

“Curious Monsters” – Changing perceptions of tanks across the First AIF.

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Abstract

For the past few decades, the prevailing assumption has been that after the first battle of Bullecourt in April 1917, the entire AIF saw tanks as “anathema,” and hated the machines – until Monash changed this view through training the men alongside tanks for the battle of Hamel in July 1918. This belief is based on Monash’s claims in *Australian victories in France in 1918*. However, Monash specified that it was the Fourth Division who were the most opposed to tanks. It seems the perceptions of tanks in the AIF before Bullecourt, between Bullecourt and Hamel, and during Hamel were much more varied and complex than is usually claimed, and depended on a man’s rank and experience. These perspectives also depended on which tanks the men saw and in which contexts.

Presumed perceptions of tanks in World War I.

For many years, based primarily on Lieutenant General Sir John Monash’s claims in *Australian victories in France in 1918*, the prevailing belief has been that the men of the AIF hated tanks after the experience of the first battle of Bullecourt.

Monash claimed:

Tanks had become anathema to the Australian troops. For, at Bullecourt more than a year before, they had failed badly, and had “let down” the gallant Infantry, who suffered heavily in consequence; a failure partly due to the mechanical defects of the Tanks [...], partly to the inexperience of the crews,

and partly to indifferent staff arrangements, in the co-ordination of the combined action of the Infantry and the Tanks.¹

Apparently the infantry only embraced tanks after they interacted with tanks and their crews in preparation for the battle of Hamel over a year later. The success of the latter battle supposedly solidified this appreciation and the AIF never again took issue with tanks. It seems, however, that tanks being “anathema” in the AIF was actually a minority view primarily based on the 4th Division’s experience of Bullecourt.² In reality, perceptions of tanks varied greatly according to rank and experience. These views evolved as men interacted with British and German tanks in battles that occurred in the 15 months between Bullecourt and Hamel. Other allied troops working with tanks further altered Australian views. Most of the negativity towards tanks by groups within the AIF was based on the newness of the technology, exacerbated in cases such as the 4th Division’s experience at Bullecourt. The experiences of tanks by Australians at Bullecourt and later at Hamel were widely different, due to changes in conditions, command, morale and tank tactics that had developed during the interim period. This further affected the perception of tanks within the contexts of both the two battles, and of the war. Consequently, the altered perception of tanks by Australian troops in 1918 cannot be solely attributed to the experience of Hamel.

Order, counter-order, disorder – the failure of first Bullecourt

Bullecourt was conceived in April 1917 as part of the wider Arras offensive. Haig ordered Gough, commander of the Fifth Army, to seize a sector of the Hindenburg Line. The 4th Cavalry Division would pass through this sector and meet up with other cavalry divisions, who would break through closer to Arras. The attack was set for 9 April. On 8 April it was found that the wire of the sector the Fourth Australian Division and British 62nd Division were to attack remained uncut. It needed a further week of bombardment before it could be attacked. Still hoping to assist the Third Army, Gough seized on Tank Corps Major William Watson’s plan to

¹ John Monash, *The Australian victories in France in 1918*, The Specialty Press, Melbourne, 1923, p. 53.

² This myth is repeated in Pedersen, Adams-Smith and others; see Appendix D for more information.

obviate an artillery bombardment and enter the fray. Instead of a bombardment that would warn the Germans of an imminent attack, Watson argued, a dozen tanks on a small front could do the job of the artillery, destroying the wire and clearing paths for the infantry. Gough chose this plan and left General Holmes of the Fourth Division to prepare for the assault on 10 April. The Fourth Division was one of the strongest in I ANZAC, but the troops had never worked with tanks before.³ Despite this, many staff and officers were confident of this plan, declaring “the tanks will crumble down the wire.”⁴

Conditions for the battle were difficult owing to cold weather and snow. By 10 April there were reports that the assault at Arras was faltering, throwing doubt on the Bullecourt operation’s relevance.⁵ But the decision to attack remained, and the 4th and 62nd Divisions were sent out into no man’s land to await the signal to attack. After hours in freezing conditions, the tanks failed to arrive, having been slowed by a snowstorm and mechanical difficulties. At the last minute, the Australians were recalled. German forces opposite noticed some movement and launched a bombardment that caused several casualties. The 62nd Division was not informed of the retreat and attacked, losing 162 men. This would not be the only case of flawed staffwork during the offensive, which would cost both the British and Australians many casualties.⁶

Undeterred, Gough had the attack reset to take place 24 hours later. His urgency is in some ways understandable. Though patrols reported the line was well held, Gough believed the German army were about to retreat beyond the Hindenburg Line.⁷ On the night of 10–11 April, the exhausted troops returned from the rear and spent hours waiting in the cold.⁸ Only one tank was in position by 3 am

³ Peter Pedersen, *The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front*, The Penguin Group, Camberwell, 2007, pp. 198 – 199.

⁴ War diary, 16th Battalion, 9 April 1917, AWM4 23/33/17.

⁵ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 206.

⁶ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 200.

⁷ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, pp. 198, 200.

⁸ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, pp. 200 – 201.

when all were meant to be ready; one that did arrive got stuck in a sunken road.⁹ The twelve that made it were Mark I and Mark II unarmoured training tanks, slow and loud prototypes not designed to see action. Like the infantry, their crews were exhausted after hours of travelling to the battlefield.¹⁰ As the tanks were much slower than expected, orders were altered for most of the battalions; the original orders for 10 April had been that the infantry would advance once the tanks reached German lines and gave the signal. On 11 April, the orders were changed. The infantry were to begin their advance at 4.45 am, 15 minutes after the tanks had started moving across no man's land, regardless of the position of the tanks at that point.¹¹ As the top speed of a Mark I tank in good repair and ideal conditions was around 5 kilometres an hour,¹² many troops realised that they would quickly outrun the tanks once they charged. Errors in the rapidly-planned attack were unavoidable. As the clerical staff had been working long hours in very poor conditions, staffwork was also low-quality. Orders were mixed up and the 46th Battalion was left under the impression that they would begin their attack 15 minutes after the arrival of the tanks, regardless of when that was.¹³

The Fourth Division were in good condition, having come off six weeks of training. However, they were also emerging from the Somme winter, and the experiences of 1916 on the Western Front. Fromelles and Pozières had shaken Australian faith in British command.¹⁴ Regardless of whether command deserved this view, Bullecourt confirmed Australian suspicions that their British commanders were incompetent – or worse, had no regard for their lives and favoured British troops.¹⁵ In later reflections on the battle, it was argued that though the “tragically

⁹ Jonathan Walker, *The blood tub: General Gough and the battle of Bullecourt 1917*, Pen & Sword Military, South Yorkshire, 2014, p. 94.

