

Montbrehain, 5 October 1918: A case study in tactical operations and battlefield integration

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Abstract

Popular accounts of the battle of Montbrehain emphasise the prowess of the Australians but question the necessity of fighting what was the final battle for the AIF in the First World War. This study reassesses Montbrehain by establishing the larger tactical context for the operation, the integration of battlefield weapons systems, and the impact of the battle for future offensives. Montbrehain showed the sophistication and proficiency of planning and execution for the Australian Corps and the state of coordination for artillery, tanks, machine-guns, and other supporting arms. Montbrehain was a necessary battle in securing the Hindenburg and Beaurevoir Lines and was part of the larger campaign that led to the allied victory in 1918.

Introduction

At 6.05 am on 5 October 1918, Australian troops of the 6th Brigade attacked Montbrehain, a small village to the east of the Hindenburg and Beaurevoir defences. Their objective was a line running to the north and east of the town, which would secure the newly won Beaurevoir Line and act as a springboard for further attacks. German resistance was fierce, and the Australians took heavy casualties as they advanced. Within three hours, the men of the 21st and 24th Battalions, as well as the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, were on their objectives, though as they tried to consolidate their positions they were subjected to heavy shelling and uncoordinated counter-attacks from three directions. At one point, the Australians were pushed nearly 400 yards (360 metres) back through Montbrehain and many posts were driven in to the north

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of the town. By mid-afternoon, the front had stabilised at the boundaries of Montbrehain, short of the objective line to the north. The Australians suffered nearly 400 casualties while inflicting hundreds of losses upon the enemy and capturing over 600 prisoners.

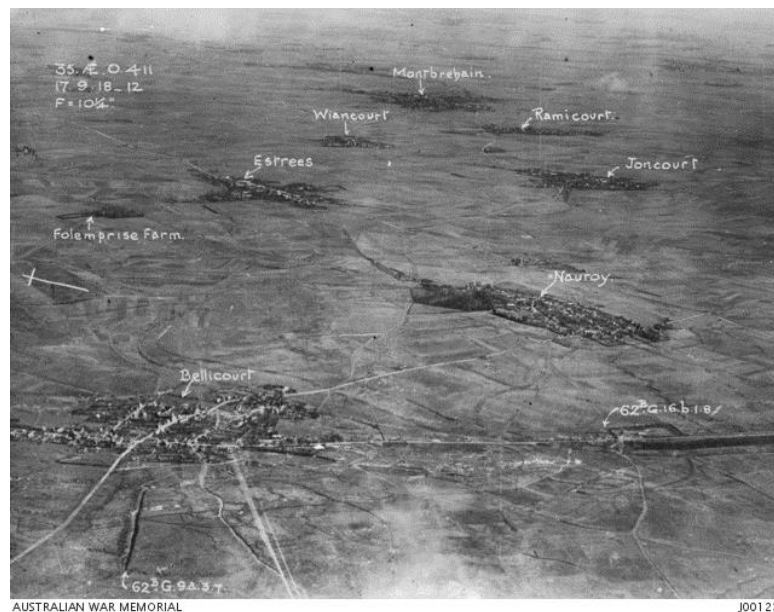


Image 1: Aerial view of Montbrehain and surrounding terrain (AWM J00123).

This is the bare outline of the battle of Montbrehain, the last infantry action the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) fought on the Western Front in the First World War. While the battle itself was covered in both contemporary and current accounts, many questions remained about how the battle was planned and fought. Its place as the last action by the Australians sometimes leaves Montbrehain orphaned and unconnected to the wider accounts of the Hindenburg Line operation and subsequent actions by the British Fourth Army. This paper will address three issues about Montbrehain: the wider tactical context in which 6th Brigade attacked, the integration of battlefield arms, and the impact of the battle on subsequent operations. Providing some answers for

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these questions will enhance the understanding of the battle and place it within the framework of the war winning offensives of 1918 that ended in victory for the Allied armies.

Historical context

The battle of Montbrehain was well covered in Volume VI of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918* by Charles Edwin Woodrow (C.E.W.) Bean and by the unit histories of the 24th Battalion, 21st Battalion and the 6th Machine Gun Company.¹ Bean served as an official war correspondent for the AIF during the war and later edited the 12 volumes of the official history. His account focused on the personal vignettes of individuals and small unit leaders. To understand the enemy point of view, Bean sent an officer to German archives after the war with lists of questions to answer. Using these and Australian intelligence summaries, Bean provided the German order of battle and their assessment of the fighting. The unit histories were usually written by a serving member shortly after the war, and provided a basic account of participation in the battle and personal anecdotes. The unit histories were not intended to analyse the larger operational campaign or provide comparative analysis with other battles or units beyond a basic assessment of difficulty.

Because Montbrehain was the last action fought by the Australians on the Western Front, it received mentions in several popular accounts of Australians in the First World War. Peter Burness provided a basic overview

¹ C.E.W. Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied Offensive, 1918*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson LTD., 1942; W. A. Carne, *In good company : an account of the 6th Machine Gun Company A.I.F. in search of peace 1915-19*, Melbourne, 6th Machine Gun Company (A.I.F.) Association, F.J. Hilton & Co., 1937; W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond: authorised history of the Twenty-fourth Battalion A.I.F.*, Melbourne, 24th Battalion Association, 1920; A.R. McNeil, *The story of the Twenty-First: being the official history of the 21st Battalion, A.I.F.* , Melbourne, 21st Battalion Association, 1920.

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and tactical analysis of the battle for contemporary readers while detailing the organisation of the units involved and expanding on the Australian experience with Montbrehain after the attack.² More recent works built upon this template. Les Carlyon's *The Great War* was written in the style of Bean, with personal anecdotes and a view of the battle from the men who were on the front line.³ Peter Pedersen's guidebook *Anzacs on the Western Front* analysed the tactics and terrain. The reader was guided to the key scenes of the battle and their significance, and invited to walk the actual battlefield.⁴

All of the modern accounts draw heavily upon Bean's account in the official history, noting the prowess of the Australians, that they took over 600 prisoners from ten regiments, and that it was the last action of the AIF. They also recognised the heavy cost and asked if the battle were necessary. The personal cost is shown through some amplifying detail of those who fought at the battle, such as the story of Captains John Fletcher and John Mahoney of the 24th Battalion. They were close friends before the war and enlisted together, serving on Gallipoli and at the Western Front. The writers linked their Gallipoli service, rise to officer rank, and deaths within an hour of each other to provide a bookend to the beginning and end of Australian service and a commentary of the perceived futility of the First World War.

Most of the literature on Montbrehain focuses on the battle in isolation, with some introductory material on the breaking of the Hindenburg Line from 29 September to 4 October. Pedersen and Burness mention some of the tactical cooperation between tanks, infantry, machine-guns and other battlefield

² Peter Burness, "The last shots: the capture of Montbrehain, 1918", *Wartime: official magazine of the Australian War Memorial*, 1998:4, 1998, pp. 3-7.

³ Les Carlyon, *The Great War*, Sydney, Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd, 2006.

⁴ Peter Pedersen and Chris Roberts, *ANZACS on the Western Front: the Australian War Memorial battlefield guide*, Richmond, Vic., John Wiley & Sons Australia, 2011.

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systems, but given the scope of their works, neither does so systematically.

While all of the accounts ask if the battle was necessary, the writers limit themselves to judging this from Montbrehain alone, instead of in the context of larger operations. Using the accounts of Montbrehain as a starting point, this paper will address the context, execution, and impact of the battle.

