Thus far, we have built up, layer by layer, a portrait of Australian battalion commanders, studying their development from the beginning of the First World War and the factors that contributed to effective battalion command. The year 1918 was the greatest test for Australian battalion commanders since the landing on Gallipoli and was vastly more important to the war’s outcome. Fighting as part of the newly unified Australian Corps, Australian infantry battalions undertook offensive and defensive operations of varied size and scope. COs needed to build on what they had learnt in trench warfare and adapt their command to an environment that gave them greater opportunity to demonstrate their ability. Operations in 1918 showed that most Australian COs had come to terms with the complexity of command. The remarkable victories achieved by the Australian Corps reflected well upon those battalion commanders who were at times literally on the front line of operations. The tactical, administrative and personal factors of the earlier years of the war contributed to making an efficient cohort. Like the men they commanded, COs were well trained and experienced, although, also like their men, they were becoming increasingly tired after almost four years of active service. Their inexperienced predecessors on Gallipoli had struggled, and those who had commanded battalions in 1916 and 1917 had largely laboured in vain to achieve any significant tactical success. The pinnacle of Australian battalion command in the First World War was 1918, and it therefore deserves to be studied in isolation.
Operations on the Western Front in 1918 were significantly different from those in previous years, presenting challenges for men who had learnt the art of command in relatively static trench warfare and within structured set-piece operations. The year can be broken up into two distinct periods: March to July and August to November. On 21 March, the German Army commenced its last offensives for the war. Although they achieved considerable tactical success, they also suffered from confusion at the operational and strategic levels and ultimately failed to achieve the grand objectives hoped for. Australian divisions were moved south in April to blunt the progress of the increasingly exhausted and hyperextended German Army. The front settled down for the next few months in preparation for the Entente’s counter-offensive, allowing Australian soldiers to engage in ‘ceaseless small operations sometimes one-man stunts’ termed peaceful penetration. With the battle of Amiens on 8 August, the Entente armies commenced a broad offensive that continued until the Armistice, on 11 November. During this period, known as the Hundred Days, the Australian Corps fought a ‘spectacular set of small victories’ until it was removed from the line, in early October, not to return before the Armistice.

The main characteristic of 1918 warfare was mobility, yet the high force to space ratio limited the ability to engage in traditional manoeuvre warfare. The best description is semi-open warfare, as it was more mobile than trench warfare but failed to achieve a truly open battlefield. Jonathan Boff described the British Army’s operational conduct in 1918 as ‘a form of mobile attrition’, functioning ‘largely by frontal assault … to destroy, rather than dislocate, its enemy’. It was also carried out at a high operational tempo, requiring battle procedure to be implemented swiftly and efficiently. Trench warfare taught the AIF that success required extensive and careful planning. Actions in early 1918 were reactive; battalions were mobile and engaged in combat on short notice, often with little warning as to where and when. COs needed to maintain the ‘utmost vigilance and readiness for action’ and to be able to ‘place their hand on all men under their command at short notice’. This operational tempo continued during the more structured combat of the Hundred Days. After the battle of Amiens, Alexander Heron (41st) wrote, ‘It was now evident that we would have to fight frequently and at very short notice for some time to come as everywhere our attacks had been extraordinarily successful’.

Warfare in 1918 also included many defensive actions. Since its deployment on the Western Front, the AIF had engaged in offensive warfare...
practically only in the context of the set-piece battle. A framework for how to conduct defensive combat was rarely required, which also meant there was little experience from which to develop successful doctrine. GHQ’s Training Branch had spent most of its time working on offensive doctrine until November 1917, when, as one former doctrine writer recalled, it ‘suddenly’ realised that ‘what was wanted for the opening of 1918 was a book on defence’.\(^7\) Lacking experience conducting defensive operations, COs were left slightly unprepared, which can be seen in the ad hoc nature of commanders’ tactical thinking. Sally Salisbury’s personal defensive doctrine was ‘When you get forward hang on’.\(^8\)

Breaking out of trench warfare also presented a variety of new and old situations: traditional set-piece operations, backs to the wall defence, local counter-attacks, encirclements and street fighting, as well as dozens of small, local operations at battalion level or below during the period of peaceful penetration. The operations, according to Alexander Ralston, were ‘always fresh and interesting’, instead of what had gone before: ‘a burst of activity followed by a long period of steady strain and anxiety without fresh interest to brighten it’.\(^9\) New situations required initiative and flexibility and for commanders to exercise their judgement in a manner unnecessary in tightly controlled set-piece battles. Pompey Elliott advised his COs not to lay down any ‘hard and fast rules’ regarding formations for the attack, but rather to train the men so that they were efficient in multiple forms of attacks and were ‘so conversant with the principles that they are able to apply them as best suited to the circumstances’.\(^10\)

The final aspect of 1918 warfare was its importance to the outcome of the war. Gary Sheffield described the victories of that year, particularly during the final months of the war, as ‘by far, the greatest military victory in British history’.\(^11\) Australian COs were closely involved in this victory, commanding battalions which were literally on the front line of the defence and advance of the British Army. This was a fact not lost on COs. At Hazebrouck, Ernest Herrod (7th) informed his officers, ‘Gentlemen, the destiny of the Empire may rest on what our Battalion does tonight and until the rest of the Division arrives … The German advance in this sector has got to be stopped to save the Channel ports’.\(^12\) Charles Bean argued that there was ‘no question’ that Australian infantry ‘materially affected’ the course of the fighting on the Western Front in 1918.\(^13\) This assessment is difficult to deny, even if it needs to be contextualised within the effectiveness and success of the British Army as a whole. In its contribution to the victory, Australian infantry had never been, nor would ever be, so influential in the outcome of a major war. The ability to strike important
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blows against the enemy whom they had been fighting since 1916 also made operations in 1918 a ‘most gratifying experience’, to quote James Durrant. He suggested that the Australian Corps ‘had the enemy beaten and punished him so severely’, and that this ‘compensated for our hard knocks and severe struggles earlier in the war’.  

**The CO Cohort of 1918**

Australian COs in 1918 were very different from those in 1914 and 1915. Although they retained the demographic identity (middle class, predominantly Protestant, with militia backgrounds), they were far younger. When Bean observed some newly arrived American soldiers in February 1918, he saw an American colonel ‘very similar to one of our elderly, somewhat fussy colonels with whom we began the war’.  

On 25 April 1915, the average age of battalion commanders was 46; by the first day of the battle of Amiens, on 8 August 1918, it was 33.

