

FIREPOWER SEMINAR 11- 8 NOVEMBER: PART A: WESTERN FRONT – BREACHING THE HINDENBURG LINE

COXEN AS COMMANDER, ROYAL ARTILLERY

Major-General Walter Adams Coxen CB, CMG, DSO¹ was undoubtedly one of Australia's unknown masterminds of indirect fire. Though his dedication and passion in understanding the gunnery problem helped shape the development of Australian artillery throughout the Great War, he is rarely spoken of, nor studied closely by the nation to which he gave so much.

How did a Queensland Garrison Artillery Officer become credited with commanding more artillery pieces than any other Australian in history? How did this mathematician with his prowess in siege artillery, and an in-depth passion for ordnance help shape success on the battlefields of the Somme in 1916? Why did Sir John Monash listen to Coxen's artillery advice in supporting the Mark V British tanks in the battle of Le Hamel in July 1918? And finally, what role did Coxen have in the attack on the Hindenburg Line in September 1918, during which the Allies fired nearly one million rounds of various calibres over a two-day period, in a deliberate and highly orchestrated artillery fireplan?

Seeking answers to these and similar questions on the influence of Australian artillery commanders was central to the author's early scoping discussions about the inception of the *Firepower: Lessons from the Great War* History Seminar Series with its convenor. The author's motivation to include Coxen was a solitary pictorial wall mount to him, in the old Regimental Headquarters of 2/10 Field Regiment, Melbourne² that, despite the passage of time, had never been researched.

Coxen and his relevance today

This paper considers the performance of Brigadier-General Walter Adams Coxen leading to his appointment as the Australian Corps Artillery Commander, but also provides insights into his human makeup. What was his background, and what were the operational experiences that moulded him and prepared him for his future roles? Were there significant events that impacted upon his approach as Australia's Corps Artillery Commander and as future head of Artillery? Finally, the paper reflects on the lessons learnt in this analysis that we might take forward in preparing our current artillery forces.

While there is scant reference to Coxen's life or existence in contemporary academic literature, thankfully, his personal collection of memorabilia held at Fort Queenscliff provides a valuable foundation to expand upon existing secondary source information.

School Years

Walter was born into a wealthy English family where his father, Henry William Coxen, was educated at Eton. He subsequently suffered a gunshot wound to his right hand while a cadet at The Royal

¹ Besides being bestowed the British Empire honours of *Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of the Bath*, *Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George*, and *The Distinguished Service Order*, Major-General Walter Adams Coxen was also awarded the Belgian *Croix de Guerre*.

² Previously located at 10 Chapel Street, South Yarra. This wall mount is now on display at the Queenscliff Museum.

Military College, Sandhurst, rendering it useless,³ so the family sent him to “the colony” to care for his Uncle and Aunt in Tasmania. Walter’s father hated Tasmania, and so the family soon found themselves with other family members in Queensland. This was to be fortuitous, as Henry was to become one of Queensland most successful pastoralists, owning seventeen of Queensland’s largest pastoral properties.⁴

This upbringing allowed young Walter to be educated at Toowoomba and Brisbane Grammar schools; notably one of his schoolmates from the age of 7 was Henry George Chauvel.⁵ On completing school, Coxen used his brother’s connections in the Queensland Works Department, and joined the Queensland Department of Railways as a clerk and draftsman on 18 August 1887. However, the recession saw him retrenched from this job five years later in 1892.⁶

Training for Permanent Garrison Artillery Officers

After a short period of service in the Queensland Militia Garrison Artillery, he transferred to the Queensland Permanent Artillery as a Lieutenant. He was sent to the School of Gunnery in Shoeburyness, England in 1897,⁷ where he studied the long course in coast defence and siege artillery. After completing this education with honours, he stayed a year longer and trained in field artillery at Aldershot early in 1898. Little did he realise that this exceptional formation was to set him up for success prior to World War 1.

On return to Australia, Coxen was promoted to Captain and appointed officer commanding Queensland’s Garrison Troops on Thursday Island.⁸ In his book, “The Gunners”, David Horner points out the influence that this experience and training had on several of Australia’s future senior commanders:⁹ Henry George Chauvel and a young Cyril Brudenell White¹⁰ both served as junior officers to Coxen while on Thursday Island. To strengthen Horner’s point, the Queensland Garrison Artillery provided the only leadership and management training for officers across a pre-Federation Australia, listing an impressive alumnus of students who were to become influential across Australian military history.

