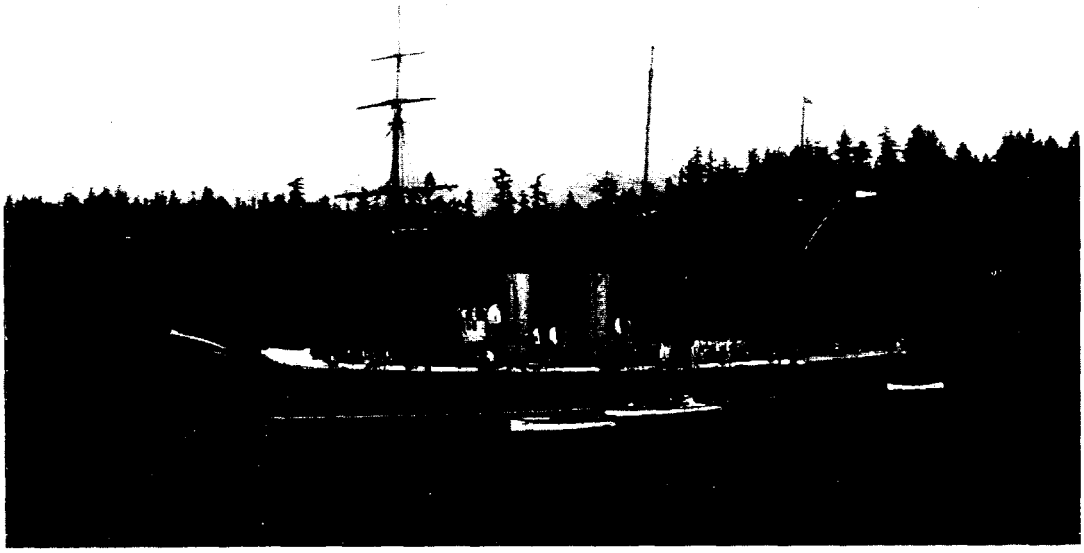


H.M.S. ' LEANDER '

THE PACIFIC STATION IN THE 'NINETIES

BY

REAR-ADMIRAL W. SCOTT HILL, C.B.E., M.I.MECH.E.

Before the opening of the Panama Canal, H.M. ships on the Pacific Station were very much cut off from the homeland. If in the north, letters reached Esquimalt in from two to three weeks, and so to the ships in the neighbourhood, but, if in the south, mails might take from two to three months, when several would arrive at once. Sometimes, when south-bound, we had the aggravating experience of passing a Royal Mail steamer going north, knowing she carried a mail that might yet be months in reaching us. Wireless and other modern forms of communication would nowadays prevent such happenings. We were dependent for up-to-date news of the South African War in the local Spanish papers, which were not always interested nor particularly friendly.

The Pacific Squadron was made up of old or obsolete ships : *Imperieuse* (flagship), *Arethusa*, *Phaeton* and *Leander* (sister ships), *Icarus*, *Pheasant* and the survey vessel, *Egeria*.

The United States of America had two or three slightly more modern ships, which we met occasionally, and France and Germany were represented by a single ship each of about the same vintage as our own. Our age was brought home to us one day, when the leader of an American party we had entertained, and shown round, turned to his friends and said, ' You now have a faint idea of a man-of-war '!

Leander and her sisters were three-masted, and in fair weather set all sail on foremast and mizzen, but not on the mainmast as it was too near the funnels when, as always at sea, the fires were alight.

The effect, in the opinion of the engine-room complement, was to negative any fuel economy by plunging the bows more deeply into the water, and because sails were never set in a really strong breeze.

The squadron's movements followed an almost invariable routine, one of the *Leander* Class going south as far as Coquimbo or Valparaiso, returning to Esquimalt six months later, and meeting her relief about half way, at Acapulco. There the Admiralty kept a stock of best Welsh coal, beautifully sewn up in grass bags, and reputed to cost five pounds a ton—an unheard of figure in those days.

The run to Acapulco was usually unbroken, as the temptation to desert at Californian ports, especially at San Francisco, was very strong, but in the course of the commission the *Leander* visited San Diego, Monterey, and Santa Barbara, with a total loss of three—one the wardroom steward, not empty-handed, and leaving us ' in the red '. One valuable P.O. was nearly ' crimped ' but managed to reach the ship just before she sailed with only a portion of his clothing.

