

Speech: First Sea Lord speech on the Royal Navy in 2017

After 23 years as a member, 2 on the Committee and nearly 6 on the Navy Board, it's a pleasure to attend Founders Day as First Sea Lord and to share a few insights with you as I approach my first anniversary in the job.

Over the past year, I've had the privilege to represent the Royal Navy extensively at home and abroad.

Last spring, the nation paused to remember the centenary of the Battle of Jutland. I met many descendants, including the family of Jack Cornwell VC, at the unveiling of his memorial in Leyton. His great, great, nephew, AB Alex Saridis, is now serving in HMS Iron Duke, proof that our career managers have a sense of history.

Later, I was in Liverpool for the 75th Anniversary of the Arctic Convoys, where I met some remarkable veterans of "the worst journey in the world." I also had the honour of presenting the Lord Mayor of Liverpool with her late father's Arctic Star.

In both cases I was reminded of how deep the British public's affection for the Royal Navy runs.

Then, towards the end of the year, I was in Auckland for the 75th Anniversary of the Royal New Zealand Navy. Even though that nation has successfully forged its own distinct place in the world, the familial bonds between our two navies are no less strong.

But, without doubt, the best thing about the past year has been hearing about the accomplishments of our sailors and marines.

One that sticks in the mind was the father of new-born twins who, in spite of the sleepless nights, had been inspirational in leading his department to design and train force protection teams for HMS Queen Elizabeth.

Another was a marine engineering submariner who worked in excess of 100 hours a week to bring a 30-year old Trafalgar-class nuclear submarine out of maintenance and ready for sea ahead of schedule.

Then there was the young Leading Medical Assistant from HMS Enterprise who led the triage process for hundreds of rescued migrants, dealing with pregnancies, gunshot wounds and everything in between.

That particular mission is ongoing. HMS Echo was the only ship from the EU's Operation Sophia on duty over Christmas, in which time she pulled another 500 men, women and children from the Mediterranean.

We can be very proud of the compassion and professionalism of our sailors and marines in responding to what is possibly the largest humanitarian in our

lifetimes.

But if you worry that our fighting instincts are in some way being softened, I would simply point you to the Gulf, where Commander Amphibious Task Group, Commodore Andrew Burns, and his staff are leading CTF-50, which plans and conducts coalition strike operations in a region where the threat level has the potential to escalate quickly.

They are embarked in HMS Ocean, currently our largest warship – but the men and women of our smaller vessels are no less mindful of the seriousness of their responsibilities.

In the face of almost daily provocation, the young ship's companies of the Gibraltar Squadron – led by Commanding Officers still in their twenties – are exhibiting judgement and restraint beyond their years and, in doing so, have revealed a bold and assertive style of ship handling in the very highest traditions of the service.

I have every expectation that there is a future Nelson or Cunningham among them.

Everything I have seen and heard since I become First Sea Lord has reaffirmed my faith that our nation is blessed with the best sailors and marines of any navy, supported by the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and a Civil Service that remains the envy of the world.

Of course, you would expect me to say this, and this audience knows it anyway – many of you helped lay the foundations upon which today's Navy rests. But now, more than ever, we must ensure the nation understands how hard our men and women are working on its behalf.

Three Theatres

As for the operational context, I do not intend to dwell too heavily, because it should be plainly apparent from the newspapers, not least those images of the Admiral Kuznetsov belching out black smoke like a dreadnought of yesteryear as she steamed past our shores.

In the Atlantic, our commitment to NATO continues to grow. In Norway, the Royal Marines have been training the US Marine Corps in cold weather warfare. Underwater, the Deterrent edges ever closer to a half-century of unbroken patrol, while our attack submarines have been very busy indeed, in ways that many of you know well, and the rest will have to imagine.

As for the Mediterranean, for many of us it was a place where we enjoyed the company of FOST as we worked up to go East of Suez. Now, sadly, it has become an operational theatre in its own right, as we respond to the concurrent challenges of Russians, Radicals and Refugees, to borrow a phrase from SACEUR.

We've been leaning heavily on the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and on our survey ships and patrol vessels in this theatre, and they have stepped up to the plate in the most remarkable way.

HMS Mersey, for example, will shortly return from a 13 month deployment that began in the Caribbean and ended 38,000 miles later in the Aegean; an astonishing accomplishment for a vessel under 2000 tonnes and a ship's company of just 52.

I should also mention our reservists – rarely in the limelight – who have been serving on Border Force Cutters in the Aegean. If your memories of the RNR are of weekends team sweeping with the 10th MCM Squadron, that's ancient history now. They are serving right alongside their regular counterparts in almost everything we do.

Finally, the Foreign Secretary recently told the Manama Dialogue that "Britain is back East of Suez".

He's not wrong – but, in truth, the Gulf has been the Royal Navy's 'home from home' for the past thirty-five years, and today, at any one time, we have a minimum of 7 ships and 1100 sailors and marines in the region, plus two naval helicopter detachments.

Royal Marines are a big part of our presence in the wider Middle East, with training teams visiting Kenya, Somaliland and Kuwait to name just a few examples.

I could say more about all three theatres – and our other duties– but, suffice to say, the world is getting less certain and less safe, and demands on the Royal Navy are growing.

