Chapter 11 - Expansion of the Navy

The war scare of 1877-78 had made obvious the risk of relying on one ship, no matter how powerful. The 25th of June 1884 brought a marked expansion of the Victorian Navy with the arrival of the third class gunboats, HMVS *Victoria* and HMVS *Albert* and the first class torpedo boat *Childers*.

HMVS *Victoria*

Although lacking armour, both 3rd Class Gunboats were heavily armed, with *Victoria* mounting a ten inch rifled breech loading gun. At 25 tons, *Victoria's* ten inch gun was too hard to train, (move so as to aim) so it was replaced in 1888 with a 12½ ton eight inch breech loading gun. The original 13 pounder breech loading guns at the stern were retained on board but replaced at the stern by a 6 inch breech loading gun. *Victoria* also carried two Nordenfelt one inch machine guns[126] and could travel at 12 knots.

Figure 44 - Firing the 8 inch Bow Gun of *Victoria* or *Albert*.
Note bare foot men of the Naval Brigade.
Colour engraving: *Illustrated Australian News*, November 1889

HMVS *Albert*

Albert, launched as HMVS *Melbourne*,[127] was slightly smaller than *Victoria* and was originally armed with a 12 ton 8 inch breech loading gun at the bow and two 9 pounder breech loading guns at the stern. As with the *Victoria*, the 9 pounders were utilised elsewhere on the ship when a six inch breech loading gun was fitted at the stern. *Albert* also carried two Nordenfelt one inch machine guns and could travel at 10 knots.

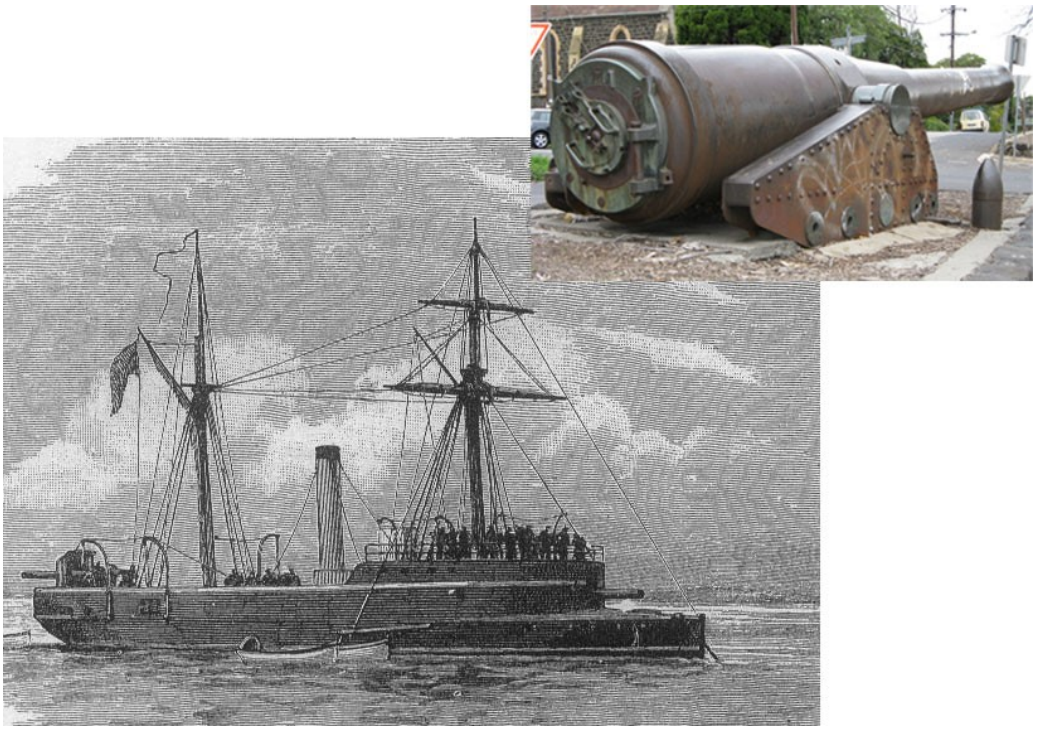

Figure 45 - HMVS *Albert* & its Bow Gun in Northcote, Victoria.
Engraving: *Illustrated London News*, 3 January 1891

