

# THE ROYAL NAVY'S ROLE IN THE DEFENCE SERVICE OF THE '80s

BY

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The task of the Royal Navy towards the end of the century, and its probable order of battle to meet such a task, together constitute a problem whose right solution is fundamental to Britain's Defence Policy. British foreign policy is only meaningful when sustained by a thriving economy. The 'professional management of violence' is part of the contingency planning of any foreign policy, however peaceful. This essay suggests that Britain can best sustain a role East of Suez by a reduction in the size of the Army, a complete integration of the Services into five or six well defined Commands coupled with the use of nuclear power at sea.

It is the twin 'explosives' of technology and population which must colour defence thinking in Britain in the next three decades. In the end it is technology allied to manpower and indigenous resources which spells industrial power and thus military power, and though advanced technology without much manpower may hold on for so long, there is a limit beyond which second or third generation technology powers with adequate and increasing manpower will overtake, in the industrial and military sense, powers with equal or, initially, even greater resources, now in the fourth or fifth generation since their industrial revolution, which have a slower, or static, birth-rate.

For Britain, therefore, manpower is perhaps her single most important capital asset and only for as long as she economizes in manpower can she hope, militarily, to sustain a foreign policy at all. Manpower economy, if logically pursued, calls into question not only the very existence of an army, itself a manpower expensive force, but also the equipment policies of the other two Services; for if these are allowed to depart too far from the needs of the civil market they could become too prolific in the use of those precious graduate resources so essential to the national economy. On the other hand, from the very nature of their military task, the equipping of the Navy and Air Force has a tendency to advance civilian technology more rapidly than has the development of equipment required for land warfare.

In theory there are three possible contingencies that the Services must face:

- (a) A direct threat to Britain as a small overpopulated offshore island;
- (b) A nationally expressed will that Britain should continue a world role;
- (c) The defence needs of a European community which included Britain.

And through these three there runs one common threat and several optional threats related to whichever contingency or combination may be chosen.

## THE COMMON THREAT

It is this common threat of interference with Britain's seaborne trade which:

- (a) Could starve Britain;
- (b) Could make it impossible for Britain to sustain a world role;
- (c) Could stop the industries of a United Europe

And it is this threat, therefore, which constitutes the single defence 'overhead' which should never be wholly renounced. At the lower end, the cost of meeting this threat could vary from that needed to establish a minimum air/sea force structure sufficient for an oceanic 'trip-wire' strategy backed by the deterrent to the larger 'Atlantic force' needed to respond effectively to a sustained attack. At the higher end there might be the larger, wholly British, or European air/sea force 'overhead' needed to dominate the more distant sea lanes, should they be threatened.

In neither case does this constant defence overhead include the need for any land forces although in the case of a United Europe such forces (not necessarily British) might be used to prolong the trip-wire strategy around the land perimeter.

Thus the simplest and probably the cheapest national strategy for Britain might consist of a joint air/sea force designed to reopen a few swept channels to the Continent after an unlimited mining attack and to provide a powerful hunter/killer force to attack concentrations of hostile submarines and, in time, to initiate convoy protection once a west coast port had been opened. This might be called the 'Fortress Britain' or Home Defence strategy.

Minehunters and sweepers have to meet a more sophisticated threat than ever existed in the last war and are therefore more expensive. Anti-submarine forces would consist of relatively expensive hunter/killer nuclear submarines, fast (and therefore expensive) frigates or other vessels with hunter/killer helicopters and a greatly enlarged Coastal Command. Nevertheless, although the unit costs might be high, it seems that a powerful and effective force could be created able to overcome the maximum credible attack on these lines; and all at a cost in money and manpower substantially less than that needed for the three Services today.

