

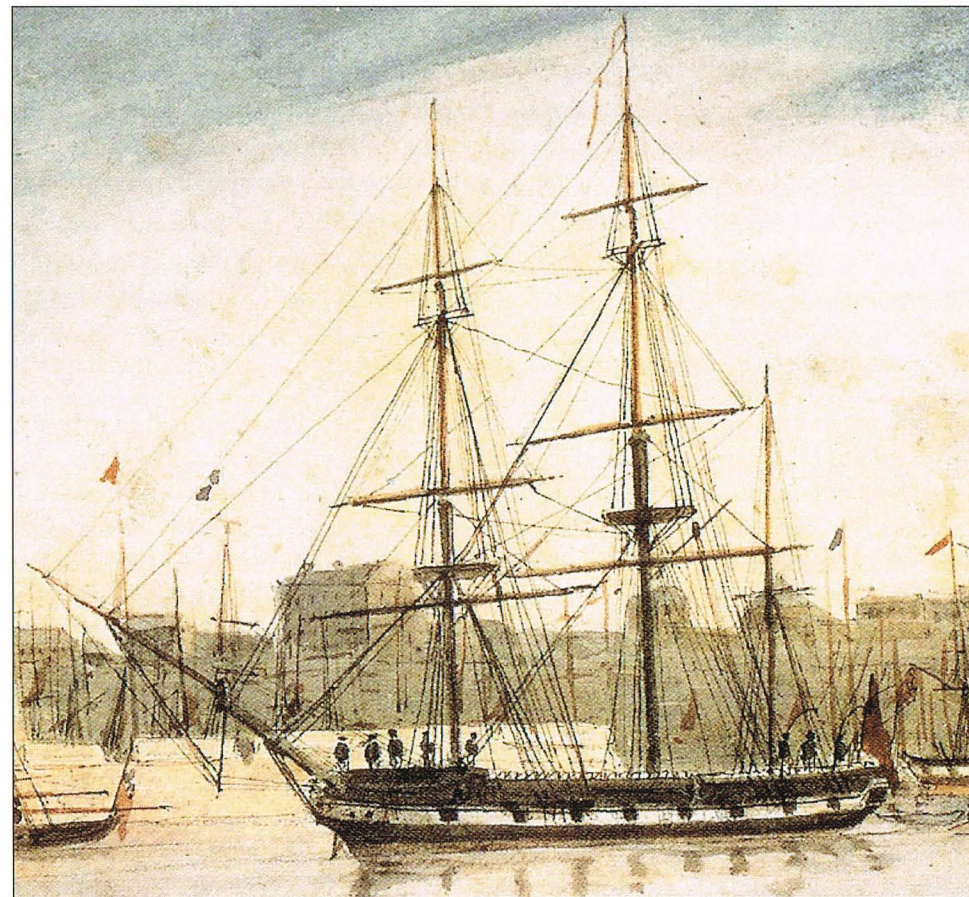
The Naval Heritage of Port Stephens



Ian Pfennigwerth

Appreciation

The Port Stephens Division of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol is indebted to Dr. Ian Pfennigwerth PhD, the author, for his generosity in granting Sales rights for this interesting book to the Coastal Patrol's Inner Lighthouse Trust.



HMS Beagle

The Naval Heritage of Port Stephens

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Introduction

On 4 June 1839, if you had been standing on Fly Point, you would have observed the embarrassing sight of Her Majesty's Ship *Beagle*, the same little vessel that on an earlier voyage had taken Charles Darwin on his famous voyage around the world, hard and fast on the bar at the entrance to Port Stephens. Filled with experienced navigators and hydrographers and setting out to complete the charting of the Australian coast, *Beagle* fetched up in Port Stephens in this inauspicious manner while taking refuge from a storm.¹ The incident was one in a series of encounters the Royal Navy had with Port Stephens, not all of them as dramatic as *Beagle's* experience.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that three navies have had significant influences on the Port Stephens region and to leave the reader thinking about the ramifications of those naval encounters and the lasting impacts that the area enjoys to this day.

A lot of the ground covered has been gone over before, and I am indebted to both the Port Stephens Historical Society and its members and to a number of authors who have researched and written about Port Stephens for much of the material in this paper. I have added to that with the products of my own research, particularly in the National Archives in Canberra and Melbourne. But no historian could ever claim that he or she had established all the facts or got the interpretation of them absolutely right, and there is bound to be more to be added to the story.

Early European Visitors

It was Lieutenant James Cook, Royal Navy, commanding His Majesty's barque *Endeavour* who, on Friday 11 May 1770 at about 4 pm, named a point of land and a harbour after Sir George Stephens, the Second Secretary of the Admiralty and thus, quite literally, put us on the map. In his Journal he recorded:

Passing this bay at the distance of 2 or 3 miles from shore our soundings were from 33 to 27 fathoms, from which I conjectured that there must be sufficient depth of water for shipping in the bay.²

We are accustomed to think that Cook was on a voyage of scientific and navigational discovery. That's true, of course, but the Admiralty wasn't sending their ace navigator and cartographer, hero of the campaign against the French in Canada, to do some stargazing, anthropology, botany and map making. The purpose of his voyages was overwhelmingly strategic. Cook was claiming territory for the British crown and

assessing the capacity of the region he was travelling through to support, sustain and protect British trade into Asia. Port Stephens wasn't the only potential strategic port he sailed past without exploring - he also missed seeing inside Port Jackson. We'll never know why he didn't turn aside and anchor here for the night. Had he done so, that might have changed the whole history of British settlement in Australia. We might have had the First Fleet arriving in Port Stephens, Circular Quay at Salamander Bay, Government House atop Corlette Hill, and a huge bridge spanning the gap between Soldiers Point and Fame Point, all of which is something to ponder. So, the first element of the naval heritage of our Port is that Cook left Port Stephens undisturbed.

Of course, Cook did not 'discover' Port Stephens. It was already the territory of the Worimi people, whose accommodating attitude towards the whites was later to bring the Royal Navy back to Port Stephens. Whether the Worimi saw *Endeavour* and, if so, what they made of this amazing visitation by eighteenth century technology, we don't know. But they were to have a more close and personal opportunity to assess the strangers when, in 1791, the whaling ship *Salamander*, requisitioned by the Admiralty to form part of the Third Fleet transporting convicts to New South Wales, sought shelter in the bay that now bears her name. *Salamander* had an excellent record in caring for her passengers on the voyage out and, released from the task, she was setting out to search for whales and trade goods in the general direction of China. She stayed for two days; her skipper made some sketches and notes on the port and then departed.

The Worimi had a much shorter wait before the next visit; there were two in 1795. The first was by Mr Grimes, the Deputy Surveyor General, in the colonial brig *Francis*. He had sailed up at the request of Lieutenant Shortland, in charge of the penal colony of Coal River - which we know these days as Newcastle - to examine the nature of the port and land to the north of the Hunter River. He made a very rough sketch of Port Stephens, the first attempt at charting the inlet, and then left, expressing himself disappointed in the quality of the soil and the general outlook of the Port.

Grimes was followed by the warship HMS *Providence*, which took shelter from a storm in Shoal Bay on 23 August. Her commander, Captain Broughton, did a little cartography and also took the opportunity of naming some features left blank by Cook. He christened the island off the entrance after himself, and the bay north of Yacaaba after his ship. He was also astonished to be hailed by four white men, convicts who had escaped from Port Jackson and had been sheltered by the Worimi. This act of aboriginal kindness was much reported on - by Broughton and the recaptured felons - and Port Stephens quickly gained the reputation of a place for escaped convicts to head for. Thus the region's tourism industry was born.

