

My Life in the Victorian Navy

by James Bryce Condor

I found there was still no chance of joining the Victorian Navy, there was still no vacancy. So I did a season on one of the Bay Boats, and when she was laid up for the winter, I wasn't sure just what to do, go deep water again or not. I was still keen on the "Cerberus" but if I went away to sea I might miss my chance, before I decided what to do. I discovered I could go on the Flagship (HMS Orlando based in Sydney) for short services after which I could if I liked sign on for twelve years, which I had no intention of doing. By joining the "Cerberus" I knew I would have a far better time than I would in the R.N. with about five times more pay. The short service would put in the time and would also be help when I did join the "Cerberus" so I went on board and after passing the doctor was signed on as one of the ship's company. That was in June 1891.

Time passed and the time came when I was near the finish of my short service (in the Royal Navy). I could take my discharge or sign on for a longer term, but I was still keen on joining the Victorian Navy. So when the time came I took my discharge and said farewell to my messmates and the Orlando.

As I went ashore with my kit all packed up in my bag. I left nothing behind as I would need it all if I entered on the Cerberus as I intended. That night I was on my way to Melbourne I had seen my girlfriend and said goodbye for the time being, and had also visited all my other friends round about, next day long before dinner I was home.

In a few weeks there was a chance for the Cerberus So I went and entered. After passing the doctor, Jack Symper who nearly lost his life on the "Cordelia" when that gun accident happened, also joined the Cerberus. He had taken his discharge and followed me over.

Cap Tallies

In the Victorian Navy every man was ships company of the Cerberus and that ships name was on his cap, no matter what ship he might be serving in, The "Nelson", Victoria, Albert, or on the Torpedo boats, in which case he would be quartered at the Depot at Williamstown. All really belonged to the "Cerberus".

There was a strong Naval Brigade¹ ashore and they would man the lesser ships if they were requested, they had their drill halls ashore and also would come on board the ships for gun drill at different times. These men were mostly employed with the Harbour Trust, and were ex seamen

Every Easter when the ships steamed about Port Phillip.

The Brigade went with them and had drafted to the "Nelson" and I was quite satisfied, it didn't matter what ship I went to. The leave was just the same, two nights out of three, and two Saturdays to Monday out of three, so that was quite all right, and if a man wanted more leave than that on shore, he was hard to please.

We also got 14 days leave a year on full pay and public holidays or some other day instead if you couldn't be spared, so we had nothing to growl about. The food was good and there was plenty of it, the pay was also good, so I was happy and contented. We also got a make and mend every Wednesday after dinner and could go ashore, that is the units ashore could, we had of course to find our own uniforms as in the R.N.

HMVS Nelson

The "Nelson" was a fine old comfortable ship with plenty of room aboard, she was built as a three decker at first and was said to have been one of the fastest ships under sail in the Navy (three decker) she could steam as well as sail, being one of those ships that could hoist the propeller into a propeller well and lower her funnel if sailing only. She was launched at Woolwich in 1814 before she came to Aust. She was made into a two decker and years afterwards she was again cut down into a large frigate, she was very heavily armed with 6 inch 64 pounder truck guns, on her main deck, with two 7 inch guns as bow chasers, these guns were all M.L. ones she had also some quick firing guns and machine guns.

She was also unrigged her fore and mizzen masts taken out, the main mast being left for signaling purposes. She was headquarters and Guard ship. The Captain of the "Cerberus" lived on board her.

So that is how the "Nelson" was when I first went on board her and still a fine comfortable ship, we had a good reading room on board on the main gun deck with a store for use in the winter time. She was really a home away from home and I was very happy whenever I was drafted to serve on her and that was several times during the years I was in the Victorian Navy

When a gale was blowing and the weather was cold the men on the "Nelson" were nice and snug and when off duty could sit in a nice warm reading room. It was no hardship to be stationed on the old "Nelson" believe me.

There was no issue of rum in the V.N. We got an allowance of butter instead. If any men wanted rum (Nelsons blood as it was called) he could get all he needed when ashore.

There was never any leave breaking which is unusual for a Navy ship there was no need to break leave, a man got all the leave he needed.

I had twelve happy months on the "Nelson" Then I was shifted back to the "Cerberus". She was just as comfortable as the Nelson with plenty of room and there was a bogie stove on the lower deck so it was warm during the winter.

As the Nelson had more deck space than the "Cerberus" a Ball or childrens party was always held on board her. When a turnout was given to the kiddies they had the time of their lives. The big quarter deck capstan was made into a merry.go.round. Bosuns chairs were rigged to a running block on wire ropes from the mast to the bows, so the kiddies could slide along and have a happy time. There were swings and other things to amuse them and keep them happy.

We had no parties for kiddies on the Cerberus but had sing songs *** amongst ourselves now and then. We had a Naval Ball every year which was held in one of the Brigade drill halls ashore, that was a ships company Ball. When the officers gave a ball it was always held on board The Nelson. There was plenty of room on board her for a Ball, and I suppose it suited the officers best to have it on board rather than ashore in the drill hall.

HMVS Cerberus

The "Cerberus" was a double turret iron clad, her length was 335 feet(sic), with a beam of 45 feet, each turret had two 10 inch guns of 18 tons they were M.L. or muzzle loaders. They fired a projectile of 400 lbs. The powder charge being 70 lbs. of pebble powder. The turrets were 10 inches thick armour plate near the gun ports and 9 inches elsewhere. There was also an inner lining of 3/8 iron with a space of 10 inches from the backing, to prevent splinters being driven inside the turret if hit by a projectile, the backing was oak 10 inches to 9 inches thick. The diameter of the turret inside was 21 feet 5 inches. The outside being 26 feet 6 inches, height inside was eight feet 8 inches.

