

Ministry admits trawlers spied on Soviets

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BY MICHAEL HORNSBY

THE Ministry of Defence has admitted publicly for the first time that British trawler skippers were recruited to spy on Soviet naval activities during the Cold War.

Officials were speaking in response to a television documentary to be screened tonight about the disappearance 23 years ago of the Hull-based trawler the *Gaul* with the loss of all the 36 crew.

Dispatches on Channel 4 will broadcast film taken by a remotely-controlled camera of the vessel lying on the seabed some 60 miles off the north coast of Norway.

Former trawler skippers tell the programme that they spied on Soviet fleet movements out of Murmansk at the request of the Government and were given cameras for the task by a man calling himself Commander Brookes.

Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank, then the Labour Government's Minister of Defence, asserted in a letter to a Hull MP at the time of the disaster that "the British trawler fleet is not involved in any way in intelligence gathering".

Lord Rodgers admits to the programme that this statement was "palpably on the evidence not true" and "that he now believes he was "seriously misled" by his officials.

The recipient of Lord Rodgers's letter was John Prescott, MP for Hull East since 1970, now also the Deputy Prime Minister and Transport Secretary. He is being pressed by relatives of the *Gaul*'s crew to reopen the inquiry into its fate.

Mr Prescott declined to be interviewed by *Dispatches*, but a spokesman said yesterday that he would "welcome and consider any new evidence the programme can provide".

The Ministry of Defence said yesterday: "In the years prior to 1974 a very limited number of vessels assisted the Government in specific intelligence gathering." However, officials insisted that the *Gaul* was not among these.

The official inquiry into the disappearance of the *Gaul* concluded that the boat capsized after being struck by huge waves.

The makers of the *Dispatches* programme reject the official view but concede that their film does not explain the sinking. However, it speculates that the vessel may have been involved in laying or recovering a military communications cable for monitoring Soviet submarine movements.