



History and Heritage Series

Vice Admiral Sir William Rooke Creswell KCMG KBE

“Father of the Royal Australian Navy”.

Based primarily on an address delivered by CAPT Richard Arundel RAN rtd, on presentation of a portrait to USCQ and with his further advice, and material sourced from various websites.



These Background Notes have been prepared as ‘bite-sized’ light reading for our Members. The intention is to broaden understanding of selected aspects of the Club’s rich history and heritage, and the remarkable people who have contributed to its development over the years. They are based primarily on a number of websites, with specific additional information in places. We acknowledge that there are probably errors and omissions. **Please contact the Club if you have additional information or comments that will assist to improve these notes.**

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed over time. They are intended as casual reading, for private use by Members only, and as they lack the rigor, attributions, and acknowledgements required for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

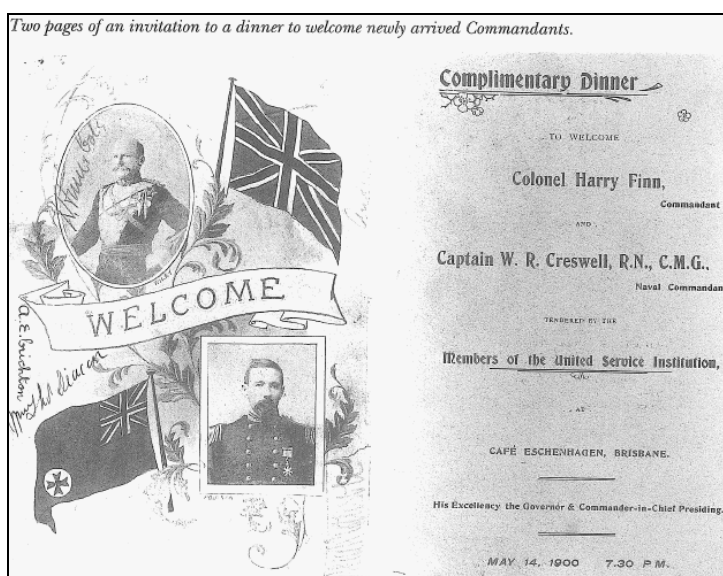
Vice Admiral Sir William Rooke Creswell KCMG KBE

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Introduction

Captain Creswell (as he was then) was the President of the United Service Club, Brisbane in 1901 and 1903. His is a remarkable story of service in the Royal Navy, a less-than-successful attempt as a pastoralist in Northern Australia before resuming uniformed service with the colonial naval forces to become, after Federation, the ‘Father of the Royal Australian Navy’.



Creswell had many qualities including sound and persuasive argument, leadership, loyalty, and a keen sense of humour. He had a breadth of outlook, an appreciation of issues other than naval matters, an ability to get on well with politicians and the public, and patience with parliamentarians even when they disappointed him

Tragically he was to lose two sons in WWI and a third son was badly wounded at Bullecourt.

Vice Admiral Sir William Creswell, was an outstanding sailor who was selected to integrate the disparate Australian colonial marine forces to form the Commonwealth Naval Force that became the Royal Australian Navy, in 1911. He is unanimously referred to as a man for all naval seasons and, deservedly and affectionately, as “The Father of the RAN”.

Service with the Royal Navy

Creswell was born in Gibraltar on 20 July 1852 where he became a Spanish linguist. He was the son of Edmund Creswell (the Gibraltar colony's deputy-postmaster-general) and his wife Margaret Mary Ward, (née Fraser). He was educated at Aitken's Private School in Gibraltar, and Eastman's Naval Academy in Southsea, England. At 13 he joined the RN cadet officer training ship HMS *Britannia* in December 1865.

In 1867 as a midshipman, his seaman officer training began in a world cruise in HMS *Phoebe*. This included a visit to Australia in late 1869.

Subsequently his postings were to HMS *Minotaur*, flagship of the Channel Fleet, and the *Thalia* on the China Station. On 16 September 1873, during a skirmish with pirates on the Malay coast,

Creswell was wounded in the hip. However, he remained at his post and for his gallantry was specially promoted lieutenant.

He was invalided to the UK and on his recovery he studied at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich.

Creswell's next sea-going appointments were with the *Topaze*, the *Undaunted*, flagship of the East Indian Station, and from 1877 the *London*, a depot ship at Zanzibar, East Africa. Here the Royal Navy was suppressing the slave-trade and Creswell, who quickly became an interpreter in Swahili, commanded a flotilla until fever invalided him and forced his return to the UK again.



