

# Officer passed course minutes before tragedy

CH  
 6/16/92

By JAMES McKILLOP

MINUTES before his nuclear submarine snagged the nets of the Clyde trawler Antares, dragging her under and killing the four man crew, the officer in charge had passed the Perisher course to qualify for submarine command, a court martial was told yesterday.

"I think we have been trawled," was the response from Lt-Comdr Peter McDonnell, of HMS Trenchant, in the control room of the submarine after a fellow officer heard what he described as two thumps — just like charges going off.

Had Lt-Comdr McDonnell, 33, failed the course, he would have had no further career on submarines, the hearing was told.

Yesterday, as the duty captain on the submarine, he faced six charges of negligence surrounding the tragedy off Arran in November, 1990.

The prosecution case was brought exclusively on the basis that the accused had charge of the submarine at all material times, Lt-Comdr Tim Martin, prosecuting, said at the outset of the court martial at HMS Drake, RN Barracks, Devonport. But none of the charges alleged a causal link between the alleged negligence and the loss of the Antares.

"These charges allege specific failings in what may be described as proper underwater navigational techniques, but do not allege that any or all of such failings led to the sinking of the Antares," he said.

While the officer in charge of the submarine was therefore not responsible for the tragedy, the Ministry of Defence had admitted liability, Lt-Comdr Martin told the court martial. He did not elaborate.

Sheriff Principal Robert Hay concluded at a fatal accident inquiry in Scotland that human error was a major factor in the tragedy.

His sheathed sword lying on a table in front of the president of the court martial, Lt-Comdr McDonnell responded "Not guilty, Sir" to each of the charges.

He is second in command of HMS Turbulent — sister of Trenchant.

Hearing inside the court room became difficult as witnesses competed with explosions from teams training for the field gun competition at the Royal Tournament.

From timings given to the court martial yesterday by Lt-Comdr Martin, it was clear that the captain of the vessel, Commander Shaun Turner, and the officer in command of the Perisher Course, Commander David Perfect, had decided that the accused had passed the grueling six-month test only minutes, possibly just two minutes, before the Antares was dragged to the bottom of the Clyde.

His last sea exam had been to lay a minefield off Hunterston and attack and evade the frigate HMS Charybdis, also taking part in the exercise.

Commander Turner had described how he was in the wardroom with Commander Perfect, when he heard a muffled thump.

An officer came to the wardroom and announced: "We have a problem."

Both officers went to the control room.

Commander Perfect took command of the vessel, and Commander Turner examined computer records. From these he saw the submarine had changed course 10 minutes earlier, and that a surface contact was on a possible collision course.

Commander Turner described how he took command of the submarine and went to periscope depth to investigate, but could see no indication of a fishing boat or any sign that a tragedy had occurred.

Lt-Comdr Martin had told the court martial that at the time of the tragedy there was no question that the accused was in charge of the boat.

Although he had completed his Perisher exam, he had not handed over control to the officer of the watch, nor to another officer taking part in the course who had arrived in the control room, and with whom he was having a "professional conversation" as the Antares' nets swept towards the submarine.

"Only one person can be in charge," the court martial heard.

Lt-Comdr McDonnell had legal responsibility for the safety of the boat.

Handing over control was a formal procedure which normally brought the response: "I have the submarine".

Lt-Comdr Martin said the accused, although not to blame for the sinking, had made fatal errors that led to the tragedy.

The prosecution alleged that a reasonably capable and careful person of the accused's seniority would have taken appropriate action to avoid a collision.

The fatal errors were: he failed to investigate the position and activities of two vessels including Antares; he failed to check they had been plotted on a contact evaluation plot; he did not notice that the Antares had changed its bearing and was so close to him; minutes later he still had not ordered a check on whether everything was clear ahead of his stern; no effort was made to check the range of the Antares, which would have led to an emergency close quarters alert.

Lt-Comdr Ian Riches, now second in command of the Polaris submarine Resolution but at the time of the tragedy a student on the Perisher course, described how he had gone to the control room of the submarine to relieve Lt-Comdr McDonnell minutes before the disaster.

He told the court martial that the first indication of danger was a report from the sound room that there was a contact bearing closing fast.

He assessed that the contact was within 1000 yards of the submarine.

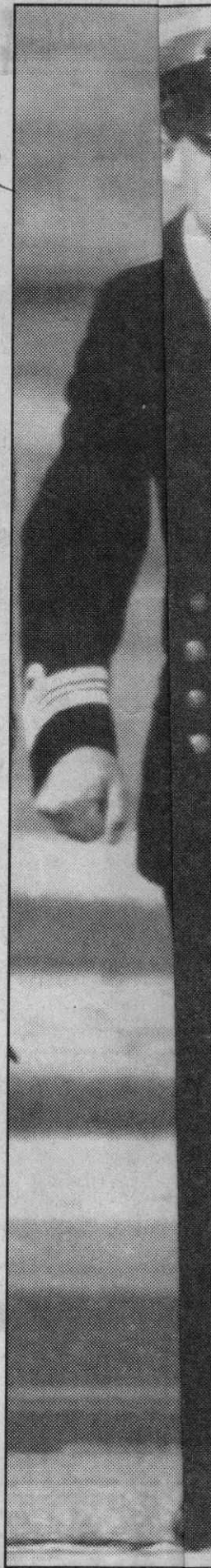
Asked how long it was before the collision took place, the witness said: "I don't know, it was a matter of tens of seconds."

He continued: "There were two thumps. It sounded like charges being dropped."

He said Lt-Comdr McDonnell said: "I think we have been trawled."

When Trenchant came up to periscope depth, the witness said he saw a wire over the submarine's bow. He believed the wire could have come from the warp wire of a fishing vessel.

The court martial continues.



Lt-Comdr Peter Mell