VILLERS-BRETONNEUX TO LE HAMEL

AUSTRALIANS ON THE WESTERN FRONT – 1918
Front Cover: Deserted by its residents and under long-range shell-fire, Amiens stood in front of the German advance in March 1918. (Australian War Memorial [AWM] H09699)

Back Cover: Australian and American troops dig in on ground captured at Le Hamel, 4 July 1918. (AWM E02690)

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By 1918 the world had become weary of war

By 1918 the world had become weary of war and yet there seemed to be no likely end to it. Back in 1914, committed by Britain’s declaration of hostilities against Germany, Australia had been quick to offer a volunteer army of 20,000 men; it was named the Australian Imperial Force (the ‘AIF’). Few then understood how long this conflict would last, how many more men would be needed and how many would die. Almost four years later, on any daily count in January 1918, there were about 120,000 Australian troops in France and Belgium. However, there was another Australian army along the Somme and in Flanders: the tens of thousands of dead in the cemeteries, in crude graves or still lying out on the battlefields.

The Australians on the Western Front—the infantry, artillerymen, engineers, machine-gunners, signallers and others—were mostly serving in the five divisions of the newly created Australian Corps under General Sir William Birdwood, a British officer who had been with the AIF since the 1915 Gallipoli campaign. There were others in units such as some artillery, flying corps squadrons, railway companies and the tunnellers, employed separately along the Western Front being used wherever the British army most needed them. There were also hundreds of nurses caring for the wounded, the sick and the dying in hospitals and casualty clearing stations.

The battles of the past years in France and Belgium had been ones of triumph and tragedy. In a single night at Fromelles on 19–20 July 1916 the 5th Division had 5500 casualties, and no ground was taken. Within days the 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions, one at a time, entered the First Battle of the Somme at Pozieres, making nineteen attacks over several weeks and capturing vital ground, but losing 23,000 men killed or wounded. The following year, after enduring a bitter winter in the trenches, these four divisions pursued the enemy to the Hindenburg Line, where in the spring they fought in the two bloody battles to seize part of the line at Bullecourt. Again, the casualties were appalling.

In the second half of 1917 the Australian divisions suffered their worst aggregate losses in a series of battles in Flanders that became known collectively as the Third Battle of Ypres, or simply ‘Passchendaele’. Here, all five of the divisions fought together for the first time, some of them attacking side by side. The casualties over eight weeks totalled 38,000. Only after this, with winter once again turning the battlefields into a bog, did the Australians get some relief from action. A chance came for rest, sport and, for the lucky ones, leave to London or Paris. Still, there continued to be heavy periods of duty in the muddy or frozen trenches, which took a further toll on the men’s health and morale.
The Australian divisions were extended, in rotation, along the front line from Armentières to Messines and then to Hill 60 and closer to Ypres. Many of the men were already familiar with these areas. Indeed Messines had a special significance for the 3rd Australian Division as it had received its ‘baptism of fire’ there in a successful action under Major General John Monash in the previous June. Soon after that it became heavily committed in the fighting around Passchendaele. Monash wrote about the winter conditions:

*Excepting for a small area of undulating ground in the extreme north of the Corps sector, the country was a forbidding expanse of devastation, flat and woebegone, with long stretches of the front line submerged waist deep after every freshet in the river Lys, and a greater part of our trench system like nothing but a series of canals of liquid mud.*

During this time the local defences were strengthened. The collapse of Russia into revolution had released many enemy divisions for use on the Western Front and the coming spring held the prospect of a new German offensive. At the same time, the British commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, wanted to renew his own offensive in Flanders — although the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, was opposing this. The French, drained after years of fighting, were holding on until the arrival of the Americans. While the old armies were nearing exhaustion, their firepower, through advances in technology and production, was greater than ever.

The AIF was seriously low in numbers. Only a few months earlier, in December 1917, the Australian public had, for the second time in the war, voted against the introduction of conscription for overseas service. The pool of enthusiastic young volunteers that had fed the AIF in the early years was now almost dry.

With the weather improving and the ground becoming firm, the Germans struck. Their large scale and heavy attacks were a shock, but not a surprise. Their offensive commenced on 21 March 1918. The most important thrust fell on the British Third and Fifth Armies and towards the old battlefields of the Somme. The Germans advanced from their Hindenburg Line in the direction of Amiens, a large and ancient city which was now also a vital communications hub. They sought to separate the French and British armies.

With massive artillery support and deep penetrating ‘stormtrooper’ assault tactics, the enemy advanced quickly, with the British battalions collapsing in front of them. Within days the Australians heard the alarming news that the battlegrounds of the previous years, soaked in their countrymen’s blood, were falling back into the enemy’s hands. The past fighting and dying seemed to have been for nothing. With the situation deteriorating, the Australians were needed 100 km away on the Somme. The divisions were hastily prepared to make the shift; the first to go were the 3rd and 4th Divisions.
Within the battalions there was a wave of rumours followed by the announcement that all leave was stopped; training was cancelled and officers were recalled to units. Transport was quickly assembled. Along with the rest of the 3rd Division, the 44th Battalion was ordered south. The unit’s historian, Captain Cyril Longmore recalls:

_The next three days and nights were a succession of railway journeys, route marches, and bus rides, about which no one who took part can have more than confused recollection._

Some units left local communities where they had been billeted, or passed through towns in which they were fondly remembered. In the 13th Battalion it was recalled:

_We were well-known around Steenwerck, and the people were lined along the roads to wave and smile to us and to call out 'Bon fortune! Bon retour'._

By 25 March, troops travelling in a column of vehicles carrying the leading elements of the 4th Division could see smoke rising from the direction of Bapaume, where the division had been a year earlier. These men of the 4th Brigade passed French refugees and exhausted British troops, and moved into positions near Hébuterne.

In a remarkable incident not far away, two Australians driving a railway engine, Sergeant Francis Hawken and Sapper John Hughes, discovered just how close the Germans had advanced when they steamed deeply through the enemy lines before they were taken as prisoners. ‘By the time we pulled the train up, German bayonets were sticking through the doors’, Hughes recalled later.

At Hébuterne British troops were holding the German advance, but there remained an atmosphere of fear and depression. Then, seeing the Australians arriving, the French called ‘Les Australiens! Vivent les Australiens! Vous les tiendrez!’ (You will stop them!). The diggers too were determined that they were not going to let the enemy past.

Just after dark on 26 March, the 4th Brigade occupied Hébuterne. Sharp fighting followed next day, during which the Germans suffered heavily. The brigade, separated from the other Australians, and alongside British and New Zealand troops, held the line here over the following weeks. Meanwhile, as the division’s other brigades—the 12th and 13th—arrived they were sent not far away to fill a gap near the town of Albert.

