



Fort Nepean

SS Pfalz

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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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The First Shot – 1914 Misperception, Miscalculation, Truth

Keith Quinton

Today, rather than reiterate the text of ‘*Stop The Pfalz -1914*’, I wish to deal with the First British Empire Shot of WW1 as a study in ‘confusion’ – intrinsic to historical examination reliant upon a meld of archived documents, newspaper articles and public perception.

Where is the First Shot?

I would like begin by narrating two narrations relating to the search for the First Shot shell – a topic which has received considerable media attention over recent months. The first was in the form of a telephone conversation, which has since been repeated in a newspaper article.

Farmer Phipps Shell

Around two months ago Mr Kevin Roberts contacted FQM with a story relating to the finding of the ‘First Shot’ shell by Mr Victor Phipps on his Point Lonsdale farm ‘*Victoria Villa*’ – which was situated on the Shell Road just beyond Point Lonsdale. According to Mr Roberts; ‘

Mr Phipps, an old man when he related the tale, was also a very honest man who did not lie. Phipps had over decades told his neighbours that on the afternoon of August 5th 1914 he had found an artillery shell lying upon the ground in a paddock on his property. Then on Anzac Day 1919, Queenscliff’s citizens, many of them women and children wearing fancy dress costumes, celebrated with a Parade led by the Garrison artillerymen. On reaching the gates of Fort Queenscliff the crowd was urged to march to the Phipps farm (about 4 km) where some garrison soldiers demanded it be handed over. This was reluctantly done and triumphantly bearing the shell the crowd paraded back to the fort. Phipps, and in turn Mr Roberts, believed that for many years this shell resided upon a shelf in the Fort Queenscliff Sergeants Mess.’

In the exchange that followed between Mr Roberts and myself he expressed a firm belief that ‘*those dive people searching the bay for the shell are wasting their time because back then the guns at the forts were really inaccurate and the shell went clean over the top of the ship and landed at Point Lonsdale, but, as you are not prepared to listen to the ‘real truth’ there is no point in continuing our conversation.* ‘

(I would like to say that Mr Roberts slammed down the phone, but I must state clearly that his call was from a mobile phone, so such an action was unlikely and would be an unsubstantiated elaboration on my part.)

Did the First shot land on Victoria farm? ‘Based upon several August 6th 1914 newspaper articles; Yes. Based upon military records & maps; No’

Was a shell kept for many years in the Sergeants’ Mess at Fort Queenscliff? There is sufficient anecdotal evidence to say – probably ‘Yes’.

Did the Sergeants believe the shell was fired from gun F1? – Highly unlikely, given their knowledge of ordnance and the restricted Fire Zones in place at Port Phillip Heads.

Kevin Dorling Shell

Another contact with FQM occurred around April 2014 following a Herald Sun newspaper article carrying the leader:

THE historic first shot fired in World War 1 may have been found beside the backyard BBQ of a Victorian man who says he retrieved the large shell from the middle of Port Phillip Bay almost 40 years ago.

The article stated that Mr Kevin Dorling, a Bell Post Hill man, possesses a shell taken from Port Phillip Bay which, based upon the area in which it had been recovered, he believed was the legendary ‘First Shot’ shell. Mr Dorling said that any further search would prove futile.

The images in the middle clearly show the ‘Dorling’ driving band bore no rifling grooves, and consequently must never have been through a Mk VII gun barrel.

(Mr Dorling invited the FQM research team for a barbeque lunch next to his shell; given the presence of an ageing 100-lb Common shell - potentially filled with 7-lbs of prismatic gun powder – this is an offer the FQM researchers have not accepted.)

Harbour Shell & the Museum Cartridge

A third shell, which in February 2014 had been illegally taken from the Port Phillip Marine Conservation Park by a small group of amateur divers, also has an unmarked driving band. (Right) This shell was kept at the Queenscliff Marina for several months until eventually confiscated by Victoria Police and the Army Ordnance disposal unit as a possible live shell. It was subsequently destroyed. Both the Dorling & Marina shells probably came from a post-WWII shell ‘dump’ known to be situated in shallow water about 200 metres offshore from Fort Nepean.

Two other interesting items have also attracted attention in terms of the ‘First Shot’. One is a Masonic gong displayed in Fort Queenscliff Museum; the other is resident in the depths of the Queenscliff Historical Museum basement. Can anyone in the audience define any problems with these objects in terms of the first shot?

Mk VII guns – no QF cartridge case

This is a Palliser 80-pdr shell. Is it the missing Phipps shell from the Sergeants Mess?

