

The Battle of Fromelles (19-20 July 1916)

The meeting of the British War Council of 13 January 1915 made 2 decisions that would have profound impacts upon the Australian Imperial Force and families in Australia. The War Council established a sub-Committee, chaired by Lord Kitchener, to consider the employment of a military force in a new theatre of war, which eventually settled on a naval attack on the Dardanelles. The War Council also considered the Western Front campaign strategy for 1915 and regarded the capture of Lille, the fourth largest town in France as a necessary prelude to any significant advance by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

As Aubers Ridge provided direct observation of the railway lines leading from the east and southeast of Lille and on the town itself, the capture of Aubers Ridge was of great strategic importance. Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief asked General Haig to draft schemes for an offensive by the First Army

On 9 May 1915 at Fromelles, the British 8th Division attacked the 6th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Division that had taken over part of the front line in March and to the south of Neuve Chapelle, the 1st Division Commanded by Lt. General Sir Richard Haking attacked the 13th and 14th Divisions. The attack made little progress and ground to a halt the next day with British casualties amounting to 11,600 men. General Haig noted in his diary:

The defences in our front are so carefully (and strongly made), and mutual support with machine guns is so complete, that (in order to demolish them a) long methodical bombardment will be necessary (by heavy artillery [guns and howitzers] before infantry are sent forward to attack)

The Allied war strategy for 1916 was for simultaneous offensives mounted by the Russians on the Eastern Front, the Italians in the Alps and an Anglo-French attack on the Western Front in the Somme Valley. However, a major German offensive at Verdun commenced in February and the French Government pressured the British Government for the attack in the Somme Valley to become largely a British attack to draw German forces away from Verdun.

The Battle of the Somme commenced on 1 July 1916 with the Fourth Army commanded by Sir Henry Rawlinson and the Reserve Army (later renamed the Fifth Army) commanded by Sir Hubert Gough attacking on a front of 15 miles. British casualties were 57,500 casualties on the first day, while German casualties were approximately 8,000, including 2,200 taken prisoner.

The British High Command sought actions to prevent the German Army reinforcing their forces on the Somme. On 5 July prospects of a break-through on the Somme appeared so promising to General Haig, now Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, that he ordered the other armies to prepare attacks to “*turn the retreat on the Somme into a general retreat.*” He ordered:

The First and Second Armies should each select a front on which to attempt to make a break in the enemy's lines, and to widen it subsequently.

General Plumer of the Second Army that held the line from north of Ypres to south of Armentieres, noted that where the Second Army joined the First Army opposite the Sugar Loaf Salient, the Germans held their front more lightly and he proposed a joint operation to General Monro, the commander of the First Army. General Monro on 8 July requested General Haking, now commanding the XI Corps of the First Army, to draw up plans for an

offensive, and to assume that his Corps would be reinforced by a division from the Second Army, together with some of that division's artillery

General Haking's scheme, aiming at the capture of the Fromelles-Aubers Ridge was rejected by General Monro, being of opinion it would be of little assistance if there were an advance on the Somme. By then, however, the situation on the Somme had changed (casualty figures were now known) and Sir Douglas Haig's general staff concluded that the attack on Aubers-Fromelles, undertaken as "an artillery demonstration," would "form a useful diversion and help the southern operations."

On 12 July the newly arrived Australian 5th Division's 31st and 53rd Battalions took charge of part of the line as part of the First Army under the command of General Monro. To their south east was the British 61st Division, the first "Second-Line" Territorial Division to serve on the Western Front, which had taken up its position in early June. Opposing them were the 21st, 16th and 17th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiments (BRIR) of the 6th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Division that opposed the British 8th Division 14 months earlier and had been refining its defences since then.

On 14 July, it was decided that an infantry attack should form part of the demonstration. This coincided with the arrival of the Australian 32nd, 54th and 59th and 60th Battalions and the 5th Division receiving its final 5,000 trench helmets. The bombardment was to begin on 14 July with all the artillery then available, and was to last about three days. General Haking's scheme of attack was approved by General Haig on the condition:

Approved, except that the infantry sh(oul)d not be sent in to attack unless an adequate supply of guns & am(munitio)n for counter battery work is provided – This depends partly on what guns enemy shows. DH

Its object (according to the First Army order issued on 15 July) being:

“to prevent the enemy from moving troops southwards to take part in the main battle. For this purpose the preliminary operations, so far as is possible, will give the impression of an impending offensive operation on a large scale, and the bombardment which commenced on the morning of the 14th inst. will be continued with increasing intensity up till the moment of the assault.

General Haking believed that the rear-most trench of the enemy's front system would probably be found at from 100 to 150 yards beyond the German front line and that the two allotted battalions of each brigade would suffice for an advance so limited.

The initial objective was the capture of a part of the German front line around a bulge or 'salient' known as the 'Sugar Loaf'.

However, the artillery bombardment which commenced on 16 July, had warned the Germans that an attack was likely and, as the Australian and British troops moved into position on 19 July, they were unaware they were visible to German observers on Aubers Ridge. The Germans heavily shelled the assembly area and communications trenches causing hundreds of Australian and British casualties before the attack even started. In the Australian area the ammunition and bomb-dump of the 31st Battalion was blown up and the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Toll, and most of his signallers, messengers, and the medical staff of the battalion were wounded

The 53rd and 54th Bns of the Australian 14th Brigade, having inadequate communication trenches, sent its third and fourth waves over the open fields between the “300 yards” and front lines at 5:25 and 5:31 p.m. At the same time the infantry of the 61st Division began to file out from its front line through sally-ports leading into No-Man’s-Land. It was with this manoeuvre that the infantry operation really began.

