

The “finest single feat of the war”?: The battle of Mont St Quentin

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The battle of Mont St Quentin, one of the final engagements of the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF), was a quick and nasty fight. In contrast to the gruelling, protracted campaigns which characterised the Western Front through 1916 and 1917, it was a relatively short battle. Between 31 August and 2 September 1918 the Australian Corps fought to control a strategic height on the northern bank of the Somme. Despite its brevity, the battle was understood by the men who fought it to be a remarkable accomplishment for the AIF.

Lieutenant Colonel Brazenor of the 23rd Battalion reported the engagement to be “one of the best the Brigade has participated in,” a mission “carried out under almost unsurmountable difficulties”.¹ Brigadier General Wisdom of the 7th Brigade recounted that “this fight is one of the most brilliant achievements of the brigade”.² Commander of the Australian Corps Lieutenant General Monash noted that he was sure that the battle would “live to become a classic in military literature”.³ This brilliant success was not confined to the private communication chains of the AIF for long. Following a slew of newspaper reports chronicling a “brilliant exploit” in which the “terrier-like” Australians conducted “glorious work” and performed “prodigies”, soon memorialists, artists, historians, and politicians were visiting the site.⁴ Needless to say, this small battle had gained a big reputation.

The capture of Mont St Quentin was an astonishing achievement for the men who fought it and a substantial victory for the Allies. It had understrength battalions, bold and courageous deeds, and a well-defended objective of strategic importance. The battle, according to the literature and witnesses, was the “finest single feat of the war”.⁵ Beneath the veneer of this remarkable legacy, however, is a more complex truth. This paper will examine

¹ Australian War Memorial (AWM): AWM4 23/40/36: Report on operations carried out by 23rd Battalion AIF on 1st September, 3 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 23rd Infantry Battalion.

² AWM: AWM4 23/7/37: Observations on the operations on Mont St Quentin by the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade, 2 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

³ AWM: 3DRL/2316: Personal letter, 8 September 1918, War letters of General Monash, Volume 2, 4 March 1917–28 December 1918.

⁴ Anzacs’ Brilliant Exploit (3 September 1918) *Daily Observer*; Terrier-Like Australians (2 September 1918) *Brisbane Courier*; A Smart Capture (3 September 1918) *Daily Examiner*; Finest Feat of the War (23 December 1919) *Herald*.

⁵ General Sir John Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936), p. 192.

the significance of the battle of Mont St Quentin, the reasons it is considered the pinnacle accomplishment of the First AIF's final days, and the gambles and oversights that could have rendered it a disaster. Close analysis of planning and orders, resourcing, and demands placed on troops will be considered in order to understand true legacy of this battle.

From 1915 to 1917, the Western Front was predominantly a static field of battle. The hasty outflanking manoeuvres of the Race to the Sea had stagnated into warrens of muddied trenches. Combatants scrambled for technological advancements in weaponry, transport, and communications in efforts to break the stalemate. Casualties climbed in battles of attrition with names now synonymous with carnage – Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele. Both the Allied and Central Powers limped into 1917 facing the harsh reality of mounting political and economic pressures on the home front, severely diminished armies, and lacking decisive means of bringing the war to a swift end.

Catalysts for change came in the United States' declaration of war on Germany in April 1917 and the collapse of the Eastern Front in March 1918. While thousands of German troops were mobilising west, Quartermaster-General Ludendorff faced a stark choice: force the Allies into an armistice before the arrival of American troops, or face a better-manned, better-equipped, and better-funded enemy. The Spring Offensive began in March 1918.

In a series of assaults supported by concentrated artillery bombardments, stormtrooper-led battalions infiltrated Allied trenches and forced a retreat along the Western Front. German forces gained significant territory, advancing nearly 100 kilometres west, but they were soon desperately under-manned, under-resourced, and over-extended. Their initially rapid progress slowed and had staggered to a crawl by July. The Allies responded swiftly: The Hundred Days Offensive commenced with the Battle of Amiens on 8 August. In a neat mirroring of Germany's advance, the Allies succeeded in pushing the Central Forces east until the Armistice was tendered on 11 November. It was during the Hundred Days Offensive that the battle of Mont St Quentin took place.

The Australian Corps' rapid easterly advance in late August 1918 was obstructed by a number of key geographic features. The infamous Somme River and its adjacent canal, surrounded by dense water-logged marshes, meandered through the countryside in wide arcs. A series of villages and woods littered the landscape. The fortified town of Peronne, well defended by the Germans, was bordered on its southern and western edges by the river. To

the north stood Mont St Quentin, known as the “key to Peronne”.⁶ Gently sloping to a height of 100 metres, the hill was a nest of trenches, machine-guns, and sentry positions swarming with German soldiers who had apparently volunteered to defend the Mont from the approaching Australians.⁷

The advancing force was commanded by Lieutenant General Sir John Monash. To hasten the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, he determined to take Mont St Quentin at speed. He was eager that this victory be attributed to his corps. In his own words, “I wanted, more than anything else, that this should be an Australian achievement”.⁸ The Australian Corps belonged to Field Marshal Douglas Haig’s British Expeditionary Force (BEF), more specifically, General Sir Henry Rawlinson’s 4th Army. Rawlinson was familiar with the landmark from the battle of the Somme in 1916 and had previously described the position as “unattackable”.⁹ When he was told of Monash’s plans he was dubious, exclaiming, “so you think you’re going to take Mont St Quentin with three battalions! What presumption! However, I don’t think I ought to stop you! So, go ahead and try! – and I wish you luck!”¹⁰ Of Monash’s five divisions, the 3rd was to hold the left flank and the 5th the right. The 2nd, led by Major General Charles Rosenthal, was to take the Mont. At his command were the 5th, 6th, and 7th Brigades, headed respectively by Brigadier General’s Edward Martin, James Robertson, and Evan Wisdom. These are the men who led the soldiers who fought the battle of Mont St Quentin.