Following a mutiny and the seizure of the colonial brig *Cumberland* in 1797 the Royal Navy again entered Port Stephens in HMS *Reliance* in pursuit of the stolen craft. *Reliance* found no mutineers, but her boats did explore the western reaches of the Port

in the hunt. Then, in December 1811, the Port and the Worimi were treated to the honour of a Vice-regal visit when Governor Lachlan Macquarie, accompanied by his wife, arrived at Shoal Bay on a visit of inspection. The Governor's party was voyaging in the brig *Lady Nelson*, a ship specially designed and commissioned by the British Admiralty for the colonial government. Nelson Bay was thus named either for the ship, named after the wife of the hero of Trafalgar, or for the Admiral himself. The name is another heritage of the Royal Navy's interest in Port Stephens.

The Australian Agricultural Company and Early Settlement

Although there were undoubtedly many further visits by His Majesty's Ships to the Port, including a survey conducted by HMS *Rainbow* in 1828, *Beagle* in 1835 and again in 1841, for the next century we must look to the land to trace our naval heritage. Under the influence of John MacArthur, the Australian Agricultural Company (AAC) had been established in London in 1824 and in 1826 the first agent, Robert Dawson, and settlers arrived to take up the company's grant of one million acres in the Hunter region. The capital city of this small empire was established at Carribeen, on the north side of the Port a few kilometres east of Karuah, and the group made preparations for engaging in the principal purpose of the company - growing fine wool. It soon became apparent that the area granted to the AAC was not very suitable for sheep farming, at least not in the vicinity of the Port. As more settlers arrived and the administration absorbed itself more with the settlement - now renamed Carrington - than with the agricultural purpose of the enterprise, the company's ledgers began to weep red ink. Change was needed, and the directors sought a doughty leader to rescue the company - and its £1 million capital - from disaster.

The man they selected was a real-life hero, and a legend in his own time. Admiral Sir William Parry was a British naval officer, a distinguished Arctic explorer and the Hydrographer of the Navy, before he resigned to take up his new post in New South Wales in 1829. He had undertaken no less than four expeditions to the Arctic, three of them in search of the Northwest Passage, which was believed to link the Atlantic and the Pacific. He also made one attempt to reach the North Pole in 1827. None of these expeditions was crowned with success, but Parry and his men did penetrate further north than any man had done - 82 degrees 45 minutes latitude, a record that would stand until 1875.³

Parry had the qualities the AAC Directors were looking for. He was tough, well-organised and was used to dealing with conditions of great hardship. His public persona also gave him great status and authority. They offered him the position of Commissioner, with plenipotentiary powers and an attractive salary and pension package: he earned £5,000 per annum as compared with the Governor's £3,000.⁴ Parry accepted, resigned his commission and sailed for New South Wales, arriving at Carrington on 8 January 1830.



By this time, conditions at the settlement were in a state of chaos and Parry employed his noted vigour to bring things under control. He established a hierarchy of superintendents for the activities of the company and set out to explore and examine those parts of the company's grant that remained unknown. This resulted in a conclusion that two thirds of the grant was unsuitable for the AAC's principal industry and a recommendation that the Company's Directors organise an exchange of those parts of the grant for territory more suitable. This proposal was certainly high-handed and it roused strong objections from rival developers and from the NSW Governor. However, Parry's influence in London was sufficient to overcome these and in 1833 the land swap was gazetted. Parry's action had saved the Company.

In the course of this struggle Parry had achieved some notable firsts. One of the biggest problems facing the Company was transportation for its produce which, to that point, had depended on Stilftig ships. This was an uncertain method at the best of times. He therefore set his workforce at Carrington to the construction of a paddle steamer *Karuah*, which first got underway on 30 November 1831. She was not the first steamship to ply the waters of Port Stephens, nor was she particularly efficient, but she was the first built in the area and greatly improved transport and communications between the Company's several settlements.

Sir Edward also took command of the Company's first Carrington winemaking during the 1832-33 season. Parry's wine was also the first exported from the region - a case was sent to the Company's directors - although there is apparently no record of what their comments on the Carrington '33 Red might have been. There is no direct link between then and the present day wine industry, but Parry showed what could be done.

Today, Carrington has very little to show of its historic past, except for the chapel constructed on the instructions of a later Commissioner, Phillip Parker King.⁵ Parry and his successors gradually moved the company's headquarters to Stroud, but the Commissioners' house - 'Tahlee' - survived until destroyed by fire in 1855, but it was afterwards rebuilt. To stand outside it and contemplate Port Stephens as the Commissioners must have seen it is to absorb some of the historical significance of the place. In the grounds of Tahlee are several cannon, whose provenance is not totally clear. One, bearing the Royal Cipher of George III, is thought to have come from HMS *Sirius* of the First Fleet. Others were manufactured in Canton Massachusetts by Paul Revere of 'Midnight Ride' fame. Just how American Revolutionary War cannon found their way to Port Stephens would make an interesting historical whodunit, but these artifacts are further examples of the region's naval heritage.

The host of problems with which he had had to contend and the unaccustomed climactic conditions of Port Stephens, affected Parry's health and outlook and he was not displeased when his four-year term as Commissioner expired. But the Company, Port



Tahlee House Cannon

Stephens and Australia, have much to be grateful for in his enlightened and visionary leadership of the struggling settlement.

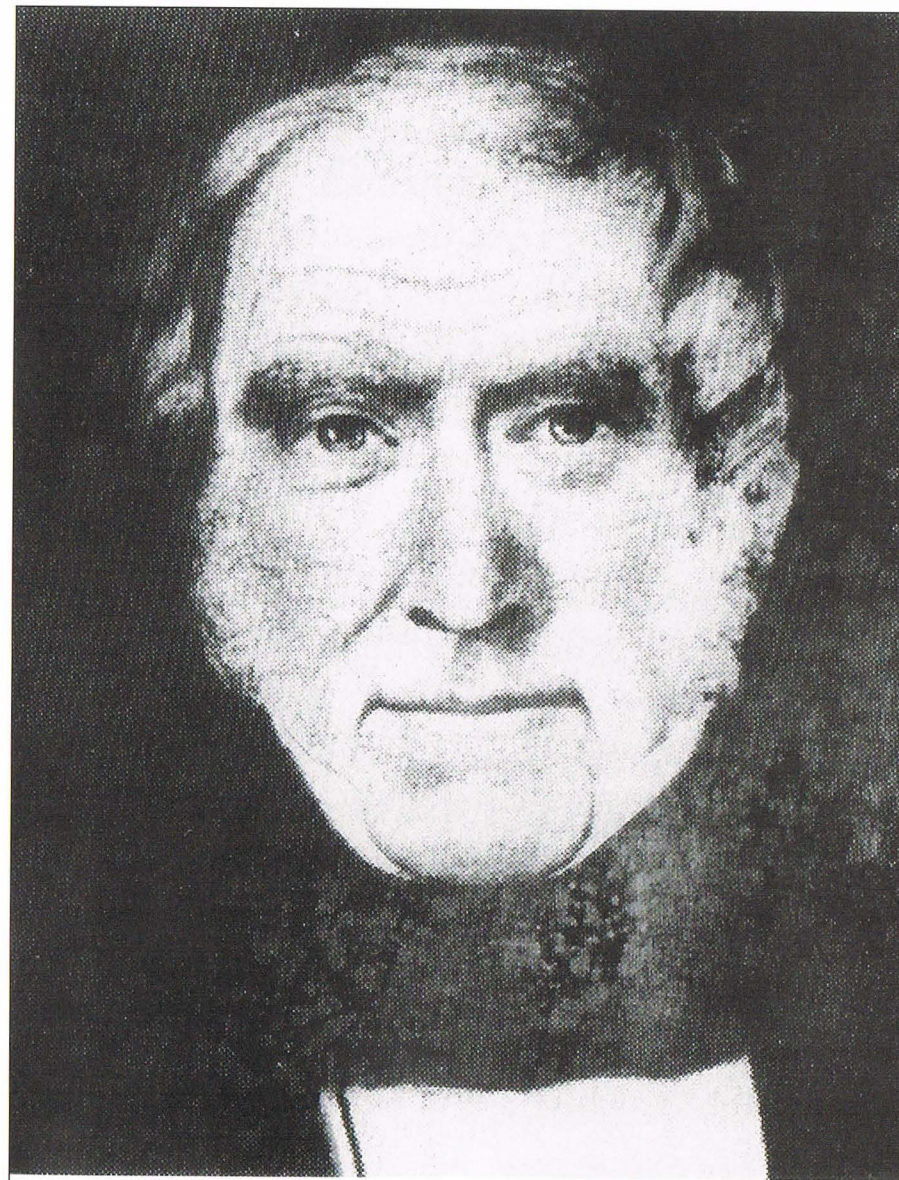
On the southern shores of the Port, another part of our naval heritage was arising. Lieutenant William Caswell Royal Navy took up a land grant of fifty acres in March 1831 on a property he called Tanilba.⁶ He was later granted an additional 560 acres in an area he called 'Saltash', probably after the village of that name near the great British naval port of Plymouth - another piece of our naval heritage. In material published about Tanilba House is the folk story that Caswell had served in HMS *Victory* at the battle of Trafalgar in October 1805 as a Midshipman, but this is not true. Research by his great-granddaughter showed that it was not until 1805 that he was press-ganged into the Royal Navy's East Indies Squadron as an Able Seaman.

