

Following are the recollections of Lieutenant Commander George Prideaux's experiences in the Victorian Navy. A set of three articles was published in the *West Australian* newspaper in 1937. A separate article was published in *Spindrift* in 1930.

The West Australian, 31 July 1937

A NAVY IS BORN

Chapters in Australian Defence.

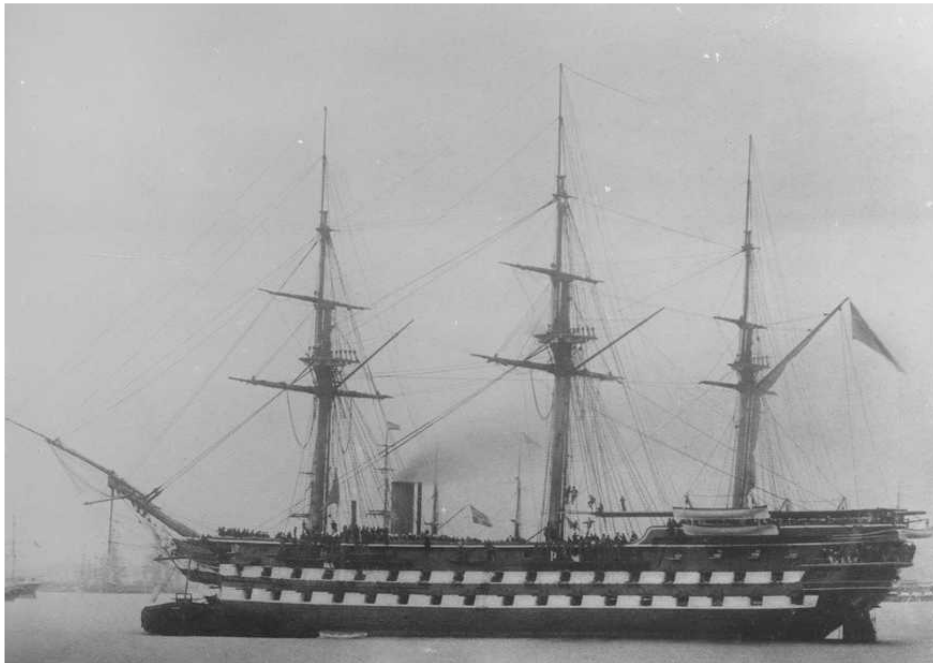
By G. Prideaux.

Early phases of Australian naval defence are described in this article by Commander G. Prideaux (retired), whose father served in the Royal Victorian Navy from 1868 and who himself saw long service in both State and Commonwealth navies from 1885 onwards.

The coming of the first big warships—the Nelson and the Cerberus—to Melbourne is described. Two subsequent articles will deal with incidents in Australian naval history and the expedition to China in 1900.

The Royal Australian Navy of today derives from the naval establishments of the various States before Federation. The Royal Victorian Navy, though there had been one armed ship on duty as early as 1856, took definite shape in February, 1868, with the arrival in Hobson's Bay of H.M.V.S. Nelson. My father, the late Chief Gunner J. Prideaux, came out as gunner on the Nelson and it is to him I am indebted for many of the recollections of the early days of the Navy. I followed him into the service in 1885.

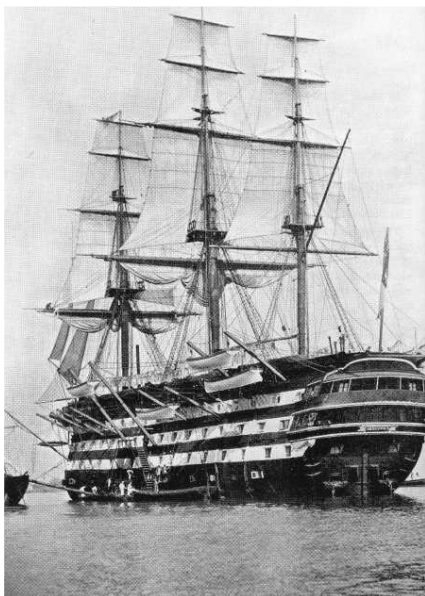
The founder of the Royal Victorian Navy was Sir George Verdon, member of the Legislative Assembly for Williamstown, then the port of Melbourne. Early in 1867, when Treasurer in the Heales-McCulloch Government, he went to England to float a loan and bring under the notice of the Imperial Government the naval defence needs of Victoria. He was successful in obtaining the gift of the auxiliary frigate His Majesty's Victorian ship Nelson, and a contribution of £100,000 towards the construction of the armoured turret-ship Cerberus. There was already in Victorian waters the sloop Victoria, which had previously been used for survey purposes in the Gulf of Carpentaria and had reached Hobson's Bay in 1856. She mounted two small brass cannon for signalling and saluting purposes. These cannon are now in front of the administrative block at Flinders Naval Depot.



Nelson as she was when she arrived at Melbourne in 1868.

