

Collingwood Gun

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The Gun

The gun at Collingwood is a 150 mm Heavy Field Howitzer Model 1913, manufactured by Krupp in 1915 and reportedly captured by the Australian Corps on 18 September 1918. Brought to Australia as a War Trophy in 1919 it was allotted to Collingwood in 1921 and displayed in Darling Gardens from where it was removed in 2013.

Its German designation is 15 cm schweres Feld Haubitze M13 (sFH13). It is the short (kurz) version with barrel length 14 calibres (14 x 150mm), a long (lang) version was introduced during the war with a barrel 17 calibres (17 x 150 mm) in length. See attachment 1 for further information. By late November 1917 the sFH13 had become the Germans principal gun of battle. 3,409 sFH13 were produced by Krupp and Rhinemetall during the war. An unknown number were also produced by other manufacturers. The gun was called the 5.9 (inch) by the allies who respected it for its effect on dug outs and trenches and as a counter battery gun.

Capture Details

This gun, serial number 548, was manufactured by Krupp in 1915. It was brought to Australia as a War Trophy, possibly on the SS Bulla in April 1919 and according to AWM93 27/1/107 was stored in the Domain, Melbourne c. June 1919, 3rd Row. The capture of this gun is recorded in the Australian War Memorial card system (as used by Bill Billet in War Trophies - From the First World War 1914 – 1918 and confirmed by myself) as being captured on 18 September 1918 by the Australian Corps. The card system consists of a single card for each gun on which is recorded basic information obtained from other records.

Information on the card for this gun is unusual for the capture unit to be so broad, Australia Corps could be any of the 60 Australian Infantry Battalions or other Australian units. Usually the battalion is indicated or at least the Brigade (four battalions to a Brigade). Experience has also shown the card record are not always correct, errors possibly being introduced when the information was transcribed from other records. There is also the possibility some 'poetic licence' was used. The lack of capture information makes it difficult if not impossible to determine the exact capture details from unit diaries.

The Australian War Memorial file AWM93 27/1/107 contain records describing each gun when they were held in the Domain, Melbourne. For 548 it records 'Gun No.548 Trail; yes, Shield; yes, Barrel; yes, Con. of gun; good, Camouflaged; yes, Marks; 24th Battalion.' This suggests the gun was captured by the 24th Battalion. The Argus of 19 March 1921 in its article on the distribution of captured enemy guns (Attachment 2) provides date of capture for some of the guns but nothing for the Collingwood gun. So where the capture date of 18 September has been determined remains a mystery.

Captured weapons were usually marked at the time of their capture with the name of the capturing unit. So assuming 24 Battalion captured this gun a search of their War Diary for September 1918 shows the unit was being rested on 18 September. They were next to see action in early October. On the morning 5 October 1918 during the attack on Montbrehain 24 Battalion captures included a field gun. The unit inflicted great losses on the enemy but themselves suffered heavily, 49 killed 80 wounded and 5 missing. After breakfast on 6

October the Battalion and other infantry units of the Australian Corps, withdrew for a well-earned rest. Little did they know at the time but it the end of the fighting for them. 24 Battalion was part of 6 Infantry Brigade along with 21,22 and 23 Battalions, all Victorian units. During this action 22 Battalion was on the left of the 24th. See Attachment 3 for 5/6 October 1918 copy of War Diary.

Work continues to identify the guns captured by the Infantry Battalions (60 in number) and Infantry Brigades (15) but it is unlikely they will reveal any information on the capture of this gun. Very few of the battalions recorded the serial number of individual guns simply supplying quantity and calibre. Calibre does not provide identification of the type of gun.

Allocation of War Trophies

The allocation of war trophies (field guns, mortars and machine guns) was undertaken by the Commonwealth Trophies Committee who set up State Trophy Committees to distribute the trophies to the towns and municipalities. Initial allocation had been given to the Australian War Museum (now Australian War Memorial) and Army units linked to a capturing unit in the Australian Imperial Force. Remaining items were then made available to the State Committees who quickly found they had insufficient to meet the demands. Additional trophies became available and eventually the French Government provided more from their stocks. But that was to occur after the Collingwood issue. In all some 3,250 cities and towns throughout Australia were allotted trophies.