Typifying this was the 13th Battalion’s 22-year-old CO, Doug Marks (figure 46), the AIF’s youngest battalion commander. He had been a

Figure 45  The CO of the 13th Battalion explaining to his officers the plan of action that was to be pursued the next morning, in the attack on the Hindenburg Outpost Line, near Vendelles, France, 17 September 1918. (AWM E03267)
subaltern in the militia before the war and had served with his battalion since 1914. Although ‘little more than a lad’, Marks developed command experience within the unit, first as a platoon commander, then as adjutant and 2iC, before being appointed CO, in December 1917. F.W. Wray, senior chaplain of the AIF, applauded him for steadily climbing up ‘through posts of responsibility more than trying for your youth and inexperience’, gaining ‘in judgement and in the faculty of dealing with and understanding men’. His men had confidence in him, because ‘though youthful, [he] was a veteran as a Commander, not only in action, but also in matters of detail preparatory to action’. The fact that he was already known and respected by the officers and men of the battalion may have made the appointment of such a young man as CO easier to accept. Wray remarked that Marks assumed command of the battalion with ‘the confidence of officers and men in a degree quite unusual for one of [his] years’.

Figure 46  Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Marks, CO of the 13th Battalion. (AWM H00010)
Accompanying the decreasing age of the cohort was its declining dependence on senior officers of the pre-war militia: most COs in 1918 had left Australia as junior officers in the CMF, and four had left Australia as enlisted men with no CMF experience: Norman Marshall, Percy Woods, Maurice Wilder-Neligan and John Corrigan. The first three were still of the ‘officer-type’. Corrigan (figure 47), however, was the outlier. A Catholic, he had been working as a labourer in 1914, and he had enlisted as a private in the 15th Battalion with no previous military experience. On Gallipoli he was commissioned shortly after landing. He rose up the ranks within the 15th Battalion and attended the Senior Officers’ School in September 1917, where the commandant noted that he had served for two years ‘without reward’, and, given his eight months as battalion 2iC, he was declared ‘fit to command’. His opportunity came in June 1918, when Hubert Ford was removed from the 46th Battalion. Corrigan was far from the norm, but his appointment reflected the trend that undoubtedly would have continued had the war gone into 1919.

Despite these exceptions, battalion commanders promoted from the ranks were relatively uncommon, in both the Australian and the British
armies. Douglas Haig argued, somewhat unconvincingly, that in the British Army ‘the highest appointments were open to the humblest, provided he had the necessary qualifications of character, skill and knowledge’. Haig’s caveat is important, as it highlights the necessity of mastering the technical aspects of command that the British Army had been committed to developing in COs since 1916. By 1918, Australian COs had received extensive command training. The Senior Officers’ School and various COs’ conferences and courses allowed battalion commanders to develop, learn and share ideas. All 5th Division COs attended a conference on 5 June where ‘a very great number’ of lessons from their recent operations were discussed, including operations, administration and training. It was acknowledged that ‘new lessons … were few’, but the drawing out of different points of view ‘proved profitable’. The British Army had also created a plethora of specialist schools at various formational levels. The brigade major of the 3rd Brigade considered it a ‘pity’ that COs did not ‘get more opportunity of seeing the schools to which their men are sent, they then would take more trouble in selecting the candidates and pick up new ideas for Training’.

A rising tide did not necessarily float all boats, and there were still poor COs in 1918, even if the gap between the most and the least competent was much narrower than it had been in 1915. Taking part in a 4th Brigade exercise at the start of the year, Terence McSharry, who had commanded the 15th Battalion since August 1916, believed his fellow COs were ‘a poor lot’. Although this assessment is probably too harsh on Doug Marks, who had only just assumed command and would prove a very competent CO, it certainly applied to Walter Smith (14th). Thomas Glasgow believed that it was Smith’s fault the 14th Battalion was ‘in a bad way’. After Smith was gassed in February, Glasgow recommended that he should not return to command. Smith was not alone. Bean’s assessment of James Denton (49th) was that he was ‘no good’; Frederick Dawson (T/25th) was not ‘as vigorous and satisfactory as was desirable’, and Hubert Ford (46th) was ‘not a success’, possessing ‘neither personality nor energy and initiative so necessary in a successful leader’. In addition, Ewan Sinclair-MacLagan accused Ford of being ‘easily affected by alcohol’, a charge that Ford fought to have expunged from his record. None of these COs lasted to the Armistice.

These instances aside, the 1918 cohort was relatively stable, which was positive for the AIF. Earlier in the war, an officer in the 23rd Battalion had noted that it was ‘no good’ for a battalion to continually change its CO, but he acknowledged that ‘we must expect these sort of things at this
SOLDIERS AND GENTLEMEN

There had certainly been significant turnover in COs between 1915 and 1917 (see table 10), but by 1918 the cohort was settled, with few COs suffering mental or physical breakdown. Between 21 March, when the German Spring Offensive commenced, and 5 October, when the final AIF infantry action on the Western Front concluded, most battalions had only one substantive CO (see table 11). This was a great benefit: as one unit historian noted, ‘nothing so disorganises a Battalion as continued changes in its command’.  

At a wider level, maintaining command continuity bred familiarity within brigades. This built a positive command culture through mutual predictability creating trust, the experience of working together and a shared set of command norms, which was evident among COs who had served together for a prolonged period of time. The COs of the 6th Brigade, for instance, had worked with each other since July 1917. Aubrey Wiltshire was constantly ‘yarning’ or lunching with his other COs. At one post-operation conference in May, all four COs ‘sat in close conclave all the morning on the lessons to be learnt as a result of the stunt. There

Table 10  Source of first CO appointments after battalion was raised, 1914–1918

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Appointment</th>
<th>1914</th>
<th>1915</th>
<th>1916</th>
<th>1917</th>
<th>1918</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2iC:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Same battalion</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different battalion,</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>same brigade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different battalion,</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>different brigade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporary CO:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different battalion,</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>same brigade</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different battalion,</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different brigade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff appointment</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total appointments</td>
<td>(&lt;1)</td>
<td>(9.5)</td>
<td>(38.9)</td>
<td>(30.9)</td>
<td>(19.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was a good deal of valuable discussion about different points and we made a number of suggestions’.  

William Brazenor (23rd) reported that an ‘outstanding feature’ of the operations in August was the close liaison maintained between the COs of the brigade, which was of ‘great value in the successes gained’, as the close proximity of the four COs allowed them to ‘confer and help materially in the tactical control’ of their units. Such close liaison had not been achieved previously in the history of the brigade.  

