

Are Big Warships Really Sinking the Royal Navy?

Military historian, Allan Mallinson, claims that the cost of big warships is still sinking the Royal Navy! In his Times article of Tuesday 31st May 2016 he suggests that by the time of the Battle of Jutland, the Royal Navy's battleships were already showing their obsolescence because of their vulnerability to the mine and torpedo and that the cost of building further units starved the service of the smaller craft needed to face the second world war U-boat menace. He then goes on to suggest that the cost of the Type 45 destroyers and the new Queen Elizabeth (QE) class aircraft carriers is such that the navy is now unable to field the smaller frigate and corvette type vessels needed to police the UK's interests abroad. Some of what he says may be true, the Type 45's and QE carriers are certainly soaking up a lot of money but by just accepting the bare facts is he missing the point; i.e. why are they so expensive and can they be acquired at a lower price so that the navy can have its large hard hitting units as well as the smaller constables of the seas?

In my recent written submission to the Commons Defence Select Committee's Enquiry into Acquisition & Procurement, I suggested that, when compared to commercial operations for similar products, the MOD and Government appeared incompetent. That is not to say that individuals within those organisations cannot see the faults, I'm sure that many of them can but the system within which they work seems to impose constraints which result in delay, change, procrastination and excessive cost; it does not seem fit for purpose. In that submission (published 25th October 2016) I drew comparison between the construction performance of the QE carriers and Royal Caribbean's Oasis class of super cruise liners, which are larger than and at least as complex as the carriers but have been delivered in a much faster time frame and at a third of the cost.

Sir John Parker, in his report to the government (published 29th November 2016) for the forthcoming ship building strategy, has drawn a very similar comparison. He has not been so unkind as to suggest that the MOD and government are incompetent, in fact he points out that there are many very good professional people within the MOD. He does however mention that the MOD is deficient in project management ability and recommends that for future ship building projects outside (commercial) assistance is sought. From a discussion I had recently with a member of the UKNDA, who has had recent experience of working with the MOD, it would appear that military personnel who are drafted to work alongside those civil servants, quickly become frustrated and disillusioned at the protracted and inflexible way in which that organisation operates. It is also apparent that artificially elongated time frames for production runs of equipment is not in tune with the requirements of industry that is fully aware that time means money. So, good professional people they might be but the proof of the pudding is in the eating and either individually or collectively, together with the government, they have not been able to run a system that delivers the vessels required by the Navy at a competitive price and in a reasonable time frame. In other words, they and the system they operate are not good enough!

Sir John's report makes very interesting reading. As an ex chairman of P&O and a director of Carnival Cruises, he knows a thing or two about the procurement of large complex vessels and their operation. He suggests that the way ahead is to design the vessel(s), identify the manufacturing companies and sites, allocate the money (which must be made available in a time frame that does not stall the building process), sign the contracts and then allow no further changes to the specification. This latter point of allowing no further changes, once the contract has been signed, is very important as anything required after that point will be many times more expensive than before the ink goes onto the paper. In order to speed up the building process, digital and modular construction techniques should be used with different parts of the vessels being constructed at various locations around the UK and then brought together at one yard for final assembly.

Modular construction of course is nothing new. It was used in the construction of the Type 45 destroyers and the QE class of aircraft carriers (where in the latter case and for other reasons, it hasn't produced a particularly fast build rate). It has also been used very successfully by the commercial sector for decades. It is sobering to think that had Sir John's recommended way of operating been used for the construction of both QE carriers, they would probably have been completed for the original estimated price of just over £3 billion, instead of the now £6.2 billion. The £3 billion overspend would have been sufficient, with orders to a foreign yard, for 2 dozen MARS type tankers or their equivalent. In other words, every ship in the RFA fleet could have been replaced with new, a dedicated Caribbean guard ship provided and there would have been cash to spare for their operation.

If Sir John's recommendations are to be adopted, they will have to be driven from the very top by someone who is politically powerful and ruthless enough to bring about the changes in policy, attitude and the operating procedure required to make the new system work. The three obvious hurdles to be overcome are a lack of finance, a very conservative civil service (MOD) that seems uneasy with radical change and a lack of project management ability and efficiency. Several years ago I watched as the management and inspection team mustered for the day's work alongside an RFA vessel in refit and thought, "My, what an awful lot of pristine white boiler suits!?" Some babies will no doubt have to be thrown out with the bath water and that might be a price worth paying. Should the recommendations be adopted however, with the construction and delivery of naval vessels being speeded up, the government will quickly find themselves with another problem. Subsidiary aims of defence equipment procurement from within the UK are the maintenance of a military manufacturing base, which obviously has strategic relevance, a desire to restrict the outflow of wealth from this country and the provision of employment for the UK population. In fact the employment of its members formed the basis of the union UNITE's written submission to the procurement enquiry. If however, the government intend to build only 16 ships in as many years (13 Frigates plus 3 RFA's) and comparatively rapid construction techniques are used, they will quickly run out of new builds with which to sustain that manufacturing base and the employees within it will seek work elsewhere. The expectation of foreign orders to fill the void may prove to be a forlorn hope! A small production run within a commercially competitive time frame is not conducive to maintaining a UK based sophisticated warship production industry or the employment that goes with it, unless a financially punitive subsidy is applied, as was done with the 2009 ToBA (Terms of Business Agreement) contract, which rather defeats the point of the exercise.

