

# Hubert Gough, the Anzacs and the Somme: A Descent into Pointlessness

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## ABSTRACT

*The newly-created Reserve Army played a secondary role on the Somme in support of Fourth Army. Its commander, Lieutenant General Sir Hubert Gough, was given the opportunity to conduct limited operations on Fourth Army's left flank in late July 1916. Using 1st Anzac Corps to capture the French village of Pozières, Gough's intention was to continue to capture the high ground along Pozières Ridge to his ultimate goal: Thiepval. But his characteristic impetuosity and aggression derailed his plan, leaving 1st Anzac Corps with little direction other than to 'think out and suggest enterprises' of its own. Ultimately, his plans were for naught, and 1st Anzac Corps' 23,000 casualties in 6 weeks of fighting were suffered for no material purpose. Gough's role in this debacle has been largely overlooked, but is integral in understanding the Battle of Pozières Ridge in 1916.*

On 22 May 1916 a new Army was created within the BEF. Known as 'Reserve Army', and later Fifth Army, the formation was placed under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Hubert Gough. Reserve Army occupied a position to the left of Fourth Army during the Battle of the Somme, and although it conducted a secondary role to that Army during the campaign, it was an important part of the aspiration to expand operations to the north if possible. Gough's command of the Army, his highest posting yet, was a curious combination of solid application of basic principles and a giddy flurry of activity that was enormously wasteful in lives and material. This was nowhere more evident than in the activity of 1st Anzac Corps in 1916, the first corps Gough could use in his subsidiary role on the Somme, and among those that saw the most sustained activity with Reserve Army. It would conduct a series of attacks that would become known as the Battle of Pozières Ridge, a six-week effort to advance the line that ultimately gained very little.

In early-July Fourth Army had moved to the right, and the newly created Reserve Army was put in place to the north of the Pozières – Bapaume Road. The role of

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Reserve Army was absolutely 'complementary, and subsidiary, to the main effort to be made by the Fourth Army'.<sup>1</sup> Action taken by the Army was to be regulated by the ammunition supply available. Reserve Army's commanding officer, Lieutenant General Sir Hubert Gough was informed in no uncertain terms that an ammunition 'allotment will be made to General Gough and it must not be exceeded. Overdrawals cannot be allowed.'<sup>2</sup> The role intended for Reserve Army on the Somme had been clearly defined; it had no more than a minor role to play in operations. On 18 July the Army took command of 1st Anzac Corps, which had come down to the Somme from Bailleul a week earlier. 1st Anzac Corps was placed on the far right of Reserve Army's sector next to the boundary with Fourth Army. Given Reserve Army's remit to take a secondary role to the main effort being made by Fourth Army, 1st Anzac Corps would be the focus of attention of Reserve Army despite appearing to have been tucked away on the far right flank.

On 18 July 1916 Reserve Army was given official leave to 'carry out methodical operations against Pozières with a view to capturing that important position with as little delay as circumstances admit'.<sup>3</sup> From the earliest days of British planning for the Somme offensive the village of Pozières was an important objective. Its significance lay in the height of the ground around the village, which gave the enemy 'a marked advantage in command and observation and cover[ed] from view a considerable part of his second line of defence'.<sup>4</sup> Gaining the ridge on which Pozières sat would give the British an advantage in both artillery observation and a view into the German second and third lines of defence. But III Corps had failed to capture the village on 1 July 1916, and all subsequent attempts on it had similarly failed. It was the perfect target for Reserve Army now: it was close to the boundary with Fourth Army, and so Reserve Army could attempt to capture the village while acting in support of Fourth Army, and its capture would materially benefit the British on the Somme – the view afforded by Pozières Ridge would be of great benefit to Fourth Army as well as Reserve.

Hubert Gough had been given command of Reserve Army on its creation on 22 May 1916. Gough had begun the war commanding a cavalry brigade, and had risen quickly, promotion that was only possible with the assistance of the patronage of General Sir

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives, Kew (TNA), WO158/244, 'Note of arrangements made verbally with Sir H. Gough on 3rd and 4th July 1916', 4 July 1916.

<sup>2</sup> TNA, WO158/244, 'Note of arrangements', 4 July 1916.

<sup>3</sup> TNA, WO 158/244, OAD 76, 18 July 1916.

<sup>4</sup> 'Plans for Offensive by the Fourth Army' in *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1916. Appendices*, (London: Macmillan, 1932), p. 64.