The basis of issue was on population for the towns and the Municipalities were given a stock for allocation which was to be arranged by the Mayor of the City. The article in *The Age* (Attachment 2) overviews the allocation but I highlight that of the 33 trophies only six field guns were available and of these Collingwood received the largest. Across Australia the dissatisfaction with what was received was widespread so Collingwood was well served.

Before the trophy was allotted certain conditions had to be agreed. The conditions required that three trustees should be appointed by the Council and that these trustees should sign an agreement to comply with the following conditions in respect of the relic:

- Arrange for it to be permanently housed in a public park, garden or building within the town, whichever may appear most suitable, and for its subsequent preservation and safe custody.
- Arrange a simple ceremony at which it will be formally taken over,
- Bear all expenses connected with transport and installation after arrival at the nearest railway station.

The Gun at Collingwood

According to documents held at the Australian War Memorial the Collingwood Council accepted the conditions and an agreement dated 27th April 1921 and signed by E. Coulson, B.W. Tapner and W. Marshall, was forwarded to the committee. A copy of that agreement is at Attachment 4. The gun was subsequently sent to Collingwood. No record in papers available on Trove have been found indicating when the gun arrived nor when the ceremony was held. Perhaps local papers may contain this information.

No doubt some citizens of Collingwood would have been offended by the presence of the gun and this is often the case throughout other localities but often they were the minority and in my opinion they viewed the object in a fashion counter to the intention of its display. In 1933 this certainly came to a head in Collingwood in April 1933. According to *The Age* of 11

April 1933 'Cr. L. Marshall, of Collingwood, has given notice of his intention to move at the next meeting of the council:

That this council, on behalf of Collingwood, present to Germany the captured German gun now in Darling Gardens as a friendly gesture with fraternal greetings for the co-operation of both nations in peaceful progress in the future, '.

The Council meeting was certainly stormy and reported widely. Recorder (Port Pirie, South Australia) ran the story on 8 May 1933, see <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/95996035?searchTerm=Collingwood%20koln&searchLimits=> . Also in hindsight 1933 is significant for events in Germany and I wonder how Cr Marshall reflected upon his action in later years.

Whilst many today may see these weapons as supportive of war I think the reply given in 1933 by the then Councillor of Collingwood, William Ruthven, a recipient of the Victoria Cross for his actions during World War I whilst serving with 22 Battalion, still holds true and in this centenary year of the conflict in which it was captured it is even more relevant:

'Cr. Ruthven, V.C., speaking with considerable feeling, said the gun in Darling Gardens had been accepted by the council as a trophy commemorating the deeds of their, soldiers..... He, for one, would be glad to assemble the children at the guns and inform them of the horrors which those implements of war inflicted. The gun was symbolic of their everlasting esteem and regard for the fallen soldiers. The motion was defeated, by ten votes to two, only the mover and seconder voting for it.' (The Age, 5 April 1933 p12).

Future Display

The above holds background on the gun and its significance to Collingwood and the commitment agreed to by the Council. Over the years the gun has fallen into disrepair. Direct exposure to the elements is a threat to an object like this but even now after nearly 100 years it is in reasonably good condition. Rust is evident in some areas and would need to be arrested and some minor parts replaced. The major damage is to the wheels which are now totally absent. This is to be expected for timber wheels supporting nearly one tonne. I believe Council should restore the gun and place it back on display to honour their original commitment for it 'to be permanently housed in a public park, garden or building within the town, whichever may appear most suitable, and for its subsequent preservation and safe custody'. To ensure the gun is maintained in the best order possible it should be covered with a shelter to protect it directly from the elements. Whilst this represents an initial cost the long term savings should make this worthwhile.

