

HAMEL

VILLERS BRETONNEUX

The battle of Hamel, on 4 July 1918, was largely an Australian-planned battle which achieved a stunning victory over the Germans at the cost of minimal casualties. Hamel has been called a turning point of the First World War on the Western Front and the first "modern" battle; certainly it marks the culmination of a learning process involving the coordinated use of multiple arms: tanks, artillery, infantry, and aircraft. It provided a model for the full-scale offensives of August and September which overwhelmed the formerly impregnable German front-line defences and ultimately led to the allied victory of November 1918.

In the early morning of 4 July, three Australian infantry brigades (the 4th, 6th and 11th) attacked the village of Le Hamel near Amiens. The date, American Independence Day, was chosen specifically to mark the first time Americans joined Australians in battle. Together with attached platoons of American troops and a British tank brigade of 60 tanks, and supported by artillery fire from over 600 guns, the Australians captured the village. The attack was a limited action, aimed at merely straightening a section of the front line in preparation for future operations. But its true value was found in the cutting-edge combination of newly evolved techniques of silently registering artillery and the coordinated deployment of massed tanks, aircraft and infantry within a protective artillery barrage.



The commander of the Australian Corps, Lieutenant General Sir John Monash, planned the assault meticulously, estimating it would take 90 minutes to capture the key objectives. In fact the victory took just 93 minutes and resulted in over 2,000 German casualties (including 1,600 taken prisoner) at the cost of some 1,400 allied casualties, making this one of the rare occasions in the First World War when an attack proved cheaper than defence.

After the March 1918 offensive was launched, German forces continued to push on to Villers-Bretonneux. Instructed to halt this advance, and to replace the badly divided and depleted British forces, Australian troops were commanded to take position and to protect the vital areas of Dernancourt and Villers-Bretonneux from German capture.



German forces using infantry and tanks captured Villers-Bretonneux (near Amiens) from exhausted British defenders on 24 April 1918. The town's defence had been given over to British troops while the Australian divisions regrouped. The enemy attack was spearheaded by tanks, which pushed through the British defences. This battle was unique in that it was the first involving tank-against-tank fighting, demonstrating the significance that tanks had increasingly come to assume in 1918. Orders for the immediate recapture of Villers-Bretonneux were met with a plan to launch an attack by two brigades, the 13th and the 15th. The unconventional night attack began on the 24th. One brigade approached from the north and one from the south, meeting at the village's eastern edge, thereby surrounding the Germans and driving them from Villers-Bretonneux and the adjacent woods.

The Australian 13th and 15th Brigades in a model of a well planned and co-ordinated night attack successfully recaptured the town.

PHOTOS BY GORDON TRAILL



THE SOILS OF THE SOMME COLLECTION



The history of Australian participation in the Great War is well documented and during the Centenary commemorations Australia has remembered the events 100 years ago that permeated every part of Australian life from 1915-1918 and beyond. From a population of less than 5,000,000, more than 300,000 Australians sailed across the world to join this 'war to end all wars'. What was initially considered a great adventure was to leave a legacy that would still be remembered 100 years later. Over 50,000 men from towns all over Australia would die, more than 150,000 would be wounded in some form and tens of thousands more would experience the mental torment of war when they returned.

The Western Front was a series of trenches that ran over 700 kilometres from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. Both sides had dug trenches, sometimes only metres apart, as their only protection from the murderous machine gun fire that would claim the lives of thousands of men. They were also never safe from the explosive artillery shells that rained down on the front line every few seconds for days at a time.

It was not long before they were involved in battles that would go down in history for the immense loss of life. Fromelles and Pozieres in 1916 were

to be the baptism of fire. Bullecourt in 1917 was another disaster, while battles at Hamel and Villers-Bretonneux would stand as testimony to the strength, courage and determination of the Australian troops. They would be long remembered and never forgotten for their courage during the Great War.

This unique commemorative collection of Somme soil is taken from significant battlefields and villages where Australian soldiers fought during the Great War. A Part of France was initially created as a final year project by three University students headed up by Alexandre Prilaux from Amiens in Picardy France. The aim was to create a way to remember the battlefields during the commemorative years and a lasting legacy for the future. ICG (Australia) has partnered with the French Team to bring this collection to Australia and individualize five significant Australian battlefields in a commemorative keyring to use or display. The five soils are also available in a beautifully presented gift box. A certificate of authenticity is included along with GPS coordinates to identify where the soil was collected.