Among the division were men who had fought on the Somme in 1916 and knew Albert well and were familiar with the district. In those days the town had been the railhead of the British Army, and all around there had been large camps and supply dumps and behind them the training and rest areas. Even then German shelling had done a lot of damage to the town’s buildings, and at the centre, atop the basilica of Notre Dame de Brébières, the golden figures of the Virgin and Child, dislodged by artillery fire, hung precariously over the town square.
Close to Albert, the village of Dernancourt stood along the main railway line. There, during the First Battle of the Somme, supplies and men had been unloaded and casualties departed; many of the latter were destined for the coast and then on to hospitals in England. Now the Germans were occupying Albert, with the town being slowly flattened by shellfire, and Dernancourt stood on the front line.

Meanwhile Monash’s 3rd Division arrived by train at Doullens and moved by buses to the Amiens road south of Albert and Dernancourt, overlooking the valley of the Ancre River. Unlike the other Australian divisions, the 3rd had not served on the Somme before. Monash later recalled:

No time was lost in assembling the troops, and in directing the Infantry—company after company—down the steep, winding road to the little village of Heilly, and thence across the Ancre. The spectacle … will be ever memorable to me, as one of the most inspiring sights of the whole war. Here was the Third Division—the ‘new chum’ Division … come into its own at last, and called upon to prove its mettle.

The Ancre River flows through Albert southwards in a valley for 15 kilometres to join the Somme River at Corbie. Along this line two brigades of the 4th Division held the northern end and two from the 3rd Division stood above the southern part. They got ready to meet any German advance. Captain Longmore of the 44th Battalion wrote:

*Isolated shells were falling on the ridges in the vicinity. The civilian population, with the exception of a few old men and women, had evacuated their homes and the whole countryside was deserted. No information was available for company commanders to work on as to where the enemy was supposed to be. The country was strange, as it was the first time the Third Division had been in the Somme area.*

Beyond Corbie the town of Villers-Bretonneux was also under threat. Monash had to send his 9th Brigade there. To compensate, he was joined by Brigadier General ‘Pompey’ Elliott’s 15th Brigade, which was the first part of the 5th Division to arrive. Elliott was a fighting commander who was revered by his men. In typical style, he would soon make an important impact on this battleground.

The most immediate problem, however, was at Dernancourt, where the Australians were in contact with the enemy. In the dim morning of 28 March, Sergeant Stan McDougall in the 4th Division’s 47th Battalion was at a post near a railway crossing. Realising that an enemy attack was forming, he raised the alarm. Then, snatching up a Lewis light machine-gun, he took on the Germans along the railway embankment.

The fighting quickly spread, but the enemy were beaten back. For his work in this critical action the bold sergeant received the Victoria Cross; it was the first awarded to an Australian since the Passchendaele fighting almost six months earlier. McDougall’s citation describes him successively attacking with a rifle and bayonet, and ‘firing
from the hip’ with a Lewis gun. It said: ‘The prompt action of this non-commissioned officer saved the line and enabled the enemy’s advance to be stopped’.

Many men were involved in the action and there were heavy casualties. Later that day a few kilometres to the south, the 3rd Division made an advance in the drizzling rain and in this the 40th Battalion was met by strong fire as it moved across open ground. A soldier recalled the death of an officer who had served on Gallipoli and whose brother had been killed on the Somme two years earlier:

_We were advancing … Lieutenant [William] Grubb was in charge of No 10 Pltn [platoon]. He was first of all hit in the shoulder by a bullet but he would not give in with that. We advanced further and I heard he was shot in the head. He was buried. There are many of the Australians buried about there. The ground is in our possession._

The division soon established itself on the plateau, declaring the ground to be theirs and defying any enemy efforts to take it back. This was a new style of fighting, using fire and movement tactics developed in the previous year and working across open and largely unspoiled country. The historian of the 40th Battalion later wrote:

_The advance was quite a parade-ground movement … probably due to the fact that we were advancing under fire over open grassy country for the first time. There were few old trenches and practically no shell holes. Sections went forward in short rushes, and gave covering fire with Lewis guns and rifles as the other sections and platoons advanced._

On 4 April, below the Somme River, the Germans attacked on a wide front, taking Le Hamel, advancing their line and pressing on to Villers-Bretonneux. Heavy fighting took place and the town was at risk until the 36th Battalion made a ‘spectacular’ charge. The Germans were driven back, while not far away Pompey Elliott’s brigade crossed the river and got onto a commanding rise called Hill 104. On any clear day Amiens could be seen from the hill. There, for the moment, the line stayed.

The next morning the Germans shifted their attention again and attacked the 4th Division’s positions at Hébuterne and Dernancourt. The fighting at Dernancourt was desperate. Shortly after daylight heavy artillery and mortar fire fell. At first it landed on the reserve and support areas and then, a couple of hours later, it concentrated on the front line posts. ‘Gas-shells were numerous, and the men had to don their gas-helmets and peer through the dim glasses to watch for the enemy’s coming. More than an hour elapsed … then he was seen to be advancing in large numbers.’ After a fierce fight in the early mist the enemy crossed over the railway and also got through an underpass in the embankment.

For the past few years it had usually been the British and Australians making the attacks on the enemy’s lines. Now it was the Germans who were assaulting and forcing the allies to defend. Charles Bean, the official historian, described the enemy attack at Dernancourt as ‘the strongest made against Australian troops in that
war’. Finally, in the early evening the diggers successfully counter-attacked.

Since arriving in the area the Australians had seen some British troops falling back in disorder while others had bravely absorbed and then held the German thrusts. None drew the diggers’ admiration more than the cavalrymen fighting mounted and often on foot. They were the remnants of the old British regular army, whose infantry battalions had fought to near extinction through 1914–15.

To this point the German advances along the Somme had been successful. But now their lines of communication were fully stretched, tired troops had to be relieved and they had been unable to bring up all their powerful artillery, which had played a major role in their initial advance. Having been held here, their commanders moved their efforts to Flanders. Just a week earlier the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions had been the last of the Australian divisions in that area, but they had already left to join those on the Somme.

The 1st Division had travelled by train to Amiens, where many of the men who knew the city from earlier times on leave in 1916 were shocked to find the place dull, damaged and abandoned by an alarmed population. In the next few days the battalions moved up towards the front line, only to be turned around and ordered to Amiens. There they again boarded trains to take them back to stop the enemy advancing towards the railway centre at Hazebrouck. During the move a German long-range artillery shell landed on Saint-Roch station, killing some of the men joining the trains. The 1st Division would remain in Flanders, detached from the others, for the next few months.

