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CHAPTER 5

The Home Fleet: Channel 5's *Warship* Series

To the documentary method, every manufacture, every organisation, every function, every scheme of things represents at one point or another the fulfilment of a human interest [but] Daily jobs, no matter how well described by rhetoric of camera and intimacy of microphone, are not documentary material in themselves. They must be related to the wider purposes of the community.¹⁷¹

The rise to prominence of Channel 5 in recent years, and the frequency with which it has commissioned and broadcast naval documentaries, represent striking coincidences with the gathering popularity, commercial success and increasingly variegated form of contemporary factual television. Launched in 1997 as an additional broadcaster alongside ITV and Channel 4, Channel 5 currently stands as the UK's third largest commercial channel, with a monthly viewership of 40 million and with the largest growth in viewer numbers of any public service broadcaster since 2020.¹⁷² Although the channel has experienced

¹⁷¹ Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), pp.132–133.

¹⁷² Anonymous, Channel 5 allows advertisers access to Britain's fifth terrestrial channel and its great content, *Sky Media UK*, <https://www.skymedia.co.uk/channels/channel-5/#:~:text=Channel%20is%20the%20UK's,spanning%20a%20of%20genres> [accessed 13 April 2022]. Channel 4 was placed fourth (ahead of ITV and behind BBC1, Channel 4 and BBC 2) in quarterly UK viewing figures in 2019. Anonymous, Quarterly reach of the leading 20 TV channels in the United Kingdom (UK) as of 3rd quarter 2019, *Statista.com*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269807/leading-tv-channels-in-the-uk-by-reach> [accessed 13 April 2022]. In February 2020, *Warship: Life At Sea* was Channel 5's eighth most popular programme, with an audience of over 2.3 million. Julia Stoll, Most-watched Channel 5 programs in the United

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several changes of ownership, its programming has been dominated by popular imported American drama series and reality television formats, alongside its statutory expectations as a public service broadcaster to provide original British content.¹⁷³ In 2022, Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries drew attention to Channel 5's record of supporting smaller regional and independent production companies, which exceeded the requirements of its Ofcom quotas and also overtook the similar investments of all other terrestrial broadcasters.¹⁷⁴

In the past, Channel 5 has attracted criticism for its controversial content, including receiving complaints about erotic and exploitative programming.¹⁷⁵ Subsequently, the channel gained greater audience shares from imported soap operas, and more recently its popularity and ratings have been sustained by quantities of reality television, docusoap and anodyne drama, often with a specific British regional bias.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, Channel 5's first two *Warship* documentary series (the first concentrating on a deployment by HMS *Illustrious*, the second following a major international overseas exercise involving HMS *Bulwark* and HMS *Ocean*) occupy intriguing positions in a commissioning and broadcasting environment defined by popular commercial imperatives and public service commitments. These series would appear to largely take up where the BBC's *Sailor* left off in the 1970s, and to anticipate the ITV factual series based on HMS *Ark Royal* (2013). On the announcement of the commissioning of the first *Warship* series in 2008:

Kingdom (UK) 2020, *Statista.com*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/486560/most-watched-channel-5-programs-in-the-uk/#statisticContainer> [accessed 13 April 2022].

¹⁷³ Phil Ramsey, Commercial Public Service Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Public Service Television, Regulation and the Market, *Television and New Media*, 2017, 18(7), 639–654.

¹⁷⁴ Heather Fallon, Nadine Dorries hails Channel 5 as the 'levelling up' broadcaster, *Broadcast*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/channel-5/dorries-hails-c5-as-the-levelling-up-broadcaster/5168972.article> [accessed 13 April 2022]. The same article notes that, in 2020, the proportion of the BBC's investment in small independent production was 37%, or nearly three times that of Channel 5.

¹⁷⁵ Janine Gibson, Get your kit on, *The Guardian*, 8 June 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/jun/08/features11.g22> [accessed 18 May 2022]; Anonymous, Soft porn warning from TV watchdog, *BBC News*, 28 January 1999, <https://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/264466.stm> [accessed 18 May 2022].

¹⁷⁶ Anonymous, Home and Away boosts ratings, *BBC News*, 17 July 2001, <https://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1443511.stm> [accessed 18 May 2022]; Jim Waterson, Channel 5 says it will not make any more shows about Yorkshire, *The Guardian*, 24 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/aug/24/channel-5-says-it-will-not-make-any-more-shows-about-yorkshire> [accessed 18 May 2022]; Heidi Blake, Richard Desmond wants X Factor and Big Brother for Channel 5, *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 February 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/7907824/Richard-Desmond-wants-X-Factor-and-Big-Brother-for-channel-Five.html> [accessed 18 May 2022].

Five's Senior Programme Controller, Chris Shaw, said: 'HMS *Illustrious* is an enormous floating community where citizens are training for warfare. It's a very intense and claustrophobic environment and will make a fascinating television series.'¹⁷⁷

In line with Chris Shaw's summation of the series' appeals, observations of the shipboard community (now obviously also including female crew members) form the basis of the programme's episodes, set against both planned and arbitrary daily incidents. In series one, *Illustrious* is seen to suffer engine troubles reminiscent of HMS *Ark Royal's* in *Sailor*. In series two, sailors exercise in cooperation with the Bangladeshi Navy, and Royal Marines practise amphibious warfare tactics in fetid marshlands (described colloquially by one Royal Marine as 'honking'). Consistent elements include the recording of Flag Officer Sea Training (FOST) inspections in both *Warship* series and also in *Ice Patrol*, which ships must pass before deployment. Alongside the interviews and observations, the series use computer graphics to locate action and crew members on specific decks and in specialised spaces, in order to reveal aspects of the ships' features. In this way, the documentaries function as both exciting public relations tools (highlighting and extolling the size, power and weaponry of the Navy's ships) and introduce elements of peril (depicting the damage to *Illustrious's* propeller shaft and the near-fatal damage and flooding experienced aboard HMS *Endurance* in *Ice Patrol*).

Although comparable to factual observation, the series' implied, inquisitive view of the shipboard environment and community suggests the aura of reality television rather than documentary. On transmission, Channel 5's factual naval series have been embedded within programming schedules which epitomise the channel's popular appeals but also reflect the primacy of reality television. For example, *Submarine School* (2011) was broadcast in a mid-evening reality television slot labelled '8 o'clock Heroes' (other trailed examples including *Danger: Diggers at Work*, a reality show following demolition crews). The series was followed in the mid-week schedules by American crime drama series such as *NCIS*, *Castle* and *CSI*, and its advertising breaks carried trailers for indicative Channel 5 staples such as the controversial chat show *The Wright Stuff*, lesbian docusoap *Candy Bar Girls* and confrontational reality show *Cowboy Builders*. *Royal Navy Submarine Mission* (2011) was followed in its mid-evening slot by a reality series recording real-life policing, *Soho Blues*. Similarly, episodes of *Warship: Life at Sea* (2022) were followed by *Casualty 24/7*, a factual series filmed in a Yorkshire accident and emergency department. This concentration of factual series (variously categorisable as reality television, docusoap or popular documentary) in scheduling and the frequent resort to 'A & E' formats portraying the police, real-life accidents or the work of emergency services reflects

¹⁷⁷ Anonymous, Five Commissions New OB-doc Aboard HMS *Illustrious*, 28 February 2008, <https://www.tvthrong.co.uk/new/five-commissions-new-ob-doc-aboard-hms-illustrious> [accessed 22 February 2011].

a catering to or manipulation of viewing taste for formulaic entertainment. Richard Kilborn has noted and interpreted these tendencies:

The constant desire to extract maximum commercial potential from these formats is also evidenced in how they are scheduled. Mindful of their general popularity with viewers, schedulers will sometimes group individual reality programmes to form a solid 'reality wall'.¹⁷⁸

Therefore, in terms of form, scheduling and audience, Channel 5 appears to equate the Royal Navy as spectacle, institution and community with any other reality television subject, no less and actually more than a 'daily job'. While accepting it can be 'difficult to provide an account of how genre categories operate outside the bounds of the text', the preponderance of these programmes within Channel 5's output is symptomatic of the changes to factual television and its place within commercial broadcasting in the period preceding its launch.¹⁷⁹

Annette Hill has described and differentiated the strands of reality television programming, specifying 'infotainment' (or 'tabloid TV', a term suggestive of its likeness to lurid and populist journalism) as a trend and term adopted from American production practice in a 'first wave' of change during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the 'docusoap' as representative of a subsequent 'second wave' of observational popular television and lifestyle programming (see Chapter 6).¹⁸⁰ Hill's definitions, in associating infotainment more specifically with news or current affairs rather than documentary, therefore suggest a far wider and more varied category of reality and documentary under the 'docusoap' heading. Where British examples of the 'A & E' format such as 999 (BBC, 1992–2003), featuring both interviews with real-life participants in emergencies and making extensive use of re-enactment, readily fit in the first category, documentary series such as *Airport* (BBC, 1996–2008), which observed mundane and dramatic events at Heathrow Airport and made stars of consistently appearing employees, arguably straddle these definitions even if they occupy indistinguishable roles (and timings) in scheduling. Such series have gained significant audiences from mid-week, mid-evening time slots on major broadcast channels.¹⁸¹ Their relationship with the expectations of previous generations of

¹⁷⁸ Kilborn, *Staging the real*, p.57.

¹⁷⁹ Jason Mittell, A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory, *Cinema Journal*, 2001, 40(3), 3–24, p.10.

¹⁸⁰ Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.24.

