

DEFENCE CHIEFS ORDER CHECKS AFTER REACTOR FAULT IS FOUND

ATOM SUBS ALERT

AN ALERT was flashed to Britain's nuclear-powered subs following the discovery of a "defect" in one boat's nuclear reactor, it was revealed last night.

The Ministry of Defence said the "technical defect" was found during a routine refit.

It is understood that engineers raised the alarm when they were carrying out work on a sub at Devonport dockyard in Plymouth.

A spokesman said: "Submarines at present in harbour are being checked. Boats already at sea will be inspected when they return to port."

"These inspections are being carried out in close consultation with the Ministry's independent technical and safety advisers."

Although the MoD would not discuss the nature of the defect, Navy experts say it is clear that it occurred in the nuclear reactor.

It is understood the boat was one of the Valiant class, the Navy's oldest nuclear-powered submarines built between 1966 and 1971.

Among the Valiant fleet is the HMS Conqueror, based at Faslane on the Clyde, which sank the Argentine battle cruiser Belgrano during the Falkands conflict.

RECORD REPORTER

Senior MoD sources stressed the four Polaris nuclear deterrent boats were operating as normal, with "at least one" at sea on patrol at any time.

CHECKS

However, they will be checked along with the Navy's other nuclear-powered submarines when the opportunities arise.

The water-cooled reactors on all the Navy's nuclear-powered submarines are manufactured by Rolls-Royce and their subsidiary, Associates of Derby.

The most likely fault is thought to be a hair-line fracture in the primary cooling system.

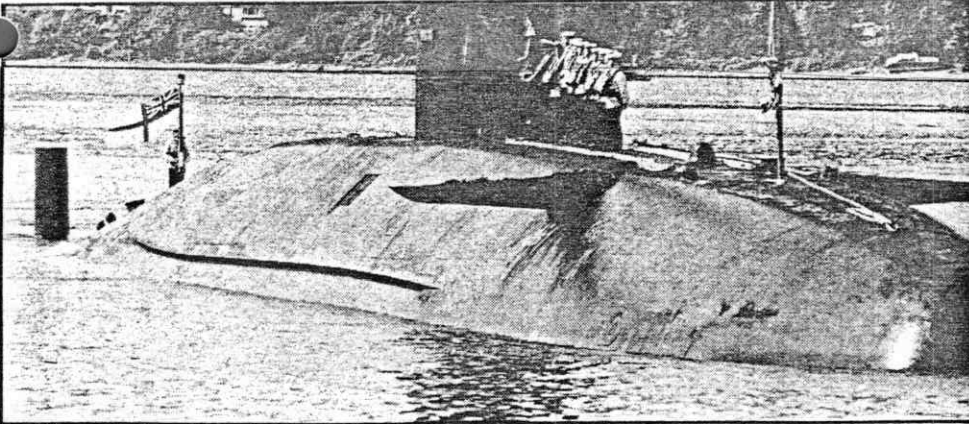
Considerable pressure and temperatures have to be sustained.

It is believed that as the fault occurred in an older sub, fatigue - which has been blamed for accidents involving ageing aircraft - has played a part.

The MoD stressed there has been no risk at any time to personnel working on the submarines' refit.

They also said that crews at sea were in no danger.

"The submarines are not unsafe," the spokesman added.



The Clyde-based Conqueror ... one of the nuclear powered subs at the centre of the alert

