

# THE HUNDRED DAYS OFFENSIVE AND THE BATTLE OF HAMEL

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**Hundred Days Offensive:** In the 1918 northern spring, the German army embarked on the offensive that it believed would finally crush the Allied resistance and end World War One. Boosted by the release of troops from Eastern front in the wake of the Russian Revolution, the Germans sought to strike telling blows before the Allies' numbers were swollen by the American Expeditionary Force. The Germans struck three times, devastating the British Army in particular, but at a significant cost to the Germans. When the Allies rallied and the exhausted Germans failed to deliver the final blow, Allied command devised a sustained counter-attack.

What became known as the Hundred Days Offensive was the final instalment of the Great War that would take the Allies to victory, bring Germany to surrender and prepare the world for peace.

The broad thrust of this plan – supervised by the head of Allied command Frenchman General Ferdinand Foch – was to harness the elements of modern warfare to create a co-ordinated and unrelenting threat.

It began with the Battle of Amiens, on August 8, 1918. This was to be the exemplar of a new strategy, involving British, French, Canadian, US and Australian troops and co-ordinated by British General Sir Henry Rawlinson with support from Australia's Sir John Monash and his Canadian counterpart Sir Arthur Currie. The plan was to push the Germans back from Amiens and further erode the enemy's fragile morale.

Prior to Amiens, Lt-Gen Sir John Monash demonstrated his tactical acumen at the Battle of Hamel and his strategic planning was to have a tremendous impact on trench warfare.

**Hamel (Le Hamel):** Between Villers-Bretonneux and the Somme is a small place called Le Hamel. In July, 1918, just at that point, the Germans' front line pushes its way into the Allies' own line. Lt-Gen Sir John Monash, head of the Australian Corps, wants to take Hamel. He has a plan that involves tanks and a precise timetable. Monash also has the benefit of the new sound ranging technology that enables his gunners to be pretty sure of the enemy gun locations. The British loan Monash some extra firepower and he has 1000 soldiers from the American Expeditionary Force as well. He also has 60 tanks and a bevy of aircraft to provide support and drop ammunition.

There are about 2500 Germans encamped in shallow trenches in and around Hamel and the woods nearby. At 3.02am on July 4, the Australian artillery starts and then the planes follow, dropping bombs and covering the noise of the advancing tanks and infantry. The battle takes 93 minutes, three minutes longer than Monash had planned.

“Never have I seen such brilliant co-operation of all arms of the service, and with such excellent results,” one Australian lieutenant notes. Monash’s legend – and that of the men he commands – grows in the battle’s afterglow.

**Sir John Monash:** He remains Australia’s most famous general and successful soldier, but Sir John Monash was more than a military man. He was an engineer, a man with a taste for the finer things in life, and a deep compassion and interest in the men he commanded.

Monash was born in Melbourne in 1865, to parents of Prussian-Jewish origin. His initial association with the military came with his service in the Metropolitan Brigade of the Garrison Artillery. After stints commanding the Victorian section of the Australian Intelligence Corps and briefly, when war broke out, Chief Censor, Monash was sent to Gallipoli in charge of the AIF’s Fourth Brigade.

But it was at Hamel and the subsequent strategic achievements during the Hundred Days that Monash’s reputation was burnished.

When he died in 1931, thousands lined Melbourne streets to pay their respects. One of Sir Monash's most lasting legacies is our Shrine of Remembrance. His passionate speech on the need for the Shrine on Anzac Eve 1926 in the presence of the future King George IV as well as his leading 30,000 veterans in the following day's march, led to widespread support of the Shrine in the community - accelerating fundraising and quietening media opposition to the Shrine.

Sir Monash oversaw construction of the Shrine, and crafted the final inscription for the western wall: LET ALL MEN KNOW THAT THIS IS HOLY GROUND. THIS SHRINE, ESTABLISHED IN THE HEARTS OF MEN AS ON THE SOLID EARTH, COMMEMORATES A PEOPLE'S FORTITUDE AND SACRIFICE. YE THEREFORE THAT COME AFTER, GIVE REMEMBRANCE.

**August 7, 1918:** On the eve of the Battle of Amiens, Lt-Gen Sir John Monash sends a note to his men. It reads:

For the first time in the history of the [Australian Army] Corps, all five Australian division will tomorrow engage in the largest and most important battle operation every undertaken by the Corps...