Nepean and *Lonsdale*

Nepean and *Lonsdale* arrived on board the *Port Darwin* steamship in July 1884. As second class boats, they were not intended to operate independently, but to be carried to where required by ship and lowered into the water. Second class boats were considered best suited to operations in creeks, estuaries and bays. Clearly *Nepean* and *Lonsdale* were ideally suited to Port Phillip Bay and, after their arrival, were never lifted onto the decks of larger vessels.

As the torpedo to be launched by steam impulse gear lay on the boat's bow a downwards slope was required. When travelling at speed, up to 20 knots, the sharp bow angle, weight of the torpedoes and launching apparatus meant that the bow was almost always submerged. The only solution was to slow down, thereby losing the boat's advantage of speed when it was most needed during an attack.

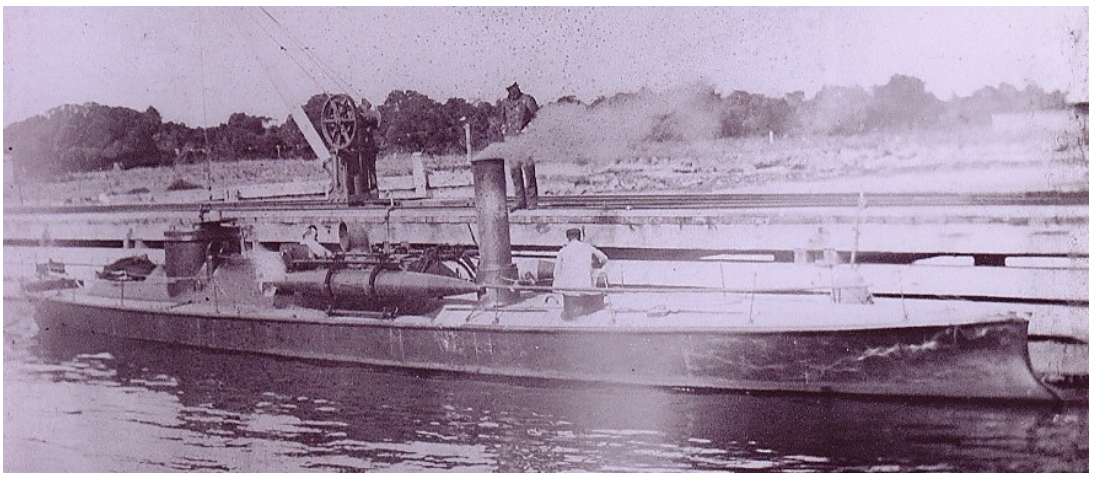

Figure 46 - *Nepean* or *Lonsdale* with Dropping Gear at Swan Island.
Photo: Queenscliff Maritime Museum

Dann's Torpedo Dropping Gear

Chief Torpedo Gunner Cardigan Dann V.N., who accompanied *Childers* on her delivery voyage to *Victoria*, solved the bow submersion problem of *Nepean* and *Lonsdale* with the light pattern of "Dann's Torpedo Dropping Gear" (Figure 47) which accommodated 14 inch torpedoes. In the case of *Nepean* and *Lonsdale*, a torpedo was hung from each side of the boat amid ship. Building up the bows of both boats, combined with the reduced weight on the bow, meant that the bow rode higher in the water and the boat could then use its main asset, speed.

"The *Nepean* having been completed [fitted with dropping gear], Captain Thomas took her down the bay a few days ago for a trial, when there was a good sea running, and the result was entirely satisfactory. The *Lusitania* was then coming up the bay at about 16 knots an hour, and the torpedo boat was able to run round that vessel, and catch her up again. The *Nepean* was sent against the sea at full speed, whereas prior to the alterations, a two thirds speed would probably have been all that could have been obtained from her."[128]

Four sets[129] of the heavy pattern of Dann's Dropping Gear were fitted to *Childers* thereby substantially increasing her firepower.

