

HMS Warspite - A Story That Will Break Your Heart

Written by Andy Owen



She was the most successful battleship EVER of the Royal Navy - but, when she needed the Navy's help - they turned their back on her...

HMS Warspite was born on 26th November 1913.

She was built and launched at the Devonport Royal Dockyard in Plymouth and was formally commissioned on March 8th, 1915.

It was a royal birth...

She was 640 feet long, had a 34-foot draft, 91-foot beam and displaced 33,410 tons. She had a top speed of 24 knots.

Warspite was decorated with the most battle honours ever awarded to an individual ship in the Royal Navy, including Lord Nelson's famous HMS Victory.

Her service history spanned decades of unrivalled service and two World Wars - something shared by only a few other vessels in the world.

She was the most awarded warship for actions in World War 2.

Warspite was, quite simply, marine royalty.

Yet, when her time was up, despite frantic efforts from thousands of people, including past and present crewmen and other dignitaries, the decision was made to send her to the breaker's yard.

Stuff like this, even after all this time, makes me so sad.

And very angry, too...

The British Admiralty should have turned her into a floating museum. But they didn't - and everyone associated with Warspite's final journey, should hold their heads in shame.

Let me tell you a little bit about this wonderful ship.

She was a Queen Elizabeth Class battleship - and she was the sixth Royal Navy warship to bear the name 'Warspite'.

The cost to build her was £2,524,148, excluding items such as guns and wireless equipment. The First Lord of the Admiralty - Winston Churchill - was present when she conducted her first gunnery trials in 1915.

She had a rather chequered start in life.

In the first few months of her life, she was damaged twice.

First, she ran aground in the Forth, then she followed that, by colliding with the battleship Barham.

After repairs, she joined the rest of the 5th Battle Squadron. She played a big part in the famous Battle of Jutland on 31st May 1916 - and received an incredible 15 direct hits from German capital ships, resulting in serious damage.



During this battle, she also lost 14 men and many more were injured.

Despite being twice hunted by German submarines, she eventually made it back safely to Rosyth for repairs.

She was a warrior.

Even in her adolescence...

At the end of WW1, she was among the ships of the Grand Fleet that received the surrendering German High Seas Fleet.

In the years after WW1, she was significantly modernised, including the addition of an array of small calibre guns, plus a number of many other changes.

She sailed down to the Mediterranean as the flagship of the Mediterranean Fleet, then she spent some time with the Atlantic Fleet.

In 1934, she had a further modernisation, including a redesign of her forward structure and modifications to her 15-inch armament, to increase elevation and attainable range.

Other radical improvements were made to her secondary and anti-aircraft armament. In addition to this, provision was made for carrying four aircraft and two new hangars were fitted.

Following this, she returned to active duty in 1937, once again taking her role as the flagship in the Mediterranean.

In June 1939, Vice Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham came aboard as the new Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet.

When war was declared on 3rd September 1939, the British Admiralty ordered HMS Warspite to join the Home Fleet at Scapa Flow.

Warspite, now part of the Atlantic Fleet, played a big part in the British campaigns in Norway.

On 1st March 1940, Adolf Hitler ordered the invasion of Norway, codenamed Weserübung.

A group of 10 German destroyers escorted by legendary battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, each landed some 200 land troops off Ofotfjord.

Coastal defence ships HNoMS Norge and Eidsvold refused to surrender Narvik and were both torpedoed and sunk.

On April 10th, the Royal Navy attacked with the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla, H-class destroyers, HMS Hardy (flagship), Hotspur, Havock, Hunter and Hostile.



On April 13th, Warspite became involved and joined nine destroyers, HMS Bedouin, Cossack, Punjabi, Eskimo, Kimberley, Hero, Icarus, Forester and Foxhound - and aircraft carrier HMS Furious - in a new battle.

Warspite launched her Swordfish Biplane scouts, with immediate success.

They sighted the German submarine U-64, anchored in the Herjangsfjord near Bjerkvik. They engaged and sank her with bombs.

This was the first German submarine sunk by battleship-launched aircraft since World War 1 and the first German submarine sunk in World War 2.

During this battle, Warspite and her accompanying destroyers engaged and sank three German destroyers, the remaining five panicked and scuttled, to avoid being taken as war prizes by the British.

