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# Sir John Monash – An effective and competent commander?

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*The main thing is always to have a plan; if it is not the best plan, it is better than no plan at all.*

Sir John Monash<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

1. From the destruction and despair of the First World War emerged the reputation of John Monash as one of Australia's finest military commanders. He began the war as a 49-year-old brigade commander in Gallipoli, having assumed command of the 4th Brigade on 14 September 1918. At the conclusion of hostilities, he was Australia's first ever corps commander and had presided over a number of great victories. A citizen soldier with 30 years experience, Monash regarded permanent soldiering an unattractive proposition because he believed it to confine a man's scope and, in comparison to civil employment, limit his opportunities.<sup>2</sup> He was a civil engineer, whose studies included degrees in arts and law. Monash understood the totality of warfare in the context of the First World War. His intellect facilitated his understanding of the revolution in military tactics, equipment and doctrine that emerged on the Western Front. His planning and execution saved many lives and shaped the battlefields of the future.

2. The aim of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of John Monash as a 20th century commander based on an assessment of his competence in high-level command appointments.

3. This paper will first examine the concept of command and Monash's command philosophy. It will then examine effectiveness and Monash's performance at divisional and corps level before concluding with a review of his adaptiveness and decision-making. The paper seeks not to discuss any model of command or leadership but will use a narrative to highlight the intellect-based competence consistently demonstrated by Monash as a commander.

## Command and Monash's command philosophy

4. It is important to understand the meaning of command in order to analyse Monash's approach. The Australian Army defines command thus: 'The authority which a commander in the military service lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment is termed command'.<sup>3</sup>

5. This definition does not include leadership. The Australian Army defines leadership as the ability to influence people. Whereas command provides a lawful authority to direct that certain actions occur; leadership supports command by engaging subordinates at a personal level.<sup>4</sup> The definition of command also refers to a commander's obligation to conduct management functions. It is management that seeks to bring order and consistency.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the essential tenets of command are a lawful authority, an ability to influence subordinates and an ability to manage. What was the basis of the command philosophy of John Monash?

6. His command philosophy was the same at brigade, divisional and corps level. The recurrent themes are an emphasis on training, technology, the human element of warfare and, above all, comprehensive planning.

7. As the commander of the 3rd Division, Monash decided that it would not be ruined on the Western Front as all the others had been.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as he had previously done with the 4th Brigade in Egypt before the Gallipoli Campaign, he implemented a vigorous training program. The 3rd Division was to be recognised as one of the best trained divisions to have been deployed since the commencement of hostilities. In contrast to the common approach of his fellow commanders, Monash sent his best soldiers to the training battalions in England.<sup>7</sup>

8. Monash embraced the use of technology to create battlefield advantage. After the war, he noted that the infantry was frequently misused in the war given the development of military machinery.<sup>8</sup> Pederson observes that he could readily grasp the potential of new ideas<sup>9</sup> and at Hamel, Monash clearly demonstrated his understanding of all arms cooperation.

9. The psychological aspect of human endeavour was important to Monash. He believed that the general failure to address the psychological aspects of warfare prolonged the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Before the Battle of Hamel, he embedded tanks within the infantry units to overcome the deep distrust created by the earlier failures of the tanks in combat. This developed a level of trust between the two arms.<sup>11</sup> He also recognised the importance of battlefield success to the maintenance of morale and regularly appealed to exhausted soldiers' higher ideals in order to exhort further effort in battle.

10. However, it was detailed planning that most characterised Monash's commands. He believed in the concept of the fixity of the plan to the point that he would prefer to cancel and re-plan an operation if it could not be completed on the lines originally devised.<sup>12</sup> His plans were detailed and incorporated a series of battle conferences. The conferences allowed Monash to convey his intent to subordinate commanders. At the completion of the conferences, subordinate commanders had been briefed collectively and understood both their own and their colleagues' part in the plan.<sup>13</sup> Detailed written orders supported the conferences. Monash's skill in planning is universally recognised.