The 2nd Division began to mobilise on 25 August 1918. From their reserve positions in Allonville the troops were bussed to the front line. Arriving at their starting points, the troops were still some 25 kilometres distant from the Mont – a journey that would take place on foot. Patrols began to clear trenches, woods, and villages. Signs of retreat were everywhere. Germans units had corrupted wells, mined roads, and shifted railway sleepers to render the line useless (see Figure 1).

⁶ AWM: AWM4 1/44/38: The operations of the 2nd Aust. Division between midnight 26th/27th August and midnight 4th/5th September, 20 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, General Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division.

⁷ AWM: AWM4 23/38/37: Report on operations 31st August to 1st September inclusive, 2 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 21st Infantry Battalion.

⁸ Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, p. 176.

⁹ State Library of New South Wales (NSW): MLMSS 1536/3/4: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Francis Joseph Campbell Brewer, 6 July 1920, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

¹⁰ Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, p. 180–81.



Figure 1: View of the railway near Halle, illustrating the German method of shifting sleepers to sabotage the line (AWM E03241)

From 29 August, the enemy was closely pursued to the Somme. The Australian advance stalled when local bridges were destroyed by retreating Germans. Engineers and pioneers laboured on repairs, often under direct fire. Their progress was rapid and by 30 August the corps was once again on the move. For the Australian soldiers arriving on the northern banks, the prospect of taking Mont St Quentin was intimidating (see Figure 2). They could see that the German defences were substantial. Belts of wire and well-established machine-gun and artillery positions guarded the slope. The bare ground offered minimal cover. Concealed German positions protected snipers and machine-gunners as they fired onto possible approaches.

After receiving rum rations, the 5th Brigade started up Mont St Quentin at 5 am on 31 August. They hollered and cooed as they emerged from trenches, wanting to fool the enemy into believing they were a larger force. One soldier observed “the boys started off like a lot of squealing yelling hounds ... one would have thought it was a stock yard broke loose”.¹¹ The men made rapid progress, taking ground and prisoners as they ascended. They were so swift

¹¹ State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/4a: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Percy Morris, 10 September 1918, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

in their advance that a captured German remarked, “it was all the work of an instant”.¹² Gaining their objectives by mid-morning, the 5th Brigade were forced by a counterattack to a lower position by evening, though pockets of resistance held out in trenches and dug outs further up.



Figure 2: A view of Mont St Quentin taken from a hill near Clery (AWM E03577)

The 6th Brigade, waiting in reserve, was ordered to relieve the 5th Brigade early the following morning. Its approach was met with strong resistance. Brigadier General Robertson reported that during their advance, the men came under intense machine-gun fire. It “opened as soon as the men went over the top” and “broke up our formations”. As such, “the advance had to be made in rushes”.¹³ It was in conditions akin to these that three men of the 2nd Division would win Victoria Crosses, the highest award in the British Honours System. Lieutenant Towner, Sergeant Lowerson, and Private Mactier conducted attacks on machine-gun posts under heavy fire, successfully neutralising positions that were prohibiting the Australian advance. As these deeds were taking place, large amounts of German prisoners

¹² C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume VI: The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied Offensive, 1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942), p. 817.

¹³ AWM: AWM4 23/6/36 Part 3: Report on operations August 31st to September 4th 1918, 4 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 6th Infantry Brigade.

flowed down the hill. These men were drawn from five different units tasked with defending Mont St Quentin, described by Monash as a “heterogeneous jumble” instructed to hold the position “at all costs”.¹⁴

Despite this swift progress in seizing territory and prisoners, by mid-morning the advance had stalled. A half-hour artillery barrage targeting German positions commenced at one o’clock while men hunkered in trenches and shell-holes. The offensive recommenced at 1:30pm, and the 6th Brigade soon took the village of Mont St Quentin (see Figure 3) before clearing the buildings and streets of remaining resistance. Private Morris of the 20th Battalion confiscated a canister of coffee from a German doctor who was found hiding in a cellar and soon found himself popular with his jubilant comrades, who mistakenly thought he was issuing rum. According to Morris, “Fritz did not like parting with it, but thought it was as well to do so when he saw the victorious Australians surrounding him”.¹⁵ Activity on the front line continued for the 2nd Division until the 4 September 1918, as it mopped up pockets of resistance and conducted flank support.



Figure 3: Members of the 21st Battalion emerging from a trench following the artillery bombardment. Ahead of them is the village of Mont St Quentin (AWM E03104)

¹⁴ Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, p. 183.

¹⁵ State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/4a: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Percy Morris, 10 September 1918, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

The feats performed by the Australian Corps at Mont St Quentin were substantial. Former journalist Private Brewer of the 20th Battalion, returning from leave, began a personal investigation into the battle. He interviewed his comrades, walked the ground of the Mont, and persuaded his superior officers to show him their reports on the action. He wrote of the pride the soldiers felt in their achievement, the “resourcefulness and tenacity” of the leaders in the field, and the “masterly daring” and “absolute courage” of the men.¹⁶ During nine days on the line, seven were spent fighting. The Australians captured 15,141 acres, 265 machine guns, and over 1,500 prisoners.¹⁷ The terrain was brutal and unforgiving, and closely guarded by German soldiers who had the advantage of preparation and the high ground. The men adapted to circumstances in the field and took positions at an almost unprecedented speed. The battalions involved were significantly understrength and incurred further substantial casualties in conducting the offensive. The performance of the troops far outstripped commander expectations. It was a well-decorated battle that earned conspicuous recognition for many of its soldiers. Most crucially, this battle was a major blow to the enemy. The Germans lost a significant amount of men and valuable assets, as well as a key strategic defence point on the Somme. The reasons for Mont St Quentin’s historical significance are numerous. The so-called “finest single feat of the war” was an astounding achievement.

It could also have been the costliest blunder of the Hundred Days Offensive. The battle was characterised by rushed orders delivered in the early hours of the morning, insufficient artillery support, and dangerously fatigued men. The oversights which endangered the operation become overwhelmingly apparent through an examination of preparation, instructions, the provision of resources, and the expectations of troop performance.