It is easy to demolish this concept and to postulate other, equally feasible, forms of conventional, or near conventional, attack which could be launched to bring Britain into subjection. Bombing and non-nuclear missile attack followed by a mass airborne landing is one possibility; the infiltration into civil air traffic of aircraft loaded with temporarily disabling nerve gas, is another. Nevertheless there is something less emotive about a mining or even individual submarine attacks than there is, for instance, about a bombing assault; and therefore any aggressor seeking to reduce the rate of escalation would find much to commend the mine instead of the bomb.

Who would actually launch such an attack is less clear. Steadily, Russia is becoming more European; yet her submarine and surface Fleet is constantly at sea, constantly practising, and it is not likely to be of much use against China.

That a threat to Britain exists is plain and whether it is to Britain alone or part of the threat to Europe does not greatly change the situation. Neither does the possession, by Britain, of a second strike nuclear weapon, which is a premium she must continue to pay at least until the proliferation of nuclear weapons ceases.

Air/sea 'shield' forces are therefore essential until Russia has entered into the comity of Europe and has disbanded her submarine fleet. Until that occurs Russia's option of being able to starve Britain and to disrupt Europe's trade must be put out of her reach, without the temptation at once to escalate into nuclear war.

In the present disarray of the European community it seems that British land forces in some strength, should remain in Europe. But if Britain joined the European community there are compelling manpower arguments to suggest that her most effective contribution to the defence of Europe could be the manning of the sea frontier, leaving to the mainland powers the provision of land forces

Given therefore:

- (a) That 'at first sight a direct threat to our survival seems less likely outside Europe' (1966 Defence Review);
- (b) That this European 'direct threat' would take the form of mining and submarine attack;
- (c) The validity of the arguments for the possession by Britain of a second strike nuclear weapon;
- (d) That Britain joins the European Community and is allocated the defence of the sea lanes;

a credible Fortress Britain strategy could comprise the following:

- (a) A second strike nuclear armoury (submarine mounted);
- (b) A powerful air/sea minehunting and sweeping and hunter/killer anti-submarine force;
- (c) A very limited aircraft or missile defence against bombing or airborne troops;
- (d) A limited mining capability against seaborne troops;
- (e) A Home Guard trained on territorial lines and able to deploy rapidly within their immediate area.

#### BRITAIN'S OVERSEAS COMMITMENTS

'In recent years the threat to peace has been far greater outside Europe, than within it . . . Britain's forces outside Europe can help to reduce this danger'. The 1966 Defence Review is specific as to what is intended over the next few years.

Clearly from a Fortress Britain strategy with, and still more without, land forces in Europe, to any world constabulary role is an enormous jump. But economic considerations alone, if not the other reasons given in the Defence Review, such as strong support for United Nations and for arms control, demand a dramatic cut back in British manpower and money. Indeed, one major decision in this direction has already been taken and it is worth close examination.

In the Spring of 1966 a political decision arising out of financial expediency set a time limit to a Fleet designed, quite deliberately over nearly twenty years, on the basic assumption that the Navy (in the nation's interest) should operate not only on and under the sea but also *from* the sea and that naval controlled air power would:

- (a) Defend the surface Fleet against aircraft armed with bombs or stand-off missiles;
- (b) Provide mobile airfields to deploy strike reconnaissance aircraft in support of the Army;
- (c) Provide airborne early warning of airborne or surface attack;
- (d) Provide a surface-to-surface weapon possessing far greater range than the big gun and extreme accuracy;
- (e) Provide anti-submarine detection and attack;
- (f) Provide troop and material lift from Commando carriers in the assault or support role;
- (g) Provide vertical replenishment at sea although the airborne strategic nuclear strike role has disappeared.

Some of these roles are essentially naval and some are in support of army operations. There is little doubt in most minds that the aircraft carrier force

as it evolved after the Second War was, from the point of view of the country, the most effective way of dominating the oceans and exercising sea power, and there is not much doubt that it could have continued to do so for at least another couple of decades. But there was nothing immutable in the carrier force and it had to come to an end one day; and in some ways we are fortunate to have had a 10-year period in which to rethink how, in the interests of the economy, the country can exercise the degree of sea power which will be appropriate in the second decade from now, without carriers.

