

Frederick Wordsworth Ward (aka Captain Thunderbolt)

Facts sheet on the death of Thunderbolt.

An Alternative Story - by Barry Sinclair, Uralla NSW

A well known fact about Thunderbolt.

It is claimed in nearly every book about Thunderbolt, that, throughout his career, he never shot at any one, including the police. However what is not so well known is the reason for this. Thunderbolt's wife, Mary Ann Bugg, due to her aboriginal heritage, had a total hatred of guns because of the way so many of her people had been murdered by the white population of the time. During her time with Thunderbolt she instilled in him this same total hatred of guns and of shooting at people. This is an important factor in the subsequent pursuit and death of Thunderbolt.

Was Thunderbolt married?

Many authors claim that Mary Ann & Thunderbolt were not married despite this testimony shown in the article. The problem is there seems to be no records at Stroud to the marriage. We remember reading in the 'North-West Champion' of December 7, 1929, that an old lady whom I knew, Mrs. Deamer, in an article entitled "The Days That Were", claimed that she saw Thunderbolt married at Stroud. The old lady seemed to have a clear recollection of the event, and she told the story in these words, I quote: "It was at Stroud and I was going to school at the time. Frederick Ward, that was Thunderbolt's name, was a nice looking young fellow, and the girl he married was Mary Bugg, daughter of Mr. Jimmy Bugg who looked after the Australian Pastoral Company's station at Port Stevens. There was a great to-do at the church the day the wedding was on, and we were all let out of school to see them come out of church." At that time, Mary Ann was working in the Anglican School at Stroud. It is certainly reasonable that the children would be given time to watch the wedding. The Parish at that time was not the parish of Stroud but part of the Church of England Parish of the Australian Agricultural Company, which included the area from Wollongong to the Queensland border with the exception of Sydney. The Stroud Website clearly indicates that Thunderbolt was married in the Stroud Anglican Church.

What caused the beginning of the career of Thunderbolt?

In 1850 Fred's older brother George married Charlotte Nixon in St Paul's Cathedral in Armidale. During the next 4 years, whilst employed at Tocal Station near Patterson, they had 2 children. In 1854 George was instructed to take a herd of cattle to the Maitland sale despite the knowledge that the Hunter River was in flood. While crossing the river George was drowned. About 18 months later the Ward family seemed to be targeting Tocal Station out of revenge. Brother William (Harry), owner of nearby Lamb's Valley Station 12 miles west of Tocal, and 2 nephews, James and John Garbutt, commenced stealing horses from Tocal Station. Fred, also an employee of Tocal, was asked to assist in droving the cattle to the Windsor Sale yards where Fred and James Garbutt were arrested. Fred and James were both charged with stealing horses, however Fred's charge was reduced to 'being in possession of stolen horses.' Fred should have been given a lesser sentence of 4 years served locally; instead the Judge delivered a full 10 year sentence, to be served in the hated Cockatoo Island prison. Thus began the career of "Captain Thunderbolt."

Now to the actual death. The Police were warned of the presence of Thunderbolt. On the 25th May, 1870 in the late afternoon the Italian hawker, Giovanni Cappissote, while traveling past Thunderbolt's Rock near Uralla was held up and relieved of £3/13/6 and some jewelry. He was sent on his way to Tamworth. However after traveling a little over a mile, he hid his cart in the bushes near Dorrington's farm and rode back to Uralla, through the bush to the east of Thunderbolt's rock so as not to be detected by Thunderbolt. He advised the police, in Uralla, of the presence of Thunderbolt near Blanche's Inn.

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The Two policemen chased after Thunderbolt?

Constable Mulhall was on duty, however Constable Walker was neither in uniform nor on duty but present in the Police Station. Both policemen set out after Thunderbolt. By the time Mulhall reached Thunderbolt's Rock, having the faster horse, he was about 500 yards ahead of Walker. He said his gun went off and his horse turned around and bolted back to Uralla. It is my personal belief that Mulhall was warning Thunderbolt that he was about to be chased by Cnst. Walker. On passing Mulhall it is claimed by Walker, Mulhall said, "There they are. I have exchanged shots with them. Go and get the wretches."(i) Walker then commenced his chase of Thunderbolt, knowing that he would not be shot at.

Why didn't Thunderbolt have his favorite horse "Combo"?

