

Intelligence in Public Media

Monash's Masterpiece: The Battle of Hamel and the 93 minutes that Changed WWI

Peter FitzSimmons (CPI Group (UK) Ltd, 2018)

Reviewed by James Noone

If any Intelligence Community member is lucky enough to be invited to Friday night “Prayers” at the Australian embassy, definitely attend! The moniker “Prayers” is actually non-religious. According to Air Vice Marshall Alan Clements—former Dean of the Washington, DC Defense Attaché Corps—“Prayers” reflects the casual way Australians like to both entertain and socialize with mates. It is an opportunity, particularly after a hard week’s work, to relax, meet new friends, share tall stories and learn from each other. You will almost certainly enjoy an evening of genuine “Mate-ship” with our Aussie cousins, and perhaps a frothy libation or two. During the evening, the “Hamel” protocols and General Sir John Monash will be reverently invoked. Modern Australian military officers invariably mention, with more than a bit of pride, that the WWI Battle of Hamel^a in France was the first (and only) time US forces have served under the direct command of an Australian General in a combat zone. This is quite true, but there is so much more of significance about Sir John.

Monash was a master military tactician. He eschewed the horrific infantry casualties resulting from en masse assaults across “No Man’s Land.” His synchronization of new combat technologies such as biplanes, tanks, and radios revolutionized warfare and minimized military casualties. Logistically, he was the first to airdrop resupply to advancing troops and “let the tanks do the heavy lifting” when pushing loads of ammunition, medical supplies, and food forward in a combat zone.

Of note for *Studies in Intelligence* readers is Monash’s elaborate intelligence deception plans to cover the advance of his tanks without warning the enemy. Monash also understood the importance that foreign language fluency and cultural awareness had on the interrogation of German prisoners. Yet, his greatest intelligence innovations also involved the exploitation of new technologies and techniques. “By the aid of sound ranging devices and spotting from the air of gun flashes, and the

aerial photographs we took every day, it was possible to locate the positions of a great number of enemy (artillery) batteries.” In addition, sound ranging was a new technique which involved positioning army monitors at various angles and distances from the front lines and then measuring the time it took for the sound of the German artillery blasts to reach each point. Cross-referencing this information enabled accurate triangulation of the enemy’s artillery positions.

Peter FitzSimmons’s account is enlivened by colorful Australian soldiers (nicknamed “diggers”), like the seemingly crazy, yet audaciously heroic Sergeant “Two Guns” Harry Dalziel. I also found myself fixated on the meandering, yet I knew inevitable, march of the US doughboys toward their first blooding in the trenches of WWI. This included Monash’s integration of American combat troops at Hamel in defiance of orders from the legendary General Black Jack Pershing. Pershing is one of only two Americans to ever reach the 5-star rank. Happily, Monash judiciously used the green American troops since he valued the doughboys’ lives as much as he did those of his own beloved “diggers”.

Monash’s Masterpiece is clearly written from the Australian perspective and some of it delves in Aussie political bickering that may be difficult for American audiences to follow. Yet the insights it provides on Monash’s innovative use of emerging technologies to provide both a tactical combat and intelligence advantage are totally relevant to today’s intelligence environment.

Readers not familiar with WWI, might consider watching one or both of two movies about the war that have recently been produced. One is New Zealander Peter Jackson’s documentary “They Shall Not Grow Old,” film put together with WWI camera footage (cleaned up and colorized) and oral history interviews of war veterans recorded decades ago. The other is the 2019 Oscar-nominated movie “1917.”

The reviewer: Jim Noone is a retired senior DIA officer.

a. The Australians pronounce this French town to rhyme with “Camel.” In French, it is pronounced “Ah’-mel”

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