

launched 24.03.1919 and completed the same year. Disposal was varied – the majority were cancelled or scrapped however, some were converted for survey duties and a number were laid up in reserve . A number, including HAVANT, were placed in the hands of the Ministry of Shipping/Board of Trade for sale out of service. By August 1922 HAVANT was in the hands of J I Thornycroft, Southampton being prepared for her further disposal – to the Government of Siam. Her ultimate fate after August 1971 is unknown.

Dimensions : 231ft oa, 220ft bp x 28.5ft x draught 7.5ft

Displacement : 800t std, 930 full load

Machinery : two shaft Steam, reciprocating 3 cylinder triple expansion, two coal fired Yarrow water tube boilers, 2,200ihp.

Speed : 15.5 knots

Range : estimated 1,500 n.miles at 10k



The transfer of ex-HMS Havant to Siam

Dr David Chessum

The author continues his series exploring limitations placed on contracting powers under the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty and in this case a British (mis)interpretation.

HMS HAVANT was an Aberdare class minesweeper, built by Eltringham & Co, launched on 4 November 1918, and completed in March 1919.¹ HAVANT was placed on the sale list on 1 April 1920 and as she was regarded as having a commercial value she was handed over to the Board of Trade for disposal. HAVANT was sold by the Board of Trade to John I Thornycroft Ltd on 27 July 1922 for the sum of £6,000. Although the sale agreement placed no restrictions upon Thornycroft with regards to the future uses of HAVANT, other than a requirement that the name of

¹ Some references cite 24 Mar 1919 as the launch date for *Havant* (e.g. R Gardiner (ed), 1995, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1947-1995*, Conway Maritime Press, London, p461), but the date stated in this article were drawn directly from notes in TNA: ADM 1/8681/112.

the vessel be changed,² it was subsequently claimed that Thornycroft had been advised at the time that negotiations were opened 'that such vessels could not be sold, or re-sold, to any foreigner or foreign Government, whereby they might become vessels of war in the Navy of any foreign Power.'³

The Admiralty became aware that the ex-HAVANT was being refurbished as a training ship for sale to the Government of Siam in November 1922, and wrote to the Board of Trade on 1 December advising them that in accordance with the provisions of Washington Naval Treaty (WMT) Article XVIII, they were debarred from converting warships to training ships for supply to foreign Governments, and requested the Board of Trade inform Thornycroft accordingly.⁴

The Siamese Acting Minister of Marine, H.R.H. Prince Abhakara, sent a telegram to the Siamese Chargé d'Affaires on 29 December 1922 advising that HAVANT was 'required for training cadets only approximately sea scout movements and definitely outside war purposes'. This message was forwarded to Thornycroft on 5 January 1923, who forwarded it on to the Board of Trade on 17 January, and the Admiralty on 18 January.⁵ On 19 January the Admiralty noted:⁶ The practice followed in the case of the transfer of ex-British war vessels for service under a foreign flag has been to authorise the transfer only on condition that the Foreign government concerned will furnish an undertaking that the vessel in question will not become a vessel of war in their Navy.

On 20 January the Admiralty wrote to the Board of Trade advising that they had received a copy of the communication from the Siamese Naval Authorities and that "this undertaking is sufficient guarantee that the vessel in question will not become a vessel of war in the Siamese Navy, and they have no objection therefore to the '*Havant*' now being allowed to leave the country'.⁷

² Contract between the Mercantile Marine Department of the Board of Trade and John I. Thornycroft and Company Limited, 27 Jul 1922. *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112.*

³ Admiralty to Foreign Office, 9 Feb 1923. *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112.*

⁴ The decision was based, in part, on the precedent that in Jul 1922, Armstrong Whitworth had asked whether Flower Class sloops could be converted into Training Ships for supply to foreign governments possessing minor navies. The Admiralty replied that under Article XXVIII they were debarred from entering into negotiations, either directly, or indirectly, for the sale of any of H.M. Warships for such purposes. Admiralty to Board of Trade, 1 Dec 1922, *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112.*

⁵ All correspondence referred to in this paragraph is from *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112.*

⁶ Minute, 19 Jan 1920. Unreadable signature for Head of M. *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112.*

⁷ Admiralty to Board of Trade, 20 Jan 1920, *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112.*

The Siamese Chargé d’Affaires sent a further letter to the Admiralty on 26 January stating that he had been authorised by the Siamese Foreign Minister to give ‘an absolute assurance on behalf of the Siamese Navy that the sloop ‘HAVANT’ will only be employed as a training ship and in no way at any time as a war vessel’.⁸ The Admiralty replied on 31 January 1923 stating that the assurance provided was considered to be “quite satisfactory”.⁹

