

Two of a Kind

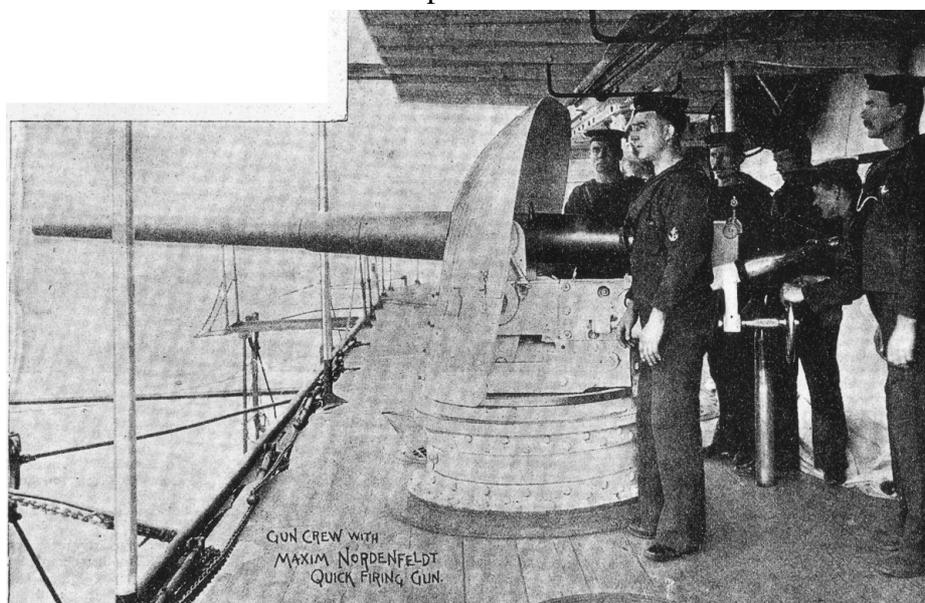
The Long Chambered Maxim-Nordenfelt 14 pounder Quick Firing Guns

In order to improve the protection of Port Phillip Bay in the 1880's the fleet of eight permanent Victorian Navy vessels was doubled by modifying Government and Harbour Trust vessels. These vessels, with locally invented torpedo dropping gear, strengthened decks and magazines etc. could then be quickly fitted as gunboats and torpedo boats in an emergency. In addition, for troop transport and scouting outside of the protected waters of Port Phillip Bay, modifications were made to large merchant vessels so that Quick Firing Guns could be mounted.

The Guns

To this end two Maxim-Nordenfelt 14 pounder (pdr) Quick Firing (Q.F.) Guns were acquired by the Colony of Victoria in 1889.¹ These guns were originally intended to arm the Bay Steamer, S.S. *Courier*, for emergency situations.² In April 1891 it was reported that two long chambered Maxim-Nordenfelt 14 pdr Q.F. guns were in use at Fort Queenscliff.³ Most likely the suitability of this type of gun for possible use at the fort was being tested while they were not required on board *Courier*.

When five more 14 pdrs, presumably Mk I guns, were obtained for the Land Forces, the two long chambered guns were handed back to the Navy.⁴ Both guns were then mounted on board HMVS *Nelson*. It would appear that only a small amount of ammunition was held on board *Nelson*, as it was stated that the Q.F. Magazine on board HMVS *Cerberus* was: 'also used for the stowage of the ammunition for the 14-pr. Q.F. guns on the Nelson.'⁵ On the sale of *Nelson* both guns were transferred to *Cerberus* in July 1897. These guns were mounted on the Breastwork Deck, one on the port side & one on the starboard side of the ship.



One of the 14 pdrs on board HMVS *Cerberus* in 1900
(note shell standing vertical behind the gun).⁶

In 1900 the Victorian Government offered the British Government a Naval Contingent to assist in suppressing the Boxer Uprising in China. Use of the 14 pdrs from the *Cerberus* was also offered. Engineer William George Robertson (Victorian Navy) designed and superintended the construction

of gun carriages, limbers and ammunition wagons at the Newport Railway Workshops (Victoria) over a period of seven days.⁷ The guns then accompanied the Victorian Naval Contingent to China. In Hong Kong the 14 pdrs were swapped for 12 pdrs which had the advantage of being lighter and easier to obtain ammunition for. Given that on 22 December 1901 the 14 pdr ammunition on board *Cerberus* was transhipped into the Army launch, *Vulcan*, for transfer to the Military Department,⁸ we can assume that the guns did not return from Hong Kong.



