



## **The Face of British Foreign Aid:** **A justification for dedicated Disaster Relief ships**

On 6 February 1975, Hurricane Gervaise swept over the island of Mauritius, causing widespread destruction, killing ten of the inhabitants, injuring many more and making thousands homeless. Two days later, on the 8th. February, the American fleet support ship USS Camden arrived and immediately sent teams ashore to help recover the situation. Two days after that the French aircraft carrier Clemenceau arrived and offered help followed the day after, on 11 February, by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, which took control of the disaster relief operation from the Camden.

As the 1st mate aboard a British cargo ship, I visited the island a few months later and spoke to several of the locals about the effects of the Hurricane and the efforts required to put things right. They regaled me with the way the Americans had come in with their combat helicopters, re-installed the toppled communication masts, distributed food, fresh water and other aid around the island and how teams of American sailors came ashore to help with medical aid and the reconstruction effort to house the displaced. Even the French had offered a hand. Then with a curl of the lip they described how, several weeks after the event, a lone British frigate had turned up and asked if they could be of any assistance! I still remember that my feeling at the time was one of shame.

For an island nation that had, until seven years previously, been a British colony, was then a member of the Commonwealth and still recognised our Queen as their head of state, we Brits had not been there to help in their hour of need. If Great Britain had retained any semblance of respect and, dare I suggest, affection from the Mauritians, she lost it in that second week of February 1975.

The Americans at the time were building their Indian Ocean base at Diego Garcia, an island not far away, and so they had naval units in the area. The French carrier Clemenceau had been stationed in the Indian Ocean for a year, primarily because of issues in the Horn of Africa, but at that time she was visiting Reunion, an island that is an administrative, if not a geographical, part of France. So, each of those two nations had ulterior reasons for having assets in the area but the fact remains that they were there - and we were not.

### **We cannot be everywhere at once!**

Disaster relief aid has often been sent from the UK by air, but the uplift capacity is by necessity limited and local airport facilities and overland routes have frequently been made unusable by the disaster. Thus, access by sea is often the fastest and best way of getting aid into troubled coastal areas and in the

past naval units have been used for that. We cannot be everywhere at once of course, but some of the notable operations in recent decades have involved:

1995: The destroyer HMS Liverpool standing by the Caribbean island of Montserrat to evacuate people in the face of a volcanic eruption.

1998: The helicopter carrier HMS Ocean off Honduras and Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch (locally known as Mitch the Bitch) had ravaged their coastlines.

2004: The forward repair ship RFA Diligence and the frigate HMS Chatham off the East Coast of Sri Lanka to assist with relief efforts in the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami.

2013: The destroyer HMS Daring off the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan had devastated areas in the South East of those islands. Daring was later replaced by the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious.

2014: RFA Argus off Sierra Leone to act as the base for British medical staff helping to counter the Ebola outbreak in the area.

2017: HMS Ocean, again, engaged with RFA Mounts Bay in disaster relief operations, this time in the British Virgin Islands, after Hurricane Irma had swept across the area.

2019: RFA Mounts Bay rendering assistance again; this time in the Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian had trashed the Islands.

In this year, 2020, RFA Argus, with her 100 bed hospital has been sent to the Caribbean to act as the UK's guard ship. The point of Argus being there instead of any other UK naval unit is her medical facility and the Covid-19 pandemic.

For UK-delivered aid, however, a problem is looming. HMS Ocean, a very useful vessel, is gone, sold to the Brazilians. Diligence is up for sale and may already have been disposed of. Argus, at 39 years old, is at the end of her operational life and because of financial restrictions there are no plans at present to replace any of these vessels. The navy does have some amphibious assault ships, five in total, which have proved useful in such situations and an ever-decreasing number of destroyers and frigates. The destroyers and frigates, while useful, are not, however, vessels of great burden and so they do not bring a lot of aid to the situation. Usually their embarked helicopter is the most useful asset. There are of course two new aircraft carriers and if they are available and able to get into the area fairly quickly, will make excellent deliverers of aid.