Douglas Haig.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, his first operation as an Army commander, an attempt to capture the Schwaben Redoubt on 2 July 1916, was a dismal failure.<sup>6</sup> This did not seem to shake Gough's confidence at all, and he continued to submit plans for further operations to Haig for approval. For weeks these were either turned down or scaled down until the opportunity arose to conduct operations against Pozières. Gough needed no encouragement, and issued orders for its capture that very morning.<sup>7</sup> This was madness. 1st Anzac Corps had not even established its headquarters on the Somme, and the infantry of the 1st Australian Division, which would be conducting the operation, was still filing into the front line. Worse, the 1st Australian Divisional Artillery had not even arrived, much less registered its guns. The commanding officer of the 1st Australian Division, Major General Harold Walker strenuously objected to being pushed into an operation with his force in such disarray and without sufficient time to prepare, and as a result the assault on the village was delayed to 23 July.<sup>8</sup>

The plan of attack for Pozières, issued by Reserve Army direct to the 1st Australian Division in the absence of 1st Anzac Corps, showed an Army commander who had some education in recent techniques in set-piece operations. He constructed a battle plan that was firmly based around a lifting artillery barrage to protect the infantry as they advanced. The artillery had been experimenting with lifting and creeping barrages for some time, with mixed results. As recently as 1 July 1916, the first day of the Somme offensive, the 7th Imperial Division demonstrated that a creeping barrage could effectively protect the infantry as they crossed no man's land.<sup>9</sup> However, creeping barrages, screens of shells that moved – 'crept' – across no man's land ahead of the advancing infantry, were still extremely difficult to fire with accuracy in 1916. A lifting barrage, a screen of shells that fell on a particular objective before lifting to the next, allowing the attacking infantry in, was a simpler prospect, and had the benefit of signifying a clear timetable – if the artillery barrage moved away, it was time for the next wave to move through. The objective for the attack on Pozières was in fact three objective lines – three waves of infantry would advance,

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Sheffield & Helen McCartney. 'Hubert Gough' in Ian F.W. Beckett & Steven J. Corvi (eds.) *Haig's Generals*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009. p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Sheffield, 'An Army Commander on the Somme: Hubert Gough' in Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman (eds.) *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-18*. Stroud: Spellmount, 2007. p. 78

<sup>7</sup> Australian War Memorial (AWM), 4/1/42/18 part 2, 'Report on the Operations of First Australian Division at Pozières,' undated.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Sheffield, 'The Australians at Pozières: Command and Control on the Somme, 1916,' in David French and Brian Holden Reid (eds), *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation c.1890-1939* (London, Cass, 2002), pp. 112-26.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, 'The Somme', (Yale UP, Sydney, 2005), p. 104.

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leapfrogging through each other to capture three staggered lines in order to maintain defence-in-depth even as they moved forward.

The other important factor in the plan of attack for Pozières was that the operation was limited to the objectives described. Some have claimed that Gough feared 'that opportunities would be lost if every unit was obliged to stop at a predetermined line, dictated by the artillery plan' and acted accordingly.<sup>10</sup> However, this is simply not evident in the orders issued by Reserve Army to 1st Anzac Corps in the period July – August 1916. Every unit at Pozières was indeed obliged to stop at a predetermined line which was dictated by the artillery plan. This was no sweeping breakthrough; it was a carefully planned operation that left as little to chance as possible. When, on 23 July 1916, the 1st Australian Division attacked Pozières they captured all three objective lines in almost all places along the attacking front. From there they took on the fortifications inside the village itself. Within three days the Australians had entered the village and cleared it of Germans, occupying a much-sought-after position.

There was very little post-operation analysis following the capture of Pozières. It seems that one feature of the operation was deemed the most important in its capture. For all of the good artillery barrages and limited objectives, the change in direction from which the assault was launched was considered the most important factor in the capture of the village. All previous attempts to capture Pozières had been conducted from the south-west along the Albert – Bapaume Road, but this one had come from the south-east, perpendicular to the road, and parallel to the German second line of defence. Even years later Gough indignantly contradicted Walker's claim to have come up with the idea of changing direction, writing to the British Official Historian that

I gave Walker no choice in that matter... he got from me clear & definite orders what he was to do (to take Pozières) & how broadly he was to do it – only the details of the attack were left in his hands – and the details he carried out thoroughly well.<sup>11</sup>

There is no contemporary evidence that Gough ordered the change in direction, and in fact Walker wrote in his report on operations:

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<sup>10</sup> John Lee, 'Some Lessons of the Somme: The British Infantry in 1917', in Bond et al. , *Look to Your Front: Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History*, (Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> TNA, CAB45/134, Gough to Edmonds, 16 June 1938.