We hope that it is a fitting way to be able to remember the Great war and the sacrifices made long after the commemorations have finished.

PHOTO SOURCED FROM AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

FROMMELLES POZIERES

FROMMELLES

Fromelles was the first major battle fought by Australian troops on the Western Front. Directed against a strong German position known as the Sugar Loaf salient, the attack was intended primarily as a feint to draw German troops away from the Somme offensive then being pursued further to the south.

A seven-hour preparatory bombardment deprived the attack of any hope of surprise, and ultimately proved ineffective in subduing the well-entrenched defenders. When the troops of the 5th Australian and 61st British Divisions attacked at 6 pm on 19 July 1916, they suffered heavily at the hands of German machine-gunners. Small parts of the German trenches were captured by the 8th and 14th Australian Brigades, but, devoid of flanking support and subjected to fierce counter-attacks, they were forced to withdraw.

By 8am on 20 July 1916, the battle was over. The 5th Australian Division suffered 5,533 casualties, rendering it incapable of offensive action for many months; the 61st British Division suffered 1,547. The German casualties were little more than 1,000. The attack was a complete failure as the Germans realised within a few hours it was merely a feint. It therefore had no impact whatsoever upon the progress of the Somme offensive.



POZIERES

Pozieres, a small village in the Somme valley in France, was the scene of bitter and costly fighting for the 1st, 2nd and 4th Australian Divisions in mid 1916. The village was captured initially by the 1st Division on 23 July 1916.



The division clung to its gains despite almost continuous artillery fire and repeated German counter-attacks but suffered heavily. By the time it was relieved on 27 July it had suffered 5,285 casualties. The 2nd Division took over from the 1st and mounted two further attacks - the first, on 29 July, was a costly failure; the second, on 2 August, resulted in the seizure of further German positions beyond the village.

Again, the Australians suffered heavily from retaliatory bombardments. They were relieved on 6 August, having suffered 6,848 casualties. The 4th Division was next into the line at Pozieres. It too endured a massive artillery bombardment, and defeated a German counter-attack on 7 August; this was the last attempt by the Germans to retake Pozieres.

PHOTOS BY GORDON TRAILL

BULLECOURT

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Four experienced Australian divisions of I ANZAC Corps were part of the British 5th Army under Sir Hubert Gough. The general wanted to attack at Bullecourt to support an important offensive by the adjoining British 3rd Army to the north and the French Army further to the south. Relatively young, Gough was an energetic commander. However his aggressive spirit coupled with poor planning resulted in heavy losses. His attack launched at Bullecourt on 11 April 1917 was a disaster. Despite this a further attack across the same ground was ordered for 3 May. The Australians broke into and took part of the Hindenburg Line but no important strategic advantage was ever gained; in the two battles the AIF lost 10,000 men.

First Bullecourt (April) General Gough planned to use the 4th Australian Division and the 62nd British Division to attack the Hindenburg Line near the village of Bullecourt. Rather than wait until he had sufficient artillery resources he decided to employ a dozen tanks to lead the troops through the enemy's barbed-wire. An attack set for 10 April was suddenly abandoned when the tanks did not arrive. It went ahead the next morning with disastrous results. Exposed to murderous machine-gun and artillery fire the Australians were forced back to their own lines while tanks stood burning on the battlefield. The Australians had 3,000 men killed or wounded; many survivors remained bitter about such a futile waste.



Second Bullecourt (May) Despite the failure of the first attack on 11 April 1917, a few weeks later General Gough once again tried to break the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt. On 3 May 1917 the 2nd Australian Division attacked with the British alongside. Although the brigade on the right faltered under deadly machine-gun fire, the 6th Brigade got into the enemy's trenches and, despite heavy shellfire and counter attacks, bravely held on. The 1st Division relieved the 2nd, and soon the 5th Division took its turn. Finally, after more than a week, the Germans gave up these blood-soaked fields. Then the depleted Australian battalions were withdrawn to recover. The furious fighting, which in the end only advanced the line a kilometre or so, had been at the heavy cost of another 7,000 Australian casualties.

PHOTOS BY GORDON TRAILL