Allied planning and order of battle

By July 1918, the German spring offensives had ended. Smaller scale counter-attacks such as the action at Hamel on 4 July progressed to the larger French battles at Soissons from 18 to 22 July and were aimed at straightening the line before the Allies launched their own counter-offensive. On 7 August, the Germans evacuated some of their advanced positions and cancelled their Hagen offensive, which had been conceived as the final war winning operation. They now stood on the strategic defensive. The battle of Amiens from 8 to 11 August marked the beginning of the British offensive north of the Somme, and was a large scale success, advancing 12 miles on a large front and transitioning to semi-open warfare that brought the allies to the Hindenburg Line by the end of September. The British Fourth Army had been in the van of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) advance, with the Australian Corps as one its main fighting formations.

By late September 1918, Fourth Army was prepared to assault the Hindenburg Line, centred on the town of Bellicourt and the St. Quentin Canal in their sector. About 2,000 yards east was the Hindenburg Support Line and behind that, the Beaufort Line, which was the final prepared German defensive position. The objective was to break through the three defensive lines and enter unfortified territory. Fourth Army, including the Australian Corps, attacked on 29 September, and by 1 October they had broken through the

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Hindenburg Line and Hindenburg Support Lines and were preparing to assault the Beaufort line. The offensive continued on 3 October, breaching the Beaufort Line in several places. Montbrehain was captured by the 46th British Division, but lost in a counter-attack, a situation by no means unusual during the advance. The 2nd Australian Division attacked the Beaufort Line using the 5th and 7th brigades, with the 6th Brigade in support. By the end of the day, the 22nd and 23rd battalions of the 6th Brigade were called up from reserve and in the line south of Beaufort.⁵ On 4 October 1918, the 6th brigade took over the division sector and conducted local attacks with the 22nd and 23rd battalions between Montbrehain and Beaufort. The 2nd Division was due for relief on 5 October, but their replacements, the II American Corps (consisting of the 27th and 30th American Divisions) would not be ready. Therefore the British Fourth Army Commander, General Sir Henry Rawlinson retained the Australians in the line for an additional day and ordered them to join in the attacks of the 5th.⁶

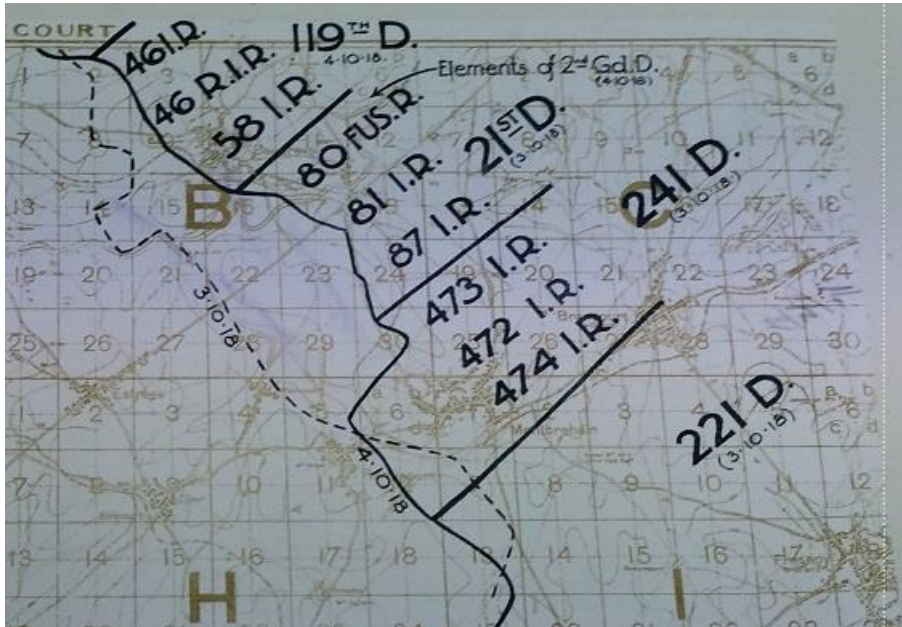
⁵ Report on operations of 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4, 23/6/38 Part 1.

⁶ Lt-Gen Sir John Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, Melbourne and Sydney, Lothian book publishing, 1923, pp. 277-278.

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Map 1: Situation 4 October 1918 showing the front line, Allied positions and suspected German units.

Source: AWM G5831.S65 Sheet 18.21.71.

Fourth Army planned an army-wide offensive on 5 October with attacks by the XIII, Australian, and IX Corps. XIII Corps would attack with the 25th British Division on a two brigade front to secure Beaurevoir and Poncheux.⁷ The Australian Corps would assault with the 6th Brigade of the 2nd Australian Division to capture Montbrehain. IX Corps would advance with the 3rd Brigade, 1st British Division, under the operational control of the 46th Division to push north-east of Sequehart and recapture Mannequin Hill, which overlooked Montbrehain to the south.⁸ These attacks were timed to start at 06.00 and 06.05 am. As part of the preparation, several divisional and corps boundaries were adjusted on the night of 4 October, requiring several reliefs to

⁷ Extracts from war diary of G.S. 25th Division, subperiod from 3rd to 6th October, 1918, AWM45, 23/82.

⁸ Extracts from war diary of H.Q. 3rd Infantry Brigade (1st Division) attached to 46th as line brigade from 3rd October and on right flank of Australian Corps, subperiod from 3rd to 5th October, 1918, AWM45, 23/93.

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ensure the assaulting units would be in position at the Jumping off Tape (JOT) at the proper time. The 2nd Division took over the positions in front of Montbrehain from the 46th Division, with the new corps boundary running south of the town.



Map 2: Operational graphics for the attacks on 5 October 1918.

Source: AWM map G5831.S65 Sheet 18.21.71.

Allied intelligence reports templated the 241st Division defending Montbrehain, with the 21st Division to the north and 221st Division to the south as of 6.00 pm on 4 October.⁹ Two other divisions, the 34th and 24th, were known to be in the sector. The actual German dispositions were slightly different, with the 241st in Montbrehain, the 21st Division to the north, the 34th

⁹ Second Australian Division intelligence summary no. 211, War Diary, 2nd Australian, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 1/44/39 Part 1.

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Division to the south and the 24th Division in support nearby at Brancourt. Most of the divisions had been in the line several times throughout fighting from August to October 1918, and were severely understrength. The 2nd Division intelligence summary noted that: "In the MONTBREHAIN sector units seem to be considerably intermingled and confused."¹⁰ After the battle, the Allies estimated that they had engaged approximately 1,500 Germans in and around the village.¹¹

The front-line positions around Montbrehain were beyond the Beaurevoir Line defences. However, the village was on a slight rise that overlooked the defences and several valleys to the east. This made the area key terrain in preventing the Germans from regaining their lines. The lack of men and fixed defences forced the Germans to adopt a strongpoint style of defence centred on machine-guns. To make up for shortages of manpower, they used the town of Montbrehain and natural obstacles such as farms, quarries, sunken roads and railway cuttings as fortified posts. There was also an increasing use of light artillery pieces such as the 7.7-centimetre *Feldkanone* in the direct fire role, particularly against tanks.¹²

The grouping of all the Australian divisions into a single corps gave it a level of cohesion and political access quite different from a British corps. In many ways, the Australian Corps functioned as a national army, and Billy Hughes, the Australian Prime Minister, intervened to ensure that the corps was to be sent into reserve to rebuild their numbers for the anticipated offensives of

¹⁰ Second Australian Division intelligence summary no. 212, War Diary, 2nd Division 6 October 1918, AWM4, 1/44/39 Part 1.

¹¹ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

¹² Montbrehain 5th Oct. 1918, German account of attack, AWM47, 111.05/1, pp. 11-13.

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1919.¹³ By 1 October 1918, the Australian Corps retained a single division, the 2nd, in line. The other four divisions were in corps and army reserve, though much of the other divisional artillery remained in place to support the 2nd Division in its operations beyond the Hindenburg Line. Three main considerations drove this relief. First, the corps had been heavily engaged since August 1918. Second, approximately 6,000 soldiers who had been serving since 1914 would be awarded two months home leave in Australia. Third, the infantry brigades were to be reorganised to a three-battalion establishment, to conform to the new British pattern.¹⁴ These factors meant that the Australian Corps required significant time for rest and refitting before they would be ready for further heavy action.