Monash made a rash and unnecessary decision to take Mont St Quentin. Official War Historian Captain Charles Bean, concerned about the growing death toll incurred by the Australian Corps during the Hundred Days Offensive, noted in his diary that by this time there was a feeling that there may no longer be a “Dominion army left soon”.¹⁸ He felt that this was due, at least in part, to Monash’s lack of care in judging which engagements were

¹⁶ State Library of New South Wales (NSW): MLMSS 1536/3/4: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Francis Joseph Campbell Brewer, 6 July 1920, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

¹⁷ AWM: AWM4 1/44/38: The operations of the 2nd Aust. Division between midnight 26th/27th August and midnight 4th/5th September, 20 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914-1918 War, General Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division.

¹⁸ Peter Burness (ed.), *The Western Front Diaries of Charles Bean* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018), p. 734.

vital. While Bean was by no means Monash's greatest fan, this observation does reveal Monash's demanding ambitions for his corps.

While casualties were mounting, Monash was seeking out victories. In a letter written two weeks prior to the battle he boasted that his units were "piling success upon success".¹⁹ However, his run was drawing to a close. At a conference on 26 August, Monash was told by his superior officers that the 4th Army had "done its share" and it was soon to "await events elsewhere".²⁰ Rawlinson had informed him that there "was no object in hastening the Germans' withdrawal" and ordered him to "keep touch with the enemy".²¹ A major push by the 3rd Army to the north and the advance of the 1st Army to the south were to be the primary focus of BEF operations. "Keeping touch" meant keeping pressure on the enemy without costly engagements. Nevertheless, when Monash received advice from Haig that the time had come to "act with the utmost boldness" and to "act energetically and without hesitation",²² these were the words he chose to take to heart. When Monash revealed his intentions to attack Mont St Quentin regardless of his advice, Rawlinson laughed at his "cheek" and explained that he had no expectations of success.²³ Despite well-founded doubts regarding the capability of the severely diminished units to take the objective, Rawlinson agreed to let Monash try. While the capture of Mont St Quentin would come to be considered a noteworthy achievement for Monash and his corps, it certainly was not essential.

The hasty attack was at the expense of the meticulous planning upon which Monash had built his reputation. The preparation for the battle of Mont St Quentin was inadequate and this insufficiency dictated the soldiers' experience on the ground. Orders formed in evening conferences at headquarters were issued, then rescinded, then replaced. Timings turned on a dime. Coordination of movements and resources occurred on the run. Often orders were not given in writing due to the rapidity of movement. As such, the majority of commands occurred over the telephone, frequently in the early hours of the morning. Brigadier General Wisdom complained that the delayed orders meant that his commanders only had "just time

¹⁹ AWM: 3DRL/2316: Personal letter, 11 August 1918, War letters of General Monash, Volume 2, 4 March 1917–28 December 1918.

²⁰ AWM: 3DRL/2316: Notes from conference, 26 August 1918, Personal files of General Monash, Book 20, 15 August–8 September 1918.

²¹ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume VI*, p. 780–81.

²² AWM: 3DRL/2316: Haig's orders, 23 August 1918, Personal files of General Monash, Book 20, 15 August–8 September 1918.

²³ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume VI*, p. 796.

to get their companies and move to the jumping off line”.²⁴ There were times when machine-gun companies were not notified of the movements of their battalions.²⁵ Sometimes reconnaissance was weak and reporting was inaccurate. Lieutenant Clayden of the 23rd Battalion argued that if the trenches at the base of Mont St Quentin had been empty “as was stated”, the task of arriving at the jumping off point by zero hour “would have been comparatively easy”. Instead, the position was “strongly defended by the enemy”.²⁶ These conditions were characteristic of the Second Division’s time on the line during the Hundred Days Offensive, though the battle of Mont St Quentin was certainly the worst instance of this level of unpreparedness.

These demanding conditions were all the more punishing because of the high levels of troop fatigue. Exhaustion was present from the earliest stages of mobilisation and was exacerbated by the rushed nature of the battle. The threat posed by fatigue was understood by Monash, who acknowledged that the “troops were tired” or even just “a little footsore”. He argued that it was still “worthwhile undertaking this effort” even when it was “to put a severe strain upon the endurance and capacity of the troops”.²⁷ Some soldiers who had been marching and fighting for days at a time would drop when told to stand down, sleeping for sometimes only minutes before being ordered forward. There are reports of artillerymen who fell asleep on limbers while they were on the move.²⁸ To put this in context: sleep deprivation of 28 hours and above impairs motor and cognitive performance to the same degree as a blood alcohol reading of 0.1 per cent.²⁹ Conducting flank support to the north, the 38th Battalion had been marching and fighting for 84 hours without break when they took the village of Clery.³⁰ The soldiers fighting this battle were experiencing impaired memory and reasoning function, and reduced reaction speeds. In conducting the mentally and physically gruelling task of combat, these soldiers were at a significant disadvantage even before they encountered the enemy.

²⁴ AWM: AWM4 23/7/37: Observations on the operations on Mont St Quentin by the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade, 2 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

²⁵ AWM: AWM4 24/2/7: Summary of operations period 27th August–2nd September, 2 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 2nd Machine Gun Battalion.

²⁶ AWM: PR01423: Report on operations of August 31st 1918, 31 August 1918, Lieutenant Walter James Clayden, 23rd Infantry Battalion.

²⁷ Peter Burness (ed.), *The Western Front Diaries of Charles Bean*, p. 739; Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, p. 186–87.

²⁸ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume VI*, p. 845.

²⁹ A. M. Williamson & Anne-Marie Feyer, “Moderate sleep deprivation produces impairments in cognitive and motor performance equivalent to legally prescribed levels of alcohol intoxication,” *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 57 (2000), p. 649.

³⁰ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume VI*, p. 791.

