



FROM THE GALLERIES AND COLLECTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY MUSEUM OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Typically only a small portion of a museum collection is exhibited at any one time. This is due not only to practical consideration of display space but a range of professional considerations designed to protect and preserve the artefact.

This series highlights objects and stories you may have overlooked in the galleries or collection items awaiting the opportunity to be viewed and share their story. Enjoy and explore further.

Australian Trophy Guns Today



German weapons captured during Battle of Amiens displayed at the Chateau of Bertangles when King George V knighted Lieutenant General John Monash

The guns captured by the Australian Imperial Force were the largest collection per head of population of any combatant nation. To many, these guns symbolised the strength of a new nation and triumph of good over evil. For others, they were a reminder of the waste of war and a blot on the civic landscape.

During WW1 Australian soldiers captured 1,340 enemy guns and mortars. This led to the creation of the Australian War Trophy Collection (AWTC). By September 1922 the AWTC had distributed almost 1,000 war captured guns for memorial purposes to local government councils, schools, halls and other public institutions. These weapons became the first memorials of the Great War in Australia, often years in advance and in marked contrast to memorials that followed with traditional cemetery iconography in bronze, marble and granite.



Australia's first consignment of 180 guns arrived in 1918, most being captured during the Battle of Amiens. German guns had the most symbolic value as trophies. Krupp guns, perhaps linked to ore mined in Australia, further sanctioned their display as a matter of principle and recompense. Krupp guns issued to the Ottoman Turks also fell into this category.

In three months early in 1919, over 1,000 trophy applications sought to claim a weapon. At first there was no formula for trophy distribution but by October 1919 a War Committee had been appointed in each state and a policy agreed. Towns with a population of more than 10,000 would receive 2 guns and 2 machine guns. One gun would go to towns of between 3,000 and 10,000, while towns of 300 to 3,000 residents were allocated 1 machine gun. The distribution for cities as it stood in 1920 would provide 20 guns, 40 machine guns and 10 mortars each to Melbourne and Sydney; with Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart receiving smaller allocations in that order.

2/42 2/2 Regt.

HISTORY SHEET OF WAR TROPHY

(a) Description, Etc.

Unit *Aust. Corps* Serial No. of Claim..... Aust. Div *AL 15*
 Description *5.9 Howitz.*
 Registered No. of gun or mortar *1090* of carriage or mounting *597*
 Date of capture..... Place of capture.....
 Details of capture.....
 Particulars of despatch to Base:—
 (a) Railhead *Longueaux* Date *11.11.18* Truck No *39297*
 If not despatched:—
 (a) Map reference..... Reason for delay.....
 Remarks (including Unit's wishes as to disposal).....
H 2 De
Rod

Trophy transfers were formally signed on a printed Agreement, where the recipient agreed to arrange for the trophy to be permanently housed and preserved in a public park, garden, or building. Recipients had to meet all expenses connected with transport and installation from the nearest railway station and to arrange a simple dedication ceremony.

One sentiment was that display of a trophy guns at schools would instil a sense of patriotism and promote concepts of service and sacrifice, an idea which today seems unthinkable. Nevertheless, trophy guns were prized by schools in the belief that they would teach children about war and the higher duty of sacrifice,

Many sectors of the population which had opposed conscription during the War protested against the display of war trophies in schools, noting that 'it seems strange that many of those very people who are striving to introduce Bible instruction into the State Schools are also seeking war trophies for school grounds, and striving to inculcate feelings of race hatred which are contrary to the spirit of Christianity'.

Some municipal councillors objected to distributing German guns as trophies of war, 'and otherwise promoting a feeling of militarism amongst school children'. There does not appear to have been any instances in Australia where veterans or the local community, opposed to their display, physically dumped trophies into nearby ponds or rivers as occurred in Britain.

Very quickly after installation, exposure to the elements and lack of daily use caused the trophies to deteriorate from corrosion. This deterioration placed both the trophy and the public at risk. Although the AWRS had required recipients to maintain the trophy, it was inevitable that their steel and timber fabric would decline. Vandalism, maintenance demands and public injuries increased during the inter-war period diminishing the cultural and spiritual importance of the guns. As a result, during World War 2, councils were actively seeking to divest themselves of these responsibilities by disposing of the guns in patriotic scrap metal drives.



