

# **A Short History of A Field Battery RAA**

## **Early History**

Prior to 1870, each Colony in Australia was responsible for the defence of their principal ports. Towards the end of 1870 the last Imperial Garrison, Royal Garrison Artillery, withdrew from New South Wales (NSW). The NSW Government passed the Naval and Military Forces Act (1871), allowing for the raising of the first Permanent Military Force in Australia. This provided for one battery of Artillery and two companies of Infantry. The Act was important because it was the same as applied to the the Imperial Forces and in the case of the Gunners, maintained the direct links to the Royal Artillery (RA). These links are a strong point in the maintenance of standard Commonwealth Gunner traditions and procedures and have been preserved to the present day.

On 1 August 1871, A Battery NSW Artillery was formed, a Unit which has existed continuously ever since although under many different designations. On the same day, the following Artillery appointments were made by the Governor of NSW:

- Captain G.J. Airey to be the First Captain of the NSW Artillery.
- Captain W.W. Spalding to be the Second Captain of the NSW Artillery.
- Lieutenants J.J.R. Russell and G.S Lindeman
- Staff Sergeant H.T. Green, an ex-Sergeant of the Royal Horse Artillery, being the first non-commissioned man enlisted in the Permanent Forces, was allotted Regimental Number One. (Officers did not have Regimental Numbers in those refined times).

From 1872, the Battery was located at Dawes Point. The next significant event occurred in March 1881 at the outbreak of the First Boer War. Major Spalding suggested that the Battery be offered for service but this offer was politely declined.

## **Sudan Campaign**

A few years later in February 1885, the NSW Government offered a Battery of Artillery and a Battalion of Infantry for service in the Sudan. With the offer being accepted by the British Government, A Field Battery was assembled from the NSW Artillery and was ready for embarkation within two weeks. The Battery sailed on 3 March 1885 on the transports "Iberia" and "Australasia". The Battery landed in Suakin on 30 and 31 March 1885 but was to see limited action as the campaign was almost at an end. The most significant action appeared to be support for the Guards Brigade and the NSW Infantry in a minor skirmish to clear Tamai. Towards the end of this campaign, there was a suggestion that the Battery was to be transferred to Afghanistan as the Russians were making trouble on the border. This crisis was averted and the

possible redeployment did not eventuate. Plans now turned the question of returning to Australia. The Imperial Government offered to transport the NSW Contingent back to Sydney free of charge. The Colonial Government in turn offered the horses (which then as now, were affected by quarantine regulations.). In response to this, the Imperial Government allowed the Battery to retain the six 9 pounder guns which had been issued earlier in the campaign. The Battery embarked on the troop ship "Arab" on 17 May 1885 for return to Australia and landed in Sydney on 12 June 1885. The Battery was commended by the Commander-in-Chief, Sudan, Lord Wolsley for its most soldier-like appearance and exemplary conduct at a review a few days previously. The Battery returned to routine duties in Sydney. There were two significant events in this time relevant to our National Heritage.

The first of these was the commissioning of Tom Roberts for a series of four paintings with military themes. The sponsor of these paintings was Major General Edward Hutton, the retiring Commander of the NSW Defence Forces. One of the paintings was of A Battery Field Artillery in action at a Practice Camp at Sugarloaf Hill near Campbelltown in 1896. On his retirement, General Hutton took three of the paintings home donating the fourth (his portrait) to the Field Artillery Officers' Smoking Room at Victoria Barracks. The painting of A Battery returned home when it was purchased by the Australian War Memorial in 1952.

The second event occurred on 24 August 1899 when Queen Victoria agreed to the formation of the Royal Australian Artillery (RAA). The RAA was formed from the Colonial Artilleries of NSW, Victoria and Queensland and is considered to be the first Federal Institution, occurring as it did well prior to Federation.

