

## **“Rare among brass hats”: Charles Rosenthal in the First World War**

**Timothy Kemm**

It was dark; he was tired and sore. By the time the weary traveller arrived at his accommodations for the night he had already covered approximately 875 miles (1408 km). His mode of travel was bicycle – not by necessity, but by choice. It was late November 1898 when he embarked from the mining town of Coolgardie, Western Australia. A hot, Australian summer was on its way, and he was recovering from an acute bout of typhoid fever, having spent many weeks in hospital. Fortunately, it was just a touch under two and a half thousand kilometres until he reached his destination. A reprieve from his travels came at the border town of Eucla, where he found refuge in the hut of a local family. The traveller, a keen musician, noticed that this family had in their possession a piano, which was quite out of tune. Undeterred, the traveller took inventory of his supplies. There, alongside his meagre rations of food and water, he found it: his piano-tuning gear, an utterly indispensable item for any cross-continental cycle. He was able to restore the piano to a level of musical respectability before hitting the road again, tuning many more out-of-sorts pianos along the way. The city of Melbourne was in his sights, where his wife was waiting for him; only 1536 miles (2472 km) to go.<sup>1</sup>

Our intrepid traveller was Charles Rosenthal – architect by day and musician by night. In 1898 he was tuning pianos in the Australian bush; 20 years later he would be Major General Charles Rosenthal of the 2nd Infantry Division of the Australian Imperial Force, commanding thousands of men as they charged up the hill of Mont St Quentin, capturing it from the hands of the Germans, achieving what some considered to be the “single finest feat of the war”.<sup>2</sup>

Stories like this evoke images of belligerent, blustering and invariably moustachioed men from the turn of the century. Rosenthal was certainly all these things. While his time spent as a full-time cyclist and part-time piano tuner in transit from Coolgardie to Melbourne makes for a remarkable story, it is only a small chapter in the life of Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal.

---

<sup>1</sup> National Library of Australia (NLA): MS Acc08.166: Notes on overland journey (per bicycle) from Coolgardie, Western Australia, to Melbourne Victoria. December 1898. Papers of Warren Perry, circa 1860–2011.

<sup>2</sup> General Sir John Monash, *Australian Victories in France in 1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936), p. 192.



Figure 1: *Charles Rosenthal*, John Longstaff, 1919, Australian War Memorial: ART02988.

### **A Place in History**

Charles Rosenthal was born in Berrima, New South Wales, in 1875 to a Danish father and a Swedish mother. His military service began at age 17 when he joined the Geelong Battery of the Victorian Garrison Artillery, and his professional soldiering began in 1908 when he joined the Australian Field Artillery. Rosenthal was a singer of some repute and would often take partake in evening concerts and performances.<sup>3</sup> As well as exercising his baritone voice, he could also play the piano, organ and the violin.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after war broke out in August 1914, Rosenthal was seconded to the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) with the rank of major and given command of the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade.<sup>5</sup> Having been promoted to lieutenant-colonel, he embarked for active service in September 1914. Rosenthal landed on the beaches of Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 with the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade. He served on the Western Front as Commander, Royal Artillery (CRA), the senior artillery officer in the 4th

---

<sup>3</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Extracts from Press Criticism 1902–1905. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011.

<sup>4</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Notes from discussion with Rosenthal, 3 January 1952. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011.

<sup>5</sup> Warren Perry, “Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal: Soldier, Architect and Musician”, *Victorian Historical Magazine*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (August, 1969), p. 122.

Australian Division, which saw him promoted to colonel, then brigadier-general. Having been given command of the 9th Infantry Brigade in August 1917, in May 1918 he was promoted to major general and given command of the 2nd Division. As well as the Gallipoli landings, Rosenthal took part in fabled Anzac operations at Pozières, Mouquet Farm, the Somme, Messines and Third Ypres. As divisional commander he was involved in attacks on Hamel, Mont St Quentin, the Hindenburg Line and Montbrehain, to name a few. He was wounded five times, Mentioned in Despatches seven times, made a Knight Commander of the Bath and a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George, and awarded the Distinguished Service Order, the Belgian Croix de Guerre, the French Croix de Guerre and the Légion d'honneur.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2: Colonel Rosenthal, c. 1914, State Library of NSW: PXA 1011/23.