¹⁸¹ Hill, *Reality TV*, p.36. Hill also notes that these discrete categories, formats and specific terms are not necessarily used, or used consistently, by television audiences which might collate and equate varying programmes and series in their viewing: Hill, *Reality TV*, pp.50–53.

documentary television and the demands of present commercial circumstances is complex, as Kilborn explains:

Since the 1990s the most discernible pressure was to develop formats that would attract the attention of a wider public than would have tuned in to traditional documentary ... Though some of the new formats carry echoes of more serious categories of work (the observational documentary, the investigative report), the feature that is common to all these newly devised formats is their entertainment orientation.¹⁸²

Where examples of these series exhibit marked narrativisations of the realities they record (in consciously structuring and editing for suspense, and climaxes around advertising breaks and across episodes and series), this can be interpreted as both reflective of the hybridisation affecting forms of reality television, and of the manipulation of reality this entails. Docusoaps seek to replicate the soap opera audience's emotional investment by presenting ordinary people as characters within a narrative, and to similarly craft reality into a narrative, by imposing structure, chronology, crises and resolutions.¹⁸³ Hill notes the apparently contradictory (or alternatively comprehensive) viewing appeals of such programmes, with 'self-contained, short segments and/or serialised stories with strong identifiable characters' proving accessible and satisfying for occasional viewers, while the regular and repeated watching of ordinary people of the docusoap appears to fulfil the narrative familiarity and investment of the soap opera.¹⁸⁴

The creation of these series within an avowedly popular and commercial environment for factual television production therefore meets Paul Rotha's long-standing condition of a 'human interest' for documentary observers, practices and audiences. As in the cases of Channel 5's contemporary submarine series (see Chapter 2), formulaic popular appeal might appear to demand the stylisation of the subject to produce both 'intimacy' and 'rhetoric'. More importantly, in recognition of Channel 5's increasing pre-eminence as the populist rather than simply popular broadcaster and not only on the basis of their being surrounded in the schedules by examples of reality television, the *Warship* series and the very recent and highly remarked *Warship: Life at Sea* relate the Royal Navy 'to the wider purposes of the community' formally, representationally and polemically. In readily comparing and likening the Navy as a community to similar, relatable subjects in wider examples of reality television, Channel 5's series bring the 'fleet' into the 'home' in ways that diverge from documentary

¹⁸² Kilborn, *Staging the real*, p.9.

¹⁸³ Gail Coles, Docusoap Actuality and the Serial Format, in *Frames and Fictions on Television: The politics of identity within drama* ed. by Bruce Carson and Margaret Llewellyn-Jones (Exeter: Intellect, 2000), 27–39, pp.30–33.

¹⁸⁴ Hill, *Reality TV*, p.52.

precedents such as *Sailor* or *HMS Splendid* but which respond to contemporary media currents, and to contemporary viewership trends.

Warship series 1 and 2 (2008–09)

Warship series one was filmed aboard HMS *Illustrious* (Figure 5.1) during a lengthy overseas deployment in 2008 and was broadcast soon afterwards in a 9pm Monday evening slot in May and June 2008.



Figure 5.1: HMS *Illustrious*, with Harrier aircraft on deck, 1997. CPO Phot Rob Harding. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

Series two recorded the involvement of both HMS *Bulwark* and HMS *Ocean* in the 'Taurus 2009' deployment to the Indian Ocean and South East Asia and was broadcast in the same weekly slot in August and September 2009. These Granada television programmes followed other reality television series placed earlier in Channel 5's schedules because of their unedited language and adult innuendo.¹⁸⁵ Amidst the first episode's rapid opening montage of the ship, her aircraft and close-ups of weapons, HMS *Illustrious* is introduced by a voice-over (provided by actor Dexter Fletcher) in hyperbolic terms as: '£1billion's worth of military muscle. Weighing in at 22,000 tons, she's home to nearly 1000 sailors who are about to embark upon a phenomenal mission, half-way around the world.' The on-board production promises 'to access all areas as she embarks on her four-month adventure.'

Members of the crew who will be consistently followed as characters through the series are introduced at the beginning of the voyage: the trainee female warfare officer, 23-year-old Milly Harridean, and twins Rachel and Michael 'Shiner' Wright, who embark the day after their shared 19th birthday. The rapidity of the exposition means that the momentary melancholy registered at Shiner's girlfriend being left behind is immediately and wryly undone as the voice-over introduces a sailor's wife ('But there is a plus side for some') who comments to camera, 'I only ever decorate when he's away, 'cos then he can't argue.' The frenetic pace is maintained as the entire series is previewed with a computer graphic map charting *Illustrious*'s progress to Gibraltar, Malta, Suez and the Indian Ocean and flashes forward to future events. This itinerary is summarised in sensational terms, as 'a mission fraught with danger' because '*Illustrious* is an obvious terrorist target', but the ship is forced to return to Portsmouth immediately by a fault with its freezers. As the ship undergoes hasty repairs, the hectic pace and hyperbolic language of the series are ironically contrasted with the unwelcome newspaper coverage of the breakdown, with close-ups of tabloid newspaper headlines: 'Rusty Lusty'; 'doggy freezer halts carrier.' The ageing *Illustrious*'s mechanical difficulties facilitate the foregrounding of another significant figure, senior engineering officer Lieutenant Commander Helen Ashworth, who is frequently interviewed in the course of her vital repair work. Although her selection for consistent appearances provides an affirmative female role model, the series more often assumes a simplistic and exploitative approach to the environment of the mixed crew. Another rapid montage defines the differences between male and female accommodation, juxtaposing images of pink dressing gowns, and a quiet female mess area accompanied with sedate music, with pinups, video games and raucous laughter in the male mess. The voice-over observes leadingly that 'men and women have to live in close confines in the modern navy' before

¹⁸⁵ Other programmes trailed in *Warship*'s advertising breaks included *Brits Who Made the Modern World*, *Brighton Beach Patrol* (an 'A & E'-style reality series), *Kidnapped Abroad* (a reality series featuring re-enactments), Australian soap opera *Neighbours* and a one-off documentary entitled *Viagra: Ten Years on the Rise*.

Milly opines in interview that, despite the 'no touching at sea' rules, relationships will inevitably develop: 'it's human nature.'

The majority of episode one concerns the ship's undergoing 'Thursday War' exercises and tests as part of FOST training prior to deployment. When the ship fails FOST, crew members receive the consolation of a night of shore leave in Plymouth. As she disembarks, the voice-over observes archly, 'yes, this is Rachel in civvies!' The series' briskness therefore allows no crisis or disappointment to linger, though each advertisement break and the end of each episode provides an opportunity for the voice-over to reintroduce tension and peril: for example, 'After the break, the whole deployment's in jeopardy, as Lusty's bad luck just won't run out!' The vocabulary and tone of the voice-over throughout the series strive to connect the audience with its documentary subject by the evocation of associations and connotations of the everyday. The visually established contrast between the captain's individual meals and the crew's mass catering leads to the narrator describing the galley staff as 'bracing themselves for the usual whingeing.' A sequence of rapidly edited soundbites from crew members sums up the food as: 'onions in everything'; 'hot potatoes, cold potatoes or burnt potatoes'; and conclusively as 'shocking!' The ship's NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institute) store is described as doing 'a roaring trade' in the extra treats and conveniences the crew needs ('so far, they've sold 55,000 cans of lager, 22,000 cans of cider and 6,000 pot noodles'). This extraordinary itemisation of the crew's mundane consumption introduces an operational parallel for the viewer's comprehension. The NAAFI, originating in 1921 but now run by Spar supermarkets, provides an idiomatic parallel to the ship's resupply needs being furnished by the auxiliary ship *Fort Austin*, described as a 'floating supermarket' ready to receive 'Lusty's ten-ton shopping list.' Similarly, in series two an accessible analogy serves to illustrate HMS *Bulwark's* replenishment at sea with diesel fuel: 'going by today's prices at the pumps to fill her up would cost £700,000.' When engaged in flight operations, 'Lusty' is compared to 'a mini-Heathrow', and then to the 'Costa del Sol' when sailors sunbathe on the flight deck. Hosing down and cleaning the Harriers is dubbed 'the ultimate jet-wash!' When 'Hands to Bathe' is piped in the Indian Ocean, the voice-over draws attention to how this 'exposes another naval tradition', the camera then providing close-ups of the varied tattoos on display. The absurd aspects of military mundanity are also accommodated with observation of the ship's boarding parties training for searching suspect vessels. Editing imbues this sequence with the bathetic comedy of cumulative institutional chaos as radio batteries are found to be dead, call signs get confused, and problems with lifejackets mean that boat drills have to be cancelled.

Throughout the series, considerable emphasis is placed on the three female sailors introduced in episode one. Their recurrent appearances provide realistic positive and negative portrayals of service experience. Helen Ashworth's engineering team successfully complete an exchange of the ship's gas turbine engines while at sea (seen first in an abbreviated time-lapse sequence before an

advertising break) as well as overcoming numerous defects. Her reflections in interview validate gender equality in service life:

One of the biggest compliments you can get is that the guys have forgotten that you're a girl, and you don't really appreciate it until you dress up to go out and people that speak to you day in and day out just walk past you. Even my deputy did it to me, and he's known me for ten years.

After her introduction in episode one Milly only reappears in episode four, when the voice-over contrasts her 'high hopes of day one' with 'serious doubts' eight weeks later. Bored with her training, she seeks a transfer to logistics but her personnel officer informs her that, while there is a shortage of female warfare officers, the Navy already has too many female logistics officers. Without waiting for official notification of her transfer being refused, Milly resigns, 'abandoning ship and the Navy' after 18 months and £60,000 of training. By contrast, Helen's status as role model as a female officer is reinforced by Rachel's desire to change trades to become an engineer, yet Rachel's appearances within the series are more frequently connected to an entirely different gender narrative. In episode four Rachel begins a relationship with engineer Dave Smith, even though the voice-over reminds the audience she has a boyfriend at home. She discusses her views on relationships with the interviewer off-screen, ending with a serial drama cliffhanger: 'Watch this space!' During episode five, when Helen's marine engineers are introduced (in a rapid montage of dials, gauges, pipework, warning signs and archive footage from the days of steam to explain why they are referred to as 'stokers'), Rachel's wish for a week's work experience before requesting her branch change is qualified by the voice-over as 'not just because her new boyfriend's a stoker'. Later the couple is seen chatting on deck, ironically sitting next to a locker marked 'Danger – Explosive'. By episode six (in which shots of them together from previous episodes are repeated as flashbacks and they are questioning individually on whether they are now a 'couple'), Dave and Rachel are described by the voice-over as 'finding the Navy's strict no touching rule increasingly difficult'. When the ship reaches India and shore leave is permitted, the voice-over observes wryly: 'now they're docked in Goa, the no touching rule doesn't apply'.