The crew that manned each turret consisted of 23 men, 15 men and one powder man to each gun, with a Captain and second Captain of the turret. The height of the turret above the breastwork deck was a little over five feet, on the flying deck she had two 6 powder quick firing guns and four five barrel Nordenfelts machine guns. Later on two 14 pounder guns were put on board. They were breach loader quick firing guns, and were on the breastwork deck between the turrets. The ship was armour plated all over and well down past the water line. So she was a strong well armed ship, and was one time the strongest and only iron-clad south of the line. With these details you will have an idea what the "Cerberus" was like. For her general appearance you will find all you want to know by looking at the sketch of her as she was at the time I served on board of her.

Hurry up Jo Jo!

There was often dock yard partys sent over to Williamstown to the Depot. The men for this work would be drawn from the different ships, it depended how big the job was. As a rule they left the dock yard to return to the ships about 3.45 so that the men that was watch ashore could have plenty of time to clean and get ready to land at 4.30 when liberty men left the ships.

Most of the men were married and always wanted to be in time for the liberty boat. One day when I was one of the dock yard party, we were all in the boat at the dock head ready to return to the ship. The officer in charge of us was talking to someone and didn't seem to be in a hurry to go back on board, but those in the boat were, as the minutes went by and he was still there talking all in the boat were getting impatient with the delay. Most in the boat were liberty men and wanted to get back on board and get cleaned up for shore. More time passed and still the officer showed no sign of coming to the boat, one of the men called out, Hurry up, Jo Jo! That was the nickname the officer was known by on board the ship, and he wasn't very popular. He at once turned, hurried to the boat jumped in and gave the order to shove off, and away we went. We had a good mile to pull and bent our backs to it and was soon back on board. As soon as we were on board we were all fell in on the quarter deck and asked who was it that called out, hurry up Jo Jo! No one seemed to know, all heard it of course but none could say who it really was, that is they would not say. No doubt some knew who it was. I was there but couldn't say who called out, although I heard it plain enough, but no one would give the offender away. Our leave was stopped for the time being, then each man in turn had to go before the Commander to be questioned again, and one gave the show away by telling who it was that called out to the officer. So that was that! The offender was detained and the rest of us was dismissed, some were late that evening getting ashore, they had missed the liberty boat. It wasn't my watch ashore so I wasn't worried. The outcome of this little affair was, the offender was punished although he still denied it was he who called out. The man who informed was nicknamed, Carey the informer. He was Court Martialed on the lower deck and the sentence was that no one was to speak to him, only in the case of duty for six months, and he was to have his meals sitting on the deck away from his messmates, and this was carried out for the full six months.

He knew it was no use to complain about the treatment. It would only make it worse for himself if he did, so he took his gruel for the six months. Even after that, he wasn't forgiven and few had any use for him. He was well hated. A lower deck Court Martial is no joke believe me.

Some time later the offender took his discharge. and shipped on a sailing ship going to England. As the ship passed us being towed out The man (our former shipmate) was working on the fok'sl again yelled out good Bye Jo! Jo! I often wondered what that officers thoughts were. The man came back some time later and I hear was in Melbourne but I never met him.

Dropping the Bundle

On The "Nelson" when there was a blow with a heavy sea running the liberty men used to get into the boat by using a jumping ladder hanging over the stern from the Poop. They would throw their bundles down first those times every man carried a bundle going home, washing or such like, so after throwing their bundles down to the boat their hands were free for going down the swinging jumping ladder. One day a steward threw his bundle down, a chap that tried to catch it missed and it fell on a Tharvait and came open and out fell some silver back hair brushes and other things, which belonged to the Officer of the Watch who was then standing on the poop looking into the boat. So he got a surprise to see his own property going ashore. The steward was ordered back and put in the rattle. Later on he was punished and dismissed from the service. He was blamed for stealing other things from the officers cabins. On board ship a thief gets no sympathy from anyone, it's a great crime to rob a shipmate or a messmate, Yet it is done.

Saluting

When a salute had to be fired it was always fired from the "Nelson" being the senior officers ship. The Cerberus had saluting guns, but she never fired a salute. The Nelson's 64 pounder guns were used with a reduced saluting charge, and I've known times when windows ashore on the front were broken by the firing if the wind was in the right quarter, and when the "Cerberus" was miles away down Port Phillip doing some firing her 10 inch guns would make the crockery rattle in homes many miles away. When the wind was in that direction, I've known windows to rattle 12 miles away.

Live Projectile

One day some of us were at drill on the "Nelson" we were at a Nordenfelt machine gun which fires a steel projectile 1 inch in diameter, they are in a hopper on the gun which held five barrels² and five shots can be fired at one time. Dummies are used for drill and are tested to make sure that no live ones are amongst them. We had been at the gun some time. Each time we fired the dummy shells would fall from the gun. The gun was sighted for the chart room of The "Cerberus" where some men were at work cleaning and paint work. Suddenly there was a report and we knew that a live charge had been fired. I looked at the "Cerberus" expecting to see that one of the men had been shot. They were lucky, what happened was, the projectile hit the top rail on our poop which altered its course and it smashed into the top of the chart house on the "Cerberus" thus missing the men, which was a good thing for them, as well as us. There was a big row about it and the gunner got a rub down over it, but it was never discovered how the live charge got into the hopper, as all those used are tested before using for drill. It seemed impossible for a live one to get mixed with

the others, but that did happen. The chaps working at the chart house got a scare it could easily have been a tragedy. There were no more mistakes after that, they made certain the hoppers contained only dummies.