However, Caswell did have a very active naval career, seeing service against Malay pirates, the continental powers in the Mediterranean and, finally, against the Americans during the War of 1812. His conduct earned him a commission.⁷ After the Napoleonic Wars had ended in 1815, he found himself, like so many other naval officers, discharged on 'half-pay'. Disturbed by the phenomenon of groups of disgruntled naval officers hanging around its doors looking for employment and mindful of the need for settlers in the new colonies, the Admiralty persuaded the British Government to institute that land grant scheme. One might term this the first 'sailor-settler' scheme.

After arriving in Australia, Caswell discovered an unsuspected skill at farming and, by 1837, he and his convicts had constructed Tanilba House, which, although rebuilt in the 1930s, stands to this day. Caswell lived at Tanilba for fourteen years, during which time he sired nine children, of whom six survived, established a dairy industry and planted olive groves. An olive tree in the grounds of Tanilba House is said to be the oldest in Australia. Caswell also planted grape vines, which were said to cover ten acres when he left Tanilba House in 1844, and which were quite bountiful.⁸ One is tempted to explore the connection between naval men and their enthusiasm for grapevines but, in this case, the Port Stephens vineyards have a direct line of succession, as do the olive groves at Bob's Farm, and the region's dairying industry.

Now, wandering right off the subject, it is interesting to note that there is a little piece of Port Stephens enshrined in New Zealand's geography. In the fiordland on the west coast of the South Island one can find Caswell Sound and Mount Tanilba, named by the British navigator Captain John Stokes in 1851. Stokes had been a guest of the Caswells when *Beagle*, now under his command, paid her second visit to the Port in 1841.

Before Caswell left Tanilba, another naval man was in charge at Carrington. Phillip Parker King was the son of Phillip Gidley King and a convict woman and he was born on Norfolk Island. He was thus not only Australian, but also our first naval officer,



Commander Wm. Caswell, R.N., 1857

and in 1855 he became our first to reach the rank of Rear Admiral. King's ancestry left him with an abiding interest in Australia and, as a navigator and explorer, he was to circumnavigate the continent, filling in most of the gaps left by Flinders' interrupted progress. He was a daring officer and a lucky one, or else we would not remember him today as, during his circumnavigation and exploration, he escaped death time after time in hair-raising navigational circumstances and in encounters with the aborigines.⁹

King was one of the original shareholders in the AAC on its founding in 1824, and he became Commissioner at Tahlee in April 1839, a post he was to hold for the next ten years. It is King we have to thank for the first professional charting of the whole of Port Stephens in 1845 and the establishment of the region's first observatory at Tahlee. King was also responsible for exploring the Myall River and lakes and for the encouragement of the timber trade, which provided an important economic boost for the region. His careful hand on the tiller saw the Company weather several crises during his term as Commissioner. These included the cessation of transportation of convict labour, the gradual realignment of the company towards its agricultural and coal mining ventures away from Port Stephens, the ramifications of the severe drought of 1838 and the negotiation of legal titles to the Company's land to replace the original grants.¹⁰ The Company he left in September 1849 was in a far better shape than it had been twenty years earlier and he was its final Commissioner. He was also the last to use Tahlee as his home.

There was one further naval figure at the helm of the AAC. Captain Marcus Freeman Brownrigg, Royal Navy, became Superintendent in November 1853. Brownrigg was not a particularly effective Superintendent and his reason for appearing in this presentation at all is that it was under his guidance that the sheep properties on the Port Stephens grant were finally eliminated. So, in a way, that is one more piece of our naval heritage - no sheep stations around the Port!¹¹

Australian Federation and the Birth of a Navy

As the nineteenth century drew to a close there was a groundswell of opinion favouring some form of permanent association between the six Australian colonies, and New Zealand too. In time this became a proposal for Federation. One of the driving forces behind the concept of a federated Australian nation was the issue of defence. For a variety of reasons, people living in Australia were becoming more fearful about their security - the 'Yellow Peril' and all that. Being an island - something even modern-day Australians are prone to forget - the principal need was a force to defend the sea approaches, and this meant a navy. In fact, at the time it meant the Royal Navy, not withstanding the efforts various colonies had expended in developing their own local maritime defence capabilities.



Rear Admiral Phillip Parker - King

On 1 March 1911, the Commonwealth Naval Forces came into existence and inherited an odd assortment of old ships from the former colonial administrations. This did not constitute the kind of navy Australia needed and negotiations were entered into with the British. Stated very simply, the British wanted the newly-federated Australia to rent a navy from them. On the face of things this wasn't a bad offer, with the Commonwealth having very little money to pay for defence. But the stumbling block was the British inability to offer a guarantee that the hired fleet would always be available to meet the requirements of the Australian Government. This lack of certainty did not appeal to the new sense of Australian nationhood, and the new nation pressed for its own naval forces under Australian control. And the Admiralty finally gave in. Orders were placed in 1908 for the first ships of the new navy - three destroyers - and orders for larger fighting ships followed. King George V assented to the title 'Royal Australian Navy' on 10 July 1911 and the new Fleet finally assembled in Sydney on 4th October 1913.¹²

Australia, with a population of around four million people scattered across a continent the size of the USA, now had a navy comprising a battle cruiser, four light cruisers, three destroyers, a swag of torpedo boats and two submarines, with one cruiser and three destroyers building.¹³ This had all been accomplished within the space of around five years. It was a magnificent achievement and one of which all Australians could be proud. As it turned out, the new Australian Fleet arrived in time to place a powerful strategic block in the path of the German East Asiatic Squadron when World War I broke out ten months later. Indeed, it was the Royal Australian Navy that first-saw action - and suffered casualties - in that war, as the Germans were swept from their Pacific colonial possessions.

The new navy had also embarked on a strategic overview from which to take decisions on the disposition of the Fleet and the location and construction of the appropriate bases and support facilities. The officer selected for this task was a retired British officer Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson, whose recommendations regarding bases and facilities were quite shrewd and were to be largely accepted by the Australian Government. There are some claims that Henderson's proposed location of naval bases had a strong element of political expediency - there just happened to be two in each state - but in the light of modern developments, his ideas were sound. It was Henderson who recommended the development of Cockburn Sound in Western Australia, now the RAN's Fleet Base West, and he also recommended that the majority of Australia's twelve submarines, whose purchase he recommended, be based there. Today, the RAN submarine base is now indeed in Cockburn Sound.

