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## Slide One

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

I have been asked to do two things tonight – **Slide 2** - summarise how the War was going in 1917 and provide an overview of issues affecting the Australian artillery in that year. I will try and do both topics some justice in a mere 20 minutes but please forgive me if it is all a little rushed!!

How was the War going in 1917? (**Slide 3**)

By any measure – political, economic or military – 1917 was not a good 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 now, both the British and the German Governments tried to fight a total war while not messing about with their peace-time economies.

Britain only went onto a war footing in December 1916, having been surviving on its financial resources and deficits to fund their war effort to that point. Britain had

also been financing the rest of the Allies (direct payments plus purchasing of war material on behalf of the Russians and the French). By early 1917 they had spent all their financial reserves and had had to start borrowing heavily from the Americans.

In 1917-18, Britain borrowed approx. \$4 billion from the US Treasury – and that is 1917 dollars!! Unlike the British, the Americans insisted these loans needed to be repaid after the war!! GDP increased in Britain, the US and surprisingly, Italy but shrank for all the other combatant nations. For Britain, this was just as well 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, and relied almost totally on Germany to keep it afloat. 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 but, by 1917, with the British blockade choking its exports, it was broke and borrowing

from Swiss banks and its own citizens at ridiculous rates of interest. It had no obvious means of repaying such loans. In 1917, the German military imposed a command economy, with war production attracting the highest priority but, with all the external pressures, what was left of the German economy was at the point of collapse when Russia surrendered. Financial need was part of the reason for the savage peace terms the Germans imposed on the Russians at the treaty of Brest-Litovsk: so savage that over fifty German divisions had to be left in occupied Russia to make it happen.

The second point in this global overview is Germany's unrestricted submarine campaign. Germany's 31 January 1917 decision to 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 several, most importantly the United States, declared 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 unprepared 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). But the strategy failed.

While the entry of the Americans complicated, and to an extent, destabilised the relations between the British and the French at both the political and military levels, it also panicked the Germans and encouraged them to adopt their crazy 1918 strategy of the *Kaiserschlacht* that contributed so much to them losing the war.

#### (Slide 4) 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.

#### (Slide 5) 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 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, 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. A major attack launched 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. They 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 military failure and enormous casualty counts. To their allies, Italy looked 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 fragile Italy 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.

Internal upheaval was not the only problem facing the French Government. For the first two years of war, its biggest political battle had been to gain control over the French General Staff and the strategic 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. After Verdun, political oversight and control was finally achieved and Joffre was promoted to obscurity. However, despite this strategic victory, the politicians were 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 such as new major military offensives 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. Herbert Asquith's government, which had run the war to 1916, was a product of the Edwardian world view and 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 appointment of the interventionist and overbearing Lord Kitchener in 1914 to 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 and replaced by David Lloyd George. Lloyd George made no pretence of trying to be a military operational commander but he did challenge the basic national strategy for fighting the war. Lloyd George's capacity to direct the war changed dramatically in December 1916 when, following the resignation of Asquith, he became Prime Minister. His ongoing difficult

relations with his Generals caused much consternation and confusion in 1917 and nearly led to a serious military defeat in early 1918.

## **Military Developments in 1917**

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 (Slide 6) and in Palestine. (Slide 7) However, I do not plan on discussing these slides at all – you can read them for yourselves - as I need to focus on two significant military developments that make 1917 important.

The Western Front (Slide 8) was the critical theatre of this war. 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. (Slide 9)

Throughout 1916 and early 1917, French public and their political leaders were growing dissatisfied with the French High Command's conduct of the war. In late 1916, 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. As noted earlier, on 26 December 1916, Joffre was promoted Marshal of France and replaced as the commander of all French forces in France and Belgium by Robert Nivelle. Nivelle won his appointment largely by convincing French political and military leaders he could conduct offensives without incurring huge casualties.

Early in 1917, Nivelle revealed his plans for a massive offensive, to be conducted by French troops, in the *Chemin des Dames* sector. Despite considerable misgivings from the French Government and his own subordinates, Nivelle launched his attack on a 25 kilometre front on 16 April. Despite some early success, the attack failed. The French did capture several kilometres, together with 20,000 prisoners and 147 guns, but at a cost of 187,000 casualties.

This was too much and Nivelle's reputation was destroyed. On 15 May he was dismissed. Worse still, many French Divisions lost confidence in their commanders and declared they would not in attacks they considered futile. The French Army had had enough.

The first of the mutinies had occurred on 3 May, although the French authorities successfully suppressed the news for several weeks. 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 Allied leadership. The Germans had long recognised the centrality of the French Army in Allied strategy and had deliberately targeted it. 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. With no French Army offensives to pressure the Germans, they would be given breathing room to exploit their victory in Russia before the Americans arrived.

(Slide 10) 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. Unfortunately, he spooked the British by giving a more radical assurance that there would be 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. They also understood that victory needed the British Army to take on the offensive.

This realisation led to the other overarching factor worth a brief mention. 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 Passchendaele Campaign was fought largely by the British for largely British objectives.

(Slide 11) 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.

### Australian Artillery in 1917 (Slide 12)

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.

This audience does not need to be reminded that artillery is always a compromise. 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. 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 and in this slide (Slide 13). 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.

(Slide 14) 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. (Slide 15) 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.

(Slide 16) I fear I have over-run my time so will end there  
– I'm not sure whether it is questions now or later?