Coxen as Chief Instructor, Australian School of Artillery

Coxen married Adelaide Rebe White Beor in 1902, and became Chief Instructor, School of Gunnery in Sydney at an important time when the artillery lessons of the South African War were being evaluated, and procedures and techniques were developing making gunnery more scientific.

“My first association with the Fort at Queenscliff was as a Captain during the first years of the Commonwealth, when General Sir Edward Hutton called me down from the School of Gunnery in Sydney, where I was Chief Instructor, to instruct at the first Federal School of Field

³ Perry, Major Warren, ‘Major General Walter Adam Coxen’, *The Australian Army Journal* No: 310, 1975, p 29.

⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1899 – 1939*, Vol 8, pp 130-131. Australian Dictionary of Biography.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Perry, *op. cit.*, p 19.

⁸ *The Official Quarterly List of Officers of the Queensland Land Forces No. 45 for 1899*, 1899, p, 6.

⁹ Horner, David, *the Gunners: A History of Australian Artillery*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995, pp 67 – 68.

¹⁰ General Sir C.B.B. White had a distinguished military career, becoming Chief of General Staff 1920-23 and again in 1940.

and Garrison Artillery which was held at Queenscliff and consisted of about 40 officers drawn from all parts of Australia.”¹¹

The above extract from one of Coxen’s personal letters to a Mr. Batten about his posting as Chief Instructor highlights his passion for exploring the gunnery problem. He writes with delight about conducting the first federal school of Field and Garrison Artillery. As its Chief Instructor, Coxen was given an excellent opportunity to impart his knowledge and training gained in England, combined with others’ lessons learnt from the South African War. There was no-one better qualified to take on this national responsibility.

Return to England

1907 saw another significant landmark in Coxen’s professional study of the gunnery problem, when he was sent to England for three years’ education, gaining an ordnance certificate at Woolwich and qualifying as an inspector of Warlike Stores. While in England, Coxen was promoted to major, and upon returning to Australia was initially posted back to Queenscliff, but quickly appointed as the Inspector of Ordnance and Ammunition at Army Headquarters, Melbourne.

Coxen’s collection of personal memoirs and letters quickly bear out that throughout his life, Coxen was fascinated with long range artillery and ordnance. Frequently, before, during and after the War, Coxen gave numerous lectures about topics such as cordite, long range artillery, long-barrel guns, ordnance, and the characteristics of artillery. All of these topics are at the heart of understanding the gunnery problem, which every artilleryman knows must be constantly examined, understood and applied to the current situation. Coxen’s dedication to this intellectual pursuit is justly depicted in a photograph held at the Queenscliff Museum of Coxen and his team firing a long-barrel gun at Marcus Hill, just outside Queenscliff.¹²

This series of early career postings, combined with his qualifications and recent training placed Coxen competitively to be rewarded with key appointments prior to the outbreak of war: firstly as Director Artillery, Australian Military Forces, then on promotion to Lieutenant Colonel, he held two highly influential positions simultaneously: Inspector of Coast Defences, and Director Artillery. However, there was one more critical formative posting yet to come.

Operational experiences of Brigadier-General Coxen

At the outbreak of War, as Australia announced that it would stand by England, Coxen was perfectly placed to be seconded to the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel on 21 May 1915 to raise and command the 36th Heavy Artillery Group (HAG). Known also as the Australian Siege Brigade¹³ and comprising the 1st and 2nd Siege Artillery Batteries,¹⁴ it was the only wholly permanent Australian Artillery unit to serve in the war.¹⁵ The Brigade left Australia with its establishment of 412 all ranks, manned exclusively by regular officers and men, and was the first AIF fighting unit to reach France in February 1916.

¹¹ Coxen, W.A., Personal letter to Mr. Batten dated 3 Feb 1933, Fort Queenscliff Museum – Coxen Collection.

¹² Picture on display showing Coxen and a gun team firing a long-barrel gun at Marcus Hill. Fort Queenscliff Museum – Coxen Collection.

¹³ Also known as the 1st Siege Artillery Brigade.

¹⁴ Also known as the 54th and 55th Siege Artillery Batteries respectively.

¹⁵ Horner, *op. cit.*, p 82.

