

FLAG HOIST

The Chatham Naval Officers' Association Newsletter

Dear Members

Firstly, I want to welcome Ashely and Philip as new members of CNOA. I hope we get the opportunity to meet them at a meeting soon.

Thanks to those that attended the Easter lunch and the feedback I have received is all positive in addition to a lovely meal and good service. We presented the Kent Branch of MSSC and the Hospital of Sir John Hawkins a small donation towards their good work.

Pictured elsewhere are photos of Peter and Steve accepting a cheque from Jan our treasurer.

My thanks go to you all for being so generous and for supporting the lunch.



Lt Cdr Jon Vanns RNR

Royal Engineers Museum - CNOA Mulberry Event

The Royal Engineers Museum, located next to RSME, is holding a Mulberry Harbour Exhibition later this year, and we have arranged a special event for CNOA members in recognition of its special interest to the naval community.

The Royal Engineers drew up the first plans and models for the Mulberry Harbour project and this is a rare opportunity to see exhibits from the Museum's archives.

Details:

Date : Tuesday 23 September 2025

Place and Time: Meet in the Car Park of the Museum at 1100

1115 Tour with talk by Martin Watts

1230 Buffet Lunch in main building

Cost: £15 per person

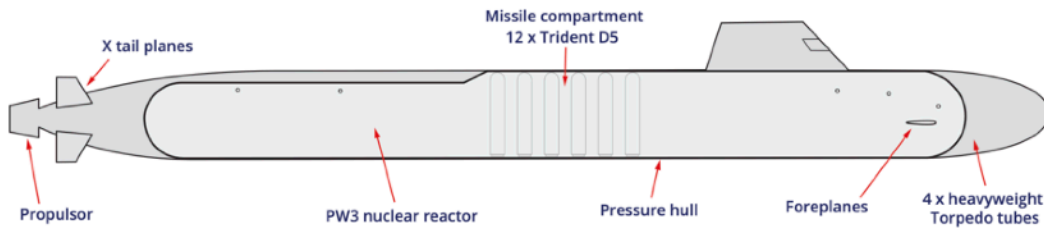
Free access to the main museum after lunch

Due to space limitations, there is a cap of 20 persons for this event. If you wish to attend please email Hon Sec at cnoauk@gmail.com and places will be awarded on a first come first served basis. Menu and payment details will be provided in due course.



HMS Dreadnought

Dreadnought class submarine



In response to the almost unprecedented upheaval of the world's geopolitical-military standings brought about by the new Trump administration in Washington, British Prime Minister Kier Starmer has been forced to bring forward plans to increase British public spending on defence to 2.5 per cent of national gross domestic product [GDP] earlier than he had planned.

The decision to raise the amount the government spends on defence has been at the cost of spending on foreign aid, which saw a large chunk of its budget redirected towards bolstering depleted British defences.

There have been calls to raise the defence budget yet further to reflect the dangerous times into which the world has moved, some pundits have even described the scenario in '1938' terms, a reference to how underfunded Great Britain was prior to the outbreak of World War II the following year.

British defence spending has been slashed by every government, of whatever colour, since 1945 to the point that the nation's defences have been significantly weakened.

For the Royal Navy, this means that there are currently almost twice as many admirals drawing pay as there are large warships available to fight a war

The Starmer-led government has announced that the Multi-Role Support Ship [MRSS] programme will in the future be referred to as the Multi-Role Strike Ship [MRSS] in an attempt to better reflect the multi-role purpose of these yet-to-be-funded ships. MRSS is a programme to replace, within the next decade, the two Abion-class assault ships, the Bay-class landing ships, and the aviation support ship RFA **Argus**. The first of the projected six new ships is expected to be commissioned into service by 2033.

Prime Minister Sir Kier Starmer was in attendance for the keel-laying of the future HMS **Dreadnought** at BAE Systems shipyard at Barrow-in-Furness.

With him was Defense Secretary, John Healey, and the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Ben Key. In times past, the keel-laying would consist of a relatively small part of the submarine on the construction slipway, but with modern shipbuilding techniques, the keel-laying of HMS **Dreadnought** was a one of a joining of several large pre-assembled sub-components within Devonshire Hall at the shipyard.

On completion, HMS **Dreadnought** will be the largest submarine ever built for the Royal Navy with a total length of 153.6 metres.



Lottery Cash For Veteran Vessels

THE future of the last surviving dedicated Battle of the Atlantic convoy escort ship has been secured thanks to a grant of £225k from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The ship is considered of local, national and international importance as a reminder of the longest-fought battle in World War 2, involving both Royal and Merchant navies working to ensure vital supplies reached the UK.

HMS **Wellington**, currently moored at Temple Stairs, Victoria Embankment, London, was bought by the Honourable Company of Master Mariners in 1947.

Since April 2023, the Wellington Trust (<https://www.thewellingtontrust.org/>) has been working on a revitalisation project and new business model to secure her physical and financial future as she was at serious risk of being lost.