Thunderbolt used to follow the races and later would often "take possession" of the best of the horses so he had the ability to outrun the police. At this time he had a special horse called "Combo" which he had taken from Goonoo Goonoo Station south of Tamworth. This station secretly kept a paddock with fresh horses ready for Thunderbolt to exchange. However after trying "Combo", an English racehorse he liked it so much he did not return it. On this particular day he did not have "Combo" but was trying out a Coghlan horse. A young man, James Coghlan, was leading 3 horses that his employer had recently purchased at Scone and was taking them to their property in Ebor. He had been leading the horses all day in an attempt to get home as quickly as possible, so the horses were totally exhausted. Not knowing this, Thunderbolt commandeered one of the horses to try it out. At that moment Walker arrived on the scene. Walker chased Thunderbolt for approximately 2 miles in a South Westerly direction until they reached Kentucky Creek, where Thunderbolt abandoned his exhausted horse and proceeded to cross the Creek. Walker then states that he shot the horse, (ii) to the later upset of James Coghlan.

Now let us look at the "facts" of the killing of Thunderbolt.

According to the statement of Constable Walker, (written in the 3rd person) on the 29th May 1870. "(Constable Walker)... immediately plunged his horse into the Water and his horse stumbled and went underneath the water when Ward made a rush at the Constable into the Water with his Revolver in his hand. The Constable fired and Ward fell forward into the Water and went under and when he came up he tried to catch hold of the Constable who then struck him on the top of the head with the Revolver, the Constable rode his horse out of the water and tied him up, he then drew Ward out of the Creek and believed him to be quite dead... (later). the Constable then took him (Coghlan) out to look for the body of Ward but could not find it, returned to Blanches...found the body at daylight." (iii)

Phillip Pomroy, in his paintings of the event hung in the McCrossin's Mill Museum Uralla, appears to use the description by Constable Walker showing Walker on his horse above Ward shooting down upon him. If as portrayed, and according to Walkers own statement, the bullet entering the left chest above the heart it would have passed through the body exiting at the rear of the body near the right hip. There is also the following "Walker returned and found the body next morning about 9 O'clock." There is no direct evidence, but the more reliable secondary sources basically claim: -

'When they returned next day they found that Ward had crawled a little distance into the bush, and was still alive, but he did not survive the trip back to Uralla.... when the police examined the body and clothing they found that Ward's revolver had been empty when Walker shot and clubbed him.'

'(100 Australian Bushrangers, 1789-1901, Allan M Nixon.) (iv)'

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Two days after the death of Thunderbolt, Walker re-enacted the shooting for a photographer, Mr. Cunningham of Armidale. "Mr. A Cunningham has taken several excellent photographs to illustrate the end of Thunderbolt, and other matters connected with it. Of Ward's dead horse there are two views. There are three different views of the spot on which the final struggle took place, Mr. Walker being shown in the same dress and on the same horse as he had when he came upon the W. side of the creek; the reality of the scene being added to by Mr. Smoker, of Uralla, representing, on the E. side, Ward - each with weapon leveled at his opponent. To secure a good view, Mr. Cunningham took the trouble to cut down several trees. Then there are two portraits of Mr. Walker, one being full length; while there are three of Thunderbolt when he was lying dead, after the post-mortem examination. One represents him with his hat off, another with his hat on, and the third is his profile." (iv) (A copy of the Creek re-enactment photo can be viewed in the Uralla Visitors Information Centre).

Unfortunately he turned up in uniform. As a result many of the later drawings of the death of Thunderbolt show Walker in uniform. The photo shows a different view of the shooting to the one in Walker's original statement. It shows Walker directly across the other side of the creek and several meters from Ward and just slightly above him, this however is more in line with Dr Spasshat's autopsy report, except for the difference in the distance between them, ".....; mark of a gunshot wound below left collar bone towards the armpit; on examination I found the aperture communicated with the lungs, both of which, right and left, had been penetrated; there was an aperture as if the exit of a ball on the right side of the chest, three inches below and two inches anterior to lower point right shoulder blade; there was a large quantity of fluid blood in cavity of pleura; the wound was just such as might have been inflicted by a pistol bullet discharged in immediate proximity to and rather above the body; I am of the opinion that the wound was the cause of death....."(v)

(In September 2003, I sent copies of all material pertaining to the death of Thunderbolt - Dr Spasshat's autopsy report, Constable Walker's statement, and the copy of the death photo of Thunderbolt - to Dr Godfrey Oettle, the recently retired Director of the Division of Forensic Medicine in the Department of Health of New South Wales. His finding states that, according to the details of the autopsy, Thunderbolt could only have lived a maximum of 3 minutes after being shot and I would expect him to lose both motor and cognitive function within about ten seconds. (See Appendix 1). This certainly does not agree with Constable Walker's report.)

What happened to Thunderbolt's body?

