GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS   (July 2003)

By Rob Upson

HMVS NELSON and VICTORIA'S NAVY
(Part 1)

It was late afternoon on another hot January day in 1997 as a small group of volunteers packed up their tools and lunch boxes and headed home. For several days now, under the expert guidance of a professional archaeologist, they had been excavating the Cascades that had remained buried for many years in Rosalind Park. Within a few minutes of the dig recommencing the next day there was a metallic sound as a trowel came into contact with something solid. With some more careful digging the shape of a large cannon barrel came into view. Later that day a second cannon barrel had been exposed. The two barrels were conveyed to and secured at the Council Depot where they remain pending a decision on their future and the allocation of funds for restoration.

The cannons have been identified as coming from Her Majesty's Victorian Ship *Nelson.* The *Nelson* was a wooden line of battleship, commissioned in 1815 and belonged originally to the Royal Navy. It was 74.5 metres long, weighed about 2650 tons, had a crew of 875 and boasted 126 guns on three decks. To understand what the State of Victoria was doing with a wooden warship we have to go back to the year 1850.

It was in November of 1850 that the district of Port Phillip gained independence from NSW. In July the following year Victoria was declared a separate colony with powers invested in a Lieut. Governor. Charles Joseph LaTrobe was the first appointee.

In the early years of the gold rush, Melburnians were concerned at the lack of protection for the many ships in Port Phillip Bay that were laden with gold. Also the city had banks and a treasury that contained vast quantities of the precious metal. Easy pickings for an invading force who would only encounter a primitive means of defence, most of the colony's population being on the goldfields.

LaTrobe urgently requested the Colonial Office back in London for some help to protect the port and the city. Britain's response was lukewarm. HMS *Calliope* and several other naval units came to have a look, and then sailed away again. However, HMS *Electra*, an old sloop-of-war, was detached from the East India Squadron and stationed in Port Phillip Bay from April 1853. The outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 further put the wind up the local population as it was rumoured that a Russian fleet was roaming the Pacific.

The next Governor, Sir Charles Hotham, authorised the building of Victoria's first warship in 1855. Built at Limehouse, London, the colonial steam sloop HMCSS *Victoria,* arrived in Port Phillip from Britain in May the following year. She was a 560-ton oak-hulled craft equipped with sails and steam engines. The *Victoria* was mostly used as an armed police and customs vessel plus performing a number of other non defence type activities. In 1859 she took rations and supplies to the Fitzroy River in Queensland where a number of gold miners from Victoria were said to be starving near Port Curtis. In 1861, under the command of Commander W.H. Norman, *Victoria* was sent on a mission to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the vain hope of rescuing the lost explorers Burke and Wills. The Norman River was named after this commander and subsequently the town of Normanton.

The first Naval Brigade in the colony of Victoria was formed in 1859. This force contained a high proportion of ex Royal Navy men and was trained in both infantry and artillery. The brigade was divided into the Williamstown and Sandridge (Port Melbourne) divisions and service was part-time and unpaid. (Society was relying on volunteers even then).

In 1865 the Colonial Naval Defence Act provided a legal basis for the establishment of colonial naval forces separate from the Royal Navy. The Australian colonies were empowered to provide, maintain and operate warships and to raise and train seamen to serve in such vessels.

Victoria, with the formation of permanent naval forces in 1867, now had its own Navy to protect the Colony. The aforementioned volunteer Naval Brigade supplemented the manning of these forces.

At Federation in 1901, all the State naval forces were transferred to the Commonwealth Naval Forces.

(To be continued)

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS   (August 2003)

By Rob Upson

HMVS NELSON and VICTORIA'S NAVY
(Part 2)

Continuing the story of Victoria's naval defences, let us now return to the HMVS *Nelson.* She was given to the Victorian Navy, by Britain, in 1867 after an overhaul at Portsmouth. There she was converted from 3 decks to 2 decks and the number of guns reduced to 72. In February the following year she arrived in Port Phillip Bay under the command of Acting Commander C.B. Payne RN and dropped anchor off Point Gellibrand. Because the *Nelson* was basically an obsolete warship, she was primarily used as a naval training vessel.

The defences of the colony had been further enhanced by the construction of emplacements for 68-Pounder guns in various locations around the bay. In the 1870s major fortifications were erected on both sides of Port Phillip Heads, at Point Nepean and Queenscliff. Smaller forts were built in the South Channel and on the Pope's Eye Shoal. Swan Island provided a base from which to control a minefield. Should all these defences be somehow avoided, a further formidable obstacle remained – the floating gun platform that was HMVS *Cerberus.* This somewhat unattractive steel plated, twin-screw vessel of 2107 tons was purchased from Britain in 1871 and had four 10-inch turret guns. As well as being a guard ship for Port Phillip Bay she was also a training ship for naval volunteers.

Earlier, the Commander of HMCSS *Victoria*, William Henry Norman, suggested that if an enemy were to attack, the buoys locating the shipping channels could be moved. Port Phillip was treacherous at the best of times but shifting the buoys would ensure that enemy ships would sooner or later run aground on sandbars or rocks.

The bayside defences were considered at the time to be both intelligent and formidable and fortunately they never had to be put to the test. The only naval shell ever to land on Melbourne came not from a foreign raider but from a gun of HMVS *Nelson* during gunnery practice. The shell badly damaged a workshop in St. Kilda and a neighbouring house. No one was killed. In another earlier embarrassing incident the gunners at Queenscliff had been unable to reply to a salute from a visiting Russian warship in 1862. They had no ammunition. It was believed that the Russian vessel was examining and testing the defences of the port.

HMVS *Nelson* was the first warship to be docked in the Alfred Graving Dock at Williamstown in 1874. This dock was completed the previous year. When the *Nelson* became no longer useful as a training ship she was used as a reformatory for errant boys for four years. She then deteriorated until finally she was broken up in 1908. Her anchors now adorn the foreshore at Williamstown and its weaponry distributed to numerous Victorian country towns, including Bendigo, Eaglehawk and Hamilton. Two of the guns stand sentinel in front of the old Eaglehawk Town Hall and it is believed that at least six guns stood at the top of Camp Hill. Two were found buried in the Cascades so the others may still be buried up there somewhere.

HMVS *Cerberus* was scuttled in 1926 at Half Moon Bay off Black Rock to form a breakwater. There are current moves afoot to try and save the vessel from complete deterioration by raising her on to an underwater platform. In Greek mythology, Cerberus was a three-headed dog that guarded the underworld.

References – Victoria Illustrated (1834-1984) by HH Paynting & M Grant
            Melbourne after the Gold Rush by M Cannon

-