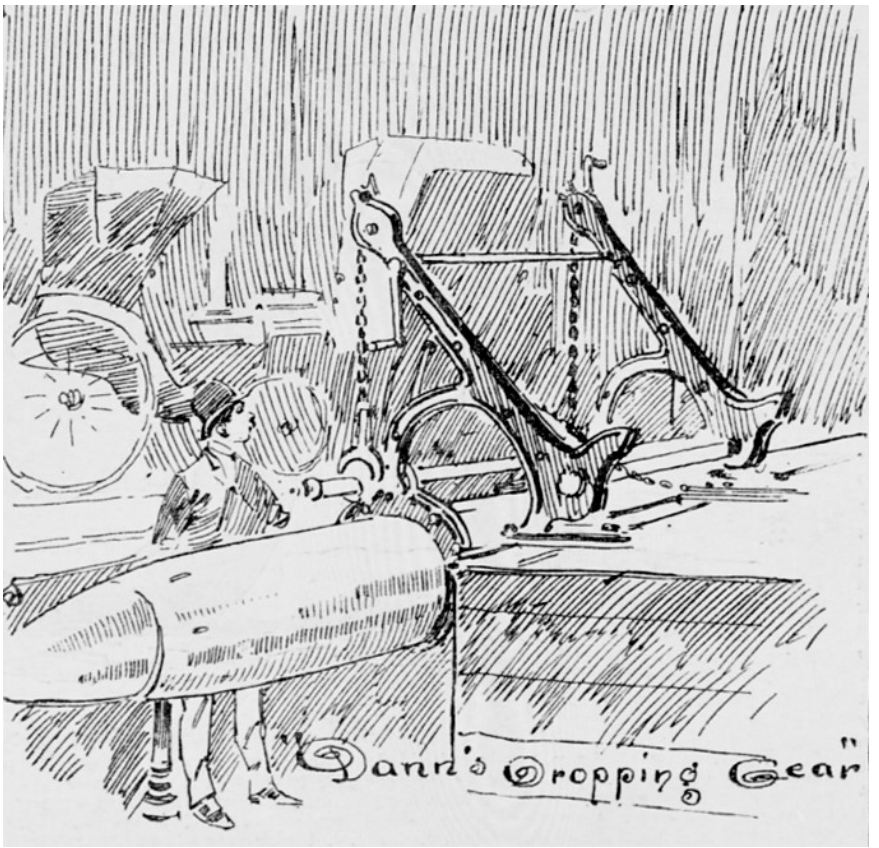

Figure 47 - Dann's Torpedo Dropping Gear.
Engraving: *Illustrated Australian News*, 22 December 1888

A secondary benefit of the dropping gear was the ease of retrieving torpedoes during practises. Whereas previously a second boat and six men were needed to retrieve a torpedo from the water, Dann's gear enabled two men to retrieve the torpedo directly onto the torpedo boat. This represented another saving in resources and manpower for such a small navy. So successful was Dann's invention that the British naval authorities awarded him £500.[130]

Childers

As a first class torpedo boat, *Childers* was intended to be able to operate independently long distances from her base. Proof that this was possible, were her cruises to Tasmania in 1905[131] and 1907. *Childers* with her twin funnels, two rudders and two bow torpedo tubes had a speed of 20 knots. She was originally equipped with two 15 inch bow tubes and carried four 19 foot torpedoes which were the largest torpedoes then in use in the Royal Navy. The torpedoes had a range of 1,000 yards and travelled at a depth of ten feet and a speed of 28.5 knots. *Childers* could operate in water deeper than 5 feet 10½ inches, and when built, she was the largest torpedo boat then constructed.

