

THE AUSTRALIAN NAVAL SHIPBUILDING PROGRAM OF 1909

Should war occur and the Imperial squadron be ordered to rendezvous elsewhere, the Commonwealth will be naked of sea defence. The whole trade and business life of the Commonwealth, property worth many millions, will be at the mercy of any raider, even the weakest, which would be able to carry out any [operation] with the most perfect immunity, and it must be kept in mind that NOT ONE PENNY OF THE PRESENT EXPENDITURE ON DEFENCE WILL AVAIL TO PREVENT IT.

- Captain WR Creswell, 4 February 1909.¹

This desperate plea by Captain (later Vice Admiral Sir William) Creswell, the Director of Commonwealth Naval Forces, was yet another of his attempts to convince Australian politicians to act upon their previous pledges to adequately fund a credible local Navy.² Having described the rundown and dilapidated state of the naval forces inherited from the former State navies, Creswell then pointed out that the Commonwealth had been established to ensure sound defence, and reiterated why naval defence was so important to the new Australian nation. Despite the relatively large expenditure on land forces, Australian sovereignty could only be directly threatened at or from the sea. In the existing climate any raiding enemy cruiser might easily shell the major ports and cities, capture all incoming and outgoing trade, and make prizes of coastal traffic.

Creswell further explained that since the former colonial governments had established their own naval defences the volume of overseas trade and the interests at stake had doubled or even tripled: 'Today under the Commonwealth the defence is not a tithe of the old States' organisation in war value, though it has to defend interests probably three times as great'.³ Naval defences, he declared, 'are at the front doors of the Commonwealth. It is proper, if only as an indication of what lies behind, that even if small they should be up to date and of high order of effectiveness'. To this end Creswell argued that Australia should first acquire torpedo armed craft because they would furnish her with the best defence value commensurate with the young nation's means and resources. Not only would these craft have the greatest deterrent effect, and the greatest power in return for expenditure but, just as vital, they would be within Australia's capabilities to build, 'and to achieve self-sufficiency in their production is a strong factor in our defence'.

It is clear that from the beginning the Australian Navy was to be much more than just a squadron of ships operating as a sub-set of the Royal Navy and under the direction of the British Admiralty. Creswell's vision for a local Navy included its development as an independent organisation; one that controlled its own administration, finances, personnel, training and bases, and was capable of building and sustaining its own ships. He well understood that maintaining effective sea power involved much more than possessing a fleet. He saw that the Australian Navy must be a national endeavour, involving many, and in some ways all, aspects of government and society.

The development of suitable naval infrastructure was a priority, but Creswell and his supporters did not envisage Australia becoming a world leader in naval shipbuilding overnight. They recognised that ship design, research and

development, technical standards and many specialist systems remained beyond the Commonwealth's near-term abilities. They understood that it was better to adopt the world's best practices and modify them as necessary to meet local conditions. In the early 20th century, there was only one logical source for such skills, and the Australian Navy would need to capitalise on the deep experience of the Royal Navy. This had the concurrent advantage that Australia could also use the Royal Navy's command, operational, training, and support instructions with only slight amendment. All that was needed was the application of political will and the allocation of sufficient resources to develop local facilities to meet Australian naval needs.



Rear Admiral WR Creswell (RAN)

Much of Creswell's frustration grew from the slow progress and changing nature of previously agreed schemes. These appeared subject as much to political calculation as strategic need. In September 1906, Prime Minister Alfred Deakin had announced an initial three-year acquisition program of eight coastal destroyers and four torpedo boats, but by December 1907 nothing had been ordered and the force structure had evolved to include nine small submarines and just six coastal destroyers. Two senior Australian naval officers, Commander William Colquhoun and Engineer Commander William Clarkson were already in the United Kingdom.⁴ They had been ordered to obtain plans, specifications and cost estimates for the construction of various warships, and in view of the complexity of the task had engaged the services of Professor John Biles, an eminent naval architect.

Biles developed the basic design for a fast, 700-ton, oil burning destroyer especially suitable for Australian conditions and, even before Deakin's December 1907 announcement, agreement had been reached with Scottish builders Messrs.

Denny Brothers and the Fairfield Shipbuilding Company for a joint tender. This foresaw the following stages of construction:

- (a) a portion to be built completely in England and steamed to Australia;
- (b) a portion to be cut out and set up in England, then taken apart and shipped to Australia to be put together here;
- (c) a plant and shipbuilding yard to be established in Australia, and to be taken over at a valuation by the Commonwealth; to be followed by
- (d) complete building in Australia.⁵

Deakin lost office in November 1908 and Creswell's plea was instead directed at Andrew Fisher's new Labor administration. It did not fall on deaf ears. Creswell argued in his letter that an order should be placed immediately for three destroyers and on 5 February 1909 Fisher did just this; two to be completed in Britain and one to be prefabricated before being shipped to Australia for assembly. A sum of £250,000, previously set aside for harbour and coastal defences, was allocated to the destroyer purchase and tenders were called for in Great Britain on 13 March 1909.

