

**From Damage Control to Abandon Ship:
The British Admiralty and the Decline
of Royal Navy Battleships 1939-1960**

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Introduction

“Naval men do not commit suicide, and battleships are vital to their profession and vital to their comfort.”¹

— Admiral Percy Scott, RN.

Many histories have been written about the age of the Royal Navy’s steel-hulled battleships; a 100-year era stretching from the 19th century HMS *Warrior* to the missile-age HMS *Vanguard*.² Some texts are concerned with technical innovations and the battleship’s contribution to the maritime tradition of Great Britain.³ Others review the command and control of the Admiralty, debating the complex conflicts and personalities that guided the Royal Navy in war.⁴ This dissertation does not seek to be a technical study of the British battleship or an Admiralty history of the Second World War. Instead this paper will examine the end of the battleship era by focusing on how a multitude of events and decisions encompassing the years 1939-1960 contributed to its demise. It will tell the story of the Royal Navy’s battleships to answer how and why they became extinct with the final voyage of HMS *Vanguard* to the ship breakers.

In the decades before the Second World War the battleship was frequently sunk in newspaper columns, in political speeches, and by new weapons. On each occasion it survived to fight again. Although battleships no longer dominated naval warfare in 1939 as they had in 1914, these warships endured as the most important and powerful symbols of sea power.⁵ Battleships headlined naval construction programmes, served as the flagships of admirals, and measured the maritime power among nations. In the 1920s and 1930s the capital ships of the Royal Navy represented Britain’s imperial interests as influential “grey ambassadors.” Their symbolic power in peace became as important as their destructive capabilities in war.

¹ Padfield, Peter. *The Battleship Era*. Hart, Davis: London, 1972. p. 256. [hereafter Padfield, 1977.]

² *Note:* This paper will employ the term “battleship” interchangeably with “capital ship” to refer to all the armoured ships mounting large calibre guns, including the more lightly armoured and faster “battlecruisers.”

³ See: Parkes, 1957; Padfield, 1975; Raven, 1976; Preston, 1977.

⁴ See: Roskill, 1954, 1977; Howard, 1972; Marder, 1974; Gibbs, 1976; Kennedy, 1976; Grove, 1987.

⁵ Parkes, Oscar. *British Battleships: Warrior 1860 to Vanguard 1950: A History of Design, Construction and Armament*. Seeley Service: London, 1957. p. 591. [hereafter Parkes, 1957.]

However, the battleship during the inter-war years increasingly relied upon past laurels more than continued victories to maintain its status. Long-standing Admiralty traditions, the infancy of aircraft carriers and submarines, and the retention of obsolete naval strategies safeguarded the powerful reputation of Britain's big gun ships. American historian Arthur Marder argued the anti-intellectual atmosphere of the Royal Navy after the First World War encouraged this complacency.⁶ In his own history of the Second World War Winston Churchill called the period of disarmament and disaffection "The Locust Years."

To secure the peace of this era the major maritime powers convened several naval disarmament conferences to scale back their navies.⁷ A battleship building holiday adopted by the signatories to the Washington Naval Treaty in 1922 prevented new capital ship construction, set displacement limits at 35,000 tons and gun calibre to 14-inches, and established a twenty-year life span for existing vessels.⁸ The building holiday eliminated the famous First World War battlefleets and dramatically changed the role of the battleship. The disarmament and inattention of the inter-war years allowed the battleship to stay afloat not because of continued progress, but from the false belief that its past victories could be easily reproduced.

When the battleship building holiday expired in December 1936 Britain immediately laid down the new "King George V" class battleships. At the same time the First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Samuel Hoare ordered a "Battleship Enquiry" to explore the future of the all-gun capital ship.⁹ For several months, officials from all three services debated issues that frequently anticipated important

⁶ Marder criticised the Admiralty's preoccupation with battlefleet war games while ignoring convoy escorts, anti-aircraft defence, and anti-submarine tactics. Arthur Marder, From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace. Oxford UP: London, 1974. p. 38-45. [hereafter Marder, 1974.]

⁷ In the run-up to the 1930 London Naval Conference the MacDonald Labour Cabinet considered the battleship to be a weapon outmoded by diplomatic advances. "[the] battleship is simply and solely a ship of war and as political security is strengthened it must stand to disappear." Roskill, S.W. Naval Strategy Between the Wars: 1930-1939 Volume II: The Period of Reluctant Rearmament. Collins: St. James Place, London, 1976. p. 54. [hereafter Roskill, 1976.]

⁸ Barnett, Corelli. Engage the Enemy More Closely. Penguin: London, 1991.p. 21, 41. [hereafter Barnett, 1991.]

⁹ The 1936-37 enquiry is frequently neglected in place of the more famous Bonar Law Committee of 1921-22. This previous enquiry, with Winston Churchill and Admiral Beatty serving as members, expressed the government's continued faith in the battleship although much of the reasoning was emotional rather than "numerate operational analysis". *Ibid.* p. 25.

developments of the future war.¹⁰ The minutes for the Enquiry began with a list of advances in naval warfare factored into the design of the “King George V” class, including the threat of air attack, larger calibre shells, and more powerful torpedoes and mines.¹¹ Of these concerns the danger posed by aeroplanes proved the most controversial of the subjects discussed.

Two opposing perspectives on the vulnerability of battleships to air power arose during the enquiry. The pro-battleship lobby considered a strong anti-aircraft armament to be an effective deterrent against attacking bombers. They claimed sufficiently armed and alerted capital ships need not fear air attack. “The combined anti-aircraft armament of a typical fleet as it will be with its accompanying craft is greater than the total armament prescribed for the land defences of the UK and is concentrated in one spot.”¹² A smaller and less vocal group argued the growing threat of submarines and torpedo bombers marked the big-gun ship for destruction. Rear Admiral Sir M. Sutor suggested the battleship had lost its place on the maritime battlefield. “There are all these weapons which can be used against the battleship until her field of operations is so restricted that she has to be kept within great net protection to make her safe.”¹³ The enquiry of 1936-7 became the latest cycle of the debate between supporters and detractors of battleships. Despite the improvements to the new “King George Vs,” the same doubts about bombers and submarines persisted. Three years before the war this Admiralty-sponsored enquiry raised significant reservations about the future role of the modern battleship.

By 1945, after a decade of tension and war, the pre-war confidence of the pro-battleship lobby had mostly vanished. The battleship *King George V* served as the flagship of the British admiral in the Pacific, but the fleet’s armoured aircraft carriers contributed more to the defeat of Japan than that battleship’s 14-inch guns. The loss of five British capital ships and the neglected condition of the survivors marred the reputation of the whole class. The battleship symbol, once an inspiration for omnipotence and invulnerability, now reflected the ships’ declining state. As the battleship’s most steadfast supporters in

¹⁰ ADM 116/4916, “Battleship Enquiry: Extracts from First Sea Lords Evidence.” September 1936.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

both the navy and the public drifted away or retired the only voices favouring the old warships spoke of nostalgia and historical preservation. The late 1940s and 1950s saw the battleship veterans of two world wars make their final voyages to scrap yards. No fresh keels were laid in the shipyards to replace them and by 1960 the battleship was gone from Britain.

What convinced the admirals and the politicians to abandon the warship that for so long had defined and defended British military power? Did the obsolescence of the battleship first arise during the Second World War, or were signs of its weakness visible long before? How did post-war economic factors in Britain influence the scrapping of the last battleships? And how did the media and the British people respond to the disappearance of this historic and national symbol? Central to these questions is the role of the Lords of the Admiralty, the ancient and ennobled board of admirals who guided the Royal Navy through two world wars. Although the growing power of the aerial torpedo, submarine, and aircraft carrier highlighted the weakness of battleships during the Second World War, the damage they caused was not fatal. It was the naval men of the Admiralty who devised the strategies and influenced the public perceptions that ultimately steered the battleship to the scrap yard, and it is their actions this thesis will examine.

What was the Board of the Admiralty? From 1939-1945 it was an administrative committee of senior naval officers chaired by a civilian First Lord who was appointed by the Prime Minister. The First Sea Lord served as Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy and delegated various departments to other Sea Lords who were in turn supported by a large staff of naval officers and civilians. The Admiralty was a bureaucracy as institutional as any other government agency, and perhaps even more stubborn due to its established history and traditions.¹⁴

Although this paper questions the role of the Admiralty as a whole, it does so by addressing the impact of both individuals and groups on the fate of the battleship. This story is thick with dynamic personalities, from Winston Churchill to the admirals who contested the war at sea: Pound, Phillips,

Tovey, Cunningham, Somerville, and Fraser.¹⁵ Most of these men believed in the battleship and worked for many years of their lives aboard them. But in seeking to come to terms with the battleships' place in modern naval warfare the Admiralty unwittingly at first, and then deliberately brought about its decline.

The major blows against the battleship were struck by the storm of memorandums, operational decisions, bureaucratic inquiries, and special committees all spawned by the new complexity of managing a war. At start the admirals defended the battleship's reputation beyond its realistic limits. Their strategies to diminish the impact of naval losses on public morale created a damaging gap between the perceptions of modern and older battleships that ultimately enforced the obsolescence of the entire class. Censorship became a regular naval policy and raised the Royal Navy's reputation as the "silent service" and increased its distance from the media and public. As continuing naval setbacks established the obsolescence of battleships the Admiralty persisted in the mistakes of their pre-war predecessors by ignoring faults in their design and utilisation. After the war the navy faced the increasingly difficult task of maintaining both public confidence in these warships and the funds to keep them operational. Kneeling to post-war economic pressure the Admiralty discarded the remaining battleships in several acts from 1947 to 1960 to create a smaller, slimmed-down navy for a post-imperial Britain.

This introduction has described the battleship's position, both symbolic and real, at the start of the Second World War. The first chapter "A Few Unlucky Hits: The Sinking of HMS *Royal Oak*, HMS *Hood*, and HMS *Barham*" reviews the development of Admiralty strategies to investigate and explain the first three capital ship losses of the war. The second chapter "'A most terrible shock' - The sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales*" describes the rationale behind the failed mission of the Far Eastern Fleet and the impact of their destruction on Admiralty and public perceptions of the battleship's future viability. Chapter three "The Decline of the Big Gun Ship" explains how the wartime role and status of the

¹⁴ For an overview of the Admiralty organisation see: Roskill, S.W. War at Sea: The Official History of the Royal Navy Volume 1: The Defensive. Her Majesty's Stationary Office: London, 1954. p. 14-27. [hereafter Roskill, 1954.]

¹⁵ *Note:* Although Churchill served as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence from May 1940 to July 1945 and was technically not within the Admiralty, it will be shown that he exercised such a strong degree of control over naval

battleship responded to evolving Admiralty goals and perceptions. The conclusion “The End of Eras” will examine the Admiralty’s response to post-war political and economic pressures hostile to the extension of the battleship age. It will seek to explain the reasons why and how the Admiralty, as well as the British people, abandoned such an old and loyal warrior as the battleship.

Chapter One

A Few Unlucky Hits: The Sinking of HMS *Royal Oak*, HMS *Hood*, and HMS *Barham*

The First Lord of the Admiralty and the Royal Navy entered the Second World War with a strategy to challenge German warships and submarines wherever they could be found. However, this aggressive approach soon resulted in mounting shipping losses and declining public morale. As early as a November 1939 memo to the Admiralty the First Lord highlighted the problematic link between sinkings and public confidence.¹⁶ The fact that the Royal Navy was fighting in 1939-40 was not enough, they had to be winning more battles and sinking more German ships.¹⁷

Royal Navy battleships remained conspicuously dormant during the early months of the war despite the First Lord's offensive goals.¹⁸ In a December 1939 radio speech Churchill reassured the nation of their contribution: "The main fleet has been more days at sea since this war began than has ever been required in any equal period of modern naval war."¹⁹ While it was true that Royal Navy battleships rarely rested in 1939-40, they also consistently failed to bring German surface raiders to battle.²⁰ This lack of success made British capital ships appear idle when in fact poor reconnaissance, out-dated tactics, and bad luck continually hampered their operations.

Despite this lack of success the battleship retained its esteemed position within the Fleet. The symbolic importance, great expense, and scarcity of these ships made them the most valuable pieces on the naval chessboard. As these prized warships became casualties, however, the Admiralty developed specific strategies to minimise their loss. The first three British heavy ships to perish in the war were universally characterised as obsolete, under-protected, and daringly attacked by a more powerful enemy. While these descriptions were sometimes accurate, their main purpose was to bolster public confidence.

¹⁶ "British public opinion is extremely sensitive when British ships are sunk." Gilbert, Martin. The Churchill War Papers – September 1939-April 1940 - Volume 1: At the Admiralty. Heineman: London, 1993. p. 435. [hereafter Gilbert, 1993.]

¹⁷ Churchill often exaggerated U-boat losses to bolster morale. Marder wrote that Churchill believed "it was essential that the nation should have some sense of action and success and achievement." Marder, 1974. p. 123.

¹⁸ The war's first capital ship engagement occurred on April 11 1940 between HMS *Renown* and the German battlecruisers *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*. Barnett, 1991. p. 111.

¹⁹ Churchill radio broadcast. 18 December 1939. Gilbert, 1993. p. 37.

The additional practice of blaming losses on the deficiencies of older battleships camouflaged the greater risks confronting all British heavy units. Within the first 26 months of the war the Admiralty responded to three British battleship disasters with efforts that proved as damaging to the ships as the enemy's shells and torpedoes.

HMS *Royal Oak*

On the night of October 13-14 1939 Lieutenant-Commander Gunther Prien guided U-47 through a partially blocked channel to attack the Home Fleet at Scapa Flow. Prien's first torpedo salvo only slightly damaged the bow of the battleship HMS *Royal Oak*, but his second attack caused her to capsize and sink with the loss of 833 men.²¹ After some confusion the Home Fleet reported to the War Cabinet the next morning that than an enemy U-boat was the likely culprit.²²

When the Admiralty announced the loss of *Royal Oak* on the afternoon of October 14, they only made a vague reference to a U-boat attack. A confidential addition to the War Cabinet minutes on October 16 recorded the motive for secrecy. "[T]he First Lord of the Admiralty said that the Germans still did not appear to have any information as to how the *Royal Oak* had been sunk; he therefore did not propose to publish any further information on the matter for the time being."²³ The government's reticence continued until the first blasts of Nazi propaganda announced U-47's homecoming on October 17. On the same day the First Lord Churchill admitted the role of the U-boat in a speech to the Commons.²⁴

²⁰ "During February 1940 the warships of Home Fleet averaged 23 days at sea, more days 'than ever before since the advent of steam.'" Roskill, 1954. p. 147.