The First Shot & South Channel

I now wish to briefly discuss the *Southern Ocean Exploration* 'Long Shot' quest to search a portion of South Channel. In February this year I was approached by Mark Ryan, leader of a wreck discovery group, to assist in narrowing down a possible position for the 'First Shot' shell. Unlike other groups who wished to dive the bay floor, SOE sought acquisition of a Magnetometer (magnetic resonance scan system) used to locate WWII ordnance in Pearl Harbour. While we at FQM initially expressed incredulity - our interest was soon attracted by the ability of the magnetometer to locate metallic objects buried in up to two metres of sand/silt and then utilize data acquired at Pearl Harbour to define found objects by size/weight for further examination. It was made clear that there may be several hundred shells within the practice firing zone and that even if a single shell were located within a more precise search area it could not be verified as the 'First Shot'. Both sides agreed that to map metallic objects in the search zone would be of considerable archaeological interest for possible further investigation. At this time SOE have not been able to raise the \$42,000 necessary to purchase the magnetometer.

The Pfalz Passage from Victoria Dock to Observatory Point

In 1925 Colonel Eric Harrison provided a broad outline of the *Pfalz* action starting with a departure from No. 2 berth Victoria Dock at approximately 8.00 a.m. His sources are unrecorded - some other sources place *Pfalz*'s departure closer to 7.30 a.m.

Harrison was the Senior Officer on duty at Victoria Barracks on August 5, 1914, and in 1925 was attached to the War Office in London. At the request of Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the British Cabinet and previously Secretary to the 1914-18 War Council, Harrison sought evidence in London and Melbourne for the *Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence* on what Sir Maurice acknowledged was '*the First Shot of the War.*'

8.00 a.m. departure of *SS Pfalz* from Victoria Dock

12.00 noon the forts were warned of imminence of War Stage and the attempted departure of *Pfalz*.

12.20 p.m. the forts report the *Pfalz* approaching the entrance to Port Phillip

12.30 p.m. Orders for War Stage passed to defended Port Commander (Major Cox-Taylor) and through him to examination Battery. Simultaneously *Pfalz* enters the Rip and was fired at.

12.35 p.m. *Pfalz* turns back to port having passed dangerous portion of the Rip.

The voyage from No.2 berth Victoria dock to the examination anchorage at Observatory Point) is 79 km (42.66 n.m.). (VD to the Gellibrand Light is around 9.4 km (4.93 nm), there is a further 51 km (27.5 n.m.) to the Hovel Light marking the entrance to South Channel and from there 18.6 km (10.0 n.m.) Given an average speed of 10 -11 knots the *Pfalz* passage required a minimum 4 hours 15 minutes from Victoria dock to the examination anchorage. (Melbourne sunrise on August 5th is around 7.17 a.m.) Using these calculations *Pfalz* would arrive at the examination anchorage sometime between 11.30 a.m. and 11.45 a.m. The subsequent time provided by Harrison for 'approaching the Heads' is most likely the time *Pfalz* departed Observatory Point following the inspection of the port clearance papers.

The *Pfalz* Action on August 5, 1914

These two maps - one dated to 1910 the other 1917 indicate Port Phillip Heads artillery danger /prohibited fire zones. The map for Fort Nepean contains segmented rings which indicate-

1. Open areas
2. Peace Danger Zones
3. War danger Zones
4. No Fire Zones (blank- no text)

The 1910 map for Artillery Practice Zones at the Heads Forts shows peacetime gun ranges.

This 'Fire Zone' maps we saw earlier indicated safe areas for artillery practice at Port Phillip Heads for four Mk. VII guns at Point Nepean (F designation) , three Mk. VII's at Fort Queenscliff (A & B designation) and a single 4.7 inch QF gun (D designation) located at Fort Franklin. They clearly illustrate that at Fort Nepean an arc stretching around 120 degrees from Point Lonsdale in the West to Swan Island in the North-east was a prohibited-fire zone. This was due to the close proximity of the far shore (around 3,500 yards) and the extreme likelihood of shells ricocheting off water from guns firing at a depression angle of less than 10-15 degrees. They also illustrate that the 'Heads entrance' and 'turn' zones were covered by A1 gun at Fort Queenscliff.

Mk. VII guns were equipped with auto sights which, when calibrated, provided extreme accuracy at up to 5,000 yards. Depending upon trunnion height above sea level maximum gun range reached to 10,600 yards and due to the direction of rifling (right spiral) shells tended to diverge right – dramatically so if ricochet was involved. The map on screen illustrates two paths which *Pfalz* may have used to reach Port Phillip Heads. The path indicated by the blue line is the generally recognized route taken, the red line indicates a

revision which F1 gun captain Captain Morton Williams provided to the AWM in 1963, demanding that the official history be altered.