11. As a senior officer, Monash's command philosophy was skewed towards management over leadership. He rarely visited the front line as a divisional or corps commander, preferring to command the battle from his headquarters. Frontline commanders were left to conduct the fighting. He saw his role as setting the conditions for battlefield success through his intellectual approach to warfare. However, he understood the needs of the group, task and individual and exercised his leadership by attending to these needs as priorities allowed. The key characteristic of his leadership was the demonstration of competence. Monash was revered by many of his subordinates and respected by them all.<sup>14</sup> Gellibrand once said that: 'I could admire and follow him with comfort and pleasure.' He did not fit the mould of the classical warrior but used his powerful intellect to analyse situations and to plan accordingly.

### **Effectiveness and competence – was Monash successful?**

12. Competent and effective commanders will achieve success in battle. In six months under Monash, the Australian Corps achieved impressive results. It captured almost 30,000 prisoners, 338 guns and liberated 116 towns. In raw terms, a force comprising approximately 10 per cent of the British Forces captured 22 per cent of the seizures of the entire army. The corps engaged 39 German divisions and forced the disbandment of at least six of them.<sup>15</sup> The cost was 4,998 killed, 16,166 wounded and 79 missing. By any measure, these figures are impressive and are testimony to the effectiveness of Monash as commander.

13. Monash abhorred the war and the loss of life and misspent energy that it represented. He balanced this loathing against the requirement to spare no effort and refuse no sacrifice to prevent such

a horror occurring on Australian soil.<sup>16</sup> He was also ambitious and actively sought acknowledgement through honours and praise but at the same time, recognised that his success was dependent on his subordinates. Callinan contends that Monash's egotism was part of his strength and that his sensitivity to criticism contributed to his deviousness.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he sought to avoid unnecessary risk and took great pains to ensure that lives were not wasted as they had been in the earlier battles of the war. This reflected an understanding of the developing political-strategic environment. The populace was becoming increasingly casualty averse, was not providing large numbers of reinforcements<sup>18</sup> and yet wanted an end to the war.

14. The Battle of Hamel enhanced Monash's reputation as a commander who could embrace new ideas. The general Australian opinion of tanks was very negative after Bullecourt where they proved to be unreliable and had no influence on the battle. However, as an engineer, Monash had previously experienced technical innovations that were unimpressive as early variants but ultimately proved invaluable.<sup>19</sup> He viewed tanks this way and the success of the improved versions at Hamel vindicated his decision to use them in mass. Massed artillery was already common but Monash massed all of his available firepower for the battle including all of his corps machine guns, tanks and artillery. The results were spectacular by 1918 standards. The battle was completed quickly and with, by the standards of the day, minimal casualties. Many subsequent battles were modelled on his success at Hamel.

15. The importance of surprise and deception was not lost on Monash. At Hamel, he used aircraft to fly over enemy trenches thereby masking the sound of tanks moving into position. In later battles, he would use dummy tanks and challenge the notion of artillery pre-ranging in order to hide his intent. One of his stratagems was to fool the enemy into thinking that he had fooled you. He would continue bombarding enemy gunpits after they had moved their guns and then range onto new positions on the day of battle.<sup>20</sup> He challenged the accepted norm of firing only high explosive shells and used smoke extensively to mask intent and to protect the infantry. Regular harassing fire included gas shells to force the enemy to wear gas masks to reduce their effectiveness while allowing his own troop to operate unmasked.

16. Most importantly, Monash continually demonstrated his strong understanding of the totality of warfare. He placed great emphasis on administration. At Hamel, he used four modified tanks to transport defence stores and ammunition that would otherwise have required a 1,200 man carrying party. In the same battle, aircraft were used to drop machine gun ammunition. His administrative effectiveness was perhaps best enunciated by Albert Jacka when he said: '...the men went into action knowing that, whatever might be ahead, everything would be right behind them'.<sup>21</sup>

17. In subscribing to the theory of the limited objective that sought to prevent the line being weakened by exploiting success too far, Monash demonstrated an understanding of the theatre of war in which he was operating. The best counter to German counter attacks was to set objectives that could be consolidated by heavy artillery barrages. Exploiting too far made attacking troops vulnerable to counter attack. At the Battle of Amiens, the Australian Corps achieved great success and captured over 6,000 prisoners and 172 guns. The capture of the guns and the planned Blue Line satisfied Monash.<sup>22</sup> It achieved his role in the Army plan, provided his troops with success and limited the corps' vulnerability to counter attack.

