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CHAPTER 2

Image and Identity: *Sea Power* and *Submarine*

Following a significant gap after the completion of *Sailor*, the BBC produced and broadcast two factual series representing the Royal Navy in substantially differing ways. These series adopted divergent documentary techniques, yet both functioned to represent and respond to the altered political and military climate of the 1980s. *Submarine* (1985) provided revealing insights to the training and operations of the Navy's conventional, nuclear and deterrent submarines, with both observational and more journalistic techniques applied to these previously undocumented areas of the service. By contrast, *Sea Power* (1981) adopted an historical-educational structure, resembling a sequence of cohesive, illustrated lectures on the past, present and future of national power at sea. Although its scope encompassed international fleets and conflicts at sea throughout history, its overriding Anglo-American focus reflected the historical-political realities of the Royal Navy's decline from pre-eminence during the 20th century, the rise of the US Navy in its stead, and the climate of the Cold War. Similarly, despite its aesthetic resemblance to *Sailor, Submarine* also depicted fundamental changes to the Navy's composition and role. Nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines (or SSNs) were acknowledged and highlighted as the Navy's new 'capital ships' bearing the names of former battleships, while the first detailed representation of the nuclear deterrent on television with filming on board a Polaris ballistic missile submarine (or SSBN) on patrol confronted audiences with the day-to-day realities and the political and ethical dimensions of national defence.[59]

[59] Duncan Redford, The 'Hallmark of a First-Class Navy': The Nuclear-Powered Submarine in the Royal Navy 1960–77, *Contemporary British History*, 2009, 23(2), 181–197, p.182.

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The series' deviating solutions to the issue of representing the Navy reflect their differing documentary auspices, *Submarine* being a chronologically, institutionally and physically constrained portrait of the present and *Sea Power* claiming an historically comprehensive and nationally significant perspective upon naval culture and tradition. Where *Sailor*'s documentary techniques established shipboard life on *Ark Royal* as an observable and ultimately familiar norm, *Submarine* challenged audiences with previously unseen environments and elites – submariners of all ranks, commanders in training, and officers and crews entrusted with the nation's most destructive weapons – witnessed in ways that underscored distinctions from the everyday. *Sea Power* sought to persuade as much as inform its audience of the national dimension of naval history and its abiding, communal importance into the present. Rather than simply documenting and recording, both series can therefore be seen to be polemical, dedicated to providing unique insight but endeavouring more to provoke debate. The broadcasting of *Sea Power* and *Submarine* respectively before and after the Falklands War emphasises their combined relevance to contemporary controversies about the composition, size, role, responsibility and capability of the Navy under the conditions of the Cold War, the administration of the then Conservative government and the anticipation, and experience, of armed conflict. Andrew Doorman notes that Margaret Thatcher's premiership and the defence policies and reviews enacted under it highlight the significance of the period, covering as it did the heightening of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as widespread privatisation, trade union reform and unemployment in the UK:

> Within this context of both international upheaval and domestic change British defence policy emerged from its traditional post-war position of relative inconsequence to become one of the key issues of the 1983 and 1987 general elections. The resurgence of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the decision to acquire the Trident missile system, the Falklands War, the deployment of ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) at Greenham Common and Molesworth, the Westland saga and the Nimrod AEW3 cancellation were just some of the more memorable issues associated with Conservative defence policy.[60]

Although these series from the 1980s are less renowned than their drama and documentary precedents of the 1970s, they illustrate a significant juncture in the Navy's history and characterise a crucial era of national political and cultural life, during which competing concepts of British identity exerted considerable sway.

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[60] Andrew M. Doorman, *Defence Under Thatcher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.1.

Sea Power

Sea Power presented an historical overview of naval warfare via case studies of warship types and their roles, employment and evolution. Its producer John Dekker collaborated with the Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Peter Hill-Norton, who acted as the presenter and narrator of all the programmes, though the precise origins of the project are unclear.[61] Its seven themed episodes ('Battleship', 'Carrier', 'Gunboat', 'Commando', 'Cruiser', 'Submarine' and 'Destroyer') were broadcast in February and March 1981, just over a year before the beginning of the Falklands War. If the documentary series *Sailor* had assumed an elegiac aspect, with the retirement of HMS *Ark Royal* against a backdrop of continuing cutbacks in defence, then *Sea Power* embodied a potent combination of retrospection and rhetoric in charting the history, lamenting the decline and stressing the unchanged significance of the Royal Navy.

John Dekker had been involved throughout the 1970s as an editor, producer and director for numerous BBC factual and current affairs programmes, working on *Campaign Report* during the 1970 general election, on several series of *The Money Programme*, and on *Parliamentarians* (in which Robin Day interviewed prominent political figures including Michael Foot, Jo Grimond, Francis Pym and Enoch Powell). Hill-Norton (as stressed repeatedly in the series) had been a lifetime career sailor, entering the Navy during the 1920s and serving throughout the Second World War in the Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific. After the war and involvement in the Suez Crisis, he became Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff, then Second and subsequently First Sea Lord, before being promoted to Admiral of the Fleet and Chief of the Defence Staff in the 1970s.[62] In these roles Hill-Norton participated extensively in meetings with NATO allies, was involved in decisions relating to the maintenance of the British independent nuclear deterrent, and clashed frequently with representatives of the Conservative governments of the period over cuts to defence.

Hill-Norton's tenure in various senior positions within the defence establishment coincided with a period in which fundamental changes to the role, perception and size of the Navy took place. The extents to which these changes

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[61] Amongst Lord Hill-Norton's extensive papers ('The Papers of Peter Hill-Norton, Baron Hill Norton' GBR/0014/HLNN) in the Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, no correspondence exists detailing the origins or development of the *Sea Power* television series. It is therefore impossible to determine if the idea for the series came from Dekker following Hill-Norton's other appearances on the BBC, or whether Hill-Norton instigated the project himself to broadcast the views on the future of the Navy and the NATO alliance which he promoted in speeches, lectures and his previous publication *No Soft Options: The Politico-Military Realities of NATO* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1978).

[62] Thomas A. Heathcote, *The British Admirals of the Fleet 1734–1995: A Biographical Dictionary* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2002), p.107.

were economically unavoidable, politically expedient and resisted or welcomed by the service itself continue to be subjects of debate. Between the beginning of the 1960s and the start of the 1980s (at which point the Nott defence cuts were first mooted), successive British governments wrestled unsuccessfully with the varying and often incompatible demands of the national economy, increasing but unaffordable defence spending, NATO membership and cooperation with the United States, the gradual disintegration of the British Empire and irresolution about the withdrawal from 'East of Suez'. The Labour government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson (and Defence Minister Denis Healey) drastically transformed the Navy's future plans with the cancellation of a new generation of aircraft carriers in 1966.[63] The judgement not to proceed with new aircraft carriers was linked to the eventual, official pronouncement of a renunciation of Britain's role 'East of Suez' and a reframing of the UK's land, sea and air forces to concentrate on NATO commitments in Europe. Ironically, the 1974–75 defence review that instigated more cuts and savings on this basis actually secured the Navy's funding, in order to placate NATO allies about a decline in capabilities and to protect UK employment through the maintenance of the shipbuilding programme. [64] However, in Bruce Watson's view the inconclusiveness of the withdrawal and the apparently unchanged and ongoing British obligation to distant operations on grounds of political influence and moral responsibility created an untenable present and uncertain future:

> In one sense, Britain's east of Suez policy was a failure of her leaders to see the importance of sea power. The policy was not clear cut because, instead of a total withdrawal, it was revised to allow for keeping some distant territories. British defense [sic] policy, however, was in accord with the original policy, producing a navy that was appropriate for London's regional NATO role, but not providing the force projection necessary to defend the distant territories. This left such possessions vulnerable to regional intrigues and to attack by nations that would never have challenged the strong Britain of years past. Just such a set of events occurred in the Falklands.[65]

The policies of previous decades, driven by economic realities and political decisions affecting the country's present and future identity, thereby created a Navy with both resource and identity crises, attempting to balance expectations, capabilities and contingencies. In the continuation of its international

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[63] Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, pp.272–277. See also Hampshire, *From East of Suez*, pp.107–140; Michael Howard, Britain's Strategic Problem East of Suez, *International Affairs*, 1966, 42(2), 179–183; Hugh Hanning, Britain East of Suez: Facts and Figures, *International Affairs*, 1966, 42(2), 253–260.

[64] Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, pp.320–322.

