

Melanie Spriggs, with her children, Emma, 15, and David, 9... thwarted in attempts to get her husband's radiation records PHOTOGRAPH: MARTIN GOODWIN

Widow fights radiation secrecy

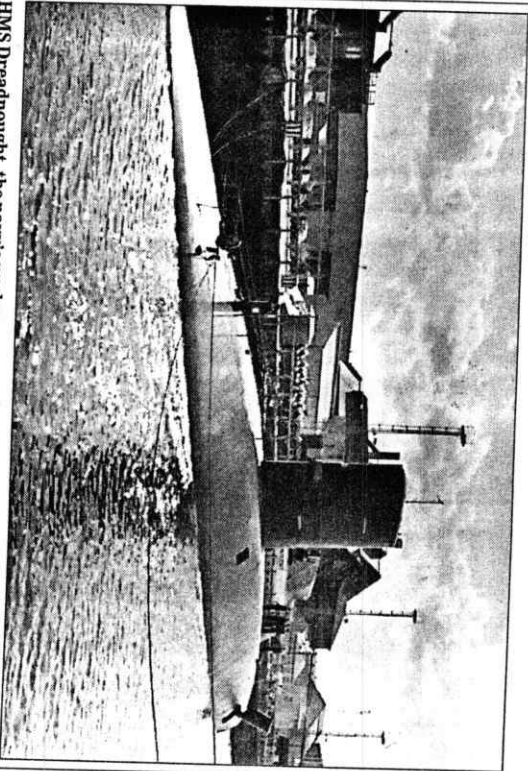
DAVID Spriggs was an engine fitter working deep in the reactor compartment of the nuclear-powered submarine, Dreadnought, in Chatham naval dockyard when the pipe above his head burst, drenching him in water.

The supervisor said carry on to the end of the shift, so it was not for another hour that he realised the water was contaminated with radioactivity. Repeated showering and scrubbing failed to quieten the geiger counters. The management told him would have to take six months off nuclear work. But in a couple of weeks he was back, because they had "a rush job" on.

Years later, in October 1994, when Mr Spriggs was suddenly taken ill with a virulent cancer, he told this story for the first time to his wife, Melanie. He was sure what had caused his appallingly painful illness. "It's that nuclear thing," he told her.

Four months later he was dead, aged 38, leaving his wife to begin a long campaign for an official explanation — and perhaps eventually some compensation — from the Ministry of Defence.

As soon as word got round the Kent dockyard community that David Spriggs's widow was trying to obtain her



HMS Dreadnought, the navy's nuclear-powered submarine, where David Spriggs worked
husband's radiation records, others began to call her with similar stories. She says: "You'd be surprised how many young people have died of cancer after working in the base."

The newly elected mayor of Rochester-upon-Medway, Linda Robson, whose husband also died young after working on nuclear submarines, has given her support. The council is about to announce a scheme with the ministry under which all former workers at the base, which closed in 1984, will at least be offered "health counselling".

But for Melanie Spriggs (now remarried as Mrs Nicolson) dealing with the ministry has proved an uphill struggle. "They put every obstacle they can in your path."

Her dying husband had insisted that something should be done, if only because so many others might be at risk. "That's why I've pursued it, for him and for the children."

Her solicitor, Ian Baker, of Guy Clapham and Co, began by asking the ministry for Mr Spriggs's medical records, only to be referred to the government-sponsored Compensation Scheme for Radiation

Linked Diseases, a "no-fault" scheme which only pays out if you agree not to litigate. The CSRDL regretted it could do nothing without some record of the radiation dose Mr Spriggs received during his five years in the submarine dockyard — a record the ministry said it could not find.

So the case went to the High Court, which ordered the ministry either to produce the radiation record or explain its absence. Mr Spriggs's personal file did eventually appear, but without the necessary radiation information. Now the solicitors are demanding the radiation film badges he wore, if they still exist, and accident reports from HMS Dreadnought, the navy's oldest nuclear-powered submarine.

For the Defence Ministry's lawyers, already under fire over sexual and racial discrimination in the armed forces, the Spriggs case could set important and potentially expensive precedents. About 2,500 men from the Medway town worked on nuclear submarines before the dockyard and its associated naval base closed.

Mr Baker does not rule out the possibility of seeking compensation for his client from the CSRDL. The scheme was set up through British Nuclear Fuels following a suc-

cessful action against the ministry in 1983 by another Chatham dockyard fitter who contracted leukaemia.

But Guy Clapham and Co have been warned. In a letter from the CSRDL dated October 23 last year, that should their client "choose to take legal action then the Scheme will no longer be available as an alternative and she will still be faced with the position that MoD cannot locate dose records for Mr Spriggs."

The legal requirement to keep radiation dose records varies from two to 10 years, depending on the type of work involved. Mr Spriggs worked on the submarines Churchill and Dreadnought between 1972 and 1979.

But his widow is determined to pursue the case, if only to establish whether her children, Emma, aged 15, and David, nine, are also at risk through some sort of genetic damage.

Linda Robson's husband, Tim, who campaigned for ministry recognition of the dockyard workers' health problems as a city councillor, died of cancer in August 1995, aged 39, unable to obtain compensation under the existing rules. His case was fairly typical, says his widow. "Lots of young men with families who've been robbed of their lives, and the MoD not accepting its duty of care."