My father had just completed a commission in the paddle box frigate Pandora on the West African coast when the Nelson was being fitted out, and he volunteered for service in the ship. A remarkable fact about the Nelson was that, although laid down just after the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and completed in 1814, she was never commissioned as a man-of-war until she hoisted the blue ensign of the Victorian Navy. The long period of peace had been responsible for her long inactivity in Portsmouth harbour. The Nelson and St. Vincent were the largest three-decker line of battleships ever constructed. In 1860 the Nelson had the upper deck removed and was converted into an auxiliary frigate and rearmed with twenty 32-pounders on the main deck and twenty 64-pounders on the lower deck, while forward in the bow, on the upper deck, were two 7-inch converted pallisers throwing a projectile of 150 lb. These two guns were capable of piercing the armour of the Warrior class—the first iron warships constructed and the most powerful then afloat.

Great difficulty was experienced in obtaining a crew for the Nelson. The Abyssinian expedition had absorbed all available seamen. Eventually a mixed crew of naval and mercantile seamen were obtained and these formed the nucleus of the splendid personnel of the present Royal Australian Navy. The Nelson left Portsmouth on October 4, 1857, under the command of Captain Payne, R.N, and arrived in Melbourne, via the Cape, in February, 1868. The turret ship Cerberus followed in 1871. She was the most modern warship afloat, her armament consisting of four 18-ton Firth steel guns mounted in two turrets, and throwing a projectile of 400 lb. Lieut. Panter was sent to England to bring the vessel out. His task was anything but an enviable one. H.M.S. Captain, a vessel of similar type, had shortly before been lost with nearly all hands in a gale in the Bay of Biscay. Seamen had not forgotten the fact and Lieut. Panter had great difficulty in obtaining a crew.



This picture of H.M.S. St. Vincent, a sister-ship of the Nelson, shows what the Nelson looked like before her conversion. These vessels, which were the largest three-deckers built, were laid down in the year of Trafalgar, but were not commissioned until many years later.

Eventually 23 seamen were secured. Then trouble arose as to what flag she would sail under. Eventually it was decided she should come out under the flag of the Merchant Service and this was the first time on record of a warship's sailing under that flag. As the Cerberus had only a little over two feet freeboard, a false deck had been built round the ship, giving her the appearance of an elongated gasometer.

After being driven nearly frantic with red-tape, Lieut. Panter eventually made a start from Palmers' shipbuilding yard on the Tyne, the first port of call being Plymouth. In the Downs she met with a stiff gale with a head sea, in which she was unmanageable, being able to steam only 1 knots. The below decks were constantly flooded, keeping the 25 men continually baling the water out in buckets. Eventually Plymouth was reached and the crew of able seamen was increased to 65.

Two days after leaving Plymouth a heavy gale was experienced in the Bay of Biscay. The ship behaved as badly as a ship possibly could. She rolled 45 degrees each way, and Lieut. Panter found it impossible to keep her head to wind. After a terrifying trip she eventually reached Gibraltar, where those on board were informed the gale which they had come through was a far worse one than that in which H.M.S. Captain was lost. The Admiral of the port expressed his surprise that Lieut. Panter had not cut his masts away in the gale.

Having obtained permission to pass through the Suez Canal the Cerberus eventually reached Melbourne on April 9, 1871.

The appearance of the Cerberus caused great disappointment to sightseers, who had expected to see the war ship as she appeared in prints published in the newspapers as designed by the makers. She brought out two passengers who had been employed in the building of the ship, and they supervised the removal of the very unsightly superstructure so that in the end she looked what she really was—a modern man-of-war. My father was appointed gunner of the ship. In addition to four 18-ton guns she had two 6-pounder Nordenfeldts and four four-barrel quick-firing Maxim Nordenfeldts.

So the Navy began. My earliest recollection of the Navy was when, with my mother, I was rowed off to have Sunday dinner with my father in the warrant officers' mess in 1878, my age then being six years. It left an indelible impression on my mind. Another early incident was being taken on board the naval hulks Deborah and Success, the latter the infamous convict ship of unhappy memory. Chief Gunner Groves was in charge of these vessels, which were used at that time as store ships for the Navy. Mr. Groves showed me the cells, ankle chains and other fittings, which were still on the store list of the ship.

Not very long after this the Navy had the only serious accident it has had. Chief Gunner Groves and five men left the Cerberus in a gig, having on board a mine which was to be exploded electrically from the Cerberus when it had been moored, and the boat was out of danger. The mine exploded however while the men were preparing to moor it, and Mr. Groves and four seamen were killed. One seaman, Jasper, who was in the bow of the boat, escaped with his life, but he was seriously injured. and never really recovered from the effects of the explosion, though he lived several years.

With 200 years of naval tradition behind our family it was but natural that I should follow in the footsteps of my father, so on May 5, 1885, when still under the age of 13, I was "slipped into" the Navy as armourer's apprentice, over two years under age. Commander Collins (afterwards Captain Sir Muirhead Collins) and my father had evidently talked the matter over, for when asked my age I unblushingly replied, "Fifteen," and I was not asked to produce my birth certificate, as was the general custom. I entered the service when the Russian War scare of 1884-5 was simmering out, and the feeling of pride when I first donned the Queen's uniform can well be imagined.

