

Montbrehain: the AIF's last battle of the war

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The last major action involving Australian infantry on the Western Front in the First World War was at Montbrehain, France, on 5 October, 1918. The battle involved the 2nd Division's 6th Brigade under **Major General Charles Rosenthal**, with **Lieutenant General John Monash** in overall command of the Australian Corps.

As was becoming typical of the open warfare following the battles of Le Hamel (4 July, 1918) and Amiens (8–12 August, 1918), the battle plan was put together at relatively short notice. However, the plan applied many of the successful tactics that had been learned since July 4th. These successes, although hard fought, resulted in the capture of substantial German territory, equipment and prisoners, in contrast to the bloody battles of the Somme (e.g. Pozieres, Flers) in 1916, and Bullecourt and the Ypres Salient in 1917 ('Passchendaele').

In the aftermath of Billy Hughes' failure to carry conscription in Australia, with the losses since July in the Somme Valley and the number of wounded/gassed men away being treated, the ranks of the AIF by October 1918 were depleted and physically exhausted. The 2nd Division was to be the last AIF division in the line before a spell of at least three months, before the Germans were expected to be finally finished off in 1919.

The attack on Montbrehain on 5 October was spearheaded by the 21st and 24th Battalions (Vic). Critical support in the attack was provided by the 2nd Pioneer Battalion and the 6th Machine Gun Company (a unit of the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion). The reserve units were the 18th and 27th Battalions, while the 22nd and 23rd Battalions were to hold and cover the left flank (north of Montbrehain).

The 21st and 24th Battalions had been used sparingly during the successful Australian contribution to the breaching of the Hindenburg Line and Hindenburg Support Lines between 29 September and 1 October by the Fourth Army. Importantly, the advance also included the capture of the Beaufort Line in several places. The Beaufort Line was the final formally organised German defensive line. One of the key uncaptured sections of that line was at Montbrehain, which Carne (6th MG Coy, writing in 1937) described thus: *[Montbrehain] stood on a plateau dominating any further advance*. More fully, Rankin (in 2014) wrote: *the village was on a slight rise that overlooked the defenses and several valleys to the east. This made the area key terrain in preventing the Germans from regaining their lines*.

Table 1: Field returns 5 October 1918.*
(Extracted from Rankin, 2014)

Unit	With unit in battle	Sick	Detached	Total
21 st Battalion	27 / 461	0 / 5	8 / 133	35 / 599
24 th Battalion	28 / 442	0 / 9	14 / 163	42 / 614
2 nd Pioneer	25 / 708	0 / 0	9 / 172	34 / 880
6 th MG Coy	2 / 43	0 / 0	1 / 3	3 / 46
In Reserve				
18 th Battalion	14 / 303	0 / 3	11 / 199	25 / 505
27 th Battalion	18 / 322	0 / 0	12 / 166	30 / 488

* Figures are given separately for officers/other ranks. Authorised establishment was 44 officers and 901 other ranks per battalion. Source: Second Australian Division, strength Return as at noon 5.10.18, War diary, Administrative Staff, Headquarters 2nd Australian Division, AWM4, 1/45/35 Part 1.

The strength of the depleted AIF battalions is laid bare in **Table 1 [left]**. Typically, a full-strength battalion would have 44 officers and 901 other ranks. The battalions tasked with the attack had barely half that number available for the attack once the sick, those on other duties and those reserved from the *nominal fighting strength*, which was further reduced by men left behind as a cadre for rebuilding if the unit suffered heavy casualties (Rankin, 2014).

Rankin estimates that the 21st and 24th Battalions could muster only 20 officers and 300 men each, with the 2nd Pioneers contributing about 500 men. The reserve 18th and 27th Battalions, which had fought for the last week, each had a fighting strength of 10 officers and 180 men of other ranks. These 1 150 men were up against 1 500 German defenders.

The weak strength of the Australian infantry necessitated that the 2nd Pioneer Battalion would, for the first time, be deployed into an infantry assault. The 2nd Pioneers were at near-full strength. Their usual duties during the war were the vital construction of supply infrastructure, such as roads, railways, bridges and dug-outs, typically behind (but close to) the front line. The hazards of this work were more from shelling rather than bullets. The 2nd Pioneers were, however, trained as fighting infantry; they just had little experience in this role. Montbrehain was the first time that they would be tasked to fight as attacking infantry.