The grant will enable the ship to be opened to the public this year so many can learn of the unique story of HMS **Wellington**.

During her service, she has been home to mascots such as a monkey and a cat. She also saved hundreds of lives during the Battle of Atlantic rescuing torpedo victims, including Indian mariners, and the entire crew and passengers from the Royal Mail Liner Highland Patriot.



Meanwhile enthusiasts hope an £800k handout from the National Lottery will kick-start efforts to save 200-year-old frigate HMS **Unicorn**.

Unicorn is the third oldest warship afloat in the world – and the third oldest Royal Navy vessel still in existence behind her sister HMS **Trincomalee** (a floating museum in Hartlepool) and iconic HMS **Victory** in Portsmouth.

Since ending her active service with the Royal Navy six decades ago, the ship has served as a floating museum in Dundee.

After 200 years in the water, however, she's in urgent need of a major overhaul – part of a wider project to revitalise the waterfront in the Tayside city.

Unicorn is a post-Napoleonic war frigate, but was never fitted with a superstructure/ masts because the war was over and instead spent her entire career as a depot and drill ship– through most of the 20th Century she was home to reservists – until the late 1960s, when her naval service ended.

The emphasis over the past five years has been on moving Unicorn to Dundee's revamped East Graving Dock, restoring the ship and building a visitor centre.

The initial £800k – there's the potential of another £3.3m from the lottery later this year – will help, but the dock still needs emptying, repairing, a new caisson and a supportive cradle to house/support the ship.

Naval CAT-astrophy



Royal Navy sailors fought tirelessly in both World Wars, not only against enemy forces but also against another persistent foe – rodents. Yet one group of sailors who waged this battle never truly received the recognition they deserved: the ships' cats. It is hard to believe, but fifty years have now passed since cats were officially banned from Royal Navy vessels.

The Royal Navy's association with ships' cats dates back to the Age of Sail, when mice and rats posed a significant threat to a ship's safety and crew. These vermin spread disease and infections that could decimate an entire crew and also gnawed through precious supplies of grain and dried food. Additionally, with ships made of wood and rope – materials rodents readily consumed – an infestation could cause serious damage.

Cats proved to be the ideal solution to this problem. Beyond their practical role as pest controllers, cats were also valued as omens of good luck. Many sailors, particularly the superstitious ones, believed that black cats could calm storms and ward off misfortune. A feline presence onboard also provided company, boosting morale among the crew.

Several ship's cats became famous for their exploits during the 20th century. Perhaps the most well-known was 'Blackie', the cat aboard HMS **Prince of Wales**, in 1941 Blackie was present when Prime Minister Winston Churchill boarded the battleship before his historic meeting with US President Franklin D Roosevelt. So memorable was this encounter that the crew renamed Blackie 'Churchill' in honour of the occasion. Another notable cat, 'Tiddles', lived aboard the aircraft carrier HMS **Victorious**. A lively and playful companion, Tiddles helped morale high while ensuring the ship remained virtually rodent-



free. He was no stranger to life at sea, having been born on the carrier HMS **Argus**.

Post-war, another remarkable ship's cat was 'Simon', who served aboard HMS **Amethyst**

during the Yangtze Incident of 1949. Under relentless enemy fire from Chinese forces, Simon continued his duty, hunting rodents and protecting the ship's dwindling food supplies. His bravery was recognised with the Dicken Medal making him the only cat ever to receive this distinguished honour.

By the 1960s, however, attitudes towards ships' cats began to change. Advances, in pest control, coupled with a growing emphasis on hygiene, meant that cats were gradually phased out. In 1975, the Royal Navy formally announced that cats would no longer be permitted aboard its warships. In hindsight, this decision was understandable, as the noise, confined spaces, and constant activity of a modern warship were hardly suitable for an animal's welfare. The Royal Navy's stance aligned with similar policies in navies around the world.

Despite the official ban, some ships continued to host feline companions for a while longer. Among them was 'Convoy', believed to be the last ship's cat, who lived aboard HMS **Hermes** in the 1970s. Upon his passing, he was given a ceremonial burial at sea.

While cats are no longer found on Royal Navy ships, their legacy endures through the stories shared by sailors and historians. Naval museums recount the tales of these remarkable felines, and Simon's Dicken Medal remains a lasting tribute to their service. The 1975 ban marked a shift towards a modern navy, but the legends of Blackie, Simon, Tiddles, and others continue to captivate, reflecting a unique chapter of camaraderie between sailors and their four-legged shipmates.



*Article supplied and approved by
Midshipman Barney.*



HMS Sutherland Returns

HMS Sutherland has returned to sea after nearly four years after a major overhaul in Devonport dockyard.

The ship is the final Type 23 frigate to receive the life extension upgrades in the hands of defence firm Babcock – allowing her to continue in service into the mid-2030s alongside her sisters.

