HMS Belfast: "For so much, how shall we repay?"



- Town Class, Light Cruiser, (10 built) sister ship the HMS Edinburgh.
    - A balance of speed and weaponry over armour/protection. The purpose of these cruisers was to use their high speed to get in close to an enemy target and disable it with a heavy rate of fire – Not to sink it but to inflict significant damage and then escape quickly. Their armour was designed to withstand an 8" shell – greater than her 6" firepower.
- Laid down December 1936, at Harland and Wolff (Belfast).
- Launched 17th March1938 (St Patricks Day),
- Commissioned 3rd August 1939 – the most modern ship in the Royal Navy.
- Expected cost was £2,141,514;
    - Guns cost £75,000
    - 2 Supermarine Walruses £66,500.
- The main armament was twelve 6" guns in four turrets, with a rate of fire of 15 rounds/minute and a range of 14 miles - each shell had a 40 second "Time of Flight" a speed 840 metres/second.
- Ships company of 761 increased to 950 for action in WW2.
- 11,500 tons, capable of 32 knots.
- Powered by 4 Steam turbines producing 80k Horsepower (at the shaft (ship)) or 60kw.

Active Service

- September 1939 based in Scapa Flow (Orkney Islands).
    - After Royal Oak had been torpedoed Belfast's base was Rosyth (Edinburgh)
- 21/11/1939 hit a mine in Firth of Forth.
    - Very badly damaged returned to Devonport Dockyard (Plymouth) for repairs and refitting
- 3rd November 1942 Return to duty on the Arctic Convoys. The most modern ship in the Royal Navy again.
- Battle of North Cape Christmas 1943.
- D-Day – 6th June 1944 (Delayed 24hrs to 6th June 1944 due to bad weather)
    - Overlord was the overall Invasion plan
    - Operation Neptune was the naval component.
    - 7,000 Allied vessels, 80% being British/Royal Navy.

- 1948 Flagship of the British Far East Fleet.
    - At Shanghai during the Yangtze Incident of 1949.
- Korean War June 1950 – 1952
    - Part of the United Nations naval forces - US Navy's Task Force 77
- 1956 – 59 Refitted and modernised. The most modern ship in the Royal Navy again.
- 1961 – 62 Flagship of the British Far East Fleet.
- 24th August 1963 Decommissioned.
- 1964 – 71 Returned to Portsmouth to be the Headquarters Ship of the Portsmouth Reserve.

Saved for the Nation

- Saved for the nation October 1971 (IWM).
- Arrived at South Bank 14th October.
- Ceremonial opening 21st October.



Armament

The main armament is twelve 6" guns in four turrets, all 25ft barrels, with a rate of fire of 15 rounds/minute and a range of 14 miles. Each shell had a 40 second "Time of Flight", speed 840 metres/second. All the guns could be fired broadside simultaneously. Loading and firing was a manual procedure which was faster than the rate of fire. 6" shells from one magazine, propelled by Cordite. Cordite is not an explosive; it burned to produce gas which expanded in the breech to drive the shell up the barrel. Range finding used radar and visual, but was mechanical using the "Clock" control table, which took into account course, speed, humidity, wind etc. Accuracy was determined by "Deflection" – anticipating where the target would be in 40 seconds after the shell was fired - and had to take into account that both ships were taking avoiding action, zigzagging, from each other. Two or three "Ranging salvoes" would be fired to gain accuracy before the bombardment would commence.

Initial ships company of 761 increased to 950 for action in WW2. 11,500 tons, capable of 32 knots. Powered by 4 Steam turbines producing 80k Horsepower (at the shaft (ship)) or 60kw.

Laid down December 1936, at Harland and Wolff (Belfast).

Launched 17th March1938 (St Patricks Day),

Commissioned 3rd August 1939 – the most modern ship in the Royal Navy.

Based in Scapa Flow (Orkney Islands) at the start of the war. After Royal Oak had been torpedoed in Scapa Flow (13/10/1939), Belfast's base was Rosyth (Edinburgh) where she hit a mine in the Firth of Forth (21/11/1939), laid by U21 commanded by Fritz Frauenhein, a lucky hit! Amazing it stayed afloat after its keel was broken. There were injuries but no direct fatalities on the Belfast although one sailor died of wounds in hospital on shore.

Returned, via Rosyth to Devonport Dockyard (Plymouth) for repairs and refitting. This modernisation made the Belfast the most modern ship in the Royal Navy again.