Longevity was a doubled-edged sword, however. Most COs had been with their battalions since they were formed, and 25 had fought at the landing at Gallipoli. After four years of active service, some were approaching a state of exhaustion. Rupert Rafferty looked ‘pretty worn-out’ in March and was moved sideways to get some rest. Maurice Wilder-Neligan was looking ‘very tired and anxious’ by late August. Wiltshire wrote on 17 September, ‘Feel dopey and cannot concentrate lately on any work. This tiredness is the tiredness of staleness I think. One can be too long on the job’. The challenges of semi-open warfare created additional stress for COs. The high operational tempo also made operations more frequent, taking up more of the COs’ time. Wiltshire recorded in his diary for 29 August, ‘Laid down and tried to get some sleep but it was a hard matter on account of the constant interruption of the telephone’. A 3rd Division memorandum after Amiens questioned the practice of withdrawing the 2iC from the battalion before it went into battle. If an operation required exploitation, the strain on the CO was ‘continuous’, and a rapid advance created a ‘new local situation’ and moved the unit further away from the nucleus, where the 2iC was. Thus, there could be a considerable time lag before a 2iC could move up to replace a CO if required.  

John Monash acknowledged the necessity for rest among his COs, and he distributed a memorandum to his divisional commanders in late June.
Figure 48  The grave of Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Daly, 6th Battalion, in the civil cemetery at Hazebrouck, France, 27 October 1918. On the morning of 13 April 1918, Daly was taking up a support position in the Forêt de Nieppe, to hold up the advance of the Germans at Hazebrouck. The night had been quiet, but soon after 5 a.m. the Germans opened on the village of La Motte and its environs with 4.2-inch and 5.9-inch guns. Daly was riding on the road between La Motte and Vieux-Berquin, superintending the dispositions, when he was killed, with his favourite horse, Bobby. (AWM E03831)
1918 encouraging them to grant special leave of up to one month for COs (among other senior officers) who ‘by reason of the strenuous work of the past three months, are considered to be urgently in need of a rest in order to restore their efficiency and value to their Division’. This offer was well used by COs. Later in the year, 1914 leave, constituting a return to Australia, was offered to officers and men who had been serving since 1914. Although there was a risk that this would remove the most experienced and effective commanders in the AIF, the Armistice solved the problem.

Finally, there were more CO fatalities in 1918 than in any other year in the war, a trend replicated in the British Army. This did not reflect a return to the reckless fighting leadership typical of battalion commanders on Gallipoli. Instead, indirect fire when COs were away from the front line was largely responsible. Jock Milne, David McConaghy and Clarence Daly were all killed in April by accurate German shelling. McSharry was killed in a similar manner two days before the battle of Amiens. In addition, as the 11th Battalion was leaving the line for the last time, in September, a German aircraft dropped a daisy cutter bomb on it that killed Aubrey Darnell, the battalion’s temporary CO.

Only two COs were killed in direct combat. Ernest Knox-Knight (37th) was hit with fragments of an anti-tank shell attacking Proyart on 10 August. Robert Henderson (39th) was shot through the head by a sniper as his battalion assaulted the Hindenburg Line on 29 September. Neither Henderson nor Knox-Knight was killed through recklessness, inexperience or bravado: these were not the attributes of a 1918 CO. Even the ‘impetuous, dare-devil officer’ Wilder-Neligan was ‘free from the carelessness with which those qualities are often associated’. Geoffrey Hurry lamented that he probably was not going to be wounded for the remainder of the war and thus was unlikely to receive a Victoria Cross.

| Year | Substantive only | | Substantive and temporary | |
|------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------|
|      | No. | %   | No. | %   | |
| 1915 | 4   | 25.0 | 6   | 28.6 | |
| 1916 | 2   | 12.5 | 3   | 14.3 | |
| 1917 | 4   | 25.0 | 5   | 23.8 | |
| 1918 | 6   | 37.5 | 7   | 33.3 | |
| Total| 16  | 100.0| 21  | 100.0|
'In any event,’ he wrote, a CO would ‘only by a miracle ever get the chance of doing anything in that line’.  

Well after the war, James Durrant commented that although it took a long time to make ‘a good soldier’, it took ‘a very much longer time to make a good leader’. By 1918, the Australian CO cohort was experienced, well trained, physically and mentally robust and replete with good leaders.

**Battalion Organisation**

Like the COs themselves, the 1918 infantry battalion was entirely different from its 1914 predecessor. Since the start of the war, the average strength of an Australian infantry battalion had fallen from 1000 to 500, and this fell lower still during the 1918 fighting. The battalion establishment dropped from 966 to 900 other ranks, but this was largely symbolic for Australian battalions, few of which had anywhere near this number. During discussions over the disbandment of one battalion per brigade, Monash asked GHQ to be allowed to reorganise Australian battalions on a three-company basis, but he ‘knew that most of them had already done this for themselves, and reduced their companies to three or even two platoons’.

A battalion’s manpower shortages were compensated for by the power and diversity of its internal fire support elements, making the 1918 battalion stronger despite its fewer men. The war establishment specified each unit would have 36 Lewis guns, including 2 per platoon, 8 light trench mortars and 16 rifle grenadiers, in addition to support provided by artillery and, increasingly, by tanks. It was the coordination of these various elements that had made the battalion an effective tactical unit in trench warfare. As 3rd Brigade COs were reminded in June, the individual use of weapons was ‘of minor importance when compared with the combined tactical use of them all’.

Yet this ‘combined tactical use’ had been developed under trench warfare conditions. COs discovered that the war of movement required a slightly different configuration to maximise each weapon. As a ‘mobile weapon of opportunity’, reported Henry Crowther (14th), the Lewis gun was incredibly valuable, and he argued that ‘every man must be a Lewis Gunner’. Doug Marks described a section of bomb throwers as ‘impracticable’, and Edmund Drake-Brockman found bombs and trench mortars ‘practically useless during war of movement’. Midway through the year, infantry battalions were reorganised to accommodate these observations. To keep the battalion ‘tactically sound’ in light of its diminishing size, the four-section platoon of riflemen, Lewis gunners,
rifle grenadiers and bombers changed to an uneven platoon of two rifle sections and a Lewis gun section.\textsuperscript{60} To compensate for losing the specialised rifle grenadier and bombing sections, COs were encouraged to train a proportion of their riflemen as specialists in these two weapons. Cam Stewart recommended that all riflemen should be trained in this manner, and Pompey Elliott argued for half of each section. Both brigadiers stressed the point that this would allow the platoon to be more flexible as a fighting unit.\textsuperscript{61}

Communications needed to adapt to a more mobile battlefield. The British Army had been innovative in experimenting with different methods of communications, but the results were mixed at battalion level.
Despite the implementation of wireless communications at higher levels of command, forward of brigade headquarters the new technology was ‘not a resounding success’, since messages could be intercepted, there was often a lack of trained operators, and the wireless sets were often destroyed, scrambled or out of range. Cyclists and light horse provided a swifter alternative to runners. At Amiens, Charles Denehy (57th) was promised a cyclist section to assist him with conveying messages, but this ‘did not materialize’. The light horse despatch riders were ‘of considerable service’ but were ‘unfortunately both wounded’. The two methods that had worked best in trench warfare still worked in semi-mobile warfare: runners and lines. The 4th Battalion’s operations on 23 August were a typical example of battalion communication in 1918. Cecil Sasse (4th) was able to move his headquarters by bounds, which enabled him to more closely control the battle and to quickly report on the state of his troops to the brigadier. For the first four hours, communication was by runner, but afterwards lines were run to the forward companies. This action also demonstrated the value of visual communication. Sasse suggested that ‘the use of the signal lamp from the forward Coys to the rear as a much quicker method of bearing important news than a runner’. Light signals were also unable to be killed, unlike a runner.