Sutherland sailed from Devonport to begin sea trials and training ahead of re-joining the Royal Navy fleet and serve on operations around the globe – namely on submarine hunting missions in the North Atlantic.

The ship underwent a full structural survey and a major upgrade, including more than 800 inserts and 11,500 weld repairs, demanding more than five kilometres of welding.

As a fighting machine, 'The Fighting Clan' has also received an upgraded 2150 sonar system, requiring the removal of the sonar bow dome – a major lifting operation involving specialist support.

She is also the last ship in her class to receive the Sea Ceptor missile system – now proven in action after HMS Richmond downed drones in the Gulf last year.

Entire sections of the ship have been deconstructed and then rebuilt to allow engine, generator and machinery control upgrades: forward and aft switchboards, new diesel generator and motor generator sets in the forward and upper auxiliary machinery rooms, as well as the installation of several miles of new pipework and cables.

Prior to her return to sea, Babcock handed over the ship to the Royal Navy in a small ceremony onboard before she continued down the River Tamar into Plymouth Sound.

Sir Nick Hine, chief executive of Babcock's Marine Sector, said: "After a significant upkeep programme, it is fantastic to see HMS Sutherland starting sea trials and well on her way to achieving full capability before re-joining the fleet.

"Our team has provided trusted expertise, utilising our long-standing through-life experience to ready the ship before she recommences her journey to support the nation's defence.

"We are proud to support these important naval assets and to work alongside our MOD and Royal Navy colleagues."



CNOA Bursaries

The President, Chairman and Committee of CNOA are pleased to announce the establishment of a fund to provide CNOA Memorial Bursaries, in memory of Officers and Members of The Chatham Naval Officers Association who have crossed the bar.

The Bursaries have been co-founded and sponsored by Kent County Councillors Mr Alan Ridgers (CNOA Committee member) and Mr Jordan Meade, who have successfully recommended this scheme for a Kent County Council Community Grant and Dr Martin Watts (Hon Sec).

Cadets should apply on a single page A4 document, and include name, age, unit, unit contact details, course applied for, cost and amount applied for (up to £100). The application should also include reason(s) as to why CNOA should sponsor them, where possible written by the cadet, and always endorsed and signed by the unit CO. Example templates for these can be seen opposite.

For further information please visit the CNOA website

<https://cnoa.org.uk/CNOA-Bursaries/>



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE
WELLS
Kent, TN1 2PF

www.linktr.ee/tsbrilliant

President:
Commodore B Bryant CVO Royal Navy

01022 322000

Email:
admin@tsbrilliant.org.uk

Commanding Officer:
LT (SCC) M Vanns RNR

Date: xx xxx xxxx

CHATHAM NAVAL OFFICERS ASSOCIATION BURSARY APPLICATION

Cadet Surname: xxxxx **Cadet First Name:** xxxxx
Cadet Rate: xxxxx **Age:** xx
Unit location: xxxxx **Course:** xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Dear Chatham Naval Officers Association,

My name is xxxxxx and I am a member of *insert name organisation/unit here*. I am writing to request consideration for a bursary towards the cost of the above course. The total cost of the course is £xxx, excluding transport costs.

Attending this course will give me an opportunity to *expand my* knowledge and understanding of how power vessels operate and how they navigate. I will also gain knowledge on practical maritime engineering, catering and what to do in an emergency situation. *(Adapt opportunity description as required)*

During my specialisation training within Sea Cadets Marine Engineering is an area that I really enjoy and I am keen to progress in. So being on a working power vessel for a week will be an incredible experience. *(Adapt this as required to reflect what the applicant sees as the most important benefit to be gained from the course)*

I would greatly appreciate any assistance CNOA could provide and would be willing on my return to provide a written account of my experience or to give a short presentation to your members.

Yours aye,

Applicant name, rate and signature

CO Name, rank and signature

Matthew Vanns, GCGI
Lieutenant (SCC) Royal Naval Reserve

To Be Put On The Organisation/Unit Letterheaded Paper:

Date: xx/xx/xxxx

Cadet Surname: Cadet Forename: Cadet Rate/Rank:
Age: Unit Location: Course:

Dear Chatham Naval Officers Association,

Commanding Officer/Officer in Charge Endorsement:

Commanding Officer/OIC to write 2 or 3 sentences supporting the application and confirming the benefits of attending the course....

I fully support this application for a CNOA bursary and have no hesitation in recommending (name the applicant) for (name the course), in pursuit of personal and unit development.

Yours aye,

CO/OIC Signature, Name & Rank

CHATHAM NAVAL OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS



Joining Fee and Annual Subscription

With effect from 20th March 2023, new members will be required to pay a joining fee of £30 by cheque or transfer to CNOA at the following bank:

Metro Bank Sort code 23 05 80 Account 50484076

Cost £20 PA payable to Chatham Naval Officers Association

Address if required 2 Calverly Road, Tunbridge Wells Kent TN1 2TB

On receipt of the joining fee new members will receive an Association tie or scarf and lapel badge. The Annual Subscription of £20 applies from the date of joining if this occurs before 1st July, and then will be renewed by Standing Order from the following 1st January.

