On the Werribee
Volunteer Reviews and Encampments in Victoria 1860-1862

On 27 July 1859, under the authority of Major-General Edward Macarthur, CB, the General Officer Commanding Imperial forces in the Australian colonies, with Headquarters in Melbourne, a new Volunteer force was proclaimed for the colony of Victoria. Lieutenant-Colonel J. Martin Bladen Neill, Deputy Adjutant General in the Australian colonies and Inspecting Field Officer of Volunteers, in turn appointed Captain George Dean Pitt of the 80th Regiment, Inspector of Musketry as Colonel of Volunteers.!

The new Volunteer force was to replace the small Volunteer units established in the colony since 1854 to supplement the Imperial British Army units stationed in Victoria at that time. Ironically, Neill’s proclamation was published four days after he was buried in Melbourne’s New Cemetery; he had died on the 19th July at age 45 after falling from his horse. He had more than 20 years of service with the 40th (2nd Somersetshire) Regiment before retiring on half-pay to be Deputy Adjutant-General in Australia and of Victoria.2

By this time enrolment of Volunteers in the new corps was underway, giving the citizens of Melbourne who were concerned with the poor state of its defences some comfort that matters were in hand to improve the defence capacity of the colony and especially to better protect Melbourne.3 Already Imperial units had been moved from the colonies for service in New Zealand – indeed Neill’s old unit, the 40th, was to leave Victoria for New Zealand the following year, leaving the defences of Victoria virtually in the hands of the Volunteers. While colonists expected the British Army units to return or be replaced, they rarely did, at least not in the same strength, although it was not until 1870 that the last of the British Army units left Victoria forever.

After a slow start, by December 1859, it was reported that the Victorian Volunteer force consisted of about 1600 men of all ranks, enrolled as follows:

- Royal Victoria Artillery Regiment: 357 men
- Queenscliffe Artillery Company: 79 men
- Geelong Rifles: 166 men
- Royal Victoria Yeomanry Cavalry: 113 men
- Volunteer Rifles (ten companies): 803 men
- Naval Volunteers: 82 men

[IMAGE Old Victorian Volunteer Rifles]

1 Victoria Government Gazette (VGG) 119, 27 July 1859, p.1575.
2 Neill’s brother, General James George Neill, of the East India Company, had been killed at Lucknow only the year before during the Indian Mutiny; J M B Neill had survived the 2nd Afghanistan Campaign only to succumb to a fall from his horse in a Melbourne street when dogs startled his mount. At his funeral, one of the volleys from the 40th dislodged a spectator from a tree, who fell to the ground unharmed but ‘much to the suppressed merriment of the nearby spectators’. The Age, 20 July 1859, p.4. Neill was succeeded as Deputy Adjutant General by Pitt, with local rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.
3 A number of defence reviews had been conducted over previous years and the most influential, that of Captain Peter Scratchley Royal Engineers, was published in 1860, but was largely ignored due to the costs to be incurred and the number of men required to man the proposed fortifications. Scratchley returned to the colonies years later as part of another defence review.
4 Argus, 17 December 1859, p.5.
A correspondent to the Beechworth press calling himself ‘Civis Colonus’ even came up with a new Australian Volunteer Song to commemorate the new movement, which ended with stirring words not necessarily reflected in reality, except for the confidence in Britain’s navy:

With trenchant steel and marksmen leal
We’ll welcome all who dare
Seek strife or spoil on Austral soil
Such spoilers ill shall fare;
Before them graves! behind, the waves!
Where Britain’s navy steers,
Come when it may, they’ll rue the day
They face our Volunteers!  

With such sentiments as backdrop, over 1860 the volunteer force in Victoria and in other Australian colonies continued to grow, in line with the tremendous growth in the Volunteer movement in England, supported as it was by Royalty. Volunteer units in Victoria were formed and disbanded as public support waxed and waned according to the alarms of the day - Napoleonic designs on England or in the Pacific or later fears that the Russians were somehow interested in stealing the gold from Ballarat and Melbourne through naval raids. The growth of the Volunteer movement in England was accompanied by reviews en masse of the Volunteer regiments, followed by Royal receptions for Volunteers led by the Queen herself, especially on the Queen’s official birthday. Naturally Victoria could not be left behind in such patriotic spectacles and it wasn’t long before letters to the editor urging Volunteer reviews in Melbourne began to appear in the Victorian press.