## **South African War**

In 1899, when the South African War commenced, all the Colonies in Australia offered military assistance to England. These offers were accepted but only to the extent that the Colonies were initially requested to send mounted infantry, light horse and medical corps units only. After the action at Magersfontain, the early confidence and optimism of the Imperial Forces had faded. A second offer by NSW to send a battery of Artillery to South Africa was accepted with a greater degree of urgency. A Battery RAA was formed from Officers and Men of A Battery NSW Artillery, and on 30 December 1899 the Battery embarked on the "Warrigal" from Sydney to South Africa. Given that the Battery was only warned for service on 19 December 1899 the ability to mobilise and sail within 11 days was testimony to the Battery's state of readiness and training.

A week after their arrival on 5 February 1900, the Battery moved by train from Capetown to Belmont. Almost immediately, the Battery was broken up into three sections of two guns apiece. There was a fear of insurrection in the North West Cape areas and the possible effects on the lines of communication for Lord Robert's planned invasion of the Orange Free State. It was decided to conduct a supporting operation to clear the Boers from the

NW Cape area and this task was given to Major General H. Settle. General Settle had a total force of 1600 men assembled at short notice from available forces in the area. He arranged his Force into three columns; A Battery was in General Settle's own column. By 19-21 March 1900 this operation was sufficiently effective to remove the threat of insurrection. This allowed General Settle to commence widely dispersed operations around Upington and Kenhardt.

The Centre and Left Sections were deployed with patrolling columns while the Right Section and Battery HQ were to remain in a static role in what was reputed as a miserable place called Dragoender. There is ample evidence that the Imperial Forces had failed to learn some hard lessons from the First Boer War in 1881 in that they persisted in the break-up of formed units. Critics of the Gunners often fail to appreciate that it is the role of the Artillery to provide advice and effective fire support for the plan of manoeuvre of the Supported Arm (no matter how flawed these plans are judged to be at the time and after their execution). Apparently the citizens of NSW were more aware of this than many of the Field Commanders as letters to the Sydney papers of the day show. They questioned why one of the best trained units sent from the Colonies was being so seriously misemployed.

As 1900 was drawing to a close, this already unsatisfactory situation was exacerbated as the Boers changed their tactics from fixed engagements in favour of a campaign of guerilla warfare. In October 1900, while the Battery was concentrating at Prieska, the Left Section (commanded by a very capable officer in Lieutenant Christian) was ordered to Colesburg which was astride the main railway line to Pretoria.

Meanwhile, the Right Section was involved in several actions around Vryburg in mid-November 1900. During one of these actions, one gun managed to get 190 rounds away while Gunner B. Gowing died of wounds sustained in this engagement.

The Left Section (as often happens in warfare) was destined to see the greater part of the action in the coming months. On 21 February 1901 the Section was in support of a Column under Lieutenant Colonel E.M.S. Crabbe. The Column consisted of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Grenadier Guards and about 150 mounted troops. Their mission was to trap De Wet's force who were operating in the immediate area. The Section was soon called into action in support of an attack on a ridge near Pampoepenpan. The Section was able to keep pace with the attacking force (in this case, the Victorian Mounted Rifles) but was able to come into action quickly and effectively silence the enemy guns deployed on the ridge. DeWet withdrew to the East but on 22 February 1901 the Boer camp was observed at Disselfontein. The Left Section went rapidly into action and engaged the Boer guns causing them to be abandoned. During these operations, which covered a period of three months, Christian's Left Section showed an exemplary ability to keep pace with the leading elements of Crabbe's force and to be decisively engaged on those occasions when a quick response was called for. It was recorded that of all of the Artillery Sections employed in this manner, Christian's Section was the only one to

keep up the pace throughout. This effort came at a great cost in terms of the condition of the horses and the physical demands on the men.

In March 1901, the Left Section left Crabbe's force and was allotted to another Column under Lieutenant Colonel H.M. Grenfell in the Graaff-Reinet area. This move was as inexplicable as it was pointless and only a month later the Section joined a new Column forming up under Lieutenant Colonel A.G. Ingouville Williams at Klerksdorp (160km SW of Johannesburg). Christian became ill and was replaced by an unknown officer from the RA who greatly improved the dress sense of the Battery but apparently was well regarded despite this. Eventually the Section was commanded by Lieutenant R.G. King who had recently arrived with 43 reinforcements from Australia.