Compounding these issues, signallers encountered difficulties establishing communications. The battle required communications to cross the Somme in a short time frame, and many signallers were killed laying wires under fire.³¹ Rosenthal lamented the shortage of cable, mounted orderlies, wireless transmitters, and trained operators, and noted that in many cases units had to resort to visual signalling.³² Telephone cables were cut regularly throughout the battle.³³ When telephone and visual communications were not feasible, runners, cyclers, and light horsemen were used to send messages.³⁴ Brigadier General Wisdom initially commented in his report that communications were “effective”, but later complained that poor communications meant forward observation officers (FOOs) from artillery units were unable to keep in contact with their own guns.³⁵ Inadequate communications meant that many officers were unsure of important details of the attack. Lieutenant Smythe of the 24th Battalion recounted approaching Mont St Quentin: “the situation was, to put it mildly, vague. Just where the enemy were, we did not know ... who was holding the line on our right flank, or whether it was held at all, was a mystery.”³⁶

In addition to insufficient planning, fatigued men, and poor communications, the hasty attack did not allow for an adequate build-up of artillery and other weaponry. Heavy artillery and tanks were discounted from participation due to their distance from the line.³⁷ What light artillery support was available was inadequate to establish a creeping barrage. Instead, positions of strategic importance were selected and bombed in rising sequence, following the progress of the infantry. The deficiency of this barrage is best appreciated when compared to the battle of Hamel, perhaps Monash’s most well-known victory. The machine-gun and field and heavy artillery barrage maps of Hamel are set out in almost excruciating levels of detail (see Map 1).

³¹ AWM: AWM4 23/7/36: Report on operations on August 29th 1918 – the advance to the River Somme and Capture of Biaches, 8 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

³² AWM: AWM4 1/44/38: The operations of the 2nd Aust. Division between midnight 26th/27th August and midnight 4th/5th September, 20 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, General Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division.

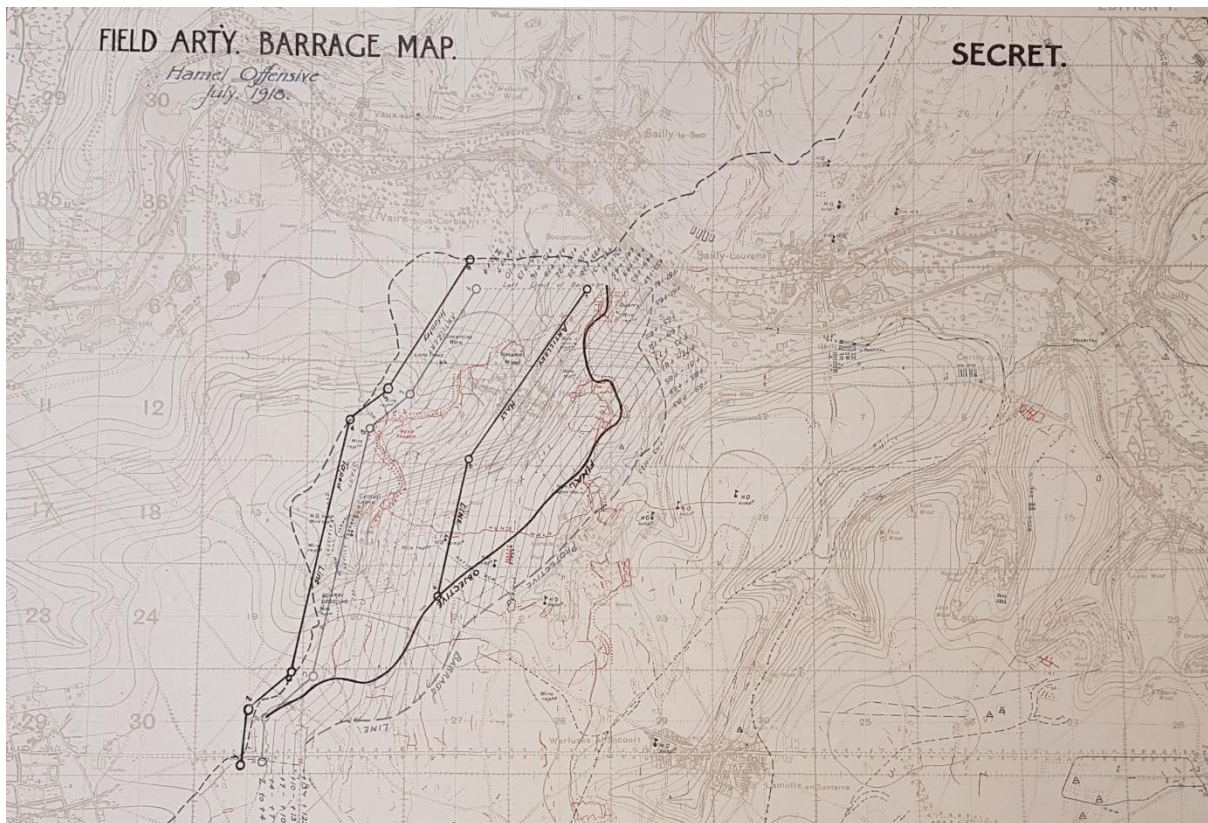
³³ AWM: AWM4 23/6/36 Part 3: Report on operations August 31st to September 4th 1918, 4 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 6th Infantry Brigade.

³⁴ AWM: AWM4 23/5/39: Report on operations 27th August to 31st August 1918, 4 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 5th Infantry Brigade.

³⁵ AWM: AWM4 23/7/37: Report on operations September 2nd 1918, 8 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

³⁶ AWM: PR01463/12: Diary entry, 31 August 1918, Lieutenant Percy Ellesmere Smythe, 24th Infantry Battalion.

³⁷ Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, p. 178.



