

## **Fleet Commander's strategic aims, June 2020**

*or Fleet Transformation – The future is exciting*

The First Sea Lord, Admiral Tony Radakin, Second Sea Lord, Vice Admiral Nick Hine and Fleet Commander, Vice Admiral Jerry Kyd have exciting and far reaching plans to transform the Fleet to meet new threats around the world, including a return to a more permanent presence in the Far East. At our Spring meeting shortly before lock down CONA were honoured and delighted to hear all about them. I thought this might be of interest to Shipmates. I should add a word of caution. While I hope and believe I have not misquoted I have added quite a few interpretations of my own.

Our source was the Fleet Commander's Warrant Officer, a newly created post and itself part of the Navy Command Transformation programme. WO Mick Turnbull works alongside the Warrant Officer of the Naval Service as well as First and Second Sea Lords WOs. This is a change from the former situation where each fighting arm (Surface Ships, Submarines, Royal Marines, Reserves and Fleet Air Arm) had its own WO. It is one part of a shift to a whole naval force focus.



But to begin with we were all fascinated to hear the details of WO Turnbull's astonishingly varied career to date. He initially joined at the age of 16 in 1986 as a Junior Seaman 2nd Class, volunteered for Submarines and after a period in Boats moved on to become an Aircraft Controller. After service in that role in BOXER, CUMBERLAND and two Fleet Air Arm Squadrons he was promoted to Petty Officer and completed the Joint Air Traffic Control Course. Three years as a FOST sea rider were followed by Plymouth Military radar and the RAF Flight Operations Managers Course. He then spent six months in Iraq as the Senior Non Commissioned Officer in charge of the Helicopter Control Cell. A Warrant Officer 1<sup>st</sup> class from the end of 2012 he earned a Master of Arts in Naval History in 2019. He has been a regular member of the RN/RM Martial Arts Team, competing at Inter-Service level in full and semi-contact. Those skills might have been useful as Executive Warrant Officer of ILLUSTRIOUS. In a competitive field he was selected at the start of this

year to be the Fleet Command Warrant Officer. The alternative appointment was as Executive Warrant Officer in PRINCE OF WALES. What a difficult choice that must have been for him?

The First Sea Lord's number one of five objectives in Fleet Transformation is to regain and maintain tactical advantage in the North Atlantic. Russian submarine activity is running at levels not seen since the height of the Cold War. Our technological lead was eroded by the Walker spy case in the 70s but still remains. Some veteran submariners have expressed the thought to me that lack of recent operational experience has reduced some of our skills. However our new ASTUTE submarines about which I wrote in the last Circular show every promise of enabling our submariners to get and stay on top. And the Fleet Commander has directed much more activity further north with these world-class hunter-killers. The number one objective will also be greatly aided by the acquisition of Boeing Poseidon P8 maritime patrol aircraft and in due time the new Type 26 Frigate will carry it further. The first three T26 are in build and the first, HMS GLASGOW, is coming together quickly. They will be operating in the Atlantic and escorting our two new aircraft carriers around the world.



*Type 26 Frigate*

*HMS ASTUTE*

*Poseidon P8*

The second priority is to bring the Carrier Strike Group to full fruition. This is very much allied to and an inspiration for, the move to a whole force Navy I mentioned earlier. When both QUEEN ELIZABETH and PRINCE OF WALES are operational we might see not only an Atlantic Task Group but also one potentially earmarked for the Asia/Pacific Task region which could be based in Japan alongside the US and Japanese navies. Perhaps we are

looking at a revival of the old Anglo/Japanese Alliance which came to an end in the 1920s as part of move to avoid a naval arms race with the USA. It could not be more appropriate now that the Corona Virus has shown the urgent need to reappraise our attitude to China. Here's a piccy of HMS PRINCE OF WALES taken from my Old Portsmouth roof on 19 February:



Third on the list is Forward Presence. This looks a bit like an updated version of the fun and adventure filled Naval deployments so many of us will remember from the '60s and '70s. It is already happening with our five new Batch 2 RIVER class patrol vessels like HMS TRENT whose prime area of deployment will be West Africa. They are very capable, 2000 tons, able to land a Merlin helicopter and accommodate 40 Royal Marines in a big mess deck aft. HMS TRENT will be based in Gibraltar from this summer. HMS TAMAR and SPEY are projected to deploy to the Far East full time perhaps as early as the end of next year.



MEDWAY is already permanently based in the Caribbean. We'd all fancy that draft! She is using Martinique and Barbados as her main hubs. Working alongside the French Navy it is 'Vive l'entente cordiale'! And today she is accompanied by an RFA hospital ship. RFA ARGUS ready for any coronavirus responses in our overseas territories such as British Virgin Isles. How about that RFA Shipmates? And FORTH is now permanently based in the Falkland Islands. The crews of these Offshore Patrol Vessels will enjoy 3 watch manning with ships' companies being rotated to and from theatre every 4 months. This is proving extremely popular and I can see why!

Larger warships will also feature in this scheme. The Type 23 HMS MONTROSE is permanently stationed in the Gulf (like four SANDOWN Minehunters) with 2 watch manning. The first of 5 Type 31 Frigates being built at Rosyth and due in service in 2023



All five T31 frigates will be likely based abroad permanently with the White Ensign flying from the Mediterranean to Singapore. They will be double crewed to allow shipmates to take leave and train back in the UK.

Not forgotten and next on the list are our revered Royals. The future Commando Force will move away from Brigade level operations and the conventional infantry type operations

which they performed so effectively and heroically in Iraq and Afghanistan toward more fuller utilisation of their unique Commando skills returning to their historic maritime expertise and agility. The Fleet Commander has asked them to equip and train as Commandos ready in ships to 'cause havoc and mayhem ashore'.

And finally the list of five completes with wholesale adoption of innovation. This will include novel unmanned systems. Trials are already in progress in HMS ALBION. Last summer she led an international deployment of nine nations and the largest UK force in the Baltic Sea for a century.



Unmanned systems are seen as having great potential for safer and more cost effective Survey and Mine Countermeasure operations.

In the Question and Answer period WO Turnbull also told us how HM Ships DEFENDER and MONTROSE had gone to Action Stations with all weapons loaded in the Gulf and successfully faced down what appeared to be an Iranian attempt to seize a British merchant ship. He also mentioned Project HECATE which is a review of all 14,500 personnel currently shore based. The objective is to move more to sea while also ensuring that at sea with the Fleet is the best place to serve.

These are indeed exciting times to be serving in any part of the Naval Service. As the National Chairman observed on reading this article: "Where do we sign up?"