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## BRITANNIA RULE THE WAVES – THE ROYAL NAVY PAST AND FUTURE

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### JCSP 40

#### *Exercise Solo Flight*

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FUTURE**

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## **BRITANNIA RULE THE WAVES – THE ROYAL NAVY PAST AND FUTURE**

*“Nothing, nothing in the world, nothing that you may think of, or dream of, or anyone else may tell you; no arguments however seductive, must lead you to abandon that naval supremacy on which the life of our country depends.”*

- Winston Churchill, 1918

### **INTRODUCTION**

The history of the United Kingdom is the history of the Royal Navy. Britain is an island nation and the sea has always been a vital factor. It is the means of people arriving from overseas, a barrier to invaders, a highway for trade, and the basis for a once-global empire.<sup>1</sup> However, while the geographic factors have not changed, Britain's position in the world has and the demise of the British Empire since the end of the Second World War has had a substantial impact on Britain's armed services. Since 1945, declining global commitments and fiscal pressures imposed by the costs of world wars and more recently global recession have driven a series of defence reviews by successive governments. The reviews have seen the three armed services fighting for primacy and relevance and have had a dramatic affect in reducing the size and strength of Britain's defence forces. More recently, global recession and competing operational priorities have combined to reduce the size of the Royal Navy to unprecedented levels.

This paper will examine the changing shape of the Royal Navy in the post war period before going on to set out the vision for the Service into the twenty first century. Firstly providing a brief contextual history, it will then go on to describe the impact on

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<sup>1</sup> History of the Royal Navy, last accessed 12 May 2014 at <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/History>.

the navy of the succession of defence reviews that the United Kingdom has undergone since 1945. Finally it will describe the implications of the most recent 2010 Strategic Security and Defence Review and how that will shape the Navy of the future.

## **FROM OUT THE AZURE MAIN - HISTORY**

The Royal Navy has been a vital component of Britain's power projection since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Henry VIII created the first permanent administration for the navy via Letters Patent in 1546. With growing skill and assurance, its ships defended their nation well throughout the wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and contributed to the growth of the British Empire, advancing voyages of exploration and defending recent strategic gains. The Royal Navy began to show superiority to the navies of her enemies, winning, amongst many victories, the great battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Imperial assets continued to be defended throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the Royal Navy also undertaking the lengthy campaign against the slave trade. In an era of technological revolution, moving from sail to steam, and from wood to steel, the navy kept pace with its rivals to ensure command of the seas and national security. As the world plunged into the chaos of two global conflicts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Royal Navy fought to maintain this command. Convoyed merchant shipping ensured that Britain had the food and armaments to survive and turn the conflict against the enemy. Innovative advances in technology created a renewed assurance and confidence in naval power. Naval forces prevailed, whether in the Grand Fleet action of the Battle of Jutland, the slow attrition of the Battle

of the Atlantic, or the amphibious triumph of the D-Day Landings.<sup>2</sup> Victory in World War Two however came at great cost. Post war, Britain was financially devastated. Having borrowed heavily from the USA, Britain began to withdraw from an Empire that could no longer be sustained and for which the US donor was unwilling to finance or sanction. Consequently as Britain began to cut its cloth, the armed services were ripe targets for savings.

## **THE CHARTER OF THE LAND - DEFENCE IN REVIEW**

Since the end of WWII, Britain has conducted eight defence reviews. This section will examine five of those that had the greatest impact on Britain's maritime capability.

Conducted after a period of post war reflection, many analysts consider the first major, wholesale strategic defence review conducted after the Second World War to be the Sandys review in 1957.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting the focus on the Cold War, which had taken hold and was dominating western defence planning, this review resulted in the Royal Navy adopting a more defensive posture. It concentrated on the navy providing an anti-submarine warfare capability against the Soviet threat in the north Atlantic leaving the maritime strike role to the more capable carrier task groups of the United States. Only eleven years after the end of the war in which the capability came in to its own, carrier borne aviation already looked vulnerable. However post WWII, under Admiral Lord Mountbatten's stewardship, the Navy was able to move into the nuclear age with the

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<sup>2</sup> History of the Royal Navy, last accessed 12 May 2014 at <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/History>.