So on 25 May 1860, the first ever fully fledged Volunteer review and field day was held in Melbourne for the Queen’s birthday (she turned 41 that year). Held in an enclosed field on the south bank of the Yarra River near the Princes Bridge Barracks, after, and ending in, heavy rain, the review nonetheless attracted a ‘wet-footed, splashed, and generally mud-bedabbled crowd’ estimated at up to 10,000 strong. About 1,150 Volunteers paraded from the 1,900 or so enrolled by that time, along with the band and two companies of the 40th Regiment, whose red uniforms contrasted strongly with the greys and greens of Volunteer rifle companies. Inspected by the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly and the General Officer Commanding, Major General Sir Thomas Simson Pratt, [IMAGE] accompanied by the usual inspection, march past (just one on account of the rain), anthem and three fue de jolie before the rain returned.

Public admiration for the spectacle was mixed with some mirth at the ‘butterfly soldiers’:

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5 Owens and Murray Advertiser, 9 May 1860, p.3. leal = loyal and honest
6 Prince’s Bridge barracks are believed to have been a temporary barracks on the eastern side of St Kilda Road pending the construction of Victoria Barracks on the western side. Most notably it was occupied by the garrison troops of the 40th Regiment through the 1850s.
7 Argus, 25 May 1860, p.5. Barkly was Governor in Victoria from December 1857 to 1863. Pratt was GOC in the Australian colonies from January 1860 to 1863 during which time he suppressed the Taranaki rebellion in New Zealand in 1861, for which he was knighted. His only daughter married Governor Barkly in 1860 three days before Pratt left for New Zealand.
The want of discipline in the Volunteers, was, on an occasion like the present, ludicrously apparent, and many a hearty laugh was raised at the expense of some awkward youngster who would persist in misunderstanding the orders of his commanding officer, and stand at ease when ordered to fire a salute, or frighten the front rank out of its propriety by suddenly discharging his piece when ordered to ground it.

The poor discipline continued after the parade. A Volunteer walking down Bourke Street, the main commercial street of Melbourne, was ridiculed by a bystander ‘either for his gait or his costume’. The volunteer about faced and fired a full blank charge at the miscreant’s face, causing him to bleed profusely. Unfortunately the Volunteer shot the wrong fellow, and compensation and apologies followed with the Volunteer explaining that thought his musket had been discharged at the review and he only meant to snap the lock. The press thundered too – ‘It may be as well to inform persons who may be tempted to jeer at or insult those who come forward in the service of their country, that they are liable to the operation of a special section of the Vagrant Act, and may be sent to gaol for their impertinence.’

For the first time, an idea that the Volunteers should have a field day on the plains above the Werribee River valley, halfway between Melbourne and Geelong, was touted for between 23 November and 3 December 1860. A village had been established there in the 1850s and grew steadily, helped by a railway line from Melbourne to Geelong, with a station at Werribee in 1857. Scottish brothers, the patriotic pastoralists Thomas Chirnside and Andrew Chirnside, bought up large tracts of the land around the Werribee, and became the local ‘aristocracy’ – by 1863 they controlled more than 280 square kilometres there. They were early supporters of the Volunteer movement. The Chirnside family, in the 1880s, even maintained a half-battery of artillery for the colony, directly competing with another pastoralist family, that of William J. Clarke, which would also figure prominently in the Volunteer movement over the next twenty years or so and which would also support a half-battery of horsed artillery for the colony.

Given the railway line and location, halfway between the Geelong Volunteers and Melbourne, as well as perhaps the early interest of the Chirnsides, the idea was a good one, but in the event, was postponed by Lieutenant-Colonel Pitt ‘to allow newly formed companies and lately admitted members to obtain proper clothing and accoutrements.’ Instead another metropolitan grand review would be held in Melbourne on 3 December following rifle matches organised by the Caledonian Society - for three days prior. This time, it poured rain throughout, turning the selected ground between Emerald Hill (near where Victoria Barracks Melbourne stands today) and Sandridge Battery on Port Phillip Bay foreshore, into a quagmire. More than 6,000 ‘drenched and draggled’ spectators braved the weather to watch about 1,800 Volunteer cavalry, artillery and riflemen go through their ‘evolutions’ before the Governor. Following the parade a mock battle was enacted, complete with artillery fire.

