

The Western Front 1916: the Allied strategy and Australia's contribution to it in the Battle of the Somme

An overview of the Institute's 2016 Seminar on Military History "Australia's Contribution to the 1916 Somme Campaign" held on 26 September 2016 prepared by

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The Anglo-French 1916 Somme Campaign was the major element in a series of simultaneous Allied offensives coordinated by the French designed to eventually destroy the German and Austrian armies by attrition. Relief of pressure on the French Army from the German pre-emptive attack at Verdun became an additional objective. Four Australian infantry divisions contributed to the Allied offensive: 5th at Fromelles; and 1st, 2nd and 4th at Pozières and Mouquet Farm. A reappraisal of the Somme Campaign, based on research since the official histories were written, is presented.

Key words: The Great War; World War I; Western Front 1916; Allied strategy; Chantilly Conference; strategic attrition; attacking trench systems; Verdun; Australia; Battle of the Somme; Fromelles; Pozières; Mouquet Farm.

Great Britain's grand strategy in 1914 was to protect its world trade by naval superiority, and its homeland by a European balance of power so that no state or coalition could dominate the coast of Europe opposite Britain (Deverill 2005).

Between 1894 and 1907 the French, the Russians and the British formed a triple grouping to balance the power of Germany (MacMillan 2013: 22, 150, 144-196). From 1911, that balance was shifting: if Germany again fought and quickly defeated France, it would dominate Western Europe. A diplomatic crisis with Germany created '... a *de facto* military alliance [of France and Britain]' (Weist 2005: 13). In 1912, the British Secretary of State for War warned the German government that Britain would not tolerate German hegemony over France (Herwig 1996: 262).

This British land force strategy had no depth beyond staff talks starting in 1906. The three-year conscript systems of the Continent had created peacetime standing armies of 890,000 (Germany) and 700,000 (France) with extensive reserves. The French had conscripted 80 per cent of those of military age and Germany 50 per cent (Reid 2006: 268). The Germans had 87 infantry and 11 cavalry divisions and the French had 62 infantry and 20 cavalry divisions (Reid 2006: 180, 265).

Britain had no conscription and an immediately deployable regular force of six infantry divisions and one cavalry division. By early 1915, once Territorials relieved Empire garrisons, the regular force reached 11 infantry and 3 cavalry divisions. Comparative population size suggested that a British army could have been the same size as the French. Because Empire expeditionary forces could increase it, staff discussions began with the British dominions regarding expeditionary forces.

Britain lacked the experience to raise and train an army about ten times its pre-war size (Terraine 1980: 112), and British industry would need conversion to equip it. The coming war would show that raising, training and equipping such a force would take until 1916 and it would be without its full establishment of supporting arms until 1917. Until then, Britain would be the minor partner in the alliance with the French, who would determine the coalition military strategy.

An Australian officer was posted to the Imperial General Staff in London from 1909. At the 1911 Imperial Conference, the Australian delegation became convinced that deteriorating relations with Germany would require the raising of an Australian expeditionary force by 1915. The government authorised only plans without binding commitments which might reduce Australian political autonomy. After the Balkan war of 1912, Australia planned with New Zealand a combined expeditionary force (Connor 2011: 21-37).

Force Expansion

By 1914 the British General Staff knew the demands of this strategy but civil authority was less clear. At a 'Council of War' convened by the British Cabinet on 5 August 1914, Haig stated that, from the political grand strategy of opposing German victory over France and Belgium, followed a military corollary: fighting the German Army would be long and hard (Reid 2006: 139). From that followed another: such a war would take several years and need millions of men (Weist 2005: 14). Logistics dictated that the Germans must be beaten in France close to French and British logistic support using the French road and railway networks (Terraine 1980: 112, citing Fuller). Cabinet agreed upon the strategy.

Large volunteer armies were raised throughout the British Empire, but command and staff competence in the tiny professional cadres was weakened by rapid promotion of inexperienced officers (Terraine 1980: 114). By 1916, the

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British Empire had 70 divisions, 56 of which were infantry divisions, but the quality of training and tactical proficiency was variable as was the quality of the artillery and munitions due to hasty industrial expansion.