THE NAVY GROWS

Men and Incidents of Early Days

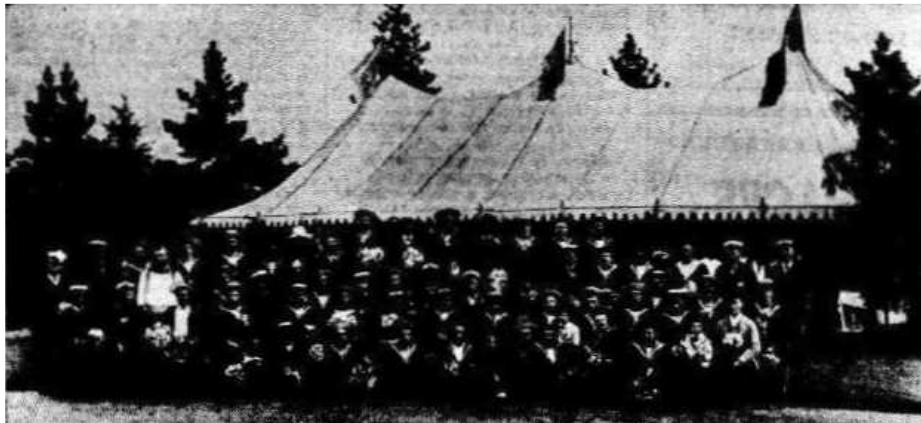
By G. Prideaux.

The men of the early days of the Royal Victorian Navy, both officers and ratings, are discussed in this article by Lieut Commander G. Prideaux, R.A.N. (Retired), who last week described the birth of the service--a forerunner of the Royal Australian Navy.

IN 1884, the Royal Victorian Navy which had started off with two warships, the Nelson and Cerberus, was further strengthened by the addition of two river gunboats, the Victoria and Albert, and the first-class torpedo boat Childers. The second-class torpedo boats Nepean and Lonsdale were also added and in 1890 the Countess of Hopetoun came out. It may be mentioned here that the Childers created a record by steaming all the way from England and chief engine-room artificer Chas. Allard earned the commendation of Captain Thomas, the then Naval Commandant, for his splendid feat. He drew on the Victoria and Albert for his coal and supplies during the voyage. At the time of the Russian war scare the Victorian Government also purchased two old ships, the Formosa and Chusan (the pioneer P. and O. liner). They were to be sunk in the fairway of the south and west channels and so prevent the Russian war ships from approaching Melbourne and bombarding the city, but the need never arose, and eventually they became coal hulks. The Government also had a 6-inch gun mounted on the two steam hopper barges, Batman and Fawkner, and the paddle-box tug Gannet belonging to the Melbourne Harbour Trust. These vessels were manned by the Naval Brigade when the fleet were mobilised. Thus the infant Navy grew.

Officers on Loan.

In the eighties the Government had the same arrangement with the Admiralty as at present, whereby specialist officers were lent for periods of two years, including captains, commanders and gunnery and torpedo lieutenants. There can be no doubt that the Admiralty gave us of their best and in nearly every instance these young officers afterwards rose high in the Navy. The following are some of the officers who were lent when they were young officers to the Victorian Navy: Admiral Sir G. Neville, Admiral Mann, Admiral White, Admiral Pelham, Admiral Sir H. Heath, Admiral A. H. Christian and Rear-Admiral de Courcy Hamilton. Of these officers it was my good fortune to meet Admiral Sir H. Heath and Rear-Admiral de Courcy Hamilton. While I was doing an ordnance course at Whale Island, Portsmouth, in 1913 Admiral Sir H. Heath was Admiral Superintendent of Portsmouth Dockyard and when I called on him he expressed his pride at having at one time been attached to the Australian Navy. As a young torpedo lieutenant he had married Miss Simpson, daughter of a wealthy Riverina squatter at St. John's Church, Toorak. After the ceremony the seamen unharnessed the horses, and dragged the happy couple to the Simpson's beautiful home, Carmyle, Toorak. The whole Naval Depot were invited to the ceremony, and to the grounds of the home, where marquees were erected and a royal feast provided. Champagne flowed like water. Socially it was the wedding of the year in Melbourne.



Wearing their best straw hats and carrying bunches of flowers, men from the Naval Depot, Williamstown, at the wedding of Lieut.-Commander (later Admiral Sir H) Heath at Melbourne in 1891.

At the same time Lieutenant A. H. Christian was gunnery lieutenant. He was the first officer I served under and was strict, but how efficient. Fortune smiled on me during our association. We had been carrying out battle practice from the Cerberus's ten inch guns. After firing it was my duty to lift the guns and examine them in succession. When the guns recoiled after firing, the recoil was taken up by a series of compressor plates under the mounting, operated by one of the turrets crew who ran back with the mounting and, by means of a compressor wheel, brought the gun to rest gently against a buffer. Evidently the compressor number had allowed the gun to recoil too violently, for, on examining the trunnion of the right gun, after turret, I found it very badly fractured and practically broken off. Had one more round been fired the 18-ton gun would have broken loose inside the turret doing incalculable damage, besides the attendant loss of life.

