

CHAPTER 6

Different Eyes: Chris Terrill's Naval Documentaries

Don't think of an impersonal mass audience out there when you are making a film. Imagine you are making it for some select and trusted close family members and friends. It gives you an alternative focus and the sense of others' appreciation and perceptions – different eyes with which to view and evaluate your subject.²²¹

Since the 1990s, the work of Chris Terrill (Figure 6.1) has constituted a significant contribution to both popular documentary form and factual naval and military representation. While his output of series and individual documentaries warrants in-depth study on its own, the programmes considered here represent key components of the Navy's public-facing commitment to uncompromising but abidingly positive portrayals of the service and its missions, traditions and personnel since the end of the Cold War.

Terrill's prolific programme-making has encompassed numerous series over more than 30 years, documenting aspects of the Royal Navy's and Royal Marines' establishments, communities, and experiences. Interspersed with series devoted to day-to-day life in the armed services, Terrill has made comparable programmes depicting civilian vocations and communities such as *Soho Stories* (BBC, 1997), *The Cruise* (BBC, 1998) and *Theatreland* (Sky Arts, 2009). In addition to many individual factual programmes, his series documenting the Navy and Marines include *HMS Brilliant* (BBC, 1996), *Shipmates* (BBC, 2004), *Commando: On the Frontline* (ITV, 2007), *Royal Navy Caribbean Patrol*

²²¹ Chris Terrill, *Patrolling Paradise*, *Broadcast*, 7 February 2011, <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/patrolling-paradise/5023369.article> [accessed 18 May 2022].

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Figure 6.1: Chris Terrill at work. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.

(Channel 5, 2011), and *Royal Marines: Mission Afghanistan* (Channel 5, 2012). Most recently he has followed the progress of the new aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* from construction, training and sea trials into active service in two series of *Britain's Biggest Warship* (BBC, 2016–19). A third series, recording the carrier's historic deployment to the South China Sea in 2021, is in preparation at time of writing.

The diversity of these titles reflects a multifaceted focus on armed service communities, encompassing routine activities at home bases and at sea, phases of intensive training, deployments and shore leave, active service during conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the experiences of wounded and traumatised veterans returning to the civilian world. Terrill's series evince the immediacy and authenticity of the observational mode, balancing their intimate records of naval and shipboard communities with a reportage approach to illustrations of the Navy's demanding operational roles (such as Royal Marine training in preparation for active service in Afghanistan, disaster relief in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in *Shipmates*, and the provision of emergency aid during hurricane season in *Royal Navy Caribbean Patrol*). At the same time, the style Terrill's films adopt – featuring much captured, immediate footage and spontaneous commentary to camera from participants – is facilitated by the working methods he has developed with civilian documentary subjects and suggested by his anthropological background. (He describes the naval communities he joins and observes positively as 'tribes' with their own distinctive

customs, ethos and language.)²²² His documentary approach and the discourses of identity, community and contemporary Britishness his series explore clearly bear comparison with the contemporary *Warship: Life at Sea* series produced for Channel 5, which entered production after the production of Terrill's *Royal Navy Caribbean Patrol* for the same channel.

Working alone, Terrill operates his own camera and sound equipment, as well as conducting live interviews and interjecting comments and observations as events unfold. This methodology of 'embedding' aims to encapsulate the spontaneous, the authentic and the mundane, alongside the extraordinary and the typically unseen aspects of operational life. The occupations and interactions that Terrill records underline the typical and unenvisioned aspects of day-to-day employment in jobs and communities at once like and unlike any others. Terrill himself describes this approach in terms of maintaining authenticity for the viewer and respect for the documentary subject, without negating or denying the obvious presence of the filmmaker:

By immersing in a community by myself I go in on the community's terms, not my own. I have to earn my right to be there. Embedding with the military – especially on operations – requires a very sensitive approach and that is why I choose to embed for at least six months or, in some cases, for years. I try to avoid the 'them and us' trap at all costs. It is all about mutual trust. The lighter my footprint the better but, by the same token, I never pretend I am not there with my camera and avoid the approach some filmmakers adopt which is to pretend there is an invisible glass wall between camera and subject.²²³

Terrill's films therefore stand in contrast to those of contemporary British documentarists such as Nick Broomfield and Louis Theroux, who engage in superficially similar explorations of the lives of atypical individuals, communities and institutions. In comparison with Terrill's acknowledged presence out of shot, the on-screen presence of these filmmakers is conspicuously intrusive and vocalised, epitomising how Nichols's 'interactive' mode can become overstated into the distractingly 'reflexive' and 'performative'. While in all these cases the documentary makers act as observers, conduits and interlocutors on the audience's behalf, Terrill's in-world but off-screen presence eschews the performativity of Broomfield and Theroux. Their visible and opinionated manifestation of the filmmaker in the observed environment is frequently justifiable, in order to flush into the open key aspects of a subject's character and circumstances, and through them to highlight wider sociological and political concerns. However, in Broomfield's and Theroux's films this objective is reliant upon an observable,

²²² Chris Terrill, Shooting Sailors: filmmaker reflects on his passion for Royal Navy, *Navy News*, 2022, 814, 27.

²²³ Interview with the author, November 2019.

consistent filmmaking persona, whose apparently artless presence and disingenuous questioning occasionally produces comedic and/or satiric effects. This participatory approach carries with it the danger of creating a distancing mockery rather than maintaining the neutral observation of an unfamiliar situation, an unusual environment or an eccentric individual.²²⁴ Terrill's questions to his subjects from out of frame prompt conversational responses rather than strictly factual answers. Humour, institutional observation, criticism and satire do emerge in Terrill's films from the recorded events and environments, but authentically through the actions and reflections of the individuals and communities themselves. At the same time, presence and interactivity are crucial to the authentic observation of and accessible intimacy established with the documentary subject, as Terrill explains:

I develop personal relationships with people that often informs the way they interact with me and that can sometimes become part of the story. If I do not appear on camera myself (and I usually don't) it does not matter who I am – I am just the voice behind the camera – but if people interact with me, they are in effect interacting with the viewer.²²⁵

Sea soap?

Terrill's programmes vary widely in their scope. *Shipmates* is composed of a series of portraits of ship and shore-based communities and establishments, explored through the experiences of varied individuals. *HMS Brilliant* and *Royal Navy Caribbean Patrol* concentrate on active overseas deployments, during which the consistent appearances and commentaries from specific crew members become both personal and indicative portraits within a fabric of reportage (Figure 6.2).

Shipmates provides a holistic cultural study of the Navy (including new recruits at HMS *Raleigh* in Plymouth, FOST aboard HMS *Ocean*, a naval boxing competition and the field gun race at Devonport, and an Arabian Gulf patrol aboard HMS *Chatham*), whereas the other series offer observational and investigative documentary footage, edited (in the case of *Caribbean Patrol*) for tension and suggested climaxes, furnished by the participation of HMS *Manchester* and her crew in drug interdiction and disaster relief operations. The consistency of method, taken across the full range of series, produces an unbroken but nuanced record, which (in Terrill's view) must be alert and responsive to personal and institutional continuities (and differences)

²²⁴ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp.31–75.

²²⁵ Interview with the author, August 2022.



Figure 6.2: Chris Terrill interviews a member of HMS *Chatham*'s crew. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.

within evolving and topical events occurring at both domestic, local and dramatic, international levels:

The pressures on and demands made of military groups are fundamentally different from those placed on civilians. It is hardly surprising because they are not only being asked to put their own lives on the line but are themselves invested with the authority to apply lethal violence to others. This changes the ethical and moral dynamics at both individual and group level and informs everything from comradeship to attitudes to duty, loyalty, honour and even humour ... One has to be very careful to recognise that the military is not a lumpen community but a very distinct collection of specialist, segmentary sub-tribes that make up the generic whole. Each is distinct in terms of purpose, culture and shared values.²²⁶

Therefore, Terrill's naval series furnish sensitive and humanistic studies of individuals working within institutions portrayed as operational and traditional continua. The record of the almost instantaneous shift from aggressive patrolling to anticipated relaxation to disaster relief seen in HMS *Chatham*'s

²²⁶ Interview with the author, November 2019.



