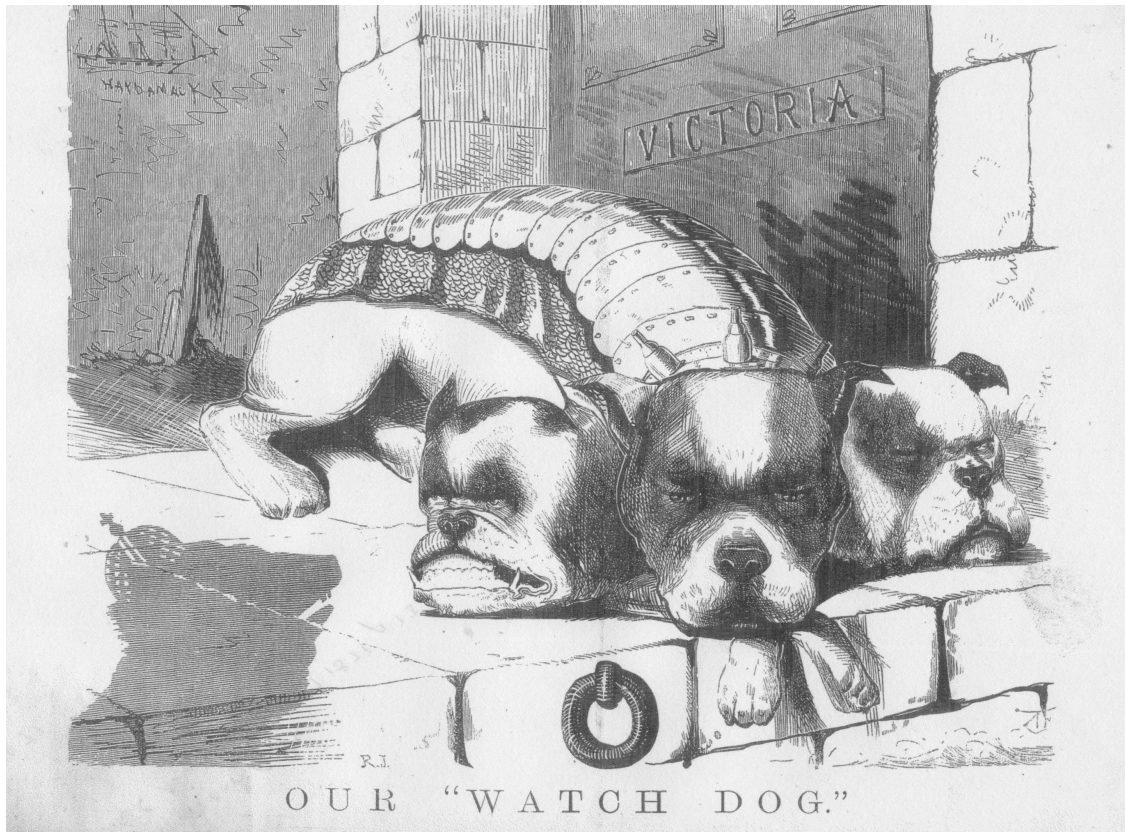# H.M.V.S. CERBERUS



**A snarling Cerberus keeps the Russian bear at bay.**[1]

# "Guarding the Entrance to Victoria"



a "National Heritage Place"
www.cerberus.com.au

Named after the fearsome three headed dog of Greek mythology, the monitor HMVS[2] Cerberus is arguably the world's most important accessible shipwreck. Launched in 1868, at the Palmer Shipbuilding Company Works on the Tyne River in the UK, just six years after the USS Monitor, Cerberus was one of the most powerful and revolutionary warships the world had ever seen - the forerunner of all modern battleships. Today, the wreck of the HMVS Cerberus lies in just 3 metres of water off the beach at Half Moon Bay in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria. The ship's lower iron hull is in an advanced state of collapse after 78 years battling the elements as a breakwater. In contrast the upper half of the hull, which is up to eight inches thick, has only last a few millimetres over the same period.