I hurriedly called Lieut. Christian, who, after examining the gun, immediately condemned it. Next day, at divisions, in front of the whole ship's company and my father, I was complimented on doing my duty faithfully. Shortly afterwards I received my first step in promotion. The disabled gun is now in the Ballarat Gardens, together with a group of four guns taken from the Nelson when that ship

was dismantled in 1899. Lieutenant Christian and I never lost touch with each other. Had there been a gun accident in that turret it would certainly have prejudiced his chance of promotion. He was actively engaged during the Great War on the Gallipoli coast, being then Rear-Admiral with his flag hoisted on H.M.S. Swiftsure. In reply to a letter congratulating him on his elevation to vice-admiral, he said it was an honour to be associated with the Australians in the Gallipoli campaign. He had watched their fighting with more than ordinary interest, for they were the finest troops who had set foot on the peninsula.

From Lieutenant to Admiral.

In the early nineties there entered the Victorian Navy a young sub lieutenant from the mercantile marine -Guy Gaunt, son of Judge Gaunt, and brother of Mary Gaunt, the authoress. He was tall, fair, and a fine all-round sportsman. He was quickly promoted lieutenant. He was one of the most popular officers that Victoria ever had, as well as being a very efficient one. He could always get the best out of the men. If on shore to a theatre the night boat crew never went to their hammocks after bringing him off to the ship without being taken to his cabin for a stiff whisky. About this time the Admiralty found itself short of lieutenants and called for applications from the merchant service for 100 lieutenants. Lieutenant Gaunt applied, was accepted, and appointed to the H.M.S. Royalist on the Australian station. The conditions were that these officers were to serve ten years as lieutenants with no promotion and retire on a pension of £500 per annum. They were called "The Hungry Hundred." Shortly after Lieutenant Gaunt joined the Royalist trouble broke out in the Solomon Group. The Royalist was dispatched to deal with the situation. Lieutenant Gaunt was given charge of the operations and so successfully did he quell the rising he was mentioned in dispatches to the Admiralty with the result he was placed on the active list, and became Lieutenant Gaunt, R.N., with every prospect of promotion in front of him. He became Admiral Sir Guy Gaunt, K.C.M.G., C.B. Besides Sir Guy Gaunt the Victorian Navy had two other officers who attained flag rank - Rear-Admirals Tickell and Feakes.

On the Lower Deck.

From the lower deck Captain O. Burford, at one time District Naval Officer at Fremantle has gone the farthest. He served his apprenticeship in the merchant service before joining the Victorian Navy. Tall, and very placid, it is no wonder he was such a crack shot with the rifle, and the champion pistol shot of Australia. The Boxer Rebellion lifted him from warrant rank to that of lieutenant.

The seamen of the Victorian Navy were largely drawn from the ranks of men who had completed their first period of 12 years' service in the Royal Navy, and from the mercantile marine. In the case of the Navy men we got fully-trained men in their prime with out the cost of training them, and splendid material they were. There came out in the Nelson as boatswain's mate, Joe Orenden. In the Cerberus they had a boatswain's mate, Samuel Clapp, who graduated from the merchant service. Both men were "three star" men at their job. Each had different methods, but what splendid seamen they were. Each received the praise that was their due from the seamen of both services, all of whom had served their time in sail. When H.M.S. Nelson was flagship of the Australian station there joined our service from that ship a boatswain's mate, Thomas Mooney by name. He had a deep voice that could be heard all over the ship. It was no use giving an excuse, "I didn't hear the pipe," when Mooney piped the orders. A magnificent specimen of manhood, strong as a lion and as game, he was possibly one of the best known and liked men that ever entered the service. It was punishment for him to have to wear boots. The soles of his feet were like leather. After reaching the retiring age he joined the tug service, and when close on 80 years of age was still at work on the tugs, a very active and strong man. He is, I believe, still on deck, hale and hearty. Another well-known seaman was James Browning. Although a splendid seaman, Jimmy was always in trouble. No sooner would he receive promotion than he would be hailed before the captain and lose his anchor. Eventually he retired and became a cab driver in Ballarat. On one occasion a fellow cabman dared Jimmy to stand on his head on top of the truck on the flag pole on the tower of the post office. He accepted, and, locking the door behind him, climbed the pole, and in half a gale of wind vainly tried to balance himself on the truck while hundreds of people looked on with bated breath. Browning appeared before the court for his offence, but a lenient chairman gave him a severe caution. Afterwards he told me he would have succeeded but for the wind.

Torpedo Efficiency.

The torpedo section of the Victorian Navy was always very efficient. At an early date there transferred from the Royal Navy a remarkable torpedo officer, Mr. Cardigan Dann. Originally an engineroom artificer, he specialised in torpedo and eventually became chief torpedo gunner. He was an inventive genius and Victoria was indeed fortunate in securing the services of this outstanding officer. He was the inventor of the torpedo-dropping gear which bears his name. The torpedo depot at Williamstown had the heater torpedo before any vessel of the Australian squadron of the Royal Navy had it as part of its armament.

