

Occasional Paper

# Maritime Reserves: Grasping the Opportunity

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Occasional Paper

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# Executive Summary

The Integrated Review Refresh (IR23) describes a more contested and volatile world which may require greater defence capacity while funds remain tight. With a regular Naval Service that is already operating at or close to capacity, there is little scope to surge. This paper examines whether and how the Maritime Reserves (MR) can bring extra fighting power at an affordable cost.

The paper finds that one of the strengths of the MR is the calibre of many of its personnel. However, they have suffered from a lack of clarity on their purpose for several years. This has been exacerbated by the decision to stop training altogether for four months in 2020/21 and then to reduce budgets for training, including reserve training days, by 30%. Recent moves to restore training budgets and publish the new 'Maritime Reserves Orders 2023–24'<sup>1</sup> have been welcomed, as has progress in building and reshaping capabilities, especially in information warfare.

Nevertheless, fundamental conceptual and structural problems remain; there is a lack of ambition in the published requirement for reserves across many parts of the MR. Furthermore, the mission outlined in this year's orders focuses on reservists exclusively as augmentees (although there are, in practice, a few exceptions), something out of line with the UK's major Five Eyes counterparts. It also goes against best practice in comparable areas in its sister services, most notably for the Royal Marines Reserve (RMR), whose nearest counterparts in airborne and special forces view collective capability as essential for delivering operational demands and building unit spirit.

A bolder vision is necessary. That means being clear about requirements, which must be grounded in a proper understanding of what a reservist can deliver well, what they can turn their hand to, and what is impractical. It is no criticism of dedicated full-time leadership to say that the reserves need a stronger voice across Navy Command to provide that understanding. As is now the case in the Army, RAF and Strategic Command, this should include a part-time volunteer reservist voice on the Navy Board and in other Naval Service headquarters and policy branches. The Royal Navy Reserve (RNR) still has a well-developed officer structure (unlike the RAF Reserves, who are having to rebuild theirs) which would facilitate this.

Reserves could provide much greater affordable capacity in seagoing appointments and ashore. Seagoing reserves could be grown by recruiting officers with

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1. Royal Navy, 'Maritime Reserves Orders 2023–24'. This was issued recently but has no publication date.

watchkeeping qualifications to crew offshore patrol and littoral vessels, and, with regular reserves, provide a surge capability in war to vessels in re-fit or as casualty replacements. Ashore, lessons from Ukraine suggest that growing a remotely-piloted aircraft division (RPAS) in HMS *Pegasus* (formerly the RNR Air Branch) from civilians skilled in operating drones would add significant value. The decline in the number of pilots in HMS *Pegasus* has been driven by a combination of extreme pressure on flying hours and ever-increasing safety requirements from the Defence Safety Authority (DSA). This should be revisited, both to see whether small sums could significantly rebuild numbers of reserve pilots flying and whether DSA demands are truly necessary. The lack of surge capability means that the Naval Service would also struggle to expand its critical (and recently reduced) staffs.

This paper identifies that there are some roles which need to be re-examined in light of the deteriorating security environment, such as protection of ports, coastal critical national infrastructure (including nuclear power stations) and the littoral, which are currently largely neglected. Recent reports of Russian activity in the North Sea highlight this.<sup>2</sup> A reserve capability, including a substantial explosive ordnance disposal search element, including divers (a recently disbanded reserve capability, where safety considerations seem to be the driving force again) could provide a cost-effective solution, whether in the MR, the Coastguard or Army Reserves.

For the Marines, the RMR could be structured for use as formed bodies, similar to 4 Para and the Australian 1 Commando Regiment and 131 Commando Squadron RE. This would provide scalability for a very fine but expensive regular force, greatly improving the offer to officers, who are only 65% recruited (with none aged under 30).

Unlike the other two services and Strategic Command, the MR budget is delivered centrally within the Naval Service, and then through Commander Maritime Reserves (COMMARRES). Delivering it through the capability areas could protect them from savings measures made without knowledge of their impact on outputs, such as those in 2020. This would align the Royal Navy with the other services and Strategic Command. With this transfer should come a change in the chain of command to align with capability owners and away from COMMARRES, allowing the latter to focus on areas such as N1 personnel matters, selection and recruiting, where reserves must be distinctive. The Naval Service leadership is right to recognise that reserves are needed, but a wider vision and structural change that maximises their value and amplifies the reservist voice are essential.

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2. BBC News, 'Russian Ships Accused of North Sea Sabotage – BBC News', YouTube, 20 April 2023, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VVDaetyMd4>>, accessed 12 August 2023.

Building on recent progress, a bolder approach to the MR is recommended. This must identify the real need for maritime reserve forces, including scalability of both the Dark Blue and Lovat elements, at modest cost. A revised management structure and newly appointed senior part-time volunteer reserve officers in each of the major headquarters should be at the heart of this approach.

# Introduction

Today, with war in Europe and growing tensions around the world, most of the UK's European neighbours are seeking affordable ways to grow their defence capabilities against a background of economic stress. In most cases, this involves expanding their reserve forces.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the UK's major Five Eyes partners (Australia, Canada and the US) already have a much larger proportion of their forces in their reserves, on the basis that they offer an inexpensive route to (lower readiness) capability, can bring in ideas and technologies, and link the regular armed forces to the wider nation.

The Defence Command Paper Refresh comments:

The War in Ukraine has reminded the world that Reserves are essential both on and off the battlefield. Making the Armed Forces more capable and resilient, the Reserves deliver both mass and access to battle-winning specialist civilian capabilities that Regular forces cannot readily generate or sustain.<sup>4</sup>

Reserve forces are not an entitlement. They exist to provide surge and/or niche capabilities to allow a service to meet its commitments in extremis, which they can often do at a much lower peacetime cost than regulars. Holding contingent mass and specialist skills in the reserves allows Defence to do more with less in conflict. Both are important at a time when the UK is facing a more 'contested and volatile world', as the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh (IR23) puts it,<sup>5</sup> and given Defence's financial constraints. This paper examines whether and how Maritime Reserves (MR) can better contribute to the Naval Service.

Against the background of the war in Ukraine, and after a loss of momentum in the rebuilding of Britain's reserves, the UK armed forces took a fresh look at their reserves as part of the IR23. Previous RUSI papers have considered opportunities for the reserves to contribute to Army and RAF outputs.<sup>6</sup> The

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3. For example, France plans to increase its reserves to 100,000. See Defence Connect, 'French Military Aims to Increase Number of Reservists', 23 November 2022, <<https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/11030-french-military-aims-to-increase-number-of-reservists>>, accessed 17 January 2023. Germany also plans a large expansion. See German Federal Ministry of Defence, 'Reserve Strategy', K-10/5, 18 October 2019, <<https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/about-bundeswehr/the-bundeswehr-reserve>>, accessed 19 September 2022.
  4. Ministry of Defence, *Defence's Response to a More Contested and Volatile World* (London: The Stationery Office, 2023), p. 23.
  5. HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*, CP 811 (London: The Stationery Office, 2023).
  6. Julian Brazier, 'Mass, Mobilisation and Reserve Forces', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (September 2022); Julian Brazier and Keith Mans, 'Depth and New Capabilities: Delivering on the RAF's Ambition for the Air



Army and RAF each now have a seat on its service board occupied by a reservist with extensive experience of combining a civilian career with uniformed service. UK Strategic Command has also created a position for a senior one-star reservist with direct access to the commander to advise on its use of reserves. Reservists also head up the US and Canadian naval reserves, making the Royal Navy (RN) an outlier in this regard.<sup>7</sup>

The complexities of the maritime domain impose different challenges on RN planners, but the Naval Service has not engaged with or shaped the purpose of the reserves in the same way as the Army and the RAF, because of the absence of volunteer reserve voices in its structures. Consequently, the MR has had an extremely difficult time. A lengthy Maritime Reserves Directive was published in 2020,<sup>8</sup> but the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association External Scrutiny Team (EST) observed that it was still not clear exactly what the Naval Service feels it needs its reserves for. The EST's 2021 report states:

The RN's intent is less clear to us. We were told that the requirement should be driven by the Service need but we are concerned that could lead to the feeling of the Reserve being considered purely as a commodity.<sup>9</sup>

This concern followed the RN's unilateral decision to stop all training for four months in 2020/21, prompting a former First Sea Lord to suggest that cutting the Naval Reserve 'would be an insult to its members and a disaster for the Navy'.<sup>10</sup> The speed at which some of the cuts had to be reversed suggested that the then Navy Board was unaware of the measure's impact on operations.<sup>11</sup>

In recent months, the 30% cut in training budgets has been reversed and new orders outlining the way forward for reserves have been published.<sup>12</sup> While both

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Reserves', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2023).

