Chapter 2 - Volunteer Naval Brigade

To supplement the small permanent Victorian Navy, the colony of Victoria formed a Volunteer Naval Brigade consisting of Williamstown and Sandridge (Port Melbourne) divisions (originally known as companies). Combined, the Victorian Navy and the Victorian Volunteer Naval Brigade were known as the Victorian Naval Forces.

Figure 2 - Structure of the Victorian Naval Forces
The Victorian Volunteer Naval Brigade was later reformed as the
Victorian Naval Reserve, and still later as the Victorian Naval Brigade.

Williamstown Division

The appointment of Charles Bradney Payne as Lieutenant of the Naval Volunteers on the 25th of July 1859 marked the beginning of the Victorian Volunteer Naval Brigade. The Williamstown division was formed soon after on the 27th of September 1859[25] and carried out Great Gun practice on board the blockship, *Sir Harry Smith*, from its inception until the 31st of December 1860.

The Williamstown division also drilled in the District Drill Room (Atheneum) in Little Nelson Street until funds could be raised, in conjunction with the Williamstown Artillery, to build the first Drill Room in Pasco Street. In 1867 the new Drill Room was available for drills which were used by the Naval Brigade/Reserve and the Artillery

until the Artillery vacated in 1885 in favour of their new Drill Room in Morris Street. Known from 1885 as the Naval Drill Room, eight 32 pounders from *Nelson* were moved in for practise purposes. In 1892 the Pasco Street Drill Room was described as a disgrace[26] and plans were made to build a new Drill Room at the Williamstown Naval Depot. The following year the new Drill Room at the Depot was opened and, measuring 50 metres x 23 metres, was described as the largest in the southern hemisphere. The Pasco Street Drill Room continued to be used by community groups until removed to NSW for use as shearing and wool sheds in 1924. That same year the Drill Room at the Naval Depot was moved to Pasco Street and remained there until demolished in 1970.

**Figure 3 – The Williamstown Naval Depot Drill Room in 1900
with part of the China Contingent. Note the 3 Gun Ports.**
Photo: *Deeds not Words*, Wilson P. Evans, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1971.
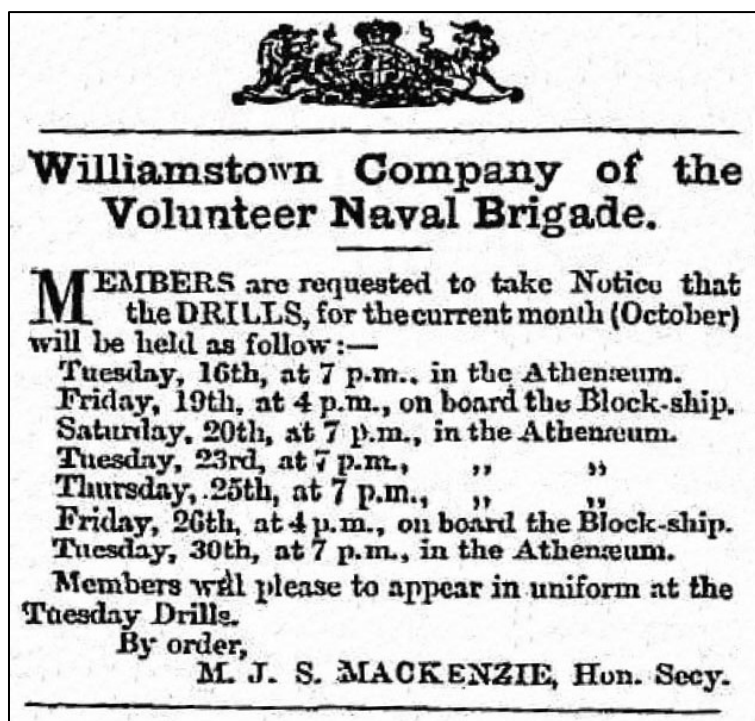
Figure 4 - Volunteer Naval Brigade Practise.
Drills at the Athenaeum & on board the Blockship, *Sir Harry Smith*, October 1860.
Image: *Williamstown Chronicle*, 13 October 1860

Breakwater Battery

After *Sir Harry Smith* was no longer available for gun drill, construction commenced on a gun battery at the seaward end of the Williamstown Breakwater Pier in early 1861. The Williamstown Naval Brigade practised at the Point Gellibrand battery with 32 pounders and at the Right Battery with 68 pounders, until the new Breakwater Pier Battery, which consisted of a structure to protect its six guns and equipment from the elements,[27] was fitted out. To keep the men familiar with naval drill procedures, the Breakwater Battery's six 68 pounders were mounted on naval slides and worked as broadside ship's guns[28] firing through embrasures[29].