A frightening product of the Industrial Revolution, Cerberus was the world's first truly integrated modern "battleship", or capital ship, a radical departure from the wooden and iron hulled warships that had previously dominated the navies of the world. Drawing inspiration from the USS Monitor, Edward Reed improved upon the monitor design with a range of successful innovations, the most important of which was the raised central superstructure or armoured breastwork. This eight inch thick armoured Shield deck provided superior protection and seaworthiness, while allowing the two rotating turrets to move and fire while under steam, greatly enhancing manoeuvrability and fighting capacity. It is the great strength of the ship's armoured belt that makes it possible to save Cerberus 139 years after her launch. Cerberus was not only the world's first breastwork monitor, she was also the first British warship to dispense with sails, the first to have a low profile and the first to have fore and aft rotating Coles turrets mounted on a central superstructure.

Vulnerable because of the great distance from the closest British warships in Sydney and after unannounced visits by foreign warships an increasingly nervous government of the recently separated colony of Victoria sought permission from London to acquire a warship. The steam sloop HMCS Victoria was purchased in 1862 but its legal status was only clarified in 1865 with the passage in Britain of the Colonial Naval Defence Act. Only now did colonies have the legal right to maintain a naval force and hence from then on used the designation HMVS. Next came the loan of an ex Line-of-Battleship, HMS Nelson, arriving in Victoria in 1868. It was on board Nelson that the Victorian flag was first flown on February 9 1870. Basically the same as the current Australian flag but without the federation star, the original Victoria flag was also flown by Cerberus while transiting the Suez Canal in December 1870. Interestingly one newspaper[3] referred to Cerberus as "hoisting the Australian flag".

Although Captain Panter probably exaggerated the danger involved in the delivery voyage once Cerberus had cleared the Bay of Biscay, the trip was nevertheless momentous in being such a long voyage for a monitor class vessel. Having been designed and built specifically for a shallow bay, Cerberus had no keel, thereby rendering her unsuitable for blue water use. Being confined to a bay meant that Cerberus would never be far from coal supplies and this, combined with the limited finances of a small colony, meant that savings on manpower could be made by dispensing with sail power. Cerberus was, for the above reasons, the first British warship powered purely by steam.

Learning from the limitations of the USS Monitor, Edward James Reed, the designer, placed the two gun turrets so that they protruded from the top of a second deck known as the Breastwork Deck. This central superstructure, covered with eight inches of armour, meant that those steering the ship, rotating the turrets and passing ammunition into the turrets were protected within this Shield Deck.

Once in Victoria, Cerberus settled into a routine of maintenance, exercising and manœuvres so as to be prepared for any hostile forces that might arrive. Although often criticised a century later for infrequent exercising, Cerberus in fact exercised more often than did the then all powerful British Navy. "In summer about once in six weeks; in winter, once a quarter…..and that is more than is allowed in the Imperial ships."[4] The Victorian Navy, or as the British insisted it by called, The Naval Forces of Victoria, was considered the exception to the rule for colonial navies,[5] which were usually judged as mediocre. As far as their proficiency was concerned, their accuracy with shot, shell and torpedoes was

very high. "It may be mentioned that the average of 'dead hits' in firing torpedoes in the Victorian service is over 60% higher than in the Imperial."[6]

Due to the public's interest and incredible pride in their colonial navy, Easter and other Manœuvres were extensively covered by the local press, whose representatives accompanied the fleet to the Heads and back. Lengthy reports gave intricate details of life on board and what exercises were carried out. Whether it was shot and shell practise, descriptions of the mock battles between the torpedo boats and the flagship or simply humorous anecdotes, extensive newspaper coverage ensured that Victorians were reassured of the ability of their fleet to protect them. When technological advances enabled photographs to be printed in newspapers, the fourth issue of *The Australasian*[7] to do so, carried a full page spread of various drills on the ship. That interest in Cerberus was not just of novelty value is demonstrated by her having been in Pt Phillip Bay for 23 years by this time. In the 1890's news replaced classified advertising on the front page of newspapers. Under the heading "Voice from the Deep, Cruise of the Cerberus", manœuvres then became front page news.[8] That this again was not novelty value is obvious as Cerberus had been exercising in Pt Phillip Bay for 27 years by then.
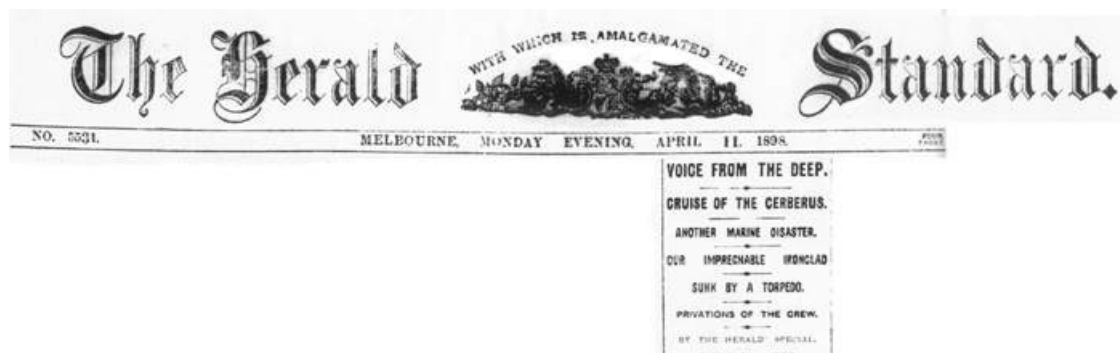