The transition to semi-open warfare was a tactical challenge that most Australian COs handled well. The ability to incorporate weapons and doctrine built around a trench-to-trench attack into a mobile battlefield involved relearning how to conduct the types of operations they carried out in the CMF. As Pompey Elliott noted, ‘All this open warfare stuff [was] what we grow’d on’. Many COs found that they had to reteach basic skills neglected in the static trench environment. Crowther reported that his platoon commanders needed more instruction on map reading, as ‘rapid changes of position demanded continual accurate spotting of positions without which efficient artillery support was of course out of the question’. Terence McSharry believed there was ‘nothing fundamentally new in this war but it is remarkable how we forget and misuse old recognised ideas’.

Throughout 1918, Australian battalions were able to operate swiftly and successfully in different contexts and environments, attesting to the tactical skill and flexibility of their COs. Even if elements were not perfect, they still worked well enough to achieve battlefield success. COs were commanding experienced and well-trained soldiers within a battalion organisation suited for the type of war they were fighting.
Administration and Morale

In 1918, mobility and war weariness posed new administrative challenges for COs. In supply terms, the Australian Corps was in an enviable position, one almost unique in Australian military history. As part of the British Army on the Western Front, Australian battalions were in the main theatre of operations against the main enemy and thus received priority treatment for matériel. The ‘superabundance’ of supplies allowed Australian battalions to fight a ‘rich man’s war’, as Gary Sheffield referred to it.\(^70\) The British Army’s excellent ‘Q’ operations continued throughout the year, keeping Australian battalions usually well supplied.\(^71\) In April, possibly the most chaotic month of operations that year, many COs and quartermasters reported little in the way of difficulty in receiving and dispensing rations.\(^72\) Drake-Brockman reported that ‘at no time were the men without at least one hot meal and two hot drinks per day’.\(^73\) Patrick Currie’s 28th Battalion received hot meals every morning and evening while in the front line, the food taken straight from the cookers.\(^74\) This level of supply was more or less consistent throughout the year.

Battlefield mobility challenged transport officers and quartermasters to keep the fighting elements of the battalion well supplied. Frederick Street called April a ‘good and severe test’ for his transport section, to which it ‘responded well’ and moved ‘without any difficulty’.\(^75\) Operations in August similarly tested battalion mobility, as Wiltshire observed: ‘Getting up ammunition is one of the many problems here as we are going ahead so fast’.\(^76\) Despite his battalion’s ‘great mobility’, William Brazenor’s transport and quartermaster sections worked ‘without a hitch’. Both sections ‘did all that was desired of them’, and feeding the battalion, ‘in many times under adverse conditions, was well attended to’.\(^77\) In the same month, William Cheeseman’s (53rd) quartermaster reported, ‘In spite of the numerous moves of the Battalion the ration[s] have been delivered at times and places required. Two hot meals have been served to the troops daily’.\(^78\)

On the ‘Q’ side, battalion commanders had what they needed, where they needed it, when they needed it. This aided the chief difficulty on the battalions’ ‘A’ side: morale. By 1918, the years of active service were beginning to tell on officers and men, and the recent fighting added its toll. In October, John Farrell (43rd) reported, ‘At the beginning of the month the men showed signs of their recent continuous fighting – there was a good deal of grumbling, and the tone was anything but good’. COs often used every utility available to them to get their war-weary soldiers to continue fighting. Farrell continued, ‘By a system of good feeding, regular bathing,
trips and leave to Abbeville and neighbouring towns, a carefully planned system of recreation and good regular sleeping, the men gradually picked up, they began to show some of the old dash, grumbling disappeared and the morale was greatly raised.79

Consistent and varied supplies of food assisted greatly, as did the procurement of clean clothing and bathing facilities.80 Coming out of the line at Hazebrouck, John Mitchell made a complete change of underwear available to all his men, though it was impossible to arrange for a bathing parade.81 Bernard Duggan took ‘every opportunity’ to ‘increase the comfort’ of his men (including obtaining ‘ale’ through the canteen), who were ‘soon feeling brighter and showing the benefit of recreation and relaxation’.82 Men particularly appreciated the procurement of beer. Frederick Street used the battalion’s comforts fund for a full issue to his men.83 Frederick Forbes’ 20th Battalion maintained its canteen ‘fairly well’, inclusive of ‘a proportion of Beer’, which was ‘highly appreciated by all ranks’.84 COs were able to keep their men refreshed by giving them time away from the line, either through granting leave or by using the battalion nucleus when in the line. In Charles Elliott’s 12th Battalion, the number of men allowed to take Paris or England leave was increased early in the year, which was ‘appreciated by everyone’.85 In the 7th Brigade, COs ‘much appreciated’ rotating officers and men through their nucleus when they went into the

Figure 50  Cooks of the 35th Battalion, with their cookers, in a position near Guillemont Farm, France, a few hours after the infantry had captured this section of the Hindenburg Defences, 1 October 1918. (AWM E03474)
line, giving those who were ‘hard worked and tired’ a few days’ rest.\textsuperscript{86} The COs of the 4th Brigade were given a ‘free hand’ to select men for the nucleus, which both kept the brigade fit and allowed it to stay in the line ‘indefinitely’.\textsuperscript{87}

On the battlefield, mobility was a welcome change.\textsuperscript{88} One soldier remarked that mobile warfare ‘relieved the monotony of standing about in trenches; we could have gone on as long as the quartermaster brought up tucker’.\textsuperscript{89} The strategic situation also provided an impetus. When the German offensive began, the 25th Battalion was ‘straining at the leash’ to be part of the fighting.\textsuperscript{90} Aubrey Wiltshire noted that his battalion was ‘in the highest of spirits’, and Herbert Collett (28th) reported that morale was ‘very good’, and ‘all ranks evinced the greatest interest in the German Offensive’. His men were looking forward to ‘going down South to cut him off’.\textsuperscript{91} The subsequent battlefield success helped to maintain the men, despite the long periods of front line work draining them physically and mentally. At the end of September, Herrod’s men were ‘very tired and warworn’, but the ‘continued success … on all fronts’ kept morale alive.\textsuperscript{92}

