

The '100 Series' Batteries: Inception of the Howitzer batteries into the Australian Field Artillery

Keith Glyde

Introduction

Perhaps the most notable deficiency in the artillery of the Australian divisions during the early operations on the rugged Gallipoli peninsula in 1915 was the lack of howitzers to bring fire into the gullies, entrenchments and gun positions sheltering the Turkish forces. The provision of these assets was beyond Australia's capacity on the outbreak of the Great War; how this was addressed and how howitzer batteries were incorporated in the organisation of the Australian divisional artillery by the time they began arriving in France in early to mid 1916 is the subject of this paper.

Pre-War

In the British army, the field artillery howitzer had dropped out of favour with the introduction of rifled guns during the 1860s. By the turn of the century however, a breech-loading howitzer had been introduced and where used in its designed role during the Second Boer War, had demonstrated the value of an indirect fire weapon that could place a high explosive shell on a target in natural or entrenched cover that could not be reached by flat-trajectory guns and infantry small arms. On the outbreak of the Great War, a Regular British infantry division included a howitzer brigade of three batteries, totalling 18 QF 4.5-inch howitzers; its Territorial Force counterpart had one howitzer brigade of two batteries totalling eight BL 5-inch howitzers. The practice of brigade commanders training the batteries they would command in war and the establishment of a divisional artillery commander and his staff had been belatedly, if perhaps grudgingly, introduced.

In Australia however, the only active howitzer battery was just six years old in 1914, and was equipped with four 5-inch howitzers of a two decades old design. Training of field artillery as a brigade was virtually unknown; organisation of artillery at divisional level did not exist. Thus while the principles for the employment of howitzers may have been known to Australian gunners in theory, the opportunity for pre-war practical experience was negligible and the command structure for the tactical employment of howitzers as a component of an artillery force was non-existent.

Gallipoli

The lack of modern equipment meant that the 1st Australian Division embarked for the Middle East in late 1914 with neither a howitzer brigade nor a heavy battery. These resources, in both men and *materiel*, did not exist in any sufficiency amongst the British forces in Egypt either; the best that could be done for the initial Gallipoli operations was the allocation of two batteries of the Indian Mountain Artillery, equipped with 10-pounder mountain guns, to the 1st Australian Division. It was not until two months after the Landing that a battery of 5-inch howitzers arrived, and another month later before an additional 5-inch battery and two 4.5-inch batteries, all from the Royal Artillery, were allotted to the division.

The demand for howitzers led to the dispatch from Australia of its only four howitzers in August 1915. These arrived off Gallipoli on 24 November 1915 but were not disembarked. 2nd Battery, 1st Field Artillery Brigade, was made up to the establishment of a howitzer battery, less drivers and artificers, on 2nd December 1915 and moved to Kephalos, Imbros, for training.¹ The evacuation of ANZAC in mid-December meant however that the battery never functioned operationally in its intended role. The allocation of 2nd Battery to the howitzer role almost certainly occurred because a substantial nucleus numbering at least three officers and 28 other ranks of this battery

had been recruited from the 44th Battery of the Citizen Military Forces, to which unit these howitzers had been on charge.

Egypt

By the end of January 1916, the AIF had concentrated in Egypt and thought had been given to the expansion of the force and its employment in Europe. Two additional infantry divisions were to be raised from the existing formations and reinforcements in Egypt; a further infantry division was to be raised in Australia. The War Office directed on 31 January 1916 that the organisation to be adopted by the AIF divisions moving to France was to be in accordance with War Establishments Part VII. On this basis divisional artillery was to consist of three field artillery brigades each of four 4-gun batteries, and one howitzer brigade of four 4-howitzer batteries. This would entail the raising in Egypt of 16 howitzer batteries, in addition to 30 new field batteries, from an existing trained nucleus of just 18 field batteries.

The authority for the raising of the first AIF howitzer batteries is dated 2 March 1916, the exception being that there were only to be three batteries per howitzer brigade, not four.² These batteries were uniquely numbered outside the field battery sequence, commencing at 101. The outcome of this reorganisation and the new establishment of the divisional artillery are shown as Table 1 and Figure 1.

1st Division. Fortuitously the three batteries required for the 1st Australian Division were already in existence. On 18 February 1916 the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Field Artillery Brigades of this division had provided the cadres for the 12th Field Artillery Brigade.³ This brigade had been raised for the 4th Australian Division, but on 6th March 1916 was redesignated the 21st Howitzer Brigade, comprising the 101st, 102nd and 103rd Batteries.