After the Armistice, Rosenthal became commander of the AIF depots in the United Kingdom and was involved in the demobilisation and repatriation of overseas forces. In the inter-war years he resumed his architectural career, served two terms in NSW State Parliament, a term as president of the Australian Museum in Sydney, another two stints as commander of the 2nd Division (now part of the Citizens Military Forces), and declared bankruptcy during the Great Depression. There are rumours that Rosenthal was head of the NSW branch of the Old Guard – a secret, pro-white, pro-Empire, proto-fascist and anti-Labor organisation.<sup>7</sup> There is enough evidence in Rosenthal's public remarks to conclude that he shared the sentiments and political ideology of the movement: he often spoke of his commitment to the British Empire, as he spoke often of the need for Australia to expand and

---

<sup>6</sup> National Archives of Australia (NAA): B2455, ROSENTHAL CHARLES.

<sup>7</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Correspondence with Robert Darroch, July–August 1977. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011

accelerate its military production and capabilities, declaring in 1920 that he intended to put “every ounce of energy into the military life of Australia”.<sup>8</sup> For this he was accused of being a “jingo imperialist” and an “anti-Australian war maker” who “dreams war, thinks war, and is everlastingly talking war”.<sup>9</sup> While such sentiments may be shared by many veterans, alleged involvement with a secret, right-wing paramilitary organisation such as the Old Guard is another matter entirely. Allegations surrounding the extent of Rosenthal’s involvement with the Old Guard are beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is worth noting that it is believed that Rosenthal was inspiration for the character Benjamin Cooley – an ex-soldier and leader of secret, fascist paramilitary organisation the Diggers’ Club – in D.H. Lawrence’s 1923 novel set in Australia, *Kangaroo*.<sup>10</sup>

Rosenthal was appointed administrator of Norfolk Island in 1937 and remained in that role for the duration of the Second World War. He died in 1954, aged 79.

### **Downright Reckless**

Rosenthal was no château general.<sup>11</sup> Accounts described how he spent his time “daring the Turk or the Boche to drill holes in him”, and noted that his “continued existence [was] one of the strange manifestations of fate in war”.<sup>12</sup> Having been wounded at Gallipoli in May 1915 after a close encounter with a Turkish shell, he concluded that he was “not destined to be killed by shrapnel” and wondered whether the prayers of safety that he received in his letters were responsible for his lucky escape.<sup>13</sup> He conducted himself on the front lines like a man comfortable in the assurance that he was protected by divine intervention.

Danger was all in a day’s business for Rosenthal, and his contemporaries recall he encountered it “equable and laughing”.<sup>14</sup> This style of leadership was fraught with risk, however, and on occasion Rosenthal would forget that the role of divisional commander held different responsibilities than that of the front-line soldier. Some of his actions could be considered irresponsible, if not downright reckless. On 19 July 1918, Divisional Commander Rosenthal spent the morning with Brigadier Robertson and his Brigade Major examining enemy territory at the Western end of Railway Mound, east of Villers–Bretonneux. As Charles Bean tells the story in the Official History, Rosenthal was “resplendent in red staff cap and gorget patches”.<sup>15</sup> As the officers were about to return to their trenches, their reconnaissance complete, Rosenthal was hit by a German sniper’s

---

<sup>8</sup> *Morning Bulletin*, Rockhampton, 21 January 1920, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *National Advocate*, Bathurst, 28 May 1921, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Pierce, “Dubious Conclusions”, *Age*, Melbourne, 15 August 1981, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Stanley, *Men of Mont St Quentin: Between Victory and Death*, (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2009), pp. 41–42.

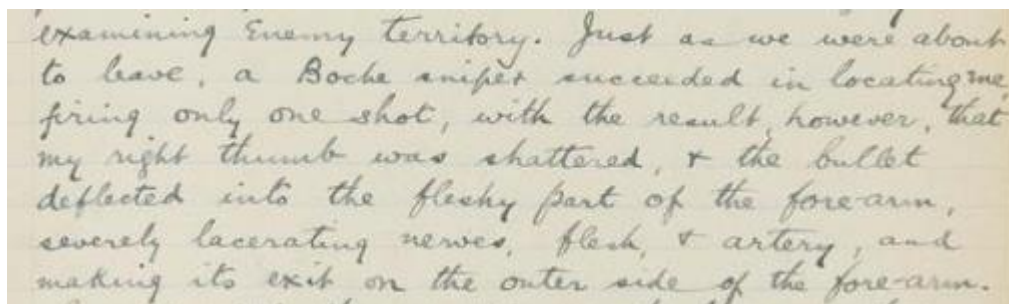
<sup>12</sup> Ek Dum [pseud.], *Bulletin*, Vol. 75, no. 3875 (19 May 1954), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> State Library of NSW (SLNSW): 412443: Rosenthal Diaries, 25 September 1914–5 January 1920. Entry for 5 May, 1915.