The 2nd Division filed into line on the night of 4 October with the 6th Brigade, having seen the least amount of fighting in the preceding week, in the trenches with orders to attack Montbrehain on 5 October. The 5th and 7th Brigades were in reserve. The 21st and 24th Battalions of the 6th Brigade had been in reserve during the Hindenburg Line battles and were therefore designated the primary assaulting units. The 22nd and 23rd battalions would hold defensive positions north of Montbrehain. Because this would leave the brigade with an inadequate number of battalions to conduct the attack, the 2nd Pioneer Battalion was placed under the orders of 6th Brigade. The pioneers were a divisional asset who were trained as infantry, but specialised in road building and other light engineering tasks. Montbrehain was the first time that they would fight as infantry. The 27th Battalion of the 7th Brigade and the 18th battalion of the 5th Brigade were held in reserve under the orders of the

¹³ Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied Offensive, 1918*, p. 1032, 1044.

¹⁴ Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, pp. 271–76.

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General Officer Commanding (GOC), 6th brigade.¹⁵ This was a common practice and gave the brigade commander greater flexibility and firepower. Attached to the 2nd Division for use in the battle were corps level assets, such as heavy artillery brigades, No. 3 Squadron Australian Flying Corps (AFC), and service troops, as well as a company of 12 Mark V tanks from the 16th British Tank Battalion.¹⁶ Brigade assets were also detailed to support the attack. The 6th Machine Gun Company allocated two Vickers Machine Guns to each battalion. Engineers of 6th Field Company laid out the JOT and guided troops into position, while the 6th Field Ambulance provided medical care and transport from the battlefield to the regimental aid post (RAP). The 6th Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery (ALTM) supported each battalion with a 3-inch Stokes mortar which was controlled by the battalion commander.

The order to disband a battalion in each brigade was received on 20 September. However the men of the 21st battalion (and six other battalions) refused to march out and be absorbed into the remaining battalions of their brigades, citing the cohesion and *esprit de corps* in their units.¹⁷ Instead, the C Company of the 21st battalion was broken up and divided among the remaining companies. Beyond the display of collective insubordination, the reshuffling brought the remaining companies closer to establishment strength.¹⁸ The 2nd Pioneer Battalion, however, remained on a four-company establishment. Though reasons were not explicitly given for this exception, the greater strength and specialised nature of the pioneers likely necessitated keeping the original establishment. The reduced number of companies would impact the plan that each battalion developed for the attack.

¹⁵ War diary, 2nd Division, 4 October 1918, AWM4 1/44/39 Part 1.

¹⁶ Australian Corps, Battle instructions series E, No. 24, 4 October 1918, AWM4 1/35/10 Part 1.

¹⁷ Officers and other ranks deputations, War diary, 21st Battalion, AWM4 23/38/37.

¹⁸ War diary, 21st Battalion 20-26 September 1918, AWM4 23/38/37.

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Table 1 shows the field returns of each unit prior to the battle. These numbers need some qualification, as many men on the unit rolls were on leave, in schools, or on extra-regimental duty.

Table 1: Field returns 5 October 1918.*

unit	with unit	sick	detached	total
21st Battalion	27 / 461	0 / 5	8 / 133	35 / 599
24th Battalion	28 / 442	0 / 9	14 / 163	42 / 614
2nd Pioneer	25 / 708	0 / 0	9 / 172	34 / 880
18th Battalion	14 / 303	0 / 3	11 / 199	25 / 505
27th Battalion	18 / 322	0 / 0	12 / 166	30 / 488
6th ALTM	2 / 43	0 / 0	1 / 3	3 / 46

* Figures are given separately for officers / other ranks. Authorised establishment was 44 officers and 901 other ranks per battalion.

Source: Second Australian Division, strength return as at noon 5.10.18, War diary, Administrative Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division, AWM4, 1/45/35 Part 1.

The nominal fighting strength was further reduced by men left behind as a cadre for rebuilding if the unit suffered heavy casualties. This was specified in *S.S. 135.J the training and employment of divisions, 1918* and further operational directives.¹⁹ The cadre was approximately 100 men in October 1918, although this would have included some of the men on leave and in schools. After these adjustments and other detachments, the infantry battalions of 6th Brigade had a fighting strength of about 20 officers and 300 men, with about 500 men available for the pioneers. The 27th and 18th battalions had been fighting for most of the week and only had about 10 officers and 180 men each. Knowing exactly how many men actually attacked Montbrehain is therefore difficult to

¹⁹ General Staff, *S.S. 135.J the training and employment of divisions, 1918*, France, army printing and stationery services, January 1918, pp. 72-73; Organization of the infantry battalion, 22 June 1918, AWM27 303/174.

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establish; however, companies of approximately 80 to 100 men were typical. For example, B Company 21st Battalion reported approximately 90 men taking part in the assault.²⁰

Each company had four platoons, with each platoon having three sections. There was usually one double Lewis gun section, with two guns and two rifle sections in each platoon. Fifty per cent of riflemen were trained in bombs or rifle grenades, and each man carried four bombs for the attack. Tactical experimentation showed that one leader and six men for a rifle section and one leader and ten men for a double Lewis gun section was the minimum number needed for tactical flexibility and employment.²¹ These instructions were guidelines only, with subordinate leaders possessing a degree of latitude in the organisation of their sections and platoons, as well as the minor tactics associated with deploying their units in battle.

Battle procedures

Commanders within the Australian Corps were well acquainted. Lieutenant General Sir John Monash had been the corps commander since 31 May 1918 and had previously commanded the 3rd Australian Division.²² Major General Charles Rosenthal was an artilleryman by training, but had previous infantry brigade and division command experience before being appointed GOC of the 2nd Division on 22 May 1918.²³ Brigadier John Robertson had a similar level of experience, having a year of brigade command before receiving

²⁰ Report on the operations carried out by the 24th Battalion during period October 2nd to October 6th 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

²¹ Organization of the infantry battalion, 22 June 1918, AWM27 303/174.

²² Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, pp. 6, 10.

²³ Ross Mallett, Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal, 12 January 2002, accessed 4 March 2014, <http://www.aif.adfa.edu.au:8888/Generals/rosenthal.html>.

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the 6th Brigade on 18 July 1918.²⁴ The 21st (Lieutenant Colonel Bernard Duggan) and 24th (Lieutenant Colonel William James) battalion commanders both had over a year of command.²⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Frederick William Godsby Annand had commanded the 2nd Pioneer Battalion since March 1916, though with several periods of convalescence from wounds.²⁶

This familiarity with each other and their positions meant that by 1918, the divisions and brigades in the Australian Corps had developed a sophisticated set of methods for fighting battles. Peter Pedersen's analysis of mission planning in the Australian Corps in 1918 used the current Australian Army definition of battle procedures to show how the cohesion and professionalism contributed to comprehensive and synchronised operations. Battle procedures consisted of four stages: warning orders, mission planning, operations orders, and movement. The warning order was an initial notice of attack that allowed subordinate units to begin their preparations. Mission planning worked out the details of the attack, including objectives, synchronisation of zero hour with flanking units, use of artillery and air support, and the necessary logistical details. Once the plan was finalised, units sent out formal operation orders that detailed what they were required to do. Movement by subordinate units occurred throughout the planning phases as needed in order to put them in position at the JOT at the right hour. As higher units such as corps and division worked through the procedures, their subordinate units would gain the information needed to conduct their own

²⁴ AWM, Brigadier General James Campbell Robertson, CB, CMG, DSO, VD, accessed 4 March 2014, http://www.awm.gov.au/units/people_16207.asp.

