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*The First Fateful Shot:  
Port Phillip Bay, August 1914*

One Day Conference  
9.30 am - 4.30 pm 2 August 2014  
Queenscliff, Victoria

# THE FIRST FATEFUL SHOT: PORT PHILLIP BAY, AUGUST 1914



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2 AUGUST 2014

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# **A war worth fighting**

## **Enlistment motivations 1914 - 1918**

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**Historian and Author**

My talk today is not so much about providing answers as to why men enlisted in 1914 and beyond but rather to point out some of the difficulties we face in trying to determine why they did. There really hasn't been a lot of research undertaken about why men volunteered to go to war, nothing on the scale of studies on the Gallipoli landing for example. There have been lots of assumptions made about why men enlisted but these are not based on hard evidence. There are a couple of reasons for this, the first is that despite leaving us a voluminous collection of personal records in war letters and diaries, few soldiers actually recorded their reasons or motives for enlistment. Those who did usually did so after the event often through the prism of the front line. Furthermore these chroniclers come predominantly from officers and NCOs with only 25 per cent representing other ranks. Those who did record reasons represent only a fraction of the soldiers who served and cannot be considered an adequate representation of the whole.

The second reason for the lack of attention is that post war narratives have tended to concentrate on the experience of war rather than the reasons why men participated in it. These narratives might also be loosely divided into two camps, the story of the left – that the war was an abominable enterprise that served no real purpose and created a lost generation and the story of the right – that Australia achieved real nationhood through its participation from which a distinct national identity emerged. Neither of these stories reveals much about the motivations of the men who actually enlisted. They are stories shaped by the post war generations' need to give meaning to their own world rather than the world of those who served. In the first the soldiers are cast as victims of a war of mass slaughter and in the second they are cast as the vital seed of a nation's birth, paladins of a new nationalism.

I want to cover three main points today. The first is to show why the historical record cannot be trusted to provide a definitive answer to the motivations for enlistment of soldiers through 1914 - 18. In doing so, I also want to touch on some of the motivations that *might* have been influential in prompting men to enlist. The second is to suggest that we need to affect some separation from the reason for enlisting and the motivation for enlisting – sometimes the two

might be synonymous but they are not necessarily the same. The third aim is to consider the power of propaganda at the time and whether it was capable of shifting opinion. Through consideration of these factors, I'd like to advance the proposition that most men in 1914 probably volunteered because they believed the principles over which the war was fought and that the importance of this has been largely overlooked in our post war renderings.

Why, then, is the historical record with which many of us are so familiar, not definitive? We quote soldiers letters, diaries and journals as proofs all the time. We quote newspapers of the day all the time. These things are primary sources surely they must be true. Indeed they do represent a degree of truth but they reflect the biases of individuals and of sections of society that do not necessarily reflect the views of all people. The editorials of the major daily newspapers the length and breadth of the land expressed a unified pro Empire rhetoric in support of the war and so too did the clergy of the major churches. The majority of parliamentary representatives were also steadfast in their support of the war. Young men in 1914 were subjected to a relentless torrent of pro war sentiment. Patriots assumed that those who enlisted shared those views and we must ask ourselves whether, in fact, they did or not.

Before we get too advanced though we need some background of the group we are talking about.

Australian population	<b>4.94 million</b>
Total eligible males 18-44	<b>1,015,470</b> 558,509 (S) 456,961 (M)
Total volunteers	<b>589,947</b>
Total enlistments	<b>416,809</b>
Total served overseas	<b>333,725</b>
Total rejected	<b>178,000</b>

**86 per cent of eligible single men volunteered**  
**22 per cent of eligible married men volunteered**

**78 per cent under the age of thirty**  
**57 per cent under twenty-five**  
**22 per cent under twenty-one**

**63 per cent tradesmen & labourers**

What this tells us is that a sizeable portion of the AIF was young working class males who responded to what some historians have suggested was a largely middle-class driven patriotism.