“The Countess”

The torpedo boats when not in the water were kept on slips in sheds at the Depot, next to the dock yard. When wanted for a run they could be launched down the slip way at very short notice, they were well looked after and kept in first class order. It was Torpedo men that looked after them and manned them. They lived at the Depot and had a good easy job. Every man in the service had to go through a Torpedo course of training. Whether he took up torpedo work or not (that is a torpedo rating) you had to be able to take your place in a torpedo boat, as well as behind a gun on one of the ships. It was different in the R.N. as gunnery was separate from Torpedo work. A large Torpedo boat was ordered and built in England, she was the latest thing in Torpedo boats being ocean going and very fast. Torpedo boats were getting larger and larger, until the Torpedo boat destroyer was built and that was the finish of torpedo boats, but at this time when the new large torpedo boat was ordered. Destroyers were not thought of.

This new boat sailed from England rigged as a Brigantine and sailed all the way as she couldn't carry enough coal for a long voyage. She was a good sea boat and made a good trip out to Victoria. After she was unrigged and conditioned for service she looked a smart little ship and had room for a large crew. When she was ready she was put into the dock which was flooded for the occasion, ready for the ceremony of the christening, she was dressed with bunting rainbow fashions and Lady Hopetown came from Government House to christen the ship.

The dockyard was crowded with sightseers, it was a great day. So she was christened the “Countess of Hopetown” but the only name she got in the navy was “The Countess” the other was much too long for sailors. After the ceremony was over many of the visitors (special ones of course) were given afternoon tea in the Depot. The new boat became the pride of the navy after she was put into commission. She was the fastest boat in Australian waters and the most up to date, sometimes she would go down to Swan Island where we would do torpedo running for a week. Little trips like these were a nice change from the usual routine of ship board, we could fish in the evenings and there was a Fort there, where we could visit the canteen and have a very good time. Then when that was finished and we were homeward bound, if the weather was good, The "Countess" just seemed to fly through the water. It was then I could say I was really having a fast time.

Sometimes on a Wednesday morning we would land for Battalion drill, every man that could be spared was landed and we marched about drilling until about 11.30. There was always an army of small kids there to watch us maybe wishing they were sailors, then back to the ships we would go

have dinner and those who's watch ashore it was landed at 1.30 on leave while the rest on board had a make and mend. It was a great life in the Victoria Navy.

Opening Parliament

When Parliament opened we would land for a guard of Honour, we would march up Collins street spic and span and I guess none could find fault with our marching. The men of the "Cerberus" could march, take it from me. Well so they should they were all well trained and knew their job, we would have the Brigade band to lead us, there was no looking to the right or left, but straight ahead, stepping it out like guardsmen. If any man turned his head, he was sure to be spotted by some officer and would know all about it when he got back to the ship. The Permanent Artillery would also march and form up opposite us. They were good to watch as they marched along just as good as the guards. I was told once that the men of the "Cerberus" marched as well as the V.P.A. and that was praise good enough for me.

One time there was a big review at Albert Park. Lord Hopetown took the salute. We landed and marched right up the north side of the city by the Haymarket then back again to Albert Park Melbourne with the usual army of kids marching with us. It was alright on such times as that for those on the watch ashore for they were already dressed in their best and hadn't to get ready, only maybe a brush down, to get some of the street dust off and maybe a wash. If those kids that marched from the review to Port Melbourne with us were not tired I guess we were. We had put in a pretty tough day going to and coming from, and then as well, all the marching about at the review. It was an outing and did us no harm, and that is what we were trained for. As I look back to those days I know we had a very good time of it with little to growl about. I had been to one or two reviews and if marching made a man fit, I had a fair share of it and should have been fit enough, that's certain. We all had a pretty good time and we knew it.

There were times when we all got underway. The "Cerberus" and the two gun boats and did some manoeuvres and gun practise for a few days, and there would be no chance of getting home but that was not often, but at Easter time all the ships and the Torpedo boats would go away for a week for exercises. The Brigade would go too, some on each ship and they would have plenty of it before they got back, at night time. If there was no torpedo boat attack we would often have a sing song on board the "Cerberus". We always had plenty to amuse us one way and another, but we were there for exercises and we got them, man and arm ship exercise action, repel torpedo attack and plenty of other evolutions. Sometimes late at night after all of those off duty would be in their hammocks. The bugle would sound clear ship for action or some other exercise and all hands would turn out, with more or less growling it was all in the game and was soon over, we could always to be turned out like that, it was Navy. Always was so and always will be I reckon, men must be prepared. After the rounds had gone and all found their stations and all correct we

would be piped down again. We expected to have plenty of breaks like that, turning out at all hours of the night.

Death of Symper

It was during one of these trips that Symper lost his life, the chap I mentioned before who had been on the "Cordelia". It was during the day time, a sea boat was called away - it was a ten oar cutter and Symper was one of its crew, as the boat is still in the davits when the crew man it, then it is lowered into the water, when he was getting into the boat Symper fell overboard and went down like a stone, a mark buoy was dropped and the ship stopped, as Symper didn't come to the surface, a diver was sent down but couldn't find him. His body was never recovered, why he sank like a stone and didn't come up again was a mystery to us all. He hadn't been long married. The death of Symper cast a gloom over the ship for the rest of the trip.

