

# Trawler sank 'while on spying mission'

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GAVIN INNES

FAMILIES of fishermen who vanished 23 years ago when their boat mysteriously sank are demanding a fresh public inquiry because of new evidence that the trawler was being used to spy on the Russian navy.

Wives and sisters of the missing men have also called for the bodies aboard the Gaul to be recovered for burial. The Hull-based trawler disappeared without a mayday call in heavy seas in February 1974, with the loss of its 36 crew.

The Ministry of Defence has always refused to search for the boat, claiming it would be too difficult to find it among dozens of wartime wrecks. But the Channel Four series, *Dispatches*, took only two days to find the trawler this summer, lying in 1,000ft of water 70 miles off the Norwegian coast.

They now believe the ship had been on a secret spying mission when it sank. Sailors and Soviet sources came forward to say trawlermen were used as spies, while the state of the ship throws into doubt claims she was lost in a storm.

The official inquiry concluded that the Gaul was smashed by a huge wave - but the programme suggests this was nonsense after researchers found the boat in almost perfect condition on the seabed.

Relatives of the men have called on their local MP, John Prescott, to back their efforts to have the inquiry reopened and their questions answered.

Solicitor Max Gold, who spoke after 200 relatives watched a private screening of the documentary film which will be broadcast tonight, said: "The first thing they want is the reopening of a public inquiry to find out what happened. They also want the Government to carry out a survey of the wreck in the spring.

"A lot of the families, although not all, feel that if there are remains on the boat they should be brought back home for a proper burial.

"They are extremely angry. They feel they are being despised and lied to and no-one has been brought to account. They expect their MP to back them up

"They are the real sufferers, they have been waiting 23 years for answers."

Carol Radford, who lost her brother, was with the Channel Four crew when it found the trawler. She said: "I can't understand why they didn't look for it. They've let all these families suffer and be upset and they could have stopped it and just put everybody out of their misery."

The boat disappeared at a time when NATO commanders were becoming increasingly concerned about the new Soviet Hunter submarines which could target the United States with nuclear missiles.

The Gaul was found in the Barents Sea, a region whose Arctic waters were a Cold War battle zone where NATO forces played a game of cat and mouse with the Soviet northern fleet, based in Murmansk.

The boat was found lying on top of a secret communications cable.

General Torkel Hovland, a former Norwegian military intelligence expert, said that the Gaul could have been sunk by the Soviet Union if it was on a submarine detection mission, or placing systems to detect Soviet submarines. The programme makers interviewed Hull fishermen, who came forward in droves to say they had been recruited for spying missions in the Norwegian seas although at the time this had been vehemently denied.

The former defence minister during 1974 to 1976, Bill Rogers - now Lord Rogers - wrote to Mr Prescott to say that British trawlers were never used for spying. But when confronted with the new evidence, he said: "I think, simply, I was wrongly informed, I was seriously misled on the evidence. But it certainly came as a shock to me to discover the fleet had been involved in systematic intelligence gathering."

One fisherman, Mason Redfearn, said he was even sent on a week-long spying course. "Every trip I went to the Barents Sea, if I saw a Russian ship I would take photographs."

He was recruited with fishermen on 50 other vessels by a shadowy naval officer, Commander John Brookes, who on-