WOLLONGONG HARBOUR FORTIFICATIONS

The earliest evidence of a need for defence against an external enemy was a recommendation by Colonel Barney who, in a letter dated 14-9-1839 to the Inspector of General Fortifications in England, advocated a permanent defence to protect Wollongong.

Little appears to have been done until the 1850s, when, owing to the Crimean War and fear of Russian expansionism, the military authorities sent down to Wollongong two 64-lb. muzzle loaders (described as of Waterloo vintage).

For twenty years the local militia used the cannon for gunnery practice and it was quite common to hear the roar of cannon fire rolling over the district.

Following renewed Russian scares, a series of Royal Commissions advocated an upgrading of defences at Wollongong, and in July 1879, the SS Havilah (164 tons) landed four 68-lb. muzzle loaders at Wollongong Harbour. One of the old 64-lb. guns was converted to a signal gun. At one o'clock each day a signal from the old post office was lowered, allowing the gunners to fire off the piece and locals to set their clocks and watches. After many years the gun was removed from Flagstaff Hill to the grounds of the Town Hall and later placed next to the Boer War Memorial. From there it has disappeared.

With the “new” guns (1861 vintage) placed at Flagstaff Hill, gunnery practice was carried out on a regular basis, led by men such as Major MacCabe, Captain Robertson and Captain Beatson, and the local volunteers continually won the annual nine-day gunnery competitions at Middle Head, Sydney.

Today two of the 68-lb. guns are in the C.M.F. grounds at Gwynneville, the third gun is situated in the front of the Sea Scouts’ drill hall in a sad state of disrepair. A fourth gun is still buried on Flagstaff Hill.

During the 1870s-80s more Royal Commissions were convened and together with advocates such as Colonel P. H. Scratchley, Commander Howard R.N. and Major Penrose R.E. proposed that fixed fortifications with adequate protection for the defenders be built together with modern pieces of ordnance. One cost estimate was £9,000 for the work.

In 1887 the Public Works Department (Military Works Branch) called for tenders to start work on the first stage, emplacements on Cliff Road. To save costs, two older rifled muzzle-loaders RML were installed and underground rooms were built in and behind the parapet. In the 1890s a Nordenfelt quick-firing breechloader was installed to prevent an enemy landing on the beach.

In November 1889 James Russell & Co. of Sydney secured the contract for the construction of an emplacement at Flagstaff Hill. The cost of the work was £3,235. Work was begun in February, 1890, with Mr. P. J. Owen, Public Works Engineer, supervising, and Mr. Alfred Hall representing Messrs. James Russell & Co. The construction entailed the removal of 1,500 cubic yards of material during excavation. A 45-foot concrete pit was constructed; the magazine
rooms were of 2-ft. thick concrete with the roofing reinforced with steel rails and then a 5-ft. layer of earth over the roof. The entrance to the gun pit was from the circular corridor behind the gun pit wall. Two corridors led off to observation points east and west of the pit. The fort entrance was made of brick with an enclosed court yard in front of the fort.

On 28 June, 1890, the **Mercury** described the landing of the modern 6" breech-loading gun by the ISN Bega. The gun was built by the Elswick Ordnance Company in England, weighing 5 tons, and with its shield, carriage and recoil mechanism weighed a total of 30 tons and took 10 horses to haul in a trolley up the hill. The gun was unusual in that it lowered under its iron shield in the pit to reload and then it was raised above ground to fire off a shot. It incorporated the Moncrieff and Crozier principles of recoil, had a range of 10,000 yards and was installed in early 1891. Evidence has also shown that two French mitrailleuse machine guns were installed on the top of the fort on its southern aspect 40 yards apart and designed to repel enemy troops landing on South Beach.

The Number 6 Artillery Battery (later the Number 4 Company) consisting of a hundred men, manned and maintained the fortifications for over ten years. Because of obsolescence the forts were closed by the Commonwealth Government and were later given to the Council. By August 1937 the six-inch breechloader was removed by the military authorities and sent to Sydney, where no trace so far has been found of it.

In the case of the fort at Cliff Road, luckily the 80-lb. guns were allowed to remain but by 1946 owing to reports of undesirable persons frequenting the area, the Council sealed off the rooms and filled in the area with building refuse to create Battery Park we know today.

From the evidence available it appears both emplacements and rooms are in restorable condition, and in the fort at Cliff Road one of the rooms may house the Nordenfelt gun.

In conclusion, the prospects of restoring the guns and emplacements at Cliff Road look promising. The work of restoration is within the capability by volunteer groups, e.g. Apex, Jaycees, Scouts, etc. The guns and their carriages could be restored by technical apprentices on advice from the Army troop that restored the gun on Bare Island, La Perouse. The rooms could be refurnished by tradesmen volunteers and then be used to display photographs and objects of early Wollongong. When complete, two or three volunteers dressed in the Army uniform of the time could conduct and explain to tourists the operation of the guns and purpose of the rooms and their contents.

The problem of upkeep could be solved by having a ground keeper look after the site; vandalism could be prevented by fitting steel doors to the rooms and having the area well lit at night.

—G. J. SCOTT.

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