

Post War Conflict: Surface Fleet

World War Two brought widespread changes within the Royal Navy both in terms of technology and manpower these changes had a huge impact on the post war fleet.

At the end of the World War Two large numbers of men returned to civilian life and the Royal Navy had to pay off many of its warships. Royal Navy began to once more adopt a new role ranging from meeting obligations under new treaties through to covering the numerous guerrilla wars in colonies seeking independence. The most prominent of the new treaties was the North Atlantic Alliance or NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation).

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The Yangtze Incident

On 20th April 1949 the Royal Navy frigate HMS Amethyst entered the Yangtze River to take the regular supplies to the British Embassy in Nanking and to relieve HMS Consort. Communist artillery fired on HMS Amethyst when she was sixty miles from Nanking causing considerable damage. The coxswain ran her around on Rose Island.

On the morning of 21st April 1949 the cruiser, HMS London, and the frigate, HMS Black Swan, entered the river to attempt to tow HMS Amethyst but again heavy gunfire prevented this from happening and the two ships withdrew returning to Shanghai.

Lieutenant Geoffrey Weston refloated HMS Amethyst on 22nd April 1949 and moved her out of range of the artillery. The British Naval Attache Lieutenant-Commander John Simon Kerans joined the ship later that day and took command.

HMS Consort proceeded downstream from Nanking and also attempted to take HMS Amethyst in tow. Heavy gunfire again prevented HMS Consort from giving any assistance and so they continued downstream.

For three months HMS Amethyst remained at anchor during long negotiations aimed at allowing the ship to proceed downstream into the open sea. In the end the Commanding Officer decided to break the deadlock by running for the open sea, 140 nautical miles away, despite realising that it was likely that his ship would come under enemy fire at several points in this journey.

The Admiralty sent HMS Amethyst approval for the plan which was carried out over night 29th-30th July 1949 when the ship managed to reach open sea in seven hours. As she went through the entrance to the river she sent the signal "Have rejoined the Fleet. No damage or casualties. God save the King!"™

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Suez Operation

The Suez Canal Company opened the Canal in 1869 with Britain taking control of the main canal in 1882. The Suez Canal was strategically important, because it was the ocean trade link between Britain and its colonies in India, the Far East, Australia, and New Zealand. In its entirety, the area was strategically important to North Africa and the Middle East.

In 1949, Egypt closed the canal to Israeli shipping, and blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba. This caused protest from Britain and the United Nations. On 26th July 1956, Egypt announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, in which British banks and business held a 44 per cent stake.

Three months after Egypt's nationalization of the canal company, a meeting took place at Sèvres, outside Paris. Britain and France enlisted Israeli support for an alliance against Egypt, it was agreed that Israel would invade the Sinai. Britain and France would then intervene, instructing that both the Israeli and Egyptian armies withdraw their forces to a distance of 16 km from either side of the canal. The British and French would then argue that the canal should be placed under Anglo-French management.

The joint forces named the raid Operation Musketeer. Although the plan was essentially French, Britain, as the major contributor to the invasion, assumed command of the Anglo-French part of the military operation. General Sir Charles Keightley assumed command of Operation Musketeer.

The air-sea-ground force consisted of approximately 45,000 Britons and 34,000 Frenchmen. There were 200 British and 30 French warships, including seven aircraft carriers.

Israel invaded Egypt on 29th October 1956. Late on 30th October 1956 British and French gave their joint ultimatum to Egypt and Israel. Britain and France ordered them to cease firing and withdraw to positions 10 miles from the Suez Canal. Egypt rejected it. During the night of 31st October – 1st November 1956, the Anglo-French invasion armada sailed from Malta and Algeria.

Even before the 12-hour ultimatum expired, the war at sea began. The Egyptian frigate Ibrahim al-Awal was fired upon by a French destroyer and Israeli air and sea units, captured, the frigate was towed in and later formed part of the Israeli navy.

On the 5th November Royal Marine Commandos carried out a helicopter borne assault from the British carriers HMS Theseus and HMS Ocean. The Royal Navy flew 2000 sorties during the operation. This included 1600 from Fleet Aircraft Carriers this mainly consisted of Sea Hawks and Wyverns and 400 from Commando Carriers consisting of Whirlwind and Sycamore helicopters.

In mid-November, the first elements of a newly created, blue-helmeted United Nations Emergency Force, soldiers from half a dozen neutral states, reached the canal zone. The last of the Anglo-French forces steamed out of Port Said just before Christmas.

The operation to take the canal was highly successful from a military point of view, but was a political disaster. After economic pressure from the United States France and Britain were forced to withdraw, the Israelis left the Sinai in March 1957. Suez marked the last significant attempt Britain made to impose its military will abroad without United States support until the Falklands.

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The Cod Wars

Fishermen had commercially caught cod for over a thousand years and was a major factor in international trade well up until the nineteenth century. Between 1958 and 1976, Britain and Iceland had three disputes over fishing rights in the waters around Iceland.

The first Cod War started on 1st September 1958 after the First Conference of the Law of the Sea in Geneva failed to

muster a the two-thirds majority to adopt a 12-mile limit on territorial seas. Even before the first Cod War the Royal Navy maintained a patrol in Icelandic waters for about 15 weeks a year. The mission of the Royal Navy was to prevent the interference with British fishing vessels.

