

HMS Trincomalee at Honolulu



During her second commission (1852 to 1857), whilst attached to the Pacific Station, HMS Trincomalee called in at the Port of Honolulu a few times. The Polynesian islands, being upon the great highway of the nations of the Pacific, were of great importance to the maritime powers of America, Russia, Britain and France.

The “Polynesian” newspaper of 12th February 1853 contains the report:

“H.B.M.'s ship Trincomalee, arrived here on the 12th; she is destined for the Arctic seas, in search of Sir John Franklin; I almost fear it is a forlorn hope; yet I cannot but admire the efforts being made in such a humane and philanthropic cause”

The involvement of the ship in supporting a search for Franklin is an article in its own right, in this article we look at events relating to Hawaii itself.

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 gave rise to a rapid settlement of that State and the opening up of new routes across the American continent. For the Hawaiian islands it opened up new markets for their products, with closer commercial ties with the United States and the investment of capital in the islands. However the islands were now under threat from numerous lawless adventurers based in California who planned a number of raids or filibustering expeditions into the neighbouring countries.

In Autumn 1851, the Hawaiian Government received many warnings that a band of filibusters was being organised to invade their kingdom. At the request of their cabinet, the USS Vandalia, under Captain Gardner, was kept at Honolulu, and a body of one hundred native troops were drilled for several months by Lieutenant Read of the Vandalia.

In November 1851, about twenty-five suspicious characters, led by Sam. Brannon, came to Hawaii from San Francisco in the ship “Game Cock”. They thought that the country was ready for revolution, and that the king was ready to sell his kingdom and to retire from the cares of state. They soon found that they had been deceived; the feelings of the natives and the officers and men of the whaling fleet being hostile towards them. The king declined to see them, and the expedition ended in a fiasco.

At this time the kingdom of Hawaii was ruled by King Kamehameha the third, and he was greatly aided by his Minister of Foreign Relations, Robert Crichton Wyllie, who was appointed to the post on 24th March 1845, and continued in it until his death in 1865. Wyllie was born in Dunlop, Ayrshire in 1796, and qualified in surgery at Glasgow, receiving his diploma before he was twenty. He made voyages as a surgeon on various ships, and was wrecked three times. Visiting the Australian colonies he applied himself to sheep farming, later he also visited South America and the southern states of America, before becoming a partner in the successful firm of Begg, Wyllie & Company in Chile. He rode about the republic of Chile girded with pistol belts to collect money owed to the firm, accumulating a fortune and a good knowledge of the Spanish language.



King Kamehameha the Third



Richard Crichton Wyllie

After a period as a director in a bank in London, living in Mayfair, where friends recalled him “as a well-dressed man, of animated, yet tedious conversation, but above all, possessed of a remarkably retentive memory.” Wyllie suffered financial loss in this venture and went again to America, this time as secretary to General Miller who had been appointed British consul-general to the Hawaiian Islands.

They arrived in Honolulu in March 1844 aboard HMS Hazard. When General Miller was called away to Tahiti on official business Wyllie was left in charge of the consular office, later being appointed by King Kamehameha the Third as his Minister of Foreign Relations.

Wyllie gave up everything for his position and his sovereign. His great aim was to keep Hawaii independent, and to stop it becoming a political pawn in the hands of Britain, France and the United States. He succeeded in this. When he died, a bachelor, on 19th October 1865, he was given the great honour of being buried in the newly completed Royal Mausoleum amid the august dead of the great Kamehameha dynasty.

On 19th May 1854, HMS Trincomalee arrived at Honolulu from Callao, leaving ten days later heading to Port Clarence in the Bering Straits. This was at a time of impending war between the great maritime powers of Europe, the Crimean War started later that year. King Kamehameha issued a proclamation of neutrality of the Hawaiian kingdom. The “Polypesian” newspaper of 20th May 1854 reported that the ships of the maritime nations of Europe:

“both national and private, are constantly visiting our waters. A Russian frigate is now at anchor here, and ships of war of other belligerents may arrive at any hour. Indeed since the above was written, the British Sloop-of-war Trincomalee has arrived in our waters, and is quietly anchored alongside the Russian ship; and if our neutrality can be respected, and a dozen belligerent ships should assemble in our harbors, do not suppose the business men of Honolulu will seriously object to the increased business that would be created by their visits at our ports. As a neutral kingdom, we can welcome them all, and here they can seek and find those refreshments they may need, in the midst of this great ocean. ...

...The Russian frigate DIANA, Capt. Lessoffsky, arrived at this port on the 13th inst., in 50 days from Valparaiso. Salutes were exchanged with this flag on the 16th, and on the 17th an audience to Capt. S. and his officers was given by his Majesty, at the Palace. The frigate is bound to the Russian Possessions at the north, and will sail in a few days.”

On the 23rd May 1854 King Kamehameha:

“accompanied by a numerous suite, paid a visit to H. I. Majesty's Frigate Diana, at anchor in the outer roads, where he was received with all the attentions and honors due to a sovereign.