Return to duty in 3rd November 1942 on the Arctic Convoys. **Captain Frank Parnham** in command of Belfast from 1942. Rear Admiral Robert **Burnett**, "Uncle Bob, an old sea DOG" took over command of the 1st Cruiser Squadron from Rear Admiral Louis "Turtle" Hamilton in 1942.

Belfast re-entered service on Arctic Convoy duty on JW53, February 1943, which was a baptism of fire; many of her crew had not been to sea before. Belfast was part of the 10th Cruiser Squadron commanded by **Burnett**, Belfast as his flagship, with cruisers Sheffield and Cumberland.

JW53 Loch Ewe to Murmansk, experienced terrible arctic storms, even before Iceland, some ships (RN and Merchant) had to return to port for repairs caused by the storm damage. Convoy became scattered due to the storm. Additionally, during February there were approx. 7 hours of daylight which favoured the Luftwaffe, based in Norway. As the storm decreased the convoy was under attack from the air and from U-boats, some sinkings, but not significant. Convoy split and reached Archangel and Murmansk. The return convoy RA 53 had an even tougher time; attacked by U-boats with some sinkings

Types of Convoy escort:

- Close escort – Small boats, Destroyers, corvettes, Minesweepers etc close to the convoy the whole way, at convoy speed.
- Ocean escort – Bigger ships, cruisers, carrier, destroyers – plus the 10th Cruiser Squadron (Force R), screen the convoy from a distance.
- Distant cover – commanded by Admiral Sir Joyhn Tovey (C-in-C, Home Fleet) ; battleships, George V, Howe; cruiser Norfolk, (cruiser)
- Submarines on patrol

Remained on Arctic Convoy duty through 1943

Battle of North Cape Christmas 1943.

Bletchley Park learned that the Scharnhorst, commanded by Rear Admiral Bey, holed up in Alten fjord, in German occupied Norway had been ordered to attack convoy JW55B bound for Murmansk, Russia. Force 1, a squadron of three Cruisers; Belfast, Sheffield and Norfolk were already in the North Cape area. The squadron was part of the 10th Cruiser Squadron commanded by **Burnett**, who used Belfast as his flagship as the command-and-control centre. Burnet was an experienced officer approaching retirement who wanted to bring about an action

before he left the service – not necessarily appreciated by the crew, didn't fancy getting into battle in the Arctic as much as Burnett!

Force 2 was also in the area commanded by Admiral Bruce **Fraser** C-in-C Home Fleet, in his flagship The Duke of York, joined by cruiser HMS Jamaica, and Destroyers Savage, Scorpion, Saumarez and Sword along with the Norwegian Stord.

Scharnhorst along with 5 destroyers sailed for JW55B which had Force 1 as escort. Inexplicably, Bey dispersed his force of destroyers, leaving Scharnhorst alone, with no flank protection; this was fatal mistake. Using radar, before dawn, 09.00, 26/12/43 Belfast detected Scharnhorst 30 miles away. Burnet intercepted and Norfolk fired the first salvoes. It was a short initial engagement of 15 minutes; Scharnhorst was caught cold and suffered damage to its Fire Control radar, leaving it blind, and escaped under its smokescreen, even though she was much superior to the British ships for firepower and armour. Burnet chose to stay with the convoy rather than to give chase. The risk was that Burnet would lose the Scharnhorst and it would escape to attack convoys, however Burnet calculated a position where he would intercept the Scharnhorst again , effectively using the convoy as bait. The German destroyers were sent south-west and the Scharnhorst went in south-east, leaving the Scharnhorst isolated.

The Scharnhorst was much quicker than any of the British ships, but eventually Belfast made contact again around midday and Force 1 opened fire. Norfolk was hit quite badly and again Scharnhorst escaped. Force 1 gave chase, but eventually Sheffield and Norfolk dropped out leaving Belfast alone. Belfast avoided contact as she would have been out gunned.

However she sailed into the path of **Fraser** in The **Duke of York** and Jamaica with their destroyers. The Duke of York engaged and Scharnhorst sustained damage to her engine rooms and subsequently slowed down. The Duke of York and Belfast went in for the kill. British destroyers attacked with torpedoes which ultimately sank the Scharnhorst "went down firing" at 19.30 – only 36 survivors from a ships compliment of 2,000.

It was the final "ship to ship" conflict of the Royal Navy

. 30th March 1944 part of the covering force for Operation Tungsten, a carrier-based air attack on the Tirpitz holed up in a Norwegian Fjord. The aircraft inflicted damage on the Tirpitz, keeping it out of action for two months but it did not sink the ship, this was done later by RAF Lancasters dropping "Tallboy" bombs.

