

## **BRITAIN'S MARITIME POWER, OR LACK OF IT**

**Address by**

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In considering this subject it is necessary to have some historical context as to why the Royal Navy is a crucial part of the security and fabric of the nation

At the dawn of what became the British Empire, that great Elizabethan adventurer, naval commander and occasional pirate Sir Walter Raleigh said, "Whoever commands the sea commands the trade; whoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world and, consequently, the world itself".

But the state did not fully register this at the time. And, notwithstanding Henry VIII's building of a couple of dockyards and some grand ships and defence against the Armada, it was not until delegations of supplicants came from Devon and Cornwall to Charles the First to beg protection against the ravages of Barbary pirates, who were taking whole villages into slavery, that the conscious decision to develop a strong Royal Navy was taken.

Naval dominance of European waters was the largest, longest most complex and expensive project ever undertaken



by the British state and society. It led to the greatest empire the world has ever seen. An insignificant group of islands off the western coast of Europe became the greatest power in the world. Few aspects of national life were unaffected by this project and science, technology and industry were all closely involved.

It also led to the development of the Civil Service with that great administrator and diarist Samuel Pepys putting in place the rudiments of a

relatively independent group of administrators freer from corruption than ever before. At that time the reality was that the bulk of government spending was on the Navy. This is somewhat different today, where defence spending is well below spending on Security, Welfare, NHS and Education.

For centuries, spending on the Army was much lower than on the navy. Indeed, from 1700 -1914 the Army was invariably smaller than the Royal Navy. For example, in 1809 Wellington took 30,000 troops to the Peninsular War; that is almost half the Army of 80,000. At the time the Royal Navy had 142,098 men and 755 ships in service.

In a succession of wars against the Dutch, French, Danes and the United States the Royal Navy established a dominance culminating in the crushing victory at Trafalgar that led to 100 years of the Pax Britannica. This allowed the Industrial Revolution to move forward in the United Kingdom, untroubled by war. The Empire expanded in the search for raw materials and markets, often in an unintended way. Naval captains also showed an unhealthy propensity to claim land for the crown.

The shield provided by the Royal Navy protected world trade. Piracy was

almost eradicated. More than ten thousand Royal Navy sailors died suppressing the slave trade. The USA was able to develop unhindered by unwanted attention from European powers.

By the first decade of the twentieth century the Royal Navy, which maintained as a matter of policy a fleet larger than the next two largest fleets in the world combined, was for the first time being challenged by Germany and their High Seas Fleet.

Under the leadership of Admiral Jacky Fisher in the first decade of the century the Royal Navy went from a relatively older, coal-fired, slower and dispersed force primarily concerned with showing the flag and handling colonial warfare, to a modern force of high speed oil-fired combatants, seaplane carriers and submarines in the space of little more than a decade. Churchill's decision to go for oil had huge grand strategic ramifications that still echo today. As he put it "The prize of the venture was world mastery itself" and events proved that, but, no longer relying on "best Welsh" coal but rather on oil, which was produced in Persia; so safety, reliability of supply etc. meant a pivot towards the Middle East involving actions that have ramifications to this day.

Fisher was a legend for his unpredictable behaviour. He stalked the halls of Admiralty with signs hanging round his neck that stated "Bring me something to sign" and "I have no work to do" He ended his correspondence with vibrant closing such as "yours till charcoal sprouts" and "yours until hell freezes over". He is credited by the Oxford English Dictionary as being the first person to use the phrase "OMG" ("Oh My God" in written English). His quotes include such phrases as "moderation in war is imbecility" and "any fool can obey orders".

The changes that had been wrought in the Royal Navy allowed it to ensure Britain's survival and victory in WWI. Not a single soldier was lost crossing the channel – on the Dover Patrol. Troops were transported from the dominions, Empire and the United States and all this had to be done by sea. Our people were kept fed, our industries were supplied, our nation was not invaded and our naval blockade led to the German collapse in 1918. (Similarly in WWII when the RMS *Queen Mary* set the record of 16,683 troops from New York to the Clyde in 4 days and, yet again, in 1982 when the STUFT ships *Canberra* and the *QE2* carried the bulk of the troops to re-take the Falkland Islands).

So, the Royal Navy had ensured Britain's survival again, Churchill stating on 26 November 1918: "Nothing, nothing in the world, nothing that you may think of or dream of, or anyone else may tell you, no argument, however seductive must lead you to abandon the Naval Supremacy on which the life of our country depends".

With the end-of-all-wars-to end-all-wars came the naval treaties. No longer could Britain maintain the 2-power standard and was now at parity with the USA. But, at the outbreak of war in 1939 the Royal Navy was still the largest Navy in the world.

