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Chief of Defence Force Designate

Centenary of the Battle of Hamel Oration

Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 6.10pm Wednesday 4th July 2018.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. Good Evening.

I wish to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are meeting this evening, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

My thanks to Chris Jenkins for his very kind the introduction.

The Battalion War diary of the 'Fighting 13th' Battalion, 4th Brigade, 1st AIF, records that at midnight on the night of 3-4 July 1918 it moved onto marking tapes designating the line of departure for an attack south of the River Somme.

The battalion was to be part of the centre-right forward assault element. Their objective was a line just past the Vaire Wood.

The attack became known as the Battle of Hamel.

The 13th was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Marks, DSO, MC, MID; sometimes referred to as 'the Boy Colonel'.

Marks had been promoted to command the Battalion in November 1917.

He was 22 years of age and already a veteran combat leader of Australian infantry from the Gallipoli Campaign, including the landing at ANZAC, and many battles on the Western Front.

In March 1918 he had led the 4th Brigade advance to halt the German breakthrough at Hébuterne; securing the town.

The Brigade Commander subsequently messaged: *'The Corps Commander is afraid to let the defence of Hébuterne out of your hands'*.

The 13th's war diary records what occurred at 'Zero hour', 3.10 am on the 4th:

Barrage opened with a crash. Tanks just passing Battalion

Headquarters. Immediately the barrage came down the battalion moved forward crawling to within 60 yards of the barrage which was well timed and fairly accurate.

The tanks were not heard during the preliminary 8 minutes bombardment, and no suspicion was aroused in the minds of the enemy in our sector.

Then, at 3.14am:

Tanks caught the infantry at the first lift, and enemy's first line of posts was met on a road running north...a small post had been met about 100 yards out from our tapes, but neither this nor the post on the road gave any trouble.

By 3.45 am Marks reported all assault companies were clear of the woods that had been their initial objective and were shaking out under an artillery halt.

At 4.18 am, the War Diary notes 'A' company was on its final objective and in touch with the 15th Battalion on their left.

Final consolidation of the battalion's objective occurred by 6am, with link-up to the 15th Battalion on the left and the 21st Battalion on the right.

The battalion's mission was achieved at a cost of 26 killed, 99 wounded and 1 missing.

Across the battle front other battalions had similar success, notwithstanding fierce fighting in the vicinity of Pear and Vaire Trenches.

By the standard of the day, and that time of the war, the battle was a resounding success.

Much has since been written about the battle – a remarkable amount when we consider the action was a mere 93 minutes in a four-year long war fought by the AIF.

This evening I will reflect upon Hamel and the leadership offered by Lieutenant General Monash. Key to doing so is context – a preoccupation of historians and generals alike.

John Monash was promoted to Lieutenant General and given command of the Australian Corps on 31 May 1918.

He was the second Australian to achieve the distinction of Corps Command during the war, the first being Sir Harry Chauvel of the Palestine Campaign.

Hamel was the first battle conceived and fought under Monash's command of the Corps.

A recent history of the 1st AIF makes this assessment:

There was much in the planning and execution of the attack that was innovative and adaptive, but it was the bringing together of a number of widely sourced ideas and the management of the planning process that has given Hamel, and its chief planner, Monash, such a positive reputation.¹

The battle planned by Monash was a 'limited objective' attack.

The aim was to remove a small salient immediately south of the Somme River – essentially straightening the line. The Germans had been firing from the salient into the Australian flank on the Northern bank.

Monash had conceived the operation months earlier when he was commanding the 3rd Division. As the Corps Commander he now had the chance to plan and execute it.

In one of his first actions as Corps Commander Monash sought approval for the attack from the 4th Army Commander, General Rawlinson. He supported

¹ Lee, Roger (2016). 'The AIF and the Hundred Days', Chapter 10 in: Bou, Jean, editor. (2016), *The AIF in Battle: How the Australian Imperial Force Fought, 1914-1918*. MUP, Melbourne

Monash's idea, although he had reservations, noting the five Divisions of the Australian Corps were 8,255 men below strength.