Australia raised three divisions in 1914-1915. Then, based on recruiting results in 1915 after the Anzac landing, decided in early 1916 to increase the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) to five divisions. This expansion then seemed feasible; but recruiting rates fell off massively by March 1916 and sustaining five divisions subsequently would prove beyond voluntary recruiting. Furthermore, the splitting of existing units meant that three-quarters of the men were inexperienced and partly trained (Bean 1929: 54). All divisions were in action in less than five months from the expansion and the 1st Division was in action in less than two months. Denuding the 4th and 5th Divisions of their artilleries to round out the first two divisions to Western Front scales, completely removed such artillery skills as they possessed.

Allied Co-operation: the Chantilly conference

In November and December 1915, French and British ministers met to spell out the military strategy for 1916. It was agreed that General Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, would concert four Allied offensives that summer to wear down the German and Austrian armies by attrition. A decisive offensive would follow later to break their national morale by inflicting unsustainable casualties (Philpott 2014: 215-7).

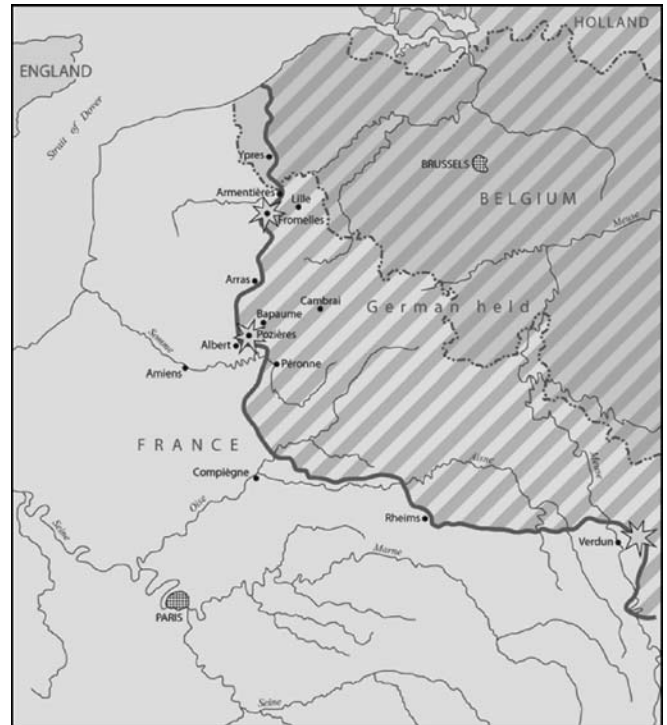
The British prime minister agreed that the Western front was to be the British main theatre, but the Cabinet took three months to agree about this and the attrition strategy out of concern for the expected casualties (Philpott 2014: 218-9). Haig, now the British commander-in-chief, was directed that 'closest co-operation of the French and British as a united army' was British government policy. Joffre insisted that the French and British attack together astride the Somme. Haig concurred (Read 2006: 284-287). Haig's task would be to link this strategy to operational concepts, plans and tactics.

The attrition strategy was chosen because communication and logistics difficulties in vast modern armies were making battles of annihilation outdated. Germany had failed to annihilate the French Army after an outflanking manoeuvre – the 1914 Schlieffen Plan. Attrition strategy is an alternative. It has two parts: first, attacks which wear down the enemy and draw in his reserves; then a strategic breakout battle (Gross 2016: 43-5). The wearing down battle must be fought on terrain suited to that purpose. Then the breakout battle will need a 20km-wide piece of terrain suited to the expansion and logistic support of the breakout force (Mosier 2002: 232).

Take the German plan at Verdun: once he had worn down the French Army and drawn its reserves away from the Somme to Verdun, Falkenhayn planned to use a reserve of 20 to 25 divisions kept out of the Verdun battle to break through between Arras and Albert, to take advantage of the unreadiness of the British Army (Gross 2016: 45; Stachelbeck 2016: 147).