F1 Gun Crew

There are three acceptable lists of names for F1 gun crew at Point Nepean on August 5th, 1914. Those that accompany the official war photo, the 1964 list produced by Moreton Williams and a list held by the Queenscliff Historical Museum - of unknown but possibly credible provenance. Assembled together we have six names included on all three lists, five names on two lists, plus fifteen names mentioned only once. I have been approached by a further six people who desired to include relatives or others - on the basis of anecdotal evidence. I do not believe that there can ever be an undisputed answer to 'First Shot' gun crew names.

3 listings	2 listings	1 listing	
Capt. Morton Williams	Cpl. J J Jack * ++	Bdr. A Fox ++	Gnr. G T Bennett ++
Sgt. Maj. E Wheeler	Cpl. A Britnell * ++	Gnr. W Carlin *	Gnr. P Moden ***
Sgt. C A Carter	Gnr. J Gregory * ++	Gnr. Garling ***	Gnr. J Clay ***
Cpl. W Young	Gnr. V Quirk * ++	Gnr. F J Mealey *	Gnr. Lewis ***
Bdr. J D Purdue	Gnr. J Ryan * ++	Gnr. A Murray *	Gnr. A McPhee ***
Gnr. Brown ? (- A & W)		Gnr. E V Quirk *	Gnr. Ronald ***
		Gnr. J Russell *	Gnr. Wallace ***
		Gnr. F Connan ++	
Official photos *			
Williams List 1968 ++			
Queenscliff Museum List ***			

German Merchant Raiders

The greatest fiction levelled against *S.S. Pfalz* was that it was a potential German Hilfskreuzer.

At the outbreak of war the Imperial German Navy had thirteen fast passenger liners listed for conversion to auxiliary cruisers, and another seven mail steamers, to serve as supply vessels.

However the immediate imposition of a Royal Navy blockade of German ports saw most of these vessels trapped in home ports. It should also be remembered that *Pfalz* departed Bremen well before the assassination of Arch Duke Ferdinand and therefore any knowledge of the race to war.

Amongst German WWI commerce raiders, *KMS Wolf* was probably the closest in size and structure to *S.S. Pfalz*. However *KMS Wolf* did not depart Germany until 1916 and was equipped with six 15 cm (5.9 in) guns, three 5.2 cm (2.0 in) guns, several smaller calibre weapons and four torpedo tubes. She also carried 450 mines to be dropped outside enemy ports - including mines laid along Australia's southern coastline. Top speed for both *Wolf* and *Pfalz* was 11 knots (20 km/h). However, *Wolf* could rapidly alter its appearance using fake funnel and masts, false side panels to keep weapons hidden; a sea plane for reconnaissance, and on departure a cruising range of 32,000 nautical miles (59,000 km) thanks to a coal bunker capacity of 8,000 tons. *Wolf's* captain held a career naval officer's commission, unlike Captain Kuhlken the merchant marine commander of *S.S. Pfalz*.

Pre-war German men aged between 17 and 45 years were obliged to serve a compulsory three years in military or naval training - even those residing overseas - which included resident German/Australians. At the outbreak of war it was estimated that at least 100,000 German civilians had received naval training, far in excess of German fleet requirements. However as there was no evidence they were German reservists, on August 7th 1914 the *Pfalz* crew were released into the community at Melbourne - required to report to police weekly . Eventually widespread demands for internment saw the *Pfalz* crew spend the remainder of the war at Liverpool (crew) and Berrima (Officers) internment camps.

Officers - Veracity - Memory – Invention Image 13 Text Title

Speaking in an RSL hall and also in the presence of a number of retired and serving officers it is perhaps dangerous to link veracity & memory with military and naval testimony.

However, the *Pfalz* story is not complete without an examination of various officer and there additions to the First Shot historical record.

