

# Nuclear sub cover-up alleged

Peace campaigners feared a cover-up as the Ministry of Defence rushed to downplay the fire that broke out aboard Britain's oldest submarine, HMS Valiant, at the Clyde submarine base, Faslane on August 5.

The civilian fire service in the surrounding area was called out to a fire at the base at 1am August 5. All available fire engines were dispatched - two from Gareloch, two from Faslane and one from Dumbarton - suggesting that the alert was serious indeed. The Clyde Submarine Base has its own specially-trained crews to fight fires on submarines; civilian firefighters are not allowed to fight such fires unless there is no alternative. The civilian engines arrived between 1.15 and 1.30am and started to leave the base from 2.00am.

The Ministry of Defence quickly dismissed the Valiant incident as 'minor', but peace campaigners charged that a cover-up had begun.

The MoD contends the fire started in the hydraulics system used to open hatches and raise the vessel's periscope. But peace campaigners suggest it likely broke out in a compartment housing the reactor's cooling system.

A Royal Navy spokesman said the fire had lasted only two minutes and was quickly put out by a crew member with a hand-held extinguisher. Yet earlier, the fire was said to have lasted a quarter-hour. And soon after the fire, members of the Faslane Peace Camp observed thick smoke pouring out of the conning tower of HMS Valiant; five and a half hours later smoke was still pouring out.

Whichever way, the MoD was being less than frank in styling the fire 'minor', according to Faslane Peace Camp member Gordon Muchan, a former Royal Navy submariner. 'We were always told that anything longer than 30 seconds is a major fire,' he said.

An MoD spokesman insisted that the smoke observed by the Peace Camp members (see picture) in fact came from a diesel-powered submarine moored nearby.

An eyewitness at Faslane replied: 'The jetties were all lit up and we had a clear view. The smoke was quite dense coming through the hatches, and we could see people running around it on deck.'

Scottish CND pointed out in a statement that the 80,000 people living near Scotland's 22 submarine berths are put at risk by such incidents.

A Faslane Peace Camp spokesman commented: 'It was we who first alerted the press to this fire. If it were not for our camp, incidents like this might go unreported.'

'It is the same old story of secrecy', said submarine specialist Shaun Gregory of Bradford University. 'The MoD want to keep the lid on this incident'.

The Valiant fire brings to eight the number of fires aboard British nuclear submarines in the past 26 years. HMS Conqueror suffered two fires in Devonport in 1983 and 1987. HMS Warspite experienced a massive engine-room blaze in 1976, lasting five hours and totally gutting the vessel. Firefighters were kept on standby for a fortnight.

The August 5 incident was fire number four for HMS Valiant. In 1968, it suffered two small blazes while docked at Chatham. This followed her baptism of fire in December 1963 - a fire broke out in the reactor compartment while Valiant was still being built at Barrow.

● **William Peden/Ben Webb**

◆ The Soviet Defence Minister, Marshal Dmitri Yazov, admitted in mid-July that an Alfa-class nuclear-powered submarine had suffered reactor problems in an incident off Norway earlier in the month.

Marshal Yazov's statement contradicted Soviet Navy claims that the vessel had been in no trouble at all.

The incident, off the Kola Peninsula, was the third in the area in four months. In April, a Soviet submarine sank, with 42 lives lost.

Norwegian government officials have called for an early warning agreement to cover future incidents.

## Dump in Devon

Remember when it used to be all old fridges round here?



Plymouth will be the site of a large concrete dumping ground for nuclear waste from Royal navy submarines if the Ministry of Defence has its way, it was revealed this summer. The MoD plans to store nuclear waste for 20 years in the middle of Plymouth, adjacent to a council estate and 50 metres from the London-to-Penzance railway line. Another nuclear dump is being planned for Rosyth, in Scotland.

But the proposed Plymouth store will have walls three times as thick as those in Rosyth. This has led to fears that Plymouth harbour has been targetted as the centre for de-commissioning nuclear submarines.

The Navy is desperate for nuclear waste storage space - the civil nuclear industry is years away from being able to build its own waste depository.

Local councils have objected to the plans for both dumps, but the Ministry is not required to seek planning permission. This means the ball is now in the court of the Department of the Environment. It will rule whether a public enquiry may be held.

