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Phil Shiner

3 Nov 2000

Dear Phil,

I am writing to authorise you to carry out two hours of work with regard to HMS Triumph and the Secretary of State for Defence's decision to return the submarine to operational service.

John Ainslie
Adminstrator
Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

HMS Triumph

“The House will be aware that the United Kingdom hunter-killer submarine fleet was recalled recently for checks to be made on their reactor systems to determine whether they had the same defect as HMS Tireless. I can now update the House on the present position.

The inspections have shown that there is no evidence of the problem in five submarines. Although four of them were already alongside undergoing repair, maintenance or refit, this means that HMS Triumph, which has the capability to launch Tomahawk missiles, will return to operational duties very shortly.

Analysis of more detailed inspections will allow a recovery programme to be set in place for those submarines that are affected. We aim to have that established by the end of November. In the short term, HMS Triumph’s availability means that we are much better placed to conduct operations, including those in support of the deterrent.

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There is a programme of inspections. The reason why we were so determined that the inspections should take place as quickly as possible was concern that there was a generic design fault in the construction of the reactor. That appears not to be the case. In five of the boats we have not been able to find that particular problem. One of them will be very shortly available for deployment. We are continuing with more detailed inspections of the remaining vessels and I will certainly bring the House up to date as and when I have more specific information available.”

(Geoff Hoon, Hansard 1 Nov 2000, Defence and Armed Forces Debate, col 724-725)

A press release issued on 1 Nov 2000 by the MoD refers to the above statement and includes a note with the following list:

“Notes for editors:

1. The status of UK SSNs is as follows:

HMS Sovereign - Faslane for maintenance - clear of flaw
HMS Sceptre - Refit in Rosyth - clear of flaw
HMS Spartan - Refit in Rosyth - clear of flaw
HMS Triumph - Devonport - clear of flaw

HMS Superb - Faslane for maintenance - signs of flaw
HMS Splendid - Faslane - signs of flaw
HMS Trafalgar - Devonport - signs of flaw
HMS Turbulent - Devonport - signs of flaw
HMS Torbay - Refit in Devonport - signs of flaw
HMS Talent - Devonport for maintenance - signs of flaw
HMS Tireless - Gibraltar - defect under repair”

The Spanish government appointed a group of experts from their nuclear safety organisation (CSN) to meet with officials from the MoD for an exchange of information on HMS Tireless. The CSN report was made public in Spain on 30 October. It says that the accepted hypothesis is that the problem is a generic design defect -

“Los trabajos analizados para clarificar las causas de la avería han permitido establecer la hipótesis de que la grieta se ha producido como consecuencia de un proceso de fatiga térmica, debido a la comunicación de dos factores: *un defecto de diseño* en las características de la mecanización y las tensiones térmicas que se producen en esa zona durante la operación normal del reactor.

“La armada británica realizó una inspección en todos los submarinos nucleares de características similares, comprobando la existencia del mismo tipo de grietas en otras unidades en servicio. Dichas grietas que no habían llegado a producir fugas, determinaron la instrucción de retirada de servicio por parte de las autoridades británicas.

“La existencia del mismo tipo de problema en otras unidades confirma la hipótesis de que se trata de *un problema genérico* de esta clase de reactores que se localiza y restringe a este punto concreto del circuito. ”

“Analysis work to clarify the causes of the failure have allowed the hypothesis to be established that the crack has taken place as a result of a process of thermal fatigue, due to the combination of two factors: a design defect in the characteristics of mechanisation and the temperature stress that take place in that zone during normal operation of the reactor.

“The British Navy made an inspection of all the nuclear submarines of similar characteristics, verifying the existence of the same type of cracks in other units in service. These cracks which had not resulted in leaks, resulted in an instruction from the British authorities to retire them from service.

“The existence of the same kind of problem in other units confirms the hypothesis of a generic problem of this class of reactor that is located and restricted to this particular point of the circuit.”

The exact nature and cause of the problem on HMS Tireless are not yet fully understood. As a result the Navy do not know exactly what they are looking for on other submarines.

On 21 October when the government announced that submarines were being recalled they stated that HMS Triumph was in Toulon, France. The vessel sailed into Devonport on 27 October. Since the seriousness of the problem on Tireless was appreciated they will have had no opportunity to inspect Triumph. A full inspection could only be carried out several weeks after the reactor had shut down, by which time radiation levels would be lower.

It is likely that the reactor on HMS Triumph has been shut down on arrival in Devonport. There will be a risk of a nuclear accident when it is started up again to sail. It is possible that it may have been kept running at low power, in which case there is an ongoing hazard. As Geoff Hoon refers to the vessel being deployed in support of Trident submarines it is likely that it will be deployed in the near future to Scottish waters.