

Sub that sank Belgrano goes down in £600m defence cuts

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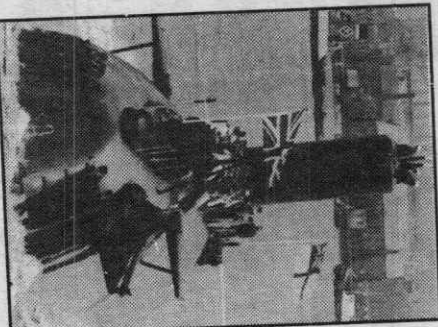
By IAN BRUCE,
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HMS Conqueror, the nuclear hunter-killer submarine which torpedoed and sank the Argentine cruiser Belgrano during the Falklands war, is to be scrapped as part of a programme of emergency spending cuts announced yesterday to trim £600m from the current defence budget.

Eight other Royal Navy vessels, including the £150m specialist seabed operations ship HMS Challenger, also are to go. The six-year old Challenger, designed to rescue submarine crews, launch deep-diving teams, and tow an unmanned submersible for exploration and mapping of the ocean floor, is to be sold.

The cuts were made necessary by higher-than-expected inflation which would have involved the Ministry of Defence in a £600m overspend this year. The RAF's budget is to be cut by £200m, the Navy's by £170m, and the Army's by £160m. A further £70m is to be clawed back from cuts in research and general defence projects.

The immediate impact of the



HMS Conqueror: 370 died when she sank the cruiser Belgrano off the Falklands

cuts will be felt at Devonport, where hundreds of jobs will be lost because of the scrapping of ships due for refit. Rosyth dockyard, which employs 5000, is unaffected for the moment. The RAF, as announced several weeks ago, has cancelled its final batch of 33 Tornado air-

craft, worth £60m, and is to save a further £140m through reduced running costs, spares, and servicing. This is likely to have the effect of cutting flying time for aircrews.

The Navy is to lose Conqueror, Challenger, the ageing Leander-class frigate Phoebe, the Oberon-class diesel submarines Onslaught and Oberon, the 30-year-old minehunters Gavinton and Kirkliston, and the patrol craft Sandpiper and Peterel. All crews are to be redeployed to other posts. This will save an estimated £40m. Another £130m is to come from fuel and ammunition cuts, delaying refits, and a range of other measures.

Army recruitment is to be cut by 4000, procurement of new equipment cut or slowed down, ammunition stocks — already in short supply — not replaced, and works programmes on barracks and training areas in Germany reduced.

Conqueror, the only serving British submarine to have sunk an enemy vessel in action, is one of the oldest of the nuclear hunter-killer fleet. She was built by

Cammell Laird at Birkenhead in 1971, and underwent an £80m refit five years ago.

Since then, the boat has reportedly developed serious rust problems in her reactor compartment, and it emerged last night that for the past seven months — since reactor ul's were found in HMS Warspite — Conqueror and two other nuclear submarines, Courageous and Valiant, have remained alongside at Faslane.

A spokesman for Scottish CND last night claimed that the Ministry of Defence was lying about its reasons for getting rid of the Conqueror. He said that in 1983 there was a serious incident in its reactor while the submarine was on its way to the Falklands, and that at the beginning of this year several of the workers at Faslane telephoned Scottish CND to say the submarine was "very dangerous".

Conqueror's voyage to Devonport Dockyard at Plymouth to be decommissioned will be under tow.