However, the list above, of past aid operations, shows that disasters can strike at any time and at any point on the globe. Because of cost and manpower shortages, UK naval deployments are reducing all the time, and while we can agree that we Brits cannot be everywhere all of the time, we are rapidly approaching a point when we will hardly be anywhere, at any time!

## **Amalgamation**

The Department for International Development (DfID) part-funded many of the aid operations carried out by the Royal Navy and when people asked what they had done with 0.7% of the UK's GDP, they were often not given credit for that. For the reasons mentioned above, the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), an amalgamation of the former Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the DfID, will increasingly find it difficult to deliver aid by sea, regardless of how much funding they have at their disposal. There is, however, a solution; one that covers the points above and which will deliver a flexibility that services other of the FCDO's operational requirements at a lesser cost than that for commissioning warships.

- LOA 135m, Breadth 23.40m, Draught 5.20m
- Speed of 18+ knots
- Range: 6000 nm + on station for 21 days unsupported
- Accommodation for crew and 200+ persons including Cadets/Trainees and VIP's
- UK Flag and Green notation
- DE-Battery Hybrid power plant
- Technologically advanced energy-efficient machinery
- Provision for the introduction of future 'green' low or zero carbon technology



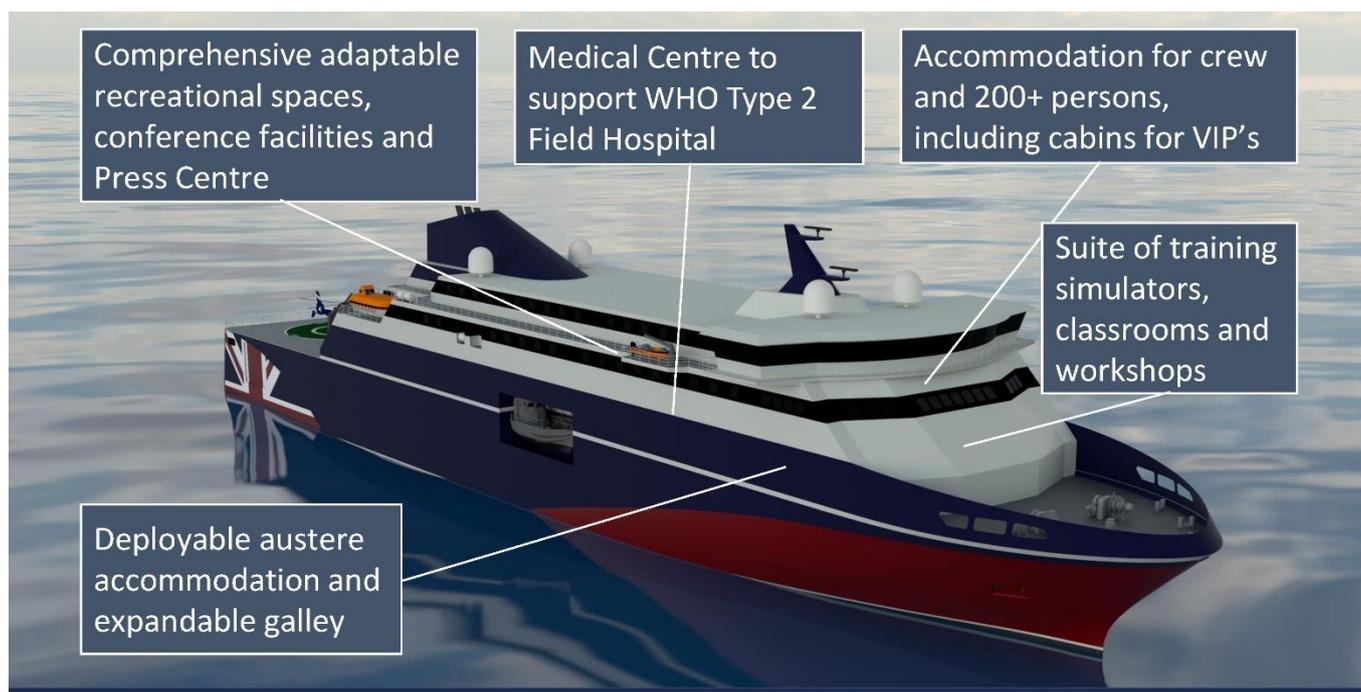
The charity **Britannia Maritime Aid (BMA)** has teamed up with the shipbuilder **Cammell Laird** and together with **Leadship**, a pan-European naval architect and design bureau with one leg firmly based in London, and **Woodbank Marine Limited**, a British marine technology and engineering consultancy based in Liverpool, they propose that the UK builds dedicated **Disaster Relief Ships** that can be stationed in areas of the world where natural disasters frequently occur. They hope to build three, which will be constructed in the UK, crewed by British merchant seamen and fly the Red Ensign. Based upon an existing commercial RoRo ferry design, these vessels of burden will have many of the attributes possessed by the naval auxiliaries that have in the past been used to deliver aid, but their utility will provide additional benefits. The range of operations that they can support and the benefits that utility will bring are:

