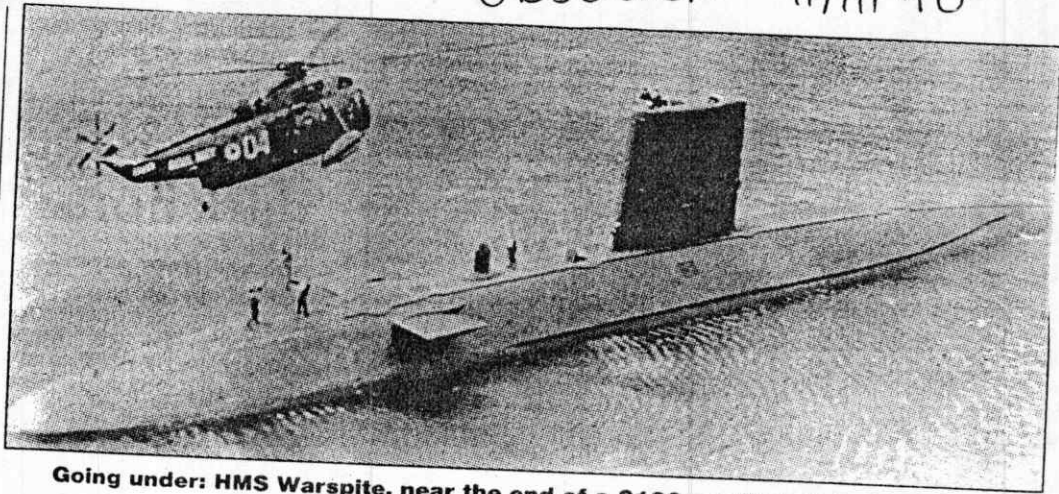


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OBSERVER 11/11/90



Going under: HMS Warspite, near the end of a £100m refit, is to be scrapped.

Cracks threaten to cripple N-sub fleet

Peter Beaumont

THE FUTURE of almost half of Britain's 22-strong nuclear submarine fleet was in doubt yesterday after it was revealed that one of the hunter-killer subs, HMS Warspite, is to be scrapped. This follows the discovery of a crack in its nuclear propulsion system.

The Royal Navy said the 23-year-old Valiant-Churchill class submarine, nearing the end of a £100 million, 31-month refit at Devonport, was to be decommissioned 'as part of the Government's defence cuts' announced earlier this year.

Labour's defence spokesman, Martin O'Neill, immediately condemned the decision and said he would be calling for an inquiry into why taxpayers' money had been wasted.

The announcement that the Warspite is to be scrapped follows the decision in September to retire its sister ship, HMS Conqueror, also at the end of its refit, after a similar fault was discovered. Two other sister

ships, the Valiant and Courageous, have also been confined to port since last autumn.

Sources told *The Observer* that it was 'odds on' that the rest of the Valiant-Churchill class would have to be decommissioned.

Discovery of the fault has even more serious implications for those submarines that carry Britain's Polaris missiles (Valiant-Churchill submarines do not carry nuclear missiles).

The Polaris submarines Renown, Repulse, Resolution and Revenge — which are planned to be replaced by Trident II submarines, a project running three years behind schedule — all have the same P1 reactor system as the hunter-killers. If cracks develop in the Polaris boats before Trident is ready, a gaping hole in Britain's strategic defences could develop.

John Large, an independent nuclear engineer, said: 'Since the reactors on the Polaris submarines are exactly the same design, as well as being older

than the Valiant-Churchill submarines, then the same design defect is likely to exist. It seems as though the Ministry of Defence might be stretching its luck in continuing to operate these submarines until the Tridents come into commission.'

The cracks are understood to be the result of a design fault in the P1 reactor, where the metal has become brittle. A final decision to scrap the Warspite was made after Rolls-Royce told the Royal Navy that it would be impossible to weld.

The explanation that the Warspite was to be decommissioned as part of the Government's defence cuts was described as 'nonsense' by a leading Devonport dockyard union official, Bill Goffin.

He said HMS Warspite was not among vessels named when Defence Secretary Tom King announced the cuts and said the boat had a long history of technical problems. It had been public knowledge for some time that there had been a reactor problem, he added.