Rippon Lea Picnic

When Sir Frederick Sargood was Minister for Defence, he invited the men of the Navy with their wives and children to spend the day at his lovely place "Rippon Lea" at Elsternwick. So as many as could be spared got leave to go, leaving on the ship just enough men to look after things. Four drays each with four horses were provided for us. The drays were packed full, all the wives and children, and the best girls of the single chaps, and away we went. Some of the chaps in the leading dray fixed a barrow on outriggers like davits, over the stern, with two handy billys to hoist it or lower it down. As we went along St Kilda road a chap would drop off the dray, there would be the cry of "man overboard" the dray would stop, and the barrow lowered then one of the chaps would wheel it back pick up the man overboard, and return with him in the barrow. When the poor supposed half drowned man was hoisted on board again amidst the cheers of the crew in the dray. St Kilda Road was at that time just a metal road not the fine street lined with trees and lawns as it is now, and it wasn't very busy, so the chaps could skylark as much as they liked. There was no traffic much to hold up. After the barrow hoisted and all made snug the drays would get under way again until some-one else fell overboard when again the barrow would be lowered to save him. There were no trams along there then only a few buses ran along that way. The men overboard business caused much amusement amongst the people passing along, as well as to the women and children on the drays. That foolery was alright those days but it couldn't be done today, what with the trams all the motor cars rushing along, at last we arrived at "Rippon Lea". What lovely grounds it had, beautiful lawns and flower beds, shrubs and trees it was a beautiful place. The old Mansion is still there but most of the lovely grounds have been cut up and built on now, and there is a railway station quite close called "Rippon Lea" after the mansion. We were made very welcome and had the freedom of the place. We could use the large ball room, the

billiard room, or we could roam where liked about the beautiful gardens. A very nice dinner and tea was provided, we had a very enjoyable day. A day to remember, I know I've never forgotten it. The kiddies had swings etc to keep them happy too. None of us were ever likely to forget Sir Frederick Sargood. I've had plenty of good outings, but the day I spent at "Rippon Lea" stands out as the best.



Rowing Races

The two ten oar cutters of the "Cerberus" were both Canadian built. Such cutters were supposed to be the best pulling races, they must have been fine racing cutters as they had never been beaten by any other ships boats. British or Foreign. As it was either the cutter, or The "Cerberus" crew that pulled the boat, maybe it was both, but the fact remains they had beaten all comers. It was usual where a man of war came in for a cutters crew to pull over to our ship and toss their oars under our bows, as a challenge to race. Foreign ships too would challenge us and we always took it up, and always won. We had beaten, Russian, German, French and Austrian cutters as well as R.N. Ships on the stations.

One day an Austrian Corvette came in and as soon as they had dropped anchor, they sent a cutter over and challenged us we didn't disappoint them. The race was arranged for the next afternoon the distance being four miles, when the race came our cutters won easily. The Austrians complained that we had a much lighter boat, there was no doubt about that, our boat was much lighter, their cutter was lined inside and was much heavier than ours. The outcome was that our boats crew offered to lend them our boat and they would pull the Austrian boat, and race again, so another race was arranged. The cutters being swapped, and again they were beaten by our crew pulling their boat, so we heard no more complaints. Our cutter was clinker built while theirs was a diagonal built boat, so our cutter was a very much lighter boat. Anyway the race was fair and square. The boats being changed decided which was the better boats crew. Kept in one of the sheds at the Depot was the old Captains Gallery that came out in the "Nelson" (The old two decker) it was there only for show, being too old for use. It was the finest galley I ever saw, it a

beautiful boat. After a good spell on the “Cerberus” I was sent back to the “Nelson”. I didn’t mind which of the ships they sent me to, as one was just as good as another with the same routine on each. I was never drafted to the Depot or to the “Victoria”. The only time I went on board the Victoria was for a bit of gun drill at her 8 inch gun, but later on I went to the “Albert” and as she had a gun the same I never had to visit the ship for drill. When the “Victoria” came to Australia she had a 25 ton 10 inch gun forward, with a length of 26 feet, it was really too big a gun for such a small ship. The yarn was told that when this gun was first fired it stopped the ship and sent her astern, but I reckon that was only a sailors joke. Anyway they did consider it was too big, so it was taken out and put shore in one of the forts at the Heads. An 8 inch gun was put in its place.

Nelson in Dry-Dock

I wasn’t very long back in the “Nelson” when she went into a dry dock for a general overhaul and clean the bottom of mussels etc. After a long spell at her moorings there would be many tons of mussels on her, and this time she had a fair issue, so we had plenty to do scraping them off the bottom as the water was being pumped out of the dock. When the deck was almost dry, there were tons of fish trapped.

It didn’t take long for the news to get about, and soon there were men women and children with bags, trucks and anything they could carry fish away in, we gathered all we needed, and they soon took all they could carry away. And what was left was hoisted out of the dock to be carted away and buried. It was a pity to see so much good fish wasted, but the dock had to be cleaned out. It was only once in a while that so much was found in the dock and pumped out but at times a good haul was made. As soon as we had cleaned the bottom of the ship and painted it, the dock was flooded and we came out and made fast alongside the dock pier. A merchant ship was ready to go into the dock. Ships after they had unloaded went into dock for cleaning and painting before loading for the homeward voyage. So as there were plenty of ships loading or unloading the place was pretty busy. When we came out of dock we still had plenty to do, the paint had to be burnt off her hull, cleaned and then repainted. She was a big ship and that job took nearly two weeks to do. When the work was finished we went back to our moorings. The old ship looked spic and span in her new coat of paint. I was glad she was back at her old place as I could land at Port Melbourne instead of going right around from Williamstown while at the dock. I could get home in half the time landing at Port Melb. The “Cerberus” would soon go into dock I knew and I hoped I wouldn’t be one of the dock yard party as men from all the ships would be sent to help clean and paint her in order to make a good job of it. If I was working party and returned to my own ship each evening, I would be alright but if I had to stay on board the “Cerberus” that wouldn’t suit me. I didn’t like the long journey by train if I went on shore leave. In a week or two the “Cerberus” did go into dock and I was told off as one of the working party to clean and paint her, but as we were to return to our own ship at four o’clock p.m I was well satisfied. That job was

soon finished and the ship back at her moorings.

