

**DAVID MCGINNESS**

## **DEFENDING THE SOUTH-WEST COAST OF VICTORIA**

### ***INTRODUCTION:***

Unease in Europe will see the colony of Victoria take steps to build up her defences and be prepared for any hostile acts that might fall upon her shores.

Military units will be encouraged to form and help defend our fair colony.

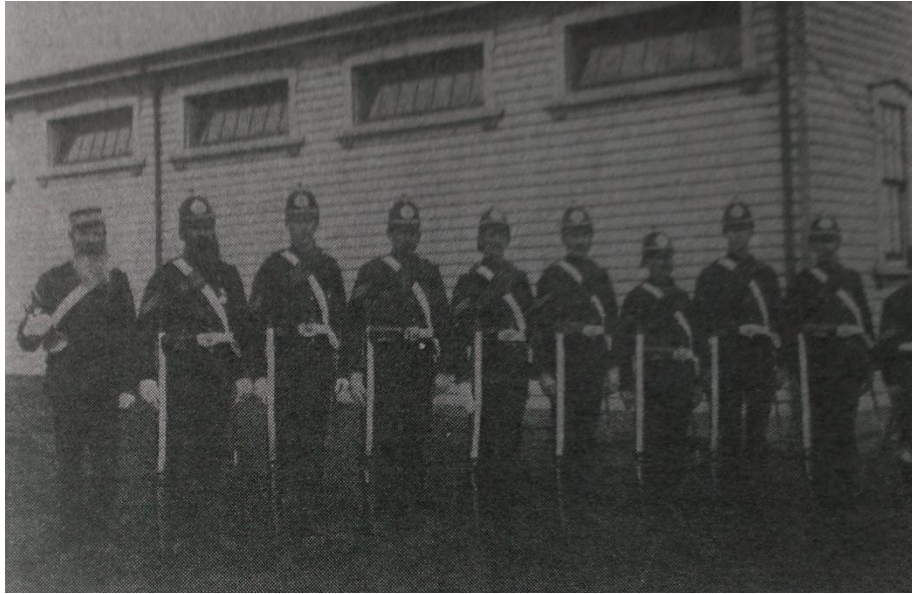
A naval force, infantry, mounted troops and artillery units will form the main force to defend our land and this will be supported by a number of ancillary units.

In the south-west coastal region we will see volunteer rifle units form, followed by garrison artillery units and, not to be forgotten, the Victorian Mounted Rifles.

### ***OUR UNITS AND FORTIFICATIONS:***

## **PORTLAND**





On September 25<sup>th</sup>

1859, following public meetings, the Portland Volunteer Rifles were formed and William Learmonth was appointed Captain.

The unit's fortunes waxed and waned and it was disbanded in late 1863.

1866 saw the return of a military presence in the town with the formation of the Victorian Volunteer Artillery.

The batteries at Warnambool and Belfast combined with Portland to form the Western Artillery Corps.

Enrollment in such a force was attractive to many as between 1865 and 1868 all men serving in the volunteer movement were entitled to the assistance of a sum of 50 pounds toward the purchase of Crown Land.



The first inspection of the corps was undertaken in September by Lieutenant James Trangmar (he was a non-commissioned officer in the rifles) in the absence of Capt William Learmonth. In November of 1866 a musketry course was set up, with Lieutenant Trangmar making the promise of good shooting. He had arranged for 110 rabbits to be released into the heath ... need I say any more? But there has been some good shooting ever since. In April 1867 the Portland contingent was conveyed by HMCS *Victoria* to the first of the Easter encampments at Sunbury on the property owned by William Clarke, a well known and wealthy business man.



On their return from their first camp they bought back a renovated, antique, Armstrong, 32 pounder. It was placed to overlook the beach and bay.

Practice on the gun was quite impossible during the winter, so a group of local volunteers made a wooden 32 pounder for them to practice with while indoors and the practice paid off.

Major Snee of the local staff inspected the corps in 1868. He tested them on their knowledge of gun drill and their ability to fire the 32 pounder directed at a target secured to a buoy 850 yards out to sea. Fifty-three men passed the test.

