

Mu-Steer 4.8.87

Danger beneath the waves

Growing interference between submerged naval vessels and on-the-surface shipping is causing increasing concern to civilians reports **JANEY HULME.**

MARGARET MACCORMACK, whose young brother died on the trawler **Mhari-L**, which sank mysteriously in February 1985 was due to appear on television recently to talk about the incident.

Ms. MacCormack, angry about what she and other friends and relatives of the five lost crew see as a "cover-up" by various bodies including the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Transport was going to voice the widespread belief that the **Mhari-L** was struck and sunk by a submarine.

But her TV appearance was cancelled—although a film crew had been spared no expense to film in Galway and on location where the **Mhari-L** went down.

Reason

Ms. MacCormack was not given any clear reason for the cancellation of the programme, but the horrendous Zeebrugge tragedy had just occurred.

As there was a NATO exercise in the Zeebrugge area at that time, the TV company obviously did not want to appear to imply that there may have been submarine involvement in the capsizing of the **Herald of Free Enterprise**.

No such evidence was offered of course at the lengthy inquiry into the Zeebrugge tragedy and indeed there seems to be nothing to substantiate such a theory.

However, according to a recent account in the Irish current affairs magazine **New Ireland**, submarines have been regularly lurking 20 feet or so below tankers and cargo vessels in the Irish Sea.

According to other reports submarines regularly exercise in areas where there are busy ferry lanes.

This year, a Belfast paper reported that Townsend Thoresen's Ionic ferry which ran aground on a sandbank early in June had to change course to avoid a submarine.

A Townsend Thoresen spokesman admitted: "The Sea-link ferry **Galloway Princess** was entering Larne about the same time and both ships had to alter course to avoid the submarine."

The spokesman confirmed that the submarine had surfaced beside the Ionic but maintained that there had been no danger to the ferry or its passengers.

An organisation called the **Celtic League** is now stepping up its monitoring of submarine movement in the Irish and Celtic seas.

The **Mhari-L**, a 56ft steel scallop dredger, left **Kilrudy**, **Bright**, **Scotland**, on Sunday February 17 1985 with two other fishing vessels, bound for the **Morecambe Bay** fishing grounds 15 miles south-east of **Douglas**, **Isle of Man**.

Radio contact was eventually lost between the **Mhari-L** and the other two fishing vessels who tried without success to contact the **Mhari-L** on a number of occasions during **Wednesday** and **Thursday**.

The skipper of one of the other vessels, **John King**, alerted the coastguard and finally a full-scale search and rescue operation began. This ended on February 24 with totally negative results.

It was not until **John King** returned to the fishing ground that some clues to the boat's whereabouts became known.

A deck brush was picked up by his crew and later that night the skipper got a sonar trace of an uncharted wreck on the seabed.

According to a Department of Transport report the insurers of the **Mhari-L**, the **UK Mutual Insurance Company**, made two attempts in March

to identify the wreck.

But, says the report, a combination of bad weather, depth of water and strong tides made both attempts unsuccessful, and the insurers indicated that they would not be making any further attempts to identify the wreck.

"This," says **Margaret MacCormack** "is very odd."

"These people are usually extremely thorough — after all there are thousands of pounds involved. We were all amazed that they never positively identified the wreck."

"How did they know it was not the **South Stack**, which also sank with all hands lost in the area?"

"It was as though someone somewhere had a quiet word — they just left without any further attempts to identify the wreck."