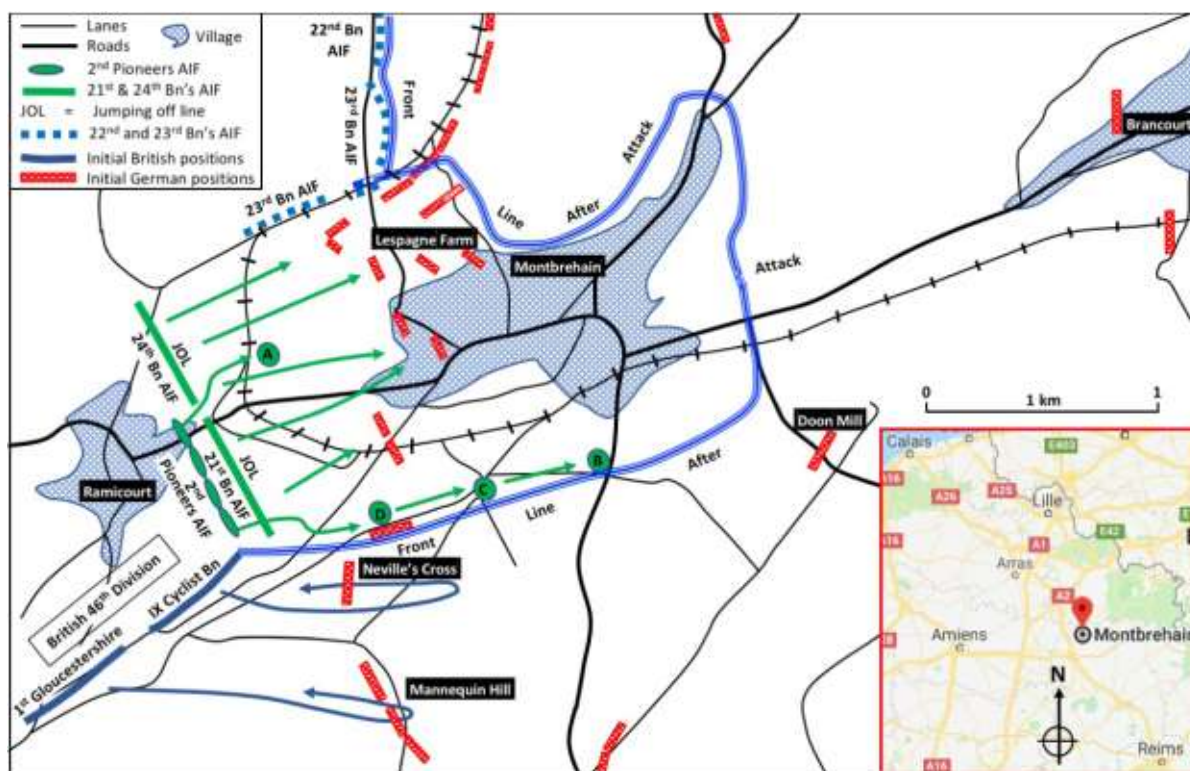
Over the following century much debate, starting with Bean (1942, *Vol. VI*) and followed by others such as Carlyon (2006), has been centered around whether the AIF needed to fight this last battle, but instead should have been taken out of the line. In part, the 2nd Division was unlucky, in that the II American Corps (27th and 30th American Divisions) were due to relieve the Australians on 5 October but were delayed. Therefore, the British 4th Army Commander, **General Sir Henry Rawlinson**, retained the Australians in the line for an additional day and ordered them to join in the attacks on 5 October (Rankin, 2014).

The attack on Montbrehain was critical to other British attacks to consolidate the Beaurevoir Line: in the north by the 25th Division (Genève), and in the south by the 46th Division (IX Cyclist and 1st Gloucestershire Battalions), towards Neville's Cross and Mannequin Hill, respectively, in the following days. Thus, the AIF attack on Montbrehain was both strategic and a coordinated part of attacks by other British forces.

