



The
Simpson
Prize

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SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 students

2019 Winner

Tasmania

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To what extent could 1918 be considered a year of victory for Australia and its people?

1918 is often remembered by the contemporary Australian public as ‘a year of victory’. While this is an accurate description of the Australian Corps’ involvement in the Great War, it overlooks the suffering endured by our fellow Australians. The military victories of 1918 include the battles of Hamel and Amiens, both of which were greatly impacted by General Sir John Monash. Monash’s ingenious battle plans were renowned for their precise calculations and comprehensive preparations which fully deserve to be remembered by Australians today. These victories had a profound emotional effect on both the Australian and German soldiers, which further supports the view that 1918 was a year of victory as this benefitted Australia. While these factors provide compelling weight to the victorious year’s perspective, it neglects the suffering of the Australian soldiers as well as their families in Australia. There were over twelve thousand Australian casualties in 1918; while this is significantly less than the antecedent years of the war, it is still an immense statistic. Evidently, the war experience for countless Australians was an awful one, and we see this through letters from the soldiers and commanders as well as newspaper articles of that time.

An undeniable argument supporting 1918 as ‘a year of victory’ is the military advances that General Sir John Monash devised and orchestrated. Monash was promoted to Australian Corps Commander in May 1918 and gained the respect of other high ranking military personnel through his methodical and calculated tactics.¹ These strategies combined the efforts of artillery, infantry, aircraft and tanks and utilised physics, maths and psychology to achieve the desired result. Monash led numerous Australian battles during 1918, most notably those of Hamel and Amiens. Hamel, which was fought on the 4th of July 1918, is remembered as the paradigm of a successful battle. It was over within ninety-three minutes, which is a testament to Monash’s comprehensive planning as it was projected to last ninety minutes. The 8th of August 1918 saw the Battle of Amiens - known by the Germans as ‘der schwarze Tag’ (the black

¹ Serle, G., *John Monash*, Griffin Press, South Australia, 1985

day).² The Battle of Amiens began the Hundred Days Offensive, which ultimately ended the First World War (See Appendix A). It was the tactics used in these battles that ensure they stand out from others.

An example of Monash's ingenuitive tactics implemented in 1918 is the new procedures used to supply ammunition. Monash mentions in his book *'The Australian Victories in France in 1918'* that casualties among ammunition suppliers were substantial.³ He relates how the task of carrying a single ammunition box containing one thousand rounds took two men and a journey of over four kilometres one way. This amount of ammunition would last a machine gun on the front line just five minutes. The discrepancy in effort and result prompted Monash to find a more efficient way to supply ammunition. With significant input from Captain Lawrence Wackett⁴, he revolutionised ammunition supply procedures. The two men conceived a plan for the distribution of ammunition to be done by aeroplane. The aeroplanes available for use already had bomb releasing racks and levers that could easily be adapted to hold ammunition, so fitting these planes with ammunition instead of bombs was logical. Calculations of the weight of the ammunition against the distance from the ground and the speed of the plane were used to provide the logistics of these drops. This resupply tactic premiered at Hamel and was one of the various facets that brought it international acclaim⁵ and altered the attitude of multiple belligerents.

The victories of 1918 permeated the Australian Corps across Europe and inspired them to maintain their fighting spirit, despite the toll that four years of war had taken. Hamel's outstanding reputation affected both the Australian and German service personnel. It induced a sense of fear of the Australians in the Germans, and a feeling of invincibility in the Australians.⁶ On the 8th of November 1918, Monash wrote, *"Its success converted the whole thoughts of the Allies from an attitude of pure defensive to an attitude of offensive ...The psychological effect of the battle of Hamel was electric and startling."*⁷ This psychological shift within the combatants characterises the victorious nature of 1918. Events chronicled

² AWM ART03022, *8th August, 1918*, 1918-19, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ART03022> (See Appendix A)

³ Monash, J., *Australian Victories in France in 1918*, Black Inc, reprinted 2015

⁴ FitzSimons, P., *Monash's Masterpiece*, Hachette Australia, Sydney, 2018

⁵ Dando-Collins, S., *Heroes of Hamel*, Penguin Random House, North Sydney, 2018

⁶ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Monash and Me*, 2018

⁷ Monash, J., *War Letters of General Monash*, Black Inc, Melbourne, reprinted 2015

in a 1918 *The Mercury* piece entitled ‘Australian’s Fighting Spirit’ from the 14th of August epitomises this shift in attitude. The article recounts a true story of an unnamed Australian soldier who captured a party of German bombers. The Germans had reached the Australian trench and were seconds away from attacking when the soldier came up to them, pointed to the firestep and said “Put those bombs down. Put them down. Put them down,”⁸ increasing in emphasis each time. The Germans obeyed his orders, but not because of his words. They listened instead to his tone and his attitude. The Germans surrendered as prisoners just moments after arriving. This interaction between the Australian soldier and the German bombing party demonstrates Monash’s perception of the changed atmosphere to the Australians’ advantage. Evidently, both this soldier and the German bombers had been impacted by this psychological shift. It is likely that the Germans involved had been told of the fierce and formidable Australians, and the Australian was aware of his image. Both parties understood the Battle of Hamel’s effect on the psychological facet of the war. This interaction shows how the attitude shift in both the Germans and Australians contributed to Australia’s year of victory. However, 1918 was not a flawless year.