The demographic of the soldier letter writers and diarists should be considered against those figures. Bill Gammage's seminal study on the AIF *The Broken Years* looked at about one thousand diary and letter writers. This represents .303 per cent of those who served overseas so it is a pretty small sample from which to make assumptions. In fact, it has been pointed out that Bill Gammage referenced only sixteen diarists and letter writers in his discussion of enlistment motives.

Of these, 73 per cent were officers and NCOs. Officers were also more likely to be drawn from the educated middle-classes. Only 26 per cent of letter and diary writers came from the other ranks that constitute the vast bulk of AIF soldiers. This is a problem which confronts anyone studying the written records of the AIF. My research into the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, which is one of the best represented AIF units in the various archives, can only claim to tap into the written records of 1.66 per cent of those who served the battalion. On the rare occasions that those soldiers wrote about their motives for enlistment we must accept Lloyd Robson's caution that they are atypical rather than typical representatives of the AIF.

What then might some of the reasons have been for why men enlisted? We are told by the official historian, C. E. W. Bean that among the first volunteers could be found some of the 'romantic, quixotic, adventurous flotsam that eddied on the surface of the Australian people'. This observation of Bean's is indicative of the happy go lucky adventurous image that is often preferred of the First World War diggers – think of Archy and Frank in the film *Gallipoli* and Paul Hogan's casting as Pat Cleary in the television series *Anzacs*. Those examples are representative of modern post war story telling where themes such as larrikinism, mateship and anti-authoritarianism are the preferred templates of character.

If we stick with the statistics available to us we can identify some trends in enlistment that possibly suggest higher motivation on the part of some groups over others. In the original force of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Australian born men represented 72 per cent of volunteers and British born 22 per cent. Yet the figure for British born volunteers in the first three reinforcement groups was as high as 32-34 per cent and trended steadily downward for the

duration of the war. So we might say that British born volunteers were more motivated to enlist after the initial intake – perhaps due to a relaxation in physical requirements or perhaps they felt the imperial ties more strongly than Australian born volunteers or, a third possibility, that some prospective Australian born volunteers were tied up in the Australian Military Forces and so weren't as strongly represented in the initial surge.

Unemployment has been touted as a likely motive for enlistment. Out of work coalminers were certainly reported as among the first volunteers in Sydney. Yes there was high unemployment in some sectors of Australian society but few soldiers declared themselves as unemployed on their attestation papers or recorded it as a fact in their letters and diaries so we don't really know.

When you examine the recruitment figures for the AIF you can detect various spikes in enlistment which tell us that volunteers were clearly responding to public overtures and/or war news.

The first obvious one was the declaration of war. This we are told brought men flooding to the recruitment stations when they were opened. Newspaper reports give testimony to this apparent surge of volunteers. By year's end 52,561 volunteers or 5.17 per cent of all eligible males had enlisted. Eric Andrews argued some years ago in *The Anzac Illusion* that this hardly represented an enthusiastic response to the war. It must be remembered though that initially only 20,000 men were called for and that physical requirements were quite stringent. Many men were not therefore motivated to go to war immediately.

The next discernible spike occurs in May 1915 when news of the Gallipoli landing occurs. Men respond to that news, whether their consciences were pricked or it just served to remind them that the war was on we cannot say with any certainty. Another spike occurs in July and August as the government embarks on a well orchestrated recruitment campaign which in many instances tries to shame men into enlisting, particularly targeting sportsmen and spectators. The rise in numbers tells us that this campaign was highly effective in motivating young men to enlist. 21,000 in Victoria during July and 20,000 in NSW over July/August of 1915. By the end of 1915 over 50 per cent of the total of volunteers accepted for the AIF had enlisted.