¹⁰ Bryan Cooper, *The Ironclads of Cambrai: the first great tank battle*, Cassell Military Paperbacks, Reading, 2002, p. 56.

¹¹ Walker, *The blood tub*, p. 91.

¹² John Laffin, *The battle of Hamel: The Australians' finest victory* Kangaroo Press, East Roseville, 1999, p. 61.

¹³ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 202.

¹⁴ Bill Gammage, *The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1982, pp. 178 – 179.

¹⁵ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 205.

absurd”¹⁶ tanks were to blame for the immediate failure of the offensive, it was the fault of the callous British, who had conceived the whole thing and “had men’s lives to play with”.¹⁷ Disillusionment with the war, and fatalism, were on the rise, even if men within the Fourth did feel pride in their division. “I do not skite,” Lieutenant George McDowell wrote in March 1917, “but our Div is recognised by HQ as the best in the AIF and our Brigade as the best in the Division.”¹⁸

With poor weather, worn-out infantry and exhausted tank crews – added to an assault that combined rapid planning with experimental technology, thrown against the fearsome Hindenburg Line – it is no wonder that First Bullecourt was a spectacular failure. One tank of eleven made it over both trenches of the Hindenburg Line.¹⁹ There were high losses for all battalions, and the number of Australians captured was not equalled until the fall of Singapore over two decades later.²⁰ Though the tanks clearly deserve most of the blame for the immediate failure of the attack, the fact was that the attack seemed doomed from the start. Staffwork was low quality – evident in the missed order to the 62nd Battalion to retreat on 10 April, and the confused order that led to the 46th Battalion attacking late on 11 April. This was exacerbated by the poor conditions in which the men attacked, and the lack of coordination between the tank and infantry officers in planning the offensive.

“Useless, or worse than useless” – tanks and the upper ranks

Animosity, anger and rage are consistently present in official reports regarding First Bullecourt. Reports written as the battle unfolded and in its aftermath carry a clear sense of shock or hatred of the plan, and of the tanks. Officer and staff perspectives on Bullecourt differ from the infantry’s in two key ways. They had been involved in the organisation of the assault, and were aware of its intricate

¹⁶ T.A. White, *The history of the Thirteenth Battalion, A.I.F.*, 13th Battalion, A.I.F. Committee, Sydney, 1924, p. 93.

¹⁷ White, *The history of the Thirteenth Battalion*, p. 93; According to Pedersen this is an untrue assumption and Australian officers and staff certainly held enough sway to have perhaps stopped Bullecourt going forward, or at least reworked the plan to include artillery.

¹⁸ Letter, Lieutenant George Stanley McDowell to family, 20 March 1917, PR00276.

¹⁹ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 203.

²⁰ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 205.

aspects. This meant that when it did fail, it was immediately apparent where the blame should fall.

Commander Birdwood was present at the planning of the battle of Bullecourt. In papers written afterwards, Birdwood emphasised both his doubts about the plan and his attempts to stop it.²¹ Birdwood's discussion of tanks demonstrates some variance in how infantry officers and command may have perceived the machines, as having some potential use in battle, but being completely overblown by the Tank Corps, writing, "It was the first time my corps had seen [the tanks] in action, [...] we had felt that they were not things to be relied on for a definite success, yet we had hoped that we should get much benefit from their cooperation, [...] both the Army and 'Tank' commander were enthusiastic [and] very confident that at least 75% of [the tanks] would do all that was expected."²² The infantry and command may have felt the tanks would be of some use, but not the guarantors of success that the tank commanders thought they could be. This demonstrates early differences in Australian perceptions of tanks. Birdwood also supported the claims, common in infantry accounts, that if an artillery barrage had been included, victory may have been possible.

Of the eight Australian battalions involved in first Bullecourt, six of their unit diaries for April contain at least one condemnation of tanks, their crews or commanders. The 13th Battalion's report claimed "the Tanks [were] the primary cause of our failure," though it did note the artillery's absence and later slowness to assist the infantry entering Reincourt as another issue.²³ The 47th Battalion's diary lacks any relevant references to tanks, instead focusing on the human cost of the battle, and mentioning men who stayed after the battle to assist the stretcher-bearers.²⁴ This focus on the men relates both to the role of individual battalions in the battle, and highlights the newness and unfamiliarity of the technology involved.

²¹ Whether these were genuine attempts to stop the battle, or Birdwood trying to cover himself after the battle's failure, can be debated.

²² Note, Field Marshall Birdwood, "Omitting Comments on 1st Attack on Hindenburg Line", undated [April-May 1917], 3DRL/3376 12/1a.

²³ War diary, 13th Battalion, April 1917, AWM4 23/30/30.

²⁴ War diary, 47th Battalion, April 1917, AWM4 23/64/11.

The reports that focus on the men may reflect the fact that they were the familiar element of the battle; this is also apparent in many private accounts.