Perspective

This brings me to the crux of what I want to say tonight, which is about our challenges and opportunities.

The word I keep coming back to is perspective – perspective on the kind of Navy we are today, and perspective on the kind of Navy we can be in the years ahead.

You will be familiar with much of the recent coverage of the Type 45 destroyers, which in many ways is emblematic of the challenges we face more widely.

This was the first new destroyer type in over thirty years. Almost every system on board was designed from scratch. In the end, the power and propulsion system fell short of what we hoped, but the air defence system turned out to exceed all expectations.

It's not ideal, but the money is now in place to put it right. Had the problem been the other way around, it would have been altogether more difficult to fix.

But the real truth about the Type 45 is to be found not in the pages of newspapers but at the sharp end of operations.

Last year, HMS Defender spent over 100 days protecting US and French carrier

groups in the Middle East without losing a single day of tasking to machinery defects.

Meanwhile, following attacks on coalition vessels by Houthi rebels, HMS Daring was quietly deployed to the coast of Yemen.

Her ship's company spent 39 days in Defence Watches and over 97 hours at Action Stations as they accompanied 650,000 tonnes of coalition shipping through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait at the height of the threat.

This kind of mission – in this kind of environment – is precisely that for which the Type 45 was conceived.

Where it matters most, the Type 45 has proved itself to be one of the most capable air defence destroyers in the world, and the escort of choice for our most important, and demanding, coalition partners.

We demand the best from our people and equipment and, in doing so, the challenges we face are those of a first rate Navy.

The same is true across the board.

The financial constraints we face are shared across the public sector, and the scrutiny, regulation and efficiency challenges by our partner navies.

Our most pressing manpower shortfalls are not unique to the Royal Navy either – many of the same issues apply to other technology-dependent organisations, and we are working with industry to bring forward the next generation of engineers to meet both our needs.

Yet despite these challenges, the Royal Navy retains a position of global leadership, as evidenced by the international success of FOST and BRNC, and our permanent leadership roles in NATO and the Middle East.

I was in Manila in the autumn to represent CDS at a US PACOM-sponsored conference of military leaders from the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. It was apparent that many of the most significant security issues in that part of the world are maritime in character, and our friends want to work with and learn from the Royal Navy – indeed, last year I signed a historic agreement for closer cooperation with the Japanese Navy.

So the Royal Navy still sets the international maritime standard and the demand is growing. This, more than anything else, is the measure of the kind of Navy we are.

Of course I recognise we have challenges. Much of my time is spent working with Ministers, the Head Office and my fellow Chiefs to put them right. But everything is relative, and my job is to lead the Navy to make the most of the resources we have – and the significant investment coming our way – in order to be the best Navy we can. I am grateful for the support, the leadership and the commitment of my top team and Navy Board colleagues here tonight.

There's a lot of difficult work involved, but our efforts now will shape the Navy – and the UK's place in the world – for decades to come.

So as we grip these challenges, it's critical that we don't sell ourselves short, or lose our long term focus.

Because the single most important factor in our success is belief: our people need to believe in the Navy's future in order to believe in their own future within the Service.

But we can't do it alone. The Navy Board and I need you – our friends and advocates – right behind us.

Opportunity

In drawing to a close, let me add a final, personal, perspective.

The 35th anniversary of the Falklands Conflict is now just a few weeks away.

As the senior serving veteran, I am looking forward to playing my part to ensure the contribution, and the sacrifice, of all those involved in that extraordinary endeavour is recognised.

Today, we rightly marvel at the audacity of our accomplishment in that campaign, so far from home.

Yet, as many of you well know, the early 1980s was far from a happy time for the Royal Navy in capability terms.

The submarine force was growing but everything else was either shrinking or, in the case of our amphibious capability, about to go altogether.

That included my own ship, HMS Fearless.

So if you'd told 21-year-old Acting Sub Lt Philip Jones that in 35 years' time he would be leading the Royal Navy as it renewed the nuclear deterrent, commissioned two 65,000 tonne strike carriers and fifth generation fighters, reopened a naval base East of Suez, with a construction programme for submarines and frigates stretching far into the future, I'm not sure he would've believed you...but he would probably have been quite pleased.

Yet those are the hard facts of where we are today.

And the impending arrival of the Queen Elizabeth-class carriers is just the beginning.

Last December, the Prime Minister stood on the deck of HMS Ocean and told the assembled audience that the Royal Navy was central to her vision for Britain to forge a new positive, confident role for our country on the global stage.

The Government has stated – repeatedly – its intention to increase the overall size of the Navy by the 2030s, and now the Type 31e programme is in train to do just that.

So, the vision for the Navy is clear; the equipment is on its way; and the possibilities are growing – what is required now is the sustained focus and effort to reach out and grasp the opportunity.

In short, I cannot remember a time when the Royal Navy has been more relevant to the UK's security challenges, or more important to our global ambitions.

I'm not alone – people are listening – and the real scandal would be if we allowed this precious opportunity to slip through our fingers.

So we mustn't be distracted from our course or dissuaded in our efforts.

We must be guided by the ambition that has been set for the Navy, and judged by our achievements on operations.

I am convinced that if we do these things, and do them well, then we cannot fail.

Thank you.