

1917 – Strategic Overview plus Developments and A brief outline of the Australian artillery in 1917

I have been asked to do two things tonight – to summarise how the War was going in 1917 and to provide an overview of how the Australian artillery fared that year. While there have been millions of words already expended doing just either one of those two tasks, I will try and do both topics some justice in a mere 15 minutes. Forgive me then if it is a little compressed!!

How was the War going in 1917?

By any measure – political, economic or military – 1917 was a terrible year for the Allies. I have picked economics as the start point for this talk because, although it is a complex subject, it contributed as much to the shape of 1917 as military and political events. Hard as it is to comprehend, both the British and the German Governments tried to fight a total war while not messing about with their economies. Britain only went onto a war economy in December 1916, having been surviving on credit and loans to fund their war effort to that point. Britain had been financing the rest of the Allies (direct payments plus purchasing of war material on behalf of the Russians and the French) but by early 1917 they had spent all their financial reserves and had to start borrowing heavily from the Americans. In 1917-18, Britain borrowed approx. \$4 billion from the US Treasury – that is 1917 dollars, not the valueless stuff we move around the world today. Unlike the British, the Americans used loans which they insisted needed to be repaid after the war!! (One reason the Allies insisted on Germany paying reparations – they needed to shift the debt burden onto someone else!!) GDP increased in Britain (together with the US and Italy) but shrank for all the other combatant nations (on both sides). It was as well Britain's financial status was so sound as by 1917 it was costing between 3 and 4 million pounds a day simply to provide artillery and small arms ammunition to the British Army: never mind all the other costs.

The financial position for the Central Powers was if anything worse. Austria-Hungary had started the War in debt and with an inefficient tax system. It couldn't pay for its antiquated, ill-equipped Army in 1914 and things rapidly got worse. Germany was second only to Britain in financial power in 1914. By 1917, with the British blockade choking its exports, it was borrowing from its own citizens at ridiculous rates of interest and with no obvious means of repaying such loans. In 1917, the German military virtually instituted a command economy, with war production attracting the highest priority but under the external pressures, what was left of the German economy was at the point of collapse when Russia surrendered. This was part of the reason for the savage peace terms the Germans imposed on the Russians at the treaty of Brest-Litovsk and implementing the terms of the treaty was so difficult the Germans had to leave over fifty German divisions in occupied Russia to make it happen.

The next point could consume this whole lecture but I will keep it short. 1917 was the year the civilian populations, on both sides of the line, began to feel the full impact of the War. Famine was never far away for any of the populations. The Germans were already substituting artificial ingredients in everything from food to clothing to propellant for artillery and small arms. As I will mention in a moment, the British public was on starvation rations during the worst months of the German submarine blockade. The French and Italian

civilian population also suffered as their economies could not pay for much of the basic necessities of living. I will talk in the next section about political developments but bear in mind that not even the military dictatorship of Germany could afford to ignore the condition of the population – the Russians tried to and the result illustrates why this was a bad idea!!

The last point for this overview is the unrestricted submarine campaign. This was both a political and military issue but I will deal with it here as it is the backdrop you need to keep in your mind for almost all the subsequent points of discussion.

Germany's decision on 31 January 1917 to try and blockade the British Isles using an unrestricted submarine campaign was a two-edged sword. While it did nearly bring Britain to her knees, it also so antagonised many neutral countries that it prompted several, most importantly the United States, to declare war. The US entry into the war on 6 April 1917 did much to offset the withdrawal of Russia and thus neutralise the strategic gain the Germans had achieved with the defeat of Russia. While initially the US contribution was primarily money, supplies and raw material (it would take almost a year before American forces arrived in France in any numbers), the psychological boost given to the Allies was beyond calculation.

The Germans had considered the possibility that their actions would prompt an American declaration of war against them but determined that the strategic situation was such that they needed to take the risk. The Commander of the German High Seas Fleet, Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer, argued that Britain would be starved out of the war before the US was sufficiently ready to alter the balance of military power – so woefully prepared was the US for war in 1917. He was almost vindicated! In March, 25% of all Britain-bound merchant ships were sunk. In the three months June to August 1917 alone, the Germans sank 312 British merchant ships (gross tonnage lost equalled 1,112,593 tons). Britain was in real danger of being starved out of the war.

Political developments in 1917

It can be argued that we are still feeling the effects of some of the political developments that came to a head in 1917 – I refer of course to the Russian revolution and the rise of communism as a political system. However, it was the political and military developments in 1917 that set the year apart.