The ship was fully dressed and the yards manned for the occasion, and His Majesty received the customary royal salutes, both from the Russian ship and the British sloop-of-war Trincomalee, as he passed her on his way out.

An hour was most agreeably spent by his Majesty on board, during which, the utmost courtesy was shown him by Capt. Lessoffsky and all his officers.”

A later newspaper report informs us that HMS Trincomalee:

“remained at Honolulu from May 19th to June 1st, during which time the frigate Diana was at the same port. Entire good feelings existed between the British and Russian officers, attending balls and fraternizing heartily together, notwithstanding it was supposed at the time that war was declared, although no official notice had been received to that effect. This made no difference, however, as regarded the Trincomalee. Being attached at the time to the Discovery squadron, and carrying supplies for their relief, she was, by the usages of nations, not liable to any attack.”

HMS Trincomalee's next arrival at Honolulu was on 9th October 1854, having sailed from San Francisco. The Crimean war on land had already started, the Battle of Alma having been on 20th September 1854. The Court News section of the “Polynesian” of 4th November 1854 reports:

“An audience was granted by the King on Tuesday, the 31st ultimo, to the Commissioner of His Imperial Majesty of France, acting for H. B. M.'s Consul General, (who was indisposed,) to present Capt. Houstoun, and the officers of H. B. M.'s ship Trincomalee, accompanied by their allies, the Captain and officers of H. I. M.'s ship l'Artemise.

The Commissioner of H. I. Majesty expressing regret for the indisposition of H. B. M.'s Consul General, presented Capt. Houstoun and his officers to the Minister of Foreign Relations, as also the Captain and officers of H. I. M.'s ship l'Artemise.

The Minister of Foreign Relations presented the two Captains to the King.

Captain Houstoun then presented the following officers of the Trincomalee: A. C. Ballingale, Lieutenant, John S. Haverfield, Lieut. R. M. P. W. Dillon,, M. R. C. S. Eng, ass't Surgeon, V. R. B. Wilkinson, 2d Master, C. D. C. Voce, D. A. Aelsglee, clerk ass'ts, S. E. Price, C. E. A. Wilcox, midshipmen. ...

...The King expressed great pleasure to see the Captains and officers of the two ships of

the combined squadron, along with the Commissioner of France, and that he was sorry that the British Consul General had been unable to attend from illness.

Both Captains invited the King and suite to visit their respective ships”

The USS steam frigate Mississippi under Captain Lee, departed from Honolulu on 9th November 1854. At the port she had undergone repairs from damage sustained in a gale, and had taken on water and coal. Prior to departing for San Francisco, Captain Lee:

“gave a general invitation to the residents of Honolulu to visit his ship, and a large number availed themselves of the opportunity.

On account of indisposition, His Majesty was prevented from going on board, as he had anticipated. His Excellency the Governor of Oahu and suite, however, went off, as well as His Majesty's Ministers of Foreign Relations, Finance and Public Instruction, the Commissioners of France and the United States, and the several consuls of foreign powers resident in Honolulu, all of whom were received with the customary salutes and honors due them under such circumstances. A large number of ladies were also Capt. Lee's guests during the day, as well as the commanders of the several ships-of-war, Portsmouth, St. Marys, l'Artemise and Trincomalee, and numerous officers from the same.

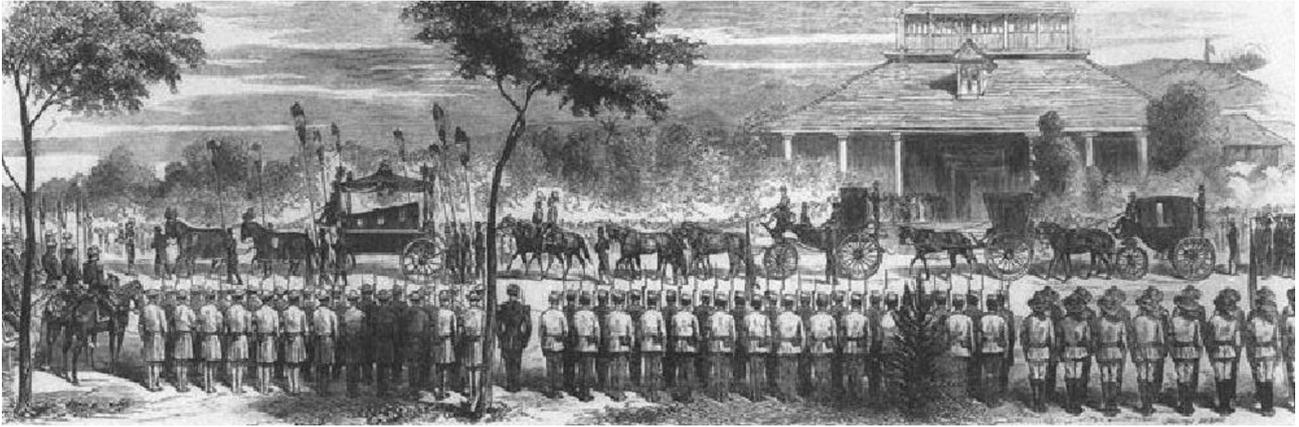
The Mississippi was in fine order, and in every department exhibited the skill of her officers, and the good discipline of the ship. The Band discoursed sweet music while the visitors were on board, and the courteous attentions of Capt. Lee and the officers of the Mississippi rendered the occasion one of much enjoyment and satisfaction.”

