

HMS Trincomalee & the Crimean War



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The Crimean War with its associated naval campaigns against Russia occurred during the second commission of HMS Trincomalee, our ship having been recommissioned at Devonport on 24th June 1852 for service on the Pacific station and later decommissioned in September 1857. During this period the ship sailed over 110,000 miles, spending 944 days at sea and 882 days in harbour. It also had a part to play in those naval campaigns against Russia.

The origins of the war related to Britain and France being concerned about Russia's expansion to the south-west, the Balkans and the Mediterranean. The prospect of a Russian naval base in the eastern Mediterranean would threaten French security on its Mediterranean coast and Britain would find her important trade routes to India and the Far East under threat.

The more immediate trigger for the war related to a long-standing dispute between France and Russia over the Christians in the Ottoman Empire. In 1850 Louis Napoleon, the French President, put pressure on the government of Sultan Abdul Medjid II to increase the influence that the Roman Catholic had in managing the Christian Holy Places in Palestine. This was strongly opposed by Tsar Nicolas I of Russia who supported the Ottoman Empire's fourteen million Orthodox Christians having authority over these Holy Places.



Louis Napoleon



Nicolas I

In January 1853 the Tsar demanded the establishment of a Russian 'protectorate' over Slavic Christians in the Balkans, together with 'substantial and permanent guarantees on behalf of the Orthodox Church'. His demands were rejected and diplomatic relations between France and Russia were broken off. In July 1853 Russian troops invaded the Ottoman provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia, Britain subsequently led the unsuccessful diplomatic attempts of European powers to broker a peace and force Russia to withdraw.

On 4th October 1853 Turkey declared war on Russia, and nineteen days later Commander-in-Chief Omar Pasha led his Turkish troops across the Danube to engage the Russians. In anticipation of becoming involved in a war against Russia, a combined Anglo-French fleet was moved into the Bosphorus and in January 1854 entered the Black Sea, the objectives being to support the right flanks of the Turkish positions in the Balkans, aid the defence of Constantinople and keep the Russian Black Sea Fleet in check. Britain declared war on Russia on 27th March 1854, with France following suit the next day.

Whilst popular knowledge of the Crimean War centres on the land-based battles on the Crimean Peninsula, these being the Battles of the Alma, Inkerman, Balaklava (with the Charge of the Light Brigade), and the subsequent siege of Sebastopol with its fall on 9th September 1855, for Britain the war with Russia was viewed as primarily a naval concern.

HMS Trincomalee played a role in the War, being part of the Pacific Fleet at the time.

The June 1855 edition of the twice yearly produced Royal Navy List informs us ten officers amongst the crew of HMS Trincomalee were:

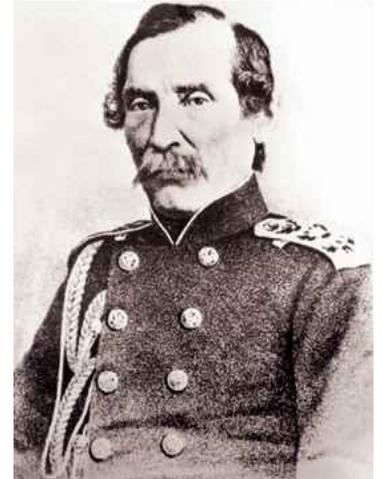
| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Captain | Wallace Houstoun |
| Lieutenants | William C. Chapman Alexander C. Ballingall Charles Parry (acting) |
| Mate | Horatio Norway |
| 1st Lieutenant Marine | G.T.J. Haverfield |
| Surgeon | John Gray (acting) |
| Paymaster | W.J.R. Hall |
| Assistant Surgeon | P.W. Dillon |
| Clerk | H.T.W. English |

Amongst the other crew members was the midshipman Lambton Loraine.

At the time of the Crimean War there were few major Russian settlements on the Pacific coast, the only three of any significant size being the towns of Okhotsk and Petropavlovsk, along with the fish trading port of Sitka in Alaska. The largest settlement was the port of Petropavlovsk which in 1854 was an anchorage of the Russian Pacific squadron. It was because of the existence of this squadron, and the perceived threat it posed to 'injure' British whaling and trading vessels in the Pacific, that in summer 1854 it was decided that Anglo-French naval forces would operate against Russian interests in the area. This meant seeking out and

destroying Russian warships (in this case the small Russian 'Okhotsk' squadron), attacking shore-based military targets and disrupting trade.