2nd Division. The 2nd Division raised the 22nd Howitzer Brigade on 8 March 1916 from personnel of its existing artillery units. The 4th and 5th Divisions were less fortunate, the 24th and 25th Howitzer Brigades being raised in March 1916 on a small cadre of trained personnel from the artillery of the 1st and 2nd Divisions, and brought up to strength primarily by the transfer of men from infantry battalions.

3rd Division. Meanwhile, the 23rd Howitzer Brigade was raised from reinforcements and recruits at the artillery training camp, Maribyrnong, Victoria, in March 1916, and the brigade embarked for England on 20th May 1916.

France

The first two howitzer brigades proceeded to France at the end of March 1916 and were fully equipped from the depots at Le Havre prior to their batteries deploying into the line in mid April 1916. Each battery was attached for tactical purposes to a field artillery brigade, forming a group responsible for covering by fire an allotted zone of the divisional front.

The headquarters of howitzer brigades did not have operational control of their batteries or their ammunition column during operations at this time; in effect they became tactically redundant while their sub-units were in the line. This situation may be behind the order issued by General Headquarters in France on 6 May 1916 directing that all field brigades of divisional artillery were to become mixed, i.e. consisting of three gun batteries and one howitzer battery.⁴ The howitzer brigades were to be reorganized as the fourth field artillery brigade. This reorganisation provided a logical solution to the issues of command and administration, at the same time as providing a single brigade unit with multiple, but complementary, capabilities.

The method by which this reorganisation was accomplished differed between the five Australian divisions and the final organisation is shown in Table 2 and Figure 2.

1st Division. In the 1st Division the three howitzer batteries were transferred to the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Field Artillery Brigades respectively, with one 18-pounder battery transferred from each of these brigades to the 21st Field Artillery Brigade.

2nd Division. A similar process followed in the 2nd Division where the 22nd Howitzer Brigade transferred its batteries to the 4th, 5th and 6th Field Artillery Brigades respectively, receiving one 18-pounder battery from each in turn. In both divisions this reorganisation was carried out on 13 May 1916.

3rd Division. In contrast, the batteries of the 23rd Howitzer Brigade were converted to field batteries and the fourth battery of each existing field artillery brigade was converted to a howitzer battery.

4th and 5th Divisions. Reorganisation of the artillery for the 4th and 5th Divisions did not occur until they concentrated in France in June and July 1916 respectively. In the 4th Division the 24th Howitzer Brigade converted two of its batteries to field batteries and received a third field battery from the 12th Field Artillery Brigade. The 10th and 11th Field Artillery Brigades converted one each of their existing field batteries into a howitzer battery. In the 5th Division the 25th Howitzer Brigade transferred one battery to each of the 13th and 14th Field Artillery Brigades and received three 18-pounder batteries in return.

The field artillery brigade with three gun batteries and one howitzer battery was then to remain the standard building block of the infantry divisional artillery for the remainder of the war; indeed it was not until the introduction of the gun/howitzer capable of firing in high and low angle immediately prior to the Second World War that the rationale for the composite organisation disappeared.

Summary

The advantage of a howitzer capability within the divisional artillery cannot be overstated. With its high trajectory and variable charge ammunition the howitzer was able to attack targets behind cover, and its HE shell was useful for demolition of buildings and defence works. The howitzer became the workhorse of the divisional artillery, with an ammunition expenditure per equipment that often far exceeded equivalent expenditure per gun for the 18-pounder guns. It might be worth speculating on the possible outcome of early operations on the Gallipoli Peninsula if the 1st Australian Division had an organic howitzer brigade available immediately following the Landing.

Key Lessons

- Remain responsive to 'Operations analysis' lessons
- Value complementary firepower systems
- Value complementary ammunition (the 'weapon')
- Ensure carefully considered logic in method and incremental approach to expansion
- Agility in Firepower Command & Control is key: ensure Firepower C2 structures are both efficient and effective, not simply extensions of manoeuvre C2

¹ AWM4: 13/10/15, HQ 1 Div Arty war diary for November 1915, p88; AWM4: 13/29/10, war diary HQ 1 Fd Arty Bde for September 1915, entry dated 30 Sep 15; AWM4: 13/29/2 Part 3, war diary HQ 1 Fd Arty Bde for Nov-Dec 1915, p19.

² AWM27: 303/31, HQ Aust and NZ Circular Memorandum No 23, *War Establishments – Artillery*, dated 2 Mar 16.

³ AWM27: 302/15; HQ A&NZ Forces CM No 4, *Organisation of Divisional Mounted Troops and Divisional Artillery*, dated 17 Feb 16.

⁴ GHQ OB/818 of 6 May 16; HQ I. ANZAC GS Circular No 7 of 9 May 16.