While it was entirely logical to appoint Coxen to the Australian Siege Brigade due to his extensive technical gunnery training, this decision came at the expense of recently operationally-experienced officers such as Bessell-Browne,¹⁶ Johnston,¹⁷ and Grimwade,¹⁸ who had all just returned from service in South Africa. Coxen missed the opportunity to serve with the Colonial forces in either of the Boer Wars, and therefore had no “war experience”, so his appointment as the commander of the only Australian permanent artillery unit to serve in the war was unpopular. This was to play out Coxen’s career continued throughout the Great War.

The 36th HAG first saw action in the British XVII Corps area north of Arras, before moving south to join the British Fourth Army for the Battle of the Somme. For the rest of 1916, Coxen commanded his siege brigade on the Somme, taking part in operations at Serre, Hamel,¹⁹ Ovillers and Pozières.²⁰ However, in the early years of the War, there was a severe shortage of guns, especially heavy artillery pieces, and so the two batteries of 36th HAG served more time supporting British units than Australian. As discrete siege batteries, they were used to gain advantage on the battlefield, and were usually divided in allotment to support different Brigades within the Fourth Army.

This gave Coxen a unique opportunity to experience serving on higher headquarters as an artillery staff officer, gaining much valuable experience at that level. It was also a level where he could provide his expertise comprehensively as a Garrison Artillery Officer who had Ordnance certifications.

With this staff-level exposure, Coxen saw the consequences of Fromelles whilst appointed Assistant to the General Officer Commanding VIII Corps Heavy Artillery and acting as the GOCRA’s²¹ Liaison Officer. At around this time, the AIF confronted its single worst day of the War at the battle of Fromelles, and then endured six long weeks of fighting in the murderous ordeal that was Pozières. For the battle of Pozières, the 36th HAG had joined I ANZAC Corps Artillery, highlighting the increasing reliance placed by Australian commanders of heavy artillery as the only arm capable of countering enemy guns.

Nonetheless, Coxen’s high-profile headquarters experience gained throughout 1916 was adding to the tension amongst Australian artillery officers (especially embedded within the British forces) as they competed for recognition. Most of the senior artillery commanders and staff officers were from the field or horse artillery; yet the techniques required on the Western Front’s static battlefield had more in common with those used by Garrison Artillery. In Coxen’s case, Horner highlights this tension when Birdwood was contemplating the appointment of a new GOCRA 3rd Australian Division. Birdwood initially suggested Coxen; however, Army Headquarters in Melbourne overturned this, and instead proposed Grimwade, a capable militia officer who had the same operational experience in France:

It would be most inadvisable to take Colonel Coxen away from his Siege Brigade. Siege work requires a most technical knowledge which Colonel Coxen undoubtedly possesses.....LTCOL

¹⁶ Alfred Joseph Bessell-Browne (1877-1947).

¹⁷ George Jameson Johnston (1868-1949).

¹⁸ Harold William (1869-1949).

¹⁹ Not Monash’s Battle of Le Hamel of 4 July 1918.

²⁰ Perry, *op. cit.*, p 21.

²¹ GOCRA: General Officer Commanding Royal Artillery.

*Grimwade has a more up-to-date Field Artillery knowledge than Colonel Coxen, and would be more suited to the Divisional command.*²²

The tactical and organisational factors to this rivalry and the decision not to make Coxen CRA 3rd Division provides an instructive backdrop: the short supply of heavy artillery pieces and the impact they were beginning to have; the new and emerging techniques of sound ranging; the development of the theory of counter-battery fire; the emerging techniques of barrages; and the role heavy artillery had in these set-piece offensives. With his pre-war technical expertise and his recent operational experience earlier in 1916, Coxen was definitely in the right place at the right time. Coxen and other technically professional British gunner officers were taking the techniques of coast and siege artillery into trench warfare on the Somme; however, even as late as mid-1916, not everyone could make that stretch of imagination, especially for the majority of field and horse artillery trained senior commanders. Hence, while not many got it, those that did understood – and Coxen and Birdwood got it.

The Somme had brought structural changes for Artillery, the first being the arrangements by which the GOCRA of a corps now wholly commanded all the corps artillery – an arrangement that was already in place within I ANZAC Corps – and secondly, the creation of “Corps” and “Army” artillery assets that could then be allocated as required.²³ Coxen, who had already commanded a large heavy artillery group within II British Corps and whose skills Birdwood fully recognised, was now promoted to Colonel and appointed as CRA 1st Australian Division at the temporary rank of Brigadier-General. He served in this capacity throughout the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the Battle of Bullecourt and the Third Battle of Ypres – which for the Australian troops in 1917 meant the assaults at Menin Road and Polygon Wood.