1. **Disaster relief, medical intervention and rescue**
2. **Act as a base for various aid programmes**
3. **Be a training and research hub**
4. **Act as a Royal Yacht when required**
5. **Support a military campaign in a STUFT condition**
6. **Stimulate the Home Industrial Base**
7. **Operate at reduced costs**
8. **Appeal to and massage the public mood**

1. **Disaster Relief** – Their prime purpose; as vessels of burden their large cargo spaces will enable the stowage and delivery of a multitude of support equipment and supplies in standard ISO 20ft containers, including prefabricated medical units. Additionally they will have landing craft to provide an over the beach ability when ports are not available, and will be able to deploy items such as mechanical diggers for clearing rubble to recover buried victims, several small boats to rescue people in flooded areas, off-road vehicles to deliver aid teams, fresh water, food and material when roads have become blocked, tents to provide temporary accommodation and possibly an extensive field hospital to compliment the on-board medical facilities. They will be able to accommodate and operate unmanned air vehicles (UAV-Drones) for reconnaissance and helicopters to access those areas that cannot be reached overland. The accommodation will be more than sufficient for all of the people required to deliver these services and also to provide temporary succour and medical attention for distressed individuals.

By the use of their Dynamic Positioning (DP) control systems, they will be able to hold position close to the shore, without having to anchor and so will be able to crawl into small sheltered bays to more easily deliver their aid.

Disasters, however, are not always caused by natural disturbances. They are occasionally man-made. When war or civil insurrection has developed in a particular country, and where non-combatants are at risk, the UK government has, on occasion, sent a warship to evacuate our citizens and those of other nations. Where a Royal Navy warship is not available, or even where it is, in addition to such a vessel, the BMA ships can carry out the same task. While holding position offshore and possibly out of sight, just over the horizon, their embarked UAVs will be able to monitor the situation ashore while their helicopter(s) are used to bring the vulnerable to the vessel; which in that instance will be used as a safe haven and refuge. If it is decided that the ship can safely hold position closer to the shore, her landing craft may be used to evacuate large numbers of people from secluded bays and over the beach, so that they do not have to travel through built up areas and use port facilities, where fighting might be taking place. Additionally, in certain circumstances, a warship might be seen by one or other of the combatants as a threat and thus become a target. As merchant vessels, the BMA ships may be able to blend with others in the area and go relatively unnoticed.

