

Polaris 'forced' to spend longer at sea

By MICHAEL EVANS, DEFENCE CORRESPONDENT

BRITAIN'S Polaris nuclear submarines are spending longer at sea because rigorous new safety checks have forced the Royal Navy to change their normal patrolling sequences, Admiral Sir Julian Oswald, chief of naval staff, said yesterday.

Patrols by Polaris ballistic missile boats have been extended by about 15 per cent, he said. This is the equivalent of between one and two extra weeks at sea.

In an interview with *The Times*, Sir Julian said the safety checks of the submarines' nuclear reactors involved highly complex work. They were ordered after the discovery about 18 months ago of a fault in the primary cooling system around the

reactor of several of the navy's older nuclear-powered submarines. Polaris boats are more than 20 years old.

Sir Julian said the reactors were hard to get at. Contradicting recent reports by Greenpeace that the Polaris boats were no longer safe, Sir Julian said: "We're absolutely committed to the safe operation of marine nuclear reactors. There is no way, for the personnel and for the environment, that we would send reactors to sea unless we felt it was safe to do so."

Each boat has to be given a safety certificate by the independent nuclear-powered warships safety committee before going out on patrol. "We never have sent, and I hope we never will send a submarine to

sea against the advice of that committee," he said.

Sir Julian said he was satisfied that Britain would be able to rely on Polaris as the strategic deterrent until replaced by the Trident system. The first Trident boat is due to come into service in December 1994. Sir Julian said that deadline would be met.

"Polaris and Trident will run in tandem for a short time and then Polaris will be phased out," he said. Fewer people were now being trained for Polaris and less work was being carried out on Polaris missile maintenance.

The crew for the first Trident submarine, HMS Vanguard, was selected and in training, he said. The first Trident captain will be Commander David Russell.

HMS Vanguard is due to be "dunked" into the water from a hoisting platform in February and formally named in April.

Sir Julian admitted that while the timetable for Trident was "in general" running according to plan, it might still be necessary to carry out a final £100 million refit of a Polaris boat. A decision is expected soon.

Three Trident boats are under construction and an order for the fourth and final boat is expected early next year.