Although the dropping gear on *Childers* enabled both 14 and 15 inch torpedoes[132] to be used, only 14 inch torpedoes were used in the dropping gear after 1892.[133] In 1907 the bow was rebuilt with only one torpedo tube being retained. Whether the opportunity was taken to standardise the fleet by making this a 14 inch tube is not known, but is likely. This may be when the dropping gear fitted was reduced from four to two sets, as in Figure 48. Unlike the other vessels, which carried Nordenfelt guns, *Childers* carried two single barrel Hotchkiss guns which fired shells with a diameter of 37 mm.[134] These shells were the smallest exploding shells allowed under the St. Petersburg Declaration of 1868.

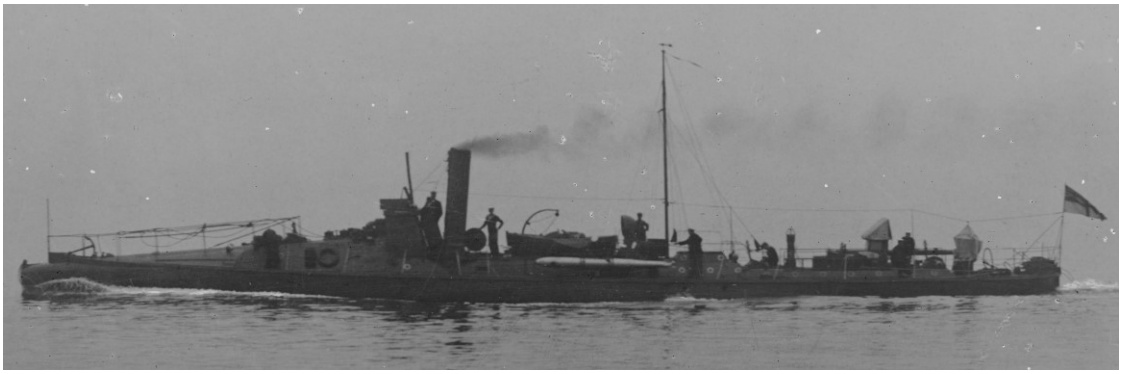

Figure 48 - 1st Class Torpedo Boat *Childers*
with Torpedo held in Dropping Gear after federation.
Photo: *State Library of Victoria*