In December 1854 a number of ships were at Honolulu, HMS Trincomalee's sister ship, HMS Amphitrite, Captain Connolly, arrived on 11th December, and the frigate HMS Pique, Captain Nicolson, on 9th December. The French frigate Alceste was in the port from 23rd November until 12th December, and the French corvette L'Eurydice, Commander La Grandiere, arrived on 8th December, remaining in Honolulu until the New Year.

King Kamehameha died on 15th December 1854 at the age of 41 years. His funeral took place, after being delayed due to poor weather, on 10th January 1855. Some of the officers and crew of HMS Trincomalee played an important part in the proceedings:

“... At 20 minutes of 12, A. M., the procession moved from the Palace under the direction of the Grand Marshal ...

The Second Division of Hawaiian Infantry, flanked by the Hawaiian Guard, a body of foreign residents, who were called into military existence by their attachment to His late Majesty, and their desire to preserve the peace of the Kingdom from lawless violence, and now uniting in this, the last earthly testimonial of respect and affection, was followed by the body of Marines from the different vessels of War in Port, who were a marked feature of the procession. They were led by the English Marines of the Trincomalee, her Captain being the senior officer in port. Their uniform, white and red, contrasted pleasantly with the French Marines of the Eurydice in theirs of black with the broad collar trimmed with white, and with the American Marines of the St. Marys in their neat uniform of white and blue, trimmed in red. ...”



Funeral procession for King Kamehameha the Third

With the death of King Kamehameha the Third attempts by his government to annex Hawaii to the United States of America were thwarted. The king's nominated heir, Alexander Liholiho, was declared king under the title of King Kamehameha the Fourth, and he decided to discontinue all negotiation for annexation. On 6th February 1855 Robert Wyllie addressed a letter to the Secretary of the U.S. Navy:

“On the 23rd of January, the Minister of Foreign Relations announced to Mr. Gregg that the King had commanded all negotiations for the purpose of annexation to cease.

The young King is evidently desirous of tasting for a time at least the sweets of sovereign power, and for the present, I imagine entertains not the most and distant idea of annexation.”

There is a strong tradition of the navies of the world enjoying a good party, so let's finish this article on a happier note. The following is a letter by a member of the American Sloop-of-War Portsmouth, under Commander Dornin, which was in the port of Honolulu from 12th September until 4th December 1854:

“THE PORTSMOUTH AND TRINCOMALEE

SOME FUN FORWARD AS WELL AS AFT

MR. EDITOR :- With your permission, I will give you a few lines for your paper, informing you of a friendly party between the men attached to the above named ships.

Last week the band on board of the Trincomalee, having learnt that we were upon the eve of starting for home, came on board and spent an evening with us, and performed many national and other popular airs. Capt. Dornin having concluded to stop in this port until Saturday the 2nd December, invitation, by permission of Capt. Dornin and Lieut. Parker, was sent on board of the Trincomalee, to her commander and first Lieutenant asking permission of their Band and as many more of her ships company as they might think proper to be allowed to spend an evening on board the Portsmouth previous to her departure for home. With great pleasure they consented, and on Wednesday evening last, the band and others of the crew, to the number of forty, came on board. The forward part of the ship was handsomely decorated with flags, the American and English ensigns hanging in festoons together. The berth-deck was also handsomely decorated and illuminated on which were tables laid the whole length of the deck, which groaned with the

weight of good thinks upon them.

At 7 P. M. our guests were conducted below and after a complimentary speech by one of our number, welcoming the Trincomalees on board, the word was given to prepare for war, - not with *gun and shot*, but with knives and forks; thus was one hour happily spent in eating and drinking, speeches and sentiments appropriate to the occasion were passed between the party, the Queen of England and President of the United States were not forgotten. The rest of the evening was spent in songs, dancing and music.

At 10 P. M. our guests left us. As they left the ship they played "sweet home," and "homeward bound." They then saluted us with long and loud cheers which were loudly responded to by our gallant tars. The Trincomalee boys can be assured that as the Portsmouth glides along her passage to our native land, they will often be remembered by us. Her commander has our warmest thanks for so kindly permitting them to pay us a visit. Captain Dornin and our own officers very kindly lent us all their aid to receive our guests in a proper manner, for which they have the warmest thoughts of the gallant sons of the Ocean on board of the Portsmouth.

Honolulu, Nov. 28 W.T.G."

**QD056: Originally appeared in the "Quarterdeck" magazine
Ref: 2016 Issue 3 (Autumn) pages 43 to 49**