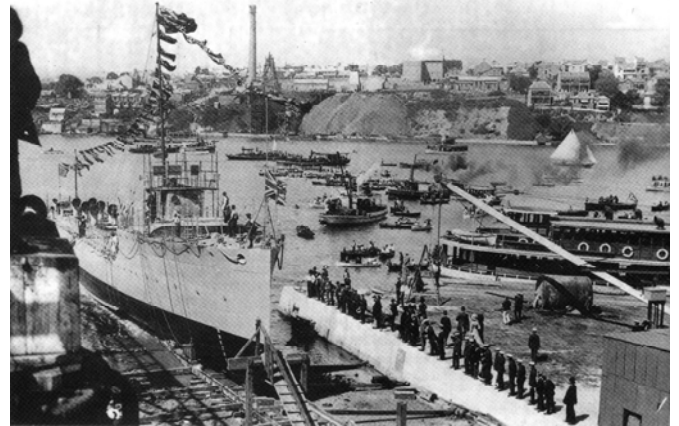
The broader picture was not lost, and Parliament also allocated money to establish a government shipyard in Australia for the purpose of additional construction. In fact, one of the more important conditions of the tender documents, declared that the purchased vessels were to be patterns or models upon which others would be designed and built in Australia. Moreover, the successful tenderer was required to accept from the Commonwealth a number of picked artisans who, during the term of the building of the vessels, were to be employed by the builder in the actual work of construction. By sending these men from Australia and familiarising them with the technical work of naval construction, they would be well fitted subsequently for positions in local building yards.

Fisher authorised the Australian High Commissioner in London, Sir Robert Collins,⁶ to accept tenders, and Engineer Commander Clarkson, still serving in Britain, was directed to assist in the analysis and assessment of the tender proposals. Not surprisingly, Clarkson recommended the design previously provided by Professor Biles, and declared that these ships would be superior to any other then in service worldwide. In March 1909 the Denny/Fairfield consortium was announced as the successful tenderer and Clarkson acted as Australia's naval engineering representative in Britain throughout the build.⁷

Such was the genesis of the successful River class destroyers, the first vessels acquired specifically for the modern Australian Navy. HMAS *Parramatta* was launched in February 1910 while its sister ship *Yarra* was launched in April 1910. Both ships were commissioned in Scotland in September and made the long trip to Australia as Royal Navy vessels until they reached Broome in Western Australia. On 15 November 1910 they were formally transferred to the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, work continued on the third destroyer, HMAS *Warrego*, which had been laid down in Glasgow in May 1909. By mid 1910 the work was complete and the vessel was then dismantled and shipped to Sydney.

Shortly after the Government's plans were announced in February 1909, the superintendent of Cockatoo Dockyard, Mr Cutler approached the Minister for Defence to express the New South Wales Government's interest in building the new destroyers, and after some discussion it was agreed that the third ship should be reassembled at Cockatoo.⁸

At the time Cockatoo Island was the foremost shipbuilding establishment in Australia with an experienced work force and extensive facilities. Notwithstanding this legacy, and despite a modernisation program undertaken between 1904 and 1908, new facilities for modern naval construction would take another 12 to 15 months to complete. In the meantime, nine men were sent to Britain to gain experience in the construction of the new destroyers of whom six were from Cockatoo.



The launch of HMAS Warrego at Cockatoo Dockyard, 4 April 1911 (JC Jeremy Collection)

Warrego's keel was laid for a second time at Cockatoo Island on 1 December 1910 with the destroyer finally completed on 1 June 1912. Actual reassembly took six months longer than initially planned and had not been without problems. By necessity warships are built to the most advanced designs and require robust performance and high reliability. The workers at Cockatoo were certainly not the last in Australia to discover that there are significant differences between commercial and naval shipbuilding techniques. The experience nevertheless proved invaluable, and with the Federal Government eager to acquire a suitable site for a Naval Dockyard, Cockatoo was transferred to the Commonwealth on 13 January 1913. The need was indeed urgent, for on 25 January the Minister for Defence, Senator Pearce, arrived for the laying of the keels of the light cruiser *Brisbane* and two additional River class destroyers *Derwent* (later *Huon*) and *Torrens*. Australia had embarked on the first major shipbuilding program in its history.

Whether by logical design or fortunate circumstance, Australia had adopted a single naval shipyard policy. In modern parlance, Cockatoo was the Commonwealth's sole shipbuilding entity. Australia at last had not only its own fleet but also, and more importantly in the long term, its own Naval Dockyard.

1. GL Macandie, *The Genesis of the Royal Australian Navy*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1949, p. 217. Creswell's emphasis in the original document reinforced his frustration after six years of advocacy without discernible result.
2. A biography of William Creswell may be found in G Gilbert (ed.), *Australian Naval Personalities, SPC-A, Canberra, 2006*, pp. 53-7.
3. *The Genesis of the Royal Australian Navy*, pp. 216-8.
4. For a biography of William Clarkson see *Australian Naval Personalities*, pp. 35-6.
5. *The Genesis of the Royal Australian Navy*, p. 218.
6. For a biography of Robert Collins see *Australian Naval Personalities*, pp. 43-4.
7. See C Coulthard-Clark, *Without Peer: Sir William Clarkson*, The Warren Centre, Sydney University, Sydney, 2002.
8. J Jeremy, *Cockatoo Island: Sydney's Historic Dockyard*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1998, esp. pp. 22-6.

