

HMS HOTSPUR 'Hero' Class Destroyer

THE MODERN DESTROYER was originally developed for one specific purpose — to fire the locomotive torpedo perfected by Robert Whitehead in 1866. The first true destroyers — then called 'torpedo boat destroyers' — were the sister ships *Havoc* and *Hornet*, completed for the Royal Navy in 1893. At 240 tons and with speeds of 27 knots, these TB destroyers represented a rapid advance on Britain's first torpedo boats of about 15 years earlier which had been mere 19-tonners capable of only 18 knots.

It was not long, though, before destroyers became something much more than mere torpedo-launchers. They evolved into naval maids of all work, with duties that included protecting fleets against submarine and surface attacks, escorting convoys and guarding planes on aircraft carriers. In 1932, when plans were being discussed for the 'Hero' Class of destroyers, the Royal Navy envisaged giving these versatile vessels yet another task — as minelayers. And in World War 2,

destroyers operating close inshore supported invasion landings in Sicily, Italy and the Pacific.

This multiplicity of roles made destroyers sleek, speedy power-packs of varied armament and in this context, the 'Hero' Class provide typical examples.

Nine of them, including *Hotspur*, one of two divisional leaders, were launched in 1936. Another six, appropriated from an order under construction for the Brazilian navy, were rushed into service in May and June, 1940, just in time for the start of serious, widespread fighting in World War 2.

The 'Hero' Class ships were equipped with four 4.7-inch Mark IX guns on CPXVIII mountings. *Hardy*, the leader, had five — as well as two 0.5 inch four-barrel multiple machine guns, four .303 Lewis machine guns and one .303 Vickers machine gun. Armament also included 30 Type 'D' depth charges, two DCTs, and eight Mark IX torpedoes for the two sets of quadruple QR Mk VIII torpedo tubes. The three-shaft Parsons geared turbines of 14,300 shp and five

Brenda Ralph Lewis recalls the action-packed history and eventual fate of this famous ship

22 lb/sq inch boilers could speed the destroyers along at an average 27 knots but all the ships exceeded this during their four- or six-hour trials. The 323 foot long, 1,475-ton *Hotspur* which was built by Scott's of Greenock, reached 35.8 knots in her six-hour trial.

Bad luck struck, however, towards the end of *Hotspur's* 12-hour trial on July 27, 1936. Her port propeller struck rocks about 15 feet below the surface. The destroyer was doing 15 knots at the time. She was immediately put astern, but the manoeuvre only made matters worse. The starboard screw struck the rocks and all three blades broke. Subsequent efforts to get *Hotspur* out of trouble simply added to the damage. Eventually, the destroyer ended up in dry dock with the outer arm of her port bracket severed, and a hole astern which had been punched there when the remains of the bracket battered around the stern tube casting and penetrated the hull.

Hotspur was one of 188 destroyers which the Royal Navy possessed at the outbreak of World War 2, and she was on war service only ten days after its declaration in September, 1939. On September 13, the passenger liner *Lafonia* with *Hotspur* and her sister ship *Havock* acting as escorts, sailed from Montevideo, Uruguay, for the Falkland Islands. The British Governor of the Falklands feared invasion by Germans living in South America, and *Lafonia* brought in 45 volunteers who were to help defend the islands if the attack materialised. It never did.

This uneventful start to *Hotspur's* war service was typical of the 'phony war' period that lasted for six months, until the spring of 1940. During that time, World War 2 seemed to lie dormant, with everyone



Above and left HMS Hotspur, like all the 'Hero' class destroyers, was driven by 14,300 shp Parsons turbines and had a top speed of some 35 knots. Armament included four 4.7 inch Mk IX guns.

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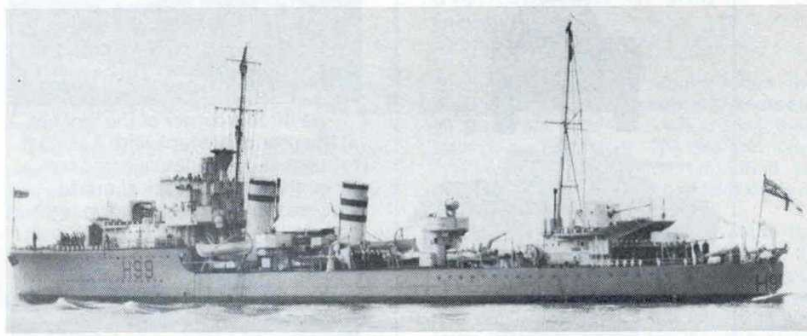
expecting, but no one actively promoting, large-scale hostilities. The war finally began in earnest on April 9 1940, when the Germans invaded Norway.

Next day, *Hotspur*, together with four other 'Hero' Class destroyers of the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla, penetrated Ofotfjord in Arctic Norway to mount a damaging surprise attack on German ships anchored in the port of Narvik. Led by Captain Bernard Armitage Warburton-Lee, commanding *Hardy*, the *Hotspur*, *Hunter*, *Hostile* and *Havock* slipped furtively up the fjord and, still undetected, reached the entrance to the harbour. In the subsequent attack with torpedoes and gunfire, *Hardy*, *Havock* and *Hunter* sank two German destroyers, crippled two more, set another ablaze and sank 25 merchant vessels. *Hotspur*, together with *Hostile* mounted a second attack and torpedoed two more ships.