I was instructed to prepare plans for the capture of Pozières. Alternative directions for the attack were suggested by the Army Commander... to attack from the south-east [or] to attack from the south-west. After reconnaissance I preferred to attack from the south-east because I was of the position that the enemy from his position on the ridge... would be able to menace any attack from the south-west.<sup>12</sup>

The truth of the matter will likely never be known. In some respects it does not matter. The change in direction had much less to do with the success of the operation than elements of the plan like the solid artillery barrage and the limited objectives, which came directly from the broad outline given by Gough to Walker. There was little recognition of the fact, however, even by Gough himself.

In fact, nobody seemed to notice that the change in direction had in fact been the source of greatest danger both to the success of the operation, and to the new Australian position inside Pozières village. Because the attack ran parallel to the German second line of defence – in this sector represented by two strong trench lines known to the British as the Old German (OG) Lines – the attacking troops were under constant enfilade fire from their right. No significant extra measures were taken to ensure the capture of these trench lines. They were attacked by two small raiding parties of around 50 men from the 9th Battalion on the night of 21 July under cover of a grand total of 14 mortar rounds and a light artillery barrage that failed to eventuate. Unsurprisingly, the operation failed with heavy casualties.<sup>13</sup> A larger force was sent to enter the lines and work their way along them during the main operation, ‘rolling up’ the German defenders as they went. This, too, failed in spite of the success experienced along three quarters of the Australian line, leaving the Germans in possession of their main lines of defence in the area. In order to protect the captured jewel that was Pozières, action needed to be taken against the OG Lines immediately.

Accordingly, with the exhausted 1st Division relieved by the 2nd Australian Division, plans were put in place to attack the OG Lines on 29 July 1916. This involved a turn back to attacking from the original direction, the south-west, and engaging the enemy in their main defensive position. This operation was again based on a lifting artillery barrage timetable, but with just two objectives, namely each of the OG Lines, OG1 and OG2. This time, however, the plan sent down from Reserve Army was not as

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<sup>12</sup> AWM, 4/1/42/18 Pt. 2, ‘Report on the Operations of First Australian Division at Pozières’.

<sup>13</sup> AWM, 4/23/26/19, ‘Report on Operations Carried Out by 9th Battalion Commencing 19th July and Concluding 0400 25th July 1916’.

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solid as that for the capture of Pozières. It was much weaker than that of 23 July 1916, with 25-30% fewer shells fired in each lift of the barrage. Most of the barrage lifts were much shorter too, in particular the first. It would fall on the first objective for just a single minute before lifting away and leaving the infantry behind.<sup>14</sup> Worse, as orders passed to 1st Anzac Corps and on to 2nd Australian Division headquarters, the artillery plan was weakened, with Major General James Gordon Legge, GOC 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, even attempting to do away with artillery support altogether. Fortunately, Gough discovered the plan in time, and reinstated the original (if inadequate) artillery programme.<sup>15</sup> In the event, the backbone of the operation – the firepower of the artillery – was not strong enough and the operation failed dismally. The artillery had been unable to cut the German barbed wire defences in front of OGI, and the infantry were caught out in the open desperately trying to cut their way through as their artillery barrage lifted away into the distance. The 2nd Division suffered nearly 1,400 casualties on 29 July 1916, without getting more than a handful of men into the OG Lines at all.<sup>16</sup>

This time there was much more discussion about the result of the operation among Gough and his subordinate commanders. But again, a single factor rose out of many to become the one point of focus for future operations. This was the problem with preparation – namely construction of an appropriate jumping-off position while the artillery destroyed the German barbed wire in front of OGI. There was little, if any, reporting on the inadequacy of the artillery barrage; neither was the fact that the operation was discovered by the Germans before it began, and they were ready and waiting. This was largely attributed to the inexperience of Major General Legge, and no examination of events at any other level of command seems to have taken place. The failure to take the OG Lines even attracted the interest of Douglas Haig, who also firmly laid the blame for the failure at divisional command's door, writing that 'some of [the Australian] Divisional Generals are so ignorant and (like many Colonials) so conceited, that they cannot be trusted [to work out unaided the plans of attack]'. Haig visited Reserve Army to impress on Gough and his staff 'that they must supervise more closely the plans of the Anzac Corps.'<sup>17</sup> Too often the slight on 'colonials' overshadows the importance of this statement – that divisional generals were supposed to be trusted to work out their own plans of attack in response to

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<sup>14</sup> TNA, WO 95/518 'Artillery Arrangements No. 2 Reserve Army,' attached to Reserve Army Operation Order No. 15, 28 July 1916, Headquarters Branches & Services: General Staff.