What was probably the first torpedo fired in Australia was one from the Nelson's armament. The wooden ship Eliza caught fire in the bay and Captain Payne was ordered to sink her. The first torpedo was placed under the stern of the ship but proved a dud. A second had to be used and this sank the ship. The Eliza wreck buoy now marks the spot and is a favourite place for snapper fishing.

Director firing is associated with the name of Admiral Sir Percy Scott, but away in the eighties we had a system of director firing in the Cerberus. It was only tried once. The turret guns were usually fired individually by the captains of the guns when his sights were on. Commander Muirhead Collins, the gunnery officer, devised a system of director firing by means of voice pipe communication from the director tower to the turrets, a sight on the director tower being calibrated with those in the turrets. I was stationed in the tower to pass the word to the turrets. When all sights were on, Comdr. Collins gave the order "Fire" and all four 18-ton guns for the first time were fired simultaneously. The effect was disastrous. The boats in the davits were smashed, the teak decking broke away from the steel plating to which it was secured, the iron plates of the hammock netting burst away from the angle iron, all glass in frames was broken, rivets and bolts broken off everywhere and some of the men lost their caps over board. After this director firing was never again resorted to.

An odd fact about the Navy may be noted in conclusion. It is not generally known that the Australian Navy was at one time a "wet" Navy like the Royal Navy, the rum ration being issued daily at one bell after dinner. This had been the daily routine from the date of the arrival of the Nelson in 1868 until 1887. From where the suggestion emanated I do not remember, but the suggestion was put to the men that 1 lb. of butter be issued to each man weekly instead of his daily gill of rum. A referendum of the whole service was taken and, by a most surprising majority the rum ration was voted out and, to the present day, butter is issued in its place.

THE BOXER RISING

Contingent from Victoria.

By G. Prideaux.

The fact that Australia sent a contingent to China at the time of the Boxer Rising is not known to many people. In this article Lt. Commander Prideaux, R.A.N. (Retired), who went with the expedition, relates his experiences and so concludes the short series of articles in which he has described the birth and growth of the Royal Victorian Navy.

IN 1900, on the outbreak of the Boxer Rising the Royal Victorian Navy volunteered to a man for service in China. Two hundred officers and men were selected from the Permanent Naval Force and the Naval Brigade for service overseas. The Victorian contingent was under the command of Commander F. Tickell. He had under him Lieut. J. Biddlecombe, Lieut. O. Burford, Engineer Robertson, and Gunners Kearns, Bates, Stone, Hearne and Marwood. I had the honour of being selected to go as Chief Armourer.

They were a splendid body of men, particularly those from the Naval Brigade. Among them were a good percentage of men who had been pulling in the international tug-of-war contests at the Exhibition building that were a popular feature of naval and sporting life in those days. For armament the contingent had two twelve-pounder quick-firing Nordenfeldt guns. These guns were of a type that had been submitted to the British Admiralty but not adopted, and accordingly had been dumped on the Victorian Navy. They were at the same time both too light and too heavy. Gun mountings were hurriedly designed, and the Newport railway workshop engineers were given the job of manufacturing them. These guns and the heavy mountings had to be hauled by drag ropes and it was found on arrival in China that the task of hauling them imposed too great a strain on the gun crews, and they were accordingly scrapped. Apart from their heaviness lack of roads in China would have made it impossible to use them.



Lt.-Commander G. Prideaux.

The contingent was addressed at Parliament House steps, Melbourne, and given a wonderful send-off. The streets were thronged, barricades being necessary to keep the roads clear as the men made their last march. We left Melbourne on August 4, 1900, in the White Star liner Salamis.

At Sydney we picked up the New South Wales contingent of 200 under the command of Commander Gillespie, RN., who, being senior officer, was in command of the combined force.

On arrival at Hong Kong we saw the squadron of five new German cruisers of the Kohn class. They were superior to anything we had in Chinese waters of similar type and excited a good deal of comment in British naval circles. At Shanghai we renewed acquaintance with H.M.S. Orlando, which shortly before had been flagship on the Australian station.

We were detained a couple of days at Wei-hai-wai. On arrival at Taku, the sight that met our view was a very memorable one. Fully 100 warships of all nations were there. Suspicion of what other nations were going to do was possibly the reason for such an Armada being in those waters.

Corpses Floating Down.

Having transferred into flat-bottomed transport barges we were towed up the Pehio river to the huge city of Tientsin. Along the banks of the river could be seen pigs devouring human bodies which had floated down from the fighting higher up stream. I resolved that no matter how hungry I might be pork should be on the "index"--a vow I scrupulously kept.

At Tientsin we were met by the reed band of an Afridi regiment and played to our camp at Shooter's Hill. As the men had not had boots on for six weeks while on the transport, the four miles was quite far enough, for the pace set by the Afridi was terrific, or so it seemed to us. We were soon hardened by route marches and shortly afterwards were sent on our first stunt against some forts inland and to the north of Taku. This operation entailed a forced march of 19 miles. We started with 150 men and at the end of the march had only 90. The terrific heat and our being yet on the green side accounted for the losses by the wayside. Each man had been warned against drinking any water except through his pocket filter. The doctor who issued the instructions was the first to break the order. He eventually died of typhoid fever. The New South Wales contingent had been ordered to Peiping, or, as it was known then, Peking.

