

Nuclear sub had crashed before

by ANDREW WILSON

THE Royal Navy is tightening its net for its nuclear submarines after the second accident to the Polaris boat in three years. The latest incident, for which the captain of HMS Renown was court-martialled last week, took place in April last year.

The submarine hit the sea bed on trials in the Firth of Clyde. There were no operational missiles on board. The 40-year-old captain, Commander J. Whiteside, was found guilty of negligence and sentenced to be reprimanded.

The earlier incident involving HMS Renown, and a different accident, was not reported in the press. It also took place in the Clyde estuary. On this occasion the submarine was surfacing and it collided with a coaster.

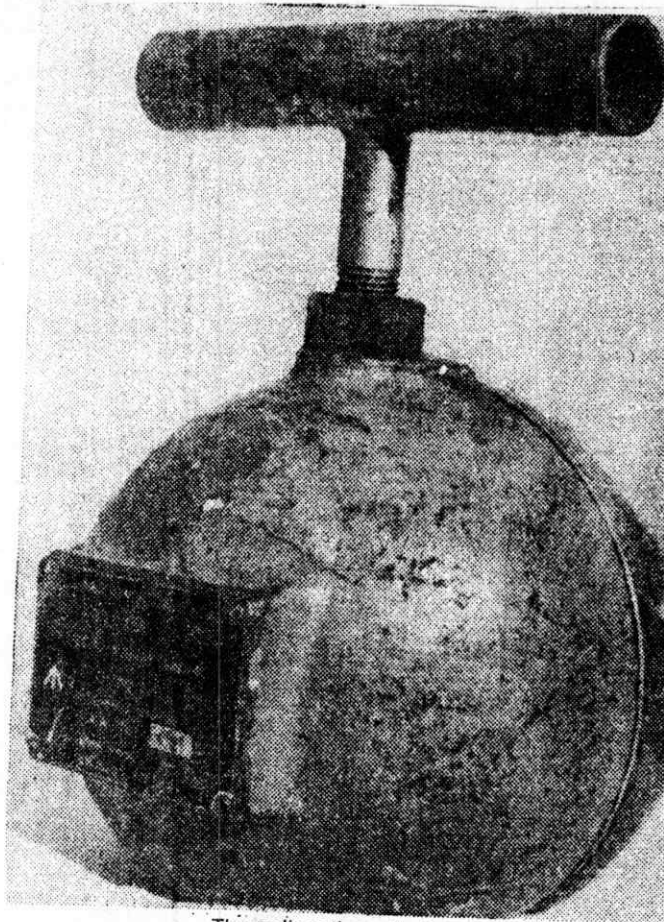
The crew of the coaster were unsure what had bumped them and thought it was a log. They reported in port that they had touched an obstruction. The submarine captain did not remember the incident. When it came to light he was summarily relieved of his command.

A court martial subsequently confirmed his transfer to another part of the service.

Both courts martial were held behind a camera for security reasons believed to concern electronic listening devices which, on the surface of it, should have made both accidents impossible. Some electronics experts have suggested that the coaster's presence near the submarine should have been detected by equipment used to determine the Polaris boat's depth beneath the ice on winter patrols.

Concern is felt in naval circles about the two accidents on two occasions. First, they suggest the danger of a radioactive discharge if the reactor compartment of a hull should be damaged in a collision in the Clyde estuary. Secondly, a submarine could be damaged while returning from a winter patrol.

With only four submarines in service there could, in certain circumstances, then be an interruption without a Polaris boat on patrol.



The radioactive cylinder.

Missing cobalt found in nuclear dry dock

THE radioactive cobalt missing inside Rosyth's top security nuclear dock since last February, turned up yesterday.

It was found covered with lead sheeting at the bottom of the dry dock where Polaris submarines are refitted.

A top-level police investigation was under way last night.

A Ministry of Defence spokeswoman said: "No member of the work force has been exposed to higher-than-normal radiation in the course of their work."

He added: "Work is proceeding normally."

But the Transport and General Worker's Union claimed last night that dockyard management had been grossly negligent in failing to trace the cobalt sooner.

The union's district organiser, Mr Jim McIntyre, said: "We will want to have our own inquiry, particularly through the health and safety machinery at the dockyard."

"It seems incredible that police and senior health representatives could have failed to find this cobalt under some lead sheeting."

"Lead sheeting, one would have thought, would have been the first material anyone would look under."

There was speculation among workers at Rosyth Dockyard last night that when the hunt for the cobalt was resumed after the Civil Service strike, it had been on a low-key basis.

During the strike the search had been virtually called off because health monitors were involved in the dispute.

Many workers believe that the cobalt has been lying at the spot at which it was found since last September or October.

The MoD spokeswoman said she did not want to prejudice police inquiries, but admitted that someone must have covered the 3in.-long cobalt bolt with lead sheeting. Its 24lb lead container was found in the nuclear dock last April.

A special key had been used to extract the cobalt bolt.

Last year the then Navy Minister, Mr Keith Speed, admitted the cobalt had probably been stolen to embarrass the MoD or even the Government.

The cobalt could damage human tissue exposed to it for any length of time.

Mr Derek Stubbs, chairman of the union's Whitley Council at Rosyth Dockyard, said: "The cobalt was obviously placed at the dock bottom by a mischievous person or persons."