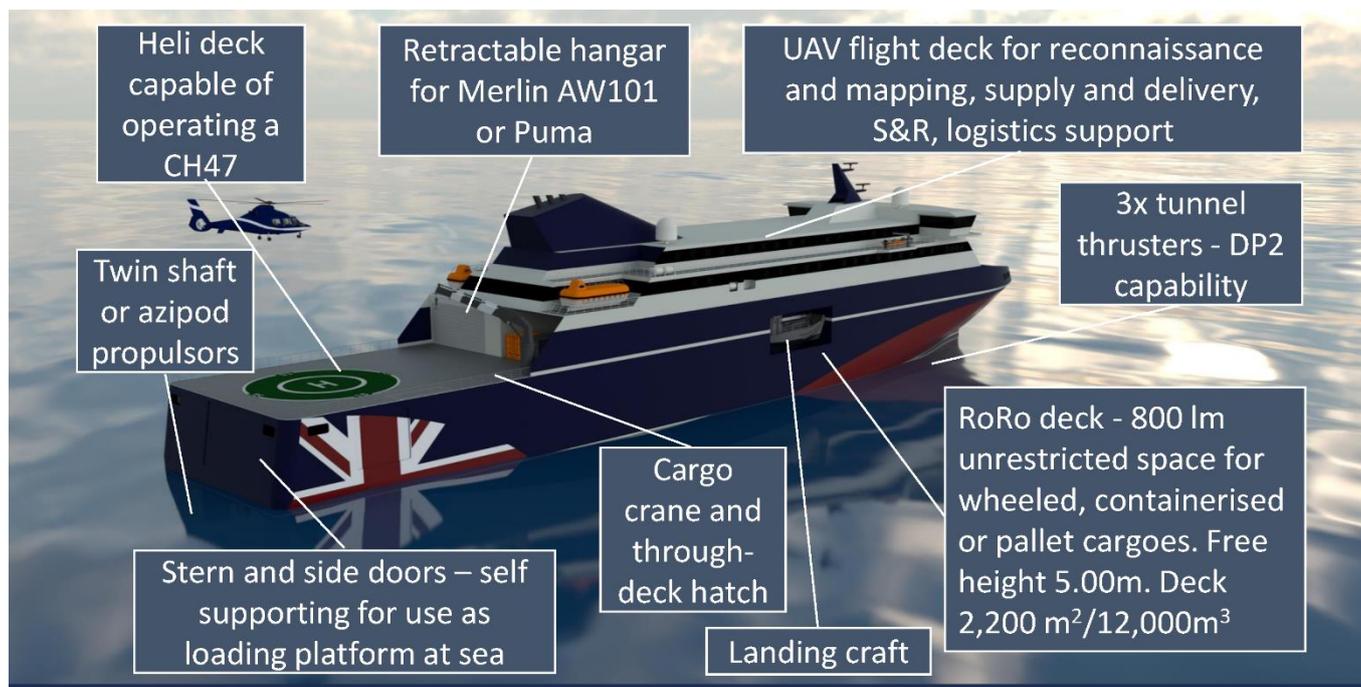


**2. A Mobile Base** – For other UK aid programs, including those delivered by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The deployment of RFA Argus to Sierra Leone in 2014 and to the Caribbean this year has been due to her on-board hospital facility, that can support a medical intervention programme. There was a suggestion that the DfID, before their amalgamation with the FCO, was planning to fund the construction and operation of a hospital ship. China supports such a vessel, the Peace Ark and the US operates two called the USS Mercy and the USS Comfort. They however are pure hospital ships and so lack many of the facilities that can bring different types of aid to distressed communities. While the BMA vessels will possess well-equipped medical facilities and can operate as temporary hospital ships, because of their additional attributes, they can also provide excellent operating bases for other than just medical intervention teams.

**3. Training and Research** – Another function of the BMA vessels will be to act as training hubs for British and Commonwealth seamen. This profession is rapidly disappearing as an employment option for young people throughout the Commonwealth but particularly from the developed parts. Many countries support training vessels, some of them under sail; the UK has a few but those are primarily aimed at adventure rather than professional training. As a trading nation it is time that Global Britain again looked towards the sea and supported her maritime base. Environmental research is another activity that these vessels can support, particularly marine research and ocean advocacy, liaising with local organisations for beach and ocean clean ups etc. To this end, teams from our universities can deploy from these mobile and well-equipped bases to collect the data required to write their theses.

