

Compare the military effectiveness of the AIF and NZEF on the Western Front 1917 - 18

Modern western military doctrine states there are three levels of warfare: strategic; operational and tactical.¹ These levels may also be applied to the military forces involved in World War I. Many scholars assess military effectiveness by examining only one of these levels. However, the operation of the military at each level of warfare and interplay between the levels precludes such limited analysis from accurately assessing the overall merit or effectiveness of any single force let alone the comparison with another force.²

Military effectiveness has been defined as the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power. Resources include public and governmental support for the military involvement, the acquisition of manpower, and the quality of soldiers and leaders within the force. A military capable of accessing and employing these assets to accomplish strategic, operational and tactical end states in the most efficient manner may be considered to be an effective military.³

By the end of World War I both Australia and New Zealand could and did lay claim to providing the most elite troops. Much of the justification for these claims lies in the success and ability of the two nations' respective forces: Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF), particularly on the Western Front 1917-18.⁴

This essay will focus on the two nations' claims to have provided the most elite troops on the World War I battlefield. First, the essay will examine and compare the two forces' military effectiveness within the context of the levels of war outlined above. Particular focus will be given to the AIF's and NZEF's operations on the Western Front 1917-18. The first level to be examined is that of strategy.

Strategy may be divided into national or political strategy and military strategy. Political strategy is concerned with furthering national objectives via the application of political, economic, diplomatic and military forces. Whilst military strategy is aimed at determining the use of military forces and war plans in order to win wars in accordance with political directives.⁵

For the majority of the war neither the Australian nor New Zealand governments sought to significantly influence military strategy. For both governments the strategic aim was to provide military forces in order to win the war. The Dominion Government's increasing disillusionment with the British reluctance to consult encouraged their determination to increase their strategic influence. This resulted in the creation of the Imperial War Cabinet in 1917 that provided the Dominion Prime Ministers with a forum to express their views. Despite this concession and improved communications over strategic affairs the Dominion Governments remained excluded from the critical decisions such as the peace terms or the crucial meetings such as the Versailles Council. Even Hughes' increased operational control over the AIF and Massey's demands for influence over the German Pacific colonies are relatively minor successes.

Effectiveness at the military strategic level may therefore be viewed as outcome driven. That is the result is the determinant of effectiveness. On this basis both Australia and New Zealand could be considered to be strategically ineffective on the military level. The evaluation of political effectiveness may also be conducted using similar criteria. However, this would limit

the analysis of effectiveness to the assessment of aims and objectives at the various levels and the respective success. Therefore, the investigation of national or political effectiveness pursues a different path.

Effectiveness at the political level is constituted by the military's ability to capture the necessary resources by securing the co-operation of the national political elite - the government. Political support for the military provides legitimacy for the operations in which the military is engaged. Legitimacy in a democracy also derives from the perceptions of the public: is the military fighting a just cause?⁶ Without political and public support the military's ability to access or acquire national resources such as financial support, materiel and manpower would be significantly diminished. Consequently, the effectiveness of the military would be reduced.

The political effectiveness of the AIF and NZEF can be examined by considering the issue of conscription. At the outbreak of the Great War, public and politicians supported the AIF and NZEF. The soon to be Australian Prime Minister Andrew Fisher best outlines both countries sentiment and attitude to providing support to the 'mother' country when he stated "Australia will stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling".⁷

The political and public legitimacy established by such statements and supported by the large number of volunteers measurably waned over the last two years of the war.⁸ The AIF and NZEF recurrent clamour and desperate need, on some occasions, for manpower was challenged as the public and political perception of the war changed. The conscription issue exemplifies this point.

Conscription was introduced into New Zealand on 13 November 1916. A full six months after the Military Service Bill was ratified by Parliament. The government had sought to delay its introduction on political grounds, fearing an electoral backlash from anti-conscription groups such as the Red Feds. Notably the public almost overwhelmingly supported the move. The perception was that conscription would address the inequality of sacrifice created by volunteerism.⁹ Moreover, the government hoped it would address the shortage of manpower/reinforcements that volunteerism produced. Conscription was readily accepted or legitimised by the public, which had waited for over a year for its introduction.