Almost certainly, Lieutenant General Sir John Monash also recognised that a breach of the German Beaurevoir defence line, in combination with the German territory losses since 4 July, would ensure the war would end in 1918, rather than 1919.

The detractors of the attack have focused on the high cost in casualties borne by the AIF: 430 casualties in total (around one in three of those deployed), with the loss of 135 killed in action or dying of wounds. Ultimately and overall, the attack on Montbrehain *was* successful, with the AIF capturing and holding close to its objectives, despite some very heavy infantry fighting. The attacks by the British 25th and 46th Divisions were largely unsuccessful.

However, the capture of Mannequin Hill did eventually occur on 8 October. As such, Rankin concluded that the attack on Montbrehain was successful, justified and worthwhile. In contrast, others have concluded that the cost was too high at this late stage of the war. Hindsight, of course, is 20/20 vision.



Map of Battle of Montbrehain, 6.00 am 5th October 1918, after Carne (1937) Rankin (2014), McClusky and Dennis (2017). A, B, C and D are positions later occupied and defended by the 2nd Pioneer Battalion. [To see this map in colour, members on e-mail can refer to the pdf copy of DIGGER 64 e-mailed to them.]

The attack on Montbrehain by the AIF started at 6.05 am on 5 October [see Montbrehain map, **above**]. The plan called for the support of 12 Mark V tanks from the 16th British Tank Battalion. Owing to difficulties and the short planning time, the tanks did not arrive until after the attack had commenced. However, the tanks did some very useful work until they were withdrawn (as planned).

The 24th Battalion, in particular, almost immediately met very stiff opposition in clearing the trenches to the north-west of Montbrehain. Eventually, 'B' Company lost every officer during the attack,

wounded or killed. This was the stage that **Lieutenant George Ingram MM** of the 24th Battalion led his platoon into a German post containing nine machine guns and 42 German soldiers. Ingram was awarded Australia's last VC for the Great War in this particular action.

Right: Lieut George Ingram VC, MM, 24th Bn, AIF (later Capt), and his medals.



On the other side of the battlefield, **Lieutenant Norman Francis Wilkinson** and his section (6th MG Coy/2nd MG Bn) showed initiative and courage to reconnoitre and then capture a German machine-gun nest, containing no fewer than 14 guns, in a protected position in the railway cutting adjacent to Neville's Cross. This action resulted in about 30 Germans killed and 50 wounded, while about twenty enemy escaped to Mannequin Hill (Carne, 1937).

Wilkinson was subsequently awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre. Members of his team were also decorated:

Private 418 David Lazarus was awarded a DCM and **Private 3777 John Bates** a MM. Most importantly, Lieutenant Wilkinson's action enabled the 21st Battalion's attack to move forward into Montbrehain and the 2nd Pioneer Battalion to protect the south-western flank of the attack from fire and attack from Mannequin Hill, which had not been captured as planned by the British 46th Division.

Left: Lieutenant Norman Wilkinson CdG, 6th MG Coy, AIF, RTA 23/3/1919.

Hence the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, in their first infantry engagement, provided critical and steadfast support for the successful Montbrehain assault. This success came at a high cost, with the loss of 35 members of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, being either killed in action or dying of their wounds [see Table 2, p8]. In total, the attack on Montbrehain yielded around 600 prisoners and many hundreds of losses on the German side (Rankin, 2014).

For the 2nd Division, the losses of the men killed were particularly wrenching, as the dead included a number who had been awarded significant and sometimes multiple honours in the preceding years (17 of the 135 killed). Prominent and sorely felt in the 24th Battalion were the losses of the 'two captains of Montbrehain': **Captains Harry Fletcher** and **Austin Mahony MC** (Carlyon, 2006, and Ganey, 2015).

