

HMVS CERBERUS:



The Visit of the Russia Squadron

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SUMMARY

In 1881 three Russian warships under Admiral Aslanbegov undertook a goodwill cruise throughout the Pacific Ocean. From the west coast of Canada and the USA the squadron traveled to Hawaii, Tahiti, Auckland, Sydney, Hobart, Melbourne, Glenelg (SA), Albany (WA) and Indonesia. It would appear that the Russians were quite proud of their advanced lightweight boats and decided to test their boats and crew against the navies of other countries.

Sydney

Admiral Aslanbegov's challenge to compete in boat races was taken up by so many teams that it was known as the "International Regatta". There were over 1,000 sailors competing and in the second rowing race there were 17 cutters and whaleboats.

Teams from the following ships competed:

Russian frigate Afrika 
Russian corvette Plastoun 
Russian corvette Vestnik 
German Gunboat M^cwe 
French Survey ship D'Estrees 
HMS Nelson  (New flagship to the British squadron in Australian Waters.)
HMS Wolverine  (Retiring flagship to the British squadron in Australian Waters.)
HMS Emerald 
HMS Miranda 
HMS Cormorant 
HMS Alacrity 
HMS Renard 
HM Schooner Sandfly 
HMS Lark 
HMS Beagle 



Admiral Aslanbegov

The Russian teams won every race except for the Whalers Sailing race.

Hobart

Admiral Aslanbegov issued the same challenge in Hobart but would only race if the crews of the British Warships then in the harbour participated. The British refused to enter the races on the basis that the Russian boats were superior and lighter to their own.

Melbourne

In Melbourne the Russians challenged the locals to the same boat races as in the other colonies. After the Victorian Navy teams defeated the Russian teams the Russians protested that they were at a disadvantage in one of the sailing races as the course was not well marked. The protest was upheld and the race was re-run on the following Saturday with the Victorian teams again taking out first and second place. A challenge was also issued by the defeated Afrika crew to have a second chance at defeating the victorious Cerberus crew, but only if the water was smooth. Unfortunately the water was rough and so the re-match did not eventuate.

Glenelg

The Russians issued no challenges against the locals in Glenelg.

SYDNEY

INTERNATIONAL REGATTA

Sydney Morning Herald January 14 1882

The aquatic proceedings in the harbour yesterday, which were inaugurated by the Russian Admiral, passed off most successfully. When Admiral Aslanbergoff suggested this regatta a few days ago, he met with prompt co-operation from Rear-Admiral Wilson and the commanders of other foreign war cruisers now in harbour. Although it was an entertainment for their own special amusement, still it was one in which the general public appeared to feel an intense degree of interest, because practical boating men and judges of small sailing craft marked the superiority of the Russian boats on Thursday and Friday. British prejudice was disposed to disallow any point in their favour, but the outcome of yesterday's proceedings must at once dissipate any doubt as to the supremacy in these lighter craft, and to verify the predictions of a few local salts who were gravely dubious as to the issue of the various contests which are no longer a matter of doubt.

It will be found from the appended results given below that, both in the sailing and rowing contests, the Russian crews were successful on every occasion excepting one — the sailing race for whalers — in which the crew of the D'Estrees, contesting with one of the most beautifully rigged boats in the world, passed the winning line ahead of the rest by an immense distance. Nothing less than a tug of war could accurately demonstrate superior physique, although, so far as judgement could be formed from outward appearances, there was nothing wanting in the condition of those who proved themselves victors yesterday, so far as rowing was concerned. Undoubtedly, in the race for sailing cutters one of the Nelson's boats would have come off winner easily, for, although one of the last boats to start, she was passing the leading boats one by one, and making rapidly to the front, but in attempting to tack to soon off Fort Macquarie she came hopelessly to grief, much to the relief of Muscovite partizans, whose discrimination enabled them at the outset to mark the Nelson's large boat as the winner. The days results brought slight glory to the British crews, yet it was pleasing to find that the visitors in each instance were warmly applauded by spectators of every nationality, many of them exceeded a righteous sense of fair play by suggesting that there should be a repetition of the afternoon's engagements with an exchange of boats. The Russian Admiral is entitled to every credit for the success which attended the efforts of his men in this impromptu regatta, favoured as they were in the contest by boats of superior design.