1916 Allied Operational Plan

Haig and Joffre settled the Western Front operational plan. There would be 25 British divisions and 42 French on



The Western Front in 1916
[Source: Australian War Memorial]

a total frontage of 60 – 70km. Britain would fight the wearing down battle and France the decisive battle and breakthrough. The location and the timing of the 1916 British offensive were matters to be determined by Joffre not Haig. Haig's preferred timing would have been early Autumn to allow the volunteer armies to develop cohesion as fully embodied divisions and corps (Reid 2006: 269). Haig created the Fourth Army under General Sir Henry Rawlinson on 1 March to carry out the agreed offensive.

The Somme area chosen by Joffre for the combined effort was strategically attractive because it was where the British and French forces could fight side by side and there were significant logistic advantages – Amiens was connected by rail to Britain (via Calais), Paris, Brussels and the Ancre valley.

Verdun

On 21 February, however, the Germans surprised the French with an attrition attack at Verdun. A huge drain on French manpower and resources followed but paradoxically morale did not falter as the French soldiers took pride in saving France by rotating through service at Verdun (Philpott 2014: 225). To assist, the British took over some of the French front and Joffre was forced to deploy French divisions to Verdun that he had reserved for his own breakout offensive.

The divisions available for the Somme offensive fell to 21 British and 18 French by May. The date was brought forward from August to 1 July (Reid 2006: 290). The British/French attack would also now 'draw off pressure from Verdun' though it had not been planned with that aim. The British Army was not battle ready but Joffre required Haig to attack with what forces he had.

Haig's Concept of Operations

Haig had long believed that operations would be conducted in a sequence of manoeuvre, attrition, decision and exploitation (Philpott 2014: 220-1). As a result of the reduction of the French contribution, Haig accepted that the manoeuvre stage had taken place in 1914 and 1915, but his actions at the operational level suggest that he believed that the British Army's 1916 objectives should be strategic because it would not only fight the attrition battle but had the opportunity to be the principal player in the decision and strategic breakout (Reid 2006: 286). While the reduced Allied force meant that the attrition stage on the Somme would be less destructive of German morale (Philpott 2014: 227), Verdun could also add to the attrition stage in Haig's model, because the German losses there were (incorrectly) assumed to be greater than the French and to that extent the German army would be much weaker against the British.

Tactics: attacking trench systems

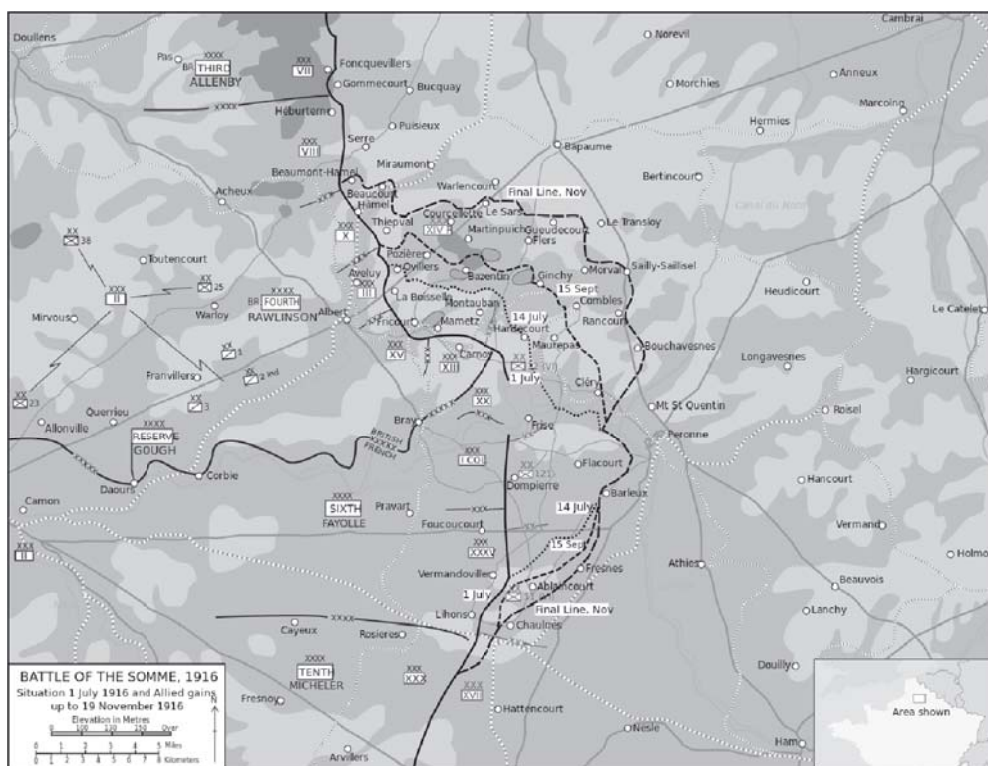
In February 1915, Sir Henry Rawlinson had set out a principle for infantry attacks against a trench system (usually three lines of trenches): effective employment of artillery. A successful infantry attack must be 'primarily an artillery operation ... [to] crush and demoralise the enemy's infantry'. The critical tasks for artillery were: wire cutting; destruction then neutralisation of enemy positions; and counter battery fire (Prior and Wilson 1992: 25, 77-80, 171). The *duration* of fire for each task and the *intensity* of the destructive fire on strong points and every line of trenches were critical factors. The Germans also learned from their experience in 1915 of resisting artillery-based attacks. Their 1916 Somme defences consisted of: three trench systems with deep dugouts in the soft chalk; fortified villages; and strong points *between* the trench systems.

