



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



# SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2023 Winner | New South Wales

**Murphy Xi**

THE KING'S SCHOOL

## **How significant was Australia's contribution to the Allied military victory on the Western Front in 1918?**

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The Western Front was the primary theatre of warfare during the First World War (WWI). For most of the war, the trench warfare fought between the Germans and the Allies was a stalemate. Thus, whichever belligerent could break the stalemate was likely to achieve victory – which the Allies achieved in 1918, largely as a result of the entry of the United States of America alongside the failure of German efforts to break the stalemate (See: Appendix A).<sup>1</sup>

However, when contemplating factors in Allied victory like the Hundred Days Offensive, which was the successful counteroffensive to the failed German Spring Offensive, or even the Western Front more generally, the contributions of Australia are probably not the first to come to mind. Australia's contribution around 400 000 troops throughout the war<sup>2</sup> – a staggering c. 8% of the overall population at the time – is dwarfed by the 4 million troops deployed by the US as part of the 'selective service act' within only a year of combat.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the Australian national imagination, Gallipoli overshadows the Western Front as the predominant arena in which Australians saw battle. Yet despite the plausibility that US intervention made Allied victory a historical near-inevitability, Australia was highly significant in hastening the efficiency of Allied victory.

This essay firstly considers the numbers that Australia contributed to the Western Front, and in doing so, establishes that it had an impact to some extent; though not affecting the outcome of the war altogether. Additionally, this essay uncovers the strategic developments from General Sir John Monash, as a more crucial factor, securing significant battles that ensured Allied victory.

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Australia's numerical involvement in the Western Front, although useful to some extent, had little impact on the outcome of the war. Indeed, as the Australian War Memorial notes, from "a population

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<sup>1</sup> "The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial," [www.awm.gov.au](https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023), accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Scott, *THE OFFICIAL HISTORY of AUSTRALIA in the WAR of 1914-1918*, vol. XI (1936; repr., Naval & Military Press, 2017), 874.

<sup>3</sup> History.com Editors, "U.S. Congress Passes Selective Service Act," HISTORY, August 21, 2018, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-congress-passes-selective-service-act>.

of fewer than five million, 416,809 men enlisted”<sup>4</sup> of which “more than 60,000 were killed”.<sup>5</sup> This shows that, proportionally, despite a small population at the time, high numbers of Australians enlisted, overall representing 38.7% of the male population from ages 18 to 44.<sup>6</sup> These troops, once sent into Europe, prominently saw conflict on the Western Front, where the majority were injured or killed as a result of trench warfare. However, despite these staggering numbers from Australia, it was “never large enough to influence the outcome of the war by [itself]”,<sup>7</sup> numerically diminished by the weight of Britain and the United States. Indeed, while there were approximately 400,000 men that enlisted from Australia, it is diminished by the 4.7 million British troops,<sup>8</sup> which represented 66.4% of the Commonwealth’s personnel (See: Appendix B),<sup>9</sup> or the 4.8 million US troops that saw fighting at one point throughout the Great War.<sup>10</sup> With Australian and other Allies’ involvement, the war had grinded to a stalemate with seemingly little chance of being broken; thus, from a purely numerical standpoint, the troops provided by Australia were not as decisive as those provided by the US. From this perspective, the course of the war may have been identical regardless of Australian involvement.

However, more importantly, Australia, under the guidance of General Sir John Monash, pioneered critical strategies that significantly contributed to the outcome of WWI, especially when employed more broadly by the Allies. Generally known as “a brilliant tactician”,<sup>11</sup> Monash was particularly well-known for the idea of bombarding German lines with gas prior to an attack. By doing so, he only fired smoke shells on the day of the attack, confusing the Germans by thwarting their visibility and communication.<sup>12</sup> Due to the element of surprise, the Germans often did not know Monash was approaching, ensuring they were relatively unprepared for rapid attacks. Indeed, Monash’s close-quarters combat was largely effective in many situations, like the First Battle of the Somme where the Allies took six weeks to advance three miles – unheard of at the time.<sup>13</sup> Another strategy

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<sup>4</sup> Australian War Memorial, “First World War 1914–18 | the Australian War Memorial,” Awm.gov.au (Australian War Memorial, 2016), <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Albert J. Mullett, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, vol. 12 (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1919).

