

Chapter 10 - War Scares

To understand why fears were held that Victoria might be attacked, the following needs to be kept in mind:-

1. Fighting had actually occurred between Britain and Russia during the Crimean War in 1854-56.
2. War nearly broke out with the USA in 1862 over the *Trent* affair.
3. Before the completion of the telegraph link from Europe in 1872, it was possible for a European war to break out without Victoria hearing about it for weeks.
4. In an emergency it would be days before the British fleet could arrive from Sydney.
5. It appears that Russia had contingency plans for a raid on Melbourne in the event of war breaking out.

Russian Raiding Plans

T. B. Millar's 1957 Master of Arts thesis¹²⁰ details a plan for Russian ships to attack Melbourne. The Admiral of the Russian Asiatic Squadron held two plans, one of which was to be executed in the event of war with Britain.

The first plan involved launching a naval attack on Hong Kong and Singapore and then taking refuge in the neutral west coast ports of the USA. This plan was apparently rejected by the Admiral as it was not thought that there was enough time to reach the west coast of the USA before the Russian Squadron would be engaged by the British Fleet.

The second plan, favoured by the Admiral, was to shell Newcastle, coal the five fast Russian cruisers, as well as to commandeer two vessels filled with coal. Sydney and Melbourne were then both to be shelled and their gold seized. The Russian ships would then circumnavigate Australia, destroying all British ships that they encountered. After re-coaling in Newcastle, the Russian ships would seek safety in the neutral American west coast ports.

That the Russian Fleet could expect safe haven in the American west coast ports was due to the assistance that their presence, and offer to defend San Francisco, gave to the North during the American Civil War.

Millar points out that, prior to the 1877-78 war scare, Russian ships had visited Australian ports and taken soundings in Port Phillip. Five Russian officers also visited Melbourne, as civilians in the winter of 1876, and returned to their ships in the spring. When friendly relations returned, the Russian Admiral, after slapping his thigh with his hand, is quoted by Millar as saying "Fancy one, after all, missing such a chance! Six millions Sterling! Why, there would not have been such a coup since the days of the Spanish galleons!"

1877-78 Russo-Turkish War

In 1877 the Russo-Turkish war led to Britain transferring 7,000 troops from India to Malta, calling up reserves and mobilising a fleet for operations in the Baltic Sea. In February 1878 a British fleet stood off Constantinople.

The result in Victoria was concern that the local defences were not up to scratch should hostile Russian ships enter Port Phillip. Frantic action was undertaken to transfer the 80 pounders and nine inch Armstrong guns to the Heads and mount them to more fully implement the forward defence strategy. Torpedoes were laid in the South Channel and possibly the west channel.

On the 24th of December 1877, the *Argus* newspaper reported that "Consequent upon the news received from Europe, the *Cerberus* has been placed upon a war footing." Part of this war footing involved the hiring of twelve extra crew for *Cerberus*. Permission was also given to take all necessary actions.

The recent ending of the use of *Nelson* as a training ship for boys led to its being available for defence purposes. The planned conversion of *Nelson* into a frigate was briefly put on hold, but as cutting down commenced before the crisis was over, it can be assumed that *Nelson* was seen as being of no use in her pre-converted form.

As HMCS *Victoria* carried no armour, her availability, even with her strengthened deck, was of limited value against enemy ships. *Victoria's* activities would have been limited to laying torpedoes in the channels and perhaps defending the torpedo fields.

Cerberus stood alone as the only ship capable of tackling the anticipated fast cruisers that were expected to comprise the Russian fleet. Given her heavy armour, *Cerberus* would certainly have been able to accept punishment from her enemy's superior numbers. The advantage that *Cerberus* had of not being restricted to the channels, as well as her heavy guns, would have given her a decided advantage. The four knot advantage that the Russian ships enjoyed over *Cerberus* was unlikely to have proved as decisive as it is generally assumed, as the Russian ships first had to get past her in the narrow channels.

Before the crisis was over, orders had been placed for six 7 inch 6½ ton guns, a torpedo boat and a Gatling Gun. However as soon as the war scare was over, the above orders were cancelled. Well aware of the lead time involved in obtaining equipment, and the time needed to recruit and train men, in 1882 Captain Mandeville again argued the case for action.¹²¹ As the railway had now reached Portland and would soon reach Warrnambool and Fort Fairy^A, it was necessary to obtain gunboats that could not only operate in Port Phillip, but that were also able to operate between Cape Schanck and Portland. Torpedo boats capable of deploying whitehead and spar torpedoes were also required, as were new boilers for the *Cerberus*. Captain Mandeville's recommendations were to bear fruit with the fitting of new boilers to *Cerberus* in 1883 and the arrival of two gunboats and three torpedo boats in 1884.

1885 Afghanistan Crisis

After Russian troops seized the oasis of Panjdeh near the British protectorate of Afghanistan, Russian and Afghan troops clashed in March 1885. As a result £6.5 million was allocated, above what was required for the Sudan expedition, by the British Government for possible military action. Preparations were made to move 25,000 troops from India to Quetta. The force sent to Khartoum was withdrawn and the British battle fleet was mobilised.

As was the case in 1877, unfinished fortifications, such as the South Channel Fort, were given extra attention. Advertisements were placed to recruit additional men for *Cerberus* and the gun boats (see Figure 43). Possibly because of difficulties experienced obtaining sufficient stokers during the Easter Manoeuvres, at least 19 of

^A Because of their harbours and railway lines, the three western ports were considered possible landing sites for an attacking force.

the men hired were stokers.¹²² After reports of Russian ironclads off Singapore and the Cape of Good Hope, regulations were introduced prohibiting ships from entering Port Phillip after sunset. So as to navigate the torpedo fields, all vessels entering Port Phillip were required to carry a pilot. HMVS *Albert* was stationed off Queenscliff with every vessel entering Port Phillip being boarded, and those without a pilot being turned back.

Victorian Defences.

WANTED, for Victorian Naval Forces, 50 **ABLE SEAMEN**, to be engaged for six months at 5s. a day pay with rations, and an allowance of £3 for uniform. Men must have previously served in men-of-war and be under 40 years of age.

A. B. THOMAS, R.N.,
Naval Commandant.

March 14, 1885.

Figure 43 - Men wanted for Victorian Naval Forces.
The Argus, 17 March 1885.

A Yachtsman's Volunteer Naval Corps was proposed but lapsed due to practical difficulties.¹²³

Of more use was the offer by the Melbourne Harbour Trust to allow their employees to also take time off with pay if they joined the Naval Reserve. As a result, approximately 130 men joined up. As well as training in the evenings for which they collected the normal retaining fee, they undertook four days training afloat on board HMVS *Nelson*.¹²⁴

1888 Telegraph Cable Break

On the 29th of June 1888 both submarine cables between Darwin and Java were interrupted simultaneously. Rumour of war in Europe quickly spread, and a special meeting of Cabinet was called on the Saturday. The Minister of Defence and the Premier "discussed the circumstance,... bearing in mind the fact that the interruption of the cables under these peculiar circumstances was exactly what might be anticipated in the event of any attack upon the Australian ports..."¹²⁵ Although it was decided that an

attack was unlikely, it was decided to err on the side of caution, and treat the situation as an exercise (see page 104).

There was great activity at Williamstown by the Naval authorities, and before the church bells stopped ringing on Sunday morning, the entire fleet was in readiness. Two days later *Nelson* joined *Cerberus*, *Victoria*, *Albert*, *Childers*, *Lonsdale*, *Nepean* and *Gordon* at the entrance to Pt. Phillip Bay.