

Solent Coalition Against Nuclear Ships

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Monitoring of

Royal Navy and Southampton City Council

PITS distribution Exercise in Hythe

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Background

The Royal Navy (RN) insists on using Southampton Docks for nuclear submarines, despite requests from Southampton City Council (SCC) not to do so. The risk of a reactor accident may be small, but SCANS argues that it is an unnecessary risk. There is no need for submarines to use a major commercial dock when there is a military dock close by at Portsmouth RN Dockyard. It represents a risk to shipping, ferries, leisure yachts, both small and international industries and a very large multi-cultural community. REPPIR, the European directive on Radiation Emergency Public Preparedness Information Regulations requires nuclear operators to hold off-site emergency exercises every three years. This Exercise, to test the naval ratings' ability to find every house and business in a given area in readiness to be able to distribute PITS – Potassium Iodate Tablets, was done in advance of the full Sotonsafe Exercise planned for 14th January 2009. Only three of the seven distribution areas in Hythe were checked, and no Exercise in Southampton City area was carried out.

SCANS observed the exercise in order to see if such a distribution is feasible and if all residents and workers in the designated area would have been reached in the event of an accident exposing them to radiation. We distributed leaflets to explain what was going on, and residents and commuters using the ferry received these with interest.

Observations

Three teams, each consisting of a naval rating and naval observer with two SCC monitors were dispatched from Hythe Police Station just after 09.00 to walk the route of the central area, the residential area west of the Marina and the Southampton Road area.

Walk 1

This group went off first but did not get started until 10.09 and took 1 hr 35 minutes. This section covered central Hythe, including private and social housing in Shaw Road and St. John's Road. The very large new Shipyard Estate proved extremely difficult to navigate and numbers were hard to correlate. One of the monitors from Hants CC (an ex-policeman), considered 20-25 minutes more time was needed for the Exercise. He was very thorough, going into small businesses and searching out addresses in a maze of lanes and cul de sacs with a mixture of cottages, new houses, small businesses and yards. Staff at an old people's Day Centre was contacted but this was discovered to be a pre-distribution point. The shopping area was not checked as it was considered too disruptive to business. SCC

and RN personnel had different versions of the street plan making it difficult to tick off the properties located, and requiring the Exercise group frequently to stop and confer. It was a hopeless task.

Walk 2

This section started at the Recreation Ground near Hythe Marina, covering the Jones Lane area of residential streets. The warden at Ewart Court sheltered housing accommodation offered assistance which was at first refused but was then taken up when the team were unable to locate a property. People looked on from inside their homes and one resident said that she had an emergency leaflet to hand. The team were thorough, communicated with each other well and persevered to ensure that houses were not missed when their two lists did not agree. There was confusion over whether or not a Doctor's surgery was included. Even with accurate lists, it took time to locate some addresses. This small section of Hythe took 1.45 hours to walk.

Walk 3

This section appeared to be the lower left hand 'square' area of the 2km zone map. It was quite short though hilly, starting at about 9.10 and finishing about 10.25. Properties were all houses and bungalows - no flats. The roads were as follows:

Malwood Road West (starting at one of the pre-allocation centres at no 1, Little Shipmates Nursery); Michaels Way; Douglas Way; Dale Road (only between Hollybank Road and Lower Mullins Lane); Lower Mullins Lane (from Dale Road northwards only); Southampton Road westwards; Mountfield and a track up to Depedene and the houses back along Southampton Road (right hand side only) to Jones Lane. One man with a clipboard did one side of the road and two women, one with a clipboard, did the other. Houses did not need close examination as the numbers and letter-boxes were fairly obvious. The team did go up some of the long drives in the rural sections.

Conclusions

Based on this exercise, SCANS considers it highly unlikely that everyone down-wind of the submarine would be reached by PITS distribution teams in the event of a real radiation emergency, when neither SCC staff or the police would accompany the naval ratings.

The professionals familiar with finding awkward addresses are Royal Mail postal deliverers, but they did not assist and don't seem to have been consulted. Clearly properties change all the time and a thorough updating for the whole city would be needed every year to keep lists up to date. Even then, some would be missed. SCANS considers that the same people would need to practice their routes every three months to be able to provide a safe level of cover in cooperation with a neighbourhood warden in each street. A continuous programme is necessary for this plan to work. In the event of an accident, a greater number of RN would not necessarily improve the cover as only the easy and obvious addresses would be located. Ratings would be at a disadvantage when under pressure, wearing protective Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear (CBRN) suits and without supervision, as SCC and the police are not cleared to enter a contaminated area. The distribution of preventative medication has medical implications and should not be delivered by sailors. This charade is a waste of council resources of time, energy and money. Unless health issues and the PITS distribution are taken more seriously, it will be inappropriate and random. Even if the MoD underwrites the legal liability of the City Council, the council should not be party to causing unnecessary suffering through misuse of PITS. It is time for SCC to seek an independent legal opinion on the question of whether this risk is justifiable.