[65] Watson, *The Changing Face of the World's Navies*, p.182.

role, Eric Grove equally identifies the role played by the Navy's own traditions and practices, which may also have served as leverage for wider consideration, and greater funding, of its responsibilities:

> Despite its primary Atlantic role the Royal Navy was loath to give up the capacity to operate worldwide. British imperial nostalgia could be legitimised by the requirement to demonstrate the 'general capability' to operate outside the NATO area, a capacity that reflected the residual interests and commitments the United Kingdom retained around the globe. The Royal Navy itself, unhappy with a future that limited it to cold, grey, northern seas, and with centuries of experience in colonial and post-colonial peacekeeping duties in more congenial warmer climes, encouraged as much as possible an emphasis on these worldwide commitments.[66]

Hill-Norton's Admiralty appointments overlapped with this tumultuous period of the Navy's history. After participating in the decisions taken in the context of the Labour government's defence white papers of the 1960s and 1970s, he went on to become a vocal critic of the Conservative government's statements on defence both before and after the Falklands War. Writing in 1983, he dismissed the defence policy contained in white papers in 1981 and 1982 as 'demonstrable rubbish [that] flies in the face of history … and would serve neither our national interests, nor those of the [NATO] Alliance, best'.[67] His contribution to, or even instigation of, the production of the *Sea Power* series therefore stands as historical, not simply as an embodiment of the Navy's and his own personal record but as a reflection of an historic period of the Navy's post-war development.

Sea Power's dedication of episodes to particular ship types rather than eras or national fleets provided a framework for the examination of varied instances of their successful and unsuccessful uses in the past. However, implicitly this approach articulated an urgent concern for the application of historical lessons to the Navy's circumstances in the present. In providing tactical and strategic analysis based on the precedents of experience (above all his own, in the course of a long naval career), Hill-Norton sought to extrapolate from and guide viewers through the lessons of history towards the pressing problems of the present, pursuing a relentless rhetorical aim:

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[66] Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, p.336. Given that recruitment and retention remained abiding problems for Royal Navy manpower throughout the period, First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Varyl Begg was keen to stress that the 'Eastlant' Navy still offered opportunities for foreign travel and overseas deployments. Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, p.339.

[67] Lord Hill-Norton, Return to a National Strategy, in *Alternative Approaches to British Defence Policy* ed. by John Baylis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983), 117–137, p.117.

> The idea of sea power has seldom been taken very seriously, even in a maritime nation such as Britain. It is true that most people vaguely believe in British sea power rather as they do in Christianity … The Royal Navy has always stood high in the public regard, while few people ever bother to ask what the Navy is *for*, what it is expected to *do*, and, more important, what it *can* do.[68]

Hill-Norton's concentration upon the 'size and shape' of navies through history belied his overriding concern for the 'right shape' and size for the British navy of the future.[69] His naval narrative was therefore crafted to accommodate both the exigencies of the Navy's present NATO role confronting the Soviet Union, and the archetypes of its contributions to national and imperial history. What he judged to be the misconception as much as underestimation of threats in the past provided the cautionary exemplars for present-day leaders responsible for national sea power:

> It is reasonable to suppose that since misjudgement (and even folly) were not the prerogatives of our ancestors alone, it is at least possible that similar misconceptions of danger may exist in present-day navies and Governments. A later generation will doubtless be better placed to explain the muddled thinking that has led to some of the errors committed by today's admirals and politicians in London, Washington and Moscow.[70]

The first episode opens with a pre-credit sequence shot in the highly traditional surroundings of Greenwich Royal Naval college, which, Hill-Norton's voice-over asserts, 'for centuries … has been the centre of a maritime world, the Navy's university' and 'the cradle of sea power'. The narrator is then presented in full uniform, speaking directly to camera: 'In my own family the connection to the Navy has been unbroken for three hundred years. I've been a naval officer for half a century.' A title on screen then introduces the series: 'Admiral of the Fleet, The Lord Hill-Norton G.C.B presents …' A similar traditional emphasis dictates the first programme's concentration on the history of the battleship. As concrete illustration of a vanished warship type, Hill-Norton visits a preserved battleship (the museum ship USS *Alabama*), relating

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[68] Lord Hill-Norton and John Dekker, *Sea Power* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p.18.

[69] Hill-Norton adopted similar vocabulary and analogy in comparing the 'shapes', capabilities, uses and intentions of the Royal and Soviet Navies and the need for conventional as well as nuclear deterrence in a lecture in 1983. Lord Hill-Norton, 'Maritime Affairs – The Royal and Merchant Navies', *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*, 1983, 31(5326), 604–615.

[70] Hill-Norton and Dekker, *Sea Power*, p.19.

his own experience of service on board British ships (HMS *Ramillies, Rodney, Malaya* and *Howe*) as he leads camera and viewer around the 'floating town' with its 'miles of streets, and separate neighbourhoods'. While navigating the functional environment of mess decks, magazines and machinery spaces, he describes the community and existence of the battleship as human and naval entity, with its strict discipline, 'law' and 'ceremonial' demands, all devoted to 'delivering the punch' of sea power. The organisation of the battleship's crew is described in the terms of a conservative industrialised hierarchy, as 'very advanced heavy industry … with nearly the entire workforce engaged in the manufacture of one product: continuous heavy gunfire'. As the 'backbone of every great navy', Hill-Norton avers that 'battleships were the most technically advanced machines the world had ever seen … in their time as terrifying as nuclear missiles are today'. Leaving the narrator on USS *Alabama*'s deck, the following animated sequence charts the development of the 'line-of-battle-ship' from the wooden ships of the Nelsonian era to the armoured dreadnoughts of the world wars, with illustrated pages turning to depict the evolution of protection, propulsion and armament.[71] Rhetorical and folkloric diction marks the narration, as the replacement of cannon balls with explosive shells is said to reduce the three-deck ship of the line to 'just so much firewood', and the revolutionary HMS *Dreadnought* is championed as having been built in 'a year and a day'. Hill-Norton also recalls the treaties of his days as a cadet in the 1920s, which strove to constrain capital ship numbers like the efforts to limit strategic nuclear weapons in the present. In narrating but also interpreting the demise of the battleship, the episode encourages the recognition of abiding and relevant concepts instead: the inactive British battlefleet of World War I should be better understood as an effective 'deterrent' rather than a fighting unit.

In detailing the story of the aircraft carrier, the ship type destined to displace the battleship within the naval hierarchy, Hill-Norton concentrates on the innovations and controversies of the history of Britain's Fleet Air Arm, with illustration provided by extensive archive footage. His orthodox narrative of the passing of the mantle of naval supremacy from battleship to carrier is entwined with the parallel fall of the Royal Navy and rise of the US Navy to prominence, with the carrier facilitating America's ascendency during and after World War II. This acknowledgement of historical inevitability in the demise of both Britain and the battleship as manifestations of naval dominance does not pass without other affirmations of importance. In leading the development of naval aviation between the world wars, Hill-Norton asserts that 'Britain was ahead of the world in everything – except the aircraft', thus highlighting the

[71] A much later series, *Combat Ships* (Woodcut Media, 2017–23), frequently features museum ships or vessels undergoing restoration in order to illustrate types of warship through history, alongside historians' insights and archive footage. Without *Sea Power*'s national focus and lacking thematic or historical coherence, the series epitomises 'popular documentary' and 'factual entertainment' (see Chapter 4).

perceived malign influence of inter-service rivalry between the Navy and Royal Air Force (which had been instrumental in the cancellation of the Navy's carriers in the 1960s).[72] The admiral's view of the harmful effects of RAF control of aviation at sea and its dominance of aircraft development underpins his subsequent valorisation of the quaint, obsolete Swordfish aircraft famed for its role in the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck*. Narrating over archive footage of the war in the Pacific, Hill-Norton relates the advantages conferred on American and Japanese admirals from their having (unlike British ones) full control of their ship- and shore-based aircraft but is also quick to point out the presence of five Royal Navy fleet carriers in the Pacific by the war's end. In advocating the primacy of the aircraft carrier, Hill-Norton's personal commentary acknowledges the waning in British sea power, asserts the consequences of the decision not to build new British carriers, and also reveals his views on the Navy's eventual stopgap solution in the introduction of the vertical take-off Sea Harrier aircraft operated from smaller ships. Even as he asserts that 'every naval commander must have his own planes: the ocean is so vast, there is no substitute', he recognises that, while the US Navy deployed over a hundred carriers by the end of World War II, 'there are only twenty in the whole world today'. From the American super-carrier USS *Forrestal* operating at sea, the image cuts to the forlorn image of HMS *Ark Royal* (which Hill-Norton himself had commanded in the 1960s), inert, decommissioned and anchored, with the narrator himself in the foreground looking on, his back to the camera to hide his expression. His voice-over intones the economic truth ('But to build a new fleet carrier today would cost a thousand million pounds, and Britain can't afford them any longer'), and, while the advent of 'a new kind of carrier – the *Invincible* class' (Figure 2.1), sporting the British inventions of the Harrier and the ski-jump – is celebrated as a development which the Russians and Americans may copy, the admiral affirms that there is 'still no substitute for the big carrier'.[73]

Having ended the 'Carrier' episode upholding the reputation of aircraft carriers as the 'supreme embodiment of sea power for forty years, the latter-day ships of the line' that will last as long in service as HMS *Victory*, Hill-Norton devotes the 'Gunboat' episode to ships at the opposite end of scale and apparent importance. He visits HMS *Anglesey* on fishery protection duty, patrolling British waters in defence of fishing grounds, which he labels a vital manifestation of 'sea power in practice all the year round'. If the 'Battleship' and 'Carrier'

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[72] For a comprehensive analysis of the complex circumstances of the Royal Navy's aviation in the interwar period, see James P. Levy, The Development of British Naval Aviation: Preparing the Fleet Air Arm for War, 1934–1939, *Global War Studies*, 2012, 9(2), 6–38.

