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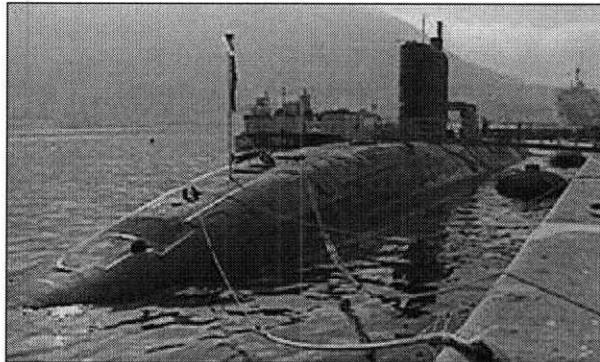
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Saturday, 21 October, 2000, 10:09 GMT 11:09 UK

Britain's underwater hunters



The fleet was recalled after an inspection of HMS Tireless

The 12 hunter-killer submarines being recalled by the Royal Navy play a key role in Britain's defence.

The five Swiftsure class and seven Trafalgar class vessels are extremely sophisticated war machines, capable of a wide range of maritime operations.

The nuclear-powered submarines are Britain's unseen and unheard underwater weapons.

Their primary role is to seek out and destroy enemy submarines that may pose a threat.

Swiftsure class

Five in service
Crew of 97
Displacement: 4900 tons dived
Top speed: 30 knots dived

One of their main tasks is to escort the country's four Vanguard submarines, armed with strategic ballistic Trident missiles, when they go out on patrol.

Formidable arsenal

The submarines carry a formidable arsenal. They are armed with Spearfish torpedoes and Royal Navy Sub Harpoon missiles which have a range in excess of 50 miles.

They also carry a complement of Tomahawk cruise missiles, enabling them to provide support to army operations on land.

The submarines saw action during the Falklands war and more

Trafalgar class

Seven in service
Crew of 98

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Falklands war and more recently during the Kosovo conflict, when HMS Splendid was used to fire cruise missiles against targets in Yugoslavia.

Crew of 98
Displacement: 5300 tons dived
Top speed: 32 knots dived

The 12 hunter-killer submarines are the last generation of this type of vessel and it could be some time before they are back at sea.

"These boats are a very important part of the European contribution to Nato," said Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs and Defence spokesman Menzies Campbell.

"It raises questions of both capability and credibility. It looks as if this important capability will be denied for some months."

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