Figure 6.3: HMS *Manchester* at sunset in the Caribbean. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2010. Used with permission.

transition from Dubai to Sri Lanka in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 provides a spontaneous and positive factual portrait of the Navy's capabilities and purpose. At the same time, Terrill's films comment, intentionally or coincidentally, on the contemporary circumstances they capture. Perhaps reflecting British military overstretch or American security concerns, in *Caribbean Patrol* HMS *Manchester* (Figure 6.3) was seen to embark a US Coast Guard boarding party rather than a Royal Marine contingent during its drug-enforcement duties. Similarly, the first episode of *Caribbean Patrol* was broadcast in the week in which it was officially admitted that such warship deployments to the region would be discontinued as an economy measure.²²⁷ The series that documented the twilight of the ship's career (this being HMS *Manchester*'s last deployment before retirement) therefore also highlighted and implicitly commented upon the Navy's role and relevance and foregrounded questions of national pride and responsibility.

The uncompromising approach that Terrill's films adopt lends them a veracity that recalls the transparency of *Sailor*, which is reinforced rather than hindered by the viewer's awareness of the presence of the filmmaker himself

²²⁷ Nick Hopkins and Richard Norton-Taylor, Navy forced to drop warship patrols in Caribbean through lack of funds, *The Guardian*, 7 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/feb/07/navy-abandons-caribbean-warship-patrols> [accessed 22 February 2011].

on board ship, just out of frame and out of sight, though heard through his conversational prompts and questions. At the same time, his series are ultimately affirmative in their portraiture of the Navy as an institution, with the immediacy of their recording as the down-payment on their verisimilitude. Reflecting on the production of *Shipmates*, Terrill noted the binding sense of responsibility to both subject and audience that his approach demanded, and that the Admiralty's acquiescence facilitated:

The degree of access I enjoyed was unprecedented, and I applaud the Admiralty for granting it even though, for them, it was always going to be 'high risk.' I think they decided to take the plunge again for two reasons. Firstly, they know they are accountable to a tax-paying public, many of whom do not really understand what the modern Navy actually does any more and secondly, I reckon, they felt pretty confident that most of what I would find would enhance their reputation before it would tarnish it.²²⁸

This (repeated) open-ness of the naval establishment to Terrill's approach needs to be seen in the context of his many other series depicting varied aspects of civilian life. With his output dating back to the 1980s (with work on the BBC's documentary series *40 Minutes*), Terrill has been a long-standing practitioner of observational documentary in relation to underrepresented subject matter. The participatory nature of embedding seeks to translate and impart the experience of the director/filmmaker directly to the viewing audience. Terrill's reticent coexistence with his subjects over periods of months reduces the tendencies towards a reflexive documentary mode in privileging uninflected observation. The solitary filmmaker's access to the documentary subject granted by these methods has become formally and contextually suited to the circumstances of contemporary television. James Chapman underlines the relevance of this approach to social information and engagement, but also suggests criticisms of its tendency towards superficiality and narrativisation:

The genre is particularly suited to television in two respects: First, the intimacy of television made the 'human' element more immediate: television allows a sense of closeness to the subjects that is different from cinema. Second, the episodic format of television allowed observational documentaries to follow individuals or institutions across a longer period of time than a film: this allows more detail and more incident. Observational documentary divides commentators: for its supporters it can provide a valuable sociological experiment and insight into the

²²⁸ Christopher Terrill, *Shipmates: Inside the Royal Navy Today* (London: Century, 2005), p.xv.

cultural politics of institutions ... while for its detractors it is often seen as little more than a soap opera.²²⁹

The decline of current affairs and journalistic documentary, and the subsequent emergence of the docusoap as a cheaper and markedly more popular form of factual programming, is noted by Jonathan Bignell as a symptom of production and policy change in the 1990s. For Chapman, the mixed mode of the docusoap crystallises not only the evolving environment of broadcasting for the factual and the popular (and the factual *as* popular) but also the reorientation or blurring of the public and private, and the observed and the narrativised, in the definition of documentary:

This was a hybrid of documentary and soap opera that adopted a *vérité*-style observational mode to follow individuals or groups in their working or domestic lives. Its mode of address crossed from the traditional public space of documentary into the personal space of the soap opera.²³⁰

Notably, Bignell therefore draws a generic distinction between the observational documentary form of Terrill's *HMS Brilliant* and the docusoap characteristics of *The Cruise*.²³¹ Given the similarity in recording method, this differentiation implies other divergences of subject, value and significance separating *HMS Brilliant* and other service-based series. Similarly, John Corner asserts that the docusoap's 'nosy sociability' underlines its approach as a more 'relaxed, looser, less purposive form of observation (the incidental becoming more important than the incident)', in contrast to more committed observational documentary.²³² While acknowledging the disparagement that docusoap as a factual form has received, with some of its most popular incarnations being partially scripted and emotionally manipulative, Chapman also identifies the more reputable and influential antecedents of these techniques, such as *The Family* (BBC, 1974), seen as the prototype of the 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary, *Sailor* (BBC, 1976) (see Chapter 2), *Strangeways* (BBC, 1980), filmed inside the high-security prison in Manchester, and *Police* (BBC, 1981), a controversial series depicting day-to-day investigations in the Thames Valley force. Terrill's

²²⁹ James Chapman, *A New History of British Documentary*, pp.198–199.

²³⁰ Chapman, *A New History of British Documentary*, p.211.

²³¹ Jonathan Bignell, 'Docudramatizing the real: Developments in British TV docudrama since 1990', *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2010, 4(3), 195–208, pp.197–198. Terrill disagrees with this distinction since the series' subjects were approached through identical methods: 'The Cruise was dubbed a docusoap but for me it was still a closely observed doc series about a ship's company.' Interview with the author, August 2022.

²³² John Corner, 'What can we say about documentary?', *Media, Culture and Society*, 2000, 22, 681–688, p.687.

service subjects can be seen to conform more to these precedents but seek to be records of the real rather than judgemental or journalistic exposés. Uniting anthropological method, documentary production and docusoap appeal, Terrill's work therefore sustains a tradition of institutional observation and reportage, updated and broadened in appeal (but therefore also in relevance) by the popularisation of factual programming.

HMS Brilliant (1996)

Terrill's embedding technique and diary-like coverage of quotidian duty and off-duty time combines institutional scrutiny with close observation of individuals within a variegated, institutionalised community. This is analogous to the video diary format with its aspiration towards full multicultural and niche representation.²³³ Following the schedules and experiences of a few outstanding personalities within the community facilitates this approach's representation of both individuality and unity at work within the social, professional and national system. Terrill's naval and military series might therefore seem to be simply expansions and reapplications of a docusoap format seen with civilian workplace subjects. However, the sustainment of his embedding produces concentrated records of highly specific circumstances, unseen events and portraits of professionals, and accessible observations of communities at once unique and nationally representative.

The six-part series *HMS Brilliant* follows the Type 22 frigate during three months of Operation 'Sharp Guard', enforcing United Nations' Security Council resolutions for sanctions against warring parties in the former Yugoslavia.²³⁴ The documenting of this deployment assumed historical and cultural significance after *HMS Brilliant* (Figure 6.4) became the first UK warship to have female crew members at sea, and the first to have female crew involved in conflict.²³⁵ In view of the differences apparent in the ship and its mission that his series documented (a patrol in a war zone with female crew members

²³³ Chapman, *A New History of British Documentary*, p.210.

²³⁴ The duration, complexities and generally overlooked successes of the Royal Navy's large-scale and politically delicate operations in the Adriatic Sea are covered in detail in Stephen Prince and Kate Brett, *Royal Navy Operations off the Former Yugoslavia: Operation Sharp Guard, 1991–1996*, in *You Cannot Surge Trust: Combined Naval Operations of the Royal Australian Navy, Canadian Navy, Royal Navy, and United States Navy, 1991–2003* ed. by Gary E. Weir and Sandra J. Doyle (Washington: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2013), pp. 45–82.