The first two events in the sailing section of the programme were started almost simultaneously, the final gun being fired punctually at 2 o'clock. But between the termination of the sailing races and the starting of the rowing ones there was a tedious delay, and the afternoon was far advanced before long strings of competing boats in the rowing lists were towed down to a parallel with Shark Island. These were started off upon firing of a musket, which was discharged for the last four events at given intervals. In consequence of the breeze which prevailed over the waters the distinguishing flag could not be identified even at a reasonable distance without the aid of a good binocular. The following colours adopted by the various competing crews:— Africa, white and red checker; Plasstoun, blue and red; Vestnik, blue and red stripes; D'Estrees, French colours; Moewe, German colours; Wolverene, white with red cross; Nelson, blue; Emerald, green; Miranda, yellow with blue stripe; Cormorant, blue with white cross; Alacrity, white; Renard, red; Sandfly, yellow; Lark, Yellow and blue; Beagle, red and yellow.

The novelty of the competition of this nature between the crews of men-at-war's men of various nations, of course attracted an unusual assemblage of people ashore, who gathered in large numbers in the vicinity of Mrs. Macquarie's chair, whence a good view was obtained of the starting and finishing of the sailing races and the termination of the rowing. A close and oppressive afternoon was rendered more bearable by the freshening influence of a stiff north-easterly breeze, whilst the close proximity of the Afrika enabled people on shore to enjoy the selections so well discoursed at frequent intervals by the Russian band, His Excellency the Governor and Lady Augustus Loftus, Sir John Robertson, and other distinguished visitors, were on board the flagship Afrika, from which a good view of the sports were obtainable. A thunderstorm prevailed for a couple of hours previous to the last race, which terminated at 6.30. Appended results are:—

SAILING RACES		
Course: From Russian flagship round the lightship and back to starting point: six miles.		
	Place	Prize
Cutters		
Afrika ☒ (admiral's cutter)	First	£2
Vestnik ☒	Second	£1 – 5 – 0
Nelson ☒	Third	–
Launches		
Plastoun ☒	First	£2 – 10 – 0
Afrika ☒	Second	£1 – 10 – 0
Whalers		
D'Estrees ■ ■	First	£1 – 0 – 0

British Cruiser
HMS Nelson



Sydney Mail,
January 14 1882

German Gunboat
Moewe



Picture Collection
State Library of Victoria

Russian frigate
Afrika



Australasian Sketcher,
January 28, 1882

British Corvette
HMS Wolverine



Picture Collection
State Library of Victoria

ROWING RACES

To start at the termination of the sailing races course:
From point of Shark Island to Russian flagship: 2 miles.

	Place	Prize
Cutters		
Afrika  (admiral's cutter)	First	£4 – 10 – 0
Nelson 	Second	£2 – 10 – 0
Plastoun 	Third	–
Afrika 	Fourth	–
Möwe 	Fifth	–
Whalers		
Afrika 	First	£2 – 0 – 0
Wolverene 	Second	£1 – 5 – 0
Afrika 	Third	–
Plastoun 	Fourth	–
Vestnik 	Fifth	–
Vestnik 	Sisth	–
Plastoun 	Seventh	–
Launches		
Afrika 	First	£5 – 0 – 0
D'Estrees 	Second	–
Emerald	THird	£5 – 0 – 0
Cutters		
Afrika 	First	£2 – 0 – 0
Vestnik 	Second	–
Plastoun 	Third	–

HOBART

THE ANNUAL REGATTA

Hobart Mercury January 25, 1882

[excerpt]

..... Some disappointment was caused by the races for boats from the ships of war not being rowed. The reason, was as follows:— When Admiral Aslanbegoff was waited upon by the deputation from the Regatta Committee, he allowed boats' crews' from the vessels under his command to enter for competition, provided that boats should also be entered from the English men of war, for, as he expressed it, he would not care, a stranger in a foreign port, to allow his men to take away prizes unless they won them in full competition.

The Englishmen refused to compete, because the Russians rowed in lighter and superior boats to theirs; those attached to the English men—of—war being heavily fitted, and intended for active service only. Under these circumstances, the Russian Admiral, with a delicacy of feeling which cannot but be respected, withdrew his men, as he did not wish them to take prizes unless in friendly competition with the other war vessels.....