News of the northern breakthrough was distressing for the Australians on the Somme. The view within the ranks of one battalion, having lost many men in Flanders during 1917 and having worked hard at developing defences there through the winter, was shared by many:

*We should not have been human had we been otherwise than enraged when we contemplated how vain had been rendered all the vast amount of energy we had expended on defences. All these works we had performed to defend the ground desperately won at the expense of lives of some of our best friends and comrades.*

One Australian battalion recorded that its stores, left behind when they came south, had now fallen into enemy hands and this included the men’s kits, band instruments and even the battalion’s flag. With the situation getting worse, and as the 1st Division was heading back to help confront the Germans, the British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, issued a famous and dramatic order:

*Three weeks ago the enemy began his terrific attacks on a 50 mile front. There is no other course open to us but to fight it out! Every position must be held to the last man; there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause each one of us must fight on to the end. The safety of our Homes and the Freedom of mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each one of us at this critical moment.*
The 1st Division would go on to play a vital role at Hazebrouck. They successfully withstood attacks on 14 April and again on the 17th. The Australian machine-guns did particularly good work and German reports confirm their heavy losses. Soon the diggers would mount their own attacks and then keep the enemy in this area occupied with constant raids and patrols.

Despite these developments, the threat on the Somme remained. While it was evident that the German offensive had lost momentum, few expected that they would not attack again. The Australians were holding more than 20 kilometres of front line from Dernancourt to Villers-Bretonneux. The 2nd Division had taken over from the tired 4th, and beside it, stretching to the south, stood the 3rd and 5th Divisions. Then, with more British troops arriving, the Australians were able to begin concentrating astride the Somme River. As the fresh troops moved into the line, even their own British officers commented on the youth of these reinforcements. Similar observations would be made of many of the Germans taken prisoner of war.

While for the moment Villers-Bretonneux and nearby Corbie were safe, Albert was in German hands. From their positions a few kilometres away some Australians could still see the tower of the famous basilica with the statue of the Virgin and Child on top. Among the superstitious there was a wide belief that the war would end when the statue fell. On 16 April a few Australian machine-gunners watched the shelling by British heavy howitzers and recorded:

*A big shell hit the tower fair in the middle, and we then saw it waver and slowly fall over on the right. The statue has now fallen, and we are wondering if the prophecy will be fulfilled.*

On 21 April the Australians became involved in an incident that, although minor in itself, became a notable event in the war. Two Australian reconnaissance aircraft from No. 3 Squadron Australian Flying Corps (AFC) had been making observations over German positions near Le Hamel when set upon by German fighter planes. Among the enemy formation was a red Fokker Triplane flown by Manfred von Richthofen, who had already shot down more aircraft than any pilot on either side in the war; he was a German national hero. British fighters soon joined the fray. Then, when Richthofen spotted a loose Sopwith Camel being flown by a novice pilot, he went in, for what he must have felt sure was to be another kill.

The Camel, with Richthofen in pursuit, skimmed low over the front line, then desperately across the Somme River and up above the high bank east of Corbie. Suddenly the German ace was low and exposed over Australian positions. His Fokker drew heavy fire from the ground. One round found its mark; the German was hit in the chest, and crashed. Richthofen’s body was recovered and he was given a military burial, attended by men of the AFC, in the town cemetery at Bertangles.
Meanwhile the German attack was still expected. Finally, on 24 April, at 4.45 on a dull and misty morning, heavy German artillery fire descended on the British troops in front of Villers-Bretonneux. Behind the town, Australians met young soldiers withdrawing who told them that waves of German infantry were advancing with flame-throwers and with a few tanks. The latter were great slab-sided monsters that they had not seen before. Vulnerable as these cumbersome vehicles were, they had a powerful morale effect, and the British had no special weapons to quickly deal with them.

Tanks would briefly feature heavily in this action. At one point British Mark IV tanks met three enemy ones near Cachy. In the ensuing fight—the first tank versus tank action in history—a German tank was knocked out and the others were driven off. One of the German tanks was later found abandoned and was eventually recovered by Australians; today it is displayed in the Queensland Museum in Brisbane.

The Germans rolled forward in a powerful attack. From Hill 104, men of the 5th Division watched the fighting unfold and saw Villers-Bretonneux entered and the enemy beginning to move in their direction. However, most of the action was on the other side of the railway in the direction of Cachy. By mid morning the Germans were in the wood on the Amiens side of the town. At some points hard-pressed British troops were still holding on, but the Germans were gaining the ascendancy. Only a strong counter-attack by fresh troops held some hope of turning around the deteriorating situation and the imminent threat to Amiens.

At Querrieu, several kilometres away, the 13th Australian Brigade under Brigadier General William Glasgow, which was in reserve, suddenly received orders to march towards Villers-Bretonneux. Although the brigade had suffered at Dernancourt three weeks earlier, it headed off ‘brimming with confidence’. Meanwhile General Elliott, ‘who since dawn had been straining on the leash’ to join the battle, was told to prepare the 15th Brigade for a counter-attack.

The idea was for these brigades, the 13th and 15th, to assault on each side of Villers-Bretonneux in a pincer movement. British troops would attack alongside the 13th Brigade on the southern side, and others would mop up in the gap between the Australians. There was too little time to form an extensive plan, a reconnaissance was not possible, and while it was proposed to use artillery there would be no preliminary bombardment or creeping barrage. The 15th Brigade knew something of the area, but the 13th would have to attack over unfamiliar ground in the dark and beside a wood in which were concealed many enemy machine-guns.

The two brigades, coming from different divisions, would be under the command of the British who had already taken the brunt. Here were good and experienced brigades under two of the most redoubtable and
outspoken brigadiers of the AIF. When told that the attack would be in the late evening Glasgow responded: ‘If God Almighty gave the order, we couldn’t do it by daylight’. He proposed 10.30 but finally reluctantly agreed to attack at 10 pm. In the event he was right as the brigades could not be at the start line in time.

This mobile free-flowing warfare over open ground and intact fields was different to the fighting of recent years. In the past when set-piece attacks were made without proper planning or with too little attention to detail, disaster usually followed. Now there was not much time. The situation was fluid, and there was the potential for things to quickly get out of control.

Problems began early. Some companies of the 13th were still getting into position as ‘zero’ approached and Glasgow had to agree to a short delay. At 10 pm, the appointed time, the artillery opened up, sending shells into Villers-Bretonneux and its surrounds. German flares rose into the sky, and soon their artillery began to retaliate. After the delay, on the order to advance the men fixed bayonets and moved forward, silhouetted by flares and fires. It was misty and overcast, although moonlight occasionally broke through the clouds.

Elliott too had trouble. Some companies were late getting into place, and one of them lost direction while trying to avoid an area where gas still hung about. The brigade finally moved off two hours behind time. The advance began well until machine-gun posts were met. Heavy fire chopped through the groups of men as they rushed forward yelling with their bayonets thrust before them. Under the weight of the attack many of the Germans fell back while elsewhere there was close hand-to-hand fighting.

Heavy machine-gun fire also tore through the 13th Brigade. At a vital moment Lieutenant Clifford Sadlier and his sergeant, Charlie Stokes, attacked and destroyed six machine-guns. After a kilometre advance the troops met barbed-wire entanglements, part of the earlier defences, and machine-gun rounds swept through the troops as they struggled through. Strong leadership and good discipline showed. The Australians pushed on with the enemy withdrawing before them.