<sup>15</sup> Sheffield & Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters*, p. 210.

<sup>16</sup> AWM, 4/1/44/12 Pt 2, 'Report on Operation 28/29 July, 1916', 2nd Division War Diary, July 1916.

<sup>17</sup> Haig Diary, entry for 29 July, Robert Blake (ed.). *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952), p. 156.

Army and corps orders, and 1st Anzac Corps, and in particular the commander of the 2nd Australian Division, had failed to do so adequately. Closer supervision was the only answer. The officer commanding 1st Anzac Corps, Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood, would also work to ensure the 2nd Division had ample time to prepare for the next operation, and to closely monitor and report on progress. The simplistic determination was the attack had failed because Legge had failed to prepare the ground properly, and the simple answer was to watch Legge closely, and make sure he got the preparation done.

If not the sole problem with the previous attack, adequate preparation was indeed a key factor in any further advance. To ensure this was completed, Haig determined that the date of the next attack on the OG Lines would be determined by the progress of these preparations, and not the other way around. Gough had little choice but to wait.<sup>18</sup> This was much harder than it seemed under the constant shellfire. In many cases a jumping-off trench would be worked on all night only to be pounded flat in an hour's barrage. The Germans had accurately ranged their guns on the village of Pozières and surrounds, but while the Australian and British artillery searched out the enemy batteries with their own guns, their counter-battery fire was having little effect. It took just under a week to dig an appropriate jumping-off trench and thoroughly destroy the German wire through carefully laid artillery barrages, with work constantly hampered by severe and constant artillery fire. This laid a good basis for the next operation, and on 4 August 1916 the 2nd Division was successful in capturing all its objectives in the OG Lines, albeit at heavy cost.

There were a significant number of problems with the attacks on the OG Lines, and many of them came from divisional level. Legge had indeed done a poor job of preparing the position for battle. But this was not dealing with the main problem of the attack. Legge had overcrowded his attacking lines with infantry, deploying them in a manner that made command during the heat of battle extremely difficult. Each company was divided into four waves and then assigned a sector of the line to attack. This meant being spread over the two main objectives for the operation, OG1 and OG2, each with different barriers and separated by as much as 100-150 yards. The company commander, then, had to control two parties undertaking different tasks in different locations.<sup>19</sup> But even though the problem of preparation was resolved for the second attack on the OG Lines, other problems with Legge's heavy reliance on the infantry to advance in large numbers simply went unmediated by Gough, who was required to closely supervise his Australian subordinate. There is no evidence that Gough recognised Legge's infantry deployment as problematic, or indeed a very

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<sup>18</sup> AWM, 26/50/15, 'Points to be placed before GOC 2nd Div', 29 July 1916.

<sup>19</sup> Hampton, *Attack on the Somme*, pp. 65-6.

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real factor in the massive casualty rate – 6,848 officers and men in their twelve days in the line.

At this stage Gough was in a good position. He had successfully atoned for his failures in early July with the capture of such a coveted position as Pozières. Despite some problems creeping in to his approach to the operations that immediately followed the capture of Pozières, he had effectively avoided any examination of his methods. And so while Gough had originally been strictly limited to acting in a supporting role for Fourth Army's left flank, his success allowed him to start looking away from Fourth Army towards operation around Thiepval and even the Ancre to the north. In fact, just days after Pozières was captured, Gough began looking to capture Thiepval, the highest point on the Pozières Ridge. His plan was to

work systematically northwards, rolling up the German second line from about Pozières to about Grandcourt: to secure the high ground North and North-east of Pozières and Thiepval: to obtain observation over Courcelette and Grandcourt: to cut off, capture or kill the German garrison of the Thiepval area.<sup>20</sup>

This was a significant departure from the directive to take on no more than operations that were 'complementary, and subsidiary, to the main effort to be made by the Fourth Army'.<sup>21</sup> But in reality, the only way this could work would be if 1st Anzac Corps continued to advance, a point not lost on Gough. An ongoing advance on the boundary with Fourth Army would give him the legitimacy to push on to the left, allowing II Corps to increase its operational tempo to keep up the flank, and could allow more and more of Reserve Army to get pulled into attacking. The capture of Thiepval, another coveted position, would give Gough even more authority to do as he wished on the Somme. This was not mere empire building aimed at subverting Haig, but rather an attempt to expand his own influence on the battle. Gough's personal confidence and faith in his own aggressive approach to warfare seems to have left him with the conviction that, if left to his own devices, he could do little else but succeed.

