

TORPEDO BOAT NO 191

The colony of Tasmania, self-governing from 1856 until Federation in 1901, depended on the Royal Navy for sea defence. Other eastern Australian colonies established naval forces but the Tasmanian government only ever ordered one vessel.

In the late 70s one of the succession of 'Russian scares' prompted Australian colonies and New Zealand to order 8 second-class torpedo-boats from builder John I Thornycroft, on the Thames. These fast steam-driven boats had been developed as a counter to the heavy armour of the ironclad battleships of the period. The Tasmanian vessel, TB No 191, reached Hobart on the steamer *Abingdon* on 1 May 1884 and was housed in John Lucas's Battery Point slipyard before moving to a special slipway and shed below the Domain.

With no Tasmanian naval force the torpedo boat was in charge of the colonial volunteer Engineer Corps, which also prepared defensive minefields for the Derwent. Her acceptance voyage was performed under the supervision of officers from HMS *Nelson*, the flagship of the Royal Navy's Australia Squadron, on one of her regular visits to Hobart.

Thereafter she was little used and spent most of her time on the slipway. In 1900 she was transferred to South Australia and delivered after an eventful tow by the cruiser *Protector* from Hobart to Port Adelaide in 1905.

TB 191 was built of 1/16 inch (1.6 mm) galvanised steel, 63 feet (19.2 metres) long and capable of 17 knots. A locomotive boiler acted at 130 pounds per square inch (896 KPa) and drove inverted direct-acting compound engines – one high pressure and one low pressure cylinder.

The craft was controlled from a completely enclosed conning tower. The crew was 7 to 10 men including coxswain, engineer, stoker, boatman, torpedo-officer, electrician and gunner.

ARMAMENT – THE SPAR TORPEDO

In 1887 self-propelled Whitehead torpedoes were installed (the vessel had been built with the deck strengthened to take the torpedo dropping gear) and a Nordenfeldt machine gun was fitted to the conning tower.

However, when delivered, like most of her class, TB 191 was fitted with a remarkable weapon – a spar torpedo. This consisted of an explosive charge at the end of a long steel spar, to be electrically detonated after being thrust underwater against the hull of an enemy ship.

Except in attack, the spar was retracted and housed in a trough on the superstructure. Wire cables from a hand-winch below the conning tower controlled spar movement.

Spar torpedoes dated from the mid-19th century and were fitted to small submersibles, steam launches and, eventually, specially designed fast torpedo-boats.

They had occasionally been used in action with some surprising successes in United States engagements, Black Sea encounters and by the French against Chinese cruisers (1890s).