

The History of the 106th Field Battery

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'One-Oh-Six' was first raised in Egypt in 1916. Since then it has seen action in France and South Vietnam; been disbanded four times and reraised thrice; served in Singapore; and been garrisoned in Hobart, Brisbane and Townsville. In it's time it has been a howitzer battery, field battery and trials unit. It has been a part of 22nd Howitzer Brigade; 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade; 4th Field Regiment RAA; and 28th ANZUK Field Regiment.

Founding and the Western Front

106 Howitzer Battery (together with 104 and 105 Howitzer Batteries) was raised as part of 22nd Howitzer Brigade at Moaacar, near Ismalia, on the Suez Canal in Egypt. 22nd Howitzer Brigade's War Diary records that the first troops arrived in March 1916; that the brigade paraded for the first time as a unit on a 2nd Division Artillery parade on 12th March, and then entrained for Alexandria on 17th March. 22nd Howitzer Brigade sailed for Marseilles on 19th March, arriving on 25th March.

2nd Division Artillery, (4th, 5th and 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigades and 22nd Howitzer Brigade), moved from Marseilles to Le Havre where new 18 pounder guns and 4.5 inch howitzers were issued on 27th March 1916. On 8th April, 2nd Division took over part of the front line south-east of Armentieres from 34th (British) Division. 22nd Howitzer Brigade took over positions from 176th Brigade Royal Field Artillery on 10th April, less than five weeks after being formed. In his 'official history of Australia in the Great War', C.E.W. Bean records that the Royal Artillery Gunners left their old, worn guns in position for 2nd Division Artillery units to take over, and took the Australians' brand new guns in Lieu!

Initially 106 Howitzer Battery occupied billets in the 1st Division area, and did not join the Brigade until 30th April. 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade's diary records that they had 105 Howitzer Battery attached from 22nd Howitzer Brigade at least as early as 13th April. The diary entry for 29th April reads (in part) '... handed over 105 How Bty and took over 106 How Bty ...'.

Thus began 106 Howitzer Battery's long association with 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade. It was to last, almost without interruption, for nearly 35 years. Both brigades record that 106 Howitzer Battery first fired on 5th May 1916. The 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade diary entry gives a mildly dramatic account of 106 Battery's first shots fired in anger:

'Bois Grenier 5th May 1916. The Mobile How 106 Battery at 1am fired 18 shells at Bas Hau, Frenetic and Bas Champs. Two loud explosions were heard after firing at Bas Hau'.

The 22nd Howitzer Brigade diary records the implementation of a major reorganisation of the British and attached artillery on the Western front, where

howitzer brigades were abolished and their batteries distributed to existing 18-pounder brigades:

‘13th May 1916. 1200hr. 104, 105 and 106 Batteries taken over by 4, 5 and 6 FA Bdes. 19, 20 and 21 Bdes were transferred, making this the 22 FA Bde. HQ 22 How transferred to 22 FA Bde. HQ 22 How Bde transferred to 22 FA Bde. The batteries remained grouped as before for tactical work’.

6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade diary merely records:

‘14 May. 1800 hr. New establishment created. 106 How Bty joins Brigade and 21 Bty going to 22 AFA Brigade.’

See C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the Great War*, Volume 5, Appendix 1, which explains this and other, reorganisations affecting the Australian Artillery during World War 1.

6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade was organic to 2nd Division Artillery until the spring of 1917, when it became an ‘Army Brigade’ and served where, and as, required. From April to July 1916, 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade served in Flanders, mainly around Ypres. Between July and September 1916 it was on the Somme, then back to Flanders for a fortnight. It was in Picardy from October 1916 to May 1917, then back to Flanders between July 1917 and April 1918, and on the Somme again from April to July 1918. In August 1916 the Brigade took part in the drive to the Somme River. The following month it was with Australian and American troops in the attacks on the Hindenburg Outpost line and the push to Le Catelet.

In October 1918 the rapid advance left the Brigade behind – its exhausted horses could tow the guns no further. Like most AIF troops, 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade was not actually involved in the final fighting up to Armistice Day. During December the Brigade moved east and took up a garrison position at Boussu – Lez – Walcourt in Western Belgium, where it remained until disbandment in March 1919.