The shortages created by volunteerism were a problem most of the dominions faced during the war.¹⁰ Australia was no different in that respect. This shortage of manpower was exacerbated by the Army Council's call for a further 20,000 infantry plus an increase in the monthly reinforcement rate. The Australian Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, by this time was an avowed advocate for conscription used this demand to force the issue.

Faced with a hostile and anti-conscription Senate Hughes turned to the public via a national referendum in order to enact the proposals. Hughes' 'campaign' included appeals to the public's loyalty to Britain, patriotism, the fast forwarding of military training and the enlistment of Birdwood and the AIF.¹¹ The narrow NO vote split the ruling Labor party and polarised the populace. A second referendum held after continuing shortages in December 1917 returned a higher NO vote than before.¹²

The political failure was to provide continuing manpower dilemmas for the AIF. The failure to introduce conscription combined with declining numbers from recruitment and mounting operational casualties eventually contributed to the disbandment of eight battalions of the AIF.¹³

The NZEF in contrast would not suffer from such debilitating shortages. The NZ Division was the only full strength Allied division at the end of the war. Nor did the success of the reductionists in lowering the reinforcement rate effect the Division. In fact on two occasions the NZ government agreed to create extra formations from surplus soldiers in depot units in Britain.¹⁴

Politically, it can be said that on this issue the NZEF held the advantage over its colonial rival. However, quantity does not automatically transfer to quality. Likewise, political effectiveness does not always confer tactical effectiveness. Tactical effectiveness is indeed more than the quantity of soldiers.

The tactical level of warfare can be defined as "the planning level of warfare that deals with battles and engagements."¹⁵ Effectiveness at this level may be defined as success on the battlefield. This would appear to be an over simplification of the problem as it fails to acknowledge the reasons for that success. Millet and Murray provide a detailed list of points from which tactical effectiveness could be examined. Technological sophistication and unit cohesion are two areas considered vital to effectiveness at this level.¹⁶ MLW adds that the quality of the soldier and the calibre of the commander are also of critical importance.¹⁷ For the purposes of this essay tactical effectiveness is considered to be a product of the fusion of leadership, technology and soldierly ability.

An evaluation of the leadership provided to the AIF and NZEF during 1917-18 is problematical.

Approaches aimed at comparisons between senior commanders neglect the relative contribution of leaders at lower levels. Many of those senior commanders were also British, Godley and Birdwood to name but two.¹⁸ Moreover, as neither country had a developed leadership training institution the overall product is difficult to assess.¹⁹ The impact of commanders cannot be underestimated. It is commanders who have the most direct influence on the training, morale and tactical employment of their command. Thus, this essay will analyse the two commanders who arguably had the most impact of the effectiveness of Australian and New Zealand forces on the Western Front during 1917-18; Major-General Sir Andrew Hamilton Russell Commander New Zealand Division and Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash Commander 3rd Division and later the Australian Corps.

One of the components or imperatives of command is action.²⁰ This is the ability to create and control battles. History has recorded that this ability was not the strong suit of most of the chateau generals of World War I. Monash's manoeuvring of the Australian 3rd Division and later the Australian Corps proves to be an exception to this view.

Monash's abilities are admirably displayed in his first battle as Commander Australian Corps. The battle of Hamel confirmed Monash's ability to plan and execute a Corps battle. His co-ordination of four independent arms; infantry, artillery, armour and the air force drew widespread praise. The brevity and success of the battle moved Monash to write:

A perfected modern battle plan is like nothing so much more as 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.²¹

This view of battle is underscored by his use of the conference system. Unlike a modern orders group this system required the input of all participants in the forthcoming battle. This open system allowed Monash to confirm every conceivable detail and bred trust and optimism in subordinates whom could feel ownership of the plan. Each instrument could thus read its score in perfect unison with the rest of the orchestra.

