

Crisis and Response: Australian Artillery at Second Villers-Bretonneux

24/25 April 1918

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The Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux was fought between 24 and 27 April 1918, commencing with the German capture of the town of Villers-Bretonneux on the morning of 24 April and effectively concluding when the line was completely restored on 27 April. In Australia, the battle is best known for the action of the 13th and 15th Australian Infantry Brigades, which encircled the town on the night of 24/25 April as the major phase of the counter-attack. While the infantry largely drove this operation, that battle provides the opportunity to examine how well artillery reacted and responded to crisis at this stage of the war. As such, this paper will cover the tactical actions of the 5th Australian Divisional Artillery during the battle, to give an sense of what the artillery knew, when they knew it, how they reacted and how they fit into the actions of 24 and early 25 April 1918.

To begin with, it is helpful to sketch out a picture of the 5th Australian Division, the composition of its artillery, and some of the personalities involved. The 5th Australian Division was commanded by Major-General Joseph John Talbot Hobbs, and had been since December 1916. Talbot Hobbs was a gunner, having commanded the 1st Australian Division's artillery for the first years of the war.¹ His Commander Royal Artillery was Brigadier-General Alfred Joseph Bessell-Browne, an experienced artillery officer who had not only been serving in the AIF since the start of the war but who had deployed to South Africa as well (although not in the artillery).² At the time of the battle, Bessell-Browne had

¹ A.J. Hill, 'Hobbs, Sir Joseph John Talbot (1864-1938)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, ANU, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hobbs-sir-joseph-john-talbot-6690/text11539>, published first in hardcopy 1983, accessed 3 March 2018

² Merrilyn Lincoln, 'Bessell-Browne, Alfred Joseph (1877-1947)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, ANU, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bessell-browne-alfred-joseph-5223/text8789>, published first in hardcopy 1979, accessed 3 March 2018

under his command two of his own brigades, the 13th and 14th Australian Field Artillery brigades, the 5th Australian Division Artillery Column, and two additional brigades of the Royal Field Artillery, the 150th and the 298th.³

On 21 March the 5th Australian Divisional and its artillery was in Belgium, holding the front line just north of Armentières. Two days later the division was given a verbal warning order that they would be moving south. By 26 March the division (excluding artillery) had been relieved and it began moving south. The division's artillery remained in place for a few days until it too was relieved. The division was allocated to the Third Army reserve, to be placed in the line where necessary. Elements of the division were inserted into the line from the River Somme to Villers-Bretonneux in early April, and were responsible for the defence of this sector.⁴

On 21 April the division shifted north to allow the British 8th Division to assume responsibility for defending the French town of Villers-Bretonneux. Adjusting to this slight relocation, the 5th Australian Division gunners registered and calibrated their guns, sorting out their SOS positions and the counter-battery lines of communication. On 23 April another artillery brigade was added to the division's order of battle. The 16th (Army) Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery, was to be a mobile reserve. It had formerly belonged to the 1st Indian Cavalry Division and, after the dissolution of its renamed successor, the 4th Cavalry Division, it was one of several unattached horse artillery brigade that could be allotted to divisions where necessary.⁵

By this time and throughout the division, it was suspected that there would be a local operation by the German Army against Villers-Bretonneux. Captured German soldiers were saying as much, and troop movements could be observed

³ Disposition Return No. 70, 22 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 2

⁴ A.D. Ellis, *The Story of the Fifth Australian Division: Being an Authoritative Account of the Division's Doings in Egypt, France and Belgium* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920), pp. 287-90

⁵ Fifth Australian Divisional Artillery Order No. 9, 23 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 2

in the area. On 23 April the division's frontage was bombarded in depth with HE and gas by German artillery. The 5th Australian Divisional Artillery Headquarters' diarist noted that an attack on Villers-Bretonneux was expected during the early morning of 24 April 1918.⁶

Sure enough, at 3:45 am the following day, German artillery laid down a heavy barrage along the British and Australian front from the Somme southwards. This barrage included significant counter-battery efforts by the German gunners, but the 5th Australian Divisional Artillery batteries had taken steps to mitigate the risk of sustaining heavy casualties to such action. Bessell-Browne had instructed them that the choice of positions for the batteries was of 'utmost importance', they were not to be 'clumped together' and should be sited in depth.⁷ Seemingly undaunted, the field artillery weathered the storm, with shelling dying down by 6:00 am. As part of the response, the corps level 9th and 65th Brigades, Royal Garrison Artillery, were carry on counter-preparation barrages in the 5th Australian Division's sector.