Although one of the reasons given for transferring the 32 pounders from *Sir Harry Smith* to HMCS *Victoria* in 1865 was to enable the Naval Brigade to practise on them,[30] no evidence has been found that this practise occurred.

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As well as the Williamstown division firing the guns of the shore batteries, they also fired the Gun Raft's 68 pounder in 1864 and 1865, and the Breakwater Battery's 68 pounders from July 1866 until December 1868. The arrival of HMVS *Nelson* in 1868 meant that the Breakwater Battery was no longer required and after having had its roof blown off in a storm it was dismantled in late 1870, only to be rebuilt later.

The Sandridge division of the Naval Brigade practised at the Sandridge Battery until *Nelson* was available. For the first time in ten years (on the 10th of September 1870) the Naval Brigade again practised on board a Man-Of-War when 247 men of both divisions mustered on HMVS *Nelson*[31] (Figure 5) to practise on the 64 pounders. The *Nelson* boys assisted in the magazines.

Sandridge (Port Melbourne) Division

The Sandridge division of the Naval Brigade was created on the 24th of September 1860 with the signing on of its first twenty men.[32] In 1864 the "crazy weatherbeaten shingle fabric"[33] building which had previously served as the Sandridge Orderly Room, was replaced by a new Drill Room in Dow Street. Around the sides of the large room, measuring 85 feet x 35 feet, were eight 25 cwt 32 pounder guns on naval carriages, complete with gun ports. After 1879 an excess 42 cwt 32 pounder *Nelson* gun on a naval slide was installed for gun practice. Other naval equipment such as boarding pikes adorned the walls

As well as serving on board the naval vessels it was also originally the role of the Sandridge Naval Brigade to man the guns of the shore defences. This was to continue until 1871 when the Volunteer Naval Brigade was reformed as the Naval Reserve, and the landsmen split off to form the Sandridge Artillery.[34]

In 1869 the main Drill Room was widened to 56 feet and extra rooms, including living quarters for the Drill Instructor, were added. The Drill Room was also used by the Sandridge Artillery and for many community events.

In 1887 a new Drill Room was erected on the foreshore near Watson's Baths, and by 1889 two mock up Breech Loading guns were also available for drill purposes.

Of the 45 *Rules & Regulations for the Guidance of the Victorian Volunteer Naval Brigade,* nine of the rules differed according to which division the men in question belonged to. Reflecting the emergence of democracy in the Colony, rules 4 and 4a for

the Sandridge and Williamstown divisions respectively covered how non-commissioned officers were to be appointed. Members of the Williamstown division elected three candidates, one of whom was selected by the commanding officer. In the Sandridge division, members elected their non-commissioned officers outright, without any input from the commanding officer.[35] Although instructors were paid £182.10.00[36] per year, the men were not paid, but did receive a £50 Government land certificate after five years' service.
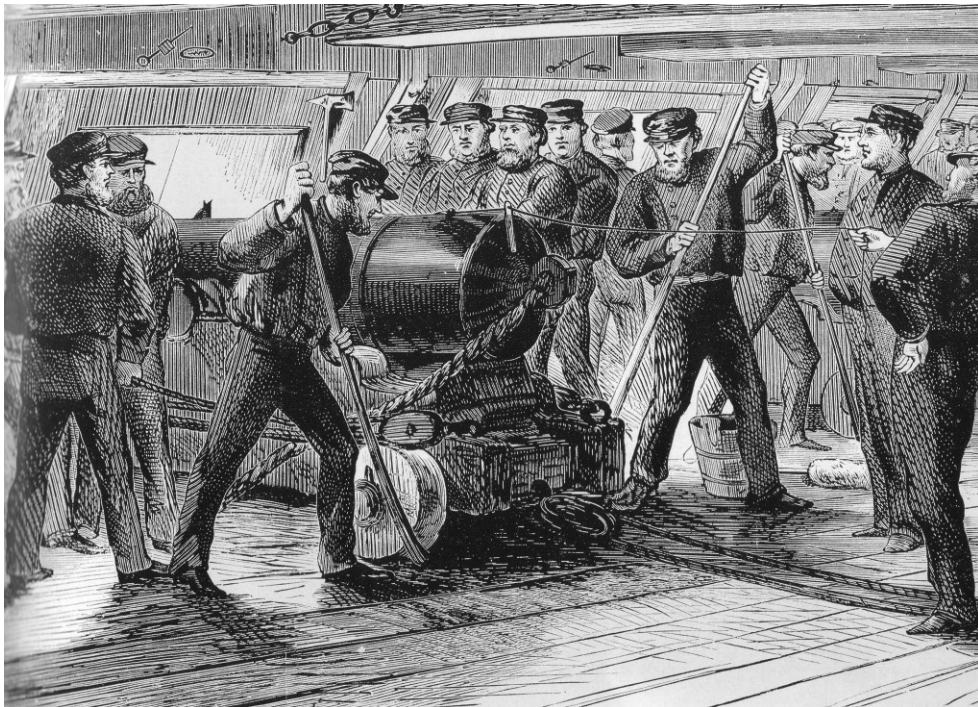