**4. Royal Yacht** – The suggestion that the UK should again have a Royal Yacht is supported by many like myself. Others, however, would see it as a waste of money that could otherwise be spent on social programs. Those of us however that know something of the Royal Yacht Britannia, now a well preserved museum piece in Leith Docks, will also realise that, based upon the design of a cross Channel and North Sea ferry, it was intended that in time of war she could rapidly be converted for use as a hospital ship. They will also know that as a conveyor of the ‘Marque UK’ she was an unparalleled ambassador. She was the only ship in the world that did not have a name or pennant number painted on her side or stern. It wasn’t needed because most of those who saw her knew immediately that she was the Royal Yacht Britannia. Additionally, they will know just how much money she generated for the UK; a sum that far outweighed her building and operating costs. Many will raise an eyebrow at this claim but that will only be because they will not have realised that when the Royals visited foreign countries in her, they often had alongside them, people who represented British business interests and when the local dignitaries and commercial elite were invited on board, they were for a time captive and exposed to these other individuals. The Royal Yacht Britannia was a vessel that promoted the UK in a way that resulted in many commercial contracts coming to Britain. On the diplomatic front the Royal Yacht offered unparalleled security for the royal party and imposed only limited responsibility on the host country for their accommodation and safety. She also afforded the ability of the Royals to play host to their hosts and provide, with the occasionally embarked Royal Marines band, a little colour and pageantry to brighten their visit. With the secondary role of the, now decommissioned, Britannia being that of a hospital ship, it would surely be appropriate for the BMA vessels, disaster relief and hospital ships combined, to have secondary roles as Royal Yachts. What better way of celebrating the forthcoming Royal centenaries than for these ships to actively facilitate Royal charities with international branches such as the Duke of Edinburgh Youth schemes and the Prince’s Trust. Should the Royal Party, when visiting a foreign country, use one of these vessels as an operating base, it will be a further sign of their widespread support for charitable works. How nice that they should be using a base that has been provided by the British establishment, primarily for the benefit of others.

**5. The Military** – The DfID and the aid ministries that preceded it, occasionally part financed aid delivered by naval vessels. In effect they chartered those naval vessels and commissioned the navy to deliver aid to stricken communities. With the BMA vessels the opposite can apply. As British registered and manned merchant vessels, in time of war or national need, they can be quickly ‘taken up from trade’ (STUFT) and pressed into service. Their on-board hospital and helicopter handling facilities make them the ideal vessels to use as casualty receiving stations. Beyond that, their ability to carry large amounts of equipment and the personnel to go with it, together with their across-the-beach capability, make them ideal supplementary logistic and amphibious assault vessels. In effect they can become additions to the Royal Navy’s two Albion class and three Bay class dock landing ships. These ships, together with the four Point class logistic support vessels, owned by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) but operated commercially, can be quickly gathered into a squadron to transport an expeditionary force, such as the Royal Marines together with the Army’s new Strike Brigades and other supporting units.



The military benefits do not end there. As merchant vessels, they will easily enter foreign ports by merely turning up and requesting 'Free Pratique' (literally, intercourse with your port and its facilities), where a warship would require diplomatic clearance to gain access. As civilian vessels and crews, bent on training to deliver charitable aid in the event of a natural disaster, they will be able to request low key access to the emergency reaction services of the countries visited and build up a data base on how they work. Thus, they will gain an insight into how the administration of those countries perform, in a way that is often not possible through diplomatic channels. The military have a long history of gathering intelligence during peacetime for use in any future conflict. The data gleaned via this avenue can be used to enhance their data base and possibly used to advantage for either military or diplomatic purposes. Additionally, data gathered during marine research projects, where it might have a hydrographic or defence application, can also be recorded for possible future use. For those that think this might be a rather weak consideration, consider this; when British forces travelled south, in 1982, to retake the Falkland Islands, they were bereft of good information about the bays, coves and beaches that might be suitable for amphibious landings. They relied initially on the diaries of Ewen Southby-Tailyour, a Royal Marine and amateur yachtsman who, a few years previously, had sailed around that archipelago when stationed there and had recorded the coastal conditions during his sailing expeditions.