Accident with Donkey Engine³

Not long after this we started to get up the “Cerberus” moorings, so they could be examined and be sure they were safe. It was a hard heavy job. The cables being very large, a punt with sheer legs and steam winch was got from the Harbour Trust for the work. I was one of the working party told off for this job and I didn’t care much for it as it would be a very dirty job, the cables being covered with mussels and salt. When I first went to the punt, I noticed that the big wheel of the winch was cracked as I pointed it out to the gunner who was in charge of us & the job. He looked at it, and reckoned it was safe enough as Harbour had used it, but I didn’t think it was safe enough to get up the heavy moorings of the “Cerberus”, others agreed with me. But he was in charge of the job and all we could do was to carry on, we worked all that morning and then knocked off for dinner. After dinner we started again at the moorings, and expected to finish the job before four o’clock. We hadn’t been working half an hour when the big cog wheel of the winch flew to pieces. The heavy cable was too much for it, bits of the wheel flew in all directions. One piece of iron just missed the gunners head and cut a piece out of one of the sheer legs. Others of the working party had narrow escapes but one man was hit, his shoulder was smashed by a large piece of iron. He was taken to hospital. His was so badly smashed that they wanted to remove his arm as it would be quite useless to him, but he wouldn’t have the arm removed. He got better at last, but his arm was just hanging useless at his side. He was invalided out of the service and given a job at gate keeping in the dock yards, he got some compensation as well. The job he got was a life time one.

Another punt was got, and care was taken that nothing like that occurred again. But it wouldn’t have happened had they sent the Punt back when the flaw in the wheel of the winch was discovered. We all learn a lot by an accident. We completed the job next day and I wasn’t sorry it was over.

Permission to Execute

One day another Austrian man of war came in, the Captain of it wanted permission to execute a man while the ship was in Port. It was an extraordinary request to make. Of course it was refused so the ship went to sea next morning and when they were outside the three mile limit, the man was stood in the gangway and shot, a weight being tied to his feet and he went overboard and sank at once. Then the ship returned to Port, we found out that the offender had stabbed one of the officers. I don’t think this affair got to the news papers. What we couldn’t understand was, why the man wasn’t executed before they came into a British Port and asking permission to carry it out

then. The ship remained in Port nearly a week and before they left, they landed a sick sailor and sent him to the Melbourne Hospital, where he soon died. We landed and gave him a Naval Funeral, as his ship had gone to sea, his body was carried on a field gun as is usual with a guard as well. He being a foreign man of wars man, he got the same Honors as a British one would have got. Coming back from the Cemetery the band played lively tunes. That is supposed to cheer the men up after a funeral, but does it?

HMVS Albert

Next shift was to the “Albert” the smallest of the two gun boats I expected I would go back to the “Cerberus” from the “Nelson” but the “Albert” was just as good to me. So I didn’t mind at all. I found the “Albert” quite all right, we were all comfortable and contented on board there wasn’t very much room on her mess deck. Still we were happy enough. She was armed with a 8 inch B.L. gun of twelve tons. That gun was right in the bows of the ship and fired over the whale back. Right aft at stern she had a 6 inch B.L. gun of four tons, with a shield of steel 3 inches thick, as a protection from machine guns and splinters. She also had two 5 barrelled Nordenfelts⁴ as she was well armed for a little ship. I had just got settled down and got used to a small gun boat.

Surveying Western Port

When there was talk on the mess deck that we and the “Victoria” were soon to go to Western Port Bay to survey it, and chart the soundings. It wasn’t very long before I knew that the talk was true, we were to go soon and would be away for six weeks or more, and that news didn’t worry me, it would be a nice change away. There would be plenty of boat work but that didn’t worry me, it wouldn’t be any hardship, we were well used to boat pulling. It was summer time so it wouldn’t be too bad, had it been winter the work wouldn’t have been too good pulling about in boats, maybe in cold and wet weather. The married men wouldn’t like the idea much of being away from home for so long, or the other hand maybe their wives would be glad to get rid of them for awhile, perhaps! And again perhaps not! Anyway I was single and didn’t care a hoot. I knew now why I had been sent to the “Albert” instead of the “Cerberus” and I was quite satisfied I would welcome the little trip away. It was a change from swinging at the moorings most of the time. So we left one morning and went to sea. When we arrived at Western Port Bay we anchored off the township of Cowes on Phillip Island, and that was to be our headquarters. The two gunboats would remain there until all the surveying was done. Captain White R.N. the Commandant came with us. Our first job was to put the up beacons along the coast line of the Bay to guide during the survey. Several parties were told off for this work. I was one of the party working towards San Remo, on the Island others were doing the main land. The beacons were for taking bearings from. While the away work was taking place scrub had to be cleared away and here and there for

a clear view, so the jobs took several days to do. We always returned to the ships for dinner by boat unless we were within easy walking distance that was us on the Island. Those over the Main land had to pull across the Bay. We had no steam cutter with us.

One day my party having finished one part of the Island, the officer in charge of us, told us to [go] ahead and just find out if we could get anything to eat anywhere, as he wanted to put another beacon up before we went back to the ship. He told us he would come along later and settle up. We went along towards the Township which was about two miles away. At last we came to a cottage by the roadside. It was also a little store. As we went inside we met a very nice elderly woman who told us we could not get a good dinner until we got to the Township, but if we liked and would be satisfied she could give us plenty of eggs and bread and butter. We said that would do us so we went into the little sitting room and sat down. She got busy and set the table, telling us she wouldn't keep us waiting very long. She came in with a large plate of bread and butter, and a little later brought in a large basin of eggs. It was full of them, so we set to and soon the eggs were all gone, as was the bread and butter. She asked us if we would like some more eggs, but we considered we had enough.