Rawlinson wrote to Haig, the Commander-in-Chief, on the 25th of June:

After going into General Monash's proposals, I am of opinion (sic) that if the operation is successful, the casualties should not be great, as it is intended to make the operation essentially a surprise tank attack. I consider the advantages gained will be well worth the cost.

Haig concurred with Rawlinson but directed that units of the 'unblooded' American Expeditionary Force participate in the battle.

Douglas Marks recorded in the 13th Battalion's Diary:

A very welcome addition to my strength in the shape of 7 officers and 237 O/Ranks of "A" Company, 132nd Regiment, United States Army, arrived late on the night of the 29th June. After setting aside 1 Officer and 20 O/Ranks to remain with the Nucleus, the four platoons were attached- one to each Coy of the Battalion.

Only last week I was in Washington DC, where we acknowledged '100 years of Mateship' between our nation's armed forces, that began at Hamel.

Hamel refined a model of combined arms operations which was first attempted, with limited success, at Cambrai in November 1917. Hamel was to prove the concept and the technology.

The objectives were achieved by adapting and synchronising the new forms of warfare: gas, tanks, aircraft and massed indirect fire (artillery and machine gun barrages).

Operational security and deception were key elements of the plan.

Troop and artillery movements only happened at night; and all traces of movement were removed before daylight.

For over a week before the battle, the Australians shelled the enemy for eight minutes at the same time each night, using high explosive, smoke and gas to condition them.

On the morning of the battle, gas was omitted - but Germans were captured wearing gas masks, restricting their vision and movement.

North of the Somme, a feint attack at Ville also on 4 July, further confused the enemy.

Hamel was fought by the 4th Australian Division under Major General Ewen Sinclair-Maclagan, one of only 5 British Officers to serve in the AIF for the duration of the war. He had joined the AIF from an instructional position at Duntroon in 1914.

In addition to American elements of the US 33rd Division, the order of battle included elements from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Divisions. This was designed to spread casualties across different formations, and not critically weaken a single division.

Interestingly, only ten Battalions would be used in the assault. Peter Pedersen, in *Monash as Military Commander*, offers a startling comparison:

'ten battalions would assault, each on a frontage which Ludendorff had allotted to a division on 21 March [1918, in Germany's last great Spring Offensive]'.²

Monash's idea was that the artillery, tanks and other technological aids would make up for the comparative absence of soldiers.

² Pedersen, P.A (1985). *Monash as Military Commander*, Melbourne University Press, P. 226.

Hamel was the first battle that used the new Mark V tank. It was faster, more powerful and more reliable than the Mark IV.

At a scintillating 3mph, it offered a 50% increase in speed over the Mark IV's 2 mph!

Another improvement was it only needed one driver, rather than the four required for the Mark IV!

A previous Australian operation with tanks, Bullecourt in April 1917, had been a disaster.

Monash ensured the Australian infantry trained with the new tanks to build familiarity and overcome any lingering distrust of the technology.

Again, the 13th Battalion War Diary records:

On the 28th, 29th and 30th June, parties (in the aggregate 180 Officers and O/Ranks) were taken....to take part in a demonstration exercise with tanks; (Continued...)

while on the 30th June the Officers of the Tank Corps detailed to work with the Battalion visited our lines to become perfectly familiar with the Officers with whom they would be working.

Monash's insistence on training and rehearsals meant Hamel would prove to the Australians that tanks could work well with infantry.

Despite success, the battle wasn't all smooth.

Some artillery fired short, causing friendly casualties.

In the centre of the assault, tanks didn't arrive in time to assist the attack at Pear Trench.

The infantry adapted and overcame enemy machine guns through all they had; fire, movement and raw courage.

The 15th Battalion's Henry Dalziel was awarded the 1,000th Victoria Cross for his valour during the fight for Pear Trench.

When the 15th met strong resistance from heavily armed enemy in the trench, Henry silenced machine gun fire as the second member of a Lewis-gun team.

When fire opened up from another post, he dashed forward with his revolver and killed or captured the crew and gun, allowing the advance to continue.

The tip of his trigger finger was shot away and he was ordered to the rear.