In contrast to this established quotidian docusoap focus, episode two introduces recognition of *Illustrious's* affiliation with the island of Malta (Figure 5.2). The ship's visit to Valletta prompts a brief history lesson on World War II in the Mediterranean, noting the historic attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto and the Luftwaffe's 'revenge' attacks on the ship's namesake at sea and again in harbour, which killed over a hundred sailors and many Maltese civilians.

Crew members perform a wreath-laying commemorating the bombing of Malta, while others undertake community work on the island. (A comparable 'sombre ceremony' occurs in series two aboard HMS *Ocean* when she reaches the area in which HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk in 1941). The



Figure 5.2: HMS *Illustrious* at Malta 1995. PO(Phot) ‘Kenny’ Everitt. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

recollection of past conflict and the maintenance of the ship’s international relationships in the present are marked soberly by the voice-over: ‘HMS *Illustrious* makes her way into Valletta Harbour, just as she did sixty-seven years ago.’ When Helen Ashworth takes the chance to visit HMS *Trafalgar* (since at that time women were still not allowed to serve on submarines), a brief summary of the story of the *Kursk* disaster is somewhat incongruously included. This bleak tone sits uneasily alongside the heightened description of the ship’s passage to the Gulf past ‘the war-torn states of the Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia, a failed state harbouring terrorists.’ As boarding parties train aboard, dramatic music and news footage reminds viewers of the story of HMS *Cornwall*’s sailors taken prisoner by the Iranian Republican Guard ‘last year in the Persian Gulf’.¹⁸⁶ In distinction from dangers and losses of life in the more distant past,

¹⁸⁶ This incident became a notable public relations disaster when Royal Navy sailors were paraded before television cameras by their Iranian captors and several members of HMS *Cornwall*’s crew subsequently sold their stories to the media. Anonymous, Naval captives can sell stories, *BBC News*, 8 April 2007, <https://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6536203.stm> [accessed 21 April 2010]; Matthew Hickley, Top brass escape disciplinary action as the Iran hostages fiasco ends in a whitewash, *The Daily*

the roles of the ship and her aircraft in present conflicts are confronted frankly but uncomplicatedly.

In episode five, *Illustrious's* Harriers train at sea before deploying to support ground forces in Afghanistan. The air group leader, Lieutenant Commander Toby Everitt, who gives a guided tour of the Harrier's cockpit, is understatedly described as having been 'flying helicopters and Harriers in war zones for 16 years'. In interview, Harrier Maintenance Engineer Rob 'Chainsaw' Hunt summarises his contribution in terms of professional detachment and satisfaction: 'We love it. Twenty odd years' worth of training and now I'm allowed to do it for real. I have no qualms, Afghanistan's a war. Simple as that. We're out there killing people.' As he speaks, cuts between blue-painted practice weapons on deck and bomb mission markings on the Harrier's side concretise the connection between the supposedly everyday environment of the ship and the ongoing war over the horizon. While these segments certainly stress and connect the audience with the circumstances of the unending War on Terror and the commitment of British service personnel to it, their brevity allows the viewer no more political insight into or opportunity to question the conflict than the sailors and pilots evince themselves. Elsewhere, the ship and its military capability (including 'the deadly Harrier GR.9') are sensationally described in triumphant technological and patriotic terms. Episode five's opening voice-over and montage of shots of the task force's ships at sea encapsulates the unquestioning celebration of *Illustrious's* mission:

Thirteen battleships, 2,500 sailors on a journey half-way around the world. And leading the flotilla, Her Majesty's finest: aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious*. Her mission: to show off Britain's military power in the Middle East and to train the naval strike wing to reach their full fighting potential.

Series two makes similar patriotic claims for the ships and crews at its centre. HMS *Bulwark* is described as leading 12 NATO warships in the Navy's 'most ambitious deployment in a decade: Their task: to prove they can carry out a seaborne military invasion, thousands of miles from home.' The voice-over asserts that HMS *Ocean* (Figure 5.3) is exercising in the Indian Ocean 'to prove the Royal Navy is still the best in the world'.

Mail, 20 June 2007, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-463057/Top-brass-escape-disciplinary-action-Iran-hostages-fiasco-ends-whitewash.html> [accessed 21 April 2010]. The British sailors' capitulation was unfavourably compared to the more robust response of the Royal Australian Navy in similar circumstances: Richard Shears, F*** off, mate! How the Aussies repelled Iranian gunboats (unlike our own hapless sailors), *The Daily Mail*, 22 June 2007, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-463690/F---mate-How-Aussies-repelled-Iranian-gunboats-unlike-hapless-sailors.html> [accessed 21 April 2010].



Figure 5.3: HMS *Ocean*. LPhot Kyle Heller, 2017. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

As with series one, computer graphics illustrate the layout, systems and capabilities of the landing craft, vehicles and helicopter deck. During the Taurus deployment the British vessels cooperate with ships from 17 other nations and visit India, Bangladesh and Singapore. Royal Marines from *Bulwark* and *Ocean* conduct exercises at Chittagong and in the Malaysian jungle. While these international operations illustrate the Navy's continuing commitments 'East of Suez', the series occasionally betrays a conservative, orientalist or even imperialist perspective visually and verbally. The 1971 Five Power Defence Agreement is briefly mentioned as the basis for exercises conducted with the cosignatories Malaysia, Australia, Singapore and New Zealand, whose cooperation with the UK represents 'a show of force in a region of unpredictable regimes'.¹⁸⁷ When the fleet reaches Singapore, the island nation is described as 'one of the world's most important seaports, and once a key part of the British Empire'. Gazing at the anchored warships, a sailor observes to camera: 'A lot of Royal Navy real estate in one place'. Later in the series, initial sea training of cadets is depicted aboard *Ocean*, with this year's group being entirely international, and mostly composed of officers from the navies of Kuwait, Iraq, Qatar, Jordan and Yemen. The voice-over explains that: 'each junior officer's government pays for this prestigious chance to train with the Royal Navy and the Navy sees it as a way of building international relations'. Bangladesh is succinctly categorised by the voice-over as 'a stable Muslim country with close ties to the UK'. Its navy operates second-hand British ships and 'to be trained by the Royal Navy is seen as a great privilege', but when the marines stage a landing before bemused Bangladeshi villagers, the voice-over boasts: 'the locals don't know what's hit them'. The poverty and over-population of the exercise area off the Ganges delta are noted only in terms of their effects upon ship and crew. Bangladesh's landscape is described as:

perfect for the Marines to practice attacking from the sea ... it's one of the wettest countries on earth. It's also one of the most densely populated: over 160 million people live by the rivers, and all their waste is washed out to sea.

This creates a recognised health hazard for marines wading in the surf, and also disables *Bulwark's* freshwater production as waste clogs the system's filters in hours. Members of the ship's crew who volunteer to play the role of the marines' terrorist enemy are warned about the dangers of the area's anacondas, pythons, vampire bats, mosquitoes and crocodiles. With the announcement of

¹⁸⁷ Cooperative exercises as part of the Five Power Defence Agreement had also been a feature of HMS *Illustrious's* 2008 deployment not represented in the earlier *Warship* series. John Roberts, *Safeguarding the Nation: The Story of the Modern Royal Navy* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2009), pp.328–330.

Commodore Peter Hudson's promotion to rear admiral, a gourmet dinner prepared to celebrate the event is juxtaposed heavily-handedly with Marine survival training, in which they learn to kill and fillet snakes.

The concentration upon the marines provides the series with the spectacle of their training on land, but also unexpectedly candid insights from their dissatisfaction on board ship. The marines of 40 Commando are identified as a mix of 'new recruits' and veterans of Afghanistan whose training (like that of *Illustrious's* Harriers) precedes active deployment in combat. Recruit Dean Medhurst is followed through the series, with dedicated sequences (which reappear as reminding flashbacks) when he fails during a live-firing exercise and redeems himself abseiling successfully from a hovering helicopter. The marines are labelled 'a tight-knit bunch': their distance from and competitiveness with the ship's crew emerges when a physical instructor organises a ship-wide 'testosterone-fueled sports event on the flight deck'. However, some of the marines identified and interviewed during earlier episodes deliberately absent themselves from the games and barbecue on the flightdeck. They are vocal in their criticism of the expenditures of the deployment in comparison with the costs of vital equipment that is needed but not available in Afghanistan. While the cameras follow the marines below deck to discover their grievances, their comments to camera are not glossed by the voice-over or overtly prompted by interview questions. Their contempt for being on a 'shit cruise liner' with 'matelots who don't understand' rather than in-theatre with their comrades is simply noted, prompting reevaluation of the previous portrayals of trivial tensions between sailors and marines. This unexpected and unqualified moment (similar to the candid observation of the practical, emotional and moral difficulties the ship's medics encounter when called upon to recover an unidentified and decomposing human body from the sea) represents a frank and uninflected documentary interlude within the series' otherwise fragmentary yet manipulative flow. In these cases, the undemonstrative and unmediated recording of authentic, disruptive incidents validates the film crew's presence, but inevitably also highlights the prevailing brevity, levity and populism of the series' approach. The potential inconsistencies between observation and structuration that *Warship* exhibits become even more exaggerated in the next Channel 5 series to be broadcast.

Ice Patrol (2010): tedium, trivia, tragedy

Although made by a different production company (Spiderlight Films) and commissioned for broadcast by both Channel 5 and National Geographic, *Ice Patrol* shares features with the *Warship* format.¹⁸⁸ It was aired in a 9pm weekday

¹⁸⁸ Producer Martin Kemp formed Spiderlight specifically for the production of *Ice Patrol*. The series was filmed with a small embedded team during HMS Endurance's



Figure 5.4: HMS *Endurance* in the Antarctic in 2007. LA(Phot) Kelly Whybrow. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

slot and parallels previous naval series in detailing day-to-day events aboard ship. However, the uniqueness of the vessel at its centre (the ice patrol ship HMS *Endurance*, Figure 5.4) and of the environment in which it operates (the Southern Ocean and Antarctic territories) gave a superficial distinction to the series' emphasis upon the ecological and climatic study of the area. As a Royal Navy ship with research and constabulary rather than combatant roles, HMS *Endurance* presents a less obviously militarised and more popularised scientific subject for documentary coverage. The series makes no mention of the involvement of the previous vessel of this name in the Falklands conflict (despite the islands serving as the ship's base of operations), yet frequently comments on the present *Endurance*'s origins as a commercially constructed vessel and her inheritance of the name of polar explorer Ernest Shackleton's ship. Additionally, the ship's Royal Marine contingent is followed attempting the 'Shackleton Walk', paralleling the journey made by survivors of the original *Endurance*'s wreck across South Georgia.

