

During the court-martial of Lieutenant-Commander Peter McDonnell, his sword will rest on a table between him and the board of officers. After the verdict the sword will be moved. If guilty it will be pointed at him; if innocent it will be directed away. But the Clyde fishing community believes it should be pointed at other officers. **Steve Briggs** reports

# Antares scapegoat fear as sub's officer faces trial

**T**HIS Wednesday morning Lieutenant-Commander Peter McDonnell will ease himself into a chair in the room set aside for his court-martial at HMS Drake, the Devonport base of nuclear submarine HMS Trenchant. His naval future will be determined by his defence against charges of negligence over his role in the sinking 18 months ago of the Carradale fishing boat Antares when four men died.

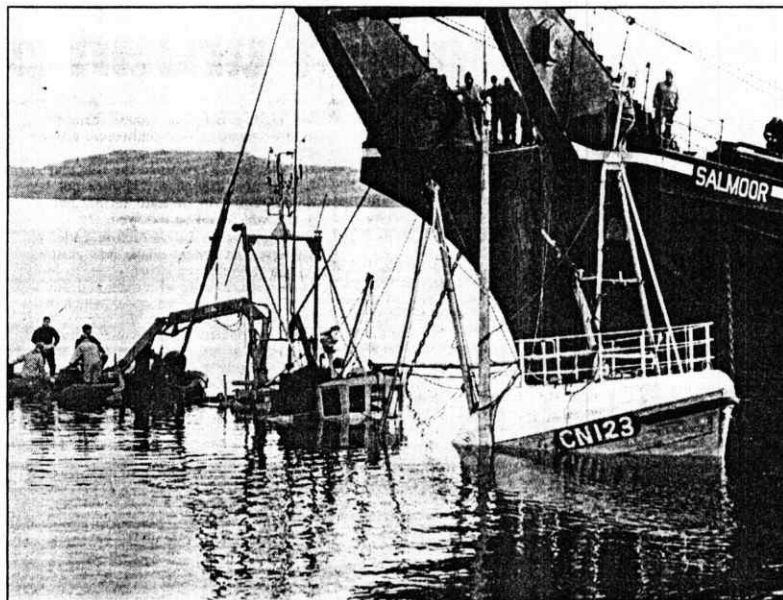
McDonnell, then a trainee submarine commander in the final stages of qualifying, was in charge of Trenchant in the early hours of November 22, 1990, when it ploughed into the Antares's nets, capsizing it and dragging it under the surface. A fatal accident inquiry at Paisley last autumn concluded that human error on the submarine was responsible for the tragedy, which took place off the north-east coast of Arran.

The navy, by charging McDonnell, alleges that he was responsible for errors which led to the fatal collision. But the Clyde fishing community, whose ranks were so abruptly depleted by the sinking, is not so sure. The fishermen, with many naval personnel from the Faslane submarine base on Gare Loch, believe that McDonnell is being made a scapegoat.

The fishing community believes that the tragedy was an inevitable consequence of submarines and fishing boats sharing the same waters. Should there be a finding of guilt against McDonnell, they will not be satisfied, particularly since the navy quickly doubled the mandatory separation zone between submarines and fishing boats after the sinking, and introduced a new method of warning the fishermen of where submarines were operating. Those changes, they say, are an admission that the previous practices were dangerous.

When the tragedy happened Trenchant was taking part in a Perisher exercise — a qualifying course for trainee submarine commanders. On board were the submarine's normal crew of around 120 men, and its own commanding officer, Commander Shaun Turner. Also on board was Commander David Perfect, an experienced submariner in his own right — known as the teacher and who was running the Perisher — as well as four trainees including McDonnell.

The exact charges which McDonnell faces will not be known



Salvage operation: Antares is raised from the depths after its fatal collision. Photograph: Allan Milligan.

until the hearing begins on Wednesday, but they have been brought under section 7b of the Navy Discipline Act, which deals with negligence. If found guilty the lightest sentence he faces is a reprimand, and the heaviest two years' imprisonment.

It seems likely that the charges will involve events on the submarine in the period leading up to the collision. These may include actions during a six-minute period around 50 minutes before the sinking, when Trenchant was at periscope depth.

The opportunity was not taken to obtain an accurate visual picture of the number, positions and ranges of other vessels around the submarine. The unexplained failure to do so proved fatal for Antares. Two important factors which contributed to the sinking included the fact that the number of fishing boats in the vicinity of the submarine had been miscalculated — plus gross miscalculation of the dis-

tance of the boats from the submarine.

Submarines operating below periscope depth were under orders to keep a minimum of 2000 yards away from fishing boats, a distance that has now been extended to 4000 yards. Trenchant breached the order because it was thought the boats were much further away.

**A**nother unanswered question centres on why McDonnell was not told of a near-miss which occurred 21 minutes before the collision. According to a tape-recording of events in the control room, the passive sonar operator heard noises which should have been recognised as a near-miss with another boat. This should have meant the submarine going to close-quarters drill and coming to periscope depth to obtain an accurate surface picture.

It is also not known why, between

2.09am and 2.17am, Trenchant knowingly continued on a collision course towards Antares — albeit unaware of how close Antares was — when a safer practice would have involved steering away.

Then, after the collision, Trenchant did not surface for approximately 33 minutes and, on surfacing, failed to make contact with the two fishing boats it could see, and failed to fire white smoke signals as it should have done. Had the submarine surfaced earlier the lives of two of the Antares crew, who appear to have escaped while the boat was sinking, might have been saved.

After surfacing it appears that those on the submarine, commanded by David Perfect who had taken over from McDonnell around three minutes after the collision, had no idea of how serious the incident had been, and little idea of what had happened.