Instead, he continued to serve his Lewis Gun in the final storming of Pear Trench. After again being ordered back to the Aid post, he began taking ammunition up the front line, until he was shot in the head and severely wounded.

There was something in the air at Hamel: a surfeit of valour in a short, intense period.

Adjacent and to the right of Pear Trench, the 16th Battalion assaulted Vaire Trench.

Lance Corporal Thomas (Jack) Axford was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions.

His citation describes the action:

On 4 July 1918 during the attack at Vaire and Hamel Woods, France, when the advance of the adjoining platoon was being delayed in uncut wire and machine-gun fire, and his company commander had become a casualty, Lance-Corporal Axford charged and threw bombs amongst the enemy gun crews. He then jumped into the trench, and charging with his bayonet, killed 10 of the enemy and took six prisoners. He threw the machine-guns over the

parapet and the delayed platoon was able to advance. He then rejoined his own platoon and fought with it during the remainder of the operations.

Recognition of valour wasn't confined to the Australians.

The first US Army Medal Of Honor in World War One was awarded to Corporal Thomas Pope of the US 131st Infantry Regiment, (Illinois National Guard), for his actions during the battle.

Other innovations assisted the attack. Carrier tanks were used to resupply the assaulting troops on their objectives.

Each tank dropped 12 500 rounds of ammunition and defence stores to the troops on the objective.

Pedersen notes '*At least one infantry commander thought that in this achievement, which represented the loads normally carried by 1250 men, lay the outstanding lesson of the battle*'.³

In a similar vein, aircraft of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) were used to conduct aerial resupply of ammunition to the forward troops.

³ Pedersen, *Op Cit*, P. 231.

But in this case: *'Reports on the dropping of 112 000 rounds of ammunition by aircraft were "favourable but not enthusiastic", for many parachutes failed to open'*.⁴

Monash had forecast the battle would take 90 minutes to achieve its objectives, based on lifts of the field artillery, speed of the tanks and the firepower of the infantry.

The objectives were achieved in 93 minutes, whereupon digging-in and reinforcement operations began to repel expected counter attacks.

During the attack the allied force suffered 1400 casualties, took 1600 prisoners and captured 177 machine guns.

Reflecting on the battle eight years after the war, Monash stated:

*'no battle within my previous experience, not even Messines, passed off so smoothly, so exactly to timetable, or was free from any kind of hitch.'*⁵

Monash has rightly received recognition for the success of Hamel – although it is clear Maclagan's cool professionalism in command of the 4th Division was also vitally important.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Monash, Sir John (1926). *Leadership in War*, Speech to the Beefsteak Club, Melbourne, 30 March 1926.

Monash acknowledged *'Maclagan's tact, industry and judgement'* in controlling the mission. He later wrote of Maclagan: *'In appearance and temperament he is every inch a soldier... Although not Australian born he was whole-heartedly Australian...'* High praise indeed!

Monash's plan embraced technical innovation. He grasped that it could have a real effect on restoring mobility to the battlefield, mobility lost for nearly four years in defensive trench warfare.

Although by 1918 standards Hamel was a small operation, the lessons of the battle were circulated to all commanders in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

The gathering of lessons began at the lowest levels.

Appendices in the 13th Battalion's War Diary deal with lessons about Lewis guns, enemy machine guns, artillery barrage, tanks, ammunition, stores and...mules!

While individual aspects of the plan, such as the use of tanks, had been used before, Monash's achievement was to bring them all together at once.

Pedersen highlights this:

*'What is certain is that, once it was suggested, Monash's enthusiasm for the use of tanks far exceeded that of his Army commander and his divisional generals.'*⁶

The Battle of Amiens, one month later, was the immediate legacy of Hamel. On 8 August, three corps' worth of British, Australian and Canadian infantry, supported by a cavalry division, 2,070 guns, 432 tanks and 800 aircraft, launched an attack that by nightfall had punched an 11 kilometre salient in the German Lines.