These officers are pictured to the **right** with their good mate, **Lieutenant Joseph Scales DSO, MM, MID**, who was one of only three Australian servicemen to be awarded this medal set (Clay, 2018). Austin Mahony and Harry Fletcher enlisted together in Melbourne and had the consecutive regimental numbers of 1056 and 1057, respectively. They had both started their army careers as privates and fought at Gallipoli, arriving with the 24th Battalion in the early hours of 6 September, 1915. They were both part of the defence of Lone Pine when the Turks brought up howitzers in the late afternoon. The heavy barrage ended up wounding and burying Harry (Carlyon).

Through dedication and leadership during battle, both men rapidly progressed through the ranks to become officers in 1915/1916 and captains in 1917/1918. Along the way, Austin, as a 2nd lieutenant was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery at Pozieres:

For conspicuous gallantry during operations. When commanding a working party close to the enemy he heard that another battalion was hung up and required bombs. He at once took up his party with the bombs required and after bombing three enemy dug-outs on the way, returned to the work that he had in hand.



Above right: Captain Harry Fletcher (KIA 5/10/1918) (right); Lieutenant Joseph Scales DSO, MM, MID; and Captain Austin Mahony MC, DOW 9/10/1918, all 24th Battalion, c. September 1918.

Later, on 18 May, 1918, Austin Mahony was recommended for a Bar to his MC for his gallant contribution to the attack on Ville-sur-Ancre. However, this medal was not awarded.

The walking stick that Mahony sports in the photo [below left] was the result of a battle of a different kind. Mahony loved playing Australian Rules football, along with many others of the AIF. The cane resulted from a badly sprained ankle that took him away from the Front for a total of six months, from June 1917 to the beginning of 1918. This fortuitously meant he missed the bloodbath that was Passchendaele in late 1917.



From then on, Austin always carried this walking stick to the front and inspired those around him with his coolness. Several times when it appeared he should be killed, he walked away, swinging his stick. Naturally he was considered lucky (Carlyon).

Unfortunately, not quite lucky enough. Captain Mahony MC died four days after being hit in the temple by a German sniper at Montbrehain, while Captain Fletcher was killed instantly by a 77 mm shell; both incidents occurring in the early morning stages of the battle for Montbrehain.

Left: Captain Austin Mahony MC, 24th Bn, DOW 9/10/1918.

Although the 24th Battalion perhaps suffered the highest rate of casualties, the 21st Battalion also lost its share of 'old hands'. Perhaps the most significant of these was **Captain James Sullivan MC & Bar, MM** who was killed when hit by a shell as the 21st Battalion was entering the village of Montbrehain on 5 October.

Sullivan was promoted to sergeant soon after he landed on Gallipoli. At some stage during the fighting on the Peninsula, Sullivan was recommended for a Military Medal for bravery, but for some reason this was not instigated until March 1916 and not gazetted until January 1917.

On 9 March, 1918, Sullivan took command of 'A' Company. In early May the battalion was in reserve in Querrieu and 'A' Company was billeted in a brewery. From then on the company was referred to as the 'Brewery Company' within the battalion. On 8 August, 1918, Sullivan was finally promoted to captain. On that day he was in an action that saw him successfully recommended for a Military Cross:

At Marcelcave near Amiens during the attack on the 8th August 1918 this officer was in command of 'A' Company, maintaining liaison with the troops on his right. Seeing that the attack was being held up by very heavy MG fire he organised a party of nine men with two Lewis Guns and led them against the enemy MG nest under heavy fire. Despite severe opposition he silenced the enemy guns, rushed them, capturing two MG's and 10 prisoners. Lieut. Sullivan's initiative and dash enabled the flank units to advance and so prevented a serious hold up in the operation.

Right: Captain James Sullivan MC & Bar, MM, 21st Bn, KIA 5/10/1918.

It was only ten days later that Captain Sullivan was to earn a recommendation to give him a Bar to his Military Cross:

On the morning of the 18th August 1918 near Herleville, East of Amiens, the attack was held up by MG [machine gun] fire. Capt Sullivan immediately reorganised his command into two parties, personally leading one to a commanding position from which he was able to give covering fire to the other party, which was bombing up a trench from the flank. From this position Capt. Sullivan and his party were able to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy when he attempted to retreat. He then went forward, reorganised, disposed his company for defence, so as to secure the ground at the 'Crucifix', which, was of great tactical importance, and gained touch with the units on both flanks. His initiative and tactical skill cleared the situation at a critical time and enabled the flank troops to attain their objective, which they had previously been prevented from doing by the enemy machine gun fire. He was responsible for the capture of six prisoners, 2 MG's and the killing of twenty of the enemy by this operation.