<sup>14</sup> Ek Dum [pseud.], *Bulletin*, Vol. 75, no. 3875 (19 May 1954), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, Vol. VI, p. 375.

bullet. Rosenthal's diary entry for that day records that the bullet shattered his right thumb, "severely lacerating nerves, flesh, & artery, and making its exit on the outer side of the fore-arm".<sup>16</sup> Rosenthal was forced to return to England to receive treatment on his wound, and did not resume his command until 6 August, two days before the Allies launched the Hundred Days Offensive – a succession of operations that would end the war.<sup>17</sup>



examining enemy territory. Just as we were about to leave, a Boche sniper succeeded in locating me firing only one shot, with the result, however, that my right thumb was shattered, & the bullet deflected into the fleshy part of the fore-arm, severely lacerating nerves, flesh, & artery, and making its exit on the outer side of the fore-arm.

Figure 3: Rosenthal Diary, 19 July 1918, SLNSW.

Bean was unimpressed. He thought "Old Rosenthal" to be reckless in his actions and thoughtless in his choice of attire, noting that a digger seeing Rosenthal in his crimson regimentals remarked, "Struth Bill, there goes the bloody Salvation Army". Bean lamented Rosenthal's lack of caution: instead of "creeping out and lying on the parapet well back and taking a good long careful look", they were standing on the western end "in full view".<sup>18</sup> While Rosenthal had his steel helmet in his hand rather than on his head, it should be noted that he was shot in the hand and not the head; perhaps he had the right idea after all.

Shot and suffering a "considerable loss of arterial blood", rather than retreating to seek medical attention, Rosenthal rested where he was for a short while, as he was feeling "rather groggy".<sup>19</sup> It was only when German artillery began to land "uncomfortably near" that Rosenthal made his way to the regimental aid post to have a medical officer properly dress the wound. Fearing that he would be evacuated to England for further treatment, Rosenthal sought to be transferred to an Australian General Hospital in nearby Abbeville so he could remain close to the front lines.<sup>20</sup> This cunning plan was foiled ten days later when Surgeon General Neville Reginald Howse visited and declared that it was Rosenthal's duty to go at once to England to receive the best treatment.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> SLNSW: 412443: Rosenthal Diaries, 25 September 1914–5 January 1920. Entry for 19 July, 1918.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Entry for 6 August, 1918.

<sup>18</sup> Australian War Memorial (AWM): AWM38 3DRL 606/116/1: Charles Bean Diary June–September 1918. Entry for 20 July 1918.

<sup>19</sup> SLNSW: 412443: Rosenthal Diaries, 25 September 1914–5 January 1920. Entry for 19 July, 1918.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Entry for 20 July–1 August 1918.



Figure 4: *3rd Australian General Hospital, Abbeville*, Arthur Streeton, 1918, AWM: ART03529.

This was the fifth time Rosenthal was wounded during the war. Spending his time away from the front lines eager to return to the battlefield, Rosenthal continued to receive official correspondence in hospital and was kept informed on divisional matters.<sup>22</sup> He later recalled that his primary concern was whether or not the wound would affect his ability to play the piano.<sup>23</sup>

While there is no record of Rosenthal being chastised for his reckless behaviour by his military superiors, he was rebuked by none other than King George V. When Rosenthal presented to the knighting ceremony of General John Monash with his arm in a sling, the monarch remarked that he could not have his generals getting wounded this way.<sup>24</sup> Rosenthal's arm was still in a sling as he directed the 2nd Division through their final operations on the Western Front.

When Rosenthal was brigadier general in command of the 9th Brigade, divisional command ordered the capture of more German prisoners. Rosenthal insisted on going out with a small party to tape out the planned positions of new posts for lines of barbed wire.<sup>25</sup> Encountering a party of six German soldiers, Rosenthal called on the group to halt and drew his revolver when they instead attempted a daring escape. He winged one German with his revolver; his colonel winged another. This was enough to encourage the surrender of the remaining four. The sight of a brigadier general returning from a reconnoitre with his own party of prisoners was an amusing sight for the troops. "Colonel", Rosenthal said to the battalion commander upon arrival, "if your men can't capture prisoners, just send down to Brigade Headquarters and we will."<sup>26,27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Perry, *Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal: Soldier, Architect and Musician*, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Notes from discussion with Rosenthal, 30 September 1951. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011.

<sup>25</sup> AWM: AWM38 3DRL 606/109/1: Charles Bean Diary June–September 1918. Entry for 4 May 1918.

<sup>26</sup> SLNSW: 412443: Rosenthal Diaries, 25 September 1914–5 January 1920. Entry for 4 May 1918.

