

## THE AMIENS OFFENSIVE

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The Entente launched the Amiens offensive on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 1918. This paper examines the actions of the Australian Corps' artillery over the following six weeks as the Corps broke the German lines at Villers Bretonneux and then advanced for about 60 kilometres to the Hindenburg Line at Bellenglise.

By way of background, in 1918 the early strategic initiative lay with Germany, which between March and June launched four offensives without achieving decisive success, although the first, discomfitingly, ended within heavy-artillery range of the important Entente rail junction of Amiens. The Battle of Hamel in this area in early July was a sign the tide was turning, but it was only when the final German offensive on the Marne failed a few weeks later that Entente leaders felt confident enough to take the initiative.

They chose first to free up Amiens. Here opposite the British 4<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> French Armies, the German defences were temporary, improvised, lacking in depth, and manned by depleted divisions. The front passed through Morlancourt, Villers Bretonneux and Montdidier, and behind it the countryside was little touched by war until a line of 1915 trenches running from Mericourt to Harbonnières and Le Quesnel, and, further east, substantial, overgrown trench lines from 1916 stretching from Peronne to Roye. The Somme River was a significant obstacle, especially where it ran north-south, across the line of advance around Mont St Quentin and Peronne.

German forces were supplied through the rail junctions at Peronne, Chaulnes and Roye, and the Entente Armies were directed to strike in the direction of the latter. The 4<sup>th</sup> Army, issued orders on 31 July for an attack on 8 August, with the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps advancing north of the Somme, the Australian Corps in the centre between the Somme and the Villers Bretonneux to Roye railway, and the Canadian Corps on the right between the railway and the Villers Bretonneux to Roye road. The 1<sup>st</sup> French Army would advance on the Canadian right.

The objective was the 1915 trench line, known as the Blue Line, about twelve kilometres away. Combined infantry-tank assaults would first seize an intermediate objective designated as the Green Line, encompassing the German forward defences and gun line. Shortly afterwards, another infantry-tank assault would set out for a depth objective, the Red Line, from which exploitation to the Blue line was to commence immediately.

The Australian Corps decided to use the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Divisions to take the Green Line, and then pass the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions through to take the Red and Blue Lines. It was allocated eighteen brigades of field artillery (432 weapons) and ten brigades plus five batteries of heavy guns (243 weapons), predominately 6-inch howitzers and 60-pounders. They were backed up by sound ranging, survey, calibration and air

observation resources. This capability was vastly superior to the Germans, who only had some 192 field guns and 116 heavies on the Australian/Canadian front.

4<sup>th</sup> Army set the key artillery parameters: surprise was paramount, forces were to deploy secretly, there would be no preliminary bombardment, the seizure of the Green Line would be assisted by a predicted creeping field-artillery barrage, and at the Green Line a protective barrage would be laid down while the forces for the next phase moved forward.

In the Australian Corps the creeping barrage advanced initially at a rate of 100 yards every two minutes, slowed later to 100 yards every three minutes, and then slowed again to 100 yards in four minutes as it crossed the enemy gun positions. The field guns opened with a little smoke, but thereafter used HE with delay fuses or shrapnel to allow the infantry to follow closely, keep the enemy under cover, and create dust and haze to obscure his observation. The field howitzers fired some 200 yards in advance. The creeping barrage was supplemented by a counter-battery plan fired by two-thirds of the heavy artillery, and a heavy-artillery bombardment plan engaging depth targets, lifting eastwards in accordance with a time schedule.

Deploying the artillery covertly - calibrated, surveyed and stocked with ammunition - was a prodigious challenge, as was the firing of the initial barrages and bombardments. But these drew on well-practised techniques. The novel aspect of the attack lay in supporting the advances to the Red and Blue Lines.

The heavy artillery continued its timed bombardment in depth, but for the field artillery there was no barrage. Once the Green Line was reached, six field artillery brigades moved forward and - three brigades to each attacking division, one to each forward infantry brigade with gun sections to accompany the forward wave - provided for the advancing troops ad hoc fire support controlled from observation posts, liaison officers or mobile forward observers. A 60-pounder battery was placed under the CRA of each attacking division.

Then, once the advance to the Red Line was under way, a further six field artillery brigades moved forward, so that for the consolidation on the Red and Blue Lines, each of the two forward divisions was supported by six artillery brigades. By this time too, some of the heavy artillery had deployed immediately behind the Green line.

On the day, the creeping barrage in conjunction with a thick ground mist facilitated the rupture of the weak German front, and in the absence of depth positions, open-warfare-style artillery support assisted both the Australian and Canadian Corps to reach the Blue Line. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps was less successful.

4<sup>th</sup> Army sought to maintain momentum on 9 August by directing the Canadian and Cavalry Corps to continue the advance towards Chaulnes and Roye, and the Australian Corps to protect the Canadian left flank by capturing Lihons and swinging the line forward in sympathy a little further north.