7. The only other exception across all the reserve services of the major Five Eyes countries is the head of the Royal Australian Naval Reserves, but they are composed almost entirely of ex-regulars, apart from mostly medical-related specialists. See Australian Navy, 'Royal Australian Naval Reserves', <<https://www.navy.gov.au/royal-australian-naval-reserves>>, accessed 14 August 2014.
8. Ministry of Defence (MoD), 'Maritime Reserves Directive: Transforming the Maritime Reserves for 21st Century Operations', 2020. This does not appear to have been made public.
9. Council of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations, 'The United Kingdom Reserve Forces: External Scrutiny Team Annual Statutory Report 2021', 26 May 2022, p. 9, <[https://hac.org.uk/images/2022/Documents/RFCA\\_External\\_Security\\_Report/Part\\_1\\_UK\\_RF\\_Annual\\_Statutory\\_Report\\_2021\\_foreword\\_to\\_assessment.pdf](https://hac.org.uk/images/2022/Documents/RFCA_External_Security_Report/Part_1_UK_RF_Annual_Statutory_Report_2021_foreword_to_assessment.pdf)>, accessed 14 August 2023.
10. Admiral Lord West, 'Cutting Naval Reserve Would be an Insult to its Members and a Disaster for the Navy', *The Telegraph*, 9 December 2020.
11. For example, Reserve Service Days had to be restored to the RNR Air Branch when RNAS Yeovilton unexpectedly closed for the weekend, as they are routinely used to sustain it. Cyber reserves were another example of a rapid (and, in their case, total) reversal.
12. Royal Navy, 'Maritime Reserves Orders 2023-24'. This was issued recently but has no publication date.



are welcome improvements, this paper argues that they do not fully address the underlying problems with MR.

The Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) study called for objective measures to show the capabilities and costs of reserves,<sup>13</sup> and Reserve Forces 2030 (RF30) identified Ministry of Defence (MoD) accounting as a critical impediment to change.<sup>14</sup> While the Army has made some progress on costs since FR20,<sup>15</sup> the Naval Service appears not to have made the same progress or published an understanding of what the MR can do. Nor has there been recognition of the benefits of senior part-time volunteer reserve (PTVR) representation in headquarters and policy centres, even though the Royal Navy Reserve (RNR) continues to have PTVR leadership at unit and branch level (unlike the Royal Marines Reserve (RMR) or much of the RAF Reserves). This paper offers some areas for consideration that may help planners find effective ways to harness the potential in an MR. Typically, such reserves are to fill gaps, either as individual augmentees or small units, or to provide surge support for specialist operational needs (limited, pre-defined, additional mass). Examples include:

- Those with previous service expertise and where RNR training can prevent skill fade (for example, the air branch, engineers or a resuscitated reserve divers branch).
- Where it would be too expensive or otherwise impossible for the regular service to develop a full-time, regular career path when only small numbers are needed (for example, maritime trade operations or elements of intelligence).
- Where specialist civilian skills would be available (for example, medics, cyber or media operations) or where skills developed in the military can be sustained in the commercial world (including, again, the air branch).

This paper examines wider opportunities that stem from both the recent limited experience of reserves undertaking many of the seagoing roles in coastal, fishery protection and littoral vessels and broader experiences from the past and of the UK's allies today. Moreover, a number of maritime roles from which the Navy withdrew several decades ago, including protection of most ports and elements of coastal security, appear to pose serious potential threats.<sup>16</sup> While such roles

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13. MoD, *Future Reserves 2020: The Independent Commission to Review the United Kingdom's Reserve Forces* (London: The Stationery Office, 2011), p. 42.

14. MoD, 'Reserve Forces Review 2030: Unlocking the Reserves' Potential to Strengthen a Resilient Britain', May 2021, p. 10.

15. MoD, 'Cost Comparison Analysis of Army Regular and Reserve Sub-Units', 25 March 2015, p. 4, Table 3, <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/417634/20150326-Cost\\_Comparison-v6-6-O.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/417634/20150326-Cost_Comparison-v6-6-O.pdf)>, accessed 19 September 2022.

16. In his statement in 1993, then secretary of state for defence, Malcolm Rifkind, made it known that he no longer saw the role of the Royal Naval Auxiliary Service as relevant. This organisation, although unarmed, was critical to the communications, logistics and planning for defence of the country's ports. See *Hansard*, 'Statement on the Defence Estimates: Volume 230', debated on 18 October 1993, <<https://>

need not necessarily be forced onto the Naval Service, the paper examines whether the reserves could offer cost-effective options with a low peacetime cost that could be called out at scale and composed of people with local knowledge.

Finally, the RMR, which makes up a quarter of the MR, has an extremely limited function in providing individual augmentees and specialists for the regular force. The Royal Marines are embarked on a journey to become a maritime force capable of special operations, which led to a (recently dropped) proposal to require reserve recruits to undergo the main element of the regular pathway. When the Army Reserves have special forces and airborne units, as well as a commando engineer squadron, all with capabilities as formed bodies at least at sub-unit level, the narrow and unambitious RMR role is worthy of broader examination.

In considering opportunities and lessons for reserves, this paper focuses on the PTVR elements. The Naval Service has full-time reserve service (FTRS) personnel and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA), who are technically civil servants, with 80% sponsored reservists. They provide logistics and operational support but offer no capacity to scale up in war. Both categories are largely ignored in this paper, although where FTRS and Additional Duties Commitment personnel are involved in reserve units and supporting structures, they are relevant to this paper.

In terms of structure, Chapter I outlines the current state of the reserves and examines several roles where gaps exist. Chapter II looks at examples of the use of maritime reserves, including by the UK's allies. Here, the main focus is the major Five Eyes countries, both because their potential adversaries are overseas, unlike the continental NATO partners, and because they share the UK's tradition of voluntarism rather than conscription in uniformed services. Chapter III plots a way forward. The Maritime Reserve Organisation structure is shown in the Annex.

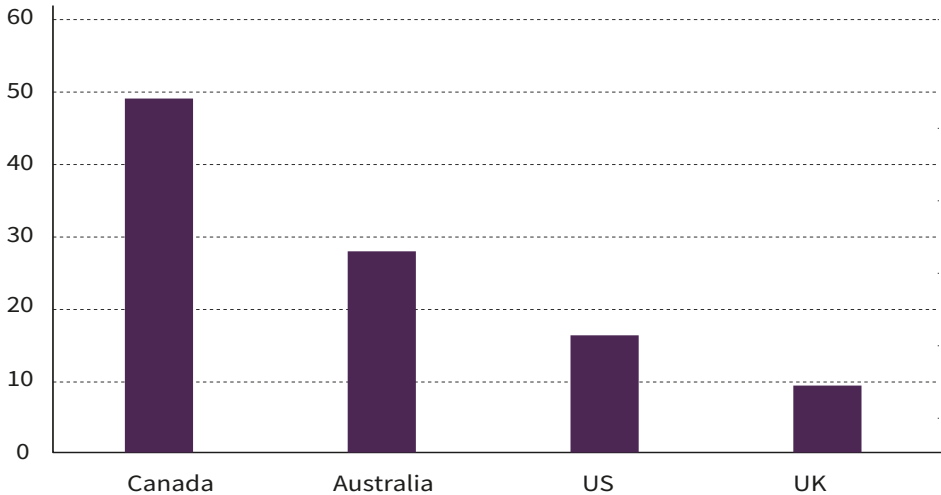
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[hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1993-10-18/debates/00e0e205-c15b-40a1-83a5-58ab7ad8f6bf/StatementOnTheDefenceEstimates column 39](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1993-10-18/debates/00e0e205-c15b-40a1-83a5-58ab7ad8f6bf/StatementOnTheDefenceEstimates%20column%2039)>, accessed 14 August 2023. Today, only a handful of strategic ports are in scope.

# I. Today's Maritime Reserves

The MR are comprised of two elements: the RNR and the RMR, totalling approximately 2,800 trained personnel. This chapter explores what they do, how they are structured and operate, and how they compare to their major Five Eyes peers.

**Figure 1:** Maritime Reserves as a Percentage of Regular Maritime Forces



Sources: Statista, 'Active and Reserve United States Military Force Personnel in 2021, by Service Branch and Reserve Component', <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/232330/us-military-force-numbers-by-service-branch-and-reserve-component/>>, accessed 18 January 2023; Government of Canada, 'Royal Canadian Navy', <<https://www.canada.ca/en/navy.html>>, accessed 14 August 2023; Australian Government, *Defence Annual Report 2021-22* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022), p. 120, Table 6.14, <<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/accessing-information/annual-reports>>, accessed 18 January 2023; Ministry of Defence, 'Quarterly Service Personnel Statistics 1 October 2022', last updated 15 December 2022, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-2022/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-1-october-2022>>, accessed 19 January 2023. The above comparisons include US Marines and Royal Marines. Coastguard forces are excluded as they differ so much between countries. The Australian Commandos are also excluded as they are part of the Australian Army but are discussed in the paper as they make an interesting comparison.

## The Royal Naval Reserve

The RNR currently has 14 regional units which support multiple specialisations, plus HMS *Ferret* and HMS *Pegasus*, which act as national sites for intelligence and aviation respectively. The capabilities are divided into three groups (plus a fourth for the RMR) and a headquarters function (see Annex).

Each geographic unit typically has a range of skills, including seagoing general warfare support (principally for offshore patrol vessels) and battle staff and support functions, including for mine warfare, amphibious warfare and submarine operations. This is slowly changing as individual specialisations become more geographically focused to enable specialist training to take place at regional training centres, reducing wasted resources in terms of time and cost of travel. An example is the engineering branch now administered by HMS *Vivid* in Plymouth, with the (PTVR) Commanding Officer ‘double hatted’ in command. Nevertheless, where geography requires it, general warfare individuals can become members of their nearest unit for representational purposes while engaged in a capability function centred elsewhere. While this is a step forward, the overall vision of the new MR document is now based on a strictly limited mission ‘to provide sufficient, capable and motivated personnel, at readiness to support RN operations around the globe’.<sup>17</sup>

Focusing on the provision of individual personnel is out of line with most other reserve services in major Five Eyes countries, and also specifically with comparable reserve organisations in the UK.<sup>18</sup> In particular, this arrangement makes the ‘offer’ for the RMR a quantum lower than the formed body capabilities of, for instance, special and airborne forces in the Army, where squadron-level capabilities are seen as essential.

