



***Attack on the Somme:***  
***1st Anzac Corps and the Battle of Pozieres Ridge, 1916***  
**By Meleah Hampton**  
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Reviewed by Maj Timothy Heck, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

In *Attack on the Somme*, Dr. Meleah Hampton, currently with the Military History Section of the Australian War Memorial (AWM), presents the Battle of the Somme for 1st Anzac Corps. Popular memory places Australia's primary contribution to the Great War at Gallipoli. Pozières Ridge, however, was even bloodier and their pointless sacrifices greater. Dr. Hampton analyzes the battles as both an individual campaign and as a learning experience for the Australians. Commanders and their actions, both Australian and British, are assessed using contemporary documents more than retrospective memoirs. These sources, often written on the line during the battle, allow Dr. Hampton to present the Australians' successes and failures at the brigade and division levels in near-real time. As a result, the reader gains an appreciation of the friction present during planning and execution for the 1st Anzac Corps.

On 23 July 1916, as part of the ongoing Somme Offensive, the 1st Australian Division launched an attack on the village of Pozières that differed from previous efforts to capture the town. The attack, while successful in capturing the town, was hampered from the beginning by a lack of coordination and planning at the army level. General Hubert Gough, commander of the newly-created Reserve Army, "called spur of the moment conferences without representation from [neighboring] Fourth Army to begin planning uncoordinated attacks within his sector." Gough's lack of coordination was emulated by his subordinates as the battle continued over the next six weeks. Furthermore, the capture of Pozières represented the high-water mark, but even its significance was limited by the failure to capture the German defensive lines to the east and northeast.

On 27 July 1916, the 2nd Australian Division replaced the 1st Australian Division in the trenches. The 2nd Australian Division's mission was to capture the German lines. Their approach to that task, however, was markedly different from that of their predecessor, especially with regards to training and fire support coordination. Dr. Hampton provides thoughtful analysis of the different planning styles. She dissects the application of artillery and its coordination with infantry objectives and finds it was uneven across commanders. Even the involvement of their higher headquarters' staff in the matter failed to rectify woefully inadequate fire support planning and execution. In the midst of this planning, German defensive fire severely limited Australian logistical preparations or reconnaissance opportunities. As a result, the hastily-planned and executed attack on 29 July was a failure.

Dr. Hampton places Australian failures within a wider context of British Expeditionary Force (BEF) operations. She ascribes some of the failures of August and September to the change in British campaign strategy. Previously, attacks in Reserve Army's area of operation were in support of attacks by Fourth Army. After the overall strategy

changed on 30 July 1916, the attacks of Reserve Army were to be “an end in themselves.” With this change in operational design, 1st Anzac Corps began planning and executing a series of actions that were largely in support of II Corps’ 12th Division to their left instead of predominately supporting Fourth Army’s main effort on the right. This change in role, while not tactically changing the nature of the battle, did change the campaign objective for 1st Anzac Corps and made its efforts increasingly in vain.

The bulk of Dr. Hampton’s work focuses on the change of Anzac operations from one of disrupting attacks and economy-of-force operations to one of constant pressure. She relates division after division coming through the line launching nearly six weeks of operations that can best be summarized as displaying initiative but poor judgment. Reserve Army’s desire to continuously attack the Germans led to ongoing attacks that were only loosely tied to Reserve Army’s concept of operations and “attacks were being conducted on such a small-scale that had they not been so costly in lives they would be inconsequential.” These uncoordinated attacks sapped Australian troop strength, supplies, and morale, all while being part of “the seduction of being able to report a ‘success.’” The goal of being able to report any success led to the frittering away of combat power with limited correlation to larger army or even BEF goals. These piecemeal attacks frequently displayed a lack of coordination between infantry and artillery, inadequate coordination or liaison efforts between adjacent units, and progressively smaller objectives.

By late August, General William Birdwood, commander of 1st Anzac Corps, reduced assault objectives to a distance of 50-100 yards with, at best, limited artillery support on the objective itself. In 1916, “danger close”-type fire restrictions were 200 yards from friendly troops, resulting in Australian forces frequently having to abandon their frontline trenches during pre-assault bombardments. This, in turn, forced them to retake ground they previously held. Furthermore, even when they could stay in their trenches prior to an attack, Anzac troops frequently received short rounds from their own fire, with minimal ability to find protection or adjust those short fires onto the Germans. As a result of this constant grinding loss for minimal ground gained, Dr. Hampton damningly states, “there had simply been no purpose in 1st Anzac Corps’ operations. There had not been for several weeks.”

Dr. Hampton provides thoughtful analysis of the different planning and training methods used by the Australian division and brigade commanders. To modern American readers accustomed to a prescribed pre-deployment training cycle, the individualized approach available to Australian commanders nearly two years into the war is a fascinating revelation of how armies prepared or failed to prepare to fight. This uneven approach extended beyond the individual soldier to the staff level as well.

She also examines the learning process of commanders and staffs during the battle. While she finds numerous examples of lessons learned-type documents in the archives, unfortunately for the men of 1st Anzac Corps, the disseminated lessons learned failed to lead to “no practical examples which indicated that what was being written about was actually being absorbed and implemented.” As a result, while the information and analysis might have been available to commanders, its incorporation into the planning cycle or in the attacks themselves was absent, a negligence at the command and staff level with costly results.

*Attack on the Somme* is an eminently readable counterpoint to parochial histories that place the Australian contribution to the BEF as a uniquely Australian venture divorced from a larger British, or even coalition, effort during the Somme Campaign. Dr. Hampton presents an important critical campaign analysis of one part of the larger Somme Offensive that sheds light on the months the Anzacs fought an increasingly futile sideshow.