Early on the 26th May the body of Thunderbolt was taken back to Blanche's Inn and examined by Dr Spasshat from Armidale. It is interesting to note that although there were positive identification marks recorded in police records for the identification of Fred Ward especially the mole and warts (...Ward is a native of Windsor, New South Wales; a laborer, 27 years of age, 5 feet 8 ¼ inches high, hazel grey eyes, mole on right wrist and two warts back of middle finger of left hand.")(vi.) Despite the fact that many people viewed the body of Thunderbolt, these marks were not used to identify the body as that of Frederick Ward. During the next few days over 300 people viewed the body and all agreed that "It's Thunderbolt alright." Many authors and researchers misquote this statement as "It's Fred, alright" despite the fact that at the time he was known by the general public only as "Captain Thunderbolt." Various other names suspected of belonging to the person, such as Fred Britten, Michael Blake, Fred Ward, William (Harry) Ward, Fred Blake etc were only rumors.

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It was left for young Will Monckton being a companion of Thunderbolt, who had served one year of a six year gaol sentence (which was to include five years in a reformatory school) in Armidale (viii), to identify the body at Uralla on Sunday, May 28th, four days after the shooting (viii). Will, as an assistant of Thunderbolt, in the Tenterfield region 12 months earlier surrendered to the police and was gaoled. While in gaol he had heard that the police had shot Thunderbolt in the right knee at the top of the Moonbi's but had escaped. At that time he knew he had been with Fred Ward aka "Thunderbolt" near Torrington, and that Fred Ward was not the "Thunderbolt" shot at Moonbi.

He was brought to Uralla to identify the body and used the scar on the right knee as positive identification that the body was that of Fred Ward. The police immediately accepted his identification and excused him from the remainder of his sentence. The body was buried that Sunday afternoon in the edge of the Uralla Cemetery in unhallowed ground, after a judicial hearing to confirm the death of Frederick Ward aka "Captain Thunderbolt". Present at the funeral was a very tall woman, for those days, (5ft 8inches) dressed in a full-length black gown and a heavy black veil. A journalist stated that "after the funeral it was noted that she left without speaking to anyone", however it was also noted "she walked away with a very manly gait." Was this Fred saying goodbye to his brother, Harry? This has always been the understanding held by the family as fact.

Dr Spasshat's autopsy report is dated May 29th 1870. I believe it was not filled in until after the funeral and then, on police instructions, the mole & warts were added although they had not previously been used to identify the body.

Where was Fred's horse Combo?

On 28th May, the Saturday after the death of Thunderbolt, 2 young policemen, stationed in Armidale, were on duty at the races in Glen Innes and saw Combo tethered there. Hiding, they watched the horse for some time until they saw a man, who they personally identified as "Thunderbolt", appear and quickly mount the horse, before they could stop him. He left the area in a southeasterly direction towards Wards Mistake. He went over the steep side into the gorge area. Being inexperienced horsemen, the young policemen were not able to follow him. On returning to Armidale they submitted their report of the day's activities to their commanding officer, only to be told that "Thunderbolt" had been shot 3 days previously. To justify what they had been doing during the day, they insisted on filing their report. I have been told the report was seen in the police archives in Sydney as recently as several years ago, but is no longer available to the public.

What happened to this "Thunderbolt"?

In the Ebor/Hernani area where he was heading, lived his sister Sarah Ann Edwards, my Great Great Grandmother. I believe he went to his sister's home. If you go out to Hernani and talk to the families of the oldest residents in the area they will all tell you that - "Great Aunt or Great Grandma danced with Thunderbolt at the weekly Saturday night dances for 6 weeks after The Death of Thunderbolt". It is my belief that during those 6 weeks Fred used this time to visit all his caves and hiding places in the area from Lansdowne near Taree, Barrington, Moonbi, Uralla, Black Mountain, Torrington, to Boonoo Boonoo, near Tenterfield and retrieve his "earnings". It has been reported as being as much as 20,000 pounds about \$1,000,000 in today's money. Despite people searching the area of these caves for the last 130 years all that has been reported as having been found is one bottle containing about 20 pounds in notes.

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I believe that at the end of this 6 week period, Fred, possibly with a female companion, went to Sydney then by boat to San Francisco. When the gold petered out in California he moved to Alberta, Canada where he stayed until the end of the gold rush there in the late 1800's, then moved to live out his life in Ottawa, Canada - dying in the early 1900's.

A story told by Mr. R S Spencer (quoted from the "Western Stock & Station Journal in the 'Uralla Times', 4/9/1969

.... the letter was written in Canada, the date January 21st 1892. The signature was one word – Fred. After a careful examination of the document, my father remarked, "But, good God, man, it can't be true?"