Unlike the other *Warship* series, the uniqueness of the ship and the Antarctic environment, and the range of subjects included in *Ice Patrol* offer both greater specificity and variety. The ship's crew, Navy divers, meteorologists, adventuring

Antarctic Patrol in late 2008. Martin Kemp, *Ice Patrol*, <https://www.martinkemp.tv/icepatrol> [accessed 9 June 2022].

school parties and civilian photographers and climate scientists are seen and interviewed during their activities spanning several months. In common with other series, *Endurance*'s crew is observed undergoing FOST inspection before proceeding to operations. Computer graphics are used to map the ship's progress and explain special design features for icebreaking. Yet this diversified coverage struggles to produce a focus or provide compelling interest. Reviewing the transmission of the first episode, Sam Wollaston sardonically described *Ice Patrol* as 'possibly one of the least exciting documentaries ever':

To be honest, absolutely nothing happens. Well, there is a personal tragedy for a crew member, who has to fly home. And the ship's bow thruster breaks down, which makes parking a little more difficult; sorry, which means the captain and crew have to pull off 'a remarkable piece of seamanship'. They do some safety drills, then there is a problem in the engine room. 'One of *Endurance*'s two engines has suddenly started spitting out highly flammable fuel,' says Bernard Hill, narrating, trying to inject some drama. Hmm, to me it looks like a fairly minor leak of diesel, which isn't very flammable at all, but what do I know?¹⁸⁹

Endurance is seen to suffer numerous mechanical defects before and during the patrol, as outgoing captain Bob Tarrant prepares to hand over to a new commanding officer arriving from the UK. The accompanying voice-over's aggrandisement of the ship's engine problems (which could leave her 'trapped in the ice') sits uneasily alongside the comedic treatment of other incidents. When Captain Tarrant goes ashore, in order to give his executive officer more command experience before the arrival of the new captain, the camera follows him through ship's cafeteria, and the voice-over observes: 'but on his way out there's one final emergency to deal with: burning breakfast'. Smoke from a toaster threatens to set off alarms. The camera follows Tarrant as he intervenes with the stewards, ordering them to tell the bridge, turn off the toaster, 'get the toast out of there' and open the porthole to let out the smoke. The humorous observation of this authentic, bathetic 'emergency' is more conspicuous given the portentous tone struck by the voice-over in the opening credits.

During a montage sequence previewing many forthcoming aspects of the series (*Endurance* seen from the air, isolated in fields of ice (Figure 5.5); helicopter flights; diving operations; views of the ship's bows breaking through pack ice; Marine skiers encountering seals), the voice-over asserts the ship's and environment's exceptionalness:

¹⁸⁹ Sam Wollaston, *Ice Patrol: It's about ships, ice and the sea – who cares if it's possibly one of the least exciting documentaries ever?* *The Guardian*, 9 April 2010 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2010/apr/09/tv-review-ice-patrol-sam-wollaston> [accessed 2 May 2022].



Figure 5.5: HMS *Endurance* in pack ice. LA(Phot) Kelly Whybrow, 2007. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

There is only one Royal Navy ship capable of breaking into the icy wastes of Antarctica. HMS *Endurance*'s mission is to explore, survey and watch over the British Antarctic Territory: to reach parts of the frozen continent that no other ship can reach. For the 120 men and women aboard, these are voyages of risk and discovery.

This introductory embellishment is, however, ominously undercut by the first of several intimations of a forthcoming calamity. As the voice-over continues, additional elements on the soundtrack (alarm bells, the rasping of breathing apparatus, and an unidentified voice on the ship's tannoy stating 'the priority is safety of life ... the vessel is taking on water ...') accompany chaotic handheld camera views of an unspecified emergency: 'And this year, waiting for them at journey's end, is a disaster that could take *Endurance* and their very lives.' The remainder of the first episode depicts mundane and serious events, described alternately in ironic, grave or exaggerated terms, which distract from this opening in quotidian observation even where cliffhanger commentary ('in just a few days' time there will be an even bigger engine failure, and this time it could mean the end of *Endurance*') is positioned purposefully before advertisement breaks. However, the voice-over reinforces the fatalistic tone in the final

moments: 'what the crew cannot know as the ice breaks beneath them is that before the year ends, a major tragedy will see them fight to save their ship and their very lives.'

Against the documentary content which subsequently occupies episodes two and three, this oppressive atmosphere is repeatedly reinserted via the omniscient and prophetic voice-over, leading to significant tonal inconsistency. The dangers of the environment are frequently recalled. The crew's 'boat camp' for surveying the hydrography and wildlife of the South Shetlands Islands is overtaken by a damaging storm. In addition to references to (and an archive photograph of) Shackleton's *Endurance* being 'crushed by the ice', the grounding of the cruise ship *Nordkapp* and sinking of the Canadian *Explorer* are also cited as cautionary examples. When *Endurance* visits Deception Island, the geographical aspect and appeal of the series are emphasised by the observation that this is 'one of the only places in the world where a ship can sail into the centre of a dormant volcano'. This marvel is undercut by a mundane storyline, the recurrent failure of the divers' boat's outboard engine: 'the volcano might not be dead, but Tommo's motor certainly is'. Episode two concludes with another ominous reflection, as for the captain and a sailor returning to the UK on disciplinary charges 'the *Endurance* they return to a month from now will be a very different ship from the one they leave behind'. In episode three, banality and levity (logistics officer Craig Hasting's observation that 'sausages are key for breakfasts') vie with further intimations of future disaster. A man-overboard drill is badly mishandled, provoking the voice-over to disclose: 'three weeks from now *Endurance* will face disaster in the Southern Ocean. The crew's very survival will depend on knowing how to act in an emergency.' The fragility of the marines undertaking the 'Shackleton Walk', reduced to minute figures on the glaciers of South Georgia, is tellingly juxtaposed with British scientists' study of sediment cores: the analysis and carbon dating of the microscopic life they contain will be vital for understanding global climate change. The surveying of resurgent seal populations (hunted to near extinction in the 19th century), the successful completion of the marines' expedition, and the prospect of Christmas in the Chilean port of Valparaiso are not permitted to conclude this segment on a positive note, as the final episode is previewed forebodingly: '*Endurance* and her crew will never reach their destination, because a few days from now, somewhere in the Southern Ocean, disaster will strike.'

Episode four begins with observation of light-hearted moments on board (a beard-growing competition and a 'pub night' for the whole crew) before the long-awaited catastrophe takes place. However, another advertisement break and cliffhanger comment from the voice-over still intervene. Despite the series' anticipation of this event, the incident – sudden and unstoppable flooding in the engine room during 'routine maintenance' – is understandably incompletely represented by actual footage, and is instead related via interviews with key members of the crew. Slow-motion scenes (which may be shot at the time or re-enactments) accompany the retrospective commentary, while

computer graphics represent the flooding and near capsizing of the ship. With the addition of heightened narration from the voice-over ('if the flood can't be stopped, it'll be the end of *Endurance* ... the engineers are fighting a losing battle'), the final episode of *Ice Patrol* therefore shifts into reality television in 'A & E' mode. 'Against all odds' and with 'incredible luck', the ship is saved, towed into Punta Arenas, and eventually returned to the UK for repair. After evincing several conspicuous shifts in tone, from presaging the disaster to reviewing the traumatic events in fragmentary flashback, the series ends on an inconclusive but optimistic note, anticipating that the crew's effort to save the ship will be rewarded by its repair and return to service.¹⁹⁰ Because of the unenvisioned events that overtook its filming, *Ice Patrol* therefore emerges not only as a peculiar entry in Channel 5's naval-oriented series but also as a conspicuous example of the interaction of the pro-filmic and filmic in documentary: in capturing an unprecedented event on film, and also restructuring and blatantly narrativising the resultant series around it.

Warship: Life at Sea series 1–3 (2018–22)

The more recent successive series of *Warship: Life at Sea*, produced by Artlab Films, can be seen to develop the observational templates established by the earlier *Warship* and by *Royal Navy Caribbean Patrol* (2011), made for Channel 5 by Chris Terrill's Uppercut Films. The first series, filmed aboard HMS *Duncan* in the Mediterranean, aired in November and December 2018. The second, following *Duncan* to the Arabian Gulf, was broadcast between February and March 2020 and the third series in January and February 2022. Maintaining the established Monday 9pm slot, *Warship: Life at Sea* has remained a popular focus within Channel 5's schedules, with the opening episode of series two rating ahead of direct competition from Channel 4's 999: *What's Your Emergency?* and outperforming the first episode of series one, with 1.4 million viewers, or

¹⁹⁰ In actuality HMS *Endurance* was scrapped after being deemed uneconomical to repair and was replaced with another ex-merchant vessel acquired in 2011 and renamed HMS *Protector*: Anonymous, HMS *Endurance*: Former ice patrol ship to be scrapped, *BBC News*, 7 October 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-24436594> [accessed 2 May 2022]. The enquiry into the flooding of *Endurance* noted the damage control response of the ship's company, but concluded that inadequate risk assessment and mitigation, 'poor system knowledge' and 'manpower constraints' contributed to the accident and nearly caused the ship's loss. HM Government, Service Enquiry into the Flooding of HMS *Endurance* 16 December 2008, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27150/service_enquiry_flooding_hms_endurance.pdf [accessed 2 May 2022].

8% of the audience.¹⁹¹ Although these series maintain the recording of everyday activities, roles and relationships aboard ship seen in the earlier versions of *Warship*, they have also notably captured more unexpected, tense and evolving situations involving Royal Navy ships in near-conflict, for example HMS *Duncan* being approached by Russian aircraft and warships while transiting the Black Sea. During the second series, the Artlab production team was present to record HMS *Duncan*'s confrontation with the naval forces of Iran following the seizure of a British-flagged merchant ship in the Straits of Hormuz. Executive producer Mark Tattersall's description of their unenvisioned involvement in the unfolding crisis suggests the transformation of their filming project from documentary to current affairs television:

What compelled us most as a team at this time was the ability to capture a story like this in real time from the people at the very heart of it. As news organisations around the world reported on HMS *Duncan*'s arrival in the Gulf, on board there was a far more nuanced attitude that was hugely intriguing. Our team had a front-row seat to history in the making.¹⁹²

The first two series' setting aboard the Type 45 destroyer HMS *Duncan* (Figure 5.6) provides operational postscripts to the documentary depiction of the *Daring* class's design and construction (see Chapter 4).