The 1966 Defence White Paper is perfectly explicit on the substitutes for seaborne air power:

'We also believe that the tasks ((a)-(f) above) for which carrier-borne aircraft might be required can be more cheaply performed in other ways'.

'Our plan is that, in the future, aircraft operating from land bases should take over the strike reconnaissance ((b) above) and air-defence functions of the carrier ((a) above) on the reduced scale which we envisage that our commitments will require after the mid 1970s'.

'Close anti-submarine protection of the naval force will be given by helicopters operating from ships other than carriers' ((e) above).

'Airborne-early-warning will continue to be operated from existing carriers and subsequently from land bases' ((c) above).

'Strike capability against enemy ships will be provided by the surface-to-surface guided missile (mentioned in para. 2 of Defence Review)' ((d) above).

Thus (a)-(c) are very precisely catered for although it is implicit that the anti-surface ship potential of the Royal Navy will be reduced by the vast difference between the range of carrier-borne strike aircraft and surface-to-surface missile range which, in the present state of the art, is limited to the radar horizon.

These decisions have caused controversy and misgiving and it is idle to pretend that all who understand the full implications have fully accepted them. Yet accepted they must be, if not in deference to political decision then surely to the hard facts of 'lead times' and building time. The chance of a viable British Carrier Fleet much beyond the mid 1970's has now passed and, anyway, it is questionable whether such a Fleet, if not nuclear powered, would have been viable for long, as the tenure of existing bases and fuel storages is at least questionable and the development of new ones both difficult and expensive.

#### THE ISLAND STRATEGY

Even an island strategy however has a minimum overhead not only in terms of the F.111A and those impressive juggernauts of a bygone age, the V-bombers, but also in their successors, the Anglo-French variable geometry aircraft, and in the fuelling convoys which, in the event of trouble, the Navy will have to fight round the Cape and through a hostile ocean with air cover provided from the islands themselves.

In this connection although the serviceability of the 50 F.111As and the unspecified number of variable geometry aircraft which will succeed them will doubtless be good under the superlative Royal Air Force servicing arrangements (once the R.A.F. have learnt the perils of a sea environment) it must still always be sufficient to ensure that there are enough aircraft available both to fight through the convoys to the islands and to carry out whatever operations foreign policy requires.

Quite patently the present situation is that the R.A.F., by the mid 1970's (or 1980 at the latest) must be capable of fulfilling roles (a), (b) and (c); and by then the Navy must have given to the R.A.F. all its great experience and knowledge of the oversea battle so that the R.A.F., in turn, can provide

adequate air defence to naval surface forces (roles (a) and (c)). And in addition, a breakthrough must have been achieved by the late 1960's which will give to some British surface ships at sea in the late 1970's a surface-to-surface capability outranging the present well developed surface-to-surface missiles in the Krupnys, Kashins, Kyndas and Kildins *or their successors*, in the hands of any second generation technology powers who may be given them.

If both these considerable feats can be achieved in time and within a reducing Defence Vote then Britain, should she wish to, might just be able to sustain a credible presence East of Suez in the post British carrier era. If one or the other should fail then there must be a strong supposition that no really credible surface presence can be provided East of Suez if the navies developing in that area, either singly or together, should prove hostile; at least until their effectiveness had been reduced by British submarine attack.

From what has been put down so far, and from much else it is possible to derive 'optional' threats which might well be credible. One thing is certain, however, more will continue to be demanded of both the Air Force and the Navy than planned; and into the ships aircraft and equipment now being designed there must be built a greater degree of reliability and maintainability; and also equipment requiring less uniformed and civilian manpower to design, operate and sustain. Unless this can be achieved then both Services, in any militarily effective form, will soon price themselves out of the national defence structure and, if this should happen to the minimum basic overhead (composed principally of an Air Force and a Navy) then it would be as well to renounce violence altogether and beat the aircraft and ships, as well as the swords, into ploughshares.