**6. Supporting the Home Base** – The saying 'charity begins at home' can be applied to the construction of these vessels in the UK and their operation by British management and seafarers. In no way, however, does this conflict with the fact that these ships are intended to bring charitable relief to others. Other countries that possess the skills, infrastructure and the ability to construct vessels such as these are not generally those that require development aid. Many of them already have vibrant shipbuilding industries. This latter point however cannot be applied to the British shipbuilding industry, which is surviving on a trickle of government contracts and whose very future is hanging by a thread. Leadship are industry leaders in the design of RoRo ferries and passenger ships. The building of these ships, which will be based upon one of their standard designs, at Cammell Laird's yard in Birkenhead, will, it is hoped, attract follow-on commercial orders from this niche section of the market, and bring volume ship building back into the Mersey. The boost this will give to the ship building industry in that part of the country will strongly support the government's intention to encourage commercial activity in the area. The involvement of component manufacturers and suppliers across the region and through

the country in general will have a beneficial effect on the UK marine industrial base and the consequential skills retention and expansion will give a further and longer term benefit to the country as a whole but specifically to the North West of England. It will be a very powerful sign that the government really do mean it when they say that they will promote the Northern Powerhouse.

**7. Cost** – Because these vessels will be built to Lloyd’s commercial standards, their construction will cost less than would be the case for a warship. Unlike a warship, they will not be built to sustain battle damage and will not require many of the systems that would be the norm for a vessel designed to venture into harm’s way. Likewise, the helicopters and UAV’s they operate will not have to be of a military standard, although they can of course handle those aircraft if required. Commercial helicopters will be sufficient for most of the emergency aid interventions they might be involved with, and so with these, as with other equipment types, the operating costs will generally be less than those of the military alternatives. As civilian vessels these ships will qualify for funding from the Overseas Aid Budget and thus will not impact upon sparse MOD allocations. Overall therefore operating costs for these vessels will be considerably less than those for pure warships or naval auxiliaries, and additionally they will be offset by income from commercial activity and charitable donations.

**8. Public Perception** – When an area is devastated by storm, earthquake or volcanic eruption, warships and naval auxiliaries are often used to bring much needed aid into the area. Because they may not already be stationed in the area, however, and may have to be loaded with appropriate equipment before they proceed, it is often some time before that aid reaches the needy. While the aid they bring is always welcomed with open arms, people know that, except in that instance, those ships are not really intended to be Angels of Mercy. They are warships and they are only helping out because at that present time they are not involved in conflict elsewhere. Also, when they cruise a certain area, they are generally seen as instruments to further the interests of their home country, not that of those they visit, or the populace therein. None of those negative points will be the case with the BMA ships. As pure merchant vessels, with civilian crews, pre-loaded with disaster relief equipment and stores, they will be based in the areas where environmental disasters might be expected and so will be on hand to react immediately and dispense aid. As overt symbols of benevolence, they will in fact be seen as the angels of mercy, which warships are so obviously not, and will be accepted as such when they cruise their allotted areas. Additionally, as the world’s first purpose-built humanitarian aid vessels, these ships will be visible evidence of the UK’s commitment to combating the consequences of climate change, a great opening for the COP26 conference, to be hosted by the UK in November 2021.

The media love a disaster and, when an area is devastated by a natural upheaval, they flock there with their satellite communication links. When their cameras sweep over the bay showing the ships bringing aid, to the general public, one grey hull will look like any other. The one that will stand out will be the BMA ship, which, as a commercial vessel, will so obviously differ from the others and with the Union Jack so prominently displayed on her side, will metaphorically shout to the world, we Brits are here and lending a hand.

Britannia Maritime Aid and Cammell Laird are ready to proceed with this project. All that is required now is the cash to procure the materials and start construction. If UK foreign aid is used to finance this project, as I hope it will be, when people ask, what on earth is the FCDO doing with all of this aid money, they will be able to point to these ships and say that is one of the things we are doing. **British aid delivered directly in British ships by British professionals.** Nobody – NOBODY – will be able to say that we Brits were not there to lend a hand in their hour of need. **These ships will be the face of British overseas aid.**

**Fred Dupuy (Non-Executive Director - Defence UK)**