The opening of the first episode's record of *Duncan*'s deployment from January to June 2018, in keeping with the sensationalising montages of earlier series, stresses the ship's capabilities and the threatening environment in which it operates. The voice-over (provided by radio presenter Loz Guest) accompanies a hectic audio-visual sequence, including blaring alarms, dramatic music, rapid editing, zooms and pans within the operations room: 'This is the story of the most advanced warship of its kind in the world at the most dramatic time in its short history, but this state-of-the-art ship is also home to 280 men and women.' The series' predictable weft of reality television coverage (sailors taking selfies, enjoying birthday celebrations or facing disciplinary charges) is contrasted in this rapid kaleidoscopic introduction with the warp of anticipated incident. The voice-over's assurances of authenticity and hints of conflict ('our cameras have been given unprecedented access to *Duncan*'s dramatic seven-month mission as they come face-to-face with Russian forces') are reinforced by a fleeting soundbite from Commodore Mike Utley, the senior

¹⁹¹ Stephen Price, C5's Warship sinks rivals, *Broadcast*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/channel-overview/c5s-warship-sinks-rivals/5147409.article> [accessed 13 April 2022].

¹⁹² Mark Tattersall, Warship: Life at Sea, Channel 5 – a front-row seat to history, *Broadcast*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/channel-5/warship-life-at-sea-channel-5-a-front-row-seat-to-history/5146985.article> [accessed 18 May 2022].



Figure 5.6: HMS *Duncan*, pictured in the Gulf in 2019. LPhot Rory Arnold. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

NATO commander leading the deployment ('There is a challenge from Russia at the moment'). Another inference of action to come ('and the crew find themselves on the front line as missiles rain down on Syria') closes the title sequence, before *Duncan* is introduced in Portsmouth with a close-up of the Union Jack.

The depiction of specific crew members serves positive as well as illustrative purposes against this constructed background of conflict. Most notable amongst them is Captain Eleanor Stack (Figure 5.7), who personifies a new,



Figure 5.7: Captain Eleanor Stack. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

different and inclusive service. She recalls how, growing up in Glasgow with no naval background, a school visit to HMS *Argyle* inspired her to join the Navy in 2000.

Other interviewees include chef Liam Fletcher, *Duncan's* youngest sailor, 18-year-old Owen Clements, who is unsure how he will cope with the lengthy deployment, and 26-year veteran Executive Warrant Officer Martin Watson. Medic Rhiann Dilmore, who is shown dealing with a suspected heart attack on board and acting as the 'condom fairy' in preparation for shore leave, is proud of the variety in her job: 'I couldn't think of a better career, to be honest.' Principal Warfare Officer James Smith states he wanted 'a job that made a difference' and navigator Ryan Greig admits that, 'since I was nine years old, I never wanted to do anything else'. The series' portrait of a navy as varied community and fulfilling career therefore exceeds simple docusoap observation to become a positive recruitment image. This observational element is contextualised but also constrained by the conspicuous emphasis upon the international events in which the ship becomes embroiled.

As *Duncan* heads to the Mediterranean, a computer graphic map charts the ship's course to rendezvous with Spanish, Turkish and German warships and 'and lead them into the Black Sea – one of the most sensitive areas in the world' (Figure 5.8). Leading up to the first advertisement break, Captain Stack reflects: 'You never quite know what's going to happen when we get into the Black Sea, and what our presence there will provoke from other nations', and



Figure 5.8: HMS *Duncan* in the Black Sea. L(Phot) Paul Hall, 2017. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

this intimation of threat is exaggerated by the voice-over: ‘Going to the Black Sea puts *Duncan* on a potential collision course with the Russians and no-one knows how they’ll react.’ When Commodore Utley joins *Duncan* and addresses the crew, the voice-over insists his ‘first job is to explain why they’re going into the Black Sea’ but the programme itself prefaces his remarks to provide this same message graphically to the audience.

An animated map represents growing Russian influence as a spreading expanse of red over the Crimea as the voice-over describes the region as ‘fraught with tension since Russian forces moved into Crimea in 2014.’ Sailors are filmed listening to Commodore Utley’s briefing (‘let’s not be under any doubt, that we do not have normal relations with Russia’) and their reactions are also sought. Rhiann calls his words ‘inspiring’, and Owen expresses confidence in the crew’s abilities. Inserted in a separate interview with the commodore is a cut to a quotation painted above a hatch: “‘The name of *Duncan* will never be forgot by Britain and in particular by its Navy” – Admiral Lord Nelson, October 1804.’ Although not explicitly addressed (viewers will recognise the allusion to Nelson, but not necessarily Admiral *Duncan*), the tradition associated with the name of HMS *Duncan* is therefore silently associated with the present putative crisis, which the voice-over seeks to intensify before the next advertisement break: ‘The commodore is taking the fleet deep into the most tense regions of the Black Sea. *Duncan* is heading straight into the lion’s den.’ Ominous soundtrack music is introduced as *Duncan* passes under the

last bridge on the Bosphorus and enters the Black Sea, and, after a port visit in Romania where shipboard guests discuss Russian aggression in the region, the opening episode ends with the first encounters with Russian aircraft and the voice-over's tantalisation: 'the arrival of the Russian jet is an escalation – the question now is, what will happen next?'

Duncan's confrontation with fighter aircraft in the Black Sea consumes episode two, as the ship approaches within 30 miles of the coast.¹⁹³ The launching of the ship's helicopter for reconnaissance is not construed on board as 'escalatory', though the voice-over states that 'no Royal Navy ship has been this close to Crimea since Russia occupied it in 2014'. The arrival of a Russian intelligence-gathering ship is noted with satisfaction as proof that '*Duncan* has the attention of Russia.' Captain Stack announces to her crew that what they are doing in the Black Sea is 'resonating across Whitehall'. Commentary on the unfolding situation alternates between heightening the crisis and dismissing the threat. With 'swarms of aircraft' approaching, the voice-over speculates 'are they here to attack, or intimidate?', whereas Commodore Utley calls their tactics 'naïve: what they don't know is how capable this ship is'. After the planes withdraw without incident, a brief interlude sees the ship dock at Catania, with crew members visiting a war cemetery to recall the invasion of Sicily in 1943. *Duncan's* chaplain leads a service of remembrance with contemporary relevance, reminding the congregation of 'what the purpose of being in the military is' and reflecting that 'the world in which we live seems to have suddenly started to ramp up into a more dangerous world again'. This respite from tension is brief, however, as the voice-over anticipates episode three's events: 'This is the last chance *Duncan's* crew have to reflect on the past, because they're about to be thrust into one of the most dangerous missions of their lives ... a chemical weapons attack in Syria gives *Duncan* a new mission.'

Although ordinary shipboard events continue to receive representation, with junior officer Will de la Mare undergoing his Fleet Board examination (which the voice-over introduces with predictable amplification: 'the next three hours will determine if Will stays in the Navy...'), episode three parallels the previous instalment in detailing another heightened confrontation with Russian forces. An excerpt of news footage of Theresa May's announcement of the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury and other comments by President Trump on the 'brutal' Syrian regime are included to contextualise the joint American, British and French missile strikes which HMS *Duncan* supports. However, the series' portrayal of these events seems at variance with their historical sequence.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Meetings, mutual curiosity, aggressive manoeuvres and even collisions between Russian and Western forces at sea were not infrequent occurrences during the Cold War. Bryan Ranft and Geoffrey Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp.61–62, 231.

¹⁹⁴ The series' representation of events appears altered from their chronological sequence, in that the poisoning in Salisbury took place in March 2018, the strikes

With the series being broadcast six months after the events it portrays, the voice-over's immediacy ('a chemical weapon has been used on the streets of Britain') and the recognition of relevance of these incidents to the documentary subject (Commodore Utley remarks: 'linking Salisbury to HMS *Duncan* might seem like a bit of a leap, but we need to be out there ensuring UK interests are looked after') underline *Warship: Life at Sea's* reiteration of national, political and naval discourses within popular televisual form. *Duncan's* arrival to support other ships and aircraft striking targets in Syria precipitates further encounters with Russian warships, since Russia has stated it will act to defend Syria from external aggression. The voice-over summarises the political situation in simplistic, aggressive terms ('Russia's threat to defend their Syrian ally raises the stakes'), while titles specifying the date and time strive to enhance the immediacy and authenticity of the danger. The call to action stations occasions dramatic music and rapid cuts and pans as crew members don anti-flash clothing and move to their positions in the operations room. As Russian ships approach, the voice-over declares: 'the battle lines are being drawn: this is what *Duncan* was designed for, but it's the first time the crew have done it for real. Should they fire back, the UK could find itself at war with Russia.' The inflammatory if nonsensical nature of this commentary (watching in December 2018, the audience knows war did not break out in April) underlines the series' habitual embellishment of events despite their basis in observed reality. The effect of such overdetermination was not lost on contemporary reviewers:

Episode three of Channel 5's *Warship: Life at Sea* again made me wonder whether, unsuspected by millions of us at home, Britain really is teetering on the brink of all-out war with Russia. Or whether compressing nine months of unusually busy time at sea into four hour-long episodes might give a slightly overheated impression of reality.¹⁹⁵

Unfortunately the series' stylisation has undermined faith in the 'for real'. A comparable moment in the final episode when a Russian helicopter approaches the ship ('*Duncan* is on a knife edge: one wrong move could cause either side to open fire') similarly passes without incident: the helicopter merely takes photographs, as HMS *Northumberland's* aircraft does when tracking a Russian submarine in series three. The voice-over's exultation ('*Duncan's* crew held their

against Syria were conducted in April, and *Duncan's* transit of the Black Sea occurred in May. HMS *Duncan's* transit of the Black Sea may have appeared more provocative, and the Russian reaction less unexpected, if seen *after* the encounter with Russian ships off Syria rather than before.