The RNR has a well-developed junior and middle-ranking officer corps, with those joining from civilian life (apart from certain professionally qualified officers like doctors and chaplains) doing either an eight-week course through Britannia Royal Naval College (BRNC) Dartmouth or a modular equivalent in units, at BRNC or elsewhere to fit their tighter civilian commitments.

Like their Army counterparts, but unlike the current RAF, students joining University Royal Naval Units (URNUs) can offset part of the BRNC course against training at the URNU or basic training in their units. Almost all RNR units are commanded by PTVR officers. These officers manage with an exceptionally slim

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17. ‘Maritime Reserves Orders 2023–24’, p. 13.

18. In fact, despite the wording of the 2023 document, there are a few examples of small teams regularly deployed, including the maritime trade organisation team in the Middle East, media operations teams in task groups and international teams providing watchkeeping cells. Also, the RMR occasionally provides small NCO-commanded detachments for RFA and other vessels.

full-time cadre compared to the other services and recently suffered further reductions.

At the higher ranks, the RNR is in a very different place from the other services. In the Navy, the senior officer with a specific volunteer reserve focus is a one-star appointment as Commander Maritime Reserves (COMMARRES), which has been filled by a succession of FTRS officers and regulars for many years. The new appointee does, however, have some PTVR experience from the beginning of her service. There is no senior PTVR representation in any command or policy branch outside COMMARRES' staff, including 3 Commando Brigade. Despite this, MR officers have done well competing for the handful of 'purple' posts outside the Naval Service, with a one-star officer responsible for implementing FR30 in the MoD, and a Captain RN (OF5) currently serving in Strategic Command.

In contrast, the comparable-sized RAF Reserve has a PTVR two-star officer on the Air Force Board Executive Committee, a PTVR one-star officer, and several PTVR half-star (OF5) officers in various headquarters and departments. The Army has a senior reservist in almost every single headquarters and policy branch, including two-star officers on the Executive Committee of the Army Board and its Field Army counterpart, the deputy commanders of divisions and brigades and staff officers in key branches from the Military Secretary's department to Army Recruiting and Initial Training Command. It also has a reserve brigade (19 Light Brigade) commanded by a PTVR brigadier. These senior elements in critical structures are essential to ensuring the reserve voice is heard at a high-enough level to influence thinking in otherwise regular systems that are often inadequately aware of reserves.

Strategic Command, which has the smallest reserve element of the four commands, also has a senior PTVR one-star position with direct access to the commander and has ensured that reserve officers are distributed widely throughout it.

A small further difference to the disadvantage of MR units is that they do not have individual honorary officers as Army Reserve units have honorary colonels and Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF) units have honorary air commodores. So, even this informal voice with access to power is not provided for MR units; instead, honorary officers are held in a pool by the regular service (although one or two have reserve service), administered by Naval Regional Commander Eastern, with a primary role of advising First Sea Lord and in many cases allocated to (regular) warships.

Another key difference between the MR and those in the other commands is that their budget is held and delegated to units and heads of departments via MR HQ. In the other commands, the budgets are delegated to the relevant functional area. This connects the reserve component to capability, including

those only required in war or major operations, without the link to functional areas. Elements that are not regularly used in peacetime may wither and gaps only become apparent when it is too late. After all, a crucial role of reserves is to provide elements of capability in warfighting that are not needed in peacetime, either at all or at the requisite scale, and so would be expensive to maintain in the regular service. This arrangement has arguably given reserves a safeguard at a time when their voice was lacking in all other parts of the Navy. However, if each regular headquarters and command had a senior reserve voice, as in the other services, the best of both worlds could be achieved.

In combination, these factors mean that the various elements of the Naval Service have few institutional arrangements that bring understanding of reserve capabilities, strengths and shortcomings. The fact that the four-month training ban, when the then Navy Board was unable to easily see its impact even on current operations, had to be speedily partially unwound highlights the problem. In these regards, the RN is out of line with the Army, RAF, MoD and Strategic Command.

The MR does have an officer development programme up to commander level and occasionally beyond. As with the Army Reserve, there is a bespoke reserve Intermediate Command and Staff Course (ICSC(MR)) for SO3/2 and Warrant Officers, then the Combined Reserve Advanced Command and Staff Course (ACSC(Reserve)) for senior SO2/SO1. The RMR typically attend the ICSC(Land Reserve). Unlike the Army Reserve, all MR officers must attend ACSC(Reserve), or the full course, to be substantially promoted to SO1. The Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS) also takes OF5 MR from time to time. While laudable, there are weaknesses with the Combined Reserve ACSC(Reserve), which are examined more fully in an earlier paper in this series on the Army.<sup>19</sup>

## Seagoing Elements of the RNR

The RN does not have warships in a reserve fleet that reservists can crew in times of tension. Nevertheless, for reasons of cost and the capacity of its regular force size, the RN has vessels undergoing refit in which it has no/limited crews, as regular personnel are rightly concentrated in operational vessels. In war, it seems likely that such vessels would be accelerated back into service and a combination of volunteer reservists and ex-regulars with key skills could thus contribute to providing mass at sea.

Currently, the 'core' element of the RNR's General Warfare Sea Specialisation is primarily composed of ratings because officers require a suite of skills deemed

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19. Brazier, 'Mass, Mobilisation and Reserve Forces', p. 13.



too difficult and too expensive to be taught *ab initio* and maintained in the time available for training reserve officers. The watchkeeping qualification for officers, for example, is now the same as for the Merchant Navy, and gaining it requires extensive seagoing experience. However, officers are used in three disciplines where the training burden is lower: mine warfare; submarine operations; and amphibious warfare.<sup>20</sup> And while major warships may be too demanding for full reserve crews, coastal, fishery and littoral vessels are potentially more suitable and generally less complex if, as in the past, officer recruitment focused more heavily on those with the relevant civilian watchkeeping qualifications. When the RN took operational command of the Border Force afloat assets, some of the personnel provided for several months were reserves who acquitted themselves well.<sup>21</sup> Experiments are now planned with RNR ratings in RMR teams providing protection for the RFA and supporting vessels.

A positive development is the priority being given to officer recruiting (on target, unlike other ranks, which is running at about 50%) and phase-two training for general warfare officers in all three specialities. The potential for wider employment at sea is also being looked at. Nevertheless, the scope remains limited compared with the US and Canadian navies; allowing officers greater roles, including command of offshore patrol vessels as they do abroad, is outside the scope of current studies.

## Coastal Security and Port Protection

Britain neglected coastal security in the build-up to the Second World War, leaving its coastline and nearby ships vulnerable to E-boats (see Chapter II). For an island nation that depends on the sea – approximately 95% of British goods (by weight) travel by sea – there is little clarity on who has responsibility for the protection of ports, save to state that it is not a task formally given to the RN. Few ports have been designated as strategic and thus warrant any form of naval protection. Moreover, while the coastguard, police and border force all have some maritime (or at least aquatic) responsibilities, none has any equipment publicly evident to deliver this, particularly at a scale to provide meaningful defence in the event of the UK being engaged in a war in Europe. Similarly, no evidence of exercises to protect any part of this critical national infrastructure (CNI) has been unearthed, except, perhaps, in the narrow area of cyber. Indeed, much of the UK's wider CNI is coastal, including all its nuclear power stations, and similar points can be made about a lack of preparedness. Recent reports of

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20. See Annex.

21. From an official document, an internal exchange of signals between senior officers, proudly logged by the Maritime Reserves, seen by one of the authors.



Russian vessels carrying out ‘hostile’ reconnaissance of UK waters and sub-sea infrastructure add a further dimension.<sup>22</sup>

Should a requirement emerge to remedy this, the MR could be well placed to satisfy it in an affordable manner. Moreover, with only three naval bases for the RN’s warships and submarines, these sites are very vulnerable to attack. Each would benefit from more physical protection in the event of war, but the RN should consider how to distribute its ships to reduce their vulnerability, much as the RAF is doing for its aircraft, which are also grouped into very few locations in peacetime.<sup>23</sup>

More widely, the UK lacks intelligence arrangements for coastal security beyond a few coastguard and border force clusters, as well as an element of satellite monitoring. If, for example, a yacht operator spotted a group of people offloading equipment in a marina which looked as if it could be heavy weaponry from a motor yacht, there is no avenue for them to report it aside from calling 999.

## Mine Warfare

Until a generation ago, the RNR had its own ships, most of them *River*-class minesweepers operating as MCM10. When these were replaced with more capable, but also more complicated, *Hunt*-class mine countermeasure vessels (MCMs), the RNR continued with detachments of divers and a few personnel trained on the REMUS remote mine-hunting system. Today, all that remains are a few battle staff and watch officers. This seems to be a consequence of rising safety standards and a widespread belief that the current skills involved in the operational side of mine warfare are too complicated for reservists. However, this contrasts with the Army’s Royal Engineers’ view of explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) work, where the reserve regiment (101 City of London Regiment) is similar in size to its regular counterpart (33 Engineer Regiment (EOD)). The Royal School of Military Engineering at Chatham and Minley, which has been repeatedly praised by the RFCA External Scrutiny Team for their success in making training reserve friendly,<sup>24</sup> has recognised that the strongest requirement for a surge capability is in the search for mines and other EODs, the main focus for reserve training. At the same time, ex-regulars and those reservists who can take the time off can do the full regular course and offer the full range of skills,

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22. Gordon Corera, ‘Ukraine War: The Russian Ships Accused of North Sea Sabotage’, *BBC News*, 19 April 2023.