While the gunners could tell that no infantry attack was directed at their front, by 7:30 am the artillery was beginning to receive reports that the 8th Division to their south had been pushed out of Villers-Bretonneux and that the German assault had included tanks. They were correct on both counts. The penetration of German infantry and armour to the south was exposing the right flank of the 14th Australian Infantry Brigade, and by 8:30 am calls started to come in for field artillery barrages on the SOS lines to the division's south.⁸

Sensing the danger, at 8:50 am Bessell-Browne informed Talbot Hobbs that he had ordered the 16th (Army) Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery, to 'cross the river

⁶ War diary, 23 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918, AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 1

⁷ Fifth Australian Divisional Artillery Instruction No. 4, 23 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 2

⁸ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

and get into action'.⁹ He told their commander to get into contact with Brigadier-General Harold 'Pompey' Elliott, commanding the division's reserve brigade. The divisional artillery was told that German infantry was advancing from Villers-Bretonneux north to Fouilloy. At one point the artillery south of Fouilloy became anxious, when they heard a rumour that suggested that the Germans had gained the line of the railway north-west of Villers-Bretonneux (placing them under direct observation), but this proved to be untrue.¹⁰ By 9:30 am Talbot Hobbs had personally informed Bessell-Browne that the 14th Australian Infantry Brigade were trying to form a defensive flank to their south that would, among other things, protect the 298th (Army) Brigade, Royal Field Artillery.¹¹ Its batteries were later described as being in a 'precarious situation' throughout the morning.¹²

Through the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon the artillery sought information about the situation.¹³ At 11:27 am Major Hulton, the divisional artillery's brigade-major, reported that the position of the 8th Division, that street fighting was proceeding in Villers-Bretonneux and that a counter-attack was being organised.¹⁴

At 3.22 pm, Bessell-Browne was effectively told that Villers-Bretonneux was lost, having been given the direction by the 8th Division that all heavy and field artillery could be turned on the town. However, a minute later he was informed by the divisional headquarters that Elliott's 15th Australian Infantry Brigade would be making a counter-attack and that the 16th (Army) Brigade, Royal

⁹ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

¹⁰ 24 April 1918, 14th Australian Infantry Brigade war diary, April 1918, AWM4, 23/14/25

¹¹ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

¹² War diary, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918, AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 1

¹³ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

¹⁴ Signal, H. Hulton to 13th AFA Brigade, 14th AFA Brigade, 150th Army Brigade, RFA, 1127 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

Horse Artillery, which was now under Elliott's command, would assist. This message was passed on to the four field artillery brigades.¹⁵

Although the 5th Australian Divisional Artillery was not given any specific direction as to what part they would play in the counter-attack, they expected to be providing a barrage to the east of Villers-Bretonneux to cut the line of retreat of the German infantry now occupying the town. At 7:00 pm the corps artillery commander directed Bessell-Browne to cover the old front line 600 yards in front, down to the Warfusse-Abancourt-Villers-Bretonneux road.¹⁶ At 7:40 pm the 5th Australian Divisional headquarters directed Bessell-Browne: 'From dusk until midnight artillery will fire bursts of fire 600 yards East of old line.'¹⁷ This was passed on to his four field artillery brigades, with zero hour set as 10:00 pm. It is important to note here that the divisional artillery was not being instructed to provide a preparatory bombardment or creeping barrage in support of the infantry, both due to the lack of time and the desire to retain surprise.

The final instruction Bessell-Browne gave to his gunners was that they stiffen their SOS barrage with their howitzers. This was issued to the three southernmost brigades approximately half an hour before zero.¹⁸ Ten minutes after zero, Bessell-Browne personally called the CO of the 298th (Army) Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, (which had been in the most immediate danger of all his artillery during the day and which had been best placed to put fire into the German assault) and thanked him for the excellent work of his batteries. He replied that the task was a light one when he had such excellent infantry to cover.¹⁹

¹⁵ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

¹⁶ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

¹⁷ Signal G207, 5th Aust Div to 15th AIBde rptd All Units, 1940 24 April 1918, 15th Australian Infantry Brigade war diary, April 1918, AWM4, 23/15/26 PART 2

¹⁸ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

¹⁹ Summary of Telephone Operations, 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

As directed, the artillery put down a barrage on the SOS line until midnight, but at 12:22 am the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade requested that their artillery fire be maintained. This was passed on to the divisional artillery through the GSOI, but it appears only the 298th (Army) Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, and the 9th Brigade, Royal Garrison Artillery, (those brigades firing on the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade's protective flank) were ordered to do so.²⁰ The artillery remained on the SOS lines and periodically searched back 600 yards. By 1:14 am Bessell-Browne sent a message through to Elliott and the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade, asking whether they still needed the artillery on the SOS line, because 'Ammunition supply is not inexhaustible'. It was not until just after 4:00 am that the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade informed divisional headquarters that they were holding the old British front line and that their artillery fire could 'slacken', which it did, probably much to relief of exhausted gunners.²¹

These gunners had been a small part of the wider action, in which two Australian infantry brigades had encircled the town during the night. While it was not executed perfectly, the counter-attack had nevertheless been able to effectively regain much of the ground that had been lost that day. It took the further efforts of the 58th Division and the French Moroccan Division on 26 April to complete the work of restoring the line.