MELBOURNE

NAVAL REGATTA IN HOBSON'S BAY

ARGUS February 18 1882

A regatta was held on Saturday last under the auspices of the Victoria Yacht Club and the officers of the Naval Forces, to commemorate the visit of the Russian Squadron to Hobson's Bay. Additional interest was taken in the regatta as the Russian crews had achieved easy victories over their opponents in New South Wales and Tasmania, and so rendered the results of Saturday's contests all the more surprising, as the visitors crews were unable to secure a place in any of the races. The piers at St. Kilda, Sandridge, and Williamstown were thronged with spectators, and the bay itself, notwithstanding the heavy sea and strong southerly wind that prevailed throughout the afternoon, was fairly swarming with craft, steamers, steam pinnaces, yachts, and every description of sailing boat cruising about the scene. A numerous party of ladies and gentlemen was present by invitation on the Nelson, which had been secured as flagship, and their pleasure was greatly enhanced by the playing of the band of the Afrika. Admiral Aslanbegoff visited the flagship at about 3 p.m., and a guard of honour from the Cerberus.

The handsome trophy presented by Mr. J. S. Butters for the race for man-o-war and Government sailing boats was greatly admired. The vase and the salver are of silver and richly chased after the Indian fashion.

Commander Duiker and Lieutenants Alaze, Collins, R.N., and Scott, R.N.R., acted as judge and starters, Mr. A. M. Henderson as timekeeper, and Mr. J. Barker (the hon. Secretary of the V.Y.C.) was indefatigable in his endeavours to promote the general comfort of all.

In order to start the races as fairly as possible a line was stretched from the Nelson to a boat moored some distance off. But this arrangement did not answer very well, as in the first sailing race, owing to the heavy sea, the boat dragged the line, and shortly after the S.S. City of Adelaide, in passing, caught the rope on her propeller, and towed both boat and rope some distance away with her. The boat was brought back and replaced, but the races were afterwards sent off to flying starts. The following is an account of the various events:—

RACE FOR SAILING BOATS.



Illustrated Australian News, February 22 1882

1. Race for Man-of-War and Government Sailing Boats Prize, Benares vase and salver, presented through the Victorian Yacht Club by Mr. J. S. Butters. The course, about six miles, as laid out on day of race, was from the Nelson, round the Success and Dynamite hulks, and back to the flagship; twice round. The start for this was effected at 2h. 22m. 41s. Quickly after the signal gun was fired and the boats were under way, but owing to the mooring anchor having dragged four of the Russian and Customs boats got jammed together, and sailed about 800 yards before getting clear. The Naval Reserve (sailed by Mr. Grimwood) went away with the

lead, closely followed by one of the Russian boats. The latter soon tailed off, and the Customs (sailed by Mr. Herman) drew up and took second place before completing the first round, the rest extending a long distance behind. The official times taken were as under:—

	h	m	s
Naval Reserve 	3	24	45
Customs	3	27	43
Afrika  (cutter)	3	28	0
Afrika  (barge)	3	35	25
Plastoun  (cutter)	3	37	35
Vestnik 	3	40	45
Plastoun  (barge)	3	43	39%

The clever sailing of the Naval Reserve boat was the subject of general remark, Mr. Grimwood being highly praised for the skill he exhibited. A protest was entered by the Russian officers, on the grounds that the start was unsatisfactory and the course was unknown to their crews. A meeting was subsequently held, at which Lieutenant Scott moved, and Lieutenant Collins seconded, "That the protest be allowed, and the race sailed again at 2 o'clock on Wednesday next." After some discussion, the race will therefore be sailed as proposed.

SECOND CLASS YACHT RACE.

2 Race for Victoria Yacht Club Second-class Yachtss. Prize presented through the club by Mr. H.P. Fergile; second prize £3. Course— From Nelson round lightship, flag off St. Kilda pier, wreck buoy Off Sandridge; twice round, finishing at starting line. All marks to be passed on port hand. No. 1 position next Nelson. To be sailed under V.Y.C rules and allowances. The Rory O'More was first off, Minnehaha second, the Payche making a mistake at the start, being left behind. After passing the lightship the Minnehaha overhauled the Rory O'More. In the first round the Minnehaha Passed the flagship at 4h. 11m. 8s. and the Payche at 4h. 11m. 28s. In the last round the Minnehaha gained considerably, the time being:—

	h	m	s
Minnehaha	5	26	27%
Rory O'More	5	40	9
Pache	5	43	46%

The Viking was also entered but did not start.

BRIGHTON AND ST. KILDA YACHT CLUBS.