## Subs again

We managed to make nonsense of this contribution last issue. Let's try again with this apposite submarine poem. [Ed]

Soviet sub. kaput.  
Norway (plus rest of West)  
the target  
helps out -  
thus, curiously, abetting  
its own nuking.  
● **Pat Arrowsmith**

## October Deadlines

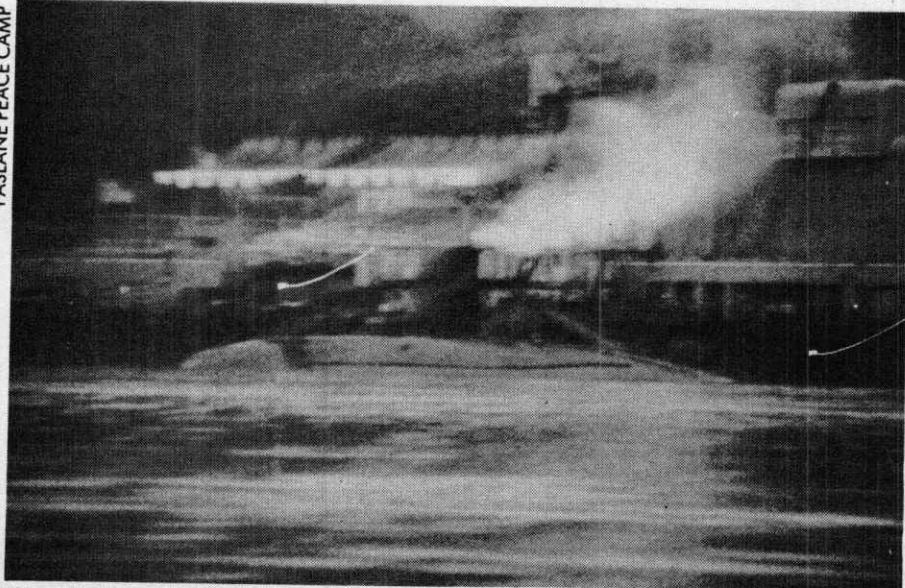
Reviews and letters - September 7  
Ad copy and listings - September 11  
Campaign copy - September 4  
Campaign listings - September 7

## In coming issues

Britain's Shocking Seaside:  
Conference Season Special

The end and the beginning in Eastern Europe

FASLANE PEACE CAMP



'Do you believe your eyes, or do you believe what I say?' as Marx asked. (Groucho, that is, in *Duck Soup*.) The MoD says the smoke seen hours after the Valiant fire came from another, diesel-powered submarine. Judge for yourself. We might add that diesel fumes are dark.

## Will NZ non-nuclear policy stay on course?



ASSOCIATED PRESS

David Lange celebrated his 47th birthday on August 4. He had just been severely disappointed by the re-election to Cabinet of his former Finance Minister, Roger Douglas. By August 7 he had decided to resign. Douglas's return signalled a comeback for the (economically) Thatcherite wing of the Labour Party, which Lange had held back by sacking Douglas and his ally Richard Prebble last year.

New Zealand politics do not match easily the left-right polarities of Britain. While Roger Douglas's economic measures would do Thatcher proud, he has always supported the country's anti-nuclear policy, which bans port visits by nuclear weapons-bearing vessels.

Lange was no guardian angel either of the anti-nuclear policy or of more traditional socialist economics. He played a waiting game

over ship visits, not introducing anti-nuclear legislation until shortly before the last election; and he firmly supported Douglas's 'Rogernomics' for the first term Labour was in office. The anti-nuclear policy was never 'Lange's policy'; if it had been, he could very easily have been persuaded out of it. The triumph of Peace Movement Aotearoa – the network of local peace groups all over the country – has been that, as the new Prime Minister, Geoffrey Palmer put it, 'The anti-nuclear policy won't change. It is entrenched in the minds of New Zealanders.'

But Lange's failure to fill the economic policy vacuum with an alternative to 'Rogernomics' and the potential now for a drift back to monetarist policies (Douglas's goals are to deregulate the labour market and to introduce competition into the social services) may be simply an alternative route to losing the anti-nuclear policy. If the Labour Government does not recover firm public support within the next six months, its chances of winning the November 1990 elections look slim. But if the Labour Party does manage to get re-elected next year, it will be in no small part because of public desire to remain nuclear free, rather than accept opposition leader Jim Bolger's line of 'we want to be nuclear free, therefore we expect the US to respect this but we won't legislate against ship visits'.