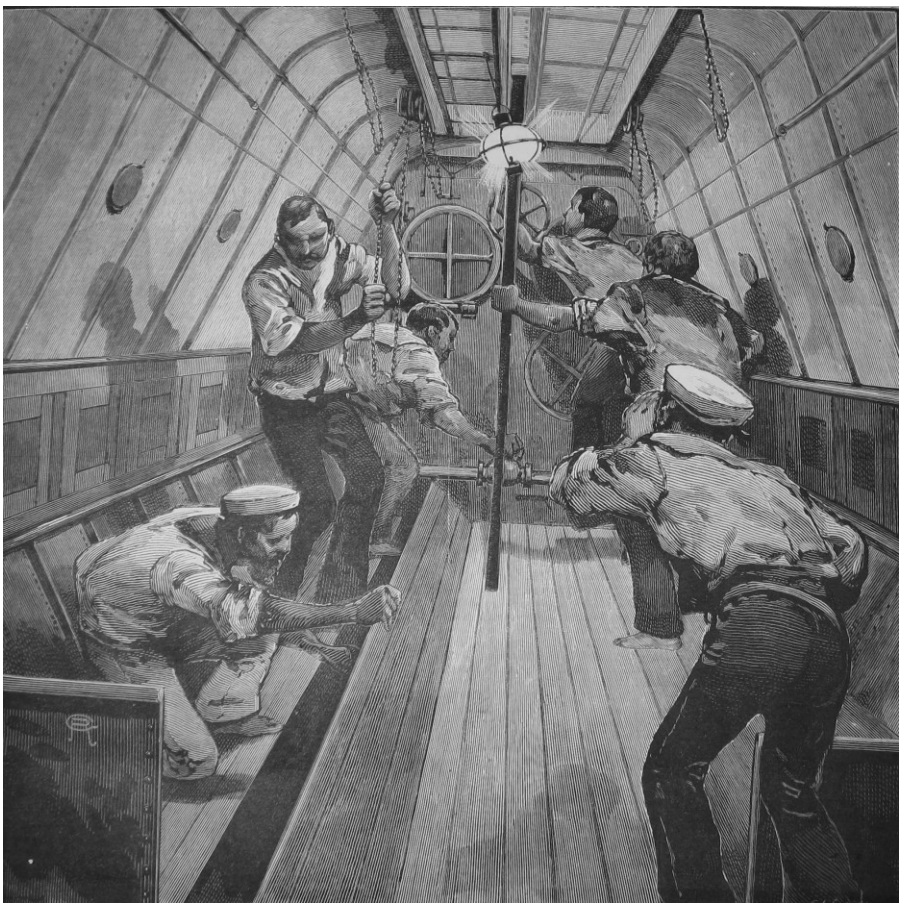

Figure 49 - Inside the *Childers*
Hoisting a torpedo from under the floor
prior to firing from one of the two bow tubes.
Engraving: *Illustrated Australian News*, 18 April 1885

"Then coal was heaped on the fires, and the little craft [*Childers*] panted and throbbed like a racehorse finishing for the Melbourne Cup as she dashed full speed ahead through the gale for the man of war." *The Age*, 19 April 1892

Vessel	Department	Role	Armament
HMVS *Cerberus*	Victorian Navy	Breastwork Monitor	4 x 10 inch RML Guns 4 x 1 inch Nordenfelt M.G.
HMVS *Nelson*	Victorian Navy	Wooden Frigate	2 x 7 inch 115 pdr RML Guns 20 x 64 pdr RML Guns 8 x 32 pdr Smooth Bore Guns
HMVS *Victoria*	Victorian Navy	3rd Class Gunboat	1 x 10 inch RBL Gun 2 x 12 pdr Guns 2 x 1 inch Nordenfelt M.G.
HMVS *Albert*	Victorian Navy	3rd Class Gunboat	1 x 8 inch RBL Gun 1 x 6 inch RBL Gun
HMVS *Gannet*	Government vessel	Paddle Steamer	1 x 6 inch RBL Gun
HMVS *Batman*	Harbour Trust	Hopper Barge	1 x 64 pdr RML Gun
HMVS *Fawkner*	Harbour Trust	Hopper Barge	1 x 64 pdr RML Gun
Lion	Government vessel	Patrol Boat	1 x 6 pdr Armstrong Gun
Spray	Government vessel	Patrol Boat	1 x 6 pdr Armstrong Gun
Childers	Victorian Navy	1st Class Torpedo Boat	2 x 15 inch Whitehead Torpedoes 2 Hotchkiss 37 mm Q.F. Guns.
Nepean	Victorian Navy	2nd Class Torpedo Boat	2 x 14 inch Whitehead Torpedoes 2 Spar Torpedoes
Lonsdale	Victorian Navy	2nd Class Torpedo Boat	2 x 14 inch Whitehead Torpedoes 2 Spar Torpedoes
Commissioner	Harbour Trust	Torpedo Launch	1 x 3 pdr Whitworth Gun 2 Spar Torpedoes
Customs No. 1	Harbour Trust	Torpedo Launch	1 x 3 pdr Whitworth Gun 2 Spar Torpedoes

Table 5 - Vessels of the Victorian Navy in 1885.
Adapted from - Report on the 1885 Naval Demonstration by Captain A. B. Thomas.
The Argus, 1 June 1885

To supplement the vessels of the permanent force a number of government vessels were modified so as to serve as gunboats and torpedo boats.

Harbour Trust Vessels

HMVS *Batman* & HMVS *Fawkner*

The 8½ knot hopper barges, *Batman* and *Fawkner*, were each fitted with a 64 pounder RML gun as a temporary measure in 1885. In 1886 the 64 pounders were removed and the bow strengthened on both barges to allow a six inch breech loading gun to be mounted. Two machine guns were also fitted to each hopper barge. The fitting of a magazine, shell room, accommodation for a crew of 20 men and armour protection for

the crew was supervised by Captain Panter,[135] who was designated as being in charge of the Harbour Trust fleet. The modifications to the barges added two more gunboats to the fleet at 24 hour's notice.