Charles Bean was critical of how hard John Monash pushed the Australian Corps, particularly during the Hundred Days: ‘Six days rest and a bath, in John’s opinion, restores the elasticity of a division and makes it quite ready to fight again’, he wrote. Monash told Bean that the men were not tired, just ‘a little footsore’.\textsuperscript{93} Most COs’ reports from the period indicate that the men were indeed tired, and that rest was appreciated.\textsuperscript{94} Problematically, an army’s most experienced (and hence most war weary) formations are often its most effective; the success of the battle-hardened Australian Corps made it a valuable formation to use. Every victory the Australians achieved made them more exhausted. After their success at Mont St Quentin, Duggan’s men were ‘in great spirits’ but ‘very tired’, a description that reflected the state of many other Australian battalions.\textsuperscript{95}

A result of weariness was a downturn in discipline. This trend was observed throughout the year, as being absent without leave and desertion became even more common.\textsuperscript{96} Bean believed that the length of the war was ‘beginning to try some of the older hands’ and that men were becoming ‘sick at heart’.\textsuperscript{97} In May, while still in command of the 3rd Division, Monash found ‘very gallant’ men with ‘very long service’ being brought up for being absent without leave and desertion. He believed it was ‘due to a quite natural lowering of the fighting spirit due to long service, and stress upon nerves and physique’.\textsuperscript{98} Not all behaviour was as excusable. A memorandum to 1st Division COs in May specifically mentioned the
'disgraceful conduct' of certain battalions, with regards to reports of looting and even threatening French civilians to acquire alcohol. There is no indication as to how widespread these instances were, but there was also a note that there was an ‘abnormal number of absentees’ from the division, indicating that indiscipline was becoming greater than it had ever been before. In these instances, COs were responsible for preventing ‘indiscipline and lawlessness’.99

Defending themselves, COs often emphasised the positive spirit engendered by battlefield success and played down war weariness and ill discipline, sometimes attributing problems solely to ‘hard cases’ within the unit.100 Drake-Brockman suggested the larger percentage of men being absent without leave was due to the general shortage of reinforcements, resulting in the ‘general round-up in England’ of ‘many who have so successfully evaded coming to France’. Despite joining their units, many went absent without leave as soon as the battalion moved to the front line.101 Duggan reported that most men being absent without leave in his battalion were usually ‘hardened offenders … caring nothing for their own personal disgrace’.102 Although the truth will possibly never be known, every battalion certainly had its hard cases, and by 1918 even the best COs had trouble keeping these men in line. On 19 October, several ‘notorious characters’ in Maurice Wilder-Neligan’s battalion had escaped from the guardroom by overpowering the guard and stealing his rifle, exchanging shots as they fled.103

Collective discipline was also ebbing away. By September, Monash, who in May had understood the plight of many of his war-weary veterans, was dismayed at the general slackness he observed in the Australian Corps’ collective discipline.104 Although he acknowledged the impact of ‘almost continuous line work’ that denied COs ‘those periods between battles which are so necessary for training and tightening up the discipline’, he broadly criticised his corps’ poor discipline, which was ‘perhaps more noticeable at the present time than it has been for a long time previously’. Saluting, for instance, was ‘gradually becoming extinct’.105 The blame obviously fell on COs, who were also tired and probably less likely to enforce strict collective discipline. At least one CO, Bernard Duggan, was stung into action, and he put extra effort into his unit’s discipline, particularly saluting; by the end of September, the battalion’s discipline ‘during the recent times of trouble [had] improved greatly’.106

Towards the end of the year, some COs faced the prospect of losing control over their war-weary men. This was demonstrated in September when eight battalions were required to disband to compensate for the
perilously low fighting strength of some units. Faced with orders to disband and join other battalions, soldiers stood their ground, citing loyalty to their unit, unmoved by pleas from their COs. But it was not impossible to get a recalcitrant battalion to follow orders and disband. Pompey Elliott was able to convince the 60th Battalion to do so after personally addressing its members. Bean’s description of Elliott’s ‘unrivalled hold’ over his men appears apt, since none of the COs attempting to have their men disband seemed to have the level of referent and expert power that Elliott possessed.\(^{107}\)

Both during and after the war, Australian soldiers’ indiscipline was excused partly by their good battlefield performance. But by 1918, even Haig’s claim that ‘when they are ordered to attack they always do so’ was being tested.\(^{108}\) Bean wrote that if battalion officers kept pushing their men for renewed efforts, ‘any chain of mischances increasing the burden might precipitate a local mutiny’. He probably wrote this with Bertie Stacy’s 1st Battalion in mind. The unit had been in action on 18 September, and the men expected to be relieved for a spell. On 20 September they were informed they would be returning to the line for another operation the next day. In response, 119 men disappeared.\(^{109}\) Stacy was incredulous at the behaviour of his men.\(^{110}\) In the morning of 21 September he asked Iven Mackay, his brigadier, to place guards on the roads leading to the rear to collect stragglers.\(^{111}\) The operation went ahead, and the remaining 110 men successfully captured their objective and 51 prisoners.\(^{112}\) Meanwhile, those who had left the battalion were rounded up and placed in a compound, waiting for Stacy to investigate each man one by one. All were charged with mutiny and desertion, and all pleaded not guilty. The subsequent court martial deemed that there was not enough evidence to convict them of mutiny, but they were all found guilty of desertion. Stacy informed Mackay that he ‘would not be answerable’ if lenient sentences caused unrest among the remaining members of the battalion, and he recommended the offenders be committed to prison, an opinion with which Mackay concurred.\(^{113}\) Like other COs in 1918, Stacy wanted to attribute the mutiny to ‘men with bad records’ who had ‘induced the others to leave’. Peter Stanley has argued that Stacy was wrong, and his men were not manipulated by ‘wasters’ but rather had simply had enough.\(^{114}\) Given the generally lax approach to individual discipline in the AIF, the men probably knew that they would avoid being shot or awarded Field Punishment No. 1 and thus deemed whatever softer punishment they would receive worth the reward of not having to fight again.
Battalion administration in 1918 was characterised by an excellent logistics system that kept units well supplied in order to get the most out of men who were rapidly approaching their limits. In the case of Stacy’s battalion, many reached it. Yet as battalions were slowly disintegrating and becoming increasingly tired, they were the most powerful and efficient they had ever been – a perverse circumstance.

