

Chapter 1 - Birth of a Navy

HMCS Victoria

In July 1853¹ Commander William Nicholas Love Lockyer R.N. was sent to Britain, by the Victorian Lieutenant-Governor, Charles La Trobe², to purchase a steam vessel whose purpose (as stated in a minute of November 1852) was “the conveyance of public officers and of stores to the outposts”³. Between November 1852 and December 1853 the Victorian Navy was born, as by December 1853 what had been conceived as a despatch vessel had been changed to a war-steamer. Commander Lockyer’s instructions were now not simply to purchase, but were “to superintend the building of an armed steamer for the service of the Colony of *Victoria*”⁴. Under Lieutenant-Governor Charles Hotham the ship’s specifications changed again, with Commander Lockyer being instructed that he was “no longer to consider a light draught of water as a necessity. Your business is to obtain a good sea-going vessel fitted for general service”⁵.

After the launch of Her Majesty’s Colonial Ship (HMCS) *Victoria* on 30 June 1855 Commander Lockyer supervised the fitting out of *Victoria*. Commander Lockyer advised Commander William Henry Norman that as his (Lockyer’s) pregnant wife “positively declares that nothing will induce her to undertake the voyage (to Australia)”⁶, he was declining the offer of commanding *Victoria*⁷ on her delivery voyage. Commander Norman was then appointed as *Victoria*’s delivery voyage captain on the 3rd of November 1855. For the next month, now referred to as Captain Superintendent Lockyer was assisted by Commander Norman to prepare *Victoria* for her delivery voyage. On the 1st of December, under Captain Lockyer, *Victoria* left Greenhithe for Plymouth on her trial trip and called in at Southampton to collect two cows and repair a broken screw. Captain Lockyer disembarked at Plymouth and Captain Norman took command of *Victoria*, which left for Australia on the 8th of March 1856 via the Cape of Good Hope.

The resulting ship, HMCS *Victoria*, was described as “the pioneer of the Victorian Navy”⁸. On arriving at Southampton the officers were described as being dressed in the Victorian Navy uniform which was “precisely like that of the officers of the Royal Navy, only the bands, buttons, and lace were of silver instead of gold.”

Sir Harry Smith

Before HMCS *Victoria* arrived in Port Phillip Bay a second warship was being added to Victoria's new navy. Whether or not it was the current war with Russia that was the cause of the Government's concern or the realisation that, given her despatch duties, *Victoria* would not always be present in Port Phillip, the Government was obviously not prepared to rely on just one armed vessel. In order to have an immediate and full time naval presence in Hobson's Bay (the northern part of Port Phillip), the eight year old barque, *Sir Harry Smith*, was modified and "twisted into a kind of Man-o'-War for the defence of the harbour".⁹ Manned by veterans of the water police and boatmen connected with the Custom's Department, and under the supervision of Mr Shillinglaw¹⁰, *Sir Harry Smith* was armed on her flush upper deck with six 32 pounder smooth bore guns, most likely of the 45 cwt type¹¹. The men were drilled on the guns by ex-Royal Navy Gunner Sheath, and regulations specified that the men were "responsible that her armament is at all times complete and in proper order"¹².

The lack of built up sides meant that there was no protection for the men working the guns. It also meant that the guns were at risk of going overboard in a storm. This is what almost happened early in April 1856¹³. All hands were needed on deck so as to secure the guns during the pitching and rolling caused by a strong gale. Presumably a solution was found as the sides were not built up until *Sir Harry Smith's* second period of service in 1865 when substantial bulwarks¹⁴ were added. As *Sir Harry Smith* was on active duty¹⁵ two months before the arrival of HMCS *Victoria*, she therefore qualifies as *Victoria's* first warship.

Although *Sir Harry Smith* was termed a blockship, the reference was to the blockships used in Britain during the previous decade. These blockships were not meant to be sunk in channels, as were blockships in earlier times, but rather were cut down 74 gun Men-of-War intended as mobile batteries or port guard ships. Unlike the British blockships, *Sir Harry Smith* was not fitted with a steam engine and was towed to her station so as to cover the gap between the Williamstown and Sandridge batteries. *Sir Harry Smith* continued in her blockship role until early 1861 when her first period of service in the Victorian Navy came to an end.

At noon on the 31st of May 1856, HMCS *Victoria* arrived in Port Phillip. Although *Victoria* had been built to accommodate two pivot bow guns and six broadside guns, on arrival her armament consisted of one 56 cwt 32 pounder bow pivot gun and two 25

cwt 32 pounder broadside guns¹⁶. Although fitted with fewer guns than *Sir Harry Smith*, *Victoria* had a more powerful bow gun and the obvious advantage of mobility. Unless towed, *Sir Harry Smith* was fixed in her position half way between Williamstown and Port Melbourne.