New members who join after 1st July will be required to submit a Standing order from the following 1st January.

Annual Subscription – Current members

The annual subscription remains at £20 and, with effect from 1 January 2024, the subscription will be payable annually on that date. In the first instance, and to allow members time to alter their current standing order dates, a transition period of 3 months, to 31st March 2024 will be in place, after which an audit and follow up process will be undertaken.

CHATHAM NAVAL OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION ANNUAL STANDING ORDER FORM

Please complete this form and return it to the Hon Treasurer: Lieutenant Jan Dean RNR, 79A Cherry Avenue, Swanley, Kent, BR8 7OU, or, if you prefer, you can scan a copy and email it to cnoauk@gmail.com. You can arrange a standing order electronically via your bank and, for those using traditional banking methods this form can be used to inform your bank of your instructions as below.

I wish to make my annual subscription payments by standing order to the Chatham Naval Officers' Association.

Your Name: _____

Your Address: _____

Post Code: _____

Name of your Bank: _____

Address of your Bank: _____

Your Bank Sort Code: ____/____/____

Your Account Number: _____

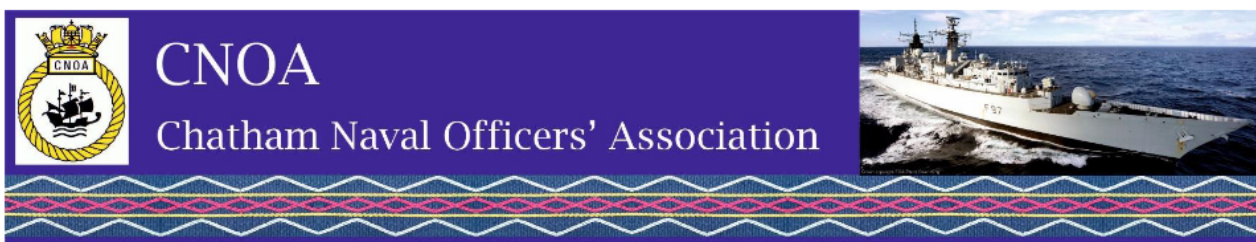
To my bank:

I request you to pay the regular sum of: £20 PA

Metro Bank sort code 23 05 80 account 50484076

Payable to Chatham Naval Officers Association

Address if required 2 Calverly Road, Tunbridge Wells Kent TN1 2TB



If you enjoy the CNOA activities, why not extend an invitation to a like-minded serving or retired officer? Or ask them to look at cnoa.org.uk



APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

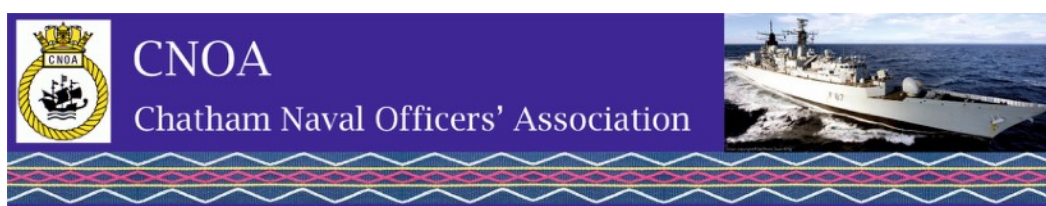
| | | | | |
|--|----------------------|--|---|------|
| SURNAME | | FORENAMES | | DATE |
| HOME ADDRESS Tel. No: E Mail Address: | | | BUSINESS ADDRESS Tel. No: E Mail Address: | |
| RANK | TYPE OF COMMISSION | SPECIALISATION / AWARDS & QUALIFICATIONS | | |
| BRIEF CAREER DETAILS | | | | |
| <p>General Data Protection Regulation: I agree that all the above details may be maintained and kept by the CNOA and RSME for the purposes of membership records and security. I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to my details being published in a membership booklet.</p> <p>SIGNED.....</p> | | | | |
| PRESENT OCCUPATION | | | | |
| PROPOSER'S NAME | PROPOSER'S SIGNATURE | HOW LONG KNOWN | | |
| SECONDER'S NAME | SECONDER'S SIGNATURE | HOW LONG KNOWN | | |