The start of 1916 saw another spike as news of the Gallipoli evacuation reached home and as a further call for volunteers to expand the AIF was made. October 1916 which coincides with the first conscription referenda sees a small rise in enlistment numbers. This increase may have represented a desire on the part of some men to avoid the stigma of being a conscript lest conscription was introduced. It was certainly partly explained by the contentious compulsory service order issued by the government that compelled men of eligible age to enter military encampments under the War Precautions Act for the defence of Australia. A year later men held no such qualms as there is no corresponding spike in December 1917 with the second referenda.

By the end of July 1916, before any news of the carnage of the Western Front battles has reached Australia, 73.88 per cent of all enlistees had already come forward. By year's end 82.24 per cent of those accepted into the AIF had already enlisted. This is further proof of the misguided intent of the conscription campaigns to dragoon eligible single men. By the end of 1916 Australia had virtually exhausted its manpower stocks in regard to single men but certainly not married men.

Another spike in enlistments occurs in May 1918 which coincided with a change to enlistment eligibility in that boys between the ages of 18-21 no longer needed parental consent to join the AIF. Whether this was a factor or whether the news of the German breakthrough and the gravity of the Allied situation in France and Belgium was the greater motivating factor is impossible to determine.

From 1917 there is little occurring that can successfully increase men's motivation to enlist in the AIF. The only definite conclusion that we can reach in regard to men's motives for enlistment is that single men were significantly more motivated to enlist than married men.

This failure on the part of married men not to enlist actually carried little social stigma. There existed an unwritten social code that war was the province of fit single men and not for men with family responsibilities. In fact married men were initially excluded from enlisting but that was changed very quickly when married men who did want to enlist protested its unfairness. The propaganda of the recruitment campaigns almost always invariably targeted single men. Soldiers who wrote home often qualified their sentiments about the need for reinforcements with statements such as 'the time has come for every able bodied man without

ties to go and help'. The intimation was that 'ties', one assumes it to be family ties, were considered binding and a legitimate reason for not enlisting. This undoubtedly reflects a community value that recognised the far reaching consequences to families should they be denied their main provider through service abroad or through death and injury. In 1917 the government, in fact, promised to exempt married men from being conscripted should the referenda for conscription prove successful. It also set the eligible age between 20 and 44 thus excluding eighteen and nineteen year olds who were entitled to enlist under the voluntary system. The exemption of married men flew in the face of numeric logic given the government's own estimation by mid 1917 that there were 280,000 married men of eligible age and 140,000 single men still unenlisted. That said some recruitment posters were produced which clearly targeted married men.

Given the trends I have just outlined in enlistment figures one would have to say that pro-Empire, pro war patriots should have been pleased with the responses to their demands. Those trends also tell us that the vitriolic bleating of the patriots toward single men's commitment was largely misplaced and that the group that didn't respond and ought to have been targeted – if one believed in compulsion and harassment as legitimate tools of influence – was married men.

I stated earlier that motivation and reasons for enlistment were not necessarily the same. What do I mean by that? The declaration of war, the landing at Gallipoli and the recruitment campaigns and the conscription referenda were all prompts for men to enlist. To be sure, they were accompanied by strident arguments about loyalty to nation and Empire, of not leaving the burden of war to others and to higher principles among nations. These, of course, might be influential in a man making his mind up as to whether he would serve or not.

Anecdotally we can find a number of reasons for why individuals might have been prompted to enlist. Unemployment has been mentioned, escaping bad relationships is another that is sometimes suggested. British born, brawling, socialist inspired stoker John Simpson Kirkpatrick (the man with the donkey) saw enlistment as an opportunity to get a free ticket back to England. Bill Gammage tells us that one soldier enlisted after having punched his boss in the eye and that others saw the army as an escape from pending custodial sentences. He claims men enlisted because their mates did or because they had friends in Europe or because they couldn't bear the social pressure of not enlisting. Gammage suggests the list of

reasons was 'almost infinite'. As captivating as some of these motivations may have been there is no reason to think that they are the norm or that they should be taken as a singular reason as to why a man enlists. If we accept these sorts of reasons as being general we risk painting the AIF as some sort of Foreign Legion, a haven for outlaws and individuals fleeing personal demons.

