



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

VISIT TO HMAS CERBERUS

Friday 29 November 2024

Acknowledgments

Commodore Greg Yorke, Senior Naval Officer Victoria

Captain Ben Favelle, Commanding Officer, HMAS Cerberus

Members of the Royal Australian Navy

Distinguished guests

Let me begin by acknowledging that we're meeting on the lands of the Eastern Kulin nations, in this case the Bunurong people, and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and recognise any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders who may be here with us this morning.

You have no idea what a glorious sight you are, because I can see you – and you are.

With the passing of the *Colonial Naval Defence Act 1865*, the Colonies in pre-Federation Australia first gained the power to commission and acquire warships.

As it turned out, Victoria, a relatively new colony at that time, leapt at the opportunity.

Following the unprecedented wealth brought on by the gold rush, Victoria had more to gain than any other colony from the protection offered by a naval defence force.

They were transporting all that gold overseas, of course.

Under the threat of a Russian attack on the Colony's gold resources – here, at the end of the world out of reach of the British Royal Navy – Victoria commissioned HMVS Cerberus.

It was to be the first iron-hulled British warship powered purely by steam – but, most importantly, it was to be Victoria's own.

The ship took its name from the three-headed hound in Greek mythology that guards the gates to the Underworld.

It says many things, but was meant largely to be a fitting acknowledgement of the vessel's fierce power.

But it was also prophetic sign in terms of the hellish challenges that particular ship was to face on its journey to Victoria.

After three years of construction, it was launched from Chatham in 1870 and as she departed, she was battered by heavy weather, rolling the ship, and its crew, violently back and forth until they found safety near the Isle of Wight.

Continuing southwards, it contended not just with very difficult weather, but also two consecutive changes in crews.

With the third and final crew, it appeared their luck had turned.

The weather lifted, and she made her way through the Red Sea.

However, the better sailing conditions only proved to reveal a greater issue.

Rather unceremoniously, Cerberus' appearance had been dubbed in one newspaper as like "an elongated gasometer."

It was an almost all metal design, fuelled by coal, and therefore did not lend itself well to warmer temperatures.

Through the Red Sea, the crew recorded temperatures in excess of 60 degrees in parts of the ship.

Despite those sweaty and laborious conditions, Cerberus did pass through the Suez Canal – becoming the first steamship to do so.

It took 123 days en-route – it battled storms, heat, changing personnel – it proved resilient, it got here to Port Phillip Bay and thousands of Victorians gathered on the shore to witness its arrival.

It was monstrous but modern, and it drew a mixed reaction from the crowd.

What was indisputable was its formidable power.

During trials in Port Phillip Bay, they discovered that Cerberus' guns too close to shore resulted in damage to windows on the land.

Yet it turned out that she never fired a shot in conflict.

Just as its namesake guarded the gates to the Underworld, Cerberus and its crew guarded Port Philip Bay.

After decades of service in the Victorian and then the Australian Navy, the ship was eventually scuttled in the bay off Black Rock in 1926, and that's where she is to this day.

You are here in the place that was the beginning of our navy.

It is a very important place, and it reminds us of just that continuing need for naval protection in a large island continent, a long way from the Northern hemisphere where we had traditionally relied for support.

What you're doing is a tough and difficult undertaking, because being in the navy means a separation from land as well as the coordination of so much when you're in large and small vessels in a fleet in a large ocean.

It requires personal strength to overcome the inherent challenges that you face when you're at sea, and strength as a unit to be able to deter external threats.

Just as the story of HMVS Cerberus shows us – protection through the security that brings peace is the best outcome – it's the one we're always hoping for.

As a nation “girt by sea” as the anthem goes, your responsibility in defending Australia's shores goes to our very identity.

On behalf of all Victorians, I want to extend our deepest thanks for the responsibility that you have bravely decided to bear – for the work you do here and will do when you leave here, serving this nation.

A lot has changed since the days when HMVS Cerberus navigated the waters of Port Phillip Bay –

But remember, when it came here, it was new, it was at the forefront of new technology, and it was ours.

And that is what we're always seeking to do.

The magnitude and challenge of training Australia's navy now is even more important as it was back then.

We all offer our deepest respect for those who are delivering this training and those who are undergoing it.

I wish all of you really well on your journey and truly hope that yours will remain a safe one as you will provide security for all of us.

I finally want to finish by just acknowledging the many years of service of Commodore Yorke to Australia's naval defence.

It's been a privilege to know you, Commodore Yorke.

Each and every Victorian owes you a great deal of gratitude.

I wish you well on your next journey, just as I wish all those before us the very best for what comes next.

Thank you.