[73] Despite the loss of new conventional carrier construction, Grove notes that Hill-Norton was amongst those who opposed the building of the *Invincible*-class 'through-deck cruisers' in the late 1960s as an expedient alternative. Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, p.317.

Figure 2.1: HMS *Invincible* returns to Portsmouth following the end of the Falklands War. Royal Navy, 1982. Crown Copyright: Open Government Licence.

programmes elegise aspects of British naval culture that had passed into history, the 'Gunboat' episode purposefully illustrates under-appreciated present-day political and economic realities, yet with historical dimensions. The constabulary and national roles he describes ('Fishery protection may look simple, but it's one of the trickiest jobs the Royal Navy has to do … hemmed in by treaties and restrictions') expand without apology to acknowledge an imperial history of worldwide presence and policing. The beleaguered nature of British maritime culture figures in his delivery through an implicit criticism of European fishing controls (bemoaning fishermen watching 'their very livelihoods vanish'), contextualised by wider trends in the shrinkage of Britain's merchant navy ('eighty years ago the British fishing fleet, like the Royal Navy, was the biggest in the world'). A cross-fade from the present to black-and-white footage of Victorian-era fishing vessels seamlessly introduces further archive images of 19th-century gunboats regulating the empire, 'on the river Tigris, showing the flag and showing who was boss'. Similar footage of the Yangtse prompts Hill-Norton to mention his own great-great-grandfather's service on a gunboat during the Opium Wars. The danger (and justification) of Western powers' embroilment in China is illustrated by the famous stories of USS *Panay* and HMS *Amethyst*. A cut from footage of HMS *Amethyst*'s escape to

Hill-Norton on HMS *Anglesey*'s bridge underpins his reflection on a history of responsibility and obligation. Although 'gunboat diplomacy' has now become 'a term of contempt', he claims that the putting down of the African slave trade is 'one of the finest chapters in history of the Royal Navy'. By comparison, more recent humiliation in the 'Cod Wars' with Iceland emphasises for the admiral the need for constant and multifaceted embodiments of British maritime influence. The absurd spectacle of 'frigates playing bumper cars' with Icelandic gunboats means, in a decisive deduction, that 'not just a Cod War but even a Cold War underlines the fact that it requires several sorts of warship to make up a whole navy … in the exercise of sea power'.

The discussion of the next example of sea power to supplant the battleship and the carrier, 'Submarine', provides Hill-Norton with similar scope for the recognition of a glorious past and the regret for a guarantee-less present. The history of the Royal Navy's struggle against the submarine in both world wars offered examples of endurance and the opportunity to moralise upon its underhandedness as a weapon inimical to British concepts of sea power and warfare. Paradoxically, the post-war technological maturation of the submarine with nuclear power, and its transformation (by Britain and other countries) into an instrument of deterrence with nuclear weapons and therefore the most powerful demonstration of sea power in history, are largely dismissed by Hill-Norton within his traditionalist view. For nuclear-powered fleet boats, as for ballistic missile submarines, he argues that 'there are no rungs on the ladder of escalation of underwater conflict'. While the Soviet Union's submarine fleet is argued to represent as existential a threat to the West as Donitz's U-boats in World War II, ballistic missile submarines can 'threaten only Armageddon, nothing less', and in contrast to the usefulness of traditional surface ships, risk becoming 'militarily insignificant'.[74] Similar defences of the flexibility (and necessary scale) of traditional forces permeate *Sea Power*'s presentation. For example, the exploration of the evolution of amphibious warfare and the changing role of Britain's Royal Marines in 'Commando' pointedly recognises the repeated post-war threats to the Corps' continued existence.

The epilogue to the book published to accompany the television series is a transcript of the speech Hill-Norton gave in the House of Lords in July 1981, in response to the government's white paper for United Kingdom defence ('The Way Forward').[75] The book's inclusion of this concerted individual assault on the Conservative government's defence programme ('faulty in reasoning, incomplete in strategy and totally mysterious in arithmetic') renders explicit the agenda behind the previously broadcast series. The climax of Hill-Norton's speech and the coda to it, which the book adds, encapsulate not only the admiral's choleric political convictions but also the auspices and the message, more widely propagated than the House of Lords, which the television series promoted:

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[74] Hill-Norton and Dekker, *Sea Power*, p.153.
[75] Hill-Norton and Dekker, *Sea Power*, pp.182–188.

> 'To conclude, I regard these savage cuts in the Royal Navy as a highly dangerous gamble with our national security. They flow from a misunderstanding of the threat, ignorance of the best means to counter it, disregard for the combined capability of the Alliance, a mistaken assessment of priorities and a total neglect of history.'
>
> After fifty-three years in the Royal Navy, I could have said much more – but could hardly have said less.[76]

However, the orthodoxy of *Sea Power*'s arguments and claims for the maintenance or recovery of British naval standing, though ironically borne out by the outbreak of the Falklands War barely a year later, stand in marked contrast to *Submarine*. The divergent perspective and contemporary portrait it provides offered viewers insight into a previously underrepresented arm of the Navy but also delivered a more open, discursive documentary treatment to inspire the renewed consciousness and debate that *Sea Power* had sought.

Submarine

The six-part series (shot during 1983 but broadcast in 1985) devotes two episodes to three illustrative events: the submarine command course ('The Perisher') conducted aboard HMS *Oracle*; HMS *Warspite*'s participation in the NATO 'Ocean Safari' exercise in the North Atlantic; and HMS *Repulse* preparing for and undertaking a deterrent patrol. In addition to opening the relatively secretive world of submarine operations to a television audience, the series also addresses the status of the nuclear submarine as national and naval symbol of the Cold War:

> There is absolutely no doubt that by embarking early on a programme of nuclear-powered submarines, the Royal Navy kept itself in the front rank of maritime fighting powers. It is not chance that confines that front rank to the five nations that are also possessors of nuclear weapons and are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.[77]

The series answers the same need established by Duncan Redford, in his recognition of the requirement to identify and understand the significance of the

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[76] Hill-Norton and Dekker, *Sea Power*, p.188. Hill-Norton spoke repeatedly in the Lords on naval cuts proposed before the Falklands War, and on defence policy in its aftermath, denying that his criticisms sprang solely from 'dark blue nostalgia'. Hansards, The Defence Estimates 1982, House of Lords Debate 27 July 1982 434/149-220, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1982/jul/27/the-defence-estimates-1982-1#S5LV0434P0_19820727_HOL_172 [accessed 22 February 2022].

[77] J.R. Hill, *British Sea Power in the 1980s* (London: Ian Allan, 1985), pp.21–22.

nuclear submarine within the Royal Navy's 'culture' (and additionally how public perceptions of the submarine and therefore of the service are also formed or influenced).[78] The transformation of the submarine (as much as its escalating cost) during the Cold War underlined its magnified importance, the secrecy surrounding its design and operation, and its aura of technological and military ascendency, but with particular significance for Britain, as Redford observes:

> This change in the perception of the submarine from one that threatened the Navy's heavy units, such as aircraft carriers, to one that gave them the freedom to operate effectively was significant. The submarine was now a means of achieving naval supremacy not destroying it, helping to preserve the idea of the British naval superiority, global power, status and identity.[79]

Redford notes the combination of both historical evocation and technological innovation encapsulated in the christening of the first British nuclear submarine, HMS *Dreadnought*, as well as the conscious selection of names associated with World War II battleships.[80] By contrast, he suggests that the selection of the 'R' class names for Britain's first Polaris missile submarines (even though these also evoked capital ships of the past) was inflected by concerns about civilian perceptions (i.e. sensitivity over naming a deterrent submarine HMS *Revenge*). It is noteworthy that the names eventually selected pointedly eschewed associations with famous and (within the service, at least) familiar submarines from World War II, though names such as *Upholder* and *Turbulent* came to be reused in the 1980s.[81] Where the episodes centred on HMS *Warspite* and on the deterrent patrol concretised the nuclear-powered (and -armed) submarine's contemporary significance, those depicting the 'Perisher' course represented elitism alloyed with tradition.

