

The Battle of Hamel

July 4 1918

1. The German Breakthrough.

The collapse of the Russian front in late 1917, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed on March 3 1918, left the Germans free to move a large number of troops to the Western Front (although about one million remained in the East to garrison the gains claimed in the treaty). Although there was much disagreement in the German High Command, Ludendorff's plan of launching a major offensive in the West, which would knock the British and French out of the war before the Americans could become fully effective, was adopted. The offensive was to begin on March 21, on a front 40 miles either side of St. Quentin, at the junction of the British and French armies. Two weeks later, an attack was to be launched in the North, in the Hazebrouck area.

In both these sectors, German advances were enormous, especially that at St. Quentin. 71 German divisions, supported by 7,000 guns with a four-day supply of 9 million shells, were hurled at the British Third and Fifth Armies, which had a combined strength of 29 divisions. The Germans advanced 14 miles in the first four days, but thereafter slowed down, although they continued on the offensive throughout most of April. The British armies fell back in what began in some sectors to look like a rout.

On April 12, Haig issued his famous Order of the Day: "Every position must be held to the last man; there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end." How much effect these fine words had it is difficult to tell. The Germans were weary. They had stretched their supply lines to the limit. They had outrun their artillery. Many of the men transferred from the East had been infected with Bolshevism. The cream of the German officer class had been killed, and likewise the NCOs; discipline was often poor. The High Command was vacillating and indecisive, changing the direction of attack and failing to follow strategic principles. This led to a further decline in morale, which was made more serious by the news coming from home that families were hungry and fed up with the war – the people were no longer confident that their armies would be victorious.

2. Villers-Bretonneux

The city of Amiens was essential to the British armies, as it was the railhead for supplies and personnel for the whole of the Somme area. If Amiens fell, the British would be unable to continue the war on the Western Front. The Germans advancing towards the city captured the large village (or small town) of Villers-Bretonneux, after heavy fighting, on 24 April. A brilliant attack on either side of the town by the Australian 13th and 15th Brigades recaptured the town that evening; and within a few hours the situation was stabilized, with the whole Australian Corps, commanded by Lieut-General John Monash, united in a line stretching northwards from the eastern outskirts of the village to the north bank of the River Somme.

3. "Peaceful Penetration".

Monash was determined to obtain a psychological advantage over the Germans. An important part of this policy was to make use of the ample cover provided by crops and woods (this part of the Somme area was relatively undamaged by war at this stage) by conducting surprise raids on the enemy trenches. One example, on May 18, came about as Lieutenant A.W. Irvine of the 18th Battalion guessed that the garrison of a German outpost opposite was asleep. He collected his scouts, walked over in broad daylight, and captured 100 prisoners, 10 men and one officer, and their LMG. The rest of the day passed without incident, and no further action happened until the company