The 48th Battalion's experience of Bullecourt is often tied to the Leane family, as several members of the family served in it.²⁵ Major Benjamin Leane died when the Germans bombarded the retiring Australians on 10 April; he was buried by his brother, Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Leane. Raymond's nephew, Captain Allan Leane, was also a Bullecourt casualty.²⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Leane felt the attack failed because of both the tanks' and the infantry's actions. "Tanks not carrying out their work," and the "failure of the British to attack left of Bullecourt" were, in his opinion, the reason why the attack failed.²⁷ Other officers were critical of the 46th Battalion retiring without informing the 48th, and so leaving the 48th in the objective alone.²⁸ Known for appreciating and encouraging initiative in his men, Leane saved his worst criticism for the tank crews.²⁹ He instructed a tank to assist his battalion, and watched the tank go 300 yards, only to return and the crew exit the tank, leaving it around 20 yards from Leane's headquarters. The crew's NCO said the tank had been hit, and one crewman was hurt. Leane described the scene in his *Report on Operations of Tanks*: "[The NCO] said it [...] could be driven away but declined to try [...]. The enemy put a heavy fire on the Tank and about 7.30 am it caught on fire."³⁰ Leane blamed the tank men for Bullecourt's failure, writing, "the tanks absolutely failed to carry out their part in the attack. I consider had they shown more dash and initiative things would have been better and perhaps might have been still holding the line."³¹ Leane felt for the great losses suffered by his men, and included a letter to his unit in the diary.³²

The 16th and 14th Battalion diaries are harsh but less personal in their assessment of tanks and contain the *Special Report on 'Tank' Co-Operation* co-signed

²⁵ It was often called the "Joan of Arc" Battalion as it was "Made of all Leanes".

²⁶ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 204.

²⁷ War diary, 48th Battalion, 13 April 1917, AWM4 23/65/15.

²⁸ War diary, 48th Battalion, April 1917, AWM4 23/65/15.

²⁹ Walker, *The blood tub*, p. 98.

³⁰ War diary, 48th Battalion, April 1917, Report on Operations of Tanks, AWM4 23/65/15.

³¹ War diary, 48th Battalion, April 1917, Report on Operations of Tanks, AWM4 23/65/15.

³² War diary, 48th Battalion, 14 April 1917, AWM4 23/65/15.

by both battalion commanders. Elements of the document are underlined. “Tanks were late [...] arriving at rendezvous [...] late in getting to the jumping off place. In fact only 3 got to the latter place at all.”³³ An intelligence report in the 14th Battalion’s diary contains similar emphasis. After witnessing one tank ditching and another experiencing engine trouble, the frustration of the writer is clear, as “this left us with only 3 Tanks to operate on whole front, instead of 6.”³⁴ The report also appears in the Fourth Brigade diary, demonstrating clear attempts to officially share this view of tanks with higher channels. The report also mentions the destruction of Leane’s headquarters - “[A tank] pulled up right on the sky line in full view of BULLECOURT, thereby making a splendid aiming mark, and drawing severe enemy gun fire.”³⁵ As with Leane, the report condemns tank crews and their alleged lack of initiative.

The *Special Report on ‘Tank’ Co-Operation* closes with speculation on the use of tanks. The commanders conclude their report implying, despite their anger, that they would use tanks under vastly different conditions. This demonstrates they understood tanks to be misused weapons rather than useless technology. “Tanks,” they wrote, “armed by the bravest of crews, if placed under the Infantry Officers concerned in operation would be of great help, but they should never be relied upon as the sole arm of support in an attack by Infantry.”³⁶ The inclusion of advice for using tanks in future offensives implies the officers would consider working with tanks under different circumstances. This throws doubt on the concept that all Australians were set against tanks until Monash’s work in June and July 1918.

Bullecourt, tanks and the poor bloody infantry.

Private records written by men after Bullecourt make it clear that though there was hostility towards tanks, the focus was on the familiar elements of the battle – the men fighting in the trenches. Further, though the tanks are often blamed, the

³³ War diary, 14th Battalion, April 1917, Special Report on ‘Tank’ Co-operation, AWM4 23/31/30.

³⁴ War diary, 14th Battalion, 11 April 1917, Intelligence Report from FILE and FAD on Operations Night of 10/11th April, AWM4 23/31/30

³⁵ War diary, 14th Battalion, April 1917, Special Report on ‘Tank’ Co-operation, AWM4 23/31/30.

³⁶ War diary, 14th Battalion, April 1917, Special Report on ‘Tank’ Co-operation, AWM4 23/31/30.

failure of the artillery to respond to the men's SOS rockets³⁷ is referred to with vehemence.³⁸ As the infantry and artillery, not the tanks, were more familiar elements in a battle, they could be more easily discussed and dissected in personal records. In many records, infantrymen felt they could have held the line if they had used a covering barrage instead of tanks. This is mentioned in personal and official records.³⁹ It becomes clear from personal records that many of the infantry were unaware the tanks were part of the plan until after they had retreated on 10 April. The exhaustion of men after waiting in the snow is clear in many entries. "Our first order of business when we got back was to [...] make our bed," wrote George Mitchell on 10 April. "It was then I [found out] an appointment had been made with some tanks to go through the wire. But the tanks did not turn up, and on the wire stretched in an impenetrable line the attack was postponed [sic]."⁴⁰ This entry shows that some infantry were not privy to the details of the attack until after its postponement. It also implies, as the infantry knew the Hindenburg Line was strongly held, that some were questioning the attack's validity beyond the usual grouching of soldiers. A reconnaissance team led by Captain Jacka of the 14th battalion on 9 April confirmed the line was strongly held, and the wire mostly uncut. This information was shared among many of the soldiers.⁴¹

In diaries and letters written in the immediate aftermath of Bullecourt, the expected railing against tanks is limited to retelling their failure, before the writers return to the men's experiences of trench warfare. One particularly terse diary entry on 11 April makes no reference to tanks at all - "Our men broke the Hindenburg line but the enemy got it back. Six men were wounded, one killed."⁴² Lieutenant James

³⁷ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 206.

³⁸ War diary, 14th Battalion, 11 April 1917, Intelligence Report from FILE and FAD on Operations Night of 10/11th April, AWM4 23/31/30.