18. Monash achieved great success as a corps commander. Certainly, there were some things in his favour. Pederson has previously described him as lucky. There is no doubt that the German Army was in decline at the time that he assumed command. However, it was only after the Allied offensive

at Amiens in August 1918 that it lost the ability to mount offensive action on a significant scale. It still possessed an effective defensive capability. Monash must be credited for developing a fighting force with the capability of the Australian Corps—remember part of it was his 3rd Division. Importantly, his approach limited casualties while successfully prosecuting his allocated tasks.

### **Adaptability and decision-making**

19. Monash did make errors. The 2nd Division attack on Mont St Quentin is regarded as one of the finest assaults of the war. However, contrary to his usual practice, Monash devised a high-risk plan for the attack. The proposed frontal assault required the 2nd Division to cross a series of marshes to attack the heights. This plan failed. The assaulting troops could not cross the marshes and Monash had to adapt quickly.<sup>23</sup> After this initial setback, he proved to be a master of more than the set piece battle. He was able to win the day by manoeuvring his divisions in the only free manoeuvre battle of any consequence undertaken by the Australians on the Western Front, demonstrating an ability to think and react quickly.

20. During this battle, he displayed that he could be ruthless when required. At a critical point in the battle, he advised subordinates that casualties no longer mattered in an assault on the flank. Monash made a number of similar calls as the corps commander in the belief that drastic measures were sometimes required to bring victory and avoid higher casualties.<sup>24</sup>

21. Monash did not lack courage and his decision to remain with his headquarters during battle was made consciously in the belief that it was the most efficient way for him to exercise command—he understood his own capabilities. This contrasted to the generally accepted Australian view that commanders should locate themselves further forward to maintain control of the battle. Monash's awareness of battle developments was reliant on an extensive series of runners, pigeons and line. This required him to receive, assess and then act on the information provided by his subordinates. He felt that the best place to conduct this task was from his headquarters.

22. He did not always make the correct call. During the attacks on the Hindenburg Line in September 1918, he initially ignored advice from subordinates that the United States 27th Division had not secured its objectives. Monash ordered the 3rd Division to complete a frontal assault on the Hindenburg Line believing that their task was limited to mopping up intervening machine gun posts.<sup>25</sup> The attack failed after a few hundred yards and was probably his worst mistake.

23. Nicholl claims that Monash often made poor decisions or vacillated before making decisions.<sup>26</sup> He overstates the case. As the Corps Commander, Monash was an exceptional planner and poor decisions during the preparation for set piece battles were rare—perhaps the planning for the attack at Chuignes is the most obvious example.<sup>27</sup> However, his commands were characterised by great success and the failings are well documented because they are uncommon.

24. Monash's planning tended to manifest itself in quite detailed tasking of his subordinate commanders. This tendency may have developed as a result of having inexperienced subordinate commanders as a brigade and divisional commander. Monash's penchant for working out the low-level detail of the plan was contrary to his own advice that superiors should not impinge on their subordinates' responsibilities. It may also have contributed to the general tiredness mooted by Pederson as contributing to his decision to agree to the costly and pointless attack by the 2nd Division on Montbrehain on the day before being relieved.<sup>28</sup>

25. Would Monash have performed well at higher levels? He was appointed as corps commander too late to have altered the course of the war as an army commander or even as a replacement for

Haig. Nonetheless, the army plan for the assault on the Hindenburg Line was largely based on his plan for the Australian Corps. Many students of history, including Montgomery, believe strongly that he was capable of higher command. The indisputable fact is that he succeeded as a divisional and corps commander—assessment of his performance in higher command appointments is purely speculative.

### **Conclusion**

26. Does Monash deserve to be lauded as a great military captain? As the commander of the Australian Corps, at times he commanded over 200,000 soldiers. It is true that he was generally required to conform to the campaign plans developed by Haig and his Army Commander. That said, he was widely regarded as a military planner of some skill. The all-arms tactics that he developed for the Battle of Hamel were to influence all of the remaining major battles of World War I. His intellect was his key strength and he influenced subordinates by creating a pervading impression of competence. As a commander, he focused on management but understood what was required to motivate subordinates.

