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# ***FIREPOWER: LESSONS FROM THE GREAT WAR***



HISTORY SEMINAR SERIES

**SEMINAR 11: 8th NOVEMBER 2018**

***Western Front: Breaching the Hindenburg Line***

**COXEN as Commander Royal Artillery**

**Authored and presented by COL Jason Cooke**



## MAJGEN Walter Adams Coxen

Companion of the Most Distinguished  
Order of the Bath,  
Companion of the Most Distinguished  
Order of Mt Michael and St George  
Distinguished Service Order  
Mentioned in Despatches 4 times  
Croix de Guerre

# Scope

- provide insight into BRIG-GEN Coxen background prior to WW1,
- describe the operational experiences of BRIG-GEN Coxen during WW1 leading up to his appointment as I Australian Corps Artillery Commander,
- describe significant events which may have impacted on his approach in this role,
- describe his performance in this role and significant challenges he faced, and
- reflect upon application of lessons learned in current and future operations.

# History Observations

First: Came from Wealth = Education

- Born in England but family moved to Australia, first to Tasmania but ended up in Queensland
- Father successful pastoralist
- Walter was educated at Toowoomba and Brisbane Grammar
- Used his brothers connection to get a job
- Of Interest: Knew Chauvel from the age of 7 school mates, Chauvel served under him at Thursday Island Garrison Artillery, both had a love of horses. Brudenell White also served under Coxen for 18 months also on Thursday Island.

# History Observations

## Second: Training given to Permanent Garrison Artillery Officers

- Commissioned 2LT Queensland Militia Garrison Artillery 1893
- Commissioned LT Queensland Permanent Artillery 1895
- Sent to England, Shoeburyness, School of Gunnery 1897
- Of Interest: Royal Australian Garrison Artillery main avenue for training young officers in Leadership and Management, names such as White, Coxen, Lavarack, Bridges, Gordon, Morris, Miles, Phillips and Smart

# History Observations

Third: Chief Instructor – School of Artillery

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

Extract from a personal letter to  
Mr Battern about his time at  
Queenscliff

# History Observations

Fifth: Coxen appointed over more “war experienced” gunners

- At the start of the war, small amount of regular personnel were mostly artillery and engineers focused on coastal defences
- RMC commenced 1911 but by 1914 the first class had not completed training
- Alfred Bessell-Browne, George Johnson, John Dudley Lavarack, Horald Grimwade

# 36<sup>th</sup> Heavy Artillery Group

- Also known as Australian Siege Brigade
- Called a Group as it wasn't complete. Had no guns, not a full compliment of HQ Staff or had sufficient spotters
- Only permanent Australian Artillery unit to serve in the Great War
- 2 Batteries (initially 4 but became 6 guns)
- 54<sup>th</sup> – 8 inch Howitzers
- 55<sup>th</sup> – 9.2 inch Howitzers





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British 8 inch Howitzer

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

Extract from "The Gunners" by  
David Horner page 122



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## 9.2 Inch Howitzer

General Coxen then amplified the position by going into more local and itemised details [and] said: “You are to make a reconnaissance of the front and select positions for the 72 guns of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> Army Brigades. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> you are to locate on the right of the corps and the 12<sup>th</sup> on the left front about Hamel. Your judgement must be sound and the positions you choose must not be more than 800 nor less the 500 yards from the front line. You will arrange to have at each battery position 650 rounds per 18 pounder gun and 450 per 4.5 howitzer. There must be no tracks left, and you will meet Brigade COs and BCs at a time to be fixed and take them round their positions.”

Extract from “The Gunners” by David Horner  
page 172 quoting from LTCOL Selmes Diaries  
COMD 1 Fd Arty BDE about Hamel

# Extracts from his 1917 War Diary

- Coxen's diary of 1917 tells how he left Queenscliff with two horses and gave up his right to a batman so the horses could have a groom. Almost every day he rode out to inspect some form of Artillery line, often showing great concern for the welfare of the artillery horses.
- 23 March Mon. rode over to watering Troughs. 5000 horses being watered & only 2 Troughs. Not sufficient but water was available today.
- 3rd May Attack by 62nd on left 2nd on Rt. Attack on Hindenberg Line at 3.50(abt) heavy Barrage. Very warm dusty day. Not much success in operation.

# Extracts from his 1917 War Diary

- Sept. 2,873,000 Rounds fired )  
85,000 Tons of Amntn )  
Casualties 38 officers 600 OR ) 6 weeks
- Friday 21 In office. Easy day Batteries moving forward. Over in morning to see Johnston re getting Bty positions in his area – received Congratulatory letter from Army & Corps Comds on work done by my Artillery in taking all objectives to Polygon Wood.
- Friday 28th Cm Chief Sir Douglas Haig called in to thank Arty for their work at 2.30pm
- Of course he is talking about the attack on Polygon Wood
- Thursday 4 3rd Attack on BRUODSEINDE at 6am by 1st Anzac Corps – successful – Heavy Rain in afternoon – Quiet night several thousand Prisoners taken & losses of enemy very heavy

BRIG GEN Coxen,

August 8<sup>th</sup> was a great day for the Artillery. Will you please convey to all ranks of the artillery under your command my admiration and appreciation of their work.

I consider the following points to be particularly noteworthy:

1. The manner in which difficulties were overcome in putting Guns and Ammunition into positions.
2. The accuracy and effect of the barrage fire and Heavy Artillery bombardment without previous registration.
3. The effective counter-battery work.
4. The bold and successful way in which the advance of the artillery in support of our infantry was carried out.

My best congratulations and wishes for continued success to you and your staff.

MAJGEN Budworth GOC RA Fourth Army

# Lessons Learnt

- Know your profession – explore the boundaries.
- No use having new technology if you don't apply it on the battlefield.
- Continue to re-evaluate your knowledge in light of new techniques, technology or structural changes of command and control.
- Need to acknowledge that he appeared to be the right man, in the right place for the right job. Can we afford to do this again.





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