³⁹ War diary, 14th Battalion, 11 April 1917, Intelligence Report from FILE and FAD on Operations Night of 10/11th April, AWM4 23/31/30; Captain JH Honeysett, "Aussies in Exile," unpublished manuscript, Australian War Memorial, 3DRL/4043, p. 5 - 6; Poem, Private Patrick Joseph Hogan, "Jim," undated [April 1917], Australian War Memorial, PR85/069.

⁴⁰ Diary, Capt George Dean Mitchell, 10 April 1917, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0928, volume 3. Some infantry felt there was little chance of any attack succeeding on the Hindenburg Line such as Sgt. A Guppy, 3DRL/1545 (see Appendix A, no. 3).

⁴¹ Walker, *The blood tub*, p. 84.

⁴² Diary, Lt James Vincent, 11 April 1917, Australian War Memorial, PR90/25.

Vincent's brevity is not unusual in his diary; however, after making daily entries to this point, and having space left in his notebook, entries stop after 12 April and he did not use the notebook again, perhaps due to his experience of the battle. When the failure of the tanks is detailed in private records, as the tanks leave the soldier's experience of the battle, they also drop out of the soldier's personal narrative. Once they pass the burnt-out tanks in no man's land, the tanks leave the soldier's awareness and the men focus on what has become familiar to them all – fighting in the trenches. Sapper Thomas Linney watched the battle, and his diary mentions the tanks once during the entry about Bullecourt. After this reference he focuses on the infantry bomb battles, and his attempts to keep communication lines open. Writing after the battle, there is no anger, merely a sense of exhaustion. "I am just about broken up. [...] The boys could not believe we had got thro' it. We had just got a cup of tea when we received orders to move. [...] We had had practically no sleep for 48 hours."⁴³ As with Linney, Private Walter Kennedy's memoir goes into detail on his own fight in the trenches. Overall Kennedy barely even notes the tanks. When he does, there is a sense of resignation at their failure. "Eleven armoured tanks [...] The german shells were directed at them and they were soon put out of action."⁴⁴ Other records have cursory references to tanks that describe infantry actions in much greater detail.⁴⁵

Some diaries do explicitly rage against the machines, though these references are brief in comparison with discussion of the infantry. George Mitchell wrote of the battle on 13 April, "I felt [unemotional] that day [...] except for the lust of blood. Suddenly the muttering of tanks came to us. We saw them away [...]. Dark blobs against the snow. They [...] moved, slowly, oh how slowly. I cursed them and cursed them for their sloth. They stopped, rolled on, stopped and went on. [...] What

⁴³ Diary, Sapper Thomas Edward Linney, 11 April 1917, Australian War Memorial, PR00436.

⁴⁴ Pte Walter Scott Kennedy, "From Anzac Cove to Villers Bretonneux: the story of a soldier in the Fifteenth Battalion, First AIF," unpublished manuscript, Australian War Memorial, PR02032, p. 41.

⁴⁵ For example, see the diary of Company Quartermaster Sgt Alfred Leslie Guppy, 3DRL/1545 (Appendix A, no. 3). Lt Appleton's 22 April 1917 letter to his sister Vera (1DRL/0048, Appendix A, no. 7) is similarly brief in its discussion of tanks, and is primarily focused on his personal experience of waiting out the battle wounded in a shell hole.

a noise they did kick up.”⁴⁶ Despite Mitchell’s ranting against them, once the tanks are taken out of the battle they are similarly absent from Mitchell’s narrative. The following pages lack references to tanks or their failings, and focus on his experience of the battle.

In the aftermath of Bullecourt the men wrote of their losses with little focus on the technical details of the offensive’s failure. Though his diary focuses on his hatred of Germans and bloodlust, and his experience of the battle, Mitchell makes a passing reference to the trauma that the division was feeling. “Birdwood came down,” he wrote on 14 April. “When he said our losses had not been in vain, most of our officers broke down.”⁴⁷ This sense of loss and shock is what most personal writing addresses after Bullecourt, which is not what would be expected if tanks were so hated in the Fourth Division. George McDowell, who did not want to skite about the Division’s condition, told his family about a friend who died at Bullecourt. “My old pal Charlie Kahler; he was killed in the last scrap we had [...] I loved him like a brother [...] I have felt rather rotten since; am being sent to England [...] to buck up again.”⁴⁸ McDowell, despite expecting to be made Captain in a “month or so,”⁴⁹ later deliberately overstayed his leave. In documents that refer to the failure of the tanks, the focus remains on the loss of men, rather than detailing what went wrong, such as in the poem “Jim”, which rages about tanks but centres around the writer’s grief for his missing friend.⁵⁰ The common experience among the men of the Fourth Division after Bullecourt is loss, not anger at tanks.

If tanks had become anathema to the AIF after Bullecourt, personal records about the battle throughout and beyond 1917 presumably would mention this. The focus however remained on the men’s experiences and the emotional fallout. In November 1917, Private Edmund Louis Stanley Harding wrote to his father, displaying how some still found the slaughter of the Western Front distressing.

⁴⁶ Diary, Capt George Dean Mitchell, 11 April 1917, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0928, volume 3.

⁴⁷ Diary, Capt George Dean Mitchell, 14 April 1917, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0928, volume 3.

⁴⁸ Letter, Lieutenant George Stanley McDowell to family, 15 April 1917, PR00276.

⁴⁹ Letter, Lieutenant George Stanley McDowell to family, 22 April 1917, PR00276.

⁵⁰ Poem, Private Patrick Joseph Hogan, “Jim,” undated [April 1917], Australian War Memorial, PR85/069. The poem is about Hogan’s friend Private James Shaw who was listed as missing after First Bullecourt; it transpired that Private Shaw had been taken prisoner and survived the war.

“[Australians thought] that there would never be anything nearly as bad as [...] the Peninsular [sic], [but] that can not touch some of the fights in France [...] On April 11th last, when the 14th Batt went over the top at Bullecourt, they numbered twelve hundred and some hours later there was only two hundred odd, and the 15th suffered worse than that, I believe it was terrible.”⁵¹ In December 1919, after the supposed redemption of tanks by Hamel, Private Etherton refused to discuss the battle in a letter to a friend – “Bullecourt. Where we lost three parts of our Div on the 11th April 1917 – a day I will never forget, ‘Good Night!’”⁵² The focus remained on the losses of the battle, rather than why the battle was lost.

