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In the Tradition of Nelson: The Royal Navy in World War II

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BOOK REVIEW

In the Tradition of Nelson

The Royal Navy in World War II

Robert Vogel

Correlli Barnett: *Engage the Enemy More Closely — The Royal Navy in the Second World War.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991.

The attempt to encompass in a single volume the history of the Royal Navy during the Second World War calls for careful judgement and considerable restraint. Barnett manages to do both in his *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, the first serious full-length study of the Royal Navy since Roskill's magisterial *The War at Sea*. But this book is not simply an account of the operations of the Royal Navy during the war. The structure of the book is informed by Barnett's major premise that the Royal Navy was the wall behind which, for the first three years of war, the British Army and the Royal Air Force gathered the strength necessary to help defeat the German, Italian and Japanese enemy. Consequently, unlike the other two services, the Navy had to fight its major battles largely with the organization and the material with which it had entered the war. The defeat of the U-boats, which had posed the greatest threat to British survival, the virtual annihilation of the German surface fleet and the struggle in the Mediterranean leading to the surrender of the Italian Fleet were accomplished, for the most part, with the somewhat outdated weapons with which the Royal Navy began the war. The operations leading to these victories, completed by 1943, are described with clarity and with an eye on the major strategic decisions taken at the

centre of the British wartime leadership. They take up about two-thirds of the nearly 1000 pages of Barnett's work. In many respects all these operations were basically defensive in character and, given Churchill's penchant for offensive operations, the Royal Navy never received the kind of priority which its importance to the British war effort clearly warranted, a point which is particularly strongly made in Chapter 15, 'The Battle of the Air.' The debate about providing the Navy with sufficient long-range aircraft to help defeat the U-boats was, in Barnett's view, "...the most important single strategic debate of the war. It is, moreover, the one case where Britain's survival was imperilled not so much by enemy action in itself as by blind folly within Britain's own leadership."(p.476)

The last third of the book is devoted to the period after 1943. The preparations and the organization for the D-day landings, Operation "Neptune," are given nearly one hundred pages and are described, surely correctly, as one of the outstanding feats of staff work ever to be performed by any military organization. Admiral Ramsay correctly gets all the credit for this. The last chapter deals with the British participation in the war against Japan. The relatively small part which the Royal Navy was



Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay

able to play in that great maritime conflict was, in Barnett's view, the direct result of the failure to provide the Fleet with the kind of modern equipment which had become standard in the U.S. Navy.

Barnett naturally builds on his previous work with respect to the great failure of Britain to maintain its industrial and military strength following the First World War. The prologue, entitled, 'The German Ensign will be hauled down at Sunset,' has many harsh things to say about the Navy's performance during the First World War—many of them already rehearsed in Barnett's essay on Jellicoe in *The Swordbearers*, but the conclusion of the prologue, "And indeed the root causes of all the Navy's coming tribulations and enduring