As 2008 marks 102 years since Cerberus stopped steaming around Pt Phillip Bay, there is no-one left alive who would remember the degree of respect in which the ship and her crew were held. Writing around 1917 Florence Pollitt wrote:-

> "…there was not a sounder ship afloat. There was not a ship along the coast that did not dip its flag to the flagship. The girls were thrilled when they saw her steaming up the bay."[9]

In 1871, a petition by numerous churches, was presented to the Chief Secretary stating that the petitioners "look with deep regret upon the opening of the *Cerberus* for inspection on the Lord's Day, as an unnecessary infringement of the Divine sacredness of that day, and a temptation deliberately offered to its profanation."[10] Countering this, a second petition with 20,343 signatures was presented to the Colonial government. It requested that Cerberus should remain open to the public on Sundays. Almost as an afterthought, the petition asked that the Public Library and the Museum should also consider opening on Sundays.[11] Cerberus stayed open but the Public Library and Museum had to wait at least another 10 years.

When Cerberus exercised off Williamstown in 1872, 20,000 people (10% of Melbourne's population) turned out to watch this marvel of the modern technological age. When Cerberus travelled to Geelong in 1871 special trains were put on to bring people in from country towns. So popular was Victoria's watch dog that her stay in Geelong had to be extended by two weeks. It was estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 Geelong and Western District residents had inspected Cerberus while she was in Geelong. One can only guess at the percentage of Victoria's population that visited Cerberus over the next 34 years of her active service.

When a Russian squadron paid a good will visit throughout the Pacific during 1880-1, the Victorian Navy was challenged to six mile, two hour rowing races. The Russians had been victorious against British, German and French naval crews in Sydney. In Hobart the British Navy crews had refused to compete, but not so the Victorian Navy in Melbourne. There was great pride when, led by the Cerberus crew, the four Victorian Navy teams defeated the four Russian teams.

> "Our stout lads were something different as opponents to the (British ship) Nelson's youths. Australian beef & mutton are rare promoters of muscular fibre. All things considered it was no marvel that our men came off easy victors.  Not that their competitors are to be set aside as unworthy. Right sturdy fellows are they, strong & brave; & next to the pleasure I have derived at our complete triumph is my regret for their thorough defeat.
>
> But it was necessary to show the Russians that it did not follow because they whipped the raw youngsters of the Nelson in the waters at Port Jackson, they were going to do the like with our broad shouldered jolly boys. It would, indeed, have been a sad humiliation had we been thrashed. And all the more pride, therefore, may we justly feel in the result of the fight. The ringing shouts which echoed long & loud from the excited spectators told how strong was the interest in the contest."[12]

An Australian identity can be seen developing twenty years prior to federation with local factors seen as giving Australians an advantage over those from the Old Country.

When in 1877 a Russian attack was thought possible, Cerberus was placed on a war footing. In 1888 there was great activity at Williamstown by the Naval authorities, when both telegraph cables to Europe were cut. Before the church bells stopped ringing on Sunday morning, the entire fleet was in readiness. Two days later Nelson joined Cerberus, Victoria, Albert, Childers, Lonsdale, Nepean and Gordon at the entrance to Pt. Phillip Bay. In 1890 Cerberus was again sent to the Heads when both cables were again broken.