<sup>3</sup> United Kingdom House of Commons International Affairs and Defence Section, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews* (London: House of Commons Library, 2010), p3.

development of nuclear powered hunter-killer submarines. Also emphasizing the independent nuclear deterrent as the mainstay of Britain's defence policy, the review led to the development of the four Resolution Class Ballistic Submarines from which the Navy would be charged with deploying the deterrent capability from 1968.

The Labour government of 1964 came to power with the view to redress the balance between resources and capability. In a statement on the defence estimates in 1965 the government posited:

The present Government has inherited defence forces which are seriously over-stretched and in some respects dangerously under-equipped [...] There has been no real attempt to match political commitments to military resources, still less to relate the resources made available for defence to the economic circumstances of the nation . . . <sup>4</sup>

In a review that further acknowledged Britain's declining global fortunes, the government sought to bring defence expenditure into balance with the nation's resources. The main thrust was the achievement of substantial savings through the cancellation of major equipment orders, including further aircraft carrier construction. Loss of the proposed aircraft carrier programme was a devastating blow for the Royal Navy causing the then First Sea Lord to resign. Not only did this mark the first of a staged removal of the Navy's aircraft carrier capability, it would also mark the beginning of a period that would see the Navy decline at a rate unknown since the reign of King Charles II three hundred years before.

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<sup>4</sup> Government of the United Kingdom, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1965*, Cm 2592, February 1965 p5

By the time Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power in 1979 the Royal Navy had been reduced to a fleet of just sixty frigates and destroyers compared to a strength of around 600 warships prior to Sandys review in 1957. As a palliative measure, a form of strike capability was maintained through the development of the three hybrid Invincible Class carriers which, combined with the Sea Harrier, allowed a seaborne fixed wing capability to be maintained.

The Thatcher government's review of 1981 once more had huge implications for the Royal Navy. The Nott review as it is known was again cost driven and focused on strategic prioritizing between the UK's continental and maritime contribution to NATO. The latter took the main brunt of the proposed cuts with the Royal Navy earmarked to lose approximately one fifth of its destroyers and frigates, one aircraft carrier and two amphibious ships. In total the Navy took 57% of the cuts in expenditure. As many analysts noted, the cuts to the Navy, emphasised the UK's reliance on its nuclear capability to counter the Soviet threat and the increasing expectation that the UK would only act as part of the NATO alliance in any other expeditionary operations. Such assumptions were subsequently undermined by the invasion of the Falkland Islands just six months later.<sup>5</sup> As Lawrence Freedman noted in his book *The Politics of British Defence 1979-1998*: “ [The Falklands] was precisely the war for which Britain was

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<sup>5</sup> United Kingdom House of Commons International Affairs and Defence Section, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews* (London: House of Commons Library, 2010).

planning least.”<sup>6</sup> Arguably it was perhaps the war that the Royal Navy needed most. Conflict in the Falklands halted many of the proposed cuts of the Nott review. The Invincible Class carriers were retained as were the battle proven Sea Harriers. Also preserved and marked for renewal was the Royal Navy’s amphibious capability together with 3 Commando Brigade of the Royal Marines. A larger than expected fleet of frigates and destroyers was also maintained.

Nonetheless, the end of the Cold war saw Britain keen to reap the financial benefits of a perceived peaceful future. The 1990 *Options for Change* review saw threat based defence planning replaced by a capability based policy. The armed forces suffered swathing cuts in personnel as NATO began to withdraw from central Europe. The Royal Navy endured significant equipment cuts and a further reduction in the frigate and destroyer fleet from forty eight to forty hulls. As international security expert Professor Stuart Cross observed, “the commitments have only been trimmed while the resources have been cut . . .”<sup>7</sup> This was to be an ongoing issue as the overstretch in the armed forces and the Royal Navy became ever more apparent into the twenty first century.