But Perfect, it emerged during last year's FAI, had been involved in an earlier trawl-snagging incident. He had been in command of HMS Sceptre in 1987 when Sceptre collided with nets being towed by the fishing vessel Prevail. Perfect's recollection of the 1987 events, in which Prevail lost part of her trawl off the Mull of Kintyre, was contradicted by later evidence.

When Trenchant surfaced and fishing gear was discovered attached to her hull — but two boats could be seen apparently fishing normally — Perfect said he had assumed the submarine had dislodged part of a trawl without the boat concerned having realised. This had happened in the 1987 Prevail incident, he said, and Prevail's skipper had become aware of the collision only when Perfect had told him.

But according to Ian Gibson, the Prevail's skipper, this was not true. He told the Antares FAI that he had been aware immediately of the impact, and had not been contacted by Perfect's submarine. Until the Antares FAI no-one in the fishing industry had known that either the Sceptre or Perfect had played any part in the Prevail collision.

Throughout the Perisher exercise Commander Turner, Trenchant's captain, remained in command of the submarine. For the purposes of the Perisher, effective command — in naval terms "conduct" — was delegated to Commander Perfect. During McDonnell's qualifying test he was delegated "charge" under Perfect's supervision.

What the fishing community cannot understand is why McDonnell appears to have been singled out to carry the can for the Antares sinking. Although the fishing industry has no equivalent of the Perisher, if a subordinate's error leads to an accident, the vessel's captain and the individual in charge at the time are called to account.

Why, if Peter McDonnell's behaviour has been deemed to be potentially negligent, did he pass the Perisher test and gain promotion to the rank of lieutenant-commander?

Why, if human error was to blame, the fishermen want to know, are David Perfect and Shaun Turner not facing charges?

And why, if the previous rules were so dangerous that swift changes were necessary, are even more senior officers not on trial?

**Transcript of the Trenchant's "Black Box" for the three vital minutes leading up to the sinking of Antares at 2.19am on November 22, 1990. The black box is a taping system situated in the submarine's control room. It did not record everything that was said.**

**PERISHER CAPTAIN:** Lieutenant Peter McDonnell — in charge of submarine Trenchant.  
**TEACHER:** Commander David Perfect — supervising McDonnell

**SUBORDINATE CONTROL ROOM CREW MEMBERS:**  
**Officer of watch:** In charge of the submarine  
**Ship control officer of watch:** in charge of submarine technical systems and safety  
**Ops:** controls sonar picture  
**Controller:** attack controller  
**Planes:** submarine driver  
**Left hand op:** sonar operator  
**06:** Antares

**Cuts:** Passive sonar reading showing Antares bearing on Trenchant. The decibel count is a guide to how close the vessel being registered on passive sonar is.

**2:17am** **Officer of watch:** 05, is that a fishing boat?  
**Ops:** 05 is sir, yes, just a bad bearing.  
**Controller:** Ops-controller, contact 05 getting louder, best bearing of 05, 322 degrees.  
**Ops:** Roger.  
**Controller:** Going to manual cuts 05.  
**Ops:** Correction, he's

starting to move fast right.  
**Officer of watch:** Port 15 degrees.  
**Ship control officer of watch:** Port 15 degrees.  
**Ops:** Coming left.  
**Controller:** Roger, 05 now marking 35 decibels on EN meter.  
**Ops:** Roger. Marking all round on the PPI.  
**Controller:** Best bearing now 326 degrees.  
**Officer of watch:** Port 30 degrees.  
**Controller:** Best bearing now 334 degrees. Still breaking right.  
**Ops:** Roger. Just keep the cuts coming.  
**Controller:** Roger.

**Planes:** Ship's head passing 300 degrees.  
**Officer of watch:** Roger. Steer 280 degrees.  
**Ship control officer of watch:** 280 degrees. Roger.  
**Left hand op:** Bearing rate on contact 5 to 10 degrees right.

**2:18am** **Controller:** Cuts being made, best bearing now 355 degrees.  
**Ops:** Roger. Closest point of approach was probably 200 yards.  
**Controller:** Roger.  
**Officer of watch:** Port 10 degrees, steer 260 degrees.

**Perisher captain:** Happy.  
**Controller:** Still moving right, best bearing now 10 degrees.  
**Ops:** Roger, you're going to have to cut searcher soon.  
**Controller:** Yep, searcher holds him.  
**Ops:** Roger, cut searcher.  
**Controller:** Roger cut searcher. Cut made searcher.  
**Ops:** Cut received. How far to edge of beams?  
**Controller:** Now out of beams passive. Being cut searcher.  
**Ops:** Associate 05 with 35.  
**Controller:** Searcher cutting, bearing 28 degrees.

**Ops:** What was that noise? What was that noise then?  
**2:19am** **Controller:** We've possibly snagged a trawl, no trawl noise was audible on the contact zooming over.  
**Perisher captain:** They're shut, the arms are cocked.  
**Ops:** We've possibly snagged a trawl.  
**Officer of watch:** Stop together.  
**Ship control officer of watch:** Stop engines.  
**Perisher captain/Officer of watch:** Second watch stand to.  
**Ship control officer of**

**watch:** Second watch stand to.  
**Controller:** Trawl noise audible now, going down the side of the boat.  
**Ops:** Any more noise?  
**Controller:** No more noise.  
**Perisher captain:** Speed 10. Black lighting in control room, standby to return to periscope depth.  
**Ship control officer of watch:** Standby to return to periscope depth.  
**Officer of watch:** Throttles to remote.  
**Teacher:** What's happening?  
**Perisher captain:** Possibility we've snagged a trawl, sir.