During this time, the tactics of artillery upon which success in battle now relied became more and more refined, complex and sophisticated. Then, in line with the Australian government’s policy that all senior posts should be held by Australians, Coxen took over as commander of the Australian Corps Artillery on 18 Oct 1917.

However, the earlier tension within senior Australian artillery officers over appointments had not dissipated. Coxen’s appointment now as the senior Australian Gunner²⁴ meant that both Johnston and Grimwade now reported to him: and in fact, Johnston became so upset over Coxen’s appointment that he asked to be sent home. General William Birdwood accepted the request, and Johnston was replaced as CRA 2nd Australian Divisional Artillery by Brigadier General Owen Phillips on 1 November 1917. In contrast, Grimwade replaced Coxen as GOCRA in Nov 1918, when Coxen was attached to Research & Development Department England as Director Branch – Ordnance.

Coxen’s diary of 1917 tells how he had left Queenscliff with two horses, and gave up his entitlement to a batman so the horses could have a groom. Almost every day he rode out to inspect some form of artillery position, often showing great concern for the welfare of his artillery horses. His entry on 23 March reads that he rode over to the watering troughs where 5,000 horses were struggling to be

²² Army communique, quoted in Horner, *op. cit.*, p 122.

²³ Horner, *op. cit.*, p 123.

²⁴ This appointment was the most likely basis for his nickname, “Boss” Gunner.

watered by only two troughs – “not sufficient, but water was available today”.²⁵ Then on 03 May, he writes:

*Attack by 62nd on left, 2nd on right. Attack on Hindenburg Line at 3:50 (approx.) heavy Barrage. Very warm dusty day. Not much success in operation.*²⁶

One of his entries for September 1917 simply lists that 2,873,000 rounds were expended (representing 85,000 tons of ammunition), at the expense of 38 officer and 600 other ranks casualties over a six-week period. Then, on Friday 21 October:

*In Office. Easy Day. Batteries moving forward. Over in morning to see Johnston re: getting Battery positions in his area – received Congratulatory letter from Army & Corps Commanders on work done by my Artillery in taking all objectives to Polygon Wood.*²⁷

Coxen’s entry of Friday 28 October indicates that the Commander-In-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig called in to thank him for the Artillery support during the attack at Polygon Wood. Another favourite of his summaries can be read on Thursday 04 November, where he simply records: “3rd Attack on Broodseinde at 6am by I ANZAC Corps – successful – Heavy Rain in afternoon – Quiet night; several thousand prisoners taken & losses of enemy very heavy”.²⁸

Coxen’s performance and the influence of his approach

It was said of Coxen that “if he had not been a captain in arms he would have made a captain of industry. Good temper and a vivid sense of humour characterises this man of action.”²⁹ Gifted with keen insight, and an outsize memory, he was remembered as one who never forgot a face or a fact; and efficiency was his watchword.

Coxen was tall and well-built, with strong features and a self-possessed and dignified manner. He was a good public speaker with a pleasing well-modulated English voice, and upon retirement sometimes gave radio talks for the Australian Broadcasting Commission.³⁰ Yet it was more Coxen’s intellectual and technical capacity that made him such an influential commander: an accomplished mathematician; two previous training periods in England on siege, garrison and field artillery, professional instruction in ordnance before the war; extensive command and staff positions on higher headquarters; and application of his Siege artillery expertise at the Battle of the Somme. These experiences combined with Coxen’s intellect led to his exceptional absorption of new technology, allowing him to effectively use heavy artillery for a novel purpose than that of field guns.

Coxen’s performance as GOC RA of I ANZAC and subsequently the Australian Corps can be summarised by his watchword of efficiency. He was always taking facts, techniques and improvements and applying them to the battlefield. In Horner’s account of the final battles of 1918, he describes how the Australian Corps drove the German defenders back, with Monash alternating his divisions to maintain pressure and tempo, but specifically mentions how each division was

²⁵ Coxen, W.A., Extract from *1917 War Diary*, Fort Queenscliff Museum – Coxen Collection.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Australian Dictionary of Biography, *loc. cit.*

³⁰ Ibid.

supported by its own artillery. Horner then goes on to mention how Coxen employed his Australian and British “Army” Artillery Brigades to lend support to each divisional attack.³¹ This advance saw the Australian artillery at its best. After four years of war, it had been brought to a high level of expertise: staff work and accuracy had improved, and effective liaison procedures had been established.

