

admits N-sub accidents

From Michael White
in Washington

The Pentagon last night confirmed that two of its nuclear submarines have run aground in European waters this year, one of them in the Irish Sea. But it insisted that there had been no nuclear-related damage or injuries and that both vessels had limped to safety, one to Holy Loch on the Clyde, the other to Gibraltar.

According to unconfirmed reports here, the USS Nathaniel Greene, armed with Poseidon missiles, was sufficiently damaged when it touched bottom somewhere in the Irish Sea on March 13 to make itself an almost certain candidate for the scrapyard if President Reagan confirms his "tentative" decision to continue abiding by the 1979 Salt arms control deal.

The US Navy base at Holy Loch confirmed yesterday that the Nathaniel Greene was damaged, but said that the nuclear power plant was not ruptured or damaged. The rudder and an external ballast tank were damaged, a spokesman said.

The other incident which the navy admitted for the first time concerned the USS Atlanta, a nuclear-powered but not nuclear-armed attack submarine. It also managed to damage its ballast tanks and sustain other external damage in the treacherous waters of the Strait of Gibraltar on April 29.

Commissioned only in 1982—the Nathaniel Greene is 20 years older—it shipped water through its punctured ballast tank and may have to be towed home to Norfolk, Virginia, for final repairs. The Nathaniel Greene has already been brought back to Charleston, South Carolina, for repair—under a new commander flown from the US.

It is assumed here that the Atlanta had been involved in support operations around the Sixth Fleet during its recent engagements against Libya. But the Pentagon routinely declined to say which way it had been passing through the straits when the accident occurred. The circumstances are being investigated.

The Salt II formula requires two Lafayette class Poseidon submarines to be phased out once the latest Trident-armed submarine, the USS Nevada, starts sea trials in mid-May. With Pentagon hawks keen to dry-dock them as a half-way house, the navy itself, led by the ambitious Navy Secretary, Mr John Lehman, reportedly favours scrapping them rather than investing \$300 million apiece on converting them to other uses.

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