

Jump TO Article



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Jump TO Article

BIOGRAPHY

Who was... Charles Rosenthal?

Major-General Sir Charles Rosenthal, KCB, CMG, DSO, VD (1875 – 1954), a Sydney architect and celebrated musician, was a citizen artilleryman who in the Great War rose to command the 2nd Australian Division during the final offensives of 1918, including the battles of Amiens, Mont St Quentin, the Hindenburg Line and Beaurevoir/Montbrehain. After the War, he was President of the United Service Institution of New South Wales (1921-23), a Sydney alderman (1921-24) and a member of the New South Wales Parliament (1922-25 and 1936-37). During World War II, he was Administrator of Norfolk Island.

Charles Rosenthal was born on 12 February 1875 at Berrima, New South Wales. In 1890, he was articled to A. J. Derrick, architect, of Geelong, Victoria and in 1892 became a gunner in the Victorian Militia Garrison Artillery. He completed his articles in Melbourne with J. Edmund Burke and was elected associate of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA) in 1895.

As a draughtsman in the architectural division of the Department of Railways and Public Works in Perth, he was involved in plans for the Perth law courts, the Free Public Library and the Royal Mint. Revealing the energy and wide interests that would characterize his life, he became organist and choirmaster of Coolgardie Wesley Church and his fine bass voice made him a popular concert artist.

In November 1898, poor health and bankruptcy forced his return to Melbourne by bicycle. He joined G. C. Inskip and W. R. Butler, architects and surveyors, who sent him to manage their Sydney office in 1900. Here Rosenthal blossomed, becoming involved in the affairs of his profession, in the musical life of Sydney and in the army. Continuing his studies, he was elected associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1904 and fellow of the RVIA in 1906. His main work was the design of dwellings, but his interest in church music led to commissions for the design of churches. In 1906 he was made architect for the Anglican diocese of Grafton and Armidale. He designed St. Andrew's Lismore, St. Laurence's Barraba, and Holy Trinity, Dulwich Hill (Sydney).

Rosenthal was recognized as being 'in the front rank of oratorio singers in Sydney' and, in 1903, he was commissioned second lieutenant in the Militia Garrison



Artillery. He transferred to the Australian Field Artillery in 1908, was promoted major and given command of a howitzer battery. In 1914, he became commanding officer of the 5th Field Artillery Brigade.

By the outbreak of war in August 1914, Rosenthal was well established as a soldier. He had set up his own architectural firm in partnership with A.H. Wright in Sydney and was organist and choirmaster of Holy Trinity, Dulwich Hill. Moreover, aviation had cast its spell upon him – he was one of the founders of the Aerial League of Australia in 1909 and was a pupil at W. E. Hart's Australian Flying School at Penrith.

Rosenthal joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in August 1914 and sailed with the first convoy as lieutenant-colonel commanding the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade. He 'seemed tremendously massive and powerful...there was nobody who could hold him at single-man tug-o'-war. Nor surprisingly, "Rosie" controlled that raw lot of troops well'. At the Gallipoli landing, his energy and optimism brought him into brief conflict with his commander, Major-General William Bridges. The artillery staff had found no positions for their sorely needed batteries and Bridges told Rosenthal that he did not want guns ashore as the position was not sufficiently secure. Nevertheless, Rosenthal later was able to reconnoitre the southern sector and choose unorthodox gun positions among the foremost infantry. He then persuaded Bridges to let him land his guns.

Rosenthal's actions on 25 April 1915 are said to have 'established his reputation' in the AIF. He was twice wounded on Gallipoli. Lying amid a crowd of suffering men on a hospital ship, he entertained them by singing Handel's *Arm, Arm Ye Brave*. His second

wound led to his evacuation to England in August but he used his convalescence to study current artillery tactics in France. Returning to Egypt in time for the expansion of the AIF, he was given command of the artillery of the new 4th Division and was promoted brigadier-general in February 1916.

