# The First Shot

Introduction

On Wed 5 Aug 1914, the brand-new German freighter S.S. Pfalz tried to escape from Port Phillip Bay to the open sea, before WW1 was declared. The *Pfalz* was built in 1913 and launched from the yard of Bremer-Vulcan, Vesesack, Germany and was 6,750 tons gross, 4,083 tone net and had refrigerated holds – "the finest of her type in the world" according to Frank Brennan, author of 1978 book *The Australasian Commonwealth Shipping Line.* The ship berthed at No 2, Victoria Dock, on Fri 31 Jul 1914 on its maiden voyage, under Captain W. Kuhiken (Kuluken?) on his first command.

War in Europe was declared on Tue 4 Aug 1914 at 11 pm (London time), which was 9 am on Wed 5 Aug 1914 (Melbourne time).

Engagement

At about 12.40 pm on Wed 5 Aug 1914 (Melbourne time), the S.S. Pfalz was underway and just short of the Port Phillip Heads, having been released from inspection by the RAN near Portsea, when news reached Fort Queenscliff that war had been declared in Europe. Fort Queenscliff (the local coastal artillery HQ controlling all the separate forts in the Point Nepean / Queenscliff / Swan Island vicinity) telephoned Fort Nepean to stop the S.S. Pfalz.
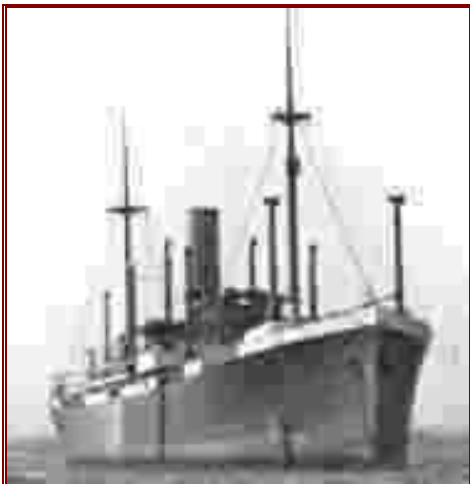

SS Pfalz

An initial flag signal from Fort Nepean for the Pfalz to heave to was not seen – the Pfalz continued to steam towards the Heads, which were now tantalisingly close from the perspective of the German Captain.

Once it was confirmed that the Pfalz was not heaving to in accordance with the Fort Nepean signal, the order was given to fire a shot across the bows of the Pfalz to compel its surrender.