HAVANT had not been the first second-hand warship Siam had attempted to buy. On 22 January 1922, the Siamese Chief of Naval General Staff had approached the American Minister in Bangkok regarding the possibility of purchasing two or more small obsolete light cruisers, or perhaps gunboats, from the USN. The boats should be not more than 200ft long, unequipped, for use as training ships with the Siamese Navy, and have a draft of 14 feet. Delivery was required within six months in view of the proposed recruitment of 3,000 additional naval personnel.¹⁰ The maximum length of the vessels was subsequently amended to 270 ft.¹¹ On 7 February 1922, the US Government replied that in view of WNT Article XVIII they could not consider the proposal.¹² After the US became aware of the HAVANT purchase, the Secretary of the Navy advised the Secretary of State that HAVANT had all the characteristics of a vessel of war, was probably unsuitable for any commercial use, and clearly came within Article XVIII of the WNT.¹³ In April 1923 the Secretary of State advised the British Ambassador in Washington that the US had learned that the Siamese Government had purchased HAVANT, and that the Siamese intended to mount guns on her. He stated that although HAVANT appeared to be of negligible military value, Britain should obtain the consent of the other signatories to the WNT for the transaction.¹⁴ He further went on to advise that should such a request be obtained, the Government of the US would consent to the transfer, conditional upon similar consents being obtained from the other signatories.¹⁵

Many years after the sale had taken place, the British Government, when comparing the disposal of HAVANT, with a proposal by the US to

⁸ Sampakitch to Flint, 26 Feb 1923, *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112*.

⁹ Admiralty to Siamese Charge d’Affaires, 31 Jan 1923, *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112*.

¹⁰ Paraphrased telegram from US Minister, 23 Jan 1922, *NARA: RG80, File SC162-106*.

¹¹ Brodie to Secretary of State, 4 Feb 1922, *ibid*.

¹² Paraphrased telegram to US Minister, 7 Feb 1922, *ibid*. Hughes to Geddes, 5 Apr 1923, *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112*.

¹³ SecNav to Secretary of State, 1 Dec 1922, *NARA: RG80, File SC162-106*.

¹⁴ Sir A. Geddes (Washington) to Foreign Office, 7 Apr 1923, *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112*.

¹⁵ Hughes to Geddes, 5 Apr 1923, *TNA: ADM 1/8681/112*.

lease destroyers to South American republics,¹⁶ reiterated that they had fully carried out their obligations under the WNT on the grounds that:

- 1) HAVANT was of negligible military value,
- 2) she was only sold to the Siamese Government after it had been converted into a training ship, and
- 3) the Siamese Government had provided a definite assurance that HAVANT would not in any event be used as a vessel of war.¹⁷

The ex-HAVANT served in the Siamese/Thai Navy as CHAO PHYA¹⁸ until 24 August 1971.¹⁹ Although primarily used as a training ship, she was described as a 'sloop' in material provided by the Royal Thai Naval Museum,²⁰ and has been classified in general naval reference works as a minesweeper or gunboat.²¹ In 1935, CHAO PHYA deployed to the Mediterranean to carry the crews for the new torpedo boats TRAD and PUKET that had been built there. Although initially operated without armament, CHAO PHYA was subsequently armed with two 75mm and one 40mm guns.²²

Regardless of how CHAO PHYA was actually employed, and notwithstanding any assurances the Siamese Government might have given, the fact remains that the WNT prohibited the transfer of any vessel of war which may become a vessel of war in a foreign navy, and there is little doubt that CHAO PHYA could have been used as a warship had the Siamese Government chosen to do so. It is therefore difficult to reconcile the sale of this vessel with the provisions of Article XVIII of the WNT.

¹⁶ See D Chessum, 2019, A 1937 US proposal to lease destroyers to the Latin American Republics, *Warships (WSS)*, 196, pp12-17.

¹⁷ Eden to Mallet, 30 Aug 1937, *BDFA, Part II, Series C, Vol. 22*, pp308-308

¹⁸ The Siamese/Thai name of this ship is variously spelt in English language sources as either CHOW PHRAYA or CHAO PHYA. Material supplied to the author by the Royal Thai Naval Museum used the latter spelling, and that has therefore been adopted for this article.

¹⁹ R Gardiner (ed), 1995, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1947-1995*, Conway Maritime Press, London, p461.

²⁰ CHAO PHYA. Information sheet provided to the author by the Royal Thai Naval Museum, Bangkok, 12 Jun 2014.

²¹ For example, R Chesneau (ed), 1980, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1922-1946*, Conway Maritime Press, London, p410; and R Gardiner (ed), 1995, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1947-1995*, Conway Maritime Press, London.

²² CHAO PHYA. Information sheet provided to the author by the Royal Thai Naval Museum, Bangkok, 12 Jun 2014.