The openness of the conference system required Monash as Commander to be receptive to alternative ideas. This was an attribute that resulted in his acceptance and often adoption of new technologies and tactics. As a divisional commander he had accepted the theory of the limited objective ascribing intermediate objectives at Messines and Broodseinde. Moreover, his original plan at Hamel had emphasised the primacy of the tank at the expense of the preliminary artillery bombardment. However, Monash was by no means the only capable commander on the Western Front. Russell, his colonial contemporary, was just as capable as his more famous colleague.

As a tactician Russell was every bit the equal of Monash. He recognised the value in using firepower to overcome difficult positions. At Messine Ridge he noted:

The battle in a few words was won by the weight of metal that was thrown onto the enemy positions, and the mettle of the men who advanced to attack them.²²

Nor was Monash the only commander to appreciate the value of intermediate objectives. At Passchendaele Russell was careful to provide a series of limited and achievable objectives for his subordinates. Russell also understood the fluidity required in the more open warfare of 1918. As the leading division of IV Corps during the August offensive of 1918 Russell bypassed villages and strong points directing that "villages are only obstacles - not ends in themselves".²³

Russell was also an advocate of the conference system. He used it to allow contributions from a cross section of his subordinates. On at least one occasion drawing on the first hand experiences of NCOs to highlight points.²⁴ However, neither Russell nor Monash were infallible. Both blundered at Passchendaele: Russell accepting responsibility for the failure to verify the condition of the wire entanglements, Monash's failure to appreciate the limitations provided by the muddy ground. These mistakes resulted in defeat.

Effective execution of their plans would have proven both difficult and dangerous without well-trained troops. Both commanders recognised the importance of training to reinforce lessons learnt from bitter experience at the front line. For the soldiers this meant revision on bayonet fighting, range work and live-firing attacks. Tactical problems and exercises were conducted for commanders from Brigadier down. Monash, prior to arrival in France with the 3rd Division, prepared a brigade trench system on Salisbury Plain climaxing with an exercise involving all arms and air support. This front line training rounded out skills that in the New Zealanders case had been honed for six to ten months in New Zealand, Britain and finally the Depot in Etaples.

Training, success and administration may be considered to be three key elements to good morale which, as an element of combat power, can be a factor in victory. Both commanders recognised the necessity to maintain efficient administration. Russell stated after the Somme the necessity for the Division to improve its administration; "Men's comfort and safety first, the rest nowhere."²⁵ Commanding officers were held accountable for conditions in their area. A divisional school of catering was established with the express aim of preparing good hot food for the men. Physical fitness was programmed and, almost inevitably, a Divisional Rugby team was formed. Russell's frequent visits and inspections of his units ensured his orders were carried out.

Monash was no less concerned about the welfare of his troops. He ordered Commanding Officers to ensure that the appearance and welfare of their men was maintained. He confirmed his orders were followed by frequent visits to units under his command. His chief staff officer on arrival at the 29th Division noted the difference in administrative efficiency. He reports;

The lack of attention to detail is very apparent, e.g. no fuel for the men, 4 blankets to 3 men instead of two each and a thousand and one little things that we think are essential are omitted. . . They are not within months of our modern ideas.²⁶

The tactical effectiveness of both forces can be partly attributed to the ability of their commanders. Both Russell and Monash recognised that unit cohesion and esprit de corps was a product of relevant and realistic training and administrative efficiency. Their attention to these areas drew praise from many quarters including Haig.²⁷ Their concern for their soldiers was supported by the ability as tacticians. Both commanders recognised that new techniques such as 'Peaceful penetration', the incorporation of technology such as tanks and airpower and the power of firepower would not only save lives but lead to battlefield success. This is reflected in the successes such as Messines and Hamel. Consequently, both commanders and their respective forces have been recognised as elite or tactically effective.