Regular competitions were held between Portland and neighboring contingents and the 'crack shots' would travel to Melbourne to compete in statewide competitions where they acquitted themselves very well.

On March 10<sup>th</sup> 1884 the volunteer movement in Portland was disbanded with the final parade being inspected by Lieutenant-Colonel William Learmonth, assisted by Major James Trangmar and Sergeant-Major Browning.

A call for men to enroll in the permanent part time paid Militia, subject to the provisions of the Discipline Act of 1870, immediately followed the disbandment of the volunteers.

Lieutenant-Colonel Learmonth served to see the new regime started. He retired in 1886.

With full enrolment attained, Portland was admitted to the corps with 75 men as its strength.



Again the men were subjected to rigorous drill by Sgt O'Sullivan, with Sgts S P Hawkins and Templeton instructing on the use of the rifle.

The local men enjoyed their involvement in the militia: they had a uniform to be worn on as many occasions as possible, to the delight of proud parents and sweethearts alike; there were twice yearly paid parades to provide a few extras; and militia men were likely to have first chance of employment on any Western District harbor works in those cases where works were undertaken by a government department and not private contractors.

December of 1888 saw the passing of Lieutenant-Colonel James Trangmar and a connection with the old volunteer force. James Trangmar will be always remembered in Portland. He arrived in the area in 1844 and during his time led a very busy life, even being elected mayor on four occasions. We are not

quite sure whether his connection dates back to the inception of the movement, but for a period of nearly twenty years his title of 'Captain' and subsequently 'Major' had been household words in Portland. Under his command the local corps was always of respectable if not full strength (although no pay was attached to it) and numbered in its ranks those who had grown grey in the service. Most of these members fell out, some from necessity others from choice, when the new order of things came into existence. When he severed his connection with the local military Lieutenant-Colonel (then Major) Trangmar was placed on the unattached list and only a short time afterward—rather late in the day considering the many previous years of volunteer service—he received his promotion to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. He was given a private funeral and he left a wife, one married daughter and four adult sons.

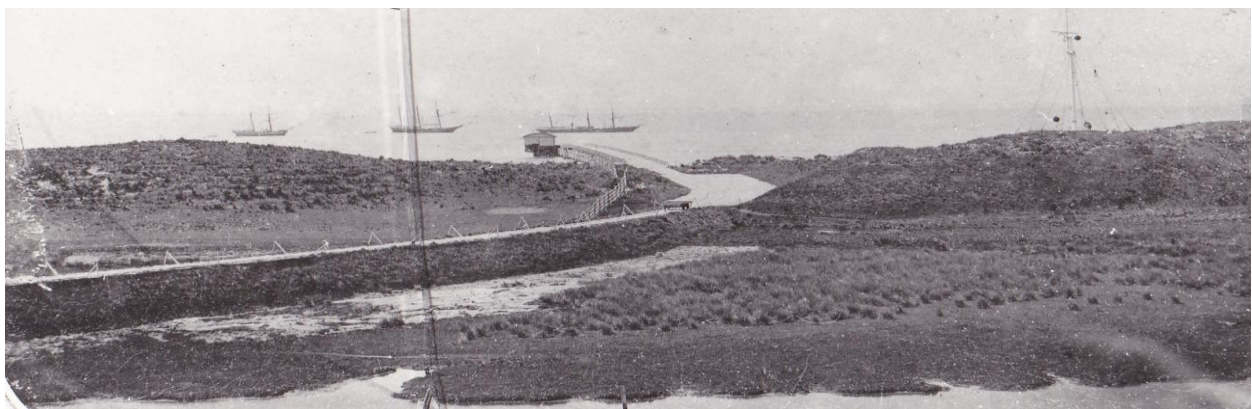
Earlier in the year, on July 11<sup>th</sup> 1888, the erection of a fortification for a battery was proposed. Tenders were called in 1889 and work commenced and was completed on an elevated site overlooking the anchorage and piers in 1890.