Map 1: Field Artillery Barrage Map, Hamel offensive, 4 July 1918 (AWM G5831.S65 Sheet 17.19.3)

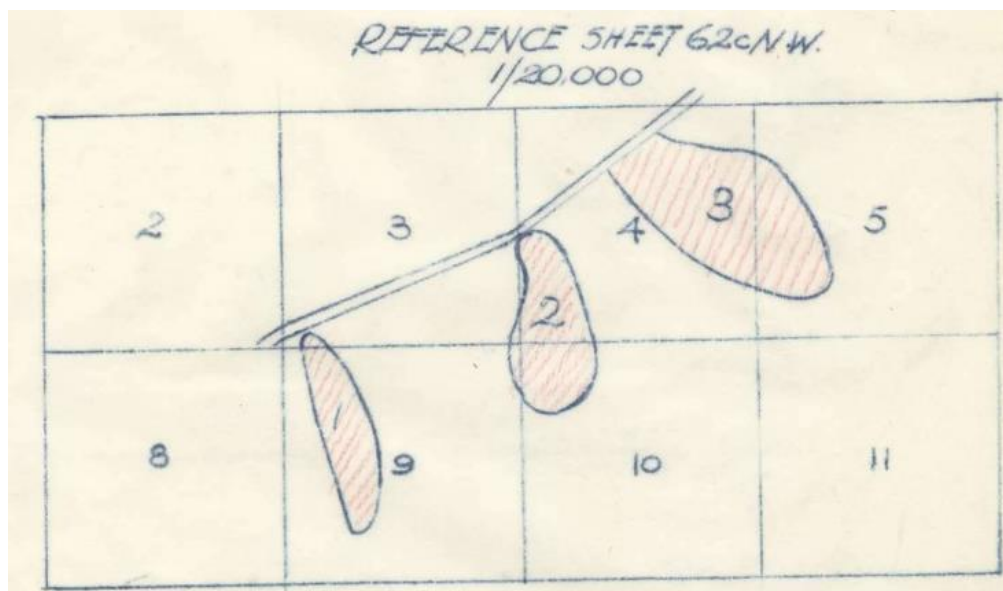
Each of the regimented steps represents a meticulously timed and sustained field of fire. In striking contrast, the equivalent maps from the battle of Mont St Quentin show three small targets (see Map 2). These hurried blobs were all that the artillerymen had to go on when organising their barrages. Fire was restricted to these zones at two rounds per gun per minute, a rate half of firing capacity. The approach to the position had been so quick that ammunition dumps were poorly supplied.³⁸ As such, the barrage was to be maintained only as long as “supply allows”.³⁹ This is a far cry from the battle of Hamel, with 132,000 rounds of field artillery ammunition fired in 90 minutes during the creeping barrage alone.⁴⁰ The barrage on Mont St Quentin was described as “thin” and “spasmodic” in multiple reports, while some soldier accounts document the barrage falling short and mingling with German shells fired on

³⁸ AWM: AWM4 1/44/38: The operations of the 2nd Aust. Division between midnight 26th/27th August and midnight 4th/5th September, 20 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914-1918 War, General Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division.

³⁹ AWM: AWM4 13/32/29 Part 5: Targets for Siege Batteries, 29 August 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914-1918 War, Headquarters, 4th Australian Field Artillery Brigade.

⁴⁰ Meleah Hampton, “The key to victory: Australia’s military contribution on the Western Front in 1918,” in *Australians and the First World War*, ed. Kate Ariotti and James E. Bennett (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 35.

Australian positions.⁴¹ This may speak to poor siting, worn barrels, or inadequately surveyed and prepared firing positions. However, the hurried nature of the attack did not allow for the recognition of these problems, much less their rectification.



Map 2: Field Artillery Barrage Map, Mont St Quentin offensive, 1 September 1918
(AWM4 13/32/30 Part 1, p. 30)

Following the battle, many battalion commanders bemoaned the lack of artillery support. Lieutenant Colonel Davis of the 25th Battalion reported that the barrage was “light” and that its insufficiency meant that soon the battle “developed into an Infantry fight entirely”.⁴² Major Robinson of the 26th Battalion protested that the barrage was “thin” and of “little assistance to the Infantry”, stating that in future battles more time should be allowed for artillery to be brought forward.⁴³ Lieutenant Colonel Chalmers of the 27th Battalion commented that the artillery was of little use as it “could not keep sufficiently close”.⁴⁴ Brigade commanders mirrored these complaints. Brigadier General Martin admitted that

⁴¹ AWM: AWM4 23/43/38: Report on operation by 26th Battalion on September 2nd, 1918, 6 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914-1918 War, 26th Infantry Battalion; State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/7: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private W Miller, 25 February 1919, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919; AWM: PR01463/12: Diary entry, 29 August 1918, Lieutenant Percy Ellesmere Smythe, 24th Infantry Battalion.

⁴² AWM: AWM4 23/42/37: Report on operations 2nd September, n.d., Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914-1918 War, 25th Infantry Battalion.

⁴³ AWM: AWM4 23/43/38: Report on operations 2nd September, 6 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 26th Infantry Battalion.

⁴⁴ AWM: AWM4 23/44/36: Operations of August 29th 1918 – Capture of Biaches, n.d., Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 27th Infantry Battalion.

“longer times spent” on targets “would have meant more success.”⁴⁵ Brigadier General Wisdom commented that the large frontage had meant the barrage was “light” and had “soon outpaced the infantry” and as such was of “no assistance” to the soldiers making the advance.⁴⁶ He criticised an over-reliance of artillery units on their FOO and argued that valuable targets were missed as a result. He complained that one FOO turned up at a position two hours after its capture, stating that “the Battalion Commander is to be excused if he did tell him to get the Hell out of it”.⁴⁷

In his report to Monash, however, Rosenthal did not replicate these criticisms. His critique of the artillery did not address coverage, speed, or the lack of time for units to find appropriate positions. Rather, his qualm was that insufficient staffing and disrupted communications made it difficult for commanders to coordinate their movements.⁴⁸ There are a number of reasons why this discrepancy may have occurred. Reporting was a more rushed process, as the pace of battle escalated during the Hundred Days Offensive. Rosenthal may have thought the battle of Mont St Quentin to be an anomaly, a set of unique circumstances that were unlikely to be replicated in the remaining course of the war. While these conditions were by no means ideal for his troops, he might not have thought it worthwhile to note these complaints if this type of battle was not to occur again. Alternatively, Rosenthal may have thought it futile to pass on this myriad of complaints if they were unlikely to be heeded. Maybe the artillery had not been ideally situated or supplied, and casualty rates were higher as a result. For Monash and Rawlinson this was irrelevant as the battle was already won, and their attentions turned to the Hindenburg Line.