²³⁵ Iain Ballantyne, *Strike from the Sea: The Royal Navy and US Navy at War in the Middle East, 1949–2003* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004), pp.110–111. The female crew on board *HMS Brilliant* were the first 20 Wrens who volunteered to go to sea in 1990. Anonymous, *History, The Association of Wrens and Women of the Royal Naval Services*, <https://wrens.org.uk/history/> [accessed 25 August 2019].



Figure 6.4: HMS *Brilliant*. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 1995. Used with permission.

that also represented a new post-Cold War interventionist stance for NATO and the EU), Terrill's narrative begins with observations on the weight of tradition.

Recalling the long history of ships named *Brilliant*, he observes that 'an old name bestows on a new ship not only a ready-made reputation, but also a sense of continuity and survival'. Embracing this inheritance is also part of imparting 'a spiritual identity that belies the inanimation of wood or metal'.²³⁶ Although as the title suggests HMS *Brilliant* is the site of observation and the home of the crew, it is the human element (albeit routinely confined and culturally defined by the ship) that absorbs interest.

The individuals from the crew with whom Terrill interacts (as with *Sailor* representing a broad cross-section of rank, experience and opinion) constitute the consistent points of contact throughout day-to-day operations. These include Leading Seaman Micky Goble, Principal Warfare Officer Bob Hawkins, Lieutenant Tracie Lovegrove (the most senior female sailor aboard, who abandoned PhD study at Edinburgh University to go to sea) and Medical Assistant Jacqui Quant, as well as Captain James Rapp. They provide insights and reveal details about themselves and their institutional and personal circumstances

²³⁶ Christopher Terrill, *HMS Brilliant: In a Ship's Company* (London: BBC Books, 1995), pp.12–13.

that prompt scrutiny of issues of wider relevance for the audience. For example, having embarked upon an academic career, the ship's supply officer, Martin Atherton, felt driven to join the Navy after witnessing the Falklands War. He describes himself as having been struck by 'the absurdity and the fragility' of a society in which 'some people "do" and others "think"'.²³⁷ Celebrating the unity of identity and purpose that is created among the disparate members of the crew, Atherton remarks positively and paradoxically that 'a ship like this is a model, a paradigm for the way all societies should be – and then perhaps there would be no wars and, therefore, no need for warships...'²³⁸

While noting the idealism and irony at work in such individual and institutional responses, Terrill's series records the honouring of tradition during *Brilliant's* deployment. Sequences of this kind have come to characterise his and other subsequent series (q.v. the first *Warship* series following HMS *Illustrious's* visit to Malta; see Chapter 5). Members of the frigate's crew visit the military cemetery at Souda Bay on Crete to commemorate the casualties of World War II. Without specifically addressing or connecting their current NATO role, they reflect on their forebears 'vanquishing a terrible evil in Europe'.²³⁹ Where tradition meets present-day policies and underlying stresses is in the filming of *Brilliant's* 'SODS' (Ship's Operatic and Drama Society) Opera, an impromptu entertainment put on by and for the ship's crew:

The theory is that the SODS Opera provides a social pressure-release for a community with no escape from itself. By giving everybody a night of amnesty to do and say what they want old scores can be settled and the air cleared. That is the theory.²⁴⁰

This event forms the basis of the fifth episode, forming a climax to the series prior to the ship's return home.²⁴¹ Having endured insult, denigration and prejudice from some portions of the ship's male complement, *Brilliant's* minority female sailors take the opportunity of the SODS Opera to challenge their antagonists on board. While other turns of the night ridicule other individuals and groups in the carnivalesque atmosphere, the Wrens' performance of a re-lyricised version of Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive' draws booing and heckling from angry male sailors. In recording the tensions on both sides, with divided opinions from male and female crew members on the experience of this first sea deployment, Terrill's series presents a vitally topical view of a necessary and inevitable shift in the Navy's culture. While controversial and unpopular at

²³⁷ Terrill, *HMS Brilliant*, p.74.

²³⁸ Terrill, *HMS Brilliant*, p.75.

²³⁹ Terrill, *HMS Brilliant*, p.87, 186–187.

²⁴⁰ Terrill, *HMS Brilliant*, p.141.

²⁴¹ The accompanying book publication suggests a slightly different chronology, with the visit to Istanbul taking place after the SODS Opera.

the time because of the full frankness of its record, Terrill's film can be seen to serve the same purpose as the SODS Opera itself: 'not an anarchic act of mini-mutiny, but a bizarre way of actually confirming and strengthening the very order that was dismantled.'²⁴²

An earlier episode tracks the ship's departure from patrols in the Adriatic Sea and arrival in Istanbul. There preparations for a cocktail party for distinguished local guests and Turkish naval officers are undercut by the observations of the lower ranks, who comment wryly to Terrill on the indulgence, distraction and triviality of the occasion. Scenes of the raucous behaviour of the ship's officers in the wardroom contrast with their later efforts to entertain their guests. More significantly, these scenes are also intercut with the progress of the 'girls only' drunken and noisy Halloween party taking place in the female mess (known as the 'Wrennerie'). The camera dispassionately observes these parallel official and unofficial social shipboard events. Amongst the spontaneous recording, one conspicuous and unbroken camera movement down a connecting companionway contrasts a quiet upper deck with a lower deck echoing with sounds of Wrens singing. As with the documentation of the SODS Opera, these scenes remain open to interpretation in showing enduring and emergent senses of community, unity and division, order and disharmony within the traditional and new aspects of the ship's life.

The series ends with the ship's return to Plymouth. In addition to predictably recording the reunion of families, this final episode ends with titles revealing (alongside retrospective clips) the details of the futures of those the series has observed:

Captain James Rapp is now heading the RN Presentation Team promoting public awareness of the Navy.

Lt. Tracie Lovegrove, currently with HMS *Exeter*, now has her bridge-watch keeping ticket.

HMS *Brilliant* will be decommissioned in 1996 and transferred to the Brazilian Navy as part of a sales package.

Celebrating the advancing careers of the documentary's now-familiar participants is redolent of their connection (rather than 'characterisation') for the audience as real subjects. Notably, the conclusive reflection on the fate of the ship implies an equal status in emotional investment (recalling *Sailor*) and, as in the subsequent cases of *Shipmates* and *Caribbean Patrol*, passes its own comment on a wider sense of loss or decline. Documentary endorsement of the Navy on the communal and individual scales seems bound to

²⁴² Terrill, *HMS Brilliant*, p.158.

wider appeals for relevance and engagement with naval issues, marked with a melancholy tinged with implied loss (of naval capacity, prestige or heritage), here embodied in the passing of *Brilliant* for the viewer, and the country. This understated promotion of the documentary subject adds 'persuasion' to the Renovian 'tendencies' to observe and record, augmenting Terrill's reportage and truth with a 'viewpoint' that focuses audience attention on Corner's concepts of 'institution' and 'order.' In distinguishing between docusoap and documentary, Jonathan Bignell asserts that it was 'interest in the central characters of docusoaps ... that drove the public discourse about the programmes', in contrast to 'the insight into occupational roles, institutions and hierarchies that the settings brought with them' forming the more serious focus of documentary series.²⁴³ Ending *HMS Brilliant* by fostering a persistence of interest in both characters *and* institutions epitomises the popularisation of documentary, or the elevation of docusoap, in Terrill's work.

Shipmates (2005)

Terrill's next naval-focused series was produced nearly a decade after the controversial observational milestone of *HMS Brilliant*. In the interim he had completed *Soho Stories*, *The Cruise*, *Jailbirds* (BBC1, 1999), a 10-part series documenting the stories of individual inmates of Newhall Women's prison, and *The Ship* (BBC2, 2002), following the crew of a replica of *HMS Endeavour* recreating the voyage of Captain Cook. While continuing to explore unusual or unprecedented factual subjects, Terrill's work over this period also reflects the refinement and convergence of popular docusoap appeal and selective and revelatory documentary observation. Under the emblematic working title of 'England Expects', *Shipmates* was commissioned by the BBC as a series to chart a year in the life of the Royal Navy to mark the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar.²⁴⁴ After the controversies of *HMS Brilliant*, *Shipmates* documents an equally groundbreaking example of female Navy personnel, with one episode dedicated to petty officer and physical training instructor Natasha Pulley competing for and winning a place on the Devonport team for the naval field gun competition.