A few days later Reserve Army revealed that this was under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief himself, who 'intended to resume active operations north of the Ancre with the XIV Corps, while the II and I Anzac Corps carry out their plans for breaking the German 2nd line and cutting off the Thiepval area.' Commanders in this area, although not to make any definite plans, were to 'make a careful study of [their] whole front, and will push on the work everywhere so that there may be as

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<sup>20</sup> TNA, WO 158/334, 'Outline of Plan of Attack on Thiepval', 28 July 1916.

<sup>21</sup> TNA, WO158/244, 'Note of arrangements', 4 July 1916.



little delay as possible when definite orders are issued.<sup>22</sup> But Gough had already hedged his bets – if Haig did not expand the BEF's area of operations to the north of the Ancre, then he would force his way north on the tail of 1st Anzac Corps' advance, and his corps commanders would be ready for either development.

One of the reasons Haig considered Gough suitable for command of an Army was his impetuous and aggressive nature.<sup>23</sup> While Gough's capacity to write a measured, firepower-based battle plan may come as a surprise to some, his interminable impatience and reckless belligerence will surely not. The chief of staff at II Corps, Brigadier General Philip Howell, who referred to Gough as 'the bantam' in letters to his wife, wrote

Always pace with the bantam! Only twice has he really succeeded in upsetting the apple cart, though it's always been a struggle to prevent him doing so. He's very good in some ways: plenty of drive & determination, but wholly increscent & impulsive, unable to visualise what will be the result, say, tomorrow of anything done today. Also blindly convinced that he & he alone is the only person capable of doing anything in this world. It's all like a play & quite amusing.<sup>24</sup>

Gough's impatience had already caused problems for the divisions of 1st Anzac Corps. Although Walker managed to have his attack on Pozières postponed from 18 July to 23 July, it should be noted that Walker was not left alone to get his headquarters in order and prepare the orders issued by Army for his brigades – Gough called meetings to push the attack forward almost daily, and Walker was hard pressed to get the extra time he eventually won. And Legge had taken over command of the front line at 9am on 27 July 1916, conducting his first large-scale operation on the Western Front less than forty hours later.<sup>25</sup> Despite close scrutiny of his division's preparations for that attack, Legge took all the blame, Gough seemingly avoiding any inquiry into his insistence on rushing the attack through too quickly.

Haig's interference in the effort to capture the OG Lines following the failure of 29 July caused an enormous problem for Gough. With his Commander-in-Chief's orders

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<sup>22</sup> TNA, WO 155/333 'Memorandum of the policy to be pursued by the XIV Corps', 30 July 1916.

<sup>23</sup> Sheffield & McCartney. 'Hubert Gough', p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> LHCMA, Howell Papers, IV/C/3/357a, Howell to wife, 4 October 1916

<sup>25</sup> He assumed command at 9am on 27 July and the assault went ahead at midnight 28/29 July – 39 hours later.

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that a full and thorough preparation had to be completed before the renewal of the attempt to capture OG1 and OG2, Gough was forced into patience. And yet, this went against his entire approach to battle as an Army commander. With little he could do, Gough worked on a memorandum which would have a serious effect on future operations. Issued on 3 August, the day before 2nd Division's second operation, its purpose was to urge Reserve Army's corps commanders to 'impress upon their subordinate leaders the necessity for the energetic measures and offensive action which the present situation requires.' While the document makes clear that 'that preparation must be through and careful,' this was a concession only, and Gough in fact wanted preparation for future attacks to be carried out at any time a division was not conducting active operations 'so that there should be no delay directly the time for such an attack arrives'. This kind of ongoing preparation was not that intended by Haig's assessment of the 'want of adequate preparation'.<sup>26</sup> While it was possible for infantry to keep up their reconnaissance of forward positions and work on possible jumping-off trenches and communication saps in preparation for potential operations, other factors – notably the destruction of barbed wire and strongpoints by the artillery – had to be done in a manner tailored for each operation. Gough's main point in this memorandum, clearly borne of his frustration at waiting for Legge, was to ensure that his corps commanders understood that it was 'imperative to press the enemy constantly and continue to gain ground as rapidly as possible'.<sup>27</sup> Preparation was secondary.

