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BIOGRAPHY

Who wasCharles Frederick Cox?

Major-General C. F. Cox, CB, CMG, DSO, VD, a citizen cavalryman and Boer War hero, commanded the Australian 1st Light Horse Brigade in Sinai and Palestine in World War I.

Charles Frederick Cox was born at Pennant Hills on 2 May 1863 and joined the colonial railways as a clerk in 1881. He enlisted in the New South Wales Lancers in 1891 and was commissioned in 1894. He proved a forceful and reliable officer, so was given command of the Lancer detachment that went to London for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1897.

In 1899, he took a squadron of lancers to England at their own expense to train with regular cavalry. While there, war broke out in South Africa and Cox and most of his men volunteered. They took part in many major actions in 1900, including the relief of Kimberley, the battles of Paardeberg and Diamond Hill and operations in the Eastern Transvaal.

In 1901, Cox took 3rd New South Wales Mounted Rifles to South Africa where they joined a force led by Colonel M. F. Rimington in the guerrilla phase of the war. Later, Rimington wrote of them: "They ... are thoroughly good soldiers ... Under splendid officers, their coolness, self-reliance and dash brought them out of difficulties where other troops might have suffered severely." Cox was appointed a Companion of the Bath and mentioned-in-despatches. He had won a reputation as a fearless leader and earned the nickname "Fighting Charlie" (Hill 1981).

On the outbreak of World War I, Cox raised 6th Australian Light Horse Regiment, which fought dismounted on Gallipoli in 1915. Cox, after recovering from shrapnel wounds, assumed command of 1st Light Horse Brigade in September and led it for the remainder of the Gallipoli campaign and throughout the Sinai and Palestine campaigns of 1916-18.

At Magdhaba in Sinai on 23 December 1916 when caught in the open by Turkish artillery, Cox handled the brigade with great flexibility, saving heavy casualties. Later in the same fight, when a stalemate appeared to have been reached and no water was available for the horses, the divisional commander sent an order for withdrawal just as Cox was preparing to assault a Turkish position. Cox ignored the order. The successful assault by his 3rd Regiment broke the Turkish resistance (Hill 1981).

In 1917-18, Cox commanded the brigade in Palestine and Syria. At Abu Tellul in the Jordan Valley on 14 July 1918, he again revealed his instinctive grasp of a battle when he launched his 1st Light Horse Regiment in a counter-attack against a strong enemy force which had penetrated far into his position. His timing was exact; the



Brigadier-General C. F. Cox
CB, CMG, DSO, VD c.1921
[National Library of Australia nla.pic-an24081715]

enemy, caught between the 1st Light Horse and fire from Cox's posts, surrendered in hundreds (Hill 1981).

Cox was not without his critics. Nevertheless, his record was one of unbroken success. He was appointed a companion of both the Order of St Michael and St George and the Distinguished Service Order and was mentioned-in-despatches many times.

Gullet (1923, 65) says: "Cox ... (was) a very spirited cavalryman. ... a man of instant intuitive resolve and swift tempestuous action. He won his 'C.B.' in South Africa ... by an inspired decision to lead his men at the gallop round the flank and across the rear of a greatly superior force of Boers who were seriously threatening a British infantry position. His dramatic move unnerved and broke the enemy, who fled in disorder. The action was

characteristic of the man, and was repeated in more than one fight in Palestine."

"'Fighting Charlie' ... had never been a deep student of war. He relied upon his native wit and his common sense ... Except in actual operations, he left the conduct of his brigade almost entirely in the hands of his staff But ... in more than one crisis in Palestine, (he) took hold of his force with the grasp of the real leader, and turned a critical fight into sudden complete victory. These flashes were apparently so unpremeditated and so daring that critics feared Cox would one day sustain a bad failure. But both in South Africa and in Palestine his instinct in the thick of battle was always sound, and gave him a sure, strong grip on the confidence and affection of his brigade" (Gullett 1923, 65-66).

After the war, Cox represented New South Wales in the Senate from 1920 to 1938; and continued to serve with the Militia, commanding 1st Cavalry Division before retiring as an honorary major-general in 1923. He devoted himself to the welfare of returned soldiers and was much in demand on public occasions. He died on 20 November 1944 and was buried in Carlingford cemetery with full military honours.

David Leece

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