There was some difficulty in getting the two brigades to link up on the eastern side of Villers-Bretonneux, but overall the attack had been a remarkable success. Many of the Germans caught in the Australian infantry’s trap withdrew from the town along the railway, their escape protected by a deep cutting. By morning, the anniversary of Anzac Day, Villers-Bretonneux was back in British hands.

The fighting had been vicious and many lives were lost on both sides; the Australians had 1500 casualties. One of these was Private David Evans of the 50th Battalion, who was wounded and was not recovered until the following night. He reported on the nature of the
fighting and having seen some of his mates killed or wounded: ‘I could not see where they had been hit’, adding, ‘but it was all MG [machine-gun] bullets that day’.

In the following weeks the British and Australians changed places so that the diggers held the line to the Ancre with the French on one side and the British on the north. At last it seemed that the German offensive had spent itself, and the Australians were holding the honoured ‘the right of the line’ of the main British army in France. Still they maintained an aggressive pressure on the enemy.

Both sides were nearly exhausted but the diggers did not allow the Germans any rest. An enemy soldier complained that they ‘creep up to our posts at night like cats, killing and carrying off’. Such tactics were called ‘peaceful penetration’, and their success showed that the Germans’ morale was low. On the north of the Somme River, in early May, the 3rd Division made a number of successful small assaults towards Morlancourt, taking more ground. Shortly afterwards, on 14 May, the 2nd Division repelled a counter-attack. A few days later the division’s 6th Brigade made a clever attack at Ville-sur-Ancre.

Sergeant William Ruthven of the 22nd Battalion received the Victoria Cross for his work at Ville-sur-Ancre. When his company commander was wounded, he took over. Armed at different times with bombs, rifle and bayonet, and then a revolver, he captured a machine-gun that was holding up the advance and then, leading attacks, or at times acting alone, he helped capture vital ground. His citation says:

*Throughout the whole operation he showed the most magnificent courage and determination, inspiring everyone by his fine fighting spirit, his remarkable courage and dashing action.*

While the Australians took ground north of the river, to the south the line remained stuck. From the captured high ground they could look across at Le Hamel, facing Villers-Bretonneux, which was still held by the Germans. By possessing this territory the enemy had a commanding view and with their artillery could still dominate an area far beyond what they had occupied.

A British gunner, Aubrey Wade, later wrote of his own experiences alongside the diggers at this time:

*[T]he Australians held the line, and never was the line held better. Villers-Bret, was held intact by an army of great-hearted men who were afraid of nothing on earth. I knew them in action and out of action, in the front line, in observation-posts, with the guns, riding up at night with the ammunition, mending the lines to the shriek of shells and the roar of explosions; I and the rest of us made friends forever of the loose-belted Aussies.*

During these weeks of action and then consolidation, important changes took place within the AIF. The Australians on the Somme were now part of the resurrected British Fourth Army under General Sir Henry Rawlinson. Meanwhile the British Fifth Army was being reformed and needed a commander.
General Birdwood, the highest ranked officer leading a corps, was duly appointed. The promotion provided an opportunity for the vacancy created at the top of the Australian Corps to be filled by an Australian. Monash, the former Melbourne militia officer who had trained and led the 3rd Division so well, got the appointment.

Monash was nearly fifty when the war began and already had broad military experience on the staff and in command. He was not a regular soldier, and even during the war never acquired a reputation as a frontline general. His exceptional gifts were his powerful intellect, commanding presence, articulateness, determination and confidence. As a civilian engineer he had gained experience on large scale enterprises, understood the need for management and organisation and embraced technology and new ideas.

Monash’s promotion, and replacement by Major General John Gellibrand, brought further changes within the corps. British officers, Major Generals HB ‘Hooky’ Walker and Nevill Smythe, commanding the 1st and 2nd Divisions, would return to the British army with their places to be taken by Australians. In May Major General Charles Rosenthal, a battle-scarred frontline soldier, took over from Smythe. Walker held a special place among the Australians and had led the 1st Division since its days on Gallipoli. It felt right that he was the last to depart. Glasgow from the 13th Brigade was promoted to take over from him.

The case with Major General Ewen Sinclair-MacLagan, a Scot commanding the 4th Division, was different. He had been in Australia before the war and with the AIF since its beginning. Monash later wrote that, ‘although not Australian born he was whole-heartedly Australian’. He remained with his division until the end of the war and only then went back to the British army. Meanwhile the 5th Division remained with a former Perth architect, Major General Talbot Hobbs.

The fighting around Villers-Bretonneux had focused on the infantry. However no one could ignore the increasing role of technology on the battlefield. More machine-guns, including light machine-guns, were being used in attack and in defence. Aircraft were conducting vital spotting, reconnaissance and aerial photography. Tanks too were more plentiful and the much improved Mark V model was making its appearance. Most of all was the increasing sophistication and dominance of the artillery. The work of the gunners had become a science and plenty of guns and ammunition were now at hand.

For years the booming of guns had been a constant backdrop to the fighting on the Western Front. Now the German offensive had taken the battles beyond the old stagnant trench lines. By 1918 the firing on unseen targets by ‘indirect’ fire was mastered. Accuracy had also been improved. Weather and atmospheric conditions, wind direction and timing, became fundamental considerations. The calibration of guns—identifying the
characteristics of each gun—enabled surprise ‘predicted fire’ without the need for firing preliminary registration shots. Curtains of fire, called creeping barrages, gave protection for the infantry when advancing, and counter-battery fire could help neutralise the enemy’s batteries.

Australians were also a part of the war in the air. Three squadrons of the Australian Flying Corps —Nos 2, 3 and 4—served on the Western Front. Although stationed some distance away, the airmen of Nos 2 and 4 Squadrons had taken part in attacks against the recent German advances on the Somme. The other squadron, No. 3, had been allocated to the Australian Corps. Its role was primarily reconnaissance and artillery observation.

One incident involved Captain John Duigan, a pilot with No. 3 Squadron who already held a unique place in aviation history. In 1910 he had become the first Australian to build and locally fly an aeroplane. On 9 May 1918, flying with his observer in an RE8 two-seater above the Somme, he was attacked by four enemy machines. Despite the enemy’s great advantage, troops on the ground watched as Duigan ‘manoeuvred his machine with great skill, giving his observer every opportunity to use the rear machine-gun’, with the result that one of the enemy machines was shot down out of control. Duigan’s machine was hit numerous times and both men were badly wounded. However, they made a forced landing close to the front line and were rescued.

On 10 June, part of the 2nd Division took more German positions near Morlancourt, further advancing the Australian line above the Somme River. This increased the concern about the positions on the south, and Monash was among those who were keen to remove this enemy encroachment and straighten the front line. An attack against Le Hamel village had been considered for a while. It was the arrival of new British tanks, unloaded some kilometres away from rail-trucks, and the availability of sufficient artillery, that brought a new dimension to the thinking.

