

# Snagging Submarines in the Irish Sea

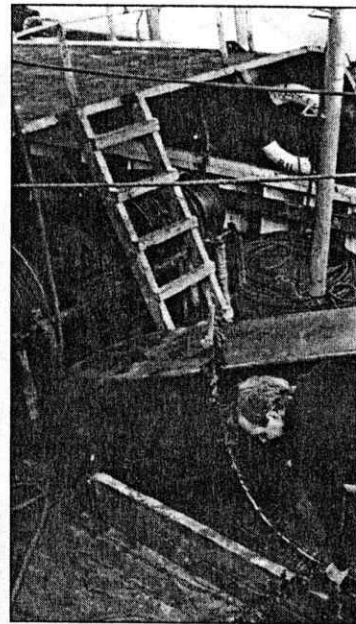
The Irish Sea is known to local mariners, like Welsh fisherman Sam Skinner, as the British Bermuda Triangle. In September 1988 Skinner was piloting a 30-foot lobster boat named *Inspire* when a freak wave suddenly rose out of the calm waters. As Skinner radioed for help, the wave swamped and sank the boat. One member of the crew died of a heart attack, and another was swept away. Skinner and the skipper clung to a lobster pot buoy. Ten hours later, when another fishing boat came to the rescue, the skipper was dead from exposure; only Skinner survived.

No one thinks there is anything supernatural behind

these mysterious accidents. The Irish Sea is also known as Submarine Alley, an area heavily populated by nuclear subs from the American base at Holy Loch and the British base at Faslane, both in Scotland. These NATO bases also attract subs from France and other Western allies, as well as Soviet subs sent to spy on the rest. The silent runners, fishermen claim, may be responsible for more than 40 accidents to fishing boats since 1980. The British and Americans have admitted to 19 submarine accidents since 1980—none of them fatal—and have paid nearly \$1 million in compensation. Recently, however, a London court agreed to a ju-

dicial review of Skinner's case: he charges that a submarine's wake sank the *Inspire* and caused the death of his boatmates.

The hazards of submarine operations in the Irish Sea came to public notice in 1982, when the fishing boat *Sheralga* capsized in calm waters. London blamed whales or Soviet subs until investigators found telltale black paint from the submarine *HMS Porpoise* on the *Sheralga's* remains. Three years ago an Irish trawler, *Summer Morn*, spent three terrifying hours dragged backward by something snagged in its nets and bagged a piece of American sonar equipment to identify the culprit.



Caught in the net: Examining a piece



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sonar aboard the *Summer Morn*

## Killer Fish



A regional pressure group, the Celtic League, counts at least 24 ships and 100 lives that have been lost under mysterious circumstances in the Irish Sea since 1981. "When a boat sinks in good conditions it's either snagged or a sea monster, and I don't believe in sea monsters," says Bernard Moffat, assistant secretary general of the Celtic League.

"Snagging," or catching a fishing boat by its net, is the most common submarine accident. (Others reportedly involve submarines surfacing under ships, or misfiring practice missiles.) The problem appears to be poor vision. Submarine sonar cannot detect fishing nets and sometimes will mistake a school of fish for an enemy submarine. The result, claims Moffat, is that

NATO subs sometimes follow fish right into the nets, thinking that they are trailing a Soviet vessel.

As the list of submarine accidents grows, members of the European and British parliaments are pushing for new rules of submarine conduct—so far with little effect. "What we need to happen is a major accident with deaths before something will be done," complains a British Labor Member of Parliament, George Foulkes. Under pressure from Dublin, Britain has in fact ordered its subs to run on the surface "whenever possible" so they can see where they're going. That, the fishermen say, still leaves plenty of killer fish in Submarine Alley.

TONY EMERSON with  
MEGGAN DISSLY in Paris