Observation of contemporary conditions leavened with the continuing significance of tradition characterises this episode. The historical background to the competition is explicated with archive footage of the Boer War and the Siege of Ladysmith. The eight-week basic training of a new intake is contrasted with the 17-year veteran Tasha's eight-week preparation for the celebrated and

²⁴³ Jonathan Bignell, Docudramatizing the real: Developments in British TV docudrama since 1990, *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2010, 4(3), 195–208, p.199.

²⁴⁴ Anonymous, BBC1 to chart a year in the Navy year to fill, *Broadcast*, 20 January 2005, <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bbc1-to-chart-a-year-in-the-navy-year-to-fill/1018576.article> [accessed 18 May 2022].



Figure 6.5: The Devonport Field Gun Squad. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.

gruelling competition. The new recruits' abrupt initiation into conformity, discipline and routine contrasts with Tasha's stated love of service tradition. Ironically, Natasha entered the Wrens when the female arm was still separate and admits to Terrill that she was never interested in service at sea, and yet seeks to join one of the most exclusive and traditionally male preserves. The unpredictability of the competition means that, despite their superlative performance throughout the heats of the competition, the Devonport team (Figure 6.5) are robbed of victory in the final by a tiny, accidental error. The drama of this moment is heightened by slow-motion and an integrated montage of the previous weeks of 'bonding and team-building', contrasting with the hectic *vérité* style used for the training and heats.

Other episodes are similarly devoted to allusive topics, rather than discrete narratives. Episode four ('Raising the Dead') brings together several events separated chronologically and geographically. After duty in the Gulf, HMS *Chatham* visits Alexandria and members of her crew become a ceremonial guard for the reinterment of the remains of British sailors who died during the Battle of the Nile. A week earlier, Gunner Rab Butler (Figure 6.6) had been filmed getting a special tattoo of his 'guardian angel' (his grandfather, who served in the Navy in World War II) during a run ashore in Dubai. Another week later, the ship provides an honour guard at the Turkish war memorial at



Figure 6.6: Rab Butler of HMS *Chatham*. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.

Gallipoli for the 90th anniversary of the battle in World War I. On this occasion Rab tracks down another relative, his great-grandfather, immortalised at the British and Commonwealth memorial at Helles.²⁴⁵

These poignant connections of today's sailors with their antecedents, stressing unbroken service and family traditions redolent of the series' Nelsonian commemoration, are somewhat awkwardly juxtaposed with the investigation of alleged hauntings and paranormal activity in some of the oldest buildings at Plymouth naval base. Episode five ('Theatres of War') follows HMS *Ocean*'s chaplain Mike Brotherton as he supports the rehearsals for an amateur dramatic group's revival of HMS *Pinafore* and participates in fleet exercises ('the Thursday War') (Figure 6.7). The 'Bish's' performance (comforting refugees and casualties in an imaginary conflict) and other realistic aspects of the exercise are intercut with the gently mocking vision of the Navy and its customs provided by Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera. Both 'theatres' gesture towards serious and satiric truths. The final episode concludes at a patriotic peak in the closing credits with a portrait of Nelson and his dates.

In contrast to these diffuse, reflective and episodic elements of the observed year, the series' most concentrated and enthralling sequences of both mundane

²⁴⁵ Terrill, *Shipmates*, pp.254–257.



Figure 6.7: interviewing Captain Tony Johnstone-Burt on the bridge of HMS *Ocean*. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.

and extraordinary record form the core of the first two episodes. These parts both recall HMS *Brilliant* and anticipate *Caribbean Patrol* in their concerted and intimate study of life on board HMS *Chatham* on deployment, but also capture service and family life ashore. Both HMS *Chatham* and *Ocean* (and significant crew members such as gunners Rab and 'Ratz' Rackliff, the 'Bish', and chef 'Ginge' Grieveson) are introduced in the opening episode. In interview Rab and his wife Mel explain their experience of regular separation. *Chatham's* departure for duty is intercut with the 'Bish' presiding over a naval marriage which will 'launch' another couple to, he admits, an uncertain shared future (the chaplain has previously been observed counselling sailors with relationship problems). Rackliff discovers he is about to become a father shortly before departure, whereas 'Ginge' confesses that he has missed his son's last four birthdays ('long as I'm there for his eighteenth!'). Within an hour of departure, *Chatham* suffers an engine room fire, occurring as 'Ginge' is being interviewed, so the camera immediately records the emergency response. As the danger passes, Terrill comments to Grieveson that fire must be 'just about the worst thing that could happen on a ship'. Another sailor observes, 'sinking's quite bad too', and Grieveson concludes, 'and running out of toilet roll'. Such droll observation of the momentous and the mundane is mirrored by Captain Chick's understatement of *Chatham's* mission, a return to 'the old stomping ground' of the Gulf. While the testing of all *Chatham's* weapons



Figure 6.8: HMS *Chatham* in Dubai at Christmas 2004. Photo copyright Chris Terrill. Used with permission.

is amplified by the soundtrack (featuring the theme music from *Where Eagles Dare* [1968]), the training of the crew to handle weapons while wearing gasmasks provides a chastening consciousness of the threats they may face.

Chatham's deployment to the Gulf (Figure 6.8) is interrupted by the occurrence of the Indian Ocean tsunami. New of this disaster comes at the end of episode one. Episode two shows the ship transiting at high speed to Sri Lanka to provide emergency aid ashore. Departing from Dubai, Rab reflects that this unexpected duty will be a chastening and formative experience for younger sailors, making them 'better people' by introducing them to places where an immediate difference can be made. These activities again produce remarkable convergences of modernity and tradition. Arriving at an orphanage in Batticaloa to assist in cleaning and repairs, Terrill's camera records how *Chatham's* sailors receive tea in vintage cups bearing a *Players* branded picture:

of a fully bearded British sailor, the one you see on the front of a packet of *Senior Service* cigarettes ... I do not think the nuns even know the head on the cups is a British sailor, and so do not realise the irony. The sailors do.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ Terrill, *Shipmates*, p.159.

In another wry recollection of the imperial past, Lieutenant Surgeon Alison Dewynter (on her first at-sea deployment) is questioned by a local about the Navy's descent on the island:

'Are you American or British?' he enquires politely.

'British, sir,' says Alison. 'Royal Navy.'

'Have you come to invade us?' he asks, looking up to the sky as we hear the sound of the returning Lynx.

'We are not invading, sir,' replies Alison gently. 'We have come to help.'

'Thank you,' says the man, 'but couldn't you invade us as well? My father used to say it was much better under the British.'

'No, sir,' laughs Alison. 'It's not what we do these days, I'm afraid.'

The man turns and walks away disconsolately.²⁴⁷

The relief operation (Figure 6.9) represents a different but equally long-lived tradition of intervention and responsibility. Initially overwhelmed at the scale of the disaster, Alison prepares a plan to revive the local hospital at Kallar and provide an immediate outpatients service. A montage sequence telescopes the hours of herculean effort, combining Chaplain Tommy Goodwin leading children in songs and games, with *Chatham's* sailors labouring to restore their community. With the hospital and hope for the community restored, Alison eschews her own efforts in celebrating the determination and humanity of her shipmates: 'Give Jack a job and he just doesn't seem to see any barriers' (Figure 6.10). Reinforcing the cultural memory evoked by the earlier *Players* image, the recollection of 'Jack' in the actions of *Chatham's* sailors (in an historic imperial setting, albeit in a distinctly post-imperial context) provides a latter-day validation of the national ideals enshrined in 'positive depictions of naval men' since the Victorian era.²⁴⁸

Shipmates represents an unusual example of naval documentary in its combination of calendar record and spontaneous reportage. Its documentation of activity at Plymouth anticipates a similar episodic docusoap *Devonport: Inside the Royal Navy* (Discovery, 2016). Although the heart of the series was formed by following HMS *Chatham's* wide-ranging deployment, the series

²⁴⁷ Terrill, *Shipmates*, p.166.