¹⁹⁵ Gerard Donovan, *Warship: Life at Sea* review: let's hope this is exaggerated – else we're on the brink of all-out war with Russia, *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 December 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/2018/12/10/warship-life-sea-review-hope-exaggerated-else-brink-all-out/> [accessed 20 December 2018].

nerve') is reinforced by the inclusion of Theresa May's official recognition of the involvement of UK personnel: 'My thoughts are with our brave British servicemen and women who are carrying out their duty with the greatest professionalism.' The series' conclusion with the ship's arrival back in Portsmouth, accompanied by a rapid flashback summary of the series' events, is made suitably patriotic and circular with a final view of the Union Jack.

Series two's treatment of *Duncan's* operations in the Gulf under new captain Tom Trent replicates the combination of observational record and heightened rhetoric that characterised series one. A similarly breakneck opening credit sequence of more than 70 shots in less than two minutes introduces the ship and its exceptional systems, but also incorporates more levity (seen on the bridge, female watch officer Jo Peacock remarks: 'I don't want to freak anyone out but what is that in front of us?'). *Duncan's* confrontations with Russian and Iranian vessels receive comparably heightened and stylised treatment through editing techniques, prominent soundtrack music and a similarly hyperbolic voice-over, provided by producer Mark Tattersall:

With exclusive access, our cameras have been invited back for *Duncan's* dramatic new seven-month deployment, as the crew join the fight to eradicate Isis in Iraq and Syria and they find themselves at the heart of an international crisis.

Duncan screens the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* from the attention of Russian warships while operating in the Eastern Mediterranean (in the voice-over's words 'to eradicate the last remnants of Isis'). Ensuring 10 miles of sea room for flight operations against Isis targets means the destroyer must be interposed between the carrier and the shadowers, the *Admiral Essen* and the *Severomorsk*. The voice-over both colloquialises and exaggerates the danger of these manoeuvres: 'Playing a game of chicken with the Russians in a £1 billion warship is a risky tactic, but could be their best option.' A visit to Odessa to support regional alliances sees the ship play host to President Zelensky. In interview, Captain Trent describes their activities as part of a 'huge strategic game going on here with Russia ... it's not about antagonising Russia but it is about showing strength.' *Duncan* is subsequently dispatched to the Gulf to protect shipping after the British-flagged tanker *Stena Impero* is boarded: 'news reaches the ship that Iran has made good on their threat'. As *Duncan* successfully escorts ships through the Gulf (Figure 5.9), the audience is reminded of the significance of the Navy's presence, not simply to protect British sailors. Lieutenant Jack Mercer points out that, 'if the Straits of Hormuz are shut, the lights go out in the UK'.

Using the ship's helicopter as 'five tons of pretty loud violence' to drive away Iranian speed boats without resorting to weapons satisfies Captain Trent, who reflects: 'It's quite nice now and again to tease them, for a change.' Comparable statements encapsulate the attitudes towards both Iranian and Russian



Figure 5.9: HMS *Duncan* escorting merchant ships in the Straits of Hormuz. POPhot Jay Allen. ©UK Ministry of Defence CROWN COPYRIGHT, 2019: Open Government Licence.

activities to dominate regional waters. Captain Trent says it is ‘critical’ that NATO allies ‘remind Russia that they can’t dominate this space as they want to’. Likewise in interview he maintains: ‘The Iranians are trying to assert authority over the region, but the point is that we don’t recognize that that is acceptable.’ The assertiveness of these comments (seen in both series in response to the actions of other states’ military forces) purport to justify if not fully explain the Navy’s presence in areas of the world where British interests are apparently at risk. The vested right to free trade in the Gulf to ‘keep the lights on’ appears unproblematically equated with arbitrary rights of navigation in the Black Sea.

Despite these prominent visual and verbal elements of *Warship: Life at Sea* that emphasise external threats and vindicate British responses, the series also provide documentary portraits of the Navy and its contemporary community. While there is relatively little probing and profiling of interviewed crew members beyond their introduction in series one, fewer incidents for illustration or exaggeration in series two allow for more significant representation of individuals. Young engineer Kieran Witty, first observed getting a severe haircut, comes to prominence when he is given responsibility for a ‘mission critical repair’ to the ship’s navigation radar. He receives promotion for his work and states his intention to rise from enlisted to officer status and gain a degree through his naval career. The recognition he receives for enthusiasm and ambition makes Witty an exemplary recruiting role model. He comments to camera:



Figure 5.10: HMS *Northumberland*. LPhot Bill Spurr. UK MOD. © Crown copyright 2022: Open Government Licence.

‘The job completely suits me in every respect. The Navy gives you the chance to work and get qualifications and learn.’ When fire breaks out in the engine room, 20-year-old technician James Bradbury is labelled a hero and personally thanked by Captain Trent for spotting the emergency on his rounds and preventing loss of the ship’s power: ‘Bradbury has saved the day.’ Lieutenant Megan Mackley-Heath (whom the voice-over describes as ‘at just 27 she’s the second most senior engineer on board’) also features in several sequences. Although somewhat salaciously introduced in the credit sequence commenting on her relationship with her ‘deployment husband’ Pete Howell (‘like a married couple but with no benefits whatsoever’), Megan is seen leading her male team, overcoming breakdowns and difficulties and also passing her command board to become a chief engineer.

The relative rebalancing of documentary elements, intentions and appeals of *Warship: Life at Sea* in its second series is largely reversed by the augmentation of its polemical treatment and political content in its third. Although the series’ depiction of life on board the Type 23 frigate HMS *Northumberland* (Figure 5.10) provides occasional consideration of individual circumstances (such as trainee officer Olivia Titmuss’s first experiences at sea, the isolation felt by chef Sauhil James, recruited straight from school in St Vincent, who is supported by the ‘ship’s daddy’ and oldest crew member, Executive Warrant Officer Darren Wollington, and 20-year-old Phoebe Stead’s enthusiasm for the ship’s primary anti-submarine mission), these cameos struggle for screen time amid the

representation of burgeoning crisis and confrontation. Events on camera are constantly accompanied by soundtrack music that shifts rapidly from martial to whimsical to ominous. *Northumberland's* operations in the North Sea and around the UK (portrayed by the voice-over as 'a secret four-month deployment at a time of unprecedented pressure from the Russian military') are repeatedly framed in terms of imminent danger. In the first episode the frigate is interposed between Russian intelligence gatherers and HMS *Queen Elizabeth* as the new aircraft carrier exercises in the North Sea. Russian warships and submarines appear on a computer-animated map as anonymous red symbols: 'Russia's intentions are unclear, but their warships are advancing. It's *Northumberland's* job to stop them.' Having joined 'one of the most powerful naval fleets Britain has ever assembled', the frigate is next dispatched to meet a new threat, which is referred to obliquely in episode two:

The new intelligence suggests the Russians are heading towards sensitive waters in the Arctic. Downing Street has been notified and has ordered *Northumberland* to head north immediately. If the captain doesn't get his ship to the Arctic first, vital British interests there could be under threat.

The nature of this threat, and the 'British interests' in the Arctic, are subsequently revealed to be attempts by specially equipped Russian submarines to interfere with, cut or tap communications cables on the seabed. *Northumberland's* captain, Commander Tom Hobbs, is shown watching a news report (actually from 2017) of an announcement by 'Britain's most senior military officer' of this new menace to national security.¹⁹⁶ Hobbs describes the danger such operations pose in apocalyptic terms, which also compare present circumstances with the Navy's most traditional roles:

Russia will take care of the UK not by lobbing nuclear missiles into us. They will take care of us by disconnecting us from the rest of the world. And so that can't happen, and we have to react. We need to protect our cables in the same way that we used to protect ships going across the oceans.

¹⁹⁶ The footage appears to be taken from a BBC report of a speech given by Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach at the Royal United Services Institute in December 2017 as then Chief of UK Defence Staff. Anonymous, Could Russia cut undersea communication cables? *BBC News*, 15 December 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-42365191> [accessed 11 March 2022]. There is no admission that British submarines similarly undertake intelligence-gathering in Arctic and Russia waters, nor any acknowledgement of similar activities by American submarines against the Soviet Union's undersea cables dating back to the 1960s: Caitlin Morris, Operation IVY BELLS: Lessons learned from an 'intelligence success', *Journal of the Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers*, 2012, 20(3), 17–29.

Northumberland battles through a storm to intercept the Russian submarine, undertaking a dangerous replenishment at sea and suffering flooding in her main gun's magazine en route, the danger that the voice-over accentuates before an advertisement break: 'one short circuit could cause a spark, detonating the nearby ammunition and blowing a hole in the ship...' After this disaster is averted, several drastic tonal shifts occur, which again suggest a reordering of recorded material. A celebratory mood predominates as some crew members witness the Northern Lights inside the Arctic Circle for the first time, but Warfare Officer Lee Ellis reflects dejectedly on repeated separations from his family. His interview takes place in a cabin decorated with family pictures, and is punctuated by shots of him recording a bed-time story for his children:

I've missed yet another anniversary, and they're six years old, my twins. I've had two solid Christmas periods with them, so yeah, I leave quite a lot behind. My kids don't understand what I'm doing, why it's important, and why other ... their friends' dads go home every night and I don't. They're not quite getting it. They keep asking when I'm coming home, and why I'm not coming home.

While this segment accords with other foregrounded comments throughout the series on the duty of and sacrifices made for naval life, it is quickly overtaken by the frigate's hunt for the submarine, which is interrupted by an electrical failure disabling the sonar. By the time power is restored the contact has been lost, yet the episode ends with a further heightening of the drama by implying 'next time ... a Russian submarine collides with the ship'.