The Naval Base Plan

Of Port Stephens, Henderson said:

Port Stephens is a very good harbour. My proposals only suggest using it as a submarine

*base for the present, but it should be surveyed and examined thoroughly, and land reserved, with a view to possible requirements of future naval expansion.*¹⁴

The expansion plan was another of Henderson's recommendations but this was a bit rich; he wanted a Fleet of eight battlecruisers, ten light cruisers, eighteen destroyers and twelve submarines by 1933. Despite this, the Henderson Report of 1910 marks the start of the modern naval heritage of Port Stephens.

In recent times, the local historian John Armstong has suggested that the Port could never have become a naval base because of the shallowness of its waters. I'd have to take issue with that because, in many respects, Port Stephens has ideal qualities for a naval base and modern engineering practice has turned many a waterway with less attractive natural features into a successful naval harbour. As well, naval strategists of impeccable credentials later saw the topography of the Port as being no barrier to the development of a Fleet base. More importantly, at that time Australian strategists and naval planners were prepared to respect Henderson's opinions.

In June 1912, writing his recommendation to the Council of Defence on the strategic value of Port Stephens as a 'flanking port' [the other was Jervis Bay] for the great naval and commercial port of Sydney, the First Naval Member of the Australian Naval Board, Rear Admiral Creswell said;

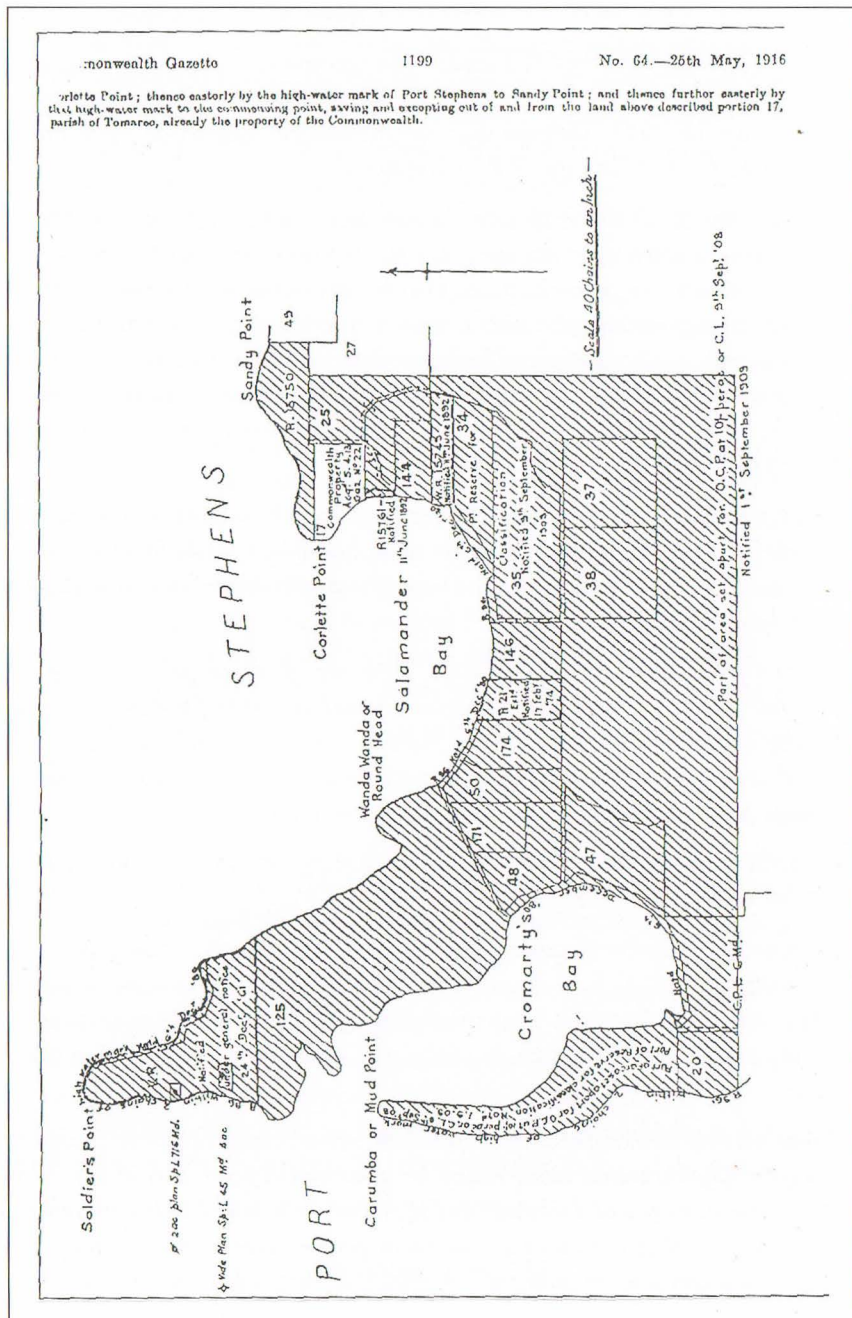
*Quite apart from their naval importance, these two, flanking ports must be strongly held - Jervis Bay as the port of the Federal Capital and Port Stephens as the door to the coaling centres and the valley of the Hunter, a district so rich in supplies as to be capable of sustaining an enemy's force of considerable numbers and consequently a part of Australia to be specially guarded.*¹⁵

This last sentiment was to become an important strategic mindset in future Australian defence decisions.

These sentiments about Port Stephens as a naval base gained considerable popular support as well. In 1913, C.E.W. Bean, later to become famous as war correspondent with the Australian Army, wrote a book titled *Flagships Three*, which was a philosophical discussion about the new navy that Australia was creating. It contains the following passage:

*One could not help thinking of a time when Australia would no longer be an infant, and when a great flagship would swing round her moorings at Jervis Bay or Port Stephens, and swim downstream past dockyards and slips and sheds, past low red ordnance stores, with a whole crowd of grey funnels and masts peeping over them, her music trailing behind her in waves like the smoke of her funnels or the wash from her bows.*¹⁶

The Commonwealth accepted the Defence recommendations on Port Stephens in principle but little was done about them before the outbreak of the First World War. In