However, if history and normal British habit are followed, practice will prove very different from theory. In fact some arbitrary proportion of the gross national product will be selected as the defence share of the national 'cake' and from this slice some sort of inter-Service order of battle which, inevitably, will include a few land forces, will evolve; the whole splendid glittering phalanx, with the Air Force and the Navy, slanted towards a foreign policy which, at the time, will seem in all good faith to be financially and politically feasible. What has to be done now is to ensure that waste of precious effort and economic resources is eliminated and that industry benefits from the defence effort.

It is a matter of history that the short period of Pacific operations with Admiral Nimitz's fleet gave to the Royal Navy an emotional shock which is still unforgotten. Initially the impact of discovering the vast technological gap between the two fleets was healthy and invigorating and helped directly and indirectly to boost morale in the period of post-war neglect which the Royal Navy always stoically endures. There was a clear technological challenge, and all ranks and ratings and civilians very successfully rose to meet it. But the U.S. Navy too, under various pressures, went ahead and there is a quite irreconcilable difference in the resources available to the two navies. Thus there came a moment when, with hindsight, the Royal Navy should have said, not 'So far, no further', but 'So far so good and now we plot our own course at the best rate our resources will permit'. In the event technology has taken charge and as yet no halt has been called. Happily the Navy, unlike the other two Services, is still largely master of its own Supply Departments and the solution to the dilemma which is in two parts—material and personnel—is still in its own hands.

The range of possible weapon fits and the cost of the most effective ones is now so prodigious that it is easy to expend the total resources available on half a dozen super-sophisticated ships. At the other end of the scale, a large number of ships of doubtful military worth would be a possibility. From this dichotomy there springs the argument about a 'first' and 'second' League.

The current antipathy to two 'Leagues' in the Navy is something very new and reflects a preoccupation with all-round unqualified technical excellence which would appal the last generation of naval officers. To some extent naval engineers are victims of their own recruiting propaganda; to a similar extent seaman specialist officers are victims of scientific enthusiasm and science fiction. Between them anyway, in their chase after advanced technology, they have managed to create a philosophy in which anything less than the best is wholly unacceptable. Naval officers have begun to lose faith in themselves and to forget the spirit which has carried the British Navy through so many periods of retrenchment similar to that it is now enduring. The Royal Navy has always had two 'Leagues' and it is only since the abolition of the Reserve Fleet that this has been forgotten.

Now in order that the Navy may support foreign policy and provide the naval safeguards essential to Britain's survival, a certain density of warships is required about the world and today's hard economic facts seem to dictate that this will mean a large second League backed by a small very effective first League. Without specifying precisely the types of ship in each league, it is possible to establish certain principles which, if followed, could create an effective fleet on these lines manned by experienced crews in the post-British carrier era. From this arrangement, as this essay will try to show, a national strategy might evolve.

#### THE SHIP DESIGN AND BUILDING PROBLEM

When he established a Naval Staff Mr. Winston Churchill defined its role, *inter alia*, as follows:

'It is to be a brain far more comprehensive than that of any single man, however gifted, and tireless and unceasing in its action, applied continuously to the scientific and speculative study of naval strategy and preparation.'

Whether this recipe has been scrupulously followed can be debated, but what Mr. Churchill did not specify was the need also to include economists and people, preferably engineers, able to comprehend British industry.

Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond laid down the duties of statesmen concerned with seapower, to the shipbuilding industry; but the Navy allowed his words to be forgotten and the appalling results are proclaimed daily in the newspapers. Many would hold that the 'ball' in the shape of a fleet credible in terms of men, money, headquarters resources, and subsequent repair resources, is in danger of dropping between a Naval Staff, anxious in the national interest to equal the technological achievements of the U.S. Navy, and naval material supply departments, anxious not to be found wanting and too separated from the realities of British industry.