The Australians had long mistrusted tanks. A year earlier, on 11 April 1917, the 4th Division had relied upon them in an attack at Bullecourt. The attack was a disaster with heavy losses, and no ground was taken. Now this division was facing the enemy at Le Hamel. Monash set about planning an attack. However, in order that casualties would not fall too heavily on the battle-scarred 4th Division, he proposed using a composite force that included one of its brigades as well as some from other divisions. To further bolster his resources, he also arranged to use some American infantry. Sinclair-MacLagan would be in command.

There had been a build up of Americans in France, but their commander, General John Pershing, was determined that they not be used piecemeal and was directing them towards the French sector. He was not entirely successful, and the British managed to get a
few of the divisions and undertook to provide them with experience and training. Eventually, some from the National Guard—the 27th, 30th and 33rd Divisions—would develop a close association with the diggers. Monash wanted to use ten companies from the 33rd Division, and in acknowledgement of these Americans, he set the attack for 4 July. At the last moment Pershing heard of the plan and refused permission. Six companies were withdrawn, but it was too late to change. With Rawlinson’s support, Monash went ahead with four American companies. The American general was furious when he got the news.

Essential to the whole scheme was firepower and timing. Monash planned to use sixty tanks together with large volumes of artillery. The tanks and infantry were to advance behind the artillery’s creeping barrage. Heavy artillery would fire on selected targets, including the enemy’s batteries. Aircraft would drop ammunition supplies and some tanks would be used for moving supplies and men.

By chance the Australian Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, was in France on his way to a meeting of the Supreme War Council in Paris. He took the time to visit the troops and was able to meet some of those about to go into battle. Knowing what they would soon face, he put politics aside. Those observing Hughes saw that he was thoughtful and concerned.

The battle commenced in the mist at 3.10 am. The artillery fire came down with a crash. Smoke shells were among the exploding rounds. The plan was to have the tanks go forward and the infantry to come along behind. With the artillery laying down a curtain of fire for protection, the tanks moved over any barbed wire and dealt with some of the machine-gun posts while the infantry assaulted with Lewis guns, rifles and grenades. By 5 am the battle was over and the Australians were digging in on their objectives.

Private Frank Roberts wrote his impressions later:

Knees knocked when barrage opened, but after the start all trepidation vanished. Wonderful barrage put up … explosion[s] lit up the scene and we caught glimpses of Fritz going for life. No return barrage and no machine gun fire … An easy walk over.

At some places stiff opposition was met and machine-gun fire from two enemy points, Kidney Trench and Pear Trench, caused particular problems. Both were finally overcome, largely due to Lance Corporal Tom Axford of the 16th Battalion and Private Harry Dalziel of the 15th Battalion. Each later received the Victoria Cross. Dalziel had fought on despite having had a finger shot off and soon afterwards was badly wounded in the head. An American, Corporal Thomas Pope, did similar good work that day and was awarded the US Medal of Honour.

Monash later wrote:

The attack was a complete surprise. The selected objective line was reached in the times prescribed … and was speedily consolidated. It
gave us possession of the whole of the Hamel Valley, and landed us on the … eastern slope of the last ridge, from which the enemy had been able to overlook any of the country held by us.

The capture of Le Hamel thrilled the Australians and today many still regard it as one of their most important achievements on the Western Front. It established Monash’s reputation as a corps commander, proved the dependability of the tanks and confirmed the importance of artillery. The event was widely and favourably reported, even among the French and Americans. However, the actual area captured was limited. Larger battles employing similar tactics on a greater scale awaited the Australian Corps in the months ahead.

There was good reason for Monash and all the Australian, British and American troops involved to be pleased by their achievement. Others were, and many congratulations came in. The Australian Prime Minister responded proudly, and Haig promptly commended ‘the skill and gallantry’ of those who had taken part. Monash took particular satisfaction that Georges Clémenceau, Prime Minister of France, made a visit a few days later, going to Sinclair-MacLagan’s headquarters at nearby Bussy and meeting Monash and an assembly of leaders and some of the troops.

Clémenceau gave a most generous and inspiring speech:

We knew you would fight a real fight, but we did not know that from the very beginning you would astonish the whole Continent with your valour. I have come here for the simple purpose of seeing the Australians and telling them this. I shall go back to-morrow and say to my countrymen; ‘I have seen the Australians; I have looked into their eyes. I know that they, men who have fought great battles in the cause of freedom, will fight on alongside us, till the freedom for which we are all fighting is guaranteed for us and our children’.

With the capture of Le Hamel, the year was half way through. Things had looked bleak when the Germans made their great advances. Then, after a few weeks of stiff fighting, they had been brought to a stop, and now they had been forced to fall back. Here, and on other points of the Western Front, the enemy was beginning to look vulnerable. The troops could see a glimmer of hope that the war could be won. They also knew that there were still months, possibly a year, of fighting before them.

The Australians’ fatal casualties over the past half year had been:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Casualties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>2700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The wounded and gassed numbered 23,000.
Along the Somme the front line now stood just beyond Le Hamel, and the Australians were generally consolidated around Villers-Bretonneux and the surrounding area. In a few weeks the detached 1st Division would also return. To the north and the west the small villages in and behind the Ancre valley were taken over by troops. When the men were free from the fighting lines, the village barns and lofts became their homes, the officers were often accommodated in the farmhouses or cottages, and headquarters were set up in local chateaux. The adjacent fields became training grounds, while closer to the front line were the horse-lines and the artillery batteries. Australians seemed to be everywhere. Even after the war ended in November 1918, some of them remained for a while. Among the last to go were those gathering in the dead from small plots or isolated graves for burial in the local war cemeteries.

Eventually the soldiers went home, leaving behind their cemeteries, monuments and memorials. The villagers returned, their homes were rebuilt, and the fields returned to crops. Villers-Bretonneux was not forgotten and in the following years it became the main centre for Australian commemoration in France. It took twenty years, a period interrupted by the Great Depression, before the Australian National Memorial was erected on the hill outside the town. Under the memorial’s great tower, and enclosed by walls bearing the names of 10,771 Australians ‘missing’ with no known grave, visitors across generations have arrived on pilgrimages, wreaths have been placed, and Anzac Day services conducted.

The Villers-Bretonneux Memorial was inaugurated in July 1938. Monash had died several years earlier but his predecessor, Birdwood, now a field marshal, was there joining the King and the President of France at the ceremony. Fifty-five years on, in 1993 the body of The Unknown Australian Soldier was taken from the nearby Adelaide War Cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux for entombment at the Australian War Memorial. The French town’s mayor was one of the official mourners at the ceremony conducted in Canberra.