The title sequence announces the series' emphases upon warfare, secrecy and high technology. The programme title scrolls vertically across the frame, periodically illuminated as if by the sound waves of a sonar system on a detection screen. Shots of a submarine included in the sequence are intriguing and fragmentary, giving views of the deck as it surfaces, a single diving plane cutting through the waves, the submarine's bow, and a long shot of the boat leaving a powerful wake as it rushes past the camera. The 'radiophonic' theme music, reminiscent of a contemporary Vangelis electronic score, underlines both the other worldliness and modernity of these images. In the first episode ('Million Pound Captains'), this sequence cuts directly and dramatically to a shot of a speeding warship at sea level. The accompanying voice-over (by actor

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[78] Redford, The 'Hallmark of a First-Class Navy', pp.181–197.
[79] Redford, The 'Hallmark of a First-Class Navy', pp.183–184.
[80] Redford, The 'Hallmark of a first-class navy', pp.185–186.
[81] Redford, The 'Hallmark of a first-class navy', p.187.

John Nettles) only partially explains the dangerous situation: '30 miles outside Glasgow, a Royal Naval frigate is charging straight towards a Royal Naval submarine.' The expansive shots of warships on the surface contrast strikingly with limited periscope views and the constricted handheld camera perspective inside the submerged submarine as trainee captains are confronted with steadily increasing pressure and complexity in the command course's tests. The course's instructor and examiner ('Teacher'), Commander Dai Evans, is introduced first by his words inserted over shots inside the submarine and the students in the midst of their tests, and then by a cut to him being interviewed ashore, summarising the 'Perisher' in principle and in practice:

> In order to be able to test someone, and in order to prove someone fully capable of taking the responsibility of commanding, it's important that you actually take them to the limits and that's what we do. We actually create situations which take the student to the limits. The idea is that at the end of the Perisher course the student – by that stage an embryo commanding officer – should be able to take his submarine to war.

Despite the acknowledgement of the ruthless professional environment of the course (success means becoming a submarine captain, failure immediate expulsion from the service), the 'Perisher' episodes recall the focus of *Sailor* in dwelling on the human dimensions of its demands.[82] Evans's four students are introduced by name, with explanation of their varied backgrounds and personalities. The intricacies and dangers of the successive exercises are detailed for audience comprehension via diagrammatic computer animations, yet the inevitably claustrophobic shooting and terse voice-over document the human difficulty. In a directly documenting role, an extended, unbroken point-of-view shot tracking and panning through the cramped compartments from bow to stern illustrates the voice-over's informative commentary:

> The design of these submarines dates from the 1950s. They're not much bigger than the U-boats Germany was sending to sea at the end of the Second World War. The single galley feeds the crew of 70. Patrol for these submarines can last for many weeks. The seven officers work, eat and sleep in the tiny wardroom. These small quiet submarines can be used for all kinds of covert operations, but they are uncomfortable places to live.

[82] An earlier BBC series recording the three-year training course for RAF pilots, *Fighter Pilot* (1981), similarly stressed the personal challenges, disappointments and emotional demands of military training. In contrast to John Nettles's nuanced and emotive voice-over for *Submarine*, the formal and informative narration of *Fighter Pilot* appears more overtly recruitment-driven.

Figure 2.2: HMS *Warspite*. 1970. Isaac Newton, CC BY-SA 2.5, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:49_HMS_Warspite_entering_Gibraltar_Feb1970.jpg

As the course continues, sympathetic scrutiny of the struggling students' tribulations outweighs any sensationalisation of success. While the camera observes his trial, the voice-over reveals that the escalating demands are 'making [student] Simon Bevington feel physically ill with nerves'. Conversely, the failure of another student ('Tiny' Lister) is registered entirely through 'Teacher's' regretful reaction. Shots of Evans and his words in interview are intercut to accompany long shots of the submarine surfacing in the dark for Lister's departure: 'He was absolutely marvellous about it. He took it with tremendous dignity, really – it's a day that I loathe.' In contrast to the immediacy of the series' record of the course, its extended schedule facilitates this introspective posture, as the unsuccessful students are interviewed after having left the submarine service. Their reflections (Gavin McLaren, who resigns 'just five days before the end of a four-month course', compares his feelings to those of 'bereavement') are intercut with Evans pouring champagne for the successful candidates. The final images show Lister walking alone on the seashore. In addition to the poignancy of this juxtaposition of success and failure, the temporal and spatial disruption of this concluding sequence ironically enforces a void between the failed students and their peers akin to the distance the series has documented (and striven to overcome) between submariners and the civilian audience.

Continuing the 'Perisher's' emphasis on command, the episodes following HMS *Warspite*'s (Figure 2.2) participation in a major NATO exercise ('Ocean Safari: The Hunt' and 'The Kill') above all portray the response of the submarine's captain to (mock) combat. The extraordinary record of the preparation of the submarine and crew for the exercise and the conduct of extended

wargames in the North Atlantic anticipating conflict with the Warsaw Pact also encompasses a further appreciation of everyday life on board, extending the study of the 'Perisher' programmes. However, in line with the command course's acknowledged preparation for war, the exercise's spectacle of simulated combat provokes reflection on the potential future global war for which the submarine and crew are training, and on the actual conflict that took place in the Falklands.

In interview, Commander Jonathan Cooke admits he relishes the prospect of the exercise in which his HMS *Warspite* will assume the role of a Russian submarine: 'playing the bad guys' will be more satisfying than a recent lengthy patrol in the South Atlantic. In the exercise his submarine will be attacking merchant ships just like U-boats in World War II: Cooke discusses the perceived 'underhandedness' of the submarine and the description of them as 'un-English' but stresses that the role of the Royal Navy's submarines is not anti-shipping but anti-submarine, and 'anti-Soviet submarine principally'. He admits that the submarine 'may look extremely sinister to a layman' and that submariners 'are conscious of the image we portray, and perhaps don't discourage it'. The camera records and provides its own comment on the seriousness with which the exercise is viewed. Cooke's strenuous efforts to manoeuvre and evade detection from opposing helicopters and ships as in a real war situation, and the enthusiasm with which he attacks his targets are juxtaposed with his officers playing the board game *Risk* in the wardroom.

The ordinary crew members evince no interest in the exercise, which to them simply represents more work. Their briefing dissolves in laughter when the speaker struggles to pronounce the name of the French aircraft carrier *Foch*. Their impromptu remarks or comments in interview span jokes about radiation ('Can you still have babies after being on nuclear submarines?' – 'Well, I've never had one!' – 'Do you glow in the dark?'), thoughts on the 'money-trap' of extra pay for submarine service, and domestic difficulties caused by being out of communication for weeks or months at a time. One sailor confides more seriously that wives do not want to hear about the problems of their patrols when they return, because they have experienced problems of their own in their absence. Therefore domestic life is made light of in mess conversations, because sailors do not want to think about wives at home on their own. Earlier, the camera impassively observes younger crew members being instructed in the use of escape equipment by a senior rating: one asks anxiously about their real chances in an emergency and is told that, if escape were not possible, 'we wouldn't go to the expense of all this equipment'.

Overcoming technical difficulties and the opposing forces, *Warspite* completes 'Ocean Safari' with great success. Cooke reckons they have attacked and sunk 12 warships, four replenishment ships and 13 ships of the convoys, a total of about 300,000 tons of merchant shipping. The implications of this for national or European defence (since *Warspite* has been playing the role of the enemy) are neglected in favour of confronting the personal consequences. When he

confesses that such 'exercise carnage' would weigh on his conscience if it were real, there is a sudden cut to an extreme close-up of *The Sun*'s 'GOTCHA' headline, announcing the sinking of the Argentinian warship *General Belgrano* by *Warspite*'s sister ship HMS *Conqueror*.[83] Confronting the viewer and the captain with the continuing controversy surrounding this action in the Falklands, the programme interweaves the captain's comments ('we being in the trade so to speak were aware for instance of the prevalent weather conditions down there and the likely water temperatures'), a photograph of the skull and crossbones flag flown by *Conqueror* on her return to the UK, and Cooke's personal views:

> Well, if I'd been that commanding officer, if *Warspite* had been in the same position, I'd have done exactly the same. I only hope I'd have done it with as much technical proficiency as he did. But I'd have done it because that was what was required to win the war. I don't think I'd have taken much pleasure in doing so.

While it is tempting to see crystallised in the story of the sinking of the *Belgrano* every aspect of Britain's historical, ambiguous relationship with the submarine and the morality of its use in war, *Submarine*'s choice to end its episodes on the new 'battleship' on this ethical conundrum (for the documentary subject and its audience) underlines the series' maturity, responsibility and openness.