A young William Creswell

To Australia

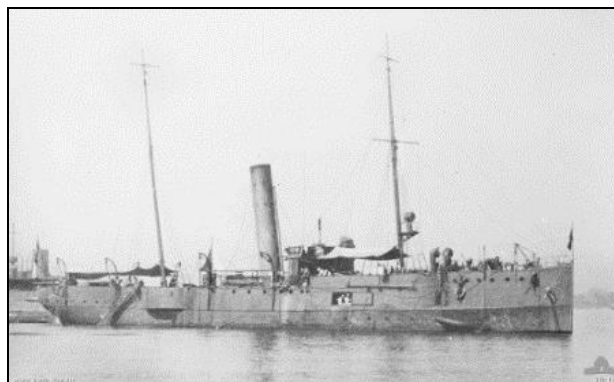
In 1878 with financial constraints (his father having died in penury) and as he believed early promotion was unobtainable with RN personnel reductions Creswell retired on 6 September 1878.

Next year, hoping to become a pastoralist, he migrated to Australia with his brother Charles, and until 1885 pioneered in the Northern Territory, exploring and cattle-droving.

Despite his fine physique and determination he never came to terms with the outback. In 1885 while visiting Adelaide he met an old shipmate, Commander John Walcot, naval commandant of the South Australian Defence Forces. This meeting led Creswell back into uniform.

Colonial Career

On 12 October 1885 he was offered, and accepted, an appointment as first lieutenant of the sole South Australian naval unit, the light cruiser HMCS *Protector*.



HMCS Protector c1914

By 1886 Lieutenant Commander Creswell had become a perceptive and outspoken advocate of the need for independent colonial naval forces to supplement, rather than subsidise, the RN Squadron based permanently in Sydney. His views mirrored those of the British Squadron Commander Rear Admiral (Sir) George Tryon RN.

Creswell married Adelaide Elizabeth Stow in Port Eliot on 29 December 1888.

Promoted to Commander in 1891, Creswell became the Commandant of the South Australian Marine Defence Force, succeeding Walcot as naval commandant. He was promoted to Captain in June 1895 and was appointed CMG in 1897.

That year he began recommending the raising of an Australian naval force (rather than the supplementary enlistment of Australians in British naval squadrons east of Suez).

On 1 May 1900 Captain Creswell was appointed Commandant of the Queensland Marine Defence Force but shortly thereafter, when his previous command (HMCS *Protector*) was provided to the British Government for service to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China, Creswell was released to again command HMCS *Protector* from August to December 1900. He was later commended by the commander-in-chief of the China Squadron for his ship's survey and dispatch operations in the RN China Squadron.

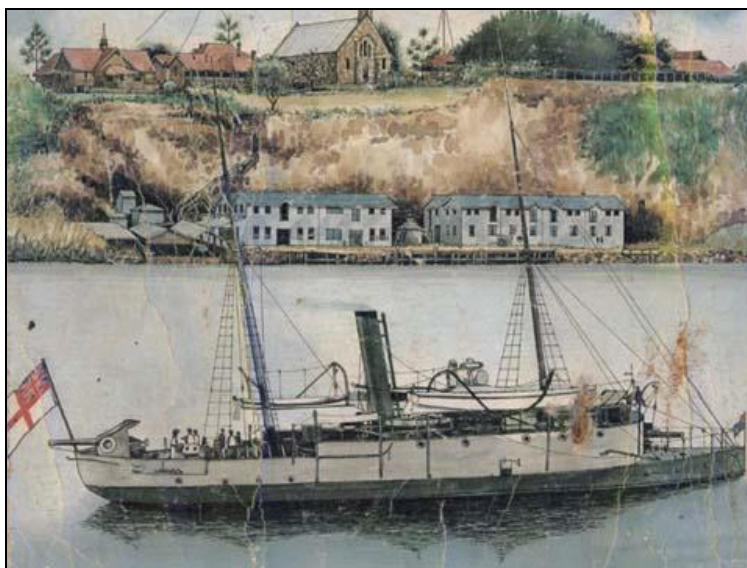
Post Federation

When Federation of the Australian colonies occurred Creswell was immediately selected to advise the Minister for Defence on naval defence of commerce, port protection and the amalgamation of now-federated Australian ex-colonial marine force assets.