Once again the Royal Navy ensured the survival of the nation. It defeated the U-boat menace (Churchill famously said "the only thing that frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril"), the German surface fleet, the Italian Navy (Taranto) and controversially the French (Mers el Kabir). John Toland, in his book on Hitler, wrote "He who was practically land bound was stunned by the shocking mobility of sea power".

The Royal Navy saved the nation from invasion. In 1940 the Germans were never in a position to conduct Operation Sea Lion. They had not neutralised the Royal Navy and they had little prospect of doing so in

anything other than a prolonged campaign of years not months. Their failure in the Battle of Britain meant that they could not achieve limited air superiority over Southern England even for short periods of time. More widely, the Japanese navy was defeated by the US Navy and the result decided by aircraft carriers.

At the end of the war the US Navy was vast and the most powerful in the world, followed by the Royal Navy and then, not known to many, the Canadian Navy. We were also in a new atomic world with huge implications for warfare.

At the war's end the UK had over 1500 major combatants. There were 850k men and women serving in the Royal Navy. The Fleet Air Arm consisted of 59 carriers, 3,700 aircraft and 71,000 officers and men.

In the course of the war we had lost 5 battleships, 8 aircraft carriers, 28 cruisers, 188 destroyers and frigates, 83 submarines plus a multitude of minor war vessels such as minesweepers and smaller vessels.

Today the Navy has no such allowance for attrition. Consider that in the Falklands we lost 4 escorts plus 8 badly damaged and compare that statistic against our current naval order-of-

battle of 19 escorts. The number is a National disgrace.

In the final analysis at the war's end it was the Navy (Royal and Merchant) that, as had been the case for centuries, that was crucial to our national survival. But Britain was broken and there was a new world order.

So where are we today and what scale of navy do we require? First, let us not forget that the UK remains a world power responsible for 14 dependencies worldwide. It is the largest trading nation as a percentage of GDP in the world and, at present, the fifth richest. It has nuclear weapons. It is the largest European investor in many parts of the world including South Asia and the Pacific region and it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. We run world shipping from London.

As regards shipping, over 95% of UK imports by volume are carried by sea, as are 75% of exports. 35% of our energy requirements come by sea. Half of the food we eat is imported and 5.5 million UK citizens live overseas.

And the fleet we have today to protect all these interests consists of 19 escorts (6 Destroyers and 13 frigates),

10 nuclear submarines (4 Ballistic and 6 Fleet). Three large amphibious ships and 15 Mine Hunters plus miscellaneous small craft and the RFA support fleet. All are manned by 30k men and women, 7 thousand of whom are Royal Marines. It is too small for the tasks the government commits it to and it cannot do what our population expects of it. And, of course, the absence of any carrier/maritime strike capability is a glaring omission in our arsenal.

Our wealth, more than almost any other nation, depends on the maritime and a stable world. What sort of a world are we in?

We are entering a big-power age; a hyper-competitive age in which illiberal power is growing and liberal power is declining. It is a world made dangerous by Europe's retreat from power and its wilful refusal to invest in power.

Ours is an extremely chaotic and highly dangerous world, not least within the context of possibly irreversible climate change and ever increasing competition for resources of all kinds among a rapidly expanding world population causing pressures for mass immigration.

Add imbalances in wealth, disease and the aggressive international growth in terrorism, WMD, drugs and criminalised activity and we have the potential for big shocks in an increasingly interconnected world to overturn or radically modify existing assumptions about partners, vital interests and safeguards. The Arab Spring is a manifestation of this unpredictability.

To put it simply, I view these considerations and conclusions as compelling reasons why, in this unpredictable and potentially extremely chaotic and dangerous world, the UK must not elect to forgo its independent nuclear deterrent or cut its defence forces any further. Already the US doubts our ability to be a true and worthwhile global ally as the world becomes more dangerous.

We have a political class which has little military experience and which has a tendency to nationalise anything big that works, as Churchill once accused Aneurin Bevan. If ministers get defence wrong then the nation will never forgive them and the costs of so doing in both blood and treasure are enormous. More recently, of the Falklands, Mrs T said "Don't do it again".

We have entered an era where our maritime capability is vital. Yet those forces have taken disproportionately heavy cuts over the last few decades whilst our nation has been embroiled in the centre of Asia. The Navy needs significant investment. A good step in the right direction is the decision to build and run two new aircraft carriers, but they will not be operational until 2020 and will need a full complement of aircraft.

Whilst I have serious doubts about the ability of the Royal Navy to defend Britain, I can reassure you that, whatever is said about defence, the quality of our people is as good as ever and, as a nation, we should be proud of them.

The preamble to the Articles of War written in 1666 in the reign of Charles II and cut in stone on the portico of the Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth is as pertinent as ever:

“IT IS UPON THE NAVY UNDER GOD THAT THE SAFETY, HONOUR AND WELFARE OF THIS REALM DO CHIEFLY DEPEND”.

[Ed.; Si vis pacem para bellum!]

End