

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF HMAS NIRIMBA - QUAKERS HILL NEW SOUTH WALES



The requirement for a naval trade training establishment evolved from naval training activities in Victoria, which began in 1855, when Her Majesty's steam sloop VICTORIA was launched for service in the young colony of Victoria. That ship formed the nucleus of the Victorian State Navy which was officially titled the Victorian Naval Forces. The Victorian Naval Forces based in Port Phillip Bay eventually grew to comprise the three decker battleship NELSON, gunboat PROTECTOR, four torpedo boats, COUNTESS OF HOPETOUN, CHILDERS, LONSDALE and NEPEAN, the ironclad monitor CERBERUS, gunboats VICTORIA and ALBERT and four smaller craft in addition, prior to the formation of the Commonwealth Naval Forces following Federation in 1901 and the Royal Australian Navy in 1911. Victoria possessed several shore facilities including the Williamstown Naval Depot where trade training was carried out in the Armourer, Torpedo (Electrical), Engineering and Ship's Carpenter branches. These recruits joined as apprentices in the Victorian Naval Forces.

In 1910, the Federal Government requested Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson KCB, to state the best position for a central naval base and positions for secondary bases for the service of a fleet Admiral. Henderson's lengthy report, dated 1st March 1911, caused the Government to establish Flinders Naval Depot at Westernport Victoria, whose role was to include trade training. Flinders Naval Depot commissioned as HMAS CERBERUS on 1st April 1921 when the Williamstown Naval Depot closed down - the various trade training schools having transferred to Flinders Naval Depot.

Around that time tradesmen in the Royal Australian Navy were being recruited from shore either during their apprenticeships or following award of their Certificates of Competence as qualified tradesmen. On initial entry to the Navy, whether qualified or not, Artificers and Artisans, as they were titled, were required to undergo naval trade training in the various schools in HMAS CERBERUS. Electrical tradesmen attended the Torpedo School, Engine Room Artificers recruited from Fitters, Enginemechns, Moulders, Boilermakers and Coppersmiths attended the Engineering School whilst Shipwrights, Joiners, Plumbers, Blacksmiths and Painters were naval trained in the Barrackmasters' Workshops.

After World War II there was a shortage of qualified tradesmen in the Royal Australian Navy when the supply of tradesmen recruited from shore, dried up. The Royal Navy had been training apprentices in technical fields for many years before that time and the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board decided in 1955 to commence training naval trade apprentices. The original aim was to produce tradesmen both identical and interchangeable with their Royal Navy counterparts.



First Intake of Apprentices and Staff - 1956



Captain Frank Leveson George RAN one of the Navy's most senior and experienced Engineering Officers was commissioned to conduct a survey of Royal Navy Apprentice Training Establishments prior to taking up command of HMAS NIRIMBA (RAN Apprentice Training Establishment) as its first Commanding Officer.

HMAS NIRIMBA was established at the former wartime Air Force and Naval Air Station Schofields. The existence of wartime buildings housing personnel and facilities - ready made, albeit 'temporary', largely influenced the decision to take up the site. HMAS NIRIMBA (RAN Air Station Schofields) paid-off on 4th January 1956 and the name was transferred to HMAS NIRIMBA (RAN Apprentice Training Establishment) which commissioned on 5th January 1956.

The first intake was to occur in July 1956 and the formidable task of preparation was begun. Buildings were rehabilitated as dormitories, messing and canteen spaces; others were converted to boiler, boatbuilding and welding shops; yet others were allotted roles of electrical workshops, drawing offices, hobbies rooms, barber shop etc. Lathes were installed and benches, vices etc, set up to form a fitting shop. A school block of classrooms, laboratories and an instructional cinema were rigged, and a large area between the runways was cleared and drained for use as a sports field.