The next defence review took place in 1998 as the new Labour government under Tony Blair swept away the vestiges of Thatcher’s Conservative reign. While the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) was considered to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, the Royal Navy once again faced cuts. The proposed new aircraft carrier programme was

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *The Politics of British Defence 1979-1998*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p83.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Croft, *British Security Policy: The Thatcher Years and the End of the Cold War*, (London: Harper Collins, 1991).



retained but the frigate and destroyer force was reduced to 32 hulls and 1400 personnel were lost. In spite of this, the then First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jock Slater felt the review was, “. . . a most responsible root and branch strategic review [which] charted a pragmatic way forward for our Armed Forces and their future role, not least the maritime contribution to that role.”<sup>8</sup> However, looking back at the subsequent decade, he reflects with hindsight that the government “utterly failed to ensure that the way forward was adequately funded.” This resulted in a decade of cuts to personnel, equipment, support and training, which significantly hollowed out Britain’s military capability.”<sup>9</sup> For the Navy, the promised order of twelve Type 45 destroyers to replace their aging predecessors was slashed in half to just six.

## **THOU SHALT FLOURISH GREAT AND FREE - BEYOND 2010**

The impact of global turbulence of the first decade of the twenty first century was certainly felt by the Royal Navy. The events of 9/11 led to land focused wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the former of which was to become the main effort for UK defence for over a decade. This left the navy jockeying for attention as the army absorbed the majority of what scant resources were available to the military. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) was the first substantial United Kingdom defence review in over a decade. While SDR had established the broad strategic direction of defence for the following decade, the purpose behind SDSR was to set out the practical

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<sup>8</sup> Admiral Sir Jock Slater, “Foreword,” in *Britain’s Future Navy*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2012), p6.

<sup>9</sup> Admiral Sir Jock Slater, “Foreword,” in *Britain’s Future Navy*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2012), p6.

direction of defence policy in the light of a strategic assessment that would inform the period of Conservative or coalition government to come in the same way that the 1998 SDR had defined new Labour's era in defence policy. Nevertheless, this strategic vision existed in the context of, and so would be conditioned by, a Labour legacy of unfunded liability in defence estimated at approximately £38 billion in the 2010–2020 period. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, the situation was neatly summed up in a note by the outgoing Labour Secretary to the Treasury Liam Byrne left to his coalition government Liberal successor which simply stated, "Dear Chief Secretary, I am afraid to tell you there is no money left."<sup>10</sup> As the reality of the global recession became clear, it was apparent that the armed services would have to bear their share of the consequences. Short-term cuts in the defence budget were unavoidable. Consequently, many analysts considered SDSR less strategic than driven by financial imperatives. Certainly the measures imposed were swift, harsh and, for many, incoherent. All three services lost capability and personnel although the army fared better due to ongoing commitments to operations in Afghanistan. Royal Navy strength was to be reduced by 5000 over five years to 30, 000 personnel. The frigate and destroyer Force was to be reduced to a total of nineteen hulls. Removal of the Harrier for the Royal Air Force had a direct impact on the Royal Navy's strike capability and this was further exacerbated by the immediate withdrawal from service of the aircraft carrier Ark Royal and the conversion of her sister ship *Illustrious* to an amphibious role. The long threatened removal of the carrier strike capability was finally realised – temporarily at least. The development of the 65, 000

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Owen, "*Ex-Treasury secretary Liam Byrne's note to his successor: there's no money left,*" *The Guardian*, 17 May 2010, last accessed 12 May 2014 at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/may/17/liam-byrne-note-successor>.

tonne aircraft carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth and Prince of Wales was again safeguarded but would not reach full operational capability with the F35 Joint Strike Fighter until 2020. In a policy that seemed inconsistent in the least, the strategic assessment of the government was that while a strike capability was deemed important to defence strategy, it would not be required for the foreseeable future.