The U.S. Navy has shown the operational and tactical advantages of nuclear power and, in an era when any strategy depending wholly on bases and the seaborne or airborne supply of liquid fuel is at risk, and when the Suez Canal can be closed without warning, and perhaps altogether to warships, there can be no other answer for a First League Fleet.

So without at this stage committing the Royal Navy's future capital fleet (First League) either to submarines or surface ships or to any proportion of each, it can be said that both should be nuclear powered and that the design would occupy the full technical manpower resources at Headquarters working closely as they do with the Atomic Energy Authority and other agencies; while the building of these (few) advanced vessels would certainly have to be undertaken within the few shipyards capable and experienced in nuclear work.

This preoccupation at Headquarters with the design of very advanced (nuclear powered) ships and submarines leaves to the British Shipbuilding

Industry the responsibility for much of the design and production of the rather more numerous Second League Fleet.

Space does not permit any detailed exposition as to how this should be done, but in essence the way ahead is not too difficult given that the industry reorganizes on the lines of the Geddes Report and that the Navy is willing precisely to specify the requirements and then to proceed on the lines indicated below.

*Step 1.* Staff (operational) requirements and machinery and equipment specifications would be issued to a navally-controlled but industrially operated design and specification agency capable of 'working up' the design to the stage where it could be put out to tender to the 'S' Yards postulated by the Geddes Report.

*Step 2.* Tenders would be received from the 'S' Yards and accepted on a basis of lowest cost and quickest delivery time against penalty clauses. Always in order to take advantage of the learner factor, an order would be placed for a maximum number of ships with one firm and strict overseeing would be imposed. Most items of machinery and weapon equipment would be designated by the Navy from well developed current 'standard ranges'.

The merits of these two different ways of designing and building the First and Second League ships are clear. For the large ships the design would stem from all the knowledge and expertise at Headquarters and associated agencies; while, although competition between shipyards would be very limited, price control as practised today in the case of nuclear submarines would be enforceable through deep and precise knowledge of what the design involves.

In the Second (more competitive) League, ships would no longer be so 'custom' built, and shipbuilders would be free—and indeed actively encouraged—to introduce techniques designed to cut prices and to speed output.

The second great dilemma which faces the Royal Navy is how to man it. In a world where marriage age is getting younger and where, increasingly, separation is resented, the Navy will never be able to recruit the highly skilled technicians it needs if it cannot offer a secure home to the wives and families and, in peace-time, a not too long separation and regular homecomings. Neither will ships achieve the serviceability they should if they are subjected to constantly changing crews.

To correct these troubles would involve the Navy in a radical departure from its present training and commissioning system and ships, whether in the First or Second League, would need double crews; each crew when not at sea in the ship being stationed at its own 'Class' base. Thus during the shore 'leg', which might range from two months for a Polaris submarine to a year for surface ships, crews would have the leave due to them, would work for promotion and would absorb and train, with simulators, new recruits fresh from basic training, into the techniques and practices of the particular ships to which they will all return.

This form of manning and training has long been advocated in the Navy although there are severe difficulties in changing from the present pattern; but with an entirely 'new look' Navy in the post-carrier era, there is an opportunity gradually to abolish the great weapon and machinery schools which commit the Navy of the future—as they do the present—to a heavy and crippling training overhead it must at the moment have but really cannot afford.

If then the Navy can solve these two major problems, the building of a 'two-league Fleet' and the creation of a manning structure which will give an economic use of manpower and also greater serviceability of machinery and weapon systems, then the way is clear for a radical change in the nation's defence structure.

There must be continuing doubt, in the light of Britain's economic situation,

that the island strategy can be anything more than an interim stage on the way to something if possible as effective, and certainly, cheaper.