This tendency to challenge the documentary subject in order to inform and confront the audience becomes even more noticeable in the final parts of the series portraying the Polaris submarine HMS *Repulse*. The controversy and cost associated with the acquisition of an independent nuclear deterrent in the 1960s focused attention, like the building of nuclear submarines in general, on Britain's military influence, naval standing, political allegiances and economic resilience. Arguing that Britain's strategic security was in any case assured by America's nuclear deterrent, Bruce Watson has asserted that the 'prestige' conferred by being one of only five nations to possess SSBNs was acquired at the cost of resources and units needed for 'a more substantial presence East of Suez'.[84] Conversely, even more so than the more visible and prestigious

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[83] Questions of military necessity, underlying political machinations and debate on the ethics of combat have always surrounded the attack on the *Belgrano*. Its sinking has been perceived to be 'unsporting, discreditable, even perfidious' ('Canopus', A Personal View of the Falklands Campaign, *The Naval Review*, 1983, 71(1), 19–23, p.21), but suggestions of its political motivation and a subsequent cover-up of its circumstances reflect wider suspicions about the government's pursuit of military resolution to the conflict. See Paul Rogers, A Necessary War? *Political Studies Review*, 2007, 5(1), 25–31. Criticism of *Conqueror*'s flying of the skull and crossbones overlooked or ignored the tradition of this practice for submarines returning from active service. Jim Allaway, *The Navy in the News 1954–1991* (London: HMSO, 1993), pp.68–69.

[84] Watson, *The Changing Face of the World's Navies*, p.135

SSNs, Ken Young has argued that the construction of Polaris submarines for the nuclear deterrent was deliberately sought to cement the Navy's significance within national defence debates following the decline of the surface fleet.[85] Although nearly 20 years of continuous at sea deterrent patrols had been completed by the time of *Submarine*'s broadcast, the pertinence and topicality of its timing is discernible from the controversy surrounding the renewal of Britain's deterrent (with negotiations on the purchase of the American Trident system in 1980–82 provoking a rise in UK membership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament).[86]

Although they introduce the most secret and least understood aspect of the submarine service and the Navy with comparable candour and revelatory detail, the episodes devoted to HMS *Repulse*'s preparation and departure ('Taking the Black Pig to Sea' and 'Polaris Patrol') differ from the series' earlier portraits in privileging the shoreside civilian families supporting the sailors at sea. While the difficulties of separation (on both sides) described here pertain equally to the submarines and crews portrayed elsewhere in the series, the exploration of the domestic impact of naval and submarine service in these parts of the series gains significance from the weight of responsibility deterrent duty entails. The paradoxical, acknowledged but repressed logic of the men's lives is that they perform roles dedicated to the defence of nation and family, which if carried to their conclusion would occasion the annihilation of both. The introduction to HMS *Repulse* emphasises its aura of secrecy as much as its national significance. Return from patrol necessitates a replacement of the crew and a replenishment of stores so that the submarine can depart again as soon as possible. A brief edited sequence follows her new commander, Captain Mike Hawke, being driven wordlessly to the quayside. The camera pans over the full length of the submarine as it docks and sailors raise the jackstaff, with the shot coming to rest on the carved crown at its top. Shots of anonymous hands depict couriers delivering sealed orders to Captain Hawke. The voice-over describes the unchanging routine:

> For the next six weeks, *Repulse* will be checked, tested, maintained, painted and stored. Then she will leave the Clyde submarine base at Faslane, and Hawke will take her back to sea for another patrol. For eight weeks at a time, *Repulse* and its nuclear missiles can represent the sum-total of the nation's independent deterrent.

The portentousness of this opening is immediately contrasted with the handheld camera mimicking the confusion of new crew members attempting

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[85] Ken Young, The Royal Navy's Polaris Lobby, 1955–62, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2010, 25(3), 56–86.

[86] Anthony Eames, The Trident Sales Agreement and Cold War Diplomacy, *Journal of Military History*, 2017, 81, 163–186.

to navigate the 'maze' of the submarine's passageways. This is followed by discomforting shots of faces perusing official documents, as the voice-over describes a necessary but appalling formality to rival the enormity of the deterrent captain's orders:

> For the new crew, there's a difficult decision to make: once the submarine leaves for patrol, they're stuck underwater for at least eight weeks, so most decide not to be told of any domestic tragedy until the end of the patrol. The frustration of knowing that a child had died, for instance, yet not being able to return home could drive a man insane.

A close-up of the form's options for receiving news – 'AT ONCE? ON RETURN TO HARBOUR? OR WHEN (Give details)' – sets out the imponderable choice. Similarly unthinkable circumstances are explored in interview with Surgeon Lieutenant Robert Garth. The Polaris submarines are described as unique in carrying qualified doctors, since medical emergencies must not interrupt the deterrent's operations. Although an operation would be possible if there were no alternative, he admits that with only one doctor acting as both surgeon and anaesthetist it would have to be done under local anaesthetic, an 'unpleasant procedure', and 'if things go wrong there is no back-up'. Unusually within the series' approach, this prompts the voice-over to frame a direct question: 'So if someone became too ill for the doctor to treat, would Hawke abort the patrol and leave Britain without its deterrent?' A cut to the captain in interview provides (or fails to provide) the answer: 'Well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to dodge that question and say that I can't answer it. There are rules laid down for me to react to certain conditions. I'm afraid I must say no more than that.'

If the conditions of the deterrent patrol are shown to precipitate unthinkable circumstances and unanswerable questions, these appear as at once exaggerated versions of the 'normal' experience of submarine service, and as small-scale, individual manifestations of the overarching inconceivability of nuclear war. The irony of these analogies and connections is encapsulated in the programme's record of 'family day', when family members are welcomed aboard HMS *Repulse*. This temporary staged convergence of the submarine's contrasted communities is followed by franker comments in the pub. One spouse comments simply on the submarine's appearance ('it's an evil looking thing, I think'), while her husband reflects on the 'hard work' of the last weeks at home before sailing, conscious of the days slipping away before 'you've got to be taking that black pig to sea' … 'and suddenly that time's upon you when you've got to say goodbye'. With the submarine's departure concluding the first half of this segment, the second probes the consequences for family and crew members. On board the camera observes the monotony. The voice-over makes clear: 'when a patrol's definition of success is that nothing happens for eight weeks, the enemy is not the Soviet Union, but boredom'. With their scrutiny of

every crew member every day, the chefs reveal their insight (illustrated by the camera's shallow focus observation of faces in the mess) to the gradually shifting mindset on board:

> It starts off unsettled for the first week, until everyone gets into their routine. But then about week 5 they start getting a little bit edgy, because they've all done enough. Then about week 6 it all starts to happen. They start thinking about home and go into what we call a glaze … They'll sit there and eat half their meal, and then they'll just stare at the bulkhead.

The effects of separation on families ashore reveal similar signs of apprehension, withdrawal and individual coping strategies. The careful composition of weekly 40-word 'family-grams' is shown to require circumspection or obfuscation of any detail that could distract or distress the sailors. The sequence showing their reception on board (crew members scanning the brief messages while their spouses or their own voices read the words aloud, secreting the print outs in pockets or using them as bookmarks) ends with a sudden cut to the call to action, when the voice-over announces that 'the signal has arrived from London to fire *Repulse*'s sixteen Polaris missiles'.

After the domestic and personal insights provided by inclusion of the families' experiences and messages, the sequence following the missile launch procedure returns to the distant documentary observation of this alien subject. The restrained voice-over merely accompanies and explains the concise images: introducing Mike Reeves, the submarine's weapons officer, the process of authenticating the orders to fire, and the truncheon hanging over the safe containing the missile trigger, to be used in the event of an unauthorised attempt to fire the nuclear weapons. Although 'everyone knows it's only an exercise', the implications of the procedure enforce acknowledgement of the submarine's purpose. The accumulation of painful personal choices that the programmes have recorded for the deterrent crews and their families therefore reaches its apogee with the consideration of the decision underlying the existence of the submarine and its attendant community: the resolution to use nuclear weapons in the nation's defence. It is notable that, where in previous episodes the interviewee's words enjoyed similar status to the voice-over narration and the interviewer's questions went unheard, in the Polaris episodes the filmmaker's enquiries are included to render the deterrent debate explicit for the audience:

> [Captain Hawke] To carry the nation's deterrent is an exceedingly responsible job and must be taken terribly seriously – from my own point of view I would be being very silly if I didn't believe in doing the job I'm doing now but my own personal views of the actual morality of the deterrent or the wisdom of the deterrent I'm afraid I keep personally to myself. I very seldom discuss it with anybody other than my own immediate family.

> [off-screen] And does it ever keep you awake at night when you're on patrol?
>
> [Captain Hawke] No, not at all, not one moment.
>
> [off-screen] So it doesn't weigh on your mind?
>
> [Captain Hawke] No, it does not.

The captain's apparent conviction and impervious preservation of the official line is contrasted with more thoughtful, spontaneous and fearful responses from Reeves himself ('I don't think you should dwell on it too much, but obviously we've got something here that's quite dreadful and it's unthinkable to use it') and from a group of junior sailors:

> No one would hesitate but they would think about it afterwards. I don't think anybody would think about the consequences now.
>
> … When a firing signal arrives on patrol, I mean it's just automatic, I mean they sound the alarm and everybody just does their job. For all we know it might not be an exercise.
>
> … It's just a job, and a few minutes later they're all gone and then I think then you'd sit down and start thinking about it and then you'd sort of say 'well, what we were here for we obviously failed to do.'
>
> … You could surface four or five weeks later and there's absolutely nothing left. The reason we're doing it is to protect our families and friends at home and when you think about it, that we've done our part of it but it's still done us no good because there'll be nothing left at home.