²¹ Barnett, 1991. p. 71.

²² "[*Royal Oak*] had been attacked by a submarine which, by some unknown means, had penetrated the defences." CAB 65/1, War Cabinet Minutes. 14 October 1939.

²³ CAB 65/3, The First Lord made a brief statement about the *Royal Oak* to the House of Commons on 17 October. 16 October 1939.

²⁴ Oral Answers to the House of Commons. 17 October 1939. Gilbert, 1993. p. 255.

Minimising the Damage

To elevate public morale after this setback the Admiralty attempted to portray the loss of *Royal Oak* as inconsequential to the battleship fleet. The initial War Cabinet discussion included the assertion by the Admiralty that “[t]he loss of this ship, though an extremely regrettable disaster, did not materially affect the general naval position.”²⁵ On the international front Churchill quickly assured President Franklin Roosevelt of Britain’s continued naval supremacy in the Atlantic.²⁶ Churchill presented this same viewpoint when he addressed the House of Commons three days after the sinking. He emphasised the Admiralty’s openness about the loss while at the same time minimised its impact to the Fleet. “The Admiralty immediately announced the loss of this fine ship. Serious as the loss is, it does not affect the margin of security in heavy vessels which remains ample.”²⁷ In reality Churchill was speaking two half-truths. The War Cabinet minutes revealed how the Admiralty attempted to obscure the role of U-47 before the German announcement. Furthermore, the attack on Scapa Flow reduced confidence in the navy and severely disrupted the organisation of the Home Fleet for many months.²⁸

The loss of *Royal Oak* also inaugurated the Admiralty’s policy of discriminating against older battleships. Laid down in January 1914, the un-modernised *Royal Oak* was hampered by poor speed and protection. Despite these handicaps S.W. Roskill claimed the survivors of her class “did valuable work escorting convoys and covering landing operations later [in the war].”²⁹ The Admiralty’s attempts to emphasise the obsolete nature of the five “R” class battleships damaged the reputation of battleships in general. When a modern battleship was destroyed in 1941 the practice of blaming losses on antiquation evaporated along with public confidence in these warships.

²⁵ CAB 65/1, War Cabinet Minutes. 14 October 1939.

²⁶ “Sinking of the *Royal Oak* was a remarkable episode of which I will write you more fully. It in no way affects the naval balance.” Churchill Papers [hereafter CP] 20/15, Churchill to Roosevelt. 16 October 1939. Secret and Personal.

²⁷ Oral Answers to the House of Commons. 17 October 1939. Gilbert, 1993. p. 255.

²⁸ The *Royal Oak* disaster “not only caused the loss of one battleship, damage to another and to a valuable new cruiser but vitiated the ability of the fleet to perform its proper functions.” Roskill, 1954. p. 80.

²⁹ Roskill, 1954. p. 74.

The Drax Enquiry

Immediately after the raid the Admiralty convened an official inquiry into the *Royal Oak* disaster chaired by Admiral Sir Reginald Drax. Embarrassed to lose a battleship when the heavy ships had contributed so little to the war the navy sought to avoid a controversial investigation. As a consequence the inquiry deflected attention away from the *Royal Oak* and focused on the failed defences at Scapa Flow. In a memo to First Sea Lord Admiral Dudley Pound the First Lord advocated an efficient review: “It is an inquiry designed only to give their Lordships the necessary information on which to consider the new problems, and also whether disciplinary action is required.” He warned that a drawn-out investigation and court martial would involve an “elaborate legal affair.”³⁰

The Drax Report appeared at the end of October 1939 and portrayed few faults in the actions of *Royal Oak*. The main report and a special sub-committee focused principally on improving defences at Scapa Flow against enemy submarines and bombers. The only criticism of *Royal Oak* accused the battleship commanders of lax precautions inspired by the supposed security of the base. The inquiry noted that after the first explosion, “none of the vigilant and experienced officers conceived that it could have been a torpedo.”³¹ The heavy loss of life was attributed to the ship’s status at air defence stations, a highly regrettable condition that placed many men under the armour deck.

When the *Royal Oak* report circulated at the Admiralty the Director of Naval Ordnance criticised the effectiveness of the battleship’s bulges against modern torpedoes. He noted the bulge protection fitted in 1922 was “estimated to be proof against a torpedo warhead with a charge content of 450 to 500lbs. *Royal Oak* was hit by at least four in number torpedoes [with warheads] estimated at 750lbs.”³² No court martial was pursued in this matter, but a scapegoat for the lax base defences was found in ACOS Admiral Sir Wilfred French who was placed on the retired list.

³⁰ CP 19/3. WSC to First Seal Lord. 18 October 1939. Gilbert, 1993. p. 305.

³¹ Weaver, H.J. Nightmare at Scapa Flow. Malvern: Cressrelles Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980. p. 122. [hereafter Weaver, 1980.]

³² *Ibid.* p. 122-23.

Minutes from the War Cabinet discussion on the Drax inquiry recorded the government's intention to quickly resolve the investigation. "[T]he view was generally expressed that any pressure for a long and detailed enquiry into the apportionment of the blame for any deficiencies at Scapa should be resisted." Recognising the increasing burdens of the war effort the Cabinet acknowledged that an extended review would create "a division of effort in the Admiralty from other more important work."³³ In addition to preventing the disclosure of more embarrassing oversights the Admiralty hoped closure would return the navy to its offensive strategy.

Admiralty censorship policy

The legacy of the first battleship loss introduced a censorship dilemma that would confound the Admiralty for the rest of the war. Within ten days of the sinking the Admiralty pressured the War Cabinet to tighten the disclosure of war losses. At a Cabinet meeting on 25 October the First Sea Lord "made out a very powerful case against the free disclosure of information."³⁴ The Sea Lords were especially concerned about protecting the battleships which hunted and deterred German surface raiders. During the ensuing debate Winston Churchill outlined the positive and negative aspects of wartime censorship.

The First Lord of the Admiralty drew attention to the great difficulty in reconciling on the one hand the desirability of giving the public some news of the operations of the forces, and on the other hand the danger of disclosing thereby information which would be of value to the enemy.³⁵

Despite the First Sea Lord's concerns about excessive disclosure the Cabinet approved a policy favouring the full release of warship losses. In a memo to Admiral J.H Godfrey Churchill explained the new British position. "The Admiralty policy is to publish all losses of HM Ships due to enemy action as soon as it is possible to inform the next of kin, where these losses are known to the enemy or not."³⁶ Thus at the beginning of the war the Admiralty adopted an open policy on releasing information to the public. However, as the war progressed and British battleships faced mounting setbacks, the Admiralty increased

³³ CAB 65/1, War Cabinet Minutes 28 October 1939.

³⁴ CAB 65/1, War Cabinet Minute. 25 October 1939.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ CP 19/3, "Publication of Losses." Memo from Winston Churchill to Admiral J.H Godfrey. 23 November 1939. Gilbert, 1993. p. 435.

its censorship to defend their declining position. Battleship losses were only announced under the threat of the enemy making the news known first. The impact of the Admiralty's neglect of propaganda and public opinion on the status of the battleship will be explored further in the third chapter.

Legacy of *Royal Oak*

While the *Royal Oak* inquiry did not cover up the scope of the disaster, it brushed over battleship deficiencies stemming from the decades of pre-war disarmament and complacency. The difficult struggles during the early months of the war convinced the Admiralty that battleships required their complete support. The Admiralty's attempts to diminish doubts and controversy were not surprising. The 1936-37 Battleship Enquiry already identified serious internal divisions over the future of the big gun ship. The enquiry even ironically foreshadowed the *Royal Oak* disaster when one member suggested the capital ship of the future would only be safe inside harbours protected from attacks by aircraft and submarines. Only a few months into the war long-standing doubts about the battleship were beginning to come true.

HMS *Hood*

Though the *Royal Oak* could be labelled an obscure battleship, the next capital ship sunk could not be more opposite. Laid down during the First World War and launched in 1920, HMS *Hood's* size, speed, and armament made her the most prominent warship to fly the White Ensign. Yet by 1941 *Hood* typified the declining condition of the Royal Navy battlefleet more than the Admiralty would accept. For beneath her famous reputation and sleek appearance the *Hood* was a warship of twenty-year old technology and thin armour much inferior to the modern capital ships of the Kriegsmarine. By the Second World War the *Hood's* true fighting days lay in the past although her symbolic strength still persisted. Her sudden destruction by the new German battleship *Bismarck* revealed to the Admiralty what S.W. Roskill described as "the delusion... ...that old ships could be made to do the work of new ships which should have built but did not build."³⁷

³⁷ Roskill, 1954. p. 417.

First Reactions

Britons learned of the *Hood's* tragic loss through a special Admiralty announcement at nine o'clock on the evening of Saturday 24 May 1941.

British naval forces intercepted early this morning, off the coast of Greenland, German naval forces including the battleship *Bismarck*. The enemy were engaged and during the ensuing action HMS *Hood*... ..received an unlucky hit in the magazine and blew up... ..It is feared there will be few survivors from HMS *Hood*.³⁸

The sinking had an instant impact on public confidence as it struck down a familiar and popular symbol of British power. Unable to censor the *Hood's* destruction the government reacted by quickly emphasising the un-modernised condition of the British battlecruiser. Churchill stressed the advanced age of the *Hood* in a speech to the House three days afterwards. As Churchill spoke the crippled *Bismarck* was being battered to pieces by Royal Navy battleships. "Great as is our loss in the *Hood*, the *Bismarck* must be regarded as the most powerful, as she is the newest, battleship in the world, and this striking her from the German navy is a very definite simplification of the task of maintaining the effective master of the Northern Seas."³⁹ A few minutes after the Prime Minister finished he arose again in the House to announce the sinking of the *Bismarck* to tremendous cheers and celebration. To the Admiralty's relief the euphoria over the destruction of the *Bismarck* helped to push the loss of the *Hood* into the background.

Two Inquiries

Less than a week after the *Bismarck* was sunk the Admiralty set up an inquiry to uncover the cause behind the explosion on the *Hood*. This brief investigation soon concluded that a 15-inch shell from the *Bismarck's* fifth salvo destroyed the *Hood* by slicing through its thin deck armour to explode a magazine.⁴⁰ However, dissatisfaction soon developed within the Admiralty regarding the limited scope of the inquiry. Citing the criticism of the Department of Naval Construction (DNC) and the lack of a

³⁸ Destruction of HMS *Hood*. 24 May 1941. Gilbert, Martin. The Churchill War Papers 1941 - Volume 3: The Ever-Widening War. Heineman: London, 2000. p. 717. [hereafter Gilbert, 2000.]

³⁹ Gilbert, 2000. p. 720.

⁴⁰ ADM 116/435, p. 6-7.

“verbatim record of the evidence of the witnesses,” the First Sea Lord proposed a new investigation.⁴¹ The second inquiry more in-depth inquiry included interviews with survivors from the *Hood* and *Bismarck*, witnesses to the battle, and the testimony of Royal Navy explosion experts. On 12 September it reported the same findings of fact regarding the origins of the *Hood’s* explosion, but with more substantial evidence to eliminate other theories.⁴²

Criticism of the investigations

Although the second inquiry expanded the scope of the investigation, the Admiralty failed to examine the performance of British battleships to the fullest degree. The inquiry largely ignored the role of mechanical defects in the guns of *Prince of Wales* and the superior shooting of the German warships.⁴³ In the official history The War at Sea S.W. Roskill described the “teething problems” of the *Prince of Wales’s* 14-inch guns as a “disturbing” warning to the navy about training and technology.⁴⁴ Instead of reviewing shortcomings in battleship strategy and design, Admirals Pound and Phillips contemplated court martial proceedings against Captain J.C. Leach of the *Prince of Wales* and other senior officers for disengaging after the *Hood* was sunk. These trials never occurred because of the intervention of Admiral Tovey, C-in-C Home Fleet. However, the attempted court martial was not the only example of the Admiralty’s heavy-handed interventions with dangerous consequences for the status of the battleship.

When HMS *King George V* and HMS *Rodney* brought the crippled *Bismarck* to battle on the morning of 27 May the British battleships were seriously low on fuel. Although Admiral Tovey contemplated breaking his flagship away, he maintained contact until just before the *Bismarck* sank. Sailing home he received the following infamous signal sent by Pound but acknowledged to be the idea of Churchill.⁴⁵ “*Bismarck* must be sunk at all costs, and if to do this it is necessary for *King George V* to remain on the

⁴¹ ADM116/4351, Memo by Admiral Sir Dudley Pound. 19 July 1941. p. 11. SECRET.

⁴² The role of UP (Unrotated projectile) rockets stored amidships on *Hood* has spawned many theories about the explosion. While the inquiry established a fire was burning among the UP ammunition when the *Hood* blew up, they determined it did not contribute to the main explosion. ADM116/4521, Board Minutes of Second Bucknill Committee.

⁴³ ADM116/4521, Board Minutes of Second Bucknill Committee.

⁴⁴ Roskill, 1954. p. 417.

scene then she must do so even if subsequently means towing *King George V*.”⁴⁶ The order to risk his flagship infuriated Tovey and is a key document in criticism of Churchill’s ham-fisted style of management. Had the *King George V* been taken under tow she would have almost certainly been attacked by U-boats and bombers.⁴⁷ Churchill’s message to Tovey highlighted changing Admiralty attitudes concerning the value of capital ships during the first part of the war. No longer were heavy ships to valuable to risk. Despite the shocking loss of HMS *Hood* only three days before Churchill was willing to sacrifice the Royal Navy’s most capable battleship to ensure the defeat of Germany’s equivalent. Either Churchill did not appreciate the risk of immobilising *King George V* or he deemed her possible sacrifice worth the certain destruction of the *Bismarck*. The loss of two capital ships in a week would have been devastating to both public morale and the strength of the Royal Navy no matter how effectively the Admiralty minimised and interpreted the outcome.