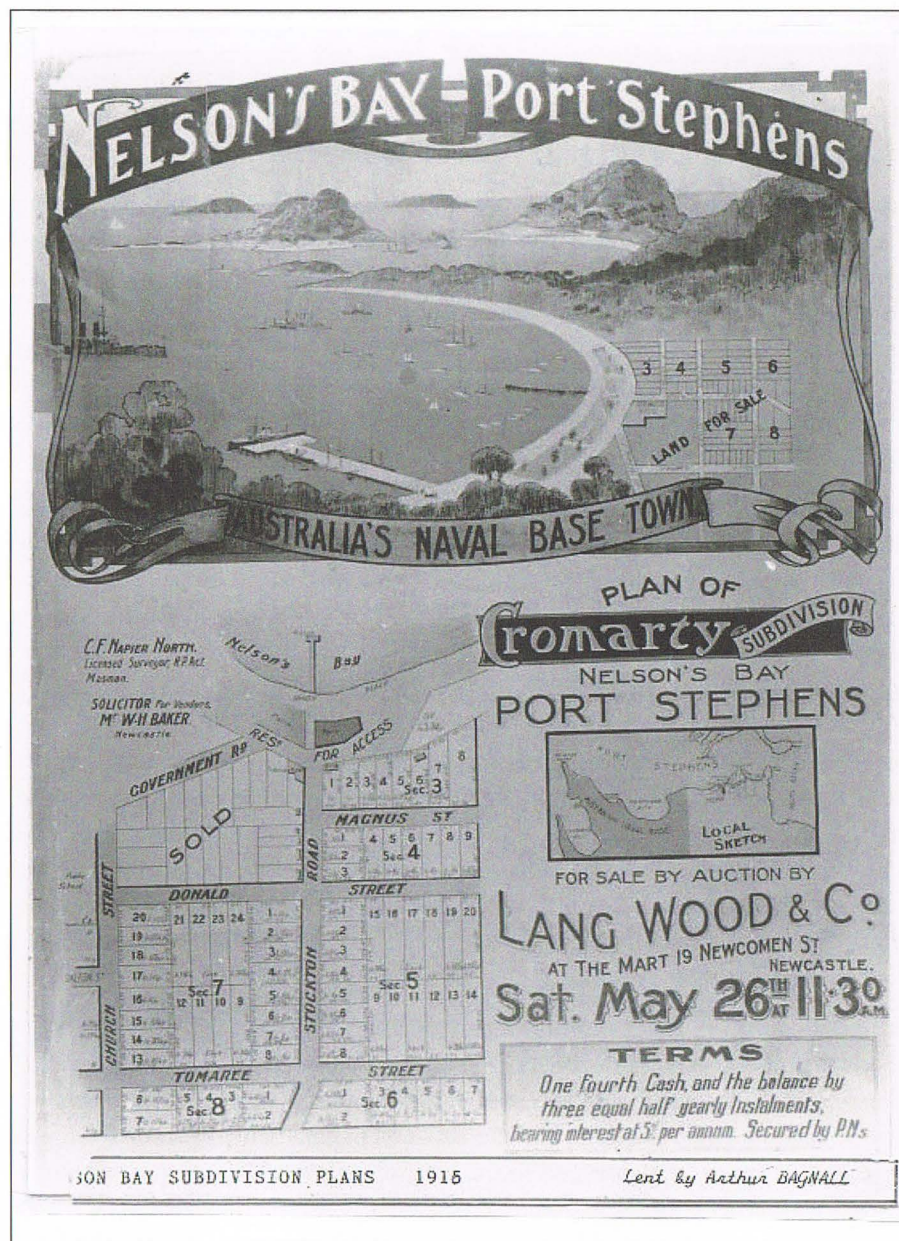


fact, at the same time the NSW Government's Decentralisation Commission also had designs on Salamander Bay as a deep-water port - particularly for loading coal.¹⁷ This might have caused some reticence on the part of the Federal Government to implement its plans, because Federation was still a new thing, after all, and the Commonwealth was not yet ready to test its powers in the face of State opposition. However in 1913 land was resumed by the Commonwealth and in 1916 the area was gazetted for the purpose of constructing a submarine base in Salamander Bay.

There were to be a number of facilities - offices, barracks, workshops, oil tanks, magazines and a floating dock. Employing 250 unemployed miners from Newcastle, work on clearing the site was started, an access road and drainage ditches constructed and a start made on a jetty at which the submarines would berth, but a halt was called in 1921-22. Today there is nothing to be seen of this work which took place approximately on the south side of Wanda Head, where Cook Street now runs, although Kevin Russell, a local historian, believes that the stone breakwater around Wanda Head was constructed using spoil from the works.¹⁸

However, it isn't the physical remains that are important to my theme, the ramifications of this activity lie in other directions. One consideration is that nobody else was able to develop the prime real estate the base site represented until 1955. A second is that the gazettal of the naval base attracted the attention of Henry Halloran, a property developer. It also interested Walter Burley Griffin, architect of the city of Canberra and other Australian landmarks, who, amongst others, believed that the existence of the base would strengthen the case for his 'Port Stephens City'. This was to become the 'New York of Australia'¹⁹ The subsequent idiosyncratic subdivision of the land around North Arm Cove that ensued is thus, I suggest, another heritage of the gazettal of the naval base lands at Salamander Bay. An alternative scheme was 'Pindimar City', floated in 1920 by a rival consortium. Under the banner 'Port Stephens must boom and Pindimar City leads in the forward move', the promoters used the recommendations of the NSW Decentralisation Commission and the remarks by both Creswell and Jellicoe to promote their proposal.

Another outcome of the Commonwealth decision to construct the base was the development of real estate outside its boundaries. The base staff - officers and sailors, contractors and those servicing the base's requirements - were going to have to live somewhere, and George Halloran had the answer. His Salamander Estate development, advertised as 'Nearest available land to the Naval Base!' at Nelson Bay was designed to meet the requirements of these potential residents. Today, all that is left of his grand plan is the distinctive layout of Pirralea, Iriwari, and Wahgunyah Avenues and part of Galoola Drive in Nelson Bay, but these are surely all part of the naval heritage of Port Stephens, a fact probably unknown to their residents.

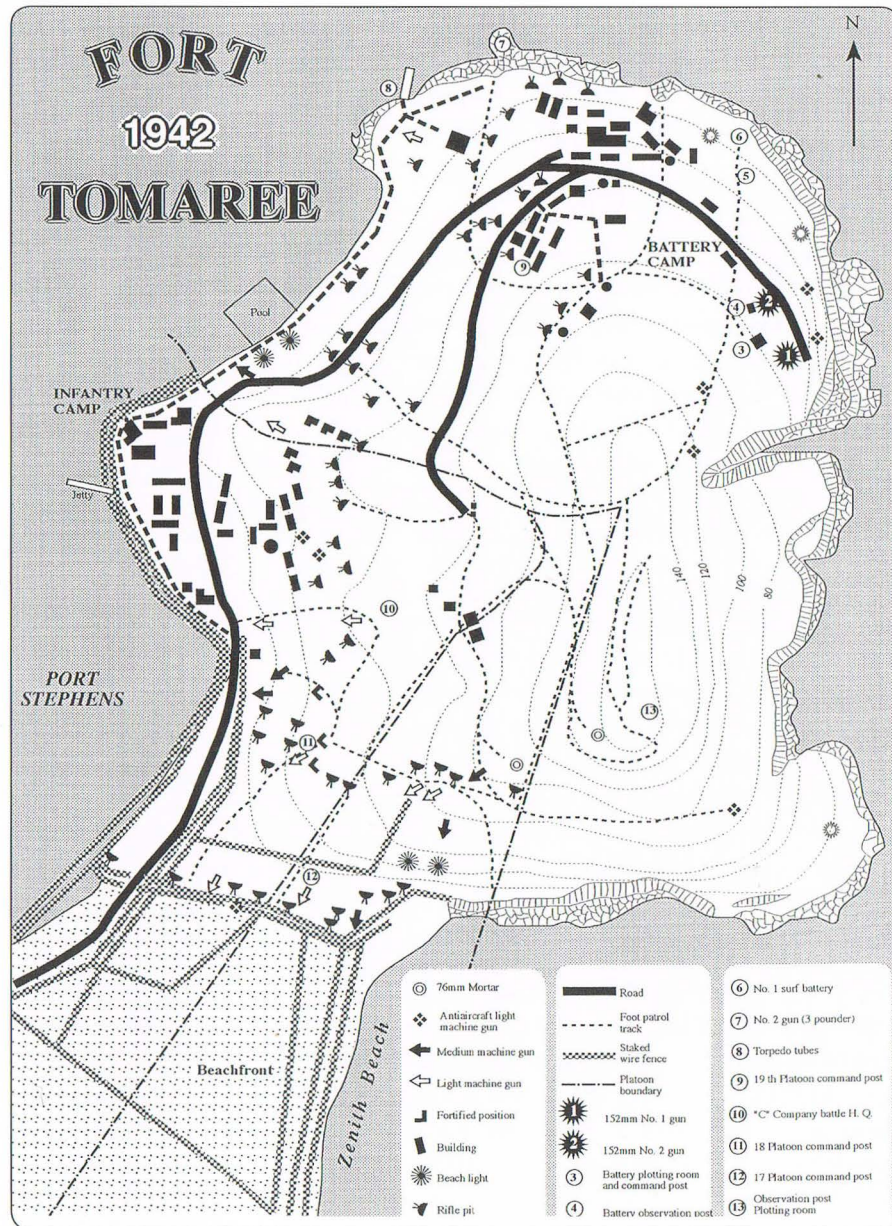


By the end of the First World War the RAN had grown, with the addition of two more cruisers, nine destroyers and six submarines, set against war losses of only two submarines.²⁰ In 1919, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Jellicoe, the victor of the Battle of Jutland, was invited to study and report on Australia's post-war naval needs. Jellicoe had a dislike of the Japanese, which appealed well enough to contemporary Australian attitudes, and his advice was the more respected for that. He endorsed Henderson's recommendations but also thought that the entire Fleet Base in Sydney should be moved to Port Stephens.