Capt James Sullivan was also killed early in the Montbrehain attack. He was leading his men forward when he was caught by the full force of a shell burst. Sullivan was one of only 96 Australian WWI servicemen to be awarded an MC (as an officer) *and* MM (other rank) during WWI (Clay).

The 2nd Pioneer Battalion had two men die of their wounds well after the battle. Royal ('Roy') Courtney was born in 1891 to Isaac John and Elizabeth Alice Courtney in Launceston, Tasmania. He had two older brothers and two sisters. Roy was a member of the rowing club and played football for the North Launceston Football Club. **Corporal 1213 Roy Courtney MM** initially served in the 26th Battalion but transferred into the 2nd Pioneer Battalion in March 1916. Roy was wounded in March 1917 and was not fit to return to the battalion until June 1918. He was awarded a Military Medal (gazetted after his death) for his bravery two days before Montbrehain as the 2nd Division attacked the Beaufort Line around Estrees:

During the attack on Beaufort Line north of St Quentin on the 3rd October 1918, this NCO had charge of a section of road to be cleared and opened up for advance of the artillery. Despite persistent shell-fire and danger of falling debris from buildings, he cleared the road through the village, allowing the awaiting artillery to proceed. His coolness and determination were a fine inspiration to his men until he was severely wounded [on 5/10].

Courtney received a deep shrapnel wound to the head. He was repatriated to Australia but died of his wounds in the Hornsby Military Hospital at Launceston in July 1919. It is most likely that Roy Courtney MM and **Private 3446 Kenneth Whitelaw**, who died of his wounds (bullets to right arm and chest) on 17 October, 1922, were the last Australians to die directly as a result of the fighting for the village of Montbrehain. Regrettably, Kenneth Whitelaw does not appear on the AWM Roll of Honour as he died after 31 March, 1921.



Above right: Corporal Roy Courtney MM, 2nd Pioneer Battalion, died of wounds 29/7/1919.

Left: Private Kenneth Whitelaw, 2nd Pioneer Battalion, DOW 17/10/1922.



Captains Austin Mahony MC, Harry Fletcher, James Sullivan MC & Bar, MM, Corporal Roy Courtney MM and Pte Kenneth Whitelaw were just part of the cost to Australia of the Battle of Montbrehain – the last fought by the AIF in the Great War.

All 135 brave men that were lost in the Battle for Montbrehain are listed in **Table 2** on the **next page**. Australia paid a high price for Montbrehain, but their deaths were not in vain. The battle was a key component of an overall strategic push by the Allied armies to capture and secure the Beaufort Line, the last of the formal German defensive lines.

Due to the success of the greater operations on the Beaufort Line and the earlier significant Allied advances after Le Hamel, the First World War thankfully ended successfully for the Allies at the 11th hour on 11 November, 1918, rather than the otherwise anticipated victory in 1919.

The two photographs below show the main intersection in Montbrehain late in 1918 and in 2012. The centenary of the Battle of Montbrehain will be celebrated on 5 October, 2018. For further information on the centenary, visit: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1727147143983952/>. Lest We Forget.



Far left: Postcard of Montbrehain intersection in late 1918. Courtesy Michael Ganey.
Left: The same intersection in 2012. Courtesy Andrew Pouncey.