This would a busy year for the Portland battery. Gunner Findlay gained the Star and Crown badge for musketry and was declared to be the best shot in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade. Sgt Thomas Huxley was examined for a commission in July, was passed with flying colors, and appointed to the rank of Lieutenant. On a sadder note Major R. Foote was farewelled as he took up a job as a bank manager outside the area; Captain Samuel Hawkins took over the command.

1893 saw the loss of two of its members, both passing away through illness, and then Lieutenant Matheson resigned because of 'Behavior not becoming an officer and gentleman.' (He had made a trivial social gaffe by criticizing the morals of a young woman.) The year also saw the state cabinet resolved to reduce the number of men at Portland to forty.

In 1899 an Elswick 5 inch gun was mounted, making the 80 pounders and other guns obsolete. This gun would be removed in 1904 when the Portland battery was disbanded.

## PORT FAIRY

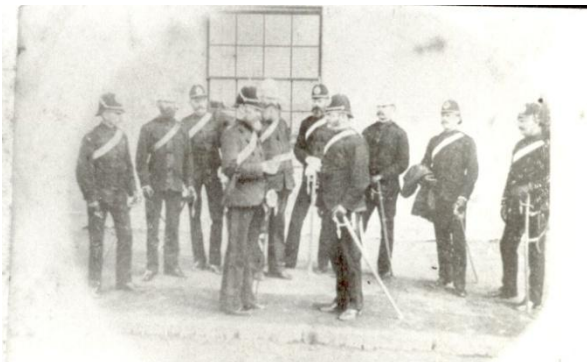




Captain Mason was the first commander of the Belfast Volunteer Rifles in 1860 but three years later the corps was disbanded. In 1866 a detachment of western artillery was formed and Captain Mason retained his position as commander of it until 1882 when the present volunteer garrison artillery was enrolled.

Under the command of Major Kell the Port Fairy battery of garrison artillery would obtain a good name for its smartness and knowledge of gun drill. The Belfast Company of the Western Artillery Corps was first noted in the local paper in June of 1866 with enrolments commencing in mid-July.

Those enrolled were encouraged to attend their first encampment at Sunbury over Easter, 1867. In June of that year a naval, smooth-bore, muzzle loader (SML), 32 pounder arrived and was emplaced on the sand dune behind the East Beach foreshore—whereupon the arrangement was named the Mills Battery.



In 1870 the Volunteers were reported to be 'in disarray', with Captain Barrett having resigned his commission and left the district, and the suggestion being made that he had absconded with the corps' funds.

A second 32 pounder was delivered by the schooner *Elizabeth* in May, 1872. It was mounted on a traversing slide and located near the first. Practice with both weapons followed soon afterward.



It was reported around this time that a 68 pounder, with traversing platform, was to be provided for the garrison corps.

The government approved the provision of revetments and built emplacements for the weapons in 1874. The contract to provide a floor and protective earthworks in place of the exposed timber platform then in use by the gunners was gained by A. McLaren. However, there was still dissatisfaction concerning undisclosed grievances, the militia forces' claimed inefficiency and waste of money. There was evidence of poor supply of ammunition, and Captain Cramer (Warrnambool) asserted that the SML 32 pounders were of no use as defensive weapons.

Morale among the Volunteers was lifted in February of 1876, when both local newspapers reported that 80 pounder, rifle-bore muzzle loader (RML), Armstrong guns were to be provided, and they were to be issued with Martini-Henry rifles to replace the old Lancaster rifles they were then carrying, although ammunition for the rifles could not be supplied!

The 80 pounder arrived on the schooner *Nith* in March of 1877 and was placed at the Mills Battery (i.e., the East Beach foreshore position) on April 30<sup>th</sup>.

The Martini-Henry rifles were distributed in May 1878.

In April of the following year it was decided that the mountings (presumably meaning the foundations for the guns) for the 80 pounder gun were unsafe. But, despite such unwelcome news, to maintain the volunteers' interest in training the guns were still being fired.