Bullecourt to Hamel – tanks in the interim period

Tanks were often misused by infantry officers on the Western Front to the frustration of tank officers, and the injury of the infantry. As demonstrated through officers’ reports from Bullecourt, it is clear that though these men had not worked with tanks before, some were aware that the potential of the machines was squandered in unsuitable conditions such as Bullecourt or Passchendaele.⁵³ High command’s eagerness to use their new weapons – originally designed for the flat, dry fields of Flers – meant tanks made their debut on the muddy, shell-pocked Somme battlefields, and so on the whole were failures. Their use on the Somme in incorrect conditions without proper planning was criticised, as it meant the Germans became prematurely aware that allied forces had made some kind of war machine.⁵⁴ To the pro-tank echelons of higher command, tanks were land-ships, impenetrable weapons capable of restoring mobility to the battlefield.⁵⁵ The term “land-ships” points to the ways naming was used in the alien landscapes of the First World War to make one’s surroundings familiar. For pejorative descriptions of tanks, the infantry used terms such as “monster”. These monikers were later reclaimed and used fondly by troops once they had warmed to tanks, and are present in accounts

⁵¹ Letter, Pte Edmund Louis Stanley Harding to family, 5 November 1917, Australian War Memorial, PR85/348.

⁵² Letter, Pte CG Etherton to friend, 28 December 1919, Australian War Memorial, PR01020.

⁵³ Paddy Griffith, *Battle tactics of the Western Front: the British Army's art of attack 1916–18*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1996, p. 163.

⁵⁴ Cooper, *The Ironclads of Cambrai*, pp. 33, 41.

⁵⁵ Cooper, *The Ironclads of Cambrai*, p. 24.

regarding Hamel. Not all troops warmed to tanks, and their views of the machines varied over the course of the war. Perspectives further depended on the context in which they met or fought alongside the machines, and what tanks they saw – British, or eventually, German.

Corporal John Allan wrote home in October 1916 to share his impression of tanks. He was gleeful in his descriptions, saying “since the introduction of tanks, land-dreadnoughts on caterpillars, Fritz has started to whine piteously, [claiming] that this new innovation is not warfare but downright butchery and murder. One [smiles] at his dilemma now ‘the tables have turned.’”⁵⁶ Two years later, he saw the captured German tank Mephisto, and said it “shows evident inferiority of architecture [...] in comparison with even the original production of its clan, by the brains of the despised & decadent Briton let-alone, comparing it with our latest [tanks].”⁵⁷ There is no reference to hating tanks; Allan was proud of them, and felt the tanks were intrinsically superior, as they were British. Private Harding wrote home to his family about another captured German tank, Elfriede, in May 1918. “It is an immense thing [with] eight guns, but is too big and awkward to be very dangerous.”⁵⁸ His description implies familiarity with British tank size, movement and ability in May 1918, two months before Hamel. Such views were not uncommon.⁵⁹

The writings of Private Reynolds Potter reveal a different way in which Australians viewed tanks; Potter was disenchanted with the industrialised slaughter of the Western Front, and viewed tanks and the war through a dark lens. On 3 April 1917 near Pozières, he wrote, “we found one of the awful monsters called, for want of a better name, ‘tanks’ [...] Our vocabulary was never meant to accommodate such outlandish indescribable contrivances devised for the destruction of human beings in the present war. I can well imagine the consternation of the foe on seeing these

⁵⁶ Letter, Corporal John R Allan to parents, 6 October 1916, Australian War Memorial, 1DRL/0022.

⁵⁷ Letter, Corporal John R Allan to parents, 4 August 1918, Australian War Memorial, 1DRL/0022.

⁵⁸ Letter, Pte Edmund Louis Stanley Harding to family, 19 May 1918, Australian War Memorial, PR85/348.

⁵⁹ See also Pte Charles Malcolm Smith (3DRL/5023), Appendix B, no. 18.

uncouth demons drawing nearer [...] vomiting death at every inch.”⁶⁰ However, Potter was not just appalled by tanks; he found the nature of industrialised warfare an affront to humanity and normalcy. A poem by Potter reflects this, situating “some ruined ‘tanks’” within the “torn, twisted, tortured upturned earth” of the Western Front.⁶¹ His impression of tanks had not improved by September. “I saw the ominous sign of tanks creeping along [...] looking like the weird monsters of mythology – no, the imagination of mythological times never conceived anything to vie with the devices of sciences and civilisation today.”⁶² Potter’s discomfort with tanks is clear, but it related to the mechanised murder of the Western Front as opposed to the specific failure of tanks at Bullecourt.

Between Bullecourt and Hamel, Australian infantrymen fought directly alongside tanks, and heard of their work in other theatres.⁶³ Tanks mostly failed at Arras and were next used to some effect at Messines in June 1917. According to *The History of the Fifteenth Battalion*, tanks at Messines were unwelcome, but they were disliked as machines of murder, not because of Bullecourt: “Guns, railways, tanks, and every conceivable engine of destruction invented for the killing of men.”⁶⁴ The 45th Battalion’s unit history mentioned tanks cooperating well, but retreating before taking the final objective.⁶⁵ The tanks working with the 47th Battalion were of more assistance but, “with [...] Bullecourt in mind, no aspect of the operation depended on their success.”⁶⁶ The 47th Battalion would later refuse the assistance of tanks at Dernancourt in April 1918. In November 1917, thanks to prime conditions and planning, tanks were effectively used on the first day of the battle of Cambrai; this battle did not include Australians in combat roles, but word of the early success at

⁶⁰ Pte Reynolds Cleve Potter, “Not Theirs The Shame Who Fight,” self-published collection, Australian War Memorial, PR01958, pp. 73–74.