The Russian naval fleet in the north-western Pacific turned out to be small. It was under the command of Rear Admiral Yevfimy Putyatin and consisted of the aged 60-gun frigate *Pallas* (or *Palladas*), the frigate *Aurora* and the armed transport vessel *Dvina*. Putyatin decided that it was best to avoid engaging in battle with a superior force and sent the *Pallas* far up the River Amur for safety, the *Aurora* and *Dvina* were sent to Petropavlovsk both for shelter and to help defend the port if necessary.



Yevfimy Putyatin

The allied squadron to operate in the north Pacific collected together at Honolulu towards the end of July 1854. The combined fleet being:

British:

President (flagship), 50-gun frigate, Captain Richard Burridge
Pique, fifth-rate frigate, Captain Sir F.W.E. Nicholson, Bart.
Trincomalee, Leda-class frigate, Captain Wallace Houston
Amphitrite, Leda-class frigate, Captain Charles Fredericks
Virago, paddle-steamer, Commander Edward Marshal

French:

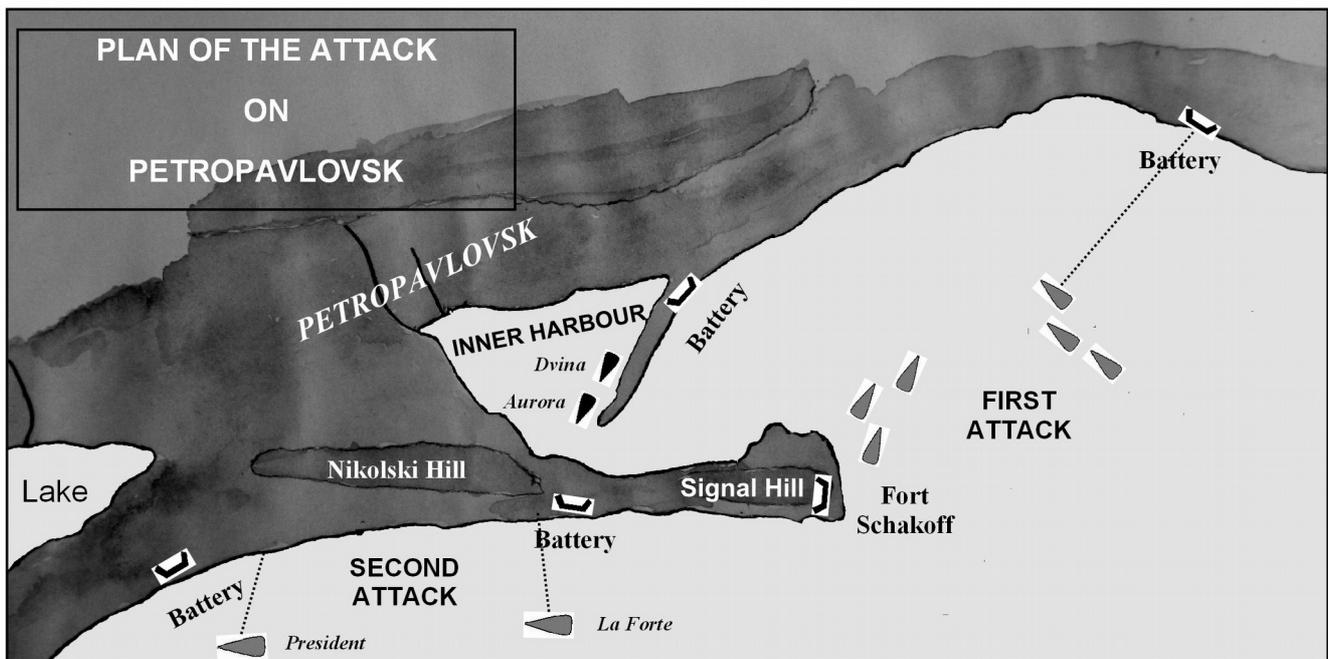
La Forte (flagship), frigate, Captain de Miniac
L'Eurydice, frigate, Captain de la Grandière
L'Artémise, corvette, Captain L'Evéque
L'Obligado, brig, Captain Rosenat

Rear Admiral Auguste Fébvrier-Despointes (1796-1855) led the French contingent, with Rear Admiral David Price (1790-1854) leading the British and having overall command of the combined force.

Having received instructions from the Admiralty, on 9th May Price issued his instructions.

The *Trincomalee*, *Amphitrite* and *Artémise* were sent to the Californian coast to protect commerce, the remaining squadron of over 200 guns and 2,000 men heading first to Alaska, and later, having found no suitable targets there, arrived off Petropavlovsk on 29th August. Price used the steamer *Virago* to reconnoitre the port, finding it defended by four small batteries and a larger defensive structure, Fort Schakoff, which had five heavy guns and flanking batteries each of twelve 36-pounders.

