

H.M.V.S. Cerberus

VOICE FROM THE DEEP.
—◆—
CRUISE OF THE CERBERUS.
—◆—
ANOTHER MARINE DISASTER.
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OUR IMPREGNABLE IRONCLAD
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SUNK BY A TORPEDO.
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PRIVATIONS OF THE CREW.
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BY THE HERALD SPECIAL.
FULL FATHOM FIVE.
SUNDAY.

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BY E. J. MURPHY, EDITOR.

The Herald April 11, 1898

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SUNDAY.

When on that fine Good Friday morning "The Herald" representative leaped boldly onto the uncertain deck of the steam launch Gordon, bound for "the front," there was little thought in the mind of the fearful catastrophe which was within so measurable a space of time to consign him to a watery grave, together with a gallant company of nearly 200 souls all told. All the potents pointed to a successful cruise. What though the keen north-easter blew the salt spray into his eyes, and bought unaccustomed blush to his nose? Did it not waft to him from the pleasant fields of Footscray and the balmy solitudes of the Saltwater river unmistakable signs of those important and flourishing industries which it has ever been the policy of our great and glorious colony to foster and conserve. For that colony he was now prepared to face possible death — even probable bronchitis— and actuated by this high sentiment of duty he was able to gaze at the imposing iron walls of H.M.S. Cerberus, destined to soon be his prison, nay, perhaps his tomb, with the calm fortitude of a man who knows that his cause is just, and that his Gladstone bag has been properly stowed away.

Strange, how in the midst of imminent danger, the finer affections seem to increase in force. Here was the grim battleship vomiting black smoke from her central funnel— her decks crowded with blue trousered and white striped Naval Brigade men — bristling with bayonets — weighed down by the burden of shot and steel in her magazines — armed to the teeth with all the murderous inventions that the fiendish ingenuity of man can devise, till, like an overloaded gun, she was ready to explode at any moment, with the most glorious state of uncertainty about who was going to be hurt. Yet she was linked with none but the most pleasant associations. Even the ten inch muzzel-loaders in the turrets seemed to breath a federal odor of welcome and grease. And as an additional proof of the spirit of unity, the tall form of Lieutenant Cross, of the New South Wales naval service — who takes advantage of the manoeuvres to continue his course of instruction — was the first to welcome the visitors. Best of all, the ship was under the command of Captain Tickell, then whom

better or more popular officer and seaman never stepped a deck. And in the little group of officers we recognise the familiar faces of Lieut. Webb, V.R.N., First Fleet Engineer Breaks, and Assistant Paymaster Treacy. Lieut. Richardson was indeed away in charge of the torpedo boats, and thus the anecdotal side of the manoeuvres was a trifle weak; but take it in all, it was a show of a fine officers and gallant gentlemen as any colony need wish to possess. It was our own ship, commanded and worked by our own men. And that speaks volumes for the steady educational work that has been done in our naval forces for years past. All the same, it was a trifle thoughtless of Lieut. Richardson to vow horrid war against us on account of a mere departmental grievance — not that anybody minded his blowing our ship into atoms since that was no more than his plain duty. But it was refinement of friendliness to do it at dinner time.

Of the voyage down the Bay nothing need be said. Will not the voices of the morning chronicle the technical details of such manoeuvres as were executed, and the exact number and description of projectiles fired from each gun? After all, there is a certain amount of monotony about big gun fire— unless you happen to get hit. In which case it is not usual to complain of any want of variety. All that is necessary to say, therefore, is that certain manoeuvres were set down to be done, and that the ship's crew did them. But no mere mechanical performance of duty could still all emotion in the breasts of men whom the night meant the certainty of attack, and that of the most dreadful description.

Away there, somewhere over yonder, the wily Richardson, with his midget flotilla, was wandering round the points of the compass. From what point the blow might fall no one could tell. By certain secret information which fell into our hands it was surmised that his plans were deeply told. There was found hidden in the wardroom a remarkable cipher document, containing a code of private signals, arranged to report the manoeuvres of the Cerberus. It was whispered that the enemy had planted a look-out. Armed with an 18 ft telescope, on the top of Mount Martha and, as afterwards became known Lieut. Richardson realising at a glance the strategic importance of Mud Island, had established subsidiary observation station on one of the most elevated pinnacles of that rocky outlook.