17 cm Minenwerfer in South Perth

During the post-WW2 period, many of Australia's 1,340 WW1 trophies and mortars were destroyed or lost and by the early 1990s as few as 20% remained. Private collectors and heritage organisations have preserved guns for ongoing display. Examples may be found in South Perth, York, Donnybrook and Whiteman Park. Much of this restoration and research activity has been stimulated by commemorative activities associated with ANZAC centenaries and events.

The Australian Army Museum of WA is the current custodian of four weapons originally allocated to Western Australia as war trophies. The largest is a 10.5 cm light field howitzer leFH 16 captured by 10 Light Horse on 9 November 1917 at Huj, a village 15 km north-east of Gaza. While the Krupp steel of the barrel is intact, the rest of the gun shows the effects of 100 years of exposure and gradual deterioration in a variety of display locations. It is presently exhibited in a protected location while plans are developed for its further conservation.



Envisaged exhibition and memorial display of 10 Light Horse trophy gun

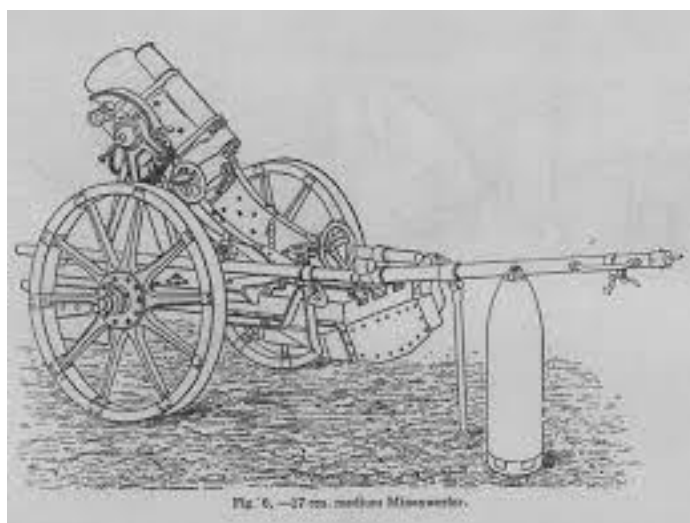


At the other end of the scale in size is a *Maschinengewehr 08*, machine gun originally allocated to the City of Perth. Escaping a cutting torch in the Victoria Park maintenance yard, the gun, with its visible battle damage eventually was donated to the Army Museum.

During conservation the remains of an inscription provided evidence that this machine gun may well have been one of those central to the Victoria Cross exploit of Corporal Thomas “Jack” Axford VC during the Battle of Hamel on 4 July 1918.

His citation for the award reads:

On 4 July 1918 during the attack at Vaire and Hamel Woods, France, when the advance of the adjoining platoon was being delayed in uncut wire and machine-gun fire, and his company commander had become a casualty, Lance-Corporal Axford charged and threw bombs amongst the enemy gun crews. He then jumped into the trench, and charging with his bayonet, killed 10 of the enemy and took six prisoners. He threw the machine-guns over the parapet and the delayed platoon was able to advance. He then rejoined his own platoon and fought with it during the remainder of the operations.



The remaining two weapons originally retained as trophies in the Museum's care are medium 17cm Minenwerfers similar to the excellent example in South Perth. The Museum's examples show the effects of years of external display in parks and are missing the wheels which with the light weight of the weapon permitted their rapid deployment in the front line.

While the Army Museum is privileged and honoured to be the custodian of these trophy guns, their removal from the original sites of public display does raise issues for further discussion. Are community attitudes, truth telling, and an understanding of past events better served by removal of memorials and statues or by updating interpretation, context and acknowledgement for continuing public display and informed community dialogue?

The background information on Trophy Guns for this presentation is largely derived from *Statement of Significance & Heritage Impact: Collingwood WW1 Trophy Gun* prepared by Michele Summerton for the City of Yarra.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2620623>

<https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2018/10/Restored-Krupp-field-gun-offers-sombre-reminder-of-wars-toll.aspx>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48601883>

https://www.artilleryhistory.org/artillery_register/directory_of_allocated_minenwerfer_war_trophies_ww1_western_australia.html

http://members.upnaway.com/~obees/soldiers/guns_of_wa/site.html

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/chateau-de-bertangles-scene-of-general-john-monashs-legend-should-be-better-known-says-cosgrove-20160425-goe0b3.html>