Generations of local French people have welcomed Australian visitors to the places where their countrymen fought and died. It was difficult and expensive for Australian veterans, families or pilgrims to get to the old battlefields after the war but modern air travel has made it much easier. Today an increasing number of Australians come to France to remember the war, and Villers-Bretonneux and the surrounding Somme region remain the centre for most of these visits.
Australians on the Western Front 1918

Infantry units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Brigade</th>
<th>Battalions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Division</td>
<td>1 Bde</td>
<td>1–4 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Walker)*</td>
<td>2 Bde</td>
<td>5–8 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Bde</td>
<td>9–12 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Division</td>
<td>5 Bde</td>
<td>17–20 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Smythe)</td>
<td>6 Bde</td>
<td>21–24 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Bde</td>
<td>25–28 Battalions</td>
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<td>33–36 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Monash)</td>
<td>10 Bde</td>
<td>37–40 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 Bde</td>
<td>41–44 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>4th Division</td>
<td>4 Bde</td>
<td>13–16 Battalions</td>
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<td>(Sinclair-Maclagan)</td>
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<td>(Hobbs)</td>
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<td>53–56 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 Bde</td>
<td>57–60 Battalions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* appointments are those held in January 1918

Australian Victoria Cross Awards
MARCH–JULY 1918

Sergeant SR McDougall
Dernancourt, 28 March 1918

Lieutenant PV Storkey
(Hangard Wood) Villers-Bretonneux, 7 April 1918

Lieutenant CWK Sadlier
Villers-Bretonneux, 24–25 April 1918

Sergeant W Ruthven
Ville-sur-Ancre, 19 May 1918

Corporal P Davey
Merris, 28 June 1918

Lance Corporal TL Axford
Hamel, 4 July 1918

Private H Dalziel
Hamel, 4 July 1918

Corporal W Brown
Villers-Bretonneux, 6 July 1918

Lieutenant AC Borella
Villers-Bretonneux, 17–18 July 1918
The Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux.
Mess orderlies carry soup to the reserve troops in the Messines sector, Belgium, on 22 January 1918.

(Australian War Memorial [AWM] E01512)
An Australian working party develops the defences near Wytschaete, Belgium, on 15 February 1918. The camouflage prevents enemy aerial observation of the concrete observation post. (AWM E04538)
British troops withdraw in the face of the German advance on the Somme, 24 March 1918. (AWM E01861)
German soldiers march through Bapaume, March 1918. Australians were alarmed that the town which they had captured a year earlier was again in enemy hands. *(AWM H13220)*
The German advance placed Amiens under direct threat. The city, dominated by its ancient cathedral, was a vital communications hub. (AWM E04734)
Deserted by its residents and under long-range shell-fire, Amiens stood in front of the German advance in March 1918.  
(AWM H09699)
The village of Dernancourt, 1918. The Germans occupied the village and the ground north of the railway (running diagonally) with the Australians on the southern side. (AWM A01058)
Sergeant Stanley McDougall of the 47th Battalion was awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry at Dernancourt on 28 March 1918. When a Lewis gun team was knocked out by an enemy bomb, McDougall snatched up the gun and attacked two German machine-gun posts, killing the crews and turning one of their guns onto oncoming enemy troops. When his ammunition ran out, he charged with his bayonet and then used a Lewis gun to force the surrender of the remaining enemy troops. A week later, also at Dernancourt, he again fought with bravery, earning the Military Medal. (AWM A05155)

Villers-Bretonneux to Le Hamel
Troops in reserve trenches at Lavieville, behind Dernancourt, watch a shell bursting near trenches occupied by the 51st Battalion, 28 March 1918. (AWM E01854)
The 29th Battery, Australian Field Artillery, in action near Vaux-sur-Somme, 29 March 1918. Arriving with the infantry on 27 March, they fought an engagement with opposing German guns the next day. (AWM E01874)
With the enemy advance pressing, Australians set up barricades in the village of Ribemont in the Ancre valley, March 1918. *(AWM E01938)*
Recently arrived Australian machine-gunners study a map in a building taken over at Sailly-le-Sec, 29 March 1918.

(AWM E01942)
Troopers of the British 15th Hussars rest in Corbie after several days hard fighting, 31 March 1918. Australians admired the part the British cavalry played in holding the German advance. (AWM E04660)
German prisoners captured in an early clash with the 4th Australian Division assemble at Baizieux, a village behind the front line, 31 March 1918. (AWM E01948)
Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie Morshead, whose 33rd Battalion took part in heavy fighting around Villers-Bretonneux, stands on the steps of his headquarters on 5 April 1918, the day after it had been hit by a shell during the German assault on the town. Morshead later gained fame as the commander of the garrison at Tobruk, during World War II. (AWM E02390)
An elderly French woman who refused to leave her home in Villers-Bretonneux despite heavy enemy shelling that reduced much of the town to ruins, stands on her doorstep the day after the attack, 5 April 1918. (AWM E02392)
Australian wounded gathered in a barn being used as a dressing station at Daours, a few kilometres from Villers-Bretonneux, during the local fighting. (AWM P00437.092, photographer: George Rose)
Lieutenant Percy Storkey, 19th Battalion, was awarded the Victoria Cross for ‘most conspicuous bravery, leadership, and devotion to duty when in charge of a platoon attack’ on 7 April 1918 at Bois de Hangard, France. Facing an enemy party of 80–100 men armed with several machine-guns, Storkey led a group of twelve men in a charge that succeeded in killing or wounding thirty enemy soldiers and capturing three officers, fifty men and a machine-gun. (AWM P02939.028)
Reinforcements for the 52nd Battalion at La Neuville, near Corbie, 12 April 1918. They would replace some of the men lost in the fighting at Dernancourt a week earlier. (AWM E02396)
The basilica at Albert, familiar to all troops who served on the Somme, was damaged in German shelling during 1916, then took a direct hit by a British Howitzer on 16 April 1918, and stood in ruins at the end of the war. (AWM H15597)
Men of the 1st Battalion, quickly sent back to Flanders, prepare defences against German attacks near Pradelles, 16 April 1918; heavy fighting took place the following day. (AWM E02027)
Officers and men of the 1st Australian and 29th British Divisions watch the bombardment of Strazeele during the renewed German attack, 17 April 1918. (AWM E02026)
Men of the 9th Battalion, in the reserve line at Borre, watch the German shelling of their billets, 17 April 1918.