The crew's unmediated comments conclude this climactic confrontation with the nature of the national nuclear deterrent. The mention of home draws the episode to an abrupt close, without further comment or voice-over accompaniment, by a cut to a child's painting of the black submarine with the message 'Welcome Home, Daddy'. HMS *Repulse* is seen completing its patrol, with the returning crew greeted on the dockside by family members. Introducing the modern nuclear submarine and its role as subjects for documentary, *Submarine* evinced the stylistic influence of *Sailor* but was itself influential in suggesting the distinctiveness and drama of the submarine environment for televisual consumption. Subsequent treatments (the BBC's own *HMS Splendid* and a plethora of series and individual programmes broadcast on Channel 5) attest to the perceived popularity of the submarine as setting and subject for factual programming, but these examples can also

be seen to extend and adapt the precedent of *Submarine* to different decades and discourses.

HMS Splendid (1999)

The BBC's three-part series *HMS Splendid* (Figure 2.3) strongly recalls the format and approach of *Submarine*, in favouring an actorly voice-over (by David Suchet) over an overt interview format. As in the earlier series, members of the submarine crew speak to camera responding to unheard questions as they explain personal and professional aspects of life on board. Where *Submarine* revealed three distinct aspects of the service, *HMS Splendid* concentrates on a specific but again contemporarily illustrative mission: the titular submarine's selection and preparation to be the first Royal Navy warship to carry the American Tomahawk cruise missile system, and the successful completion of the first firing at a testing range in California in 1998. Used operationally by the US Navy during the Gulf War of 1991, and fired by the Royal Navy (from HMS

Figure 2.3: HMS *Splendid*. 1995. LA (Phot) Richard Harvey/Ministry of Defence, Open Government Licence v1.0, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HMS_Splendid_S106.jpeg

Splendid) for the first time in 1999 against targets in Kosovo, Tomahawk has been a controversial weapon since the first appearance of strategic, nuclear-armed land-based variants in Europe in the 1980s.[87] In addition to confronting the implications of Britain's adoption of this missile – precise in principle but often indiscriminate in effect – in a comparable fashion to *Submarine*'s discussion of the nuclear deterrent, *HMS Splendid* revisits the depiction of everyday life on board, featuring interviews with specific crew members and their families on shore, and showing the stresses of the 'Perisher' course portrayed in the previous series.[88]

The submarine's general mission and its particular task are initiated by both the voice-over and introduction to *Splendid*'s captain, Commander Ian Corder. Alongside irised periscope views of warships exercising with the submarine off Scotland, the captain's careful understatement of the conceptual threat (and its attendant advantages) created by operating submarines ('the uncertainty that a submarine generates in any military situation is one of its great assets. You don't actually have to deploy it, you just have to have the ability to deploy it and declare a possible intention to deploy it') previews the augmentation of these capabilities that Tomahawk will impart ('as we saw in the Gulf, it really is a question of not which building are we trying to hit, it's which window are we trying to fly the missile through'). Before *Splendid* can undertake Tomahawk testing, a new second-in-command must be appointed. The candidates for this post as well as their own commands are shown undergoing the 'Perisher', and (in spite of a more focused concentration on a small selection of specific crew members) the series' resemblance to *Submarine* is also discernible in interviews with their families. A close-up of a tattooed upper-arm (with the voice-over's observation that 'even on a modern submarine some of the oldest naval traditions survive') introduces Petty Officer Chef Lee Goodhill. In a staged interview at home, the wife of Commander Bob Mansergh, the 'Teacher' of this 'Perisher' course, comments judiciously on the 'independence' the spouse of a submariner must display, and the ability to be 'patient' with the things they have missed in their family's and children's lives while they have been away. In contrast, another wife, speaking as she peels potatoes, exhibits if not disloyalty a weary disinterest in her husband's employment:

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[87] John Roberts, *Safeguarding the Nation: The Story of the Modern Royal Navy* (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2009), p.270; Kate Sopev and Alison Assitev, Greenham Common: An Exchange, *Radical Philosophy*, 1983, 34, 21–24.

[88] Dr David Owen, former Labour Navy minister and later leader of the Social Democrat Party, foresaw the adoption of Tomahawk in proposing its purchase as a cheaper and more flexible alternative to the construction of new deterrent submarines for the Trident missile system, supported by both major political parties in the later 1980s. David Owen, 'Towpath Papers' bode ill for the Royal Navy', in *Jane's Naval Review*, 6th ed. by John Moore (London: Jane's 1987), 18–24 (p.24). See also Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, pp.348–349.

> I'm married to Jason, who is the DWEO, which is the Deputy Weapons Engineer Officer. He looks after the missiles. Well, he's the deputy that looks after the missiles. I'm not sure really what he does. He just does an awful lot of paperwork that's unnecessary, and – spends a lot of time away from home. [laughs] That's kind of what his job is. I'm not awfully, overly interested in it, because it's the thing that always takes him away.

Before the 'Perisher' begins, Bob Mansergh is interviewed in an office ashore (with a painting of a 19th-century naval battle on the wall behind him). He observes that 'these officers could be commanding the nation's strategic deterrent or a fully armed attack submarine at the age of 35'. Unlike *Submarine*'s portrayal of the command course and perhaps in recognition of the added responsibility that the adoption of Tomahawk entails, Mansergh confronts the candidates at once with whether they have thought about their responsibility for taking decisions to sink ships and take lives. He insists they need to know that they 'can face it, the horror of it, and still be able to do it … because if you can't, then you're no use to the Navy, okay?' The four students offer their varying responses. Lieutenant Commander Nick Hibberd states unhesitatingly that he has 'no qualms' about acting in the moment, with the proviso that he would reflect after the event. Nick Hine, wishing to become *Splendid*'s second-in-command, reflects uncomfortably but euphemistically on the implications of using Tomahawk, which had killed civilians in Iraq: 'while it's a discriminate weapon, it's not necessarily a completely anti-military weapon.'[89]

Despite its explicit focus on the Tomahawk acquisition and test, the series provides as rounded, shrewd and critical a perspective on the submarine service as its predecessor. In a lull during the 'Perisher', Nick Hibberd reflects ruefully on the 'structured routine' of life on board: 'The luxuries of life – fresh vegetables, sunlight, wide open spaces, clean air, family, the ability to do what you want, the ability to go to sleep when you want – No, you don't miss much at all really.' As the crew clean HMS *Splendid* intensively for days before a flag officer inspection, the complaints of Radio Operator Jason McKee ('It's something they don't tell you about when you go to join up, you know? And you really don't have a choice in the matter. You've just got to do it or you get a bollocking') contrast with Ian Corder's upbeat appraisal ('the sailors appreciate what we're trying to achieve, and they will be proud of their submarine'). Similarly, the Scottish chefs in the galley comment wryly on the flag signal ('England expects') reproduced on the celebratory cake for Trafalgar Night on board, and

[89] After commanding HMS *Westminster* Nick Hine was decorated by the President of the United States for service in Iraq and occupied numerous senior posts within the Navy before being promoted to Vice Admiral and becoming Second Sea Lord in 2019. Anonymous, Royal Navy appoints new Second Sea Lord, *Royal Navy: News*, 26 April 2019, https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2019/april/26/190426-new-second-sea-lord [accessed 22 April 2022].

Donald 'Smudge' Smith remarks to camera: 'there's a high retention problem in the submarine service – well, lack of retention, should I say'. When a voice off camera asks why, he explains, 'It's – it's not the best job in the world. And I won't go any further than that.' The introduction of Lee Goodhill's wife, Roz, at home is immediately contrasted with Lee explaining the galley arrangements for feeding over a hundred men: 'All the housewives at home, take note. If you think you're hard done by at home, ladies, try coming on here.' Later Lee points out that the allowance for feeding the guard dogs at Faslane is larger than the budget for feeding the submarine's crew, £2.21 per man per day.

Having passed harbour inspection at the Clyde naval base, and successfully completing 'OPEX' (a four-day 'operational exercise' simulating combat against warships, aircraft and helicopters) and BOST (Basic Operational Sea Training), HMS *Splendid* embarks on the transatlantic voyage to San Diego via the Panama Canal to undertake the Tomahawk trials. At home Zoe Hine remarks, 'The baby's seven months old now … and Nick's only actually seen her for about three weeks of her life.' Lee receives Roz's letter ('I'll read this time and time and time again, see if there's any little words in there I missed. Because that's all, you've got nothing else to do'). Following cuts to Roz in her garden and to Lee's daughter Leah recording a taped message, a cut back to Lee listening to it reveals him answering her as if they are in a conversation. This marking of familial separation (and continuity) produces and is articulated by the same spatio-temporal dislocation within the documentary diegesis seen in *Submarine*. This focused consideration works with reciprocal balance later, when Lee reveals that he hopes his family understands that he does the job to support and to provide for them, and a cut to Roz provides her frank and rationalised response: 'The Navy give us a wage, and a lifestyle, but we've given the Navy something belonging to us that they can … no pension can make up for that. There's nothing you can do to get that back.'