Since we were not dependent on our masts and yards, they became, as generally in the Navy at that period, subjects for exercise and competition ; the importance of gunnery was only then beginning to be realized. Almost daily at sea, therefore, if the weather was reasonable, part of the dog-watches was taken up with a ' mast and yard ' evolution—set all sail : send down topgallant mast, etc. Very fine exercise for the seamen, but, since the longest-off watch of stokers manned the fore yard, and were in three watches, i.e. eight hours watchkeeping in each twenty-four, their leisure was badly broken into. Since sail was never set when there was any real force in the wind, this drill became almost automatic, and, as we were never in company with one of our opposite numbers at sea, it had no competitive value.

After Acapulco, calls were made at almost every one of the numerous nitrate ports to the south, with a stay of a week or more at Callao, and a long stay at Coquimbo. These nitrate ports, most of which had a British Consul, sometimes involved two or more seven-gun salutes in one day. Except Iquique, the ports were mostly open roadsteads, owing their selection to their accessibility to particular *officinas* where sacks of nitrate could be brought and lowered by cable down the cliff, which fringes so much of the coast, and embarked.

Iquique, the capital of the industry, was then in full swing and as many as fifty masted ships of various nationalities, could sometimes be counted there at one time. Nearly every day, their cargo completed, one or more would be warping out, boats from other vessels lending a hand, and the sound of the old shanties coming over the water.

The *officinas*, where the nitrate is mined and prepared for shipment, were then manned almost entirely by Englishmen, with perhaps a Chilean doctor. Iquique, as the only possible place for short leave, was seldom without a number of young fellows having a fling after monotonous spells in isolated *officinas*. High spirits sometimes led to arrests, but it was understood that a kindly Chief of Police had a back door to the prison, by which he released minor offenders before their sentences had expired.

Callao, where a wind known as the ' painter ' discolours paint-work, and discourages efforts to keep brightwork up to standard, though not at first sight attractive, was very popular, partly on account of friendly English folk who ran a mill there, and partly on account of its accessibility to Lima.

From Lima the Oroya railway, climbing 16,000 ft in 80 miles, provided a thrill, especially if one got permission to coast down in one of the hand-cars used for inspection of the permanent way. Although this height is little com-

pared with that attained by planes and that of other mountainous regions, for some reason few escape mountain sickness, and some suffered severely. At its highest point the line passes through a short tunnel, and descends to its terminus, then at Oroya, where one spent the night, on the Amazon side of the Andes. The climb was made in a series of Vs, the engine reversing at the angles, and roughly followed the valley of the River Rimac, crossing from side to side. This railway was one of the earliest to use oil-burning locomotives. To the height of about 10,000 ft the sides of the valley are scored with the terraces once, in Inca days, carefully tilled and irrigated. Now, only some of the lower ones are under cultivation, but all once grew crops ranging from tropical to temperate varieties and supported a large population. It is difficult to believe that the seemingly insignificant flow of the river below Lima can ever have provided the water for this elaborate irrigation system.

On leaving Esquimalt for our annual jaunt to the south, the Admiral's orders to our Captain were to go 200 miles a day ' then I know where you are ', calling at ports as directed but with a certain amount of latitude otherwise. The Captain would sometimes come into the wardroom and ask for suggestions and, as a result, we twice had interesting calls at the Galapagos Islands and he finally brought us home through the Smythe Channel, avoided by most naval ships but saving us a lot of unpleasant weather.

At Coquimbo the old three-decker, *Liffey*, flew the white ensign and, with a small maintenance staff, housed stores for our replenishment and some cells for the reception of any defaulters visiting ships brought for custody. Her condition, even in those days, necessitated regular pumping to keep her afloat and, failing a few prisoners, her Commander was at a loss to man the pumps and much disappointed if we did not bring him a few. Most of her officers and their wives lived on shore, and, as the Chilean and British communities were on the best of terms, our visit was a very pleasant one, with tennis, riding, and some shooting (red-legged partridge, and guinea-fowl). With the opening of the Panama Canal, the reduction in size of the Squadron, and the development of a keener national sentiment in Chile, a storeship became unnecessary, and she was taken to sea and sunk.

