

# *The Battle of Hamel, 4 July 1918: the blueprint for future allied attacks on the Western Front*



A paper based on a presentation to the Institute on 26 June 2018 by

**Peter J. Sweeney**

Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales  
Special Interest Group on Military History<sup>1</sup>

*The attack by the Australian Corps, led by Lieutenant-General John Monash, on the German-held village of Le Hamel on 4 July 1918 secured an important allied foothold in the Somme valley forward of the vital town of Amiens. Of greater long-term significance than the tactical victory was the manner of its planning and execution. It became a blueprint for subsequent combined-arms attacks during the final allied offensive of the Great War and for deliberate attacks in later wars.*

**Key words:** Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash; Australian Corps; Australian Imperial Force; Le Hamel; Somme; France; Western Front; Great War; World War I; First World War.

After the 1918 German spring offensive had been halted in the Somme valley within striking distance of the vital allied logistics base of Amiens, the attack on 4 July 1918 was conducted to seize a salient that projected from the German front line around the village of Le Hamel, which lies just south of the River Somme, some 5km north-east of Villers Bretonneux and 20km east of Amiens. The capture of the village and its surrounding areas would provide an important foothold in this area, which was the key to the defence of Amiens (Laffin 1999: 55).

## **Battle Planning**

The attack at Le Hamel, which was scheduled to occur on 4 July 1918, was assigned to the recently-formed Australian Corps. By contrast to Australia's first attack on the Western Front at Fromelles on 19-20 July 1916, which had been poorly planned, Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash and the staff of Headquarters Australian Corps planned the attack in great detail. Monash directed that the attack should be an infantry assault with well-co-ordinated tank, artillery and air support; and that the attack should occur pre-dawn so as to reduce the enemy's visibility of the assaulting troops and, thereby, to protect the troops from enemy fire for as long as possible.

The Australian Corps assault was to be led by the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, supplemented by brigades from both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Divisions, and with the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division executing a 'feint' attack just north of the River Somme. Ten

companies of recently arrived American infantry (subsequently reduced to four) also were assigned to the Australian Corps for experience (Laffin 1999: 65, 68 - 69). The Australian troops were highly trained, both veterans of fighting for up to three years on the Western Front and new enlistments trained in England by men with experience of trench warfare (Frederickson 2015: Chapter 2).

To support the attack, Monash was provided with four companies of the new Mark V tank, sixty tanks in all. Fifty-six tanks were to lead the infantry assault and four carrier tanks were tasked to carry forward ammunition and supplies, including hot meals, to the assault troops (Laffin 1999: 57, 63).

The field artillery of the four Australian divisions and the heavy artillery of the Australian Corps was supplemented by French and British heavy artillery to bring the total number of guns to support the attack to 600 – 200 of which were to be employed in counter-battery fire. Unlike earlier in the war, both the artillery pieces and shells were now of good quality. The employment of artillery also had improved considerably since the start of the war, with better training of gunners and the development and employment of predicted fire and sound ranging.

Monash also was provided with several Australian Flying Corps and Royal Air Force fighter squadrons. The fighter squadrons were to seek out and strafe German gun positions and troops in reserve areas; and to undertake reconnaissance.

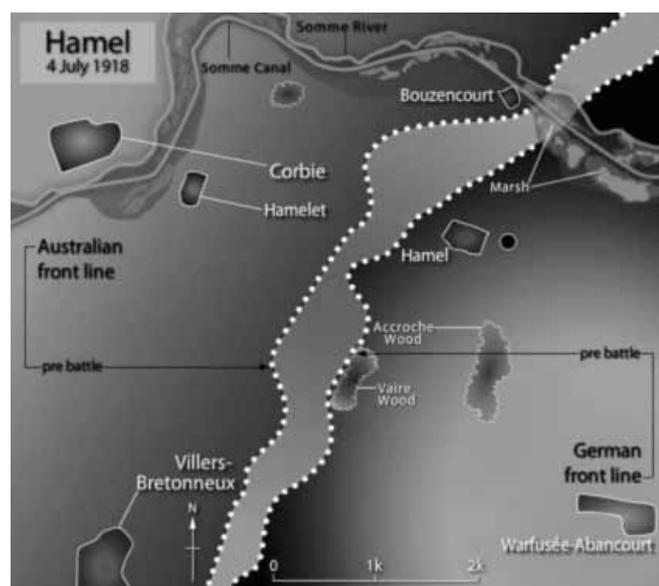
The preparations for the attack were thorough. Key elements of the attack were co-ordinated through the detailed planning of Monash and his senior officers (Monash 2015: 51). All decisions and tactics were

<sup>1</sup>E-mail: psweeney8@gmail.com

outlined, refined and formalised in conferences of all the commanders down to battalion level. Monash had the infantry and the tanks practise co-operation before the battle. This was important as the Australian infantry heretofore had had a very jaundiced view of the tanks – the soldiers felt they had been badly let down by the tanks previously, particularly in the battles at Bullecourt in April and May 1917 (Coombes 2016: 363).