Spotted

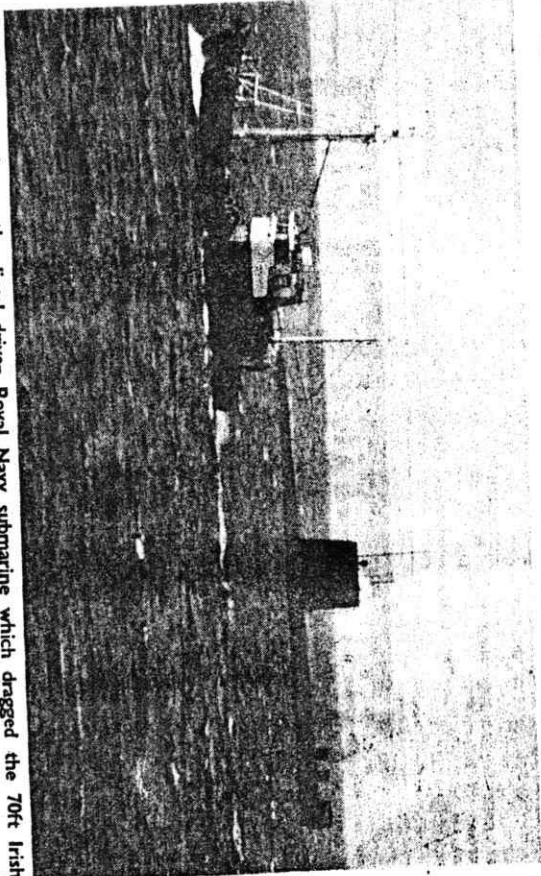
Divers working from the mine hunter **HMS Bideston** successfully identified the **Mhari-L** on April 23 1985 by means of the name and fishing number on the wreck's stem.

Further investigations were carried out by **Royal Navy** divers from the diving support vessel **MV Seaforth Clansman** in May.

No bodies were ever recovered and the cause of the casualty and the sinking, according to the DOT report, was said to be that the fishing gear in an vessel had caught up in an underwater **British Telecom** cable.

The DOT report says that the efforts to free the gear from the cable had caused both the gear and the cable to be hauled clear of the water.

"The combined weight when this happened would have been suspended at the end of the out-rigger causing a very large capsizing movement."



HMS Porpoise — the diesel driven **Royal Navy** submarine which dragged the 70ft Irish fishing boat **Sheralga** seawards for two miles where it sank without trace.

Fortunately, the 6-man crew were saved by other fishing vessels in the area — the submarine crew made no attempt to give aid nor did they radio for assistance.

Only hours before this, another Irish trawler **Crimson Dawn**, lost all its gear after nets and lines were struck by what was believed to be the same submarine which sank the **Sheralga**.

"The vessel must have listed heavily, sufficient for water to have come in quantity over the gunwale — the hatch was open so the fish hold would have rapidly flooded, causing the vessel to sink."

Commenting further, the DOT report also says: "Early in the inquiry it was rumoured that the **Mhari-L** might have been run down or dragged under by a submarine fouling her gear."

The investigation of the wreck as described, indicates that both these possibilities were extremely unlikely. In addition, so far as the latter was concerned, the naval authorities assured the inspector that no **Royal Navy** or **US Navy** submarines were in the area at the time of the loss.

However, this report did not satisfy Ms. MacCormack other relatives of the dead men or indeed the **Celtic League**.

Clansman

He pointed out that no satisfactory reason had been advanced for the appearance at the wreck site of the vessel **MV Seaforth Clansman**, with a heavy lift capability — often used by the **US Navy** for lifting purposes.

Other tugs he said, on charter from a Liverpool salvage company accompanied the **Seaforth Clansman** at the wreck site — but why were these vessels not mentioned in the DOT report?

Mr. Moffat also asked the transport secretary why neither the DOT or **British Telecom** could produce any evidence of cable damage?

On February 18, the Irish fishing vessel **Summer Morn** was towed backwards for three hours by a **US sub** which fouled the boat's nets. This was in the vicinity of the area where the **Mhari-L** and the **South Stack** were lost.

Following this incident relatives of the crew lost on the **Mhari-L** again wrote to **George Foulkes MP** urging him to do something about reopening investigation.

Margaret MacCormack, with the courage of her convictions, is determined to succeed.

"The whole thing stinks of a cover up," she says bitterly. "They had better come clean about it this time—before more lives are needlessly lost."