We had already told her that the officer would be along soon to settle with her. She asked us if we would like to take some eggs on board with us. We thanked her and said we would. She went out and soon returned with a large basket of eggs. Our eyes stuck out like hat pegs to see as many eggs. She told us to take as many as we liked as she had plenty. So we took off our silk handkerchiefs and filled them with eggs. With the corners tied we could carry them alright, there was no payment, she just gave them to us. I said to her, you must have a lot of ducks to have so many eggs, she looked surprised at me and replied Why bless you, they are not duck eggs, they are mutton bird eggs. They were large eggs and we all thought we had been eating duck eggs, so we were much surprised when she told us they were mutton bird eggs. They were very good, and that was the first time I had seen such eggs or eaten them. The mutton birds had a rookery on the Island and their eggs were plentiful. The officer came along and also had some eggs and tea. I don't know what the old lady charged for what we had eaten, but I don't think it was much. That evening we went on board all of us well loaded with mutton bird eggs, so we had eggs for breakfast for a day or so. I think each one of us brought on board about three dozen eggs in our silks and there were eight of us. After that mutton bird eggs were in great demand on both the gun boats.

Every day at low tide there would be a mud bank stretching across the Bay off the Island, and every evening it would be black with wild swan. Thousands of the birds would gather there (The mud bank has long since been dredged away) The officer shot some of the birds which were up in the fore part of the ship they were left there until they were very high game and we were all sick of the smell of them. We could hardly stand it but it was no use growling about, but we were getting all the smell, the officers were not having the high game at their end of the ship so had

nothing to put up with. The idea of the high game was to make jugged swan after the style of jugged hare. When the birds were very bad indeed, so much so that we reckoned they should be thrown overboard the cook got busy. I wouldn't have liked his job. The swans were cut up and boiled for hours. The awful smell from the cooks galley was all over the ship. I don't know which was the worst, the birds hanging or while they were cooking. The stew seemed to be just as ripe as the birds were before being cooked. This awful stuff was steamed, and all the meat discarded. Then port wine etc mixed therein and that was jugged swan. The officers seemed to enjoy it, and strange to say none died or got ill after it. The smell of it was quite enough for us, none of the crew tasted it, although the cook offered us some. It was too dead for us, believe me. It was days before the smell of that dish left the ship, and us.

Day after day we were out on the boats taking soundings, pulling across the Bay back and forth, while the officer sat in the stern marking them down on the rough chart. The weather was quite warm so we didn't worry. We had to be careful when the tide was running out that we were not caught on a mud bank. One day this happened to one of the boats. They were caught on a mud or sand bank when the tide was running out fast and before they could get away the boat was hard and fast in the mud. As they couldn't get the boat back into deep water they would have to remain there until the tide turned. If we had a steam cutter we could have towed the boat off, but that's what we didn't have. A boat was sent over with their tea, the idea was for some of the crew to get out of the boat and carry the eats and tea to the stranded boat, but they found they couldn't do that as the silt was too deep. They walked until it was over their middle then had to give it up. Those on the mud bank had to stay there all night, which wasn't much of a hardship as the weather was quite warm. They floated off in the morning when the tide came in and returned to the ship, had a good feed and some sleep. They were let off duty for the day. No other boat was caught on a bank after they took fine care it wouldn't happen. On Saturdays no surveying was done as all hands were needed with the usual Saturday routine cleaning ship. After dinner leave was given and most of us went ashore for a rumble.

On Sundays we would march to church. The Captain would read the lesson then after dinner there would be shore leave again, then sometimes on a Saturday some of the officers would go shooting over to French Island and while the boat would be waiting for them the crew would fish and would catch a good haul as a rule, so we had plenty of fish for food off and on.

On the Albert when it happened to be my watch on board I had to take my turn at watch keeping through the night, that is I would be on deck for four hours, from 8 to 12 or 12 until 4 A.M. There was always a man on this duty. You struck the bell every half hour to keep the time, and hail "all's well" was called from each ship, and if you didn't hear the hail from the nearest ship you reported that fact to the officer in charge who of course would be turned in. If a ship near you didn't hail you that all was well, then there would be something wrong, and it would go hard with

that man on watch if he was found asleep. The man on watch had to challenge any boats coming near the ship, and sometimes if the weather was fine a boat would go the rounds, from the guard ship and woe to you if it was allowed to approach your ship without being hailed. If it did you was up for neglect of duty, you also had to keep the log and enter before you left off watch, what the weather was like etc and the direction of the wind. What with one thing and another, the man on watch had to keep his eyes open. If it was a rough and wet night you were pretty safe, as no officer would care about visiting your ship on such a night, but you were never sure about it, and it was best (if you didn't want your leave stopped) to keep your eyes peeled and a good look out. Before the rounds went at nine o'clock at night (2 Bells) the galley fire has to be put out and the furnace door open so that the officer could see that the fire was really out, and all correct, but sometimes if it was a cold night a few coals would be left bunked up at the back of the furnace and covered with some ashes, this could not be noticed unless the officer going the rounds stooped right down and looked in which they never did. So the risk of leaving a few coals was often taken and got away with. When the fire was banked like this, the man who had the middle watch, that is from 12 until 4 A.M., could start the fire and make a cup of tea and have a warm every little while. Sometimes the one who had the first watch 8 until 12 would start the fire and make a cup of tea or coffee. It all depended what kind of night it was and everyone turned in. One very cold night I had the middle watch and about 2 A.M. I decided to make a cup of coffee and also fry a bit of beef steak. I had the frying pan going and every little while I went out on deck to see that all was right and no boat near the ship. I had made the coffee and was just finishing frying the steak, then I heard someone say, "very nice Conder, very nice". I looked around and saw the officer in charge standing at the door. Of course he must wake up just then and come on deck. I hadn't a word to say. I was caught red handed and sure enough, maybe he could smell the steak and coffee and came along to see what was doing. There was no excuse that I could make and I expected nothing less than the Commanders report and that would mean a stoppage of shore leave. As I said it was a pretty cold morning, and all he said to me about it was, that coffee smells very good Conder I think I'll have a cup of it. So I gave him a cup and also offered him a bit of steak but he refused that. He drank his coffee and went back and turned in, I went on with my supper feeling pretty good. I reckoned I wouldn't be reported for my neglect, nor was I. I heard no more about it, maybe there was another reason why I got off, for when certain B.I. steamers came in he would often ask me to pull over and get some cigars for him from the officers, and if he reported me, he knew I would refuse to go for any more smokes for him, I was lucky, and so was he.