Calls at the Galapagos Islands, only one of which was inhabited, and that by a convict establishment from Ecuador, were very popular. Though on the Equator the climate is perfect and, in the uninhabited islands, birds and beasts have no fear of man. Within a few moments of landing, enough duck could be shot for picnic needs, and to send off to the ship for the Captain and the Mess. Anchored off the convict island, the manager sent horses down to the landing place to meet us, was most hospitable, and welcomed the extra chance of a mail to the mainland, over and above his regular three-monthly schooner. Over the entrance of the establishment were the words ' El Progreso ', but from our observation we felt a more fitting motto for most of the convicts would have been Dante's ' Abandon hope . . . '. The Governor, or Manager, dressed in corduroy shorts, an enormous hat, a coat worthy of Joseph, pistols and knives at his belt, was evidently a complete and merciless autocrat. Some of the convicts were allowed complete freedom on the island, living in huts they built themselves, but others were inside iron cages. Evidently no nonsense was tolerated. To us, however, he was geniality itself.

Since it was *Leander's* fate, always to be south of the Equator when it was summer and spend the autumn in the north, we missed the fishing, but as compensation, spent Christmas among our many friends at Victoria, and occasionally a spell of snow and frost permitted skating and tobogganing. Ski-ing had not yet arrived, but snow shoes appeared occasionally.

One Christmas was nearly marred by the disappearance, for three days, of our youngest officer, an assistant clerk. We carried one of the original Thorneycroft torpedo boats, fitted with dropping-gear, which had to be given a run once a quarter, the opportunity being taken to combine the run with a little shooting trip. On this occasion, one day in mid-December when we were in the neighbourhood of Comox, the prevailing weather being that of a wet Devon day at the same season, three of us set off with guns to a small island on chance of seeing deer. This island, Valdez, is about five miles long in its major dimension, with a lake of some size in its midst, and wooded with magnificent timber. A party of about twenty lumbermen with a couple of Chinese servants occupied a log-raft which provided a comfortable base and which a small steam launch could tow to that point on the lake most convenient to their work. It was then near the inlet where we landed, and at the head of the ' flume ' down which the logs were shot ready to be rafted and towed to sawmills at Chemainos.

They lent us their rowing boat, and told us that deer had recently been seen at the far end of the lake, some two miles from their camp. We pulled there, landed and parted, agreeing to meet again in about two hours, that being all the time our programme permitted. Our young messmate failed to turn up, and, after waiting till dark and firing several shots one of us stayed at the rendezvous, the other pulled back to the camp, sent the torpedo boat back to the ship with the news, and told our trouble to the lumbermen. After supper they came with their launch, hoping to find both, but there was no sign of the straggler. The lumbermen advised us against whistling or other noise after dark, lest it tempt the missing man to move and risk breaking a leg over fallen timber. The undergrowth was mainly ' salal ', a plant which hid the irregularities of the ground and was apt to pour the remains of the last rain over one from its saucer-like leaves as one scrambled through it. Search was therefore given up till daylight, when the whole party gave up their day's work for an organized effort. Meanwhile the ship sent off every available boat to take stations at intervals round the island, light bonfires and do some local searching, in case our messmate had reached the coast, never very far in actual distance from the lake.

This he had actually done on the day he was lost, but turned back on finding the water salt. The first day brought no success, though a half-breed Indian found and lost his tracks making for the sea. He was found on the afternoon of the third day, working his way back to the lake, having spent two nights under fallen logs, and without any food. Indians with one party sighted deer, and persuaded their leader to leave the arranged line of search, to get a shot, when they heard a faint cry and found him. Although he had not eaten for nearly three days, was wet through, with boots reduced to uppers only, he had hung on to his rifle, had kept his watch wound up, and had not panicked. The lumbermen said he owed his life to his youth and not realizing his danger and told of a lost lumberman who, when sighted by a search-party after some days, had become demented and bolted and, falling over timber, lost his life.