Russia

A key to Allied confidence of success in 1914 was Russia. While there was success against the Austro-Hungarians, reaching an apex with the 1916 Brusilov offensive, the Allied expectation that Russian manpower superiority would offset German operational superiority was, by 1917, almost extinguished. Russia's interest in and ability to continue fighting started to unravel in March 1917 when bread riots broke out in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). The riots spread to include industrial workers and then the Petrograd military garrison. The rioters formed the Petrograd Soviet and began to act as an alternative government. The Imperial Government resigned and the Duma (the Russian Parliament) formed a provisional government that competed with the Petrograd Soviet for control. On

15 March 1917, the Czar abdicated. Power continued to be disputed between the Soviet and the provisional Government until November 1917 when Lenin, the Bolshevik leader smuggled into Russia by the Germans, staged a bloodless coup against the Provisional Government and formed a new Communist Government. During this period of political uncertainty, Russian soldiers did continue to fight but with ever-decreasing interest and enthusiasm. One major attack organised by the provisional Government on 18 June failed badly and more and more troops began to refuse to go to the front. With fewer troops, a collapsed logistics system and with the troops' morale plummeting, Russia was effectively, if not formally, out of the war by August 1917. The Russians finally capitulated on 26 October 1917.

Italy

Almost totally unprepared for war, the Italians were reluctant members of the Entente. Caught between their Commander-in-Chief, General Luigi Cadorna, who saw himself as completely independent of the Italian Government and who would have preferred to fight alongside the central powers, and a strong anti-war sentiment in both the Government and in popular opinion, the Italian government faced almost insurmountable problems in the early years of the war. The Italian defeat at Trentino in June 1916 saw the end of Antonio Salandra's liberal government. The Boselli Government then fell in October 1917, after the defeat at Caporetto. As with Russia and France, the political survival of governments was constantly threatened by huge losses and constant military disappointment. For the other allies, Italy appeared a very unreliable ally during 1917. Italian political fragility was more that matched by Italian military impotence.

France

Equally as alarming for the British as the fragile state of the French Army was the dysfunctional French Government. Throughout the war, the French Republic functioned almost as viciously as it had pre-war. In a little over four years of war, the French had six governments. Of these, only one was voted out of office. (The others all resigned.) The Government of Prime Minister Paul Painlevé lasted a mere nine weeks, from 12 September to 13 November 1917. The Government it had replaced, under Prime Minister Alexandre Ribot, had itself only been in office since 20 March 1917. There was no equivalent of the political truce seen in other countries during the war: the Socialist left and the anarchists were generally anti-war and always critical of the conduct of the war. The French Minister for the Interior, responsible for internal security, between 1914 and August 1917 was Louis Malvy, a member of the Radical Party and an avowed anti-war politician. He was notorious for giving financial support to anti-war newspapers and organisations encouraging French soldiers to desert but the numbers his political faction controlled in the Chamber of Deputies protected him until one of the anti-war newspapers he supported was found to be being subsidised by the Germans and receiving French military secrets. Clemenceau openly accused him of treason and in November 1917, he was arrested and charged.

Internal upheaval was not the only problem facing the French Government. For the first two years of war, its biggest political battle was to gain control over the French General Staff and direction of the war. Joffre, the French Commander-in-Chief, considered the role of the

Government was merely to supply the Army with everything it asked for and then stay out of the way. Ex-generals, such as Joseph-Simon Gallieni, who became Ministers in successive Governments were seen by Joffre as interfering and as rivals. After Verdun, political oversight and control won and Joffre was promoted to obscurity. However, despite regaining overall control of the war strategy, the politicians were still regularly reminded that the actions of their generals at the operational level still had direct political implications. It was strong adverse public reaction to Nivelle's failure that brought down the Ribot Government in September. In such an uncertain climate, obtaining political endorsement of high risk military strategies was very difficult and it was not until the dominating figure of Georges Clemenceau became Prime Minister in November 1917 that the French Government and Army returned to an aggressive war-winning posture.

British Politics

France and Russia were not the only members of the Entente experiencing political upheaval or changes in the political-military relationship. On 6 December 1916, Great Britain welcomed a new prime minister: the former Secretary of State for War, David Lloyd George. Lloyd George replaced H.H. Asquith who had been prime minister since the war's beginning: a development that heralded a dramatic shake-up of political-military arrangements. Asquith's government, a product of the Edwardian world view, tended to be a 'hands-off' type of government with little interest in 'interfering' in the economy or in the strategic direction of the war. Even with the interventionist and overbearing Lord Kitchener in the role of Secretary of State for War, political direction of the war was still comparatively remote.