Media reaction

The British media echoed the official explanation of the *Hood*’s loss as correspondents and editorials repeated the Admiralty’s excuses concerning the battlecruiser’s advanced age and lack of horizontal protection. However, the conclusions drawn by the media from these deflection strategies further eroded the reputation of the capital ship.

The first major coverage of *Hood*’s loss appeared on Monday, 26 May. A page four story in *The Times of London* described it as “the heaviest blow the navy has received in the war.” A subdued editorial in the same edition entitled “The Price of Sea Power” characterised it as a “heavy calamity.”⁴⁸

The front page of the Monday Glasgow *Herald* carried banner headlines and file photos of “Britain’s mightiest battleship” and blamed her loss on a “lucky hit” in the magazine. The articles drew heavily from the brief Saturday bulletin and past files on the *Hood*. A second article described how “Aircraft seek to avenge Loss of *Hood*” while an editorial inside maintained the sombre tone by claiming “No attempt will

⁴⁵ Churchill, Winston. *The Second World War Volume III: The Grand Alliance*. Casell & Co. Ltd.: London, 1950. p 292. [hereafter Churchill, 1950.]

⁴⁶ Barnett, 1991, p. 315.

⁴⁷ Similar attacks succeeded in sinking the destroyer HMS *Mashona* the next day.

be made to minimise the seriousness of the loss of HMS *Hood*,” a pledge soon forgotten.⁴⁹ The lack of details from the continuing battle in the North Atlantic meant that these initial reports contained more reflection and opinion than solid news.

Reports of the *Bismarck*'s destruction dominated the newspapers on 28 May but the correspondents highlighted the contribution of torpedo bombers more than the battleships. Front-page articles in the *Herald* attributed the navy's success to the torpedo strikes which crippled the German battleship, declaring “today it is the aeroplane which gives a new shape to operations everywhere.” An article on the *Hood* informed readers that the famous battlecruiser “was actually much less heavily armoured than her opponent.” The same article rationalised the loss using the arguments expressed by Churchill and the Admiralty: “valuable though the *Hood* was, the result of this whole operation is to confirm our superiority at sea.”⁵⁰ The initial media coverage of these events avoided criticism of the Admiralty and focused on the continuing hunt for the *Bismarck*. When newspapers did discuss the *Hood* they tended to resign themselves to her tragic loss to navy and nation.

A former First Sea Lord from 1933-38 took his message directly to the media in a letter to the *Times of London* on 28 May. In defence of the *Hood* Admiral of the Fleet Sir A. Ernle Chatfield argued “the *Hood* was destroyed because she had to fight a ship 22 years more modern than herself. This was no the fault of the British seamen.”⁵¹ Lord Chatfield blamed the loss on the pre-war governments failure to begin rearmament. His letter was one of the few to assign blame for the *Hood*'s loss, most other articles and editorials seemed unwilling to make such judgements this early.

The newsreels of the day proved more sympathetic to the battleship, perhaps because the Admiralty had more oversight over the images and narration they used. A Pathe Gazette newsreel entitled *A Year to Remember: 1941* included camera footage and commentary on the hunt for the *Bismarck*. The loss of the *Hood* was mentioned only obliquely when the pursuit of the German battleship was described as a “1750

⁴⁸ *The Times of London*. 26 May 1941.

⁴⁹ *Glasgow Herald*. 26 May 1941.

⁵⁰ *Glasgow Herald*. 28 May 1941.

mile chase... ..to avenge the HMS *Hood*.” The newsreel concludes with stirring stock film of Royal Navy warships involved in the pursuit including the battleships *King George V*, *Prince of Wales*, and *Ramillies*.⁵² But these images belay more propaganda than truth. British battleships showed themselves to be weak and outclassed in the *Bismarck* battle although the Admiralty failed to acknowledge the signs.

Legacy of HMS *Hood*

The British capital ship survived the *Bismarck* chase with its reputation cracked but still largely intact. The attacks on the *Hood*'s age and the limited inquiries deflected attention from the real problems facing the battlefleet. However, the aftermath of the episode was littered with lessons reflecting the changing status of the capital ship. Despite 25 years of design improvements British capital ships could be sunk as rapidly as they had at Jutland. The critical role of air power in finding and damaging the *Bismarck* did not go unnoticed by the media or other navies. Capital ship strength required more than just past glory or appealing looks. And new technology required extensive proving before being introduced in battle.

By 1941 the Royal Navy's narrow margin in the Battle of the Atlantic placed greater burdens on the battleships of the Fleet. The fact that Churchill's infamous order to “tow the KGV” was directed at a new battleship and not an older vessel demonstrated that modern battleships were no longer inviolable in the eyes of the Admiralty. For the future the navy faced a choice between protecting battleships from the growing risks, or letting these ships sink or swim in the active pursuit of an offensive strategy to win the war. The admirals chose the hazardous path and their decisions over the next six months pushed British battleships closer to the edge of their capabilities.

HMS *Barham*

On 25 November 1941 the three battleships of the British Mediterranean Fleet cruised near the coast of Cyrenaica to cover an attack on Italian convoys. Admiral A. B. Cunningham was having tea aboard his flagship HMS *Warspite* when he heard the sound of three torpedoes striking the battleship HMS *Barham*.

⁵¹ Letter by Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Chatfield. *The Times of London*. 28 May 1941. This letter also appeared as part of the official record in the Bucknill Report. ADM116/435.

Cunningham described the death throes of the battleship in his autobiography *A Sailor's Odyssey*: "it was ghastly to look at, a horrible and awe-inspiring spectacle when one realised what it meant."⁵³

The loss of the *Barham* to U-boat attack, in which 861 men died, is a frequently forgotten naval disaster of the Second World War. The event is overlooked not only because of the obscurity of the victim, but also due to an effective Admiralty censorship campaign to camouflage British weakness in the Mediterranean. The secrecy surrounding *Barham's* fate marked an important stage in the battleship's decline at the same time the Royal Navy faced serious challenges.

Launched in 1914 *Barham* was one of the two un-modernised vessels of the "Queen Elizabeth" class. With her high-stacked bridge and worn-out boilers providing barely adequate speed she appeared quite unlike her faster, modernised sister-ships. Despite *Barham's* old age her loss was lamented in the Mediterranean and beyond because of the Royal Navy's desperate need for capital ships at that time.⁵⁴ Admiral Cunningham had an additional reason to regret her destruction beyond the cost of a valuable warship and the lives of hundreds of men. Six months earlier the C-in-C of the Mediterranean Fleet had saved *Barham* from an Admiralty plan to sacrifice the battleship to block Tripoli harbour. Cunningham opposed the destruction of a vital battleship and the expected heavy loss of life among its crew. His sharp exchange with the Admiralty over the sacrifice of the veteran ship will be addressed in the third chapter which explores the changing roles of battleships.⁵⁵ That the *Barham* was saved from destruction at the hands of the Admiralty to be sunk by a German submarine makes her story ironic. But the true importance of the *Barham* is that her loss represented the last attempt by the Admiralty to unconditionally defend the position of the battleship during the Second World War.

⁵² *A Year to Remember: 1941*. Pathe Gazette. Glasgow Room. Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

⁵³ Cunningham, Andrew Browne. *A Sailor's Odyssey: the Autobiography of Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope*. Hutchinson & Co., Ltd.: London, 1951. p. 424. [hereafter Cunningham, 1951.]

⁵⁴ "Though the loss of this fine ship, the first British battleship to be sunk at sea, was kept secret for several months, the blow was a heavy one." Roskill, 1954. p. 534-35.

⁵⁵ See Chapter 3 "Decline of the Big Gun Ship" p. 31.

Inquiries

Two weeks after the torpedoing of *Barham* Admiral Cunningham ordered an inquiry to determine the cause. The committee report issued on 18 December blamed the loss on the failure of escorting destroyers to detect the U-boat. The inquiry absolved the battleship of any failings leading to her loss, stating “the damage [to *Barham*] was so considerable and the rapidity with which she heeled over so great, as to preclude any effective measures to save the ship.” The report also vouched for the battleship’s competence and seaworthiness: “the vessel was in a recognised state for cruising and the degree of water tight subdivision appears to have been satisfactory.”⁵⁶ Unlike the *Hood*, the destruction of *Barham* was not blamed on the chance exploitation of an unappreciated weakness. The inquiry noted that the impact of three torpedoes was more than enough to sink the old battleship.⁵⁷

The failure by the escorting destroyers encouraged a second inquiry conducted by the Admiralty’s Director of Anti-submarine Warfare (DASW) whose conclusions corresponded to the review done by the Mediterranean Fleet.⁵⁸ The DASW report emphasised the link between the destruction of a battleship and the failure of protective measures such as destroyer screens, air cover, and anti-aircraft cruisers. The lesson from the loss of the *Barham*, the report concluded, was that “the failure of the screen on this occasion emphasises the danger of sending capital ships into U-boat waters without this training.”⁵⁹ The helplessness of the *Barham* to protect herself from the U-boat attack showed how a breakdown in these defensive shields placed the battleship in danger.

The focus of both inquiries on the failure of the destroyer screen shifted attention away from the limitations of the battleship in modern war. Just as the report on the *Royal Oak* concentrated on the deficiencies at Scapa Flow, this third Admiralty investigation quickly left the sunken battleship behind. Both reports noted how recent intensive naval operations in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean had prevented destroyer crews from practising anti-submarine drills. To encourage increased training the

⁵⁶ ADM 1/11948, Board of Inquiry into Loss of HMS *Barham*. 18 December 1941.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ ADM 1/11948, Report from the Director of A/S Warfare. 4 April 1942.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Admiralty issued a top secret memo to all Royal Navy C-in-Cs announcing the findings of the *Barham* inquiries and reassuring them of their continued faith in the battleship. The memo implied the sinking of *Barham* was a “chance” enemy success and concluded “[t]he loss of HMS *Barham* must be primarily attributed to a failure on the part of the A/S screening destroyers.”⁶⁰ The inquiries into the torpedoing of HMS *Barham* concluded the Royal Navy could continue to defend its battleships by practising and improving the techniques to protect them from underwater attack. From this disaster the Admiralty and the naval staff maintained their pre-war belief that threats to the battleship’s station could be defeated without major changes to their design or operation.

Censorship

The sinking of HMS *Barham* is frequently overlooked because of the strict censorship surrounding the event. The news was not officially released until two months later in January 1942 in violation of the Admiralty policy on censorship formulated during the *Royal Oak* inquiry.⁶¹ This level and length of secrecy made the *Barham* unique among the British capital ships sunk during the Second World War.

The Admiralty’s rationale behind the censorship was that enemy intelligence was not yet aware of their success. Two days after the loss Winston Churchill explained the censorship to Australian Prime Minister John Curtin. “This is being kept strictly secret at present as the enemy do not seem to know, and the event would only encourage Japan.”⁶² Many considerable steps were taken to prevent news of *Barham*’s loss from reaching the public or the enemy. One extraordinary measure was the printing of Christmas and New Year cards for the crew of a battleship that no longer existed.⁶³ Traditional forms of deflection were also employed. Mediterranean C-in-C Admiral A. B. Cunningham reassured the residents of Glasgow with the statement “All’s well with the Navy in the Mediterranean” in an article appearing in the *Herald* on 8 January 1942. Although he also admitted “we have had to fight and win against some

⁶⁰ ADM 1/11948, Admiralty message to C-in-Cs, 2109B. 28 April 1942 MOST SECRET

⁶¹ “HMS *Barham* Sunk in Mediterranean.” *Glasgow Herald*. 28 January 1942.

⁶² CP 20/45, WSC telegram to John Curtin. 27 November 1941. Gilbert, 2000, p. 1540.

⁶³ Historian Iain Ballantyne recorded this amazing fact in his history of *Barham*’s sister-ship HMS *Warspite*: “such as the secrecy over *Barham*’s dreadful loss that special Christmas and New Year card greetings, prepared for her crew, were still printed.” Ballantyne, Iain. *Warspite*. Leo Cooper: London, 2001.

pretty long odds at times,” this confident appraisal was hardly an accurate assessment of three battleships lost in as many months.⁶⁴

The most bizarre story of censorship involved the case of the Edinburgh spiritualist Helen Duncan who presided over seances claiming to raise the spirits of soldiers killed in the war. In an episode particularly troubling to the Admiralty Mrs. Duncan communicated with the ghost of sailor serving on HMS *Barham* who said, “My ship has sunk.” This occurred while the loss of the battleship was still unknown to the public. To prevent the disclosure of further secrets Mrs. Duncan was later prosecuted under the Witchcraft Act in a trial Prime Minister Churchill described as “absolute tomfoolery” because of the publicity it aroused.⁶⁵

The censorship extended to the Admiralty’s monthly “Naval Supply and Production” statistics as well. This document summarised in graphs the number and type of British warships ordered, launched, damaged and destroyed for each month during the war. The records for November 1941 failed to register the loss of the battleship *Barham*, although the December records accounted for the disaster of Force Z in the Far East.⁶⁶ The Board of Admiralty must have been aware of *Barham*’s fate, and it is likely these statistics were used to brief the press and therefore could not reveal the true situation.

The example of the *Barham* presents an interesting case in which the death of 800 men and the loss of a battleship remained a secret for two months. Only when the Germans guessed at its loss in January 1942 did the Admiralty acknowledge the truth about *Barham* to the British public. It is likely that the Royal Navy in this time of crisis would not have announced the loss unless forced to by enemy propaganda. This episode represented the only occasion when long-term censorship was rigidly enforced for the loss of a British capital ship during the Second World War.

⁶⁴ The two other battleships were HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Valiant*, both damaged on 19 December 1941 at Alexandria Harbour.

⁶⁵ “British lion, the witch, and her wardrobe.” *The Times*. 31 January 1998.

