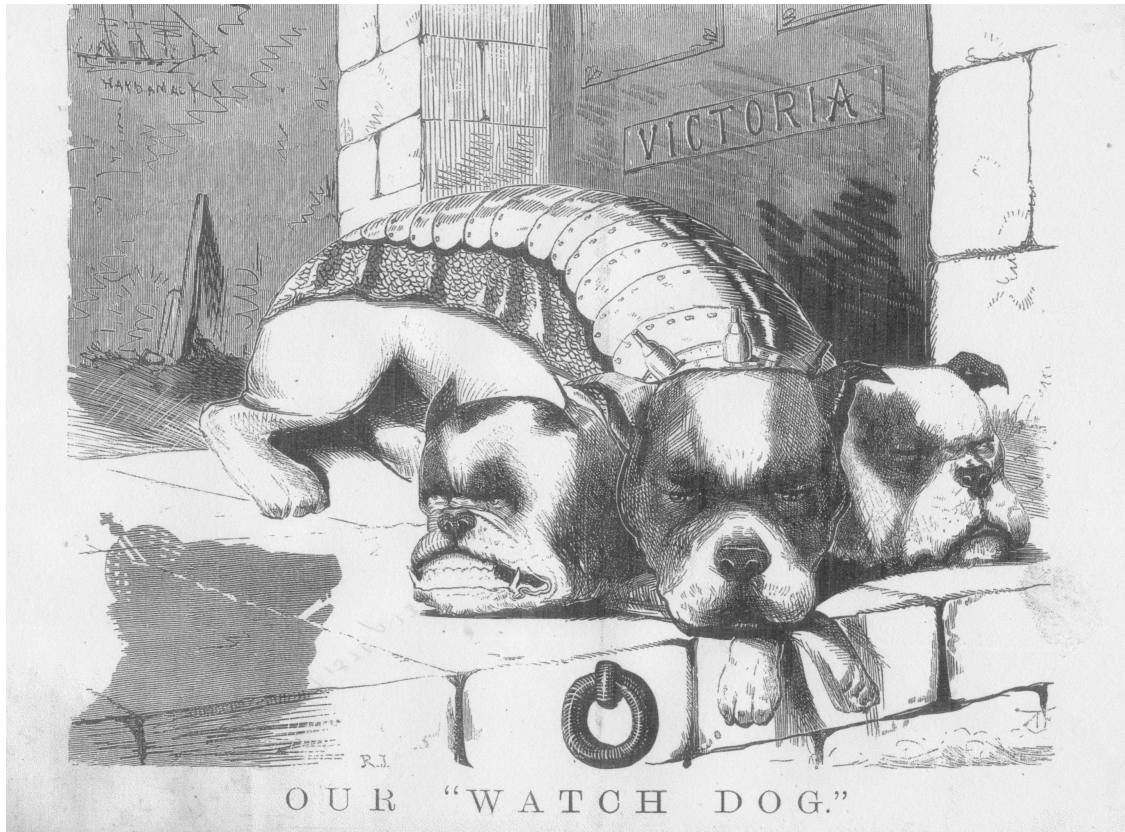


H.M.V.S. CERBERUS



A snarling Cerberus keeps the Russian bear at bay.¹

“A MONITOR DOWNUNDER”


Save the Cerberus

a “National Heritage Place”

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.”ⁱⁱ

Named after the fearsome three headed dog in Greek mythology, the ironclad HMVS 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, she 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 15 feet of water off an Australian suburban beach, her lower iron hull in an advanced state of collapse after 78 years battling the elements as a breakwater.

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 her raised central superstructure or armoured breastwork. This eight inch thick armoured belt provided superior protection and seaworthiness, while allowing her dual rotating turrets to move and fire while under steam, greatly enhancing manoeuvrability and fighting capacity. It is the great strength of this 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.

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 HMVS Nelson joined HMVS 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 broken a second time.

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, Cerberus was the first to be purely powered by steam, used not only for propulsion, but also 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, she was also fitted with a hydraulic steam steering system. This steam powered machinery greatly reducing the manpower needs of the vessel on a small colonial navy. Other technical innovations and improvements followed, many of which were later adopted by the British Navy, including Morse code, electric search lights, Gatling, Nordenfelt and Quick Firing guns, torpedo nets, Morris tubes and increases in boiler and engine capacity. 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.