<sup>27</sup> *Sunday Times*, Sydney, 4 January 1920, p. 3.

These are examples of the “spirited front-line leadership” of a commander who “loved not only to be in the front line but to be seen there”.<sup>28</sup> This style of leadership endeared Rosenthal to the men under his command. Later accounts recall that before his men went anywhere into a “sticky corner”, Rosenthal went first.<sup>29</sup> According to Bean, the troops “leapt at the breezy courage that was keen to test any danger before they entered it”.<sup>30</sup> Of course, earning the popularity and respect of your charges alone is not enough to gain promotion in the AIF, you must also impress those above you.

## Rosie

Excelling as an artillery commander, Rosenthal so impressed Lieutenant General William Birdwood that by August 1917 Birdwood had Rosenthal pencilled in to take the next vacant infantry division command position.<sup>31</sup> But first, Rosenthal – an artillery man since the turn of the century – would need experience as an infantry commander.<sup>32</sup> In August 1917 Rosenthal was given command of the 9th Infantry Brigade, part of Monash’s 3rd Division. His predecessor, Brigadier General Alexander Jobson, had lost Monash’s confidence after the battles of Messines, and was perceived as a leader who could not make up his mind. Later accounts state he drew Monash’s ire because of his pessimism and his tendency to magnify difficulties, in violation of one of Monash’s “fundamental principles of command”.<sup>33</sup> Optimistic Rosenthal was selected as his replacement and soon brought to the brigade, as described by Bean, a “robustness and audacity intensely welcome to its members”.<sup>34</sup> According to later sources, he was seen to be a decisive leader whose “knockabout attitude” and belligerence was like a “fresh draught to a man thirsty for natural stimulant”.<sup>35</sup> According to Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie Morshead, commander of the 33rd Battalion, there was “all the difference in the world” between Rosenthal and Jobson.<sup>36</sup> ‘Rosenthal is a man’, Morshead had said.<sup>37</sup> Bean noted in his diary that in 1917 the 9th Brigade was in poor shape, giving special mention to the 34th and 35th Battalions.<sup>38</sup> It was Rosenthal’s task to turn the 9th around, and in this he was successful: his leadership infused new life into the brigade.<sup>39</sup> Correspondent Keith Murdoch remarked that the 9th Brigade under Rosenthal

---

<sup>28</sup> Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, Vol. V, pp. 300–301.

<sup>29</sup> Ek Dum [pseud.], *Bulletin*, Vol. 75, no. 3875 (19 May 1954), p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, Vol. V, p. 301.

<sup>31</sup> P.A. Pedersen, *Monash as Military Commander* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1985), p. 185.

<sup>32</sup> Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, Vol. V, p. 300.

<sup>33</sup> Pedersen, *Monash as Military Commander*, p. 185.

<sup>34</sup> Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, Vol. V, p. 300.

<sup>35</sup> Pedersen, *Monash as Military Commander*, p. 185.

<sup>36</sup> AWM: AWM38 3DRL 606/93/1: Charles Bean Diary November 1917. Entry for 8 November 1917.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Perry, *Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal: Soldier, Architect and Musician*, p. 127.

was “beautifully turned out”;<sup>40</sup> General Monash reported that their “mere presence” on the Somme seemed to “stiffen up” the French soldiers stationed there.<sup>41</sup>

Rosenthal soon proved popular with the troops under his command, and was affectionately known as “Rosie”.<sup>42</sup> According to an unnamed digger, “no head of the AIF was better liked”.<sup>43</sup> Much of his popularity can be attributed to his willingness to lead from the front line. Also key to his popularity was the responsibility he felt for the welfare of his men, and the effort he put into ensuring their comfort. Rosenthal said his predecessor Brigadier General Jobson was a “good soldier for training” but never visited the front-line troops.<sup>44</sup> Rosenthal, to the contrary, was a commander who would undertake his front line inspections on foot, often covering distances of up to 20 miles (32 km), and refusing the food and drink offered to him by units because he did not want to take from the rations of his men.<sup>45</sup> While involved with the repatriation of AIF troops to Australia after the Armistice, Rosenthal made a point of personally inspecting as many ships as possible in order to check the suitability of shipboard arrangements for the comfort of the soldiers.<sup>46</sup> Generous with praise, he did not shirk away from attributing credit to his soldiers for the successes his command achieved on the battlefield. While Rosenthal received many plaudits from his superiors following victory at Mont St Quentin, after the war he was deliberate in directing praise to those who did the fighting. “Mont St Quentin was essentially a soldiers’ battle”, he said during a postwar lecture tour, with its success due “very largely to the initiation, courage and skill of the individual soldier”.<sup>47</sup> After the war, he proclaimed that he owed his successes to the Australian soldiers, “with whom no others in the world could compare, let alone equal”.<sup>48</sup> The crucial role of women was not ignored by Rosenthal either. During his postwar lecture circuit, he praised the 2,600 or so brave women who had “literally fought on every battlefield and in many cases had worked right up near the firing line”.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> *Herald*, Melbourne, 24 October 1921, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> AWM: 3DRL/2316: War letters of General Monash, Volume 2, 4 March 1917–28 December 1918. Letter dated 2 April 1918.