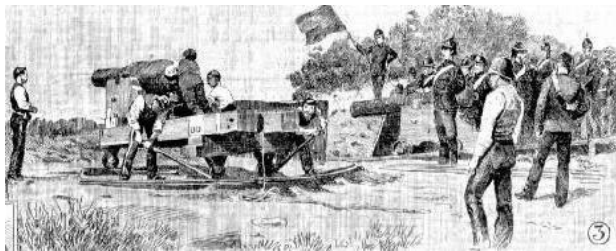
At the training camp at Queenscliff, the Belfast Battery finished third of the corps attending, and with the conduct of the Militia Ball at Moyne Mills later in the year their social skills were not neglected either.

The volunteers put their training to some 'active' purpose during Easter, 1886, when the Victorian Naval gunboat, *Albert*, accompanied by the auxiliary tug/gunboat, *Gannet*, exchanged blank gunfire with the fort at Port Fairy. Meanwhile other vessels challenged the efficiency of the Warrnambool and Portland batteries.

In April of 1887 the government sought tenders for the construction of a two-gun battery on Battery Hill. The contract was awarded to Messrs Lewis, Roberts & Glover, and the foundations were in place by late June. The new battery was completed in October.

This work comprised the provision of a firing platform on the top of the dune.

As part of this upgrade of weaponry and efficiency, the Port Fairy battery received two 68 pounder, smooth-bore muzzle loader (SML) cannons delivered by the steamer *Casino*. They were placed in the Drill Hall to allow the volunteers to practice gun drill at their evening fall-in.



Toward the end of March in the following year a friendly competition with the Warrnambool militia was held. The 80 pounder located in the 'lower' battery was used, mounted on a timber carriage and with a traversing slide.

The gun used was known to have a *'flaw in the bore and which sometimes delays the work of loading to the Annoyance of the gunners.'*

The friendly competition was witnessed by a touring reporter and a photographer from the Sydney based *Town and Country Journal* who reported the competition in detail, noting this was the first such competition between the rivals in 20 years.



The Port Fairy Volunteer Band preceded the parade of both garrisons along Bank and Gipps Streets, before the gun crews were transferred to the battery by rowing boat. The Warrnambool crew was judged the most efficient—although none of the shots found the target 1500 yards distant.

In October of 1888 it was announced that a tender was being called for the alteration and improvement of the gun emplacements at Port Fairy and Warrnambool.

Two 80 pounders on steel carriages were delivered by the *Casino* in April of the following year. They were transferred to their emplacements at Battery Hill soon afterwards and first discharged there at the end of July.

Due to budget constraints following the spectacular financial 'crash' in Melbourne the Government indicated that the complement of men in the militia corps would be reduced. Formal notice to reduce the corps to 56 was advised in July of 1891, and in 1893 for the removal of payment entirely. The complement for the Western garrisons was progressively reduced, with the government eventually allowing 40 men per garrison.

In July of 1904 the *Gazette* noted the handover of the Port Fairy Battery, responsibility for the Battery Hill was transferred to the Navy in 1905, and formal transfer of the Drill Hall to the Navy in 1920.

## WARRNAMBOOL

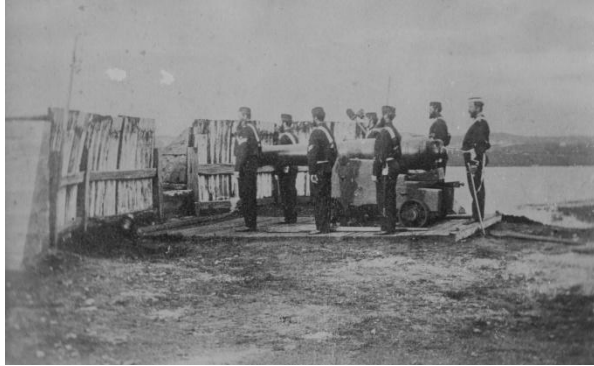


From the early days of settlement at Warrnambool the town and district have embodied an important militia center, especially for the provision of cavalry and artillery volunteers.

The first call to form a volunteer corps was made at a public meeting held in August of 1855 at the time of a war scare when the need to defend the seaports was felt. The scare quickly passed and the patriotic feeling lapsed with it.