### ● Stephanie Mills

Some Maori groups are calling for a boycott of the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Waitangi, the basis of New Zealand's legal identity. In Britain, women from the WWNFIP groups have called a meeting for September 4 to discuss the issue. Venue is 8pm, the Club Room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

## French colony to be used as N-base

The Matignon accords putting off independence for the French South Pacific colony of New Caledonia have given a green light to a nuclear build-up, Kanak activist Nicole Tangopi told peace campaigners in London this summer.

'Kanak (New Caledonia) is being drawn more and more into the nuclear situation,' said Ms Tangopi. 'With the Matignon accords meaning that France will stay in Kanaky for the next ten years, it is likely we will see a new base for nuclear submarines built in Noumea, the capital.'

Last summer's Matignon agreement between the metropolitan government and the recently-assassinated leader of the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), Jean-Marie Tjibaou, provides for a referendum on independence in 1998. But the deal provoked deep divisions in the independence movement, since it will allow all New Caledonia residents, including French settlers, to vote. The indigenous Kanaks make up only one half of the population, after waves of settlement by metropolitan French and other ethnic groups.

Jean Marie Tjibaou was murdered by Djoubelly Wea from Tangopi's home island, Ouvea, and Tangopi says the misunderstandings between people from Ouvea and the rest of the Kanaks threaten to worsen. It began when men from Ouvea took French gendarmes hostage before the French presidential elections last year. The hostage-taking ended with the massacre by the French of nineteen men from Ouvea – which in a population of 2000 had a traumatic effect on the whole island.

'For me,' said Tangopi, 'the killing of Tjibaou was the result of a year of misunderstanding developing between the people of Ouvea and the rest of Kanaky over the hostage affair, because many people did not support the hostage-taking. Now on Ouvea, things are even worse, because the people feel as if they are being reproached, are being blamed for Tjibaou's murder.'

'The accords were a bribe, and I don't think we will gain independence through them. But I don't think the Kanak people will choose violence; that is not part of our natural way.'

### ● Stephanie Mills

## Iraq jet sale stopped

A decision by the Cabinet's Overseas and Defence Committee at the end of July to block the sale of 50-plus Hawk aircraft to Iraq brought a successful conclusion to a major campaign.

The proposed £300 million deal included the setting up of an aircraft production line in Iraq. The Hawks had been shown at a military exhibition in Baghdad in April and were said to be the favoured plane of Iraq's Air Force. British Aerospace argued that the Hawk, designated a trainer, would not contravene the Government's 1985 guidelines on the sale of military equipment to Iran and Iraq. The company's own literature, however, has promoted the versatility of the plan for both training and combat.

Opponents of the deal pointed out that there was still no peace treaty to settle the Gulf War, arguing that to sell the jets would give implicit British support to a government with an appalling record on human rights and which had used chemical weapons against both the Iranian armed forces and its own Kurdish population.

Within the Government, the Ministry of Defence and Department of Trade and Industry supported the Hawk sale, while the Foreign Office had reservations, particularly about the fragile nature of the ceasefire in the Gulf.

Now anti-arms trade campaigners face a new challenge – how to stop the sale of Iraq's second choice, France's Alpha jet.

## F-111 plans shelved?

Reports in August suggested that the US Air Force has had serious second thoughts about plans to deploy some 50 new F-111 fighter-bombers in Britain.

The USAF had planned to install the 'F-111G' variant of the warplane to carry nuclear-tipped Short-Range Attack Missiles – part of NATO's nuclear 'modernisation' programme. RAF Upper Heyford had been regarded as the most likely site for the new aircraft, and as reported in *Sanity* in May, design work for new ground facilities at Upper Heyford began last year. Almost \$9 million has been earmarked in the Pentagon's 1990 budget projections for construction at the base.

The F-111G plan was first announced last year by General William Kirk, then Commander-in-Chief, US Air Force in Europe. But according to sources cited in the defence press in this country, General Kirk jumped the gun. No formal arrangement had been made with the UK government, whose position to date has been that 'no decisions have been taken'.

The USAF's change of mind on the F-111Gs is said to stem from financial concerns. There are already three types of F-111 at Upper Heyford; the arrival of yet another type will make for costly logistical problems.

The other plans for Short Range Attack Missile – bearing planes were not mentioned in the August reports. F-15E 'Strike Eagle' aircraft are scheduled for deployment at British bases later in the 1990s.