The series' representation of this incident exemplifies its tendencies to manipulate or obfuscate. The 'collision' does not occur between the Russian submarine and the frigate but between the submarine and *Northumberland's* towed sonar array. Having lost the submarine for 48 hours, contact is re-established with the ship's helicopter, which tracks and photographs the Russian vessel close to the surface. The images appear step-printed on screen to emphasise their validity and secrecy. When Hobbs manoeuvres *Northumberland* closer and into a parallel course to make it clear the submarine has been detected (the voice-over notes with satisfaction 'at this distance, the Russians are bound to hear *Northumberland* and know they've been rumbled'), the Russian vessel turns unexpectedly and impacts the towed array.¹⁹⁷ This is variously interpreted as

¹⁹⁷ The programme's dramatic depiction of this incident was matched by contemporary news reporting of it. Jerome Starkey and Natasha Clark, SEA SMASH: Royal Navy warship SMASHES into Russian 'hunter-killer' submarine after dramatic chase in icy Atlantic, *The Sun*, 7 January 2022, https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/17243613/royal-navy-warship-hits-russian-submarine-atlantic/?utm_medium=Social&utm

a deliberate and aggressive act, an accident or simply a miscalculation, but the result is damage to the sonar and loss of the contact for good. The ship's later encounters with Russian ships and aircraft are represented in similar terms, when *Northumberland* escorts an American submarine in British waters, is overflown by a 'Bear' bomber, and warns off a Russian warship that approaches the Trident submarine base on the west coast of Scotland. The captain's comments and the voice-over's enhancements strive to impress on the audience the severity of the incessant Russian menace:

[Hobbs] They're trying to assert ownership over the ocean, and like any school yard bully if you don't stop them, they'll just take and take and take.

[voice-over] This sort of mass Russian presence so close to the UK hasn't been seen for nearly 25 years.

[Hobbs] I think most people don't understand that most of the time there's a Russian warship around the UK. There's always a danger.

[voice-over] It's a clear attempt to provoke *Northumberland*, just a few miles off the British mainland. So close to home, this level of intimidation is almost unheard of.

Throughout series three, repetitive rhetorical weight is placed on the necessity of a response to aggression against varyingly defined British territories, interests and symbols. The defensive, reactive operations in which *Northumberland* is engaged and their geographical specificity (in contrast to the distant locations of all the other series) appear to represent a consciously different and topically selected representation. Although the episodes still function to provide a portrait of a crew, few individuals are allowed more than single, incidental appearances, and the third series' focus rests even more noticeably than that of its predecessors on the national and cursorily outlined but emphatically politicised discourses articulated on the ship, or attached to its activities. The contrast between *Warship: Life at Sea*'s documentary concentration and that of the contemporary series of *Britain's Biggest Warship* could therefore not be more stark.

Channel 5's original *Warship* series stand as latter-day reimaginings of observation of a normal navy life, depicting and celebrating if not always adequately explaining or justifying the inevitability of the Royal Navy's global presence. Although diverging increasingly from the observational mode of

[_campaign=sunmaintwitter&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1641493001](#)
[accessed 18 August 2022].

Sailor into the (voyeuristically) revealing and politically persuasive, these aspects can be seen to reflect the tendencies and contexts of contemporary popular documentary and its hybridisation with the forms of docusoap, infotainment and reality television. However, as with the application of the term ‘infotainment’ to localise the rhetorical features and entertainment emphasis of simplifying but informative documentary forms (see Chapter 4), the stress upon current affairs in later series of *Warship: Life at Sea* can be identified and interpreted through the vocabulary of news media analysis. Lukas Otto, Isabella Glogger and Mark Boukes reconceptualise the often-interchangeable labels of ‘soft news’, ‘infotainment’, ‘tabloidisation’ and ‘sensationalism’ applied to political news coverage into a hierarchical, critical framework. ‘Tabloidisation’ as a process rather than a genre or form and defined as ‘a spillover of values, topics and styles ‘from the popular to traditional news media’, encapsulates the evolution of *Warship: Life at Sea*.¹⁹⁸ The series’ conspicuous production features of sound, editing and narration, and affective mode of address characterised by a vernacular that places ‘emphasis on emotions’, embody its tabloidisation of factual television.¹⁹⁹ The process of tabloidisation is discernible at the formal level through features of ‘sensationalism’, which Otto, Glogger and Boukes define as ‘a specific kind of journalistic coverage aimed at triggering certain recipient reactions (attention, emotion) by using specific sensationalist production features.’²⁰⁰ Similarly, the shift from the use of actors and personalities to the producer himself providing the coercive voice-over is redolent of ‘soft news’ and its use of ‘the author’s point of view or showing a partisan bias.’²⁰¹ At the formal level, the deliberate stylisation of *Warship: Life at Sea* (and equally prevalent in previous Channel 5 series such as *Submarine School* and *Royal Navy Submarine Mission*: see Chapter 2) is redolent of wider and longer-running trends in factual television. Such trends in technique and their potential for the rebranding of ‘politics as popular culture instead of the serious business of popular discourse’ suggest a stylistically distinguished and persuasively inclined path for the documentary in the post-truth era (Figure 5.11).²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Lukas Otto, Isabella Glogger and Mark Boukes, The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication: A Comprehensive Framework Model of Sensationalism, Soft News, Infotainment, and Tabloidization, *Communication Theory*, 2017, 27, 136–155, p.145.

¹⁹⁹ Otto, Glogger and Boukes, The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication, p.146.

²⁰⁰ Otto, Glogger and Boukes, The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication, pp.141–142.

²⁰¹ Otto, Glogger and Boukes, The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication, p.143.

²⁰² Kees Brants, Who’s Afraid of Infotainment, p.320.



Figure 5.11: Film crew aboard HMS *Duncan*. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

Conclusion: from hybridisation to tabloidisation

The ongoing success of Channel 5's naval documentaries within a television context of entertainment, public service broadcasting and public relations can be deduced from the trailer tagline used for *Submarine School* (2011), which followed the submarine command training 'Perisher' course: 'Forget *The Apprentice* ... this is the world's toughest job interview.'²⁰³ The extent to which naval involvement in such television programmes and media activities is also recognised and valued by the Navy itself can be gauged from the commendation given to HMS *Bulwark* and her crew for their 'Media Operations and Public Relations work during the year June 2008–June 2009'. In addition to the Channel 5 series accompanying the ship during the Taurus 2009 deployment to the Indian Ocean, during this period *Bulwark* had also participated in numerous television and radio features and was deemed to have achieved 'considerable successes in projecting a positive and relevant image of the RN across the

²⁰³ Anonymous, *Submarine School 'The Series'* Channel 5, *Royal Navy*, https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-events/national-events/submarine_school_doc.htm [accessed 22 February 2011].

broadest media spectrums.²⁰⁴ Unlike ITV's *HMS Ark Royal*, *Warship* does not explicitly admit or address the strain on resources the Navy of the early 21st century has experienced. The positive and unquestioningly patriotic coverage Channel 5's series provide is therefore notable in what has been described as a period of difficulty and decline:

By the end of the first decade of the new century, Europe's naval forces were heading into the proverbial abyss. Smaller than at any time in recent history, naval forces across Europe had lost important proficiencies and capabilities. The shortfall in naval platforms had a substantial bearing on the ability to deal effectively with the growing range of naval tasks. The modernisation of many navies has been hampered not only by shrinking budgets but by cost overruns, lengthy procurement processes, and major technical deficiencies. These problems were compounded by the fact that many armed forces across the continent have found it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain young men and women.²⁰⁵

The constant, even-handed but overwhelmingly positive representation of working life and job opportunities within the Navy that the series offer (particularly in relation to female crew members but not necessarily acknowledging or privileging wider diversity) is also noteworthy in this respect, though other contemporary programmes (such as Chris Terrill's series for the BBC) provide similarly celebratory and more inclusive portraits of British society aboard the Royal Navy's ships.

Channel 5's series can be considered successes in repeatedly bringing the Navy to public attention, fitting this national, institutional subject into patterns of popular representation that stress the relevant and the recognisable as much as the popular or accessible. The worldwide operations portrayed in *Warship* (and *Submarine Mission* and *Ice Patrol*) during the first decade of the 21st century and the globally capable and present Royal Navy they appear to represent constitute an affirmative and relevant depiction of British naval power for popular consumption. It is ironic that this increase in the Navy's televisual presence coincided with burgeoning (or perhaps simply continuing) consciousness of irreconcilable pressures (of dwindling ship numbers, extending deployments, postponed construction and expanding commitments) afflicting the service at the time.²⁰⁶ The politics for public consideration, as much as the personal

²⁰⁴ Anonymous, *Bulwark's Media Efforts Recognised*, *Royal Navy*, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/operations-and-support/surface-fleet/assault-ships/albion-class/hms-bulwark/news/bulwarks-media-efforts-recognised> [accessed 21 April 2010].

²⁰⁵ Jeremy Stöhs, 'Into the Abyss': European Naval Power in the Post-Cold War Era, *Naval War College Review*, 2018, 71(3), 13–29, p.14.

²⁰⁶ Geoffrey Till, Great Britain Gambles with the Royal Navy, *Naval War College Review*, 2010, 63(1), 33–60.

difficulties for crew members, associated with lengthy foreign deployments and potentially dangerous intervention in international events stand problematically alongside the obvious and traditional attraction of overseas service for recruitment purposes within *Warship*'s spectrum, and spectacle, of factual entertainment. However, the relative weightings of these elements raise questions for the categorisation as much as appraisal of these series when, as John Corner has noted, 'documentary formats' can become characterised by 'their subtle, illusory realisms and modes of sustained, narrativised referentiality'.²⁰⁷ The shifts between decades are discernible in the differences displayed by *Warship* and *Warship: Life at Sea*, the former connected to the distant East of Suez commitments of the War on Terror yet exhibiting a predominantly wry and jocular tone, and the latter refocused on threats in European and even UK home waters represented with heightened visual and verbal rhetoric in response to 'Russia's irredentism'.²⁰⁸

In terms of the evaluation of evolving documentary styles, the variegation of the events, comments, insights and tones that the *Warship* series encompass is matched by the rapidity with which they are covered. Except for the concerted and prurient reality television-oriented treatment of (potential) romantic or sexual relationships, most occurrences receive fleeting attention: multiple advertisement breaks reduce episodes to around 45 minutes in each televised hour, with the shortest segments between breaks during the original broadcasts being less than 10 minutes. While teasing previews and crafted cliffhangers are inserted to pique and sustain viewer attention, the compartmentalisation (and transience) of each incident reduces the risks to comprehension of channel-hopping and inattention. Recaps ('previously...'), flashbacks and anticipatory flashforwards also impinge on running time, but enhance the resemblance to docusoap in shaping the documentary subject. At the same time, in drawing large popular audiences to naval documentary subjects, and in facilitating accessibility and familiarity with them via the visual and verbal vernacular of reality television, the *Warship* series admirably serve the purposes of broadcasting and normalising the image of the Navy and (as the concentration on female crew members in early series demonstrates) contributing positively and authentically to crucial recruitment discourses.

