

## Underwater confrontation

### Submarine versus Submarine

by Richard Compton-Hall, *David & Charles*, pp 191, £13.95

William Scanlan Murphy

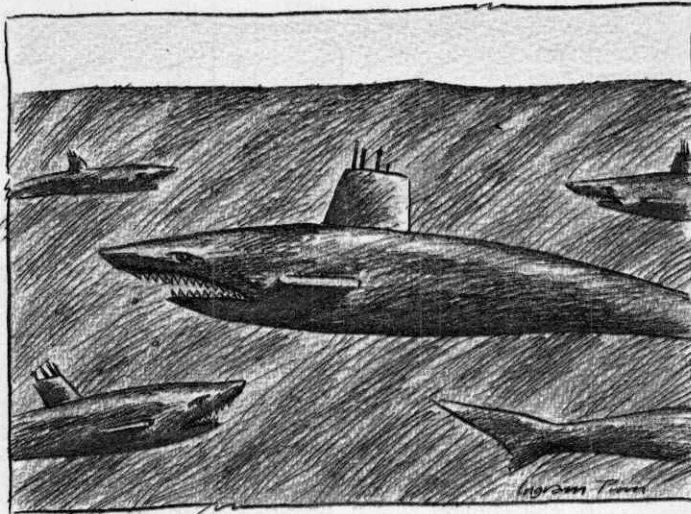
THE ITS flashy presentation and a series of "scenario" paintings that look alarmingly like old Airfix jostops, this is very far from being a book solely for the naval buff or armchair admiral. Commander Richard Compton-Hall, director of the Royal Navy Submarine Museum, offers an icily objective, easily grasped and occasionally grimly funny summary of current and future underwater weaponry.

Mr Gorbachov's recent declaration of a unilateral reduction in forces had nothing to say about the navy, let alone submarines, yet it is under the polar ice and around the Soviet Union's ballistic-missile submarines that the (very) final conflict is likely to begin. *Submarine versus Submarine* deals with the nuts and bolts of that conflict and Compton-Hall gives a fiercely thorough crash-course in the design and operation of modern submarines and their weapons. Loved, loathed or ignored, submarines are ultimately what "defence" has come to mean.

The actual technological analysis in the book is, in fact, almost alarmingly candid; the limitations of Western equipment earn the same brisk treatment as the dazzling achievements of recent Soviet boats. The author's bottomless fund of historical background and the many excellent photographs set the whole subject in a context whose message is all too often one of *déjà vu*, not least in the Soviet resurgence of midget submarines, an important but neglected weapon of the Second World War. Unless, of course, the Swedish Commander-in-Chief is wrong, and Swedish waters really *are* infested with "giant prehistoric centipedes".

While *Submarine versus Submarine* is strong on Soviet underwater cloak-and-daggery, it shows a tendency to steer round the darker doings of the West. I suspect that this may have been due to a fear of alienating more conservative readers. But because these will, in any case, be outraged by the author's views on the strategic deterrent, it would have been worthwhile considering, for example, the increasingly bizarre behaviour of the US Navy. There is, I believe, something of a trade-off to be made between the undoubted personnel problems of the Soviet Navy (short-term conscription, nationality conflicts and so on) and those reportedly threatening the US Navy (drugs and inadequate education).

Thus, although we can read (wide-eyed, in my case) of what



seems to have been a biological warfare test on Royal Naval families at Faslane, the book is silent on such horrors as the near-disastrous dropping of a Poseidon missile from the Holy Loch tender USS Hunley in 1981, believed to have resulted from the widespread use of recreational chemicals at the base. A more insistent, dimly audible, time bomb is the fact that ballistic missiles on US Navy submarines are not electronically locked. A cheesed-off

crew might well be so mean as to start the Apocalypse without us.

Those expecting an apologia for Britain's purchase of Trident are in for a surprise. *Submarine versus Submarine* lays out, in the clearest possible terms, the military rationale for a rejection of the "independent" deterrent, expounding a view which is, in fact, widely held in the navy, if, so far, discussed only on a consenting-adults basis. The six numbered paragraphs with which Compton-Hall opens the

chapter on submarine-launched missiles should be nailed to the door of 10 Downing Street, with copies to every political leader. The fact that *nobody*, regardless of political views (unilateral, multilateral or bomb-*em-flateral*), will find them a comfortable read is perhaps the surest sign that the author is talking sense. At the very least, there is a basis here for a sane argument hardly normal in the defence arena.

In the second half of the book, Compton-Hall provides a series of (mercifully imaginary) "scenarios", factional escapades for the hardware described earlier. Some of the submariners he describes might be suspected of a mass breakout from the pages of *Valiant*—the Westerners just a fraction too square-jawed, the Russians too stolid—but an entertaining style is no great crime.

For me, the book's only real cause for deep depression is its adoption of American spelling throughout. It seems, alas, that our language is becoming as "independent" as Britain's "deterrent". There is, in fact, more than a little irony lurking there. But, for all that, *Submarine versus Submarine* remains an object lesson in not judging a book by its cover. This is *not* a book to decorate a naval enthusiast's coffee-table—but its ideas may help to prevent the table from becoming irradiated charcoal. □

Moyna,

Could you please pursue the underlined ideas, through a purchase or the Mitchell Library or British C.N.D., etc.?

Jan.