

## Information sheet no 031

# Naval Brigades

Naval brigades were detachments from ships consisting of seamen and Royal Marines (which were soldiers on board ships) landed ashore to undertake naval operations or to support the army in a wide variety of campaigns. During the period from 1850-1914, the Navy did not fight any ship-to-ship actions and most British seamen who saw active service in operations did so as part of a Naval Brigade.

The Naval Brigades were professional organisations. Both officers and men received regular training in the techniques of land warfare at the gunnery school, HMS *Excellent*, at Portsmouth.

The major campaigns in which the Naval Brigades were involved:

- Burma Wars 1824-85;
- Crimean War 1854-6;
- China Wars 1856-63;
- Indian Mutiny 1857-9
- Maori Wars 1860-4;
- Kagoshima and Shimonoseki 1863-64;
- Gold Coast and Ashanti War 1873-4;
- Natal and Zulu War 1879;
- Transvaal War 1881;
- Egypt 1882;
- Sudan 1884-5;
- Boxer Rebellion in China of 1900;
- Boer War 1899-1900

During World War I, the naval brigade idea of using naval personnel to fight ashore was used for naval reservists and the Royal Naval Division was formed to assist the army in various theatres of war. The RND was disbanded in 1920. (See Information sheet number 25)



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The most famous action in which the Naval Brigades were involved is the relief of Ladysmith during the Boer War – an event commemorated by the Field Gun Run at the Royal Tournament for many years.

In October 1899, British Army chiefs were out gunned by Boer troops who were threatening the garrison at Ladysmith. As a last resort, an appeal was sent to the Royal Navy for more guns. The Navy were hundreds of miles away at their base at Simonstown. Rear Admiral Sir Robert Harris formed a plan to strip the guns from HMSs *Terrible* and *Powerful* and take them over land to Ladysmith. The guns, on mountings designed by Captain Percy Scott of HMS *Terrible*, had to be taken 800 miles by sea, from Simonstown to Durban, and from there taken 190 miles over land to Ladysmith.

Within 24 hours, Captain Lambton of HMS *Powerful* had loaded three 12 pounder guns and two 4.7” guns on board and was steaming flat out to Durban. Two special trains were waiting to carry the men and guns onward to Ladysmith. The trains travelled through the night to get to Ladysmith before the Boers could close off the town and destroy the railway line. The guns were unloaded amongst rifle fire and a deluge of shells from the Boers. In the midst of the fighting, the naval brigade, assisted by a team of oxen, hauled their guns from the station across rocky terrain and into position where they could be brought to bear on the Boers’ heavy gun emplacements.

Meanwhile, a second naval brigade brought more naval guns to join a relief infantry force, under the command of General Sir Redvers Buller. After four months, Buller broke through under a barrage laid down by naval gunners to cover his advancing infantry and Ladysmith was relieved on 1 March 1900.

Lambton brought HMS *Powerful* home to an unprecedented welcome. His crew pulled their guns through the streets of Portsmouth and London as crowds cheered, sang and waved Union Flags. They took their guns to Windsor where Queen Victoria invited the men to lunch.

For more information about the Field Gun Run commemorating the relief of Ladysmith, see Information Sheet number 28.