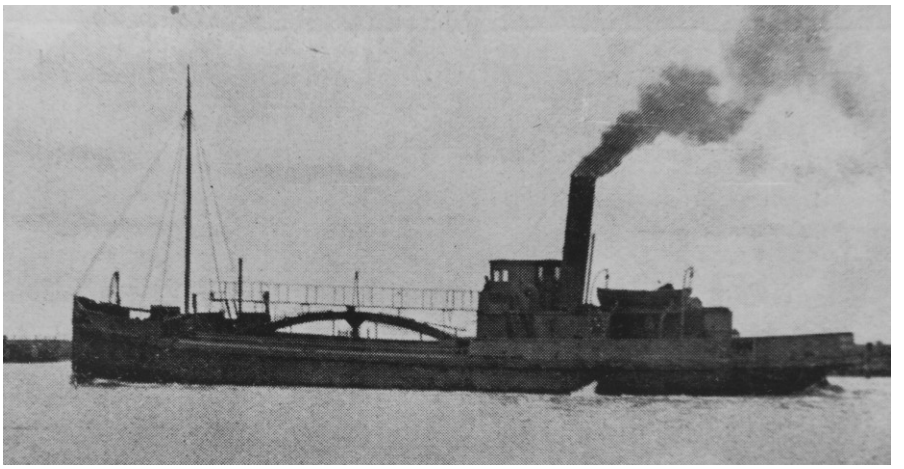

Figure 50 - *Fawkner* Hopper Barge

Figure 51 - *Batman* with its Temporary 64 pounder Bow Gun.
Engraving: *Illustrated Australian News*, 10 June 1885

Batman was assigned to the Outside Squadron and on occasions, such as in 1886, would in conjunction with *Victoria*, *Albert* and *Gannet* "bombard" the western ports of Warrnambool, Port Fairy and Portland and the little village of Cowes in Westernport.

A compressor fitted to *Fawkner* meant that torpedoes of the torpedo boats could be recharged while at sea. This role meant that *Fawkner* served as part of the Inside Squadron that operated within Port Phillip.

HMVS *Gannet*

The 12 knot paddle tug steamer, *Gannet*, was built strong enough to accommodate a gun in the bow and had steel plating fitted to protect the boiler and men. By May 1886[136] a 6 inch breech loading gun had been fitted. The Victorian Navy thereby gained another Gun Boat in case an emergency situation arose.

Commissioner

The 9 knot Harbour Trust boat, *Commissioner*, was originally fitted with a 35 foot spar at the Williamstown railway workshops.[137] In 1886 two sets of Dann's light pattern torpedo dropping gear were fitted thereby adding another torpedo boat to the fleet.[138]

Customs Launch No 1

Originally fitted as a spar torpedo boat in April 1885, *Customs Launch No. 1* eventually had two sets of Dann's light pattern torpedo dropping gear fitted. *Customs Launch No. 1* could travel at 9 knots.

Government Vessels

HMVS *Lady Loch*

Built in *Victoria*, the Government steamer *Lady Loch* was prepared for a 6 inch gun to be mounted in the bow[139] in 1887. *Lady Loch's* top speed was over 13 knots.

Lion and *Spray*

In 1885 the 8½ knot government steamers, *Lion* and *Spray,* were fitted with six pounder Armstrong guns,[140] and acted as patrol boats.

Figure 52 - *Childers* Lifebuoy.

Photo: Detail from AWM 305447

Figure 53 - HMVS *Lady Loch* Lifebuoy.

Photo: Lynne Moore

Illustrating how ships & boats were designated differently.

Commercial Vessels

SS *Elingamite*

Built to Admiralty transport specifications, the 17 knot Huddart-Parker ocean steamer *Elingamite* was fitted with four 36 pounder guns, two on the Poop Deck and two on the Forecastle, and several rapid firing guns amidships.[141] *Elingamite* could therefore be utilised to scout outside of Port Phillip or to quickly transport 2,000 troops to where required.