The waters between Vancouver Island and the mainland provide worries for the navigators of small craft, owing to risk of striking a semi-submerged log with the propeller. On one occasion a destroyer came back to Esquimalt, and reported the loss of a blade in this way. The usual Court of Enquiry absolved the skipper but, on a subsequent visit by another ship to the same neighbourhood, the missing blade was to be seen firmly embedded in a wooden beacon marking the end of a spit of land.

Our winters in the north were, however, very pleasant, in spite of our grouse that we never saw Victoria in the summer. Though a lieutenant's pay was the same as that of the average labourer and no coin below five cents was in circu-

THE CHIEF ENGINEER'S HOUSE, ESQUIMALT DOCKYARD

lation, amusements cost little, there were few local families of wealth, and each of us had two or three ' hat-pegs ' where we were always welcome in the evening. The weekly basket-ball match in the drill-hall made a general rendezvous on Saturday nights, when plans for any leisure in the coming week could be made.

Part of the winter was spent at Comox to put the ships company through their musketry practice. Then one got some duck-shooting, or maybe spent a day or two with some young fellows who had taken up their 160-acres claim, and were trying to clear it and make a livelihood. Clearing the stumps of the giant trees was a snag, and stumps which had defeated all efforts were still to be seen in the streets of Nanaimo. Pioneers could not as a rule afford explosives, the results of which were not always predictable. The most effective, though slow method of removal was to take advantage of every dry or breezy spell, and, armed with a big auger, a pair of bellows, and a pan of glowing charcoal, drill vertical and horizontal holes to meet in the heart of a fallen log, drop in the charcoal, apply the bellows and, with luck, the stump would be burnt through ; a keen pioneer would be out with his gear at the least appearance of favourable weather. So far as we could judge at that time few of the original owners of an 160-acre free ranch made good; success came to those who were able to buy one already ' improved '.

The Klondyke rush was in full swing in the winters of '98 and '99, and Victoria was full of sensational reports of sudden wealth and fabulous finds. Much energy and hardship had to be endured to reach the district and stake out a claim. The gold was found in the frozen sides of the valleys, from which blocks were cut and piled to await the thaw in the spring, when the gold could be washed out. One naval reserve officer, whom we knew, had three Canadian canoes built of such sizes that they could be nested as one. He loaded them

with his kit and saleable gear and sold them for a large sum on arrival, and with the proceeds bought a claim, set two men to work on it for a wage, and returned to Victoria until the spring. He then went back, saw his gold washed out, paid off his men, and came back with a nice packet. Now, where the gold is not worked out, the ground is thawed with steam hoses, and such a plan would not be possible.

The South African War was at its height during our last winter and there was much alarm that what would now be known as ' fifth column ' but were then called ' fenians ' would cross from the United States and carry out ' sabotage ', another word not then current. They had already attempted to blow up docks in eastern Canada.