23. Brazier and Mans, ‘Depth and New Capabilities’, p. 12.

24. See, for example, CRFCA, ‘The United Kingdom Reserve Forces External Scrutiny Team Annual Report 2020’, 2020, para. 32, <<https://www.nwrfca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/22-FEB-21-EST-Report-2020.pdf>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

including dismantling mines and suspected devices. Both regular and reserve IED teams and individuals were used on Operation *Herrick* in Afghanistan.

## Information Warfare

Information warfare (IW) is the fastest-growing element of the MR, although, as with other elements, figures are not published. This includes information operations, cyber, intelligence, media operations, maritime trade operations and communications technology. While IW has been part of an armed forces' armoury since the dawn of time, as any reader of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* knows,<sup>25</sup> modern equipment and social media have taken it to a new level, as the war in Ukraine has shown. The RN has recognised their importance and that these skills should lie predominantly with the MR. Cyber offers an opportunity for the Navy and the MR to grow a key capability. The capability gap across government has led to a commitment to more reserves, although the difficulties in keeping quality operatives in regular service are still not fully acknowledged.

MR information operations are a national asset, with elements at Chicksands. Most personnel are at Portsmouth, where training and employment is managed by the single unit of HMS *King Alfred* that works closely with the new (Regular) Operational Advantage Centre (OAC) there. Like the General Warfare and Operations Support capabilities, the IW capability is commanded by a PTVR captain (OF5), with each of the six elements led by PTVR commanders (OF4). Tasking comes mostly through the (regular) OAC but into reservist teams, whose command and N1 (personnel) arrangements are handled by the PTVR commanders. This means that the people responsible for N1 issues, including supporting recruiting, individual appraisals and leading work, can bring their highly relevant civilian skills to the Naval Service.

The arrangements for the six branches are different in this regard. In the case of cyber and communications technology, all recruits work in the industry and cyber applicants pass through a Defence-wide system for selection. In the case of media operations and intelligence, recruits have to pass an assessment and a useful proportion start with civilian skills. There is no separate selection for information and maritime trade operations, and recruits are trained from scratch, but a number bring valuable civilian backgrounds. This is a complicated area as these disciplines involve civilian-recognised skills but lack the professional structures which govern military personnel in areas like medicine and law. The RNR's IW capability structure seems well designed to cope with it.

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25. Bob Carruthers (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: The Bookzine Company, 2012).

Two further welcome features are that IW staff are all deployable (except some cyber staff) and some have been deployed abroad, and that the OAC actively looks to them and their unusual skills for guidance on future trends as technologies evolve.

## Aviation

Reformed in 1980,<sup>26</sup> and now known as HMS *Pegasus*, the former RNR Air Branch has a mixture of pilots and other key aviation skills, although it currently has no remotely piloted air systems (RPAS) cadre or capability. It is entirely composed of ex-regulars. The organisation is commanded by a PTVR officer with full-time support and spends almost all its output on operations working in support of the fleet, rather than training itself. The unit operates as a pool providing personnel as needed by the Navy as individuals or small teams, but tasking is through its headquarters, rather than directly by the customer unit or organisation.<sup>27</sup> This ensures that tasking is by people who understand the pressures of dual career service. Until the aircraft was retired, the air branch included Harrier pilots. By any standards, it offers access in peacetime and a surge capability in war for a range of expensive skills at very low cost, as it requires no training pipeline, just vastly cheaper routine training to maintain currency (or, where pilot skills are useful without current flying, none at all, such as inspection, classroom instruction and red teaming).

However, ever-increasing safety requirements, combined with tightening flying budgets, mean very few now actually fly. The earlier RUSI paper on Air Reserves highlighted the growing evidence that an over-cautious safety regime, introduced since the Haddon-Cave report, was both reducing the appetite for sensible risk-taking in that service and hampering the growth of reserve capability through unrealistic requirements.<sup>28</sup> The availability of reservists to help in the RN's helicopter pilot training pipeline appears to continue to give it a higher level of

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26. Royal Navy, 'HMS Pegasus (Yeovilton)', <<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/maritime-reserves/royal-naval-reserve/units/hms-pegasus>>, accessed 16 November 2022.
  27. The RAF has two squadrons which operate in a similar fashion to the RNR Air Branch, 622 Squadron and 616 Squadron, although the former is always commanded by a full-time officer but is also experimenting with some part-time officers in regular squadrons. See Brazier and Mans, 'Depth and New Capabilities', p. 6. Such experiments have failed in the past (for example, in the Puma Force).
  28. Brazier and Mans, 'Depth and New Capabilities'; Charles Haddon-Cave, *The Nimrod Review: An Independent Review into the Broader Issues Surrounding the Loss of the RAF Nimrod MR2 Aircraft XV230 in Afghanistan in 2006*, HC 1025 (London: The Stationery Office, 2009). This report and the structures and procedures it led to profoundly affected attitudes to risk in the armed forces. See, for example, Matt Whitehead, 'Cultural Readjustment in the RAF Following the Nimrod XV230 Crash', unpublished doctoral thesis, Loughborough University, February 2019, <[https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/thesis/Cultural\\_readjustment\\_in\\_the\\_RAF\\_following\\_the\\_Nimrod\\_XV230\\_crash/10292993](https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/thesis/Cultural_readjustment_in_the_RAF_following_the_Nimrod_XV230_crash/10292993)>, accessed 19 June 2023.

resilience than its RAF counterpart by assisting with instruction, red teaming on simulators and paperwork.<sup>29</sup>

## Royal Marines Reserves

The RMR was established in 1948 with a limited role providing augmentees for the regular force.<sup>30</sup> Today, the force is split into four units, each with an establishment of 155, spread over 22 locations. The regular RM are partially moving away from amphibious operations at scale towards a ‘future commando force’, capable of a range of ‘tier-two’ special forces operations. A programme to bring reserve training in line with regular training was abandoned, presumably acknowledging the incompatibility of regular full-time training with demanding civilian employment. After a period of uncertainty over its future, it has continued to provide individual augmentees to regular units, both mainstream and those holding special skills.<sup>31</sup>

While the mainstream RMR has such a limited role, UK Special Forces have two reserve Special Air Service (SAS) regiments, a small (RMR) Reserve Special Boat Service (SBS) detachment and a signals squadron, all integrated in the Special Forces Group. 16 Airborne Assault Brigade has a reserve infantry battalion and engineer and medical squadrons and is growing a reserve artillery battery. Apart from the SBS detachment, all have roles as formed bodies, mostly up to sub-unit level.

RMR premises are well resourced for facilities and supporting permanent staff structures, with each (company-sized) unit headed by a regular lieutenant colonel. These units contain many talented potential officers who serve as junior ranks, because the RMR’s traditional role – producing individual augmentees – is unambitious and offers little opportunity for command to junior officers; it is only 65% recruited officers,<sup>32</sup> and none of the officers are under 30,<sup>33</sup> unlike Army reserve officers. In comparison, the Army Commando unit (131 Squadron RE) has both a formed unit capability in providing a wide range of outputs, such as heavy plant, bridge building and demolitions, and a healthy officer cadre because it offers command opportunities, including for its commanding officer, who is always a reserve major. Both the RMR and 131 Squadron are struggling because of the

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29. Author conversation with RN pilots. The RAF does not appear to use PTVR reservists for back-up in the training pipeline.

30. Originally called the Royal Marines Forces Volunteer Reserve, established in the Royal Marines Bill. See *Hansard*, ‘Royal Marines Bill’, 12 February 1948, <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1948/feb/12/royal-marines-bill>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

31. Royal Navy, ‘Maritime Reserves Orders 2023–24’, p. 9.

32. Author conversation with COMMARRES, June 2023.

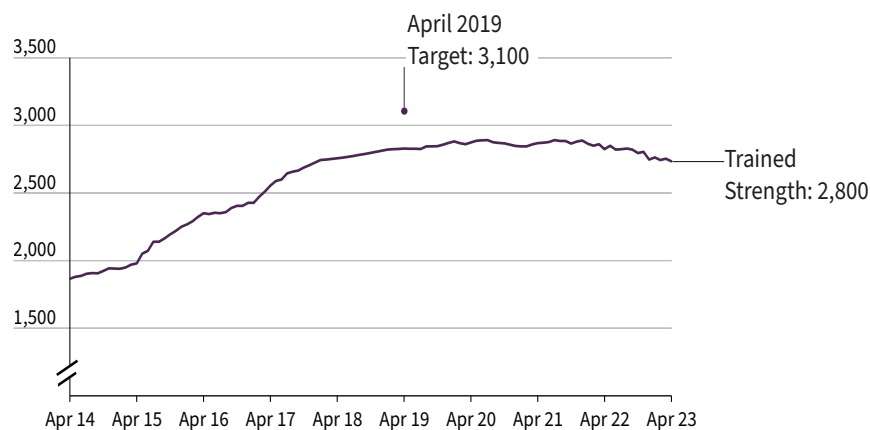
33. Parliamentary answer to Lord de Mauley, 13 February 2023, HL5242.

cuts in Reserve Service Day (RSD) budgets, which were recently reversed, but commando training is at last starting again after a whole year's pause.

The RMR also contrasts sharply with its counterparts in the US and Australia. The US has a marine corps reserve division and Australia has a commando regiment (an amphibious unit in its army reserve). Both are constituted for use as formed bodies, as described in Chapter II.

