

Lake Macquarie Minenwerfer history. Compiled by Geoffrey Mansfield, 2019

At its meeting of 24 May 1920 Lake Macquarie Shire Council considered the proposed allocation by the NSW State Trophies Committee of war trophies to towns and villages in the shire. It was resolved to make an application *'for one big gun'* to be located in Lake Macquarie Park at Speers Point.

In early June Council received an Allotment Circular from Mr William Trahair, Secretary to the Committee which provided more specific details of the allocation of the trophies to towns in the Shire. The Circular stated that the war trophies would be allocated according to the size of a town and its population. Cities and towns (other than the capital city) with a population above 10,000 would be allocated two artillery pieces and two machine-guns; towns with a population between 3,000 and 10,000 would be allocated an artillery piece; towns with a population between 300 and 3,000 would be allocated a machine-gun. Trophies remaining after this allocation, together with those that may be received in the future would be used to meet applications for trophies for special purposes, to extend the distribution of trophies to those towns with populations below 300. The circular also indicated the entitlement for each town.

In response, on 22 June the Shire Clerk wrote to Mr Trahair advising that at a meeting held the preceding day Council had resolved to accept the trophies as set out in the Committee's allotment circular. However, regarding their original request for a gun it was pointed out that Lake Macquarie Park is adjacent to the Shire offices and is considered to be the 'Capital of the Shire' and is 'frequented by thousands every year'. Therefore, it was contented their request should receive favourable consideration.

In July Council resolved to ask the Federal Member, Mr D Watkins, MHR for help with their request to the Committee. At the time, Mr Watkins was also assisting the Town Clerks of Merewether, Lambton, Wallsend and Adamstown councils in a dispute regarding all the war trophies for the Newcastle district being allocated to Newcastle City Council. On 14 July, 1920 the Acting Secretary to the Committee wrote to Mr Watkins advising that as the population of Speer's Point is less than 300 under the above scheme of distribution the township is not entitled to a war trophy. Notwithstanding this, support in the community for a gun at Speers Point was growing.

In late July representatives of the Boolaroo, Speers Point, Warner's Bay and Teralba Progress Associations, the Returned Soldiers League and citizens met at the Boolaroo School Arts to discuss a variety of civic matters, including the allocation of the war trophies. Given the contribution made by Boolaroo in providing men for active service and the perceived national status of Speer's Point Park, it was felt by those present that it was 'only just' they have an appropriate war trophy. A motion moved by Alderman Hardy that an application be made for a 'siege gun' was supported. It was also decided to forward a copy of the resolution to Mr Watkins.

On 11 August 1920 the Secretary to the Committee wrote to Mr Watkins advising that in response to the communication dated 23 July received from the Boolaroo Progress Association, Lake Macquarie Shire Council had been given the option of accepting a machine gun at an early date, or a heavy gun or trench mortar, if available, in three or months' time. This option had become available because it had been found that after the distribution of trophies to towns with populations above 3,000 a small surplus of trophies was available to distribute to towns of less than 3,000. At this time, a heavy trench mortar

(*minenwerfer*) Serial No 1480 and other war trophies yet to be allocated were being stored in Darlinghurst jail.

Eventually Council was allocated the above trench mortar and a 75mm field gun for Boolaroo. However, prior to handing over a trophy the Committee required that three trustees, including a member of the Australian Imperial Force, be appointed to act on behalf of the town. The trustees had to sign an agreement that they would:

- (a) Arrange for the trophy to be permanently housed in a public park, garden, or building in the town, and for its preservation and safe custody,
- (b) Arrange a simple ceremony at which the trophy will be formally taken over, and
- (c) Bear all expenses connected with the movement and installation of the trophy after its arrival at the nears railway station.

In late January 1921 the NSW Trophy Committee notified council that arrangements were being made to forward trophies to eight towns in the shire and requested the return of the 'papers' (trustee agreements and allotment forms) for several other towns, including Boolaroo. Two months later many of the documents including Boolaroo had still not been returned. In a letter to the Committee dated 22 April the Shire Clerk explained that he had returned the papers for the war trophy allocated to Teralba in lieu of the documents for the Boolaroo trophies which had been mislaid.

At the beginning of June 1921 the Boolaroo trophies were shipped by rail from Sydney to Cockle Creek station and then transported to Speers Point. However, having achieved their goal of obtaining guns for Speers Point Council apparently did not have any plans as to what to do after the guns arrived. Consequently, there was no unveiling ceremony, no plaques and the guns were left neglected in the park. By early November 1922 the Boolaroo Sub-branch of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers League was sufficiently concerned to request the guns to be enclosed by Council to prevent them '*being damaged by children*'. In March 1923 a tourist from Wyong visiting 'beautiful' Boolaroo and 'lovely' Speer's Point' observed:

There is one matter that reflects discredit upon all concerned, and that is the manner in which the war trophies have been dumped down anyhow. The Lake Macquarie Shire Councillors who control the Park should pay a visit to Wyong and other towns and see the care bestowed upon the captured guns.

Concrete bases for mounting the guns were finally constructed in late February 1926. Over the next decade improvements to the park increased its popularity as a picnic ground. However, after sixteen years exposure to the elements the condition of the guns had deteriorated and at the beginning of May 1942 a young boy suffered a fractured foot when part of the barrel of the field gun fell on it. Despite this, seven years later climbing over 'the rusty cannons' remained one of the main attractions of the park for children. For ex-servicemen of the Second World War they were drawn to the mortar for other reasons:

One of those field artillery pieces a stub-nosed howitzer from the second last war is so different from other guns in other parks that it immediately commands inspection. Young ex-servicemen, intrigued by its design, often stand there and talk about it.

For the Diggers of the First World War the mortar or *minenwerfer* was remembered as one of the most dreaded weapons of the war. The shells fired, depending on their shape, were known as a *minnie*, *oil can*, *torps*, or a *Raspberry tail* because of the small red light at the base of the shell as it flew upwards. The shells filled high explosive made a 'spine-chilling, whining whirr' before they fell to earth with devastating effect.

With the passage of time the history of the war trophies was gradually lost to the local community, including the Council and the R.S.L. In 1993 a heritage consultant assessing the significance of the *minenwerfer* concluded:

Apart from notes that the *minenwerfer* was captured during World War One, and that it was erected in the park in the 1930s, we have found no indication of who brought it back from Germany, what its connection is with the City of Lake Macquarie, or why it was erected in the Speers Point Park.

By this time the field gun had been removed, its fate unknown.

In 1995 for the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two an '*Australia Remembers*' plaque was attached to the side of the cement rendered brick plinth of the mortar by the local commemorations committee who mistakenly thought it was a relic from that conflict.

In early January 1995, a request in a local newspaper for information regarding the '*mystery of how a German World War One artillery piece ended up in Speers Point Park*' drew a response from an unexpected source. A German tourist Georg Hartwig visiting relatives in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie read the article and following his return to Germany, using the serial number and other information collected from the relic, sought help from the German Army Museum located in his hometown of Ingolstadt. A year later he returned to Lake Macquarie and provided to the newspaper the results of his research. The information provided by Mr Hartwig was a general history of the *minenwerfers* used by the Imperial German Army during the Great War. Unfortunately, the subsequent article in the paper portrayed the history as being of the gun in Speers Point Park.

In the Lake Macquarie Local Environmental Plan gazetted in 2004 the mortar is identified as an item of local heritage significance. Of the 12 heavy (250mm) trench mortars allocated in the 1920s as war trophies to towns in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and West Australian only 3 remain, of these two are in the Hunter Valley at Speers Point and Muswellbrook.