⁶¹ Pte Potter, “Not Theirs The Shame Who Fight,” p. 74.

⁶² Private Potter, “Not Theirs The Shame Who Fight,” p. 138.

⁶³ In the Middle East, tanks and armoured cars were used with earlier and more consistent success due to better suited conditions; so if there was vehemence towards tanks, it is doubtful it would be as harsh as those who hated the machines in Europe.

⁶⁴ T.P. Chataway, *The history of the 15th Battalion, AIF during the Great War of 1914–1918*, William Brooks & Co, Brisbane, 1948, p. 177.

⁶⁵ J.E. Lee, *The chronicle of the 45th Battalion*, Australian Defence League, Sydney, 1926, p. 46.

⁶⁶ Craig Deayton, *Battle scarred: the 47th Battalion in the first World War*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2011, p. 118.

Cambrai spread to Australian troops. Private Gilbert Kimber said Cambrai was a “near disaster,”⁶⁷ as the unexpected success of the offensive meant the breakthrough went unexploited.⁶⁸ Kimber, however, acknowledged that tanks were effectively used on the first day, implying knowledge about the correct use of tanks in battle, at least in hindsight.

Australian troops witnessed the tank battle at Villers-Bretonneux in April 1918, and it was men of the 26th Battalion who salvaged one of the victims of that battle, Mephisto.⁶⁹ Australian views of tanks were altered by these interactions with tanks apart from Bullecourt and Hamel. These views also depended on what tanks they saw, whether they were broken down or effectively used British tanks, or German tanks in battle or after being captured. Australian troops also noted that the Germans were using their tanks as cargo transporters. In April 1918 Driver John Turnbull wrote, “Fritz is making good use of his tanks for carrying ammo. They are able to get right up to the front line and distribution it [sic] to the Inf unless our guns get them.”⁷⁰ Supply tanks would become of great interest to Australian infantry and officers alike. Overall, the 15 months between Bullecourt and Hamel demonstrate the variety in the views of Australian troops regarding tanks, and that these perceptions had evolved even before July 1918.

Yanks and tanks – the battle of Hamel

The difference in the conditions at Hamel and Bullecourt cannot be overstated, and it had a clear impact on the outcome of the battle and the Australian perception of tanks. The opposite of Bullecourt in every conceivable fashion, Hamel took place in better conditions with weeks of preparation and a smaller, limited

⁶⁷ Pte Gilbert Vernon Kimber, “War as a Teenager,” unpublished manuscript, Australian War Memorial, MSS1869, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Cooper, *The Ironclads of Cambrai*, pp. 9, 64–66, 68. Cambrai was picked as it was an ideal area for a tank and was an unexpected success. The offensive was planned, in part, simply to raise the morale of both the British Army and the Empire at large; church bells rang across London for the first time since the start of the war to proclaim the victory.

⁶⁹ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, pp. 336–337.

⁷⁰ Diary, Driver John Llewellyn Turnbull, 7 April 1917, Australian War Memorial, PR91/015, vol. 3.

objective against a worn-down, unsuspecting enemy.⁷¹ Though they had been hit hard throughout 1917 and the German Spring Offensive, morale in the now-Australian Corps was “at its peak, its prestige and morale were soaring and, with a high[er] proportion of veterans [...] it had gained an ascendancy over the Germans.”⁷² The Australian Corps were predominantly under Australian officers, in Birdwood’s Fifth Army, Birdwood having curried favour with the Australians since Gallipoli. Finally, the Australian Corps were under their first Australian commander, Monash, who had established himself as a good leader and thorough planner, and was respected by the troops. In *Victories* Monash acknowledged that it was primarily the Fourth Division that had to be reintroduced to tanks after their experience of Bullecourt.⁷³ When first interacting with the tanks at Vaux or Hamel, the other men would have arguably felt the nerves of any British infantryman when engaging in a new form of warfare, as opposed to the common assumption that they hated tanks just because of First Bullecourt. The men also knew elements of the plan were relatively untested.⁷⁴ The initiative and individuality of each soldier were encouraged through allowing them to “play” with the tanks in driving demonstrations, being allowed to drive them and to interact with the crews.⁷⁵ This, supplemented with the actual training with tanks, and Monash’s emphasis on planning and tactics, helped alter Australian perceptions, and quelled fears of tanks.

There are few surviving detailed diary entries regarding the stunt training for Hamel, which implies a number of things. Monash insisted on strict secrecy in the

⁷¹ The conditions of the German army in mid-1918 as encountered by the Australians were so poor they were mentioned in war diaries (for intelligence purposes), private records and memoirs. The writers mention the clear and unnerving youth of the soldiers, as well as the shocking conditions of their trenches and latrines, which further demonstrates the youth and inexperience of the German troops.

⁷² Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 349.

⁷³ Monash, *Australian victories*, p. 53.

⁷⁴ Gammage, *The broken years*, p. 199.

⁷⁵ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 389. Though the initiative and resilience of Australian soldiers was often overstated by Bean, Australian soldiers were felt by Monash and others to be capable of initiative and taking charge if the situation did call for it. Some British troops were felt to lack this individualist streak for various reasons. This was most notably seen at Mont St Quentin and Péronne in 1918, where Monash left the details of the attacks to divisional, brigade, battalion and even platoon commanders to mixed results. This was due to time pressures rather than romantic, colonialist notions of Australian individualism, but Monash would not have left the capture of such key objectives to his men if he had not thought they had a good chance of success.

lead-up to Hamel, and this scarcity of entries could simply be a sign of the men obeying. The 4th Brigade's diary said the men were "pleased with what they saw, but still have doubt as to the value of tanks in attack."⁷⁶ However, this was before the infantry troops had been thoroughly briefed on aspects of the offensive. After Hamel's success, troops may have been more interested in detailing the attack, rather than the training. It could also demonstrate that tank stunt training, or at least interacting with tanks, had already become normalised. On 29 June, Corporal John Finney wrote, "Won toss for motor ride to see Tank Stunt. Lost our way got there too late."⁷⁷ He was not concerned about missing out and went through a later practice stunt. Hamel was given the illuminating description: "In hop-over. Hamel captured objectives all reached. Tanks of great assistance."⁷⁸ When talking about the results of the tank training, the 13th Battalion Unit history claimed, "'they'll do us,' was the general opinion [of the tanks.] What a change to the feelings about the tanks of Bullecourt when the very name was anathema."⁷⁹ The passage reveals the men were impressed with the Mark V tanks and the development of the crews, implying that they understood that the tanks at Bullecourt had been poorer versions with underdeveloped tactics.

