

## Royal Navy's Hospital Ship Argus Grounded by Safety Concerns

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The Royal Navy's sole hospital ship, RFA Argus, has been deemed unfit to sail due to critical safety issues, leaving it stranded at its Solent mooring near Portsmouth. This development marks yet another setback for a navy grappling with a shrinking fleet and mounting operational challenges.

Naval authorities had intended to return the 28,000-tonne vessel to its home port of Falmouth, Cornwall, for urgent repairs. However, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, alongside Lloyd's insurers, have ruled that allowing Argus to sail would pose unacceptable risks to its crew and other vessels. A naval insider, speaking anonymously, painted a grim picture: "This is the reality of a hollowed-out navy. Argus is riddled with issues, and there's no chance she'll be cleared to sail for proper repairs anytime soon."

The grounding of Argus is a stark embarrassment for the Royal Navy, which has seen its fleet dwindle to historic lows. Since the Labour government assumed power, seven warships, including two frigates, two amphibious assault ships, and two Royal Fleet Auxiliary tankers, have been decommissioned, reducing the navy's principal surface fleet to just a few vessels. This includes five frigates, six destroyers, and two aircraft carriers, with roughly half currently sidelined for maintenance or repairs. The decision to retire these ships, announced as part of Labour's Strategic Defence Review in 2024 and 2025, has drawn sharp criticism for weakening Britain's maritime strength at a time of heightened global tensions.

Argus, originally a container ship converted for naval use, has served as the Royal Navy's Primary Casualty Receiving Ship since the 1991 Gulf War. Equipped with a 100-bed medical facility, including a four-bay operating theatre and a CT scanner, it has played a vital role in humanitarian missions and military operations alike. Yet, it's nearing half a century since its construction, and persistent mechanical issues have now rendered it a liability. A Royal Navy spokesperson confirmed that discussions with Lloyd's and the Coastguard are ongoing "to address the identified defects," stating that "there are no plans for the ship to depart until all issues are resolved."

The situation underscores broader concerns about the state of the Royal Navy under the current government's stewardship. Critics argue that the decommissioning of key vessels, coupled with delays in new shipbuilding programmes like the Type 26 frigates, has left Britain's naval capabilities dangerously overstretched. The Strategic Defence Review, overseen by Defence Secretary John Healey, has promised to bolster the fleet with up to 12 new SSN-AUKUS submarines by the 2040s, but such long-term plans offer little comfort in the face of immediate operational gaps.

The plight of Argus is not an isolated case. Reports indicate that the navy's recruitment and retention crisis has forced the early retirement of ships like HMS Westminster and HMS Argyll to reallocate crews to newer vessels. This stopgap measure highlights the acute shortage of trained personnel, with many sailors being lured away by higher-paying private

sector jobs. As one commentator noted in a recent interview with *The Independent*, “The navy is being asked to do more with less, and it’s simply not sustainable.”

For now, Argus remains immobilised, a symbol of a navy struggling to maintain its proud legacy. As global maritime challenges grow from protecting trade routes to countering threats in the Red Sea, Britain’s ability to project power and provide humanitarian support hangs in the balance. The government’s handling of this crisis will be closely scrutinised as the Royal Navy fights to keep its head above water.