I entertain no doubt that every Australian soldier will worthily rise to so great an occasion, and that every man, imbued with the spirit of victory, will, in spite of every difficulty that may confront him, be animated by no other resolve than grim determination to see through to a clean finish, whatever his task may be...

I earnestly wish every soldier of the Corp the best of good fortune, and a glorious and decisive victory, the story of which will re-echo throughout the world, and will live for ever in the history of our home land.

**August 8, 1918:** The battle opens in a thick mist at 4.20am with the brutal noise of 2000 artillery guns and then tanks shepherding the Australian and Canadian infantry advance on the German lines.

At 8am, the mist lifts “like a curtain, gradually disclosing a scene that will never be forgotten by any who saw it”, official correspondent Charles Bean writes.

A concerted attack, involving tanks, artillery, planes and the element of surprise drive the Allied gains.

General Rawlinson writes glowingly about the impact the Canadian and Australian troops had on the battle: “The Canadians have done splendidly and the Aussies even better – I am full of admiration for these two corps.”

The barrage is so effective that Germany sustain 48,000 casualties, including 33,000 men missing or taken prisoner. The German general Erich Ludendorff is devastated at the loss and dubs it “Der Schwarze Tag” – the German Army’s “Black Day”.

**August 9, 1918:** The Allies lose some momentum and the speed of their advance slows.

The Germans are pushed back 12kms to their prized Hindenburg Line but further Allied gains are hampered by poor communication, bad timing and technical problems with the tanks.

Victorian general Harold “Pompey” Elliott, a famous commander who had been with the AIF since Gallipoli and would later become a Senator for Victoria, is shot in the left buttock.

He continues to command his men, with his usual passion.

“It stung like a whip cut, but hardly as severe as many a cut from the master’s cane in the old days,” Elliott wrote home of the injury.

**August 10, 1918:** The Australians’ attention turns to Lihons - a ruined French village, near the old Somme battlefield - as part of the Allied strategy to increase pressure on the now-precarious German morale.

Their objective is to capture the Lihons hill, to the west of the village, where the Germans have stationed their deadly artillery.

But the battle proves difficult for the 1st, 2nd and 5th Australian Divisions. Enemy aircraft and heavy shelling from German artillery positioned on the Lihons hill exposes the Australians to withering fire.

And the scene is a gruesome reminder of the Somme, with a network of twisted trenches and barbed wire making progress difficult.

Gains are small and Monash orders the battle to resume at 4am the next day.

**August 11, 1918:** Fog once again cloaks the Australian attack but the early-morning assault works and Australian troops take Lihons and push on to capture the territory immediately behind it.

Reports emerge days later about the key role Victorian soldiers played in the success.

“They were stalwart fellows,” one report states, “without a tremor, their glinting bayonets crowning their kitbags and most of them smoked nonchalantly.”

The Germans persist in what is a futile counter-attack. But the Australian casualties are high – almost 1600 in two brigades – giving rise to criticism about the lack of Allied planning to consolidate the gains of Amiens.

**August 12, 1918:** The AIF’s 3rd Division is given the job of pushing on north of the old Somme, to Chipilly and Proyart. Meanwhile, at the official headquarters of the Australian Corps - the Chateau de Bertangles - King George V invests Lt-Gen John Monash with a knighthood.

About 600 troops line the gravel drive to the chateau to honour the King and observe what is the first time in 200 years that a British monarch had conferred such a honour on a commander in the field. King George V stays for half an hour, leaving Monash – and the rest of the generals – to continue with their pursuit of the Germans.

### **Bill Rawlings and Harry Thorpe:**

Sometimes fate creates the worst kind of coincidences.

Bill Rawlings and Harry Thorpe were two indigenous Victorians who had managed to enlist to the AIF.

Both went on to be awarded Military Medals and both died, in separate actions, on August 9, 1918.

Corporal Thorpe hailed from an Aboriginal mission near Lakes Entrance and was wounded twice on the Western Front before he sustained a fatal stomach wound in the aftermath of Amiens.

Private Rawlings was born in Purnim and was breaking horses around the Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve when war broke out.

On the same day that Thorpe died, Rawlings was part of the 29th Battalion’s assault on the French village of Vauvillers.

Rawlings had only gone 200m from his trench when he was struck by a shell and died instantly.

Corporal Thorpe and Private Rawlings were buried alongside each other.

**August 21, 1918:** The Germans are reeling from the impact of the Amiens defeat and now have to contend with another offensive, this time to their north, at Albert.