Commencing with the Navy - Commander Stanley Veale was a 19 year old Ensign in charge of the naval boat crew at the examination anchorage on August 5. In 1949 Commander Veale stated in an AWM document that on observing a fragmented 'War is declared' heliograph signal from Fort Queenscliff he informed Lieutenant McWilliam, Captain of *PV Alvina*, what he had observed. Veale's stated, McWilliam had replied, "*Get Nepean to stop that German ship getting out. I immediately hoisted International Signal Flag 'R' – which was then the Examination service signal for Fort Nepean Examination Service supporting battery to 'bring to' the vessel Pfalz.*" By 1977 in his written autobiography Veale's story had shifted to him informing McWilliam of the war signal and being told by McWilliam '*signals from Fort Queenscliff were none of their business.*' Veale goes on to say that he persuaded McWilliam that the message was meant for them and that International signal flag 'H' should be hoisted to inform the examination battery, he then says the naval signal party at the battery immediately hoisted an acknowledgement. The difficulty for a researcher is which version to accept. I believe doubt must lie with the second version - on the grounds that, if Veale believed the war signal was meant for *Alvina*, why was that signal not repeated by Fort Queenscliff when there was no acknowledgement? This would be quite contrary to military

practice, as illustrated by Veale's own testimony and his expectation that the naval battery signal station at Fort Nepean would immediately acknowledge flag H.

Conflicting and doubtful statements abound in relation to military command at Eagle's Nest on August 5th 1914.

Major Cox Taylor was clearly the Commanding Officer Eagle's Nest Fire Control on the morning of August 5th. His direct subordinates were Lieutenant Charles Morris as assistant Fire Commander and Captain Moreton Williams as FI Battery Commander. All three were to serve meritoriously as Artillery Officers on the Western Front during WW1.

There is clear documented evidence that post-war - certainly up to his retirement in 1932 - Cox Taylor accepted credit for ordering gun F1 to fire on *Pfalz*. However, in 1932 Charles Morris provided a statement to the Dept. of Defence Library that his superior was away at lunch and that in Cox Taylor's absence he received the War order from Colonel Sandford at Queenscliff, and then informed Moreton Williams at gun F1 to fire a heave to shot at *Pfalz*.

On August 5th 1932, a letter was published in the Melbourne Herald from a 'Correspondent', this outlined in some detail the *Pfalz* engagement off Observatory Point. In conflict to all previous account it stated that *Pfalz* spouting smoke and flames had taken a highly unusual path from east to west across the central bay to approach the Heads passing Swan Island via the Loelia and Symonds Channels. The battery commander therefore gave an order to fire before *Pfalz* closed Swan Island. The letter said the shell was observed to land well north of Swan Island at a range of line plus 300. This would be a minimum range of 9,400 yards.

In 1968 Moreton Williams wrote to the Curator of the AWM asking for the official war history to be corrected. His letter largely reiterated the 1932 'correspondent' letter with the exception that he firmly stated - no order had be received by him from any other officer before he ordered F1 gun to fire a heave too shot across the bow of *Pfalz*.

I leave you to make up your own minds.

It is also recorded that the struggle for the engine room telegraph between Captain Khulken and Pilot Robinson was observed from land. I do not challenge that the struggle occurred, however I wish you to look carefully at the *Pfalz* (Boorara) photo and the enlargement before deciding if such observations would be possible at a range of 3,000-yards.



S.S. Pfalz

Did people hear Pilot Robinson's description of the struggle and then convince themselves they had been an observer? There is a similar issue with the 'officials' who came jubilantly onto the bridge when Pfalz was released from the Examination anchorage. Who were they? Consular officials, shipping officials, or simply Germans seeking to escape internment. We will almost certainly never know.

First Shot - Port Phillip or the English Channel



Fort Nepean F1 Gun which fired the 'First British Empire Shot of WW1'

As the Centenary of WW1 approached considerable criticism was aimed at the claim that the First British Empire shot was fired from F1 Fort Nepean at between 12.30 p.m. and 12.45 p.m. on August 5th 1914. The time argument follows two paths; first, that the time was

around 11.00 a.m. as indicated in the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Vol. 's IX & XII*; the press of the day and many later articles using the post-war testimony of Pilot Robinson. I hope that today's presentation and the information provided in *Stop the Pfalz – 1914* has laid that argument to rest. The British challenger is an action that took place in the English Channel off Harwich between *HMS Amphion & HMS Lance* against a German minelayer *KMS Konigen Luise* in which *HMS Lance* fired a shot at 10.30 a.m. GMT, August 5th 1914. It is claimed this action precedes the Port Phillip action at 12.45 p.m. AEST August 5th 1914. For me this argument is entirely specious. I will simply say that to deny the concept of UT (Universal Time) in this way would potentially have placed Australia at War with Germany at midnight AEST August 4th 1914, nine hours before Berlin time and ten hours before the British ultimatum to Germany had expired in London. Clearly this was not the case - nor is the reverse.

If Sir Maurice Hankey and the Committee of Imperial Defence were able to accept in 1925 that Fort Nepean fired the 'First WWI Shot of the British Empire' that is good enough for me.