Army

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Lt Dylan Conway, of 1RAR, clears the cargo net on the obstacle course as part of Exercise True Grit during the Junior Officers Jungle Operations Training.
Photo: Cpl Mark Doran

Junior leaders put to the test at Tully

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JUNGLE WARFARE

LEGEND REMEMBERED PP4-5 / AUST DAY HONOURS PP16-17

Big guns dominate

The Great War seminar series takes a look at four different aspects of firepower, Sgt Dave Morley reports.

FOUR seemingly disparate aspects of firepower were brought together at the fifth of the Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company's Firepower: Lessons from the Great War Seminar Series held at ADFA on December 1.

Host Brig John Cox (retd) said attempts at manoeuvring and innovation on the Western Front during 1914-15 had foundered.

"By December 1916, there was a depressingly dark view of the flow of the war," he said.

"The Allies and Central Powers had resorted to concentration of force as a means for a breakthrough of the line by which they aspired to return to manoeuvre.

"Germany sought to shatter the resolve of France through concentration at Verdun, with dreadful results for both sides.

"Also, the Somme Offensive did not deliver a victory for the Allies, despite its high cost."

Brig Cox said the concentrations of artillery fire to produce battle-winning effects had become better understood.

"Concepts of lasting neutralisation and the effects of shellshock were becoming well-known and employed," he said.

"Gargantuan offensives demanded staggering levels of munitions, men and materials, and the consumption of each was unprecedented.

"Throughout this period, the desire to outflank the enemy by any means was pursued by both sides, including the development of aerial warfare.

"However, each new foray was met with counter-measures almost as quickly as it had been introduced."

Artillery at the fore in Battle of Verdun

IN A move away from AIF artillery, former Director of the Australian Army History Unit (AAHU) Roger Lee analysed the French Army's artillery methods, tactics and coordination during the fateful Verdun offensives throughout 1916.

Dr Lee said French Général de Corps d'Armée Paul Chrétien arrived to take command of XXX Corps, part of the garrison of the Fortified Region of Verdun, on January 21.

"He was appalled by the state of the defences on the 65km front; artillery batteries were not dug in, telephone wires not buried and barbed wire obstacles were flimsy to non-existent," Dr Lee said.

"Surprisingly, the forts that were the principal defences of the entire zone were not under his command: perhaps just as well for his state of mind as they were undermanned with poor-quality reservists and had been stripped of many of their guns.

"Chrétien took little comfort from, and did not share, the views of his Commander-in-Chief, Gen Joffre, that the Verdun region was a strategic backwater, unlikely to be the target of a major German attack, as it was of little strategic value to the Germans."

French Army members carrying out trench mortar manoeuvres at Belleville during the Battle of Verdun. It was the longest single battle of WWI, lasting from February 21 to December 18 and was one of the first in which Allied artillery made the greatest contribution to the outcome.
Photos courtesy of the Australian War Memorial

Dr Lee said Gen Chrétien was right to be worried as a German artillery barrage of unprecedented volume and intensity started at 7.15am on February 21 and continued until 4pm, heralding the attack by three German corps against the single understrength French XXX Corps, along the 12km northern and eastern part of the front.

"Two corps attacked two understrength French divisions, the 51st and 72nd," he said. "The Germans had amassed more than 900 heavy guns and more than 600 field guns for the attack.

"Given they were attacking a known fortified position, the Germans had included a number of 'super heavy' guns, designed from the start to eliminate fortresses: seventeen 305mm, thirteen 420mm howitzers and three 380mm guns for long-range counter-battery and interdiction work."

Dr Lee said initially the German attack was devastating.

"The rate of fire was so great it added a new word to the military lexicon: trommelfeuer, meaning drumfire, where the sounds of individual guns and separate exploding shells were lost in one overwhelming noise," he said.

"Leading the attack were assault pioneers, armed with flamethrowers in addition to their usual weapons.

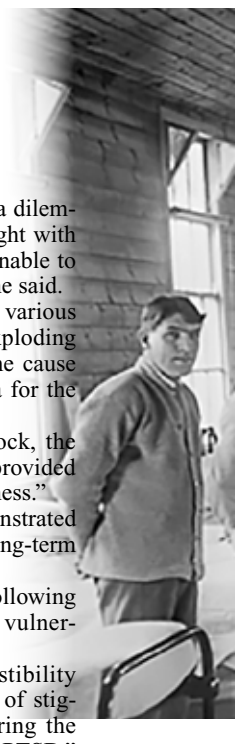
The French, faced with impending disaster, quickly adapted new techniques. Instead of occupying predictable defensive lines, they spread out making them more difficult to kill or neutralise by artillery alone.