<sup>42</sup> *Bulletin*, Sydney, Vol. 58, No. 2996 (14 July 1937), p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Notes from discussion with Rosenthal, 7 January 1952. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011.

<sup>45</sup> Perry, *Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal: Soldier, Architect and Musician*, p. 157.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>47</sup> *Reveille*, Vol. 3, No 12 (31 August 1929), p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 16 January 1920, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Daily Mail*, Brisbane, 25 July 1921, p. 2.



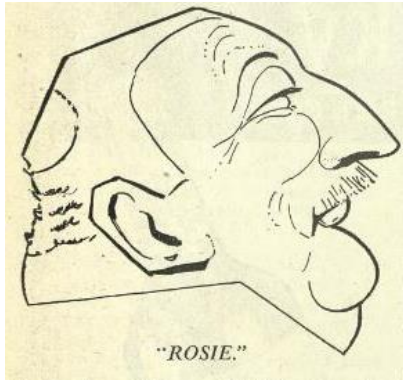


Figure 5: *Bulletin*, Vol. 58, No. 2996, 14 July 1937.

By May 1918 Rosenthal had command of the 2nd Division. There were dozens of officers qualified for the position of divisional commander; that Rosenthal was selected as one of the five is testament to his high standing in the eyes of his superiors. Rosenthal shared a personal affinity with General Monash, who was to be promoted to commander of the Australian Corps. Rosenthal quickly developed a mutual understanding with Monash and the two spent leisure time in each other's company, including a "very pleasant mountain tour" in the south of France in April 1918, a month before Rosenthal was made divisional commander.<sup>50</sup> Charles Bean accused Rosenthal of being a shameless self-aggrandizer, a trait he believed was "natural and inborn in Jews". Notwithstanding the anti-Semitism of such a remark, Bean was mistaken in believing Rosenthal to be Jewish. Rosenthal was a Methodist who often lent his baritone to the church choir.

While Rosenthal was popular, more significant was his reputation as a strong, masculine leader who could act decisively when required. By the time he took over command of the 2nd Division the Germans were in the midst of the Spring Offensive – their final push of the war. This would be followed by what was called "peaceful penetration" by the Allies – a series of small offensives which chipped away at the German lines. August 1918 marked the beginning of the Hundred Days Offensive, which ultimately led to Armistice and Allied victory. Now a divisional commander, Hamel, Amiens, Mont St Quentin, Peronne and Montbrehain all lay in front of Rosenthal. Gallipoli, the Somme and Passchendaele built Rosenthal's reputation as an able and formidable commander, over the course of the next five months he would demonstrate that he was also an educated and cultured soldier: a general who consulted widely, was well-versed in the finer points of military strategy, and who believed that preparation was the key to success.

---

<sup>50</sup> AWM: 3DRL/2316: War letters of General Monash, Volume 2, 4 March 1917–28 December 1918. Letter dated 2 April 1918.

## The Educated Soldier

Rosenthal was a soldier who was educated in finer points of warfare. Reflecting on his time in the military, he attributed his wartime successes to the fact that before the war he would spend Saturday afternoons, Sunday nights and week nights studying British text books and “practicing the lessons of war”.<sup>51</sup> For Rosenthal, military examinations were “easy stepping stones” and he was well prepared when war broke out in 1914.<sup>52</sup> Before the war he delivered military lectures on the development and potential uses of howitzer guns, citing their use in battle as far back as the 15th century.<sup>53</sup> Though known as an artillery man, Rosenthal was a student of many aspects of military operation and innovation. He had a keen interest in the latest technologies and developments, such as aviation and tanks. He studied aviation before the war and was of the belief that aeroplanes would add a new dimension to land warfare. He crash-landed while learning to fly, but this did not deter him.<sup>54</sup> He kept extensive notes on the development and use of tanks, which first appeared on the battlefield in September 1916.