This would require a massive increase in the facilities needed in the Port, such as a drydock, oil fuel tankage, coal storage, an ammunition depot, as well as dredging to deepen the entrance, defensive measures at the heads and works to maintain the depth of channel to Salamander Bay. Desirable though these measures might have been - not least to the inhabitants of Potts Point in Sydney - they were never acted upon. A recent discussion on the subsequent growth of Sydney as a strategic port suggests that the British Government's 1924 decision to proceed with the construction of the Singapore Naval Base put on hold any thought of the development of other bases in the Asia-Pacific theatre.²¹ If true, Singapore's role in defending Port Stephens against defence industrialization should now be recognised!

Unfortunately for George Halloran and others, the end of the First World War brought massive and sweeping cuts in defence expenditure. Work on the base, which had only been proceeding fitfully, was abandoned and in 1923 the Commonwealth lands in Salamander Bay were placed in the hands of the Department of Home and Territories 'for disposal by lease until such time as they are required for naval purposes. The rights of this Department to terminate such lease or leases should be safeguarded'. In other words, the project was on hold, but had not been scrapped. Note that the Navy didn't say that it wouldn't build the base; it just didn't say when the work would be resumed. This non-decision had important ramifications for Port Stephens. The suspension of the work on the naval base and the failure of plans to link the region to the main north-south railway, also doomed both of the new cities proposed for our Port.²²

Had the Navy been prepared to at least make a modest start on its plans that might have encouraged the NSW Government to look to its own decentralisation ambitions. The establishment of modest shipping facilities, which the Navy would have needed to bring in the materials needed for its own purposes, would have revived the idea of Port Stephens as an alternative to Newcastle. Certainly, any stabilisation of the sandbars and dredging of a channel would have made the proposition much more attractive - especially as the Commonwealth taxpayer would have been footing the bill. There's nothing new in political cost-shifting, is there. It would have been no great problem to connect the Port with the main rail routes from the hinterland, and we could well have seen grain and coal storage and handling facilities constructed on the waterfront.



Could I thus suggest that the Blue Water Wonderland that we enjoy today is a very direct result of that 1923 determination?

As an aside, Port Stephens acquired a long-term piece of naval heritage out of the post-war defence cutbacks. The light cruiser *Psyche*, which had been transferred to the RAN in 1915 and had seen more active service than most of our ships, was disposed of in 1922 by sale to the Waterside Ship Chandlery and Shipping Company after all recoverable material had been stripped out of her. The hulk of the cruiser was towed to Salamander Bay, where it was used as a lighter on which timber brought down river by drougers and barges could be stored before trans shipment to a larger vessel for passage to Sydney. Unfortunately, a combination of sloppy loading and severe weather conditions led to the hulk capsizing and sinking at her moorings in 1923. Between 1950 and 1973 the wreck was dispersed with explosives but the bulk of it remains on the floor of Salamander Bay.²³

The Second World War

The defence of Port Stephens itself had not, however, been forgotten. As strategic planning by the Army and Navy developed throughout the 1920's it was clear that in any second war, Japan would be a potential enemy, rather than an ally as she had been in the First. The major threat to Australia was believed to be from commerce raiding by cruisers and attacks on coastal facilities from naval gunfire. Submarines could also pose a threat, lurking outside ports to sink their fully-laden prey, or laying minefields to achieve the same purpose. There was intense competition for every Defence shilling and the Navy, with its major ship acquisitions, absorbed the lion's share of the defence vote.

Coastal defence, including minefields were, however, the province of the Army and a number of studies were done of how the major ports on the Australian coast could be defended against raiders. The answer was guns, lots of them. Amongst the priority areas for fixed artillery defences was the Port Stephens-Newcastle area, and it was the Navy that urged the establishment and arming of Fort Tomaree, work on which commenced in 1939. The naval contribution was the addition of torpedo tubes to enfilade the entrance to the Port. Defensive minefields to catch the unwary raider or submarine, and indicator loops to detect the presence of an enemy submarine near the entrance were discussed but never installed.

Fort Tomaree would probably have been built in any case, but the Navy's advocacy for it to be high on the list of priorities was important to its early development. Here again, we see the influence of Admiral Creswell's expressions on the need to defend the Hunter, now with its strategically important steel mills and shipbuilding industry. So, in June 1942, when two officers from the proposed 'Australian Combined Operations Directorate' conducted a survey of possible sites for an amphibious training base, they

had little difficulty in selecting Port Stephens. The port had a number of essential features, such as:

- It was a defended port
- The entrance was sufficiently difficult to defeat attack by submarine torpedoes
- There was a wide variety of beaches, on the ocean side and inside the Port, to practise landings on shores representative of the New Guinea coast
- The hinterland comprised a selection of representative terrains from thick scrub, through marsh to mudflats
- There was ample deep water for the ships that would be involved in the training
- Areas for base facilities and camps were readily available
- There was a plentiful water supply.²⁴

On 5 June 1942 General MacArthur assumed command of all Combined Operations and he ensured that action was taken quickly on this selection. Work was begun to develop what was termed a 'Joint Overseas Operational Training School' or JOOTS at Port Stephens. By 3 September, HMAS *Westralia*, a liner converted first to an armed merchant cruiser and then to a landing ship, supported by HMAS *Ping Wo*, a former Yangtze river ferry, had taken up residence in Salamander Bay while the new base of HMAS *Assault* was built, not on the naval base lands at Salamander but at Fly Point in Nelson Bay.

This paper will not dwell on every detail of the short life of HMAS *Assault*; there are other publications that cover this fully. But the impact of this descent by the Navy, and later more numerous Army personnel, upon the sleepy hamlet of Nelson Bay, population 470, can be imagined. By December 1942 the base was completed and the flood of amphibious hardware into the area began to build. Along with the hardware came the soldiers and sailors to be trained and soon the US Navy followed.

For a number of reasons Admiral Barbey, the new commander of General MacArthur's amphibious forces from February 1943, wanted his own base. He was somewhat scathing about the facilities the RAN had managed to cobble together at *Assault*, and he established his headquarters in Country Club Hotel at Shoal Bay, now part of the Shoal Bay Resort and Spa. There is a memorial in Bernie Fraser Park adjacent to the Harbourside Haven property commemorating the men who were trained at this facility. The impact of the Americans must have been unbelievable. The peacetime population had been housed in ten residences; at Fingal Bay there were only two families.

Barbey didn't like what the Australian navy was doing, but he admired our soldiers who were emerging from the amphibious training offered by *Assault*.