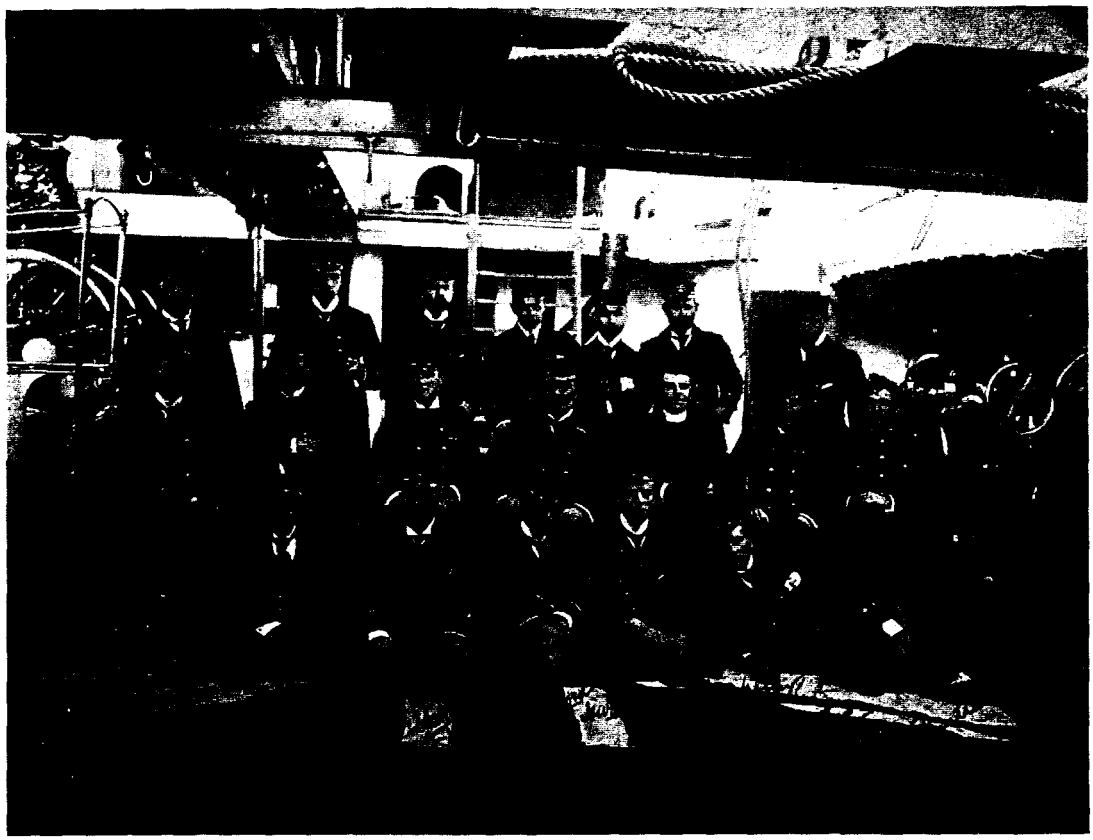
As permanent garrison in Esquimalt, there was a small body of Royal Artillery, especially for the protection of the dockyard when the ships were away. A new company had just arrived from England, and the sentry-posts were visited at night alternatively by a naval and a military officer. One night the naval officer on duty missed his way and climbed a bank below an artillery sentry and was naturally challenged. Not satisfied with the reply the sentry fired, and mortally wounded the visiting officer. The Enquiry showed the little mutual acquaintance between the Services, for the young soldier, much upset, said he had never seen a naval officer and thought the strange uniform was a foreign one.

The *Leander's* commission (three and a half years from home to home) nearing its end, we bade farewell to our many British Columbian friends and sailed south for the last time, expecting a normal passage home. Calling at San Diego, we stocked up with tinned provisions calculated to last us to Pompey, took coal as usual at Acapulco, and then got orders for Panama where a revolution, the beginning of its separation from Colombia, was in progress. It was very evident that the revolution had unofficial foreign backing and there was a great deal of surprise at the resistance the Government, under the leadership of a civilian doctor, maintained, but the final result was inevitable. We anchored off the small island of Tobago, some thirteen miles from Panama town and the former sanatorium of the De Lesseps canal scheme, being detained there six weeks.

The Captain took up his abode with the Consul on shore and our steam launch now very old, and sighing for a refit, made the trip, ship to shore and back, generally twice a day. Fighting was going on continuously, and we landed a party, with the doctor, to help with the wounded and to bury the dead but, yellow fever appearing, they were withdrawn. A ' naval ' action took place one Sunday afternoon, between two vessels, improvised into warships with boiler plate and guns. The vessels fired at one another without any visible results but projectiles passed over our bows rather unpleasantly. The fight was apparently a draw, for both vessels finally withdrew.

The insurgents were the winners, and a general and other high officers and officials of the losing side came off to us in a small boat and asked for asylum. They remained with us some days, until we landed them at Bonaventura. Treated as first class refugees, they made a big hole in our already shrunken stock of wines, provisions and minor luxuries. Nothing could be bought on shore and we made up for meat shortage with excellent fish which we caught either by seine, or by line from our sailing boats. The seining gave the whole ships company enjoyable exercise.

For the rest of the voyage, we were consequently mainly on ' hard tack '– Fanny Adams, salt pork, dried potatoes and ships biscuit, relieved by eggs and vegetables at occasional ports on our way home. Our steward having



THE OFFICERS

deserted us and also left us in debt, we avoided any expense that might result in insolvency when we came to pay off. In any case Iquique and the nitrate ports import almost all their foodstuffs and could not help us. At Punta Arenas, however, there was some fine mutton, the sheep there being said to be the largest in the world, and all Messes stocked up, and we turned north for Monte Video.