<sup>7</sup> Rhys Crawley, “Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum: Contextualising Australia’s Military Effort during the First World War,” *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 64–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461x.2014.994540>.

<sup>8</sup> “Some British Army Statistics of the Great War,” The Long, Long Trail, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/some-british-army-statistics-of-the-great-war/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the First World War*, Google Books (Taylor & Francis, 2017), <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=lzEIDwAAQBAJ>.

<sup>10</sup> History.com Editors, “U.S. Entry into World War I,” HISTORY (A&E Television Networks, April 6, 2017), <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/u-s-entry-into-world-war-i-1>.

<sup>11</sup> Australian War Memorial, “1918: Australians in France - General Sir John Monash | the Australian War Memorial,” Awm.gov.au, 2016, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/people/genmonash>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Peter FitzSimons, “How Australian General John Monash’s Meticulous Battle Plan Helped Win World War I,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2018,

known as 'peaceful penetration,' which involved troops gradually capturing sections of the German front line,<sup>14</sup> was pioneered by Monash as a response to the 1918 German Spring Offensive. By capturing German prisoners in small pockets along the front line, this strategy steadily advanced the Allied front line, and was deployed by Australians in the battles at Amiens, Hazebrouck and Hébuterne.<sup>15</sup> This culminated in three miles added to the Allied front by 8th July, seizing isolated German positions with surprise attack. Hence, the strategies and tactics implemented by Australia, which surprised the Germans with both speed and subtlety, allowed for small but notable gains for the Allies on the Western Front.<sup>16</sup>

However, when implemented more broadly, such strategies had even more success. Indeed, Monash's strategies were deployed not only by Australian troops, but by American and British forces as well in the Hundred Days Offensive, breaching the Hindenburg Line after a mere 56 hour bombardment.<sup>17</sup> Being the last and strongest of the German lines of defence, the Hindenburg Line was filled with three secure trench systems which would significantly shift the tide of the war if captured, allowing the Allies to march further onward. Indeed, as a German army ever-low on morale dug in for another battle of attrition, the Allies charged forward with speed and surprise, overwhelming the German defence and capturing the defence system within four days.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps, if the Allies didn't charge with the speed that Monash advocated for, this battle would have manifested in another standoff, grinding the Allied offensive to a halt. However, with such Australian strategies being employed widely to a large number of troops, the Allies were able to coordinate and ultimately drive the Germans to defeat.

Furthermore, Australia did win battles in significant positions throughout WWI on the Western Front, especially during the Hundred Days Offensive, which ensured the eventuation of Allied victory. The Allies' Hundred Days Offensive was a counteroffensive to the failed German Spring Offensive, being attributed as the series of battles that would lead to victory. Indeed, Australia as a unit played

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<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/how-australian-general-john-monash-s-meticulous-battle-plan-helped-win-world-war-i-20180417-p4za5c.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "Peaceful Penetration," [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au), accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E84298>.

<sup>15</sup> Australian War Memorial, "1918 Australians in France: Peaceful Penetration | Australian War Memorial," [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au), January 30, 2020, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/peacepen>.

<sup>16</sup> Peter FitzSimons, "How Australian General John Monash's Meticulous Battle Plan Helped Win World War I," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/how-australian-general-john-monash-s-meticulous-battle-plan-helped-win-world-war-i-20180417-p4za5c.html>.

<sup>17</sup> History.com Editors, "Allied Forces Break through the Hindenburg Line," *HISTORY*, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/allied-forces-break-through-the-hindenburg-line>.

