

Seven killed as two ships sink

David Sharrock

SEVEN fishermen were feared drowned last night after wide-ranging air-sea rescue searches of the Irish Sea and off the west coast of Scotland failed to find survivors from two vessels believed to have sunk.

A Belgian trawler, the 145-ton Tijn Vilenspiegel with a crew of five, vanished in the Irish Sea on Sunday night without sending a mayday call. The search for it involved helicopters, coastguard vessels and an RAF Nimrod began after the body of a crewman was found.

Off western Scotland, fishing boats continued to search as hope faded for Mr Michael Cain, 42, from Balvicar, and Mr Neill Thom, 25, from Easdale Island, last seen on board their clam dredger on Tuesday at their base at Balvicar, near Oban.

The speed of the Belgian trawler's disappearance has meanwhile prompted a nuclear protest group and a Labour MP to speculate that it had been struck by a submarine in an

area of the Irish Sea known as the Bermuda Triangle.

Mr George Foulkes MP, said he would press for a full Department of Transport investigation. "This is a Bermuda Triangle for fishermen. Boats have disappeared without trace and it is getting very suspicious," he said.

Miss Jean Emery, speaking for the Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment, said her members were suspicious of a cover-up, because the sea was calm at the time of the trawler's disappearance and the vessel gave no mayday signal. She said that in the last eight years, 17 boats had disappeared in the Irish Sea or off the west coast of Scotland, half in submarine exercise areas.

Her theory was last night dismissed by Liverpool coastguards, who said: "There was no submarine activity in the area, either ours or anybody else's." ● Sea King helicopters from RNAS Culdrose in Cornwall yesterday went to the aid of the stricken Rio Oitaven, with 16 men aboard off the Scillies, but they were recalled when it was taken in tow.

By Gareth Parry
A TRAWLER was towed backwards and around in circles for three hours yesterday after catching a submarine in its nets while fishing 10 miles south-east of Ebury Head, south Devon. It later appeared certain that the sub, which got away, was Russian.

The Royal Navy confirmed last night that the vessel did not belong to it, or its NATO allies — for no submariner had reported tangling with Brixham stern trawler Joanna C. at 3 am.

One possibility was that the vessel, although legally in international waters, was taking an interest in shipping in and around Devonport, Britain's main naval dockyard, and the home of the second sub-

marine squadron. Eastern block submarines, usually Russian, have been suspected for some time of lurking in the area, hoping to pick up signals.

The politics of the event, however, seemed of little consequence to Joanna C's skipper, John Green, who later described a "three-hour nightmare" which could have resulted in the trawler being pulled under the surface.

"It was very frightening. We didn't know how it was going to end. At first we didn't know what had happened. But after 15 minutes of being dragged backwards we knew it could only be a sub. We tried to pull our nets in, but we snapped the steel wires holding them. I contacted the coast-



Skipper John Green — "three-hour nightmare" guards by radio and they said they would try to find out from the navy if they had any subs in the area. But it was another three-

hours before they came and said the navy did have a sub in that area and we were to cut our nets immediately. It was a great relief. The whole time I kept thinking we could be dragged under by the sub."

Captain Green, aged 30, sailed back to Brixham, and said later that loss of the nets would cost him £1,000. His vessel will be berthed for at least a week.

"The coastguard told us that the navy told them I would be compensated in full," he said. But this assurance was given before the Royal Navy's confirmation later that it was not at fault for the incident. The navy's legal department was examining the question of compensation in the light of its instruction to cut the nets.

The navy confirmed that its submarine in the area was in fact around 30 miles away. The Americans also had one, but that was on the surface at the time. The fact that the mysterious submarine stayed beneath the surface added to suspicions about its nationality.

The most serious incident involving a submarine and trawler happened in May 1982, when a British submarine in the Irish Sea pulled under the Dublin-registered trawler Sharelga. All five crew were rescued. In December 1982, the trawler Algrie hooked the nuclear-powered submarine HMS Spartan off Land's End. The submarine's commander surfaced immediately, and ordered the trawler skipper to cut his nets.

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