

The 1869 Visit of the *USS Kearsarge* “Down Under”

Robert “Mick” Bedard and Jannette Greenwood

Within its collection, the Australian Maritime Museum holds a small photograph (collections.anmm.gov.au/objects/32851) related to a famous American Civil War sloop of war, the *USS Kearsarge*, which visited Sydney in 1869 as part of a goodwill tour of the Pacific. A presentation on this visit was given at a monthly meeting of the American Civil War Round Table of NSW in June, held at the Roseville RSL. The speaker, Robert “Mick” Bedard M.D. of Tolland, Connecticut, is an expert on Civil War Medicine and is a widely sought-after speaker, acknowledged for his meticulous research on Civil War-related issues.

Based on his own original research, Mick’s topic was the 21-day visit to Sydney in 1869 of the *USS Kearsarge*, an American barque-rigged sloop-of-war, carrying a crew of 160. Before he recounted the events of this trip, Mick outlined the history of this already-famous vessel. Named after a mountain in New Hampshire, she was built in 1861 and saw service during the Civil War as part of the blockade of Confederate raiders in waters off Europe. Her most famous encounter, under the command of Captain John Winslow, was with the *CSS Alabama* (which had been responsible for the sinking of 65 Union merchant ships) in international waters off Cherbourg, France. In a fierce one-hour battle on June 19th 1864, and watched by a large crowd from shore, the *Alabama* sustained below-water damage from the *Kearsarge*’s Dahlgren guns and quickly sank. It is a photograph of Captain Winslow with Surgeon Browne taken after this event that is in the possession of the Maritime Museum. The naval duel was also commemorated in a number of later paintings.

In 1868, having been decommissioned and then recommissioned, the *Kearsarge*, under the command of Captain James Thornton, embarked on a public relations tour of the Pacific as “the ship that beat a Confederate Raider”. At that time, the Pacific region had increasingly become of interest to the United States as a result of its acquisition of Alaska from Russia in 1867, the completion of the transnational railway, and expanding commercial and missionary interests throughout the Pacific. Other reasons included whaling and increasing migration and trade between the US and Australia.

On her cruise to Sydney, the *Kearsarge* sailed through the Straits of Magellan to the Pacific and onto Sydney via the Marquesas, Tahiti, Samoa and the “Feejee” islands. Relevant to Australians was the onboard visit in Tahiti of the Queen of Tahiti and Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh and Captain of *HMS Galatea*, who, on a goodwill tour of the colonies, had only recently survived an assassination attempt at Clontarf Reserve in Sydney (as a result of which, RPA Hospital was built, funded by public subscriptions).

Using the form of “The *Kearsarge*’s postcard from Sydney”, Mick outlined such details as the weather, her neighbours at anchor, social interaction with Sydneysiders by both officers and crew, and her provisioning. The *Kearsarge* arrived in fine weather at Farm Cove on the morning August 12th, 1869 and after that date began a full round of entertainment that enlivened the social life of the colony. For the officers, there was interaction with officers of other navies, a formal ball at the Colonial Governor’s

residence, a public dinner at the Hotel de France, a picnic at Balmoral and other activities. During her stay she was visited by nearly 6000 people, including the Colonial Governor and other dignitaries.

It was also a period of activity for the other ranks, including on-shore socializing in bars, brawling with British sailors and participating in a cutter race. Even some remaining on the ship were able to access liquor smuggled aboard from coaling barges and bum boats. Mick entertainingly recounted statistics regarding punishments, crew desertions (9 sailors never returned to the ship after shore leave), illness and injuries contracted locally.

Also moored nearby at Farm Cove were a number of historically-interesting ships. One was the HMS *Rosario*, which had seized the infamous blackbirding *Daphne*. Others included the colonial pilot steamer *Thetis* and the Colonial School Ship *Vernon*.

On September 1st, the *Kearsarge* left Sydney for Wellington, N.Z. with general mail and from there sailed non-stop to the U.S. South Pacific Squadron in Peru, arriving in November. She finally completed her tour in San Francisco in 1872, and over subsequent years was decommissioned and recommissioned several times before being finally wrecked in the Caribbean in 1894.

Mick outlined other interesting facts. She actually returned to Sydney, albeit as the battleship *USS Kearsarge*, as part of the Great White Fleet in 1908 (incidentally, she was the only battleship not named after a State and also saw service in the same squadron as a later *Alabama*). Her name has also been attached to a post-WW2 aircraft carrier which saw service in Korea and Vietnam and, currently, to an Amphibious Assault vessel.

Mick's excellent presentation was well-received, with a number of lively questions following. His meticulous research was evident and his slide presentation very informative, with a number of images of the ship. Three photographs were of particular interest: a view of the ship in Farm Cove held by the NSW State Library; one of the Ship's Officers in front of the forward 11" gun during the Sydney visit (in the collection of *Naval History and Heritage Command*); and an 1864 image of Captain Winslow and Surgeon Browne (part of a larger group image taken in late June 1864 in Cherbourg, France) held by the Australian Maritime Museum. The ANMM image at present incorrectly identifies the man standing next to Captain Winslow as 'the executive officer'. Based on a comparison to the original 1864 Cherbourg image of the larger group of identified officers, the second man in the ANMM image is Surgeon Browne.



Robert "Mick" Bedard MD



The USS Kearsarge in Sydney a089875h.jpeg (Mitchell Library)



USS Kearsarge (1862 – 1894): Ship's officers pose by her forward XI-inch Dahlgren pivot gun trained to starboard and taken at Sydney, Australia, circa mid-1869. *Naval History and Heritage Command*. Image NH92921.