

Speech: RUSI Sea Power conference speech

INTRO: PAST

It's an honour to give the inaugural Sir Henry Leach lecture.

When we think of this man, a man whose name should be remembered with all the great admirals, who played such a pivotal and important role in defining the modern Britain that we see today, there was no greater post-war advocate for the value of sea power.

No-one who better understood the role the Royal Navy has played, and will play in the future, keeping watch over our nation, and protecting our liberty.

No-one with greater insight into why the white ensign is admired throughout the world, and why the reputation of our brave sailors, submariners and Royal Marines remains second to none.

This year, we've once again been reminded of how our Royal Navy forged our nation as we commemorate 100 years since the end of the Great War and the great sea blockade that eventually tipped the balance decisively in our favour and our allies favour.

We remember too the astonishing bravery demonstrated at Zeebrugge, which saw an incredible eight VCs awarded.

And this year we commemorate 75 years on from the Battle of the North Cape in which a young Sir Henry on board HMS Duke of York played his part sinking an enemy battleship to keep our Arctic Convoys running, keeping Britain supplied, and the hope of our nation and our allies afloat.

I'm told that those who remember Sir Henry recall a courteous man who didn't suffer fools gladly.

A man prepared not just to engage with Secretaries of State, but someone who was even willing to do a bold thing, to take his life into his own hands by supporting a ban on the daily rum ration. Brave.

Yet when we recall Sir Henry's sober sense in the Falklands War, in those critical hours, in those critical days, a man who fortified the iron lady's resolve and laying the basis for a famous victory, we know that he got the big calls right.

PRESENT

Just think how people would see this country if he hadn't have been so influential at that moment.

If he hadn't have been the one to step up, the one who was willing to speak up, the one who was willing to take that risk, that risk, that is the sign of leadership.

That is the sign of willingness to do that bit extra, that is what distinguishes someone who is willing to commit himself and do the right thing.

That is leadership, and the thing we all so admire, and I imagine he would take great pride in seeing the way that his beloved service continues playing a global role and making a difference.

The Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, saving lives in the Mediterranean, clearing mines and ordnance from waters around the world, helping search for fellow sailors in a stricken Argentine submarine.

It goes to show the bonds that reach across, old adversaries that actually have come together because there is something more important.

But we see the Royal Navy that is training navies around the world, 50 navies in total, many of whom I'm delighted to see represented here today.

And while our supreme sailors guard our shores, our silent service, out of sight, but never out of mind, keep a constant watch, maintaining our continuous at sea nuclear deterrence, 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, as they have done for almost half a century.

They are one of the reasons why we remain a great maritime nation.

FUTURE

But as the conference title underlines, I'm here today to discuss the future of naval warfare.

Back in 2015, the MOD published a document. Now one thing I have quickly discovered since becoming Secretary of State is, the Armed Forces and the Navy is no exception, they rather like to come up with titles that are often not that catchy.

And in a Great British Royal Navy tradition, they produced a document called Strategic Trends Programme Future Operating Environment 2035.

Having been to my local library, and having asked for this and how many times they've had requests to read that document, it hasn't been that many.

But while the title was not memorable, the observations inside were accurate.

It envisaged a future in which extremists exploit information technologies, and where the lines between criminals, state-based actors and terrorists become increasingly blurred.

It imagined a world in which the spread of dangerous devices allowed a diverse range of actors to access capabilities once restricted to a few

nation states.

And where others adapted and integrated technology at an incredibly fast rate.

It is amazing to think about the technologies that are now available for so little money and the way it's starting to change the world, the way that warfare is conducted.

And that is not just at sea, but also land and air. And if we do not change, and if we do not adapt, we will be the losers.

But there was one thing that we overlooked, in this brilliant document, we got wrong the speed of change.

We thought that the events that we had outlined would take more time to develop, ten, fifteen years, the reality is they're happening today.

They are happening now.

THREATS

So we're rapidly having to come to terms with this new age of warfare.

Look at Russia's resurgence under President Putin, its submarine activity has increased ten-fold in the North Atlantic.

But that's not all. In 2010, the Royal Navy had to respond once to a Russian Navy ship approaching UK territorial waters.

Last year we had to respond 33 times.

It goes to show the increasing aggression, the increasing assertiveness of Russia, and how we have to ensure we give the right support to our Royal Navy in order to give them the tools to do the job and keep Britain safe.

I doubt Sir Henry Leach would be surprised at Russia's resurgence, nor would he bat an eyelid at our stubborn reliance on the seas for 95 per cent of our trade, for our energy supplies, and even for our intercontinental digital communications.

But I imagine what might give him greater cause for concern is the way the threats against us are multiplying, coming not just from Russia, not just from a rising China, but from non-state actors using drones to drop bombs, ballistic missiles to attack airports and anti-ship missiles to threaten our narrow shipping lanes as well as the new and evolving threats from cyber-attacks, and, of course, increasingly extreme weather conditions and the expectations that people put on the services to help and support nations right around the world.

And I imagine Sir Henry would also be concerned about the pooling of such dangers. So many of these dangers emerging at once.

