**Transcript of First Sea Lord Podcast Pt 3, 9 March 2020**

[00:54:32] Hello and welcome to this third and final part of our special podcast interview series with Admiral Tony Radakin, First Sea Lord, Chief of the Naval Staff and the professional head of the Royal Navy. In part one Admiral Radakin talked to us about his tenure as First Sea Lord so far and gave us some of his thoughts and opinions on leadership. In part two we looked more closely at his vision for the future of the Royal Navy and discuss the Naval transformation program. In this part, First Sea Lord answers your questions as posed to him via Twitter. This is part three.

[00:55:14] We're now entering the, the final part of our time together, which means it's time for the quick fire round.

[00:55:20]Thank you to everyone out there who submitted questions, literally dozens of them. So the first one, carrier strike it would, it would seem rude not to talk about it. there was a constantly evolving Twitter subculture around carrier vulnerability and lack of close in weapons. What's your view First Sea Lord.

[00:55:40]**First Sea Lord:** [00:55:40] So I'm very lucky. I've got two capabilities that are best placed across the whole of Defence to cope with these new super missiles. And those are our submarines and our aircraft carriers. And that's because our aircraft carriers are mobile, they can be put in the middle of the ocean that can be put alongside other aircraft carrier groups.

[00:56:05] They've got space-based assets, they've got air defence destroyers, they've got anti-submarine frigates. They've got submarines protecting them, and so we have an incredible level of lead defence. That helps us to defeat these super missiles. And these super missiles are a threat to everything in defence.

[00:56:27] They're a threat to our critical national infrastructure. And that's the real debate. And so I feel, I feel these are serious threats, but I feel more comfortable about what we're doing with our aircraft carriers. And when we have war gamed this and when the Americans have war gamed this, and this explains why nations are investing in aircraft carriers. It's not surprising that if you, if you have somewhere that is fixed and doesn't have defence around it, that that might be more vulnerable to these super missiles, but something that is mobile and has defences around it is a lot less vulnerable. And that's why the safest place to put your fast jets in a big conflict has been demonstrated to be the aircraft carriers.

[00:57:18]**Nick:** [00:57:18] We've talked a couple of times about technology and future opportunities. Investment in drones for the carriers to augment the F35s in future? Do you see them as a future platform in 10, 20, 30 years time?

[00:57:32] **First Sea Lord:** [00:57:32] Defence is going to become drone tastic. Whether it's underwater drones, or in the air drones and these aircraft carriers, this is not just the Navy delivering those, this is a joint effort for the whole of defence to deliver for the nation. And Mike Wigston and I, the head of the air force, we're really clear that, we're going to have to invest in drone technology and some of that expertise might best rest with the air force.

[00:58:00] And then how we apply it is we use our existing inventory. So at 2021, we're going to use HMS Prince of Wales, for large chunks of the year as an experimentation platform to try to get after some of these things. We're debating about what target we set ourselves about how large a drone we look to fly off the aircraft carrier in the next five years. It's implicit that we're going to be bringing drones alongside some of the other, parts of our defence inventory that we already have.

[00:58:32]There were lots of other things that we will do that compliment the drones. I see all our ships in the future having sensors where they as part of that forward presence they're hoovering up data, they're working with F35s, which is a phenomenal jet that has got all these other capabilities, in addition to a normal fighter jet. Can all of our ships be a floating station, a floating embassy, to work with the rest of the security architecture?

[00:59:06] It's not just the big ships, it's every ship. And that applies to our submarines as well, and that's what I see shaping towards in the future.

[00:59:16] **Nick:** [00:59:16] Okay. So taking a step back away from the assets and back into the people space there's a lot of uncertainty out there at the moment.

[00:59:25] Lots of discussions about reduction in warrant officer ones, holding of, promotion boards. But promotion board results not being announced? How would you like to, or can you counteract the demoralisation of the current cadre of chiefs who are on the cusp of picking up and, now life is just a little uncertain for them.

[00:59:46] **First Sea Lord:** [00:59:46] So I don't align the uncertainty. I don't like that there's a risk that these people feel less valued . Because if you're a chief petty officer in the Royal Navy, that's an incredible achievement. You're incredibly valuable to the organisation for your skills, your leadership. I want those people to be fulfilled, to flourish and to have a really rewarding and worthwhile careers, but rather like our admirals like some of our senior officers, we've got to look again to see whether we've got the balance right. We have nearly a thousand warrant officer one in the Royal Navy for an organization of about 30,000. That doesn't feel right. I want the WO1 rank to be the elite of the elite. So might this be the top 1% or one and a half percent of the Royal Navy?