Four years later, in July of 1859, with a stronger war spirit sweeping through the colony, a public meeting of 300 citizens unanimously decided to form a volunteer corps. In September of 1859 the Warrnambool Volunteer Rifle Corps was formed.

For four years its members served under the command of Lieutenant Robert Bushe (a solicitor) before the corps was disbanded in 1863 due to the introduction of new government regulations.



In September of 1866 the Warrnambool detachment of the Western Corps, Royal Victorian Volunteer Artillery was formed. Its first weapon was a smooth-bore, 32 pound gun which was sited overlooking the bay from Merri St, and fired on targets along the beach.



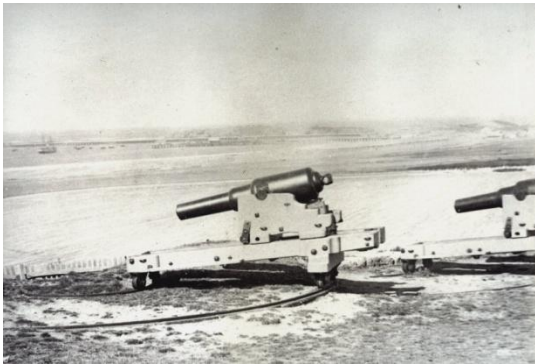
Command of the unit was given to Lieutenant C. A. Cramer who later became the Warrnambool Town Clerk. He had been a member of the Volunteer Rifle Corps. Lieutenant Cramer was subsequently promoted, first to captain and then to major.

Cramer led the unit until his death in 1885. By that time the unit had been renamed the Warrnambool Battery, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, Garrison Artillery (1884).



From October 1866 the Warrnambool detachment commenced fund raising activities to raise money to build an Orderly Room and to purchase uniforms and instruments for the band. During this time the detachment was training in a room at the Royal Exchange Hotel. In January of 1867 a public appeal was made for funds.

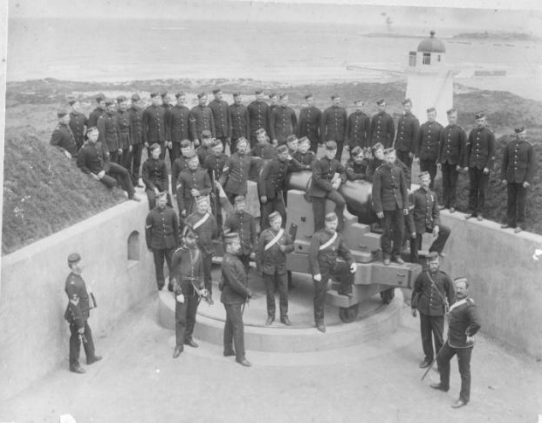
By the time the orderly room was completed and opened on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 1868, the Warrnambool detachment had also established a gun battery on Cannon Hill.



Easter of 1886 would provide an indication on how well prepared the forts and crews were to defend an attack from the sea.

The colonial ships of the Victorian Navy made mock attacks on the forts at Portland, Port Fairy and Warrnambool. But Warrnambool was caught off guard. The ships fired blanks rounds and escaped without any return fire from the fort. Not wanting to be caught out again, the garrison crew loaded and primed the gun, ready to fire. A guard was posted and the crew waited. Later in the evening there was an almighty BO...OOM! which shook the town; people came from everywhere, thinking that there was an attack by an enemy force.

It was soon evident this was not the case. Someone had snuck past the guards and pulled the lanyard that fired the gun. The person promptly disappeared into the darkness without being caught.

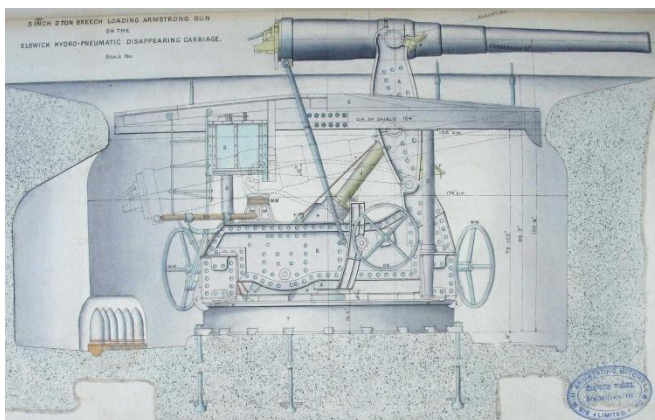


In 1887 the two 80 pounders were moved from Cannon Hill and placed into the new fortifications at Flagstaff Hill.