The first group of enlisted trainees was from the 7th Australian Division and they were typical of those who followed. They were a colourful, rough, tough and ready lot. Their choice of words was sub-standard. They didn't expect much in the line of

equipment and they could get along without many of the creature comforts that US troops seemed to consider necessary.²⁵

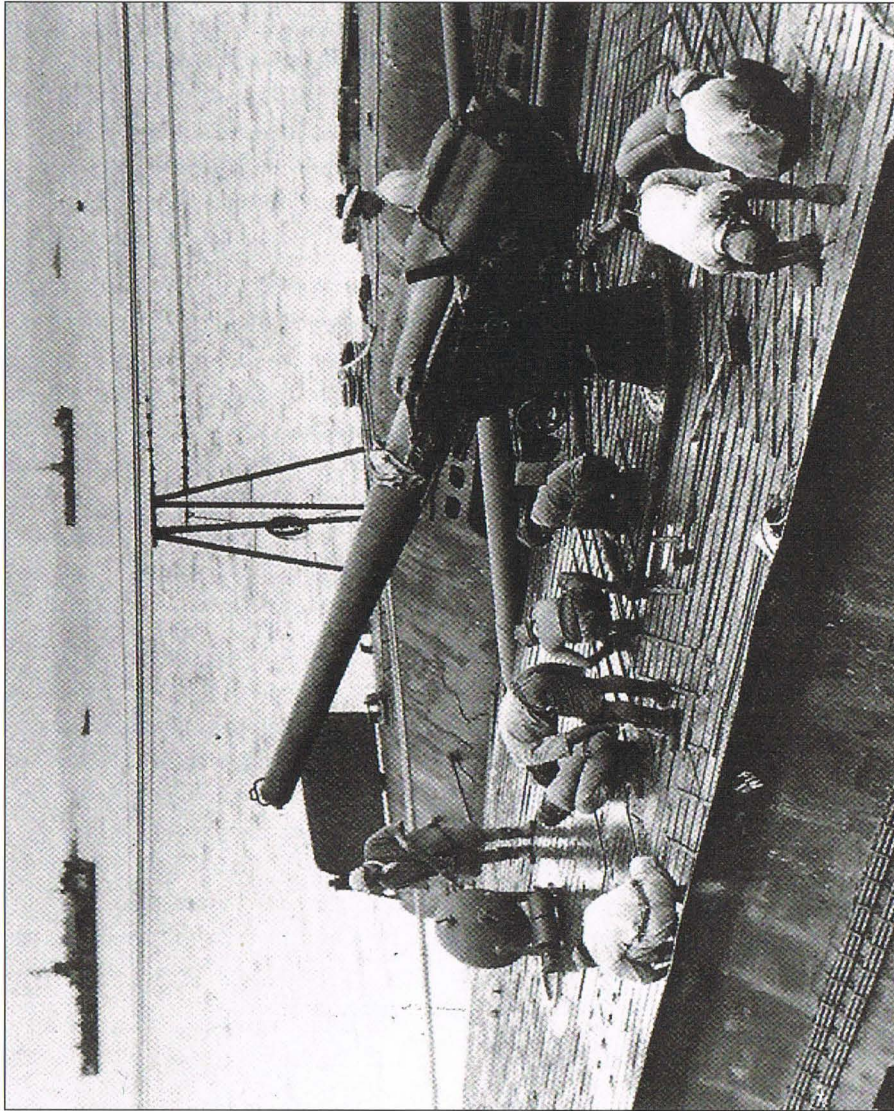
Accommodation was the first priority and, in short order, Camp Gan Gan was established to house the huge numbers of GIs who were sent to Port Stephens. Here they underwent about three weeks' training in preparation for the ambitious program of amphibious assaults that MacArthur's general headquarters had planned for 1943. Beaches from Sandy Point to Fingal were pressed into service as landing sites for the many amphibious craft that continuously seemed to be disembarking troops. Then, almost as suddenly as they had come, in October 1943 the Americans left. Port Stephens was too far from the staging camps and training areas being established in Queensland to be suitable for amphibious training.

During its brief heyday the naval establishments in the Port had trained over 22,000 personnel, most of them American, and the Shoal Bay-Nelson Bay area had become the base for nearly 120 landing vessels and four commissioned ships of the RAN.²⁶ This military tornado had touched down and had radically changed the Port Stephens area forever. Moreover, it had brought a degree of temporary prosperity to the area. What was left behind was manna from heaven. For the first time the residents of the Tomaree Peninsula had a well-engineered sealed road to Newcastle, town water, a reliable electricity supply, modern jetties and slipways, workshops, and a host of potentially useful buildings. Fort Tomaree remained and so did the RAN at *Assault*, where landing craft crews and RAN Beach Commandos continued to be trained, along with Z Special Force personnel, although the training numbers and the size of the base staff were much diminished.²⁷

The heritage of this is with us to this day. One does not have to look very hard around the Tomaree Peninsula to spot relics of this brief military 'occupation', some of them quite obvious, others not. The RAN hospital is now the Arts and Crafts Centre, Halifax Park was once a small arms range, and Little Beach, apart from the memorial located there, also houses a number of relics, including a slipway. Gan Gan Camp remains, for the moment, and is still zoned public reserve. In the rural parts of the area one will often spot the distinctive semicircular shape of a Quonset hut and there are plenty of Nissen Huts scattered around. The Fort Tomaree barracks is now a mental health facility, and has been for over forty years. The fortifications on Nelson Head are now part of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol base.

Post War Developments

In May 1944 the Australian Naval Board decided that *Assault* should be put on a care and maintenance basis and the base ceased to train naval personnel. But there was a brief reprieve in April 1945 when the Royal Marines attached to the British Far East Fleet took over the site as a training and rest and recreation area. This ended with the



Japanese Submarine Gun

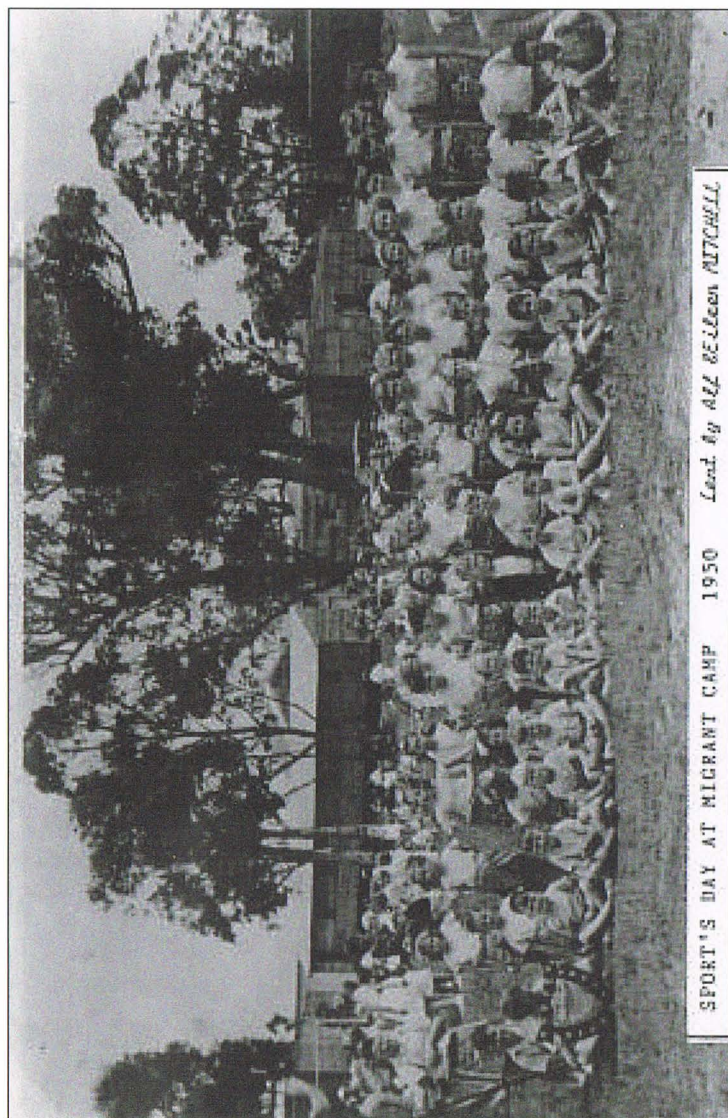
handing back of the base to the RAN in 1947. Once again *Assault* was looking less like a naval base and more like a white elephant. But it did exist and the Navy was not giving it up for development yet, declining Department of the Interior suggestions in late 1945 that it could become a holiday camp.²⁸

However, in 1949, as large scale immigration from Europe built up there was a need to find accommodation for the New Australians, as they were politely called. A potential supply of this could be found in the many military bases scattered around the country, although some were more desirable than others. Port Stephens was deemed close enough to Newcastle to be useful in that regard and, in 1949, the Navy agreed to pass control of *Assault* and the remnants of the US base at Shoal Bay to the Department of Immigration and Labour.