²⁵ AWM, Lieutenant Colonel Bernard Oscar Charles Duggan, DSO, accessed 16 June 2014, http://www.awm.gov.au/units/people_12445.asp; AWM, Colonel William Edward James, DSO, VD, accessed 16 June 2014, http://www.awm.gov.au/units/people_1076250.asp.

²⁶ Statement of Service Frederick William Godsby Annand DSO, NAA, B2455, ANNAND F W G.

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battle procedures. Different units would therefore be at different stages of battle procedures at any given time, but were fully coordinated and ready to assault at zero hour.²⁷

Battle procedures allowed planning for the next battle while the current operation was still underway and enabled parallel action throughout the chain of command. Lower level commanders could conduct their own planning, supply their men and move them to the assembly areas, while more senior commanders finished the planning and disseminated the operations orders. The staff officers at each level were critical counterparts to their commander, turning general instructions into reality and performing much of the coordination upon which a complex operation depended. Without accurate and comprehensive staff work, Montbrehain could not have been attempted, let alone won.²⁸ Ideally, the multiple levels of planning and execution would shorten the planning time for operations while ensuring that the units were in the right place at the right time, briefed on their mission, fed and rested before battle, and that the supporting battlefield arms were in position.

Mission planning for Montbrehain began when the Australian Corps sent a warning order to the 2nd Division via wire at 9.00 am on 4 October. This order specified that the division would take over the line across from Montbrehain from the 46th Division that night.²⁹ The division in turn wired 6th Brigade, designating them as the formation that would take over the front line positions and that they were “required to attack and capture the village of

²⁷ Peter Pedersen, “Maintaining the advance: Monash, battle procedure and the Australian Corps in 1918” in Ekins, Ashley (ed.), *1918 Year of victory: The end of the Great War and the shaping of history*, Wollombi, NSW, Exisle Publishing Limited, 2010, pp. 130–34.

²⁸ Roger Lee, “The Australian staff: The forgotten men of the first AIF,” in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *1918 defining victory: proceedings of the Chief of Army’s history conference*, Canberra, Army History Unit, 1998, pp. 4–7.

²⁹ War diary, 2nd Division, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 1/44/39 Part 1.

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Montbrehain in morning of 5th October." By 10.35 am, units down to battalion level were notified of the attack and were able to begin their own battle procedures.³⁰

Montbrehain was ordered at the army and corps levels, but the major planning was undertaken at division and brigade headquarters. 2nd Division received the corps operation order by approximately 11 am. With this guidance, Major General Rosenthal met with Brigadier Robertson and gave his own general instructions for the attack, placing the 2nd Pioneer Battalion under 6th Brigade command for the operation. This was followed up at 1 pm by a brigade conference with the GOC, 2nd Division Artillery, and the British tank battalion commander to coordinate these two key support arms for the infantry. At 2 pm, Brigadier Robertson held a conference with the battalion commanders that worked out the final details of the attack.³¹ This delegation of mission planning was relatively new on the Western Front and was more appropriate to the faster tempo of operations of 1918.

Montbrehain was a deliberate attack, but one planned on relatively short notice. There was no divisional order for the attack; instead, instructions were sent by wire and the finer details specified in the brigade operations order.³² The delegation of detailed planning to brigade and battalion levels shortened the planning cycle at the risk of synchronisation and coordination. 6th Brigade published the operations order at 7.45 pm, and the battalions had issued their own by 9 pm.³³ This allowed ample time to secure ammunition, plot the approach march to the assembly area, and coordinate with the tanks, mortars

³⁰ War diary, 6th Brigade, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 23/6/38 Part 1.

³¹ War diary, 6th Brigade, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 23/6/38 Part 1.

³² War diary, 2nd Division, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 1/44/39 Part 1.

³³ Battalion order no 171, War diary, 21st Battalion, 4 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38; Operation order no 119, War diary, 24th Battalion, 4 October 1918, AWM4 23/41/37.

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and machine-guns. The battalions also sent liaisons to adjacent units and guides to the engineers who laid the JOT. While such coordination was often hidden from accounts of battle, the lack of it threatened the battlefield integration and synchronisation of effort upon which a successful attack depended. Both the 21st and 24th Battalion orders included all the necessary coordination in a concise and well organised format, while the 2nd Pioneer Battalion orders, reflecting their relative inexperience as infantry, were much more informal.³⁴

The 21st and 24th Battalions had a shorter approach march, for they were already in support north of Montbrehain. The 2nd Pioneer spent most of the day doing their normal engineering duties and had to be concentrated and then put into the line to man the 2nd Division's sector. The preparation paid off, because all of the infantry units were in position at the JOT prior to zero hour. The battalion headquarters for the 24th, 21st and 2nd Battalions were co-located on the east side of Joncourt, with cable laid back to brigade headquarters located near the town of Nauroy. This facilitated communication during the battle at the risk of decapitating the command structure if it were shelled.

The artillery battle procedures for Montbrehain were developed separately, but in coordination with the infantry and tanks. Artillery support had evolved significantly since 1916: guns, ammunition, and most of all technical and tactical procedures were developed through costly trial and error to support the infantry. While the full scope of improvement is too detailed to discuss in the context of Montbrehain, the use of a creeping barrage to suppress the enemy, while heavy artillery bombarded rear areas and laid down counter-battery fire, was now standard practice in 1918.³⁵ Artillery planning was

³⁴ Administrative order no 39, War diary, 2nd Pioneer Battalion, 4 October 1918, AWM4 14/14/29.

³⁵ Paddy Griffith, *Battle tactics of the Western Front: the British Army's art of attack 1916–1918*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1994, pp. 135–59; William Sanders Marble, "The

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conducted at the corps and divisional levels in parallel with the infantry planning. The divisional artillery formed into two groups of four brigades to support the attack.³⁶ Each brigade was equipped with four batteries with six guns per battery. Three batteries were 18-pounder field guns with one battery of 4.5-inch howitzers.³⁷ The heavy artillery was organised into four counter-battery brigades and three bombardment brigades, with approximately 200 guns, roughly 120 of various sizes in the counter-battery and 68 in the bombardment brigades.³⁸ They would be used for attacking known troop concentrations and enemy artillery batteries. The artillery fire was not designed to destroy every enemy position, but to suppress them long enough for the infantry to come into action. The barrage plan also proved to be flexible. When a railway cutting to the north of Montbrehain was found to be occupied by the Germans, the barrage map was expanded to place them under fire.³⁹

The 6th Brigade was set to attack at 6.05 am on 5 October in concert with the 25th British to the north and 46th Division to the south. The objective was a v-shaped line running north and east of the village. If all of the 4th Army attacks were successful, the 6th Brigade would establish contact with 25th Division near the village of Genève to the north, and at Mannequin Hill with the 46th Division to the south.

Infantry cannot do with a gun less': the place of artillery in the BEF, 1914-1918", PhD thesis, King's College, 1998, pp. 74-125.

³⁶ Order no 158, War diary, Headquarters, 2nd Australian Divisional Artillery, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 13/11/32 Part 1.

³⁷ Ross Mallet, Artillery, 28 June 2010, accessed 10 June 2014, <http://www.aif.adfa.edu.au:8888/Artillery.html#Artillery>.

³⁸ Australian Corps heavy artillery - location list, War Diary, Headquarters, Australian Corps Heavy Artillery, 4 October 1918, AWM4 13/7/31; Australian Corps heavy artillery order no. 162, AWM26 494/9.