<sup>18</sup> Australian War Memorial, "The Hindenburg Line: Breaking the Hindenburg Line | the Australian War Memorial," [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au), accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/hindenburg>.

undeniably key roles in certain strategic battles that were critical to ensuring a successful offensive, the first of which was the Battle of Hamel. On 4 July 1918, under the command of John Monash, 8000 Australian soldiers, along with 1000 US backups attacked Hamel. Regarded as a model of innovative tactics, the Australian army had taken down all of their objectives in 93 minutes, advancing two kilometres on the six-kilometre front.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the speed of the Australian advance is reminiscent of Monash's tactics – close-quarters rapid attacks, allowing for maximum speed. As the official Australian war historian Charles Bean noted, Monash was “more effective the higher he rose within the Army”,<sup>20</sup> being able to “use his skill for meticulous planning and organisation”.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Hamel, a tactical Australian-led victory for the Allies meant that they possessed an important foothold around the Somme.<sup>22</sup>

The capture of Hamel allowed for the Allies to further pursue an offensive on Amiens. Much similar to Hamel, the tactics employed by Monash meant that Australian troops could pursue mobile warfare as opposed to stagnant (trench) warfare, winning battles much quicker with less casualties.<sup>23</sup> With utter secrecy, a combined Australian, British, French and Canadian forces captured their targets with such speed that many German soldiers were still eating breakfast.<sup>24</sup> Through the use of peaceful penetration which preceded the infantry, Monash swept the German army with a crushing blow within 93 minutes of fighting, where 12 000 soldiers surrendered with most of their equipment still intact,<sup>25</sup> and 30 000 soldiers reportedly ‘missing’ on the first day.<sup>26</sup> This impressed British G.H.Q, which circulated Monash's tactics as part of a staff brochure – where military commanders would employ his tactics more broadly.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the Australian forces enjoyed further victories with similar tactics at Mont St Quentin, which is often considered to be the AIF's finest achievement.<sup>28</sup> Attacking

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<sup>19</sup> DVA Department of Veterans' Affairs), “Battle of Hamel 4 July 1918 | Anzac Portal,” [anzacportal.dva.gov.au](https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au), January 14, 2020,

<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/western-front/battle-of-hamel>.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Robertson, “Smart Soldier: On Preparing for Conflict – Lessons from History, General Sir John Monash and Great Power Conflict in World War 1 | the Cove,” The Cove, June 2, 2022, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/smart-soldier-preparing-conflict-lessons-history-general-sir-john-monash-and-gr-eat-power-conflict-world-war-1>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Claire Hunter, “Remembering the Battle of Hamel | the Australian War Memorial,” [Awm.gov.au](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-battle-of-hamel-100-years-on), July 6, 2018, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-battle-of-hamel-100-years-on>.

<sup>23</sup> Australian War Memorial, “The Battle of Amiens: 8 August 1918 | the Australian War Memorial,” [Awm.gov.au](https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/amiens), 2016, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/amiens>.

<sup>24</sup> A. Kearsey, *Battle of Amiens 1918, and Operations 8th August-3rd September, 1918.*, Google Books (Naval & Military Press, 2004), 15–16, <https://books.google.com.au/books?vid=ISBN9781845740979>.

<sup>25</sup> Dan Moorhouse, “Battle of Amiens,” [Schoolshistory.org.uk](https://schoolshistory.org.uk), accessed September 30, 2022, <https://schoolshistory.org.uk/topics/world-history/first-world-war/battle-of-amiens/>.

<sup>26</sup> John Hughes-Wilson, *A History of the First World War in 100 Objects* (Cassell Illustrated, 2014), 18.

<sup>27</sup> John Terraine, “The Battle of Amiens | History Today,” [www.historytoday.com](https://www.historytoday.com), August 1958, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/battle-amiens>.

<sup>28</sup> Australian War Memorial, “Mont St Quentin and Péronne: Australian Victories | the Australian War Memorial,” [Awm.gov.au](https://www.awm.gov.au), 2016, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/mtstquentin>.

the Germans from an unexpected northwest angle, the 2nd Australian Division broke through the German lines all the way to Péronne, and despite a German counter-attack, was able to retake all ground lost. Despite its location being perfectly suited for German defenders – many of whom thought was impregnable<sup>29</sup> – Monash outmanoeuvred the infamous 2nd German Guard Division and broke “what remained of their courage”.<sup>30</sup> Thus, whilst Australia could not contribute the sheer manpower that the US could to the Hundred Days offensive, Australia secured multiple military victories that would propel the Allies to win the war on the Western Front.