During this period, the Right Section was engaged in garrison, patrolling and escort duties in the Vryburg area but eventually moved to the South Transvaal in April 1901 to join other forces tasked to clear that area. The remainder of the Battery (the long suffering Centre Section and Battery HQ) joined Colonel Rimington's Column at Standerton (150 km SE of Johannesburg). There was a change of command during this period with the Battery Command being assumed by Captain Antill, locally promoted to Major.

The Left Section was still in support of Ingouville William's Column which had the task of clearing the Western Transvaal of De La Rey's forces and if possible to capture De La Rey. De La Rey was considered to be one of the more effective of the Boer leaders. In early May 1901, the Column had a series of encounters with De La Rey's forces but lacked sufficient strength to effectively engage him. The Column was chasing a "Phantom" enemy but did have one small success. On 24 May 1901, Ingouville Williams attacked a laager under the command of Van Rensburg at Leewsdooins. The Left Section provided covering fire while the 2<sup>nd</sup> NSW Mounted Rifles rushed the objective capturing 28 Boers and 47 wagons and carts. After this excitement, the Column returned to Klerksdorp.

In late June 1901, Ingouville William's column was absorbed into a larger Force and committed to a clearing operation to the NW of Johannesburg. While this was happening, orders were received for the Left Section to leave this Force and concentrate with the rest of the Battery at Standerton (where one is left to assume that the majority of the Battery had been employed in a series of ineffective operations since April 1901). On the departure of the Left Section, Colonel Rimington was very appreciative of the service given by the Left Section. It was recorded that Rimington greatly valued the support of the Gunners and that of the elements of A Battery in particular. Apparently during engagements, Rimington would take station with the Section as it came into action and would observe and direct the fighting from the gun line.

In late July 1901, the Battery was recalled to Australia and this heralded the end of the Battery's service in the South African War. The concentration at Standerton was the first time that the Battery had been together as a complete unit in 12 months. The Battery spent some time on "make and mend" activities before moving to Capetown to embark on the "Harlech Castle" in mid-August

1901 for the journey back to Sydney. The Battery arrived in Sydney on 15 September 1901 having lost one soldier in action, one who died in an accident and 45 men invalided back to Australia through illness. Despite a frustrating series of events during the Battery's service in the War, there is a well documented legacy to the efficiency, professionalism and the high state of morale of the Battery in carrying out all of the tasks required of it in 18 months of operations.

## **Service Prior to the Great War**

In 1903, the Battery was re-designated A Instructional Cadre. In 1904, A Battery was formally honoured for its service in the South African War when King Edward VII presented A Battery with a King's Banner. This was not a unique event for participating Australian troops (at least the NSW Lancers and the Medical Corps were accorded similar honours). However, it is believed that this honour is unique among Commonwealth Artillery units and the award has always been a great source of pride to those serving in A Field Battery. (During its tour of South Vietnam, A Field Battery celebrated its Centenary Birthday on 1 August 1971. A Banner Party was sent home to Australia for the Centenary Celebration Parade at Victoria Barracks, Sydney where His Excellency the Governor General, Sir Paul Hasluck presented the RAA with the Queen's Banner which replaced the 67 year old King's Banner. On 25 April 1972 a detachment from the Battery laid up the King's Banner at the Australian War Memorial as part of the Anzac Day Commemoration Service.)

In 1911, A Instruction Cadre was redesignated as No 1 Battery Royal Australian Field Artillery (RAFA).

