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Before and after the 1994 winter gale. Weakened after years of corrosion the rusting hull of the Cerberus finally succumbed to the elements during a fierce 1994 winter gale.

MAAV Photos: Peter Charlesworth.

See MAAV Cerberus Project report.

http://www.users.bigpond.com/eric_l/HMVSCERBERUS.htm

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Last-ditch bid to save a piece of naval history

By DENISE GADD

Three million dollars is urgently needed to save the flagship of the Victorian Navy, HMVS Cerberus, the last surviving colonial flagship.

Heritage Victoria has asked the State Government for \$3 million to stabilise HMVS Cerberus, which could break up at any time.

An engineering feasibility study commissioned by Heritage Victoria shows the former ironclad monitor, resting on the bottom in Black Rock's Half Moon Bay, is buckling under its own weight.

"Cerberus now has a finite time, maybe five to 10 years rather than 50 to 100 years. So she could last five years or go in five minutes. Its one of those things unless she's propped up," a Heritage Victoria spokesman said.

Regular laser monitoring since 1994 of the movement of the Cerberus's rusting hulk by the wreck's owner, Bayside Council, confirms that the landmark is sinking and listing seaward.

The Victorian Government commissioned the Cerberus in 1866 to protect Melbourne from a Russian invasion. Despite being powerfully armed she never fired a shot in anger.

Cerberus was a prototype, a low-profile metal vessel, in contrast to the wooden warships of the day.

The remnants of only two ships from Victoria's grand colonial navy survive: the figurehead of the Nelson in Sydney and the hull of the Cerberus, named after the three-headed dog in Greek mythology that guarded the entrance to the underworld.

The Heritage Victoria spokesman said a corrosion expert from the Western Australian Maritime Museum concluded in 1998 that damage to the hull was beyond repair.

"This showed that it was no longer feasible to consider Cerberus as a whole artifact any more, so the first priority is to keep it from catastrophic collapse," the spokesman said.

"We need to prop it up underneath so the most important bits, like the iron cladding and armaments, don't sink to the bottom."

The National Trust campaigned in 1996 for \$10 million to jack up the Cerberus, partially restore her, create Cerberus Island and link the vessel to a shore-based visitor and education centre with a pedestrian bridge. But the proposal proved too expensive.

"It's been an unfortunate series of events that the scale and cost needed to restore the Cerberus has probably been five years in advance of where that kind of funding for heritage projects was being envisaged. Back when they needed \$100,000 there was only about \$10,000 in the entire state budget for heritage purposes," the spokesman said.

There have been many rescue attempts over the past 35 years, including a pledge in 1970 by then Victorian premier Sir Henry Bolte to save the Cerberus and a public appeal in 1972 to raise \$250,000 to tow her to a new site.

A similar idea was put forward in 1985 to tow the Cerberus to a permanent mooring, preferably next to the Polly Woodside, restore her and open her to the public to mark the bicentenary and the 75th anniversary, in 1986, of the Royal Australian Navy.

It was the closest that Cerberus supporters, including Prince Philip, who saw the ship when he visited Sandringham in 1970, the National Trust, RSL, naval historians and maritime trusts came to victory.

Bob Hawke was then prime minister. He lived close to Half Moon Bay where the Cerberus was scuttled in 1926 to serve out her days as a breakwater.

Mr Hawke supported the project but the then treasurer Paul Keating "snapped shut the purse", according to Bayside mayor and Cerberus supporter Graeme Disney.

"I'm staggered that we can care so little for such a vital part of our history. The Cerberus is the most outstanding exponent of transition from colony to federated nation. If it was in America the ship would be a national monument."

A glimmer of hope has come from the Australian Heritage Commission in Canberra, which last year told Bayside Council that it had upgraded the HMVS Cerberus statement of significance.

Heritage Victoria's \$3 million bid to fund a pier or wharf to support the pre-Federation superstructure is before the Executive Review Committee, a cabinet subcommittee.

HMVS CERBERUS 1870-?

- 1866** Commissioned from eminent British naval architect Sir E.J.Reed for the sum of 125,000 pounds.
- 1867** Laid down.
- 1870** The 3340-ton ship was launched and left England.
- 1871** Arrived in Port Phillip Bay after 123 days at sea.
- 1871-1901** Served in the Victorian Navy.
- 1896-1901** Flagship of the Victorian Navy until Federation.
- 1914-1918** HMVS Cerberus's career was revived as a guard ship for Port Phillip Bay and a storage facility for ammunition and explosives.
- 1921** Renamed HMAS Playpus II and used as a submarine depot for six J-Class submarines.
- 1924** Withdrawn from service and sold for scrap.
- 1926** Bought by the Black Rock Yacht Club for use as a breakwater, then transferred to Sandringham Council and finally scuttled at high tide on a sandbank.
- 1964** The anchor was removed from the wreck and placed at the entrance to the Sandringham Yacht Club.