In Doctor William Westerman’s *Firepower: Lessons from the Great War* presentation in March 2018 on the *Australian Artillery at Second Villers-Bretonneux*,³² we start to see the evidence that artillery was agile and responsive and contributed more than just set pieces of barrage fire plans. Evidence of this was the artillery units’ responsiveness in engaging the unknown locations that the Germans were trying to probe in attempting to re-take the town. Then, in Major General Paul Stevens’ *Firepower: Lessons from the Great War* presentation on *The Amiens Offensive*,³³ he summarised the evolution that occurred where the artillery was now being used in an offensive manner, rather than simply to protect the troops. Infantry no longer directly owned the guns, as the assets were centrally commanded. This allowed the infantry to perform their role, while the artillery was utilised more operationally, in a layering effect exploiting the strengths of each branch: horse artillery for mobility, field guns for creeping barrages and or jump barrages, larger calibres for counter battery, and heavy artillery for specific hard targets or interdiction.

With Coxen as his artillery adviser, General Monash had accelerated the shift in thinking using the advancing technology and exploiting its strengths: artillery-related technology such as sound ranging, calibration, accuracy of maps, aerial photography and communications all enabled greater success for the indirect assets to engage, harass, neutralise and generally disrupt and cause mayhem. It is my opinion that Brigadier-General Coxen as the Senior Australian Gunner had had a vital role in this development, as he strove for efficiency in understanding and employment of cordite, long-barrelled guns, and heavy artillery, and in his applying of the fundamentals of siege artillery to the modern battlefield.

The final plan for the Fourth Army’s last major offensive involved 1,386 field guns and howitzers and 684 heavy guns, making up 27 medium artillery brigades and thirteen heavy batteries, in addition to the Australian infantry divisions’ organic artillery. Although Major-General Budworth was GOCRA Fourth Army, Coxen’s personal records indicate that the fire plan for the Fourth Army’s artillery was largely devised by Monash’s senior artillery officer, “The Boss Gunner” Coxen.³⁴

Other notable records among Coxen’s private artefacts are several letters of thanks – including one from General Rawlinson, Commander of the Fourth Army, praising the Australian Corps for their

³¹ Horner, *op. cit.*, p 122-4.

³² Westerman, W., ‘Crisis and Response: Australian Artillery at Second Villers-Bretonneux 24/25 April 1918,’ *Firepower: Lessons from the Great War Series, Seminar 9*, Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company, 22 March 2018, http://artilleryhistory.org/history_seminar_series/seminar_no_9_march_2018/presentation_2.html. Accessed December 2018.

³³ Stevens, J. P., ‘The Amiens Offensive’, *Firepower: Lessons from the Great War Series, Seminar 10*, Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company, 26 July 2018, http://artilleryhistory.org/history_seminar_series/seminar_no_10_july_2018/presentation_3.html. Accessed December 2018.

³⁴ Coxen, W.A., Personal notes, Coxen’s personal listing from the time of all the artillery pieces, names, units, ordnance etc. Coxen Collection, Fort Queenscliff Museum.

involvement defeating the enemy on 08 August.³⁵ Another note was from Lieutenant-General Monash to the Australians dated 07 August – the night before the attack on the Hindenburg Line commenced – along with a list of the Batteries, including the numbers that was under Coxen’s command, dated 22 Aug 1918.³⁶

Reflections upon application of lessons learned

There are many lessons that we can learn from studying Coxen’s career: through the nature and extent of his pre-war training, to his dedication in understanding all he could about the gunnery problem, through to his attention to detail and impeccable employment of all calibres in order to shape the battlefields of the Western Front. These can be summarised into the four headings below:

1. Know your profession – continue to learn the factors associate with the gunnery problem.
2. There is no use having new technology if you don’t apply it on the battlefield.
3. Continue to re-evaluate your knowledge in light of new techniques, technology or structural changes of command and control.
4. Acknowledge the ‘human factor’ in overlooking Coxen as GOCRA, despite appearing to be the right man, in the right place for the right job. Can we afford to do this again?

From a century past, the account of this forgotten Australian mastermind of artillery conveys numerous messages that the modern Artilleryman can learn from; and equally, we should encourage other military commanders to take the time to understand them too.

Acknowledgements

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