

Fears over fire near nuclear missiles sub

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The 425ft. submarine carries 16 Poseidon missiles and has a complement of 20 officers and 148 other ranks.

Mr William Peden, a navy spokesman, said: "We saw the American submarine in the dry dock with a large pall of thick black smoke hanging over it. Workers told us a welding torch had been left on it. It was a gas bottle which had exploded, causing the fire."

A spokesman for the Ministry of Defence denied this was the cause of the fire. He said it was caused by an electrical fault in a capstan motor igniting a small quantity of canvas which had been left on top of the motor.

He also denied that the submarine was in any danger from the fire.

Nathaniel Greene was in the dry dock with its full complement of nuclear missiles on board.

The anti-nuclear protest was carried out by the submarine base, peace protesters have claimed.

The submarine was in the dock for repairs after having lost its nuclear warheads so close to heavily populated areas.

"According to our information the fire broke out after a small explosion on the dry dock. We were lucky on this occasion that it was brought under control because the possible consequences of a fire in the dry dock would have been disastrous."

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Questions for MoD on sub's lost sonar

By David Fairhall, Defence Correspondent

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Defence ministers will be closely questioned during today's Navy debate in the Commons about how the nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarine, HMS Splendid, lost its trailing sonar array.

If reports that it was torn off while playing cat and mouse with a Soviet ballistic missile submarine in the Barents Sea prove correct, opposition MPs will demand to know how such potentially dangerous and possibly provocative activity can be justified.

HMS Splendid is safely back in the Devonport naval dockyard at Plymouth, undergoing what the Defence Ministry described yesterday as "routine maintenance." A spokesman said that it was not undergoing damage repairs, but he would not comment on any other aspect of its recent patrol.

The reason submarines like HMS Splendid are known as hunter-killers is that they are designed and equipped with sonar listening devices, torpedoes and missiles, for tracking enemy submarines as well as surface ships.

In a general war between Nato and the Warsaw Pact, one of their jobs would be to prevent Soviet hunter-killers breaking out from the shallow confines of the Barents Sea into the open Atlantic. Another would be to locate Soviet ballistic missile submarines—the equivalent of the Royal Navy's

Polaris boats—and destroy them before they launched their nuclear-tipped missiles.

In peace time, therefore, British and Soviet submarines have to practise lying in wait for one another listening, shadowing and closing in sufficiently to launch their homing torpedoes or missiles. Sooner or later this is bound to lead to a near miss or a collision—as it has before.

The question for the Navy and the House of Commons is whether an unnecessary or disproportionate risks were taken this time. A suggestion in yesterday's Mail on Sunday that a Soviet submarine may deliberately have severed the Splendid's towed array of sonar hydrophones in order to recover it seems extremely unlikely, because of the manoeuvre's inherent difficulty and because what little could be learned about Nato's anti-submarine technology would not justify the risks involved.

The Alliance defence spokesman, Mr John Cartwright, said last night he would seek a factual explanation from the Ministry of Defence. If this was not simply an accident it would be necessary to review the guidelines governing submarine operations of this kind.

Mr Tam Dalyell, Labour MP for Linlithgow, said that he would also be raising the matter during today's debate and seeking to discover how valuable the lost equipment was.