CNOA Events Programme

| Date | Speaker / Activity | Subject | Comment |
|--------------|------------------------------|--|-----------------|
| 10 January | Martin Watts | Gallipoli 1915 | Virtual Meeting |
| 14 February | AGM | | |
| 14 March | Derek Goodwin | LNG Bunkers, Cold Ironing and Scrubbers | |
| 11 April | Social Evening | | |
| 26 April | Easter Lunch | Maidstone Masonic Centre | |
| 9 May | Guy Bartlett | <i>"Eat Your Carrots!"</i> The Story of Radar | |
| 13 June | Mark Gambell | Seamanship | |
| 11 July | Summer Social Evening | | |
| August | No Meeting Summer Leave | | |
| 12 September | Mark Bathurst | The History of Paddle Steamer Medway Queen | |
| 10 October | Trafalgar Dinner | | |
| 14 November | Peter Gilbert & Barry Bryant | Santa Fe & South Georgia - Hunter and Hunted | |
| 12 December | President's Christmas Social | | |



Peter Luxton and Steve Small receiving cheques from Jan Dean at the Easter Lunch, April 2025.



The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships



COMMEMORATIVE RETURN TO DUNKIRK

21-26TH, MAY 2025

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships (ADLS) is making preparations for its five yearly return to Dunkirk in 2025 to mark the 85th anniversary of Operation Dynamo.

The operation to evacuate the BEF, together with French and Belgian troops started at 18:57 on 26th May 1940 and finished on the morning of 4th June. Winston Churchill expected the operation to lift 30-40,000 personnel. In the end 338,226 were rescued, including 130,000 French and Belgian soldiers. Of the total, just short of 100,000 were rescued from the beaches to the east of the port of Dunkirk by the Little Ships picking them from the beach and ferrying them to the larger vessels just offshore.

THE COMMEMORATIVE RETURN

The Little Ships will assemble from around Europe in Ramsgate harbour in the week beginning 19th May. It is planned that they will be joined by vessels from the Royal Navy and the Ramsgate RNLI lifeboat. The town of Ramsgate will be supporting the ADLS with a number of commemorative events on 20th May.

The ADLS plan to depart in the early morning of 21st May if the weather is suitable. In case the weather is unsuitable there are two fall back days on 22nd and 23rd May. The Little Ships are expected to arrive in Dunkirk in late afternoon. The fleet will proceed into the centre of town and moor together in the Basin du Commerce.

The City of Dunkirk will be laying on a number of commemorative events in the town centre as well as the war memorial on the beach. The ADLS will attend the British Commonwealth War Graves cemetery in Dunkirk. There will also be a short open air service on the quayside on 25th May. The ADLS fleet intend to return to Ramsgate on 26th May.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit the ADLS website www.adls.org.uk

Visit the ADLS Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/DunkirkShips/?locale=en_GB

Freedom of The Borough Award

TS Brilliant, Royal Tunbridge Wells Sea Cadets and Royal Marines Cadets, has been awarded the Freedom of the Borough by the council.

The award has special significance as TS Brilliant is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year, 2025.

At their meeting in February councillors voted unanimously to honour TS Brilliant with the Freedom of the Borough and invited them to attend the council meeting on 23 April to accept the award.

Cmdre Barry Bryant CVO Royal Navy accepted the honour on behalf of TS Brilliant.

Lt Cdr (SCC) Jonathan Vanns MCGI, FIOL, Royal Naval Reserve, then thanked the council and said: 'We are honoured and delighted to accept this award that has been earned by generations of cadets since 1935, that many have served their town, and often their country with pride and distinction.

We look forward to exercising the right to march through the town with colours flying later in the year when the award is presented.'

Paul Taylor, Director of Change and Communities, TWBC said: 'I am very pleased that the council has chosen to recognise TS Brilliant with this award. The unit does great work in supporting young people locally and in giving them the opportunity to develop skills that will stand them in good stead as they go forward in life.'

In October 2025, during their anniversary year, TS Brilliant will host West Kent District Sea Cadets for the annual Trafalgar Day Parade.

Some 250 sea cadets, junior sea cadets and Royal Marines cadets will take part in the parade to commemorate both the 90th anniversary and the 220th anniversary of The Battle of Trafalgar.

Veteran Standard Bearers and a detachment of former TS Brilliant cadets and staff will join them. The Freedom of the Borough will be formally presented at this event.

About TS Brilliant

TS Brilliant is made up of around 60 sea cadets, Royal Marine cadets, and a naval band.

The unit aims to give young people, aged 9 to 18, an experience that will help them grow into the person they want to be in a safe and friendly environment.

Through various activities and adventures, they learn teamwork, respect, loyalty, self-confidence, commitment, self-discipline, honesty and how to be the best version of themselves.

The borough's first affiliation to HMS Brilliant came about during Warship Week in 1942. In 1982, shortly after the Falkland's War, the ship and her company were granted the Freedom of the Borough, which she exercised on a number of occasions, with TS Brilliant also taking part, up to her decommissioning in 1996.

About the Freedom of the Borough

The Honorary Freedom of the Borough is the highest award the council can give to an individual or corporate body. The award is not often made and is normally only conferred on local people who have made a significant contribution to the locality or have achieved something outstanding.