It is significant that at this very time the RN, in need of over-the-horizon communications in modern warfare, had begun to fit Marconi Wireless Telegraph (W/T) equipment in major fleet units. This would result in Creswell taking delivery of two Marconi W/T sets in November 1902, the only non-RN allocation in the RN fleet fitting schedule.

He then commenced riverine aerial trials with the Brisbane Technical College, sailing on 9 April 1903 (with HMCS *Gayundah*, still operating under State regulations) for the first Australian naval over the horizon W/T ranging trials. The first Australian shore radio terminal was in the grounds of St Mary's church above the Naval Stores Depot at Kangaroo Point.

The first recorded naval message was passed on 10 April 1903. This was to be the origin in Australia of rapid and contemporary RAN command and control communications between deployed naval units and their headquarters ashore.



HMCS Gayundah. She is shown moored in Gardens Reach, opposite the Naval Stores and below St Mary's Anglican Church, visible in the background.

An Australian Navy

Earlier, at the Colonial Conference of 1902, the Admiralty agreed that Australian sailors (but not officers) may serve in RN ships on the Australian Station. The Admiralty continued to insist on a free hand strategically and on the restriction of colonial naval activity to local defence.

Creswell had become the nation's chief spokesman on naval matters and on 25 February 1904 he was appointed the newly-created Commander of Commonwealth Naval Forces whilst still the Naval Commandant in Queensland and additionally the Naval Commandant Victoria.

Despite constant changes in Defence Ministers, Creswell pressured, with diplomacy, for the contribution by Australians in future Empire naval strategy and a new independent Australian naval force.

The rise of Japan and their annihilation of the Russian fleet at Tsushima emphasised the awakening Pacific power and the increasing strategic threat in the Pacific region.

He was sent to the UK in 1906 to study new naval platforms and armaments, but Whitehall at first rejected his views for an Australian destroyer force. Nevertheless Prime Minister Deakin was persuaded by Creswell and it was finally proposed that Australia should provide 1,000 seamen and a destroyer force.

Then on 5 February 1909 the Fisher Government agreed to acquire three destroyers.

Almost immediately an increase in German naval power in the Pacific became evident whereupon the 1909 Imperial Defence Conference recommended Australia should acquire one of three Pacific Fleet Units comprising a battle cruiser, three unarmoured cruisers, six destroyers and three submarines.

Deakin then implemented the acquisition of a new, if modified, Australian fleet. This was a coup for Creswell who now found himself administering a new navy, albeit one still comprising disparate ex-colonial naval assets.

Creswell's authority was established with the acceptance of the Henderson naval defence report when on 1 March 1911 he was promoted to Rear Admiral and as inaugural First Naval Member of the new Australian Naval Board. His KCMG followed in June 1911.

Birth of the Royal Australian Navy

On 10 July 1911 King George V granted the title of Royal Australian Navy to the then Permanent Commonwealth Naval Forces and the work of building it up proceeded. Ships had to be constructed, stores and dockyard facilities taken over from the Royal Navy, recruits found, systems of manning and training worked out, officer cadets appointed and a naval college founded. In all this, Creswell worked closely with the minister, (Sir) George Pearce.

The RN facilities in Sydney were transferred to the RAN as its first support base. Recruiting commenced in earnest and an RAN officer cadet college was established temporarily in Geelong and finally in Jervis Bay. That college is now named *HMAS Creswell* in his honour.

Creswell would witness the arrival in Sydney of the first fleet units of the new Royal Australian Navy on 4 October 1913 when Admiralty control of the Australian Station ceased. That the Australian ships were ready for active service when war began in August 1914 was in large part due to Creswell's efforts. This was the climax of his career.

The Great War

With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 the RAN Fleet Unit, with the addition of only two submarines (AE1 and AE2¹), was the major British naval force in the Pacific and went quickly into action to capture the powerful German Pacific W/T transmitters at Samoa, Nauru and Rabaul, as well as German New Guinea and mandated islands south of the equator. Some of the first British Empire naval casualties were to be Australian.

Paradoxically, from 1915 with RAN units dispersed in various theatres, Creswell's influence was confined to the naval administration of the Australian Station yet all his objectives were achieved.

His work during the war was concerned more with administration than with operations or strategy. He was involved in ship construction in Australia, the development of shore support, and the concentration of convoys and their various allied escorts.