Figure 5 - Victorian Volunteer Naval Brigade at Practise
The Sandridge Division practise on *Nelson's* 64 pounders on 10 September 1870.
Engraving: *Illustrated Australian News*, 10 October 1870

Non-Europeans Recruited

A black man, whose oath was initially refused by the local Sandridge magistrate, was soon sworn in by a non-prejudiced magistrate. One of the "poor Sandridge Darkeys"[37], as he was described by one of his supporters, this British born, proud Scott was most likely the first of the many non-European members to serve in the Victorian Naval Brigade.

In December 1860 official returns showed the strength of the Naval Brigade at 118 for the Williamstown division and 99 for the newly raised Sandridge division. Once fully formed, the strength of Victoria's Volunteer Naval Brigade numbered around 240 men.

First Re-organisation – 1863-64

The possibility of war with the United States in 1862[38] over the *Trent* Affair[1] no doubt galvanised the government into attempting to reorganise the volunteer forces. It was argued that a strong deterrence was necessary to forestall the possibility of attacks from France, Russia and the United States of America.

The *Volunteer Statute 1864*[39] was passed. It standardised the selection of non-commissioned and commissioned officers by adopting the method used by the Williamstown Division of electing three men from which a board, appointed by the Governor in Council, would fill vacancies. The Act also allowed for the payment for services rendered during an emergency and compensation in the event of injury. New regulations, allowed for in the Act were announced prior to the Act's passing and on the 10th of October 1863 the volunteers were re-enrolled under the new regulations.

The reorganisation's substantial changes were attempts to tighten up on attendances at drills via the new regulations, which included fines, the introduction of new uniforms,.[40] and the expansion of the size of the Naval Brigade.

Rivalry

The Williamstown and Sandridge divisions were to compete fiercely in future rifle and gunnery competitions. Unfortunately this competition between the two Naval Brigade divisions could have serious consequences. During a field gun competition in 1895 Gunner Alfred Richardson from the Williamstown gun crew ran in front of the Williamstown gun, safe in the belief that, as he was the man designated to fire the gun, no-one else would. Unfortunately in an attempt to beat the Port Melbourne (aka Sandridge) gun crew, Gunner Foxburghe decided to save a few seconds and take it upon himself to pull the lanyard. The result was "that at the instant the shot of flame belched from the muzzle one man [Alfred Richardson] crossed the line of fire and was lifted from his feet and thrown four or five yards forward onto the turf, where he rolled

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[1] During the American Civil War the British mail ship, RMS *Trent*, was boarded by the United States Navy and two Confederate diplomats taken captive.

over several times and then attempted to rise. He struggled onto his hands and knees and then fell forward on to his face, whilst flames leaped up from his clothing and enveloped him as he lay writhing on the grass".[41]

Figure 6 - Blown from the Mouth of a Field Piece.
The Accident to Gunner Richardson (Fosburghe, 2nd from left)
Engraving: *Illustrated Australian News*, 1 March 1895

Fortunately Richardson's comrades ran forward and extinguished the flames with their bare hands. Richardson recovered but he and Foxburghe[42] were severely reprimanded for deviating from the principles of their drill. The officers concerned were censured for allowing such a deviation from duty.

In 1867 the two divisions combined to compete against the Otago Naval Brigade of New Zealand. This virtual match by telegraph resulted in both teams firing at targets in their home town, and with a victory for the Otago men. A follow up match in August resulted in a victory for the Victorians.

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