⁶⁶ ADM 167/114-115, “Naval Supply and Production – November 1941”

Media reaction

Media coverage and public reaction to the *Barham* sinking was understandably subdued compared to the previous battleship losses. War news in early 1942 was dominated by Allied defeats in the Pacific and the two-month old report of a sunken battleship in a different theatre did not generate banner headlines. The 28 January 1942 edition of the *Glasgow Herald* reported the Admiralty's announcement of the loss and the reason for the delay.⁶⁷ The newspaper accepted the Admiralty's rationale for censoring the news: "the loss of the ship was not announced since it was clear at the time that the enemy did not know that she had been sunk and it was important to make certain disposition before the loss of this ship was made public."⁶⁸ A headline for a *Herald* article on 30 January read "How the *Barham* was sunk / went down in four minutes" and described the events of 25 November from the eyewitness account of a Reuters correspondent. His comment on the sinking that "It was something like one sees on film" proved more truthful than he imagined because a cinematographer on HMS *Valiant* named John Turner captured the last moments of *Barham* on film. The navy impounded the film but today it is one of the most compelling scenes of movie footage from the war. Although the torpedoing of *Barham* was the most strictly censored battleship loss of the war, it was also the best documented and explained.

Legacy of HMS *Barham*

Less than a month after the loss of *Barham* the Royal Navy's two remaining capital ships in the Eastern Mediterranean were severely damaged in Alexandria harbour. The long-term repairs to HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Valiant* left the Royal Navy extremely vulnerable in the Mediterranean at a critical time in the desert war.⁶⁹ Between 1940 and the end of 1941 the Royal Navy faced a capital ship crisis with the loss of three heavy ships and damage to several more. In December 1941 an exasperated Admiral Cunningham wrote to the First Sea Lord lamenting the series of recent setbacks, "we are having

⁶⁷ "HMS *Barham* Sunk in Mediterranean / Clyde-built battleship veteran of last war / News withheld from enemy." *Glasgow Herald*. 28 January 1942.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ The Royal Navy also tried to disguise the damage by having Admiral Cunningham's picture taken raising the colours aboard his flagship as if nothing was amiss, even though the battleship sat on the harbour bottom. Cunningham, 1951. p. 434.

shock after shock out here.”⁷⁰ But these three losses, disconcerting as they were, merely set the stage for the Royal Navy’s most devastating capital ship disaster brewing in the Far East.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Chapter Two

“A most terrible shock” - The sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales*

On 10 December 1941 Japanese naval bombers achieved a revolution in the history of war. In a two-hour bombing and torpedo attack they sunk HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, the first capital ships defeated entirely by air power outside a harbour. Afterwards the Prime Minister told the House of Commons “I do not remember any naval blow so heavy or so powerful.”⁷¹ The destruction of Force Z represented a significant turning point for the British battleship three years into the world war. During the months leading up to the disaster two competing proposals for a Far Eastern battlefleet were argued between the Prime Minister and the First Sea Lord. The Admiralty’s decisions surrounding the creation, deployment, destruction, and legacy of the Pacific Fleet crowned the debate over the symbolism and capabilities of modern and obsolete capital ships in the Second World War.

Plans

In late August 1941 the Prime Minister wrote to the First Sea Lord proposing a fleet of “the smallest number of the best ships” to create a “very powerful and fast force in Eastern waters.”⁷² In subsequent memos Churchill emphasised the political and propaganda value of sending one of the navy’s best ships – a modern “King George V” class battleship. He believed powerful and fast capital ships in the Pacific could deter a superior Japanese fleet much like the ability of the German battleship *Tirpitz* to tie down British forces in the North Atlantic. A warship operating in this elusive manner, Churchill explained to Pound, “exercises a vague, general fear and menaces all points at once. It appears and disappears, causing immediate reactions and perturbations on the other side.”⁷³ The use of British battleships as “raiders” was original, but Churchill’s plan contained flawed reasoning and unrealistic expectations about Japan. S.W. Roskill criticised the Prime Minister’s comparison of the narrow waters of the North Sea to the wide

⁷¹ Statement to the Commons. 11 December 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1597.

⁷² Churchill intended to send a balanced force consisting of a new “King George V” class battleship together with a battlecruiser and a fleet aircraft carrier. CP 20/36, Churchill to A.V. Alexander, First Sea Lord. 25 August 1941. MOST SECRET. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1109.

⁷³ CP 20/36, Churchill to Pound. 29 August 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1139.

Pacific Ocean, noting “the two theatres were of course very different.”⁷⁴ In addition, the protection of convoys and trade from enemy raiders, the major tasks of Home Fleet battleships in the Atlantic theatre, did not correspond to the probable offensive intentions of the Japanese fleet in the Far East. Christopher Bell recently described how the Prime Minister “overestimated what a modern battleship could accomplish in the event of war, and the impact it would have on Japanese naval strategy.”⁷⁵ A small group of warships, no matter how powerful, would hardly menace a larger enemy fleet in the open waters of the Pacific.

In contrast the Admiralty plan advocated a more cautious, two-step deployment. The initial force sent to Ceylon would consist of the four remaining “Royal Sovereign” class battleships to be reinforced by HMS *Rodney* and a brace of battlecruisers. Admiral Pound favoured the use of older battleships to keep the navy’s modern “King George Vs” in the North Atlantic to defend against German surface raiders.⁷⁶ Pound’s caution suggested the Admiralty’s lack confidence in the newest British warships to grapple with their German counterparts. This was likely a legacy of the poor performance by *Prince of Wales* against the *Bismarck* and an indication of the navy’s desire to protect its modern battleships. Although Churchill himself was an early critic of the shortcomings of the “King George V” class, he deplored the consequences of Pound’s restrained strategy. He claimed the retention of three modern battleships in the Atlantic would be an indictment against “the design of our latest ships, which through being under-gunned and weakened by hangars in the middle of their citadel, are evidently judged unfit to fight their opposite number in single ship action.”⁷⁷ Even as Churchill championed the *Prince of Wales* as a powerful symbol of deterrence he still registered doubts about its ability to fight enemy capital ships. However, unlike Pound, who believed the war would be won or lost in the Atlantic, Churchill placed the political and symbolic need for a modern capital ship in the Far East above a possible breakout by German raiders.

⁷⁴ Roskill, 1977. p. 196.

⁷⁵ Bell, Christopher M. “The ‘Singapore Strategy’ and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty, and the Dispatch of Force Z.” *English Historical Review*. Vol. CXVI, No 467. June 2001. p. 625. [hereafter Bell, 2001.]

⁷⁶ Barnett, 1991. p. 398.

⁷⁷ ADM 205/10, Minute from Churchill to Admiral Pound. August 29, 1941.

Describing the difference between the two plans Bell suggested the political dimensions of the mission pushed “civilian decision-makers to view battleships as symbols of British power and prestige.”⁷⁸

When Churchill learned of the separate Admiralty Fleet proposal he immediately attacked the inclusion of the older battleships. In a strongly-worded memo to the First Sea Lord the Prime Minister claimed the “Royal Sovereign” class warships would be “easy prey to the modern Japanese vessels, and can neither fight nor run.”⁷⁹ Four days later he reinforced his views by describing the “R” class as “floating coffins.”⁸⁰ It is not surprising the limitations of the “R” class fell short of Churchill’s objectives for a fleet composed of the “best ships.” His disdain for the navy’s un-modernised battleships existed since the beginning of the war. However, the Prime Minister’s preference for the “King George V” class neglected the fact that in 1941 half of the Royal Navy big gun ships were the six un-modernised battleships, including the four surviving “R’s.” The Prime Minister’s criticism of the “R” class increased doubts about the Royal Navy’s battleships that were soon to be dramatically reinforced by events in the Far East.

Decisions

When the Defence Committee met on 17 October 1941 the Prime Minister pushed for a decision on the Far Eastern Fleet. He proposed to send HMS *Prince of Wales* to join HMS *Repulse* in the Indian Ocean before both would proceed to Singapore.⁸¹ Other Cabinet members concurred with his plan, although First Lord of the Admiralty A.V. Alexander rightly pointed out that Churchill’s *Tirpitz* analogy neglected the difference in scale between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.⁸² Foreign Minister Anthony Eden supported Churchill by suggesting the *Prince of Wales* would create a “greater affect politically” than the older “R” class, an indication of the symbolic power of modern battleships. Eden’s argument demonstrated how the

⁷⁸ Bell, 2001. p. 625.

⁷⁹ CP 20/36, Churchill to A.V. Alexander, First Sea Lord, etc. 25 August 1941. MOST SECRET. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1109.

⁸⁰ CP 20/36, 29 August 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1139.

⁸¹ On 3 November 1941 the aircraft carrier HMS *Indomitable* accidentally grounded in Jamaica depriving this force of its carrier support. Barnett, 1991. p. 405.

⁸² CAB 69/2, War Cabinet Defence Committee Minute. 17 October 1941.

Fleet's deterrent effect was entirely dependent on the *Prince of Wales*, an emphasis which created serious consequences for the reputation of modern battleships when this operation ended in disaster.⁸³

With Admiral Pound on leave and absent from the 17 October meeting the Admiralty's position was presented by Vice Chief of the Naval Staff (VCNS) Rear Admiral Sir T.S.V. Phillips, soon to command Force Z on its fateful mission. He outlined the Admiralty plan to send seven capital ships to the Indian Ocean, a force consisting of the four "R" class, HMS *Rodney*, HMS *Renown* and after her repairs were complete, HMS *Nelson*. Admiral Phillips argued that only this larger and more flexible fleet would be "a match for any forces the Japanese were likely to bring against them."⁸⁴ However, the majority of the assembled Defence Committee opposed the more cautious Admiralty proposal. On 20 October Admiral Pound gave in to Churchill's constant pressure after failing at one last compromise attempt.⁸⁵ Five days later the *Prince of Wales* raised steam on the River Clyde to sail as the symbolic linchpin of the Far East "fleet in being."

Eager to make his plan known Churchill sent telegrams to the leaders of the United States, Australia and Canada announcing the creation of a Far Eastern Fleet at Singapore with a modern battleship.⁸⁶ As deterrence was the primary goal of the operation, Churchill ordered *Prince of Wales* to make highly visible port calls in South Africa to ensure Japan was aware of the British reinforcements.⁸⁷ The impact of the losses would later be more damaging because of the Prime Minister's emphasis on publicising their mission.

Five days after the arrival of Force Z to Singapore the Japanese attacked British, Dutch, and American possessions from Pearl Harbor to Hong Kong. On 8 December Admiral Phillips extended Churchill's

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ At the meeting Admiral Phillips added the ironic caveat that the British fleet would be superior to Japanese warships only if it operated in home waters with shore-based air coverage. This was not to be the case. *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ The argument between Pound and Churchill over the composition of the Far Eastern Fleet represented one of the many clashes of their professional relationship. Roskill, 1954. p. 556.

⁸⁶ CP 20/44, To President F. Roosevelt, 1 November 1941; to Prime Minister J. Curtin, 2 November 1941; to Prime Minister M. King, 5 November 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1242-45.

⁸⁷ The fleet deployment was also picked up in the British media, although the small size of the force was obscured. "British Naval Units at Singapore... ..a powerful British flotilla headed by the battleship *Prince of Wales* has arrived at Singapore." Glasgow *Herald*. 3 December 1941.

offensive intentions by sailing *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to intercept the suspected Japanese invasion of Malaya. Finding no enemy troop transports and retiring without air cover the two warships were attacked by Japanese naval aircraft and quickly sunk by multiple torpedo hits with the loss of 837 officers and sailors.⁸⁸

Admiralty reaction

The disaster of 10 December struck the Cabinet and the Admiralty harder than any previous naval setback in the war. Following the example of HMS *Hood* the government immediately announced the sinking of the two warships, hoping the admission would prevent a Japanese communiqué from delivering a pre-emptive strike against Allied morale. On the same day the Prime Minister addressed the Parliament. After confessing “I have bad news for the House, which I think I should pass on to them at the earliest possible moment,” he proceeded to tell the silent members how information received from Singapore confirmed the loss of both ships due to “air attack.”⁸⁹

The next day the Prime Minister faced further questions on the sinking of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* in the House. As the Far Eastern Fleet deployed according to his own plan Churchill staunchly defended the mission and the capabilities of Force Z: “These ships had reached the right point at the right moment and were in every report suited to the task assigned to them.”⁹⁰ The doubts he expressed in the capabilities of the “King George V” class during the debate with the Admiralty were momentarily forgotten. To protect the now vulnerable reputation of the “King George V” battleships the Admiralty avoided any discussion of the known weaknesses in *Prince of Wales*.

Churchill went on to praise Admiral Phillip’s decision to attack the Japanese transport ships, calling it “a thoroughly sound, well-considered offensive operation, not indeed free from risk, but not any different in principle from many similar operations we have repeatedly carried out in the North Sea and the Mediterranean.” However, the Admiralty’s ignorance of Japanese capabilities and Phillip’s inexperience

⁸⁸ See: Middlebrook, Martin. *Battleship: The Loss of Prince of Wales and Repulse*. Allen Lane: London, 1977.

⁸⁹ Statement to the Commons, 10 December 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1596.

⁹⁰ Statement to the Commons, 11 December 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1597.

in managing a battlefleet made the mission of Force Z far more dangerous than any previous operations.⁹¹ S.W. Roskill explained in The War at Sea how the danger of air power to surface fleets had been readily demonstrated in the Norway campaign of 1940 and during the disastrous year 1941 in the Mediterranean.⁹² The Admiralty's underestimation of the Japanese navy allowed the co-ordinated torpedo attacks against *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to come as a great shock. Arthur Marder argued that Britain's former position as an advisor to the Japanese Navy contributed to the Royal Navy's attitude of "unhealthy confidence welded to ignorance."⁹³ The debates and planning by Churchill, the Admiralty, and Phillips focused almost entirely on encounters with Japanese capital ships and neglected the danger posed by Japanese aircraft, showing a blind spot in battleship vulnerabilities.