To preserve secrecy, Monash had dummy installations created to throw the Germans ‘off the scent’; maintained harassing fire while troops were getting into positions; and prohibited daylight movement of troops. He wanted nothing that would warn the enemy that an attack was about to take place. Accordingly, he also asked for planes to bomb Le Hamel; and for older, noisier planes to distract attention from the noise of the tanks, which otherwise might indicate their locations and movements (Bean 1942: 249).

Map 1 shows the front lines of the opposing forces before the battle and the variable widths of no-man’s-land. The salient to be eliminated is shown just below the village of Le Hamel.



**Map 1:** The Battle of Hamel showing the initial positions of the Australian and German lines before the Australian attack of 4 July 1918 [Map: Department of Veterans' Affairs].

## The Assault

In contrast to previous Australian Imperial Force assaults on the Western Front, the Australian Corps' assault at Le Hamel progressed strictly in accordance with the plan and its timings – there were no deviations!

The assault troops moved silently into their start positions and the movement of the tanks was masked by nearby aerial bombing and the normal morning harassing fire which began at 3:02 a.m. and ceased at 3:10 a.m. when the attack was launched. All guns then commenced a creeping barrage whereby rounds were fired 75 yards in front of the assaulting infantry and

progressively advanced in line with the infantry walking rate (Bean 1942: 280 - 335).

The tanks went into battle in groups: 15 tanks forced their way through to the enemy rear to block reinforcements; 21 tanks led the infantry onto their objectives; nine tanks mopped up remaining opposition; and four support tanks brought forward stores, ammunition and equipment (Laffin 1999: 57).

Planes were used to drop ammunition and supplies by parachute to troops on the battlefield below – the first time in a battle on the Western Front that aircraft were used for this purpose (Laffin 1999: 63). Planes also were used for reconnaissance, the pilots marking the positions and movements of German and Australian troops on maps identical to those held by commanders below, and then dropping the marked maps down to motorcyclists who despatched the maps to the relevant section area. Consequently, Monash and his formation and battalion commanders had current information on the progress of the battle within minutes – what is now referred to as ‘situational awareness’.

Artillery was used heavily to bombard German batteries, ammunition dumps and installations. One-third of the artillery power was directed at German batteries destroying their artillery capability to hit advancing infantry through defensive fire.

Two-thirds of the artillery firepower was directed to supporting the assault. Combinations of artillery high-explosive, shrapnel and smoke rounds were employed. This was supplemented by the fire-power of the infantry, Lewis light machine-guns and 46 medium machine-guns, which moved with the assaulting troops.

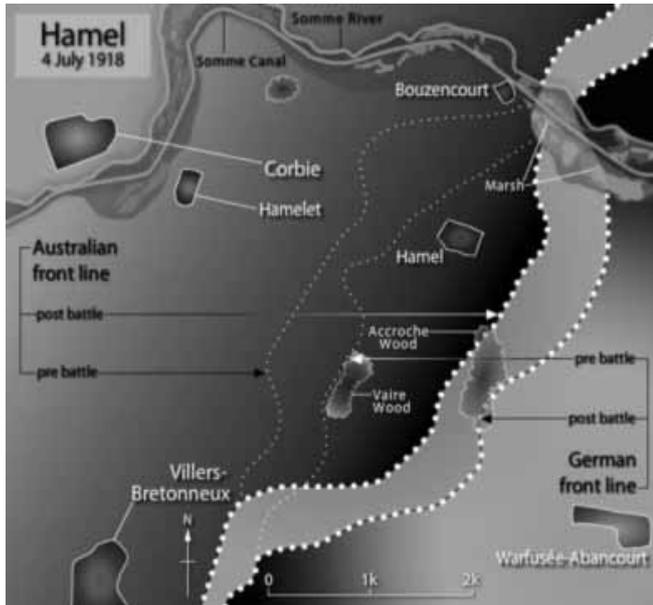
In 93 minutes, all objectives were achieved<sup>2</sup>; 1400 German prisoners were captured as well as many weapons. Australian troops suffered 1062 casualties (15 per cent), of whom 800 (11 per cent) were killed.