**Combined Arms Warfare**

The ability of a CO to achieve battlefield success did not rest simply with elements within the battalion. John Monash argued that a perfected, modern battle plan was like ‘a score for an orchestral composition, where the various arms and units are the instruments, and the tasks they perform are their respective musical phrases’. Monash was describing a combined arms weapons system, although not in those terms. The infantry battalion was just one piece, with COs needing to learn how to integrate their units within the combined structure. This concept was not new within the British Army or for many Australian COs with pre-war experience. It had been a feature of the *Field Service Regulations, Part I*, and had been incorporated into Tactical Fitness for Command, the examination for promotion to lieutenant colonel in the CMF.

There is consensus among historians of the First World War that combined arms tactics based on firepower were an important factor for victory on the Western Front. Australian COs fought with all the different arms used by the British Army in 1918. That year, the Vickers machine-gun companies were amalgamated into machine-gun battalions under the control of the divisional commander. Machine-guns could be allocated to battalions to increase a CO’s access to firepower. Vickers guns were also mounted on armoured cars to provide mobile fire support. At First Villers-Bretonneux, Leslie Morshead found that three cars did ‘good work’ engaging German machine-guns.

Light trench mortar batteries also assisted COs, particularly in defensive engagements. John Whitham praised their work at Dernancourt, while at Hébuterne, Henry Crowther used them to assist his raiders in breaking up German preparations for an attack and ‘spoilt whatever serious intentions [the Hun] had in mind’. These smaller weapons were particularly useful in the defensive warfare of the beginning of the year, as they were relatively mobile and could be brought up to support infantry at short notice.

Aircraft had previously been incorporated into the set-piece battle as a means of providing reconnaissance and assisting in artillery observation.
Now they could provide direct support. At Hamel, aircraft strafed and bombed German infantry and dropped supplies of ammunition for the advancing troops.\textsuperscript{124} Doug Marks found them ‘a spectacular novelty’ that ‘with some improvements and more practice will be very useful’.\textsuperscript{125} Finally, the much lampooned cavalry arm of the BEF performed an important role as mounted infantry. At First Villers-Bretonneux, Morshead praised the work of the 17th Lancers, who ‘saved the situation’ with their ‘dash, their gallantry and their discipline’.\textsuperscript{126} Light horse regiments could also be attached to brigades to be used as mounted orderlies or escorts for prisoners, freeing infantrymen from this task and increasing a battalion’s fighting strength.\textsuperscript{127} Historian Stephen Badsey has argued that the role of cavalry at Amiens proved that they could be successfully integrated into an industrialised all-arms battle.\textsuperscript{128}

Tanks could be extremely valuable in the right context but were far from perfect. Their debut with the AIF at First Bullecourt had been a disaster. Most failed to reach the jumping-off trench on time, and none made it across no-man’s land. Artillery had been cut back in the expectation that the tanks would prove decisive, and thus the infantry was left virtually unsupported. Ray Leane considered that the tanks had ‘absolutely failed to carry out their part in the attack’; John Peck and Edmund Drake-Brockman described them as ‘worse than useless’, and Terence McSharry called them a ‘tragic failure’.\textsuperscript{129} Improvements to tank design, doctrine and training meant that by 1918 the tanks could be employed effectively, providing there was ample time for them to be brought up and the infantry was given time to practise with them. A course of combined training between infantry and tanks was carried out before Hamel, which ‘proved of great value’.\textsuperscript{130} COs found that if their battalion officers liaised with the tank officers before an operation the results were positive. These conditions were met at Hamel and Amiens and during the continuation of the Fourth Army’s advance on 23 August. Cecil Sasse praised the work of the tanks on 23 August, calling the coordination between his company commanders and the tank commanders ‘almost perfect’.\textsuperscript{131} Even Drake-Brockman, whose battalion had suffered so terribly at First Bullecourt, was convinced of the value of tanks after his men fought with them at Hamel, describing them as ‘particularly useful and efficient’.\textsuperscript{132}

The tanks’ ability to be a decisive factor on the battlefield was not limitless, and they had trouble keeping up with the rolling offensive of the Hundred Days.\textsuperscript{133} One Tank Corps officer believed that the success of the tanks at Amiens had been ‘intoxicating’, and some came to believe that they could be used effectively in any situation.\textsuperscript{134} This overconfidence led to an audacious plan to cut off the village of Proyart on 10 August using
the 13th and 10th Brigades supported by tanks. The 37th Battalion, commanded by Ernest Knox-Knight, was to spearhead the 10th Brigade’s advance with three tanks. Knox-Knight had doubts about the operation, labelling it ‘not merely risky but rather foolish’. A two-day delay allowed time for German defenders to reinforce the area, and commencing the attack in darkness made it hard for the tanks to move safely over the unknown ground. Further, the rushed nature of the operation meant that minimal reconnaissance had been undertaken. As a result, the 37th Battalion was ‘cut to pieces’ by heavy German resistance. German anti-tank fire successful stalled the advancing tanks, and one shell burst against a tree and killed Knox-Knight. Those at higher levels had imposed an audacious battle plan reliant on technology that was not suited to the operation, a fact that those on the ground, including the CO, knew all too well. Regardless of the proportioning of blame, one outcome of the operation was that the 37th Battalion lost ‘a very fine battalion commander’.

At the end of 8 August, Aubrey Wiltshire wrote, ‘Tanks, aeroplanes, armoured cars, cavalry – it has been a full day’. The element missing from his list was perhaps the most important. Artillery was consistently the main supporting arm for the infantry, and COs often credited it for

Figure 51 A Mark V (male) battle tank named Berta on fire on the road between Bray and Corbie, France, 22 August 1918. The tank ignited internally, caused possibly by overheating, while on its way back to the tank park. (AWM E04931)
the success of an operation, particularly during the Hundred Days. Creeping barrages continued to be effective in semi-open warfare, reflecting a possible hesitation to move away from the techniques that had come to work so well in trench warfare. If an attack lost its initial drive, to continue without artillery support was ‘very exhausting and likely to prove expensive in time and men’. To receive artillery support, an attack needed to be restarted at a definite hour. Hence, the speed of the artillery largely defined the rate of an advance. Even Mont St Quentin, which Bean described as ‘largely a soldiers’ battle’, still relied on what artillery could be obtained for success.

If creeping barrages were unable to be laid down, COs wanted to have artillery respond to specific requests for support, much more in the ideal style of trench mortars. After Amiens, Crowther pointed out the ‘inestimable value of at least a section of Field Artillery under Battalion control’. With field artillery attached to infantry battalions, COs hoped to use on-call indirect fire to remove obstacles. This could realistically be achieved only by very effective communication between the two arms. A report produced in September dictated that leading infantry should be ‘closely supported by field guns’, which demanded ‘close liaison between infantry and artillery commanders and good observation’. Leslie Mullen suggested that a direct line be run from battalion headquarters to the artillery brigade, which would ‘save hours of time’, while ‘opportunities of inflicting casualties on the enemy would not be missed’. The general officer commanding the 7th Brigade believed it was better to leave the artillery free to engage targets rather than tying it down to a battalion headquarters, as artillery ‘relied too much on the liaison officer attached to the battalion, and many valuable targets were lost before communication could be established’.