Remained on Arctic Convoy duty through 1943 until D-Day June 1944

D-Day – 6th June 1944 (Delayed 24hrs to 6th June 1944 due to bad weather)

Overlord was the overall Invasion plan – Operation Neptune was the naval component. 7,000 Allied vessels, 80% being British/Royal Navy.

8th May 1944 Belfast carried King George VI on his pre-invasion inspection of the Fleet. Churchill announced that he intended to be on board Belfast to witness the invasion at first hand, but he was opposed by both Eisenhour and First Sea Lord, Admiral Andrew Cunningham (JCOS) and he was only dissuaded finally by a personal message from the King.

For D-Day, Belfast was **Flagship for Admiral Frederick Dalrymple-Hamilton** of Bombardment Force E covering Gold and Juno beach sectors, supporting British and Canadian troops. Belfast was on station at 05.00 and opened fire broadside at 05.27 on the concrete artillery bunkers at Vers-sur-Mer (part of the Atlantic Wall). Belfast was the Bombardment co-ordinator for the naval artillery bombardment programme.

Post invasion Belfast targeted impromptu targets and 10th June the accuracy of Belfast destroyed a group of Panzers in the French countryside. The final action was part of Operation Charnwood; the Allied bombardment and capture of Caen.

Belfast withdrew from Overlord on 18th July 1944 when the fighting had progressed inland and out of the range of her 6" guns. In five weeks off the Normandy coast Belfast fired 4,000 rounds of 6" shells and 1,000 rounds of 4" shells. All this firing put the ship under stress and she needed a refit before going to the Pacific.

After preparation for tropical conditions on 17th June 1945 Belfast was sent to the Far East via Sydney. Belfast was the Flagship of the Second Cruiser Squadron but saw no action due to the Japanese surrender on 15th August 1945.

1948 Flagship of the British Far East Fleet. At Shanghai during the Yangtze Incident of 1949.

Korean War June 1950 – 1952

With the outbreak of the Korean War, Belfast became part of the United Nations naval forces. Originally part of the US Navy's Task Force 77, Belfast was detached in order to operate independently (05/07/1950) undertaking coastal patrols, based at Sasebo (Nagasaki, Japan). Belfast supported troops fighting around Yongdok, accompanied by USS Juneau. On 19/071950, Belfast fired an accurate 350-round bombardment from her 6-inch guns and was praised by an American admiral as a "straight-shooting ship". Returned to UK for quick refit August returning to Sasebo January 1951. September 1952 Belfast was relieved by two other Town-class cruisers, HMS Birmingham and HMS Newcastle, and returned to the UK. She had steamed over 80,000 miles (130,000 km) in the combat zone and fired more than 8,000 rounds from her 6-inch guns during the Korean War.

1956 – 59 Refitted and modernised

1961 – 62 Flagship of the British Far East Fleet. Represented H.M. Government at the Independence Day Ceremony at Mombasa, (Kenya), Tanzania

1964 – 71 Returned to Portsmouth to be the Headquarters Ship of the Portsmouth Reserve.

Saved for the Nation October 1971 (IWM)

Left Portsmouth 2nd September. Arrived Tilbury 3rd September, fitted out as a museum; towed to King George V Dry Dock for bottom survey, scraping, painting other repairs. Arrived at South Bank 14th October. Ceremonial opening 21st October.

Mooring:

15ft from quayside. River tidal flow of 5 knots and a typical rise and fall of 18ft – sometimes as high as 22ft. Channel dredged 650ft by 70ft, with an additional 400x 50 to accommodate ship which may visit alongside. Sits on two "Dolphins" large steel pylons, 200ft apart on springs which allow HMS Belfast to rise and fall with the tide but not move with the flow. Costs: Dredging £20,000, Bridge and Pylons £44,000

Terms:

The UK Government made a gift of Belfast to the HMS Belfast Trust, on the understanding that no government funds would be used for its subsequent upkeep but if it was ever sold the proceeds would revert to the Treasury. In 1971, immediate funds were needed to Insure, Tow from Portsmouth, fit out and dry dock. These were available through a gift of £100,00 from a single benefactor Mr. John Smith (really??) and public donations. The Trustees had a further

£120,000 promised/available to convert the ship into an exhibition and calculated they needed another £80,000 to complete the project.

The public would still regard HMS Belfast as a ship of the Royal Navy. It was intended that the public should respect her heritage and importance, an inspiration for the future but not an exercise in nostalgia; it was decided that she should not become a nightclub or fun fair. To generate funds, it was anticipated that there would need to be 300,00 visitors a year; adults paying 30p and 20p for children!