## Recruiting and Training

**Figure 2:** Maritime Reserves, Trained Strength 2014–23



Source: MoD, 'Quarterly Service Personnel Statistics, 1 April 2023', updated 22 June 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-2023/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-1-april-2023>>, accessed 18 August 2023.

After several years of steady progress, the coronavirus pandemic seriously hampered recruiting problems as the Army's Defence Recruitment System<sup>34</sup> bled across the other services in terms of public perceptions and Defence-wide mitigation measures. The 2021 training ban further worsened this for the MR. After protests in parliament and the media,<sup>35</sup> training days specifically related to recruiting and basic training were restored, but the impact on trainees and potential recruits of discovering that their units had been suspended is not hard to imagine.

MR training suffers from the same issues that were extensively explored in the earlier paper on Army Reserves,<sup>36</sup> which stressed the tension between a commitment to achieve similar standards against the requirement to deliver

34. Brazier, 'Mass, Mobilisation and Reserve Forces'.

35. *Hansard*, 'Points of Order' (Vol. 685, debated on 9 December 2020).

36. Brazier, 'Mass, Mobilisation and Reserve Forces', pp. 11–14.

training appropriate for people with full-time, and often relevant, civilian jobs and skills. In the case of the MR, two additional factors compounded this: the 30% cut imposed on training budgets in 2021 (now reversed) and calls to reduce the number of permanent staff instructors in the RNR which, unlike the RMR, has always been leaner than other reserve units. However, more positively, emphasis is now placed on improving phase-two training for reserve general warfare officers, with two-week courses delivered in Cyprus or Gibraltar. Nevertheless, as previously described, the vision remains limited in this area.

The 2020 Maritime Reserves Directive states that the MR should ‘review reserves training and delivery’ and ‘explore regionalisation of training in waterfront units for seamanship, whilst exploiting distributed and virtual learning across the Branches’.<sup>37</sup>

In principle, providing more training in RNR bases and regionally will help and is sensible, but it is difficult to see how it can work in practice with fewer permanent staff in those units.

## Terms and Conditions of Service (TACOS)

As with the Army and RAF, MR suffer from anomalies in their TACOS. Both RF30 and the 2021 Council of RFCA’s External Scrutiny Team report highlight the complexity of the various structures under which reservists can be engaged, which was dealt with more fully in the Army Reserves paper.<sup>38</sup>

## Comparison with Major Five Eyes Counterparts

The UK MR is significantly smaller in absolute terms and as a proportion of the whole force than its major Five Eyes comparators, all of which, arguably, also have greater role clarity than the UK.

- **US:** The US Navy Reserve’s mission is clear: to provide strategic depth and deliver operational capabilities in times of peace or war, operating across all areas of the US Navy, as individuals and as units.<sup>39</sup> These roles include flying, EOD, engineering, intelligence, logistics and medical.<sup>40</sup> The US still has a

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37. MoD, ‘Maritime Reserves Directive’.

38. Brazier, ‘Mass, Mobilisation and Reserve Forces’.

39. US Navy, ‘Reserve’, <<https://www.navy.com/forward>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

40. Today’s Military, ‘Navy Reserve’, <<https://www.todaysmilitary.com/ways-to-serve/service-branches/navy-reserve>>, accessed 14 August 2023.



significant fleet of retired vessels in reserve, but little is spent on maintaining them and working with them is not seen as a core function for the Navy Reserve.<sup>41</sup> The US Coastguard Reserve has two main elements: pools of individuals operating in support of regular units; and self-contained port security units who are at 96 hours' notice to defend US ports. They are also occasionally deployed abroad.<sup>42</sup>

- **Canada:** The Naval Reserve generates 'trained individuals and teams for Canadian Forces operations, including domestic safety operations as well as security and defence missions, while at the same time supporting the Navy's efforts in connecting with Canadians through the maintenance of a broad national presence'.<sup>43</sup> The six (*Kingston*-class) maritime coastal defence vessels are mostly crewed by reservists.<sup>44</sup>
- **Australia:** The roles of the Royal Australian Naval Reserve (RANR) are: to support and sustain contemporary Australian Defence Force (ADF) operations in which the navy may be engaged; to deliver fundamental inputs to capability and workforce surge capacity; and to provide a strategic resource that can meet the navy's capability needs when circumstances require its call out.<sup>45</sup> The RANR workforce covers all the branches in the regular navy, and provides a surge capability that can be called on quickly. To that end, it is primarily composed of ex-regular personnel but also includes directly recruited individuals with specialist skills that would otherwise be costly to generate and develop as part of the usual force generation process.<sup>46</sup>

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41. Quora, 'How Often Does the US Navy Reactivate Mothballed Ships from the Reserve Fleet?', <<https://www.quora.com/How-often-does-the-US-Navy-reactivate-mothballed-ships-from-the-reserve-fleet>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

42. USO, '10 Need-to-Know Facts About the Coast Guard Reserve', 18 February 2022, <<https://www.uso.org/stories/2998-10-need-to-know-facts-about-the-coast-guard-reserve>>, accessed 16 January 2023.

43. Government of Canada, 'Vision and Mission', <<https://www.canada.ca/en/navy/corporate/our-organization/structure/navres/vision-mission.html>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

44. Government of Canada, 'Naval Reserve', <<https://www.canada.ca/en/navy/corporate/our-organization/structure/navres.html>>, accessed 14 August 2023 .

45. Australian Navy, 'Royal Australian Naval Reserves'.

46. *Ibid.*



# II. The Historical Use of Naval Reserves

## First World War

### The RNR and RNVR's Success After a Reluctant Start by the Admiralty

At the outset of the First World War, the RNR had 30,000 officers and men, drawn from the Merchant Navy and Britain's fishing fleets. In addition, there was a substantial force in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) drawn from civilian life. Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, was reluctant to use the RNR because of the importance of their civilian roles and the RNVR because of their lack of nautical training.<sup>47</sup> However this was quickly overcome, and many RNR officers commanded destroyers and smaller vessels. Some went on to become pilots with the Royal Naval Air Service, but the bulk spent the war in small boat work, often in trawlers adapted for minesweeping and anti-submarine operations, and in motor torpedo boats. Some were involved in innovative roles, including the three Victoria Cross winners who served in Q-boats,<sup>48</sup> the covertly armed merchantmen adapted to lure enemy submarines to destruction.

RNVR officers seldom commanded ships, but officers and ratings served at sea in mixed crews. Many served in the Royal Naval Division which served with gallantry and took enormous casualties in Belgium and at Gallipoli. Yet, arriving in France for the Battle of the Somme, General Haig said that it 'advanced further and took more prisoners than any other division'.<sup>49</sup>

Between them, the RNR and RNVR won two-fifths of all the Victoria Crosses awarded to the senior service,<sup>50</sup> and reservist intelligence staff and cryptographers set the foundation for enduring IW support from the RNVR.

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47. Stephen Howarth, *The Royal Naval Reserve in War and Peace: 1903-2003* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2003), p. 40.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

50. *Ibid.*

## Second World War

### The RNR and RNVR Were Key to Developing Small Boat Capability

During the Second World War, both reserve branches served alongside their regular counterparts, together with the Royal Naval Volunteer (Supplementary) Reserve, a small new organisation open to civilians with existing and proven experience at sea as ratings or officers and composed of experienced yachtsmen; selection was based on a single extended interview. Its 3,000 places were filled within months of its announcement in November 1936,<sup>51</sup> despite offering no pay, uniforms or formal training.<sup>52</sup> After the outbreak of war, such officers were deployed in a variety of seagoing roles with much shorter training than the three months for most wartime entry officers.<sup>53</sup> Intriguingly, some were at the cutting edge of innovation in small boat work, where, as arguably is the case today, the regular service had little bandwidth to focus. They included Lieutenant Commander Robert Hichens, DSO & Bar, DSC & Two Bars, who played a critical role in developing motor torpedo boats as a new capability;<sup>54</sup> an area in which Britain started far behind the German E-boats as its emphasis was on blue water capital ships. Again, the RNR took commands in smaller vessels and were at the forefront of innovation. The attack on St Nazaire was executed by an elderly destroyer and 18 small craft. It achieved its objective, wrecking the world's largest dock, albeit with terrible casualties. The mission leader, Commander Ryder VC, was a regular officer but almost all the officers under him, including small boat commanders, were reservists.<sup>55</sup>

Both the RNR and RNVR served as pilots in the Fleet Air Arm, in bomb disposal, intelligence, espionage, and in the new Commando and Beach Signal Section.<sup>56</sup>

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51. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

52. UK Parliament, 'Royal Naval Volunteer Supplementary Reserve', 19 October 1943, <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1943/oct/19/royal-naval-volunteer-supplementary>>, accessed 14 August 2023

53. Howarth, *The Royal Naval Reserve in War and Peace*, p. 86; Antony Hichens, *Gunboat Command: The Biography of Lieutenant Commander Robert Hichens DSO\* DSC\*\* RNVR* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2008), p. 31.

54. 'Senior staff officers ... acknowledge [Hichens'] pre-eminence in all directions where small fighting craft were concerned'. See Gordon Holman, *The Little Ships* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1943), p. 64. The author was an officer who participated in the St Nazaire raid. See also Hichens, *Gunboat Command*, Chapter 7.