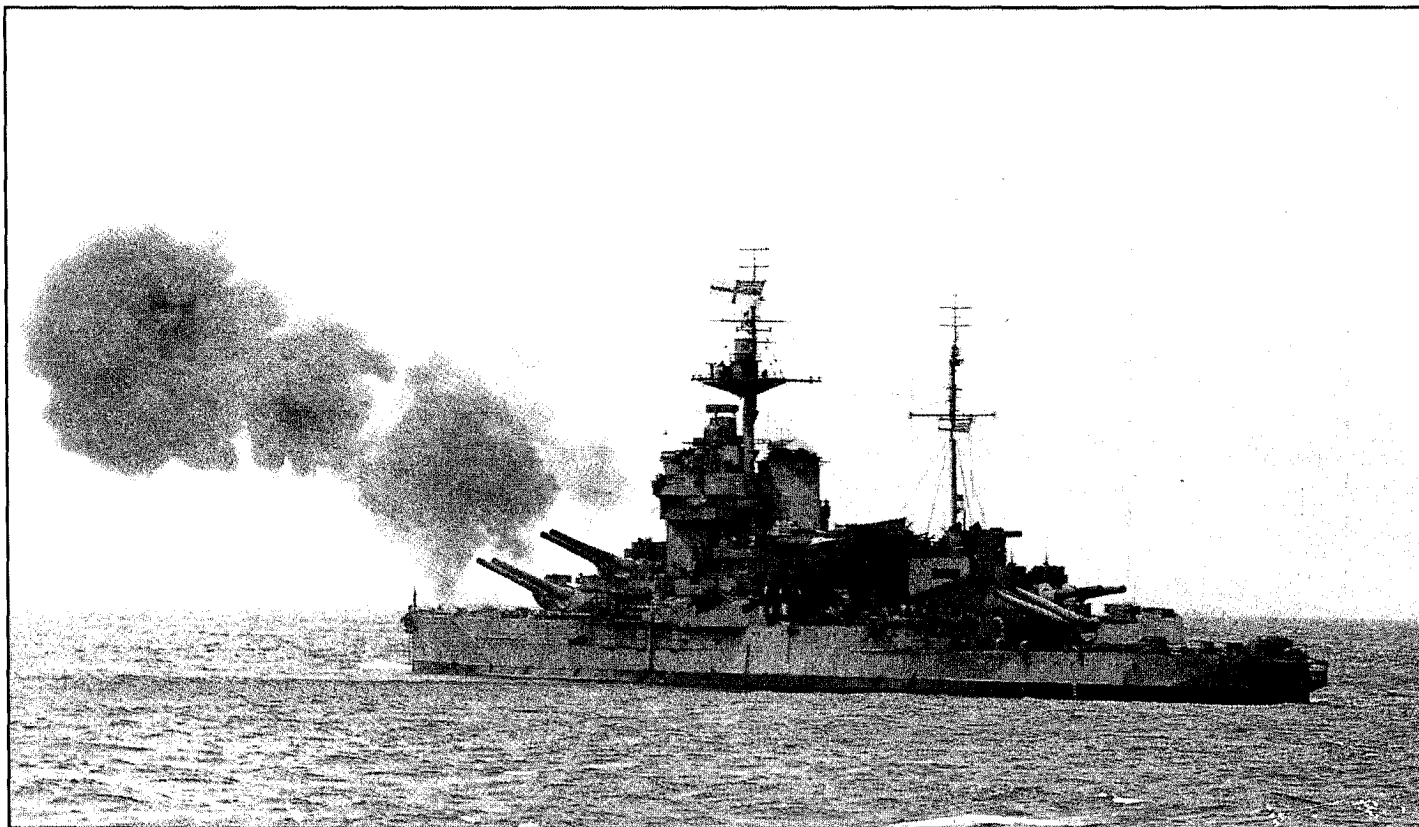
strategic dilemmas during the Second World War, of its worst disasters and most tragic losses, are to be found in the twenty years of national illusion, neglect and belated awakening that had gone before," sets the tone for much of the first section of the book. Like the whine of a bearing running hot, Barnett again and again blames the failures and tragedies of the early part of the war on the 'lost years.' There were many such failures—among the most important of course were the diplomatic decisions which led to the great reduction in the Fleet, without reducing its responsibilities, which in turn led to the loss of the highly technical naval ship-building capacity of British maritime industry, all part of the general loss of Britain's industrial leadership. Barnett also draws attention to many other aspects of the loss of this leadership both inside and outside the Navy.



Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham

HMS Warspite

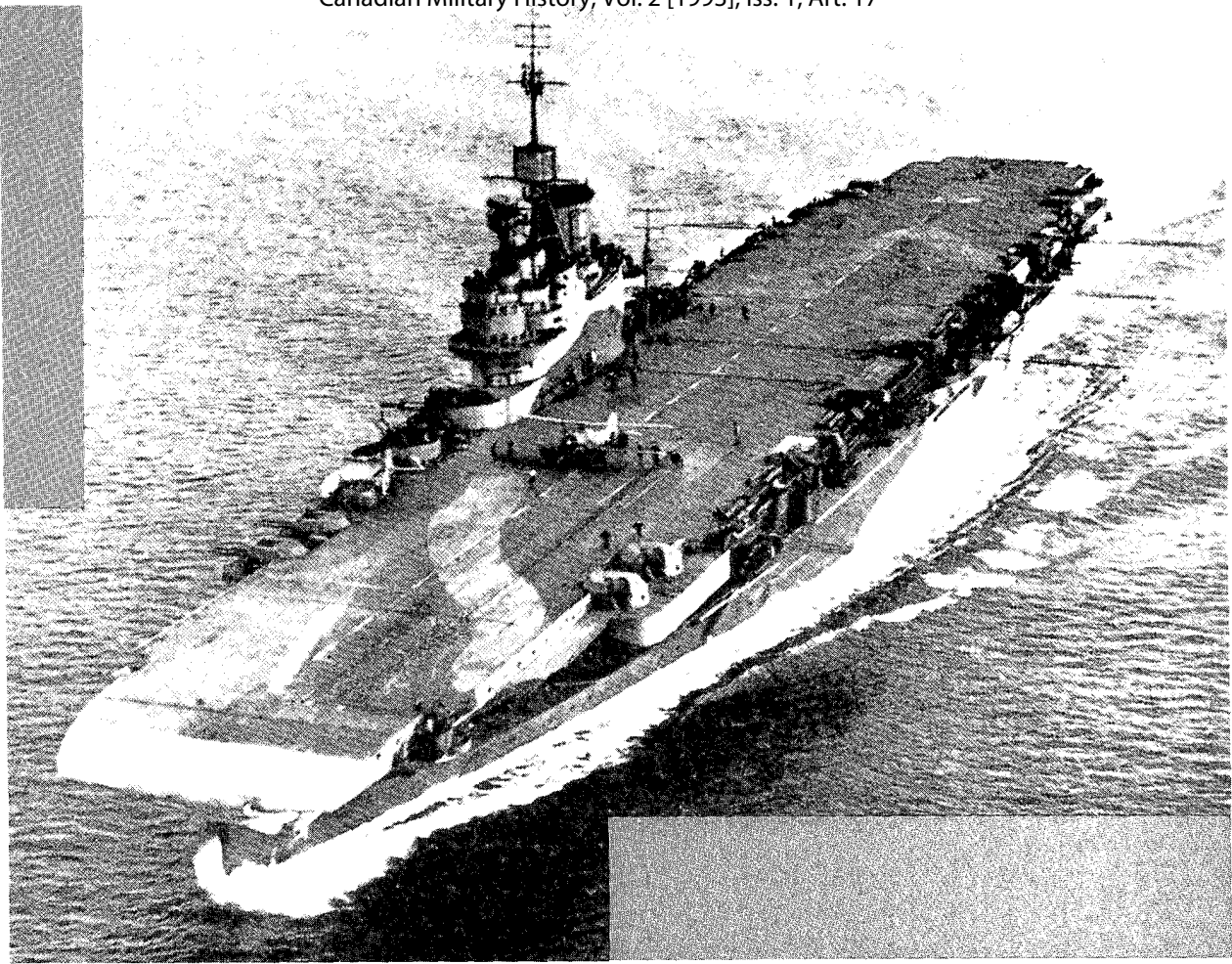
A Ship of the Line



*HMS Warspite's last engagement: The bombardment of Walcheren Island, November 1944.
(Imperial War Museum, A 23916)*

The one ship that one might say justified the Royal Navy's faith in battleships. The seventh ship bearing her name, she lay in the line at Jutland and was present when the German fleet surrendered. In the Second World War she sank German destroyers at Narvik and Italian cruisers at Matapan; she engaged, hit and put to flight two Italian cruisers off Calabria; she served as Cunningham's Flagship throughout her time in the Mediterranean. Badly hit off Crete, she sailed around the world to be repaired at Bremerton Naval Base in Seattle and sailed from Vancouver to Tricomalee to become the Flagship and the only "fast" ship in Somerville's Eastern Fleet. She was back in the Mediterranean for Operation "Husky" and was again the Flagship when the Italian fleet surrendered. Now her main enemies became the German Army and the German Air Force. At Salerno where her guns were used against the German Army, she was attacked by the newest of weapons, radio-controlled (smart) bombs. Three were launched against her, one was a near-miss and one penetrated the ship causing extensive damage. Nevertheless she was back on station firing her guns at the German Army during the Normandy campaign and ended her career supporting the Canadian Army's Walcheren operations to open the Scheldt in November 1944.

Throughout her thirty years of service she had a marked tendency to jam her rudder while turning at high speed, which no amount of refits and repairs could alter. She turned two full circles towards the German Fleet at Jutland and the whole of the German van concentrated its fire on her. She often repeated this peculiar maneuver during the Second World War and, when she was finally being towed to the breaker's yard, her stubborn and independent spirit reasserted itself and she broke her tow and beached herself on the coast of Cornwall. Nothing could be done to pull her off and she had to be broken up ashore at Prussia Cove. "Belli dura despicio."