While the significance of HMVS Cerberus to Australia's maritime heritage is undisputable, as the world's only remaining ironclad monitor, she is attracting interest from maritime experts around the world. Recently travelling to Australia to inspect Cerberus for the second time, John Broadwater, chief archaeologist for NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary Program, and former Program Manager for the USS Monitor salvage operation, has called on Australian authorities to do all they can to save what is one of the world's most important naval vessels. "Constructed only six years after our USS Monitor, and possessing greatly improved design innovations, such as its elevated breastwork deck and dual rotating turrets, HMVS Cerberus not only exhibits a direct link with USS Monitor in terms of warship design evolution, but many would argue, was in fact, the blueprint for modern warship design. Her significance is all the greater given that she is the world's only surviving breastwork monitor warship", comments Dr. Broadwater.  Mike Weidenbach, Curator of the Battleship Missouri Memorial expresses a similar sentiment, "The HMVS Cerberus is clearly of tremendous historical importance not only to Australia but to Maritime history in general, and most significantly from our perspective in relation to the design evolution of battleships; of which Missouri may be said to be a worthy and direct descendant of Cerberus".

In addition to being the first British warship to have its conning tower and vitals protected by an armoured breastwork/citadel. Steam was not only used to propel Cerberus but was also used throughout the ship for rotating the gun turrets, raising the anchor, ventilating the ship, hoisting ashes from the stoke hole and pumping water out of the double bottom. After her arrival in Australia, Cerberus was also fitted with a hydraulic steam steering system. The steam powered machinery greatly reducing the manpower needs of the vessel on a small colonial navy. Other technical innovations and improvements followed, some, such as Dann's torpedo dropping gear and Brennan torpedoes, were

pioneered in Victoria and later adopted by the British Navy. Morse code, electric search lights, Gatling, Nordenfelt and Quick Firing guns, torpedo nets, Morris tubes were all introduced by a constantly evolving Navy. Increases in boiler and engine capacity meant that the top speed of Cerberus increased 25% to 12.4 knots.[13] Boasting armour 6 inches thick on her hull, 8 inches thick on her breastwork, and 10 inches thick on her turrets and conning tower, not to mention four muzzle loading 10 inch guns, HMVS Cerberus was a formidable defensive coastal monitor, easily a match for any warship likely to appear at Melbourne's port.

Even in 1908 when Cerberus was no longer capable of raising steam she was towed into position so as to fire the salute to the visiting US Great White Fleet[14]. When plans were announced to scuttle Cerberus outside the Heads, protests ensured that this was prevented. A decision was subsequently made to scuttle her, in a still visible state, within Pt Phillip Bay.

When the active career of Cerberus was about to officially end in 1909, sentiment dictated that she be towed to Queenscliff to participate in the Easter Manoeuvres one last time. Fittingly Captain Panter, who had brought the old watchdog out from the U.K. 38 years earlier, was invited to accompany old flat-top down the Bay one last time.[15] Naturally the event was covered by the daily newspapers.

When about to be scuttled in 1926 The Herald reported:-

> "Aptly named, the old ship prowled around the bay for half a century, a watchdog with fearful barks from her 18 ton muzzle loaders, a veritable 'Old Ironside.' She was the cradle of the fleet - the nursery where two generations of sailors learned their art and craft."[16]

Cerberus, Melbourne's watchdog, guarded Port Phillip Bay for 50 years, the flagship of both the Victorian Colonial Navy, and later the Australian Navy when it was formed in 1901. Declared surplus to the Navy's requirements in 1924 Cerberus was sold to a salvage company and stripped of any fixtures of value (flying deck, funnel, machinery etc) eventually being purchased for use as a breakwater by a suburban council. She was scuttled in September 1926 at a Melbourne beach and has remained there ever since. Her profile became a familiar local landmark. Whether by accident or by design, Cerberus, which drew 15 feet of water, was scuttled in the same depth. The resulting effect was of a ship steaming by rather than that of a shipwreck.