"The greatest day of American life" – infantry impressions of the battle of Hamel

Personal records of men following the battle of Hamel are usually not overly focused on the tanks. If there was lingering animosity towards tanks before and during the battle, these records could be expected to put more emphasis on the tanks succeeding. Instead, the focus is on the cumulative success of the battle and how many disparate elements – the barrage, planes, tanks, and Americans – come together for victory in 93 minutes. Turnbull focuses on the tanks, noting they "did great work, cleaning up machine gun posts by simply rolling over them. [...] If any machine guns gave our troops any trouble, they just waited for a Tank to come up

⁷⁶ War diary, 4th Brigade, June 1918, AWM4 23/4/33.

⁷⁷ Diary, Corporal John Spence Finney, 29 June 1918, Australian War Memorial, PR00266.

⁷⁸ Diary, Corporal John Spence Finney, 4 July 1918, Australian War Memorial, PR00266.

⁷⁹ White, *The history of the Thirteenth Battalion*, p. 142.

and put it out of action.”⁸⁰ He then discusses the planes dropping ammunition to troops. Admiration for the collective nature of the battle, not the singular success of the tanks, is present in many private records. If there is a centre of focus in private records about Hamel, it would be the Australians’ fascination with the Americans. Many Australians were excited that this was the first assault to involve Australian and American troops.⁸¹ As with the Bullecourt accounts, the experiences of men were familiar and easier to write about. Further, regardless of how Australian troops felt about the tanks, the machines had been in the war since 1916 and were common sights by 1918. Americans were new, long-awaited additions to the war and something to write home about.

Accounts that do focus on the tanks reveal much about the changing perception of the machines. Private Sydney Huntingdon wrote, “It has seldom happened in this war that you could watch a battle from start to finish in the way which was possible [with] Hamel.”⁸² He discussed the actions of one tank in Accroche Wood, giving it human attributes such as a nose, and using female pronouns.⁸³ “The tank moved up [a road] to the top. She lay there for a moment with her nose turned into the bank. [...] next time one looked she had climbed on to the bank and was seated there on top of it.”⁸⁴ He further marvels at the speed and manoeuvrability of the new technology. “We could scarcely believe our eyes when the second she was gliding backwards as fast as she had clipped forward.”⁸⁵ Gone are the monstrous, slow-moving machines – Australians understood the Mark V Tanks were not the tanks of Bullecourt.

⁸⁰ Diary, Driver John Llewellyn Turnbull, 4 July 1918, Australian War Memorial, PR91/015, vol. 5.

⁸¹ Charles Smith even laboured under the impression that Hamel was taking place as a celebration of July 4, America’s ‘Liberty Day’ (3DRL/5023, 4/7/18, see Appendix C, no. 22); in many unit diaries the writers emphasise that this will be the first time that Australians and Americans would go into battle together in the present war – the 24th Battalion’s diary declared that the “Yanks will do us,” while the 42nd appreciated the American’s “keenness” in training.

⁸² Letter, Pte Sydney Lyne Huntingdon to wife, 20 September 1918, PR00654.

⁸³ Tanks were designated ‘male’ or ‘female’ depending on their guns. However, this could also be related to the conceptualisation tanks as land-ships, as boats are usually referred to with female pronouns. This was presumably designated a female tank owing to its gun array.

⁸⁴ Letter, Pte Sydney Lyne Huntingdon to wife, 20 September 1918, PR00654.

⁸⁵ Letter, Pte Sydney Lyne Huntingdon to wife, 20 September 1918, PR00654.

As with Private Potter's writing about tanks, infantry publications regarding tanks after Hamel refer to the machines as monsters, but these terms are now used proudly. The 23rd Battalion's post-Hamel newsletters present a fond view of "our latest monster tanks," revelling in their effect on the Germans. "Their ugly appearance [is] sufficient to put the 'wind up,' but when their 'for'ard'⁸⁶ belches into a flame of spitting slaughter, our sympathies should be with the enemy."⁸⁷ Like Huntingdon, the paper feminises some of the tanks, describing a tank called Mabel moving along the advanced lines with a "long, rolling, nautical stride (not exactly a lady-like deportment) [...] it was an exceedingly pretty sight to see one of our airmen gracefully glide his 'plane down alongside [...] [and] to see these wonders of the "blue ethereal" and "terra firma" promenading."⁸⁸ The description of the plane and tank promenading is another reference to the collective nature of the battle. The connection between planes and tanks is illustrated in the battalion's newsletter, terming a plane, beauty, and the tank, beast. This appreciation continued years afterwards, as described by the 14th Battalion's unit history – "Overhead, like gigantic war birds, were aeroplanes, just behind the barrage waddled the tanks and behind them the long lines of the grim Australian infantry."⁸⁹ These are all clear examples of men of the Australian Corps appreciating Hamel not as a successful tank offensive that redeemed the machines, but as a success of collective arms.

"Uneventful night" – official reactions to the battle of Hamel.

Most of the unit diaries and documents written before and after Hamel reflect the almost complete success of the battle. As with private records, the emphasis in many places is on the collective success of the battle and the quality work of the men. "This was due primarily to the intelligent appreciation by each Soldier of the task that had to be accomplished. Immediately prior to the attack, Officers made known [...] the plan of attack in every detail – action of the Tanks, times of the

⁸⁶ "For'ard" is a nautical term, a reminder of the perception of tanks as land-ships.

