



**Royal Australian Armoured
Corps Association Inc.
(Victorian Branch)**

TRACK

September 2017



Advance Australia

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The Significance of Cambrai Day and the Royal Tank Corps to the RAAC

20 Nov 1917

As the 100th anniversary of this groundbreaking event is almost upon us, we will revisit, courtesy of Major John Baines, RFD (Retd), the RAAC Historian, some brief thoughts on this momentous time in our military history.

The Battle of Cambrai is the foundation event on which the heritage of the Royal Tank Corps is built. The RAAC shares this heritage because of our close association with the Royal Tank Corps from the inception of our own tank units in 1930 and the later Australian Armoured Corps (AAC). The black beret, the mud, blood green fields colour patch and silver uniform accoutrements are testament to this relationship first ordained with the presentation of the model silver MK V tank when the Australian Tank Corps became the first Dominion unit to be granted affiliation with the Royal Tank Corps.

20 Nov 1917 Cambrai Day. The First Effective Mass Use of Armoured Vehicles In Warfare

At 5 am on 20 November 1917, tanks crossed the British trenches and entered no mans land at the start of the Battle of Cambrai. **Brigadier General Sir Hugh Elles** led the British tanks into action on the Western Front in what was to be the first effective mass use of armoured vehicles in warfare. Over 400 tanks took part in the attack, beginning the penetration of the German lines to a depth of 10000 yards on a frontage of 13000 yards.

Eight thousand prisoners and 100 guns were taken.

The anniversary of the battle is celebrated each year by the Armoured Corps in recognition of its significance.

BATTLE OF CAMBRAI

“The Motor Machine Gun Section was formed on Feb 16 and continued during April and May consisting initially of 184 Officers and 1610 Other Ranks. Training started at Bisley with what were then called LANDSHIPS and consisted of Infantry Training, Signalling and the mastering of the Vickers Machine Gun and the smaller Hotchkiss, fed by strips of ammunition. The gunnery side was under the control of the Navy at HMS Excellent, Whale Island. The name was later changed to Heavy Section Machine Gun Corps on 16 May 1917.

As Landships became available, training proceeded at the estate of Lord Iveagh Elvedon, near Thetford during June of 1916. Driving instruction was on the Mk1 with two big wheels trailing behind, for the purpose of assisting in the steering

where only a slight turn was required. Many were painted with Russian lettering said to mean ...'Water Tank, Retrograd', thus the name 'Tank' was born! By 30 Aug 16, 50 tanks of the C and D Company had arrived in France.

In January Lt Col H.J. Elles was in command and on 18 Nov 16 the four companies became A,B,C and D Battalions and five further new battalions were forming from the remaining companies E and F and on 28 Jun 17 the HSMGC became the Tank Corps.

On the eve of the Battle of Cambrai, Brig Gen H.J. Elles composed the famous "Special Order No 6"

SPECIAL ORDER, NO. 6

1. Tomorrow the Tank Corps will have the chance for which it has been waiting for many months, to operate on good going in the van of the battle.
2. All that hard work and ingenuity can achieve has been done in the way of preparation.
3. It remains for unit commanders and for tank crews to complete the work by judgement and pluck in the battle itself.
4. In the light of past experience I leave the good name of the Corps with great confidence in your hands.
5. I propose leading the attack of the Centre Division.

HUGH ELLES

B-G,

Commanding Tank Corps

19th Nov, 1917

Distribution to Tank Commanders"

This message was read out by every tank commander to his crew that night. By 5am on Tue 20 Nov 1917 all the tanks were in position and the Infantry started to cut their own wire. The sky was grey and overcast and there was a fine ground mist. The tanks were about 500 yards behind the British Front Line and at 6am the crews crawled into their vehicles ready for zero hour which was 6.20am and were then in another world. The face masks were donned with chain mail hanging down so as to protect the lower part of the face from red hot metal which might fly about inside the tanks once heavy machine gun fire was encountered. The only light was from a festoon lamp; nothing could be seen outside nor even heard. They were in an eerie silence with but the cooing of the three carrier pigeons for company. Through tiny slits the tanks on either side could be observed. Soon after 6am Brig Gen Elles appeared in the centre of the line. He chose his tank, *Hilda*, mounted, and in seconds his head and shoulders appeared through the manhole at the top, his brown, red and green colours attached to an ash plant proudly fluttered in the slight breeze. As the tanks rolled into action he was still to be seen in this position.

