

HOME NEWS

GLASGOW HERALD FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 13 1991

Skipper's attack flaw in Clyde submarine alert

By KEITH BRUCE

THE reporting system set up between the Royal Navy and the Clyde Fishermen's Association after the sinking of the Antares came in for heavy criticism yesterday as a fleet of boats chose to remain in the area where a Nato submarine was on exercise.

Against the background of the inquiry into the Antares sinking, the Royal Navy yesterday advised fishing vessels that a submarine would be on exercise near Ailsa Craig in the Firth of Clyde.

The warnings were broadcast by HM Coastguard at four-hour intervals from 8pm on Wednesday night, but when the fleet auxiliary tender Millford moved in to the area yesterday morning it found a number of fishing boats working in the area.

One of them, the Ayr-registered Spindrift, contacted the coastguard at Greenock and said that it had missed the warning broadcasts and re-

quested that the submarine be asked to exercise elsewhere.

The skipper of the Spindrift said that it was the only area of the Firth where prawns could be caught. The coastguard advised the skipper to contact the Faslane submarine base with his request.

Mr Hector McCrindle, the skipper of the Star of David, said that up to 30 boats had chosen to stay in the area yesterday afternoon.

Mr McCrindle, a member of the executive committee of the Clyde Fishermen's Association, said that the Millford was surrounded by fishing boats working to the north-west and south-east of Ailsa Craig. He said that the fleet tender had been unable to contact the submarine, believed to be Dutch, to inform her of the presence of the boats.

"It is ludicrous that a Navy ship at Ailsa Craig can't get hold of a submarine between there and the Mull of Kintyre," he said.

He described liaison between the Navy and the fishermen as "good at times", but criticised the insensitivity of the Navy in staging the exercise during the Antares inquiry as "bloody madness".

A coastguard spokesman said the security broadcast was for the information of fishermen only. "What action they take is up to them."

A spokeswoman from the Clyde submarine base at Faslane said: "There is no reason why the boats shouldn't be there. There has been no incident, just a discussion."

However Mr McCrindle criticised the working of the reporting arrangement. "I thought we'd be better organised than this. I don't see how it does one bit of good — it puts the onus on to the fishermen, which we don't want."

News of the incident reached the inquiry in Paisley yesterday morning, where Mr

Patrick Stewart, secretary of the Clyde Fishermen's Association, said: "I received a report this morning from one of our fishing vessels that there was a submarine about to dive in proximity to a large fleet of vessels near Ailsa Craig."

"As the situation developed, it became clear that the submarine was lawfully there, but so were the fishing vessels. What we had to do was to assure the fishing vessels that there was no possibility of a snagging occurring, in other words that they were safe. I was advised by their spokesman that they were not getting these assurances locally."

A spokesman for the Faslane base at the inquiry said: "The situation is that a submarine is in an area which is properly activated under the terms of the notification scheme which is in existence between the Navy and the local fishing community."

Navy officer 'devastated'

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have done this if he had known about the close pass.

He recalled picking up information that a contact was breaking right, and remembered being on a steady bearing with a contact, although at the time he did not think it was for eight or nine minutes. He believed the closest fishing vessel was 7000 yards away when they came out of the turn. He agreed they now knew the range was wrong.

He said that just before hearing two bangs he heard a

sonar controller make a report that contact 05 was breaking fast right. He became aware that there was something wrong with the information they had on that contact. He instantly went into close quarters drill.

He ordered the helm to be put to port and then ordered stop engines. He thought it was about 20 to 30 seconds after making the manoeuvre that he heard the bangs. At the time he thought they had been in contact with fishing gear.

The witness said he had heard no reports from the un-

derwater telephone operator in the submarine about unusual noises.

Commander Perfect and Commander Shaun Turner, the commanding officer, arrived in the control room to take over.

Examined by Mr Angus Stewart, QC, for the families of the fishing vessel's crew, he repeated that he had not been aware of the close contact and it was not being displayed on the computer.

Asked if there was any question of disciplinary action in connection with the close

quarters pass, he said he was not aware of any.

He was asked by Mr MacNeill what made him give the order that he did. The officer said it was the correct drill to carry out with that particular bearing movement.

Earlier evidence had been given by Commander Turner, 38, commanding officer of the Trenchant, who was also formally warned by Sheriff Hay.

He said he was in the wardroom when he heard a muffled thud at about 2.19am and went immediately to the control room.

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