

MAAV at Work on *HMVS CERBERUS*

by Des Williams

Many Melbourne divers will be familiar with the rusting hulk of the old Victorian Navy battleship *CERBERUS*, serving as a breakwater, at Halfmoon Bay, Black Rock.

The *CERBERUS* was ordered by the Victorian government to protect the colony from a perceived “Russian Invasion” during the 1870/80s, she arrived from England in April 1871. *CERBERUS* was the largest vessel in Victoria’s substantial Colonial Navy, serving until 1911, after which she was converted to a depot ship, before being dismantled at Williamstown and towed to Black Rock in 1926, to serve as a breakwater.

The *CERBERUS* never fired a shot in anger and rarely left Port Phillip, during her 40-year navy service. Her successful serving as a breakwater over the last 90 years, is testament to her rugged construction of 200mm thick armour-plating, backed by 250mm thick teak beams. The vessel weighed in at 3,480 tons and was fitted with two rotating turrets, each containing two 250mm, 18-ton muzzle-loading guns. Ugly in her appearance, she devoured coal and was described in the contemporary press as “*low, uncouth and grim and looking like a half-tide rock in the water a floating gasworks, the two turrets being gasometers.*” Despite this harsh criticism, the vessel was a state-of-the-art warship in her heyday.

During the 1970s, the old *CERBERUS* was a favourite location for swimmers, snorkellers and shore diving scuba divers, as the wreck is only 200M from shore. Today, the wreck is located in a Protected Zone, closed to all visitors, especially divers. The massive rusting hulk is now extremely dangerous to approach, following its spectacular collapse during a storm on Boxing Day in 1993. Back then, the prodigious weight of the teak deck, gun turrets and upper works, proved to be too much for the corroded, submerged ship’s frames and bulkheads. The wreck subsided violently, some two metres with a seaward lean, submerging the teak deck permanently, for the first time.

With the starboard side now exposed to stormy seas, waves were often seen washing over the gun turrets, accelerating deterioration of the guns and the entire fabric of the wreck itself. In 2005, it was decided to reduce some of the massive weight contained within the turrets, by removing all four of the 250mm guns and place them on the seabed, until the wreck itself could be stabilised.

Each of the 18-ton guns were removed by a crane, working from a large barge. The guns today, are still on the seabed close to the wreck, attached to 80kg sacrificial anodes, to neutralise corrosion. In fact, the guns are safer underwater today, than they would been if they had been left constantly exposed to a combination of atmosphere and sea spray, on board the wreck! It is hoped, that one day they will go on public display, but for the time being, they are safe.

The guns’ protecting sacrificial anodes are periodically inspected by divers from Heritage Victoria’s Maritime Heritage Unit, as the anodes dissolve away whilst doing their protective work on the guns. It is therefore necessary from time to time, to fit new anodes. In February 2019, a team of 14 volunteer divers from the Maritime Archaeology Association of Victoria (MAAV), joined with Professional Diving Services from Carrum Downs, to install new anodes to each of the four *CERBERUS* guns on the seabed. The divers worked in teams, appointed to each of the four guns and all anodes were fitted successfully.

The MAAV was formed in the late 1970s. Membership is made up of avocational archaeologists, researchers and divers, who are interested in preserving local shipwreck heritage. Members have developed their skills to the extent where they can lend assistance to projects such as the *CERBERUS* anode replacement, which is managed by the Maritime Heritage Unit at Heritage Victoria. MAAV members also actively run projects, researching, diving, surveying and finally producing reports on Victorian shipwrecks.



CERBERUS guns being relocated on seabed - 2005



Naval manoeuvres aboard *CERBERUS* during the 1890s



CERBERUS gun on the seabed with sacrificial anode attached in foreground

(Photo Credit: Mick Whitmore)



1870s sketch of an 18-ton Armstrong gun similar to the *CERBERUS* armament