At 6.10am the tanks crossed the British front line trenches and as they crossed no mans land at zero hour the thousand guns of the artillery opened up with a devastating crash and roar. From the sky swept the 14 Squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps flying low and spraying the German trenches with machine gun fire; and so at last the Tank Corps got the chance for which it had been waiting and preparing for as the Battle for Cambrai began. From left to right the line swept ever onward except for the key village of Flesquies, the key to Bourlon Wood . By nightfall an advance of five miles had been made. Eight thousand German prisoners had been taken with over 100 heavy guns, 280 machine guns and about 80 trench mortars and a huge gap had been ripped in the German defences.

In London the news was greeted with great jubilation and church bells were ordered to be rung. The tanks had proved their worth, but at a cost. By nightfall on the 20 Nov, 179 tanks lay out of action; twisted from direct hits, broken down or ditched in the great trenches. Most of the others had been in continuous action for all of 16 hours and were sorely in need of maintenance and replenishment.

The pre-battle cooperation between the tanks and the infantry, for the first phase had paid off but the tank crews, survivors of the first phase, tired and in need of rearming, refuelling and maintenance, to say nothing of rest, reorganisation, reconnaissance and further planning, were exhausted. It has been said that the Tank Corps suffered from the inferiority of its equipment, no doubt aggravated by the carrying of fascines, the width of the trenches encountered and the shortage of reserve equipment. We must not lose sight of the fact,

however, that this was a young Corps, finding its way and aside of this, it is generally acknowledged that the Corps gained a resounding victory, never to be forgotten.

Infantry reserves were virtually non-existent for the reason that they lay dead in Flanders Fields but there were still the five cavalry divisions with thousands of fresh horsemen who were now presented with the opportunity for which they had cried out. The wire was destroyed, the trenches crossed and the machine gun posts and many of the bridges cleared, but there was no sign of the cavalry.

They did not cross the British Line until 12.30 and when they got to the lines now occupied by British troops they halted and dismounted to await fresh orders and there they remained. Had they pushed on, the result might have been different, but the command was following the old trench warfare methods and by the time fresh orders came, the Germans had reoccupied the trenches from which they had so unceremoniously been ejected but a little time before. Had the cavalry not halted they could possibly have reached Cambrai in but 2 to 3 hours as had been planned.

Brig Gen H.J. Elles' Force Consisted of:

476 tanks – 378 of which were fighting tanks. These tanks came from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Brigades and were from A,B,C,D,E,F,G,H and I Battalions. Of the fighting tanks 252 of the 2nd and 3rd Brigades went to 3rd Corps and the remaining 126 to 4th Corps.

The tanks from each battalion were divided into waves, each wave into a definite unit with a specifically allotted task. Two thirds therefore planned to tackle the first objective and then to aim for the second objective. Special details were nominated to secure bridges over the Canal du Nord to ensure the unhindered passage of the pursuing cavalry for exploitation and mopping up of the expected morale shattered Germans. In addition the wire was to be breached principally to assist the passage of the cavalry, reinforcements and supply caravans.

Nine days after the commencement of the Battle of Cambrai, what was left of the three tank brigades, lined up in Havrincourt for an inspection by General Elles, but the cost had been immense. The Corps had lost 188 officers and 965 other ranks and almost half their tanks.

From January 1918 the system of lettered battalions was dropped in favour of numbered battalions. Thus A became 1 and B became 2, etc. The Mk IV Tank having given sterling service was now being replaced by the Mk V. On 17 Oct 1919, King George V became Colonel-in-Chief and in 1924 the Tank Corps became the Royal Tank Corps. This name was to survive until 1938 when it was changed to the Royal Tank Regiment.”

Maj Gen R.N.L. Hopkins: Cambrai as an important landmark in tactical employment of armour

“There have been many detailed accounts of the battle. Australians did not participate, and there seems no further reason to describe it. The importance of the event as a landmark in the tactical employment of armour however needs emphasis. The remarkable success of the tanks when the principles of surprise and concentration were allied to the use of suitable terrain pointed the way to the end of trench warfare and ultimate victory over the Germans. Nearly 500 tanks were employed in various roles and complete surprise was achieved. By midday on 20 November a deeper penetration had been made in a shorter time than in any previous offensive since the beginning of trench warfare. Moreover organised opposition on the immediate front had disappeared.