As our National Security and Capability Strategy says: “Domestic, overseas and online threats are increasingly integrated as adversaries develop capabilities and exploit vulnerabilities across borders and between the cyber and physical worlds.”

With our international rules-based-order increasingly under threat, when even US Defence Secretary Mattis is prompted to remark that the US’s “competitive advantage has eroded in every domain of warfare”, we have to sit up, and we have no option but take action and ensure that Britain and our allies are properly defended.

ADAPTING TO TOMORROW

This is where you come in, in dangerous times we look to the Royal Navy to lead from the front.

You have that unique ability to exert not just soft power across the globe but to back it up with tangible hard power across sea, air, land, space and cyberspace.

You give us politicians’ a vital choice to deter, to reassure, and if necessary, to act, whether independently, or in concert with our allies.

And that sends a powerful signal.

As Sir Henry once observed: “War seldom takes the expected form and a strong maritime capability provides flexibility for the unforeseen.”

But the great question we face today, is how can we adapt our navy to meet the challenges of tomorrow?

Fortunately, the great man, always prepared, left us a template, and we’re following it closely.

But when we just think about what we want, it is about choices.

And that is what Sir Henry gave Mrs Thatcher. He gave her a choice.

He gave her the opportunity to think about what she wanted to achieve and the means to do it. And that’s what we need as politicians.

And we need our services to be able to give us the choices so that we can make the right decisions.

We need our services to have the capability in order to offer those choices.

ABOUT MODERN CAPABILITIES

But when you look at what Sir Henry did, one of the key areas that was close to his heart is having the right most modern capabilities.

In a speech to RUSI, not long after victory in the Falklands, he said: “Periodic weapon system updating is fundamental to effective countering of the threat and provision for it.”

Our investment today holds true to that principle.

It's why we're building next generation nuclear Dreadnought submarines, putting almost a billion into our programme to begin phase two of production.

It's why we're constructing Astute hunter killer submarines, most recent naming our newest boat after the historic battle at Agincourt, following in the long tradition of Royal Navy ships with that iconic name.

I had a slightly awkward and difficult meeting with the French Defence minister shortly after the announcement, but I'm sure they understood.

But it is also important to have the strategic conventional deterrent.

One of the failures I think that we have sometimes in both the political world and also the military world is we've gone to a narrative about talking about deterrence.

We do not want to be in a position where you're only deterrence against threat and against aggressors is a nuclear deterrence.

You've got to talk about deterrence across the full spectrum right across the board.

It's sometimes difficult to explain to people that actually investing in our Armed Forces is all about making sure that things do not happen.

We've got to start explaining so much more clearly that a deterrence isn't just four nuclear boats.

It is about aircraft carriers, it is about a presence in the Pacific, a presence in the North Atlantic, a presence in the Mediterranean and in the Gulf.

Because with conventional frigates and destroyers we will be able to say that Britain is interested, Britain cares, Britain will protect our interests and our values.

If we do not have that conventional deterrence, and the ability to deter from conventional forces, then what we'll find ourselves in, is a place that none of us wish to be in, and having to turn to the greatest deterrence of them all.

Sir Henry, of course, was a great champion of carrier-strike.

One can only imagine what he would make of the new Queen Elizabeth class, more powerful than any conventional ship ever built on our shores, displacing more than Invincible, Illustrious and Ark Royal combined, and packing a powerful punch with world class F35 stealth fighters.

Next month the first of those fast jets will fly across the Atlantic and land our shores.

The first to come to Europe.

Later in the year they will be flying from the deck of HMS Queen Elizabeth, announcing that our carrier strike force is back.

Meanwhile, our majestic carrier herself will be conducting her maiden voyage off the East Coast of America.

Not just a magnificent symbol of our sea power, but of our expanding influence as a global trading nation.

And our carriers will be backed up by a formidable future fleet, including next generation global combat ships like Type 26.

And we've now spent £1bn with our suppliers to speed those next generation ships into service, as well as Type 23 frigates armed with state-of-the art, precision guided supersonic Sea-Ceptor missiles, which I can announce have successfully completed their trials, and have now been accepted into service.

Meanwhile, later today my colleague Guto Bebb will be in RNAS Yeovilton announcing the delivery of the first of a fleet of new helicopters designed for Royal Marine aircraft carrier operations.

Making sure that our new carriers have a capability to project force, project power and make sure they can deliver everything that our nation asks of them

The Royal Navy's enhanced ability to manoeuvre in the littoral, strengthened by an exciting and innovative future commando force, coupled with the restoration of our carrier strike, as well as our nuclear deterrent makes the UK one of a handful of nations that has earned the right to be a Tier 1 Navy.

INNOVATION

But the battle to remain relevant must be waged constantly.

In the past hundred years, we've seen repeated revolutions in naval technology, battleships giving way to Dreadnought, steam to the gas turbine, guns to guided missiles.

Today we're embracing fifth generation technology systems, coupled with the right mix of high end and utility platforms, in order to be able to show a presence right across the globe.

But we need to be able to anticipate the next giant leap.

So our Modernising Defence Programme will make sure we continue conquering new technological frontiers.