On face value, the results of the 2010 defence review looked stark. The proposals even caused US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to comment on the potential effect of such deep cuts on the NATO alliance.<sup>11</sup> Certainly over the course of sixty years, the Royal Navy, once the backbone of the British Empire, had been reduced from a force of over six hundred major warships to a core of just nineteen frigates and destroyers. The fleet appeared unbalanced. A small amphibious force, nineteen warships and the promise of a future carrier strike capability appeared to many to simply confirm the inexorable decline of the Royal Navy. Describing how he successfully argued the case for carrier borne aviation during his tenure as First Sea Lord, Sir Jock Slater reflects:

“... had I been told then that two aircraft carriers would eventually be built but with greatly reduced force levels of frigates and destroyers, nuclear submarines and supporting forces, a diminished amphibious capability and no fixed wing aircraft for the first ten years or so, I could not possibly have sustained the arguments, strong as they remain.”<sup>12</sup>

However, there is no doubt that reductions in the size and strength of the Navy in the post war era were inevitable. No longer with an empire to service, one of the key reasons for the Royal Navy's growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has severely diminished.

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<sup>11</sup> BBC News UK Politics, “*Hilary Clinton says US worried over UK defence budget*,” Last accessed 12 May 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-11546926>.

<sup>12</sup> Admiral Sir Jock Slater in *Britain's Future Navy*, p7.

Technology has also played a part; modern ships and weapon systems are far more capable in small numbers than their post war predecessors. Additionally, severe financial pressures from the costs of the Second World War, recession in the 1970s and most recently the global financial crisis have taken their toll on all of the UK armed services and not least the Royal Navy. The Government has made it clear that dealing with the UK's economic deficit is one of its top priorities. In respect to this, Defence must play its part in bringing the nation's finances back into balance. The challenge for the Royal Navy here is clear as described by the current First Sea Lord. "The service must continue to deliver operational success during a period of financial turbulence whilst also positioning for the future."<sup>13</sup>

## **STILL MORE MAJESTIC THOU SHALT RISE - THE FUTURE**

Despite the challenges imposed by previous defence reviews the role for the Royal Navy into the future appears clear. While the UK's global ambitions have adjusted, her geography has not and, as an island nation, the security and prosperity of the nation directly stems from the ability to access the sea. This is why the Royal Navy's ability to apply maritime power will continue to have such value in meeting the UK's defence and security needs.<sup>14</sup> As the Prime Minister articulated in his National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2010:

"Our country has always had global responsibilities and global ambitions... we should have no less ambition for our country in the decades to come. The

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<sup>13</sup> Chief of the Naval Staff, "*Future Navy Vision: The Royal Navy Today, Tomorrow and Towards 2025*," Last accessed 12 May 2014 at [http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/~/\\_/media/Files/Navy-PDFs/About-the-Royal-Navy/Future%20Navy%20Vision.pdf](http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/~/_/media/Files/Navy-PDFs/About-the-Royal-Navy/Future%20Navy%20Vision.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

UK is an open, outward-facing nation that depends on trade and has people living all over the world. It has international responsibilities and is dependent on a stable global market for the raw materials, energy and manufactured goods which underpin our prosperity and our way of life. In order to protect interests at home the UK must project influence abroad. To do so requires the ability to project power overseas and to use the UK's unique network of alliances and relationships – principally with the United States but also as a member of NATO and the European Union. The National Security Strategy (NSS) is clear; the UK must maintain the capability to act well beyond our shores and work with allies to have a strategic presence wherever we need it.”<sup>15</sup>

The SDSR recognised the enduring importance of maritime power for Britain as an island nation and directed the Royal Navy to retain and develop a powerful, adaptable maritime warfighting force; one that is able to conduct, command and sustain operations from the sea, on land or in the air.<sup>16</sup> The ability to deliver military power from the maritime without necessarily becoming embroiled in land based commitments will continue to have great strategic utility in the years ahead. The Royal Navy must continue to provide political and military leaders with a range of options to counter the threats identified in the NSS. The implication is that the Royal Navy must be able to project maritime power to protect and promote the nation's interests. This will require a navy that is operationally versatile and interoperable in all environments as part of a joint, multi-national and multi-agency force. The Royal Navy must innovate to be able to adapt more quickly than its adversaries and must be supported by lean, effective, equipment and manpower structures.