Hamel, albeit on a far smaller scale, had been the final test bed of many of the techniques used at Amiens, the greatest success in a single day on the Western Front, and the largest single battle the AIF ever fought. German General Erich Ludendorff famously described it as: *'...the black day of the German Army in this war.'*

Hamel as a battle is a great case study, but when you step back and look at in a wider context, a deeper, richer and more interesting story appears.

⁶ Pedersen, *Op Cit*, P. 225.

Despite the extraordinary claims made by some breathless authors, Hamel wasn't really the first of anything. It was the culmination of many things – and the precursor of things to come. It is a battle I intuitively understand because it saw the emergence of a 'modern' way of orchestrated warfare. Gone was the isolated massed wave of the infantry assault, which had been all too familiar in the early years of the war.

A large part of Hamel's significance is its symbolism of the AIF's evolution since Gallipoli.

At Gallipoli, Australian troops were brave, but largely raw and inexperienced. This is reflected in the command uncertainty after the landing. Monash's own papers, held here at the AWM, reflect the confusion and disarray of his 4th Brigade in the early days and weeks after it went ashore on 27 April.

Yet by July 1918 the Australians were able to devise, command and execute a division-sized operation conducted with multinational troops. And a Corps level operation a month later.

Significantly, Hamel employed a combined arms approach at the doctrinal and technological cutting edge, to capture and hold a limited objective, against an experienced lethal enemy.

Monash was alive to this point; he was a part of an actively learning organisation:

Now, we Australian Commanders were in our fifth year of intensive training as war leaders, graduating laboriously from stage to stage; beginning with the command of a battalion of 1,000 men, or in one case of a squadron of 200 men, and ending as Commanders of Divisions of 20,000 men, or of a full Corps d' Armee. Not only had we seen the machine and all the parts of it at work, from below as well as from above, but we had witnessed the gradual expansion and improvement of the machine, from day to day, and had grown with it, in experience and aptitude.⁷

Monash further noted:

By that time [1918], everyone had naturally gained some years' experience in the technology of tactics, of weapons and munitions, and of the many and varied problems of the maintenance of armies in the field.⁸

The change in the AIF from 1914 to 1918 was profound.

⁷ Monash, Sir John (1926). *Leadership in War*, Speech to the Beefsteak Club, Melbourne, 30 March 1926.

⁸ Monash, Sir John (1926). *Leadership in War*, Speech to the Beefsteak Club, Melbourne, 30 March 1926.

The change was broader than just in its commanders.

Notwithstanding the heavy casualties experienced across the infantry divisions of the AIF, a cadre, typified by the likes of Marks and Dalziel, had been almost continuously engaged in modern conflict since Gallipoli.

There was depth of experience and learning evident at all levels of the Australian Corps.

The Corps was the equal of any other formation in the BEF, successfully fighting a sophisticated enemy in the main theatre of the war.

This is a remarkable achievement if we consider the state of the Australian Army in 1913; approximately 20,000 militia troops, thinly spread across the recently federated states of Australia!

Hamel established precedents that have been true for the Australian Army ever since. As Roger Lee notes:

'...the AIF did not fight in isolation and its development as a fighting force owed a great deal to developments with the wider BEF and indeed beyond'.⁹

⁹ Lee, Roger (2016). 'The AIF and the Hundred Days', Chapter 10 in: Bou, Jean, editor. (2016), *The AIF in Battle: How the Australian Imperial Force Fought, 1914-1918*. MUP, Melbourne.

The Australian Corps was fighting, learning and developing, in partnership with coalition forces. This echoes through to today. We see it in our approach to training, development and operations with our allies and regional partners.

The battle was the first time Australians operated closely with our US allies. We have served alongside the US in every major conflict since.

A significant feature of Hamel, innovation and the application of technology, endures in the Army of today. The use of innovation and technology is often key to tactical victory. It is equally essential to helping Australian soldiers survive, win and return home safely.

Our nation values dearly the lives of its volunteer citizen soldiers.

In return for their service they deserve the technology to give them the protection, mobility and lethality to do what we ask of them. This is as true for our comparatively small Army today as it was for the AIF at Hamel.

Monash was a fastidious adherent to training and lifelong professional development.