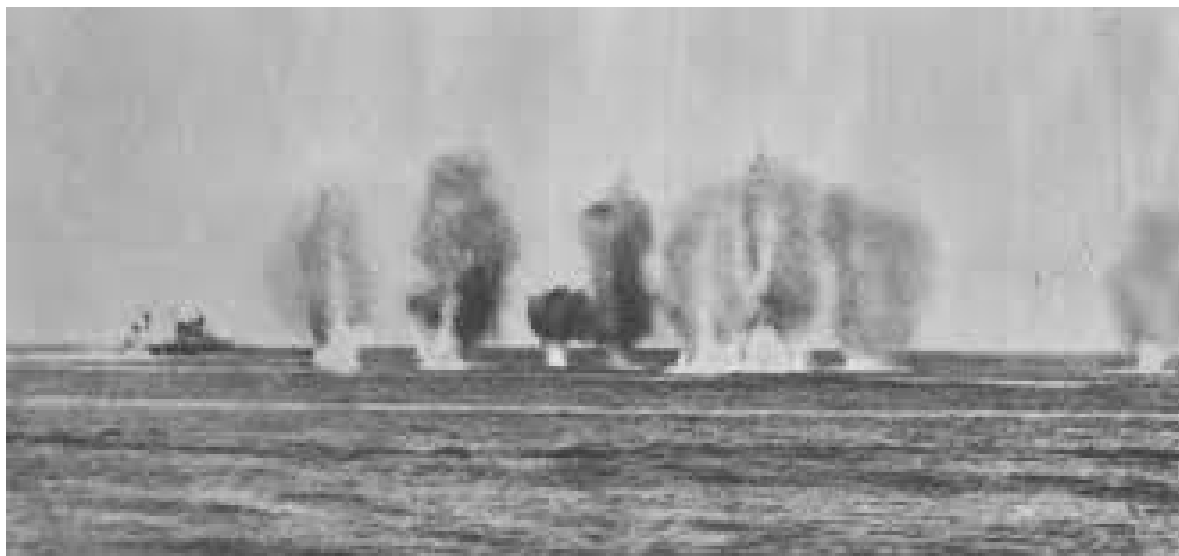
Warspite arrived back in Scapa Flow with her destroyer flotilla and, after undergoing repairs, refuelling and taking on fresh stores, she was sent back to Mediterranean waters.

She was sent to help solve a problem. The modernised Italian Navy, were causing some concerns in the region.

On July 9th 1940, the Battle of Calabria took place.

Warspite, accompanied by two other battleships and six heavy and five light cruisers, sixteen destroyers and a carrier, were matched against the Italian fleet that consisted of two battleships, six heavy and eight light cruisers, plus sixteen destroyers.

Warspite was targeted. The two Italian battleships manoeuvred to shell her in a joined effort. The Italian Battleship Giulio Cesare opened fire at a range of 26,400 meters. Warspite then split her fire between the two Italian battleships and she straddled the Italian flagship and scored her first hit after only eight minutes.



It was no contest. The Italians withdrew very quickly.

In November of 1940, Warspite played a big part in the attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto - and in the next month, she was also a key part of the naval force charged with bombarding the Italian naval base at Valona.

She continued her duties for the next few months, with continued success.

Then, on March 27th in 1941, Warspite, along with the Battleships HMS Valiant and HMS Barham took part in the Battle of the Mediterranean Sea off Cape Matapan near Greece.

It was a battle that lasted 2 days.

The Italian fleet was made up of 1 Battleship, 6 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers and 17 destroyers.

The combined British and Australian fleet, consisted of 1 Aircraft carrier, 3 Battleships, 2 light cruisers and 17 destroyers.

The British fleet had fewer ships but greater firepower - and some 80 aircraft on hand. The Italian ships had no radar and could not spot British ships, except by lookouts with binoculars.

The Italian fleet were discovered at night - and Warspite and battleships HMS Barham, HMS Valiant closed in unnoticed within 3,828 yards.

There was only going to be one outcome.

The battleships opened fire at point blank range. Searchlights from the British vessels illuminated the Italian ships and gunners could see first hand, the carnage they were inflicting.

The Italian cruiser's main turrets blew up, flying meters high into the air.



The Italian fleet suffered heavy damage with three heavy cruisers and two destroyers sunk. The Battleship Giulio Cesare was heavily damaged and lost over 2,300 men.

It was a stunning victory.

Soon after this, Warspite went proudly to the United States for upgrades and repairs. She was given the hero's welcome she deserved.

She was already an iconic ship...



The upgrades were completed at the end of December and she then sailed down to join the British Eastern Fleet in the Indian Ocean.