The memorandum ends with the directive that 'relentless pressure must be exercised everywhere and always subordinate commanders must think out and suggest enterprises instead of waiting for orders from above, which is entirely the case at present'.<sup>28</sup> But with subordinate commanders determining the next enterprise, there was a very grave danger that operations would begin to reflect the problems facing lower levels of command, that is, instead of focusing on achieving wide sweeps around Thiepval, or expansions to the north, corps like 1st Anzac Corps would start trying to deal with the nearest German strongpoint or the closest enemy trench. Neither would Gough's constant rounds of visitation to various headquarters help. Howell wrote:

the more there is to do the more the bantam fusses, those around him singing in the chorus. It's extraordinary how much he influences those immediately round him: & how their minds &

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<sup>26</sup> Haig Diary, entry for 29 July, Robert Blake (ed.). *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952), p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> AWM, 26/42/1, 'Memorandum By Army Commander, Reserve Army', 3 August 1916.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

imaginations flit about from one extreme to another. It's almost impossible to get any logical and consistent action.

Gough's insistence that every action had to be executed 'with resolution and energy,' and that any objective was better than none, for 'every yard of ground gained has great consequences, both material and moral' put him in very real danger of wasting his men on pointless exercises.<sup>29</sup>

This was almost immediately borne out when the 2nd Australian Division was replaced by the 4th after the successful capture of the OG Lines. As mentioned, according to Reserve Army's documented plans, the role of the 4th Australian Division would be to advance to the north, through the German stronghold at Mouquet Farm to beyond Thiepval, allowing II Corps to circle back and capture the town. The last untried division in 1st Anzac Corps spent just over a week in the line and was pressed into immediate and constant service from the moment it arrived. At least twice they participated in larger operations ordered by Reserve Army, but corps, division and even battalion commanders took their own initiative to conduct operations on a number of separate occasions, in some cases nightly. Yet these operations dragged them northwards only at the slowest pace. None of them can be described adequately without the use of map coordinates, and none made any kind of material advance towards Thiepval. The 4th Division, through its flurry of activity, carried the line northward around 500 yards at most. This is not in keeping with the Army commander's own stated intentions, and yet nothing was done to pause and coordinate a greater advance.

The greatest problem with this flurry of activity was, paradoxically, its success. Most of these smaller attacks were effective in gaining at least part, if not all, of their objectives. If a German strongpoint was not captured one night, it usually was the next. But many of these small-scale attacks were pushed through by the determination and capability of the infantry themselves, rather than the well-coordinated combined-arms approach of Pozières. In too many cases the objective was so close to the front line that artillery barrages were simply ineffective. In 1916 the artillery had a limited capacity for accurate fire, and prescribed a 'safety zone' of 200 yards to keep the infantry away from shells that could reasonably be expected to drop short.<sup>30</sup> On at least two occasions during this frantic activity the infantry was obliged to withdraw from the front line to keep clear of the safety zone, so badly drawn up was the artillery barrage. It was possible for well-disciplined and highly-trained troops to work around problems, particularly given that the objectives were generally very close to the front line during this period. A formation like the well-

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> AWM, 26/60/9, Durant to 4th Brigade, 29 August 1916.

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disciplined and highly-trained 4th Brigade, for example, managed to reach their objective for five successive attacks.<sup>31</sup> Those objectives were on an almost inconsequential scale in terms of the activity of Reserve Army, but the successes could be reported, and the reports gave the impression of movement and activity. Everybody, seemingly, was happy. This then triggered an unhappy cycle of small operations, moderate to inconsequential success, and limited, if any, real movement.

In the meantime, the next major obstacle in front of 1st Anzac Corps, the heavily fortified compound of Mouquet Farm, remained out of reach. The farm was certainly a formidable prospect. Beneath the rubble of the farm buildings, well established and heavily fortified underground bunkers and tunnels housed an unknown number of Germans. Australian soldiers in the front line reported seeing as many as 300 or 400 enemy disappearing into the farm from external trenches.<sup>32</sup> Counter-attacks, some of considerable size, were reported to have been launched from the farm on more than one occasion. On 11 August one of these attacks was reported, observers seeing the 'enemy leaving Mouquet Farm in large numbers... leaving the farm and spreading fanwise [to form] a thick line'.<sup>33</sup> Even so, Australian soldiers entered the farm regularly, despite it being a significant distance from their front line. Bean credited Lieutenant William Paton Hoggarth of the 50th Battalion as being the first Australian to reach Mouquet Farm.<sup>34</sup> He had entered the southern part of the ruined farm buildings in the operation of 12 August, and others continued to do so until 1st Anzac Corps was withdrawn from the front altogether. And although a formidable obstacle, Mouquet Farm was not on the scale of Pozières village, which boasted at least three concreted bunkers, an extensive trench system, and significant amounts of barbed wire.