Despite the year’s unprecedented victories and the raised spirits of the Australians, labelling 1918 as a ‘year of victory’ for Australia and its people neglects the suffering of the Australians at home and abroad. According to ‘*The Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918*’, the AIF suffered 12,553 battle casualties in 1918.⁹ Although it could be argued that this statistic pales in comparison to the anguish of 1915, 1916 and 1917, the immense casualties of the Great War’s final year should never be discounted. These battlefield casualties changed the lives of communities all over Australia. In the common occurrence that a soldier could not be confirmed dead or alive, a letter was sent to their family stating that they were *missing in action* (See Appendix B).¹⁰ This uncertainty ruined the lives of many families in Australia as they never found solace, nor were they able to properly commemorate their loss. By 1918,

⁸ The Mercury, ‘*Australian’s Fighting Spirit*’, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article11405248>

⁹ Australian War Memorial, ‘*The Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918*’, Melbourne, 1938-43, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416843>

¹⁰ Elkins, A., *No Known Grave*, Wartime: Official Magazine of the Australian War Memorial, no. 23, 2003, <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/publications/wartime/23/no-known-grave>

Australia's supply of new recruits was steadily declining.¹¹ There were just 28,883 Australian recruits in 1918, less than seven percent of all Australian enlistments during the Great War. This was not simply because the most eligible soldiers had already enlisted. When injured soldiers returned to Australia from the war, it abruptly revealed the reality of contemporary warfare to any possible recruits. The Great War was suddenly not the adventure of a lifetime that it had been advertised as being. One soldier who personally learnt this lesson was Corporal Arthur Thomas.

The communication between Corporal Thomas and his family paints a confronting picture of the suffering endured by Australians in 1918. He wrote on the 20th of March 1918,

"[I]t was awful the uncanny feeling of death eating at ones entrails and the gasping of the men trudging behind you, the thunder of the shells, & the fires from the dumps showing ghostly through the gas smoke ... two men died from the gassing, weak hearts you see, poor devils it is terrible & the horror of it; yet we all had to go up again the next night & carry on as usual."¹²

This excerpt from the letter gives a compelling account of the suffering in what is considered a year of victory. Corporal Thomas sent regular letters to his family from the time he embarked for the war in October 1915 until the day before his death in June 1918. An analysis of these letters shows his turbulent emotional journey during the war. He expressed profound excitement about the war in November 1915 when he wrote "*We have had a glorious trip and I will be sorry when it's over... there are some splendid chaps abroad*". However, by 1918 he writes of his dissatisfaction with the treatment of his comrades and the way that he was injured to death. His final letter was written on the 7th of June 1918. This letter, written on the front line, describes his excitement to see his sister. He relates how he will be on leave soon and promises to make the most of their time together in England. He finishes the letter with "*I won't be long now ... I will write again soon old girl.*" He wrote this just one day before he was hit by an artillery shell and passed away. Arthur Thomas never saw his sister or family again. This devastating story

¹¹ Australian War Memorial, 1918: *Australians in France - Recruitment*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/recruitment>

¹² Letters from Corporal Arthur Thomas, dated October 1915 to June 1918. (See Appendix C) <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG0001095/>

epitomises the tragic nature of the war and its impact on families. It is a shame that as a nation we consider a year with this extent of suffering a year of victory.

The victories of the Australians in 1918 deserve ongoing national commemoration and pride, but this should not overshadow the remembrance of the anguish that our fellow Australians endured. The battles of 1918, including Hamel and Amiens, were victorious largely because of General Sir John Monash's battle techniques and preparations. His tactics were original and inventive and were ultimately what made 1918 strategically victorious. The victories had a substantial effect on the service personnel on both sides of the war. Despite the significance of this, the battle results are not a completely accurate representation of the year. The death toll and experiences of Australians in 1918 should serve as an eternal reminder that the year was also filled with tragedy and immense suffering. This should never be forgotten.

Lest we forget.

Appendix A - "8th August, 1918"



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART03022

This painting depicts the Battle of Amiens. The lines in the centre show the mass of Germans captured as prisoners and the machine on the right is a British tank. The Battle of Amiens caused over 27,000 German casualties in the first phase alone, which significantly lowered the morale of the German troops.