Rawlinson learned during 1915 that the infantry attack on the second and third trench systems should be delayed until the artillery, after neutralising counter attacks, could be brought forward to repeat those tasks on them. He called this 'bite and hold'; historians Prior and Wilson call this 'the heart of the matter of waging war on the Western Front'. The difficulty in the concept was to hold after a trench line had been 'bitten'. The enemy (knowing the location, shape and design of his former front trenches) could target his artillery with great precision onto them at the same time as Allied infantry were converting their design to enable small-arms fire back towards the enemy counter attacks instead of over

the original no man's land. Consequently, the infantry which assaulted the first system of trenches were too busy to exploit to further objectives.

Unreconciled operational and tactical concepts

Because Haig seems to have taken over the breakout stage of the offensive from the French, there was an unexpressed difference between Haig and Rawlinson. Haig, thinking at the operational level and apparently confident that the Verdun offensive was weakening German strength, wanted to capture the first two German trench systems in the initial assault in order to allow cavalry exploitation. Rawlinson, however, knew that this would weaken the intensity of artillery fire on each German trench line such that the first German trench system could be reached but not be crossed. He accordingly limited his detailed objectives to it. Haig's exploitation plan required doubling the metres of trench to be targeted by artillery, thus halving the intensity of gunfire that had been successful in 1915. These unreconciled approaches were a serious failure of Haig's command technique and his inability to nurture the mutual frankness necessary in the relationship between a commander and his subordinate, especially in the planning stage of an operation.



The Battle of the Somme 1916
[Source: Wikipedia commons]

The First Three Weeks of the Somme Battles

It is now necessary to summarise the operational and tactical events in the three weeks before the Australian participation began on 19 July in the case of Fromelles and 20 July in the case of Pozières.

The first attack by the British Fourth Army (1 – 13 July)

The Pozières ridge is a 12km-long feature running from the Ancre River below Thiepval south-east through

Pozières to Ginchy and Rancourt thence southwards down to the Somme River. At Pozières, the ridge at its highest point is crossed by the road running north-east from Albert to Bapaume. The boundary between the French Sixth Army and the British Fourth Army was Hardicourt to Saily-Sallisel. The Germans had three trench systems on the ridge: the first on the clear forward slopes for maximum machine-gun fire effect; the second on the reverse slopes behind the ridge top; and the incomplete third system out-of-range beyond the crest. German dugouts were deeply embedded in the chalk soil and impervious to all but the heaviest artillery fire. Only the first German trench system was fully visible to the British artillery observers.