Testing of the 14 pounder guns prior to leaving for China.⁹

The Ammunition

When asked about the ammunition for the two guns which the contingent were likely to take with them (to China) – ‘the only guns of their class in the British Empire’ - a spokesman for the Victorian Minister for Defence answered: ‘these two guns were specially made for exhibition purposes, and that such alterations were made in the guns subsequently manufactured that the same ammunition will not do.’¹⁰ Presumably the two guns in question were made as prototypes for the company’s new 14 pdr Q.F. guns. Subsequent modifications to both the configuration of the ammunition, the size of the guns’ chambers and a longer barrel led to the Mk I gun, which was then incompatible with the prototype guns. The two prototype guns – which ended up on the *Cerberus* - were most likely purchased by the Victorian Government’s Agent General in London and were obviously two of a kind.

The ammunition for these long chambered guns was different to that used in the later Mk I and Mk II guns in that the shell casing and projectile were fixed together in the same manner as six pdr Q.F. rounds. The combined length of the shell casing and projectile was 40 mm longer than the Mk I and Mk II combined cartridge and projectile. As a result of these differences, the ammunition was not interchangeable between the long chambered prototype guns and the later Mk I and II guns.



14 pdr projectile (in undercoat grey) and shell casing (800 mm) with AA battery for scale.¹¹

As was the case with the early Mk I projectiles, black powder was used as the propelling charge. The *Victorian Naval Forces Manual* for 1890 stated that 6½ pounds of .45 hexagonal indented black powder was used whereas Andrew Currer's copy of the manual had a hand written note which gave the charge as 7 lb 2 oz P.B. (pebble).¹² From the *Diary of W.G. Robertson* and *Cerberus Log Book* entries we know that Shrapnel, Case & Iron Common projectiles were available for use.

According to the 1908 *Treatise on Ammunition*, the only other British ships to mount 14 pounder Q.F. guns were HMS *Swiftsure* (Mk I version) & HMS *Triumph* (Mk II). Both ships were completed in 1904 and carried fourteen 14 pdr guns each. As mentioned above, these guns differed from those on *Cerberus*.¹³

Velocities and Penetration ¹⁴

Gun & Weight	Charge	Projectile	Length of Gun	Extreme Range	Muzzle Velocity	Velocity at 1,000 yards	System of Obturation	Penetration at the muzzle of unbacked Wrought Iron.
14 Pr. Q.F. 18 cwt	6½ lbs. .45 Hex Indented	14 lbs	11 feet 6 inches	8,000 yards	2,100 F.S.	1,619 F.S.	Cartridge case & breech block.	7 inches

¹ 'The Victorian Government have ordered two 14-pounder quick-firing guns, having a muzzle velocity of 2,050 ft. per second, and firing 12 aimed shots per minute.' *The Argus*, 11 May 1889

² '2-14 pr. Guns in the colony ordered for the armament of "The Courier" it is proposed to hand over to Military charge for mounting at Queenscliff; and to allot 2 of the 5 on order to the Navy instead. *Distribution of Land Forces Guns*, 1892. Courtesy of John Underwood.

³ *The Argus*, 6 April 1891

⁴ "Note the 2 long chambered 14 P are now on Naval charge." Hand written note on *Distribution of Land Forces Guns*, 1892.

⁵ *Manual for Victorian Naval Forces - 1890*, courtesy of Melbourne University Library.

⁶ *Weekly Times*, 14 July 1900,

⁷ Diary of Engineer William George Robertson, courtesy of the (what does this mean?) Seapower Centre, Canberra, A.C.T.

⁸ *Log Book of HMVS Cerberus*, National Archives of Australia.

⁹ *The Leader*, 28 July 1900.

¹⁰ Victorian Naval Contingent Bill, *Victorian Hansard*, 10 July 1900

¹¹ The purchase of the above round was sponsored by the *Antique Arms Collectors Society of Australia*, the *Port Melbourne Historical Society*, Marie Epstein & John Short.

¹² Amendments to *Manual for Victorian Naval Forces - 1890*. Courtesy Australian War Memorial. Andrew Currer was a Signaller in the Victorian Navy.

¹³ *Treatise on Ammunition* 1908.

Amendments to *Manual for Victorian Naval Forces - 1890*, courtesy of Melbourne University.

¹⁴ *Manual for Victorian Naval Forces*, 1890.