Against strategy almost Asiatic in its subtlety, we took the simple precaution. Having steamed deliberately down towards the head of the South Channel and anchored, we weighed again at dusk, and steamed back to the shelter of Mount Martha. Briefly we ran away. The natural desire of the British sailor to get close quarters with his enemy would not permit us to stoop to any further evasion than this. But, alas just as the last rays of daylight faded, the smoke of the first one, and then two, torpedo boats was reported in that remote locality known to all nautical readers by the affectionate name of the "offing." Had the foe spied us, or was he simply fooling about the Bay in the prosecution of a vain search for his intended victims? The moments of intense mental strain which followed left the problem unanswered. But candour compels us to admit that the behavior of the enemy was such as to excite the most gloomy apprehensions in every breast.

The bugle had just blown the officers' call for dinner — a special dinner to inaugurate the cruise, and at which that splendid band of Bandmaster Underwood's was to promote digestion by a special musical programme. From the delights of such a banquet the torpedo man is, of course, shut out. While we were lingering luxuriantly over the first spoonful of soup, with the promise of even better things to follow, he would be out upon the wild bay, confined up in a sort of animated coal scuttle, chilled to the marrow. With the freezing spray, and half blinded with long gazing through a six inch slit in his conning tower. Under such circumstances the very thought of the cosy wardroom would be as gall and wormwood to his system. Was it in human nature to stand such a contrast? No, we knew that he would come, booted and frost bitten and ravenous — and that he might be expected with reasonable certainty somewhere about the forward half of the second course. Such, unfortunately, are the harrowing atrocities inseparable from war. But even a barbarian foe sometimes shows himself not deaf to the pleadings of mercy, and, as one gallant officer complained, it was "too beastly bad of Richardson to come messing about— and just when the band was going to play 'The French Maid' too." He did, and he interrupted the festivities just at the critical moment when the lighter dishes had created a healthy appetite for the more solid items of the menu. In a moment the table was deserted: then came a wild rush on deck. a spatter of Martial cartridges, and a loud above all sharp ear-splitting ring of the 6 pounder quick firing gun. "Where is he?" "Here he is" cried out fifty voices, and somewhere out of the darkness a red rocket soared upwards and broke in a little cataract of crimson stars, lighting up the long low hull of the torpedo boat. It happened, and our gloomy hearts anticipated the fatal verdict of our commander, "Gentlemen, I regret to inform you that the Cerberus has been sunk."

Everyone has read that noble story of the Birkenhead sinking slowly beneath the waves with her troops drawn up in parade array on deck. But where shall we find a more corageous deed than the ship's company of H.M.V.S. Cerberus. We needed no ostentatious pomp of military display. No, we simply returned to the mess table, and ate and drank to the strains of the band, and even applauded its rendering of The French Maid, while far above our heads the gray seas rolled and the startled flat fish pressed their cold noses against the port holes, and gazed with wondering eyes upon the scene of spartan endurance within. We have always heard that drowning is an easy death, and we are now prepared to give our unsolicited testimony that under circumstances it may even be called luxurious. This communication, which, securely sealed in a "dead marine," we now commit to the deep, will, we trust safely reach its destination, and convey to the public the assurance of our present safety, and that wives who contract a second matramonial alliance on the strength of Lieut. Richardson's triumphant bulletins will do so at their own risk. For the moment we are resting comfortably in ten fathoms of water off Schnapper Point, on soft sand and shells. Our only anxiety is that the Gordon which had been despatched to Queenscliff for provisions, may be unable to locate our exact position owing to the parsimony of the Defence Department in not supplying the fleet with sufficiently long boat hooks. Meantime we are doing our best to keep up our spirits, and as the band was stationed immediately outside the ward-room at the time of the disaster, we have hopes of a visit from some mermaids and a dance in the evening.

Later:— Fleet Engineer Breaks has just succeeded after many hours of * * in hooking a gurnard. Immediate anxiety on the score of want of provisions has thus been allayed. To-morrow he intends to bait the best bower anchor with the ship's cat, and catch a shark.

THE HERALD, April 13, 1898

FROM THE DEEP

AN AUSTRALIAN COMMANDANT RUNS THE CERBERUS.

A SPLENDID PROGRAMME.

ENTHUSIASM IN THE SERVICE.

BY "THE HERALD" SPECIAL.

When our last message to the outside world was despatched from the Cerberus, that ill-fated warship was reposing snugly (sic) in ten fathoms of water, off Mount Martha, and the head indicated soft sand and shells. The burr of the engines had suddenly stopped, and no sound disturbed the silence, except that from the forward cabin on the port side, sacred to Esculaplus, there arose a mumur, monotonous, yet musical, as though some tired trombone had wandered from the storm and strain of Underwood's Band, and laid its head upon the pillow and dreamt that it was still in motion.

