The First World War operation begun outside the northern French town of Cambrai at dawn on 20 November 1917 has often been called the world’s First Great Tank Battle. Before the day was over, the British assault force of six infantry divisions—led by 320 combat tanks—had created a hole in German defences almost ten kilometres wide and six kilometres deep, with surprisingly few casualties. Success on this scale had eluded the Allies throughout 1917, including during the grinding Third Ypres offensive just ended. News of Cambrai set church bells ringing in England for the first time in the war, and had one London newspaper proclaiming that General Haig, the British Commander-in-Chief in France, was ‘through the Hindenburg Line’.

In fact, the spectacular result achieved at Cambrai was not wholly attributable to the presence of the tanks, useful though they proved to be. Equally crucial to success was the contribution of other combat arms and elements, each using innovative tactics and techniques being tried out for the first time. For instance, supporting the assault were over 1000 guns and howitzers. Artillery staffs had devised a scheme for delivering a short preliminary bombardment to achieve surprise, employing predictive methods to silently register targets without observed ranging shots (which risked alerting the enemy to impending attack). The guns also used the No 106 graze fuze, designed to explode HE (high explosive) shells without cratering the ground ahead of the tanks.

Although historical accounts rarely mention the fact, also assembled was an aerial attack force of 14 Royal Flying Corps (RFC) squadrons, totaling 275 Sopwith Camels and Scouts, Bristol Fighters and DH4s and 5s. In the two days before the attack, aircraft noise had been used to mask the tanks as they moved up for the attack—a tactic repeated but not initiated (as sometimes claimed) at Hamel in July 1918. Despite the battlefield being shrouded in thick patchy fog, the aircraft engaged with machineguns and small bombs the enemy troops, trenches and gun emplacements in the opposing front line. While pursuing their supporting role, many pilots dropped down to only 30 feet to press their attacks, braving ferocious volumes of ground-fire directed at them.

In reality, the success of the opening thrust at Cambrai stands as an early triumph for the idea of the ‘all arms fight’, requiring close coordination of all the major components of combat power. Apart from the shock value of the tanks and their ability to breach wire obstacles, what worked here (in contrast to earlier instances of tank use since their debut on the Somme in September 1916) was the degree of coordination achieved between the tanks and the infantry. When the troops stayed or fell too far back from the assaulting tanks, as in the British centre, that was where the attack faltered.

Despite the success of the initial assault, all did not go as planned. Delays in the progress of the assault prevented...
proper breakthrough being achieved, particularly on the British left, where the wooded Bourlon Ridge dominating the terrain in rear of Cambrai still remained in German hands at the end of the first day. This meant that the attacking force was committed to three more days of heavy fighting despite mounting losses of both tanks and infantry. Losses to pilots in the air squadrons were also significant, in most instances running at 30 per cent. All available troops had been committed to the initial assault and there were no British reserves to maintain momentum. By 27 November the attack was spent, and the exhausted force was ordered to consolidate their gains.

Unfortunately for the British, the Germans had brought up 20 divisions of troops and on 30 November launched a counter-offensive, which a week later had almost entirely erased the British gains. In mounting this response, the Germans resorted to innovations that matched the British. The infantry attack was spearheaded by ‘stormtroopers’ employing new Hutier infiltration tactics devised by General Oskar von Hutier against the Russians. Integral to the German counter-offensive was the aggressive role played in the air by Schlachtstaffeln (Battle Flights), which were transferred into this part of the front, including the air ace von Richthofen’s elite squadrons. Many units had just received light, sturdy but nimble Halberstadt and Hannover two-seater aircraft, which were ideal for close-support and ground attack.

In the end, the gains and losses at Cambrai in terms of guns and casualties, including prisoners, were practically equal on both sides. Whereas the British had started out hailing Cambrai as a great victory, by mid-December it was all recrimination. Questions were asked in the War Cabinet, and General Haig was prompted to order a court of enquiry to examine what had gone wrong. The report of this body in January 1918 found that the success of the German counter-offensive was due in no small part to the use of close-support aircraft. It had been a case of the German Air Force better carrying out exactly the role that the RFC had itself attempted to perform on the opening days of the contest.

The tactics and techniques of ‘all arms fighting’ were developed further during the last year of World War I. Some historians have even come to consider that the origins of ‘blitzkreig’ style warfare are to be found in the big actions of 1918—the German Michael Offensive in March, and the ‘100 Days’ advance begun by the Allies at Amiens in August. The true significance of Cambrai has frequently been overlooked, in particular the role of air power in facilitating what could potentially have been a war winning approach to breaking the stalemate of trench warfare.

Key Points

- Cambrai was not only notable as the world’s First Great Tank Battle, but involved innovative use of artillery and air power also.
- The foundations of ‘all arms fighting’ tested at Cambrai laid the basis for successes achieved by both sides in 1918, and ultimately in German Blitzkreig tactics of World War II.
- No 2 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, played a distinctive and frequently overlooked part in the air battle on the British side.

No 2 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps (AFC)

While no Australian ground troops were at Cambrai, No 68 (Australian) Squadron, RFC, or No 2 Squadron, AFC, did take part. It had become the first Australian fighter unit in France two months earlier, and its pilots delighted Major General Hugh Trenchard, commander of the RFC on the Western Front, by the way they ‘revelled’ in flying their DH5 scouts at tree-top height to bomb and strafe German positions, even though seven of the squadron’s 18 machines were damaged or destroyed and three pilots lost on the first day alone. In fighting for Bourlon Wood on 23 November, Lieutenant F. G. Huxley played a key role in knocking out a German battery that was holding up advancing British tanks. Once the German counter-attack was underway, squadron pilots were heavily engaged in meeting aerial attacks against the British positions. Of 19 Military Crosses awarded to members of the RFC squadrons that took part in the battle, six went to pilots of No 2 Squadron.