Initially an entry of fifty apprentices was made every six months, in January and July, which conformed to the then current policy of leave pattern in the RAN. The age limits were between fifteen and seventeen years and entrants required an educational standard of the New South Wales Intermediate Certificate or its equivalent. Due to the variation of educational standards around the Commonwealth, selection was not on the basis of an educational written examination. Candidates took a full range of psychological tests followed by an interview with a committee of senior officers from HMAS NIRIMBA. The selection tour board, still in operation, covers some 7,000 miles and takes from six to seven weeks to complete.

Looking towards training standards at NIRIMBA, during the initial planning stages, meetings were held with the New South Wales Apprenticeship Board and the Employers' Federation. The extent and scope of the projected apprentice training was fully explained and the co-operation and advice of those governing bodies was received in establishing appropriate syllabus detail. Excellent liaison has existed since those early meetings as the changes required for the development of the Navy have had their effect on the syllabuses of HMAS NIRIMBA.

The training of apprentices was spread over eight sessions of twenty three weeks each. Initially the sessions were separated by two leave periods of three weeks each at mid-summer and mid-winter. A period of two weeks in a seagoing ship was arranged during the first and sixth sessions. During the second, third, fourth and fifth sessions two weeks were spent at camps external to HMAS NIRIMBA for leadership training, character guidance and similar activities in order that the long session was sensibly broken into shorter training periods.

In broad terms, the training consisted of naval general knowledge training, craft training, school (academic) training and technical training. Opportunity was taken of the lads' youthful enthusiasm to develop their skills as craftsmen as soon as possible. Their general education was steadily improved to a standard where they could more readily assimilate the technical subjects of the latter part of the four year course. The training was separated into three distinct phases.

The basic phase included the preliminary activities of kitting up, medical and dental checks, lectures on elementary naval lore, instructional films and basic parade ground training. At the conclusion, of this two week basic period, routine training commenced. That period included 23 hours per week in the workshop for elementary craft training - fitting; 12 hours per week school training in the classroom - mathematics, english, engineering science; 12 hours per week of naval training - parade ground ceremonial, physical training and domestic training.





Early Apprentices' Accommodation

The intermediate phase of training continued to emphasise craft instruction but specialised technical instruction relevant to the apprentice's particular branch was introduced together with school training slanted towards the individual branches.

The advanced phase of the apprentice's training placed the emphasis on technical and craft instruction for the specialised branches.

Throughout the full four years, extra curricular activity was compulsory and included hobbies, music, drama etc. Organised recreation of three hours per week was also compulsory, as was work on Saturday to midday and Sunday Divisions and Divine Service on alternate Sundays. The aim was to produce a well rounded student and was based on similar routines at the Royal Australian Naval College.

Examinations both written and practical were held at the end of each session, the principle test occurring at the end of each phase. In school and technical subjects, the examinations were set and marked by external examiners appointed by the Department of Technical Education of New South Wales.

Commendations and prizes were awarded on results. Apprentices could gain a maximum of six months seniority if they achieved over 75% for each aspect of training. The pass mark was set at 50% and failures were treated on their merits being dealt with by extra instruction, Captain's or Naval Board warnings, back-classing to a later entry, or discharge.

In addition to the service and trade examinations, selected apprentices were encouraged to sit for the Matriculation Certificate in order to pursue further studies. Shipwright and Engine Room (Boilermaker Welder) apprentices were required to obtain an 'A' Grade Welding Certificate. During the basic phase, all apprentices were required to pass tests in first aid and swimming.

In order to give equal leadership opportunity to all apprentices during their time at NIRIMBA, a class leader organisation was created which was filled strictly on a roster basis so that all were given the opportunity to develop.

During the basic phase, shore leave was restricted to Saturday and Sunday (1 pm to 10 pm). On alternate weekends, when Divisions and Divine Service were not held, overnight leave on Saturday was given but only to sponsor addressees approved by the parents of apprentices. During the intermediate phase overnight leave was given on Friday evenings and during the advanced phase on Wednesday evenings.

A volunteer apprentice band was created and developed over the years to become an accepted part of the local community, much in demand for official and semi-official functions in the local district.