²⁴⁸ See Mary A. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing naval manhood in the British Empire, 1870–1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p.193 (see also Introduction).



Figure 6.9: HMS *Chatham*'s Lynx helicopter engaged in disaster relief operations. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.



Figure 6.10: Alison Dewynter treats local children at the reopened Kallar clinic. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.



Figure 6.11: ‘The Bish’ Tommy Goodwin with the children of Kallar. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2005. Used with permission.

acknowledged a cultural kaleidoscope of naval events and sub-communities. The preparation of HMS *Ocean* for active service through rigorous FOST drills contrasted poignantly with the premature decommissioning of HMS *Norfolk* as part of defence cuts. In an echo of *Brilliant*’s demise, stretching commitments and shrinking resources affecting the Navy as institution and community gain political as well as sentimental representation during Terrill’s recording of this event.²⁴⁹ As in the later *Building Britain’s Biggest Warship*, the presence of a noticeable voice-over (provided by actor Samantha Bond) and soundtrack (dramatic music for *Chatham*’s exercising boarding teams, ominous notes for the frigate’s test of weapons, ‘Rule Britannia’ for the start of the final episode with images of Portsmouth and HMS *Victory*) provide a more overt and facilitating narrative beyond objective images and subjective commentary. Fades to black serve to punctuate and connect the scenes at sea and those at Devonport. Although ostensibly a commemorative project, *Shipmates*’s scope provides an affecting quotidian but multifaceted portrait but also witnesses the Navy’s response to a momentous, horrific event (Figure 6.11).

Royal Navy Caribbean Patrol (2011)

Terrill’s next naval project more resembled HMS *Brilliant*, in his embedding for a six-month drug-enforcement patrol with HMS *Manchester*. He acknowledged

²⁴⁹ Terrill, *Shipmates*, pp.213–222.

the unpredictability of events and physical and technical challenges entailed by sharing the hardships and frustrations, exertions and inactivity of the crew, albeit balanced by the observational documentarist's 'dream' of 'the hunt for the unexpected'.²⁵⁰ Despite similarities to this precedent, the five-part series *Caribbean Patrol* registers some stylistic differences. From the first episode ('Bad Guys Dead Ahead'), the filmmaker's own accompanying voice-over foregrounds the ship's character and mission in dynamic terms. The deployment represents 'a last hurrah' and a 'final and extraordinary mission' for the 'ageing warship', while the Caribbean is described as:

A haven to some of the most ruthless and determined drug smugglers in the world, and they are the enemy that the British warship must hunt down. And to make matters worse, it's all going to happen at the height of the hurricane season.

This voice-over frames observation of the voyage in terms of journalistic reportage, and other aspects of the series' techniques reflect this immediacy and anticipate to a lesser degree some of the heightened characteristics of the later Channel 5 submarine series and *Warship: Life at Sea*, for which *Caribbean Patrol* appears to act as model and precedent. A sequence of voice clips and close-ups introduce the crew members the series will follow: the captain Rex Cox, Air Warfare Officer Jim Thompson, Leading Seaman Paul Bailey and Able Seaman Kelly Hamon. By contrast, the faces of members of the Coast Guard detachment are obscured to protect their identities. Illustrative maps, identifying titles and time notations track the ship's progress from island to island in response to intelligence leads.

However, to undermine any sense of overt or false narrativisation of the mission, the opening episode's account of the ship's first interception subverts such techniques. At first, permission to board the suspect vessel is delayed. Commander Cox reflects wistfully to camera on the darkened bridge: 'We must tick all the legal boxes ... we can't just go willy-nilly boarding anything because we feel like it.' When authorisation is received, the ship closes on a suspicious object dumped overboard by the suspect vessel:

The warship edges towards the gleaming object: Marijuana? Heroin? Cocaine? No. The 5000-ton destroyer is bearing down on nothing more than a lone, drifting and entirely innocent coconut.

The bathetic conclusion to the dramatically edited and musically accompanied sequence is realistically deflationary. The suspect ship is searched for hours and cleared; Rex Cox notes the need for 'Coconut recognition'; Paul Bailey at his console in the operations room jokes to camera: 'No drugs, just one coconut – what the fuck is all that about?'

²⁵⁰ Terrill, *Patrolling Paradise*.

Following this failure, a fuller introduction to the shipboard community establishes more mundane detail. Introduced by an on-screen title, Weapons Engineering Officer Rich Scott explains the layout and hierarchy of accommodation. The junior rates occupy 3-deck, Senior rates are on 2-deck, officers on 1-deck and 01-deck, so 'the lower you are in the rank structure on board, then also the lower you live on board as well.' The camera follows Paul Bailey as he presents his berthing space, and Kelly shows Chris one of the two female messes. Rich Scott describes his 'reasonably large' officer's cabin jokingly as 'caravan living'. The camera's presence appears to be entirely ignored as a minor argument breaks out in Paul's mess over individual untidiness. A contrasting montage of activity (patrolling, boat launches and helicopter patrols) condenses three weeks of fruitless work attempting 'upstream disruption' – intercepting bulk drugs en route before they can be broken down into smaller quantities for easier insertion into the UK. The realistic lack of success is reflected in observed boredom (when Paul uses the ship's remote cameras to find a spot for 'sunbathing and beers' on Anguilla's beaches) and reflexive cynicism, as another sailor remarks that Terrill's recording of their boat trip and barbecue should be used as a recruitment film in place of current films showing 'assault courses and ironing trousers'. However, mundanity rapidly gives way to spontaneous incident. While being interviewed about their views on the anti-drug mission (and being reprimanded for making noise outside the operations room), Kelly and Paul are suddenly called to their posts when suspicious activity is detected on the island of Monserrat. A volcanic eruption in 1999 has left the island's capital 'unpeopled and unpoliced', and the exclusion zone on the island is now a sanctuary for drug runners exploiting the uninhabited coastline. After more disappointment, Terrill's voice-over offers a tantalising hint before the advertisement break: 'further up the coast the helicopter has spotted another vessel, moving at speed'. Finally, by the end of the first episode, HMS *Manchester* is rewarded with the capture of £500,000 of cannabis (Figure 6.12).

In episode two ('Old Lady of the Seas'), the fruitless patrols continue but HMS *Manchester*'s advanced age precipitates mechanical problems. A breakdown of the desalination plant leads to water rationing: 'Everyone now has to shower like they do on submarines.' Loss of refrigeration prompts a different, ironically received emergency: 'Everyone must now consume as much as they can of a three-month meat supply in a matter of hours: cue the mother of all barbecues. England expects every man and woman will do their carnivorous duty.' Despite their efforts, £20,000 worth of food has to be thrown over the side. An engine failure leads to the replacement of the one of the ship's gas turbine engines alongside in Curacao, but this provides Kelly with an opportunity for a run ashore and new 'ink'. Showing her tattoo ('I'd rather be hated for what I am than loved for what I am not') leads to her revealing that she is gay. Coming out at 19 after joining the Navy meant that people on board her ship knew before her family. Although admitting that she has encountered prejudice, the observation of mixed crews in *Caribbean Patrol* (and *Shipmates*) reflects none



Figure 6.12: Commander Rex Cox on the bridge as HMS *Manchester* approaches Havana. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2010. Used with permission.

of the tensions of HMS *Brilliant*. Having partied all night in female company (summarising for Terrill the sailor's creed: 'Matelots will go anywhere where there's food, beer, women and music. End'), Kelly is hung over but still enamoured of the service and its traditions when she must raise the colours at 8am next morning.

While episode three continues to document the routine of the patrol, the closing episodes are, as with *Shipmates*, overtaken by HMS *Manchester*'s sudden involvement in disaster relief following devastation caused by Hurricane Earl. As Lieutenant Penny Armand-Smith, the meteorological officer ('the Weather Witch'), seeks weather information in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Paul and Kelly, who have made a pact to quit smoking, are also observed going ashore. Kelly seeks a nicotine patch from the ship's medical officer, and Paul attempts to telephone the UK. The camera observes Paul from a distance, trying to phone his fiancée, Lauren, from the dockside as there is no mobile reception on board, and catches him reaching for a cigarette. Terrill's voice-over reflects sympathetically: 'the temptation is too much'. Interviewed later, Paul confides that he gave in after 'having a bit of a barney' with the fiancée. He comments on the difficulty of separation, of saying sorry over a distance, and constant awareness of the relationships that have been 'binned in the Navy.'