Duty, the Empire, Australia and the cause are often mentioned as the reason for why men enlisted. What do these actually mean? Are they separate ideas or entwined?

If we reflect upon the narrative of Australia's Second World War soldiers we find that they are accorded a much more unified and ennobling motivation. The fight against odious undemocratic and violent fascism in Europe and Japanese aggression in Asia and the Pacific morally elevate the meaning of the war. The horror of the holocaust and of outrages such as the Burma railroad left an indelible mark in our collective memory about the justness of the war against the Axis powers and Japan. The motivation for going to war on principles of democracy and human decency, and of defending Australia against invasion is not questioned. Yet we do not accord First World War soldiers with the same unqualified acceptance and uniformity of reason for going to war.

As I mentioned earlier the fact that those soldiers have been portrayed as victims is part of the reason that has deflected attention from theirs and the Nation's reasons for going to war. Another reason is that this "War to end all wars" did not achieve its aims and so it has been written off as a waste of human life. The fact that the war was a stalemate for most of its duration also underscored its pointlessness in our imagination.

The war, too, has been seen as a clash of Empires and our modern day post colonial sensibilities tell us that Empires were grossly undemocratic, suppressed indigenous populations, dispossessed people of their lands and bequeathed untold wealth on supposedly God ordained royal families. Modern day Australians with the exception of our prime minister might look back at the days of Empire as a quaint period of our history but one best put behind us, a period that doesn't much represent who we are today. We look at a head stone that reads died for King and Empire and think it's a bit pithy, a bit antiquated, that it doesn't represent a particularly sound notion for going off to war. Eric Andrews considered 'loyalty to England, duty, or the Empire' to have been abstract motives. However for soldiers



a century ago there was nothing abstract about it and we commit a grave injustice to the historical truth of 1914 if we do not accept the concept of Empire as having concrete meanings and being a cause for genuine motivation to both working-class and middle-class men.

The men who enlisted in 1914 were products of their time, not products of our post war imaginings. The King was a symbolic head of a state that embodied a raft of ideas and values by which Australians lived their lives. It meant progressive liberalism, it meant rights for workers, it meant whiteness and brotherhood, it meant parliamentary democracy, it meant secure economic markets and opportunities for personal wealth, it meant education, it was founded on Christian values and provided a shared cultural heritage in art and sport. Importantly being part of the Empire meant national security. Defending Britain meant defending Australia. German war plans for the Pacific in the event of a war against Britain placed Australian trade and shipping squarely in the cross-hairs of the German Navy. The defeat of Britain would compromise all those things or at least so it would have been perceived even if, hypothetically, it didn't prove to be so.

Australians enjoyed a duality of identity in 1914 as Australian-Britons. Despite a burgeoning parochial national sentiment in the early part of the twentieth century, Australians were just as prone to be moved by images of John Bull and Union Jacks as they were of Kangaroos and sprigs of wattle. One did not cancel out the other. The men who enlisted in 1914 didn't question the relevance of Empire or the roles of Britain and Australia within it. In all likelihood most men believed Australia had an obligation to the defence of the Empire and believed Britain's reasons for going to war were reasonable and honourable.

Britain went to war on the principle that Germany's invasion of neutral Belgium could not be tolerated, that the naked aggression of a larger nation toward a smaller one must not pass unopposed and that if Britain did not stand up for Belgium sovereignty then its word and integrity amounted to nothing.

Did this high principle resonate with young working class Australian males? There is no evidence to suggest that it did not and it is entirely reasonable to suggest that it did.

We have available to us a solid collection of data of written public texts to which the volunteers of 1914 were subjected. We know the content of the school books that they read,

we know the content of school curriculums in which they were taught, we know the sort of books published for young readers, and we know the tenor of the newspaper editorials and novels of the day. Richard White some years ago queried whether we could assume this inculcation of ideas to have been effective. In the absence of substantive data proving its effectiveness is problematic. Nevertheless I think it is reasonable to believe that the messages about loyalty to and defence of Australia and Empire were imbibed to some degree by most men at both public and private schools and in civic life.

