

# 9th Machine Gun Company

## 9th Brigade, 3rd Division, AIF





Machine Gun Companies were units attached to the Brigade with the same numeric designation, in this instance, the 9th Brigade. Later in the war they were consolidated into Battalions of four Machine Gun Companies, attached to each Division. The 9<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company was later absorbed into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Battalion

The 9th Brigade was drawn largely from NSW and comprised the 33rd, 34th, 35th and 36th Battalions.

Accordingly, the service records of MG Companies and Battalions reflected that of their parent Brigades and Divisions. The men were often similarly drawn from the Battalions of the Brigades and Divisions to which the Machine Gun Companies / Battalions belonged. Their operations reflected those of their parent Brigades and supported Battalions. For greater detail on this units' operations the reader is referred to the AWM War Diaries.

MG Companies and Battalions were equipped with the legendary Vickers Medium Machine Gun. This weapon was served by a crew of three and mounted on a tripod. It was not easily portable and was

generally sited in a prepared fixed position. Its direct counterpart on the German side was the Maxim 'Spandau' MG08, a weapon of similar appearance and capability.

Both the Vickers and MG08 had a distinctive appearance largely because of a cylindrical water jacket sleeve around the barrel which was designed to cool the barrel when firing at the rapid rate. The MG08 was mounted on a characteristic 'sled' rather than the tripod of the Vickers. They achieved continuous fire through the provision of ammunition in canvas belts (see photo).

The Vickers was renowned for its reliability, and it could maintain blistering rates of fire for extended periods, thanks to its robust design and the fact that it was water-cooled. These weapons were capable of firing at extended ranges, out to 3,000 yards.

They would be sited to provide flanking fire across a defensive front, often covering belts of barbed wire or other obstacles forcing the enemy to attack through their line of fire with devastating results; a tactic known as "enfilade fire".

It was largely the effect of well-sited German machine guns that caused such devastation among the attacking British and Dominion formations on the first day of the Somme offensive in 1916. The British "Pals" Battalions at La Boiselle and the Newfoundland Battalion at Beaumont Hamel were cut to ribbons by machine guns over 2km to their flanks that they would not have been able to hear firing at them.

They were often the lynchpin of defensive positions and thus the object of enemy attempts to neutralise them as a prelude to attack, by mortar, artillery fire or even raids by parties of grenadiers with hand and rifle grenades.

In attack they would be sited to provide indirect 'plunging fire' into enemy positions in depth at long range to prevent enemy reinforcements reaching the objective of the attack, or to disrupt attempts to withdraw, in a manner not dissimilar to artillery.

Some machine gun teams would also be assigned to follow the assaulting formations where they were to establish themselves in order to provide defensive fire across the front of the "limit of exploitation" of the attack as protection against counterattack by the enemy.

Machine guns and artillery between them were the dominant influences on the battlefields of the Great War until late in the war when manoeuvre regained importance with the advent of armoured vehicles and ground attack aircraft that could suppress enemy defences.