Figure 6: Portrait of Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal KCB CMG DSO VD, AWM: H19207.

<sup>51</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 16 January 1920, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Tweed Daily*, Murwillumbah, 5 December 1919, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Transcript of lecture “The Howitzer” by Rosenthal on 3 August 1909. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011.

<sup>54</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Notes from discussion with Rosenthal, 30 September 1951. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011.

Rosenthal's personal papers, now held at the Australian War Memorial, contain hundreds of instructional documents, pamphlets, brochures and guides – all providing Rosenthal with a template for how to conduct a war. These documents were considered important enough for Rosenthal to carry across the Western Front and back to Australia.

Rosenthal also kept personal war diaries, which are now held at the Mitchell Library, part of the State Library of New South Wales. The thoroughness and regularity of these diaries is a testament to his dedication to his job, though they reveal precious little about the author's emotional state during the war. He does not write of fears or anxieties, and is guarded on personal matters and opinions. A small crack appears in the entry for 24 April 1915 when Rosenthal wrote, "I wonder whether there will be any further entries in this Diary."<sup>55</sup> Even when corresponding with his wife, Rosenthal refers to her formally as "Lady Rosenthal".<sup>56</sup> Rosenthal maintained regular correspondence with his family during the war. His mother died during the war, though Rosenthal makes no mention or reference to it in his diaries.<sup>57</sup> This is not for lack of love or caring; in other entries he expresses his affection for his family.

Rosenthal's diaries reveal that he was the kind of commander who learnt from his past experiences and who believed that preparation – for himself and the troops under his command – was crucial. While Rosenthal's preparation involved the meticulous study of military tactics, preparation of his troops was achieved through exhaustive training regimes. He expected high standards from his men, and his contemporary officers. He expected his fellow generals to be driven and intelligent, and was critical of those who – in his estimation – fell short in this respect.

Rosenthal was a man of transferrable skills. An architect by trade, he designed his own dug outs, which were known to be the "most up to date" of the entire Army Corps.<sup>58</sup> As befitting an architect and musician, Rosenthal was a soldier who appreciated the higher arts. His love of music was even incorporated into his command. He believed that the best deeds of the war were done under the influence of music, that bands boosted morale, and that music helped restore the soldiers to a normal state of mind after the intense emotional strains of battle.<sup>59</sup> He put this theory into practice when he was wounded at Gallipoli, entertaining his fellow casualties on the hospital ship with a rendition of Handel's "Arm, Arm Ye Brave", a hymn that Rosenthal would sing at church services in his pre-war days.<sup>60</sup> He was also an appreciator of the visual arts. When artist Arthur Streeton was commissioned to immortalise the Australian experience of war through his paintings, Rosenthal took

---

<sup>55</sup> SLNSW: 412443: Rosenthal Diaries, 25 September 1914–5 January 1920. Entry for 24 April 1915.

<sup>56</sup> AWM: PR90/129: Papers of Charles Rosenthal, 1903–1936.

<sup>57</sup> NLA: MS Acc08.166: Notes from discussion with Rosenthal, 3 October 1951. Papers of Warren Perry, c. 1860–2011.

<sup>58</sup> SLNSW: 412443: Rosenthal Diaries, 25 September 1914–5 January 1920. Entry for 20 June 1915.

<sup>59</sup> Perry, *Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal: Soldier, Architect and Musician*, p. 145.

<sup>60</sup> *Goldfields Morning Chronicle*, Coolgardie, 30 April 1898, p. 2.

him out to see Mont St Quentin after the battle had been won. The results of this excursion are now held in the Australian War Memorial and in the National Gallery of Victoria. Streeton referred to Rosenthal as “our big man” in his personal letters, and wrote about what a privilege it was to dine with “such real men – the absolute flower of Australia”.<sup>61</sup> For his part, Rosenthal complimented Streeton’s depiction of Mont St Quentin as being “wonderfully correct in detail”.<sup>62</sup>



Figure 7: *Mont St Quentin*, Arthur Streeton, 1919, National Gallery of Victoria: 1984-3.

Rosenthal was also responsible for commissioning the Anzac monument at Mont St Quentin.<sup>63</sup> The statue, depicting an Anzac soldier piercing an eagle (representing the German Empire) with a bayonet, was later destroyed by Nazi soldiers during the Second World War. A less provocative representation of an Anzac soldier was erected after the conclusion of the war.