55. Howarth, *The Royal Naval Reserve in War and Peace*, p. 95.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

During the Second World War, the RNR won four Victoria Crosses and an RNVR pilot a fifth.<sup>57</sup>

The contribution to IW continued with specialists in codebreaking and intelligence. Meanwhile civilian intelligence staff and cryptographers, many of them bringing key skills from their day jobs,<sup>58</sup> set the foundations for what became the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park after the war. Among other writers, Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond books, was employed in writing stories to deceive enemy intelligence.<sup>59</sup>

## The Pivotal Role of Interwar Reserves in Scaling Up the US Marines and the Development of British Commandos

The US Marine Corps expanded more than 30-fold during the Second World War from 15,000 active-duty members to nearly half a million, while remaining an exceptionally high-quality force. These figures, focused on the immediate pre-war regular strength, disguise the work of successive commandants from 1925 onward to build capability and mass in their reserves, despite severely limited funding.<sup>60</sup> The US Marine Corps Reserve was greatly expanded by the 1938 Naval Reserve Act (still two years ahead of funding and mobilisation measures across the US armed forces); 70% of all US Marines serving in the Second World War came through it.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast, the Royal Marines had no reserve force for bringing mass and civilian talent and ideas. Although they expanded, it was by a much smaller factor than their US equivalents. Lacking mass, the first large-scale operations to destroy coastal infrastructure were carried out by a Territorial Army unit under Naval direction,<sup>62</sup> and the commando force was then set up within the Army, rather than the Royal Marines, although the latter soon developed their own raiding force, led initially by Herbert ‘Blondie’ Hasler.<sup>63</sup> Many of the Army

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57. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

58. Patrick Beesly, *Room 40: British Naval Intelligence, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1984), pp. 11–12.

59. National WWII Museum, ‘Secret Agents, Secret Armies: Who Was the Real James Bond?’, 21 May 2020, <<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/Ian-fleming-royal-naval-intelligence-department>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

60. Funds were so tight that until the 1938 Naval Reserve Act, all training apart from annual camp was unpaid. See Marine Corps Forces Reserve, ‘History of the USMCR’, <<https://www.marforres.marines.mil/usmcr100/history/>>, accessed 18 August 2022.

61. *Ibid.*

62. R P Pakenham-Walsh, *History of the Corps of Royal Engineers, Vol. 8* (Institution of Royal Engineers, 1958), pp. 76–80.

63. Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *Blondie* (London: Leo Cooper, 1998).

members of the commando force originated in the Territorials (including Shimi Lovat,<sup>64</sup> who was a reservist before and after his regular service), and many were drawn from the 10 territorial independent companies.<sup>65</sup>

The RMR was formed in 1948 as the Royal Marine Forces Volunteer Reserve (RMFVR). The pattern of reservist officers driving innovation, as outlined in the two earlier papers in this series, was absent by default in the wartime Royal Marines as they had no pre-war reserve, unlike the Royal Navy and the US Marines.

## The RNR: Minesweeping, 1946–98

The RNR was re-formed in 1946 with a primary role of operating minesweepers and small patrol boats – it absorbed the RNVR in 1958. There was no substantial reserve involvement in the Falklands War, but various ashore elements of the RNR were formed or expanded in the immediate aftermath, including the amphibious warfare and public affairs branches.

Just months after that war, the Royal Navy accepted a batch of Merchant Navy officers to serve as regular officers, with only three weeks of phase-one training at BRNC Dartmouth. They went on to do full warfare courses at HMS *Collingwood*, however.<sup>66</sup> This offers a parallel with the handling of RNR officers in both wars, although the officers concerned were accepted as career RN officers.

In 1998, the last of the RNR minesweepers were decommissioned and reservists ceased to have their own vessels. Sweeping had been replaced by mine hunting, which was deemed too complex for reserve crews. Even the URNUs have much more recently lost most of their P2000 patrol boats.

## The Gulf, Iraq and Afghan Wars

### Parallels with the US Navy

In the 1991 Gulf War, 21,000 US naval reservists were called out. The Naval Reserve provided the US Navy's only capability in many areas, including dedicated combat search and rescue, mobile inshore undersea warfare and logistic air transport. Most reservists augmented their regular counterparts. They came

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64. Shimi Lovat was one of the founding officers of the Army Commando Force. Mobilised as a captain in the Lovat Scouts, a TA unit, he transferred into the new commando force and is generally recognised as the most important inspiration for, and leader in, that force – so much so that Commandos today still call their principal uniforms 'Lovats'.

65. Timothy Robert Moreman, *British Commandos 1940–46* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2006), p. 13.

66. The authors were briefed on this by one of the officers concerned.

from all parts of the country, representing many specialities: medical; naval construction; cargo handling; mine warfare; naval control of shipping; intelligence; public affairs; and the chaplain corps.<sup>67</sup>

Similar deployments took place in the operations in Iraq (from 2003) and Afghanistan (from 2001). Following 9/11, almost 7,000 US naval reservists were deployed in the first eight weeks alone.<sup>68</sup>

While much smaller, the RNR made significant contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and Sierra Leone. These included pilots, two EOD diving teams (whose branch was subsequently disbanded), medical, intelligence and more.<sup>69</sup>

## Marines and Commandos: the UK as the Odd One Out

In the 1991 Gulf War, the US Marine Reserves deployed in formed units, sending out a higher proportion of their reserves than any other service. The highest-scoring tank unit across all the allied forces was the 4<sup>th</sup> US Marine Reserve Tank Battalion, outshooting all their US and UK regular counterparts, using homemade fire control systems (many members were Microsoft employees).<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, units across a full range of capabilities were deployed in the preparation for and during the Iraq War, with a larger percentage of US Marine Reserves committed than any other service. The most heavily used components were light armour, engineers, assault amphibious elements, air and land transport communications, medical and civil affairs. Reservist engineers built the longest bridge in the history of the Marine Corps, and reservist infantry and light armour units controlled whole provinces in the aftermath. The reserves were called out at the very beginning and took only five days to mobilise on average.<sup>71</sup> They were crucial to the US contribution: 'We could not have done what we did without the Reserves', noted Lieutenant General James T Conway, Commanding General,

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67. Naval History and Heritage Command, 'The Gathering Storm: The Build-Up of US Forces', 2 March 2015, <<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-navy-in-desert-shield-desert-storm/the-build-Up.html>>, accessed 30 January 2023.
  68. Naval History and Heritage Command, 'The US Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001-2002', 27 July 2020, <<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-navy-operation-enduring-freedom-2001-2002.html>>, accessed 30 January 2023, p. 51.
  69. HM Government, 'Recognising the Opportunity: Part 2: Maritime and Air Reserves and Tri-Service Conclusions Report of the All-Party Reserve Forces Group', pp. 4-5.
  70. The summary of this action has been recently removed from the official US Navy website, and one of the authors attended a lecture on the subject given by the curator of the Bovington Tank Museum in 2015.
  71. Paul Kane, 'Marine Corps Reserve Forces in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM', *Marine Corps Gazette*, 30 June 2022, <<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/marine-corps-reserve-forces-operation-iraqi-freedom>>, accessed 30 January 2023.



1<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF).<sup>72</sup> In Afghanistan, the US Marine Reserves played a major role once again, operating as formed units.<sup>73</sup>

The Australian 1 Commando Regiment, which is part of their Army Reserve but has an amphibious role similar to marines in the US and the UK, repeatedly sent formed companies to Afghanistan. Their missions were population centric on several occasions, which involved deploying in remote and hazardous parts of the country, at risk from insurgent influence, and working to build the support of local communities for the Afghan National Security Forces and supporting International Security Assistance Force efforts to maintain security in the province.<sup>74</sup> In this respect, they were similar to roles reportedly adopted by the US Green Berets and Britain's SAS reserves.<sup>75</sup>

The RMR sent a steady trickle of individual augmentees, almost all junior ranks, to Iraq and Afghanistan. They served bravely and one, Lance Corporal Croucher, won a George Cross.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, no formed units, even at platoon level, were deployed. While there are always national differences, it might seem at first blush that the UK's marine reserve deployment might be somewhere in the scale of ambition between the US Marine Reserves and Australian Commandos in terms of size. In fact, they operated at a level well below both, with no formed element of any kind – a de facto verdict on regular confidence in the RMR officer corps on military operations, in contrast to their counterparts in other Five Eyes countries.

## Civil Assistance: Key Skills

During Operation *Rescript*, the British military operation to help tackle Covid-19, MR officers and ratings performed a range of useful and sometimes challenging roles, filling new posts, including assisting the Cabinet Office. Ministers repeatedly applauded the innovative ideas that reservists put forward. One example was RMR officer Carlo Contaldi, a professor of theoretical physics in his day job, who received an MBE for applying his civilian skills to tackling the pandemic.<sup>77</sup> The additional capacity the reserves provided to the regular armed forces reduced

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72. *Ibid.*

73. Alex J Rouhandeh and Naveed Jamali, 'After Iraq and Afghanistan, Marine Corps Reserve Turns to Deterrence', *Newsweek*, 23 March 2022.

74. Australian Government, Department of Defence, 'One Commando Regiment Army Reservists Research Out to Oruzgan', 16 March 2010 (web archive), <<https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20110604230102/http://www.defence.gov.au/media/DepartmentalTpl.cfm?CurrentId=10046>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

75. Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), pp. 246–47.

76. Si Biggs, 'L/Cpl Matt Croucher GC', Royal Marines History, 9 February 2022, <<https://www.royalmarineshistory.com/post/l-cpl-matt-croucher-gc>>, accessed 30 January 2023.