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<sup>15</sup> A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy, Cm 7953, dated October 2010, – Foreword.

<sup>16</sup> HM Government, “*Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review CM 7948 dated October 2010*,” last accessed 12 May 2014 at [http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dg/groups/dg\\_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg\\_191634.pdf](http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191634.pdf)

From this requirement, the Royal Navy has developed a vision out to 2025 that allows sufficient force development to deliver the NSS requirements. Set under three broad headings, the Royal Navy will adopt the following core roles: Warfighting – conducting or being ready to conduct warfighting at sea; Maritime Security – protecting the free, safe and lawful use of the sea where it is vital to UK prosperity and security; and International Engagement – Promoting UK interests by developing international partnerships.<sup>17</sup> Key to realising the vision will be developing and delivering a range of new and existing capability through Future Force 2020 (FF2020). At the core of the force will be the two aircraft carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth and Prince of Wales that, combined with the F35 Joint Strike Fighter, will enable global power projection. In the future, one of the QE Class carriers will be part of the Response Force Task Group (RFTG) a core tenet of SDSR. By 2020, the RFTG will achieve full strength and be capable of landing and sustaining a Commando group ashore with associated maritime force protection, operational support shipping and enablers. In many respects the Royal Navy has one of the most exciting equipment programmes of its history. As well as the aircraft carriers, several core capabilities will be updated. The Navy will retain the nation's independent nuclear deterrent through the Vanguard Class ballistic submarines and their successors which will be in service by 2028. These will be supported by the Astute Class nuclear powered submarines which will achieve full operational capability by 2024. As well as their hunter killer role, the submarines will be able to deliver deep land strike and support special forces operations. The six Type 45 destroyers will be

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<sup>17</sup> Chief of the Naval Staff, "*Future Navy Vision: The Royal Navy Today, Tomorrow and Towards 2025*," Last accessed 12 May 2014 at [http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/~/\\_media/Files/Navy-PDFs/About-the-Royal-Navy/Future%20Navy%20Vision.pdf](http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/~/_media/Files/Navy-PDFs/About-the-Royal-Navy/Future%20Navy%20Vision.pdf) .

accompanied by thirteen Type 26 Global Combat Ships, which will replace the Type 23 Frigates from 2021. A fleet of new support ships will be delivered from 2016 that will provide the sustained reach required for global operations.

Of course a note of caution should be attached to such an ambitious equipment programme. The promise of ‘jam tomorrow’ as Sir Jock Slater describes “in defence terms seldom come to pass as planned.”<sup>18</sup> Certainly there is still water to pass under the bridge. Britain is still emerging from the global financial crisis and an interim defence review due in 2015 is likely to see all three services once again vying for primacy. However, as the UK prepares to end its commitment in Afghanistan, the Navy appears to be aligned well with the direction of the SDSR and has a coherent programme to deliver the vision of the NSS.

## CONCLUSION

In examining the changing shape of the Royal Navy, this paper has described the history of the service and how it was vital to UK interests both in maintaining the Empire and during the first and second world wars. The second part of the paper studied the decline of the Navy since 1945 and how the UK’s reducing global ambitions and interests combined with significant budgetary constraints led to a dramatic reduction in scale and capability over the course of successive defence reviews. Finally it reviewed the most recent defence review and how the vision of the Royal Navy has adapted to meet the constraints imposed by the review and the vision articulated in the National Security

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<sup>18</sup> Admiral Sir Jock Slater in *Britain’s Future Navy*, p8.

Strategy. In 2014, the Royal Navy has good reason to be cautiously optimistic. An ambitious and exciting equipment programme promises much in the future but requires the ongoing commitment and funding of current and successive governments. As the UK economy begins to grow, there is a possibility that the vision of the Royal Navy can be fulfilled. Whether the new ships and capabilities will spur a renaissance for maritime capability remains to be seen. Certainly a return to the glory days of the twentieth century is unlikely, unnecessary, and unfeasible. However, for a staunch maritime nation with professed global interests and ideals, a well-balanced, well-resourced and capable Navy remains an essential component.



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