The British 61st Division, to the right of the Australians, had the responsibility for silencing the machine guns of the Sugar Loaf. The Germans had survived the British shelling and quickly manned their machine guns. Within 15 minutes they had decimated the attacking waves of British and Australians, forcing the survivors to find shelter. The British attack failed under heavy machine gun fire and no soldiers of the 61st Division reached the German line. This left the right flank of the Australian 15th Brigade’s 59th and 60th Bns and the 14th Brigade’s 53rd and 54th Bns exposed to the machine gun fire from the Sugar Loaf.

The British planned a second attempt to capture the ‘Sugar Loaf’ salient at 9p.m. and asked the Australians for help. This plan was cancelled but the news arrived too late to stop the Australians mounting another attack with equally disastrous results.

On the Australian left, No-man’s land was only 200m wide and the 8th Brigade’s 31st and 32nd Bns and the 14th Brigade’s 53rd and 54th Bns quickly crossed no-man’s land and seized the German front line. The first wave of troops were left to consolidate the position while the second, third and fourth waves pushed on for 140 metres in search of a supposed third and last line of the German trench system. No such line existed and the Australians began forming a thin disjointed series of posts in the intended position.

After the Australians had cleared the German trenches, in accordance with their order, they continued their advance. Unfortunately, this enabled the German troops to re-enter their old trenches from both flanks and after dark, German counter-attacks developed. Throughout the night the pressure on the Australians mounted. As the call for reinforcements continued, reserves were authorised and almost the whole 5th Division was gradually drawn into the operation. The inexperienced Australian troops wanted to help their mates in trouble and military discipline broke down and reserves in ammunition carrying parties stayed in the battle with the consequence that troops ran short of ammunition.

By early morning the Australians were in danger of being cut off. With the enemy attacking the small Australian enclave on three sides, the situation became hopeless and at 5:40am the order was given for a fighting withdrawal. Isolated groups of Australians continued fighting until finally silenced at about 9:20am.

At Fromelles, on the night of 19 July and continuing into the morning, the 5th Division sustained 5,533 casualties including 1,701 killed in battle, 216 died of wounds, 3,416 wounded and 496 taken prisoner. The British lost 1,547 and the Germans about 1,500.

The factors that contributed to the Fromelles failure included:

1. The inter divisional boundary between the Australian 5th Division and British 61st Division allocated responsibility for silencing the Sugarloaf to the 61st Division, making the protection of the Australian flanks contingent upon on the success of another command.
2. Australian troops were new to the location and were not familiar with the terrain or weather.

3. Poor intelligence was reflected in battle objectives of reaching the 3rd German line, which did not exist.
4. Artillery had not been calibrated or used prior to the battle and after “drop shorts” inflicted considerable casualties on their own troops, their range was lengthened, diminishing its effectiveness.
5. There were no orders to guard the Old German Lines and protect the flanks.
6. Australian troops were trying to prove themselves and were too adventurous.
7. The Australian troops wanted to help their mates in trouble and military discipline broke down and reserves stayed in the battle with a consequence that troops ran short of ammunition.

For 3 days after the battle, Australian troops brought in wounded from No-man’s land, despite subdued but harassing enemy fire. This has been immortalised in the “Cobbers” statue depicting Sergeant Simon Fraser responding to a mate’s request “don’t forget me, cobber”.

Meanwhile the Germans re-established their front line and cleared the bodies of their own and Australian soldiers. Their commander, General van Braun, ordered that the bodies of the enemy soldiers be treated as if they were German soldiers, and be buried in communal pits behind their lines near Pheasant Wood. The Germans recorded the details of the Australian soldiers and removed their identity tags and personal effects and in accordance with The Hague convention handed this information to the German Red Cross for transmittal through the International Red Cross to the British Red Cross. This information reached London in late 1916 and the personal effects were with families in Australia by March 1917.

The Germans held their lines until the Armistice in November 1918 after which the Graves Registration Unit located and recovered the remains of Australian soldiers killed in No-Man’s land. Most of these were not able to be identified and of the 410 buried at VC Corner Cemetery, none were able to be identified. VC Corner also recorded the names of 1,299 Australian soldiers killed in the battle with no known grave.

However, the Graves Registration Unit did not find the burial pits near Pheasant Wood and it was almost 90 years later that the research of Lambis Englezos resulted in investigations confirming the locations of the burials. Exhumations recovered the remains of 250 British and Australian soldiers, which in 2010 were reinterred in the Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery with full military honours. 166 of these soldiers have now been identified as Australians and by name, involving analysis of artefacts and DNA matching with descendants. The names of a further 67 Australian soldiers buried in the Cemetery are known .

The Battle of Fromelles is commemorated at the Australian 5th Division Memorial at Polygon Wood in Belgium, The Australian Memorial and Cobbers statue at Fromelles and at the Ploegsteert Memorial to the Missing at Berks Cemetery Extension at Ploegstreet. The Foundation stone of the ANZAC Memorial Building at Hyde Park was laid on 19 July 1932. The Battle of Fromelles remains the greatest loss of life on any day in Australian history.

Lest we Forget

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