A few minutes into his explanation of the disaster to the House Churchill was interpreted by a question from Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, a hero from the last war and a critic of naval policy during the present one. The exchange that followed brought the debate over the future of the battleship to the public arena.

[Keyes] May I ask the Prime Minister whether, in view of the very grave anxiety in this House and throughout the country at the loss of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, and in view of the erroneous deductions which appear to have been drawn from that misfortune, he can give the assurance that his expert advisors are still of the opinion that the battleship is still the foundation of sea power, and that they are confident that the *Prince of Wales* was as well protected against underwater and air attack as the *Bismarck*?⁹⁴

Before the Prime Minister could answer the Speaker of the Commons interjected that he did not think this was the proper occasion to discuss the matter. But Admiral Keyes persisted, claiming he was "asking the questions in order to allay the anxiety of the people."⁹⁵ The Prime Minister did not answer the questions, but the Admiralty was already plainly aware of the discrepancy between the punishment absorbed by the German *Bismarck* and the five British battleships lost in the war. The evidence and

⁹¹ Admiral Phillip's overconfidence in the ability of surface ships to defend themselves from air attack is discussed in Roskill, 1977. p. 199. and Barnett, 1991. p. 411.

⁹² Roskill, 1977. p. 199.

⁹³ Marder, Arthur. Old Friends, New Enemies: The Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy - Strategic Illusions, 1936-1941. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981. p. 353. [hereafter Marder, 1981.]

⁹⁴ Statement to the Commons, 11 December 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1597.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

experience gained from these engagements were slowly forcing new conceptions on the future role and utility of battleships both modern and obsolete.

Vulnerability of capital ships

Six months earlier on 12 June 1941 the Board of Admiralty met in the aftermath of the *Bismarck* and *Hood* battles. The minutes record a discussion on the “Vulnerability of capital ships” and the decision to investigate this topic further.

Arguing out of experience with the *Bismarck*, the VCNS has recommended that a Committee under a Senior Flag Officer should be appointed to examine all available evidence as to the relative ability of modern British and German capital ships in withstanding damage to enemy action.

At this point the Third Sea Lord and Controller Vice-Admiral Bruce Fraser informed the Board that the Director of Naval Construction (DNC) and his staff were already preparing a technical report comparing the designs of the *Bismarck* and the “King George V” class.⁹⁶ With the Board’s endorsement the DNC staff continued to compile this report through 1941. After the *Prince of Wales* sunk in early December the technical report was expanded and adapted to join the official inquiry, the Bucknill Report. However, the two reports reached different conclusions about the performance of the *Prince of Wales* and re-kindled the internal Admiralty debate over future confidence in the battleship.

Bucknill Report

On 26 January 1942 the War Cabinet tasked the long-serving Bucknill Committee to investigate the latest British losses in the Far East. The interim report submitted on 25 March included an analysis of the last hours of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* re-created through interviews with survivors and documents. This detailed chronology supported by diagrams and charts avoided direct criticism of Admiralty strategy or battleship design. However the Bucknill Committee did recommend the correction of several deficiencies in existing and future capital ships uncovered from the experience of *Prince of Wales*. A major issue in the disaster was the unsatisfactory performance of the battleship’s modern anti-torpedo protection system. The “King George V” class contained an internal buffer unlike the bulges fitted to the

hulls of HMS *Repulse* and older capital ships.⁹⁷ The Bucknill report suggested that “[w]hile this experience has shown that the principle of the side underwater protection for *Prince of Wales* is sound, it should be improved.”⁹⁸ The report concluded the damage absorbed by the two ships would have been catastrophic to any battleship no matter how well protected.

Technical Report

Around the time the Bucknill Committee issued its preliminary report the DNC staff released its technical analysis entitled “Vulnerability of British Warships to Torpedoes, Bombs.” It was updated to include the recent losses in the Far East and subtitled “Enquiry into loss of HMS *Prince of Wales* - A Technical Report on Damage and Loss.”⁹⁹ Much to the embarrassment of the Admiralty the Technical Report’s comparison of the *Bismarck* to the “King George V” class battleships proved critical of British warship design. The DNC report questioned the effectiveness of the *Prince of Wales*’ side-protection system, the inadequate training and preparation of the ship’s crew, and the effectiveness of the high angle/low angle (HA/LA) anti-aircraft guns during the battle. The expansive third part of the Technical Report included a summary of these “main deficiencies [in the “King George V” class] together with action taken or proposed to rectify or guard against them in existing or future construction of ships.”¹⁰⁰

In reviewing the failure of the battleship’s anti-aircraft protection the report concluded, “the anti-aircraft fire of the *Prince of Wales* did not prevent the attack upon her from being pressed home.”¹⁰¹ However, the DNC did not blame the poor defence on inadequate or faulty guns, but rather on the lack of “considerable training and practice” for the crew to reach proper proficiency.¹⁰² The DNC staff maintained that the battleship’s anti-aircraft armament could have “inflict[ed] heavy casualties before torpedoes were

⁹⁶ ADM 167/111, Admiralty Board Meeting. 12 June 1941.

⁹⁷ Both *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk by multiple torpedo hits after avoiding several high-level bombing attacks. ADM 167/116. “Bucknill Report - Interim Report.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ ADM 116/4521. “Vulnerability of British Warships to Torpedoes, Bombs: Enquiry into loss of HMS *Prince of Wales* - A Technical Report on Damage and Loss.”

¹⁰⁰ The Second Bucknill Committee confirmed the “lessons learned from the loss of *Prince of Wales* have been embodied as far as possible” into the design of HMS *Vanguard*. ADM 116/4521.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

dropped, if not prevent[ed] the successful conclusion of attack” given proper training for the gun crews. This point criticised the several Admiralty decisions to curtail the *Prince of Wales*’s working up period for special missions.¹⁰³ The navy’s resolve to deploy capital ships before they were fully worked up demonstrated their great need for modern ships in 1941.¹⁰⁴

Second Bucknill Committee

The conclusions of the Technical Report touched off another battleship debate in the Admiralty. A follow-up report issued by a re-convened Second Bucknill Committee in April 1942 responded to the DNC’s critical review of the “King George V” class. The second committee did not dispute the DNC’s technical criticisms, but instead proposed new explanations and conclusions more favourable to modern British battleships. The new report emphasised how the *Bismarck* was designed outside the 35,000-ton treaty limitations governing British construction. This allowed the German battleship to be a “more heavily armed ship, having greater speed and endurance.” Through the damage control actions of the Second Bucknill Committee the Admiralty sought to preserve the reputations of the surviving modern battleships of the Royal Navy.

Disclosure

The conflict between the findings of the Bucknill Committee and the DNC report paralysed the Admiralty’s response to their own investigation. It was feared the existence of such disagreement would damage the reputation of the Royal Navy. Others claimed the distribution of the Technical Report would further diminish the credibility of British battleships. By this time the loss of HMS *Barham* was public and the higher levels of the Admiralty were aware of the serious damage to HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Valiant*. With three battleships recently sunk and several others requiring long-term repairs, the British heavy fleet at the start of 1942 was under siege.

¹⁰³ From its May engagement with the *Bismarck* to its September mission to transport the Prime Minister to the Atlantic Charter meeting in Newfoundland, the crew of the *Prince of Wales* faced many interruptions in their work-up schedule.

¹⁰⁴ Roskill, 1954. p. 568.

To overcome the indecision Admiral Pound encouraged the limited distribution of both reports to dispel the growing sense of unease about the reliability of battleships. In a memo to the board he wrote, “I agree that the recommendations are the most important, but it is almost equally important to restore confidence in the construction of our ships.”¹⁰⁵ This was an unusual case in which the First Sea Lord advocated the disclosure of information critical of the Royal Navy. Following Admiral Pound’s advice the Admiralty met in June 1942 and decided to release parts of the Second Bucknill Report to the Fleet. The minutes recorded the admirals’ realisation that continued silence would only encourage more damaging rumours and suspicions. “The existence of the Bucknill Report was widely known, and it might well be that if its contents were not disclosed to the Fleet, suggestions would be made there were matters in it which the Board felt it necessary to conceal, and suspicion might arise that our ships were unreliable.”¹⁰⁶ The Board agreed to combine the DNC and Bucknill reports and the DNC Staff was given permission to review experiments involving the “King George V” side-protection system.¹⁰⁷ This decision represented another case in which the danger of unchecked rumour and misinformation encouraged the Admiralty to be more forthcoming. More importantly, the inclusion of the Technical Report represented the first occasion in which an Admiralty inquiry accurately reflected the weakness of modern battleships to the new maritime threats.

Media reactions

The media coverage of the Force Z disaster supported the government but emphasised the impact of the event on the declining status of the battleship. The weight of reporting approached the level of the equally shocking loss of HMS *Hood* six months before. The initial articles and editorials were read by a nation shocked at the sudden defeat dealt to the vaunted Royal Navy.

An 11 December editorial in the Glasgow *Herald* praised Churchill’s decision to announce the losses to the House of Commons “at the earliest moment,” describing it as another example of his “persistent

¹⁰⁵ ADM 167/116, First Sea Lord to Board. Second Bucknill Report. 29 May 1942.

¹⁰⁶ ADM 116/4521, Admiralty Board Minutes. 18 June 1942.

¹⁰⁷ The combined file of the Bucknill Report and the DNC Technical Report can be found under ADM 239/349 at the Public Records Office, Kew.

good sense.” Censoring the disaster would have failed, the editorial claimed, because the reaction of silence or denial to the Japanese announcement would have created a “breeding ground for rumour.” However, the newspaper did not attempt to minimise the setback in the Far East, describing it as “the worst that has come from the Fleet since the war began,” and noting that “the battleship strength of the Navy has suffered severely.” This editorial also predicted a re-awakening of the “controversy about the value of the battleship in the face of the bomber – a controversy which, previous experience of this war seemed, on the whole, to have settled unfavourable to the aeroplane.”¹⁰⁸ The editorial’s assertion that the battleship had bested the aeroplane in the war before December 1941 is blind to past events. The evidence of the Taranto raid, the hunt for the *Bismarck*, and Mediterranean convoys demonstrated that air power had already arrived in force against capital ships. But the editorial was correct in assuming that the British losses off Malaya would re-open the debate that divided the Battleship Enquiry of 1936-37 and many other forums.

Other *Herald* articles during the first day of coverage expressed disbelief over how the disaster could have happened. One headline suggested “Warship Losses Mystery / Points that need amplification,” and included the warning by a naval correspondent, “We must not assume on this first incomplete information that the big ship (*Prince of Wales*) fell ‘instantly’ to air attack, for the available evidence does not justify such an assumption.”¹⁰⁹ These statements sought to rationalise the destruction and to understand the loss of warships, especially in *Prince of Wales*, which appeared both physically and symbolically invulnerable.

Within a few days the media addressed the long-term investigations into the disaster and their consequences. On 17 December the *Herald* reported “Warship losses to be debated in Secret / Wide range of subjects for discussion” and detailed how the House of Commons would consider questions on the lack of air support for Force Z and also on the preparation for war in the Far East.¹¹⁰ Newspapers for the most part left the second-guessing of strategy to the official inquiries and naval authorities. Questions about the status of the modern battleship were asked, but the media established few conclusions. Within a few weeks

¹⁰⁸ Glasgow *Herald*. Editorial. 11 December 1941.

¹⁰⁹ Glasgow *Herald* Editorial “Warship Losses Mystery.” 11 December 1941.

the events from the Far East overwhelmed the front pages with news of the fall of Hong Kong, Singapore, and the bombing of Australia. As the full scale of the disaster became known, the navy and the battleship came under more direct media criticism. In his book on war films S.P MacKenzie cited Ministry of Information (MoI) surveys conducted at the end of 1941 which revealed public disquietude with the events in the Far East. “With the passage of time... ..there is increased criticism of the naval authorities concerning the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*.”¹¹¹ In the end Force Z played a significant symbolic role, not to deter Japanese attack, but to forecast the end of the battleship’s dominance of naval power.

Legacy of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*

On the same day as the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* went down the Prime Minister received a letter from His Majesty King George VI, himself a former naval officer. The King’s note described the recent loss from both a personal and a national perspective. “The news of the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* came as a great shock to the Queen and I... ..For all of us it is a national disaster.” The letter next addressed a belief about large capital ships held by many during that era. “There is something particularly ‘alive’ about a big ship, which gives one a sense of personal loss apart from consideration of loss of power.”¹¹² The “living” element described by King George VI played a significant role in transforming British battleships into national symbols larger than just their guns and armour. The battleship’s unique nature prevented the Admiralty from making strictly rationale operational decisions. The deterrent role of the *Prince of Wales* and the political value of a Far Eastern battlefleet significantly coloured the War Cabinet’s decisions regarding the dispatch of Force Z. Churchill’s strategy eventually backfired and their shocking destruction diminished the battleship’s claim as a powerful and special class of warship.

Although Admiral Phillips has been criticised over the decades regarding his decision to sortie from Singapore, Arthur Marder wrote that the inexperienced admiral had little choice. To ignore the invasion of

¹¹⁰ Glasgow *Herald*. “Warship losses to be debated in Secret.” 17 December 1941.

¹¹¹ Ministry of Information Year-end Summary 1941. MacKenzie, S.P. British War Films 1939-1945: The Cinema and the Services. Hambledon and London: London, 2001. p. 82.

¹¹² CP 20/20, Personal Letter HRM King George VI to Churchill. 10 December 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1593.

Malaya would have created a serious rift between the navy and the army and disgraced the tradition of the Fleet.¹¹³ One of Admiral Phillips's critics over the Force Z affair was Admiral A.B. Cunningham of the Mediterranean Fleet. Although Cunningham believed Admiral Phillips erred in his handling of Force Z, he respected his commitment to duty in the face of great odds. When the Royal Navy had faced terrible losses in the evacuation of Crete Cunningham is reported to have said: "It takes the navy three years to build a ship. It would take 300 to rebuild a tradition."¹¹⁴ Although the events in the South China Sea helped to destroy the old-fashioned symbolism of the British battleship, the sacrifice of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* might have preserved the traditions and reputation of the Royal Navy.

¹¹³ Marder, 1981. p. 501.