⁸⁷ War diary, 23rd Battalion, 15 July 1918, *The Twenty-Third*, AWM4 23/40/34.

⁸⁸ War diary, 23rd Battalion, 15 July 1918, *The Twenty-Third*, AWM4 23/40/34.

⁸⁹ N. Wanliss, *The history of the Fourteenth Battalion, AIF: being the story of vicissitudes of an Australian unit during the Great War*, The Arrow Printery, Melbourne, 1929, p. 305.

Barrage, and co-operation of Aeroplanes.”⁹⁰ Before the battle, the officers were pleased at the emphasis on the tanks being there to work *with* the infantry, and the steps taken to ensure men were not at risk from their own tanks. This included assigning men as tank guides to stop the machines running over the wounded.⁹¹ Apparently “on all sides glowing opinions were expressed”⁹² of the tanks, a complete reversal of the “useless or worse than useless”⁹³ denigration of tanks by officers at Bullecourt. Some diaries even mention the tanks in a jovial manner. Instead of berating one tank for going to Harfusee, 1,000 yards beyond the objective at Hamel, the report writer said, “he enjoyed himself thoroughly out there and ultimately returned safely.”⁹⁴ The writer of the 42nd Battalion’s diary found the antics of the tanks rounding up German prisoners “extremely amusing.”⁹⁵ As with private records, the diaries focus more on the collective success of the battle, and then discuss the tanks in isolation for their reports.

Unfortunately the 4th Division were hit hardest when tanks failed at Hamel, though the battalion diaries mostly overlook the experience of Pear Trench. Due to the formation of the ground, the tanks missed the trench and the infantry took it without their assistance. The 4th Brigade’s diary declared bitterly, “The Tanks did better work in the 44th Battn Sector than with us I saw *no* tanks tackle Pear Trench and none of my officers saw them. We had a stiff fight for Pear Trench [...] where we got most of our casualties.”⁹⁶ Otherwise, the 4th Division’s report is more in line with the battalion diaries, noting the success of the tanks in responding to signals, in communicating with officers and returning safely.

Able to do the work of 1,200 men, supply tanks were discussed in both private and official records regarding Hamel and the battles that followed it. Even before Hamel, one of the main lessons from training with the tanks is the “very valuable assistance they can lend to the infantry by bringing up supplies [...] with

⁹⁰ War diary, 23rd Battalion, July 1918, General Report for Month of July, AWM4 23/40/34.

⁹¹ War diary, 21st Battalion, 2 July 1918, AWM4 23/38/35 Part 1.

⁹² War diary, 21st Battalion, July 1918, AWM4 23/38/35 Part 1.

⁹³ War diary, 14th Battalion, April 1917, Special Report on ‘Tank’ Cooperation, AWM4 23/31/30.

⁹⁴ War diary, 21st Battalion, July 1918, AWM4 23/38/35 PART 1.

⁹⁵ War diary, 42nd Battalion, July 1918, AWM4 23/59/21.

⁹⁶ War diary, Fourth Brigade, undated [July 1918], AWM4 23/4/34 PART 2.

the attack itself.”⁹⁷ Writing about Hamel, Corporal C. Smith mentioned tanks being used to quickly deliver barbed wire to help consolidate captured positions.⁹⁸ Supply tanks, and the use of planes to drop ammunition to the soldiers, fired the men’s imaginations, leading to discussion of attempting to airdrop rations in the future.⁹⁹ The 42nd Battalion’s Quartermaster was highly appreciative of tanks, saying “a vast amount of transport was saved”¹⁰⁰ as they managed to send two days’ worth of rations and ammunition to Hamel in tanks. The interest in supply tanks demonstrates that some officers and men had gone from being reluctant to use tanks – both before and in the aftermath of Bullecourt – to fully embracing and adopting the new technology and discussing further innovations.

“An unsettling weapon” – the push of 8 August and beyond

The combined offensive practised at Hamel was used on a massive scale for the allied offensive of 8 August, combining an artillery barrage, tanks, planes and infantry, pushing the German lines back for miles. As with Hamel, records of the assault revel in the advance, as entire divisions leapfrog next to each other – the focus of the men remaining on the men – and the collective success of the planes, tanks and artillery working together. The tanks in many records have become part of the scenery. Finney’s recollections of 8 August demonstrate that the tanks had become normalised, as he flags one down to ask for directions.¹⁰¹ Captain Daniel Aarons was actively impressed with the tanks. However, he remembered their history with the Australian troops when writing to his sister. “There seemed to be hundreds of tanks engaged in the stunt and they did some most wonderful work. Their mechanised efficiency and their personnel is altogether different to what was the case in the tragedy of Bullecourt, 16 months ago.”¹⁰² It is doubtful that all in the Australian Corps were enraptured with tanks by this point – just as it cannot be

⁹⁷ War Diary, 25th Battalion, 3 August 1918, AWM4 23/42/35.

⁹⁸ Cpl C Smith, untitled narrative of war experience, unpublished manuscript, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0030, p. 6

⁹⁹ War Diary, 21st Battalion, undated [July 1918], AWM4 23/38/35 PART 1.

¹⁰⁰ War Diary, 42nd Battalion, Quartermasters Report for War Diary, Month of July, AWM4 23/59/21.

¹⁰¹ Corporal John Spence Finney, “Recollections of the ‘Push’ of 7th - 8th August,” unpublished manuscript within diary, Australian War Memorial, PR00266.

¹⁰² Letter, Captain Daniel Sidney Aarons to sister, 17 August 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0166.

reasonably assumed that tanks were anathema to all men in I and II ANZAC after April 1917, and just as it is doubtful all Anzacs were the bushman larrikins described by Bean. Perspectives on tanks changed over time, not just in the months between Bullecourt and Hamel, but also across years, as memoirs were constructed and unit histories written. There is no one definitive opinion of tanks across the AIF, and it is a disservice to both the men of the AIF and of the Tank Corps to labour under this impression.