The inadequate bombardment of Mont St Quentin meant that many defensive positions were still intact as Australians advanced. Dozens of approaches were blocked by fortifications. Captain Germon of the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC), who was attached to the 44th Battalion, commented that the area was “the roughest ground, full of shell holes, barbed wire entanglements, riddled with trenches”.⁴⁹ Heavy wires caused problems for

⁴⁵ AWM: AWM4 23/5/39: Report on operations 27th August to 31st August 1918, 4 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 5th Infantry Brigade.

⁴⁶ AWM: AWM4 23/7/37: Observations on the operations on Mont St Quentin by the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade, 2 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

⁴⁷ AWM: AWM4 23/7/37: Report on operations September 2nd 1918, 8 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

⁴⁸ AWM: AWM4 1/44/38: The operations of the 2nd Aust. Division between midnight 26th/27th August and midnight 4th/5th September, 20 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, General Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division.

⁴⁹ AWM: 1DRL/311: Diary entry, 4 September 1918, Captain Samuel Leslie Germon, Australian Army Medical Corps, 44th Battalion.

the advancing Australians. Private Petersen of the 19th Battalion noted that the railway line was not a feasible route due to heavy covering fire. His platoon had to “crawl and pick [their] way through barbed wire”.⁵⁰ Private Morris of the 20th Battalion recalled that his unit had gotten “tangled up in the wire about 1,000 yards from the Mont” and it was only after “boots being ribboned and trousers and tunics torn to shreds” that they were able to wriggle through.⁵¹ Enfilading fire caused casualties as units were caught in the open. Bombardment from preserved German positions was described as “smothering”, “intense”, and “continuous”.⁵² One company was responsible for clearing a trench defended by 30 machine-guns.⁵³ Lieutenant Guard of the 20th Battalion supervised as his men timed gaps in heavy fire to jump into an advancing trench and lamented that “a number of good fellows missed it”.⁵⁴ A survey conducted of Mont St Quentin following the battle revealed that “the enemy had twice the normal complement” of machine-guns.⁵⁵ The insufficient arrangements made for artillery bombardment meant that Mont St Quentin was well defended when Australians attempted to capture it, a fact that maximised casualties.

The numbers of wounded and dying men placed an insurmountable strain on the attending AAMC. The pace of the battle placed additional pressure on already overburdened, understaffed, and underequipped medical units. While stretcher-bearers were commended in multiple reports for their tireless commitment to their work, often under fire, there were not enough to cope with the long distances and difficult terrain (see Figure 4). Surrendering German soldiers were co-opted to carry wounded Australians.⁵⁶ Regimental Aid Posts

⁵⁰ State Library of New South Wales (NSW): MLMSS 1536/3/5a: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Jens Petersen, 9 February 1919, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

⁵¹ State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/4a: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Percy Morris, 10 September 1918, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

⁵² AWM: AWM4 23/6/37: Operations extending over period 31st August–3rd September 1918, 6 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 6th Infantry Brigade; AWM: AWM4 23/40/36: Report on operations – 31st August to 1st September 1918, 3 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 23rd Infantry Battalion; AWM: AWM4 23/34/38: Report on operations 27–31st. ult. inclusive, 1 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914-1918 War, 17th Infantry Battalion.

⁵³ AWM: AWM4 23/7/37: Report on operations September 2nd 1918, 8 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

⁵⁴ AWM: 2DRL/0879: Report on the Battle of Mont St Quentin, 4 September 1918, Lieutenant William Henry Gladstone Guard, 20th Infantry Battalion.

⁵⁵ AWM: AWM4 23/7/37: Observations on the operations on Mont St Quentin by the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade, 2 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 7th Infantry Brigade.

⁵⁶ AWM: AWM419/10/35, PR83/47: Diary entry, n.d., Private Alfred W. Binikin, 20th Infantry Battalion.

(RAPs) were swamped with injured men and exposed to enemy fire, including shelling.⁵⁷ Captain Germon expressed some excitement after locating a store of German medical dressings which he eagerly utilised while awaiting supplies.⁵⁸ Major Coutts of the 6th Field Ambulance, attached to the 24th Battalion, had instructions to “hurry on as quickly as possible” in pursuit of the advancing infantry. Expected to cart their supplies up Mont St Quentin over shell-riddled ground, his group abandoned its vehicle and took only what could be carried. He noted of the night of 31 August, “we were kept going continuously all night ... the wounds were very severe ones – chiefly broken limbs, head wounds, and abdominal wounds, caused by the 5.9 shells.” Both entrances of the tunnel in which he worked were bombed and as a result, many stretcher-bearers were wounded and killed.⁵⁹ Undoubtedly, many Australians died for want of assistance, in part due to the lack of preparation, equipment, and staffing amongst the AAMC.



Figure 4: Stretcher bearers clearing wounded from Mont St Quentin. During the early stages of the campaign, stretchers were manned by two soldiers. Due to the long distances of the “carries” at Mont St Quentin, four were allowed (AWM E03105)

⁵⁷ State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/6a: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Corporal Alfred Henry Edwards, 25 February 1919, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

⁵⁸ AWM: 1DRL/311: Diary entry, 26 August 1918, Captain Samuel Leslie Germon, Australian Army Medical Corps, 44th Battalion.

⁵⁹ AWM: PR83/155: Diary entry, 31 August 1918, Major Donald Dunbar Coutts, 6th Field Ambulance.

