

## ***MAJGEN Talbot Hobbs - Command in Manoeuvre and Firepower***

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This seminar is about transition – how artillery shifts from one operational environment to another and the challenges that brings. This paper will use Brigadier-General Talbot Hobbs (as he was one hundred years ago) as a lens through which to examine this transitional period, as well as exploring aspects of artillery command at this time. Hobbs (as I will refer to him from now on) was CRA 1st Australian Division from 1914 to 1916 and then from 1917 until the Armistice he was GOC 5th Australian Division. Although he was an effective divisional commander, as one former AIF officer commented, Hobbs' 'first military love was the artillery, and he remained faithful to guns and gunners until rank and seniority took him to the command of higher formations, and to a Knighthood at the hands of the King'.

### **Pre-War Career**

Born in London in 1864 he began his working life as a carpenter but developed into an architect, moving to Perth, Australia, in 1887 at the age of 23 at the bottom rung of the professional ladder. He was a hard working, dedicated architect, who achieved professional and commercial success. In 1905 he set up the firm Hobbs, Smith & Forbes in which he was a senior partner.

On his military career, he was a committed citizen soldier. In his teens he had joined the 14th Battery, 1st Cinque Ports Artillery Volunteers in Britain and once he arrived in Australia he joined the Volunteer Field Artillery in Perth as a gunner. In 1889 he received his commission, by 1897 he was a major, and in 1903 he commanded the 1st (Western Australian) Field Battery. In 1906 his expertise expanded when he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel to command the West Australian Mixed Brigade. From 1906 to 1912 he was a staff officer for army engineering services, and then in 1913 he was a colonel, commanding the 22nd Infantry Brigade.

Not only does he get a broad spectrum of experience in the pre-war years, but he also undergoes significant training and education, heading to the UK four times at his own expense to attend training courses or to be attached to the British Army. He's someone who invests in what he does.

At the outbreak of the war Hobbs was easily the best choice to command the 1st Australian Division's artillery. He held this appointment throughout the Gallipoli campaign and even temporarily commanded the division in October. At the start of November he was removed from Gallipoli suffering dysentery. He returned to Egypt on 27 January and the following day he resumed command of the 1st Divisional Artillery. During the following period he faced organisational and tactical problems, and the way he handled these tells us about his capability as a commander.

### **Organisational Issues**

Organisationally, artillery in the AIF is expanding to bring it in line with the New Army divisions. This means that Hobbs' three brigades of three batteries had to become three brigades of four batteries plus a brigade of howitzers. This presented a whole lot of problems, one being that many of his 18-pounders had been left on Gallipoli and in addition to increasing their own number of guns the AIF needs to find guns for the newly raised 4th and 5th Divisions as well.

More specifically a problem for Hobbs was the problem of finding personnel. 1st Divisional Artillery had the most experienced gunners in the AIF, and to help raise the 4th and 5th Divisional Artilleries some of Hobbs' men needed to form the nucleus of these new divisions. What you need to understand is that Hobbs is the most influential Australian artilleryman in the AIF at the time; he's the one determining who goes where. He interviews potential officers, writes the reports for Birdwood and White, makes the recommendations and importantly, can decide who he wants to release to other divisions.

This is significant, because Hobbs is in the position where he needs to balance the needs of the AIF and its new divisions with his own needs as a CRA. Probably unsurprisingly he errs on the latter side of the ledger more often.

Basically he tries to keep 1st Divisional Artillery as strong as possible. This is helped by the decision to send I Anzac Corps to France ASAP, meaning that 1st and 2nd Divisions regain the priority during the end of their time in Egypt.

### **Tactical issues**

The personnel issues are important, because Hobbs wanted to have capable and experienced gunners in his command, possibly because he anticipated the importance of artillery on the Western Front. Gallipoli had exposed Australian gunners to modern warfare, but it was essentially an infantry dominated campaign, where the full potential of artillery was not made evident to the AIF and had not allowed gunners to develop their technical skill sufficiently to support a Western Front battle.

Although this was worked on in Egypt, he really made it a priority once the 1st Australian Division went into the line on the Western Front. Hobbs oversaw his batteries and brigades training, driving them hard throughout this period. He was constantly inspected his batteries when they went into the line as well as taking the time to visit the front line trenches to get an appreciation of the sector from the infantry's perspective.

However, Hobbs was not just training his men but also actively thinking about the challenges of providing effective artillery support in this new environment. After only having been in France since the end of March, on 11 May he felt confident enough in his knowledge to issue a sixteen-page paper entitled 'Artillery in Trench Warfare'.

This document shows that he understands that the relationship and co-ordination between infantry and artillery as being one of the most important tactical facets of finding success in trench warfare.

Right at the start, the first thing he writes is: 'In an endeavour to prevent misunderstanding arising, and to source a close and efficient co-operation with our Infantry, I have prepared this "paper" for the instruction and help of the 1st Australian Divisional Artillery. ... It is hoped that an explanation of the present Artillery organization[sic], its functions and limitations in trench warfare, will in

some measure be of assistance to officers of both the infantry and artillery and by helping each to appreciate the objects to be attained and the difficulties to be contended with, tend to assist in establishing and maintaining that spirit of mutual confidence and support so essential to success.'

With the fundamental principle being artillery/infantry co-ordination, Hobbs covers everything that artillery could and could not do in trench warfare (in both attack and defence), as well as examining the various types of artillery possessed by the modern division (including trench mortars) and explaining their purpose and their various strengths and weaknesses.

Although this document is very much a product of early 1916 you can see that conceptually he understands a lot of the big ideas that played out through the remainder of the war. He understands that artillery's role in a trench warfare battle was 'to prevent the enemy manning his trenches, and placing his machine guns in position before our infantry can reach the hostile parapet', emphasising neutralisation rather than destruction.

Importantly, he was aware of the problems associated with a linear, 'lifting' barrage, which moved from one line to the next to the next. Instead, he wrote: 'a sudden "lift" of all artillery fire is objectionable as it informs the enemy when the assault is taking place. There should be no pause in the firing line and the batteries should "lift" only a short distance at a time.' Here he seems to be pre-empting the evolution of the creeping barrage, and can certainly see the justification for it.

Hobbs was a thinking soldier, and that comes across in this document. He says much more but I'll move on and maybe we can pick this up in the discussion.

### **Conclusion**

Talbot Hobbs was by no means an expert in trench warfare artillery by the start of the Battle of the Somme. He had not experienced the full intensity of a divisional sized Western Front battle. Yet when faced with a number of different challenges during this period he handled them well and produced divisional artillery that went into the Western Front on the Somme and fought very capably.

I do not want to suggest that Hobbs was unique; other artillery commanders both inside the AIF and in the wider British Army were undoubtedly doing the same thing to a greater or lesser degree. However in his position he was very influential in AIF's artillery development. He also gives us a lens through which to view the role and influence of the CRA.

I'd argue this developed through Hobbs' pre-war career stamped him out as a man of significant capability both in military and civilian spheres and this came to fruition during the war. As one biographer commented: 'Chance had little to do with the success that has come the way of this distinguished soldier and citizen.' He was a man who invested in soldiering and that investment was returned when needed.