HMS Illustrious returning to duty in 1942 after being hit by 12 bombs—a feat which no other class of carriers could have survived. At the time it was one of the world's most modern carriers but it was still equipped with some very old fashioned biplanes. As Barnett correctly underlines, this discrepancy was due mainly to neglect by the Royal Air Force which never understood the need for adequate carrier planes in the inter-war period. By the time the Navy became responsible it was already too late.

such as the lack of adequate carrier planes, the failure to adopt the tachymetric fire-control for the Fleet's anti-aircraft weapons, the continuing emphasis in Admiralty planning on large Fleet actions, based mainly on the assumption that the main maritime enemy would be Japan; indeed the Navy is described as having a neo-Victorian character during the inter-war years. Perhaps so, but it was a character that nevertheless enabled it, with its outdated weapons, to take the Army out of harms way—from Norway, from France, from Greece, to prevent an invasion of the British Isles and to keep open the sea-lanes, despite the terrible losses which were sustained during that time. It was after all the determination, the dedication and the professionalism, as Barnett points out, which allowed the Fleet to win the defensive war against Germany and the more offensive one against Italy.

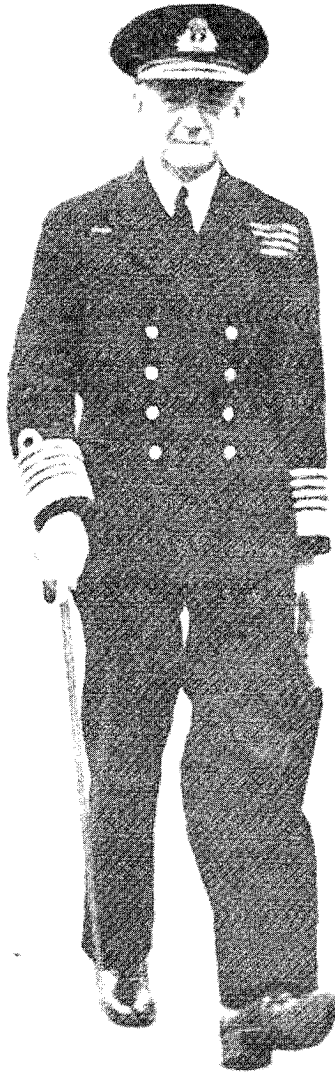
Barnett has some very strong views on a variety of strategic issues. Most particularly of course he regards the whole Mediterranean campaign as a major error and within that 'blue water' strategy, the defence of Malta is described as "less as a British strategic asset than as a hostage to the enemy" (p.491) One does not have to agree with him on all of his views, particularly since we are given no real alternatives, but one has to recognize the cogency and clarity of his arguments. And again it was the failures of British diplomacy during the inter-war years which were, according to Barnett, the main reasons for British defeats, particularly the failure to renew the Japanese alliance and the unnecessary alienation of Mussolini. "On 7 December Britain found herself at war with three great powers simultaneously—the pre-war Chiefs of Staffs ultimate nightmare. The moment of bankruptcy

for British 'total strategy' since the end of the Great War had arrived." (p.377) Surely it is here that Barnett has pushed his thesis too far—was British diplomacy really in a position to alter the course of Italian and Japanese policy? Barnett dedicates his book to Stephen Roskill, whose work he clearly recognizes as being the unrivalled record of the Royal Navy during the War. Perhaps he should sometimes have taken note of Roskill's more measured conclusions. For instance, Roskill ends his account of the surrender of the Italian Fleet with "... he closed a chapter in British history which, but for the unscrupulous opportunism of a dictator, need never have been written." (Roskill, Vol. III, part I, pp.169-170) Barnett concludes his, very similar account of that surrender with "... the Italian menace so quixotically and unnecessarily raised up by British diplomacy (and public opinion) in the Abyssinian crisis of 1935-36 had at last been removed."(p.670) Surely Mussolini's declaration of war in June 1940 owed more to his opportunism than to his resentment of British opposition to his, in any case successful, Abyssinian adventure five years earlier. Perhaps there were some things over which British diplomacy had little control during these crucial years.

The leadership of the Royal Navy during the war has not produced the kind of controversy among historians which has engendered a veritable flood of books on the Bomber Offensive and the campaigns in Italy and North-West Europe. It produced neither a monomaniac, like Harris, nor an egomaniac like Montgomery. Its admirals, despite the locust years, were largely competent professionals, and, in the Navy, the price of failure, like that of Holland and Phillips, was very often death. Barnett follows the traditional