### **“Egregious optimist”**

Though he is not likely to have admitted it, Rosenthal was not immune from making mistakes. The most acute criticism came from Harold Edward “Pompey” Elliott, who believed that Rosenthal’s over optimism resulted in the loss of many lives. In his Report of Operations for the Battle of Mont St Quentin, Pompey accused Rosenthal of misleading Monash by exaggerating the extent of his troops’

---

<sup>61</sup> Letter of Arthur Streeton, 26 October 1918. *Letters from Smike: The Letters of Arthur Streeton, 1890–1943*, eds. Anne Gray and Ann Galbally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>62</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1920, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> L.G. Short, *Anzac Bulletin*, no. 117 (4 April 1919), p. 14.

hold on the Mont. This prevented Elliott's artillery from firing on the enemy because of the false belief that Rosenthal's men held the Mont. According to Elliott, Rosenthal ordered the 5th Division to advance over ground that he claimed was clear when it was not. The 5th Division came under machine-gun fire, resulting in a "heavy casualty list and a great loss of morale". Elliott's concluding remark was serious. "A little more of that sort of thing and the men will lose all confidence in their leaders," he wrote.<sup>64</sup> The men involved in the operation were certainly none too happy with those responsible for the attack. Men were reported as saying they would have "torn to pieces" those responsible if they could get their hands on them.<sup>65</sup>

Elliott's harsh criticism of Rosenthal is unjustified. The 14th Brigade's War Diaries do not place blame on Rosenthal for the attack, nor does the personal diary of their general officer commanding James Campbell Stewart, who states that instead of Rosenthal's 6th Brigade holding the Mont, it was found in possession of the enemy.<sup>66</sup> This can be attributed to communication issues that plagued the attack on Mont St Quentin rather than any attempt on Rosenthal's part to mislead General Monash. Elliott was known to have been bitter at being passed over for divisional command, and the evidence suggests that his attack on Rosenthal is a case of sour grapes.

Other accounts of criticism of Rosenthal's command cite his tendency to be overly optimistic. Rosenthal was described by Monash as being "incapable of realising the possibility of failure".<sup>67</sup> While this may appear to be a virtue, in the hands of a commander in charge of 15,000 men it can be quite dangerous. Generals need to be acutely aware of the possibility of failure and its ramifications in order to temper the decisions that they make.

Such was Rosenthal's belief in his own ability and durability, any attempt by another officer to rein him in was met with disdain. On an occasion when Rosenthal was doing something he definitely should not have been doing – entering no man's land on a night-time reconnoitre mission – he lost his bearings before making his return to the trenches. When a soldier informed him that the particular line of trenches he was heading for was occupied by the Germans, Rosenthal dismissed him, probably with a scoff. "Nonsense, boy," he said, "I was soldiering before you were born."<sup>68</sup> A German flare then shot up in front of him, prompting a hasty reconsideration.

On another occasion when Rosenthal was doing something he definitely should not have been doing – entering no man's land on a night-time reconnoitre mission – he came upon a dead German soldier. Turning on his torch to identify the dead man, he was warned of the risk of illuminating

---

<sup>64</sup> AWM: AWM4 23/15/31: 15th Infantry Brigade Report on Operations 1–5 September 1918, p. 51.

<sup>65</sup> Bert Bishop, *The Hell, the Humour, and the Heartbreak: A Private's View of World War I*, (Sydney: Brynwood House, 1990), p. 231.

<sup>66</sup> AWM: 3DRL/1459 Diary of Brigadier General James Campbell Stewart, 1 September 1918.

<sup>67</sup> *Daily Herald*, Adelaide, 25 December 1919, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> AWM: 3DRL/6673/85b: Charles Bean, The General with Wound Stripes.

oneself in the middle of no man's land. "They can't see through me!" was the general's laughing reply.<sup>69</sup>

This evidence is consistent with Monash's appraisal of Rosenthal – that he was incapable of realising the possibility of failure. Rosenthal perhaps failed to appreciate that as a senior commander he was responsible not just for himself but for the wellbeing of many. The ramifications of the death or, worse, capture of a general would be severely detrimental to the war effort. Lighting a torch in no man's land makes for an amusing anecdote, but only because no one was picked off by a sniper as a result.