It will build on the work of our Innovation Fund, which is investing in everything from Artificial Intelligence and Cyber to drones.

It will build on exercises like Information Warrior, which last year tested out a new "ship's" brain to make our navy faster and more efficient.

And it will build on investments in high energy weapons like Dragonfire.

But there's a bigger challenge still, not just for Defence, but for the industry as a whole.

It takes 15 to 20 plus years to procure an aircraft carrier.

How many models of iPhone will have been produced and developed in that time?

Technology is moving so fast. No one can truly guarantee what the future holds.

If we do not have the technology, ability to use technology or bring technology into our ships, into our submarines at a much faster pace, then we will always be behind our enemies.

We've got to be able to change and learn how to do that, so we're seeking to create new partnerships with industry, academia and the public sector to bypass the old ways of doing things, making better use current technology, maximising our flexibility and tapping into the talents of our wider workforce.

The best brains and the best technologies that we are so dependent upon in the future, will not always sit within the Defence sector, and we must not be too proud to borrow and to use that technology in order to make us better.

If you look at the car industry, they've always been able to invest so much more in autonomous technology, because they assembling and producing so much more than we ever will do in the military field.

Let us look to these partners, seize the advantage, take advantage of technologies that they are developing so that Britain will lead the world and use them to our advantage.

So our servicemen and women have that cutting edge, have the advantage over our adversaries, so that we can thwart them.

And as we develop our Shipbuilding Strategy, alongside our competition to build Type 31e frigates, we will increase our competitiveness with our industrial partners, by shifting and focusing more exports to reduce prices to build more ships.

Because let us not forget that mass has a quality all of its own, and that is something that every navy, every army and every air force truly does need.

2. STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

But we have to always be thinking about the prosperity of our nation.

We cannot have prosperity without security that we deliver to our nation, but we also need to think about how to strengthen relationships with our allies.

Encouraging that partnership, encouraging that closer working relationship,

so we can bring ever greater prosperity to our nation.

But when we do look at partnerships, and when we look at military partnerships, it was another anchor that what Sir Henry saw was so pivotal to our nation.

As in his day, NATO remains the beating heart of our Defence and our security.

Sir Henry knew that only the world's greatest defensive alliance stood in the way of Soviet aggression.

In a very different world, NATO couldn't be more relevant

That's why, as we leave the Europe Union, we're redoubling our efforts, with our navy leading half of NATO's taskforces in the Mediterranean.

Yet like Sir Henry, we know we also must "look beyond NATO's northern and southern flanks to its "worldwide economic flanks".

So we're extending our partnership principle.

In the past month the Royal Navy has been exercising with the nine nation Joint Expeditionary Force, for the first time they've been operating together.

In the Gulf we have our new naval support facility in Bahrain at Juffair, and our commitment to the port of Duqm in Oman, all of this signals we're investing heavily in the Middle East at a time of unprecedented uncertainty.

And I can today announce that we will be extending that commitment by sending T23s to the Gulf from 2019 as an enduring presence.

Over in the Asia-Pacific, for the first time in recent memory, we will have three Royal Navy vessels in the region supporting our allies and we're continuing to strengthen our bi-lateral relationships with Royal Navy helicopters deploying off the French Jean D'Arc, our submarine working with the US – HMS Trenchant in the High North and our Royal Marines recently training with the US Marine Corps in Guam.

We're weaving a web of partnerships, demonstrating our global reach and world class capability.

3. CONFIDENCE

Yet facing the future also demands one more element, a key weapon in the great Admiral's armoury – confidence.

When Prime Minister Thatcher sought Sir Henry's advice on the Falklands he spoke powerfully for intervention.

He said: "If we do not, or if we pussyfoot in our actions, and do not achieve complete success, in another few months we shall be living in a different

country whose word counts for little”

How true.

If he hadn't been there. If he hadn't of been there to give her that option. To give her that decision to make, our nation's history would have been so different.

At a time when we're facing a generational change in the threats to our interests, when our great values of liberty, justice and tolerance, are under attack from every angle, we must always have that confidence to speak out, to stand up, to act when challenged.

That's why even as we leave the European Union, you will not find the UK retreating to its shores, exchanging isolation for foreign policy.

Instead you will find us seeking to expand our friendships, expanding our influence, extend our trading lines, and out of the shadow of present danger, shine the beacon of democracy that so many nations have always looked to Britain for.

CONCLUSION

I can't predict the future of naval warfare, that's why we have a Royal Navy to do that for us.

But let me offer my vision for the Royal Navy, from the government's bridge.

It is a vision of a navy that maintains its position as a premier maritime force, a Royal Navy balancing both strategic and operational responsibilities. Innovative by instinct, always one step ahead of our adversaries, and ever the partner of choice for its allies.

It is a vision of a Royal Navy, always forward deployed and truly global. It is a Royal Navy that will be, in the finest traditions, continuing to rule the waves, seizing every new opportunity and carrying our nation's great expectations far into the future.

In other words, it's a vision of a Royal Navy that will continue doing our country, and Sir Henry Leach, Mrs Thatcher's "knight in shining gold braid" it will continue to do all of them, and all of us, proud. Thank you