All this changed during 1916. In June, Kitchener had been killed when the ship he was travelling to Russia in hit a mine. He was replaced, not by another former military officer, but by a professional politician (David Lloyd George). Lloyd George had already had some exposure to the military and the conduct of the war through his position as Minister of Munitions and he had already expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the War Office and its conduct of the war. He made no pretence of trying to be a military operational commander but he did challenge the basic national strategy for fighting the war and, through his ability to decide the priority for supplies and reinforcements for different theatres of war, did begin to exercise some control over the military commanders. In another change from the Kitchener period, the CIGS now had direct access to the Cabinet, rather than through the Secretary of State, so Lloyd George's capacity to control the flow of military advice was more limited than for his predecessor. However, Lloyd George's capacity to direct the war changed dramatically in December 1916 when, following the resignation of Asquith, he was made prime minister.

While Lloyd George was a controversial selection, causing a major split in his Liberal Party, his dedication to a 'fight to the finish' approach to war attracted support from all sides of the political spectrum. Also, his support enabled him to finally put Britain onto a full war footing: including the regulation of labour and new methods for financing the war. It was his ongoing difficult relations with his Generals, especially his attempts to redirect priority away from the Western Front and then to put British commanders under the direct command of the senior French military leadership, that caused most consternation in 1917.

The United States commits to War

The US entry into the war on 6 April 1917 did much to offset the withdrawal of Russia and thus neutralise the strategic gain the Germans had achieved with the defeat of Russia. While initially the US contribution was primarily money, supplies and raw material (it would take almost a year before American forces arrived in France in any numbers), the psychological boost given to the Allies was beyond calculation. The entry of the Americans also served to complicate, and to an extent, destabilise the relations between the British and the French at both the political and military levels. However, there can be no underestimation of how the US entry into the war transformed the German view of their long-term prospects and encouraged them to adopt a strategy that ultimately helped the Allies win the war.

Military Developments in 1917

The brief was extended to provide a brief overview of the more significant military developments in 1917. Given I am already close to overtime and still have to talk about the Australian Artillery, I will keep this brief. I will put up on the screen a few slides to show chronologically the major military events of the year, both on the Western Front and in Palestine. However, I do not plan on discussing these various battles as I need to focus on two significant issues that makes 1917 important in understanding the progress of the war.

The Western Front was the critical theatre of this war – a colleague of mine always sums it up by saying it was the only time the modern British (and by extension the Australian) Army has fought the main enemy on the main front since Napoleon. By 1917, the war had been dragging on for three years with no sign of likely victory for either side. For this period, the French Army had borne the brunt of the fighting and the French High Command had directed the strategic and operational direction and tempo of the Allied war effort. In 1917, this changed and the primary reason was the French Army rebelled against its commanders.

In June 1917, Haig learned from the French Commander-in-Chief of mutinies in the French Army. (While the first of the mutinies had occurred on 3 May, the French authorities successfully suppressed the news for several weeks.¹) Given the French Army was the core of Allied resistance and was still the largest Allied force on the Western Front, this news was extremely worrying for the British leadership. The Germans had long recognised the centrality of the French Army in Allied strategy and had deliberately targeted it with an attritional strategy. By the time Haig was alerted to the problem, large sections of the French Army had become 'mutinous'. The word mutiny is misleading as the French troops never refused to defend against enemy attacks but, as a sizeable portion of the field Army refused to participate in any offensive action, it was clear the French Army was in crisis. The battles of 1916 had stretched it to breaking point and the failures of early 1917 finally triggered action from the long-suffering *Poilu*.

¹ Contrary to popular understanding, by June the Germans did have a good knowledge of the situation in the French Army – better than either the French or British public's knowledge – but it was knowledge received too late for them to capitalise upon.

French politicians also were growing dissatisfied with the French High Command's conduct of the war. The French Prime Minister (Aristide Briand) faced a difficult choice, replace the victor of the Marne (Joffre) with a commander more acceptable to the Chamber of Deputies, or lose government. He chose the former and on 26 December 1916, Joffre was promoted Marshal of France and effectively marginalised. In his place, Briand appointed Général d'Armée Robert Nivelle as the commander of all French forces in France and Belgium. Nivelle won his appointment largely by convincing French political and military leaders he could conduct offensives without incurring huge casualties. Verdun had taught the average French infantryman to be wary of frontal assaults so Nivelle's plan, based as it appeared to be on a new, more technical approach, helped rebuild the troops' confidence in their commander.