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8 Geelong Advertiser, 25 May 1860, p.5
9 Argus, 31 May 1860, p.5.
10 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werribee,_Victoria
12 The Age, 17 November 1860, p.5.
13 Bendigo Advertiser, 5 December 1860, p.3 and
Meanwhile, the Volunteer movement was given further impetus from the formation, two days before the Review, of the Victorian Rifle Association (VRA) which organised its first annual match for Volunteer companies from 29 December 1860. The VRA, formed to support the Volunteer movement, became a fixture of Volunteer activities throughout the colony, with the rifle companies in particular acting as de facto rifle clubs. There were no civilian rifle clubs firing military muskets let alone allowed to fire at all at VRA matches, which were held exclusively for Volunteers. Towards the end of the long hot summer thoughts were already being extended to an Easter encampment, and about 250 Victorian Volunteer Artillery held a three day camp on the high ground south of Flinders Bridge (near where Victoria’s Shrine now stands) in early February 1861 in preparation.

There was some particular excitement about the proposed 1861 Easter encampment to be held at Werribee, on the largely treeless plain about two kilometres from the railway station and the sea side of the river and about 35 kilometres from Melbourne. In early March Thomas Chirnside and his circle of friends in the Werribee area gave Lieutenant-Colonel Pitt a cheque for £1000 against prizes for shooting and races – for an encampment of Volunteers to be held in October or November. With the money in hand, however, it appeared that the encampment was quickly brought forward to Easter. Chirnside, accordingly to news reports, also ‘offered to furnish bullocks and sheep for the encampment free of charge, and to procure for the volunteer army all the wood and water it would require.’ As well, there was apparently an offer ‘to furnish a troop of 80 men of his own, all mounted on grey horses.’ Welcome though this news was, it did not stop a number of indignant letters to the editors of the newspapers decrying the encampment being held on a Sunday.

So by the weekend starting 30 March 1861 and for the next four days the first ever encampment in the field took place at Werribee. It followed a swathe of letters looking at the impact of the camp on the religious, social and commercial life of all involved, with some quarters anticipating some kind of military picnic, others something of a Victorian Aldershot. Tents were ordered, Government departments given the requisite holidays so their staff who were Volunteers could attend the camp, baggage forwarded through to the camp-site and Volunteers entrained free of charge to Werribee station. The small village of Wyndham, all of 20 small buildings and two hotels and about 100 agricultural inhabitants, was about to be swamped by Volunteers and the thousands of visitors looking for a holiday weekend entertainment.

Fears were expressed about the capacity of the single Melbourne–Geelong rail line to manage the expected numbers using it, both Volunteers and civilians. Long narratives of the preparations leading up to the encampment, complete with detailed descriptions of tentage and lines, commissariat, length of the bar in the catering tent etc., raised the whole weekend to a level of importance never before seen in the public eye. All of this was only heightened by the almost daily news of the ongoing operations in New Zealand, as the 40th Regiment soldiers and even

15 The Age, 8 February 1860, pp.4-5.
16 The Age, 5 March 1861, p.5 and The Star, 9 March 1861, p.2.
17 VGG
sailors from Victoria’s one naval vessel engaged in the conflict, HMCV *Victoria*, helped to overcome the Maori rebellion in the Taranaki district.\(^{18}\)

Volunteers from the rifle companies, artillery, cavalry, mounted rifles and Naval Brigade arrived by train or by the highway from Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo and so on, along with, in the afternoon, the first of hundreds of sightseers taking advantage of the Saturday half-holiday. With visitors departed back to Melbourne by midnight after ‘much gaiety’, the Volunteers were aroused at midnight for a night exercise and turnout, the camp being ‘attacked’ courtesy of the Naval Brigade. Sunday morning came with open air services ‘and regularity and decorum prevailed’\(^{19}\) (presumably this meant the camp was ‘dry’ that day). Monday was the big day, with a review of all 2,013 troops by the Governor of Victoria Sir Henry Barkly \[IMAGE\] along with an estimated 20,000 spectators. This was followed in the afternoon by a sham fight, which lasted about an hour with glorious cavalry charges, valiant storming of stock yards, and gallant manoeuvres among the spectators complete with volleys and cannonades. Everyone expressed themselves as very well entertained. \[IMAGE – ladies and volunteers in camp\]

The exodus of visitors to Melbourne through the tiny station continued from the evening until 3am the next morning, while many others simply stayed overnight in the camp. ‘This gave rise to many unseemly scenes of disorder, upon which, however, we will not dwell, for it was holiday time, and the majority of visitors were of the lower classes’, sniffed *The Argus*. Rain hastened an early end to the encampment and by midday on Tuesday 2\(^{nd}\) April it was all over bar the cleanup of stores and tentage.\(^{20}\) Following the encampment there was lengthy analysis in the popular press. Some reports noted that only three or four rifle companies actually catered for themselves and cooked their food ‘in the field’ – the rest were catered for in long tent dormitory messes by Spiers & Pond, proprietors of the well known Cafe de Paris in Melbourne.\(^{21}\) Others decried the disastrous railway arrangements for the visitors. But for the *Geelong Advertiser*:

> We have made a short but brilliant campaign. We have won a bloodless victory, for on the plains of the Werribee we have added one more link to the mighty chain that assures freedom to the British Empire at the hands of her noble Volunteers.\(^{22}\)

While the *Ballarat Star* opined: “This gathering evoked an immense deal of poetry, patriotism, and martial spirit. In fact, the affair proved that we are out and out chips of the old British block, and we are not a little proud of the thing altogether.”\(^{23}\)

\[IMAGE – painting of Volunteer review at Werribee\]

After such a resounding success, what then for 1862, for Thomas Chirnside was more determined than ever to demonstrate his support for the encampment on his property for the Volunteers. In fact, no sooner had the first camp finished than he announced – once again as if this was new news - that he would be forming a troop (variously described as a ‘company’ then a ‘regiment’ of cavalry), to be called the Werribee Greys, composed of local farmers riding grey

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\(^{19}\) *The Age*, 25 April 1861 p.6 and *The Argus*, 25 April 1861, pp5-7

\(^{20}\) *The Argus*, *ibid*

\(^{21}\) *ibid*

\(^{22}\) *Geelong Advertiser*, 25 April 1861, p.3

\(^{23}\) *Ballarat Star*, 24 April 1861, p.1
horses to be provided by Chirnside’s own stables.\textsuperscript{24} There is little doubt that the encampment had excited the imagination of the public and politicians alike, as well as underpinned a growing enthusiasm for the Volunteer movement and the new Victorian Rifle Association matches. The Queen’s Birthday parade of May 1861 passed by, along with a spectacular 400 strong banquet party for Major-General Pratt, returning to Victoria after his successes of the Taranaki campaign in New Zealand. The routine of Volunteer parades, musket and rifle shooting competitions and occasional drills and musters continued into 1862.

By the end of March 1862 the Victorian Government had decided to once again hold a large Volunteer encampment on the Werribee plains of Thomas Chirnside’s property, despite objections from other parties. One was from the Melbourne racecourse, which saw the opportunity to charge a gate fee for visitors to compensate itself for its ‘philanthropic’ offer of a £1000 incentive payment to the Government (and free water) to hold the encampment there. Another was from the Sunbury district, supported no doubt by William Clarke who had established himself in that district and who was later to became the Chirnsides’ great business and social competitor in Victorian society.\textsuperscript{25} Sunbury, about the same distance from Melbourne as Werribee, had the advantage of a double railway line passing through the district between Melbourne and Ballarat.

However, despite claims and counterclaims, the Commander of Victorian volunteers, Lieutenant Colonel Pitt weighed in against Sunbury\textsuperscript{26} and Thomas Chirnside was not be outfought on this battlefield of his choosing. He further sweetened his offer to the Government of his property for the encampment with a £1,000 inducement, plus provision of water and of drays to aid camp logistics. As usual there were lively letters in the Melbourne Press. Writing to \textit{The Age}, one correspondent stated that the reason Werribee had been chosen was:

\begin{quote}
To oblige a squatter [Chirnside] who is friendly to the present Government, and a leading member of that mysterious but all-powerful body, the Victorian Association, they deem it politic to pander to the vanity of this parvenu of fortune, by having the review on his lordly domain, ignoring the efficiency which our volunteers might attain by a few days exercise en much more suitable ground [Sunbury] for military practice.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

A week later in \textit{The Argus}, which generally took an anti-Government line, a Volunteer gunner wrote in to complain about the previous encampment and its inadequacies, and advising the Government on what it should do to improve it. The previous encampment, he wrote,

\begin{quote}
…with the exception of the review, there was hardly any attempt made to turn the volunteers to practical account. The members of the various companies came as they pleased, left when they pleased, and attended parades and drills (of which there were very few) just as they liked….
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{The Age}, 25 May 1861, p.7
\textsuperscript{25} For a biography of Sir William John Clarke, see http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/clarke-sir-william-john-3229
\textsuperscript{26} Pitt objected to Sunbury with regard of the difficulty of obtaining provisions, setting out rifle ranges and the terrain, including a propensity to flooding: \textit{Geelong Advertiser} 27 March 1862, p.3 reporting Parliamentary proceedings. None of these objections were sustainable and indeed were to be overcome. It was Pitt’s last act as he was soon to be replaced as Colonel Commandant of Volunteers by Lieutenant Colonel William Acland Douglas Anderson, then commanding the Victorian Royal Artillery Regiment: \textit{VGG No 43}, April 1862, p.614.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{The Age} 1 April 1862 p.6. The Victorian Association was essentially an influential group of developers and land speculators.
restaurant was allowed to be open at all hours, and upon one occasion was crowded all night with volunteers, drunk and sober. 28