¹¹⁴ Roskill, 1954. p. 419.

Chapter Three **The Decline of the Big Gun Ship**

Between 1939 and 1945 the appearance of British battleships changed only slightly while their missions and status were dramatically transformed.¹¹⁵ The impact of submarines, torpedo bombers, and aircraft carriers revolutionised maritime warfare and dislodged the battleship from the core of the fleet.¹¹⁶ Older battleships succumbed first to these new threats and became the subjects for risky Admiralty operations. New battleship construction slowed in 1941 when the War Cabinet shifted shipbuilding priorities to aircraft carriers and escort vessels. During these difficult years the Admiralty's disdain for publicity deflated the battleship image, while their poor showing kept them out of films and newsreels.

As the Allies gained ground later in the war both older and modern battleships were assembled to support the landings in North Africa, Italy, and France. The end of the war saw the "King George V" class battleships serving in the Pacific alongside the U.S. Navy. Without enemy capital ships to engage the British battleships found new roles in shore bombardment and as "aircraft carrier heavy support ships" to protect the vital fleet carriers.¹¹⁷ However, the battleship's exile to these unglamorous, secondary roles suggested their redundancy after the war. Advanced designs for new battleships never left the drawing boards and the heavy ships of the Royal Navy atrophied like their counterparts at the end of the First World War. The Admiralty's final debates and budget decisions favoured the aircraft carrier for a post-war navy and the last British battleships went to the scrap yards or the Reserve Fleet within a few years.

Older battleships

In 1939 the fifteen capital ships of the Royal Navy averaged 21 years of service discounting inter-war improvements.¹¹⁸ A modernisation programme during the 1920s and 1930s extended the fighting capabilities of six vessels by refitting them with improved guns, armour, and machinery. Yet at the start

¹¹⁵ Two major modifications included an increase in the number of close-range anti-aircraft guns and the addition of gunnery radar.

¹¹⁶ "In fact it is plain that the traditional conception of the classification of fighting ships and their roles in the exercise of maritime power requires radical reconsideration." Roskill, 1954. p. 6.

¹¹⁷ ADM 205/29, "Admiralty Future Building Committee - First Interim Report."

¹¹⁸ Jane's Fighting Ships of World War II. Crescent Books: New York, 1989.

of the war the battlefleet still contained nine older capital ships.¹¹⁹ The addition of the “King George V” class by 1942 improved the balance, but the war’s first years were fought with a mix of veteran and re-built vessels. During this period the Royal Navy’s older battleships first felt the increasing dangers posed by submarines and aircraft. As the canaries in the mines these un-modernised warships first realised the approaching decline of their class. Starting in 1939 the Admiralty devised new roles for the battleships considered too vulnerable and slow to engage German surface raiders. Although these veterans achieved some success in Norway and as Atlantic convoy escorts, their operations were overshadowed by a series of dangerous plans originating from the Admiralty.¹²⁰

“Operation Catherine”

To dispel the Admiralty’s reluctance to expose battleships to air and submarine attack Churchill unveiled an offensive project soon after returning to the Admiralty in 1939. “Operation Catherine” envisioned the reconstruction of the “Royal Sovereign” class into unsinkable gun platforms to invade the Baltic Sea and cut off Germany’s supply of iron ore. In a memo to Admiral Pound the First Lord declared “We must have a certain number of capital ships that are not afraid of a chance air bomb.” His goal invoked a return to the previous era when the battleship reigned supreme without any enemies except its own kind. “We must work up to the old idea of a ship fit to lie the line against whatever may be coming.”¹²¹ To transform the “R” class into these “armoured turtles” Churchill proposed removing two 15-inch gun turrets, plastering the deck and superstructure with armour, and adding larger torpedo bulges. While these changes appreciated the dangers of bomb and torpedo attack, they also reflected an over-confidence and naivety in achieving protection. The war soon revealed that the “armoured tortoise” concept offered marginal defence from these threats. Churchill’s reasoning also increased the divide

¹¹⁹ Un-modernised capital ships in 1939 included the five older battleships of the “Royal Sovereign” class, two un-modernised “Queen Elizabeth’s,” and the ageing battlecruisers HMS *Hood* and HMS *Repulse*.

¹²⁰ In May 1940 the main guns of HMS *Resolution* supported troop landings at Narvik, while the presence of HMS *Ramillies* with convoy H.X. 106 on 8 February 1941 discouraged an attack by the battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. Barnett, 1991. pgs. 132, 279.

¹²¹ CP 19/3, 21 October 1939. Gilbert, 1993. p. 274.

between the Royal Navy's older and modern vessels when he proposed the armoured tortoises "can work in narrow waters and keep the high-class stuff for the outer oceans."¹²²

According to Correlli Barnett, "Operation Catherine belongs not to the world of real war but rather to that of imaginative war fiction, taking as it did little heed of tedious nuts-and-bolts."¹²³ S.W. Roskill chalked it up as another Churchwellian adventure in which the First Lord "did not comprehend the difficulty of undertaking this process."¹²⁴ Because "Operation Catherine" appeared early in the war when the professional Admiralty still revered the battleship, Churchill's strategy received only lukewarm support. The admirals criticised the plan after it was recognised as a dangerous diversion of naval strength and shelved by the First Sea Lord at the end of 1939.¹²⁵

"R" class in the USA

The career of the "R" class battleships after "Operation Catherine" epitomised the dilemma of the unmodernised ships during the war. Dispatched to the Indian Ocean in early 1942 to fill the void left by Force Z, the "R's" were pushed back by the Japanese onslaught to the East Coast of Africa. By mid-1942 the condition of the "R's" had deteriorated to the extent that the Admiralty arranged for long-term repairs at U.S. dockyards.¹²⁶ When the Americans completed repairs on HMS *Royal Sovereign* in late 1942, however, they refused to dock HMS *Revenge* and HMS *Resolution*. According to the British Admiralty Maintenance Representative (BAMR) in Washington, Vice-Admiral W.F. French, the Americans believed, "the labour, material, and facilities required for a refit of an old Capital ship can be more effectively employed in the war effort in other directions at the present moment."¹²⁷ The U.S. dockyards would continue to repair modern or action-damaged British warships, but not the remaining "R" class vessels. The Americans based their decision on the poor condition of *Royal Sovereign* and the similar

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Barnett, 1991. p. 93.

¹²⁴ Churchill did not consider how the additional armour plating required for the conversion would impact the completion of the "King George V" battleships he so strongly advocated. Roskill, 1977. p. 109.

¹²⁵ Barnett, 1991. p. 95,

¹²⁶ "The condition of the "R" class battleships is such that if they are to continue as efficient fighting units they must undergo refits." ADM 1/13323, A.V. Alexander to Churchill. MOST SECRET. Late August 1942.

¹²⁷ ADM 1/13323, BAMR Vice-Admiral W.F. French to Admiralty. 20 November 1942.

state of the class. Additionally U.S. dockyards at this time were occupied with building landing craft and escort vessels for the upcoming invasions.

During the Admiralty's discussion of the situation in January 1943 the Director of Plans accepted the American decision, noting, "It must appear to be equally likely that our R's will ever see employment that justifies the large programme of refit and re-armouring now laid down for them."¹²⁸ The Director's minute also suggested that the Royal Navy no longer faced a shortage of heavy ships. "In battleships we are far nearer to having an adequate reserve than in any other category." A follow-up memo from the Second Sea Lord in February 1943 confirmed the sufficient size of the battle fleet. He claimed that in the coming year, "the problem of finding the officers and men to man ships will be a very much more difficult problem than obtaining the ships."¹²⁹ The Admiralty's acknowledgement that the "R" class could no longer play a role in the war illustrated how the evolution of naval warfare influenced official policy. The limitations of the "R" class battleships could no longer be ignored, and soon their weakness would spread to modern ships as the need for them diminished as well.

Battleship as blockship

Another blow against the old battleships occurred in mid-April 1941 when the Admiralty ordered Admiral A.B. Cunningham, C-in-C of the Mediterranean Fleet, to block Tripoli harbour with HMS *Barham*. Cunningham's autobiography recorded his opposition to this plan. "I must say at once that this project filled me not only with regret, but with disquietude." The admiral could not support the "sacrifice of a valuable ship" and the certain "heavy casualties" the operation would inflict upon its crew.¹³⁰ When the C-in-C proposed using his battlefleet to bombard the port he received a terse reply from VCNS Admiral Phillips. "The reputation of the Royal Navy is engaged in stopping this traffic... ..the effectual blocking of Tripoli harbour would be well worth a battleship on the active list."¹³¹ Under pressure from the other services the Admiralty in London responded with this dramatic operation completely

¹²⁸ ADM 1/13323, Director of Plans Minutes. MOG 05/43. 24 January 1943.

¹²⁹ ADM 1/13323, Memo by Second Sea Lord. 20 February 1943

¹³⁰ Cunningham, 1951. p. 342.

disconnected from the naval situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. The gulf between the value assigned to *Barham* in Whitehall and the importance of *Barham* to the Mediterranean Fleet indicated the Admiralty's growing tendency to trivialise the battleship. In the end the *Barham* was reprieved and Admiral Cunningham led the three battleships of the Fleet in a pre-dawn bombardment of Tripoli.¹³² While complete surprise was achieved and the squadron escaped undamaged, the reputation of the battleship received injury from the Admiralty's proposed sacrifice of *Barham*.

Bombardment duty

The 1944 invasions of the Continent brought the un-modernised battleships back in commission for naval bombardment operations. In the prelude to the invasion of France Churchill wrote a memo to the First Sea Lord suggesting that "high velocity naval guns are particularly suited for the smashing of concrete pill boxes." He even pushed for a resurrection of the "R" class battleships for shore bombardment, claiming "here is the true use for the "Ramillies" class."¹³³ Former gunnery officer S.W. Roskill disagreed with Churchill and countered that modern naval guns were ineffective at shore bombardment because of their flat trajectory.¹³⁴ As an example he cited the poor performance of naval bombardment at Gallipoli thirty years before. Four Royal Navy battleships eventually covered the landings at Normandy: HMS *Warspite*, HMS *Nelson*, HMS *Ramillies*, and HMS *Rodney*, along with the two monitors HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Roberts*. The battleship guns demoralised enemy troops and silenced shore batteries¹³⁵, but as Roskill suggested their fire rarely put enemy artillery completely out of action.¹³⁶ The bombardment missions in France, Holland, and Japan represented the final war operations

¹³¹ Simpson, Michael. ed. *The Cunningham Papers Volume 1: The Mediterranean Fleet 1939-1942*. Naval Records Society: Ashgate, 1999. p. 351. [hereafter Simpson, 1999.]

¹³² ABC to Admiralty. 15 April 1941. Simpson, 1999. p. 352.

¹³³ Roskill, 1977. p. 239.

¹³⁴ Captain S.W. Roskill served as the Gunnery Officer of HMS *Warspite* during the 1930s. Roskill, 1977. p. 239.

¹³⁵ Buffestaut, Yves. *D-Day Ships: The Allied Invasion Fleet*. London: Conway Maritime Press, 1994. p. 77.

¹³⁶ The effects of the naval guns had such an impact of the German defence that Field Marshall Rommel wrote to Hitler on 11 June 1944: "the effects of heavy naval bombardment are so powerful that an operation either with infantry or armoured formations is impossible in an area commanded by the rapid fire artillery." Barnett, 1991. p. 833.

for battleships. The shift from defending sea communications in 1939-40 to protecting invasion beaches in 1944-45 reflected the operational evolution of battleships, both old and modern, during the war.

Battleship construction

Although the new realities of war quickly affected the navy's older battleships, the declining importance of the class first registered in the curtailment of battleship construction. In 1939-40 the potential completion of the *Bismarck* galvanised the First Lord to speed production on HMS *King George V*. At one point he ordered the Admiralty to "suspend for a year all work on battleships that cannot come into action before the end of 1941."¹³⁷ To save building time on a new battleship design VCNS Admiral T.S.V. Phillips suggested using the leftover guns and turrets from HMS *Glorious* and HMS *Courageous*. Since Churchill desired warships that could rapidly enter the war this proposal met with immediate support and HMS *Vanguard* was added to the 1940 Construction programme.¹³⁸

However, by March 1940 the Atlantic convoy losses and shipyard inefficiency forced the War Cabinet to abandon all long-term building programs, including the recently laid down 16-inch gun *Lion* and *Temeraire* originally hoped to secure the future battlefleet. Admiral Pound and Admiral Phillips pushed strongly for resuming battleship construction, but shortages in armour plate and the priority of escort ships stalled their efforts. In March 1941 the Prime Minister issued an order halting all naval construction that could not be completed before 1942.¹³⁹ Battleship construction received one more boost when the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk and the First Lord of the Admiralty A.V. Alexander urged the Prime Minister to raise the building status of the final two "King George Vs" to Priority 1A.¹⁴⁰ But this relief only temporarily improved the battleship's fortunes as the legacy of the disaster quickly contributed to long-standing doubts about the class as a whole.

¹³⁷ CP 19/3, Churchill to Pound. 11 September 1939. Roskill, 1977. p. 260.

¹³⁸ "Such a vessel would be of the battleship cruiser type, heavily armoured and absolutely proof against air attack." CP 19/3, Churchill to Pound. FLPM No. 41. 3 December 1939.

¹³⁹ Barnett, 1991. pgs. 380-1.

¹⁴⁰ A.V. Alexander to Churchill. 10 December 1941. Roskill, 1977. p. 201.

Changing priorities

By 1942 the reduced threat of German surface raiders forced Royal Navy capital ships out of the spotlight. At the same time British shipyards were replacing losses from the Battle of the Atlantic and gearing up for the foreseeable demand in landing ships. As a result an amendment to the 1942 New Construction Programme encouraged a shift in priorities away from the battleship, “there are other naval craft now building, e.g. *Vanguard*, which should be stopped to enable the loss of merchant tonnage to be made up.”¹⁴¹ Since the last two “King George Vs” were almost finished HMS *Vanguard* became the logical target. Six months after the destruction of Force Z the future of the battleship came under threat from the Admiralty.

