).

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⁷Sadly, Ludendorff was not paying tribute to honourable foes but castigating his own soldiers.