

Sub incidents

UPDATE

Further media attention was given to the danger to civilian shipping from submarine activity in the British Radio 4 documentary "Face the Facts" on January 12th. The programme interviewed a number of seafarers who had survived such encounters and highlighted the problems of getting the Navies to admit responsibility, even when loss of life has occurred.

Roland Shary, an ex-commander of the UK nuclear-powered sub HMS Courageous, now editor of Jane's Fighting Ships, a standard reference work on the world's navies, explained that subs were often unaware of any problems on the surface as, while their sonar systems can identify a ship and its direction, they cannot tell how far away they are.

Dick James of the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation seemed to bear this out when he described his experience on the fishing boat "Summer Morn", which was towed backwards for ten miles over 3 hours by a sub west of the Isle of Man in February 1977. On this occasion, a Sea King helicopter finally arrived and dropped communications equipment in the water. The sub then stopped, allowing the crew to cut the nets, freeing the boat:

"Somebody somewhere obviously pressed the panic button and submarines started surfacing all over the west Irish Sea... by our account there were at least six. Apparently it was a case of a ballistic submarine carrying missiles breaking out to its operating station, and it was being shepherded out, if you like, by a pack of other submarines. It was frightening to think that there were somewhere between 5 and 8 submarines coming down in very loose convoy. You nearly think something had to happen."

In this case it was proven to be a US sub when a 12-foot submarine buoy stamped "Fleet In the USA" hastily reclaimed by the authorities, was found by the fishermen. Even so, Dick James, like many other victims, is still awaiting compensation - the US Navy are reported to be even worse than the UK Navy in admitting responsibility and paying up.



"Scotland on Sunday" 12/3/89

In 1988, the MOD announced that sub-incident survivors who did not fall the press would get prompt compensation, and trawlermen also fear that certain sea areas will be closed to fishing boats if they complain too loudly, as "defence of the nation" may be considered more important. However, this has not stopped other incidents coming to light:

On December 6th, 1988 UK diesel sub "HMS Ocelot" suffered collision damage in the Irish Sea and returned to Faslane with the sonar dome on its forward deck ripped open, apparently by a fishing trawl or cable. The MOD dismissed this as "wave damage".

On January 3rd, Ayr-based trawler "New Dawn" was badly damaged in a surface collision with the US Benjamin Franklin Class sub "Will Rogers", based at the Holy Loch, five miles south of Arran at the mouth of the Clyde. The sub, seemingly unaware of the collision continued on its journey with minor scrapes, but a US Navy spokesman later confirmed the report.

On January 22nd Fleetwood-based trawler "Lau-Anr" nearly sank near Kintyre on the west coast of Scotland after being dragged backwards by an unidentified sub for 45 minutes. The Holy Loch refused to confirm or deny that one of their subs was involved, but an unexpected radio call from an operational commander at Faslane was received, asking whether there was any injury or damage, although the crew had only contacted the coast-guard at this point. Faslane later told Scottish newspaper "Fishing News" that "no NATO submarines were in the area at that time" and refused to comment further.

The peace movement underwent a serious depression during the second half of 1988, as people became diverted and/or disillusioned with the Dukakis campaign and the Democratic party. The movement is doing better now, with a number of strong activities planned for the next six months, primarily focussing on U.S. military intervention, including "Low Intensity" Conflict and foreign bases. Mobilization for Survival and others are working to prevent the reopening of the nuclear warhead factories; other groups are also focussing on the Comprehensive Test Ban, Star Wars, and East-West relations. As usual, naval issues are relatively low on the agenda, but they are receiving more attention than a few years ago. As Trident D-5s are deployed and the new Trident home-port opens at Kings Bay, Georgia, a number of actions are planned - often lying in with the Savannah River plant up the coast.

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TRIDENT PROTESTS IN THE U.S.

On January 16, Martin Luther King Day, 51 people were arrested during a demonstration at General Electric's Electric Boat Yard in Groton, Connecticut. Electric Boat assemblies both Trident and cruise carrying submarines. Several hundred demonstrators carried banners quoting M.L.King: Non-violence or non-existence. Other actions took place around the U.S. on the same day, some connected with the arrival of the USS Tennessee at Kings Bay, Georgia. The USS Tennessee is the first Atlantic based Trident as well as being the first to carry the D-5 missile.

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Changes in the U.S. North Pacific

Maritime Strategy

The November 1988 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists reports a change in the U.S. maritime strategy in the North Pacific. Fleet activity seems to be scaled back but submarine presence is increasing. In Alaska, new submarine facilities are being built at Adak Island. Previously used as a submarine listening and intelligence post, Adak is being upgraded to take on "minor refits or repairs" on subs, thus increasing time on station for North Pacific subs which will not need to return as often to Pearl Harbour or San Francisco. In 1983, it was reported that the U.S. was strengthening its Ohio class nuclear submarine fleet in order to break through Arctic ice.

US nuclear weapons flown over Europe

Details of US air transport of nuclear weapons to and from Europe have recently come to light.

As many as 12 flights a month take place between USAF McGuire in New Jersey and Europe, mainly undertaken by the 438th Military Airlift Wing, using C141 Starlifter planes. The flights shuttle weapons, including the free-fall bombs for F-111s, between the US and bases in West Germany, Italy, Turkey, Greece and the UK for periodic maintenance and replacement.

The flights to the UK go to St Mawgan in Cornwall, Upper Heyford in Oxfordshire, and Lakenheath in Suffolk, sometimes stopping overnight at Mildenhall in Suffolk, and amount to one or two a month.

The "Observer Scotland" (26/2/89) claimed that the planes follow the same route as the PanAm 747 that crashed on Lockerbie in December 1988, but other sources think another route is used, possibly passing through Irish airspace. If true, this would embarrass the authorities, as the Irish government claims not to allow such flights to use their airspace. In answer to questions in the Dail (Irish Parliament) on October 15th, Mr Lenihan, the Minister for Foreign Affairs stated that in the past three years 24,324 requests for overflight by foreign military aircraft were received, and ten requests were refused as they did not meet the normal conditions that the aircraft be unarmed, not carry arms, ammunition or explosives, nor engage in intelligence-gathering or form part of military exercises or operations.

Of the 280 Starlifters built since 1963, 13 have crashed, a record the military consider good, but the consequences of a crash involving up to 12 nuclear warheads will obviously alarm the public with the problems of the clean-up after the Lockerbie tragedy still fresh in their minds.

The response of the Labour Opposition Defense spokesman Martin O'Neill was therefore disappointingly limp, as he merely accepted the US transport of nuclear weapons as inevitable, and called for flights not to be routed over highly-populated areas "any more than is absolutely necessary". This is clearly nonsense given the location of the bases and the routes available.

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