

Doubt cast on UK SSBN force

SUBMARINES

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Concerns about the UK's ability to maintain a submarine-based strategic nuclear deterrent have grown after nuclear reactor cracks, contributing to the decommissioning of the SSNs HMS *Warspite* and *Churchill*, were reported to also be troubling the UK's *Resolution* class SSBNs.

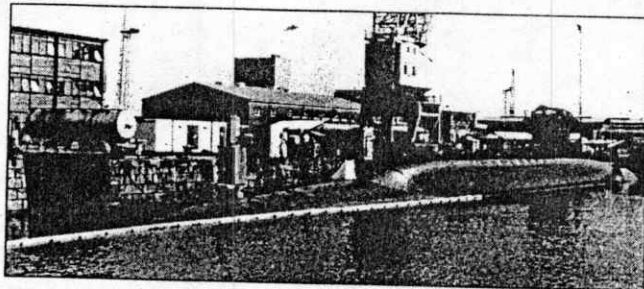
Speculation that a gap in UK SSBN patrols will occur next year mounted when it was reported by local newspapers in Faslane, Scotland, that HMS *Resolution*, expected back early last month after a three-month patrol, had extended its stay at sea.

JDW understands this is related to the lack of an available replacement SSBN. Of the three other UK SSBNs, HMS *Renown* is still in the dockyard at Rosyth, having been there in refit since 1988 and not expected out before late next year due to discovery of cracks in the pipes of its PWR-1 nuclear reactor's primary cooling system.

HMS *Revenge* has been found to have developed similar cracks, while HMS *Repulse* may also have the fault: in the past two years it has spent only one month on patrol, press reports said.

The Polaris A3 missile-carrying *Resolution* class boats have to operate until at least 1995, when the first of the new *Vanguard* class Trident D5-equipped SSBNs is expected to become operational. The existing SSBN force came into service between 1967-69 and had a planned life of 20 years.

UK Armed Forces Minister Archie Hamilton said in



A casualty of cracks in its nuclear cooling system, HMS *Renown* has been in the docks since 1988

Parliament that "a programme of inspections of all the RN's in-service nuclear-powered submarines is in progress following the discovery of a technical defect in one of the submarines during refit."

MoD sources confirmed that HMS *Warspite* and *Churchill*, from the oldest batch of five SSNs, are being decommissioned partly because of the discovery of the same type of reactor problem. According to the MoD, the SSNs were scheduled for

decommissioning anyway under the 'Options for Change' cut-backs. Both boats were undergoing extensive refits (*Warspite* since March 1988 in Devonport; *Churchill* since March 1989 at Rosyth) and an estimated £150 million (\$296 million) had already been spent on them.

HMS *Conqueror*, another SSN, was decommissioned earlier this year. Naval analysts said the cracking problem would be much more serious in SSNs, because they run at maximum

power output more often than SSBNs.

It was expected that all *Valiant* and *Churchill* class SSNs, as well as the first two of the *Swiftsure* class (HMS *Swiftsure* and *Sovereign*), will be decommissioned as a result of the reactor problem and in line with the RN's plan to cut back to "around 16" fleet submarines (about 12 of which will be nuclear-powered) and four SSBNs.

The "about 12" SSNs will then be composed of the seven *Trafalgar* class boats and possibly only four or five *Swiftsure* class boats. The four *Upholder* class SSKs will complete the 16-strong force structure.

■ Four UK fishermen were reported missing when their 16 m trawler was dragged underwater after the RN *Trafalgar* class SSN HMS *Trenchant* snagged their fishing gear off the Isle of Arran, Western Scotland, in the early hours of 22 November.

The UK MoD said there had been 13 such incidents since 1981, one of which — in the Irish Sea — was fatal.

Fishermen, however, say more than 40 incidents have taken place.

The RN says an investigation will be held.

Malaysia to buy 28 Hawks

AIR FORCES

BY ROBERT KARNIOL
KUALA LUMPUR

Airod are still going on."

Airod, which handles aircraft maintenance and repair for the Royal Malaysian Air Force together with similar contract work for other civil and military clients, is owned jointly by the Malaysian Government and Lockheed. The company's President, James Watt, told *JDW* that offset talks with BAe include some technology linked directly to the Hawk purchase and some with broader applications.

Malaysia plans to buy 28 BAe Hawk fighters at a cost of M\$2 billion (\$770 million), according to Defence Minister Secretary General Datuk Nasruddin Bahari.

Eighteen will be two-seat Hawk 100s; 10 will be single-seat Hawk 200s. Included in the price are spares for 200 flying hours per aircraft.

Datuk Nasruddin noted that an agreement has yet to be signed, but observers believe this to be imminent. "We have concluded 75 per cent of the negotiations," the secretary general said. "Only talks pertaining to the transfer of technology between BAe and

One aim for Malaysia is to acquire the capability to maintain the Hawks locally, but Watt says it will be about eight years before Airod can perform scheduled depot-level work.

The Hawk deal is part of a broader MoU between Malaysia and the UK that could be worth more than £1 billion (\$1.97 billion). Malaysia initially aimed to buy Tornados, but these appear to be too costly.

Kuala Lumpur-based observers say that negotiations are also underway with the UK for the purchase of Sea Eagle anti-ship missiles for use with the Hawks.