[01:00:36] So we have an ambition to shake to about 250 or 300 warrant officer ones. And, and that's not an instant, this is something that we will do. And reaching out to, to 2026, potentially 2027. And first of all, it might involve taking the current cadre of WO1s and 10% of them becoming officers that supplements that nearly 40% of our engineers have come up through the ranks as a whole. As a Navy, nearly 25% of our officers have come up through the ranks, which I'm incredibly proud of, and so that might be tough for a chief petty officer who thought that they were destined to be a WO1, and I want them to keep that ambition and the best of the best will get there, but then it may mean that it's tougher in the future. It may mean that it's tougher to be an admiral in the future.

[01:01:34] But we've got to be honest about the front line and shaping off structures to best serve for those outcomes. And my challenge has been that sometimes we may have protected the institution over and above those outcomes. So if that means a smaller headquarters, if that means fewer apples, we're reducing the number of 2 stars in Navy command by 40% .

[01:02:00] We're looking to reduce a number of 1 stars by between 25 and 40% and, and that we've got to look at our organisation because the thing that worries me the most is the gapping on the front line. And if I can flow a thousand people from shore onto the front line, then that's the best thing for our Navy.

[01:02:23] And that's what we do. We shape for the best thing for the Navy. And especially we shape for the front line. Some of this is tough, undoubtedly. There's an element of being an honest leader and doing the right thing. And this is about doing the right thing.

[01:02:40] **Nick:** [01:02:40] So perhaps one opportunity that transformation does give us is the chance to reassess how the Navy fishes for talent. We already have direct and lateral entry for Royal Navy police and certain engineering cadres, defence healthcare, for example, have recently recruited externally a civilian into their top job.

[01:03:06] Do you envisage a future where the Navy does something similar? Perhaps a human resource specialist into the Naval secretary role, for example, or something along those lines?

[01:03:21]**First Sea Lord:** [01:03:21] Yeah. The simple answer is yes, absolutely. So I think in this sense, the Navy's nearly a 7 billion pound organisation with over 30,000 people in it. And to some extent we have the same challenges where we have capital projects, we have run the organisation here and now. We have people issues. And I think our real search is for the best talent to help run the organisation in the most successful way possible. And there might be times where we want to reach out from our existing talent pool. And it stands to reason that if you're a uniform service and you tend to grow your talent through the organisation, there's a magnificence about that. That can be a real advantage. But it also can mean that your talent pool might be quite constrained. And I'm a fan of competition. I'm a fan of that actually some people improve or, go up through the system more quickly than others. And then others might catch up and so on and so on. So I don't think any of this is preordained. I don't like the idea that we choose our senior leaders too early.

[01:04:47] I'm very wary of golden escalators and then it becomes self-fulfilling. So I think there are times where you might want to reach out to other people who might be able to help your organisation. But I think the core model will tend to be for uniform services, that we grow our future leaders up through the organisation. And I think that that's stood us well. I think there's a lot that comes from that. There's a reassurance and confidence by those lower down in the organization. But I think we should have the humility and the selfishness for the organisation's benefit that we might want to reach out occasionally for others, for other people who might, he might be able to help us.

[01:05:32] And then the only other piece that I would sort of, add when you were going through that list of different, entries in different systems. I'm eight months in as First Sea Lord One of the things that has been very, very evident to me is the quality of our people, and I think that exists across every strata so some fantastic civil servants, fantastic reservists and fantastic sailors and Marines, and that's all the way down to the most junior level. And one of the things that I feel most strongly is how do we unlock that potential? I think we're doing well as a Navy, but I think we have this exciting opportunity that we could actually be better if we could only unlock the potential that exists in our organisation because the quality is phenomenal.

[01:06:34] And that that can sometimes be a frustration if only but it's also a fantastic opportunity to get after.

[01:06:46] **Nick:** [01:06:46] So just touching on the front line, obviously future Navy, we're going to see a significant and marked shift back to the front line, new crewing models, whether it's double crewing, three-watch manning, who knows? How do we therefore manage the balance of time between home and away, if we are losing this pool of shore jobs, what do you see the effect being on family life?