From July 1942 to the end of the year the Admiralty considered two different options for the *Vanguard*: slowing construction or converting her into an aircraft carrier. Although carriers had recently shown themselves decisive at the Battle of Midway, a July 1942 memo by the VCNS with Board concurrence rejected the conversion proposal as “most uneconomical in labour.”¹⁴² Recognising that new capital ship construction was unlikely for several years the majority of the Admiralty favoured retaining *Vanguard* as a battleship.

When the Prime Minister learned of these decisions in September 1942 he immediately demanded an explanation.¹⁴³ Admiral Pound wrote a minute reiterating the navy’s need for fast battleships like *Vanguard* to escort the new aircraft carriers. His reasoning was also guided by the fear the navy would lose more battleships and the principle that *Vanguard* would be ready earlier in her present form.¹⁴⁴ In the end it was decided that *Vanguard* would stay as a battleship.

Another voice considering the subject was the Future Building Committee, an Admiralty group chaired by Deputy First Sea Lord Admiral C.E. Kennedy-Purvis. Charged to examine the navy’s next generation of warships, the committee strongly favoured converting *Vanguard* into an aircraft carrier. To

¹⁴¹ ADM 167/116, Amendment to New Construction Programme 1942. Memo for the Board. July 22 1942.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ ADM 1/12127, Prime Minister Personal Minute M409/2. 25 September 1942.

¹⁴⁴ ADM 1/12127, Minute by Admiral Pound. 25 September 1942.

justify this decision the committee issued a memo positioning the aircraft carrier as the most important element of the future battlefleet. The battleship received a rather less enthusiastic appraisal: “The course of the war has, however, shown that the capacity of battleships to exercise sea power has become limited and the committee believe that in the future battleships will be less often at risk.”¹⁴⁵ The memo predicted the battleship would become a “supplementary unit which will provide offensive power and security in circumstances where air power cannot be developed or has been expended.”¹⁴⁶

The Future Building Committee’s opinion favouring the conversion of *Vanguard* represented just one of their assaults on the future of the battleship. In early 1943 the committee issued a report entitled “The Ideal Navy for the Future” which further eroded the position of the big gun ship. The report claimed the aircraft carrier was now “the core of the Fleet” and the “king pin of naval strategy.” Admitting the aircraft carrier had replaced the former position of the battleship, the committee decided the battleship “will continue to have a definite though more limited function” as an “aircraft carrier heavy support ship.” The committee based its conclusions on the inability for battleships to defend themselves from air attack “by gunfire alone.” They concluded “that fighter defence will be a necessity” to protect Fleets in the future. The opinions of the Future Building Committee were acid to battleship supporters and the report’s praise for aircraft carriers generated controversy within the Admiralty. In Churchill and the Admirals Roskill recorded that “[t]hough some members of the staff wanted the description of the new arm watered down Kennedy-Purvis refused to alter it.”¹⁴⁷ The lessons demonstrated by the Royal Navy’s five battleship losses fuelled the reasoning of the Future Building Committee. Previously the shortcomings of battleships had been deflected by official inquiries and bandaged by additional training, new defensive weapons, or stronger armour. The Future Building Committee did not agree with these protective responses and issued their own diagnosis of the battleship’s obsolescence.

¹⁴⁵ ADM 205/29, Completion of *Vanguard*. Memo by Future Building Committee. 1942.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Roskill, 1977. p. 233.

Hybrid battleships

An innovation that bears mentioning is the navy's short experimentation with hybrid battleships, the combination of the guns and armour of a battleship with the flight deck and aircraft of a carrier. The hybrid idea, also known as a "carrier cruiser," developed from Royal Navy officers who recognised the battleship's inability to complete the tasks of a modern capital ship. The Royal Navy's Director of Air Material, M.S. Slattery first suggested the hybrid design after the navy's difficult experiences in Norway and the Mediterranean: "it is clear... ...the fleet feel a need for fighter protection, a need which they do not feel can be entirely satisfied either by carrier borne or shore-based aircraft."¹⁴⁸ The idea received support from the Admiralty's Director of Planning, Captain Charles L. Daniel. He considered the addition of a flight deck and aircraft to a battleship much like the previous improvements in secondary batteries, torpedo bulges, radar, and degaussing gear.¹⁴⁹ Despite its transformation of the "big gun ship" the hybrid design received support from battleship enthusiasts because of the moratorium on traditional battleship construction. Even the staunchly pro-battleship Admiral T.S.V. Phillips supported an investigation into the hybrid option: "I think there are many points in this design [hybrid] if it proves practicable."¹⁵⁰

In early 1941 the Controller of the Navy, Admiral Bruce Fraser, asked the Director of Naval Construction (DNC) Sir Stanley Goodall, "to give me your impression of this [hybrid] as applied to Lion."¹⁵¹ Under the scrutiny of the DNC staff, however, the hybrid design met the realities of naval construction. The DNC reported back to Admiral Fraser and described the hybrid ships as "vastly inferior" to a pure battleship due to the sacrifices in armament and the weakness of the hanger. His criticism was joined by the Director of Gunnery Division who considered the hybrid concept a "psychological maladjustment." He claimed the carrier cruiser would not succeed because "the functions and requirements of carriers and surface gun platforms are entirely incompatible."¹⁵² After the DNC

¹⁴⁸ Layman, R.D., Steve McLaughlin. The Hybrid Warship: The Amalgamation of Big Guns and Aircraft. Conway Maritime Press: London, 1991. p. 45.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 46.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 47.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 49.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 49.

rejected the hybrid concept the Admiralty never reconsidered their decision despite a push from several admirals during the war concerned about the limited capabilities of their battleships.

Battleship image

The battleship entered the war in 1939 as the strongest symbol of the Royal Navy. Yet its image soon suffered from the Admiralty's opposition to publicity. Unlike the War Office and the Air Ministry the navy resisted publicising its exploits. From the beginning of the war it was "ruthlessly dedicated to preventing the escape of war news."¹⁵³ While the other services published pamphlets and books with the Ministry of Information (MoI) and His Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO), the Admiralty's MoI representatives were "more interested in making sure that nothing was given away to the enemy than in advertising the navy."¹⁵⁴

A change to the Admiralty's closed-door policy was urged by the Naval Publicity Committee in late 1942. Chaired by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Brunstfield, the committee recommended the Admiralty improve its image. "We are convinced that the present policy of the "Silent Service" is outmoded and that if it is continued the Royal Navy will be superseded in popular esteem as a result of the loquacity of the Air Ministry."¹⁵⁵ The report also suggested the Admiralty stop censorship of naval losses. Highlighting success must be the goal of propaganda the report declared, "but losses are an essential background and should not be disguised except so far as it is necessary to deprive the enemy of vital strategic or tactical information."¹⁵⁶ The embarrassing results of previous censorship attempts, the committee stated, were "giving the enemy a whip with which to lash us." The document concluded by recommending stronger ties between the Admiralty and the Press and the creation of a new Naval Information Department and Controller separate from the naval staff.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ James, Anthony. *Informing the People*. London: HMSO, 1996.

¹⁵⁴ MacKenzie, S.P. *British War Films 1939-1945: The Cinema and the Services*. Hambledon and London: London, 2001. p. 63.

¹⁵⁵ ADM 167/116, Report of the Naval Publicity Committee. 14 November 1942.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

The pressure from the Naval Publicity Committee and other factors convinced the Admiralty to increase its propaganda operations, but the role of the battleship still remained invisible. None of the mass-consumption navy pamphlets published by the MoI focused on battleships, although *East of Malta, West of Suez* (1943) described the contribution of heavy ships to the Mediterranean theatre.¹⁵⁸ Admiralty pamphlets after mid-1941 highlighted the work aircraft carriers with *Fleet Air Arm* (1942) and the anti-submarine campaign in *Battle of the Atlantic* (1946). Even the overlooked minesweeper received its own HMSO pamphlet with the publication of *His Majesty's Minesweepers* in 1943.¹⁵⁹ The government's silence was compounded by the lack of feature films during the Second World War with a battleship or its crew as the major focus. Although Royal Navy submarines, destroyers, aircraft carriers, and even merchant ships were featured heavily in the wartime cinema, the capital ships only made brief appearances in stock footage from before the war. In his book on wartime films S.P. MacKenzie suggested the battleship's movie potential "doubtless seemed unpromising in view of the recent sinkings."¹⁶⁰

Warship Weeks

Despite the Admiralty's neglect of publicity the residents of Britain's largest cities attempted to adopt battleships during the 1941 "Warship Weeks." These fundraising campaigns for the Royal Navy were organised by the National Savings Committee and local citizens with minimal participation from the Admiralty. On the second day of the Glasgow campaign the Lord Provost announced that the city would adopt HMS *Duke of York* if it could raise £10 million. To encourage contributions the "Warship Week" advertisements in the Glasgow *Herald* portrayed battleships in extremely positive terms. In one spot the Lord Provost described the *Duke of York* as the "mightiest vessel afloat," while another ad suggested the warship would achieve "the victory that will confer trade and fellowship on all nations who believe in the freedom of the seas." Within a few weeks Glasgow raised £12 million to buy HMS *Duke of York* while

¹⁵⁸ James, Anthony. *Informing the People*. London: HMSO, 1996.

¹⁵⁹ These pamphlets have been recently re-published by The Stationary Office: London, 2000.

¹⁶⁰ MacKenzie, S.P. *British War Films 1939-1945: The Cinema and the Services*. Hambledon and London: London, 2001. p. 83.

the city of Edinburgh likewise adopted the battleship HMS *Howe*. Although the money raised was largely symbolic and did not pay for those warships, the campaign established connections between battleship crews and city residents.¹⁶¹ The “Warship Weeks” represented the only large-scale national campaigns to promote the battleship’s status and future. The results from the campaigns in Glasgow and Edinburgh confirm that battleship appreciation existed in the general population. Unfortunately for these ships the Admiralty never understood how to recognise and nurture this support.

Post-war battleships

In late 1944 the Admiralty convened a special “Battleship Committee” to design the Royal Navy’s next generation of battleships. Unlike the Future Building Committee this group remained committed to the importance of the battleship.¹⁶² Though the Admiralty supported a new programme of battleship construction, none of the designs debated by the committee were ever built. The difficulty of incorporating wartime lessons and post-war requirements into new designs reflected the battleship’s vulnerable position after the Second World War. The committee was also divided on the battleship’s role and size. In the end Britain lacked the resolve and the resources to build the type of heavy ship that could survive in the post-war world.

Battleship size

Because capital ship size determined capacity for guns, armour and speed a “Committee on the Size of Battleships” was formed to debate various designs.¹⁶³ The committee’s examination of war losses determined that future battleships faced threats from “newer and heavier weapons,” especially from the

¹⁶¹ As a legacy of the “Warship Weeks” the ship’s bell from HMS *Howe* can be seen in St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, and the brass plaque from HMS *Duke of York* is displayed in the loggia of the Glasgow City Chambers.

¹⁶² “The basis of the strength of the Fleet is the battleship. Besides providing support for all class of ships, the Battleship is the most powerful unit for destroying the enemy’s surface forces once they are brought to gun action.” ADM 1/18659, “Future Building Committee – Reports and Proceedings.” Memo by the Director of Tactical, Torpedo, and Staff Duties Division (DTSD). 22 April 1945.

¹⁶³ “[T]he size of a battleship is an absolute and not a relative question.” ADM 1/18659, Rear Admiral Servaes. Plans Division. 23 April 1945.

air.¹⁶⁴ In 1945 the U.S. Navy's "Iowa" class battleships were considered the ultimate standard of capital ship construction. Although the committee overruled the possibility of war against the United States, some members suggested the "Iowa" class become the standard for British battleships. For the next generation of capital ships they proposed a 60% increase in displacement over the "King George V" class.¹⁶⁵ An alternative proposal was also drafted to build smaller battleships with fewer guns and thinner armour known as the "Design X."¹⁶⁶

Several committee members criticised "Design X" as being a step in the wrong direction. The Director of New Construction (DNC) claimed the smaller battleship resembled the discredited battlecruiser concept from the First World War. "Design X is the 1945 *Renown* rather than the 1945 *Queen Elizabeth*, and may well be like the *Renown*, now found too weak to be employed in the Pacific."¹⁶⁷ The symbolic role of battleships featured prominently in the DNC's reasoning. Since these battleships could be the last ones built for the Royal Navy, he predicted "We shall rely upon them to 'show off' our Navy for many years."¹⁶⁸ This faction of the committee desired a powerful ship capable of destroying any other capital ship in the world. To them the battleship retained its position at the core of the Fleet and they advocated the Royal Navy "go forwards, not backwards" in new construction.

"Design X"

The argument for "Design X" favoured the construction of a larger number of smaller battleships. Supporters of this design recognised that the battleship no longer dominated the Fleet. They believed the new battleships should "form an essential part of a composite unit consisting of aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers, destroyers, etc."¹⁶⁹ The Deputy Director of Plans Captain G.A. French argued a

¹⁶⁴ ADM 1/18659, "Future Building Committee – Reports and Proceedings."

¹⁶⁵ This "super battleship" design required hull 950 feet long, 100 feet in the beam, machinery producing 160,000 SHP, and a displacement of 70,000 tons full load. It would have mounted nine 16-inch guns. ADM 1/18659

¹⁶⁶ "Design X" would have carried six 16-inch guns, an armour belt of 9 inches, and a speed of 29 knots. ADM 1/18659.

¹⁶⁷ ADM 1/18659, Battleship Committee "Committee on the Size of Battleships – Report and Proceedings." 23 April 1945.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ ADM 1/18659, Battleship Committee "Committee on the Size of Battleships – Report and Proceedings" 23 April 1945. Director of Plans. 23 April 1945.

greater number of smaller battleships would increase the flexibility of the navy. He claimed public support for the new building programme depended on increasing the size of the Fleet. “The taxpayer will not calculate battleship strength by the number of 16-inch guns but by the number of ships.”¹⁷⁰

The smaller dimensions of “Design X” also acknowledged Britain’s reduced prominence in the world. Although both designs reflected post-war imperial requirements, the “super battleship” supporters wanted to prevent “qualitative and quantitative limitations” in capital ships that would further reduce Britain’s influence. They believed a navy led by powerful battleships would help re-establish Britain’s position on the world stage. In the end the government could not build either of the battleship designs the committee debated. The Committee on the Size of Battleships issued its reports on 1 May 1945 but post-war economic conditions soon eliminated any chance for new construction.