view of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Pound, in suggesting that he was not really fit for the position which he held throughout the crucial years. Yet Pound was often right in his views and managed in those early years, before the Chiefs of Staff Committee had really learned to cope, at least partially, with its impetuous leader, to prevent Churchill from carrying out his more outrageous ideas, such as Operation "Catherine." He also, as Barnett relates, prevented him from interfering with Harwood's tactics in the Battle of the River Plate. He could not prevent such interference during the Norwegian Campaign, and as the tragedy of PQ17 illustrated, he was prone to interfere himself. Still he did lead the Royal Navy through its most difficult time and, if he was not a great strategic mind, he was right about a good many things such as the dispatch of Force Z, and often where Barnett faults him there is room for debate. For instance over the absolutely crucial question of the disposition of the Fleet in the summer of 1940, Barnett suggests that Forbes was right about the impossibility of an invasion and that therefore the disposition of the Fleet's destroyers and cruisers was wasteful and dangerous. That is surely hindsight, given what the Germans had managed in Norway. Indeed while air superiority was unquestionably important, its importance has often been greatly exaggerated,

especially in the early part of the war. The Royal Navy managed to get the British Army both to and from Norway without it, from Dunkirk while it was in dispute and from Greece with the Germans in absolute control of the air. Moreover despite the total air superiority which the Germans enjoyed in the eastern Mediterranean, not a single German soldier managed to get to Crete by sea. No doubt the



*Admiral of the Fleet
Sir Dudley Pound*

cost was high, but surely Pound was right in maintaining his Fleet in a position which could prevent a high-stakes German gamble from paying off. Pound originally opposed the attack on the French Fleet and, in one of the very few important omissions in this book, Barnett fails to explain that he changed his mind when the French battleship *Richelieu*, which Pound considered to be one of the most powerful ships afloat, sailed from Dakar on June 25th, presumably on her way to France. She turned back when intercepted by H.M.S. *Dorsetshire* on the 27th but not before Pound had to make major changes in the disposition of some of his main units. It was after this that he would no longer trust Darlan's word and shifted his support to Churchill's proposals. Barnett's summary of Pound's record as First Sea Lord (pp. 731-734), while somewhat more complimentary than his original introduction of him (pp. 50-51) might have emphasized more of his positive contributions to the Royal Navy's most difficult but, in the final analysis, successful years.

Barnett has really only one standard against which to measure the sailors of this war. That standard is Nelson, who, although mentioned only three times in the index, is used almost as an adjective so often that one loses count after thirty odd mentions of him. Kennedy (of the *Rawalpindi*) was "obedient to Nelson's spirit." (p.74) Langsdorff took "un-Nelsonian decisions." (p.86) "Nothing could have been more Nelsonian" than Warburton-Lee's actions. (p.116) "Churchill confronted it [the problem of the French Fleet] with the ruthless decision. . . of a Nelson." (p.173) Cunningham had ". . . a spare and muscular body tense with a Nelsonian impatience for action. . ." (p.272) Tovey spoke ". . . in language with a true Nelsonian ring. . ." (p.314) H.M.S. *Valiant* ". . . fired five [salvoes] in just over three minutes, a rate faithful to the traditions of Nelson's Mediterranean Fleet. . ." (p.343), Vian's tactics were "absolutely true to the tradition of Hawke and Nelson. . ." (p.500) Mountbatten ". . . rivalled Nelson in his hunger for admiration and surpassed him in his appetite for personal aggrandizement. . ." (p.869).

The end of the war, in Barnett's view, also marked the end of British seapower, ". . . it was like a ship still on even keel, not yet perceptibly lower in the water, but with her bottom blown out." (p.881) Despite the acerbic criticism which Barnett directs at British inter-war and even war policy, there is no doubt that he judges that the performance of the Royal Navy during the war, despite its flawed weapons and its mistaken faith in the battleship, was wholly admirable. Unlike Roskill, he does not explicitly attribute this to the survival of the traditions of the Service. Yet his conclusion is both true and as, he himself suggests, contains a "poignant paradox . . . Adversity had rescued the Navy from the arrogant complacency bequeathed by the Victorian era, and which had marred its performance in the Great War; had awoken it from the conservatism and torpor of the inter-war years; and had restored it to the bold, hardy, resourceful and highly professional service that it was in Nelson's time." (p.881) This is certainly the ultimate compliment by Barnett's standards. But surely the paradox is that it was precisely the respect for tradition, the conservatism which he so often criticizes, even its faith in battleships, that enabled the Royal Navy to perform its duty with such elan and success during the Second World War.

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Opposite: Night attack on a German U-boat: Dropping flares, an RAF Coastal Command plane attacks a German submarine from 75 feet. A depth charge can be seen exploding near the centre of the photo

(Official U.S. Air Force Photo 54635 AC)