The ships of the Australian Fleet were integrated with various British squadrons and the Naval Board's orders for the fleet were controlled by the Admiralty. But the Board remained a part of the Australian government and Creswell remained the government's naval adviser. This situation, so full of anomaly, might easily have been a source of conflict between the British and Australian governments; that it was not stands to the credit of those involved, including Creswell.

Post War

After the Great War, in view of the international decisions to reduce or scuttle major fleet units Creswell concentrated on retaining a naval force that was as effective as possible.

Creswell was active in formulating a post-war defence programme based on lessons of the war. To his mind that experience reaffirmed the importance of continued development of the RAN and not a return to reliance on one great imperial navy.

It also focused his attention, and that of other members of the naval board, on the strategic importance to Australia of the Pacific island groups near the Equator that were occupied by Japan. The Naval Board frequently urged the Australian government to counter Japanese claims to permanent occupation.

There was substantial evidence in the closing years of his career that Creswell was acutely aware of the growing divergence of strategic priorities between Australia and Great Britain.

He was appointed KBE on 1 April 1919

Post RAN

Rear Admiral Sir William Rooke Creswell retired from the RAN on 27 November 1919 and engaged in farming in Silvan. Unfortunately most of his personal records were destroyed when his house was burned down in a bushfire.

On 8 March 1920 the Japanese Emperor conferred him with the Order of the Rising Sun, Second Class.

He was promoted to Vice Admiral (rtd) in September 1922.

It was the pride of his later years that in 1914 Australia had its own modern fleet, that it was the strongest British naval force in the Pacific, that it had effectively deterred the squadron of German cruisers in the Pacific, and that an Australian ship (HMAS *Sydney*) had destroyed the raider *Emden*.

¹ Compared to the three submarines recommended at the 1909 Imperial Defence Conference. AE1 was lost off Rabaul in 1914 in mysterious circumstances, and AE2 was lost in the Sea of Marmara in 1916 after a successful passage of the mine fields in The Dardenelles. News of AE2's success was a great morale boost for the Anzacs fighting on the Gallipoli Peninsular.

Creswell died in April 1933, aged 80, after a prolonged illness. He was accorded a State funeral and buried at Brighton Cemetery, Victoria.



Monument

There is a bust of Vice Admiral Sir William Rooke Creswell at Pier Road, Royal Melbourne Yacht Squadron, St Kilda, Victoria.

The original monument was unveiled in 1938 and was situated on the edge of the footpath in Pier Road. It was moved to its present position in front of the Squadron when the road near the pier was widened.



12 March 2002

The original bronze bust, which sat atop the red granite monument, was stolen in the 1970's and it was only recently that a move was made to find or replace the bust for the 100th anniversary of the Royal Australian Navy.

The Navy League raised funds to have two new castings made, one to replace that missing at St Kilda and the other to be presented to HMAS Creswell Naval base at Jervis Bay, NSW

USCQ Portrait

There are two official portraits of the Admiral painted in 1982 for the Naval Association of Australia (NAA) by Irene Hill². One hangs in the WW1 section of the Australian War Memorial Canberra, and the second is in the wardroom of HMAS Creswell.

The AWM portrait depicts WWI medal ribbons which the Department of Defence advises are incorrect since the Admiral did not serve in a theatre of war. The second portrait in full dress does not include his Japanese order which was conferred on the Vice Admiral by the Japanese Emperor in 1920.

The USCQ portrait copy by Captain Richard Arundel RAN rtd, is a corrected version of the second official portrait and was presented to the Club in late 2013, by the 1913 Naval Centenary Memorial Committee as part of the dedication of the RAN centennial memorial inaugurated in St Mary's, Kangaroo Point.



The USCQ Portrait of Vice Admiral Creswell

References:

- P.Serle, and R. Hyslop –“Creswell, Sir William Rooke”.
- N.Pixley – “The Queensland Marine Defence Force”.
- S.D.Webster – “Creswell, the Australian Navalist” (PhD thesis)
- J.J. Atkinson- “By skill and Valour (Honours and Awards RAN WWI/II)”.
- Paul Thompson- “Close to the Wind”, Early Memoirs of VADM Sir William Creswell (1866-1879).
- Randolph Vigne- “A Colonial Gunboat in the Boxer War”, The Mariner's Mirror Vol 86 No. 4 (Nov 2000).

² The NAA artist used the photo opposite page 185 of “Close to the Wind” as the full dress model for her portrait.