Sometime after this little affair, I was watch on board and again I had the middle watch, it was a clear morning and very calm about 2 A.M. I noticed smoke coming from a large sailing ship which was alongside the Town Pier, she was an American ship named the "Hilaria" and had been unloading cases of kerosene for a few days. She also had 500 barrels of resin on board. After looking at the ship for a minute or two I felt sure she was on fire, so I went and woke up the officer in charge and reported it. He rubbed his eyes, looked at me and said, are you sure she's on

fire? Yes I replied she's on fire sure enough! Have they sent on board for assistance; he asked. Not as yet I told him. Oh then if they do, you can come and wake me up, then he turned over and went to sleep. He wasn't worried about it at all. Anyway I had reported the fire so I was alright. I went back on deck and heard the chatter of fire engines rushing along the pier, soon flames were showing and more dense smoke came drifting over from the ship. Four fire engines were pumping water into the ship but still the fire gained. At daybreak they sent for a tug to tow the ship away from the pier but owing to the list she had they couldn't shift her. One of the firemen, an officer, tripped over a wire in the smoke and fell into the fore hold. Another fireman put on a smoke helmet and went down to bring the other man up. He was got out of the hold and sent to Hospital. He had a fractured skull and other injuries. He died that evening. The delay caused by getting the man out of the hold made it impossible to shift the ship as she had listed more with all the water that was pumped into her. Then they sent a 12 pounder gun from the "Nelson" mounts in a boat. Several shots were fired into the hull with the hope of sinking the ship, but the small holes made in the thick timber didn't allow enough water in to sink her. A six inch shell from one of the gunboats if steam had been up, would have done the job. After awhile her three masts and yards fell across the pier with a great crash. The ship burnt to the water's edge when my watch was over at 4 A.M. I remained on deck watching the fire. It was a fearful sight to see such a fine ship burnt like that. Sailing ships loaded with kerosene always unloaded at that pier.

Torpedo Nets

Time passed and there was another change around and once again I packed my kit and went to the "Cerberus" where I soon settled down as usual. I knew everybody on board, so it wasn't like going to a ship where I knew no one. The "Cerberus" at that time had torpedo nets, they were very heavy and when not spread, were kept tied up along the sides of the ship. Some big ships in the R.N. had a special ledge for stowing the nets, heavy iron booms were arranged along the sides of the ship and when the booms were hurled out board, the net would be spread about 15 feet from the ships side and about 8 or 10 feet in the water, this was to protect the ship from torpedoes. Then a torpedo was invented that cut its way through the nets, so nets were no longer protection, they were done away with, so we took off the nets of the "Cerberus" and sent them to the dock yard, never to be used again, and we were not sorry to see them go.

We soon got under way to carry out some gun firing etc and one evening we dropped anchor off Queenscliff. At tea time someone threw a piece of bread across the deck from one of the messes. It hit someone in a mess on the other side and of course he threw something back. Then the game was on, a lower deck battle, in half a tick loaves of bread, tin plates etc was flying across the deck. If you didn't dodge anything, well that was just too bad for you. It was all in fun, but you could get a nasty knock if you didn't dodge what was thrown, across the deck from mess to mess. It happened that when we anchored some soldiers from the Fort, thought they would pay us a

visit. They arrived on board and were just coming down to the mess deck when the battle was on. When they saw things flying across the deck. Boots, bread, large lids and anything they could fling. The soldiers thought there was a mutiny on board and cleared up to the upper deck as fast as they could. Some of the chaps went after them and explained what the mess deck battle was, as they returned and spent a very good evening with us. They said they had the wind up at first thinking they were in the middle of a mutiny.

Sometimes when we got the chance we would go ashore and visit the Fort, and always had a very good time there, but as a rule we didn't anchor there as often as we would liked, but these little trips were a break and we always had a good time, with singing songs of an evening so the time passed very well. After being away nearly a week we went back to our moorings and shore leave was on again.

Leave Breaking

One foggy morning when I was returning to the ship from leave the train was held up for a while and by the time I got down to catch the liberty boat it had shoved off without me. As there I was, adrift, a leave breaker, I knew if I explained about the train being held up over the fog, would be no good, that excuse wouldn't be accepted at all. I would have to have something better than that, and I didn't want my leave stopped, so I thought out a better excuse. I walked along the sea front until I came to a chemists shop it was still very foggy and a bit after seven o'clock. I knocked on the door a few times. An upper story window opened and the chemist asked who was there. I told him I was ill, had bad pains inside and asked if he could give me something for it. All right he said I'll be down in a minute or two. He soon came down and let me in. I told him I was sorry to trouble him so early in the morning, but I couldn't help doing so. That's alright he said, now what is the trouble. I told him about the bad pains I had. He asked me what I had been eating. I told him what I had for tea etc. So he said I must have a touch of food poisoning, and he gave me some stuff to drink. What it was I don't know, but it burnt a bit. I was told to sit down for a while. After a few minutes he asked me how I felt and how the pain was. I told him I still had them every little while, so he mixed some other stuff which I drank. I was hoping the stuff he gave me was quite O.K. and worry me as of course I had no pains at all, there being nothing at all wrong with me. After a while he again asked me how I felt, so again I told him I still had the pains now and again. Well he said! I can't give you anything else just now, you had better see your doctor when you go on board the ship. I asked how much I owed him and he said 1/6 will do, so I paid him, then I asked him if he would write on one of his dockets what he thought was wrong with me, and what he had given me for the trouble. He did that for me and I was satisfied, the docket was to prove I had been ill and so on. I had no chance of getting on board until the seven bell boat came in. 11.30, so I waited for it and went on board. My only worry was the stuff I had taken. So far it hadn't done me any harm. As I got alongside the ship I could see some of the chaps grinning and