“The fact of the matter seems to have been that the lessons of tank operations at Cambrai and in the final battles of 1918 were neglected or, perhaps, not fully understood. In spite of the steady improvement in tank design and writings of Fuller, Liddell Hart, and many others, there was no initiative in Australia towards a study of the subject, even after the first medium tanks had arrived in 1927. This was almost certainly due to the fact that no senior officer was tank trained. The only moves made by Army Headquarters were on too small a scale to impress either soldier or politician and remained isolated because of a failure to build on the foundation which had been laid. The old joke that every army prepares for the next war in terms of the last seems only too true.” **Maj Gen R.N.L. Hopkins relates the Australian tradition of commemorating the Battle of Cambrai:**

“Each year on 20 November, the anniversary of the Battle of Cambrai, 1st Tank Section [formed in 1930] paraded at the Cenotaph in Sydney where a short memorial service was held in keeping with the tradition of the Royal Tank Corps.”

VICTORIAN BRANCH BIRTHDAY

Sunday 11 February 2018

1400 hrs

The 72nd birthday of the Victorian Branch will be celebrated at the **Shrine of Remembrance on Sunday 11 February 2018** with a gathering on the forecourt of the Shrine and then a short commemorative service will be conducted in the Shrine Sanctuary followed by the usual sumptuous afternoon tea, probably in the western annex where the Shrine shop is located.

Our association flag, first flown in February 2014 will be flying from the flagpole in the Shrine forecourt. It is flown on appropriate days during the year such as **7 February (association birthday 1946)** and **9 July (official Australian Armoured Corps birthday 1941)**.

All members and spouses are strongly urged to support this significant activity. The setting, adjacent to Melbourne's most famous landmark is outstanding and the opportunity to **renew your acquaintance with this significant Melbourne precinct is strongly encouraged.**

To assist the organisers with afternoon tea catering, please contact the Secretary Peter Axton by email raxton3@bigpond.com to warn in for rations. **RSVP 2 February 2018.**

2017 KID'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

Sunday 17 December 2017

Once again this highlight on our social calendar will be conducted at the **Diamond Valley Miniature Railway**, Lower Eltham Park, Main Rd **from 1000 hrs. Santa will arrive as usual on his special train at 1300 hrs** and our two exclusive specials will arrive at the picnic area at **Meadmore Junction at 1100 and 1400 hrs.** They tour the extensive layout for half an hour with a changeover of passengers on the quarter hour.

Rod and Sharon Westgarth will be conducting their very popular sausage sizzle as usual so lunch isn't a problem. The raffle will be run with more wonderful prizes again this year thanks to the skills of **Lindsay Christensen.**

2018 AUTUMN PICNIC

Sunday 25 March 2018

This popular event will be held again at the **Australian Army Tank Museum and RAAC Memorial**, Puckapunyal on **Sunday 25 March 2018.** Bring the kids (from eight to eighty) along for a very enjoyable day. Bar-b-que facilities are available and **Rod Westgarth** will be applying his well honed cooking skills to bangers and track pads. Soft drinks for the kids will also be provided.

Remember your photo ID for admission to the Puckapunyal Army Base.

The Arch Finlayson Memorial Scholarship

Application Form

Applicants for the Arch Finlayson Memorial Scholarship must complete this form and mail to the address detailed below. The Scholarship is available to 1st year apprentices and is valued at \$500.00

Name.....

(Christian name/names)

(Surname)

Address.....

.....Post Code.....

Telephone.....

What is your apprenticeship?

Employer.....

Employer's Address

.....Post Code.....

Contact Phone Number

Registered Training Institute or TAFE.....

Name of Financial RAACA Victorian Member

Address

.....Post Code.....

Contact Phone Number.....

You will need to enclose copies of the following:

1. A brief supportive resume.
2. A copy of signed training agreement.
3. A copy of your enrolment at a registered training institute or TAFE.
4. A supporting letter from your employer.

After your application has been received, the three trustees of the fund may require you to attend an interview at a time, date and location to be advised.

Return this form together with all supporting documents to:

The Trustees

Arch Finlayson Memorial Scholarship Fund

RAACA – Victorian Branch

PO Box 547

COBURG VIC 3058

CAMBRAI DAY COMMEMORATION DINNER

Saturday 18 November 2017
1900 for 1930hrs

Hopkins Barracks Officers/Sergeants Mess
Puckapunyal

Guest of Honour
Lieutenant Colonel Josh Gillman
Commanding Officer/Chief Instructor
School of Armour

Cost: \$60:00 per head for members
\$70:00 per head for non members/guests

This function is our premier event for the year and as usual we will be providing a quality guest speaker for your enjoyment

All enquiries to:
Daryl Pinner (H) 9359 4520
Peter Branagan (H) 5793 8171

On Sunday morning enjoy a sumptuous cooked breakfast in the Chauvel Courtyard at the Officers Mess from 0800 hrs