A "Monocle Officer."

The attack on the forts was to be a combined one, bombardment from the sea and from the rear by troops. All approaches had been mined and many casualties occurred when going over bridges. The forts were demolished. Camped alongside us were the Hong Kong Regiment, a magnificent Sikh regiment with men of a minimum height of 5ft. 11in. Among their officers was Lieut. Barrett-a "monocle officer." To us Australians the sight of that monocle caused much amusement until we saw that same officer put the battalion through their facings on the parade ground. To a man we "dipped our lids" to him. Never again did I judge a man because he wore a monocle. After having met the Australians for the first time Lt. Barrett was heard to remark at dinner, "I can't make out these Australian sailors, when they pass you they not only say 'Good day,' but actually ask you how you are. To appreciate his remarks you have to imagine his very pronounced Oxford accent. We got to like him exceedingly. After we had been on the march with his battalion he said, "Give me six Australians with a crow bar, and I will go through China from one end to another, for their burgling propensities are beyond belief. On the march they will rob a fowl house, pluck the bird and have it ready for the pot when bivouacking for the night."

In October General Sir Lorne Campbell was sent against the walled city of Pao-ting-Fu, 85 miles south-west of Peiping. This city had a very bad record, and had been the centre of anti foreign activities. Of all the foreigners in the city only the Revd. Mr. Green, his wife and child escaped death. The main column marched by tortuous roads, while transport went up the river by an armada of 72 Chinese junks. Lt. O. Burford and his company were entrusted with the defence of the convoy. I had charge of the guns in the leading junk, the Brian Boru. The Junks were propelled by poles against a four-knot current.

Arriving at Pas-Ting-Fu, General Gasalee, of the Peking Column--the senior officer--was met by a messenger with a flag of truce saying the city would not be defended, and that the four gates of the city were open for the troops to enter. The 50 leading citizens were tried by drumhead court martial and sentenced to be shot. They were compelled to dig their own graves, and fell into them as they were shot.

On the return journey the four junks under Lt. O. Burford captured a small squadron of armed Chinese junks, surprising them under the lee of an island in a lake. After being searched the explosives they carried were landed on the banks of the river. This dump accidentally blew up on Guy Fawkes Day with the loss of 50 lives.

The Freeze Sets In.

Peiping having fallen, as well as other centres of Boxer activities, we settled down to garrison Tientsin for the winter, the freeze having set in on December 4. In winter all water was frozen to a depth of 20 inches, the thermometer registering as low as minus 14, or 46 degrees of frost.

A memorable event happened on June 8, 1901--the memorial service for the death of Queen Victoria. The order of the service was for all British troops to be paraded and brought to attention while 81 minute guns were fired. The thermometer stood at 6 degrees (a comparatively warm day) and we stood stock still in that intense cold while 81 guns were fired. It showed a lamentable lack of appreciation of the circumstances of the moment and brutal would not be too strong a word to apply to the occasion. In low tones the men poured imprecations on everybody who had anything to do with the service. At the completion of the service the band was to have played the Dead March in "Saul," but the valves of their instruments were frozen and so could not be played. The service was a nightmare, and I consider it one of my worst experiences.

The thaw commenced on March 5, 1901. As soon as the river flowed freely we were transported down stream, where the ss. Chingtu was waiting at Taku to bring us back to Australia.

Early Impressions of the Victorian Naval Forces

By Lieutenant G. Prideaux, M.B.E., R.A.N.

Spindrift, October 1930

Without having access to any official documents, I shall endeavour to place before the readers of "Spindrift" an idea of what the Navy was like away back in the 80's, at the same time asking them, with their knowledge of wireless, signals, modern torpedo and gunnery, not to be cynical of the efforts of those far back days; for they were just as up-to-date in their day as you are in these days. Life is evolution and progress, and each decade adds its quota to the sum of human knowledge.

In 45 years time the men of the day will smile at our efforts of the present day -- there is nothing surer than this.

I joined the Victorian Navy in 1885, as an Armourer's apprentice, when the whole of Australia was deeply agitated over the Russian War preparations. It was a time of great activity in Naval circles in Victoria.

We had then the "Nelson," one of the old wooden walls of England as Flagship, the "Cerberus," a modern ironclad, mounting 4 18 ton guns, throwing projectiles of 400 lbs., the gunboats "Victoria" and "Albert." the "Victoria" carried a 10in. B.L. gun and the "Albert" an 8in B.L.

The "Victoria's" gun was found to be of too heavy a calibre for the ship, so was removed and placed in the Eagle's Nest fort at Port Phillip Heads, for the defence of the port.

There were also three torpedo boats, the 1st. Class T.B. "Childers" and 2nd Class T.B. "Nepean" and "Lonsdale." The "Childers" put up a world's record -- in those days -- by making the journey to Victoria under her own steam. There was also the "Gordon," a vessel resembling the modern steam pinnace and fitted with dropping gear each side to carry two torpedoes.

Later, about 1890, there were added to the fleet the "Countess of Hopetoun."

The latter sailed out round the Cape of Good Hope, making the journey a non-stop one as the Captain was afraid, if he put in at the Cape, his crew would desert. The journey took six months to complete.



