

APPENDIX No. II.

THE CAPTURE OF S.S. *PFALZ*

The following account of the seizure of the German steamer *Pfalz* at Port Phillip Heads on the outbreak of war was compiled by the authorities of the Australian War Memorial after conference with the pilot, Captain Robinson:—¹

At the end of July, 1914, the s.s. *Pfalz* was at Melbourne. Her agents and captain, being aware that hostilities were threatening, had her ready for sea on the evening of the 4th of August; ostensibly she was bound for Sydney, but actually it was intended to take her to a South American port. At the last minute, however, her departure was delayed in order that she might take in an additional 200 tons of coal. This was loaded during the night of the 4th, and early next morning the vessel left her moorings, but owing to the congestion of traffic in the Yarra she was delayed in getting clear of the river. She steamed slowly down to the Heads (her captain having resolved to conserve his coal to the greatest extent possible) in charge of Captain Robinson of the Port Phillip Pilot Service.

The *Pfalz* arrived off Portsea at about 10 a.m. A launch then came alongside with an officer of the Examination Service, which, when war seemed imminent, was established under the control of the Naval Board, its object being to provide a patrol to guard the entrance to the port and to examine all inward- and outward-bound vessels. When the *Pfalz* was examined, advice of the outbreak of war had not been received, so there was no legitimate reason for stopping her, and she was given leave to proceed. Some German consular officials, who had not previously made their appearance on deck, then came on to the bridge, and they and the ship's captain displayed great jubilation. Meanwhile the vessel had turned in the tide, and Captain Robinson was engaged in swinging her round.

Between the departure of the Examination Service launch from the Portsea jetty to inspect the *Pfalz* and its return, advice of the outbreak of war had reached the Heads. It was telephoned to Fort Nepean, and signals were hoisted calling upon the vessel to stop. These, however, were not observed by Captain Robinson, whose attention was concentrated upon getting her through the Heads. The first intimation he had that anything untoward had happened was the report of one of the Fort Nepean guns, followed by the splash of the shell close to the *Pfalz's* stern (a departure from the customary shot across the bows²). He immediately telegraphed to the engine-room "Full speed astern." The captain at once countermanded this by ordering "Full speed ahead." For a time the pilot and the master struggled for control of the engine-room telegraph, Captain Robinson explaining to the German that it was useless to resist, as the next shot from the fort would hit his vessel. He thereupon submitted. The rapid change from elation at his presumable escape to the realisation of certain capture must have been very trying to a young man on his first voyage in command.

The *Pfalz* was brought back to Portsea, where both ship and crew were placed under arrest. Shortly afterwards she was taken to Williamstown by Captain Robinson, and remained there for about five months, when the Commonwealth Government put her in commission.

¹ Capt. M. Robinson, Pilot; of Williamstown, Vic.; b. Bendigo, Vic., 1 Jan., 1867.

² In this comment Captain Robinson is in error. The shot was fired, as usual, across the steamer's bows, but the angle of fire resulted in its striking the water some distance away on her starboard quarter.