A divisional system, based on the house system of most schools, was created with four divisions named to commemorate four Royal Naval officers associated with the discovery and development of early Australia - Bass, Bligh, King and Dampier.



Gradually over the years as training techniques changed to keep pace with changing technology, so did the rebuilding of HMAS NIRIMBA progress. After a period when all the original Air Station facilities were utilised, the Government approved the progressive rebuilding of HMAS NIRIMBA in 1966.

Stage 1 of the Master Plan was the building of four modern apprentice accommodation blocks each of 120 beds, the Marine Engineering Demonstration building and the Wardroom. The latter was set forward in the plan somewhat, as a result of the old corrugated iron Wardroom burning to the ground one Saturday in 1966. These segments of the building were completed in 1972 and Stage 2, which was approved in 1971, comprised the erection of an Instructional Complex comprising modern classrooms, laboratories and cinemas, new messes, accommodation and galleys for senior and junior sailors of the Ship's Company, a new galley, mess and recreational centre for apprentices and two more accommodation blocks for apprentices. These have been completed along with a new civilian staff amenities block.

The next stage of the Master Plan calls for new administration buildings, medical and dental facilities, more instructional buildings to replace the remaining corrugated iron classrooms still in use after 40 years life, motor transport facility, assembly hall and chapel. Financial constraints of late have slowed down the Master Plan somewhat.

HMAS NIRIMBA commissioned under that name in 1956 but affixed to the ship's name was the title 'RAN Apprentice Training Establishment' (RANATE). The Department of Defence decided in 1982, that, as HMAS NIRIMBA carries out technical training of officer, adult male trainees and members of the WRANS, the words 'RAN Apprentice Training Establishment' would be dropped from the ship's name.

Customs and traditions have been likened to the cobwebs of antiquity. Yet we in the Navy consider custom and tradition to be the golden thread which binds us to the past. The routines of HMAS NIRIMBA go on as before but there have been many practical changes, some not altogether to the popular accord of the Ship's Company. Most have been for the common good and have been brought about by dramatic changes in attitudes and in technological advances.

Captain D R O S Fox AM, RAN, Commanding Officer from 1980 till January 1983 departed to take up Command of the Naval Base HMAS STIRLING at Garden Island in Western Australia, being relieved on 21st January 1983 by Captain David H Thomson AM, RAN, who came to HMAS NIRIMBA from command of the Guided Missile Destroyer HMAS HOBART.

There was no intake of Apprentices from the Royal Malaysian Navy in 1983 and it is likely that this segment of the student body which has existed since 1965 will no longer be with us after graduation of the presently serving Malaysian Apprentices and Mechanics together with a class of 12 Technical Electrical Apprentices from Malaysia, who begin their training in HMAS NIRIMBA in January 1984. The Royal Malaysian Navy has developed its own Apprentice training programme, utilising instructors trained in HMAS NIRIMBA since 1965, some of whom are officers in the Royal Malaysian Navy.

Significant portions of the NIRIMBA Master Plan have come to fruition in 1983. New classrooms for the Marine Engineering Demonstration Building have been accepted from the Department of Housing and Construction. The modern Civilian Amenities Centre and Junior Sailors' Change Rooms have also been accepted from the Department of Housing and Construction.

Dramatic changes in Government on the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Australian Navy heralded no intake of Air Engineering Apprentices in January 1983. Significantly this change in policy occurred before the 1983 elections in May. Since the change of Government, and the phasing out of fixed wing aircraft, far reaching changes have been wrought in the Air Technical School. The need for the training of Air Technical sailors for rotary wing aircraft will continue and it is planned that adult entry sailors of the Air Technical categories will continue to be trained in



HMAS NIRIMBA under the Phase training scheme. This will ensure the continuance of the twenty eight years old highly regarded technical training section of HMAS NIRIMBA.

Much has been achieved in the Weapons Electrical Engineering School in the Electronics training field. Years of hard work and design by Mr Miklos Petery, Senior Technical Instructor in the School, came to fruition in 1983.