77. Conrad Duncan, Deborah Evanson and Ryan O'Hare, 'New Years Honours for Imperial Community', Imperial College London, 31 December 2021, <<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/232875/new-year-honours-imperial-community/>>, accessed 14 October 2023.

the impact on regular personnel. The operation arguably illustrated that the regular services are stretched in coping with a major crisis well short of war. This includes the headquarters command functions which, along with shore billets, have been reduced even since the height of the pandemic to send more regular naval personnel to sea. Reserves could provide important crisis capacity that is otherwise lacking and ensure a better understanding of their contribution to naval activity.



# III. A New Way Forward: Findings, Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

The biggest challenge the Naval Service faces in relation to the Reserves lies in setting out an ambitious and lucid vision as to what is needed. Until recently, there was a lack of clarity. While the ‘Maritime Reserves Orders 2023–24’ goes some way to deal with this, it has done so at the cost of lowering the level of ambition. IW, where the RNR is arguably forging ahead of its sister services, is an important exception.

The core element of general warfare has some plans to get more sailors to sea, including continuing with opportunities on offshore patrol vessels and RMR detachments on certain vessels (the latter will be section sized commanded by an NCO). But ideas for building up opportunities for officers are still at an early stage. Key watchkeeping qualifications are recognised across the naval/merchant marine divide, but the feeling remains that putting reservist officers into seagoing roles is hard. Yet, the RN took a large batch of Merchant Navy officers into seagoing ranks after the Falklands War, with only three weeks at Dartmouth. Officers are regularly employed in seagoing posts in the major Five Eyes countries and reservists command patrol vessels in Canada.

There is a depressing parallel between the loss of the diving branch in general warfare and the collapse in the number of pilots still flying in what is now HMS *Pegasus*, although that organisation remains a centre of excellence in many other ways. Yet, the UK has one of the world’s leading aviation sectors and a large civilian diving sector associated with the hydrocarbon industry and, more recently, offshore wind. Both losses reflect the ever-increasing restrictions imposed by the Defence Safety Authority since the Haddon-Cave Report, which led to its founding,<sup>78</sup> posing the question as to whether compromise can be found.

The study also found that there remains little evidence that provision is being made for the potential threats to Britain’s ‘non-strategic’ ports (most of them),

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78. Initially as the Military Aviation Authority, and then, after taking on wider duties, in its current guise.

coastal infrastructure or vulnerable cables, perhaps because, beyond the occasional survey ship, any such provision would be very expensive if provided by regulars.

The paper found an important, strong element in the newly constituted IW Capability Group, which forms one of four such groups under the new MR structure. With its PTVR leadership, both at OF5 overall and in of its branches, it is setting the pace. Having reservists with civilian professional expertise in its niche capabilities controlling the vital N1 aspects of the unit (assisting recruiting, selection, reporting, etc.) at a time when the other services have been slow to exploit IW opportunities from the civilian sector, is critical in explaining its healthy growth.

In the case of the RMR, where more than a year was lost on Commando recruit courses while options were considered, it has simply reverted to the unambitious vision of a source of mostly other rank augmentees, which dates back to 1948, with no collective role beyond NCO-led (section-sized) detachments on ships.

The starting point must be a reassessment of the demand and where the MR can best contribute. While the Maritime Directive was developed ‘bottom-up’, a ‘top-down’ demand signal is required. Central to this is that the Naval Service appears to be less reserve-aware than its sister services. To address this, evidence from other UK and allied services suggests the need to ensure the reserve voice is heard and understood throughout the RN’s structure. This requires an appropriately senior PTVR officer on the Navy Board so that a greater understanding of the MR and its relevant abilities/capabilities is not only readily available but always considered in the initial option mix.

But the Reserves also need to be seeded throughout the system (for example, 3 Commando Brigade could have a PTVR Colonel Deputy Commander [Reserve]), as is the case with almost every Army brigade that contains reservists.<sup>79</sup> That would give the reserves a voice in the same way they have in UK Special Forces and airborne forces. These positions should be filled with bona fide reservists, not just ex-regulars on FTRS or equivalent part-time contracts. The US Marines have gone much further, with reservist brigades commanded by reservists, and the British Army has now also established something similar in its new PTVR-commanded 19 Light Brigade.

Some of these posts already exist in the RNR in the form of the three RNR Captains covering groups of capabilities, but such posts are all in COMMARRES’ chain of command instead of the relevant capability command or HQ. To support the focus on Reserve outputs, they need to be more closely connected to the

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79. The senior reservist is currently a full-time lieutenant colonel, although he does have some PTVR experience.

Naval Service's relevant commands. This would mean having reserve units and personnel working in and for capability pillars through the new policy posts and deputy commanders outlined above, while protection of the reserve identity and taking responsibility for crucial N1 issues, would come under the new board member and run horizontally across the model. This pattern exists in the Army and is developing steadily in the RAF and Strategic Command. While removing the capability strands from COMMARRES' control, it would require strengthening the remaining command support function.

Making the case for the Reserves is complicated in the Naval Service by the lack of a cost model. The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory's model for cost comparison between regular and reserve Army sub-units could be applied to elements of the MR to enable decision-making on their roles, structure and resourcing.<sup>80</sup> It would inform discussion about issues which default to a regular solution or, as may be the case of 'non-strategic' ports, simply lead to avoiding the task.

## Back to Sea

Even without dedicated ships, a much larger component of reservists could ease peacetime pressures and ensure a modest degree of scalability in tension and war, when coastal vessels would need increased crew levels, all at low cost. And, while training from scratch may be too challenging, leveraging commercial sailing experience could reduce the training burden. Today's Merchant Navy, although a tiny fraction of Britain's fleet in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is still significant, with predominantly British officers (although few British ratings). The UK also has a substantial ferry sector and offshore oil support vessels while the number of fishing vessels is expected to grow post-Brexit.<sup>81</sup> While the merchant fishing command qualification (STCW-II/1 Skipper Unlimited [Fishing]) is more limited in scope than its worldwide ocean-going counterpart, it could be an appropriate way forward for offshore patrol vessel reserve officer watchkeeping and command appointments. However, the need to sustain seaborne traffic to support the UK even in times of war will mean many commercial sailors will be required to continue in their peacetime roles.

In the medium term, the MR could provide commanding officers for coastal vessels including offshore patrol vessels, as in Canada. The main argument against the use of reservists at sea is the increased complexity of modern warships. However, much equipment, from radios to sensors, is easier to operate than

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80. MoD, 'Cost Comparison Analysis of Army Regular and Reserve Sub-Units', p. 4, Table 3.

81. Nick Gutteridge, 'New Quota Deal Means British Fishermen Can Catch 30,000 Tonnes More Than Before Brexit', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 December 2022.

before, and many of the skills are comparable to ones common in civilian life, if they can be mapped. Furthermore, simulators greatly expand the opportunities for training on land and in modular packages.

The bigger challenges are for training and gaining experience in command and senior engineering roles. The US and Canadian experience, and the RN's successful experiment in 1982, may offer lessons (especially as frigates and destroyers then were arguably more complex than offshore patrol vessels today). Adopting Merchant Navy approaches might also offer solutions; instead of regionally based reserve ships that sit alongside for most of the year, allowing assets to be 'sweated' at sea. The modern approach to ship crewing (for example, waterfront 'squads', rotating crews) *could* lend itself to the introduction of (largely) reserve crews that take their place in the rota for manning offshore patrol vessels, and vessels in refit, and provide scalability in war.

There is also a case for considering more sponsored reserves – not like the RFA, who work full-time for Defence, but like the contracts for use of roll-on/roll-off ferries and (in the case of the RAF) tanker aircraft.

## Aviation

HMS *Pegasus* is arguably a jewel in the UK armed forces' crown. Its wide pool of skills is maintained on a very small budget. It has never recruited civilians because it has been able to fill its establishment entirely from pre-trained ex-regulars.<sup>82</sup> The advent of RPAS and civilian drones that can be adapted for war, as Ukraine has shown, points to an opportunity to expand and develop new capabilities at low cost. Recruiting civilians as RNR reservists to fly and counter a range of drones would make military and economic sense, and with its current lead in reservist pilots, the Navy is well qualified to show the way.<sup>83</sup>

However, the ever-increasing aviation safety burden, contributing to the severe reduction in the number of pilots actually flying, needs to be addressed. The Haddon-Cave report was a response to a tragic incident which many believe stemmed from the downgrading of the engineering function in the upper tiers of the RAF a few years earlier.<sup>84</sup> As with many aspects of Defence, work is needed to ensure a balance between increasingly restrictive safety requirements and outputs. War is inherently risky, and trying to eliminate all risk from preparing

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82. One of the authors has been in contact with the Air Branch for roughly half its life since its formation in 1982. He has also met the founding commanding officer. At no stage has he ever discovered a recruiting problem.

83. Brazier and Mans, 'Depth and New Capabilities'.

84. Conversation with Keith Mans, former RAF pilot, former director of the Royal Aeronautical Society and co-author of *ibid*.

for it will not end well. Perhaps the solution is to reopen the issues that Haddon-Cave studied.

## Coastal and Littoral Security and Port Protection

With the return of great power competition and war in Europe, threats to the UK's ports and wider coastal CNI have increased along with increased Russian activity in the UK's littoral. The regular RN is stretched even at peacetime use levels, so any further demands for protection will add additional pressure on the force. Moreover, with RN assets concentrated on very few bases, the need to disperse and defend those additional locations in periods of heightened tension, let alone war, would be difficult with the current numbers. Similarly, coastal CNI will need additional protection, and it can be expected that more suspicious activity will occur in waters affecting the UK. How the Naval Service might respond to that is worth considering, especially given the importance the IR23 has placed on the maritime domain and resilience.