Model of H.M.V.S. "Nelson."

During the Russian War scare the Government purchased two sailing ships - the "Chusan" and the "Formosa"- which were stripped of everything and made ready for sinking across the entrance to the channel leading to Melbourne, to prevent the Russian ships from reaching within gunshot of the city.

The Melbourne Harbour Trust had two hopper barges, the "Batman" and the "Faukner," and the tug-boat named the "Gannet." Forward on each of these vessels was fitted a 6in. B.L. gun on Vavasseur mountings. It was part of my weekly duty on Friday and Saturday mornings to give these guns their weekly overhaul.

The Victorian government of those days had the same scheme for the loan of Officers from the Royal Navy as at present.

The first Officers I served under were Capt. A.B.Thomas, Commander Muirhead Collins, afterwards Sir Muirhead Collins, Secretary for Defence and Secretary to the High Commissioner in London. My first Gunnery Lieutenant was Lieut. A.H. Christian, the Torpedo Lieutenant being Lieut. Heath. Both these officers reached Admiral rank, Admiral A.H.Christian being second in command of the Gallipoli operations, and Admiral Heath being Admiral Superintendent of Portsmouth Dockyard. When Admiral Christian received his C.B. I wrote and congratulated him, receiving in reply a very fine letter in which he reviewed his period of service in the Victorian Navy and the efficiency of the Gunnery Dept. for the period in which we jointly served. He paid a glowing tribute to the Anzacs at Gallipoli, his own words being "they were the finest and bravest soldiers that set foot on the Peninsula." This letter I intend later on to present to the War Museum at Canberra.

Lieut. Heath, during his two year service, married the daughter of a very wealthy Riverina Squatter. The wedding took place at St John's Toorak, and the whole Victorian Navy were invited to the residence of the bride's parents in Toorak after the ceremony. At the church we unharnessed the horses - no motor cars in those days - and with drag ropes from the field guns dragged the happy couple through the streets. In the grounds of the home huge marquees had been erected for the entertainment of the troops - the tables simply groaned under the weight of champagne, wines, etc.

Was there ever such a wedding?

There can be no doubt about the quality of the Officers lent to the Colonial Forces in those days. Coming straight from their Courses at the Gunnery or Torpedo Schools; they were the last word on the subject. Nearly all of them reached Flag rank, amongst them being the following: Admiral White, Admiral A.H. Christian, Sir R. Heath, Sir George Neville, Sir Muirhead Collins, Admiral Pelham, Capt. De Courcy Hamilton (afterwards Chief of the London Fire Brigade), and Admiral Mann.

Whilst at Whale Island I called on Admiral Sir H. Heath and had a very interesting chat with him in his office in Portsmouth Dockyard. He spoke of his wonderful two years in the Victorian Navy, and said he had enjoyed every moment of his time here.

The event of the year was the Annual Manoeuvres at Easter, when the whole of the naval forces were mobilized. The Naval Brigade, under Capt. Robert Fullarton, embarked. They were about 200 strong and for the short spell afloat brought enough kit to last the present day seaman a two year's commission. On leaving for the shore again their kit bags were much reduced in bulk, and I fear the major part of their kit consisted of "eats and drinks," for the ship was very crowded, and at meal times 'twas a scramble to obtain a seat at the table, many eating meals sitting about the mess decks.

There was a gradual working up to this. These Annual Manoeuvres were taken very seriously by the authorities- the "Nelson" and "Cerberus" carried representatives from each of the daily papers - Argus, Age, and Herald - and a great deal of space was allocated in describing the events. The reporters were the Wardroom guests and a great holiday it was for these gentlemen.

Sub-calibre firing in those days was quite a different operation to that of today. Being muzzle loading guns, great iron bands lined with leather had to be bolted round the outside of the muzzle end with clamps for securing the Martini Henry rifle on top. They were lined up from the tangent sight of the gun to the vertical groove on the face of the gun. With firing these bands would work loose at times and required constant attention in lining up. The target was a moored buoy, the ship steaming round it.

The Torpedo attack at night was considered one of the principal events of the week. The "Cerberus," "Victoria," and "Albert" were the only ships fitted with searchlights, the "Nelson" never having been so fitted.

In repelling torpedo attack, the turrets were manned and the guns loaded with blank charge, as were also the 6 pounders on the flying deck. The remainder of the crew were placed all round the ship's side, armed with rifles and blank ammunition.

Every eye was strained to catch the first sight of the Torpedo fleet. In most cases the attack was successful, as the 2nd Torpedo Boats had very little freeboard, and were well suited for harbour defence work.

The great event of these manoeuvres was the Battle practice on the last day. There was a gradual working up to this, and great rivalry between the four gun's crews. There was no Director firing carried out in these firings, each gun firing in succession.

Commander Collins did once carry out firing by a system of Director firing from the Conning Tower, from which position voice pipes led to each gun. This necessitated four persons being in the tower to shout order to fire into the four pipes. I was at one of the voice pipes. This was the only occasion on which the four guns were fired simultaneously and the result to the ship was disastrous.