The correspondent suggested that as the volunteers were not self-supporting the people had the right to expect value for money. Someone up high was listening for a number of improvements were soon being touted by the Government with regard to the arrangements for the Easter Camp at Werribee, with the troops arriving from Wednesday 16th April. Improvements included:

- £600 from Treasury to pay for the transport of Volunteers to the encampment, hence allowing more distant units to attend (the Government was hoping that this generosity would be repaid in rail fares by the travelling public).
- improving the facilities at the Werribee station to better manage the expected influx of visitors over the long weekend of Friday 18th to Monday 21st April 1862.
- A grandstand would be erected so that viewing of the sham fight made easier while confining the exercises within flagged off areas to help avoid accident and danger to the public and soldiers alike
- Rifle matches, conducted by the VRA, would be held on the Thursday, Saturday and Tuesday with prizes of cash and silver cups by Thomas Chirnside, along with prizes for the Werribee Camp races on the Tuesday complete with 'stick play, feats with the sword, cutlass and bayonet exercise, foot races, the competitors in uniform, and carrying their arms, fencing, etc.'
- Six licences will be issued, instead of one, to caterers to provide 'liquors and provisions' for the volunteer meals as well as additional outlets for the public.

Friday, Saturday and Monday 21st April were all declared public holidays to allow volunteers to attend the camp, although permission was required if they were to stay into the 22nd. 29 By Wednesday 16th heavy rain and winds had demolished much of the camp, but the damage was righted soon enough for the forces to re-gather by the Saturday, when rifle shooting competitions got underway, followed by a general parade. 30 An elaborate plan of battle for the sham fight – 'the Battle of the Werribee' - on the Monday was detailed in the press before the camp, complete with infantry and cavalry attacks, cannonades and manoeuvres with the additional delights for the public viewing of mines exploding. Chirnside had allowed for a stone woolshed and other smaller buildings to be entrenched as forts as part of the fight to come, and blown up accordingly. The mines demonstration was prepared by Captain Peter Scratchley of the Royal Engineers, who would later return to the colony as part of a wide ranging defence review in 1877 and be influential into the 1880s. 31 A very large gathering of onlookers estimated to number up to 15,000, viewed the entertainment, especially those watching from the grandstand constructed for the event), which included an impressive but ineffective cavalry charge led by Adjutant Burton on Fort Chirnside and its protective infantry squares. 32

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28 *The Argus*, 8 April 1862, p.7
29 VGG No.43, 8 April 1962, p.614.
Sports, races and rifle matches concluded the camp on the Tuesday, with the final rifle matches finishing on Wednesday. Noted among the lists of prize winners was one Sergeant Templeton of the Collingwood Rifles, who won £10 for best score at 900 yards, and who would later both head the VRA but also lead the Victorian rifle team to Bisley in Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee year, winning the Kolopore Cup for the first time.  

The 1862 encampment was over and there was general agreement about how it had been conducted and what it meant for Victoria:

> Considering the small population of this colony, the bringing together of some 2400 well armed and tolerably well drilled men, is no light undertaking, and that it has been so successfully accomplished is a good sign of the public spirit of the people, and their willingness to defend the country in which they dwell.

However, considering the heavy rain and winds which had preceded the main day and the consequently abbreviated time available for military instruction, doubts were raised as to the efficacy of the Werribee plain as the place for the next encampment. Subsequently the next encampment was held in February 1863 along the upper reaches of the Barwon River close to Corio Bay on the approaches to Geelong itself. Chirnside remained a generous benefactor, providing £750. This encampment was followed by a parade and blank firing of rifles and guns at the at the Melbourne racecourse in March.

In 1863 the Easter rains were avoided, the public were able to view proceedings much more conveniently, and it seemed that the exercises in Geelong at least, were evident of a growing professionalism among the Volunteers. Although less than 1300 paraded, it was unsurprising given that it was not a holiday period. But the evolution of the Volunteer experience was to continue until the disbandment of the Volunteers in Victoria in 1883 when the reign of the Militia would begin.