Manchester leaves port to reposition herself to provide help just as cruise ships come into harbour to take shelter. A cut from images of the ship

refuelling in heavy seas to satellite pictures of the storm from space introduces the danger: 'And this is Earl.' After undertaking a requested helicopter reconnaissance of Anguilla, where no casualties are reported, and providing a marching party for St Vincent's Independence Day celebrations on one of the hottest days of the year, HMS *Manchester* is dispatched to St Lucia in the wake of Hurricane Tomas. Episode five, 'Mission of Mercy', details the response of the ship's sailors: providing first aid, sharing their rations with evacuees and helping in the search for people missing amongst the wreckage and landslides. The ship's Logistics Officer Dickie Underwood remarks: 'we train to deliver maximum violence to the enemy. This is quite the opposite.' Speaking for the whole crew, Bosun's Mate 'Sully' Sullivan articulates the satisfaction of 'self-pride: you feel like you're making a difference', and the voice-over emphasises that 'the arrival of the Royal Navy is a huge relief to a frightened but grateful people – but the place is in chaos.' *Manchester's* chaplain, Mark Alsop, leads a vain search for survivors, and eventually for bodies, across a massive mudslide, but no one is found. The sailors instead erect a cross and 'the Bish' says a prayer on the site. Sombrely, Terrill's voice-over observes simply that: 'the British destroyer has tried to fulfil its command aim of saving life and lessening suffering'. The episode and series end with *Manchester's* return after 'nearly 7 months away: 200 days, over 36,000 miles, three hurricanes, [and] two major drugs busts.' HMS *Manchester's* and RFA *Wave Ruler's* contribution to rescue and reconstruction in the Caribbean was recorded in *Navy News*, the service's own publication.²⁵¹

Although based in the same methodological approach of embedding and observation, Terrill's series can be seen to straddle categories of docusoap and documentary (though these might be more significant for broadcasters and audiences than the filmmaker himself), which entails nuances of technique and style. While these can be detected in specifically different uses of voice-over, editing, soundtrack or in narrative framing, underlyingly these programmes (taken together with Terrill's subjects in the civilian world) represent a spectrum more than a generically divided catalogue of realist documentation. Rather than introducing a hierarchy of factual programmes and their distinguishable approaches, James Chapman has sought to redeem the denigrated docusoap format due to its relevance as a contemporarily evolving form of observational documentary. For Chapman, these series' concentration upon 'institutions and professional groups rather than individuals' validated and positioned them 'more securely within the historical lineage of British documentary practice.'²⁵² Terrill's work across this factual spectrum and within this 'lineage' would continue to evolve with a project of even greater duration.

²⁵¹ Anonymous, Ticking all the boxes, *Navy News*, 2010, 677, 20–21. This article features Chris Terrill's photographs.

²⁵² Chapman, *A New History of British Documentary*, p.199.

Building Britain's Biggest Warship (2019–20)

Unlike other documentary subjects (and unlike other ship construction projects), the conception and completion of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* has provided the prospect of very long-term observation and record. However, this opportunity has not necessarily conformed to the expectations and needs of the broadcast environment. Having observed the ship's 'conception' with the Princess Royal's ceremonial cutting of the first steel at Govan in 2009, Terrill pitched the idea of a series to follow the vessel's development through to her entry into service. Yet it was not until 2016, with the ship nearing completion and sea trials scheduled for the following year, that the project was commissioned by the BBC.²⁵³ The design and construction of the new carriers, the acquisition of the American F-35 aircraft to fly from them, and the eventual entry into service of the 'Carrier Strike' capability represent a vast national commitment and investment that will dominate defence spending for decades.²⁵⁴

The decision to build the *Queen Elizabeth*-class carriers essentially constitutes a return to and restoration of a scale of naval aviation deemed unaffordable and thus dispensed with in the 1970s: a policy encapsulated and concluded in the decommissioning of *Sailor's* HMS *Ark Royal* in 1979. As a subject of other popular documentaries (see Chapter 4), HMS *Queen Elizabeth* (Figure 6.13) has represented a focus for consideration alongside other groundbreaking engineering projects. *Britain's Biggest Warship* necessarily introduces its audience to technical details (with computer graphics to illustrate the ship's '17 decks, 5 kilometres of passageways and 3000 compartments') and significant concepts and challenges (the technologically based 'lean manning', which allows the ship to operate with the fraction of the complement of an American carrier, and the preparatory test flights and landings of the F-35). However, this technical emphasis constitutes a means rather than an end in the case of Terrill's approach: 'I developed a deep fascination with the ship's state-of-the-art engineering – but only as a backdrop to the human stories that unfolded within'²⁵⁵ (Figure 6.14).

Documenting the ship's completion, the assembly of its crew, its sea trials and flight testing and inaugural voyages allows the series (and its follow-up *Britain's*

²⁵³ Chris Terrill, Don't ever give up on a good idea – even if it takes a decade, *Broadcast*, 2 May 2018, <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/factual/why-my-series-took-a-decade-to-get-commissioned/5128780.article> [accessed 18 May 2022].

²⁵⁴ House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, Delivering Carrier Strike, HC394, January 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubacc/684/684.pdf> [accessed 11 June 2019].

²⁵⁵ Chris Terrill, Britain's Biggest Warship: Goes to Sea, BBC2/Smithsonian Channel, *Broadcast*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/factual/britains-biggest-warship-goes-to-sea-bbc2/smithsonian-channel/5144060.article> [accessed 18 May 2022].



Figure 6.13: HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in 2017. Photo copyright Chris Terrill. Used with permission.



Figure 6.14: Chris Terrill filming on HMS *Queen Elizabeth*'s flight deck. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2018. Used with permission.



Figure 6.15: Captain Jerry Kyd. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2018. Used with permission.

Biggest Warship: Goes to Sea) to follow individual crew members for several years. Aside from the frequent appearances of Captain Jerry Kyd (Figure 6.15), the numerous representatives of the contemporary Navy include Petty Officer Aircraft Handler Emma Ranson, Head Chef Mohamed ‘Wes’ Khan, Leading Aircraftsman Ricky Gleason and Executive Warrant Officer Dave Garraghty. In the first episode, particular emphasis rests on Commander Air Mark Deller’s preparations for handling and launching the ship’s future aircraft, and Emma Ranson’s role in leading the flight deck crews. As Emma’s team practise firefighting, Petty Officer Marine Engineer ‘Big’ Bruce’ Milne leads a squad of *Queen Elizabeth*’s young sailors in training for the field gun competition. The voice-over (provided by actor Caroline Catz) notes the parallels as the two challenges are intercut: ‘The fleet’s standard time to put out a fire is 75 to 90 seconds; a winning run in the field gun – 75 to 90 seconds.’ Emma’s group manage to extinguish a simulated aircraft fire in 95 seconds. Bruce’s goal of nurturing the spirit of a new crew through a traditional competition is vindicated when *Queen Elizabeth*’s team wins. Punctuating these tests are Jerry Kyd axiomatic comments on the processes and goals of training, in terms that echo Terrill’s principal documentary interest:

You know, the ship is just a metal box, it’s a waste of time, it’s useless.
It’s only when you add in the human component of blood and flesh,

the emotions and the training, does it become a warship. So getting the ship's company to fuse with the ship emotionally, but also in terms of how to operate her and routines, are absolutely fundamental.

