

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Colonel Percy Walter DOBSON, MC

(1892-1975)

Percy Dobson was born in Melbourne on 16 July 1892, the younger of two sons, into a comfortable upper class family. His mother, Bertha Emma (nee Armytage) was a third generation Australian whose ancestors had pioneered sheep breeding and wool exporting from the Werribee area west of Melbourne. Both boys attended Church of England Grange Preparatory School at South Yarra and Geelong Grammar where Percy won a Headmasters Scholarship in 1905. He was a very happy student and noted that cricket and football inspired his understanding of leadership.

Dobson joined the Royal Australian Garrison Artillery (RAGA) on 1 March 1912, and was posted to Queenscliff from whence he was transferred to the AIF in 1915 along with most Coast Gunners when the threat of German naval forces in Australian waters had passed. He sailed for Britain on the *Orsova*, and, being the youngest officer, copped his share of Duty Officer on the six week voyage. In the Bay of Biscay his ship was menaced by U Boats but Royal Navy destroyers shepherded them into Devonport without incident. The 450 men went to the RGA Training Depot at Bexhill-on-Sea in Kent and trained on a variety of heavy guns before being issued with their new 8 inch and 9.2 inch howitzers, at Taunton, Dorset.

Dobson crossed the Channel with the 36th Australian Heavy Brigade (54th and 55th Batteries) to France where they went into the line near Arras. Dobson suffered an ear infection that required a mastoid operation that rendered him unfit for active service. His return to Australia was imminent, but, by contriving extra leave, he was able to pass a medical board as fit, whereupon he re-joined the 55th Battery in France. Initially his battery served on the Somme but moved along the line mainly supporting British corps and divisions over the next two years. Dobson noted that his battery fired 70 000 rounds on the Somme.

His hour of glory came on 17 November 1917 when his battery at Viller Picquet was temporarily put out of action by enemy Counter Battery Fire (CB) which damaged all guns and inflicted severe casualties. Dobson organized the retrieval of the guns for which he was awarded the Military Cross with the citation noting that:

'this officer did excellent work with the removal of gun stores for several nights under heavy shell, rifle and machine gun fire. It was mainly owing to his bearing and judgment that the work was successfully carried out. During the past two years he has repeatedly taken work of a highly dangerous and important character. He acted as Observation Post Officer during the battles of the Somme, Arras and Flanders with ability'.

In June 1918, Dobson was appointed Adjutant 36th Heavy Artillery Group (HAG) for several months, but confessed to being less happy as a staff officer than being with his gunners. His next posting was as an Air Liaison Officer between his HAG, Australian Corps HQ and No.3

Squadron, AFC. This gave him insights into the world of CB, and also of being on the receiving end of a German 77 mm barrage and aerial strafing.

Back in Australia, he returned to peace time soldiering moving from one military district to another, with slow promotion. He had been promoted captain on 1 November 1919 and appointed to the Staff Corps on 1 October 1920. Postings as an Instructor in Gunnery and Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General in the 3rd, 5th and 6th Military Districts saw him promoted to major in November 1923. At Queenscliff his battery was being inspected by Major General Hoad, who commented: 'You fuss over your gunners like a hen with a clutch of chickens'. Dobson replied, 'Thank you, Sir'. Hoad gave him a look that signified that it was not the response he was expecting. But that was 'Dobbie' as everyone knew him. He took it as a compliment.

At the outbreak of WWII, Lieutenant Colonel Dobson was OC 3rd Heavy Battery and Fortress Commander at Fort Scratchley, Newcastle. When a Japanese submarine shelled Newcastle in May 1943 Dobson was on hand to see his able battery commander Willie Watson open fire on the vessel. Its captain subsequently reported that the fire was accurate. This was the only coast battery to fire in anger during the war.

Colonel Dobson retired at the end of the war after 33 years of service. Throughout his career he embraced the old fashioned virtues of loyalty and gentlemanly conduct. He believed that loyalty had to be given to be received and that the game of life was hard and had to be faced fairly and honourably. He had a short temper but never bore a grudge. In appearance he was bow legged and stooped with a quizzical gaze that came from beneath bushy eyebrows and in his mess dress and half-Wellingtons looked anything but a man who never rode a horse.

In retirement he was president of the Newcastle Sub-Branch of the RAA Association from January 1953 until 1968 just prior to his death. One of his last acts was to persuade Newcastle City Council in 1964 to erect two 6 inch coast guns from Fort Scratchley (after Coast Artillery was abolished) near the Obelisk on Newcastle Hill. A plaque attached to each gun bore the inscription 'To all gunners..who served in war'. In 1968, however, much to his disgust, a pacifist rump on the council during the Vietnam War removed the guns just before he died.

His first marriage was in Hobart in 1919 to Phyllis Nairn Butler and the second was in Newcastle in 1937 to Dorothy Douglas Hay Ferguson. He was a member of the Newcastle Club and Legacy. He died on 25 October 1968, and was cremated with Anglican rites after a service at Newcastle Cathedral. Dobson believed the adage, '*Old soldiers never die, they simply fade away*'. He directed there should be no funeral notices or obituaries written for him.

Sources: Army Lists; P. W. Dobson, *Diary*, ed. John Appleton, John Ferguson P/L; B. N. Dobson, *Without Leave*, 62 pp. Fast Books, Glebe; C. E. W. Bean, *The AIF in France*, Vols. III, IV, V and VI; D. Horner, *The Gunners*, p.159, p.309 ; B. M. Morriss, *The Australian Siege Brigade in France 1916-1918*; P Burness, *The Big Guns*, Wartime (AWM), No.26, pp.13-17; AWM 28 2/215, p.4; AWM Record Section RCIS 3622 of 29 April 2005.