This will be the third time in the duration of this grim Western Front conflict that Albert is in play.

The battle rages for 10 days and involves the British Third Army, and the New Zealanders, across the pock-marked territory of the Somme.

British Expeditionary Force (BEF) commander General Douglas Haig sends in the Fourth Army and later, the First Army, to strengthen the flanks and continue the attack.

The Allies continue to make gains

**August 23, 1918:** Now it is the Australians turn: the AIF's 1st and 3rd Division are set to work with the intention of pushing the Germans further back to the Somme, with British General Sir Henry Rawlinson and Monash given the job of taking Bray on the northern bank of the Somme and Chuignes and Herleville villages in the south.

The 1st Division sets out on the task with a dozen tanks for support on the two kilometre-stretch of valley, woods and the edge of the plateau beyond Herleville, while coming under heavy machine gun fire.

But after an extensive artillery barrage at 4.45am, success comes quickly. By dusk, 'the whole Chuignes Valley was ours,' Monash writes.

The victory is total: the Australians capture 21 guns and more than 3100 prisoners. Australian casualties number about 1000.

Australians seize a German naval gun with a 40-cm bore that weighs almost 500 tonnes. It had been used during the bombardment of Amiens, and Monash later gives it to the city, declaring it the "largest single trophy of the war".

**August 29, 1918:** The next stage of the Allied response is in full swing.

The Canadians have gained five kilometres and taken the towns of Monchy-le-Preux and Wancourt.

The New Zealanders have entered Bapaume, previously held by the Germans.

And Australian patrols keep finding the old German strong points abandoned.

Unofficial

Villages in the south and north of the front fall.

It seems that by nightfall of August 29, every German west of the Somme between Peronne and Brie, has been captured.

The Australians had effectively driven the Germans out of the bend in the River Somme.

What lay ahead was the dangerous task of crossing the river at its widest point to continue the German pursuit.

**August 31, 1918:** The town of Peronne gives the Germans a perfect place to repel the Allies: it is protected on one side by the river and soft, spongy ground.

The Germans have destroyed all the bridges, and there is no cover for any attackers.

Australian troops who have bravely tried to attack did so across narrow 10-cm duckboards in to a hail of machine gun fire.

Monash decides that rather than succumb to that futility, he will try to outflank the Germans and attack the Mont St Quentin hill, to the north of Peronne and 45m above it.

The Australians are exhausted: some of them have been at the front for almost five months without respite.

Australian war correspondent Charles Bean later describes the planned assault as: "[I]n some ways the most formidable [task] ever faced by Australian infantry."

So begins a ferocious assault, with 550 Diggers engaging three German battalions, totalling about 1800 men, across a terrain already devastated by war.

By 8am, Mont St Quentin has fallen, and the Australians have also taken Feuillaucourt in the north and Halle in the south, along with 700 German prisoners.

It was, said one senior British military figure, "one of the most notable of examples of pluck and enterprise during the war."

**September 1, 1918:** For all of the triumph of the previous day, Monash knows that he must push on with an exhausted corps to consolidate the victory.

Allied command's attention is on Arras, where the Canadians are on the verge of breaking through another German line that if successful could trigger an extensive German retreat.

At Mont St Quentin, the Germans counter-attack and push the Australians back of the summit.

Unofficial

It is bloody and gruesome hand-to-hand combat. Feuillaucourt is lost and then, finally, regained when Australian reinforcements arrive.

There are 3000 casualties and eight Victoria Crosses are awarded to Australians at Mont St Quentin and Peronne on this day.

**September 2, 1918:** The Canadians spearhead the breach in to the German's much-vaunted Drocourt-Queant Line, a defensive line built around concrete dug-outs, a network of trenches and metres of barbed wire that protects the northern flank of the Hindenburg Line.

The Canadians' success opens up the opportunities for the Allies to drive the Germans further back.

At midday, the German high command begins to order some of its armies to retreat. All the territory the Germans had won six months earlier is now lost.

Since Amiens, the Germans have just been trying to hold their position under the combined Allied assault.

The heady days of their own spring offensive are now just a bitter memory.

**September 3, 1918:** Monash's men push on, emboldened by their success at Mt St Quentin.

Peronne falls when the Germans evacuate.

Flamicourt will follow and the Diggers will claim another 3kms to the east within 24 hours.

The battle for the bend in the Somme River has been done and won by the AIF.