On the 10th of November, 1887, the guns were fired for the first time in the new fort with the third shot taking out the target, much to the delight of all who witnessed this feat.

In the following year the wooden carriages were replaced with the steel ones we see today.



The next upgrade to the fort came in 1898 when a 5 inch rifled-bore, breech-loading (RBL) Armstrong gun mounted on an Elswick, hydro-pneumatic, disappearing carriage was presented to the battery.

It was set up between the two 80 pound muzzle-loaders. On the 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1900, after a delay of a couple of years, the 5 inch gun was fired for the first time by Major Hawkins, the commander of the Western Artillery Corps. The second round was laid by Bombardier McClure. It fell close to the target at 2300 yards. The following rounds fell short but Bombardier Rodgers laid the seventh round and with it took the flag off the target barrel. A fresh target was aimed for and the next round covered that target with water. It was concluded that the gun worked well. The two 80 pounders were fired also and their rounds too landed close to the target.



The Warrnambool battery was also issued with four 40 pounder field guns. These formerly were at the Hasting Battery. At first the guns were drawn by bullocks, but later by heavy horses.

On 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1904, the first parade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battery of the Australian Field Artillery since its transformation from Garrison to Field Artillery was held at the Warrnambool Orderly Room. There was a muster of 50 men from Warrnambool and 20 from Port Fairy, and the inspection was conducted by the officer commanding the battery, Captain William McGee.



In 1907 the 5 inch gun was removed, and through the efforts of Mr J. G. Wilson, MP for Corangamite, a number of 4-7 inch guns and carriages, constructed to the order of the Federal Government were now being inspected in England. It was expected that these guns would be sent to Warrnambool and in fact they arrived by train on 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1908.

The 4-7s were heavy to haul, and several means were tried, including bullocks and traction engines. These guns replaced the 40 pounders which were well and truly past their prime.



Camps and training with these guns took place just outside Allansford and near Lake Gilliar where a range was laid down along the cliffs.



This would provide invaluable training for what was about to come. When WW1 broke out these guns were recalled to Melbourne and distributed into the fledgling AIF Artillery brigades.

In 1910 the fort was closed.

## **RUN DOWN AND REBIRTH OF THE FORTS**

### **PORTLAND**



Following Federation, the land was transferred to the Commonwealth Government which paid the Victorian Government compensation of 963 pounds in March, 1901.

After the battery closed it was neglected, the battery enclosure deteriorated and became an eyesore.



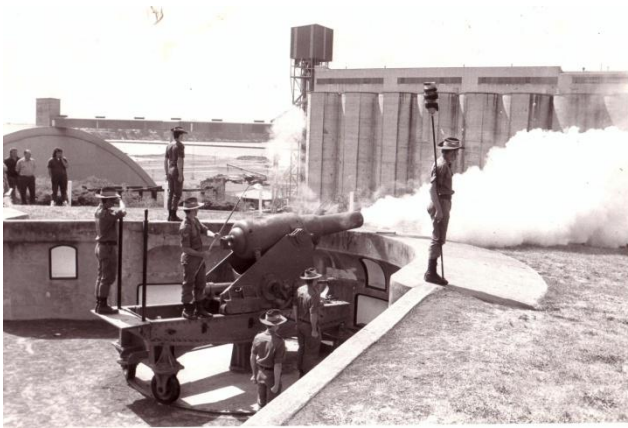
In 1926 negotiations between the Commonwealth and the Borough of Portland took place and the borough was granted permissive occupancy.