[01:07:14] **First Sea Lord:** [01:07:14] Hopefully much better. So I think our sailors and Marines have been really, really clear about they want more certainty and stability in their lives. People don't dislike being in the Navy. People enjoy what they do. They enjoy the reflection that we get from a country that I think admires us and has a lot of respect, but they hate the uncertainty and the instability.

[01:07:45] And even though they've got this enormous professional pride and selflessness. And so some of the double crewing is about giving people more of a calendar life existence. So four months on, four months then regenerating, but it means that you can say to your daughter whether or not you will be back for her birthday.

[01:08:09] And I was out in Bahrain before Christmas for the end of the third rotation in HMS Montrose and the start of the fourth. And it was very strong to me when, when I had a chief stoker standing up in front of the ship's company and saying, this is the best I've known it, that he loved what he was doing as a professional. But he felt so much more comfortable with what this meant for his family. So this is about the frontline, and this is about creating more certainty and stability for our people. And that's, again, it's the right thing to do. And it might be a different model where at times we could put people into shore jobs as a recompense for the business and the instability of their seagoing jobs, only to then end the recompense and put them back into that really tough existence.

[01:09:00] So it's about having a more settled life, which ought to be better for our families and friends.

[01:09:09] **Nick:** [01:09:09] Do you think by the time you hang up your spurs as First Sea Lord, we'll have had our first female Admiral?

[01:09:17] **First Sea Lord:** [01:09:17] Hopefully, yes. I'm conscious of this cutting across promotion boards and all of that.

[01:09:23] **Nick:** [01:09:23] There are Commodores everywhere listening out to what you say?

[01:09:25] **First Sea Lord:** [01:09:25] Yeah, exactly. I think. I'm proud of the Navy in so many ways. I think we have to recognize that it seems a bit odd that in this day and age we don't have more. We're doing well. We've got more captains than we had last year, and it's 13 captains compared to 9, we've got four Commodores, four female Commodores compared to two last year. It is getting better, but that's very, very different from saying, is it good enough?

[01:10:01] And, and so we, we have to do better. All through the organisation. My only hesitation is I'm wary of seeing this through the lens of a first female Admiral, that that to me is not what it's about. It's about a much, much deeper into the organisation and being far more representative of society. And being far more able as an organisation to reach into some talent pools that we're not drawing sufficiently from.

[01:10:36] So I hope to see a first female Admiral, but that's not what it's about, it's about something more substantial and bigger than that. it's about the whole Navy as, as a whole, and unlocking that potential and reaching out to some potential, some talent pools that we should be drawing from, from the rest of the society.

[01:10:56] **Nick:** [01:10:56] Well, speaking of drawing on talent pools and the rest of society, one area of the Naval service that we haven't really spent a lot of time dwelling on is the Royal Navy Reserve and the RM Reserve. What role do you see them playing in the Navy's future?

[01:11:12]**First Sea Lord:** [01:11:12] We're shifting the Royal Navy Reserve to better align with the rest of the Royal Navy. We already do that in the fleet air arm, an amazing contribution from the fleet air arm reserve, and it feels so comfortable to, for reservists and fleet air arm to be working together. And and we get a lot from our fleet air arm reserve. We're looking to grow the rest of the maritime reserve. We're on track to get just over 3,100. And importantly, to then bring that reserve closer to the rest of the Royal Navy. And that's really important because we are adopting a one Navy approach to whatever we do. And we've got some fantastic opportunities. So if I look at the batch one OPVs, we're looking to crew those with regulars, with reservists, and it needs to be contractors as well.

[01:12:12] But the important part is we're creating more opportunities for our reservists to go to sea That's going to be strengthened by marrying up our maritime reserve branches with the regular branches so that it's easier to go from one to the other.

[01:12:32]**Nick:** [01:12:32] What about in the Royal fleet auxiliary? Where do they fit in? What's their future hold?

[01:12:36] **First Sea Lord:** [01:12:36] So they're firstly an integral part of the Royal Navy, and I feel that very strongly part of our transformation is we take a one Navy approach. In the past, I think we've risked being siloed, whether that's aviators, sub Mariners, Royal Marines, RFA. We need to be an integrated Navy to form our part of an integrated defence. And the story with the RFA is very positive.