Appendix B - Official record of Private William Tedford

A.I.F. 47th Btn	TEDFORD 3233
	U.S. 3253? B.C.
<u>"M. 5-4-18"</u>	
Killed in action previously reported Missing 5-4-18	
Cert. by A.I.F. Mors 1-11-18.	
London	B
5-11-18	

The official record of Private William Robert Tedford. This portrays a glimpse of the uncertainty that the families of the soldiers experienced. The date that Private Tedford was reported missing was seven months prior to him being confirmed dead. This means that his family were unsure of his wellbeing for all of this time.

Appendix C - Letters from Arthur Thomas

No. 84. 126
France.
20th. March 1918

Dear old Fred

Your very brilliant letter reached me on the 16th inst. dated 13th. Dec. no doubt it was longer in reaching ~~me~~ through my departure from Blightee to the front. Gad Fred if the numskulls you mention could only be forced into this bloody arena they would soon take a tumble & shake hands with themselves; I learn more in one of your intelligent letters & understand more perfectly the long long trail than any of the John Bull element can ever hope to convey to us miserable deluded mass of humanity; it is scandalous as Cecil wrote that a man is never allowed to cry a halt & ill or well must carry on until his heart bursts, we are worse off than horses. I am so glad you are keeping fit & looking after yourself I want to see you in the 'pink' when I return & we will have a good trip to New Zealand do the lakes & see the old coast again; this country is ruined for a very long time & I never want to see it again once I am free which the other night I thought would be certain. On Sunday the 17th. St Patricks day we went up to the reserves, cable sinking, about 400 men, we have to dig trenches 5ft. deep, then fill them up & get back at the double; it was moonlight & tolerably warm, the job usually lasts from 7p.m. to 12p.m. & all serene & calm too calm I thought, we were well out in the open, a communication trench lay about 300yds. to our left; suddenly crash & several big masher shells shrieked about our ears, then on they came thick & heavy & what was more disastrous ~~was~~ two sniffs & I was satisfied, nothing will upset troops quicker than the cruel deadly gas; I whipped out my helmet & jammed the rubber into my mouth, put the nose clip on & then speedily warned my platoon to put on their equipment, get rifles & follow me & keep well blocked up together. We have a lot of new men & they completely lost their heads, an easy thing to do when new but it is fatal in these big gassing stunts, a number of them put the hoods on & could not see through the glasses, then they took them off, so I had to risk everything & yell out orders & help the poor excited humanity about me, of course I got a gut full but I didn't give a damn, my usual faith in things, however I got them moving & I made along the banks of the Yesser Canal at a steady walk, it was awful the uneasy

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL RCDIG0001095

No. 84. 127

feeling of death eating at ones entrails & the gasping of the men trudging behind you, the thunder of the shells, & the fires from the dumps showing ghastly through the gas smoke, a bluish vapour hanging like a pall over the canal. We were over an hour making for a crossing on the canal & what was my disgust & horror to find the bridge blown away by some chance shell, I did not hesitate a moment but just kept on through a veritable hell let loose; it was my job to get my men treated for gas, many of them starting to tumble about as though they were drunk & half a mile away, in a tunnel, was an A.M. Red Cross station; at last after what seemed an eternity we reached the hospital & each man very exhausted & fearfully windy were given a drink of ammonia which is supposed to have a beneficial effect; however two men died from the gassing, weak hearts you see, poor devils it is terrible & the horror of it; yet we all had to go up again the next night & carry on as usual; we have a six miles walk home every night but ride part of the way up on a light railway. We do a turn in the front line from the 26th. probably about thirty days, then we get very dirty & run down, all night duties & twenty hours on a post with equipment is very fatiguing; we are then supposed to have a spell away from this area & will then train hard for a stunt about July-August or so. I attended the 'quack' this morning & he marked me no duty, so as it has set in wet I will coal off to night & do my mail for I may not have the opportunity later on. I will get Blightee leave about May, plenty are going just now, but I have to be with the Battalion at least five months so as I have been three I will not have long to wait, so all is well I have thirty quid in my book, quite useful. Fancy Eva writes that Cecil has been taken for the Army although she paid all that money for him to learn the wireless & he is not half my age; if it is right it is cruel, although mind you he will get on, perhaps by the time he is trained all this rot will be over. I am afraid I am boring you but your poor ears are doubtless hardened by now to almost anything & yet one wouldn't be dead for something would they, by heavens Fred we come from a hardy line of ancestors, here am I forty years old on May 12th & still going strong & I haven't nursed myself at all, tis a damn shame that I am childless even for the poor Materns sake, I'll bet she would have liked us boys to have had some hairms. By the way have you dropped muzzes

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL RCDIG0001095

This excerpt from Arthur Thomas' 20th March 1918 letter to his family in Australia conveys the suffering of the Australian soldiers in a year in which they won so many battles. Arthur's letters demonstrate the Australian war experience in a way that battle results cannot.

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