Should contingent mass be needed, reserves across Defence could offer a cost-effective solution, although this need not be RN reserves, with Coast Guard, Border Agency and Police as other options – or a new organisation perhaps along the lines of the old Royal Naval Auxiliary service. If the expertise needed is land-based (for example, defending the vulnerable and critical drainage systems of nuclear power stations), elements of the RNR or the RN ex-regular reserve could be placed under command of the Army, which has a regional command and control capability.

As well as the threat to ports, infrastructure and underground cables, history suggests that sea lanes and port approaches are vulnerable to mines. Reserves could offer extra capacity for mine warfare, especially with the adoption of remotely operated systems and divers drawn from the oil industry. Such scalability, lacking today, may be needed at short notice in a crisis. In contrast, the Army provides an EOD surge capability in search through the reserves, while recognising that fewer reserves will be able to carry out the disable task. This is a cost-effective approach to scalability. As with flying reserves, this requires a re-examination of safety issues. Such roles could be given to the Army, Police or elements (such as intelligence) to the Coastguard but, to keep it affordable, the surge capability needs to come from part-time capability because it is not needed most of the time.

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution provides a standing example in which, where simple vessels are involved, part-time volunteers can operate as crews that respond at short notice.

## Information Warfare

The establishment of the IW branch to unite a range of reserve IW capabilities under one command, including a fast-growing information element, is welcome. Moreover, PTVR leadership is key to ensuring that N1 issues such as support to recruiting, selection and assessing professional development are handled by people who understand the specialist skills involved. Closer links with universities that have strong maritime reputations, like Southampton and Liverpool, might assist capabilities like intelligence and maritime trade by further harnessing civilian expertise. An earlier Navy Board's decision to close the URNU in Southampton, which was co-located with Europe's top oceanographic department and elements of the Antarctic Survey, looks short-sighted. The case for transferring it back from Portsmouth Naval Base should be considered.

More widely, however, this expanding area would benefit from explicitly broadening the MR's mission from generating individuals to routinely fielding capability in teams. It is important that the current healthy relationship between the OAC and IW does not become assimilation, with all the implications that has for loss of understanding of reservist working patterns and the importance of distinctive N1 practices.

The government should consider relaunching an offshore coastal reserve to attract yacht operators, fishermen and others to provide human intelligence on coastal trafficking. This could either fall under MR or the Coastguard.

## Royal Marines Reserve

The (regular) Royal Marines are a high-quality force currently redefining their role. They enjoy a range of proprietary infrastructure (even separate officer training), going well beyond, for example, airborne forces, the bulk of whose training is at mainstream Army establishments. This makes them expensive, yet they lack scalability; the shortage of officers in the RMR and lack of a proper role means that even in extremis it can deliver little more than a pool of junior rank augmentees. If the regular Commando brigade requires rotation or regeneration, the RMR would be unable to deliver this at any scale.

Furthermore, in modern war with a near-peer enemy, equipped with armoured vehicles, large-scale minelaying capabilities and air assets, including drones, it



is inevitable that there will be casualties at levels not experienced in the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. In Ukraine, officers on both sides are being disproportionately killed and wounded, so battlefield replacements will have to include officers as well as enlisted personnel.<sup>85</sup> The shortage of junior officers in the current RMR calls into question their ability to provide battle casualty replacements, even in small numbers.

Given that the RMR uses the same central infrastructure and has an expensive network of buildings and permanent staff (in the latter case in contrast to the RNR), it should be possible to produce fully-fledged reserve units at relatively low cost, drawing on the UK model provided by 131 Commando Squadron RE and 4 Para and looking to the Australian Commandos. This should entail structuring units to provide a second wave as formed bodies, initially at sub-unit level, but, if funds allowed growth, potentially developing to unit level at lower readiness. As the officer corps rebuilds, introducing reserve primacy for command, as happens today in the RNR – and Army Reserve – should be a priority. It is time for Defence to be clear about what it wants from the RMR and whether it needs scalability in a force whose forward role means that large elements could be lost in short order in heavy fighting. Defence's needs may not match what is convenient for the (regular) Royal Marines in peacetime.

## Recruiting

Restoring the steady progress in MR growth in the five years since 2018 is crucial. The reserve estate, which is currently under another review, should also maintain a broad geographic spread of reserve training centres to maximise recruitment opportunities. The Maritime Reserve Centres also require realistic levels of permanent staff support to go alongside the commendable investments the Naval Service has made in its facilities. There must also be a sensible and ring-fenced recruiting budget.

The delays in the Defence Recruitment System are problematic, but there is a danger that reserve recruitment takes second place to regulars, which does not work. And the local nature of reserves activity needs to be reflected in the new recruiting system, with arrangements in place to allow those with medical and dental issues to be addressed swiftly.

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85. Including in Ukraine. See Larisa Brown, 'Russian Army Loses a Generation of Young Officers', *The Times*, 31 May 2022.



## Training

The MR need reserve-friendly training with a higher proportion delivered either in-person in regional training centres or virtually as envisaged in the 2020 Directive. The new approach, involving more specialisation, should help, but two resourcing issues must be addressed: the requirement for adequate and prioritised permanent staff to provide local instruction and availability of individual equipment<sup>86</sup> where training is to take place.

## TACOS

The MR should move in line with the other two services and extend reserve careers to age 60 with exemptions beyond that for those with key skills that do not require the same fitness levels.

If the UK is to call on reserves routinely, the question of TACOS must be addressed. This should be led in the MoD as all three services' reservists face similar issues. The RFCA EST recommends:

that RF30 takes forward, as a priority, work to simplify the TACOS available and guidelines, or policy (rules) for the appropriate TACOS to meet a given situation, i.e., RSDs for routine training; enhanced RSDs for short operational deployments (maximum 28 days) whether homeland resilience or DAOTO; and full mobilisation for longer deployments and more kinetic operations.<sup>87</sup>

The review must ensure the outcome works for reservists, and also their families and employers, which is more complex than for regulars, who have no civilian employers and do not have to balance their off-duty family time with work in the same way.

## Strategic Reserves

A further point is that it seems anomalous that COMMARRES has no responsibility for the Strategic Reserve of ex-regular personnel. If reserves are to play a larger role in the warfighting space, as RF30 envisages, then that should surely change.

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86. CRFCA, 'The United Kingdom Reserve Forces External Scrutiny Team Annual Report 2020', p. 15, para. 34.

87. CRFCA, 'The United Kingdom Reserve Forces External Scrutiny Team Annual Statutory Report 2021', para. 36.

## Honorary Officers

A final proposal is that the MR consider inviting members of their pool of prestigious honorary officers who are not attached to ships to each become honorary commodores for a reserve unit. This may require also recruiting a few more. In the Army and RAuxAF unit, honorary colonels and honorary air commodores provide an extra voice for each unit, with informal access to higher levels. At a time when the MR voice is so small in the wider Naval Service, this modest reform would seem overdue.

## Concluding Remarks

The MR contain a great deal of talent, although, in the case of the RMR, much of it is in the lower ranks rather than the shrunken officer corps. The RNR's new shape, especially in the IW domain, promises progress, but clear demand signals are needed for both the RNR and RMR to show how reserves can provide scalability at sea and on land as well as specialists. That will require reserve voices in the major centres of policy and command in the Naval Service, from the Navy Board down. Defence also needs to re-evaluate the balance between safety requirements and military needs across the armed forces. This would widen the range of options across the reserve forces.

The threat to the UK is increasing, and growth in defence funding is unlikely to match it. Reserve forces offer a way of building extra capability at low cost. The UK is an island nation; reserve forces offer the naval service a critical link to the civilian world and the innovation it brings.

# About the Authors

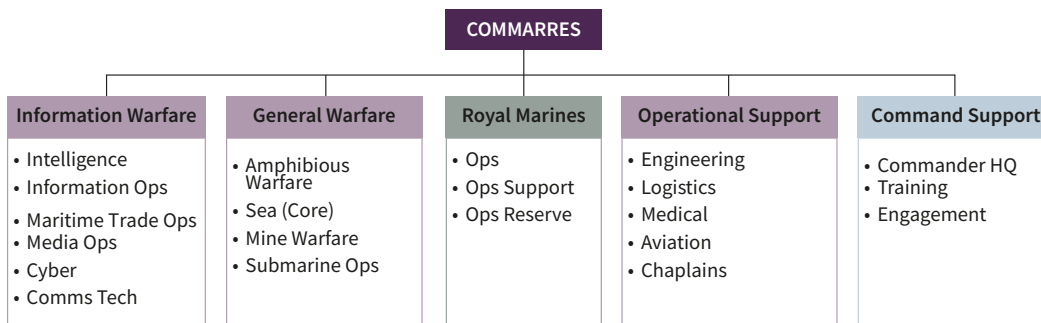
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# Annex: The Maritime Reserve Organisation

This annex shows the organisation of the MR, with four sets of grouped capabilities and command support. The latter is extremely lean and would need strengthening, especially in the N1 personnel area, where the elements are to be distributed across the regular commands, as envisaged in the paper.

**Figure 3:** The Maritime Reserves Organisation



Source: Royal Navy, 'Maritime Reserves Orders, 2023-24'. This was issued recently but has no publication date.