[01:13:07]We get more out of our RFA than I think I've ever known throughout my whole career. So you look at what kind Cardigan Bay does in the Gulf supporting our mine hunters supporting our allies in the Gulf as a command and control platform and able to do so much more than that. The Swiss army penknife, approach, that those ships provide is phenomenal. If I then jump to the Caribbean and what we saw a few months ago in our RFA Mounts Bay and acting again as a hub, not just for the Royal Navy, not just for our naval aviation assets, helicopters, but also the Royal Marines, British Army engineers. It meant that we could respond really quickly in a difficult situation with the repercussions of the hurricane that went through. And then if you look a bit further to the future, and the RFA requirement with our big aircraft carriers, again, it's phenomenal. We are growing back the RFA, we've taken a slight dip and we're bringing more ships online as we go through over the years, we are the beneficiaries of, again, some important investment with our tight class support ships, which are another leap forwards in terms of what they offer. And then we're having a debate about our future ships and the future support ship, which is a class that will be needed to help support the aircraft carriers.

[01:14:43] And then if I look beyond that, I then see furthest modern support shipping, which I see blending with our aspirations for the future commando force. And can we have in effect more homogenous ships as a single class, but able to fulfill a whole range of tasks. And I think that's the way that we see the RFA developing in the future.

[01:15:13] More of these Swiss army penknife ships that have a phenomenal range of capabilities that they offer, but most importantly, they are totally integral to the rest of the Royal Navy.

[01:15:27] **Nick:** [01:15:27] Last two, one from SURFLOT and one from the submariners. So from a, surface ship perspective. How do you envisage us managing the frigate gap over the coming years?

[01:15:38]**First Sea Lord:** [01:15:38] I'm not sure I recognise the phrase frigate gap. So I think we've got a bunch of frigates that are out there now that are doing incredibly well. And some of them are getting a bit older and we're investing in those, and that could be their refit periods, or it could be their standard maintenance periods and it could be more double crewing of them.

[01:15:59] And that gives us even more availability. Now that's not to deny that it's getting tougher and we're having to invest more in these elderly ships. But if I look at the double crewing model, we get about 30% more out of those ships. If we can hone which of the ships we're investing in with the refits at the right period of time, we think we can get about 30% more out of them.

[01:16:23] So that's one element of how we continue to manage our frigates to get the most, most out for the Royal Navy and the nation. The other piece is the more exciting investment, which is the new frigates that are coming in, and if I look at the type 31 and type 26 we're challenging ourselves to say, can we bring them into service more quickly?

[01:16:51] And especially the type 31 which is a derivative of a Danish frigate, and it's already out there. It's already up and running. So we're working with our Danish Navy friends to see whether we can adopt some of the processes that they've got and bring those ships into service even more quickly. And then when I look to the Nirvana, when we've actually got a whole series of new frigates, then actually we get even more availability out of them, far more than we've had in the past.

[01:17:26] So for the same number of frigates, we actually get a lot, lot more. So I see this as being normal business of prioritising money against operational tasks and leveraging the most out of our current fleet. And then looking to leverage even more out of the new up and coming fleet.

[01:17:47]**Nick:** [01:17:47] Last but not least, the submarine flotilla and the future submarines. Will a future fleet be crewed or uncrewed?

[01:17:58] **First Sea Lord:** [01:17:58] It depends on what point of time. So I think for the here and now, we're still in the crewed space, but I think there's a really big conversation for defence to have. I worry about our quest for elegance and certainty, and I wonder whether we have to set ourselves a challenge. That I don't know, by 2035 the assumption, the default for new equipment coming in is that it will be remotely piloted or uncrewed and it may be an exception as to why it needs to have a crew. I think those exceptions will exist for some time with our nuclear submarines. And, I think we will have underwater drones that are complimentary to those crewed submarines.

[01:18:51] But if we, if we extend our imagination even further, then there comes a point where that's no longer true. So this is a temporal thing, and it's back to what level of certainty do we want to have and what's our courage and ambition with some of the things that might challenge the way that we've been doing things in the past.

[01:19:15] **Nick:** [01:19:15] Thank you ever so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to talk to us. It's been an eye opening interview. We've covered a lot of ground. We've touched on leadership, people, empowerment, transformation, ambition, and optimism. And I think I can safely speak on behalf of most of the Naval service when I say that we wait with baited breath for the results of transformation over the next few years. We wish you all the very greatest success with it. And thank you ever so much for your time. It's much appreciated.

[01:19:47] **First Sea Lord:** [01:19:47] Thanks very much for having me.

[01:19:48]**Nick:** [01:19:48] And that concludes our interview with Admiral Tony Radakin, the First Sea Lord. Thank you very much for listening. And for more content, visit WavellRoom.Com.

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