As with *Submarine*'s continual connection of families to the mundane practicality of submarine operation and the enormity of the Polaris deterrent, HMS *Splendid*'s role and the series culminate with the Tomahawk test firing and the chance for family members to visit their loved ones in San Diego. This coincidental benefit provokes a moment of contemplation, which, the voice-over states, 'for some of the crew … has a sobering effect.' Having already decided to leave the Navy as he no longer wishes to be separated from his family, Jason Reid is interviewed before the test firing. Jason, who has been seen earlier conducting church services on board and claims there is no 'contradiction between me being a weapons engineer on submarines and being a Christian', reflects at length on what the use of Tomahawk (Figure 2.4) 'in anger' will mean for British submariners:

> I think people will be a lot more challenged about why they do this job than they are at the moment. Which I think for some people would be very good. It would be good to wake them up a bit and make them

Figure 2.4: TLAM (Tomahawk Land Attack Missile) launch. ROYAL NAVY IMAGE, 2010. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

> realise what HMS *Splendid* is really about, and that's a weapon of war. It's not if it hits the target, because, you know, we're sailors, so if it hits the target that's all right, that's fine, because they're bad guys, we've been told to do it. And they deserve it. However, you always think about the scenario if it goes wrong, or if they've chosen the target wrongly, if it does hit the hospital or the school or whatever … so what you have to do is make sure your part of this big organisation is correct.

Following scenes record the loading of missiles. The voice-over encroaches to reiterate the seriousness of the test, and what is represents: 'One American Tomahawk missile costs $1 million, and Britain wants to buy sixty-five … The firing is only a test, but the missile is real and armed.' In contrast to Reid's doubts, Captain Ian Corder observes guardedly that the missile's capabilities simply give 'a lot of options to the people who take decisions in high places'. The crew and missile perform flawlessly, the test is a success, and watching dignitaries are shown clapping while sound clips of American and British news reports mark the event.

The predictable final images of the crews' eventual return to their families in the UK both mark a documentary continuity, recognising the unchanging

service routine for personnel and families in its echoing of previous series, and imply a new status quo under which the Navy's capabilities and responsibilities have been invisibly transformed. The analogies to *Submarine*'s depiction of the mundanities of submarine life, war-simulating exercises and polemical scrutiny of the nuclear deterrent are discernible in the topicality, generality and specificity of the treatment of HMS *Splendid*'s mission.

Conclusion: crisis and identity

In 1979, an article in the *Naval Review* (a quarterly publication promoting debate on contemporary issues within the naval community) highlighted public ignorance and indifference towards naval matters and called for more active media engagement to improve the Senior Service's 'image'. Although it acknowledged some 'doubts' about allowing the use of ships for the filming of the BBC drama series *Warship*, it recognised the 'false anxieties' occasioned by the frank factual depiction of *Sailor* and called for more such documentary productions which could bring the Royal Navy 'to the attention of the public in an overwhelmingly favourable light'.[90] If *Submarine* answers the perceived need for further in-depth documentary treatment of a different service branch, then *Sea Power* stands as a conscious and conspicuous corrective to the 'inertia, ignorance and apathy' the article's author feared was dominating public and political attitudes towards the relevance of the Navy and the likelihood of conflict at sea.[91]

Lord Hill-Norton's historical series appears as an anomaly within naval representation on television in this period (and within this book), in comparison with the repeated resort to the Navy as a subject of realist documentary. It also stands in contrast to more recent trends in historical documentary television that have increasingly been presented by academics.[92] However, any apparent stylistic inconsistency with present-day documentary subjects belies the deliberate and overt political contemporaneity of *Sea Power*'s didactic naval discourse, emphasising historical permanence, identifying pertinent lessons from the past and demanding recognition of what it asserts is a communal and abidingly relevant inheritance. In continually stressing the effects of change (in ship design, in maritime conflict, and in geopolitical realities), Hill-Norton's edifying naval narrative equally insists upon unaltering necessities and continuities in national survival as much as status. The partisan nature of his series' perspective, in seeking to protect and preserve the institution to which his life has been dedicated, is as undeniable as its appearance as a professional riposte

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[90] J.B. Drake-Wilkes, Improving the Image of the Royal Navy, *The Naval Review*, 1979, 67(1), 44–50, p.47.

[91] Drake-Wilkes, Improving the Image of the Royal Navy, p.44.

[92] N.C. Fleming, Echoes of Britannia: Television History, Empire and the Critical Public Sphere, *Contemporary British History*, 2010, 24(1), 1–22.

to the political mindset driving contemporary defence cuts. Reviewing the publication of the *Sea Power* book in 1982 as the Falklands War was in progress, Anthony Watts acknowledged that the conflict had ironically vindicated those who had vociferously opposed the naval cuts:

> As far as the Royal Navy in particular is concerned this sorry episode, which should never have occurred in the first place, could not have come at a better time. Ever since Mr Nott began his cost-cutting exercises, voices have been raised in support of the Navy, arguing against any further cuts in the Navy vote or in naval strength. Much that has happened during the Falklands campaign has not only strengthened those arguments against cuts, but in a number of cases proved their protagonists to be absolutely right in their opinions.[93]

Eric Grove's analysis of the effects of the Falklands War on the future of the Royal Navy in general and the size of the surface fleet in particular underlines the contradictory impact of the conflict on British defence spending overall. Despite nominal increases to the defence budget to replace lost ships and fund the defensive garrisoning of the islands and pressure from America for the Navy to retain its naval aviation and amphibious capabilities, within the decade available surface ship numbers had indeed shrunk to levels at or even below John Nott's originally intended cuts.[94] By contrast, Andrew Doorman has argued that 'the navy had, by the time of the outbreak of the Falklands War, managed to circumvent the original force levels set out and retained its belief in a balanced fleet, albeit somewhat smaller than before'.[95] The apparently timeless historical narrative of sea power and naval history that Hill-Norton's series offers is therefore better understood as a targeted rhetorical exercise embedded in and epitomising a critical naval institutional, political and (in its narrator's view) national context.

Key to the same period, and precipitating the documentary treatment of *Submarine*, was the reorientation of notions of naval power and national status triggered by the building of nuclear submarines and the operation of the independent nuclear deterrent. Duncan Redford notes the prominence of submarines (both nuclear and conventional) in the lines of ships arrayed for the Silver Jubilee Fleet Review in 1977, and the conspicuous coverage fleet and deterrent submarines also received in the accompanying official souvenir programme:

> By shoring up pretensions to great power status that could by 1977 no longer be justified by economic, imperial or other forms of naval power,

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[93] Anthony Watts, A Maritime Nation, *RUSI Journal*, 1982, 127(4), 61–63, p.61.

[94] Eric Grove, The Falklands War and British Defence Policy, *Defence and Security Analysis*, 2002, 18(4), 307–317.

[95] Doorman, *Defence Under Thatcher*, p.156.

> the status conferred by SSNs and SSBNs now played an important part in supporting the British identity.[96]

The apparent contradictions between and incompatibility of an unending 'East of Suez' role for the Royal Navy and a political, economic and military pivot towards Europe and the Atlantic were paradoxically evaded and answered by the acquisition of a new generation of 'capital ships': 'only the nuclear-powered and sometimes nuclear-armed submarine offered the prestige that could support ideas regarding the role that the Royal Navy played within Britain's great power status from the 1960s onwards'.[97] If *Submarine* marked the secrecy, elitism and dubiety of the submarine in war via its portrayal of the 'Perisher' and HMS *Warspite*'s NATO exercise, it confronted more directly the contemporary controversies of national life and identity contained in the maintenance (and recently confirmed replacement) of the submarine-based nuclear deterrent, and the Navy's part in the conduct of the war in the South Atlantic. The gravity of these subjects and the seriousness (and openness to interpretation) of their handling in *Submarine* found their parallels in the documentary treatment of *HMS Splendid*.

The contrast that these series represent with depictions of Royal Navy submarines in subsequent decades underlines significant changes in documentary style and broadcasting ethos as much as in national and geopolitical circumstances. The 'Perisher' course and nuclear submarines on patrol have been the subject of the Channel 5 series *Submarine School* (2011) and *Royal Navy: Submarine Mission* (2011). A similar two-part series following the operation of HMS *Trenchant* (*Submarine: Life Beneath the Waves*), made by Artlab Films, was broadcast on Channel 5 in 2021. A single documentary programme by the same production company, entitled *On Board Britain's Nuclear Submarine: Trident* (Channel 5, 2020), was filmed aboard a second-generation deterrent submarine. The stylistic continuity between these productions also extends to Artlab's recurrent *Warship: Life at Sea* (2018–22) productions for Channel 5 (see Chapter 5). The proliferation of these series, alongside but distinct from the consistency of documentary maker Chris Terrill's programmes and series for the BBC (see Chapter 6), suggests a new prevailing popular orthodoxy of both naval representation and factual television aesthetics.