## **The Great War**

When the Great War broke out in August 1914, the then Commander of No 1 Battery RAFA, Major S.E. Christian, called a muster parade of the Battery at Victoria Barracks on the day war was declared and called for volunteers for an Australian overseas force. The Battery stepped forward as one. The Battery sailed with the first convoy on 18 October 1914 and disembarked at Egypt on 1 November 1914 with the Australian Imperial Force, destined as it was, for Gallipoli. Despite great difficulties, one gun was landed at Gallipoli on 26 April 1915 and fired some 500 rounds before being withdrawn. The Battery as a part of 1<sup>st</sup>. AFA Brigade was landed at Helles on 3 May 1915 in support of British and French formations. The Battery re-embarked and moved back to Anzac Cove in early October 1915. During this period of the Campaign, the Turks achieved a measure of effective counter-battery fire which made life very difficult for the Gunners. The Battery was withdrawn from Gallipoli on 20 December 1915 as part of the overall plan to close that part of our history.

After a brief re-organization in Egypt, the Battery embarked at Alexandria on 21 March 1916 and moved to the Western Front through the port of Marseilles. The Battery travelled north and went into the line near Fromelles on 19 May 1916. The Battery served with distinction in France and Belgium in

all the actions fought by its Divisions. It also, at various times, supported British, Canadian, French and American attacks against the Germans. The Battery fired on its last target in the Great War on 3 October 1918. The Battery was withdrawn from the line through a series of rest areas finally arriving at Mettet (SW of Namur) in mid-December 1919. The Battery quartered at Mettet until March 1919 when the remaining Battery members (now ingloriously titled Quota Number 43) embarked at Plymouth on 22 June 1919 arriving back in Sydney in September 1919.

## **1919 - 1939**

On the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales to Australia in 1919 and in appreciation of No 1 Battery's service to himself and also to commemorate the Battery's service in the South African and Great Wars; the Prince granted No 1 Battery RAFA the privilege of wearing a white lanyard on the left shoulder. A Field Battery is the only Battery in the Royal Australian Artillery which has the distinction of wearing the lanyard on the left shoulder.

On 1 July 1927, No 1 Battery was redesignated as 1st Field Battery RAA. On 19 July 1930 it became the 1st Field Cadre RAA. When His Majesty granted the title "Royal" to Militia Units of the Australian Artillery, the Permanent Artillery became and still is "The Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery". Between 1931 and 1937, the Battery had the apparent good fortune to be commanded by Major H.B. Sewell. By all accounts, Sewell was an inspirational leader who brought out the best in those he commanded. It is recorded that nearly all of the Gunners who served under him during this period were commissioned in World War 2.

In 1937 the first Australian Instructional Corps Artillery Course was designed to produce instructors. With the Munich scare in 1938 the strength of the Battery was increased and on 1 February 1939 the Battery regained its correct title A Field Battery RAA.

## **World War Two**

With the outbreak of World War 2 in September 1939, A Field Battery once again was volunteered for overseas service but were denied that opportunity as they were employed as the Depot Battery supporting the School of Artillery (Field, Medium and Survey) and also at Holsworthy. Their opportunity finally came on 28 July 1943 when A Field Battery was redesignated 2<sup>nd</sup>. Mountain Battery and on 1 September 1943, departed for New Guinea as a designated Artillery Unit with a special task. The Battery arrived in Port Moresby on 19 September 1943 and undertook re-training and acclimatization activities. (the Battery was issued with four US 75mm pack howitzers in two sections of two guns). The Battery left for Lae by air on 15 November 1943 and subsequently supported operations in the Sattelburg area from 17-26 November 1943. On 14-15 December 1943, the Battery moved to Katika where it languished for some months until it was redeployed in February 1944 by sea, road then air to

Dumpu. This move was to support 7 Division operations in the Shaggy Ridge/Kankiry area. In May 1944, the Battery moved to Lae for a period of rest and re-organization. This extended until November 1944 but at this time, the Battery was warned for service on Bouganville in support of 3 Division. The Battery arrived at Torokina on 11 November 1944 and set up camp with the 136 Field Artillery Battalion (US Army). The Battery supported operations on Bouganville until early May 1945 when hostilities ceased in the Torokina sector. The Battery was then placed in support of a new operation on the Numa Numa Trail and this continued until the end of the War on 15 August 1945. The Battery returned to Torokina and remained there until September 1945.

Plans were in progress not only for the return of large numbers of troops to Australia but also for a British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) to serve in Japan. This latter aspect was to have an effect on the recent history of the Battery.