(AWM E02088)
Men of the 1st Australian Division in the trenches near Strazeele, 18 April 1918. The division remained in Flanders for three more months. *(AWM E04750)*
Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil Sasse at Strazeele, 21 April 1918. Sasse had fought a heroic action at Lone Pine on Gallipoli in 1915; he would add to his reputation leading the 4th Battalion in 1918. (AWM E02414)
Australian reinforcements from England march from Villers-Bocage, north of Amiens, to join their units, 21 April 1918. The supply of fresh troops soon became a trickle. (AWM E02411)
The remains of Manfred von Richthofen’s aircraft, under guard, after it was removed to the airfield of No. 3 Squadron AFC at Bertangles, 22 April 1918. (AWM E02044)
Major General TW ‘Bill’ Glasgow (left) commanded the 13th Brigade at Dernancourt and at Villers-Bretonneux. He was later promoted to lead the 1st Australian Division until the end of the war. (AWM E02807)
Night attack by the 13th Brigade on Villers-Bretonneux, by Will Longstaff, 1919, oil on canvas, 107.5 cm x 183.9 cm. (AWM ART03028)
A German machine-gun crew lies dead at Villers-Bretonnuex following the Australian counter-attack on the night of 24–25 April 1918. *(AWM E02434)*
Lieutenant Clifford Sadlier, 51st Battalion (left), was awarded the Victoria Cross and Sergeant Charles Stokes, 51st Battalion (right), received the Distinguished Conduct medal for their part in the attack at Villers-Bretonneux on 24–25 April. Although wounded in the thigh, Sadlier, supported by Stokes, led his bombing section against the German machine-gun posts, killing the crews and capturing the guns. Attacking alone with his revolver, he put another post out of action before he was again wounded and forced to the rear. With Sadlier and the other members of the section wounded, Stokes attacked the remaining machine-gun post with his rifle, single-handedly capturing the gun and its crew. (AWM D00022A and P03853.001)
Brigadier General HE ‘Pompey’ Elliott, a renowned fighting soldier, commanded his 15th Brigade in the counter-attack at Villers-Bretonneux on 24–25 April 1918. (AWM A02607)
Australian intelligence officers interrogate German prisoners of war in the grounds of the old chateau at Bussy, 25 April 1918. The troops were captured at nearby Villers-Bretonneux. (AWM E02134)
A burial party from the 52nd Battalion at the grave of Major William Craies, a ‘loved and respected commander’ who led B Company in the attack at Villers-Bretonneux until shot by a sniper, April 1918. (AWM E02259)
Lieutenant Will Dyson, Australian official war artist (left), Private Lewis Brown MM and Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Marks DSO MC, commanding officer of the 13th Battalion, study a pile of war souvenirs collected for the Australian War Memorial by men of the battalion at Villers-Bretonneux, 29 April 1918. (AWM E02242)
Men of the 46th Battalion come out of the front line at Monument Wood, near Villers-Bretonneux, after a period of heavy fighting, May 1918. (AWM E02307)
The ruins of the church in Villers-Bretonneux, May 1918. The town was subjected to heavy artillery fire during the German attacks. *AWM E02157*
Villers-Bretonneux, deserted by civilians and extensively damaged, May 1918. Australians troops consolidated in the area after the repulse of the German attacks. (AWM E02154)
The 12th Brigade Headquarters in a railway cutting near Villers-Bretonneux, 3 May 1918. (AWM E04881)
Corporal James Coull, 4th Divisional Signal Company, with dogs of No. 3 Messenger Dog Section, in a railway cutting near Villers-Bretonneux, 3 May 1918. The section comprised sixteen men and fifty dogs. These three, (left to right): Nell, Trick and Bullet, were very efficient messengers and saw service with the 2nd, 4th and 5th Australian divisions and with divisions of the British 8th Corps. (AWM E02318)
An Australian with a German prisoner in front of the church at Heilly in the Ancre valley, 3 May 1918. *(AWM E02218)*
A French transport alongside dugouts occupied by Australian pioneers near the railway embankment between Villers-Bretonneux and Amiens, 4 May 1918. The embankment was used considerably as cover despite the shelling to which it was subjected. (AWM E02203)
The Somme River at Vaire-sur-Somme, 5 May 1918. The Australians are at a ferry spot which they have named after Sydney’s Circular Quay. (AWM E04795)
French and Australian soldiers inspect the wreckage of a Sopwith Camel aeroplane south-west of Bois de L'abbé, near Villers-Bretonneux, 8 May 1918. (AWM E04830)
Australian and French soldiers at an Australian machine-gun post near Cachy, in the Villers-Bretonneux sector, 11 May 1918. (AWM E02326)
Refugees in the ruined streets of Hazebrouck, 14 May 1918. (AWM E02219)
The British commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, conducts an inspection of the 3rd Australian Division at Allonville, not far from Amiens, 17 May 1918. (AWM E02211)
Australian troops in their billet at Querrieu, north-east of Amiens, 17 May 1918. Soldiers were often accommodated in the barns and lofts of local villages. (*AWM E02176*)
Two Australians standing on the Fouilly to Viller-Bretonneux Road watch German shells bursting on the hill which would later be the site for the Australian National Memorial, 21 May 1918. (AWM E02330)
Major General John Monash, Commanding Officer of the 3rd Australian Division, at his headquarters in the Villers-Bretonneux sector, 25 May 1918. On 31 May he was promoted to the command of the Australian Corps and to the rank of Lieutenant General. (AWM E02350)
General Sir William Birdwood presents bravery medals to men of the 4th Australian Division at Querrieu, 26 May 1918.

(AWM E02360)
Following a gas shelling, Australians await attention at the dressing station established at the ‘White Chateau’, one of the few substantial buildings in Villers-Bretonneux to escape serious damage, 27 May 1918. (AWM E04852)
Major General Ewen Sinclair-MacLagan, commander of the 4th Australian Division. A much respected British officer, he served with the AIF throughout the war. *(AWM H12187)*
Corporal Phillip Davey, 10th Battalion, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions at Merris, France, on 28 June 1918. When his platoon came under heavy fire and the commander was killed, survivors were forced to shelter in a ditch under almost point-blank fire from a German machine-gun. Davey single-handedly attacked the enemy gun with grenades, killing the crew and capturing the gun, then used it to repel a counter-attack, despite being seriously wounded. (AWM H19440)
A British Mark V (male) tank at Villers-Bretonneux, 28 June 1918. More advanced than its predecessors, this model tank soon won the confidence of the Australian troops. (AWM E05426)
Officers of No. 3 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, Captain Charles Matheson and Lieutenant Christopher Fenwicke, alongside their RE8 aircraft. The squadron flew reconnaissance for the Australian Corps during 1918. (AWM P01457.001)
Captain George Hammond MC MM, photographed in England probably just before his departure for the Somme, where he was awarded a bar to his MC for heroism at Morlancourt. Hammond had a crippled arm and used a walking stick as a result of earlier wounds. He was shot by a sniper and died on 14 June 1918. His last words to the commanding officer of his 28th Battalion were: ‘Keep the old flag flying, Sir!’ *(AWM P01228.002)*
General Sir Henry Rawlinson was appointed to command the British Fourth Army. The Australian Corps would serve under him until the end of the war. (AWM H08865)
A veteran officer of the 24th Battalion, Captain John Mahony, looks over ground at Ville-sur-Ancre which had been captured by his battalion a month earlier, 14 June 1918. Mahony died of wounds later that year, aged 25. *(AWM E02479)*
Members of the 6th Medium Trench Mortar Battery eat a meal in their makeshift mess room near Villers-Bretonneux, 20 June 1918. (AWM E02557)
Australians admire the wild flowers near Allonville in June 1918. The green fields stretched right up to the front line and were in contrast to the torn and desolate battlefields and stinking trenches of the previous years. (AWM E02642)
Australians and Americans near Villers-Bretonneux, 21 June 1918. The Americans were attached to some units to learn and gain experience. Monash would use some of them in the Battle of Hamel. *(AWM E02695)*
An Australian of the 37th Battalion and a soldier from an adjoining French unit share an ‘international’ post at Villers-Bretonneux, set up to ensure effective liaison between the two forces, 22 June 1918. (AWM E02537)
British, American and Australian troops gather in a wood near Corbie, 3 July 1918. The following day men from the three nations would fight nearby in the Battle of Hamel. (AWM E02697)
Australian officers and an NCO of the 13th Battalion with an American engineer officer (left) in an observation post facing Le Hamel on the day before the attack, 3 July 1918. *(AWM E02696)*
Australian Prime Minister, William ‘Billy’ Hughes addresses men of the 4th Division at Daours the day before the battle at nearby Le Hamel, 3 July 1918. (AWM E02651)
The village of Le Hamel, July 1918. The view looking towards the British-held territory shows the commanding positions held by the Germans before the battle. *(AWM E02844B)*
Dawn at Hamel, 4 July 1918, by George Bell, 1921, oil on canvas, 127.7 x 244 cm. (AWM ART03590)
Australian and American troops dig in on ground captured at Le Hamel, 4 July 1918. (AWM E02690)
Troops from Australia and America rest at a company headquarters shortly after the battle at Le Hamel, 4 July 1918.