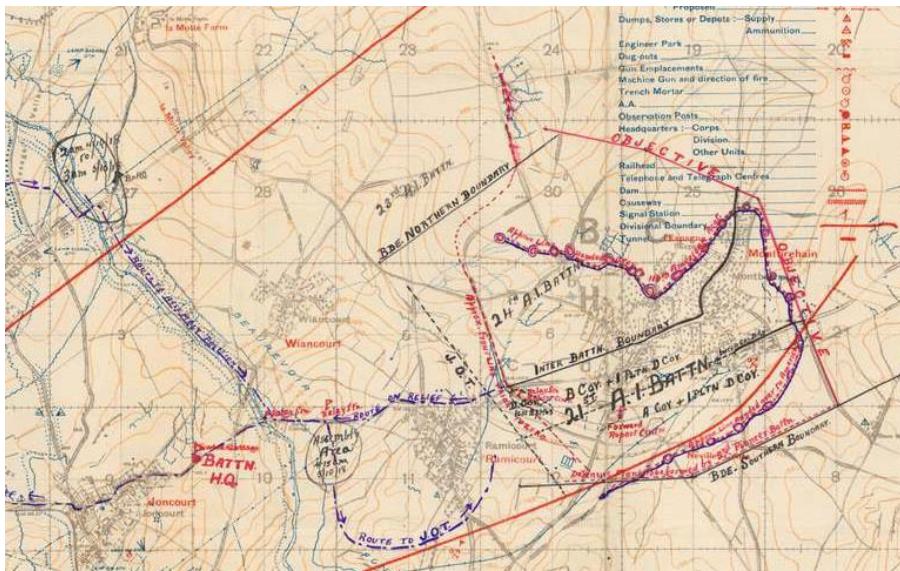
³⁹ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

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The 2nd Pioneer battalion manned the front-line trenches from the night of 4 October while the 24th and 21st Battalions formed up on the JOT. Fifteen minutes prior to zero hour, the pioneers would file out of the forward trenches and form up behind the infantry. The attack plan put the 24th Battalion on the left and the 21st battalion on the right. The 24th attacked with three companies in line: D Company on the left, B Company in the centre and A Company on the right.⁴⁰ The 21st would attack with B Company on the left and A Company on the right. Both assaulting companies were supported with a platoon from D Company. The other two platoons of D Company were held in reserve.⁴¹ Supporting each battalion were two Vickers guns and one Stokes mortar, all directly under control of the battalion commander, and four MK V tanks in general support.



Map 3: Objectives and boundary lines for the attack on Montbrehain.

Source: War diary, 21st Battalion, AWM4 23/38/38 Part 1.

⁴⁰ Operation order no 119, War diary, 24th Battalion, 4 October 1918, AWM4 23/41/37.

⁴¹ Battalion order no 171, War diary, 21st Battalion, 4 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38.

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The 24th and 21st Battalion were to advance under cover of a creeping barrage to secure their objectives. The 2nd Pioneers tasked their A Company to follow the infantry battalions and assist in mopping up resistance in the village. The rest of the battalion would pivot on D Company, who held the southern end of the line, and form a protective flank below Montbrehain facing south-south-east. The tanks would advance behind the first waves of infantry and assist in clearing strongpoints and machine-gun nests before withdrawing one hour after start time. Each battalion and company commander had discretion in manoeuvring their units and positioning the Vickers guns, mortars and tanks.

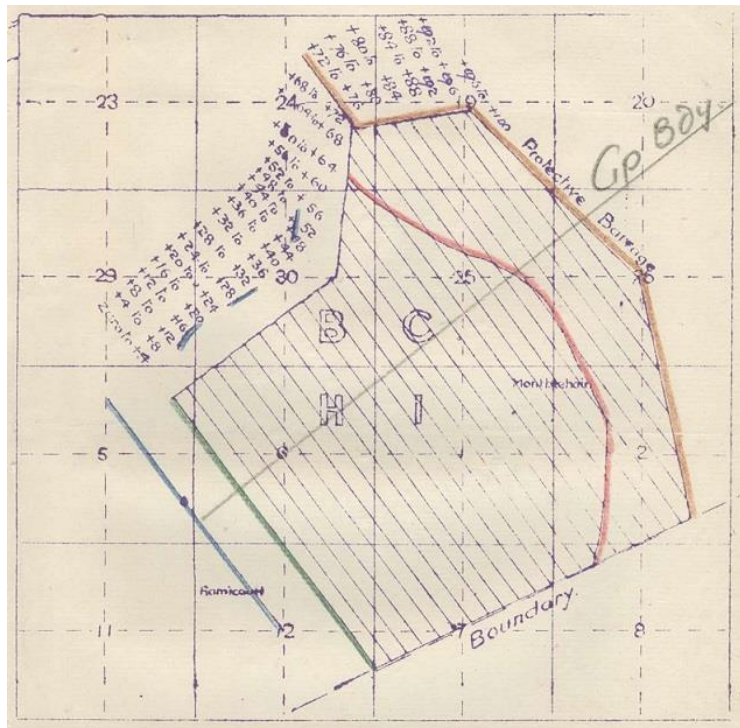
The attack was supported by a creeping barrage fired by six brigades of the Left and Right Artillery Groups, nearly 144 guns. The other two brigades with 48 guns responded to requests for fire from the infantry. The barrage would start 300 yards (275 metres) east of the JOT with two lines of fire, one fired by 18-pounders and one by 4.5-inch howitzers 200 yards (180 metres) to the east. Each line was to advance at a rate of 100 yards (90 metres) per four minutes. The lines would continue until they reached the protective barrage line 500 yards (450 metres) beyond the objective. The protective barrage fired until 120 minutes after zero hour, to break up counter-attacks.⁴² A mixture of smoke, shrapnel, and high explosives would be fired during the assault, offering both neutralisation and some screening. Seven brigades of heavy artillery, totalling nearly 200 guns, attacked known troop concentrations and conducted counter-battery fire.

⁴² Order no 158, War diary, Headquarters, 2nd Australian Divisional Artillery, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 13/11/32 Part 1.

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Map 4: Barrage map for the attack on Montbrehain.

Order no 158, War diary, Headquarters, 2nd Australian Divisional Artillery, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 13/11/32 Part 1.

Attacking Montbrehain

The battle of Montbrehain may be usefully divided into three phases: the initial attack, the German counter-attack, and the final consolidation. Correctly guessing an attack was in the offing, the Germans shelled suspected assembly areas behind the allied front line on the morning of 5 October, especially the town of Ramicourt. Sporadic use of gas shells forced some assaulting units to detour, but the gas was not thick enough for the troops to don their respirators. There were light casualties in some of the supporting artillery brigades, but the infantry was relatively untouched. At 6.05 am, troops of the 24th and 21st Battalions, with the 2nd pioneers following, stepped off onto the battlefield, advancing under the protective cover of the creeping

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barrage. The tanks were slowed by their inherent unreliability and by harassing fire, and did not accompany the infantry. The Germans responded to the assault with a counter-barrage that tracked the infantry as it advanced to the village and then rested on the old front line, necessitating the move of D Company, the 21st Battalion reserve.⁴³

In the initial advance, the 24th Battalion had a difficult time clearing trenches and a large quarry to the north-west of Montbrehain. They were eventually able to advance after clearing several large posts, though at a heavy cost: B Company lost every officer during the attack. Lieutenant George Ingram of the 24th Battalion was instrumental in storming a post containing nine machine-guns and 42 German soldiers, as well as clearing several other strongpoints in and around the village. He was awarded the Australians' last Victoria Cross of the First World War for this particular action.⁴⁴

The 21st Battalion had an easier time assaulting through the village, though both battalions reported the creeping barrage was ragged and often falling short, causing many friendly casualties. A Company of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion supported the 21st by mopping up many positions as they attacked through Montbrehain village. The rest of the pioneers made it to the protective flank at about the same time as the infantry. Throughout their advance, the pioneers encountered dozens of German machine-gun crews in a railway cutting and used their attached Vickers gun section to lay down enfilading fire, knocking out 14 enemy guns and neutralising a potential threat to the flank of

⁴³ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

⁴⁴ Report on the operations carried out by the 24th Battalion during period October 2nd to October 6th 1918, War diary, 24th Battalion, AWM4, 23/41/37; AWM, Lieutenant George Mawby Ingram VC, accessed 1 June 2014, <http://www.awm.gov.au/people/563.asp>.