Discussions were had and suggestions made about how to improve a CO’s ability to call down field artillery support right up to the end of the Australian Corps’ involvement in the fighting, highlighting the desire of COs to get the most out of this important supporting arm.

The task of coordinating infantry and artillery had been perhaps the defining challenge of the BEF’s tactical experience on the Western Front, and battlefield success in 1918 still largely revolved around these two working together. Tim Travers argued that traditional infantry–artillery cooperation largely provided battlefield success, with other arms used sporadically but lacking the coordination from GHQ to create a true all-arms system. Prior and Wilson took a broader view, contending that infantry and artillery fitted into ‘an entire weapons system’ that was ‘a strike force against which the enemy ultimately could provide no
effective resistance’. The reality, more often than not, as observed by Jonathan Boff, was that the ‘integration of attached assets was neither consistently applied nor universally successful’. Australian COs did not always have access to every arm; nor was every available arm appropriate in every situation. What was constant, as Peter Simkins observed, was that ‘it still fell to the infantry, on most occasions, to take and clear the successive objectives’. Infantry still advanced, captured and held, even if by 1918 the other arms made that task easier than it had been in previous years.

**Their Finest Hour**

If the efficiency of a battalion commander was determined by his ability to achieve battlefield success, then the combat of 1918 demonstrated that Australian COs were remarkably efficient. It was the climax of their war effort and the culmination of all the command skills they had learnt and that had been passed down over the course of the war.

By 1918, the AIF’s battle procedure was very effective. Operations could be organised and executed with relatively little warning. This was despite the difficulty of having to analyse, plan and execute rolling operations in which the situation and geography changed far more rapidly than they had done in the Australian experience of the war to date. The 14th Brigade diarist commented in late August that it was ‘no hard-ship to move to an unknown destination at a couple of hours’ notice, under present conditions, though less than 24 hours’ notice was once considered rather a rush’. On 31 August, Wiltshire slept in until 7.30 a.m. At 8 a.m. he received orders to be ready to move at 9 a.m.: ‘We are now so mobile’, he wrote, ‘that an order for a lightning move like this causes no perturbation’. The capture of Mont St Quentin, which Wiltshire’s battalion undertook the next day, was carried out with only ‘a few hours’ notice’ and demonstrated ‘the pitch of efficiency which the Australians had developed’.

To facilitate swift moves, Australian officers had become adept at conducting conferences and issuing verbal instructions to save time and paper. The 14th Brigade diarist noted:

> On such occasions when moves are frequent and the number of details to be arranged is not reduced, it is impossible to transmit information quickly enough to allow time for preparation by junior formations for the action to be taken, except by verbal instructions given at conference which are confirmed later by written orders and
instructions. In this way the units obtain the maximum amount of time in which to arrange their requirements and merely await the written order as confirmation of their action.\textsuperscript{160}

In an environment in which movement was often called for at short notice, COs appreciated receiving orders ‘as soon as possible after the attack is projected’ containing ‘only what is necessary for Battalions to know and that it then be left to Battalions to make all their own arrangements’.\textsuperscript{161} Charles Denehy disliked being issued a large operation order ‘at the last moment’, as this imposed ‘tremendous pressure’ on senior officers. With brigade staff providing preliminary instructions before the final operation order, many of the details could be taken care of in advance.\textsuperscript{162} Given the various elements that often worked together in a battle plan, best practice was for the different elements to meet and discuss the details of the upcoming operation. Before Hamel, officers from the artillery, flying corps, tank corps and engineers visited brigade and battalion headquarters ‘with whom they will be co-operating, and arranged details’.\textsuperscript{163} Bertie Stacy argued that since the artillery barrage determined the method and direction of the infantry’s attack ‘it is important that the general nature of it should be issued as early as possible so that plans can be made, Companies given their objectives etc.’\textsuperscript{164}

Battle procedure was made easier by company and platoon commanders who could carry out tasks with limited information from their COs.\textsuperscript{165} A ‘characteristic feature’ of John Whitham’s command was that his officers anticipated orders and were ready for the necessary action. That was ‘the culminating point of team work’, a fellow officer stated.\textsuperscript{166} As in trench warfare, once the battalion was deployed it fell to junior leaders to carry out an attack. Australian commanders recognised the abilities of their subordinates. McSharry declared that part of the success of his battalion’s operations at Hamel on 4 July was ‘due to the fine leadership of Platoon Commanders’.\textsuperscript{167} Major Leslie Fussell (T/17th) attributed the battalion’s success at Mont St Quentin to his four company commanders, who were ‘called upon at all hours and at the shortest notice for the continued exercise of their best qualities of leadership and initiative under circumstances in which they have had little previous experience to guide them’.\textsuperscript{168}

Another aspect of command at all levels was aggression. There were many junior officers, NCOs and privates in the Australian Corps with aggressive battlefield instincts who were willing to act on them, and Arthur Stevens believed that the war of movement suited Australian soldiers better than trench warfare.\textsuperscript{169} Don Moore claimed that the success of his battalion
in April was ‘due principally to the excellent fighting form our men were in and their keenness to uphold our reputation and kill as many Huns as possible’. COs both inculcated an offensive spirit among their subordinates and incorporated it into their own decision-making and planning. Many COs were already aggressive, front line commanders who had been forced to subordinate this tendency within the strict confines of trench warfare, using patrolling and raids to engage in aggressive operations.

A more mobile type of warfare provided a far greater opportunity for a battalion commander to be aggressive. This was evident even in defence. McSharry’s main defensive tactic was ‘to take the fight to the enemy and not sit down and allow him to bring it to you … anticipating him and moving towards him upsets him greatly, and breaks his plan up’. Jock Milne had a philosophy of ‘when in doubt, attack’, and when the 36th Battalion was ordered to counter-attack at First Villers-Bretonneux he issued verbal orders to his company commanders to advance, telling them, ‘Go till you’re stopped, and hold at all costs’. Milne praised the ‘dash and rapidity’ of his men, but he himself deserved credit for the bold and aggressive manner in which they were deployed.