His efforts in 1916 and early '17 training the 3rd Division in England, and his well-documented and demonstrated personal commitment to education and learning, are well known. The rigorous training and rehearsals he insisted upon prior to Hamel were central to its success. A similar concept of planning, training and rehearsal is still applicable today.

Conclusion

The Australian success at Hamel in 1918 was due to leadership exercised through meticulous planning, attention to detail, professionalism, thorough training and preparation, and a clear focus of the objective.

Every component part of the attacking force knew their role and performed it to the best of their ability.

Hamel is a text book case study of how to plan a deliberate attack.

But I contend that isn't why we remember it today.

Nor is it a nationalistic or jingoistic celebration of an Australian victory – there were other victories in the Great War, and many since then, equally worthy of attention.

So why Hamel?

Hamel is ultimately a great story of our people and their service, as individuals and as an extraordinary team, melded by an extraordinary leader.

Hamel reinforces the truism that an Army is made of its people.

A democratic nation's Army is as good as the support its citizens, its government and its coalition partners. In this respect Australia was, and is, the lucky country.

Monash as Corps Commander was the 'right man at the right time'.

His intellect, drive and, dare I say it, ambition, combined with decades of professional development and four years' wartime command experience, delivered a smart victory.

Yet Monash alone could achieve nothing.

He was reliant upon the other 150,000 Australians in the Australian Corps in order to achieve the goal. This is the story of otherwise 'ordinary'

Australians, people such as Marks, Dalziel and Axford; doing extraordinary things in incredibly trying circumstances.

It is about Australians accepting responsibility: quietly and humbly going about their duty but determined to excel in that duty.

Monash, Marks, Dalziel and Axford personify the AIF's character, its rapid professionalisation and growth in capability, over four years of combat operations.

Sir John Monash continued his distinguished career in the service of the nation after the War.

The statue in front of this place, unveiled and dedicated this morning, is the latest of many deserved acknowledgements of his contribution to Australia.

But what of the other Hamel protagonists I've mentioned this evening?

They too returned home and went on to live lives of service to Australia, albeit in generally quieter circumstances.

Henry Dalziel recovered from his severe head injury in England, returning home to Queensland in January 1919.

Travelling home by train he received a hero's welcome at every station on the way back to Atherton.

He became a farmer, factory worker and a soldier in the Citizen's Military Forces.

Later he developed an interest in song writing. Henry Dalziel died of a stroke in the Repatriation Hospital in Brisbane at the age of 72.

Thomas Axford came home to Australia in December 1918 on furlough and discharged in February 1919.

He recommenced work as a labourer.

In Perth in November 1926 he married Lily Foster, a shop assistant.

They lived at Mount Hawthorn and had five children.

Axford became a clerk.

On 25 June 1941 he was mobilised in the Militia, rising to sergeant, he was discharged on 14 April 1947.

In his leisure time `Jack' regularly attended the races.

He was returning from a reunion of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association when he died, on an aircraft between Dubai and Hong Kong, in October 1983.

Dalziel's and Axford's VCs are on display here at the AWM in the Hall of Valour.

Douglas Marks returned to Australia, leaving the AIF in February 1919.

Accepted into law at the University of Sydney, he deferred for a year in order to study Latin and took a managerial job with a paper bag manufacturer.

A biographer tells us what happened before he commenced his law studies:

In a heavy surf at Palm Beach, on 25 January 1920, Marks, an indifferent swimmer, was drowned in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue a drowning stranger; his body was never recovered. An overflowing congregation, made up mainly of ex-members of his battalion, attended a memorial service at St James' Church, Sydney.

Douglas Marks, DSO, MC, MID (x4) was 24 when he drowned.

Lieutenant Colonel Harry Murray VC, who had served and fought with Marks in the 13th Battalion, said:

'We loved Douglas Marks for his high indomitable spirit, his dash and daring...no truer comrade ever lived'.

Hamel is the story of a battle.

But its real story is that of the soldiers who fought.

Those who were killed or wounded, and

those who came home and continued to serve our nation through their citizenship and by their actions.

Ultimately, Hamel is part of the rich 117-year-old story of the Australian soldier: innovative, determined and professional.

Lest we forget.