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the 21st Battalion.⁴⁵ The tanks arrived late, but by about 6.30 am they were in action and assisted with destroying several machine-gun nests before departing. Several tanks were disabled by direct fire from artillery pieces.⁴⁶

The battalions were on their objectives by 9.00 am, but they were stretched dangerously thin. German reserves and artillery were brought up from the rear and began a heavy bombardment from Doon Mill, Mannequin Hill and Brancourt. At about 10 am, the 21st Battalion called up their Stokes mortar and the two remaining platoons of D Company for support and to silence some of the artillery positions on Doon Mill.⁴⁷ In the 24th Battalion sector, local German counter-attacks pushed the Australians back into the village. The German counter-barrage increased in intensity to support their assault and forced both Stokes mortars to retire. A second counter-attack from Brancourt forced the Australians back from their posts east of the village and knocked out the Vickers gun attached to 21st Battalion. To the south, heavy shelling forced the 2nd Pioneer Battalion to move back behind the crest of the ridge opposite Mannequin Hill, which the 46th Division failed to seize.⁴⁸ By 11.45 am the Germans attacked in loose skirmish order toward Montbrehain from Doon Mill. The 21st Battalion called for replacement machine-guns and reinforcements, and Brigadier Robertson released the 18th and 27th Battalions for support. The battle hinged on whether the Australians could hold their positions and break up the German counter-attacks.

⁴⁵ Sixth Australian Machine Gun Coy, report on operations 6th October, 1918, War Diary, 2nd Machine Gun Battalion, AWM4 24/2/8.

⁴⁶ Extracts from war diary of 16th Tank Battn. 5th Brigade, sub-period 3rd to 5th October 1918, AWM26, 481/4.

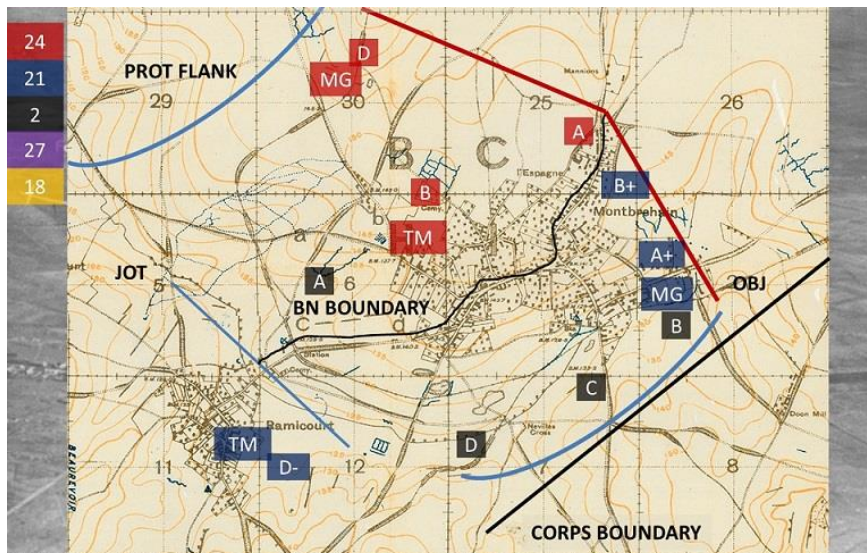
⁴⁷ Commanding officer's report on recent operations, War diary, 21st Battalion, 10 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38 Part 2.

⁴⁸ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

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Map 5: Situation at 10 am on 5 October

Source: AWM Map G5830-S20 62B NW 5A Ed. Unit markings by author.

The period between 10.15 am to 12.30 pm on 5 October was critical for the Australians. Both battalions resupplied ammunition several times and freely used captured German guns. Repeated calls for artillery fire to break up the German counter-attack began to take effect, particularly on Doon Mill.⁴⁹ The left flank recovered first, as B Company pushed back to the quarry while D Company established positions in the sunken road to the north-west of Montbrehain. A mixed group of men from 24th and 21st Battalions re-established posts in the north-eastern sector while the rest of 21st Battalion advanced on both sides of the Montbrehain–Brancourt road to the east of the village. Artillery and machine-gun fire dispersed the last counter-attack, and the retreating Germans did not press again. Instead, they established new positions facing Montbrehain at approximately 1.40 pm.⁵⁰ The 2nd Pioneer

⁴⁹ War diary, 6th Brigade, 5 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

⁵⁰ War diary, 21st Battalion, 5 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38 Part 1.

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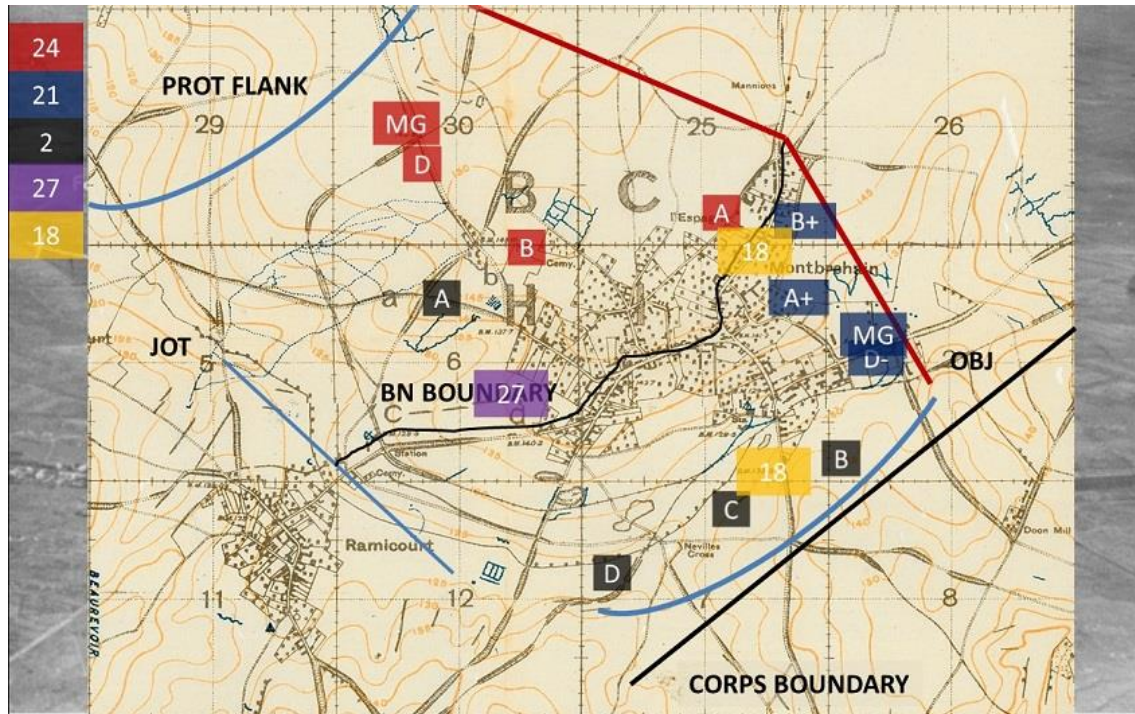
Battalion restored their protective flank, aided by a company from the 18th Battalion. C Company of the pioneers and a second company from the 18th Battalion reinforced the posts to the north. A Company of the 27th Battalion moved up in support with additional ammunition, but was not placed into the line. The timely use of reserves, coordinated with artillery fire, checked the German advance long enough for the Australians to recover the lost ground. To consolidate their gains, the Australians established a series of posts along the outskirts of Montbrehain and a secure defensive flank to the south-south-east. By 3 pm, the Australians were in the lines they handed over to the Americans the next morning, spending the evening of the 5 October guarding against any further counter-attack. By 3 am on 6 October, the 6th Brigade was out of the line and heading to the rear for a well-earned rest.⁵¹ Although they did not know it at the time, Montbrehain was the last Australian action of the First World War.