That men regularly transferred in both directions between *Sir Harry Smith* and *Victoria*, and that *Sir Harry Smith's* new commander, Inspector/Lieutenant William Crawford, was answerable to Captain Norman of HMCS *Victoria*,¹⁷ demonstrates that *Sir Harry Smith* and *Victoria* were considered as part of the same force. With *Victoria* often absent from Port Phillip on duties along Victoria's coast, *Sir Harry Smith* was the naval asset most likely to be called upon to repel any hostile force that ventured into Hobson's Bay.

Refusal of Duty

Initially *Victoria's* crew was engaged under the Merchant Seaman's Act.¹⁸ Just four days after arriving in Victoria, the crew refused orders to proceed towards Geelong so as to assist the ship *Arthur the Great*, which had run aground.¹⁹ As the Water Police boat arrived after 5.00 pm, this refusal of duty was most likely a result of the late hour of the day which would have involved *Victoria's* crew working in the evening and possibly overnight. As a result of the crew's refusal, on the 8th of August, Captain Norman was instructed to lose no time in engaging a crew for the ship under the 1853 Victorian Police Act,²⁰ the same as for the Water Police. For the next seven years the men were to have dual ranks such as Able Seaman/Constable and hence would become subject to the Act's discipline provisions. Captain Norman proposed gradually laying off the existing crew as new men were hired. Whether the men were actually dismissed is not known as Captain Norman lacked any grounds for dismissing them. It is likely that natural attrition was allowed to occur. Swearing in under the Police Act solved the problem of men refusing duty, and would continue until 1860. As the crew of *Sir Harry Smith* actually were policeman this was not an issue for them.

AN opportunity for Seamen of ability and good character, is now open, to join the Government Steam-Sloop VICTORIA, under the Police Act.

None need apply, who cannot produce good references of ability and character.

The rate of pay being £9 per month, and found.

The term of engagement twelve months. Good conduct, pay in addition to the above is also allowed.

Apply Government Shipping Office, Melbourne.

W. H. NORMAN, Commander.

P.S.—One Gunner; one Armourer, required also.

August 25th, 1856. 2685

Figure 1 - Recruiting Advertisement

The Argus, 27 August 1856

Mutiny & Murder on the Whale Ship *Junior*

During a mutiny on the 25th of December 1857 off Cape Howe, the captain and third mate of the American whale ship *Junior* were murdered. Some of the mutineers headed north towards Sydney while a second group headed west towards Melbourne.

A search by HMCS *Victoria* and her armed boats along the Gippsland coast for the mutineers of the American whaler *Junior*, turned up one of their boats at Ninety-mile Beach and information from two local Aborigines. Details of the mutineers' direction of travel were passed to the authorities at Port Albert,²¹ resulting in the capture of the remaining four mutineers near the township of Sale.

Although only a police action, the advantage of a permanent naval force was demonstrated by the capture of the mutineers heading for Melbourne. Whereas the capture of the mutineers heading for Sydney was made possible by their boasting in a hotel in Merimbula arousing suspicion as to their true identity, the capture of four mutineers heading for Melbourne resulted from a methodical search by HMCS *Victoria*. The existence of a naval force in Melbourne meant that a thorough search could be mounted in a sparsely inhabited part of Victoria. By contrast the New South

Wales government, with no naval force, chartered the steamer *Illawarra* and armed her with police which took control of the mutineers that had already been arrested and sent to Twofold Bay.

General Nowell Incident

When a police constable and custom's boat crew were forcibly removed from the ship, *General Nowell*, at Queenscliff in 1858, HMCS *Victoria*, which happened to be in the area, chased after the American ship. Regardless of whether *Victoria* did fire a shot across *General Nowell's* bow, as related 34 years later,²² the American captain was nevertheless retrieved from his ship and sent to Melbourne under arrest.²³ *General Nowell's* Chief Officer was found guilty of assaulting a police officer and gaoled for three months. A meeting of American ship captains complained that the boarding of the *General Nowell* amounted to piracy.

First Overseas Campaign

It was during *Sir Harry Smith's* first period of naval service in 1860, that HMCS *Victoria* left Victorian waters altogether. On the 19th of April 1860, HMCS *Victoria* proceeded to New Zealand to undertake the Victorian Navy's first overseas campaign. As well as transporting men from the 40th Regiment of Foot and supplies and possibly firing her guns in support of land operations, *Victoria* landed her shore party which saw action on a number of occasions. On her second trip to New Zealand *Victoria* was described as flying the colonial flag.²⁴ Shore operations by men from HMCS *Victoria* not only constituted *Victoria's* first overseas campaign but was also the first occasion on which Australians had fought overseas.

From early 1861 and for the next four years, *Harry Smith* was reduced to displaying tide and weather signals. With *Harry Smith* disarmed and HMCS *Victoria* in New Zealand, for the first three months of 1861 until the return of HMCS *Victoria* on the 10th of April, the colony's naval defences consisted only of the Volunteer Naval Brigade formed the previous year.

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