3. A Race for Boats belonging to Brighton and St. Kilda Clubs. Prize, second Course – same as for V.Y.C. yachts, but once round. Course may be reversed, as boats have to start with the wind. To be sailed under V.Y.C. rules. No allowances. Seven yachts entered for this , but two only came to the scratch, viz, the Zivola, of Brighton, and the Alice, of the St.Kilda Clubs. The Alarm, of the Brighton Club, arriving just too late for the start, which took place at 8h. 21m. 58s. the Zivola winning at 4h.58m. 1% s., the Alice coming in at 4h. 58m. 33%os.

RACE FOR GALLEYS.

4. A race for Man-o-War and Naval Reserve Galleys, six cars. Prize presented by the Victorian Yacht Club. Course— two miles straight, from the Sandridge Town pier to the lightship. Great excitement existed over this and the following events, as it was thought that the Russians possessed very superior boats, and on account of their having been victorious in the rowing races as Sydney and Hobart, but the Victorian crews proved themselves superior to their opponents both in physique and style of polling. The Cerberus gained every stroke from start to finish, and came in nearly 100 yards ahead of the two Reserve crews, who rowed a desperate race for second place, which was ultimately secured by the Williamstown, the Afrika being fourth, Vestnik and Plastoun following. Enthusiastic cheers were given for the winners, and a subscription was made on board the flagship for presentation to them.

Cerberus 	1
Williamstown Naval Reserve 	2
Sandridge do. 	0
Afrika 	0
Vestnik 	0
Plastoun 	0

SHIPS' GIGS RACE

5. A race for Ships' Gigs, 6 oars. Prize presented by the Victorian Yacht Club. Course— From Nelson round wreck buoy off Sandridge, and back. Only three crews entered for this, which was won easily by the representatives of the Connaught Ranger, with the Blair Drummond second, and the Drumlanrig third.

RACE FOR THE CUTTERS



Illustrated Australian News, February 22 1882

6. Race for Man-o-war and Naval Reserve Cutters. 12 oars. Prize presented by the Victorian Yacht Club. Course— From the Sandridge Town pier to the lightship. This was the race of the day. One of the principal features of this race was the appearance of the eight crews as they waited the signal to start with the oars on end in the usual man-o-war style, and the instant the gun was fired being dropped into the rowlocks, a splendid struggle again taking place between the crews of the Cerberus and the Williamstown and Sandridge Naval Reserves, the Russian crews being as in the other races left far in the rear. All the boats got well away at the start, the Cerberus and the Nelson rowing stroke and stroke for more than half the course, very closely followed by the two Reserve crews, the others gradually dropping behind. Greater pluck and determination were never witnessed in a boat race. Every man in the boats appeared to exert himself to the utmost, and notwithstanding the heavy sea and strong wind against them. The form displayed was remarkably good, the swing and the dip of the oars being as regular as clockwork. The official times taken as the boats passed the flagship will show the close positions of the first four boats:—

	h	m	s	place
Cerberus 	5	57	28 $\frac{0}{100}$	1
Nelson 	5	57	37	2
Williamstown Naval Reserve 	5	57	39	3
Sandridge Naval Reserve 	5	58	21 $\frac{0}{100}$	0
Afrika 	6	0	38 $\frac{0}{100}$	0
Do. 	6	1	15 $\frac{3}{4}$	0
Plastoun 	6	5	12 $\frac{0}{100}$	0
Vestnik 	6	5	24 $\frac{0}{100}$	0

in which order the boats finished.

This brought the programme to a very satisfactory conclusion. The committee and other officers were very deservedly complimented upon the manner in which the arrangements of the regatta had been carried out.

THE NAVAL REGATTA: THE CUTTER RACE

The Australasian Sketcher February 1882



Insert: The Admiral watching the contests.

We notice elsewhere the Naval Regatta, which was held in Hobson's Bay on February 11. The race delineated by our artist is the Cutter Race, in which there were eight boats engaged. The Cerberus men came in winners, and the Nelson were second, the crews of the Russian men-of-war making but a very poor show in the race. In our engraving the Cerberus men are leading, and the Nelson boat second. The official times taken as the boat passed the flagship will show the close positions of the first four boats.

Cerberus  5h. 57m. 28 $\frac{0}{100}$ s., 1;
 Nelson,  5h. 57m. 37s., 2;
 Williamstown  Naval Reserve, 5h. 57m. 39s., 3;
 Sandridge  Naval Reserve, 5h. 58m. 21 $\frac{0}{100}$ s., 0;
 Afrika,  6h. 0m. 38 $\frac{0}{100}$ s., 0;
 Afrika,  6h. 1m. 15 $\frac{3}{4}$., 0;
 Plastoun,  6h. 5m. 12 $\frac{0}{100}$ s., 0;
 Vestnik,  6h. 5m. 24 $\frac{0}{100}$ s., 0;

in which order the boats finished.