There were heavy casualties at Mont St Quentin. The Australian Corps was dramatically understrength before the battle began. A battalion is normally comprised of about 1,000 men. High casualty rates and limited reinforcements meant that the average battalion of the Australian Corps numbered 653 in August 1918.⁶⁰ The 21st Battalion of the 6th Brigade numbered 421.⁶¹ The Australian Corps, despite its size, continued to take objectives because the troops had an expansive repertoire of battlefield experience. Indeed, the casualties on Mont St Quentin were predominantly established veterans. Their loss was not just a loss of life, but a loss of expertise, mentorship, and unit culture. Following the battle, battalions which had been raised at the beginning of the war were disbanded and the soldiers redistributed. Soon after the battle of Mont St Quentin, stretcher-bearers, signallers, runners, storeman, and administrators were marching into the line as infantryman.⁶² Some 3,000 casualties were incurred in the battle, a heavy toll for three divisions numbering approximately 17,000.⁶³

On the other side of the line German troops were experiencing similarly high casualty rates. The battle of Mont St Quentin has been represented as an unmitigated victory over strong enemy units. Sensationalised newspaper reports told the story of German soldiers heavily contesting every inch of territory.⁶⁴ Monash wrote that the astonishing achievement could only be fully appreciated if there was “a realisation of the supreme efforts which the enemy put forward to prevent it”.⁶⁵ In truth, demoralisation was evident amongst a number of German soldiers and all units facing the Australians had been weakened.⁶⁶ The rush of the Spring Offensive had convinced many Central Power soldiers that victory was almost within their grasp. To have this sense of success dwindle and fade as the Western Front became bloated and unwieldy left many disheartened. While approaching Mont St Quentin on the northern flank in the days before the battle, Private Lowndes of the 20th Battalion found two Germans with their throats cut. He hypothesised they had preferred suicide rather than “meeting the Australians in battle.”⁶⁷ Demoralisation was most apparent during the opening hours of the battle. Corporal Edwards of the 17th Battalion noted that the neighbouring 20th

⁶⁰ National Library of Australia (NLA): MS 1884/504/73/Correspondence B/Series 1: John Monash to Thomas Dodds, 7 September 1918, Monash Papers.

⁶¹ Peter Stanley, *Men of Mont St Quentin: Between victory and death* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2009), p.65.

⁶² AWM: 1DRL/311: Diary entry, 4 September 1918, Captain Samuel Leslie Germon, Australian Army Medical Corps, 44th Battalion.

⁶³ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume VI*, p. 874.

⁶⁴ Wonderful Anzacs (6 September 1918) *Daily Standard*.

⁶⁵ Monash, *The Australian Victories in France in 1918*, p. 182.

⁶⁶ Peter Stanley, *Men of Mont St Quentin: between victory and death*, p.86.

⁶⁷ State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/3: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Mark Lowndes, 15 September 1918, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

Battalion were “hauling in prisoners wholesale”.⁶⁸ Assisting a captured sergeant-major, Private Morris of the 20th Battalion was questioned by the German as to why he was fighting. The prisoner informed him that this “was only a capitalistic war” and that “he didn’t know what the Germans were fighting for”.⁶⁹

This demoralisation does not reflect the experience of every enemy soldier, nor does it diminish the difficulty of the task set for the Australians. Amongst the German forces that attempted to defend Mont St Quentin were members of the 2nd Prussian Guards, one of the “finest reserve Divisions” of Ludendorf’s forces.⁷⁰ Brigadier General Martin reported that “while initially enemy resistance was slight” they eventually fought with the “greatest vigour,” defending positions “with the greatest tenacity”.⁷¹ Lieutenant Brazenor of the 23rd Battalion noted that on 1 September the “enemy made a determined and spirited resistance, in many instances dying at his posts”.⁷² German soldiers were war-wearied and conscious that they were now losing more battles than they were winning, but commitment to the cause was still evident amongst many. These varied levels of demoralisation contradict depictions of Mont St Quentin as an overwhelming success against indefatigable German units.

Many of the difficulties experienced at Mont St Quentin were unavoidable aspects of moving, open warfare conducted at a rapid pace. As the Hundred Days Offensive gained momentum, speed had become the objective. This was a reasonable strategy – any delay allowed for the rest, recuperation, and reinforcement of the enemy. However, such a swift pace also prevented the rest, recuperation, and reinforcement of one’s own units. Many of the mistakes made under the pressure of this hasty advance cost men of the AIF their lives. The question to ask then is, was it a necessary battle? Mont St Quentin was a formidable obstacle that presented a serious challenge to the Hundred Days Offensive. Maintaining momentum in the advance had to account for this “veritable fortress” on the Somme.⁷³ Monash’s account, however, sets up a false dichotomy regarding the position. To him, “the only alternative” to a

⁶⁸ State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/6a: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Corporal Alfred Henry Edwards, 25 February 1919, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

⁶⁹ State Library of NSW: MLMSS 1536/3/4a: Report of the battle of Mont St Quentin by Private Percy Morris, 10 September 1918, Brewer Papers, 20 June 1917–16 April 1919.

⁷⁰ AWM: PR88/024: Notes on prisoners taken at Peronne and Mont St Quentin, n.d., Corporal Henry Joseph Sennett, 10th Infantry Brigade.

⁷¹ AWM: AWM4 23/5/39: Report on operations 27th August to 31st August 1918, 4 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 5th Infantry Brigade.

⁷² AWM: AWM4 23/40/36: Report on operations carried out by 23rd Battalion AIF on 1st September, 3 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 23rd Infantry Battalion.

⁷³ AWM: AWM4 1/44/38: The operations of the 2nd Aust. Division between midnight 26th/27th August and midnight 4th/5th September, 20 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, General Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division.

speedy assault was “to do nothing and attempt nothing”.⁷⁴ However, forcing the enemy to retreat from this position could have been achieved in other, less costly ways.