During World War 1, 106 Battery, as part of 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade and occasionally acting independently, supported 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th Australian Divisions; 32nd and 62nd British Divisions; and 27th and 30th American Divisions. The 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade diaries record that 106 Howitzer Battery members were awarded two Military Crosses; one Distinguished Conduct Medal; seven Military Medals; one Meritorious Service Medal; one Mention In Dispatches and one Belgian Croix de Guerre. The citations for some of these awards add substance to the bland statistics of the war’s progress and show the character and bravery of some of the men who made up the Battery.

The Battery’s first award was a Military Cross to Lieutenant R. Collings in July 1917 for:

‘...having regard to heavy shelling and the fact that all its own officers were incapacitated one by one, the continuation of the battery continually in action ... was essentially due to the character, bravery and self discipline of this officer...’

Bombardier W.J. Wilson won both the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Military Medal, the latter in October 1918 for:

‘...bravery and the delivery of dispatches through HE and gas barrages.’

Perhaps 106 Howitzer Battery’s greatest day of glory was 8th August 1918 – the day Ludendorff described as ‘Der Schwartz Tag’ – when the 4th Army, (which included the Australian Corps), shattered the German front on the Somme. Initially positioned near Villers Bretonneux, 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade, (supporting 5th Division), moved about 10, 000 yards during the day to Bayonvillers.

In the official History C.D.U. Bean records that 106 Howitzer Battery was caught in heavy shelling and had three guns put out of action near Hamel. The Brigade diary records that Gunner H. Holman was awarded the Military Medal during this action for:

‘bravery and devotion to duty at Villers Bretonneux on 8 August 1918 when he continued firing his gun single handed when the rest of the detachment became casualties.’

The Battery Commander of 106 Howitzer Battery, Major A.M. Grainger, was Mentioned In Dispatches, in part for:

‘on 8 August 1918, at Villers Bretonneux having emplaced his Battery 1200 yards from the front line, fought it with the greatest determination and at one time had four guns out of action...’

The Brigade diary does not resolve the discrepancy between Bean’s statement that 106 Howitzer Battery had three guns out of action, and Grainger’s citation which says that four guns were out of action, for it fails to mention this incident at all!

The diary does however record that on that morning, between 0420 hours and 0643 hours, the 4.5-inch howitzers fired 1932 rounds. 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade spent its last few months quietly at Boussu – Lez – Walcourt. Equipment maintenance, the return of stores, education classes and local leave filled the troop’ days, while Christmas Day 1918 was celebrated in a comparatively lavish manner by those who had survived the fighting. The Prince of Wales awarded medals on a parade on 2nd January 1919 and later that month the ‘ Early 1915 – era’ were repatriated to Australia.

During February 1919 the numbers dwindled as men marched out. The last entry in the 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade diary was made on 9th March 1919. It reads ‘Boussu – Lez – Walcourt. Bde marched out for attachment to units of the 4 AFA Bde in accordance with demob Order 15, and cease to function from this date.’ Across the bottom half of the page is scrawled the final word: ‘FINNISH’.

Between Wars

6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade was re-raised in Tasmania on 31st March 1921. It initially consisted of 16, 17, and 18 Field Batteries and 106 Howitzer Battery, though by 1929 it appears that only 16 Field and 106 Howitzer Batteries were still active. 106 Howitzer Battery was based in Hobart during this period. The Battery was disbanded for the second time on 29th February 1941, when 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade was reorganised to create 6th Field Regiment RAA, consisting of the 16 and 17 Field Batteries.

The Lure of the East

106 had to wait a quarter of a century for its second resurrection. In December 1966 it was re-raised as 106 Field Battery in 4th Field Regiment at Wacol in Brisbane. During April and May 1967 the Battery moved to South Vietnam, where it served with 1st Australian Task Force until March 1968. Major E.D.M. Cape commanded the Battery until December 1967 when Major P.C. Jones assumed command. The Battery returned home to Australia in early 1968. Warrant Officers Class Two H. Iddon and D. Duggan were the Battery Sergeants Major.