The last time the council made the award to an organisation was in 2023 to Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust and prior to that to the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment in 2013.



Seabed Warfare Intensifies

A recent article in the Sunday Times revealed subsea espionage has intensified.

The RN has discovered Russian surveillance devices hidden in UK waters.

These sensors, some of which were recovered after washing ashore while others were detected by RN vessels, are suspected of being part of an intelligence-gathering effort targeting the Vanguard class SSBNs.

The location of these discoveries has not been publicised but the boats transiting in and out of the Firth of Clyde are most vulnerable to detection in this area.

The RN has now switched to autonomous or minimally crewed boats to conduct regular route surveys. By deploying side scan sonars to frequently map the seabed in high resolution, any objects not recorded in previous surveys are obvious and can be promptly investigated.

This is form of spying not entirely new as it is believed the Soviet Navy routinely deployed submarines for intelligence-gathering operations and attempted to lay underwater acoustic sensors near NATO naval facilities, cables and strategic maritime chokepoints. NATO forces performed similar missions.

As an example, In 1971 the US Navy and CIA began operation Ivy Bells, laying a recording device on a communications cable linking Russian naval bases in the Sea of Okhotsk. Uncrewed Underwater Vehicle technology has made such intrusions far easier.

Since 2020, Russian UUVs have been detected in proximity to deep-sea communication cables in the North Atlantic and adjacent seas. These UUVs are remotely operated and were deployed from long range.

It is clear they were attempting to interfere with, or gain intelligence from, subsea data infrastructure although so far, there is no public evidence that any attempt to compromise UK cables has succeeded. Less well-publicised is the existence of military sub-sea cables vital to NATO operations around the world.

This includes cables linking seabed ASW sensor arrays to data processing centres ashore which are prime targets for Russian interference.

While media attention has often focused on the Russian intelligence-gathering surface vessels such as the Yantar, which are known to operate close to NATO cables and seabed infrastructure, this is only part of a much broader threat.

Although the voyage of Yantar prompted a more assertive response when she detoured over cables in the Irish Sea in November 2024, the greater concern is the deeper waters beyond the continental shelf. It is much easier to police waters close to home than detect and deter activity in the deep ocean where Russia can covertly deploy specialised nuclear-powered submarines, mother ships to small submersibles.

There is also a strong suspicion that superyachts owned by Russian oligarchs have been used as platforms for undersea reconnaissance. Several are equipped with moon pools in the centre of the hull that allow the discreet launch and recovery of submersibles, potentially offering another covert method to conduct surveillance or deliver seabed sensors.

RFA Proteus, the UK's first Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance Ship (MROS) was purchased in January 2023. Despite the 'rapid procurement', getting her into service has taken more than two years but she is now operational.

Once into her stride, it is planned she will be deployed for up to 330 days a year. The RFA crew rotate every 4 months or so but a shortage of qualified personnel could limit this.

Under Navy Command direction, the RFA has to decide which of the 5 or 6 vessels that it can find crews for will remain active.

Currently, it appears **RFA Proteus** is being prioritised over the Bay-class vessels.

/cont...

Early operations are developmental trials already underway including closing with the Russian seabed spy ship Yantar in the Irish Sea last year. She also conducted operations off Norway (where she was originally built) in February and docked in Bodø hosting the Defence Secretary, John Healy and his Norwegian counterpart. **RFA Proteus** was operating again in the Irish Sea in March and embarked RN specialists for the first time. These personnel came from X-Ray Squadron of the Mine-Hunting and Threat Exploitation Group (MTXG) and members of the Diving Threat Exploitation Group (DTXG).

The MoD stated that **RFA Proteus** would “participate in exercises in the Baltic Sea” following the visit to Norway, possibly joining the NATO Baltic Sentry policing mission established in January. However, the trip to the Baltic has not yet materialised and at the time of writing, she has returned to the North Sea and is alongside at Kirkwall Harbour in the Orkneys.

RFA Proteus carries several advanced underwater vehicles as part of its threat detection and mitigation capability. The newest of the toys is the AEUK SeaCat, a 3-metre-long UUV with a high-resolution side scan sonar array. AEUK were awarded a £32m contract in 2022 for this system that was initially focused on mine countermeasures but can also be deployed in seabed warfare operations. SeaCat can operate at depths of up to 300 meters for up to 24 hours. It is up to 6 times more efficient at locating underwater objects than traditional shipboard mine-hunting sonars. Complementing the SeaCat is the larger Gavia UUV, capable of diving to 1,000 metres, able to reach the deepest parts of the majority of the UK’s surrounding waters. For more complex tasks such the collection of evidence, recovery of equipment or underwater repairs, **RFA Proteus** can also deploy the Defender, a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) that can be equipped with robotic arms and tools. DSTL Porton Down recently developed new manipulator arms for this system, capable of delivering and placing shaped charges to neutralise underwater threats, and this was tested in recent exercises off Norway.

