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The Royal Navy Is Down Another Type 23 Frigate

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The UK spent more than £100 million to fix up the HMS Iron Duke from 2019 to 2023, only to scrap the warship three years later.

The UK's Royal Navy is down yet another warship, as the Type 23 *Duke*-class frigate HMS *Iron Duke*

(F234) was withdrawn from service. It was an ignominious end for the warship named for one of Britain's greatest military heroes, and a reminder that the UK military's senior service is in a very sorry state.

To make matters worse, the warship had recently been upgraded with the expectation that it would remain in service.

The decision to scrap the vessel "follows an almost five-year refit that cost the taxpayer £103 million [\$139.5 million] and was completed in 2023 to give it another five years of service," [The Times wrote](#) — adding that with the retirement of HMS *Iron Duke*, the Royal Navy has just five frigates ready to deploy, but not for long.

"The decommissioning of HMS *Richmond*, another Type 23 frigate, is confirmed for this year," the British paper of record noted. "HMS *Iron Duke*'s withdrawal means the navy is unable to assign more than a single frigate to the carrier strike group."

Already, the Royal Navy had to look to its allies and partners to provide escorts for both of its carrier deployments to the Indo-Pacific.

The Type 23 *Duke*-Class Frigate's Specifications

- **Year Introduced:** 1989, when HMS Norfolk was commissioned
- **Number Built:** 16 (6 in Royal Navy service)
- **Displacement:** 4,900 tonnes (5,400 tons)
- **Length:** 133 m (436 ft)
- **Beam:** 16.1 m (52.8 ft)
- **Engines:** Combined diesel-electric and gas (CODLAG), which includes two Rolls-Royce Spey gas turbines, two electric motors, and four diesel generators
- **Speed:** 28 knots (32.2 mph, 51.8 km/h)
- **Range:** 7,800 nautical miles (8,976 mi, 14,445 km) at 15 knots
- **Armament:**
 - Guns: 4.5-inch Mk 8 Naval Gun, 30mm guns
 - Missiles: Harpoon anti-ship missiles, Sea Ceptor (formerly Sea Wolf/Sea Dart) surface-to-air missiles
 - Torpedoes: Sting Ray torpedoes (launched via Mk 32 tubes)
 - CIWS: Phalanx Close-In Weapon System (on some)
 - Aircraft: Hangar and flight deck for helicopters (Lynx, Merlin)
 - Sensors: Artisan 3D radar (post-refit)

- **Crew:** ~185 officers and sailors

The Type 23 *Duke*-class frigate was [initially developed](#) at the end of the Cold War for anti-submarine warfare (ASW), but later evolved into a multi-purpose warship, including air defense, anti-surface warfare (ASuW), and general operations.

A total of 16 of the frigates were built for the Royal Navy, and the vessels will be replaced by the newer Type 26 *City*-class and Type 31 *Inspiration*-class frigates as they enter service. However, there have been delays, and the newer warships are expected to be delayed until the early 2030s, leaving the service spread thin in the meantime.

The *Iron Duke*'s Expensive Refit Exposed Problems

HMS *Iron Duke* underwent the £103 million “life extension refit” (LIFEX) that began in May 2019 in Devonport, where it was discovered that the warship was literally rusting away.

“She was so badly corroded that the structural work carried out on her hull was almost twice that required for any previous ship in the class,” [Navy Lookout wrote](#) . The refit was the “most complex undertaken on any Type 23 frigate,” with more than four years devoted to the project, and more than 1.7 million man-hours spent refurbishing the ship.

The question could be asked why it wasn't determined then and there that the Royal Navy should scrap the ship and cut its losses, but clearly some officials understood at the time that the Type 23 frigates' return to service might be short-lived.

Although the warship received significant updates, its Harpoon anti-ship missile system was removed because it is now [considered outdated](#) compared to modern, longer-range weapons. Although it was outfitted to receive the Naval Strike Missile (NSM), none were ever installed.

Still, when HMS *Iron Duke* finally returned to service three years ago in May 2023, it was expected she would have at least another five years of active duty. However, the first year was spent on sea trials, followed by the frigate mostly monitoring Russian vessels in the English Channel. The only major overseas deployment the ship conducted took place in late 2024, when she spent several weeks in the Baltic and hosted Estonian prime minister Kristen Michal onboard.

The immense cost to refit the ship, only for her to head to the scrap heap after just 16 months back in service, is likely to become a controversy in the United Kingdom, which has increasingly limited naval resources.

“This is spectacularly poor value for the taxpayer and hard to justify,” *Navy Lookout* suggested. It

compared the *Iron Duke's* abrupt decommissioning with the decision to spend £72 million (\$97.5 million) refitting the HMS *Bulwark* assault ship from 2020 to 2024, only to sell her to Brazil for a mere £20 million (\$27.1 million) in 2025.

The Royal Navy Is in Serious Trouble

The issues may run deeper, putting into question the state of the remaining five Type 23 frigates and whether those warships can even remain in service until the Type 26 and Type 31 frigates enter service. At present, the future HMS *Glasgow* and HMS *Venturer*, the lead vessels of the two classes respectively, are planned for delivery by the end of the decade. Any delays could further impact the Royal Navy's capabilities.

“The collective failure to order a single new frigate between 1996 and 2017 is having disastrous consequences,” *Navy Lookout* wrote.

The retirement of HMS *Iron Duke* was sudden and unexpected, but perhaps it shouldn't have been, given the state of affairs with the Royal Navy. Still, the warship likely deserved a bit of pomp and circumstance.

“The Royal Navy keeps planned out-of-service dates under continual review as part of routine force planning, balancing operational requirements and affordability,” a UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) spokesperson told *The Times*. “Through the strategic defence review, we are building a new hybrid navy—investing in world-class submarines and cutting-edge warships, transforming our aircraft carriers, and introducing autonomous vessels to patrol the North Atlantic and beyond.”

The Duke of Wellington Deserved Better Than This

The sudden retirement of the Type 23 frigate HMS *Iron Duke* is a blemish on the Royal Navy, but also a significant dishonor to Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington. The British hero of the Napoleonic Wars earned the nickname the “Iron Duke” for his fearless reputation.

Two other warships have carried Wellington's moniker. The first, an *Audacious*-class ironclad warship, served with the Royal Navy for 20 years in the late 19th century.

The second HMS *Iron Duke*, and the more famous of the two, was the lead vessel of a class of four dreadnought battleships constructed before the First World War, and briefly considered the most advanced warships of their time. The battleship HMS *Iron Duke* served as the flagship of the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet and saw action at the Battle of Jutland. During World War II, she was used as a base ship at the Royal Navy's base at Scapa Flow. She was scrapped after the war.

Hopefully, the future will see another HMS *Iron Duke*—one that better honors one of the UK's finest military commanders.

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