And so it was that, at about 12.45 pm on Wed 5 Aug 1914, a 100 lb Prac 6" round was fired from 6 inch Gun at Gun Emplacement No 6 (also described as F/1) at Fort Nepean to stop the S.S. Pfalz (the exact time was not noted). The shot worked – after a brief struggle on the bridge between the German Captain and the Australian pilot (CAPT Robinson), the German Captain surrendered and the S.S. Pfalz was taken into captivity.
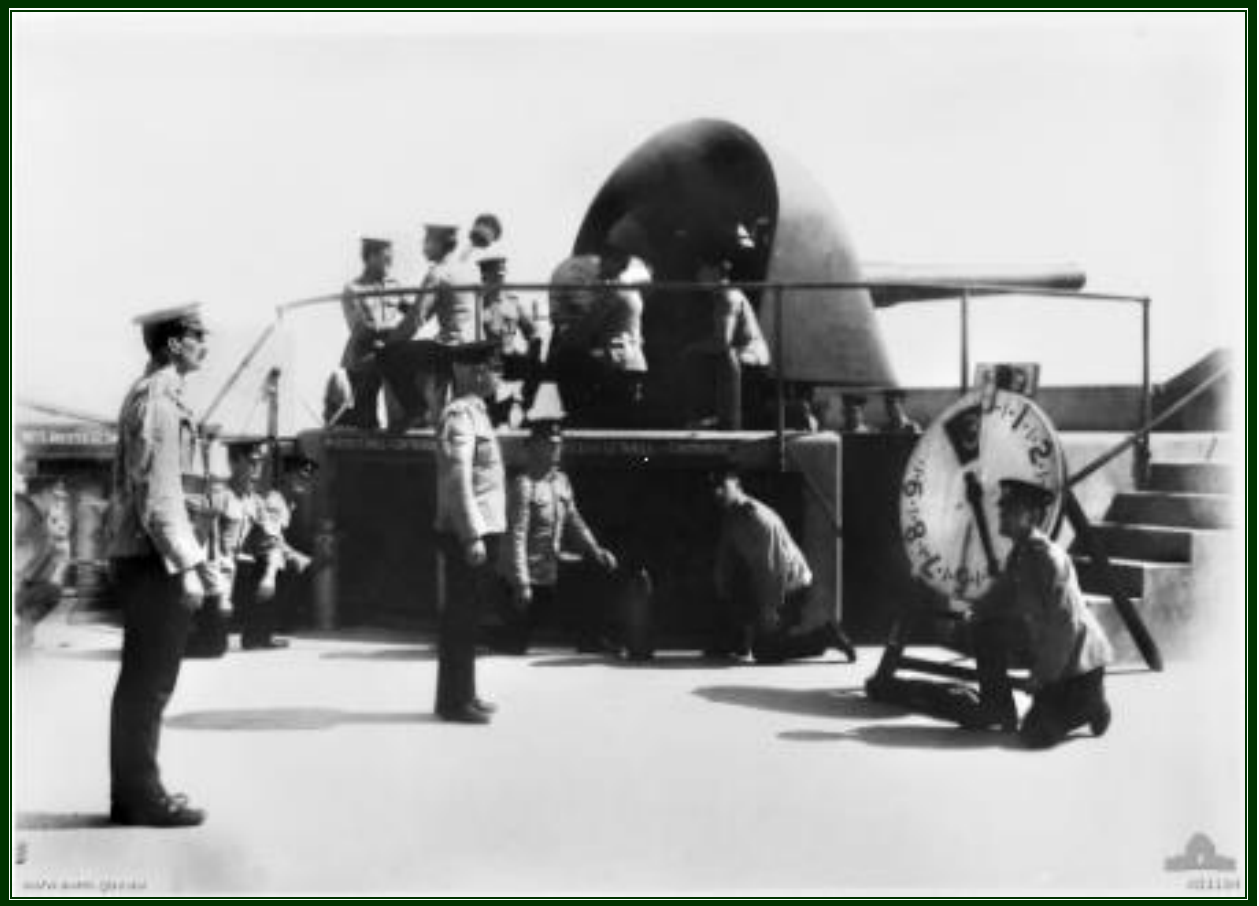
6 inch Gun at Gun Position No 6 (F/1) – Fort Nepean, Aug 1914

The shot fired from 6 inch Gun at Gun Emplacement No 6 (F/1) at Fort Nepean at about 12.45 pm on Wed 5 Aug 1914 – fired just three hours and forty five minutes after war was declared in London – was the first shot fired in the entire British Empire in WW1 – the first of all the hundreds of millions of rounds of all calibres that were subsequently fired over the next 1,560 days, until war ended on 11 November 1918.

Group portrait of men of No 6 Company, Royal Australian Garrison Artillery, 3rd Military District, who fired Australia's first shot in the Great War.

Back row, left to right: GNR W Carlin; GNR J Gregory; BDR H L Hope; GNR J Ryan; CPL W W Young; GNR A Brown; CPL R A Britnell; GNR E V Quirk; SGT C R Carter; GNR J Russell; CPL J J Jack; GNR F J Mealey; BDR J Purdue; BDR J Edwards; GNR A Murray.

Front row: CAPT M D Williams; LTCOL A H Sandford; CSM E H Wheeler.

Subsequent history of the SS Pfalz

SS Pfalz was subsequently requisitioned for the Royal Australian Navy and refitted as a troop ship at Williamstown. It was renamed A 42 HMAT *Boorara*. Soon after it took part in the 2nd Australian convoy, with subsequent duties including the transportation of Turkish prisoners from the Dardanelles.

