



Designed by an army engineer, the *Crusader* was the oddest vessel operated by the Australian army. **By Karl James**

Above: The *Crusader* was built by the Melbourne Harbour Trust, in the Williamstown docks, Victoria.  
AWM 112578

Above right: The AV2767 *Crusader* in 1945. Image courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria b40818

Right: Major General Sir Clive Steele KBE DSO MCVD, Engineer-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces.  
AWM 107691

She was big – big and ugly. At 1,500 tons and more than 60 metres long, the heavy lift ship AV2767 *Crusader* was the largest vessel commissioned by the Australian army during the Second World War. She was designed by an army officer to support operations in the Pacific and could carry landing craft, vehicles and heavy equipment. However, by the time the *Crusader* was launched, the war was all but over.

Water transport was usually a naval responsibility but during the Second World War the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) had neither the vessels nor the inclination to provide this support to the army in the South-West Pacific Area. Instead, the army was left to develop its own system and in September 1942 raised the Directorate of Water Transport (Small Craft) within the Royal Australian Engineers. At its peak, the



directorates operated more than 1,900 vessels, including landing craft, barges, launches, workboats and tugs. Some of these vessels were commandeered from civilian sources, while others were built for the army.

The army's water transport was designed to resupply forward areas and the remote garrisons on the islands, which were accessible only by sea. These vessels ferried troops, transported equipment and brought supplies, and the landing craft made small amphibious landings in New Guinea and Bougainville. These "sailors in slouch hats" covered a vast territory, from the Australian mainland to New Guinea, the Solomons, Borneo and, after the war, the Philippines.

The *Crusader* was one of the most unusual and intriguing vessels operated by the army. Ordinarily, something this vessel's size would have been designed by marine architects. But this was no ordinary ship. The *Crusader* was designed by Major General Clive Steele, the Australian army's Engineer-in-Chief. Steele had a hand in designing the army's Australian-built landing craft a couple of years earlier but was more used to designing bridges than ships.

Prime Minister Robert Menzies described Steele as a "great all-round man". In civilian life, Steele was a talented and successful consultant engineer. In uniform, he was a brave and experienced leader who had served with distinction during the First World War. At the start of the war he was seconded to command the 6th Division's engineers in the Middle East and subsequently became the Chief Engineer of I Australian Corps. When Steele returned to Australia in March 1942 General Thomas Blamey, Commander-in-Chief AMF, created the position of Engineer-in-Chief for him. He remained the army's top engineer for the duration of the war. Steele's influence was wide-reaching and he had far more freedom than other senior army officers, possibly too much. He had a reputation for getting his own way and bending the rules. "Whenever there was red tape in the way" Steele would "cut right through it", Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee later said. Steele's motto was "Never mind the rules in the book – get the job done." His willingness to bend the rules was manifest in the *Crusader*, as in order to gain permission to build the vessel, he deliberately underestimated its construction costs to get its design and construction approved. The actual costs far exceeded Steele's original estimate.

The *Crusader* was purpose-built for the army to support amphibious landings or for resupplying the army's island campaigns. Its draft enabled it to operate in shallow water and its four rudders, although unusual, increased its manoeuvrability, as did its six engines driving six propellers. The *Crusader* could carry 1,600 tons in its cargo holds and 40 vehicles on its deck. Vehicles were driven on board across one of six bridge-like structures and heavy equipment was moved by one of its six 30-ton cranes. These cranes were arranged in such a way they were able to load and unload cargo more effectively than on any other ship. The *Crusader* was built by the Melbourne Harbour Trust at Williamstown and was the largest all-weld steel vessel constructed in Australia at the time.

Although utilitarian, the *Crusader*, with its unusual "goal post" rigging, squat stern and box-like superstructure, lacked the sleek appearance of a naval vessel and failed to impress marine engineers. When it was launched on 8 August 1945, only a week before Japan's surrender on 15 August and the war's end, the official party was equally underwhelmed, with one news report describing the reaction as "startled". "Why, she's an ugly duckling," someone mumbled.

The *Crusader* never had the opportunity to prove either her worth or the merit of Steele's design. Going into service in late 1945, the vessel was operated by No. 2 Ordnance Craft Park. In February 1946 she sailed north to Rabaul, in New Britain, and then to Torokina, in Bougainville. However, there was little work left to do and she returned to Australia. No longer needing a vessel with the *Crusader's* capabilities, the army sold her in 1947. Construction had begun on a sister ship, the AV2768 *Corsair*, but with the war over it was abandoned.

During the Cold War, when it seemed Australia's future military operations would be in south-east Asia, where land operations would need to be supported by sea, the army sought to revive its maritime capability. In 1959 the army purchased four Landing Ship Medium (LSM) vessels from the United States navy. These vessels formed the basis of the newly raised 32 Small Ship Squadron. In 1965 a heavy cargo vessel, *John Monash*, joined the squadron. The squadron carried out normal operational tasks, transporting equipment and stores, around the coasts of Australia, Papua and New Guinea. The squadron also saw active service during the Indonesian Confrontation and the Vietnam War. One of the LSMs was withdrawn from service in 1969 and sold the following year. The other LSMs were also soon withdrawn and sold. 32 Small Ship Squadron was disbanded on 30 September 1971, although the *John Monash* remained in service until 1974. In 1974 the RAN became responsible for all sea-going vessels and the army lost its water transport capability.

As for the *Crusader*, she spent the rest of her working life as the *Cementco*, working the Brisbane River for Queensland Cement and Lime Company. In 1984 she was retired and two years later sunk off Cape Moreton, where she is now a popular dive wreck. 🏠

Below: The vessel's cranes enabled it to load and unload cargo more effectively than any other ship.  
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#### Author

Dr Karl James is a historian at the Australian War Memorial. He thanks Warrant Officer Class 2 Garry Parlett, curator of the Australian Army Museum of Military Engineering, for his assistance in researching this article.