Dr Lee said the defence gradually thickened and, while France paid a huge price for it, after six months on the defensive, they began to drive the enemy back.

"Eventually, in October, the symbol of Verdun, Fort Douaumont, was recaptured and by December, the enemy was back to their February start-line," he said.

Although both sides made the usual extravagant claims of success, the battle could best be described as a draw.

Medical corps unprepared for epidemic of shellshock



A FUNDAMENTAL question that confronted medical officers at the beginning of WWI was the issue of whether the inability to function in battle was a moral or mental problem.

The Director of the Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies at the University of Adelaide, Gp-Capt Sandy McFarlane, said the wave of mental casualties presented many challenges to the medical corps, who were totally unprepared.

"Was the medical officer's role to maintain the fighting force, or was his primary ethical and professional responsibility to the individual soldier?" he said.

"Given the overwhelming demand in maintaining a fighting force, the question of individual welfare was subsidiary to the question of national survival."

Gp-Capt McFarlane said the absence of a diagnostic framework was fertile ground for the acceptance of the emerging concept of 'shellshock', more driven by sentiment among the soldiers than medical knowledge.

"The medical officers were faced with a dilemma of how to deal with men who had fought with bravery, but then had been progressively unable to continue to function in the face of battle," he said.

"The name 'shellshock' attributed the various symptoms to the concussive effects of exploding shells, and hence an external agent was the cause rather than vulnerability, an attractive idea for the soldiers.

"Despite the public appeal of shellshock, the medical establishment was concerned it provided an honourable escape from combat into illness."

Gp-Capt McFarlane said history demonstrated the slowness of the understanding of the long-term consequences of combat.

"It remains the case that the period following deployment remains a critical period of vulnerability," he said.

"Issues of secondary gain and suggestibility must not be over emphasised at the risks of stigmatising those who are unwell and ignoring the reality of neurobiological underpinnings of PTSD."

Great War

An increase in the demand of artillery in WWI resulted in a logistics breakdown.

Trains feel the heat during battle

INADEQUACIES in British Expeditionary Force (BEF) logistics, coupled with an increasing demand for artillery shells, threatened the collapse of the entire resupply system during the 1916 Battle of the Somme, according to AAHU historian Maj Ian Finlayson.

Maj Finlayson said the artillery arm of the BEF operated under significant limitations during those battles of 1916.

"These limitations derived from a number of factors," he said.

"They included Britain's lack of preparation for industrial warfare, the rapid expansion of the BEF, the failure of BEF administrative doctrine to keep pace with modern warfare, and the collapse of the BEF transportation system under the demands of munitions resupply.

"While industry shortages constrained the supply of artillery munitions in 1915, by 1916 these shortages were overcome."

Maj Finlayson said the BEF's minimum weekly requirement for 18-pounder rounds rose from 340,000 in July 1915 to 700,000 in June 1916.

However, he said not all of the munitions delivered were required.

"At the outbreak of the war, 70 per cent of 4.5-inch howitzer rounds were shrapnel, with only 30 per cent high explosive.

"All 18-pounder shells were shrapnel, and experience was to soon show shrapnel shells contained insufficient explosives to demolish German entrenchments.

"Munitions for the six-inch howitzer rose from 56,000 to 204,000 over the same period, but heavy shells required much more effort to manufacture and transportation for these shells was often in short supply."

The requirements of additional munitions and artillery weren't just limited to the British Army as the Dominion forces relied on British industry for much of their equipment.

"By the end of 1915, two Canadian, one Australian, one Australian/New Zealand, one South African and three Indian divisions had been formed alongside that of the New Army," Maj Finlayson said.

"Inevitably, these Dominion divisions suffered the same shortages and constraints.

"For example, within the AIF the expansion of artillery units was limited by a lack of guns and qualified gunners.

"Nor was there any prospect of buying guns from Great Britain or having them manufactured in Australia."

Maj Finlayson said while the Dominion forces would never achieve the mass of the British Army, the growth in their artillery arms was a significant impost on British industry.