⁵¹ Commanding officer's report on recent operations, War diary, 21st Battalion, 10 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38 Part 2.

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Map 6: Situation at 3 pm on 5 October

Source: AWM Map G5830-S20 62B NW 5A Ed. Unit markings by author.

Battlefield integration

Montbrehain fared well when considered in the traditional ways of defining victory: comparing casualties, prisoners taken, ground seized and guns captured. German prisoners stated that the attack was expected and that additional men and artillery had been brought up.⁵² The battle was a tough one, with every company commander in both 21st and 24th Battalion either killed or wounded.⁵³ The Australians also captured large numbers of prisoners and weapons. By most conventional measures, the attack had been successful, with

⁵² Montbrehain 5th Oct. 1918, German account of attack, AWM47, 111.05/1, pp. 11-13.

⁵³ Commanding officer's report on recent operations, War diary, 21st Battalion, 10 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38 Part 2; Report on the operations carried out by the 24th Battalion during period October 2nd to October 6th 1918, War diary, 24th Battalion, AWM4, 23/41/37.

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the only shortfall being the lack of advance to the northern objective line.

However, another measure of effectiveness is how the various battlefield elements supported each other and the infantry in achieving their objectives.

The battlefields of 1914 saw many relatively new weapons – such as mortars, machine guns, barbed wire, and modern artillery – employed en masse for the first time in Europe. Commanders studied the lessons of the Boer War and Russo–Japanese wars and had begun to think of new ways to employ the available weapons to best effect. However, their initial use in the First World War often resembled the wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries. By 1918, this changed irrevocably, with the infantry relying on an increasingly complex array of machine-guns, artillery, tanks, mortars, aircraft, advanced communications, and the industrialisation necessary to support the increasing size and logistical needs of the allied armies. This proliferation of firepower necessitated close integration between weapon systems to utilise their full potential. The attack on Montbrehain offered a snapshot of battlefield integration at the height of the British Army's sophistication in 1918. Both the potentials and pitfalls of the new weapon systems were revealed.

The Lewis and Vickers guns were mature weapons by 1918 in the sense that their role and use was well understood. The Lewis gun formed an integral part of the platoon and proved useful in both the attack and defence.⁵⁴ While Vickers guns were consolidated into machine-gun companies and battalions, they were still occasionally detached for use on specific missions, as happened at Montbrehain. Both Lewis guns and Vickers guns were used to enfilade enemy positions along sunken roads and railway cuttings in the attack. As

⁵⁴ General Staff, *S.S. 197.J the tactical employment of Lewis Guns*, France, army printing and stationery services, January 1918.

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anchor points in the defence, they broke up several German counter-attacks, with one Lewis gun section claiming over 100 dead by their fire alone.⁵⁵

The use of tanks on the battlefield had become more sophisticated since their first use in the action at Flers in September 1916. While there was some enthusiasm for tanks as a decisive weapon in their own right, they proved more valuable working in conjunction with the infantry and supporting their advance by reducing strongpoints and destroying wire obstacles.⁵⁶ The Australian Corps was supported by tanks in several operations during the British offensive in 1918, and appreciated both their usefulness and their weaknesses, which were slow speed, mechanical unreliability, and limited endurance. These were many of the same weaknesses as in 1917, and meant that tanks were still support and not breakthrough weapons. The heavy shelling and use of gas in the rear areas delayed the tanks and prevented them from accompanying the attacking infantry. Eleven of the 12 tanks eventually came into action, although just seven reached the objective, where they cleared several posts and supported the 2nd Pioneer Battalion south of Montbrehain.⁵⁷ However, both infantry battalions reported that tanks drew especially heavy counter-fire and that their own positions were shelled by fire from their own tanks. Overall, the tanks helped more than they harmed, but the difficulties of coordination remained.

The creeping barrage and other artillery support was a vital factor in conducting offensive operations. From the first tentative bombardments in

⁵⁵ Commanding officer's report on recent operations, War diary, 21st Battalion, 10 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38 Part 2.

⁵⁶ General Staff, S.S. SS214.J *Tanks and their employment in co-operation with other arms*, France, army printing and stationery services, August 1918.

⁵⁷ Extracts from war diary of 16th Tank Battn. 5th Brigade, sub-period 3rd to 5th October 1918, AWM26, 481/4.

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1915, the creeping barrage had developed into an almost scientific endeavour.⁵⁸ The attack on Montbrehain achieved a density of one gun per 14 yards of front, similar to that employed in the Hindenburg line operations.⁵⁹ However, research by Paddy Griffith, Robin Prior, and Trevor Wilson suggested that densities of one gun for less than ten yards offered a greater chance of success.⁶⁰

This discrepancy must be qualified by two important factors: the Germans were not in strongly fortified positions, and the fairly rapid advances of the previous week meant that the artillery was not fully registered. Numerous accounts stated that the artillery barrage was ragged and many rounds fell short during the initial advance, inflicting numerous casualties on the allied infantry.⁶¹ Lieutenant Colonel Duggan reported that nearly half of his casualties were caused by friendly fire.⁶² While it is a damning indictment, this claim cannot be taken at face value. The prevailing tactics were to follow the barrage closely, with the philosophy that it was better to suffer some friendly casualties from short rounds than face unsuppressed defences. Artillery fire was far from a precision weapon, with the area in which rounds were predicted to land expanding as the range increased. If the guns had not been thoroughly registered, as at Montbrehain because of the advance, their accuracy was further degraded.⁶³ In addition, while experienced soldiers would have ideally been able to distinguish between enemy and friendly rounds, it was not always

⁵⁸ General Staff, *S.S.139/4 artillery notes no. 4-artillery in offensive operations*, France, army printing and stationary services, February 1917.

⁵⁹ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

⁶⁰ Griffith, *Battle tactics of the Western Front: the British Army's art of attack 1916–1918*, p. 150.

⁶¹ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

⁶² Commanding officer's report on recent operations, War diary, 21st Battalion, 10 October 1918, AWM4 23/38/38 Part 2.

⁶³ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

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possible, nor was it possible to establish the direction of fire with absolute certainty, which meant that enemy fire could be mistaken for friendly fire. If units strayed out of place, they were also at higher risk. In at least one case, the 2nd Pioneers advanced beyond their boundary line, which meant that they were in the impact zone of their own artillery fire.⁶⁴

Certainly, many of the casualties suffered by the Australians were caused by their own fire, but it is unlikely it was half of them. A more accurate criticism of the artillery is that it did not sufficiently suppress the enemy to the north and south. This was not the fault of the barrage, which did not cover those sectors, but in the lack of progress made by flanking units and the inherent delay and difficulty in executing calls for fire on the fly. Allied artillery broke up the counter-attacks from Doon Mill, Brancourt and north of Montbrehain. Had the Germans been able to mass their troops without interference, they may well have thrown the Australians back to their JOT, or even further. Montbrehain was thus fairly typical of artillery usage in 1918. It was not a precision weapon, but one that could suppress enemy positions within the creeping barrage and disrupt the large concentrations of enemy troops needed for counter-attacks.

The indirect fire support offered by the Stokes mortars could be a powerful weapon in the hands of a well-trained crew. In effect, the infantry had their own short range artillery that covered dead space and provided immediate suppressive fire. While much was expected of their use at Montbrehain, the reality was a different matter. Their maximum effective range

⁶⁴ From Second Australian Pioneer Battalion to 6th. Aust. Infantry Brigade, War diary 2nd Pioneer Battalion, October 1918, AWM4 14/14/29.