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Perhaps, the Allies already accepted imminent victory over the Germans nearing the end of 1918, drawing upon the industrial strength of the US. However, whilst it was believed by most generals that the war would bleed into 1919, Australia's successes in the Hundred Days Offensive would accelerate Allied victory as they secured tactical positions in a short amount of time. While it is hard to determine the significance of Australia's numerical contribution to Allied victory, the impacts of Australia's tactical decision-making and strategic military victories were indeed highly noteworthy. Therefore, this essay concludes that Australia's contribution to Allied military victory on the Western Front was significant.

*Word Count: 1499*

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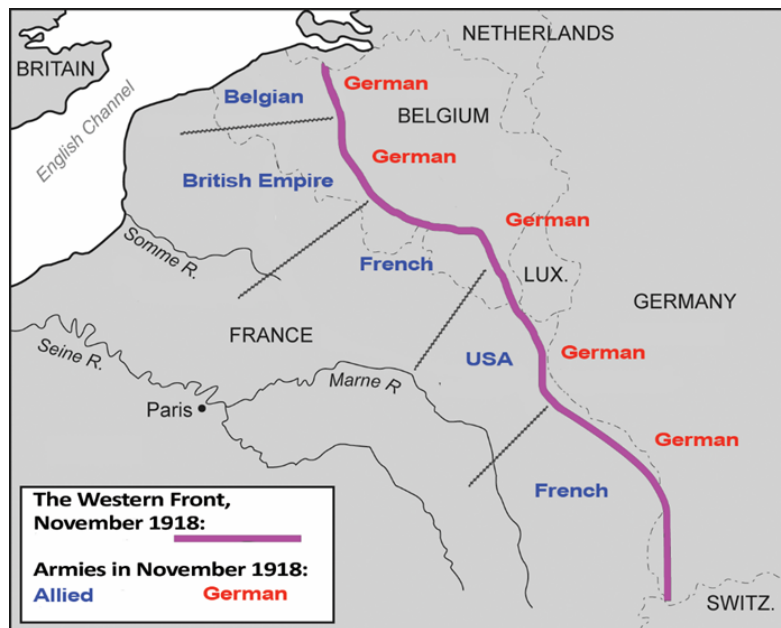
<sup>29</sup> “Mont St. Quentin,” Sir John Monash Centre, August 29, 2018, <https://sjmc.gov.au/mont-st-quentin/>.

<sup>30</sup> Hughes-Wilson, *op cit.*, p. 18



## Appendices

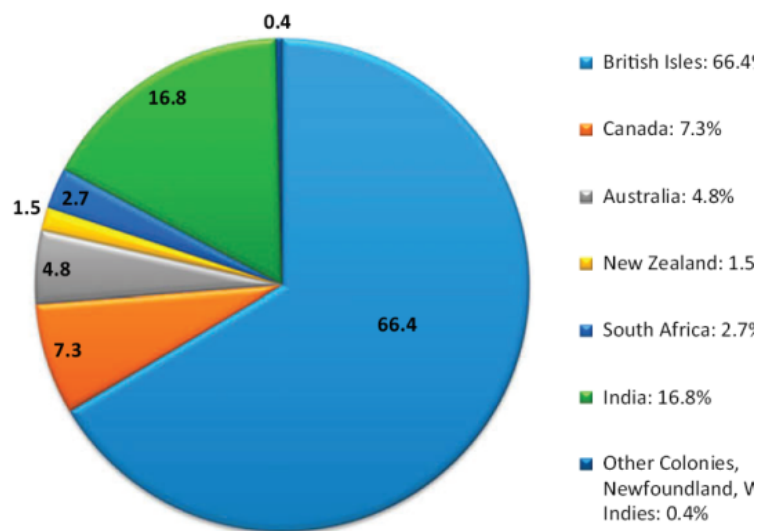
### Appendix A



*Map showing opposing armies on the Western Front in November 1918*

**Photo: Australian War Memorial**

### Appendix B



*Pie chart of Allied enlistments (percentage per country)*

**Photo: Ashley Jackson, The British Empire and the First World War**

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