106 Field Battery was the Direct Support Battery to 7th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment for most of the tour. Much of its time was spent in Phuc Tuy Province, through the Battery also operated in Bien Hoa Province during the Tet Offensive in February 1968. On three occasions the Battery acted as infantry, forming a 'fifth' company of the Battalion during cordon and search operations of villages in Phuc Tuy Province. During Operation Ballarat in August – September 1967, Lieutenant N.J. Clark, one of the Battery's Forward Observers won the Military Cross while working with A Company, 7th Battalion. During this particular action the Battery fired over 800 rounds in just over an hour. On Operation Coburg, during the Tet Offensive in February 1968, Gunner M.B. Williams won the Military Medal. He was a signaller with a Forward Observer's party supporting C Company, 7th Battalion.

The Battery returned to Wacol for a few months in March 1968, then, in July 1968, it moved to Townsville to prepare for its second tour in South Vietnam. Under the command of Major D.J. Gilroy, and with Warrant Officer Class Two A.W. Singh as Battery Sergeant Major, 106 Field Battery returned to South Vietnam in February 1970. Once again the Battery was in Direct Support of 7th Battalion for most of its tour, during which it fired about 68,000 rounds including over 1000 in one day while supporting a bunker clearing operation by D Company.

Much of the latter part of the tour was spent at the 'Horseshoe' Fire Support Base, though one gun from the battery was deployed on the coast near Long Phuoc Hai at an infantry 'Night Defence Position' called 'Brigid'. The following members of 106 Field Battery were Mentioned In Dispatches for their service on that tour: Major D.J. Gilroy; Captain B.J. Campbell; Sergeant B.J. Ruddock; and Sergeant M. O'Sullivan (AACC). The second tour of South Vietnam finished in January 1971 and the Battery returned to Townsville. The new Battery Commander was Major N. De La Hunty however his tenure was cut short with an appointment as the Second-in-Command of 28th ANZUK Field Regiment in Singapore. As a consequence he handed over command of the Battery to Major J.H. Townley.

In December 1971 the Battery moved to Nee Soon Barracks, Singapore to become part of 28th ANZUK Field Regiment, under the command of Major J.H. Townley, with Warrant Officer Class Two W.J. Gallagher as Battery Sergeant Major. 106 Field Battery ended its tour in Singapore in November 1973, and on the 9th January 1974 the Battery rear party returned to Australia signalling the disbandment of the Battery for the third time.

Of Trials and Turtles

In October 1975, 106 Battery was re-raised for the third time, rejoining 4th Field Regiment in Townsville. Captain R.J. Collins was acting Battery Commander until Major P.S. Sadler assumed command in January 1976. Warrant Officer Class Two E.B.N. Hamson was the first Battery Sergeant Major, followed in May 1976 by Warrant Officer Class Two L.W. McMullin.

After taking its place for a few months as 4th Field Regiment's 'Senior Gun Battery', 106 Field Battery became the core of the RAA Trials Unit. From August 1976 to 1977 the Trials Unit evaluated the XM204 105mm Field Howitzer; XM198; FE-70 155mm Medium Howitzer; and a number of associated gun tractors. Trials were carried out at Lavarack Barracks; High Range Training Area; Tropical Trials Establishment (Cowley Beach and Tully); and in the Hughenden area. In November 1977, 106 Battery disbanded for the fourth time, having finished its Trials commitments.

Some of its members moved to Holsworthy shortly afterwards, to join 104th Field Battery, which was being re-raised in 8th/12th Medium Regiment. This was not without significance to 106th Field Battery. 104, 105 and 106 Howitzer Batteries were raised together as part of 22nd Howitzer Brigade in March 1916, but on the re-organisation of May 1916, 104 Battery became part of 4th Australian Field Artillery Brigade. It was into this Brigade that the last elements of 6th Australian Field Artillery Brigade (including 106 Howitzer Battery) were absorbed when it disbanded in March 1919.

Prior to its first tour in South Vietnam the Battery acquired the nickname 'The Turtles', which members of 106 regarded with affection. Shortly before the disbandment of the Battery for the fourth time, Department of Defence (Army Office) approved a battery crest design showing a Green Turtle on a gold field, surrounded by a brown border. The gold is for the sands of Egypt, the brown for France's agricultural land and the green for the jungles of Vietnam. This crest was displayed publicly for the first time on the Battery guns and vehicles during the final parade of 106 Battery at Lavarack Barracks on 3rd November 1977.