During the day of 25 April the 5th Australian Division's artillery fired protective barrages in front of the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade at their furthest line of advance. As early as 3:40 am that morning the 5th Australian Divisional Artillery's brigade major had been warned about the probability of German counter-attacks during the next day, possibly starting at dawn.²² No attack came immediately, but at 2:00 pm there was a push by German infantry towards the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade. Their approach was observed and a half hour

²⁰ Summary of Telephone Operations, 25 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

²¹ General Staff Operations Diary, 25 April 1918, General Staff, Headquarters 5th Australian Division war diary, April 1918, AWM4, 1/50/26 PART 12

²² Summary of Telephone Operations, 25 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

barrage by the 13th Australian Field Artillery Brigade, the 65th Brigade, Royal Garrison Artillery, and the guns of the 20th Divisional Artillery Group scattered the attack.²³ This happened again with massing German troops at 3:15 pm, with the same reaction and the same result.²⁴ Of these actions, the 5th Australian Division's historian wrote: 'A splendid artillery barrage completely broke the attack ... Thanks to the excellence of the artillery work, the tried infantry was not called upon to sustain the burden of further hand-to-hand fighting'.²⁵

This was the work of the Australian artillery at Second Villers-Bretonneux. The British artillery in the 8th Division's sector provided the most direct support to the Australian infantry, putting down a standing barrage on Villers-Bretonneux at zero hour, which lifted at 11:00 pm to a line to the east of the town. The main achievement of the 5th Australian Divisional Artillery was to maintain continuous fire throughout the day of 24 April (under the threat of counter-battery fire themselves) and react to changing situation, and on 25 April, in protection of the captured Australian line. The division's field artillery answered SOS requests and the heavy artillery was often called down on suspected reports of German infantry massing, particularly in the mid-afternoon on 24 April as the threat of German infantry driving north from Villers-Bretonneux into the exposed southern flank of the 5th Australian Division developed.²⁶

It is worth commenting on the quality of the gunners and their support units to maintain the guns during the crisis and continuing to fire large numbers of shells, despite taking casualties. Between noon 23 April and noon 25 April the 5th Australian Divisional Artillery had expended 19,987 18-pounder shells, 4,908 4.5" howitzer shells and 651 4.5" gas rounds.²⁷ In acknowledging the work that his gunners had done, Bessell-Browne also praised the work of the Divisional

²³ Summary of Telephone Operations, 25 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

²⁴ Summary of Telephone Operations, 25 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

²⁵ Ellis, *The Story of the Fifth Australian Division*, p. 300

²⁶ General Staff Operations Diary, 24 April 1918, General Staff, Headquarters 5th Australian Division war diary, April 1918, AWM4, 1/50/26 PART 12

²⁷ Casualties and Ammunition Expended, 23-25 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3

Ammunition Column, which had kept his batteries well supplied, despite the intensive counter-battery fire being put down by the German artillery. This also applied to the brigades' own battery wagons.²⁸ Over that 48 hour period the divisional artillery sustained fifteen other ranks killed in action, one officer and 98 other ranks wounded, one officer and 21 other ranks gassed; six other ranks were wounded but remained on duty.²⁹

The artillery's role at Villers-Bretonneux may not have been as spectacular as other engagements, but its work during the battle demonstrated how responsive and powerful it could be if called upon. With the emphasis on set-piece operations, particularly in 1917, it is easy to forget that artillery in this era could be responsive and fire relatively complex barrages without the lengthy planning processes of large engagements. This example of how artillery was used in support of dynamic manoeuvre operations is something that should still resonate today, as many of the challenges faced by Bessell-Browne's gunners, would not be unknown to Australian artillery in the twentieth-first century.

²⁸ 24 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 1

²⁹ Casualties and Ammunition Expended, 23-25 April 1918, Headquarters, 5th Australian Divisional Artillery war diary, April 1918 AWM4, 13/14/27 PART 3