Dedication to tradition permeates the preparation of the new ship and crew. At the conclusion of sea trials in 2017, the ship anchors in Scapa Flow. The voice-over details the significance of this site as 'home of the Grand Fleet' in World War I. This visit by Britain's newest aircraft carrier commemorates the first landing of an aircraft at sea aboard a moving ship a century before. A more intimate and poignant memorialisation is led by *Queen Elizabeth*'s oldest crew member (Safety Officer Bob Hawkins), who accompanies two young sailors and descendants of crew members of HMS *Royal Oak* in a wreath-laying at the site of her sinking in 1939. Dave Garraghty seeks to promote the young sailors' sense of naval identity through more popular cultural connections. He brings aboard a toy parrot, with the future objective of acquiring a real talking one to teach proper 'Jackspeak' to the 'Generation Z' sailors. Amidst the memorabilia decorating his quarters is a beer advert featuring an image of the battleship HMS *Queen Elizabeth* from 1915. In a conscious reinvocation of *Sailor*, Dave also adds his own 'Wilf' to the crew for morale purposes.²⁵⁶

Awareness of the importance of the ship as a national project and the institutionalisation of the crew to that end always vie for precedence within the series with consciousness of the crew members' importance in themselves, as national and generational representatives. These emphases converge in comments by Emma Ranson (Figure 6.16) elicited by a question from Terrill off camera:

Emma, you asked to be on *Queen Elizabeth*, didn't you? How come?

Well, we've never had a ship like this and I'm never going to do this again in my career, so it's just to be part of something bigger and better for the Navy. It's the future ... so, it's good to be part of it and I can – hopefully, when I have children, then I can talk to them and say, 'Oh Mummy was part of that.'

The transformative potential of life, employment and experience on board the ship is perceptible within the observed subjects. 'Wes' (Figure 6.17) is seen to successfully balance his faith with his work. His imam has permitted him to handle pork in the galley as long as he wears gloves while cooking. When the ship docks in New York he visits the memorial at the site of the World Trade Center. He explains to camera the prejudice he encountered during training

²⁵⁶ Dave Garraghty's reinvigoration of Wilf's career had been noted several years before, when Wilf returned to serve aboard HMS *Daring*. Anonymous, Wilf is back – more *Daring* than ever... *Navy News*, 2013, 703, 16.



Figure 6.16: Petty Officer Emma Ranson. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2018. Used with permission.

in the period after 9/11, which nearly drove him to leave the Navy. On board *Queen Elizabeth* he has been allocated a prayer space that accommodates the practicalities of the ship's movement:

I do my prayers five times a day, you know. I do have to pray to Mecca but because the ship keeps on turning, I can't know where east is all the time. So, this is my direction, but it's not only for me. It's for anyone who want to come in and pray. Not just Muslims, it's for anyone.



Figure 6.17: Wes Khan in the galley of HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2017. Used with permission.

When logistical demands deprive ‘Wes’ of his prayer room, *Queen Elizabeth’s* ‘Bish’ helps him set up an alternative multi-faith room. Completing their task, they shake hands and celebrate their ‘common ground’: a fleeting close-up notes copies of the Holy Koran and Holy Bible shelved next to each other.

This positive image of unity and community is challenged when six of *Queen Elizabeth’s* sailors are arrested in New York (Figure 6.18). Given the visual emphasis frequently placed on sailors’ relaxation off duty throughout *Sailor*, *Warship* and Terrill’s other series, this episode is depicted principally through its aftermath, and its coverage in national and international news. While First Lieutenant Trevethan admits that he is ‘not surprised but disappointed’ and concedes that ‘it’s not the positive, good news story that the RN is trying to push out,’ Jerry Kyd evaluates the event as another part of the formation of the ship’s and sailors’ character:

Of course, we never excuse bad behaviour ashore. Of course not. You know, we’re not automatons, we’re not robots. And we want them to have character. We can’t have cowering quiet individuals because the nation would expect these people to go to war, put their lives in danger, potentially get wounded or even killed. It’s all about relativity.

What the Navy expects and receives from its community and what it endows its community with are revealed by such examples, which depict the most



Figure 6.18: HMS *Queen Elizabeth* arrives in New York. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2018. Used with permission.

everyday, rather than stylistically enhanced and exaggerated events. Repeatedly interviewed on duty dealing with the ship's rubbish, Ricky Gleason is frank in admitting his past and the opportunity that naval service has provided:

What brought you into the Navy?

I'd exhausted all other opportunities, pretty much. I was a typical naughty kid in school, I was in and out of trouble, I was in and out of care. By the time I was 21 I had 49 convictions for stealing things and fighting all the time. Nothing I'm proud of.

Ricky explains how, following spells in prison and being 'really honest' at the Navy careers office, he was given permission to join once he had stayed out of trouble for 10 years: 'Within two years everything had improved, I'd put on weight, eating properly, bit of self-respect. Decent wage. That was the main thing: money, driving, house.' He also reflects that time in prison meant he was able to adapt quickly to the confinement of life at sea. The diverse examples of 'Wes', Emma and Ricky (and the captain's steward, Glenn Peters, a Rastafarian from St Vincent) represent what Jerry Kyd refers to as 'a little part of Britain ... floating around in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean' and the voice-over celebrates as 'a vibrant community of 23 nationalities'. The naval communities committed to record in *HMS Brilliant*, *Shipmates* and *Building Britain's Biggest Warship*, while similarly embodying the specificities and commonalities of Terrill's other documentary subjects, also reflect the positive and reciprocal evolution of the Navy institutionally and traditionally, in line with the viewing and represented nation. Crew as much or more than ship symbolise a national project:

The military is drawn from society and so reflects society and its changes in attitude – especially amongst the young people who are perennially sought for recruitment. To some extent the young people have to conform to military tradition and convention but also, to an increasing extent, the military establishment has to bend to the will and expectation of the younger generation.²⁵⁷

Appropriately, therefore, while the second series concludes with Jerry Kyd's departure, the voice-over points out that, given the ship's intended 50-year life span, her final crew have yet to be born.

Alongside the sustained observation of and interest in *Queen Elizabeth's* cohering crew (Figure 6.19), *Britain's Biggest Warship* also inevitably charts the restoration of the Navy's carrier capability and the political climate in which this goal

²⁵⁷ Interview with the author, November 2019.



Figure 6.19: The ship's company of HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2018. Used with permission.

has been achieved. Statements on the Royal Navy's own website champion the new ships as embodiments of an updated military capability (Figure 6.20) and renewed political will epitomising contemporary British status and influence:

The Carrier Strike Group offers cutting edge air, surface and underwater defence, but it is also a focal point for the worldwide democratic activity that is more powerful than any weaponry ... The *Queen Elizabeth*-class carrier is more than just a warship ... The two ships are icons, standard bearers and symbols of a nation with a global role and global ambitions.²⁵⁸

Comments by Captain Jerry Kyd on camera to Terrill and to his crew continually focus attention on this wider national and international picture defined by the carriers' presence:

²⁵⁸ Anonymous, 'The Carrier Strike Group: Our Nation's Spearhead', *Royal Navy*, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/features/carrier-strike> [accessed 2 August 2022]. Ironically, it seems possible that CVA-01, the new aircraft carrier controversially cancelled in the 1960s, would also have been named HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Nick Childs, 'The aircraft carrier that never was', *BBC News*, 3 July 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28128026> [accessed 2 August 2022].



Figure 6.20: The first landing of an F-35 aboard HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. LPhot Daniel Shepherd. UK MOD © Crown copyright 2020, Open Government Licence.

Do I think that state-on-state friction is over? No. Do I think the root causes of war are over? No. And therefore we must absolutely remain prepared for it, sadly. The bottom line for any war is it's nasty, really gut-wrenching visceral nastiness. And I think people forget that. And we must prepare people and equip people for that challenge. It's profound.



Figure 6.21: Bob Hawkins. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2017. Used with permission.

In concert with remarks on the resurgence of a Russian presence and threat that punctuate the series, Kyd's comments represent an objective and forthright acknowledgement of the ship's and the Navy's purpose. However, this consciousness of preparation for and deterrence of conflict as the ship's underlying purpose leads to consideration of its implications for several crew members in scenes which encapsulate the series' achievement of individual, cultural and institutional observation.

In the third episode of the first series (suitably titled 'Out With the Old, in With the New'), the young crew of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* are shown watching old navy documentaries (*Sailor* and Terrill's own HMS *Brilliant*) on a dedicated channel of the ship's internal television system. The oldest crew member aboard, Bob Hawkins (Figure 6.21), had appeared in HMS *Brilliant*, and is heard in interview giving his uncompromising personal views on women at sea.