Table 2: *The list of the fallen from the Battle of Montbrehain, 5th October 1918.*

<u>21st Infantry Battalion (32)</u>	<u>24th Infantry Battalion (cont)</u>	<u>2nd Machine Gun Battalion (6)*</u>
Pte Charles Aitken	Pte Edward W Cunningham	Pte Louis H Burn
Pte Frederick J Baker	LCpl James M Dempsey	2 nd Lieut Frank G Hamilton, MM+Bar
Pte John A Barclay	Capt J Harry Fletcher	Pte Maurice Kay
Cpl Joseph Baxter, DCM	Cpl Ernest L Ford, DCM	Pte Alfred Napper
Lieut Stanley J Bennie	Pte Alexander J Fraser	2 nd Lieut George E Rennie
Pte Albert V Berner	Lieut John F Gear, MC, MID	Cpl Robert J Saunders
Pte Herbert A Browne	Pte Albert G Graham	
Pte James J Cantwell	Cpl Norman A Grant	<u>2nd Pioneers Battalion (35)</u>
Pte Clarence R Clifton	Pte Harry Grove	Pte Charles E Bateman
Cpl Stanley J Cochrane	Pte Charles W Hall	Pte William A Christian
Pte Reginald A Craig	Pte Harold F Hardy	Pte Arthur H Coad
Pte Victor A Dawson	Cpl Harold M Hellier	Pte Bert Conlen
Pte Robert Gardiner	Sgt James G Hewitt	Cpl Roy Courtney, MM
Pte Frank Goodman	Pte Ernest E Holt	Pte Walter H Crack
Sgt George Griffith, DCM	Pte Walter Hourn	Cpl Arthur E Galloway
Lieut William E Hardwick, MC+Bar, MID	Pte Ernest H Ireland	Pte James H Gray
Pte William A Kennealy	Pte Albert Jeffery	Pte Walter J Leach
Pte Percy W Logan	Pte Kevin T Knight	Pte Charles H Linford
Pte James Martin	Pte John J Lavery	Pte Arthur W Luff
Pte Thomas McCarthy	Pte Ralph V Leggett	Pte Patrick McGough
Pte Thomas W McMurtrie	Sgt William L Lyons	LCpl Sidney E McKinnon
Sgt William Montgomery	Pte Alan B Mackay	Pte George E Nash
Sgt Richard J Moore	Capt J Austin Mahony, MC	Pte John J Parker
Pte Robert J Neave	Pte John L Maxwell	Pte George Rayner
LCpl Leslie Ray	LCpl Roy A McGill	Sgt Eric F Read, MM, CdG-Fr
Pte John C Savage	Pte Arthur Miles	LCpl Harold C Reade
Pte Richard C Shone	Pte Henry B Miller	Pte Raymond R Reed
Capt James Sullivan, MC+Bar, MM	Pte Alexander P Missen	Pte John R Regan
Cpl Albert C Thom, MID	Pte Daniel R O'Dowd	Capt Louis C Roth, MC, MID
Sgt Maj Rees W Thomas, MM	Pte Ernest H Owens	Bertie Henry Saxon
Pte William M Watson	Pte Andrew W Pennant	Pte Hilton V Self
Pte Charles L Wilson	Pte Harry Powell	Cpl Henry W Smith
	Sgt Lindsay St Ranson	Pte James A Steer
<u>24th Infantry Battalion (60)</u>	Pte Alexander Roberts	Sgt John R Storer, MM+Bar
Pte William J Anderson	Cpl James D Rowlands	Pte Alexander Swinton
Lieut William D Baldie	Pte Walter H Scholz	Pte Robert Symons
Pte Henry J Beach	Pte Sydney H Stirling	LCpl Joseph H Taylor
Pte John Blankenberg, MM	Pte Francis C Titus	Pte Fred Warman
Pte Urban H, Brown	Pte Aroo M Tornroos	Pte Stanley Weston
Pte William A Burnett	Pte William Walsh	Pte Kenneth Whitelaw
Pte Thomas E Burrows	Pte William J Walsh	LCpl Gwelyn J Williams
Pte John M Campbell	Sgt William Watson	Pte John W Williams
Pte Harry C Chamberlain	Pte William G Wheeler	Pte George W Woodard
Pte Harold R Chattin	Pte John T White	<u>2nd Field Ambulance (1)</u>
Pte John A Clancy	Pte Harry F Withers	Pte Edward F Crisp
Pte Bernard M Connelly	Pte James M Wood	<u>11th Field Artillery (1)</u>
CSM George H Cumming, MM	Pte Thomas G Wright, (MM?)	Lieut Colin E Begg

* 6th Machine Gun Company; elements of the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion.

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