Rosenthal also harboured unwavering faith in the ability of artillery. Such was his belief in its effectiveness that he publicly declared in 1936 that had he been allowed the howitzer batteries he wanted during the landing at Gallipoli, the Anzac operation would surely have been successful, and the resulting ripple effect from the surrender of the Turkish forces would have resulted in the war being shortened by a matter of years.<sup>70</sup> He claimed that before embarking in 1914 he asked that four 5-inch howitzers and 5,500 rounds of ammunition that the AIF had at its disposal be included with the artillery, but his request was denied. These guns did eventually make it to Gallipoli by August 1915, which was, in Rosenthal's estimation, too late.<sup>71</sup> His claims that the presence of these four howitzers would have changed the outcome of Gallipoli and shortened the war were quickly disputed by some of his contemporaries, including Bean, who criticised Rosenthal for 'enormously exaggerating' the effect that howitzers would have had. While they would have been useful, Bean said, their effects would have been limited as the Australians were not yet aware of the location of the main bodies of Turks.<sup>72</sup> Lieutenant General Sir Talbot Hobbs said it was absurd to claim that the absence of four guns was the reason the Gallipoli campaign failed. Major General C.H. Brand thought Rosenthal to be a "super-optimist" and Major General J.D. Lavarack said that as the Australian forces did not know where they would be fighting when they left Australia, they could not have foreseen that more howitzer guns would be necessary.<sup>73</sup> Rosenthal stuck to his guns in the face of this criticism. He argued against Bean's point by emphasising that by firing ahead of the Anzac line of advance, the howitzers would have "ensured strong actual and moral support" and shown that the Australians were not just relying on their ship's artillery, thus adversely affecting enemy morale.<sup>74</sup> He went on to say that he had returned to and inspected the Gallipoli site in 1919, which only further convinced him that

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> *Glen Innes Examiner*, 11 July 1936, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> AWM: S00021: An address by Major General Charles Rosenthal regarding the lack of artillery support at the landing at Gallipoli, 1915.

<sup>72</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 13 July 1936, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 14 July 1936, p. 4.

victory might reasonably have been assured had the extra howitzer guns landed. “Probably our most valuable lessons have been learned from our failures”, Rosenthal said.<sup>75</sup>

Some of Rosenthal’s other postwar commentary provides an insight into the “egregious optimist”, as he was described by Monash.<sup>76</sup> Victory at Mont St Quentin, Rosenthal declared in 1922, had shortened the war by a year.<sup>77</sup> Remarks such as this, and his comments on the lack of artillery at the Gallipoli landing, have contributed to Rosenthal’s reputation as an overly optimistic commander, a reputation that has made him the target of some criticism. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this relentless optimism was a key factor in his rise in command. When Brigadier General Jobson lost his command of the 9th Brigade it was due to his negative attitude, as perceived by Monash. Rosenthal would not have the same problem.

By criticising the Gallipoli landings Rosenthal was not necessarily just grandstanding on behalf of his favoured artillery arsenal. He was also a believer in learning from mistakes. His postwar comments emphasised that the most valuable lessons are learnt from the history of failures. The reason he keeps bringing up Gallipoli, he said, is so that such mistakes were not repeated.<sup>78</sup> Of course, not everyone acknowledged the errors that seemed so stark to Rosenthal, nor did they examine the battles of the past with the same attention to technical detail. He saw examination of past battles to be essential to the training of new armed forces.<sup>79</sup>



Figure 8: Rosenthal (left) and New Zealand Major General Sir Andrew Russell talking prior to the Anzac Day march in Sydney, 1938, AWM, H17081.

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> *Daily Herald*, Adelaide, 25 December 1919, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 1922, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> AWM: S00021: An address by Major General Charles Rosenthal regarding the lack of artillery support at the landing at Gallipoli, 1915.

<sup>79</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 14 July 1936, p. 4.

For Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal, and many of his contemporaries, the First World War was the defining event of his life. Aside from the war, a lifetime dedicated to military service was marked by his early involvement in the Militia garrison artillery, and his rounds on the military lecture circuit after the war. The official military honours he received, the plaudits he received from his fellow soldiers, and the insights gained from his personal papers and diaries, suggest that Rosenthal was a highly capable military commander. It is unusual that relatively little biographical work has been conducted on Rosenthal, considering he was an accomplished and senior general of the First World War, and a well-respected figure until his death. The most substantial work to date is historian Warren Perry's short biographical sketch, published in 1969, compiled from interviews conducted during Rosenthal's final years, coupled with independent research. Perry maintained that Rosenthal is not as recognised as some of his contemporaries because he did not write his memoirs, and because Australia has lacked a "periodical which has exercised any sustained influence upon military thought and criticism".<sup>80</sup> In such a publication, Rosenthal, the educated soldier, could have thrived. Many of the stories told of Rosenthal during the First World War speak to his brave and often reckless behaviour. Only five Australian generals died during, or directly as a result of their service in the First World War. Rosenthal, the educated, belligerent opera-singer of a soldier, was perhaps lucky not to be the sixth.

---

<sup>80</sup> Perry, *Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal: Soldier, Architect and Musician*, p. 157.