Terrill's camera records the reactions of *Queen Elizabeth*'s present-day male and female crew members to Hawkins's apparently intolerant and unreconstructed views, recorded more than 20 years earlier. Interviewed separately, Hawkins admits that he cannot reconcile his personal and professional views – in welcoming, admiring and celebrating the female sailors that he now serves with, and yet remaining convinced that war is no place for women:

My view was then, and still is, Chris – this is personally speaking now,
Bob Hawkins – that it is a very, very difficult thing to do for a country

to send anyone in their population into war. It's a vicious, nasty business. To elect to do that with our female population is still a dilemma for me ... That doesn't mean that I don't value the contribution that our women make. Indeed, the notion that we do not recruit and train and employ 50% of our population ... I think it's unacceptable in 2017 that we wouldn't do that ... I would be dishonest with myself if I try to pretend that I don't still think, it is wrong for our women to go to war. But that is juxtaposed with the fact that I really enjoy the courage, and skill and commitment of the women that I serve with now. I would not want to go to war without them. That's the dilemma for me.

Hawkins's comments are interspersed with scenes of the earlier series featuring female officers and sailors framed within the screens aboard HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, instating the inheritance and relevance of the earlier documentary's images to the Navy and its community in the present. The following week, the conclusion of the rerun of HMS *Brilliant* shows that ship's return home, and Hawkins, who is also watching, is suddenly presented with the image of his young sons and his wife, who would die 11 years later, welcoming him home. Off camera, Terrill gently asks Bob if he thinks his views about women at sea, and the awareness of physical risks all sailors must face, are affected by his own bereavement:

Yes, yes, yes. Indeed, it kind of, er ... crystallises who I am as a person. The notion that a mother should be put into a war, and that her children would lose her if she was in ... died in combat ... I just would not want them ... I would not want anyone to lose their dad, but having seen the pain that my sons have suffered ... [he shakes his head and looks away from the camera]

His confessions are contrasted immediately with the views of Dani Hobbs, a young female sailor of the warfare branch, who is fully conscious of the risks she faces but 'has only known THIS navy, where females do all jobs'. This conclusion is cemented by parallel comments from Emma Ranson:

My personal decision is, I chose this career. I've chosen this career path and it's a path that I'm really proud of, and I love it. I absolutely love my job and regardless of whether if we possibly go to war or not, I'll never change it.

Despite the combined technological, national and geopolitical context behind the making of *Britain's Biggest Warship*, the series also produces exceptional moments of poignancy, insight and social commentary. These sequences within the final episode of the first series encompass the span of Renov's recording, revealing, promoting and expressing tendencies and the

merging of Nichols's observational, expository and interactive modes, while also averring that Corner's couplets of 'art/reportage', 'truth/viewpoint' and 'institutions/forms' need not be binary oppositions but rather the inclusive parameters of a compelling authentic record. Terrill's focus clearly remains intimate, personal, anthropological and still 'tribal' in respectfully but revealingly sharing existence with the human crew and imparting his participation in its life with the audience. Terrill's series then serve a Griersonian documentary social goal in connecting the receiving and responsible audience with a pertinent, informative world view instrumental for 'agency of citizenship and reform'.²⁵⁹ Yet, as much as this series like his others illuminates the differences and similarities of the Navy to any other British community, this sequence also reveals the reciprocal relevance of such documentary records for the culture and community of the Navy itself.

Conclusion

Public history cannot simply be an aggregate of private histories strung together or nimbly intercut. These oral histories remain valuable for their ability to bring to public notice the submerged accounts of people and social movements. But their favouring of preservation over interrogation detracts from their power as vehicles of understanding. Delegating the enunciative function to a series of interview subjects cannot, in the end, bolster a truth claim for historical discourse; the enunciator, the one who 'voices' the text, is the film or videomaker functioning as historiographer.²⁶⁰

Having been nominated in the categories of best documentary film and best documentary series on four occasions, in 2015 Chris Terrill was the recipient of a lifetime achievement award at the Maritime Foundation's Maritime Media Awards in recognition of his contribution to the recording of the nation's life at and relationship with the sea.²⁶¹ Uppercut's website champions the company's dedication to 'its own brand of public service broadcasting'. In interview Chris has expanded on his views of the roles and responsibilities implied by that ideal, in selection of as much as approach to documentary subjects:

²⁵⁹ Corner, *The art of record*, p.14.

²⁶⁰ Michael Renov, *Towards a Poetics of Documentary*, p.27.

²⁶¹ The Maritime Foundation, Maritime Media Award Winners, 2015, <https://www.maritimefoundation.uk/awards/winners/2015-winners/> [accessed 11 August 2019]. The Maritime Foundation is a British charity organisation devoted to the active promotion of maritime matters and the importance of trade and life at sea for the United Kingdom.

I worked proudly for the BBC as a staff producer in radio and TV for 21 years and so was imbued with the Reithian values in terms of broadcasting, i.e. that we should educate, inform and entertain. In some areas of modern TV the stress has become too heavily 'entertainment' at the expense of education and information. At Uppercut we try and maintain that magical balance ... in the main we make films that celebrate people at their best and who contribute positively and inspiringly to the world we live in. It is no coincidence that many of these determined high achievers are to be found in the military services and, as far as I am concerned, in the Royal Navy in particular.²⁶²

Seen alongside his other contemporary anthropological and observational documentaries, Terrill's naval series constitute a significant contribution to 'public history', as parts of the public's and populace's history, and assembled from aggregated 'private histories' of which the public needs to be aware to understand them, and indeed itself. As 'enunciator', Terrill's unobtrusive presence 'voices' the texts, in which his own utterances are often infrequent, facilitating rather than focalising, and noticeably discreetly low in the overall sound mix. The conspicuous addition of voice-over to *Britain's Biggest Warship* perhaps reflects the consciousness of an expository requirement to articulate the circumstances of the unprecedented project the *Queen Elizabeth*-class ships represent. However, the atypicality of this feature within Terrill's overall output reflects not so much its possible superfluity to his focus and emphasis (the crew rather than the ship, rather than the ship as justification for the existence of the crew), as the overriding preference for the crew to communicate, express and 'reveal' for themselves. Nonetheless, and notwithstanding the potential for controversy his programmes have courted in their revelatory access to naval subjects, Terrill's own voice when heard represents that of an informed and sympathetic witness. For example, in introducing his investigation of an alleged war crime in *Marine A: Criminal or Casualty of War?* (BBC/Uppercut Films, 2014), Terrill describes himself unashamedly as a 'passionate' observer, not a 'dispassionate' one. His involvement, not necessarily his impartiality, inspires and requires ours. His description of the embedding approach, which allows him 'to suspend' his 'world view and begin to see things through the eyes of others', is suggestive of its comparable enabling effect upon viewers.²⁶³

Taken in their totality, Chris Terrill's television series comprise a quantitatively and qualitatively significant contribution to wider documentary culture on British television. Although some of his output can be seen to be contemporary with and comparable to the development of the docusoap, his embedding techniques facilitate a respectful observation of the real, and the elevation of the ordinary in human nature and experience within representative, accessible

²⁶² Interview with the author, November 2019.

²⁶³ Terrill, *Britain's Biggest Warship: Goes To Sea*, BBC2/Smithsonian Channel.

but extraordinary national institutions. Within this body of work, his naval- and service-oriented programmes represent both a sustained and unique relationship and a candid, captivating record of the Royal Navy, as community and family, employment and vocation, organisation and culture.²⁶⁴ In this cumulative portrayal the Navy emerges as at once distinctive and emblematic within a study of constantly evolving Britishness. Terrill's approach, combining open-minded observation and revelatory recording with the consistent familiarity of modern docusoap reflects both earlier generations of documentary-making and later evolving accessible formats without apparent elitism or compromise. At the same time, the necessarily interactive mode of Terrill's own cohabitation and acclimatisation that facilitates these revelatory historiographic records distinguishes his series as the natural heirs to the public service broadcast and observational documentary ethos of *Sailor*.

²⁶⁴ Terrill, *Shooting Sailors*.