While serving in the Aegean Sea in July 1915 the ship collided with the French Navy cruiser Kléber, was beached at Moudros and subsequently taken to Naples to be repaired.
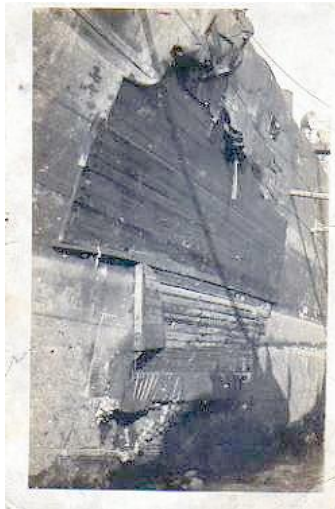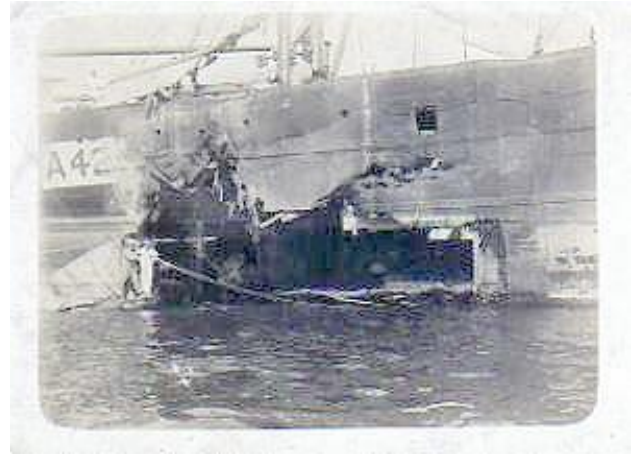
HMAT Boorara later was twice torpedoed in the English Channel. On the first occasion, on 20 March 1918, the ship was torpedoed 2.5 miles S 25° E of Beachy Head by German submarine UB 31 (Wilhelm Braun) whilst en route from London to Sydney, laden with general cargo. She managed to reach Southampton and was made seaworthy for a tow to Newcastle for extensive repairs.

Those killed in the torpedoing of 20 March 1918 were:

DRAKE, Ernest Alan - Fireman (killed)

DUFFY, Martin - Donkeyman (killed)

GRENNAN, John - Fireman (killed)

HAITHWAITE, Albert - Fireman (drowned)

TREMLETT, Henry Edward - Fireman (killed)

However, she was torpedoed again off Whitby on 23 July 1918, 12 miles S of Tees whilst being towed to Tyne for further repairs, by the German submarine UC 70 (Karl Dobberstein). No-one was killed in this attack.

Despite her engine room being wrecked twice, the sturdy vessel was repaired in time to help repatriate Australian troops from the UK back home to Australia in 1919.

After the war the ship was used by the Commonwealth Line for the transport of frozen cargo to the United Kingdom, using ports at Avon mouth, Liverpool and Glasgow.

In 1926 the E. Hadjilias shipping line of Athens in Greece bought her, renamed her *Nereus* and registered her on the Cycladean island of Syra in the Aegean Sea.

In August 1937, *Nereus* sailed in ballast from Moji in Japan for Port Alberni to load a cargo of lumber for the United Kingdom under charter to the Anglo-Canadian Shipping Co. On 8 August in heavy fog she ran aground on

rocks about 1,000 feet (300 m) south-east of Cape Beale on Vancouver Island. The salvage steamer SS Salvage King from Victoria rescued her crew. Within 48 hours of grounding, *Nereus* broke her back and was lost.

Thus ended the life of the ship that was once the SS Pfalz.

A Commemorative Ceremony

Major Bernie Gaynor, RAA, (OCS Class Dec 77) commenced discussions in 2010 to recognise the importance of the Portsea area in relation to this significant historical event. Work involved significant liaison with government departments at state and federal level, local government and various historical organisations.

On 5 August 2014, an event was conducted at Portsea to commemorate the ANZAC Centenary marking our nation's involvement in World War 1.