

Chapter 9 - Attacking the Forts

Cerberus “Attacks” *Nelson* & the Williamstown Batteries – 1872

The first public demonstration of the power of *Cerberus* occurred one year after her arrival. On this occasion *Cerberus* “attacked” the Williamstown Batteries and *Nelson*. Obviously well publicised, 20,000 spectators turned out to view this mock battle. After *Cerberus* had fired her guns 114 times, she retired. At one time during the engagement there was a shot from each cannon every minute & a half.¹¹⁸ The analysis of the battle showed up faults in the positioning of the batteries as *Cerberus* was able to find a position not covered by the shore guns.

The two signalling masts protruded from the bow hawse holes and connected together by a 45 foot spar. Hanging from the spar were six grapnels to catch any torpedoes (mines)¹¹⁹.

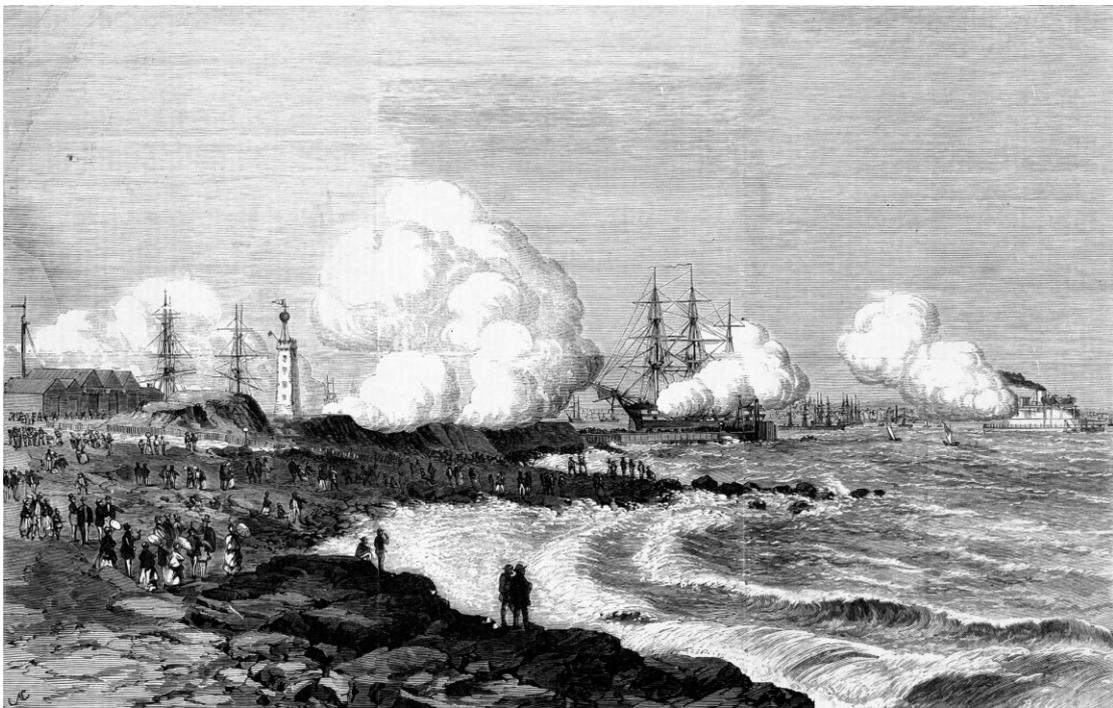


Figure 41 - *Cerberus* Attacking *Nelson* & the Williamstown Batteries in 1872

Illustrated Australian News, 23 April 1872, State Library of Victoria.

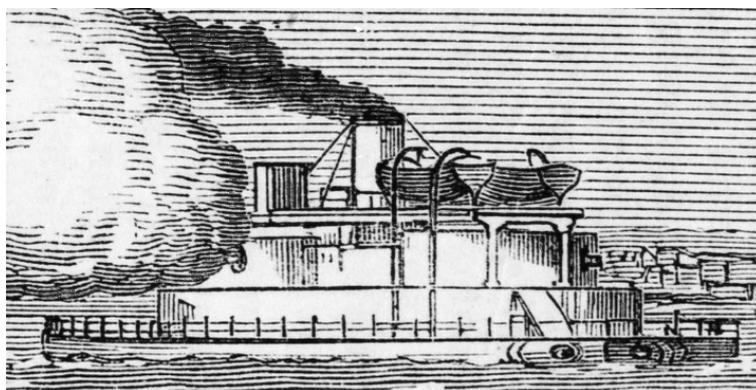


Figure 42 - Detail from Figure 41 showing *Cerberus* stripped of masts.

Running the Gauntlet - 1878

In June 1878, Captain Mandeville proposed taking *Cerberus* two miles past the entrance to Port Phillip and steaming through the Heads at $7\frac{1}{2}$ knots. The intention was to allow the batteries at Point Nepean and Queenscliff to fire at *Cerberus* with their small calibre smooth bore guns, but not with the 80 pounder or 300 pounder rifled guns that might damage the ship. Captain Mandeville pointed out that *Magdala*, the sister ship of *Cerberus*, and *Abyssinia*, did exactly this, annually in Bombay, India, and had never been hit.

Although Chief Secretary (Premier) Berry initially approved Captain Mandeville's proposal, it was eventually abandoned. Objections to the scheme included possible damage to *Cerberus* and the risk of the shore gunners being exposed to a charge of manslaughter, if someone on *Cerberus* was killed. The risk to *Cerberus* from 32 lb shot, even had she been hit, would have been minimal.

Summary

Although the role of the Victorian Navy was to counter an attacking vessel or fleet, *Cerberus* could not undertake any useful practise of this type. The only other vessel available for manoeuvres was the *Nelson*, which could never threaten *Cerberus*. Manoeuvres were therefore limited to actions against Victoria's fixed defences such as gun emplacements and the forts. Although of benefit to those manning the forts, bombarding was of limited benefit as practise for the Victorian Navy. As long as

practising was limited by the absence of other vessels, the resulting lack of interaction and rivalry between the crews of different vessels, meant that *Cerberus* would not be able to effectively develop tactics to deal with an attacking force. Theory was fine, but it needed to be honed by practise. Weaknesses needed to be discovered and then counter measures developed. This was the true limitation of, what was effectively, a one ship navy.