Plans were drawn up and work commenced to convert the *Assault* accommodation blocks into housing for 600 male and 200 female immigrants. By August of that year, the camp had 614 residents and by December that had risen to 655 residents and 81 staff. This was the return of the good years for Nelson Bay, and it lasted until 1956. Contrary to what one might have expected, the new arrivals were treated well by the locals and many formed lasting friendships, some even returning to settle in the area. So, once again, an enduring heritage of the wartime naval activity in Port Stephens developed into a real peacetime fillip for the area.

Of course, all this activity was occurring around Nelson Bay. What about the original 1913 naval base site? Work was never resumed on the submarine base, especially as after 1922 the RAN had only two submarines briefly in its inventory between 1927 and 1929.²⁹ Admiral Creswell's 'flanking port' concept was never put to the test, as cruises by German raiders and later Japanese and German submarines did not even come close to bottling up the shipping using Sydney Harbour. A German raider laid mines between Newcastle and Sydney in 1940, but the sole attack on Newcastle was made on 8 June 1942 by a Japanese submarine, which loosed off thirty-four rounds of unspotted fire in the general direction of the port, most of which failed to explode. Nevertheless, the strategic value of the land remained pending the development of Australia's defence plans post-war. The only concession to civil use was made in 1950 when approval was given for the logging of one part of the reserved land, broadly the area covered by western Corlette today.

But in 1955, the decision was taken to relinquish the land reserved for the base. Very shortly afterwards, Port Stephens Council advertised it as the site for a steelworks and a coal loading facility. This rush of blind ambition, not to mention sheer cupidity, on the part of the locals was stifled by the disinterest of the major potential bidders - fortunately for we modern-day residents and visitors alike. The post-war boom was coming to an end, and too much capital had been sunk into facilities in Newcastle for



SPORT'S DAY AT MIGRANT CAMP 1950 Led by ALG BELLER AU70411

a move to be contemplated. Thus was the area saved for residential development visible today.

The Naval Heritage

That there are now no naval facilities at all in Port Stephens can lead to the assumption that the area enjoys no particular naval heritage. I hope that this paper has shown otherwise. To sum up with a bold statement: But for the RAN Port Stephens would not be what it is today, not so much for what the Navy did but for what it didn't do to our beautiful port. So, while there are no grey ships plying the peaceful waters of the Port on a regular basis, there are lots of pointers to our naval heritage. Apart from the structures and areas I've pointed out, there are the memorials and the relics - such as the staghorn bollards from the first HMAS *Sydney* perched atop the ceremonial archway at Tanilba Bay. As well, consider some of the names of our localities and streets.

In Nelson Bay/Little Beach residents and visitors perhaps sometimes wonder why one road is named after the capital of Uruguay. This commemorates the Royal Navy's victory over the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* in December 1939, when she was forced to take refuge in Montevideo by three much smaller British cruisers. The British commander was Commodore Harwood and one of his light cruisers was *Ajax*, the other was *Achilles*, a very appropriate street for the RSL Club to be located on because of the Anzac connection. *Achilles* was manned largely by personnel of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy.

Krait was the fishing boat that took the Operation JAYWICK raiders to Singapore in September 1943, where they sank or disabled seven ships under the noses of the Japanese. The raid was conducted under the authority of the RAN. *Voyager* was an RAN destroyer of the famous 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' in the Mediterranean during World War 2. She ended her days in East Timor in 1942. 'Creswell' and 'Jellicoe' recall famous naval commanders, one Australian and the other British.

In Tanilba Bay, street names commemorate the naval connection with 'Navy' and 'Admiralty' and, perhaps more obscurely, with 'Wemyss', the admiral who led the British military delegation to the armistice talks with the Germans in 1918. And, unusually, the founder of the settlement himself is commemorated with 'Caswell Crescent'. Admirals King and Henderson are commemorated in street names in Raymond Terrace.

Soldiers Point is awash with naval heritage in its street names. There is 'Admiral', 'Cook' and 'Endeavour', although the latter two never entered the Port, and at the southern end is the housing estate commemorating the RAN ships of the Amphibious Force South West Pacific - *Kanimbla*, *Manoora* and *Westralia*, together with their Australian-built escorts, the destroyers *Arunta* and *Warramunga*. Less clear-cut but, for our purposes, perfectly evocative are the names of the warships *Adelaide* in Raymond

Terrace, *Hobart* in Hawk's Nest and *Armidale* in Nelson Bay, the latter lost with tragic consequences off Timor in December 1942. Her name is commemorated in the lead ship of a new class of patrol vessels for the RAN.

So much for the names we have commemorated; what about those we have not. Port Stephens has no street or locality named after Admirals Parry or Barbey, or for HMS *Reliance*, HMAS *Ping Wo* or any of the craft that serviced the great Amphibious Training Centre? Old *Psyche* on the bottom off Corlette surely deserves something more. What of *Assault* itself, or of the RAN personnel trained there who were the victims of war, or who were awarded decorations for gallantry? It seems to me that correcting these omissions would round out our recognition of the enduring naval heritage of Port Stephens.

Ian Pfennigwerth

¹ Horden, *Mariners are Warned*, pp 141-143.

² National Library of Australia, *Endeavour*.

³ See Fleming, *Barrow's Boys*.

⁴ Benson, *A Wide Spectrum*, p21.

⁵ Chadban, *Stroud*, p4.

⁶ Benson, *A Wide Spectrum*, P22.

⁷ Ibid, pp14-15.

⁸ Ibid, p56. Caswell moved from Tanilba to his other grant at Balickera, in 1844.

⁹ See Horden, *King of the Australian Coast*.

¹⁰ Engel, Winn & Wark, *Tea Gardens*, p32.

¹¹ Ibid, pp33-4.

¹² Stevens, *Royal Australian Navy*, pp. 11-27.

¹³ RAN Sea Power Centre, 'Semaphore', 5 July 2003.

¹⁴ AWM124, Item.3/59 - Henderson Report Action Taken.

¹⁵ NAA B197, Item 1851/2/17 - Port Stephens, Jervis Bay Remarks by 1st Naval Member.

¹⁶ Bean, *Flagships Three*, p. 28.

¹⁷ Russell, p2. The Commission's recommendations got short shrift from vested interests in Newcastle and Sydney.

¹⁸ Russell, *Narrative*.

¹⁹ Engel etc, pp56-7.

²⁰ Sea Power Centre, 'Semaphore'.

²¹ Coyle, 'Sydney 1945 - Strategic Port', p.4.

²² Ibid, pp. 64-5.

²³ Russell, *Narrative*.

²⁴ Barbey, *MacArthur's Amphibious Navy*, p. 35.

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²⁶ RAN Sea Power Centre, undated notes 'HMAS *Assault*'.

²⁷ See A.E. Jones, *Sailor and Commando*.

²⁸ NAA B6121/3, Item 289B - Combined Operations: HMAS *Assault* Policy and Administration.

²⁹ *Royal Australian Navy*, Appendix 1.

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