Warspite then took part in Allied efforts to block the Japanese Indian Ocean raids, but despite her and many other efforts, the Japanese ultimately captured Malaya, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies.

Warspite and the rest of the fleet withdrew to Trincomalee, Ceylon and, she eventually sailed back up to the Mediterranean.

On April 21st 1941, Warspite took part in the bombardment of Tripoli, as Axis reinforcements were flooding into North Africa through the city.

The following month, the Germans invaded Crete, so Warspite and HMS Valiant were sent to block the Italian Mediterranean fleet.

She was lying in a position off the west coast of Crete, waiting for the Italians, when German land-based aircraft found her.

She was badly hit by bombs that destroyed the starboard 4-inch and 6-inch guns. She was forced to retire back towards Alexandria.

Upon inspection, the damage was more extensive than feared and she was ordered back to England for repairs. Once completed, she returned to the Mediterranean.

Next up for her, was the Allied invasion of Sicily in July of 1943.

Her big guns were used to bombard inland targets. And in September of 1943, she similarly supported the Salerno landings.

The Italian Fleet surrendered soon after - and Warspite once again had the honour to proudly escort them into internment at Malta.

She was soon back on station and about to be very badly hurt.

She was once again bombed by German aircraft, but this time, even more severely.

She was hit with three of the very latest Ruhrstahl Fritz-X anti-ship, wire-guided glide bombs.

One bomb penetrated Warspite's six decks deep, before exploding at the Number 4 boiler room, ultimately destroying the boiler.

A second Fritz-X missed Warspite directly but managed to blast a hole in her hull at the waterline.

The hole in her port side, allowed 5,000 tons of water to gush in, causing a total loss of power throughout the ship.



These bombs were very advanced and powerful - and she was very badly damaged. But luckily, personnel losses were at a minimum.

She looked after her own...

She was in a pretty bad way and had to be towed to Malta by the USS Hopi and USS Moreno - both 1,675-ton fleet tugs, with crews of 80 men.



She returned to Britain and was in dry dock for 9 months.

But, sadly, she was never going to be the same again.

It became obvious the ship couldn't completely be repaired, but she was desperately needed back in the war zone.

So, they patched her up and the old girl soldiered on - and even with less firepower, she played her part in D-Day.

She used her remaining guns to bombard German positions inland of the coast at Sword Beach, during Operation Overlord.

She then shelled the German positions at Gold and Juno beaches as well.

She was in such a poor state at that time, that she had to be towed into position - and could only fire six of her 15-inch guns, eight of her twelve 40-inch anti-aircraft guns and forty of her "pompom" cannons.

But, she still delivered hellfire and saved thousands of allied lives.

At the start of November, Warspite played her part in supporting the Allied attack on Antwerp and the landings on the island of Walcheren.

She was stationed at the mouth of the Scheldt and bombarded German gun batteries at the western end of the island.

This was to be her very last action.

After sailing back to Britain, she was placed in "Category C" reserve on February 1st 1945.

The war in Europe was over by the end of May, while the war in the Pacific would also soon be concluded by the end of August.

In 1947, Warspite was so worn out by what she had done, she deserved to be recognised and honoured for her incredible achievements.

But, the people she served so incredibly bravely, decided that no further attention or expenditure was justified - and they made the decision to write her off and tow her to the breakers yard in Faslane.

But, the 'Grand Old Lady' was having none of it.

On the way to the breaker's yard, she broke her tow and ran aground in Prussia Cove, Cornwall.



She was sending out a clear message. "If you won't help me, I'll make my own decisions. I deserve better than this..."

A lot of her crew believed that the ship was trying to make a break for the North Sea, instead of allowing herself to be broken up for scrap.

They were right. That's *exactly* what she was trying to do.

She was a very, very special ship. She had a heart like a lion - and was clearly a fighter right up to the end.

But, the bastards didn't want to listen.

Warspite was eventually recovered from Prussia Cove and taken to St. Michael's Mount, where she was unceremoniously dismantled and chopped into bits in 1955.

Makes me cry to write that. It really does...

This is the last picture ever taken of her...



It's an incredibly sad and tragic end, for a unique and very courageous ship.

A memorial stone was erected near the sea wall at Marazion.



The remains of her masts were set on display at Prussia Cove, while one section was erected on a point overlooking the cove itself.



Thanks for everything, old girl.

Sleep tight.

We are so very sorry.

We owe you more than words can express...