## **BCOF and Post World War Two**

It was decided that the Australian component for BCOF would be established from troops still at Balikpapan. The major formation was to be 34 Brigade with the Artillery support being provided by a newly raised 6 Field Battery RAA. The plan was for this force to concentrate at Morotai during October-November 1945 and depart for Japan on 7 December 1945. Some aspects of this order were countermanded by a message from Land Headquarters on 9 October 1945 to the effect that 2<sup>nd</sup>. Mountain Battery would provide the Artillery component of the Force. There is an opinion that this intervention preserved the continuity of A Field Battery as the greater majority of units returning to Australia were being disbanded.

2<sup>nd</sup>. Mountain Battery joined with 6 Battery on Morotai under the newly appointed Battery Commander Major T.A. Rodriguez MC during mid - November 1945. In reality, it was the Battery in name only as very few of the men from the New Guinea and Bouganville campaigns volunteered for service with BCOF.

The main body embarked on the "USS Pachaud Victory" on 17 February 1946 and dis-embarked at Kure on 23 February 1946. On 14 March 1946, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Mountain Battery was re-designated A Field Battery RAA and carried out intensive training at Kaitaichi. In 1947, the Battery occupied permanent barracks at Hiro and were utilized performing ceremonial duties including salutes and guards of honour. In September 1948, it was decided to reduce the Australian component of BCOF to a single Battalion and orders were issued for the remainder of the troops to return to Australia. The main body of the remaining 34 Brigade component embarked on the "HMAS Kanimbla" in December 1948 and this returning force was destined to provide the nucleus of the emerging Australian Regular Army. A Field Battery moved to North Head Manly; once again becoming the Depot Battery for the School of Artillery.

On 25 May 1949, A Field Battery was incorporated as a sub-unit of 1<sup>st</sup>.Field Regiment RAA, thus losing its independent status. Even though the Battery was a sub-unit of 1<sup>st</sup>.Field Regiment, the Battery continued to act as the Depot Battery for the School of Artillery.

Shortly after this on 25 June 1950, Australia witnessed the outbreak of the Korean War.The Australian Gunners did not serve in Korea as formed units however many Australian Gunner officers served as individuals with Australian Battalions or with the RA and other formations.

In January 1950, King George VI approved of the RAA adopting the Motto of the Royal Regiment of Artillery, "*quo fas et gloria ducunt*" (Where Right and Glory Lead) instead of "*consensu stabiles*" (Strong in Agreement). On 28 November 1951, A Field Battery RAA was given custody of the King's Banner at a formal parade held at Rawson Oval, Mosman NSW.

A decision reached on 30 November 1954 meant that A Battery, because of its history, would remain as A Field Battery whilst all other Batteries of the RAA would bear a numerical designation (though for a brief period the Battery was designated 100(A) Field Battery).

## **Malayan Emergency**

The first Australian Army units were committed to fight the Malayan Emergency in 1955. In 1957, A Field Battery was ordered to replace 105 Field Battery RAA who were coming to the end of their tour.On 1 September 1957, the Battery once again became an independent unit and on the 20 September 1957 embarked on the transport "New Australia" and disembarked at Singapore on 10 October 1957. The Battery then moved by rail to Penang. During operations in Malaya the Battery fired 77,000 rounds of 25-Pounder ammunition and 2,000 rounds of 4.2" Mortar ammunition. During its tour of Malaya, the Battery supported several Commonwealth Infantry Battalions and was closely associated with both the 48th Field Regiment RA and the 2nd Field Regiment RA. The Battery embarked at Penang on the transport "MV Flaminia" on 1 October 1959. On returning to Sydney, the Battery once again lost its independent status and re-joined 1<sup>st</sup>. Field Regiment RAA at Holsworthy on 20 October 1959. The Battery remained at Holsworthy until 1965.