27. His greatest achievement was the creation of a fighting force that was unsurpassed on the Western Front. He abhorred the war, but was willing to make sacrifices to conclude it and constantly strove to achieve his objectives at minimum cost. His use of technology certainly saved many Australian lives and his ability to identify the value of the tank, despite its early failure, was instrumental in many of the subsequent Allied victories. Monash was one of the few commanders who understood the totality of the war.

28. His contribution to the Australian Corps and the Allied effort was extraordinary. Under his command, the Australian Corps achieved tremendous results on the battlefield and his ability to integrate new concepts pervaded the Allied forces. He showed the courage of his convictions and was able to feed his soldiers on success. He made mistakes, but in a time of great danger, in Monash, the Australian Corps found a commander who competently guided it to military greatness. The answer to the question is yes.



## Endnotes

1. B Callinan, *Sir John Monash*, Melbourne University Press, 1981, p. 15.
2. P Pederson, *General Sir John Monash*, in D Horner, (ed.), *The Commanders*, George, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 89.
3. Department of Defence – Australian Army 2002, *Land Warfare Doctrine 0–2, Leadership*, p. xxv. The full definition of command is: ‘The authority which a commander in the military service lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment is termed command. Command includes the authority and responsibility for effectively using available resources and for planning the employment of, organising, directing, coordinating and controlling military forces for the accomplishment of assigned missions. It also includes responsibility for health, welfare, morale and discipline of assigned personnel’.
4. Department of Defence, loc. cit.
5. *ibid.*, p. 1–6.
6. AJ Smithers, *Sir John Monash*, Leo Cooper, London, 1973, p. 153.
7. D Nicholl, ‘General Sir John Monash: What Relevance to Command in the 21st Century?’, *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 154, May/June 2002, p. 36.
8. Smithers, loc. cit. Monash said of the infantry: ‘... the true role of the infantry was not to expend itself upon heroic physical effort, nor to wither away under merciless machine gun fire, nor to impale itself on hostile bayonets, nor to tear itself to pieces in hostile entanglements ... but, on the contrary, to advance under the maximum possible protection of the maximum possible array of mechanical resources, in the form of guns, machine guns, tanks, mortars and aeroplanes, to advance with as little impediment as possible, to be relieved as far as possible of their obligation to fight their way forward: to march resolutely, regardless of the din and tumult of battle, to the appointed goal: and there to hold and defend the territory gained; and to gather in the forms of prisoners, guns and stores, the fruits of victory’
9. P Pederson, ‘Master at Arms’, *The Australian Magazine*, 7 Aug 1993, p. 40.
10. Callinan, loc. cit.
11. G Serle, *John Monash*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1973, p. 333.
12. *ibid.*, p. 384.
13. *ibid.*, p. 385.
14. D McNicoll, ‘Monash: Flawed as a Man but a Genius in War’, *The Bulletin*, 13 Jul 1982, p. 117.
15. Smithers, op. cit., p. 273.
16. V Northwood, *Monash*, State Electricity Commission of Victoria, Melbourne, 1961, p. 24–25.
17. Callinan, op. cit., p. 20.
18. The populace in Australia was bitterly divided over the issue of conscription and both referendums on this subject were defeated by small margins. The 1916 referendum was defeated with 1,087,557 in favour and 1,160,033 against. The 20 December 1917 referendum was defeated with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against.
19. Smithers, op. cit., p. 208.
20. C Edwards, *John Monash*, State Electricity Commission of Victoria, Melbourne, 1970, p. 37.
21. P Pederson, *General Sir John Monash*, in D Horner, (ed.), *The Commanders*, George, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 123.
22. P Pederson, *Monash as: Military Commander*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1985 p. 248.
23. P Pederson, *General Sir John Monash*, in D Horner, (ed.), *The Commanders*, George, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 117.
24. P Pederson, ‘Master at Arms’, *The Australian Magazine*, 7 Aug 1993, p. 42.

25. P Pederson, *General Sir John Monash*, in D Horner, (ed.), *The Commanders*, George, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 122.
26. Nicholl, loc. cit.
27. At Chuignes, Monash failed to appreciate the effect of the terrain for this battle and some late changes to the plan were required. These changes impinged significantly on the time available for his subordinates to develop their plans.
28. P Pederson, *General Sir John Monash*, in D Horner, (ed.), *The Commanders*, George, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 122.

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