The deck planking burst away from the deck, the steel plates round the hammock netting broke away from the angle bars to which they were secured, rivets were loose and broken in many places, men on the flying deck had their caps blown off their heads, overboard, and the boats at the davits had their planks opened.

Thus ended Director firing in the Victorian Navy in the 80's.

The range usually used in these firings was anything between 1,800 and 2,200 yards, the target being moored and the vessels steaming at about 10 knots on a straightcourse. Often trophies would be donated for competition between Permanent Naval Forces and the Naval Brigade.

The Silver Cup at present in the Wardroom at F.N.D. was presented by Sir W.J. Clarke and won by the Permanent men at one of those firings.

A few words about the guns.

When the turrets were manned there was very little more room than in the turrets of our two modern cruisers, the "Australia" and "Canberra."

The recoil system was a series of plates fitted under the carriages and worked by a compressor wheel on the side of the carriage. When the gun recoiled the compressor wheel number had to run back with the gun, all the time putting additional compression on the plates, and so bringing the gun carriage to rest at the buffer stops without undue jar on the buffers. This required a well trained man, and it was surprising how gently he could bring the carriage to rest. After firing, the guns had to be lifted, and the trunnions examined.

A hydraulic pump was fitted to each gun for this purpose. It was my job to lift these guns after firing, and after one firing I discovered one of the trunnions hanging by only about one third of the metal. They were nearly 12in. in diameter.

A very narrow escape from a very serious accident was thus averted. The roof of the turret had to be taken off and a new gun procured from Hong Kong Dockyard.

This disabled gun is now in the Ballarat Botanical Gardens. On visiting these gardens some years ago, the Curator asked me if I could

give him any information about the guns around the garden as all records of them had been lost. The supposition was that the big gun came from the Rock of Gibraltar, and the 64 pounders were from the Crimean War. I showed him the fractured trunnion of the "Cerberus" old gun, and informed him that the 64 pounders were from the armament of the H.M.V.S. "Nelson." I engraved two plated setting forth those facts. This serves to show how easy it is for things of historic interest to be lost sight of.

The Torpedo Branch of the old Service was always a very efficient Department. Among the junior Officers who came out in the early 80's was Mr. Cardigan Dann, Chief Torpedo Gunner. He was originally an Engine Room Artificer, I believe, and specialised in Torpedo work. He was the inventor of the Dann dropping gear, and many other inventions. He was an engineering genius and undoubtedly the value of his service to the Navy could not be measured. He lived inside the Williamstown Depot with his wife and family in the building that afterwards became the wardroom. He worked from early morning until all hours of the night in the workshop as far as humanly possible his branch was 100 per cent. efficient.

Whilst at Whale Island in 1913 I called on Mr. Dann, in Portsmouth, then an old man of 80, and I found him the same alert man, working on an invention having to do with motor engines.

The workshops on the old ships were primitive affairs, and consisted of one lathe on each of the two ships "Cerberus" and "Nelson." They were fitted for both power working and treadle, the latter being the usual method of working, as it meant lighting up the donkey boiler to work it by power. Both these lathes are still in use at F.N.D., being fitted up as pattern makers' lathes in the engineer and barrackmaster's workshops.

There were several narrow escapes from disaster in the old days. In one case a 5in. vavasseur mounting on the after deck of the gunboat "Albert" fractured down one side on the recoil of the gun, and was only noticed when the gun was ready for firing the next round.

Only one serious accident occurred. A party of five, including Mr. Bennett, Chief gunner, were in a gig, placing a mine in position for exploding. The wires had been connected to the mine, the key being on board the "Cerberus," when it exploded in the stern of the boat, four men, including Mr. Bennett, were killed, and the bowman, Jasper by name, badly injured. He recovered, but was never again fit for service.

The "Nelson" was eventually paid off in 1899, after having been in the Navy List 84 years. My father was one of the refitting party when she was being fitted out for Victoria in 1867-68 and came out in her in 1868. The "Nelson" is now a coal hulk in Tasmania.

The "Cerberus" passed out 20 years after the "Nelson" and now serves as a breakwater off Black Rock, in Port Phillip Bay. She was the last ship of the old Victorian Navy, on board which I had spent many happy years. She only went outside the Heads once since she arrived in Victoria in 1871, and then those on board wondered whether she would ever get back. I am sentimental enough to wish that instead of being condemned to be an expense for many years in the Bay, she had been towed outside the Heads, and in deep water given a decent burial.

I have gone the way of the ships myself - passed out - and am now commencing another 45 years on land. I am enjoying every moment of it. There is certainly plenty of scope for my energies here. The Naval Service I left with many regrets, at the same time I carried away with me most happy memories of my association with the finest Service in the world.

Plaques referred to in the above text.



Webmaster's Note

- There were numerous occasions when broadside or director firing occurred between 1888 and 1905.
- The Cerberus plaque above is incorrect where it states that the damaged gun is the last one from Cerberus. There were four on the ship until March 2005 when they were placed on the sea floor adjacent to Cerberus.
- The Cerberus log recorded that J. White, armourer discovered a fracture in the right trunnion on 16 September 1897.