

Britain's "Grand Old Lady"

From World War One's Battle of Jutland to the bloody beaches of D-Day Normandy, this legendary battleship continued to prove the fighting spirit of the Royal Navy

BY JAMES HUFFSTODT

An apathetic spectacle greeted the curious on the afternoon of 23 April 1947 when the drifting hulk of HMS *Warspite* grounded on the rocks at Mounts Bay on the Cornish coast.

Britain's most famous and best-loved battleship, a veteran of both World Wars, had broken her towlines several days before in a rough sea during a final journey to the breaker's yards on the Clyde, Scotland. Romantics claimed that the venerable fighting ship had thrown herself on the rocks to avoid an inglorious fate. For years the wreckers picked at her steel bones, while hundreds wound their

way down cliffside trails to gaze at this stranded piece of British maritime history. No British battleship ever fought in more battles, or survived such grievous wounds.

This was the HMS *Warspite* of Jutland, the Second Battle of Narvik, Calabria, Matapan, Crete, and shore bombardments from Albania to Normandy to Walcheren Island. Throughout the fleet, they knew her as the "Old Lady," a symbol of British naval tradition.

Throughout the late 1940s, and early 1950s, scavengers picked at the corpse until nothing remained — nothing that is except memories, which reached back to 26 November 1913 when 30,000 cheering Brits watched HMS *Warspite* launched at Devonport. She, and the other members of the

new *Queen Elizabeth*-class, represented the ultimate in battleship design for that era.

First Sea Lord Winston Churchill marveled at the ship's "unique combination of speed and power."

The *Queen Elizabeth* design was the product of Sir Eustace Tennyson d'Eyncourt, a relative of the great English poet. The ships in this class boasted unprecedented striking power, armored protection, speed, and range. The great steel hull measured 600-feet long, and 90-feet across the beam. Twenty-four Yarrow large tube oil-fired boilers powered Parsons turbines to drive 27,500-tons of steel at 25-knots; 3400-tons of oil gave her tremendous cruising ranges.

Eight 15-inch guns, mounted in four twin-turrets, constituted

her main armament. No ships in the world mounted such massive guns. Each 54-foot-long gun tube, weighing 100-tons, could hurl a projectile weighing 1940-pounds some 25,000-yards and more. Eight 6-in guns to a side constituted the secondary battery. Deep below the waterline, the hull was notched to take four 21-in submerged torpedo tubes.

HMS *Warspite* featured a

main armor belt that was 13-inches thick at the waterline. Each 700-ton main battery turret was sheathed in armor ranging in thickness from seven- to eleven-inches. The deck was protected with a three-inch layer. To drive off pestering dirigibles or aircraft (new threats in naval warfare), she would rely on two 3-in anti-aircraft guns.

She was commissioned on 8

March 1915 with the First World War already underway. Not surprisingly, a gunnery man was her first captain — E.M. Philpotts. After working up off the West Irish coast, she joined Adm. John Jellicoe's Grand Fleet at austere Scapa Flow in the far north of Scotland. She and her sisters, *Barham*, *Malaya*, *Valiant*, and *Queen Elizabeth*, were assigned to R/Adm. Hugh Evans-Thomas as



Seven ships of the Royal Navy have been named *Warspite*. The origins of the name are unclear, although it is probably from Elizabethan spelling of the word "spite — i.e. "spight" — in part embodying contempt for the Navy's enemies, but which was also the common name for the green woodpecker, thus suggesting the *Warspight* would poke holes in the wooden hulls of enemy ships. Until 1919, a woodpecker was used in the crests of the ships, but the official badge was a cannon, although the woodpecker continued to be used on the gun muzzle plugs of the ships. Illustrated is the HMS *Warspite* of 1884 — an *Imperieuse*-class first-class-armored cruiser that was scrapped in 1905.

Imposing view of the elegant HMS *Warspite* at Valetta on 13 January 1938.