SS *Burrumbeet*

Like *Elingamite*, the Huddart-Parker coastal steamer, SS *Burrumbee*t, was also placed on the Admiralty list as a transport. This meant that the two largest passenger steamships operating on the Australian coast were available to be used as troop transports. Unlike *Elingamite*, *Burrumbeet* was not modified to mount any guns.[142]

SS *Courier*

The Huddart-Parker bay steamer *Courier* was strengthened so as to mount four 14 pounder Quick Firing guns.[143] Like *Elingamite* the role of *Courier* was envisaged as patrolling outside of Port Phillip Bay and for transporting 2,000 to 3,000 troops.

Although *Courier* was strengthened so as to carry four 14 pounder Q.F. Guns these were not available when she left for *Victoria*. These guns were prototypes and differed

from the later Mk I and Mk II versions in that the projectile was attached to the shell casing. Both Maxim-Nordenfelt guns were mounted on *Nelson* and eventually on the Breastwork Deck of *Cerberus*. In 1900 these guns were mounted on locally built field carriages and then accompanied the China Contingent to Hong Kong. Both guns remained in Hong Kong after they were swapped for lighter 12 pounder guns.

Gordon

Early 1886 saw the arrival of the turnabout torpedo launch *Gordon*. Capable of 15 knots, *Gordon* was fitted with two rudders and could completely turn in a length and a half, while travelling at full speed.[144] Although intended to operate spar torpedoes, two sets of Dann's light pattern Dropping Gear were mounted, along with a bow mounted two barrel one inch Nordenfelt machine gun.

Whereas the other torpedo boats had galvanised steel hulls which corroded if left in salt water, *Gordon* had a wooden hull and did not need to be stored in the torpedo boat sheds at the Williamstown Naval Depot, but could remain in the water. For this reason *Gordon* is visible in the many photographs of *Cerberus* taken while at the Williamstown Naval Depot. (See Figure 34).

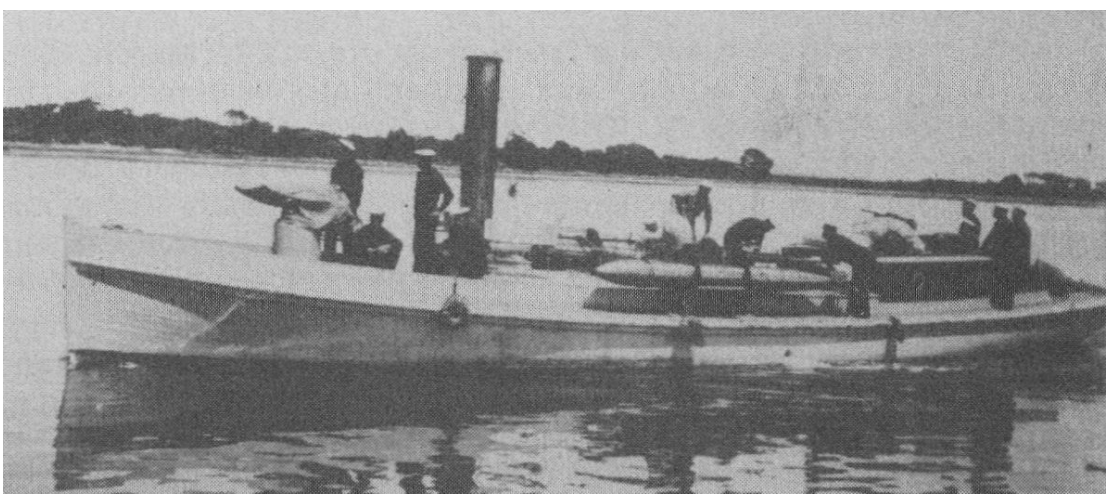

Figure 54 - *Gordon* with Torpedo Dropping Gear & Nordenfelt Gun.

Swan Island Naval Depot

1887 saw the completion of the naval depot at Swan Island for the use of the torpedo boats. A dredged channel to the pier marked with piles allowed torpedo boats to come and go by day or night.