

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Hamel 4<sup>th</sup> July 1918: the Australian & American victory*

by John Hughes-Wilson

*Uniform (Unicorn Publishing Group): London; 2018; 163 pp.; ISBN 9781911604426; RRP \$29.29;  
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The small (by Great War standards) experimental battle at le Hamel near Amiens in northern France on 4 July 1918, led by the Australian Corps under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash, demonstrated and evaluated the emerging British approach to how the stalemate of trench warfare could be broken. It became a turning point in the Great War and served as a model for the Entente's 100-days offensive beginning on 8 August and culminating in the Armistice on 11 November 1918. It also is noted as one of the first times units of the American Expeditionary Force, newly-arrived in France, had experienced combat – four companies of the 131<sup>st</sup> and 132<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiments participated and Corporal Thomas A. Pope of Chicago was subsequently awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour.

Following the war, Hamel became a model both for how to plan, rehearse and conduct the deliberate attack, and also for the all-arms attack – the combined employment of infantry, artillery, tanks and airpower – especially when done so in conjunction with deception and surprise. Indeed, the author asserts that it was the precursor for what the Germans in World War II would refer to as 'Blitzkrieg' or 'Lightning War'.

The author is Colonel John Hughes-Wilson who retired from the British Intelligence Corps after 30 years' service that included the Falklands, Cyprus, Northern Ireland and the desert, as well as the 'jungles' of Whitehall. Hughes-Wilson is an accomplished and well-published military historian and novelist, broadcaster and lecturer. He is a past-president of the International Guild of Battlefield Guides, an archives fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, and a working fellow of the Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall.

This is a small book (20cm; 163pp.) and can be read quickly. It presents the Battle of le Hamel from a strategic perspective and does so very well. Indeed, the first 95 pages are devoted to presenting the strategic context, including an excellent background to the Great War and concise descriptions of: the differences between the early campaigns of 1914, 1915 and 1916 and the later ones of 1917 and 1918; the wider pressures on Britain and Germany as the respective naval blockades took effect; the shock of 1918, including the great German spring offensive, leading to Germany running short on manpower, while the Entente benefited from the influx of American manpower and *matériel*; and details of the opposing forces and their commanders – although the descriptions of the various national forces tend to be somewhat clichéd.

The last 76 pages describe the mission; the planning/rehearsing; the vital role to be played by the tanks and how infantry-tank co-operation was fostered; the last-minute hitch when American General John J. Pershing ordered the withdrawal of the American troops, literally on the eve of the battle – in the event, six companies were withdrawn, but Monash insisted that four remain attached to Australian units and those four companies participated fully and enthusiastically as noted above; the actual battle; and the battle's immediate results and broader outcomes, including their subsequent effects on the final offensive of the Great War and later wars. Generally, this operational and tactical account is well written, but I would have expected greater precision in the description of the concept of operations. I also found the description of the battle somewhat confusing in places, partly because the Australian brigades and their battalions participating are not always correctly designated in the text, but the saving grace is that they are correctly designated on the accompanying maps.

The book contains several black-and-white photographs and a few good maps. It does not have any footnotes, endnotes or references, which may not be of concern to the general reader, but the lack of references detracts from the book's value for historians. It has a brief (two-page) list of suggested further reading, but this list does not include several of the works mentioned briefly in passing in the text, such as the important work by P. A. Pedersen *The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front* (Viking, 2007), yet it lists other works that I would regard as of lesser value.

Potential readers should note that the book is sub-titled *The Australian & American Victory* on its title page, but *The Australian & American Triumph* on its front cover. These sub-titles, as well as being inconsistent, fail to acknowledge the vital part played by British artillery, tanks, aircraft and logistic support to the success of the battle, but these are well covered and acknowledged in the text.

These reservations notwithstanding, the book overall is well-balanced, unlike some earlier national accounts of the battle. It is well worth the read for its concise strategic contextual positioning of the battle and its impacts on future events, as well as for its concise description of the planning for and conduct of the battle itself. It would provide useful background reading for someone planning to visit the battlefield and perhaps was written primarily with such visitors in mind.

**David Leece**