Early in 1917, Nivelle revealed his plans for a massive offensive, to be conducted by French troops, in the Aisne sector, including the *Chemin des Dames*. Despite considerable misgivings from the French Government and his own subordinates, and despite the capture by the Germans of a complete set of his attack plans that cost him tactical surprise, Nivelle launched his attack on a 25 kilometre front of the Aisne sector on 16 April. The attack was supported by 3,810 guns and 128 tanks (including the heavy St. Chamond type) yet despite some early success, the attack eventually failed. Initial gains were achieved more because the Germans had changed their defensive strategy than from Nivelle's 'new approach'. The Germans had recognised the difficulty of holding a solid front line, subjected as it was to enormous artillery barrages, so devised a three line defensive pattern that used a thinly held front line, to serve as a trip wire and to disrupt the advance, a strongly held second line, some distance behind the first and more protected from the initial attackers barrage and a counter-attack force held in a third line close enough to the second to be used to counter any breakthroughs. The French easily occupied the lightly held first line but then came up against the comparatively untouched second line where machine-gun barrages and prepared defensive barrages soon stopped the attack and caused heavy casualties. The terrain did not help, with the broken ground, small woods and small re-entrants providing the Germans considerable additional cover. Several follow-on assaults did manage to achieve small gains but, after 6 May, no further attacks were launched. The French did capture several kilometres of front, together with 20,000 prisoners and 147 guns however the 187,000 casualties were too much of a price for the limited gains. Nivelle's reputation was destroyed and on 15 May he was dismissed. Worse still, many French Divisions lost confidence in their commanders and refused to continue to launch attacks they considered futile. The French Army had had enough.

To its credit, the French Government moved swiftly to correct the position. Nivelle was replaced as Commander-in-Chief by General Philippe Pétain in May 1917. Pétain restored order to the Army by addressing many of the internal causes of complaint but, from a British perspective, making the more radical and worrying assurance of no more 'suicidal' attacks. The immediate French military position at the end of the mutiny period appeared to be: defend the status quo until the Americans arrive. While the repair of the French Army was occurring, the British understood they needed to distract the Germans to prevent them from exploiting the weakened French Army. A major assault such as that envisaged in Belgium would achieve this objective.

The other overarching factor worth a brief mention was that 1917 saw a shift in the strategic direction of the war. British politicians and, more importantly, British military leaders, began to plan and conduct operations in pursuit of British national interests. The Messines and Passchendaele Campaign was fought largely by the British for largely British objectives. These were clearing the German submarines from their bases on the Belgian coast and, if possible, liberating a large part of Belgium. The French participated in Passchendaele as much because they did not want the British getting too close to the Belgians. (Post-war diplomatic relations heavily influenced French thinking throughout the war.)

Before I turn to the overview of the Australian Army experience, I thought I'd better put up this slide to remind you all that we were fighting a two front-war in 1917 and that progress in Palestine was much more impressive, especially in the last two months, than it was on the Western Front. Happy to expand on developments here in Question Time.

Australian Artillery in 1917

It is important always to remember when discussing Australian artillery in World War One that it was not an independent arm in any sense. It was a fully integrated part of the BEF's artillery assets. Australian gunners spent considerably longer periods in the front line compared with their infantry or field engineer compatriots. They would often be left in place while several British or Australian Divisions cycled through the section of the front line they were supporting. Divisional artillery commanders could often find themselves commanding only British brigades. The point of this is that when the British changed their war establishment or artillery organisation, Australian artillery changed automatically to conform.

This audience does not need to be reminded that artillery is always a compromise. There is, unfortunately, no such thing as the 'sweet spot' in the conflict between mobility and effectiveness for guns. Greatest effectiveness comes from largest shell weight, longest range and greatest accuracy. All these factors add weight, both to the mount and the ammunition it needs. Weight is the enemy of mobility however. Recognising this, 1917 saw the British move to group their artillery into three specific categories, linked to specific and specified roles. The structure is shown in the third dot point on the slide. The Australians were only involved in tiers one and two of course, although the infantry were frequently supported by the very large howitzers and guns of Army level artillery.

Organisationally, the Field Artillery underwent much change. Given the field guns and 4.5 inch howitzers had complementary roles, and both were in demand by all the infantry brigades they were supporting, in late 1916 the three field gun and one howitzer brigade of the Division's organic artillery were reorganised into composite brigades with three batteries of field guns and one of howitzers. These complemented the new trench mortars coming into service.

In early 1917, in reaction to new British offensive concepts, the last major reorganisation of the field artillery during the war occurred. Given the size of attacks and the need to maximise artillery support, the British decided in early 1917 to reduce the number of

organic artillery brigades in divisions and create a number of independent – described as ‘Army’ – field artillery brigades that could be assigned anywhere with the Corps/Army organisation to support an attack. These new brigades were created from the third brigade of each of the divisions.