The inclination of those on the left has been to challenge the influence of those ideals. Yet even an alternative newspaper such as the Brisbane *Worker* in its editorial of 6 August, while lamenting a war which pitched worker against worker, while aggrieved by the fact that the rich would get fatter on the war, while advocating the labour movement should expedite peace talks, nevertheless concluded that it was Australia's duty to stand by Britain in its hour of need. The power of this sentiment for national defence has not really been woven into our First World War narrative. Bean certainly suggested it in his first volume but few historians have run with it.

The advent of the Second World War and the abominable nature of the Third Reich have diluted our understanding of the threat that Australians saw in German militarism or Prussianism as it was often called in 1914. Historians appear loath to draw too much of a connection between Imperial Germany and Nazi Germany. Hitler and the Holocaust, rightly I think, are set apart rather than representing a continuity of German thought. While the obscene philosophy that made the Holocaust possible was undoubtedly a step too far, diplomacy of the Third Reich followed a similar tenor to that practised by previous German juntas.

John Moses has argued forcefully that Imperial Germany was indeed a rogue state among the other major powers, that its reliance on coercive military threat, its adherence to the idea that war was a natural state of man, and the maintenance of the German military as the centrepiece of German *Kultur* was not only out of step with European diplomacy but also out of step with the beliefs of many German people.

In 1914 there was no Third Reich with which to make comparisons and Australians were presented with the spectre of the rise of a militaristic evil empire hell bent on world

domination. We shouldn't underestimate the effectiveness of propaganda at that time. It was potentially a powerful persuasive. Modern day opinion polls regular show governments of the day receiving a bounce in the polls whenever issues of national sovereignty arise. Certainly Adolf Hitler thought British propaganda had been highly effective in confirming 'the 'Hunnish' brutality of the barbarous enemy' to its soldiers. The use of 'Hun' and 'Squareheads' in many Australian soldiers' letters and diaries as descriptors of the enemy certainly gives some credence to Hitler's assertion.

The backdrop for the early period of enlistments was also characterised by a volatile and unedifying attack on German Australians. By October 1914 the majority of German nationals had been interned, many of those with German names were ostracised or physically attacked, many were debarred from working by trade unions and many German businesses were stripped of rights. There occurred a denunciation of all things German, irrespective of the many positive contributions German Australians had made to Australian society.

Remember, too, that Australia's first military forays in 1914 were against German forces and close to Australia – the warning shots across the bows of the *Pfalz*, the seizure of German New Guinea and then the sinking of the *Emden* by HMAS *Sydney*. These events could only have served to heighten the notion of Germany as a real threat to Australian security particularly when taken alongside the shrill assertions about potential insurgency from the German community.

Give further consideration to the public outcry over the rape of Belgium and the death of Nurse Cavell, both received saturation coverage, and one can easily imagine the broiling environment in which young Australians were making their decisions to enlist in the early part of the war. German perfidy knew no bounds and a steady stream of literature was published throughout the war detailing German atrocities, inhumanity and barbarism including a free booklet issued by the Director-General of recruiting in 1917. Can we prove the influence or otherwise of these things? We cannot.

To conclude then, despite my assertion that the written records of AIF volunteers are not voluminous enough on the question of explaining motives for enlistment and despite those records exhibiting a bias in the soldiers they represent, given what we know of the era drawn from the public literature and historical records left to us, given the news of war and

subsequent Australian involvement and accompanying propaganda - and in the absence of any proof to the contrary - I think it is entirely reasonable to suggest that the majority of Australian volunteers, enlisted irrespective of what personal motivations some may have had, because they believed they were defending Australia and, on principle, considered the war worth fighting.