The precise details of any threat in the 1980s and 1990s are unpredictable but clearly the ability to introduce air/sea power into the Aden, Singapore, Perth, Durban quadrilateral, within a reasonably short period and without the need to retain fixed bases of any sort is not an unreasonable aim. At present there are several navies which could intervene in this area, and their effectiveness is likely to increase. There is also some evidence to suggest that a Chinese Navy with a submarine arm is being quickly created.

Showing the flag in its old and literal sense may be an outworn concept; but the presence of British warships is an earnest of Britain's intention to help to maintain the peace in an area on two sides of which population explosions of unprecedented size are occurring and where inevitably, pressures will build up. The survival of Britain may well depend on the efficacy of a 'Fortress Britain' strategy but if at all economically possible, this should not detract from her ability as a world influence to put a self-contained, powerful air/sea force into the Indian Ocean.

Most notably this country has been hesitant and backward in applying nuclear power to naval warfare; but recently there has been a change of heart and the way is now clear for a rapid development.

The ability to be able to remain at sea, if necessary at high speed, for weeks and months on end could allow major British naval forces to withdraw altogether from the Indian Ocean area, leaving only a 'police force' of Second League warships for flag showing and local trade defence purposes; while the capacity rapidly to intervene in support of the police forces would be retained.

Thus it appears that the idea of a First and Second League Navy could be extended on a tri-Service basis to form the basis for an effective, economic, and as it happens industrially very worth while, successor to the island strategy.

### CONCLUSIONS

The Army, Navy and Air Force must soon cease their internecine wrangling which makes them, rightly, the butt of every Defence Correspondent and of the general public. There is no short term or slick answer and it will not be easy. Many of the wounds are deep and still open. The country is already committed to the abandonment of a carrier strategy and from that decision there is no appeal and there is no profit in looking back or in recriminations. The Island Strategy has been propounded and steps have already been initiated to implement it.

What happens next is anyone's guess. This essay suggests that in the 1980s any major British presence East of Suez (other than a naval police force) will be beyond Britain's means, but that this need not deter the country from devising a force which, if required would be able to intervene powerfully and to dominate any troublesome areas with seaborne air power and troops, at least for a period sufficient to allow diplomacy to slow down or arrest escalation. Furthermore, it is implicit that this concept is only feasible in the context of nuclear ship propulsion, of a completely integrated Air Force and Navy, and a sad but inevitable reduction in the size of Britain's incomparable Army.

If all this can be accepted—and it is a lot—then a well-planned inter-Service integration would be needed over a 10/15 year period. At the end of it, in addition to a Basic Training Command for each Service, Britain's defence forces would reveal themselves (besides a Deterrent Command) in five major operational Commands, all based on the U.K.; and within these Commands each 'arm' would be responsible for the element it knows best: the Army on land; the Navy on and under the sea; the Air Force over the land and sea and in space.



In substance these Operational Commands could be constituted on the following lines:

(i) *The Overseas Intervention Force*

An entirely nuclear powered seaborne fully integrated air/sea force with (if thought necessary) a seaborne and airborne Army element.

(ii) *Overseas Maritime Police Force*

An integrated air (helicopter)/sea force composed entirely of small second league frigates and mobile support ships, the latter possibly nuclear powered.

(iii) *Home Defence Force*

An integrated air/sea force aimed at the mining and submarine threat and including Coastal Command as well as warships and hunter-killer submarines and hovercraft, together with a Territorial Home Guard. Some elements of all three arms of this Command would also act as the 'mobile' strategic reserve for (i) and (ii) above.

(iv) *Continental Defence Force*

Army and Air Force though on a smaller scale than at present, if manpower resources permit.

(v) *Transport Command*

All ships and aircraft required for the transport of stores, fuels and men.

Furthermore a well regulated development of the Defence Services on these lines would give to the aircraft and shipbuilding industries a stability of purpose and a well defined challenge of inestimable benefit to the national economy.