However, the NZEF due to conscription and their thorough training reinforcement system were able to sustain the quality of their soldiers to the end of the war. On the other hand the AIF was handicapped by an inability to secure consistent reinforcements. The shortages created by this eventually led to the disbandment of nine battalions - an event that undermined morale and led to a temporary loss of effectiveness for the AIF. Therefore, the NZEF could be said to be the more tactically effective of the two forces.

The final level to be considered is the operational level. Current western military doctrine concurs that the operational level links the tactical to the strategic level of warfare. It is the level at which campaigns are constructed in order to achieve theatre objectives. The smallest force considered capable of operating at this level is a corps.²⁸ New Zealand contributed a division and although this represented a sizeable portion of New Zealand it is not a large enough force to operate on that level. By contrast Australia contributed a Corps, at one stage of five divisions. Yet this was still only one corps of a force with up to seven armies. Consequently, the corps ability to conduct operational campaigns was severely constrained by direction from above. Thus, the NZEF and AIF cannot be effectively assessed at the operational level.

The ANZAC forces on the western front in 1917-18 were generally considered to be amongst the elite forces of the Allied armies. This perspective is centred around the tactical successes of the AIF and NZEF during this period such as at Messines, Hamel and the open warfare of 1918.

These victories resulted from a combination of factors including the abilities of their respective commanders, the use of new tactics and technology and the fighting qualities of the trained soldiers.

On this basis both forces could be classed as tactically effective. In the Australian case this tactical ability was not supported by political or strategic effectiveness. Arguably, the Australian Government's inability to contribute effectively on these levels, through the provision of manpower and involvement in strategic affairs, directly contributed to the temporary loss of tactical effectiveness in 1918. New Zealand was perhaps even more strategically impotent than Australia and just as operationally inactive. However, New Zealand's political ability to legitimise conscription provided the NZEF sufficient resources to maintain their tactical reputation and effectiveness. For this reason the NZEF could be considered to be the more militarily effective of the two forces.

End Notes

1. **Australian Army Manual of Land Warfare(M.L.W.) 1.1.1 *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, Department of Defence, 1992, pp.2-1 - 2-10. *Design for Military Operations The British Military Doctrine (BMD)*, 1996, pp.4-7 - 4-10. ATP-35(B) *NATO Land Force Tactical Doctrine*, 1995, pp.XXII. R. Leonhard, *The Art of Manoeuvre Manoeuvre-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle*, Presidio, USA, pp.5-10.**
2. **A.R.Millett and W.Murray (eds), *Military Effectiveness Volume 1 The First World War* , Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1990, pp.1-2, footnotes 2-3, provide a brief but impressive list of single level approaches.**
3. **Millett and Murray (eds), pp.2-3. *M.L.W.* 1.1.1, 3-1, agrees with this definition but focuses more closely on the contribution of the commander in achieving effectiveness.**
4. **The AIF at armistice had a total 171,541 soldiers. The AIF was divided between the Australian Corps on the Western Front, its support elements in Britain, and the Desert Mounted Division in Egypt and Palestine. The NZEF had a total of 51,692 soldiers; the NZ Division on the Western Front, administrative elements in Britain, and the NZ Mounted Rifles Brigade in Egypt and Palestine. For further statistics see LtCol J.Studholme C.B.E.,D.S.O., *Some Records of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force*. Unofficial but compiled from Official Records, Government Printer, Wellington, 1928. W.Vamplew(ed) *Australian Historical Statistics*, Fairfax, Sydney, 1987, pp.410-417 and J.Grey *A Military History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1990, pp.118-120.**
5. **Leonhard, p.6-8, *M.L.W.* 1.1.1, p.2-3, BMD, p.4-7 - 4-8, ATP-35(B), p.XXII.**

6. The establishing of the legitimacy of a military action has almost always been an imperative of belligerents. Examples include the religious justification for the Crusades, Shakespeare's Henry V concern over his right to stake a claim for the throne of France (**Henry V, Act 1 Scene 2, 9-32**), the orchestration of a Polish invasion of Germany by Hitler in 1939, and the failure of the American government to remember this maxim in the latter stages of the Vietnam War.