(AWM E02693)
Stretcher-bearers at Le Hamel bring in a wounded man pass the wreckage of an RE8, one of the aircraft used during the battle, 4 July 1918. (AWM E04888)
Germans taken prisoner a few hours earlier during the battle of Hamel assemble at an Australian brigade headquarters in a quarry near Corbie, 4 July 1918. (AWM E02698)
Australian and American dead lie where they fell in front of Pear Trench, one of the enemy strong-points captured at Le Hamel, 4 July 1918. (AWM E02620)
A German soldier bayoneted during the fighting at Le Hamel lies dead beside Pear Trench, as German shells fall on the village behind, 5 July 1918. (AWM E02704)
A British tank moves through Le Hamel, lying largely in ruins following its capture the previous day, 5 July 1918.

(AWM E02864)
Stretcher-bearers working across the battlefield at Le Hamel after the battle, 7 July 1918. The fighting in long grass and abandoned crops was in contrast to the muddy fields of Flanders. *(AWM E02691)*
Australian and American troops occupy the positions captured at Le Hamel, July 1918. The village can be seen in the background; the enemy front line on the morning of the battle was on the crest of the hill in the middle distance, but after the attack this trench was 200 metres behind the new front line. (AWM E02844A)
Sister Ruby Everard (left) served in England and France, and was mentioned in despatches. Her brother William was killed in action near Le Hamel on 4 July 1918. *(AWM H17163)*

Private Harry Dalziel (right) fought a heroic action and was seriously wounded at Le Hamel in July 1918; he was awarded the Victoria Cross. In England, wearing ‘hospital blues’, he stands with Sister Elizabeth Mosey, who was awarded the Royal Red Cross, 2nd Class. *(AWM H00047)*
Corporal Thomas Axford (left) was awarded the Victoria Cross for attacking German machine-gun positions holding up part of the attack at Le Hamel. He already held the Military Medal for an earlier act of bravery. (AWM P02939.030)

Sergeant Walter Brown (right), 20th Battalion, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery in action at Villers-Bretonneux on 6 July 1918, during which he single-handedly charged an enemy strong point and took thirteen prisoners. (AWM A02600)
A derelict railway engine near Borre, July 1918. Its inscription reads: ‘Leave Train, 1st Australian Division, No Staff, Men Only, Fast Route. Driver Lloyd George, Fireman Billy Hughes’. (AWM E03010)
Georges Clémenceau, Prime Minister of France, visits the Australians after their success at Le Hamel, 7 July 1918. He is walking with Major General Ewen Sinclair-MacLagan, with Lieutenant General John Monash close behind. (AWM E02527)
French Prime Minister, Georges Clémenceau, visits the Australian 4th Division at Bussy, 7 July 1918. Amongst the group are Brigadier General Thomas Blamey (second from left); General Sir Henry Rawlinson (fifth); Monash (sixth); Clémenceau (eighth); and Sinclair-MacLagan (eleventh). (AWM P03631.212)
Two men of the 7th Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery operate a mortar in a machine-gun post on the new front line at Villers-Bretonneux, 10 July 1918. *(AWM E02677)*
Australians hold a position at Monument Wood south of Villers-Bretonneux, part of further ground taken shortly after the battle of Hamel, 11 July 1918. (AWM E02813)
A German A7V tank, named ‘Mephisto’, abandoned after the battle of Villers-Bretonneux and recovered by Australians on 14 July, being held at Vaux-sur-Somme as a trophy for eventual shipment to Australia, 4 August 1918. (AWM E02877)
Australians at Villers-Bretonneux with local French civilians returning to their shattered village, 1918.

(AWM P01543.001)
A soldier of the 27th Battalion attends the grave of a mate, Private Roland Shawyer, at Franvillers, February 1919. Shawyer died of wounds on 21 May 1918, aged 23.

(AWM J00030, photographer: Glen Roy Barrington)
Memorial tablet in remembrance of Australian soldiers who were killed at Villers-Bretonneux, presented by the mayor of the town on behalf of its inhabitants to members of an AIF graves detachment, representing the Australian people, on 14 July 1919. The mayor’s speech included the words:

_The first inhabitants of Villers-Bretonneux to re-establish themselves in the ruins of what was once a flourishing little town have, by means of donations, shown a desire to thank the valorous Australian armies, who with the spontaneous enthusiasm and characteristic dash of their race, in a few hours chased an enemy ten times their number … soldiers of Australia, whose brothers lie here in French soil, be assured that your memory will always be kept alive, and that the burial places of your dead will always be respected and cared for …’_

_(AWM RELAWM00770)_
Twenty years after the war, King George VI addresses a crowd assembled for the opening of the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, 22 July 1938. On the walls of the memorial are engraved the names of 10,771 Australian soldiers who went ‘missing in action’ on the Western Front in France, and who have no known grave. Listed are men from all sixty battalions of the AIF and the units which supported them, drawn from every city, town and rural district in Australia.

(AWM H17455)
King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, with the President of the French Republic, Albert Lebrun, and the Australian Minister for Health and Commerce, the Rt Hon Sir Earle Page, leave the Australian National Memorial after its official unveiling, 22 July 1938. On the slope in front of them is the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery, in which lie the bodies of 779 Australian soldiers, most of whom lost their lives in 1918 in the battles fought across the plain of the Somme. (AWM H17480)
King George VI and Queen Elizabeth greet veterans as the official party leave the inauguration of the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, 22 July 1938. In his opening address, the President of the French Republic, Albert Lebrun, paid tribute to these men and their comrades, saying:

*I have expressed the opinion that there is no spot on the whole of the tortured soil of France which is more associated with Australian history and the triumph of Australian soldiers than Villers-Bretonneux.*

*(AWM H17437)*