Map 2 (*see next page*) shows the position after the battle. The salient has been removed; the Germans have been evicted from the village and the nearby woods; and the Australians now occupy the former German position on the ridge behind the village, thereby creating a salient into the German lines north of Villers-Bretonneux.

## Lessons Learned

The Australian Corps attack at Le Hamel was an outstanding success and the reasons, as set out by John Laffin in *The Battle of Hamel*, can be put down to detailed planning, all arms co-operation, complete surprise, effective counter-battery fire and the effective employment of the tanks, including masking their movements (Laffin 1999: 135).

<sup>2</sup>Monash had planned for all objectives to be captured within 90 minutes (Kieza 2015: 456).



**Map 2:** The Battle of Hamel showing the final positions of the Australian and German lines when the battle ended – the Australians had advanced 2km on a 4km front in 93 minutes [Map: Department of Veterans' Affairs].

A more detailed analysis of the battle shows that five factors were crucial to its success: training; technology; the commander; tactics; and battle experience.

- **Factor 1 – Training.** Many of the soldiers had battle experience on the Western Front; the reinforcements had been through battle schools before joining their units; and during the battle's preparatory phase, soldiers were able to view large-scale models of the battle area to familiarise themselves with the area of the battle and their objectives.
- **Factor 2 – Technology.** The latest, a much-improved, version of the tank was used; and aircraft, both fighters and bombers, were employed imaginatively.
- **Factor 3 – The Commander.** Monash applied the discipline of an engineer to planning the battle; he introduced tactical innovations; he conferred with subordinate commanders; and he co-ordinated and innovatively employed artillery, armour and aircraft.
- **Factor 4 – Tactics.** Innovative tactics included the way tanks were employed to lead the infantry; in the close support of the infantry by artillery, tanks and aircraft; and in the way tanks and aircraft were used in re-supply.
- **Factor 5 – Battle Experience.** Many of the soldiers had had battle experience on the Western Front; and the infantry battalions and supporting units had previously taken part in brigade-level, division-level, corps-level and army-level operations.

## Conclusion

The attack at Le Hamel was not the first allied combined-arms assault of World War I. Combined-arms assaults had occurred previously in September 1916 at Flers-Courcelette; in June 1917 at Messines; in November 1917 at Cambrai; and in April 1918 at Villers-Bretonneux. The Battle of Hamel, however, was the best executed combined-arms attack up till that time.

The Battle of Hamel became the blueprint for the Battle of Amiens a month later in August 1918, which, in turn, initiated the final 100-days offensive of World War I (Stevenson 2012: 426)<sup>3</sup>. In the Battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918, the Australian Corps and the Canadian Corps broke the will of the German Army – it would subsequently be referred to by the Germans as 'the black day of the German Army' (Bean 1946: 473). The Battle of Hamel also would become a blueprint for the planning of deliberate attacks in later wars.

**The Author:** Lieutenant Colonel Peter Sweeney, RFD (Ret'd), is a member of the Institute's Board and has been a member of the Institute since 1968. A military historian and member of the United Kingdom-based International Guild of Battlefield Guides, he currently is studying for a Master of Military History degree at the University of New South Wales, Canberra, and is in partnership with fellow Institute historian, Lieutenant Colonel Ron Lyons, in the battlefield touring company, Battle Honours Australia. He is a noted presenter to community groups on Australian military history; and travels from time-to-time on cruise ships as an enrichment speaker on naval, military and air force history.

## References

- Bean, C. E. W. (1942). *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the allied offensive, 1918*. Official history of Australia in the war of 1914-1918, volume VI (Angus and Robertson: Sydney).
- Bean, C. E. W. (1946). *Anzac to Amiens* (Australian War Memorial: Canberra).
- Coombes, David (2012). *A greater sum of sorrow: the battles of Bullecourt* (Big Sky Publishing: Newport, NSW).
- Frederickson, Lewis (2015). *The development of Australian infantry on the Western Front 1916-1918: an imperial model of training, tactics and technology*. PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, Canberra.
- Kieza, Grantlee (2015). *Monash: the soldier who shaped Australia* (Harper Collins Publishers: Sydney).
- Laffin, John (1999). *The battle of Hamel: the Australians' finest victory* (Kangaroo Press: Sydney).
- Monash, Sir John (2015). *The Australian victories in France in 1918* (Black Inc.: Melbourne).
- Stevenson, David (2012). *1914-1918: the history of the First World War* (Penguin Books: London).

<sup>3</sup>The war ended on 11 November 1918.