"Yes, Mr. Spencer" said White. "It's quite true"

(...) During my visit to Canada in 1937 my enquiries at Ottawa resulted in the production of further evidence to support the claim I have advanced herein. I was informed that in Ottawa Cemetery an Australian named Frederick Ward lies buried

Is it the grave of Thunderbolt?

To me, the irresistible conclusion, drawn from the foregoing evidence, is "Yes". (x)

Who then is buried in the Uralla cemetery?

It has always been the family belief that the person buried at Uralla is Fred's brother William (aka Harry) who was responsible for the beginning of Thunderbolt's career. By the late 1860's things started to get "too hot" for Harry in the Maitland area & he came to join Fred, mainly operating in the southern area around Uralla. I believe that he was the "Thunderbolt" shot by the police at Moonbi in early 1869. On the death of their mother Sophia in 1874, her death certificate shows both Fred & William ("Harry") as being deceased. Fred is naturally shown because of his death certificate; however there is no death certificate in Australia for William (aka Harry) Ward despite a thorough search of all states BDM registers by me and other direct family members. I believe the death certificate for Fred is in fact the death certificate for Harry.

Recently talking to a local aboriginal elder from Gunnedah I was told that it was "their knowledge that it was not Fred Ward buried here in Uralla in unhallowed ground." As he was married "to one of them", Mary Ann (an aboriginal girl) and had lived with him in the bush for several years, they regarded him as "family". If it had been Fred buried in unhallowed ground they would have dug him up & buried him in their local secret burial ground. She was very emphatic that "it was not Fred Ward buried in Uralla". They normally don't talk about such things to we "whiteys"; however she was in total agreement with what I had said especially regarding who was in the grave.

As a further confirmation of this story I received this information in the last week of October 2003. "But one last thing - the local aboriginal community claim Captain Thunderbolt as one of their own, a fellow aboriginal. This could have been true in traditional aboriginal culture where a person of any ethnic background who goes through the initiation ordeals was considered a member of the tribe!" (xi)

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- i. Page 1 Constable Walker's handwritten statement dated 29th May, 1870.
- ii. Page 2 Constable Walker's handwritten statement dated 29th May, 1870
- iii. Page 3 Constable Walker's handwritten statement dated 29th May, 1870
- iv. "A Ghost Called Thunderbolt" by Stephan Williams page 146
- v. The Armidale Express, Friday June 3, 1921 - "Armidale 51 Years Ago [Reminiscences from the 'Armidale Express' of June 4, 1870]"
- vi. Police Gazette, 14/10/1983, p. 307
- vii. Dr Spasshat's autopsy report - Newling Library UNE
- viii. "A Ghost Called Thunderbolt" by Stephan Williams page 135
- ix. "A Ghost Called Thunderbolt" by Stephan Williams page 148
- x. "Western Stock & Station Journal in the 'Uralla Times'", 4/9/1969
- xi. Helen Duley, history graduate, UNE Nov 18 2003

Appendix 1

Report of Dr Oettle, Former Director of the Division of Forensic Medicine in the Department of Health of New South Wales - dated December 4th, 2003 To; Barry Sinclair, thank you for your email with your opinions. As stated to you previously, Dr. Spasshat has defined injuries clearly and refers to only two bullet wounds, the one on the front of the chest being the entry wound and that on the right side of the chest, being the exit. He mentions that both lungs were penetrated by the bullet, that the mouth contained blood which was consistent with blood rising from the lungs into the pharynx during the terminal attempts to breathe. The blood flow to the rest of the body was diverted by that lost by the lungs injuries, to the chest cavities and the air passages. I would expect him to lose both motor and cognitive function within about ten seconds because of the blood being lost through the lung injuries and both lungs collapsing. This figure is borne out both by my experience of similar circumstance and by others documented in the USA. On occasion life, as evidenced by occasional deep breaths, can extend for about 3 minutes depending on the severity of the injuries received, but, in any case, no motor function can be expected after about the shorter figure given above and this might be very much less depending on whether the great vessels at the base of the heart were involved in the injuries, let alone the heart. However, Dr. Spasshat mentions only the lung injuries. Lung collapse together with the injuries would be more than enough to cause sudden death and rapid lack of motor function compounded by breathing in water if the account of the incident is correct. He also makes no mention of any head injury or any other gun shot injury. I hope this answers your questions and I would be happy to hear from you should you wish to discuss it further.

Godfrey Oettle

Compiled by Barry Sinclair, Uralla.

Captain Thunderbolt Family Historian and Researcher

Contact me by E-mail: - barrymor@tpgi.com.au

For the latest information on Thunderbolt go to my Web Page

Website: <http://www.captainthunderbolt.uni.cc>

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