This far, the five 'Hero' Class destroyers were unscratched, but as they headed away from Narvik towards the sea, they were attacked by German destroyers which had come rushing to the rescue from nearby fjords. *Hardy* was crippled and had to be beached. *Hunter* had its rudder control shattered by a German shell. As *Hunter* was sinking, a badly damaged *Hotspur* collided with her. *Hotspur's* crew managed to extricate the ship, and she limped off at half-speed, with the other two survivors, *Havock* and *Hostile* shadowing and protecting her.

Hotspur's next scene of action could hardly have been more different from the fog-bound, ice-wrapped fjords of Norway. Five months after Narvik, in September 1940, she was submarine hunting in the Mediterranean, and in the following month, on October 18 she bagged a kill — an Italian submarine.

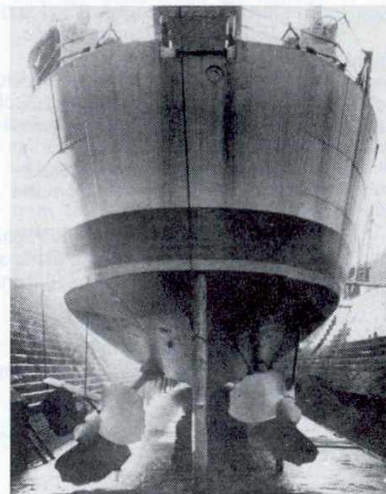
With this, *Hotspur* made her own contribution to the mood of abject terror displayed by the Italian Navy at what they fancied to be overwhelming British sea power in the Mediterranean. The Italian Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, had often boasted that the Mediterranean was "mare nostrum" (our sea), but his naval commanders had to be bullied by his German allies before they would venture upon its waters. One of their reluctant forays, on March 28 1941, ended with the battle of Matapan, in which the Italians lost five cruisers and two



destroyers. *Hotspur* took part, as one of nine destroyers forming an anti-submarine screen for the main British fleet, which was led by Vice-Admiral Andrew Cunningham in the battleship *Warspite*.

Top centre and above HMS *Hotspur* and her sister ships *Hostile* and *Hero*. **Below left** Starboard side of *Hero*. **Below** The badly damaged propellers of *Hotspur* after she had struck rocks during her 12-hour trial in July, 1936.

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Their defeat at Matapan made the Italians even more terrified of the British and even more of a liability to their German allies. At the time, the exasperated Germans were preparing to clear up the mess the Italians had made of their invasion of Greece in October, 1940. The Germans' own onslaught, which began on April 5 1941, showed in no uncertain manner how such sinister work should be done.

Within 56 days, the Germans had swept through Greece and had seized the island of Crete by means of a powerful airborne assault. British troops were forced into hasty withdrawal and the British Mediterranean fleet had to endure a through battering from the air in their task of rescuing them. *Hotspur* was one of 32 destroyers engaged in this operation, in which ten British ships were lost and 22 damaged.

Many times before the Crete operation ended on May 31 *Hotspur* was among ships operating a rescue ferry service from the beleaguered Greek islands to Alexandria in Egypt. In one suspenseful incident, around midnight on April 26, a mechanical failure put *Hotspur's* anchor-raising gear out of action just as she was about to leave Suda Bay in north-west Crete with 500 British

troops on board. The anchor had to be raised the hard, laborious way — by hand — and her departure was delayed by over an hour.

A month later, on May 28, she sailed with eight other ships to evacuate British troops fighting at Heraklion in northern Crete. On the way, the fleet endured no less than ten separate attacks from the air, including dive-bombing runs and torpedo attacks. In one raid, the destroyer *Imperial* suffered a near miss which some hours later came home to roost when her rudder jammed. At the time, the rescue fleet was already in Heraklion harbour and the evacuation was well under way. With the Germans close and threatening, there was no time to wait for *Imperial's* rudder to be repaired. *Hotspur* was ordered to take off everyone on board *Imperial* and sink the crippled vessel. She torpedoed the stricken ship at 0445 on May 29, then sped away, her decks crowded with men, to join the main fleet as it headed back towards Alexandria.

Just over a year later, on June 15 1942, *Hotspur* had to perform this melancholy task again. This time, the occasion was even more dismal, because her victim was one of her sister ships, *Hasty*. In December

Above and below HMS Hero.

1941, *Hasty* and *Hotspur* had together destroyed the submarine U-75 in the Mediterranean. The following June, the two destroyers were escorting a convoy towards the hard-pressed island of Malta when *Hasty* was torpedoed by German E-boat S.55. It fell to *Hotspur* to finish her off.

In 1944, the year in which *Hotspur* helped sink the German submarine U-767 off the Brittany coast, she was rearmed to carry three 4.7-inch guns, six 20 mm Oerlikons, two PAC projectors, eight rockets and eight snowflakes, and one .303 stripped Lewis machine gun.

When World War 2 came to an end in 1945, only five 'Hero' Class destroyers, *Hotspur* among them, survived out of the original 15. *Hotspur* joined a Training Flotilla before being sold, in November, 1948, to the Dominican Republic. The Dominicans renamed her twice, first as *Trujillo* then, in 1962, as *Duarte*, pennant no D-101. She was then one of two destroyers, both of British origin, serving in the Dominican Navy. *Duarte*, ex-HMS *Hotspur*, remained in service until 1972. □