Rosenthal's guns went into action in France in June. He was engaged in the heavy fighting on the Somme, particularly at Pozieres and Mouquet Farm. In December, he was again wounded. For a time in 1917 he was commanding the artillery of four divisions and was already recognized as a potential divisional commander although lacking infantry experience. Rosenthal was appointed commander of the 9th Infantry Brigade in July and 'his robustness and audacity' soon put new life into it. 'He loved not only to be in the front line, but to be seen there...The troops leapt at the breezy courage that was keen to test any danger before they entered it.' "Rosie" became to the 9th what "Pompey" Elliott was to the 15th Brigade.

In the battles of 3rd Ypres (Belgium 1917), particularly Passchendaele, and during the German offensive of March 1918, he enhanced his reputation. He was badly gassed at Passchendaele; and, when inspecting his own wiring parties near Villers-Bretonneux (Somme 1918), bumped into a German wiring party from which he took three prisoners. Trudging up to 20 miles (32 km) a day, 'he knew more about his sector than anyone else'. Rosenthal's penchant for the front line led him into actions which were sometimes rash and improper for a senior commander. While inspecting new outposts by night with a commanding officer in May 1918 he deliberately clashed with a German party of six in order to obtain a prisoner for identification of the unit opposite.

On 22 May 1918, Rosenthal was appointed to command the 2nd Division and promoted major-general. He took part in the brilliant attack at Hamel. Soon afterwards, on a daylight reconnaissance at a well-known danger spot, he was, for the fourth time, wounded, but returned from hospital just in time for the great battles beginning on 8 August.

In the fighting for Péronne, 31 August-2 September, Rosenthal's division captured Mont St Quentin with tired and depleted battalions in an audacious operation rated by General Sir Brudenell White as the 'first...of the four greatest achievements of the Australian Corps in the 1918 offensives'. On 5 October, Rosenthal took Montbrechain within the Hindenburg defences, the last action of the Australian Corps in the war. He was appointed Companion of the Order of the Bath (1915), Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (1917), Companion of the Distinguished Service Order (1918), and Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (1919); and was mentioned in dispatches seven times. He was also awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre (1917), the French Croix de Guerre (1918) and the Legion d'honneur (1919).

In England in March 1919, Rosenthal commanded

all the depots of the AIF during the repatriation of the troops, an arduous and delicate task for which his reputation, energy and humanity well equipped him. He returned to Australia in January 1920 and resumed practice as an architect. He was commander of the 2nd Division, Australian Military Forces, in 1921-26 and again in 1932-37. He served as an alderman of Sydney Municipal Council in 1921-24; and was Nationalist member for Bathurst in the Legislative Assembly in 1922-25 and a member of the Legislative Council in 1936-37.

In spite of these activities, Rosenthal was president of the United Service Institution of New South Wales (1921-23), the Institute of Architects of New South Wales (1926-30), the Australian Institute of Architects (1925-28), and the Australian Museum, Sydney (1926-30); and interested in native flora, reforestation and the development of wireless communication. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and a life fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, the creation of which had long been one of his chief goals.

In 1937, Rosenthal accepted the post of administrator of Norfolk Island which he governed throughout World War II. There he promoted many of his career interests – supporting tree-planting and conservation of the old convict buildings, fostering education and the work of the Red Cross Society, and raising a volunteer infantry unit. He relinquished his office at the end of 1945 but lived privately on the island until 1948 when he returned to Sydney.

In his last years he was frequently in hospital with chronic nephritis but he remained cheerful and mentally vigorous. He died on 11 May 1954 and was cremated with full military honours after a service at St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral, Sydney.

In his energy, his optimism, his courage and the breadth of his interests, Rosenthal was among the most remarkable leaders of his time. No man was better equipped to be a regimental commander. 'The Diggers took to him because he was a man and a fighter', but he was also a military thinker. As an architect, he was as assiduous in working for his profession as he had been at training his artillery. He enjoyed public life, was a good speaker, much in demand at soldiers' reunions and as leader of Anzac Day marches in Sydney. 'No "head" of the AIF was better liked...He has always been "Rosie", with respect'.

A. J. Hill [edited by David Leece']

Reference

Hill, A. J. (1988). Rosenthal, Sir Charles (1875-1954). *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Volume 11 (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne) pp. 451-453. Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 030/34036.

¹This is an abridged version of Hill (1988), with information on General Rosenthal's term as president of The United Service Institution of New South Wales added by the editor. Photo of General Rosenthal: Australian War Memorial negative H19207.