Early the next morning the port was attacked, but only a few rounds were fired before the attack was aborted on the death of Admiral Price. The Admiral had retired to his cabin on the *President* and shot himself in the heart. Whether this was an accident or suicide will never be known. Command of the British ships passed to Captain Sir Frederick Nicolson of the *Pique*, who postponed the attack. The French Admiral Auguste Fébvrier-Despointes now took overall command, and on 31st August the bombardment of Petropavlovsk recommenced. On 4th September a combined land and sea assault was launched, however this was repulsed by the Russians with 107 British and 101 French, sailors and marines, having been killed or injured. Subsequently the British squadron sailed to Vancouver as its winter station, the French to San Francisco.



In May 1855 a new allied squadron under the command of Rear Admiral Henry William Bruce sailed into Petropavlovsk to find that the town had been deserted. The squadron consisted of the British vessels *President*, *Pique*, *Trincomalee*, *Dido*, *Amphritrite*, the screw ship *Brisk*, *Encounter* and *Barracout*. The French ships remained unchanged from the first bombardment, however they were under the command of Rear Admiral Martin Fourichon.

Rear Admiral Bruce wrote the following to the Secretary of the Admiralty on 17th July 1855, whilst on board the *President* off Sitka, Alaska:

“Sir,

I request you will inform the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that before leaving Petropavlovski I succeeded in opening a communication with Captain Martinhoff, the temporary Governor of that place, who had retired into the interior, having for its object the release of two prisoners taken last year, as reported in my general letter of the 15th ultimo, No.44.

*Having forwarded a safe conduct to Captain Martinhoff, through the kind offices of an American resident in Petropavlovski, that officer sent 150 versts inland for them, and on their delivery on the 25th ultimo, delivered them up to Captain Houstoun, of Her Majesty's ship *Trincomalee*, and three Russians that had been detained on board the French brig *Obligado* since last year, were given in exchange.*

*The two men proved to be William Garland, ordinary seaman, of Her Majesty's ship *Pique*, and Pierre Langois, of the French frigate *Forte*. The latter will be handed over to the *Forte* on my arrival at San Francisco, and the former will, at his own request, be appointed to the *Brisk*, his proper ship having sailed for the China Station. Both appear to have been treated with much kindness during the time they have been in the hands of the enemy.*

*I have &c.,
H.W. Bruce”*

Charles Parry, Lieutenant on HMS Trincomalee, wrote a letter whilst on board the ship which was forwarded on to his mother, Lady Parry, from Valparaiso on 27th March 1855:

“At sea, February 16, 1855

...What our destination will be we cannot imagine, but I think Petropaulovski, in which case we will start directly, and before long try our guns in real earnest; we have boasted so much of them in practice, and we shall see if we have overrated their powers.

The English papers evidently think us something superior to the common run of ships, and it is astonishing what a good effect this opinion has had on our men; for Jack, though an honest fellow, likes flattery quite as much as many of his shore-going brothers, and maybe a 'leetle' bit more.”

Charles' brother, Edward Parry, comments that:

“The voyage to Petropaulovski was full of expectations for the crew of the 'Trincomalee', who hoped to share in hostile proceedings which might redeem the British defeat at that place the preceding year; but their actual employment was of a very peaceful yet interesting nature. They visited it under a flag of truce, spending the last week of June in an interchange of hospitalities with the Russians, whilst effecting an exchange of prisoners. They then joined the allied squadrons, whose rendezvous was off Sitka, reaching Vancouver, much in need of anti-scorbutics for the crew, on the 18th August 1855.”

In June 1855 Rear Admiral Bruce wrote a dispatch to the Admiralty from HMS President at Petropavlovsk which included the following:

“I desire to add that although it has necessarily been a great disappointment to the squadron under my command to find upon arrival at this space, more than 2,000 miles outside their station, that the enemy has escaped, and the batteries were deserted, yet their Lordships will not fail to observe that not less credit is due for the great zeal and anxiety that has been shown by each of the ships in pushing onward, in the hope of being in time to take part in the anticipated operations at this port.”

HMS Trincomalee had no further direct involvement in the Crimean War, although other ships continued to play a part after the fall of Sebastopol in September 1855 with operations in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azoff. Hostilities in the Crimea were not ceased until 28th February 1856 three days after the first meeting of the peace conference in Paris. The Treaty of Peace was signed at Paris on 30th March. On 23rd April there was a Grand Review of the British fleet at Spithead in which 240 vessels took part, peace formally being announced in London on 29th April with the last British troops leaving the Crimea on 12th July 1856.

Hugh Turner

**QD23: Originally appeared In the “Quarterdeck” magazine
Ref: 2013 Issue 2 (Summer) pages 4 to 10**