RFA Proteus has a large moon pool in the centre of the aft deck, this allows UUVs or ROVs to be lowered to the seabed directly below the ship and offers sheltered conditions protected from wind, waves and spray,

reducing motion impact during delicate operations. The moon pool is normally covered by a heavy deck hatch but when the pool is in use, the hatch is lifted by the 120-tonne crane into a dedicated storage crib.

For work in very deep water, up to 4,000m the MoD Salvage & Marine Operations (SALMO) team has acquired the FET Perry XLX-C heavy-duty ROV with manipulator arms for working on seabed objects. This kind of work requires specialist operators and a dedicated launch and recovery system. To accommodate heavier vehicles such as this, **RFA Proteus** has been fitted with a luffing A-frame on her starboard side – the frame can be tilted, or ‘luffed’, to deploy the ROV over the side.

Stepping up

Discussions are now ongoing about acquiring a second vessel to complement **RFA Proteus**. MROS(2) had originally been planned as a bespoke design built in the UK, to serve jointly as a replacement for the ocean survey vessel HMS Scott with additional seabed warfare capabilities.

However, the urgency and scale of the risk to UK infrastructure suggests purchasing another second-hand vessel (or vessels) would still be a quicker way to address the problem, despite the ponderous entry into service of **RFA Proteus**.

The renewed threat to subsea infrastructure has prompted some in the RN to question whether the UK should restore its mine-laying capability, something it has not possessed since the Cold War. The last British sea mines were dismantled in 1992 due to ethical concerns and the perception they were obsolete. However, the strategic context has changed.

In March 2025, Denmark announced the procurement of several hundred naval mines for delivery between 2027-29. Their aim is to bolster its defence of internal waters and support NATO’s collective deterrence posture.

Australia also recently committed \$500 million to acquire modern naval mines to defend its coasts from potential incursions. Several Baltic states have also signalled their intention to exit international treaties banning anti-personnel and anti-ship mines.

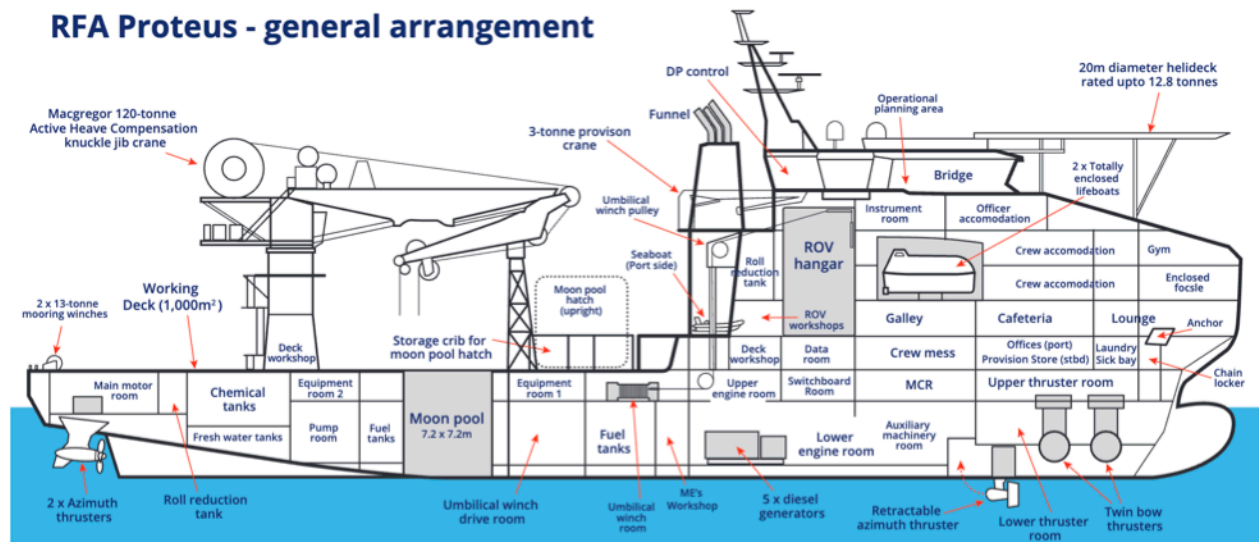
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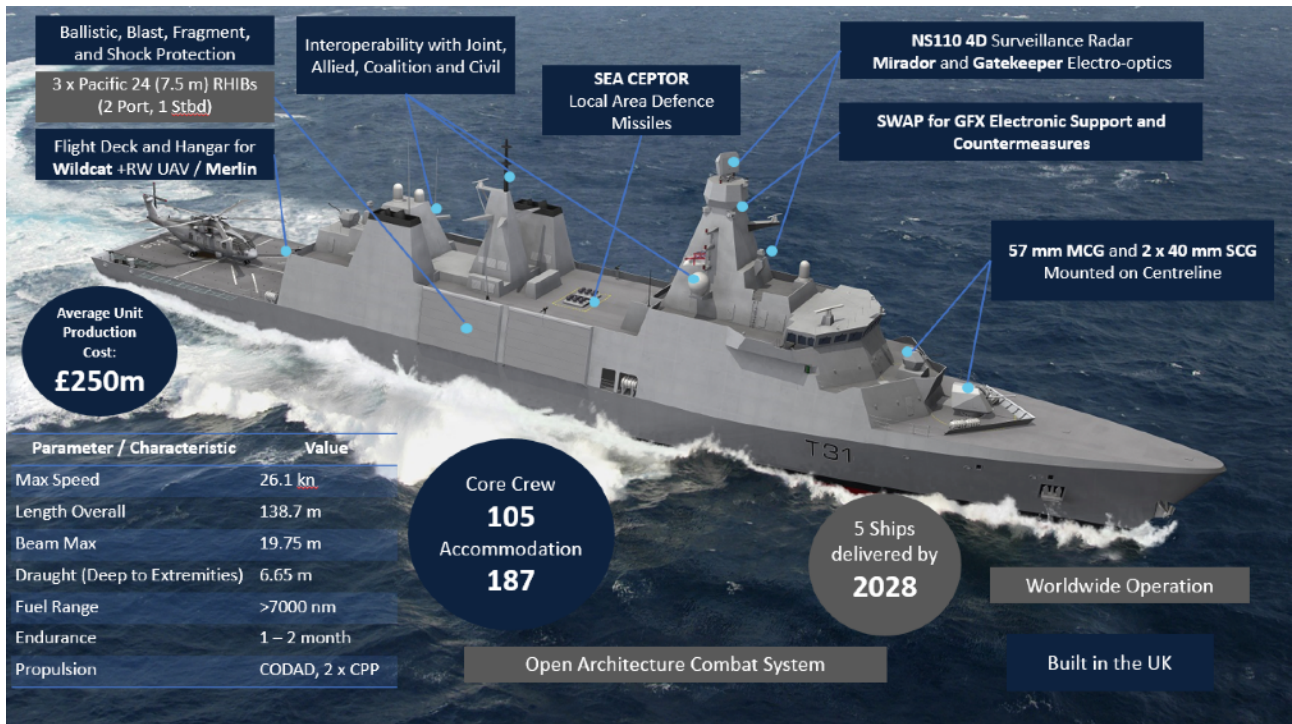
Although no official proposal has been tabled within the current UK SDR, discussions within the RN suggest that defensive minefields could play a role in protecting key maritime approaches and infrastructure from enemy submarines and uncrewed intrusions.