To the north of the Australian Corps the 3rd Army were “to take [the] burden” by advancing in a major push while the 1st Army were advancing to the south. Monash had discovered on 26 August that his reserves were to be diverted to these forces, and that the 4th would at most “form [the] flank”.⁷⁵ With the territory held by the Australian Corps as of the 26 August, these movements would have eventually formed a salient around Mont St Quentin. It is unlikely that German command would have been able to maintain the stretched supply line required to retain the position or been willing to risk soldiers and valuable weaponry from being pinched out of the line. A strategic withdrawal would have resolved this problem, successfully reforming the German front at the Hindenburg Line. This plan would have aligned more closely with both the orders issued by Rawlinson to Monash and the ongoing focus of BEF operations at this stage of the Hundred Days Offensive.

To Monash, this strategy frustrated his ambitions for the Australian Corps and disrupted the ongoing narrative of their – and his – success. On 4 September, as the streets of Peronne were cleared by infantrymen, Monash wrote in a personal letter, “after the recent brilliant successes of the Corps, it is quite evident that I cannot be spared from the Front on any consideration whatever”.⁷⁶ Each victory was inextricably linked to Monash’s own sense of importance.

It is ironic to then consider that the battle of Mont St Quentin was not solely “an Australian achievement” as Monash purported. Flank support to the north and south was conducted by British and French forces. Members of the Royal Sussex regiment relieved the 7th Brigade as they cleared Mont St Quentin.⁷⁷ Some machine-gun reinforcements were British. Lieutenant Fullard of the 8th Machine Gun Company noted on the 30 August, “Order to pull out and report to HQ at Estrees. Tommies taking over this section.”⁷⁸ Artillery firing on Mont St Quentin was in part provided by British units.⁷⁹ Despite Monash’s intentions, this battle was far from a purely Australian accomplishment.

⁷⁴ Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, p. 188.

⁷⁵ AWM: 3DRL/2316: Notes from conference, 26 August 1918, Personal files of General Monash, Book 20, 15 August–8 September 1918.

⁷⁶ AWM: 3DRL/2316: Personal letter, 4 September 1918, War letters of General Monash, Volume 2, 4 March 1917–28 December 1918.

⁷⁷ AWM: AWM4 23/44/37: Operations 2nd September 1918 – Capture of Allaines & Haut Allaines, 2 September 1918, Australian Imperial Force War Diaries, 1914–1918 War, 27th Infantry Battalion.

⁷⁸ AWM: PR01029: Diary entry, 30 August 1918, Lieutenant Arthur F. Fullard, 8th Machine Gun Company.

⁷⁹ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume VI*, p. 843.

Monash's determination to secure Mont St Quentin, the reputation of his corps, and his own reputation, resulted in insensible decision-making. On the afternoon of 31 August he told Major General John Gellibrand, Commander of the 3rd Division, that "casualties no longer matter".⁸⁰ It is worthwhile to consider what this meant for men on the ground.

On 31 August, Lieutenant Smythe of the 24th Battalion was organising his unit at the base of Mont St Quentin. As Sergeant Collery passed Smythe's position at dusk, he remarked that there were dead and wounded in a trench on the left flank. There were no stretcher-bearers attending and the men were desperately in need of assistance. Smythe, horrified that his men had been left as they fell, scrambled to the scene. He later remarked "it was the kind of thing that leaves its impress stamped on the mind forever".

The trench had been hit by a 9.2-inch heavy artillery shell. As Smythe and his men approached, there was silence. As the living realised that these were Australians and that they were here to help, they began to moan and cry. Smythe wrote, "The carnage was awful. Dead, wounded, and dying, all lay huddled and twisted together in grotesque little heaps, a mass of mangled flesh." A right arm clung to a shoulder by a strip of skin. The soldier begged Smythe to cut the limb off and he attempted to do so with a jack-knife but could not manage it. Another soldier's knees were completely shattered. He asked, "How are my legs? I can't feel them," and asked for someone to hand him his rifle so that he could "blow his own brains out" before dying of his wounds. The worst of those alive was a man whose legs had been taken off below the knees, right arm shattered from wrist to shoulder, head lacerated and covered in blood. Staring into the middle distance, he asked plaintively, "When are they going to take me away?"

Having tended to the wounded until nightfall, Smythe set about identifying the dead by taking papers from pockets and identity discs from necks. In the dark he recognised the gleam of a brass "A" affixed to a sleeve, a symbol of service at Gallipoli. This badge belonged to Company Quartermaster Sergeant Victor Jolly, a "decent sort of chap" who had enlisted on 13 March 1915 and was carrying photographs of his mother in his pocket on the day he died (see Figure 5).⁸¹

⁸⁰ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume VI*, p. 822.

⁸¹ AWM: PR01463/12: Diary entry, 29 August 1918, Lieutenant Percy Ellesmere Smythe, 24th Infantry Battalion.



Figure 5: A portrait of Company Quartermaster Sergeant Victor Jolly taken outside a barracks building in 1915 (AWM P12296.001)

This is what the battle of Mont St Quentin cost – experience, material, and men. By his own account, Monash thought of battle as a symphony in which “the various arms and units are the instruments ... [where each unit] must play its phrase in the general harmony.”⁸² He had very few of these instruments at Mont St Quentin, yet he committed the resources he did have to keep in the game.

While today we have the benefit of hindsight, Monash was not to know that the war would soon be over. Beyond suspicion and rumour, he and his superior officers could not know that it would be mere months until the Armistice. While the 4th Army were due to be taken off the line, Monash did not know when they would again be required. In taking the Mont, Monash was risking the future success of the Australian Corps. The men who died fighting to capture Mont St Quentin could have broken the Hindenburg Line, fought in the battle of Montbrehain, taken Berlin. Against necessity and the advice of his superiors, Monash risked the success of these possible future engagements.

Mont St Quentin is often described as the “finest single feat of the war”. Far from Monash’s achievement, it was a soldier’s battle, one defined by the accomplishments and sacrifices of the men who were forced to fight it. The shortcomings of Monash’s planning,

⁸² Geoffrey Serle, *John Monash: a biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2002), p. 376.

orders, and resourcing can diminish the accomplishments of those soldiers. Their success, despite these circumstances, is a testament to their proficiency and courage, not his leadership.