nodding meaning I was in for it for leave breaking. I handed in, the docket from the chemist and that was that! Before long I had go see the doctor. He asked me how I felt. I told him I felt, pretty well alright again. He told me to report if the pains came on again and out I went. I was ashore again that night my leave being still good. That was the first and only time I had broken my leave, and it wasn't my fault. I never felt sorry for the deceit I was guilty of for saving my own bacon.

Swan Island

The "Countess" and "Childers" torpedo boats were going away to Swan Island for a weeks torpedo running, and that would mean that a party from "Cerberus" would also go with them for a torpedo course, as every man had to do his bit of torpedo work. At that time a seaman gunner had to be a torpedo man as well. Now they are separate. I was hoping I would be one of the party to go, as a trip away to Swan Island for a week was like a picnic, and when the time came for the boats to go, I was one of the party sent from the "Cerberus" so I was pleased.

We had a good time down there and in our spare time did plenty of fishing so we always had plenty of fish for breakfast and tea whenever we liked. All the extra men, apart from the crews of the boats lived on the Island, in very comfortable quarters. We lived well so there was nothing to growl about. At night we could go over to the Fort and have a good time in the Canteen. Beer was only 2d a mug (pint). I was sorry when we had to leave Swan Island. It was really too good to last long, so back the boats went to the depot, and we of the "Cerberus" back to our ship.

I was lucky again because it was my Saturday until Monday leave, as I was ashore and home for the week end. During the time I had been on the Albert. The "Cerberus" had a new upper deck put in and new better dead lights so she was much better than before.

The new deck meant plenty of holystoning, but that was all in the days work and with her new teak deck she looked a different ship.

Annual Ball

The next big thing was our Annual Ball. The Naval Ball was always a big affair, and it was very bad luck if you couldn't get ashore the night it was held. However I always managed to get there. I took for a partner one of the girls I knew at our dancing club, and we had a very good time, it was a grand Ball. Later on that girl became my wife, but at the Ball that night I had no idea the day would come the when she would be my wife. We can't look far ahead can we? Although the drill hall was a big hall it was too small for all that went to the Naval Ball. They were dancing years for me, and I missed some I would have liked to go to, but those I missed were not very many.

Time marched on and once again the old ship went into dock for cleaning, painting and overhaul. Although it was only for a week I was glad when we were finished with the dock and back at the moorings. I didn't like the long train journey around the city. It took $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour those times and coming back on board in the morning I had to turn out extra early in order to get on board at 7 A.M. but I really didn't have anything to worry about. I had no dull times, I suppose I was really too happy and contented at that time for fate gave me a kick in the pants and woke me from my dream.

Retrenchments

The government of the day found that State Affairs were not too good. The papers said that expenses should be cut down. The Government was not in a good financial position. So retrenchment was the talk of the day, and the time came when it touched the "Cerberus". The order came for some of the men to be paid off. Those paid off received six months pay as compensation. Quite a lot of the men put their names down as willing to take this with their discharge. The gold fields had just been discovered in Western Australia so they were hoping to get to the gold fields, but all couldn't get their discharge, but about thirty did, and most of them did go to W.A. and did no good there. I had not put my name on the list as willing to be discharged. I decided to bide-a-wee. I intended to hang on to the service as long as possible. I guessed the bad spell would pass and all would be right again, and that is just what did happen. Before twelve months passed most of the men who had been paid off were back in the service and the Powers that be were glad to have them back too. Although the men were back again, that is most of them were, the papers were still talking retrenchment, as we were not at ease at all, anything might happen, but so far there was no more talk about retrenchment in the Navy. Time passed and then one day a notice was put on the notice board, stating that any men who would like to transfer into another Government department would be transferred if he passed for that position. So thinking that was the thin edge of the wedge, and sooner or later there would be more retrenchment. It would be better for me to transfer if I could, so I put my name down as willing to go. Many put their names down, but out of the lot, only myself and another passed the stiff exam of the Doctor. They all failed for some little fault. So it came about that I was duly given my discharge and transferred into a shore job. That was in January 1896, I drew my deferred pay and settled down in my new job. I was getting better pay here. I had far more to do. I had said farewell to the Navy, I thought for good, but the urge of the sea was still in me, and some years afterwards I was back in the service. In 1904 it was decided to recruit men for an Australian Navy.

*** word cannot be deciphered

[added word] Words in square brackets have been inserted by the editor.

Made available by Betty Cromb, the author's grand daughter.

Transcribed by Stoker Cherylle Thurling (Victorian Navy)

¹ Men in the Naval Brigade wore cap tallies bearing the words "Naval Brigade".

² As far as is known the Victorian Navy only had two and four barrel Nordenfelt machine guns.

³ William Roberts was injured by a donkey engine on 22 February 1894.

⁴ As far as is known the Victorian Navy only had two and four barrel Nordenfelt machine guns.