By 1962 negotiations resulted in the fortification reserve being handed to the Town of Portland for the sum of 25 pounds



The battery was not totally abandoned, for during WW2 it was used by the volunteer Air Observer Corps.

As a part of Victorians 150 anniversary in 1984 the Battery Reserve, fort and guns were restored.



After a large amount of work and help from many members of the community, the restored battery was officially opened on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1984.



The 80 pounder was fired on many ceremonial occasions, one of the last times was a salute the HM Bark Endeavour as she entered Portland Harbor in November, 1994.



## PORT FAIRY



The Borough of Port Fairy agreed that the 'fort' should be preserved and in 1965 agreement was reached with the Department of Crown Lands & Survey that it could manage the area. The National Trust indicated their interest in the 'fort' in 1971, and proposed restoration work, but little came from the suggestion.



The Antique and Historical Arms Collectors' Guild of Victoria proposed to the Borough of Port Fairy that about 30 of its members would visit to undertake work at the emplacements over a weekend in February 1973. However, the enthusiasm soon waned.



It was not until 1980 that further work was reported. The crew of HMAS *Attack*, as part of the annual naval vessel visiting program, provided labour at Port Fairy to remove weeds and litter.



Since the 1990s, the southern 80 pounder gun has been fired with a small charge of gunpowder for special occasions, and on Sundays at noon during January, as an entertainment for visitors to the town.

## WARRNAMBOOL



The fortifications had remained relatively derelict since 1910 and it was not until 1973 that the fortifications were restored and the building of a replica seaside village was commenced.



The two 80 Pounder RML were moved back to the fortifications in 1973 after being on Cannon Hill for many years.

They were both fully restored by Army First Year Apprentices at the Ordnance Factory in Bendigo, in time for the centenary year of the fortifications in 1987.

The guns had been fired on special occasions over the years but as time went on the frequency had slowed down and eventually the practice stopped.



In recent years we have seen a number of very keen Flagstaff Hill volunteers come together to form a gun crew. We have not only been firing the guns but been doing maintenance work on them as well.



Gun 1 has received the most attention but Gun 2 also is able to be fired and this was demonstrated to the general public on Anzac Day 2015 when we fired both guns for the dawn service to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gallipoli landings.

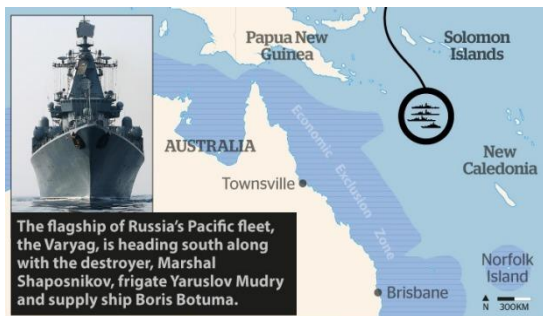
### **DID THE GUNS SCARE THE RUSSIANS?????**



We show here the President of the Russian Federation, Mr Vladimir Putin. With his support for the Ukrainian militias we once again see trouble in the Ukraine and the Crimea.



In 2014 Australia hosted the G20 Summit in Brisbane, many world leaders attended, including Mr Putin.



**THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING!** While Mr Putin was here, elements of the Russian Pacific fleet made their presence know when they sailed down the east coast of Australian in international waters. Our defence force made its way out to greet them.

Just to let them know that we are not kidding around, members of the Flagstaff Hill Garrison were dispatched to Brisbane to inform Mr Putin that we have a full and well trained gun crew that man two operational 80 pound guns and are waiting their arrival.



His response was, "You have what? 80 pound guns you say?"



Now a picture tells a thousand stories. Mr Putin was then heard to smutter: "Great! Foiled *again*." So now we know:

THE GUNS DID STOP THE RUSSIANS!

## Acknowledgements

- Portland Family History Group.
- Gwen Bennett
- Ann Grant
- Darren Hudson
- Trevor Smith
- Port Fairy Historical Society.
- Marten Syme
- Judith Kershaw
- Warrnambool History works.

- Janet McDonald
- Flagstaff Hill
- Steve Ivey
- Flagstaff Gun Crew