While it would appear the gun has been a toy within the park and subsequently climbed on by many individuals over the years it is inevitable that someone would have injured themselves and whilst this did occur in 2013, no doubt other injuries have occurred over the years. The dangers of such injuries resulting in legal action against Council, especially in this modern era, is understood and must be avoided in future. Therefore a barrier to prevent people of all ages from climbing on the gun is essential. Signs indicating the object is a symbol of the sacrifices given by the Australian Forces over many years to give us the freedoms we so much enjoy could be used to further discourage people from climbing on it.



One of two guns displayed in a park in Unley, South Australia shows an example of what the Council may possibly consider to deter people climbing on the gun. A shelter over the gun would be recommended.



Sunbury, Victoria (left) and Jamestown, South Australia (right) display historic guns in an enclosed environment. The initial cost is recognized but the savings in future costs will make up for this in a reasonably short time through reduced maintenance costs for the display item as well as its long term protection

Restoration

The cost of restoration is also something I can only comment upon. It is dependent upon so many factors and an actual cost would only be possible to determine by obtaining quotes. The least costly would be to have the work undertaken by a group of capable volunteers supported by specialists where required. Estimation of the cost of restoration of the gun is between \$4000 and \$15,000. Work would include the conservation of the ironwork, removal of rust, replacement of rusted items and possibly painting. The latter to be done in two part paint.

Whilst the latter is not heritage correct the aim here is the long term preservation of the item with minimal future costs.

The major cost will be the replacement of wheels and again here the cost will vary greatly depending on the wheelwright selected. I know three that I could recommend and also know that their prices may vary significantly although the quality of their work is very comparable. Two of them have in recent times manufactured the type of wheel required (for Moss Vale, NSW and Ballarat. Cost will also vary on whether the iron work for the wheels (hubs and tyres) is available. My recommendation would be for a quote to be obtained from them all. I would estimate the wheels would cost in the order of \$10,000 plus. Placing the gun on stands to take the majority of the weight off the wheels is also essential.

Disposal Options

Gifting. Should Council decide that it will not restore the gun and place it back on public view than the Council should gift the gun to an organization willing to restore the gun and place it on public display. This would generate least detrimental comment from the wider community.

Sale. There are collectors who would willingly take the gun off Councils hands. Recent sale of guns have attracted some unusual prices. The value may lie anywhere between \$4000 and \$30,000 plus. It would of course depend on many factors and no doubt the greater the advertising the greater the return but great advertising will bring with it a wide knowledge of what is happening and with it wide condemnation. It is difficult to place a sale value on the gun. World War I guns are sought after and rare.

Questions

To answer your specific questions from your email. World War I guns are certainly rarer than those of World War II mainly because there were fewer of them brought to Australia. There are more World War I war trophy guns in Australia than there are from World War II. This is because following World War II there was no policy to bring back trophies from that war. But there are far more allied guns of World War II in Australia than there are from World War I. In fact I would suggest there are fewer than 20 field guns used by the Australians during World War I but over 1000 from World War II. Few private collectors in Australia have World War I guns and those they do hold are only because they saved them from the scrap heap when Councils 'lost interest' in them.

Many collectors like to display their guns along with the vehicle that was used to tow it. Therefore they are interested in acquiring a gun from World War II or later. World War I guns were moved generally by horses and the cost and difficulty involved in training and running a team is much greater as are the safety restrictions. I would therefore suggest someone looking to obtain a gun from World War I is looking more towards its future financial benefit. But having said that I repeat without these people we would have lost a great number of these war trophies.

You also mention 'Peter and the RSL, as well as the History Society, have articulated the importance of the gun to Veterans and the significance on a local and national level for the community'. Whilst no doubt the importance of the gun to Veterans goes without saying but if the history of the gun and what it really represents was known by the citizens than that importance would be held right across the whole community. It was the forebears of the citizens that put

themselves in harm's way and no doubt the families of those veterans sacrificed a great deal and underwent much fear for their loved ones.

Council needs to be convinced and understand that the gun is not a symbol of war. It is a symbol of the sacrifices our forebears gave for the freedoms we so love and enjoy today.