Reserve Army issued orders for an attack on 12 August 1916 in which the 4th Division would capture Mouquet Farm. But at the same time Birdwood at 1st Anzac Corps issued an order that stated that:

For the present the energies of the Corps will be limited to the occupation of a line in the vicinity of Mouquet Farm. The exact position to be occupied must now be determined, and if after its occupation our role is temporarily to be defensive the location of

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<sup>31</sup> Meleah Hampton, *Attack on the Somme: 1st Anzac Corps and the Battle of Pozières Ridge 1916*, (Solihull: Helion & Co, 2016), p. 136.

<sup>32</sup> AWM, 4/23/41/12, 24th Bn War Diary, 24 August 1916.

<sup>33</sup> AWM, 26/60/6, 'Report on Enemy Attack on 16th Bn 11-8-16,' 12 August 1916.

<sup>34</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918. Volume IV: The AIF in France, 1917*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson (1933), 1936, p. 213.

our whole front must be considered and the distribution of troops adjusted to the new requirements.<sup>35</sup>

Birdwood was trying to have his sector of the front line shortened, seeing his allotted frontage 'considerable for the troops available'.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, he wanted II Corps to have the responsibility of attacking Mouquet Farm, but his request for a boundary change between corps was denied even as the 4th Division was frantically preparing for its next operation.

However, Birdwood's reluctance to commit to capturing Mouquet Farm continued, and he suggested that Major General Cox might like to decide whether or not to capture the farm during the operation.<sup>37</sup> Cox decided to exclude it by further shortening the distance to the objective.<sup>38</sup> Remarkably, Gough either allowed the modifications to the objective or was unaware of the change. Given that the objective had to be given in terms of map coordinates, it may have been unclear that Mouquet Farm had been taken out. Mouquet Farm was not captured during that operation, and in fact Birdwood proved so reluctant to take on the stronghold that in the end 1st Anzac Corps' line skirted the boundary of the farm to the south to the point where a man could reach over the parapet and touch it. It was not until 26 August, during an attack by the 6th Brigade, that orders were given to attack the farm, an ad hoc solution to a last-minute problem.<sup>39</sup> It failed.

All of Reserve Army's carefully expounded plans for future movement hinged on 1st Anzac continuing to advance to the north, and yet by mid-August that advance had slowed to a crawl. Gough was not in control of his front, and not acting by his own blueprint for further action. While 1st Anzac Corps was hesitantly dithering in front of Mouquet Farm, Gough was planning operations around the Ancre, and visiting various corps headquarters on his front. He continued to push subordinates into planning and conducting various enterprises. 1st Anzac Corps, which had been used for the purpose of providing legitimacy to Gough's efforts to have more influence on the Somme, was left to vacillate in front of a strongpoint, never quite getting around to attacking it, but incurring considerable casualties nevertheless. The action of 1st Anzac Corps slowly descended into pointlessness.

On 3 September 1916 Gough issued one last order to 1st Anzac Corps for an operation to advance the line some 400 yards beyond Mouquet Farm. This was part

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<sup>35</sup> AWM, 26/50/16, Brudenell White to 4th Australian Division, 12 August 1916.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> AWM, 4/1/48/5 Pt. 2, 1st Anzac Corps Order No. 24, 14 August 1916.

<sup>38</sup> AWM, 4/1/48/5 Pt. 2, 4th Australian Division Order No. 16, 14 August 1916.

<sup>39</sup> AWM, 26/58/3, Plant to 24th Battalion, 26 August 1916.

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of a much wider attack involving large parts of Fourth Army and Reserve Army's fronts. It would be the first operation on the Somme deliberately planned to be conducted on the same day by Reserve and Fourth Armies.<sup>40</sup> It would also demonstrate that the plans to advance using 1st Anzac Corps to drag the rest of Reserve Army into legitimate action were long gone. Although apparently a widely coordinated attack, Reserve Army's primary focus was on an attack on enemy trenches north and south of the River Ancre by the 49th and 39th Divisions, separated from Fourth Army by the frontages of II Corps and 1st Anzac Corps.<sup>41</sup> II Corps and 1st Anzac Corps would have to participate, but only to keep the appearance of cooperation. In fact, these two corps, once the primary focus of Reserve Army's operations, received their orders five days after those issued to the 49th and 39th Divisions.<sup>42</sup> Gough's primary interest was his attack around the River Ancre, and not cooperation with Fourth Army on the right. II Corps and 1st Anzac Corps were to conduct very minor operations to extend Reserve Army's operations closer to the boundary with Fourth Army, and no more. II Corps' attack connected with neither the Ancre operation on their left, nor 1st Anzac Corps' attack against Mouquet Farm to their right. The 1st Anzac Corps, similarly, was to conduct its assigned operation in isolation, not being required to coordinate with either flank.

