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Fromelles 1916: Is the Australian Official History more 'truthful' than the British?'¹

Chris Baker

Former Chairman, The Western Front Association

The report of the Battles Nomenclature Committee, published in May 1921, gave title to an inglorious episode that took place south of Armentières on 19 July 1916: the Attack at Fromelles². This essay examines the treatment of this event by the Australian and British official historians.

Introduction

The attack at Fromelles was, for the British, a relatively minor action involving two Divisions at a time when very much greater attention was being paid to the offensive recently opened on the Somme, where much larger forces were deployed and upon which hung genuine hopes of victory. Expectations for the Fromelles operation were not high. In consequence, the lack of any major achievement became not particularly noteworthy. The British formation involved, 61st (2nd South Midland) Division, going into action for the first time, suffered 1547 casualties – tragic under most circumstances; comparatively light in July 1916. The British Official History (Miles 1938) covers the attack in a single chapter of just 17 pages.

For the Australians, Fromelles assumed much greater significance. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had moved to France as recently as June 1916 and while it had undertaken a number of trench raids after moving into the front line, Fromelles was its first large scale action since Gallipoli. In addition, the formation that took part – 5th Australian Division under the command of Major-General the Hon. James Whiteside McCay – was the newest element, having been created in Egypt in February 1916 and yet to enter a fight (Ellis 1920). The Divisional casualty return at the conclusion of the attack at midday on 20 July totalled 5355 lost, of whom 506 were known to be dead and a further 1700 missing.³

Given its relative importance to the Australians, it is perhaps understandable that official historian Charles Bean's chapter on Fromelles (Bean 1929) would be more extensive than Miles' version, but, at 119 pages, it is seven times longer, reflecting a very different degree of detail.

Bean relates fragments of the story down to platoon, section or individual level and assesses the decisions and effects of the attack in considerably greater depth than does the British version. The sheer effort to collect and make sense of such detail is impressive.

The Attack at Fromelles

The two versions agree on the essential points. On 5 July 1916, British General Headquarters (GHQ) informed the commanders of First, Second and Third Armies that prospects for Fourth Army on the Somme were encouraging. Consequently, on 8 July, General Sir Charles Monro (General Officer Commanding (GOC) First Army) ordered Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Haking (GOC XI Corps) to prepare a scheme with two Divisions to pierce the enemy line, assuming that things continued to go well and that the enemy probably contemplated a widespread retreat. Haking proposed the capture of the Aubers Ridge, including the villages of Aubers and Fromelles.⁴ But as preparations began at Fromelles, things were not progressing as well on the Somme as GHQ had hoped. Bean (1929, 333) records that: *"The general staff...concluded that the attack on Aubers-Fromelles, undertaken as an artillery demonstration, 'would form a useful diversion and help the southern operations'... The action could, 'for the present, be purely one of artillery,' combined perhaps with a few raids, but designed to force the enemy to believe that an important offensive was contemplated."*

There was much delay and uncertainty, Zero hour being moved on several occasions due to poor weather and uncertain results of the bombardment. There were at GHQ deep misgivings that the artillery demonstration they thought was being prepared was still taking the form of a considerable infantry assault. Both Monro and Haking

¹ An edited version of an essay submitted to the Centre for First World War Studies, The University of Birmingham, in January 2006 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

² Known initially to the Australians as the Battle of Fleurbaix (Green 1919) and in German official histories as the *Gefecht bei Fromelles*. Fleurbaix was behind the Australian front and Fromelles behind the German in July 1916.

³ Casualty figures from the operational records: war diary, 5th Australian Division General Staff. National Archives, Kew. Piece WO95/3527. The same figures were used in both histories.

⁴ 8th Division had attacked over the same ground on 9 May 1915, losing 4682 men for no gain of ground and without assisting a much larger French attack north of Arras. The German formation which defeated the 8th Division, 6th Bavarian Reserve Division, was still opposite in July 1916.

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