NAVAL SAILING RACE IN HOBSON'S BAY

The Herald February 3, 1882

Owing to the protest entered by the Russian Admiral at the conclusion of the sailing match in Saturday's regatta, the race was ordered to be sailed over again yesterday afternoon. A challenge was also issued on the part of the Afrika's defeated crew to row the victorious Cerberus crew again, stipulating however that the race should take place in smooth water. This was assented to by Captain Fullarton, and it was arranged that the race should take place yesterday afternoon. The fresh southerly breeze which set in after dinner dispelled any hope of rowing races taking place, but the weather was all that could be wished for to make the sailing event attractive from a racing point of view.

Shortly after 2 p.m., the seven boats which competed in last Saturday, viz, four Russian and three Victorian ---the Naval Reserve and Customs boats, and Nelson--- were moored in line from East to West ahead of Nelson; the Afrika's cutter to windward, the Customs to leeward of the fleet, with all sails down. The course was the same as that of last Saturday, but was more distinctly marked.

It was run before the wind to the White pillar buoy, on jibbing round which the competing flotilla would have the wind on their quarter til the first hulk was reached below the Eliza wreck buoy, from thence it would be on the beam to the powder bulf; from there to the flagship a close haul, causing sheets to be flattened in to the finish. Twice round. The seven boats being all held in leash from a warp with their heads bearing direct on the course, were sent away by a gun from the Nelson at 2h 38m, all getting their sails up very quick and away together, the Naval Reserve under cover of the Afrika's cutter. She however managed to creep out in front and led the flotilla down to the mark, on rounding which also was fouled by the Customs, unshipping her rudder and causing her to breech to. She was immediately covered and hampered by the Africa's cutter and Plastoun's barge, both of which seemed to jam fairly on her gunwales, filling her nearly up to the thwarts in water. Blows were exchanged between her crew and the Russians, and those of the latter who put their hands on the T***** they had caught in their embrace had rather a lively time of it, judging from the way they seemed to fall back to the opposite side of their boats. They, however, succeeded, although possibly not their intention, in turning the Cerberus boat end for end, and it was full five minutes before she was once more on her course. Meanwhile the Plastoun's No.1 barge, followed by the Customs and Afrika cutter, led round the hulk Success, the other boats in a cluster. Once fairly under way it could be seen from her going that the Naval Reserve boat's time in the rear was going to be very short, for she seemed to run through the fleet as if she was being spirited along by some unseen influence. Making a ludicrous board towards the mouth of the Yarra, she came right out on the weather of the fleet, sufficient to fetch the Nelson in one board, completing the first round nearly half-a-mile in advance of the second boat, The Plastoun's barge, the Customs being close up, having crossed the bow of the latter too late to tack in time. At this juncture there was $\frac{3}{4}$ of a minute between the first and second boat; the Afrika's cutter, Nelson and the flotilla being altogether out of the race. In the run down to the Success the Customs reduced the lead of the Plastoun barge by 25 seconds, and from this point seemed to improve her going.

The Naval Reserve, continuing to increase her lead rapidly throughout the 2nd round, ultimately passed the winning boat at 3hr.34min.10‰ seconds; the Customs, which had rapidly overhauled and passed the Plastoun's cutter, at 3hr. 40min.58‰ sec. The Plastoun's cutter could not fetch the weather of mark boat, and gave up--- the rest of the fleet being altogether disgraced.

The winning boat was admirably sailed by Mr.Grimwood, and although her sail area was much smaller than any of her competitors, she seemed to dance away from them in the most nay manner. The large lug of the Customs boats did not seem to set till near the completion of the last round, and it seems almost a surprise why such a fine boat did not sail better in such a breeze.

The Russians have splendid boats, with small comparative displacement, but their short hollow entrance is unsuitable to the broken groundswell of Hobson's Bay. Their rowing boats are still better, but they are evidently too light to carry their way in a head sea in broken water, but, in any case, their men are no match for the Cerberus crew, and it would be very difficult to find a match for them in an open boat.

RESEARCH

We are indebted to the Newspaper Section of the State Library of Victoria for allowing the use of many of their images.

Cover image *Illustrated Australian News*, January 25 1882.

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John Rogers