In an interview with the *Navy Lookout*, an independent journalistic outlet for naval news, information and analysis, Mark Tattersall recognised the difficulties in satisfying both lay and informed viewers of naval documentary, but stated that *Warship: Life at Sea*'s key focus was 'the main target audience that just wants to see plenty of action'.²⁰⁹ This article celebrated the 'considerable

²⁰⁷ John Corner, Re-styling the real: British television documentary in the 1990s, *Continuum*, 1997, 11(1), 9–22, p.12.

²⁰⁸ Stöhs, *Into the Abyss*, p.21.

²⁰⁹ Anonymous, Documenting the Royal Navy in action – the making of 'Warship Life at Sea', *Navy Lookout*, 9 February 2022, <https://www.navylookout.com/documenting>

body of work, expertise and trust within the MoD' Tattersall and his team had built up over numerous series, and noted the unpredictability of ship deployments leading inevitably to 'an element of luck' in what series are able to observe: an unforeseen switch from HMS *Diamond* to HMS *Duncan* led to the recording of the latter's confrontation with Russian forces, and unexpectedly HMS *Northumberland's* duties in home waters 'proved highly eventful'.²¹⁰ Corner notes the 'strong literalist force' of the captured documentary moment but also the 'implicatory level' at which an event is organised or manipulated pro-filmically (by what the camera is able or chooses to depict) and/or filmically (by stylistic intervention mediating and inflecting the event at and after the event via shooting and editing).²¹¹ Clearly the numerous *Warship* series evince visual 'literalism' in their recording of events on board ships at sea, with observation of the life and work of crews participating in real events. However, specific selections and emphases reflect significant mediations and manipulations both pro-filmically and filmically, for example the selection of Rachel and Dave as 'characters', the reiterative stress upon their growing intimacy via narrativising editing such as flashbacks, and the eventual accompaniment of salacious and sardonic voice-over. While these representational decisions reflect the fitting of the naval subject to the focal demands and expectations of reality television and docusoap, the 'implicatory levels' discernible elsewhere suggest manipulation to other ends. In the second series of *Warship: Life at Sea* repeated cuts to the same view (or perhaps simply the same repeated shot) of the *Severomorsk* appearing to show her stopped, with no discernible bow wave or wake, undermine the narration's construction of dangerous manoeuvres and a 'game of chicken' between the warships. Detectably repeated uses of shots of HMS *Northumberland* in stormy seas, occasionally also disrupting continuity, draw attention to other strenuous verbal and visual efforts made to heighten drama and tension in the third series of *Warship: Life at Sea*. Frequent insertions of excerpted news reports and soundbites from national leaders may historically locate the documented events but serve problematically as mutually reinforcing sources for the unquestioned politico-military discourse the series propound.

Furthermore, the documentarists' presence for exceptional events may not always be coincidental. After HMS *Duncan's* Black Sea encounter, HMS *Defender's* (Figure 5.12) confrontation with Russian forces in 2021 followed a similar pattern of action and reaction, purportedly innocent navigation and alleged purposeful provocation. While some details of this incident remain unclear or contested, British government documents subsequently found at a bus stop in Kent appeared to verify claims that HMS *Defender's* course was deliberate and accepted as provocative. The ship's deployment was approved at cabinet level as

-the-royal-navy-in-action-the-making-of-warship-life-at-sea/ [accessed 14 June 2022].

²¹⁰ Anonymous, Documenting the Royal Navy in action.

²¹¹ Corner, Re-styling the real, p.16.



Figure 5.12: HMS *Defender*. LPHOT BEN CORBETT. UK MOD © Crown copyright 2022: Open Government Licence.

a display intended to underline the UK's support for Ukraine, with the stated additional benefit that embedded (BBC) journalists on board would provide 'independent verification of HMS *Defender*'s action.²¹² HMS *Defender*'s detour to the Black Sea from CSG-21's voyage to the South China Sea (itself construed as a provocation to China, in 'making trouble where there is none') therefore appears more manufactured as a potential incident ripe for record.²¹³ Although the incidents recorded aboard HMS *Northumberland* (Figure 5.13) took

²¹² Dmitry Gorenburg, The HMS *Defender* Incident: What happened and What Are the Political Ramifications? *Russia Matters*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/hms-defender-incident-what-happened-and-what-are-the-political-ramifications> [accessed 5 June 2022]; Anonymous, HMS *Defender*: Russian jets and ships shadow British warship, *BBC News*, 23 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57583363> [accessed 5 June 2022]; Paul Adams, Classified Ministry of Defence documents found at bus stop, *BBC News*, 27 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-57624942> [accessed 5 June 2022].

²¹³ Bill Hayton, Explainer: The Carrier Strike Group in the South China Sea, *Council on Geostrategy*, 27 July 2021, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/the-carrier-strike-group-in-the-south-china-sea/> [accessed 14 June 2022]; George Allison, British aircraft carrier ignores Chinese warnings for a second time, *UK Defence Journal*, 4 October 2021, <https://www.ukdefencejournal.org.uk/british-aircraft-carrier-ignores-chinese-warnings-for-second-time> [accessed 14 June 2022].



Figure 5.13: HMS *Northumberland*. LPhot Kyle Heller, 2019. UK MOD © Crown copyright 2020: Open Government Licence.

place in 2020, the third series of *Warship: Life at Sea* was not broadcast until January 2022.²¹⁴ This produced a remarkable coincidence with news reporting (on 7 and 8 January) of Russian threats to the UK's undersea cables heralding the episodes detailing *Northumberland's* tracking of and collision with a Russian submarine (which aired on 10 and 17 January).²¹⁵ Russia's military build-up on its borders therefore formed the current affairs background to the series, with the subsequent invasion of Ukraine taking place three weeks after its end.

This suggests a more noticeable manipulation of the timing of airing than the apparently altered sequence of events represented in series one. Irrespective of the coincidental or purposeful convergence of the programmes' transmission with these events, the consistency with which repeated *Warship: Life at Sea* series have documented recent escalating incidents at sea (not only involving Russian ships and aircraft) and the didactic techniques and heightened visual and verbal styles they espouse have created a standardised and sensationalised narrative. Channel 5's home audience for reality television has been supplied with a persistent and persuasive depiction of the Royal Navy that combines popular entertainment form with overt and opinionated political commentary in televisual 'tabloidisation'. In recognising the impact of pro-filmic and filmic manipulation on the factual image's 'epistemological claims', John Corner asserts the need for critical scrutiny of the potential ideological and socio-cultural consequences of 'current forms of institutionalisation and practice' in documentary.²¹⁶ While such stylistic and structural manipulation is clearly not limited to recent evolution in television, hybridisation of factual television's forms may entail significant 'implicatory levels' of meaning:

The blurring of boundaries, which sounds like it should be a matter of celebration among deconstructors of convention, is not seen to be such a good thing at all, connected as it is with a further commodification of television and often with political conservatism.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ The *Navy Lookout* article states that 'around 1,700 hours of footage' were edited into the five episodes over a period of 'about 8 weeks'. Although the rough cut would then be subject to official scrutiny and approval, the 18-month delay until the series was broadcast is notable. Anonymous, Documenting the Royal Navy in action.

²¹⁵ Larisa Brown and Catherine Philp, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin warns of Russian threat at sea, *The Times*, 7 January 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/admiral-sir-tony-radakin-warns-of-russian-threat-at-sea-kx7vf5sxv> [accessed 18 January 2022]; Anonymous, 'Keep your subs away from our communication cables': New head of the armed forces Admiral Sir Tony Radakin warns Russia that severing crucial lines will be seen as act of war as tensions continue to rise, *Daily Mail*, 8 January 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10380825/Sir-Tony-Radakin-warns-Russia-attempts-sever-communication-cables-seen-act-war.html> [accessed 18 January 2022].

²¹⁶ Corner, Re-styling the real, p.12.

²¹⁷ Corner, Re-styling the real, p.13.

Such problems of critical definition might appear distant from the expectation, experience and entertainment of the viewing audience. The hybridity of *Warship: Life at Sea* appears to evince a gravitation from documentary and infotainment into a more directive, journalistic and 'tabloidised' treatment of current affairs. This might be occasioned by the nature of the events recorded but is certainly furthered by the filmic influences of subsequent structuring, stylisation and even the moment of transmission. Its contemporary depiction may be recorded as documentary or reality television and received as a combination of docusoap or infotainment but may be interpreted as rendering a simplified political discourse within current affairs programming. In the most negative evaluations, the spread of infotainment focuses fears that the commercialisation, simplification and sensationalism of news and current affairs are in themselves threats to the proper function of representative democracies. Inhibited access to accurate, unbiased and comprehensive information for a civically responsible and political active population may precipitate 'a crisis of communication for citizenship'.²¹⁸ Conversely, Hill suggests audiences respond more favourably to infotainment shows that, through their recording of events as they occur, 'are thought to be more accurate than television documentary'.²¹⁹ Similarly Mick Temple has argued, in contradiction to anxious and elitist views of the 'dumbing down' of politics and current affairs within progressively commercialised news coverage, that the increasing popularisation of contemporary issues within reality television succeeds in reaching, in a conducive form, a viewing public otherwise indifferent to or alienated from political debate.²²⁰ With Channel 5's contemporary series now representing some of the most sustained and prominent television depictions of the Navy (and a fourth series of *Warship: Life at Sea* being planned at time of writing), their hybridisation of factual forms and their amalgamation of the popular and the polemical can certainly be seen to be intimately linked, and equally open to critical interpretation.

²¹⁸ Brants, *Who's Afraid of Infotainment*, p.319.

²¹⁹ Hill, *Reality TV*, p.60.

²²⁰ Mick Temple, *Dumbing Down is Good for You*, *British Politics*, 2006, 1, 257–273.