

Atomic sub fire inquiry

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A NAVY investigation began yesterday into a fire which damaged HMS Conqueror, the nuclear submarine.

Conqueror, the vessel which sunk the Argentinian cruiser, the General Belgrano, during the Falklands conflict, suffered damage to its engine room in the blaze on Wednesday night, at Devonport.

The Navy stressed yesterday that the fire, which was put out after an hour, was nowhere near Conqueror's reactors.

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Second sub sinks

The sinking of a Soviet missile submarine last month after an explosion and fire has highlighted the risk of nuclear accidents. When it was built, the Yankee-class submarine was the world's largest. When this particular boat sank it was carrying sixteen SS-N-6 ballistic missiles each carrying a large H-bomb warhead.

The one feature of this accident was that it got a great deal of publicity. Most of the other accidents over the past thirty years have been shrouded in secrecy. Even so, use of the Freedom of Information Act in the US has made it possible to bring many details to light.

There have been at least forty serious accidents involving nuclear weapons or military reactors. In at least eight cases, nuclear weapons have been lost and not recovered and in as many as twenty cases there has been contamination with radioactive materials. In January 1966, for example, a B-52 strategic bomber crashed near Palomares in Spain. One of its four H-bombs broke up on hitting the ground and caused extensive contamination. More than 1400 tons of rock, top-soil and vegetation were removed to a secure storage site in the United States.

Only a few days later another B-52 crashed in Greenland and all four H-bombs were burnt in the subsequent fire. This time 1.5 million gallons of ice and snow were removed for storage during the decontamination operation.

The recent Soviet submarine accident has awakened interest in a disaster which took place 140 miles off Lands End in 1970. Then, a Soviet nuclear-powered submarine, almost certainly carrying nuclear torpedoes, experienced a serious reactor accident and was scuttled. The submarine wreck with its damaged reactor and nuclear weapons has been lying on the sea-bed ever since and all efforts to find out if any monitoring has been carried out have been met with silence.

● Paul Rogers

A comprehensive list of nuclear weapons accidents is available from Paul Rogers at the School of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, West Yorkshire, free of charge but please send a large stamped addressed envelope (good material for your local journalists whenever the next nuclear accident happens!).

Nuclear subs checked for 'defect'

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ALL Royal Navy nuclear-powered submarines are to be checked after the discovery of a fault in one vessel's nuclear reactor, it was revealed last night.

The Ministry of Defence said a "technical defect" was found during a routine refit, which is understood to have been carried out at Devonport dockyard in Plymouth.

It is believed the vessel was one of the Valiant class which includes HMS Conqueror, the vessel responsible for sinking the Belgrano during the Falklands conflict.

Last night unofficial sources revealed that the Conqueror suffered a "serious incident" in its nuclear reactor on the way to the Falklands in 1982, which resulted in the reactor being shut down.

However, it was not known whether the two faults were related.

The MoD said submarines in harbour were being checked for the defect, while those at sea would be inspected when they returned to port.

A Ministry spokesman stressed there was no danger to personnel working on the refit, and added: "The submarines are not unsafe. Safety is paramount."

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

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

Labour's Navy spokesman, Roland Boyes, said he would be demanding a statement from the Defence Secretary, Tom King, in the Commons today. "I am greatly concerned about the effect this defect might have had on the men," he said.

"I will be calling on Mr King to carry out immediate checks to ensure that the defects give rise to no contamination."

The five-vessel Valiant class is the oldest in service, built between 1962 and 1968. The nuclear reactor cores were made in the UK with machinery of British design.

Nuclear sub sinking kept secret, says MP

A SOVIET nuclear submarine sank off the Faroe Islands just over 15 years ago, yet no British Government has acknowledged the fact, an MP claimed yesterday.

Mr Tam Dalyell, Labour member for Linlithgow and a member of the party's national executive, has written to Mr George Younger, Defence Secretary, about the accident, which is recorded in an obscure table in the May issue of the authoritative journal, Navy International.

He said the submarine

apparently had an internal fire in April or May, 1970, and was scuttled by the crew to prevent the fire from reaching the reactor compartment.

Mr Dalyell has asked Mr Younger whether the Ministry of Defence accepts that such an accident took place, why no reference was made to it, what steps are being taken to monitor radiation, either from reactors or sunken weapons, whether the exact location of the scuttled ship is known, and what information is being made public about radiation.

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