## **Indonesian Confrontation**

In January 1965, A Field Battery equipped with 105mm L5 Pack Howitzers, prepared for its second tour to Malaya (now Malaysia)and on 23 June 1965 the Battery regained its independent status. The Battery flew to Malaysia and joined the 28<sup>th</sup>. Commonwealth Infantry Brigade at Terendak Garrison (near Malacca) on 21 October 1965. The Battery initially was a sub-unit of 45<sup>th</sup>. Light Regiment RA and then 6<sup>th</sup>.Light Regiment RA from early 1966. During its tour of Malaysia the Battery participated in frequent exercises on both the east and west coast, and assisted with security measures to guard against possible

Indonesian infiltration of West Malaysia. The Battery was on the verge of a five month tour in Sarawak in August 1966 but internal events in Indonesia saw the end of direct hostilities in East Malaysia (and of Confrontation itself) just as the Battery was due to depart from Malacca. On 12 September 1967 the Battery returned to Australia by air and became A Field Battery 19<sup>th</sup>. Composite Regiment RAA at Holsworthy. In October 1969 the Battery was redesignated A Field Battery 12<sup>th</sup>. Field Regiment RAA

## **The Vietnam War**

12<sup>th</sup>. Field Regiment was warned for service in South Vietnam in 1971 and the Regiment moved from Tobruk Lines, Holsworthy to Lavarack Barracks in Townsville in January 1970. On 26 January 1971 the Battery assembled in Sydney and on a parade at Victoria Barracks, A Field Battery in recognition of the approach of its Centenary Birthday and its long association with Sydney, was granted Freedom of the City of Sydney by the Lord Mayor. On 27 January 1971, the advance party emplaned for South Vietnam where it was joined by the main body at the 1<sup>st</sup>. Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat on 4 February 1971. A Field Battery and the rest of 12<sup>th</sup>. Field Regiment took part in operations in Phuoc Tuy Province until the withdrawal of the 1<sup>st</sup>. Australian Task Force in November 1971. On 7 June 1971 during a contact with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, Second Lieutenant I. Mathers, an A Field Battery Forward Observer, received mortal wounds from enemy small arms fire. His Assistant, Bombardier P.M. Maher, was later awarded the Military Medal for his part in the contact.. In addition, 50 cartridge cases, fired by the Battery to celebrate its Centenary were presented to various persons and organisations (including the Australian War Memorial which also holds the cartridge case of the first round fired by A Field Battery in South Africa in 1900).

## **Post Vietnam to the Present Day**

On 29 July 1972 at a Battery Parade at Victoria Barracks, His Excellency the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Roden Cutler VC, AK, KCMG, KCVO, CBE, KStJ unveiled the A Field Battery Memorial. The Memorial is a 16-Pounder rifled muzzle-loaded gun made in England in 1878 and believed to be the oldest gun of British origin in Australia. The Unveiling concluded the Centenary Celebrations.

After the amalgamation of the Regiments, A Field Battery became a sub-unit of the 8<sup>th</sup>./12<sup>th</sup>. Medium Regiment RAA at Holsworthy in 1972.. In late 1987 after further restructuring within the Army, A Field Battery assumed the parachute role as part of the recently designated Parachute Battalion Group based on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. In 2000, A Field Battery became the third battery of the Townsville-based 4<sup>th</sup>. Field Regiment RAA, however the Battery remained at Holsworthy. The Battery deployed to East Timor in 1999, 2002 and more recently in 2006. Its personnel have also served in recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and on non-warlike service in the Sinai.

## Acknowledgements

This article has been prepared for inclusion on the Boer War Memorial website. The following references were used in compiling this Short History of A Field Battery which is intended to record a broad Battery historical overview with a special emphasis on the Battery's service in the Boer War from 1899 to 1901:

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[www.defence.gov.au/army/a\\_fdbty/History.htm](http://www.defence.gov.au/army/a_fdbty/History.htm)

Tom Roberts "A" Battery Artillery The story behind a painting by Tom Roberts.  
Website  
["home.alphalink.com.au/~logo27/standardisation/standard\\_modernities.htm](http://home.alphalink.com.au/~logo27/standardisation/standard_modernities.htm)

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