"In field artillery alone, by 1917 the AIF had 20 field artillery brigades and the Canadian Army 12," he said.

By 1916 artillery munitions of all calibres were being produced in ever-increasing quantities.

Maj Finlayson said the problem of munitions supply was slowly shifting from one of a shortage of industrial capacity to that of a crisis in the means of distribution.

"It would be the near collapse of BEF logistics system, rather than the availability of munitions, which would explain the shell shortage during the Battle of the Somme, which started on July 1," he said.

"Until mid-June, some five-to-12 trainloads of munitions each week were sufficient to meet the BEF's needs, but by late June the number of trains required rose to between 40-90 trains per week."

The increase in heavy artillery also caused problems, as, while one million 18-pounder shells could be moved by 25 trains, 100,000 60-pounder shells required seven.

The rail system could not cope with the increase in munitions above and beyond those already required for divisional packs providing general stores, food, fodder and engineer stores.

The lack of train drivers, coal, rolling stock and carrying capacity on trunk lines, and a shortage of maintenance workers, all added to a rail network which was over-stressed.

The aggregate result was a breakdown in the ability of the rail network to clear the ports.

Quays and wharfs became congested with all natures of supplies that could not be cleared, leaving ships in port unable to unload due to lack of space on the docks.

Maj Finlayson said in an effort to rectify the administrative problems, Sir Eric Geddes was appointed as Director-General of Military Railways under the QMG at the War Office in September 1916.

"Geddes had extensive experience in running railways, was a former manager of British North-Eastern Railway, a lieutenant colonel on the Engineer and Railway Staff Corps and had worked under British Prime Minister Lloyd George in the Ministry of Munitions.

"The Geddes reforms not only ensured an uninterrupted flow of munitions to the artillery but, in doing so, released the constraints on the development of artillery tactics that would provide the basis of the victories of 1918."

Inventive ways to combat air warfare in WWI

WHILE artillery and indirect fire were relatively mature concepts by WWI, aircraft were a relatively modern invention, with the Great War being the first conflict in which they played a significant part.

Col Chris Hunter (retd) said the aircraft of 1914 were slow flimsy machines that no general had really thought about how to use.

"Air defence, starting from a zero base, had to advance more quickly than any other branch of military science," he said.

"The anti-aircraft gunners faced a novel problem, for not only did their targets move at a rate considerably greater than anything previously encountered, but they could move in three dimensions, all of which affected the gunnery solution."

Col Hunter said enemy air activity at Gallipoli was slight throughout the campaign and since the Anzac position had no anti-aircraft guns at first, special emplacements were constructed to allow 18-pounders to shoot at aircraft.

"The method was simple: a hole was dug in the ground and the trail of the gun lowered into it so the muzzle pointed up in the air," he said.

"In late-August, three three-pounder Hotchkiss anti-aircraft guns arrived.

"All the manuals were in Japanese, but fortunately a Japanese-speaking digger was found to translate the manuals and produce range tables."

A coordinated anti-aircraft defence with machine guns was organised.

Col Hunter said each of the four divisions then holding the line around Anzac Cove designated two machine guns for anti-aircraft use, emplacing them so as to cover the entire position.

"Despite the effort, no enemy aircraft were shot down by anti-aircraft fire over Anzac," he said.

When the AIF arrived in France in 1916, defence against enemy aircraft was provided by anti-aircraft units of other Allied forces.

Col Hunter said despite this, most Australian units had personnel nominated for anti-aircraft duties.

"Australian field artillery batteries had two Lewis guns on a special tripod mounting for use against any enemy planes which might attack the battery position," he said.

"In 1918, the famous German ace, the Red Baron, met his doom at the hands of Gnr Robert Buie, an anti-aircraft gunner with 53 Fd Bty, who was credited with being responsible for his downing."

By war's end in 1918 there were 225 anti-aircraft sections with twenty 13-pounder 6cwt guns, 306 thirteen-pounder 9cwt guns, and 373 three-inch 20cwt guns.

WWI ended with aircraft in the ascendancy and, while air defence had come a long way, there was still a large gap between desired and real capabilities.

Like much of the post-war Australian Army, anti-aircraft defences were placed on the back burner and it was 1925 before the first AA battery in the Royal Australian Artillery was raised.

Patients and medical staff in a ward at the Australian Auxiliary Hospital in Kent in 1916.