After a 7-day preliminary bombardment, 13 British and five French divisions attacked the Pozières ridge after dawn on 1 July 1916. British counter battery fire had not suppressed the German artillery which targeted the British assembly trenches and the front line. An estimated 30 per cent of British casualties occurred in British lines (Prior and Wilson 2005: 95, 99ff.). North-west of the Albert–Bapaume road, the daylight assault failed and the main features remained in German hands. Haig's extended objectives to the second system thinned the effectiveness of the preliminary bombardment in destroying the deep dugouts sheltering the German machine-guns. They were swiftly firing across no man's land unsuppressed by field artillery barrages which, without common doctrine and experience, were often ineffective.

South-east of the Albert–Bapaume road, the British attack captured the first German trench system, incurring severe casualties. Rawlinson failed to hold reserves close enough to exploit to the second system. The British line, while retaining contact with the French, gradually swung from a hinge just south-west of Pozières so that it ran east-west and thus was facing north. The French made extensive gains north and south of the Somme River. On 11 July, the Germans suspended operations at Verdun, letting Haig claim one of Joffre's strategic objectives. By 13 July, British piecemeal attacks had brought the front line up the slopes astride the Albert–Bapaume road to a line from Ovillers. Thereafter the French extended it south to the Somme River and beyond.

Fourth Army attack of 14 – 16 July

Haig endorsed the Fourth Army's plan to attack with two corps on 14 July to reinforce the relative success on the southern sector. The objective was the German second trench system [here known as the OG ('old German') lines] which was now the enemy front line from just south-west of Pozières.

No man's land was 1500m wide – too wide for infantry to cross in one bound or in daylight, so Rawlinson planned, over Haig's reservations, an attack forming up at night closer to the German line by four divisions on a 6000m front. The intensity of artillery bombardment was five times greater than on 1 July. Cavalry was to exploit to High Wood. By midday, the OG lines were captured. A cavalry unit did reach High Wood, creating a salient which could not be held. Prolonged preparatory bombardment, night attacks and close creeping barrages were now orthodox.

After 14 July, piecemeal attacks continued to gain jumping-off positions for another general attack. On 16 July,

after a day-long bombardment, a midnight attack penetrated the OG system just south-east of Pozières. The next night, preceded by a heavy artillery and mortar barrage, an assault on the German outpost trench protecting Pozières came under heavy fire from 10 machine-guns in a concrete structure in the south-west corner of the village and from the OG lines beyond. This structure would need preparatory destruction by heavy artillery.

Haig's Third Somme Offensive and the Australians at Pozières

By mid-July the Fourth Army had suffered 100,000 casualties so the Pozières task was given to the British Reserve Army, which included 1st Anzac Corps (1st, 2nd and 4th Australian Divisions). The Germans around Pozières overlooked the Australians from the ridge 500 – 700m away to the north and east. The ridge's tactically important plateau around the highest point gave observation to Bapaume 12.4km to the north-east. The remains of the Pozières windmill stood there.

Haig's third major offensive began on 23 July when, after two days artillery bombardment, the 1st Australian Division attacked the OG system on the ridge behind the village at midnight. It succeeded by dawn in gaining and holding most of the village although the Germans retained its northern section and the long ridge beyond. The Australians suffered three days of bombardment by the German corps artillery, said to have been worse than anything experienced at Verdun and later described as the 'hell of Pozières'. By midnight on 26 July, the 1st Division was no longer fit for further offensive action as it had incurred 5285 casualties.

The 2nd Australian Division relieved it on 27 July. 2nd Division, despite intense German artillery barrages on 27 and 28 July, attacked just after midnight on 29 July, but gained little ground despite some 3500 casualties. It attacked again on the night of 4 August behind three minutes of intense artillery fire and was into the first German trenches before the defenders could recover. It then pressed on through two more German trench lines and onto Pozières crest at the windmill. 2nd Division was exhausted after suffering 6848 casualties during its 12 days in the Pozières area.