The aggressive instincts of COs came to the fore during the period of peaceful penetrations. The policy adopted by the 7th Brigade COs, for instance, was ‘purely one of aggression’, and all ranks were keen to ‘take advantage of the opportunities’ presented by a ‘disorganised and demoralised enemy’. Divisional commanders and brigadiers urged their COs to be aggressive. This was expressed by COs either pushing their subordinates to conduct lower level raids using their own initiative or organising larger stunts themselves. In mid July, Stacy told his company commanders that he was dissatisfied with the number of patrols being sent out and that ‘great opportunities’ existed in the daytime, when the Germans were ‘far from alert’. On 18 May, George Murphy (18th) was going around his posts when he found his sentries ‘half dopey’ or even asleep. When he inquired why this was the case, his men informed him that the Germans opposite them were all asleep too. Murphy replied, ‘Well then we’ll soon see if they’re asleep’ and organised for 10 men to go in plain daylight over to the post. The raid was completely successful, with 1 officer, 22 men and a machine-gun captured. Murphy argued in his report that ‘the stunt had to be practically organised and put through on the spot, otherwise a golden opportunity would have been lost. Under these circumstances I took the responsibility of acting on my own initiative’.

The pinnacle of these activities was arguably the capture of the village of Merris by Maurice Wilder-Neligan’s 10th Battalion on the night
of 29–30 July. As an impromptu operation, it is an example of both the flexibility and the freedom that COs had in order to pursue an aggressive policy, as well as Wilder-Neligan’s own skill as a tactical commander. Having already made an unauthorised and failed attempt to capture Merris on 22 July, three days later Wilder-Neligan received permission from divisional headquarters to seize the village, and the next day he produced his orders, possibly without much input from the 3rd Brigade staff.\(^{179}\) With a creeping barrage supported by the battalion’s organic fire support (trench mortars, rifle grenades and machine-guns), the 10th Battalion encircled Merris from the north and south. Four officers and 175 other ranks were captured – more men, in fact, than were used in the attack. The 10th Battalion suffered fewer than 20 casualties. The inspector general of training allegedly described it as the ‘best show ever done by a battalion in France’, and Wilder-Neligan was awarded a Bar to his DSO, for his ‘skill, initiative, energy, and personal control’.\(^{180}\)

The Hundred Days almost reverted into set-piece warfare, even if at a high operational tempo and with greater advances made. There was still a considerable amount of rigidity behind offensive operations, which was only to be expected from officers who had learnt their craft in the restrictive environment of trench warfare. James Edmonds, the official British historian, argued that this had been inculcated within the army during the years of trench warfare; the ‘necessary issue of lengthy orders entering into meticulous detail, and the rehearsal of attacks over a marked-out practice course with fairly well defined objectives, had produced an army which was prepared to stand enormous losses uncomplainingly, but was practically devoid of real tactical sense’. He also recalled a young British divisional commander who argued there was ‘still too much blue, red and green line’ about the operations taking place. Infantry was still advancing by bounds, rather than going ‘all out’, as some corps and divisional commanders exhorted their COs to do. Edmonds argued that regimental officers were capable of engaging only in a ‘system of limited advance’.\(^{181}\)

Regardless of whether Australian COs were capable or not of going beyond a system of limited advance, that is exactly how they fought during the Hundred Days. To borrow a phrase used by Wilder-Neligan earlier in the year, it was ‘cautious leading by fearless men’.\(^{182}\) COs conducted rolling advances made from companies attacking by bounds.

A significant difference in semi-mobile warfare was the control a battalion commander had to be tactically flexible and use his initiative if necessary. In late August, Wiltshire’s 22nd Battalion advanced towards Péronne by
‘pushing out Patrols, and then making good the ground obtained’, which was described as the ‘bound’ system. His companies used an array of weapons, and the support by the British field artillery was ‘excellent’. Wiltshire was able to ‘direct the show with field glasses and map standing out in the open and watching the men getting into position’. Whenever a significant obstacle was met, such as Mont St Quentin or the Hindenburg Line, the traditional structured battle plan was generally adopted. At Jeancourt in September, the battalions of the 3rd Brigade advanced behind a creeping barrage. The style of the operation was very similar to that of the formations carried out in trench warfare, with battalions leapfrogging each other and capturing three objectives, designated the Brown, Red and Blue lines. Gaps were left in the line of advance, allowing positions to be outflanked and mopped up by sub-units. This method proved ‘an unqualified success giving both flexibility and room for manoeuvre’. To further underscore the conservatism of the operation, after its successful conclusion, Mullen wrote, ‘The highly efficient Artillery barrage was a governing factor and the means whereby such a successful operation was attained’.

Yet even within the system of limited advance some Australian COs were able to demonstrate the aggression that had been part of the command culture since Gallipoli. Major Blair Wark (figure 52) temporarily commanded the 32nd Battalion as it attacked the Hindenburg Line on 29 September. For three days Wark displayed ‘sangfroid and magnificent dash’, often ‘fearlessly at the head’ of his leading companies. During 30 September, the line was held against German counter-attacks. The men were ‘tired and had suffered heavily’, but Wark led them personally, and his ‘presence among them inspired them to further efforts’. On 1 October, he encountered a machine-gun nest and ‘without hesitation and regardless of personal risk he dashed forward practically into the muzzles of the guns and under an exceptionally heavy fire and silenced them, killing or capturing the entire crews’. For achieving this ‘stunning victory’ he was awarded the Victoria Cross, the only Australian to receive one in command of a battalion during the war.

The award of the British Empire’s highest military decoration to an Australian battalion commander was symbolic of a cohort that had reached the peak of its efficiency. From the moment a brigadier informed his CO that action was likely to the conclusion of an operation, the conduct of Australian COs in 1918 was quick, efficient and aggressive – precisely what was required. By the Armistice, the cohort was exhausted, but they could be proud of what they had accomplished. After the cessation of hostilities,
Rupert Sadler reflected, ‘One feels proud of having played even a small part in the guidance of our magnificent men, to the victorious termination of the war’.  

It is difficult not to adopt a tone of triumphalism when discussing the events of 1918. The Australian Corps’ contribution in 1918 was immense, a fact that Australian COs recognised. Asked by Charles Bean in 1919 what period of the war they found ‘most interesting or important’, those Australian officers who had fought in 1918 overwhelmingly declared that year to be their choice. Ernest Herrod described the year as a process of ‘stopping the enemy’s vigorous offensive gradually turning that offensive into defence, then to a very passive defence, then to a retreat and finally to a route [sic]’. Although rout is probably too strong a word, the ability of Australian infantry to inflict significant defeats on the German Army both in defence and in attack was a factor in its retreat. Australian
infantry battalions were experienced, well trained, well equipped and, importantly, well commanded. The capability and achievements of the COs of 1918 place them far and away in advance of the COs of 1915. Charles Johnston (15th) believed that the success of the Australian Corps during the Hundred Days demonstrated that its ‘officers & men proved themselves veterans in the art of war’.