The Craft School fielded the mounting of a preliminary competition sponsored by Work Skill Australia in April 1983. Work Skill Australia conducts competitions in practical craftsmanship for Apprentices from all over Australia in various trade disciplines. These regional competitions led to a world Olympics technical competition - held in Austria in 1983.

HMAS NIRIMBA, on behalf of the Royal Australian Navy, sought and was granted Freedom of the City Of Blacktown in 1979. In 1983, the Captain and Ship's Company of HMAS NIRIMBA asserted that right of Freemanship on 4th June.

There were four Passing Out Parades in 1983 for graduating Apprentices, Phase Sailors (Adult trainees) and Mechanics. The Reviewing Officers were Mr B C Heagney - Regional Secretary, Department of Defence in March, Commodore R M Baird RAN, Director General of Naval Training and Education in July, Vice Admiral D W Leach AO, CBE, MVO, RAN, Chief of Naval Staff in September and His Excellency the Governor of New South Wales Air Marshal Sir James Rowland KBE, DFC, AFC, KstJ, in December 1983.

Sport played it's usual major part in life of HMAS NIRIMBA in 1983. The annual Mons Cup played in honour of the Right Reverend Monsignor Grantley Sebastian Lake, Chaplain RAN (Rtd), was played again by 20 Rugby Union teams from Ships and Establishments as far away as Cairns. Monsignor Lake came to the Mons Cup from his parish in Queensland for the event.

The HMAS NIRIMBA Heritage Trust has been formed. The Charter of the Heritage Trust charges its members and those who follow them with the duty of recording for posterity, all facets of HMAS NIRIMBA's history; and with the preservation of her important heritage factors of memorabilia, historic items of interest and film records.

As part of the endeavours of the Heritage Trust, a Museum has been set up in HMAS NIRIMBA. The Museum sets out to record and display in a visual sense, the story of HMAS NIRIMBA from its commencement in 1944 as a Royal Navy Air Base. It was seen as a matter of urgency that this task be addressed in order that valuable records and items of memorabilia relevant to more than a quarter of a century of the Establishment's life might be recorded for those who come after us. Many photographic records came to life at the time of the celebration of HMAS NIRIMBA's twenty fifth anniversary in 1981 and these formed a suitable basis upon which the Museum can be developed and refined over the years. If any readers have in their possession any items of memorabilia of HMAS NIRIMBA, they may be kind enough to loan or donate them to the HMAS NIRIMBA Museum and be assured that they will be treated with loving care.

It is hoped that the evolution of HMAS NIRIMBA to its present state of development and achievement will become clear from the presentation of the history of each section, school and department in the ensuing chapters. Interesting highlights appear in those segments and through reading the progress of HMAS NIRIMBA, readers will be able to bridge the gap between 1944 when the place first began and today nearly 40 years later.

*'If men would learn from history, what lessons it might teach us,
But our eyes are blinded by party and passion,
And the light which experience gives, is a lantern on the stern,
Which shines only on the waves behind us'.*

(Coleridge)



History of Divisional Titles

Until 1983 there were between six and eight Divisions formed to the 'house' system of large schools and each was named to commemorate famous sailors of long ago who had close affinity with the discovery and development of our country.

COOK DIVISION

JAMES COOK (1728-1779). Commissioned in 1755, Cook was promoted to Lieutenant for his distinguished survey work in North America and placed in command of HMS ENDEAVOUR in 1768.

Accompanied by Sir Joseph Banks he reached Tahiti in 1769 in time to observe the transit of Venus. Sailing from Tahiti in search of the great continent, Cook charted New Zealand and subsequently sighted the east coast of Australia - namely Point Hicks - in April 1770.