There have been at least 11 instances of damage to subsea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, the discovery of covert sensors laid on the seabed close to the UK and Russian UUVs found near undersea cables. These are just recent incidents in the public domain but the full scale of this activity is likely much greater than has been revealed so far. This demonstrates that the potential threat that has

been talked about for some years is materialised into something very real. There is a clear need to further expand the RN's seabed warfare capabilities. The technology and platforms already exist, and in many ways, it is easier to scale up SBW capabilities rapidly than to increase ASW strength or respond to other more high-end threats. The obstacles for the RN are generally prosaic: obtaining the funding, developing the CONOPS for this new battlespace and ensuring there is enough SQEP to crew commercially-derived platforms with niche skills such as marine engineers, dynamic positioning-qualified officers and ROV operators.

RFA Proteus - general arrangement





Frigates to be based in Portsmouth

A new class of Royal Navy frigates will be based in Portsmouth the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has confirmed.

In response to a question from the BBC, the MoD said all five of the new Type 31 general purpose frigates will replace ships previously based at the Hampshire naval base.

The new frigates are currently being built in Rosyth in Fife, with the first due to enter service in a couple of years time. Portsmouth City Council leader Steve Pitt said the news was "important to the city".

The vessels will undertake a variety of operational roles, including interception and disruption of illegal activity at sea, intelligence gathering and defence engagement.

They will replace the five general-purpose Type-23 frigates currently in service with the Royal Navy.

The Type 31 frigates will have advanced capabilities fitted onboard, including a supersonic

anti-air missile defence system, as well as Bofors naval guns and a 4D radar system.

There will also be space to house a Royal Navy helicopter.

Portsmouth is already home to six 45 destroyers and the two Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers.

Armed Forces Minister Luke Pollard hinted at the news during his visit to Portsmouth for the departure of the Royal Navy's flagship HMS Prince of Wales on its deployment on Tuesday.

The announcement also means the maintenance and refits of the ships will be carried out locally. Mr Pitt said: "It's fantastic to get confirmation that Portsmouth Naval Base is to get the additional warships, helping to secure the future of the Naval Base. which is so important to the city."

Mr Pollard also said there would be extra spending on the Royal Marines and the Royal Navy as part of the government's increase in the defence budget.