Various common strategies and textual features set these series apart from the precedents of *Sailor* and *Submarine* and their contemporaries such as *Royal*

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[96] Redford, The 'Hallmark of a First-Class Navy', pp.191–192. In his introduction to the souvenir programme, Admiral Sir Henry Leach addresses the intended public audience of the event: 'I wish you and your families a happy time amongst *your* fleet and *your* sailors helping to celebrate Her Majesty's Silver Jubilee' [original emphasis]. John Winton, *Silver Jubilee Fleet Review Official Souvenir Programme* (Portsmouth: Gerald Lee, 1977), p.1.

[97] Redford, The 'Hallmark of a First-Class Navy', p.189.

Navy Caribbean Patrol (Channel 5, 2011) and *Britain's Biggest Warship* (BBC, 2018–19). Although *Submarine School*'s subject is the same command course covered in *Submarine* (with four episodes devoted to the course's four weeks), its treatment displays numerous enhancements (dramatic music, rapid editing, freeze-frames) quite distant from the earlier documentary series. A hyperbolic voice-over (by actor Peter Capaldi) injects and maintains a heightened level of tension. The setting and its participants are described as 'one £500 million nuclear-powered submarine [HMS *Triumph*]: stealthy, silent and deadly; five elite submariners, hungry for command; and one no-nonsense examiner'. The 'Teacher' and each candidate are introduced by a red-tinted freeze-frame portrait giving their name and title. Each episode receives an overstated subtitle: 'For Your Eyes Only', 'Lurking in the Shadows', 'Total War' and 'The Final Reckoning'. The first days' exercises with surface ships are described exaggeratedly as 'Russian roulette' and 'playing chicken with charging warships'. A training exercise to pick up and transport special forces is amplified with Bond-thriller theme music. At the conclusion of each programme, and at advertising breaks, the voice-over similarly intervenes to fabricate cliff-hanging crises: 'a looming emergency could be about to put the whole course in jeopardy!'; 'the question now, with so many mistakes already, is whether all the students will survive the final exercises of the first week'; 'who will be next to fall foul of the Perisher?' While computer graphics are employed to render images of the submarine's interior and its operation submerged, these offer little documentary explanation: voice-over accompaniment to brief archive footage of submarine warfare in World War II describes the campaign in terms of the U-boats' activities: 'spying, laying mines and setting ambushes'. Yet, against this intensified background and the concentration upon students' errors and shortcomings, all the candidates (whose backgrounds, personalities and aspirations are only partially explored) eventually pass the course.

Royal Navy Submarine Mission follows this stylistic precedent, introducing crew members with the same tinted freeze-frame, and imposing tone via an intrusive, affective soundtrack. It insinuates secrecy and exclusivity in accessing its subject, being 'the first ever' record of a Royal Navy *Trafalgar*-class submarine (Figure 2.5) ('HMS *Turbulent*: part submerged spy, part deadly weapon') on active patrol.[98] *Submarine: Life Beneath the Waves* is similarly trumpeted as the first filming of a hunter-killer protecting a Trident submarine.

HMS *Turbulent*'s mission (transit via the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf) is introduced by a flurry of short soundbites from crew, interspersed with the provocative voice-over (by actor Bill Paterson) in a rapid montage. When 'Turbs' is diverted to join the 'UN mission in Libya', the voice-over notes how the crew prepares the 'devastatingly accurate' Tomahawk missiles for

[98] HMS *Turbulent* also featured in an episode of *Heston's Mission Impossible* (Channel 4, 2011) in which chef Heston Blumenthal attempted to transform submarine cooking and catering.

Figure 2.5: *Trafalgar*-class submarine. LA(Phot) Dan Rosenbaum, 2012. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

launching with 'quiet methodical efficiency'. This episode ends with the skyline of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, seen on the horizon, now 'in their periscope sights'. (This emotional peak, which has been manufactured without the need for Tomahawk launches (or their potential consequences) being addressed or articulated, dissipates anticlimactically in the next episode as the orders to fire are quietly rescinded.) Again, in contrast to the ambivalence of crew members towards Tomahawk in *HMS Splendid*, the 'mixed feelings' about its use noted amongst *Turbulent*'s crew are represented as not 'mixed' at all: some sailors express understandable excitement and a desire to do what the submarine is, after all, designed to do, and what they have trained to do, if they are called upon to fire. Nonetheless, the distance and significance of the submarine's deployment encapsulate the conflicts and Navy commitments of the new millennium. HMS *Turbulent*'s captain notes that his boat is 'the only Tomahawk shooter East of Suez' and applauds the Navy's capabilities and presence when a distant rendezvous takes place: 'Gulf of Aden: British submarine, British helicopter, doing their jobs – quite incredible.' When operational demands require the film crew to depart as *Turbulent* reaches the Arabian Sea, the voice-over pronounces: 'our cameras may be leaving, but for Britain's submariners, the mission never stops.'

Given that the extremities of the 'Perisher' and demands of sea service were evident in *Submarine* without formal exaggeration, the divergence in visual technique and verbal accompaniment in these later series bespeak a reliance on and presumed need for stylisation of the documentary subject. Although these

Figure 2.6: *Vanguard*-class Trident missile submarine. CPOA(Phot) Thomas McDonald, 2014. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

series do take note of details of service life (in disciplinary proceedings and the humorous and mundane experiences on board), they represent a diminished and de-emphasised proportion of the programmes in comparison to the duration and stylisation devoted to documenting (or manufacturing) action, tension and crises. In addition to prominent style, a renewed but distinct sociopolitical emphasis is obvious in their (and the *Warship* series') overt concentration on present operations, distant deployments and tangible threats to British ships and Britain itself. The distance from the static dread of the Cold War in *Submarine* to the newly heightened confrontations of the 21st century in political and televisual terms is demonstrated by the differences exhibited by *On Board Britain's Nuclear Submarine: Trident* (Figure 2.6).

This documentary programme is presented by Rob Bell, a familiar narrator and presenter from many factual series such as *Abandoned Engineering* (Yesterday, 2016–), *Secret Nazi Bases* (Go Button Media, 2019) and *The Buildings That Fought Hitler* (UKTV, 2021). Rather than providing informative documentary, the presenter's presence offers vicarious affective experience, as Bell describes being vetted in order to enter Faslane, is coached in the use of HMS *Vengeance*'s sonar, struggles to climb 'the longest ladder on board' to the top of the fin, looks nervously around the control room as the submarine dives, and gives his 'first impressions' to camera. Rather than representing the focus or climax, the testing of the Trident system occurs in the middle of the programme,

Figure 2.7: HMS *Vanguard* at Faslane. CPO Phot Nick Tryon, 2017. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

with little exploration of the personal views of the crew. Despite the camera's apparent freedom on board, the presenter's presence inhibits the grasp or directs the understanding of the subject. Bell's response to the experience of witnessing the deterrent in operation at the programme's end appears to substitute for, or even seek to direct, the viewer's own:

> For me, HMS *Vengeance* is a real paradox. As an engineering masterpiece, it is one of the most complex technical creations mankind has ever accomplished, and it's certainly thrilling. But at the same time, it is the deadliest of weapons. And if it were ever called into use, it would likely represent the end of life as we know it. Either way, it does exist and I can't imagine it being in better hands. The people I met down on HMS *Vengeance* are amongst the most capable I've ever met. And if we are to have this kind of weapon for the next 50 years, these are exactly the kind of people to run it.[99]

[99] The programme maker's views on the existence, ethics and possible use of the nuclear deterrent are, by contrast, reserved for the end of the book accompanying the *Submarine* series. Jonathan Crane, *Submarine* (London: BBC, 1984), pp.202–203.

While HMS *Vengeance* appears as a subject not dissimilar to one of the presenter's other subjects (at one stage, Bell compares the submarine to the International Space Station), the specificity of its national role is both grasped and celebrated in national terms (in addition to providing a brief history of submarines during the world wars, the programme includes reference to the new generation of deterrent submarines (Figure 2.7) and an artist's impression of the next HMS *Dreadnought*, already under construction). The programme's shorthand history of submarine warfare does not serve as an extended justification or argument for sea power to rival Hill-Norton's didacticism, yet its subjective summary of the deterrent's existence and value nonetheless restricts debate and informs a limited nationalistic view, not least in comparison with *Submarine*'s portrait of Polaris patrol. The political, cultural and national topicality of Britain's naval power and identity in the 1980s, asserted by *Sea Power*, debated by *Submarine* and re-examined in *HMS Splendid*, is matched by comparable discourses of national identity and political realities in the submarine-centred series of the 21st century. However, as much as these series reveal significant shifts in documentary style and address, they also evince reorientations in national identity within British and international politics. They mobilise the Navy as documentary subject and as representative image to promulgate specific, persuasive but unquestioned views of contemporary British sea power.