The Icelandic Coastguard started with seven ships and two aircraft, the largest ship was the Thor of only 920 tons. The first encounter involved the trawler Northern Foam when boarded by an unarmed boarding party from the Icelandic gunboat Thor. The frigate HMS Eastbourne interceded eventually managing to obtain the release and transfer of the fishermen to Eastbourne.

In 1971 the fishing limit was extended to 50 miles, this would have a dramatic effect on British deep-sea fishing business so another Cod War was inevitable. The MoD issued a political directive and "Rules of Engagement".

During 1972 eight British trawlers had their trawls cut by Icelandic gunboats. Despite political negotiations about limits and cod quotas the war escalated; a notable incident in this period is when the British trawler Aldershot was rammed by the Icelandic gunboat Aegir. The Aegir seriously damaged the Aldershot in the stern, the hole was patched up with cement in the Faeroes.

The aggression levels increased dramatically in March 1973 with many trawl cuts and shooting incidents. The most dangerous was when the trawler Brucella was hit by about ten rifle shots from the gunboat Arvakur, hitting her lifeboat and bridge. During this second cod war there were many incidents of near misses and actual collisions between opposing vessels.

On the 15th July 1975 Iceland declared a 200 mile fishing limit. Serious contingency planning for a third Cod War started immediately as there was little chance of a negotiated settlement. On the 25th November HMS Falmouth and Brighton arrived on station. Icelandic gunboats had already commenced trawl-cutting operations and the trawler men requested urgent Naval protection.

The third cod war lasted until 28th May 1976 when an agreement was reached after a Foreign Ministers meeting in Oslo which limited the number of trawlers fishing in Icelandic waters and implementing conservation areas, including extra prohibited areas. HMS Berwick was the last RN's distant-water fishery patrol ship, ending the 500-year old task.

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Between 1966 and 1975 the Royal Navy conducted a blockade of the port of Beira in Mozambique in an attempt to stop oil from reaching Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) following their unilateral declaration of independence. The Royal Navy named the duty the Beira Patrol. This patrol is an example of where political objectives were more important than military ones. Warships off Beira were powerful symbols and as such however ineffective they were Britain could not remove them whilst it remained committed to sanctions against Rhodesia.

The initial commitment to the patrol on 1st March 1966 was a carrier, two frigates and a Royal Fleet Auxiliary support ship. For the remaining nine years of the blockage two destroyers or frigates were on duty at all times in addition to RAF Shackletons flying daily patrols. The shore-based patrol aircraft detected suspect tankers then the ships intercepted them.

The Beira patrol finished on 25 June 1975 when Mozambique became independent. They assured Britain that they would not tranship oil to Rhodesia. HMS Salisbury was the last of the 76 RN ships that had supported the patrol.

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Technological change in the cold war period was a significant factor in the development of warship design and operation. The post-war era was a time of tremendous changes, with effects on weapons, communications, sensors and propulsion systems (amongst others) whose capabilities all advanced by leaps and bounds; underlying all of this were the continuing advances in computing capability. In many cases scientists had initially developed the technologies during the Second World War. Post-war research and scientific advances enabled the navy to use the technology much more effectively.

Weapons moved from what are now known as 'dumb' weapons to those, which the navy could guide towards their targets. The Royal Navy supplemented, and in many cases replaced, guns with guided missile launchers, both in anti-aircraft and anti-ship roles. Homing torpedoes became the main anti-submarine weapon instead of depth charges. Nuclear weapons became a centre of attention, both as offensive weapons and as a threat, which defences had to be capable of dealing with.

Communication capabilities changed from Morse code and teleprinter to satellite-transmitted computer-to-computer and video-conference links. The result was the ability of commanders, both military and political, to have a minute-to-minute awareness of combat situations from a considerable distance, in some cases at intercontinental ranges, and communicate with those on the scene.

Improvements in sensors were evident in all aspects of maritime operations. Improvements in radar technology meant that the Royal Navy could overcome the limitations of wartime systems. These included problems of limited detection range, the effects of poor weather and enemy jamming and the ability to track large numbers of targets accurately.

Underwater detection capabilities improved dramatically; for a considerable period the machinery noise made by submarines was a major aid to detecting and locating them, often at very long ranges.

The use of infrared sensors and other sensors in the near-visual spectrum, such as low-light TV allowed operations when previously they would not have been possible. All of these developments, of course, could be exploited by friend and opponent alike; devising and implementing suitable countermeasures, were therefore an important area of study and research for military strategists.

Engineering developments introduced several new technologies, which partially replaced the steam turbine, steam reciprocating or diesel engines of previous generations. Amongst these were the use of gas turbines to allow quicker starting from cold, lighter machinery and improved fuel economy, the development of nuclear reactors providing virtually unlimited endurance (at a cost), mixed propulsion systems, such as steam turbines for cruising and the addition of gas turbines for high speeds, allowing better fuel economy and the increasing use of electric propulsion allowing quieter ships and thus reducing the likelihood of ships being detected.