Therein lays the rub; the Navy needs ships and the men to man them. Everything else that spurs from the process to acquire them is secondary to that primary aim; or it should be. If the government are not prepared to finance the provision of sufficient warships through UK production facilities, which the present system is failing to do, but the money they are prepared to provide will produce those vessels through foreign yards, then they should consider going abroad for the basic hulls and bringing them back to UK for the high tech fit out and future servicing. In 1965 the then Labour government effectively destroyed the UK's ability to be a sole producer of high performance military aircraft when it cancelled the P1154, TSR2 and HS601 projects. The aeronautical engineers released were then gobbled up by NASA, who used them, together with some from the 1960 cancelled Blue Streak rocket project, to put a man on the moon (1/3 of aeronautical engineers on the Apollo program were Brits). The UK then majored in the development and production of high tech systems and sub-systems, so that now she has the second largest aeronautical industry in the world and we build hardly any complete aircraft. Unless the Government is prepared to finance the construction of sufficient warships from within the UK, it may now be time for them to take the UK warship building industry along the route chosen for the aeronautical industry in 1965.

There are of course ways in which some funding can be found to pay for more ships and the manning of them. The Navy gets involved in many tasks that cannot be construed as a defence of the realm. They are support activities for international communities that are suffering from natural disasters and disease. They also get involved in operations to counter criminal activity such as drug running, which is primarily a civilian matter. The Caribbean guard ship is one example. Often it is a warship that in the Hurricane season is not suited to the task and in recent years an RFA has been based there during that period. This is primarily a foreign aid deployment and that budget, which currently has a surplus of cash, should be made to fund the construction and operation of a purpose built vessel. Similarly, RFA Argus, the casualty receiving vessel is more likely to be used in a civilian role, somewhere in the 3rd World than be called into service to deal with war casualties. Her replacement and operation should also be funded by the foreign aid budget. In that way the UK can have a humanitarian aid ship, as the US and China have, that will be a highly visible symbol of the UK's benevolence but which can also be called upon when this country is involved in a major military operation. Both vessels could be manned and operated by the RFA. If the government and MOD are prepared to think outside the box and are honest about the fact that warship construction is being maintained within the UK to support employment, as UNITE suggest that it should, then in essence a part of that budget is being used to support a social welfare program and some of the Social Security budget should be diverted into the procurement of equipment from this country's manufacturers. Sir John Parker suggests that where equipment is acquired from within the UK, at commercially uneconomical prices, in order to support British Industry, the MOD (and in this case the Navy) should not be financially penalised. I realise of course that those two budgets, foreign aid and social security, may be political holy cows, as is the promise of warship construction to certain regions of the UK but if, as the government always claims, defence of the realm is their first priority, those considerations should take second place to the funding of the armed and security services, which they apparently do not.

During the period of the wooden walled Navy, personal corruption was a problem and at times it had a major negative effect on the supply and operation of ships. That type of corruption has, I believe, largely been tackled and abolished. In the UK however, we have replaced it with an institutionalised form, where major parts of government finance (in this case the warship construction budget) are sidelined to support other activities at the cost of the core aim. As Mr. Mallinson suggests, the cost of big warships is restricting the supply of other vessels required by the Navy to carry out its tasks. It is not however the ships themselves that are to blame. It is the process of their procurement, the additional requirements that are tacked onto the disbursement of the cash and the inability of the personnel involved to change it which is actually sinking the Navy. The Navy is sinking because the government and the MOD will not do what is necessary and which is within their power, to keep it afloat.

Incidentally, on the subject of the battleship's obsolescence, vulnerable to the mine and torpedo they might have been but the events of 31st May and 1st June 1916 at Jutland proved that at that time they were even more vulnerable to the big gun. In December 1939, would Captain Langsdorff of the Graf Spee have put that pistol to his head if he had not believed that HMS Renown's 15" guns were heading his way? I suspect that the German destroyer captains, who were chased up the Norwegian fjords in 1940, did not think that the Warspite's 15 inchers were an obsolete weapons system. When a 14" shell from Prince of Wales punched a hole into the fuel tank of the biggest and most powerful commerce raider of them all, Bismarck, it effectively put an end to her career. After bypassing a British submarine that could not get into a firing position and then receiving a torpedo hit on her rudder (and it is doubtful that an 18" torpedo hit directly onto the Bismarck's hull would have stopped her) it was the 16" guns of Rodney that battered her into a blazing wreck. The U boats caused great attrition among the North Atlantic convoys but had the Bismarck, Tirpitz, Gneisenau, Scharnhorst, Graf Spee, Deutschland, Admiral Scheer and the 5 Hipper class

heavy cruisers been allowed to roam unopposed by the RN's heavy units, they would have stopped the convoys dead in their tracks. Vulnerable they might have been and they took their losses but Battleships still had a role to play in WW2. Likewise today, major warships may be vulnerable to developing weapons systems but they are not without the teeth to defend themselves (or they should not be!) and they provide the support that smaller units require for protection. In a balanced fleet they are still very much required.

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