7. **Andrew Fisher, 1914, in T.B.Millar, *Australia in Peace and War*, Second Edition, ANU Press, Botany, 1991, p.28.**

8. W.Vamplew (ed), p.412 Australian enlistments in the first eight months of the war (80,069) exceeded enlistments during the last two years 976,601). **Studholme, *Graph of Strength of NZEF Overseas*** by monthly totals, confirms the trend 30,360 for the first eight months as against 39,760. Note that conscription was introduced in New Zealand in November 1916.

9. **P.Baker, *King and Country Call New Zealanders, Conscription and the Great War*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1988, pp.95-98** recognises that these were probably the two main reasons amongst a raft of others including the depletion of labour and deterioration of race

10. Both Canada and the United States faced considerable opposition in an attempt to introduce conscription. The Canadian attempt to introduce conscription split the country between French Canadians, who refused to fight, and British Canadians who wanted conscription to force them. See **Baker, p.101.**

11. **E.M.Andrews, *The ANZAC Illusion Anglo-Australian Relations during World War I*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp.121-123** outlines the political pressure placed on Birdwood to encourage the troops to support the conscription campaign.

12. **Grey, pp.113-115, Baker, pp.98-99** the result of the first vote was 1,160,033 votes to 1,087,557. A NO vote of 51.2%. The second referendum result was 1,181,747 votes to 1,015,159. A NO vote of 53.3%. The soldiers voted YES by a small majority on each occasion. Andrews, p.123 suggests the large amount of troops in bases and the Middle East provided the numbers for the result.

13. **P.Regan, "An act of Folly?:Disbandment and Mutinies in the First AIF in 1918" in *The Yolla 1985-86, Vol 2, No 11, pp.43-47*** provides a brief analysis of the impact on the Australian forces effected by disbandment and/or amalgamation. Vamplew(ed), p.412 confirms the recruiting problem. After November 1916, monthly totals would not rise above 5000.

14. **Baker, pp.132-138** highlights the growing belief in New Zealand that the country was doing more than its colonial counterparts in supporting the war effort. This apparent international inequality of sacrifice led to the calls for a reduction in the reinforcement rate. The extra troops agreed to were a Brigade in March 1917 and a Tank Battalion in April 1918.

15. **Leonhard, p.9.**
16. **Millett & Murray (eds), pp.19-28.**
17. **M.L.W. 1.1.1, pp.2-8 - 2-9.**
18. Major-General A.J.Godley Commander 2 ANZAC Corps and later GOC NZEF and Field Marshal Sir W. Birdwood Commander 1 ANZAC Corps and later appointed GOC AIF.
19. The Royal Military College Duntroon, an officer training establishment, opened in Canberra on 27 June 1911. The first course included ten New Zealand cadets. A relationship which persists today. Initial intakes were not only relatively small but were generally appointed to staff positions throughout the war.
20. **John Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, Penguin, London, 1988, p.325.**
21. **Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash, *The Australian Victories in France in 1918*, Imperial War Museum, London, 1920, p.56.**
22. **Major-General Russell letter to James Allen dated 19 June 1917 in Christopher Pugsley, *A Comparison between Russell and Monash the Divisional Commanders of II ANZAC Corps in 1917*, a paper presented to the 1989 Australian War Memorial History Conference, p.8.**
23. **Major-General Russell Diary, 30 August 1918 in Christopher Pugsley, *'Those Other "Diggers" in 1918'*, a paper presented to the 1993 Australian War Memorial History Conference, p.77.**
24. **Major-General Russell Diary, 18 September 1918 in Pugsley, *ibid.*, p.79.**
25. **Russell Papers, 21 October 1916 in Pugsley, *A Comparison*, p.3.**
26. **Letter from Jackson to Monash, P.A. Pedersen, *Monash as Military Commander*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p.218.**
27. **Pedersen, p.184.**
28. **Leonhard, p.8-9, M.L.W. 1.1.1, p.2-4 - 2-5, BMD, p.4-9, ATP-35(B), p.XXII.8**