Planning was decentralised, and the attacks suffered from a lack of coordination. The two Australian divisions principally involved, supported by a few tanks and initially by observed artillery fire, advanced against stiffening opposition. The gunner assistance proved inadequate, especially in protecting the tanks, and it took two more days for the divisions to take their objectives, both using creeping barrages in their endeavours. At the same time the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division advanced the line on the left around Mericourt using creeping and flanking barrages in combination.

4<sup>th</sup> Army planned further advances, but as its troops were tiring, Haig decided to hold in the Amiens sector and attack further north with the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Army. The Battle of Amiens, as it would become known, was over. The Australian front was divided into divisional sectors, each containing a number of field artillery brigades commanded by the divisional CRA, split into groups, with group commanders liaising with a forward infantry brigade commander. Each division also had an affiliated heavy artillery brigade.

The Corps' next major actions took place between 22 and 25 August. As flank support for 3<sup>rd</sup> Army operations they involved the capture of Bray, and the advancement of the line south of the Somme to the high ground from Foissy Beacon through Chuignes to Herleville. North of the river, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division secured Bray in three operations, all supported by divisional creeping barrages with bombardment and CB programs in depth. South of the river, covered by a Corps creeping barrage with smoke both in the barrage and on the flanks and heavy artillery and CB engagements in depth, the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian and 32<sup>nd</sup> British Divisions with tank support captured Chuignes and Herleville, following which the 1<sup>st</sup> Division successfully exploited to Foissy Beacon.

Under pressure now on a very wide front, the Germans began to withdraw, in the Australian Corps area towards Mont St Quentin and Peronne. A second period of mobile warfare followed, with divisions patrolling forward with field artillery brigades in support of battalions, and 18-pounder sections providing intimate fire support for infantry companies.

North of the Somme, to take positions around Suzanne and Curlu, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division used creeping barrages and associated bombardments, occasionally supplementing these with flanking barrages or a 'jumping barrage', one that lifted inside the creeping barrage from one defensive location to the next.

The heavy artillery continued to push forward its 6-inchers and 60-pounders, leaving its less-mobile 8-inchers and above, behind. Detachments from the latter were sometimes used to man captured German artillery, adding to the support available in the forward area. Each division had an affiliated heavy brigade and an allotted 60-pounder battery. Assisted by air observation, the remainder of the heavy artillery provided harassing, interdiction and CB fire.

The Corps' advanced quite rapidly, but it became clear that the Somme crossings around Peronne would not be captured quickly and in working order. Monash decided to slip the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division sideways over the Somme near Clery, and to have its 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade attack Mont St Quentin, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division advanced on its flank towards Bouchavesnes.

These were divisional quick attacks, with orders issued late on the night of 30 August with a Zero Hour early the next morning. Despite the short timeframe the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was able to implement a creeping barrage. 2<sup>nd</sup> Division opted for a lifting barrage, with the times for each lift determined by a prospective infantry rate of advance. Eight heavy batteries and one heavy section engaged targets within the lifting barrage, in depth, or on the flanks.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division secured its objectives, but the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade was forced back from the crest of Mont St Quentin. Monash ordered further attacks for 1 September. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division would continue to advance on the left while the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division captured the hill, and the 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division advanced on its right to Peronne.

Once again, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division used a creeping barrage but the other two divisions, because of the limited planning time, adopted concentrations of field and heavy artillery on particular targets for specific times in accordance with a rate of advance advised by the infantry.

At Mont St Quentin this support provided little assistance. An advance was only possible after the top of the hill was bombarded again around midday. On the 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade axis towards Peronne, the infantry were not able to maintain the expected rate of advance, and soon lost the fire support. Even so, at the end of the day Monash's forces held much of Mont St Quentin and Peronne.

The two localities were completely secured on 2 September. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division area, fire was applied in lanes with standing barrages at various points. Gun sections travelling with the infantry provided close support. In the 5<sup>th</sup> Division area, fire was applied once more in concentrations.

After these actions the Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg line. Its breaching is outside the scope of this paper, but it required deliberate attacks, and for these artillery planning was centralised at Corps and higher, and based around creeping barrages.

In summary, during the August offensive, the Australian Corps experienced a mixture of set-piece battle and mobile warfare. At set pieces, artillery command and control was centralised as far as practical, and techniques generally involved creeping barrages with no preliminary bombardment. The increasing use of smoke in such fire plans was an indication their purpose was expanding to include not only the protection of the infantry but also the protection of tanks, when present, primarily from enemy artillery.

In mobile warfare the movement aspects of command were decentralised to artillery brigade commanders, as was control of fire. This provided the support required by infantry brigades and battalions without burdening them with the demands of redeployment and resupply. Artillery commanders adapted readily enough to mobile operations, but dependence on wire and visual signalling for communications inhibited their ability to provide responsive support when the front was fluid. To compensate, some guns were detailed to accompany the infantry, where they did good service despite their vulnerability to small arms, mortar and enemy gunfire.