

# PRESERVATION BY OPERATION

## A COSTLY MYTH

BY

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Whoever was the eminent author of the centuries-old observation '*Ships and men rot in harbour*' is irrelevant; the fact that it is as true today as it was when first uttered is significant. Over the years the Royal Navy has had more ships than could be maintained in full commission, and a wide variety of means by which they could be held available for eventual use has been tried.

The early seventies, with the difficulties of retention and recruiting, saw the advent of a new method—Preservation by Operation (P by O). The concept that a small ship's company could maintain and operate equipments in sequence, and hence enable the vessel to be brought back quickly into front-line use or held in reasonable condition while awaiting refit, was attractive to many authorities. To name but a few: the Naval Staff kept the ship on their Order of Battle; the manning organization had to provide fewer men; and the Royal Dockyards had ships queuing up for refit and could ebb and flow on their programmes. At this time money for ships' refits was not a major problem and the fact that serious and eventually very expensive deterioration took place that would need to be corrected was not considered. Also, the small labour force was credited with the ability to undertake this mammoth task which, despite individual personal efforts, was doomed to failure from the outset.

With the passage of time, the dockyard overload became a significant factor, with the length of ships' refits extending unacceptably. On investigation, the proportion of unprogrammed work from survey, usually late in the refit, was identified as a prime cause of the overrun both of time and cost.

The use of the contract refit to unblock the system was introduced and it was here, probably for the first time, that the effect of the P-by-O concept could be assessed and costed. To quote two examples known to the author:

- (a) *H.M.S. Oracle*: The submarine had been assessed as in good condition throughout at her pre-refit inspection and was scheduled for overhaul at Scott Lithgow's yard at Greenock. The ship was prepared for refit at Faslane and the scheme of complement allowed the retention of some nineteen crew. The only change in her condition was collision damage to the bow from an incident occurring just prior to de-commissioning. At a late stage, disagreement on the contract terms between the ship repairer and CED/Government caused a delay of some six months. To a regular visitor to Faslane, the rapid deterioration despite the efforts of the crew was readily apparent. The subsequent cost of this delay was probably in excess of £1 million and formed the basis of the supplementary items costed outside the main contract.
- (b) *H.M.S. Fearless*: The debate on where the ship should be refitted and by whom went on from early 1979 until the summer of 1980. The complement had reduced to some 65 and, despite their efforts, i.e. totally de-lagging the machinery spaces, she became a sorry sight rotting away in Portsmouth Dockyard's No. 3 basin. A visit to the ship at

this time was enough to demoralize the most energetic of naval personnel. As much as 40 per cent. of the total refit cost and the major cause of the overrun on dates could probably be attributed to this dead period.

Now with the Navy entering the post-Nott era, a new series of 'buzz' words are with us: budget control, through-life costing, value engineering, etc. The message that money is tight and savings have got to be made and valuable assets used to best advantage has reached every member of the Fleet regardless of rank or specialization. The majority have responded in a most gratifying way and become cost conscious, and the overall effect of shortages has not been too dramatic.

It was in this light of pre-'Operation Corporate' days that, once it had been announced that the LPDs were to be retained, strenuous efforts were made to restrict the run-down of *Intrepid's* ship's company to a number more closely allied to the refit complement and not that specified for P-by-O. This was successfully achieved by a combination of vigorous lobbying of all interested authorities and the fact that available in the Portsmouth area at the time was a large number of ratings either eligible for shore service or awaiting sea drafts.

History will record that *Intrepid* was brought back from de-fuelled, dead-ship condition and was ready for sea just ten days after the order has been issued to come to 24-hours notice. She deployed fully loaded to join the Task Force, having undergone a trials and work-up period, some eleven days later. This was made possible largely because the key members of the ship's company had been employed in a maintenance role.

H.M.S. *Intrepid* caught up with the amphibious group at Ascension Island, played an active role in the operation, and returned back to her base port having suffered from only trivial minor defects. Steam was raised continuously for ninety-one days and a distance of 22 000 miles was travelled, mostly at high power.

The message is clear: that the most effective way of looking after a ship is to man her continuously with enough people possessing the right qualifications in order that the material condition can be maintained or improved. Furthermore, provided the notice for sea is sufficiently generous, it should be possible to take advantage of periods of light loading of the FMG or dockyard to reduce the eventual refit work package, undertake modifications, etc.

Let the term 'Preservation by Operation' sink back into history as a somewhat costly mistake and devise a more effective approach to ship management when not in full commission.

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