Even though the Victorian Navy could send 16 ships down the bay to confront an attacking force, all but Cerberus have been forgotten. The stories, most of which have changed over the years, haven't though. Many stories about Victoria's forgotten navy and land defences are now attributed to Cerberus. Even though it was a shot from Nelson that landed in St Kilda, the myth quotes Cerberus as the offender.[17] When the building of Pope's Eye fort was abandoned, it was suggested that the stonework horseshoe could be utilised by one of the armed hopper barges for protection.[18] Nevertheless the resulting story is that the Pope's Eye Annulus was built for Cerberus. Sailors from Cerberus are said to have been stationed at Princes Bridge during the 1863 flood to save those washed down the Yarra.[19] Given that the flood occurred eight years before Cerberus arrived in Victoria, the sailors would have been from HMCS Victoria. When a shell exploded over Queenscliff beach in 1882, sailors from Cerberus were blamed.[20] That Cerberus was docked at the time and that the shell was fired by a detachment of the Emerald-hill Artillery has been forgotten. Even the shifting in position of the J7 submarine[21] when scuttled is confused with Cerberus which "sank almost imperceptibly, going down slightly by the stern".[22] That so many stories persist about Cerberus more than 80 years after her scuttling speaks volumes about the importance of Victoria's Watchdog to generations of Victorians.

Proposals have come and gone to save Cerberus in the intervening years. Regretfully, in December 1993 a storm triggered the collapse of her hull making it next to impossible to refloat and relocate her to another site.

Marine engineers have completed two reports on the feasibility of preserving Cerberus. They conclude that she can still be stabilised by lifting her from above and placing her on an underwater cradle. However, time is short as she is in danger of total collapse from the failure of her main deck beams to support the weight of her two turrets - they weigh approximately 200 tons each! To ease the weight pressing down on her remaining hull structure her main armament of four 10-inch ML guns were removed in March 2005.  Each gun weighing 18 tons that equates to a combined weight of 72 tons.

Cerberus was successfully nominated by *Friends of the Cerberus Inc* in conjunction with the *National Trust of Victoria* for the Australian National Heritage List. This is the highest heritage list within Australia and is reserved for items of outstanding value to Australia's history and heritage. A total of $7 million is required to save Cerberus, the first modern battleship and the last monitor class warship.

In July 2008 a campaign conducted by *Friends of the Cerberus*, with the support of *Heritage Victoria*, the *National Trust of Victoria*, thousands of individuals and numerous community groups, achieved one of its goals. Peter Garrett, the Federal Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts, announced that the Federal government had allocated $500,000 towards stabilising Cerberus. The funds are currently being held by the National Trust of Victoria. Should the State government also make a significant contribution then the turrets and breastwork, which are close to crashing through the upper deck, would be able to be stabilised. The next task would be to obtain the funds necessary to raise Cerberus onto a supporting platform. The future is finally looking good for the old watchdog.

[1] *Melbourne Punch*, 27 April 1871

[2] Her Majesty's Victorian Ship

[3] *The Argus*, 10 April 1871.

[4] *Royal Commission on the Volunteer Forces*, Papers Presented to Parliament, 1875-6 Vol 3.

[5] *A Naval Officer in the Pacific: The Journal of James Hay*, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Newsletter, Series 5, No. 17.

[6] *The Age,* 19 April 1892

[7] *The Australasian*, 31 March 1894

[8] *The Herald*, 11 April 1898

[9] *Letter about Cerberus crewmember, John Peerless*, by Florence Pollitt c 1917

[10] *To the Ministers of Religion in Victoria*, Letter & petition to the Chief Secretary objecting to the opening of HMVS Cerberus on a Sunday, Macartney, H. B (State Library of Victoria)

[11] *The Argus*, 28 October 1871

[12] *The Herald*, 13 February, 1882

[13] *The Age,* April 14 1900

[14] *Autobiographical Recollections of a Naval Reserve Office, Cmdr. R. S. Veale,* John M Wilkins & R Veale 1997.

[15] *The Argus*, 12 April 1909

[16] *The Herald*, 8 June 1926

[17] *The Age,* 12 November 1877

[18] *The Argus* April 21 1890

[19] *Melbourne - Biography of a City*, W.H. Newnman.

[20] *Early Memories of Queenscliff*, D.O.D. Self Published, Geelong 1931

[21] *Encyclopedia of Australian Shipwrecks*,  http://oceans1.customer.netspace.net.au/portphillip-main.html

[22] *The Argus*, 3 September 1926