And so when Birdwood once again modified the objective, shortening the advance to a mere 100 yards or so, Gough had nothing to say. Mouquet Farm was included in the attack, but the Australians were so close to it that any advance had no choice but to deal with the German strongpoint. Having been so close to Mouquet Farm for so long, the Australians had a good chance to observe the position, and confirmed that it would take considerable effort to capture. Lieutenant James Stanley Rogers, the intelligence officer for the 4th Brigade, reported, 'I am of the opinion that this place has been tunnelled underground and is practically a fortress'.<sup>43</sup> Reports from the 4th Division following earlier operations confirmed that 'the enemy positions were held in such strength that it required a considerably stronger force to mop up the enemy in his dugouts and prevent him from attacking us in numbers.'<sup>44</sup> Birdwood, largely left to his own devices in planning this operation, created a hugely complicated affair in which the infantry would enter the farm from at least three different directions under the cover of a wholly inadequate artillery barrage. Several parties of Australians made it into the farm once again, only to be forced out by a well-entrenched German garrison.

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<sup>40</sup> Prior & Wilson, *The Somme*, p.173.

<sup>41</sup> TNA, WO 95/518, Reserve Army Operation Order No. 22, 24 August 1916.

<sup>42</sup> TNA, WO 95/518, Reserve Army Operation Order No. 24, 29 August 1916.

<sup>43</sup> AWM, 26/60/9, 'Our Operations:- 16th Battalion,' 29 August 1916.

<sup>44</sup> AWM, 26/60/9, 'Narrative of Operations by 4th Australian Infantry Brigade North-West of Pozières during Period 26th August – 2nd September 1916,' p.2.

All of this made no difference to Gough. He had somehow transformed his situation from being an Army commander tied to cooperation with the main force on his right flank to being able to expand operations far to the left of his sector, paying only the barest of lip service to cooperation with Fourth Army. His well-conducted operation to capture Pozières village paid a generous dividend. While operations to capture the OG Lines were necessary to protect the new advance, Gough managed to avoid any censure at the disastrous outcome of one of them, and continued to try to push the line on to the north. But Gough's insistence that operations should not be generated by Army alone, and that subordinate commanders should always think out and suggest enterprises left too much of the responsibility for momentum in the hands of men who were not responsible for seeing the bigger picture. The men of 1st Anzac Corps suffered through the uncontrolled, disjointed and pointless operations of the latter weeks on Pozières Ridge. These operations did not advance the line in any meaningful way, and the capture of the few German trenches and strongpoints was of no consequence to the outcome of the Somme campaign.

Gough showed some capability as an Army commander on the Somme. However, his impatience and inconsistent approach to command meant that in the end the situation on his Army front was not good. For the capture of a few significant positions, he spent the strength of too many battalions for too much 'reportable success' of a much less significant kind. He made plans and then ignored them the more leeway he was given, and it caused corps like 1st Anzac Corps to lose their way, battling for next to nothing with little chance of respite. In the end 1st Anzac Corps was sent to Belgium to recuperate from its experience on the Somme, many of its units crippled by casualties, and some needing to be rebuilt entirely. Mouquet Farm, once the most important objective of an Army, lost its significance with the shift of attention to the left, and was captured on 26 September 1916 by a platoon from the 6th East Yorkshire Pioneer Battalion, unable to work in the vicinity until it was cleared.<sup>45</sup>

The Battle of the Somme is largely told and remembered through its longer set-piece battles – 1 July, 14 July, 15 September. But for its other 138 days this was not how the battle was fought. At Pozières, Mouquet Farm, Delville Wood, Ginchy, Guillemont, High Wood, and Intermediate Trench the Somme was characterised by small-scale, disjointed, interminable attacks as described in the Mouquet Farm operations. This was the Battle of the Somme – not so much a measured campaign as a mish-mash of ever changing ideas and plans with deadly consequences.

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<sup>45</sup> TNA, WO 95/1804, War Diary of 6th East Yorkshire Regt (Pioneers), 26 September 1916.