Under the circumstances, nothing was to be done but to turn in, and the "Herald" representative, having first removed from his swinging cot a bucket of sand and three empty bottles, and fastened up the lanyards where they had been carefully severed, wrapped his blankets around him, and went to sleep in the security of a clear conscience, while half a dozen occupants of the surrounding cabins, who had cheated themselves of sleep for the past hour and a half to see the joke come off, gave vent to their feelings in the language which the police describe as "written on a piece of paper, your Worships," and then tossed on their uneasy pillows for the remainder of the too brief night.

Next morning, behold, all things had suffered a sea-change. We had gone to sleep with ten fathoms of green above our heads, and nothing but a yielding plank of fourteen inches of armor plating between us and eternity.

We awoke to find her Majesty's Victorian ship Cerberus bounding joyously over the waves with all her brass work sparkling in the bright sun, and the rugged height of Arthur's Seat under our lee. How had the transformation been effected? The answer came from one of the warrant officers, who informed us that we had "only let on to be sunk." Fleet-engineer Breaks, whom we left baiting the bower anchor with the ship's cat, in order to catch sharks for our consumption, had evidently laboured under a misconception. We were not threatened with immediate famine, and his efforts, though meritorious, were quite unnecessary. All the same, the mistake was a trifle rough on the cat.

Off the picturesque town of Rye the Cerberus dropped her anchor, and her crew— to use the language beloved by the morning papers— "indulged in tube practice." The expert's manner of participating in this favorite amusement is to plug up both his ears with cotton wool, and he can then indulge to his heart's content, with reasonable certainty that he has only got two eardrums, and that three of them cannot by any possibility be broken.

The 14-pounder and 6-pounder, two guns which have been mounted from the dismantled Nelson, have in particular a peculiar, ear splitting ring, calculated to reduce the average man to stone deafness. But it must be admitted that the shooting was beautiful. An Irish duellist, with cross-handled hair triggers could not have winged his man more beautifully than did the Naval Brigade men wing that target. The practice went off with the utmost satisfaction to every man on board. The opinions of the target have not yet been ascertained.

Naturally there was another torpedo attack that night – not a surprise one this time, but a regular pre-arranged engagement – in which the torpedo boats were engaged within certain prescribed hours, and the Cerberus was to have the alleged advantage of her search lights. Of these the floating fortress, which constitutes our first line of defense, carries two, and all that can be said of them is that one is worse than the other, and that the other is about as bad as it possibly could be. As a matter of fact, the dynamos on the Cerberus are simply an example of the almost criminal parsimony which has practically crippled the effective condition of the whole force. A system of defence control which reduces the item of four gross of slate pencils at a penny a dozen, as actually happened quite recently, and then provides the torpedo boats with coal which furnishes a pillar of smoke to be seen miles off on any ordinary night, is not merely absurd, but absolutely outrageous.

Thanks to the search light the Nepean got in and sunk us again. If the lookouts had trusted the darkness it would not have happened. But with such an advantage as our patent means for insanity discovering the enemy in their favor, it was at least ten to one on the torpedoes. Even then it was only the Nepean which managed to get inside the zone. The Countess and the Childers, thanks to their coal, we could keep off; but the Nepean, under Mr. Kearns, banked to her fires, dashed in and lodged her torpedos home before she was discovered.

The Naval Brigade fired, of course, and probably the officer commanding the torpedo boat would have had a particularly lively time had it been ball instead of blank cartridge. But in actual warfare, the torpedo man would hardly have courted sudden death by dancing about on his ***** deck, and howling in triumph. On the last day we had big gun practice, 18 shots out of the ten-inch turret guns, all dead on target, and then— home.

It may be admitted without the slightest reserve that the Easter manoeuvres, as carried out under Commander Tickell's direction, have been a conspicuous success. "The best programme we have ever had," was the unanimous verdict of officers and men when the scheme was first announced; and in actual practice these favorable anticipations have been more than justified. Instead of wasting time in the vain effort to crowd the whole art and mystery of working a warship into four days, Commander Tickell provided a scheme of instruction which taxed, without overtaxing, the intelligence of the men. The consequence is that, instead of having wasted their energies in half learning a quantity of things, all of which will be forgotten by the next Easter, they have gained a thorough grasp of some important main principles. So substantial a foundation has been laid, that every successive cruise will rank as an additional step in a well-devised curriculum, rather than as the mere learning over again the forgotten work of the year before.

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