

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Brigadier Reginald Lee Rex RABETT, CMG

(1887-1961)

Rex Rabett was born at Edgecliff, NSW, on 23 May 1887. He was educated at All Saints College, Bathurst, and Sydney Grammar School to Junior Public examination standard of Sydney University. His father, Percy, was a founder of Raine and Horne, Sydney Real Estate Agents, and Rex followed him into the business. He was known as Rex even though Reginald was the first given name of the previous four male generations of Rabetts.

After Cadet Corps service he joined 44th Battery, Australian Field Artillery Militia. He rose quickly through the ranks, was commissioned in 1909, and promoted captain in August 1914. He was appointed to command 2nd Battery, 1st Field Artillery Brigade (FAB), AIF, and promoted major on 18 September 1914.

The battery embarked on the ss *Argyllshire* on 17 October and marched into Mena Camp on 8 December with other 1st Division troops. Never one to neglect training, Rabett drove his battery hard. On 5 April the battery embarked on HMT *Indian* for Lemnos where they practised landings from lighters.

Rabett's eagerness to get his guns into action on Gallipoli received a setback on 26 April when, after getting one gun ashore he was ordered to return the gun and detachment to the ship. On 4 May, the brigade was diverted to Cape Helles where they came under command of the British gunners until they were embarked for Anzac Cove on 1 October taking positions at Shrapnel and Rest Gullies. After two months they were withdrawn and embarked for Alexandria via Mudros.

In October, Rabett was evacuated sick to Egypt with catarrhal jaundice. He was awarded the CMG and Mentioned in Despatches for his conspicuous service on Gallipoli. Rabett returned to his unit in January 1916. When the AIF was expanded in March he was promoted lieutenant colonel and raised the 12th FAB (45th, 46th, 47th and 48th 18 pounder batteries) from scratch at Tel-el-Kebir and set about training it with his usual enthusiasm. He started with four officers (three with Anzac service) and 30 gunners. One officer became his adjutant, the others battery commanders, and he visited camps and reinforcement depots of the Light Horse and Infantry to seek recruits.

Rabett's approach to training was simple. He drew up a syllabus to which his BCs had to adhere. He, in turn, would start his lectures at 0430, so that by 0630 the officers were ready to train their troops. Within a fortnight the officers could put in 8 hours for the gunners and 4 for themselves. Then came field drill movements and firing practice in early June when the brigade was assessed as being ready for the Western Front. Rabett considered this his greatest accomplishment.

The 12th FAB embarked for Marseilles on HMTs *Caledonia* and *Kingstonian* and then entrained for Le Havre, arriving on 12 June. Four days later they moved to billets at Caestres and within hours Rabett had them into more training. He had seen at first hand at Gallipoli how important it was, and he never let any of his subordinates forget it. In a general reorganisation of artillery, the 48th Battery was reallocated. Later the brigade moved to Messines, where 2nd Division artillery fostered 4th Division's brigades, including Rabett's, so that gradually the 4th Division was holding the line. On 1 January 1917, the 12th was one of three brigades switched from divisional to army troops.

The brigade's first engagement was at Fleurbaix and from August they deployed over much of the Western Front - Morlancourt, Vraucourt, Bougratte (they were nearly overrun here) and Bullecourt. It supported many other formations apart from I and II ANZAC Corps. Its two biggest calamities were a train accident en route to Bapaume in March 1917 and when 45th Battery copped a direct hit which exploded 150 rounds of ammunition.

In April, Rabett assumed command of Q Group at Vraucourt (his brigade now had its organic howitzer battery, the 112th). By September 1917 he was leading Rabett Group – 3rd, 6th and 12th FABs and 315th Field Brigade, RA - in the Polygon Wood area, but six weeks later he was in London's Wandsworth Hospital with trench fever and a duodenal ulcer. He had had the satisfaction of getting congratulatory letters from British brigade and divisional commanders for the quality of his artillery's supporting fire during these important battles on the Western Front. He returned to Australia in February 1918.

Rabett had married Marjory Squier in 1915 and had a son and daughter. He was a man of wide interests, being founder of the Corinthian Hockey Club, Honorary Secretary of the NSW Hockey Association and Lay Reader at St. James Anglican Church. He was also involved in the NSW Constitutional Association.

He lived at Double Bay and listed rowing, fencing, golf and riding as his recreations. Socially Rabett was formal but a good mixer, was unfailingly positive and hardworking, a man of much energy and determination and 'unflappable'. He was noted as one of Sydney's best dressed men – he often wore spats – and he spoke voluminously about the army and his career.

In 1921, Rabett resumed his Militia career as a colonel and CRA 2nd Division until 1926, when he was promoted brigadier and Commander 9th Infantry Brigade for five years. During the 'thirties' he lobbied the government to develop permanent military forces and took a keen interest in the school Cadet Corps of those schools in his 9th Infantry Brigade area.

He died in 1961 and his ashes were placed in St. James church. He was survived by his wife and daughter. His son Captain Rex Rabett, was Killed in Action with 2/15th Field Regiment at Singapore in February 1942. Another Gunner of Renown, Brigadier Hesh Fullford, was his son in law.

Sources: AWM File No.419/84/8 and C. E. W. Bean, *The Story of Anzac*, Vol. 2, *The AIF in France*, 1916 and 1917, Vols. 3 & 4; CARO Personnel Records; *Who's Who*, 1960 edition; *The First Australian Field Artillery Brigade 1914-1919*, pp.5 – 6; War Diary, AWM Microfilm, 13/29, Reel 268 & 13/39 Reel 265; Letter, Rabett to Major McGrath, Director, AWM, private correspondence; Alan H. Smith, 'Cannonball', *Journal RAA Historical Company*, No. 39, p.15-16.