Specifically designed for a shallow Port Phillip Bay and the limited manpower needs of a small colonial navy HMVS Cerberus was at the cutting edge of modern 1860's technology. Cerberus was commissioned by the Colony of Victoria to protect the city of Melbourne from foreign attack. A very real prospect considering that the nearest British fleet was based in Sydney, and that a third of the world's gold production came out the city's nearby goldfields. The colony faced hundreds of war scares, unannounced visits by Russian, French and American warships, as well as Russian contingency plans to attack the city with fast cruisers, destroy coastal shipping and obtain gold bullion on threat of bombardment. That both Cerberus and the recently restored HMS Warrior never fired shots in anger can be seen as proof of their formidable nature, since attacking such powerful and fortified ships could be viewed as foolhardy in the extreme.

Cerberus, Melbourne's watchdog, prowled 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 she 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 becoming a local landmark - she was run aground on a sandbank and remained at her normal waterline level.

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.

Note: HMVS stands for Her Majesty's Victorian Ship

ⁱ *Melbourne Punch*, 27 April 1871

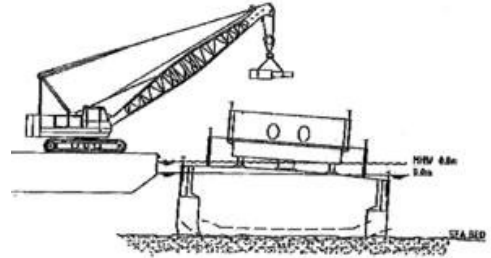
ⁱⁱ *The Herald*, 8 June 1926

The Plan to Raise & Stabilise Cerberus.

Step 1 (Guns off)

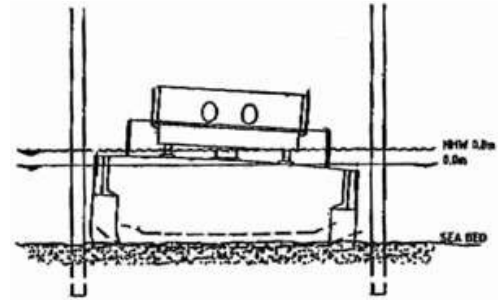
A barge with crane would moor alongside Cerberus and lift the four 18 ton guns from the turrets. The guns would be stored on the seafloor which would help leach salt from them. They would be returned to the ship during step 3.

Completed March 2005



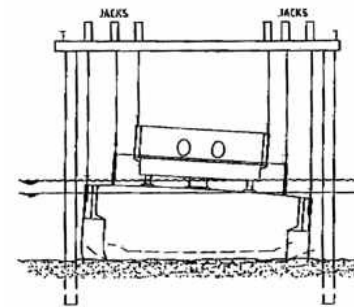
Step 2 (Beams on & Piles in)

A crane is used to lift longitudinal beams into place which are bolted to the 8" armour plating belt on the main deck, breastwork and turrets. A second barge is used to drive piles into the seafloor along both sides of the ship.

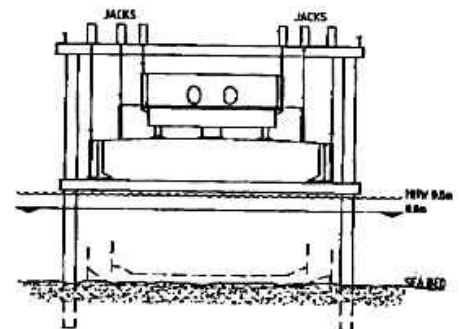


Step 3a (Raise and Stabilise)

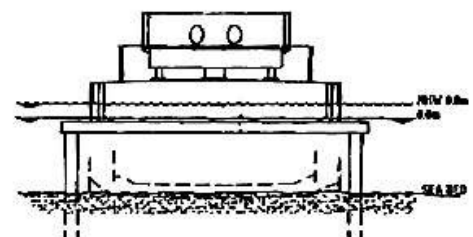
Finally the overhead jacking frame is constructed and jacks fitted.