From Punta Arenas the temperature rose rapidly, and after a few days an appalling smell pervaded the ship, and was traced to the downtake of one of the boiler-room cowls. Investigation revealed that the chief stoker's messman had bought one of these enormous sheep, had plunged in into brine in a harness cask not big enough to cover it completely and had slung it in the ventilating shaft. At that time, nor for many years after, was there any cold storage for food. The writer was shipmates with the first refrigerating plant (for magazines only) in the *Sans Pareil* in 1898, and the first for food in the *Good Hope* in 1904, fitted for Mr. Chamberlain's visit to the Cape.

We came home through the Smythe Channel, between the islands and the mainland of the southern coast of Chile, a route then only used by the German Cosmos Line. The channel in places is less than a ship's length in width, and of great depth, and safe anchorages are rare. Passage was made by day only between these known points, where it was customary for ships to record their visit on a board with the ship's name. Other lines than the Cosmos, and individual ships, had ceased to use this channel on account of the high extra insurance claimed from those using it. There had been suspicious losses of heavily insured ships, as an error of helm could head a ship into the rocks, resulting in her loss, but giving time for the crew to get ashore before she disappeared, when they could camp and await another vessel to pick them up. Small glaciers descend into the straits, and the Cosmos people took advantage

of this to embark large quantities of excellent ice adding to the amenities for their passengers, and perhaps lasting them until their return voyage. We were able sometimes to get a supply from them and enjoyed an occasional drink of good German beer, if we went aboard.

After Monte Video, our voyage home was broken only at Pernambuco and St. Vincent before reaching Sheerness and Chatham, where our $3\frac{1}{2}$-year commission ended in the month of Queen Victoria's death. The ship was completely stripped by her ships company, but in spite of the year of her birth (1883) she was re-engined and modified, and was a mobile depot ship for submarines in World War I, and was not broken up until some years after.

The machinery of *Leander* was built by John Elder of Glasgow about 1882. The boilers were cylindrical with plain furnaces and worked at 80 lb/sq in but, when I joined, the furnaces has been reinforced with plates on the lower part presumably on account of wear from ashes after sixteen years' service. The two propellers were driven by horizontal trunk engines in a foreward and after engine room. The last lengths of the shafting had originally been connected by conical bolts whose withdrawal allowed the propellers to run free but when I joined the bolt-holes were being reamered out parallel and thereafter they were permanently connected. During our long stays at Esquimalt, this job formed continuous work for the E.R.A.s.

There were three dynamos for the searchlights, but earlier in the commission the wardroom and some other parts of the ship had been wired. When steam was up, therefore, we had electric light and ceased to draw ' light money '.

We had no difficulty in maintaining fresh feed water and consequently the boilers gave insignificant trouble. As we were never in company with another ship, one E.R.A. or officer was normally in charge of the two engine rooms, the communicating door being close to both manœuvring valves, and such watches in the constant Pacific roll could be very monotonous. For entering and leaving harbour a fuller watch was, of course, closed up.

The guns were old six-inch models trained on racers and requiring projecting sponsons on the broadside to get fore and aft training. In the long swell that nearly always exists in the Pacific she rolled just enough, most of the time, for the sponsons on one side to take in water which flowed out of the opposite scuppers. The deck foreward of the poop was seldom dry and as this was the officers' smoking place, gumboots or bare feet were necessary. As in most ships of that period, the wardroom was surrounded by cabins and smoking there was prohibited except on special occasions, or for a short time after dinner.

The ships company except for a few rare changes and a case or two of invaliding, had been together for nearly $3\frac{1}{2}$ years and were passed as a very fine body at the paying off inspection. Such ships companies with the same sense of ' shipmateness ' between every soul on board cannot be repeated nowadays. Serving in the Fleet just before ' Invergordon ' this was very much brought home to me ; one-third of the complement changed every leave period and junior officers were constantly going off on courses. I heard one matelot say, one Sunday morning, ' Who is our Divisional Officer today ?' How will recent and proposed changes and reorganizations affect the position today ?