BASS DIVISION

GEORGE BASS (1763-1803). Joining the Royal Navy as a Surgeon, Bass sailed for Australia in HMS RELIANCE in which he met Matthew Flinders. Whilst waiting out refitting of RELIANCE in Sydney, Bass set out in a whaleboat with a crew of six to explore as far south as he could down the New South Wales coast. Bass reached Westernport Bay, the site of HMAS CERBERUS, on 4th January 1798 and named it Port Western as this was the most western place which had been explored at the time. Bass arrived back in Sydney on February 24th 1798 after a voyage of over ten week. A tremendous achievement by an illustrious man.

DAMPIER DIVISION

WILLIAM DAMPIER (1651-1715). Born in Somersetshire, Dampier entered the Royal Navy in 1672, but left two years later to become a plantation manager in the West Indies. Tiring of this life, he joined the SIGNET under command of the buccaneer, Captain Swan.

After sighting the west coast of Australia in 1688, Dampier deserted in Sumatra. Made famous by the publication of his book "A New Voyage Around The World" in 1697, he became Captain of HMS ROEBUCK which was despatched to explore Australia. Court martialled for the loss of his ship near Ascension Island, he became a privateer once more. An adventurer by nature, Dampier was the first Englishman to give a first hand account of Australia.

TASMAN DIVISION

ABEL JANSZON TASMAN (1602-1659). Born in Holland, Tasman was commissioned in 1642 by Van Dieman, the Governor General of Batavia to explore the 'Great South Land'. Sailing from Batavia via Mauritius, he sighted land on 24th November 1642. He named it Van Dieman's Land.

BLIGH DIVISION

WILLIAM BLIGH (1754-1817). Born in Plymouth, Bligh's first command was the Barge BELLE PAULE at the age of 26. His next command was of the ill-fated BOUNTY from which he was discharged by mutineers into an open boat. He became Governor of New South Wales in 1806, due partly to the influence of Joseph Banks, the botanist, with whom he had previously sailed. Bligh was deposed by senior officers of the 'Rum Corps' and Macarthur. In 1810 he was promoted to Rear Admiral and four years later to Vice Admiral.

KING DIVISION

PHILIP GIDLEY KING (1758-1808). Born at Launceston, Cornwall, on 23rd April 1758, he joined the Royal Navy as a Midshipman in 1770 and rose to the rank of Captain before being



appointed as third Governor of New South Wales in September 1800. King administered the colony in a continually hostile atmosphere, having to cope with an antagonistic garrison as well as a number of convict uprisings. He commenced printing of a newspaper in the Colony and established the first orphanage. King died in London in 1808 soon after returning from Australia.

STIRLING DIVISION

JAMES STIRLING (1791-1865). Born at Drumpellier, Larnarkshire. He joined the Royal Navy as a first-class volunteer at the age of 12, under the patronage of his uncle Rear-Admiral Charles Stirling. He rose to the rank of Captain and was sent in the ship *SUCCESS*, to form a settlement at Raffles Bay, Torres Straits; after this successful venture he was sent by the Governor of New South Wales to visit and report on the west coast of Australia. His report on the area around the Swan River, and his repeated attempts over the next few years led to the establishment of a settlement in Western Australia, and Stirling was appointed its Governor in 1831. He was promoted to Rear-Admiral in 1851 and Admiral in 1862 and he died at Guildford in Surrey in April 1865. Stirling Division was originally formed as the Band Division, and was made up of the members of the volunteer band.