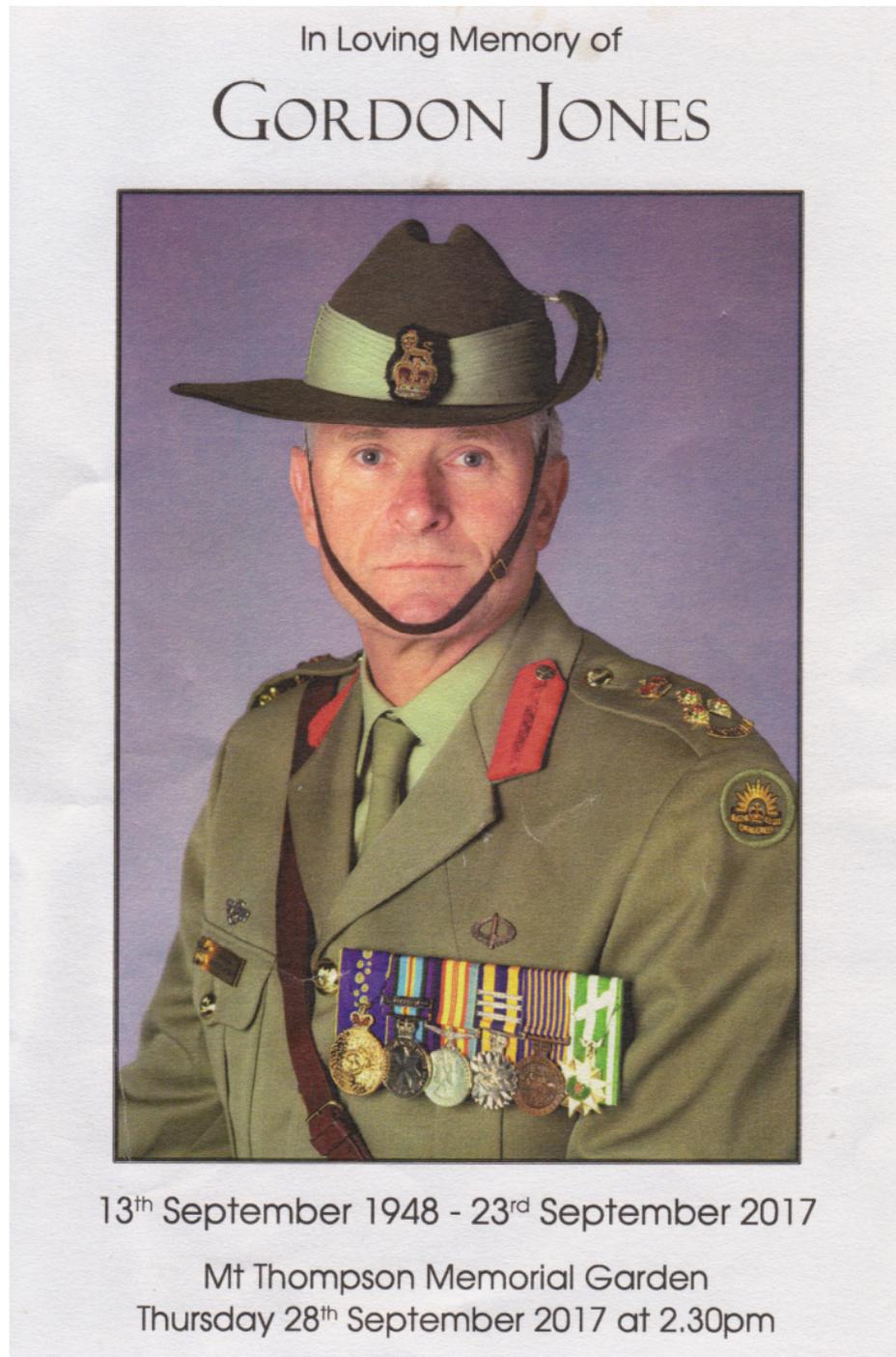
Dress: Lounge Suit or Reefer Jacket Miniatures

Tickets posted out early September

RSVP by Friday 10 November 2017

Accommodation is limited

Vale



The funeral service for this fine officer and long standing member of the Victorian Branch was conducted in Brisbane on 28 September. Many Black Hats were in attendance and a very moving eulogy was delivered by close family friend Brigadier Maurie Meecham, AM (Retd). Lieutenant Colonel Craig Burn and Major (Retd) Peter Branagan, OAM represented the Victorian Branch.

Vale



VX51051 Tpr. Brian 'Lucky' Leeder was a veteran of New Guinea and served there with the 2/8th Australian Armoured Regiment. In later years he was an active member of the Victorian Branch and along with his 'minder' Colin Carrington, attended many of our functions.