The 4th Australian Division relieved the 2nd on the night of 5 August. The Germans unsuccessfully counter-attacked the Pozières plateau on the morning of 7 August. On 8 August, 4th Division extended the narrow salient (exposed on all sides to German artillery and machine-gun fire) towards Mouquet Farm, which lay about 1500m north-west of Pozières. Despite its infantry and their logistic support running this gauntlet, the Division slowly captured the German trenches around the Mouquet Farm ruins and held them against counter attacks. Numerous attempts by 1st Anzac Corps over the next three weeks would gain no more ground or the farm itself. In its first tour of duty, 4th Division lost 4649 men.

The Australians were relieved on 3 September, after having lost about 23,300 casualties in seven weeks of fighting around Pozières (Grey 2008: 103). Bean (1929) would later observe that: 'The Pozières windmill site is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth'.

A Tragic diversion – 5th Australian Division at Fromelles

Meanwhile, Haig had ordered his three other Army commanders not engaged on the Somme to conduct operations to prevent German reserves reinforcing their Somme defence which he believed was weakening (Lee 2010: 92).

About 60km north of the Somme battlefield lay the city of Lille, an important centre of French industry and coal production, in German hands and dominated from the west by Aubers Ridge which the Germans were strongly holding. Capturing Aubers Ridge was not only a British strategic goal but also would hold down some Germans which Intelligence evidence suggested were moving (Lee 2010: 87). The plan involved the 5th Australian Division and the 61st British Division assaulting the ridge near the village of Fromelles, late in the afternoon of 19 July.

Three days of British XI Corps preparatory fire was up to the new intensity standard necessary for a successful attack (Lee 2010: 109) but inexperienced targeting failed to suppress German machine-guns in a salient, called the Sugarloaf, in the centre of the objective. Here no-man's-land was dangerously wide at 500m. The senior commanders prosecuted the attack against the advice of their subordinate brigade commanders. On the left flank where no-man's land was only 150 – 250m wide, the 8th and 14th Australian Brigades achieved their objectives capturing over 1000m of the German front line, as did the 182nd British Brigade on the right, but German night counter-attacks recaptured that line. In the centre, where the Sugarloaf dominated the long assault with machine-gun fire, the 15th Australian Brigade and two British brigades were destroyed. 5th Australian Division lost 5533 casualties in 24 hours, rendering the Division ineffective until November.

September – November battles on the Somme

The Fourth Army fought three battles in September and October, but Haig's plans for cavalry exploitation and breakthrough still weakened the artillery intensity (Prior and Wilson 2005: 262-9). Rawlinson faced growing German competence and most October attacks failed with high casualties (Prior and Wilson 2005: 269). He and a corps commander protested to Haig.

Haig, however, believed that the Germans were about to crack. Because the French were still fighting and Joffre pressed him to continue (Reid 2006: 316), Haig continued British operations with the tacit agreement of the War Cabinet (Prior and Wilson 2005: 288). The Australian Corps returned on 5 November and conducted trench raids in the worst weather conditions ever known to the AIF (Bean 1929: 918). Haig terminated the battle of the Somme on 18 November.

Effects of Fromelles and Pozières/Mouquet Farm on the AIF

While the AIF did not make a strategic difference in 1916, the effects on the force would be long lasting. By March 1916, Australian voluntary enlistment had fallen away rapidly and did not exceed battle casualties of about 40,000 in 1916² or in the years 1917 and 1918 (Beaumont

2013: 523 Fig. 5.1). The AIF of five divisions fought on for the rest of the war with diminishing strength (Connor 2011: 87-93) but increasing competence.

Conclusion

The British cabinet support for an offensive at the junction above the Somme of the French and British armies, under the operational control of the French commander-in-chief, committed Haig's unready army to a place, date and time set by Joffre. The British Army had learned much in 1915 and more during the battle of the Somme. Now competent in night attacks, it learned that after a creeping barrage covered troops over about 250m to the enemy position, they could outfight the Germans at close quarters and that tanks were useful particularly when artillery failed. The eventual success of the British land force strategy was bought by the harsh lessons of the Somme.

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²AWM website: www.awm.gov.au/atwar/WW1/ accessed on 29 October 2016.