TORRENS DIVISION

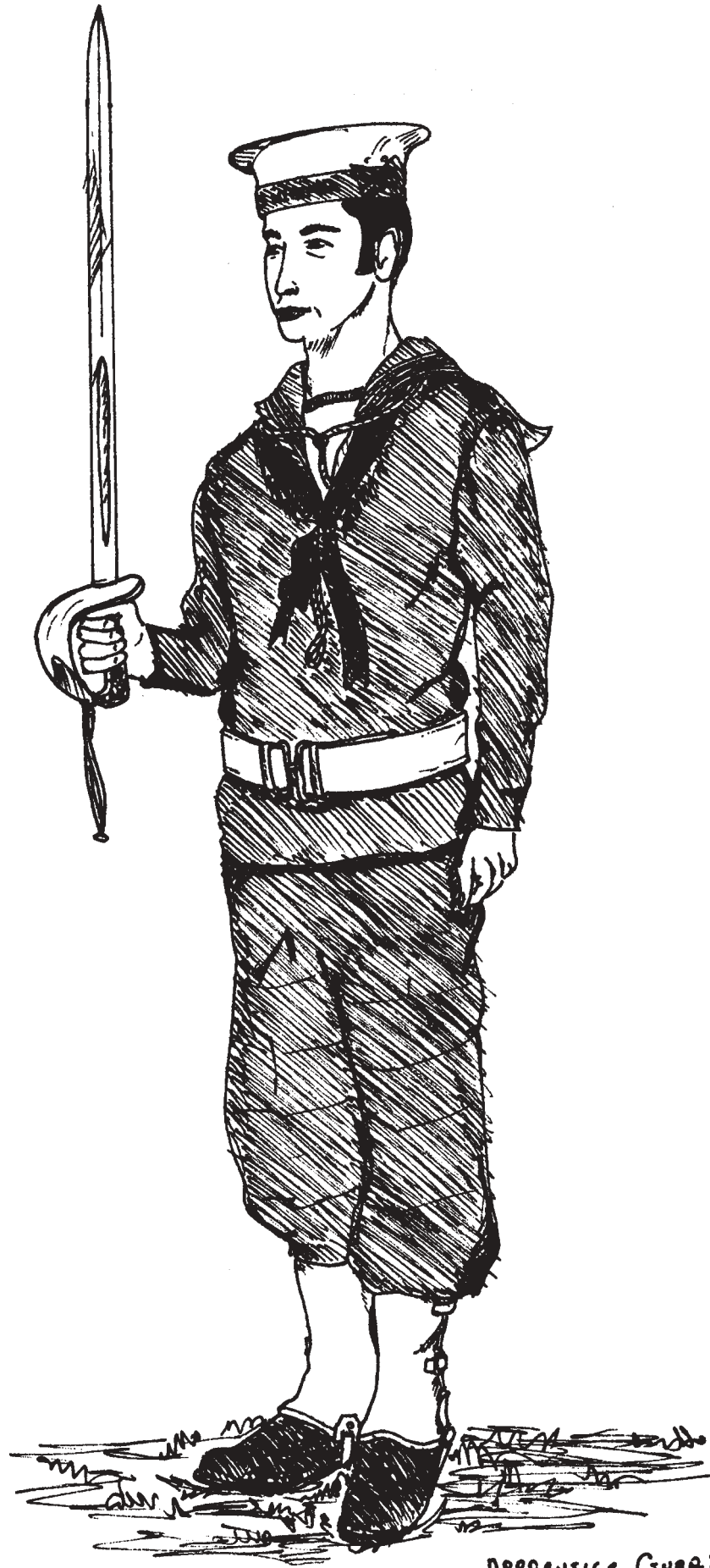
ROBERT TORRENS (1780-1864). British Army officer who rose to the rank of Colonel, the Torrens River in South Australia was named in his honour. Colonel Robert Torrens was an economist, soldier, politician and promoter of schemes for the colonization of South Australia. Torrens began his fight for SA with the first SA Land Company scheme of 1831. He became Chairman of the Colonisation Commissioners in May 1835 and worked tirelessly for South Australia. In 1840 this Board was disbanded and Torrens became Chairman of a three-man Emigration Board in charge of colonisation for the whole of the British colonies including Australia. No-one worked harder to establish South Australia than Colonel Robert Torrens.

Torrens with Tasman Division was originally for First Term Apprentices.

From September 1983, due to a reduction in trainee numbers, the Divisions extant in HMAS *NIRIMBA* are Dampier, Bass and King, with Tasman reactivated in January 1984 to cater for first term apprentices.



Mr Swan and Apprentice Donnell - 1956



APPRENTICE GUARD
COMMANDER - 1974