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of 750 yards limited their ability to target the counter-attacking Germans.⁶⁵ They were also a priority target for artillery, which suppressed them enough to prevent them from being used for shorter-range work against strongpoints. Both Stokes mortars were forced out of action by midmorning.⁶⁶

Integration was better with battlefield systems that were under closer control, such as machine-guns. Artillery was a critical factor to success, but always had an element of uncertainty. Tanks were useful, but not reliable enough to be more than a support weapon. Montbrehain showed that a well-planned attack by a seasoned, though tired, unit could succeed in the face of strong resistance, but that difficulties remained in integrating battlefield systems. Some problems were due to human agency, but others were the result of the sheer complexity impacting upon combat operations.

The necessity of Montbrehain

By the evening of 5 October 1918, the Australians were settled into their newly won positions and awaiting their relief the next morning by the II American Corps. The operational plan called for the 6th Brigade to establish contact with the 25th Division near the town of Genève. This was frustrated by two factors: the 6th Brigade was short of their objectives to the north of Montbrehain, and the attack on Beaurevoir and Poncheux was a hard-fought one, with the villages only secured on the morning of 6 October.⁶⁷ The 46th Division failed to capture Mannequin Hill, though further south the line was

⁶⁵ Anthony Saunders, "A muse of fire: British trench warfare munitions, their invention, manufacture and tactical employment on the Western Front, 1914-1918", PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2008, p. 167.

⁶⁶ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

⁶⁷ Fourth Army weekly appreciation for period from Oct. 5th to 11th (inclusive), War diary, General Staff, Headquarters Fourth Army, October 1918, AWM4, 1/14/12 Part 2.

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advanced from Sequehart approximately 1,000 yards (910 metres). Montbrehain now formed salient in the Fourth Army lines; this, along with the sustained fighting of the preceding week, meant that an operational pause took place on 6 and 7 October. Each corps conducted limited attacks to straighten out the lines and keep local pressure on the Germans, who were reported as wanting to defend their current lines long enough for the next defensive position to be constructed. On 8 October, Fourth Army launched a major attack along with the Third British Army to the north and the First French Army to the south. This attack gained approximately 3,500 yards (3,200 metres) the first day and sent the enemy into a disorganised retreat all along the Fourth Army sector to the unfinished *Herman Stellung* several miles to the east.⁶⁸

The German view of the battle is another way to consider the question of whether the battle had been necessary. They fought hard north of Montbrehain and in their attempt to recapture the town, using artillery and machine-guns to great effect.⁶⁹ However, their units were desperately understrength and thrown into the line without having a chance to sort themselves out. The 241st, 24th and 34th Divisions were described as being “tired” (24th and 34th) or “moderately” fresh (241st). All the units were depleted, with the 34th Division reported as having company strengths of approximately 50 men.⁷⁰ The 600 prisoners who were taken came from ten different regiments, showing the disorganisation along the front at this time. German documents stated that the attack of 5 October did not compel them to withdraw to the next set of lines, but that the

⁶⁸ War diary, General Staff, Headquarters Fourth Army, 8 October 1918, AWM4, 1/14/12 Part 2.

⁶⁹ Report on operations of the 6th Aust. Inf. Brigade for period 2nd October to 6th October, 1918, War diary, 6th Brigade, 12 October 1918, AWM4 23/6/38 Part 1.

⁷⁰ Second Australian Division intelligence summary no. 211, War Diary, 2nd Australian, 4 October 1918, AWM4, 1/44/39 Part 1; Second Australian Division intelligence summary no. 212, War Diary, 2nd Division 6 October 1918, AWM4, 1/44/39 Part 1.

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offensive on 8 October was more decisive.⁷¹ There is an element of saving face to this account, however, as the Germans in this sector were driven from the Hindenburg Line, the Hindenburg Support Line, and the Beurevoir Line in the space of a week. Then they lost Montbrehain as well, which was the next key terrain feature to the east. By viewing Montbrehain as a part of a series of attacks, the part it played in defeating the Germans is more quantifiable.

All the accounts of Montbrehain celebrated the Australian success and noted the comparatively heavy losses. Nearly one-third of the men engaged were casualties in the operation, and several writers have sensibly asked if the ground could have been taken for fewer lives. It is always appropriate to ask what the battle accomplished and whether it was worth the cost. However, while asking if the attack was necessary, it is also useful to ask what it would have meant had it not occurred. Counter-factual history is a treacherous path, particularly as the length of the altered timeline increases. A plausible change would have had the 6th Brigade remain in the line for 5 October. This would have immediately led to several problems for the rest of Fourth Army. The attack by the 25th British Division on Beurevoir and Poncheux was the main effort for the day.⁷² Inaction in the Montbrehain sector would have left the right flank of the attack unsupported, and released additional German reserves and artillery to contest the villages. To the south, the attack east of Sequehart and on Mannequin Hill would also have gone in without flank support, this time to the left flank. Most of the reports on Montbrehain stressed the tenaciousness of the Australians, who managed to retain the village despite the enfilading fire from

⁷¹ Montbrehain 5th Oct. 1918, German account of attack, AWM47, 111.05/1.

⁷² War diary, General Staff, Headquarters Fourth Army, 4-5 October 1918, AWM4, 1/14/12 Part 2.

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the north and south.⁷³ The Australians succeeded in taking most of their objectives by a narrow margin and had drawn several enemy divisions into the fight and counter-attacks for the town. Without their effort, it is far more likely that the attacks to the north and south would have failed completely, and perhaps even lost ground, as had happened several times in the weeks before. Even if both attacks had had the same result, it is reasonable to assume that they would have been more costly, likely equalling or exceeding the 6th Brigade casualties. Montbrehain was therefore a necessary battle in the Fourth Army's operations on 5 October.

Conclusion

The popular conception of the Australian Corps, fostered by Bean and some subsequent writers, was of a national army of shock troops, placed where the fire was the hottest to do the toughest jobs. The soldiers of the 2nd Division deserved both the pride of a hard-fought battle and the chance to rest and rebuild their battered units. However, the Australians were one corps of a single British army. This does not take away from their accomplishments, but the Australians were fighting as part of a much larger force all along the Western Front. Montbrehain was a single battle that supported the main effort. The battles on 5 October were themselves part of a follow-on effort that had ejected the Germans from the formidable Hindenburg Line and made it impossible for them to seal the gap. After Montbrehain, the allies continued to maintain the offensive, capturing large amounts of ground on 8 October 1918

⁷³ Second Australian Division, report on operations – October 3rd to 5th, 1918, War diary, General Staff, Headquarters 2nd Division, 18 October 1918, AWM4, 1/44/39 Part 2; Report on operations of Australian Corps. Capture of the Beaufevier defences and Montbrehain. 20th September to 6th October. Phase "E" ., War diary, General Staff, Headquarters Australian Corps, 20 October 1918, AWM4, 1/35/10 Part 2.

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and forcing the Germans to retire several miles to the next set of defensive positions. For this reason alone, Montbrehain must be judged as a necessary battle.

While the results of the battle were important, it is also worth noting the importance of the planning and execution involved. Montbrehain was reflective of the long experience the officers and men had as a cohesive unit. A formalised planning cycle allowed for the necessary battle procedures to be conducted simultaneously at several levels of command. Good battle procedures offered the best chance that all the units would be ready to attack at the correct time and would be supported by the complex array of battlefield and support systems necessary to fight modern war. While coordination could ensure that such systems would be available, they still needed to fight together on the battlefield, and Montbrehain showed both the strengths and weaknesses of infantry cooperation with machine-guns, tanks, mortars, and artillery. Each weapon system had its own strengths and weaknesses, and though they were much better understood by 1918, lapses in coordination or limitations in what the weapon (especially tanks) could offer, precluded the full use of combined arms. The Australians were able to work within these constraints, but by doing so, were an essential part of Fourth Army's advance which contributed to the battlefield victory of the allies.