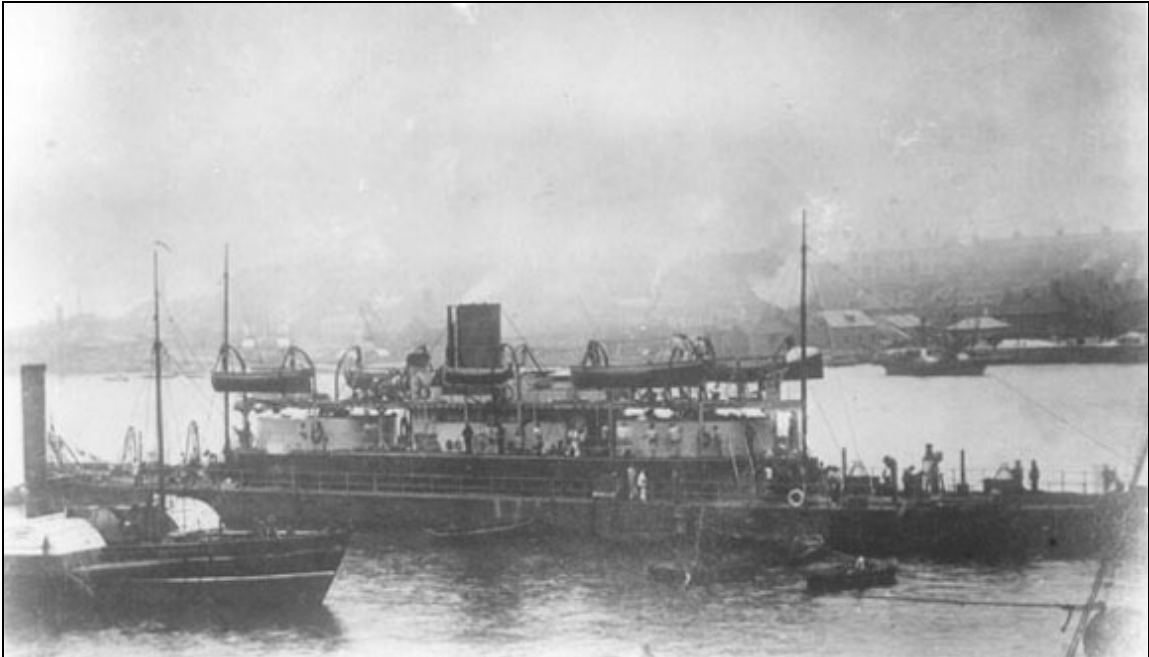
Next the ship is raised higher than required so that the substructure of supporting beams can be installed under the ship.



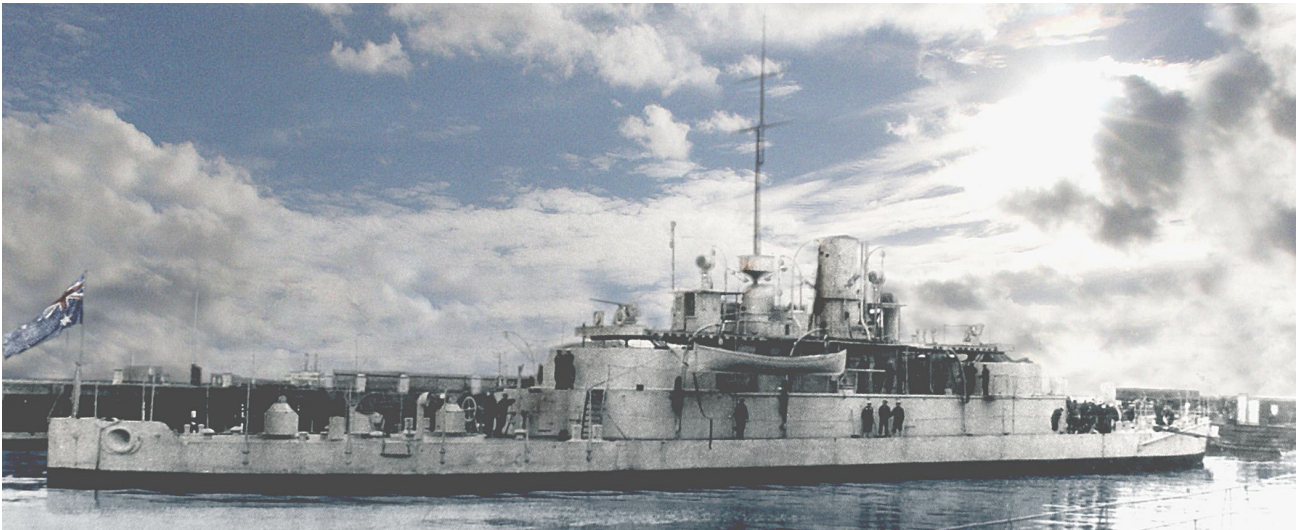
Lastly the ship is lowered onto the supporting frame. The overhead jacking frame is removed and the piles are cut off below the waterline. The guns are then returned to the ship.



Photographs



Cerberus on the river Tyne (1869)
photo – Adrian Vicary, Maritime Photo Agency



Cerberus flying the Australian flag (after 1903)
Photo courtesy of the Museum of HMAS Cerberus. Colourised by Kade Rogers.



Before collapse on 27 December 1993
Photo courtesy of the National Trust of Victoria



Cerberus in 2006

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