¹⁷⁰ ADM 1/18659, Deputy Director of Plans Captain G.A. French - Committee on the Size of Battleships. 23 April 1945.

Conclusion: The End of Eras

First moves

The Royal Navy ended the war with five fewer capital ships than its starting strength of fifteen in 1939. But ten capital ships did not correspond to the real strength of Britain's 1945 battlefleet. The legacy of six years of war left the battleship in an extremely vulnerable position. The combination of battle attrition and Admiralty neglect made the scrap metal of a battleship worth more than its fighting value.

Soon after the war the Admiralty withdrew its battleships from active service. Older vessels became training or accommodation ships while the more modern ships joined the Home Fleet and Training Squadrons. The post-war career of HMS *Renown* followed a typical pattern. A refit scheduled for 1945 was cancelled and she was disarmed to become an accommodation ship at Hamoaze.¹⁷¹ HMS *Nelson* served temporarily as the flagship of the Home Fleet but joined the Training Squadron in mid-1946. Lack of funding for exercises made *Nelson* such a permanent part of Portsmouth Harbour that the local telephone directory contained an entry for her wardroom.¹⁷²

The fate of all British capital ships was foreshadowed between 1946-49 when the first group of pre-war capital ships including HMS *Warspite*, HMS *Valiant*, and HMS *Rodney* were decommissioned and sailed to the scrap-yard. The destruction of HMS *Warspite* caused the greatest public reaction. A veteran of Jutland, Cape Matapan, Salerno, and Normandy, the "Old Lady" was the most embattled British warship afloat. But the grass-roots campaign to preserve *Warspite* as a museum ship started too late and the government never responded.¹⁷³ Iain Ballantyne's new book on *Warspite* quoted Petty Officer Charlie Pearson on the sad end to his ship.

Had she been an American ship I have no doubt they would have preserved her as a museum and made a movie about her, the whole works. But not the British. Everybody loves our naval history except us. We are truly an unsentimental bunch. Sometimes it's a pity, for some things, like the *Warspite*, are actually worth preserving.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Smith, Peter C. *Hit First, Hit Hard: HMS Renown 1916-1948*. William Kimber: London, 1979.

¹⁷² Careless, Ronald. *Battleship Nelson: The Story of HMS Nelson*. Arms and Armour Press: London, 1985.

¹⁷³ HMS *Warspite* managed to cheat her fate, however, when she ran aground off Prussia Cove on her way to the ship-breakers. Tarrant, V.E. *Battleship Warspite*. Arms and Armour: London, 1990.

¹⁷⁴ Ballantyne, Iain. 2001. p. 200.

When controversy arose thirteen years later over the possible preservation of the battleship *Vanguard*, the general opinion was that *Warspite* should have been saved. Because the Royal Navy honours and reuses the names of its warships, most of the capital ships were decommissioned with a formal ceremony similar to the one for HMS *Renown* on 1 June 1948. With current and former members of *Renown's* crew present, a Royal Marine band played “Sunset” followed by “Lost Post” and “Reveille” and lastly the National Anthem as the White Ensign was lowered for the final time.¹⁷⁵ For navy veterans who had served on these warships their demise was a significant event, but most Britons and the budget-conscious government were far more occupied with the nation’s post-war problems. Eleven British capital ships were scrapped between 1944 and 1949, and only five remained. The scrapping of so many battleships immediately following the war was predictable. As capital investments battleships were designed to last for 20 years. By 1945 the four vessels of the “Queen Elizabeth” class were 30 years old and outmoded for any future war. But the first round of post-war reductions set the stage for future scrappings by alerting the government to the potential budget savings achieved by eliminating battleships.

Post-war restructuring

By 1945 the aircraft carrier overtook the battleship as the most powerful and versatile Fleet warship. With the age of battlefleet confrontations over, the British battleship fulfilled the role of an “aircraft carrier support ship.” But the actual replacement of the battleship began much earlier in the war. In September 1942 the battleship lost the singularity of its name when the statistical summaries of the “Naval Supply and Production Report” redefined “battleship class” to include “Fleet Aircraft Carriers.”¹⁷⁶ Within a few years the aircraft carrier proved indispensable for the protection of battlefleets and convoys in all theatres of the war.

The aircraft carrier outmanoeuvred the battleship again in 1949 when the Admiralty reviewed the future employment of battleships. As a part of the review the Director of the Operations Division wrote a memo to the Admiralty announcing a significant demotion for the battleship. “As it is the intention that

¹⁷⁵ Smith, Peter C. *Hit First, Hit Hard: HMS Renown 1916-1948*. William Kimber: London, 1979.]

¹⁷⁶ ADM 167/116, Naval Supply and Production Report. Second Bucknill Report. 23 September 1942.

the C-in-C Home Fleet should, after April 1949, fly his flag in a Fleet Carrier, it will not be necessary to include a battleship in the Home Fleet.”¹⁷⁷ The loss of the flagship role removed battleships from a symbolic position they had occupied since the earliest days of the Royal Navy. An aircraft carrier as a Fleet flagship was unimaginable in 1939 and still not considered in 1945. During the recent war the aircraft carrier superseded the offensive position and capabilities of the battleship. Now in the post-war era it was taking away the battleship’s generations-old symbolic role. Deliberate Admiralty decisions steadily erased both the real and symbolic need for battleships and encouraged their complete obsolescence.

After the first wave of scrappings in 1949 the remaining Home Fleet battleships underwent a significant restructuring. The VCNS ordered three of the remaining “King George V” class battleships to the Reserve Fleet, while HMS *Vanguard* and HMS *King George V* joined the Training Squadron.¹⁷⁸ The removal of the battleship from the navy’s active list ended an era and foreshadowed their future disappearance. The government recognised the historic nature of this restructuring. The minutes from the Defence Committee meeting on 1 July 1949 discussed how to placate public concerns. “It was pointed out that a reorganisation on this scale could scarcely be expected to pass unnoticed and a public announcement would therefore be necessary.”¹⁷⁹ The Defence Committee decided to inform the public that the Home Fleet reorganisation would actually improve the capabilities of the navy: “[the] best line to take was the savings effected enabled us to keep a greater number of smaller ships operational.” To lessen anxiety over the departure of the battleships the committee explained that the warships primarily needed in post-war emergencies were actually “frigates, destroyers, and minesweepers.”¹⁸⁰

This reasoning was repeated in a telegram from the Commonwealth Relations Office to representatives of the British Commonwealth nations. The Force Z debates in the fall of 1941 demonstrated the important role of Royal Navy battleships in maintaining Britain’s empire. The

¹⁷⁷ ADM 1/21473, Memo by Director of the Operations Division. 1 January 1949.

¹⁷⁸ ADM 1/21473, “KGV Class to Reserve Fleet.” VCNS Report. 1 January 1949.

¹⁷⁹ ADM 1/21473, Defence Committee Minute. D.O. (49) 17th meeting. “Employment of battleships.” 1 July 1949.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

government telegram reassured these nations that the Home Fleet reorganisation and the battleship's retirement did not mean the decline of British overseas commitments.

For reason given it would be incorrect to regard our action as implying any weakening of UK's naval strength. It is in fact a progressive move that will help toward providing the large number of small ships which we need, both in peace, and in order to supply the initial protection which we should need to give our sea communications immediately in the event of an emergency.¹⁸¹

The government also justified their cost-cutting decision to the Commonwealth by explaining that battleships were in decline in other navies: "very few large warships are being kept operational anywhere in the world."¹⁸² The Defence Committee minutes showed that the Admiralty's explanation was a smokescreen to hide the purely financial and political motives behind these Fleet reorganisations. Before the Admiralty decided to shift three "King George Vs" into the Reserve Fleet they also investigated the potential savings of scrapping all the remaining battleships. In July 1949 the Admiralty replied to a Ministry of Defence query on the savings gained from selling the five battleships for scrap. Although the annual savings would have been £1 million, the government still conserved £350,000 a year by assigning them to the Reserve Fleet.¹⁸³

In 1950 the navy pursued a second Home Fleet re-shuffling and placed all "King George Vs" in Reserve status. The First Lord wrote the Prime Minister that the movement was for "reasons of manpower."¹⁸⁴ In this memo the First Lord explained that the Royal Navy retained the "King George V" vessels because they were "comparatively modern ships and because there is the possibility of their being re-armed at some future date with a new type of weapon."¹⁸⁵ But these innovations never developed and the battleships waited for their destruction.

Final scrappings

British defence strategy in the late 1950s involved controversial transitions. The 1957 Defence White Paper by Duncan Sandys dismissed the manned aircraft in favour of the guided missile. In a similar way

¹⁸¹ ADM 1/21473, Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office to all Commonwealth nations. 12 July 1949

¹⁸² The U.S. Navy in 1949 had one active battleship and fourteen battleships in reserve status. *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ ADM 1/21477, Reply to Ministry of Defence Question from Admiralty. July 1949.

¹⁸⁴ ADM 1/21477, "King George V" in Reserve status." Minute from First Lord to Prime Minister. 2 February 1950.

maritime air power had transformed the Royal Navy from the old days of battlefleets. By the late 1950s the Royal Navy decided against replacing the battleship's gun armament with rockets or building hybrid carrier-cruisers. Meanwhile the continued maintenance of Reserve Fleet battleships overtaxed the Admiralty's resources. The "King George V" battleships had been mothballed since the early 1950s and in late 1957 the last battleship veterans of the Second World War went quietly to the ship breakers.

The last battleship

Less than a year after the "King George V" battleships went under the acetylene torches, the government decided to scrap HMS *Vanguard*. Sensing the political ramifications of sending off the navy's last battleship, the Admiralty expressed a strong desire to finish the process quickly. "*Vanguard* will be scraped sooner rather than later and, if we are not able to confirm that this is so, her retention will seem at best pedantic, at worst a confession that we are not realistic where this ship is concerned."¹⁸⁶ At the time of the *Vanguard's* demise the Admiralty faced intensive pressure from political and economic forces as passionately against battleships as the Navy League rallied in their favour just two generations before.

From the beginning of the process the Admiralty and the Ministry of Defence opposed the preservation of *Vanguard* as a museum ship or monument. Their decision was partially based upon financial and political considerations, but it also reflected a resistance to the *Vanguard's* legacy as the navy's last battleship.

The government's lack of money served as the main pretext for the scrapping. The Director General of Dockyards and Maintenance confirmed in a memo that no dry dock existed to preserve *Vanguard*.¹⁸⁷ The Admiralty's Director of the Manning Division calculated that the cost of preserving the *Vanguard* would be equal in expense to keeping her as an accommodation ship in Operational Reserve.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ ADM 1/274803, Head of Military Branch II. 20 January 1960

¹⁸⁷ ADM 1/274803, Director General of Dockyards and Maintenance. 3 December 1959.

¹⁸⁸ ADM 1/274803, Director of Manning Division. 11 December 1959.

One high-level effort to preserve the *Vanguard* came in a letter from Admiral Sir Frederick Parham. Writing to the First Lord the retired admiral requested the Board consider preserving *Vanguard* in the same manner as the *Victory*. As *Vanguard* was the last battleship in Britain's historic naval tradition, Admiral Parham wrote, "I believe that thousands of holiday-makers in the West Country would flush to see her at Hamoaze as thousands flush to see the *Victory* at Portsmouth."¹⁸⁹

The Head of Military Branch II, a division of the Ministry of Defence, rejected Admiral Parham's suggestion in an internal memo. "Purely from a standpoint of the economic use of naval resources, there is a pretty overwhelming argument against the preservation of the *Vanguard* as a showpiece."¹⁹⁰ But financial reasons were not the only motivations urging the Admiralty to scrap her. They also opposed preservation of *Vanguard* because of the battleship's embarrassing lack of battle experience. The Head of Military Branch II accused Parham of "absurd exaggeration" in his comparison of the battleship to *Victory*. Nelson's flagship had a long and storied career, but "The *Vanguard*, at the opposite pole, never fired a shot in anger."

The First Sea Lord replied to Admiral Parham's letter and hinted at the political undercurrents influencing the Admiralty's decision to scrap. "Our detractors may be relatively few, but they do exist and on occasion they are pretty vociferous. Sitting the *Vanguard* alongside the *Victory* might give them a field day."¹⁹¹ These political worries convinced the Admiralty to finish off the last battleship as quickly as possible.

Media coverage of the *Vanguard's* demise was extensive, and thousands of people lined the West Dumbartonshire coast "as for a funeral, in silence" to watch the final voyage of Britain's last battleship.¹⁹² Within twenty-five minutes of *Vanguard's* arrival to the ship-breakers workers started dismantling her superstructure with acetylene torches.

¹⁸⁹ ADM 1/274803, Letter from Admiral Sir Frederick Parham to First Sea Lord. 17 October 1959.

¹⁹⁰ ADM 1/274803, Memo Head of Military Branch II. 17 December 1959

¹⁹¹ ADM 1/274803, Letter from First Sea Lord to Admiral Frederick Parham. 27 December 1959.

¹⁹² Glasgow *Herald*. 10 August 1960.

The idea that the steel skeleton of a battleship was worth more than its operational value originated from the Admiralty during the Second World War. The plan to sacrifice *Barham* to block Tripoli harbour and the conversion of the “R” class into “armoured turtles” reflected the de-symbolisation of the battleship as a fighting unit. This trend to disarm the battleship image culminated in activities of the scrap yards after the war. The death of battleship came when the Admiralty stopped viewing them as being “alive,” and saw them merely as eight hundred foot-long blocks of steel and aluminium. It can be said that the evolution of the battleship – from the core of the battlefleet and the symbol of a nation to a budget line item and a pile of rusted scrap – merely reflected the evolution of society to a new system of priorities. In that sense the battleship was very much alive to British society even to the end.

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