

Out of its depth

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A former operator of British nuclear weapons considers the implications of AB McNeilly's revelations for the Royal Navy and the United Kingdom's Trident submarines.

On 17 May 2015, the Scottish *Sunday Herald* revealed that a whistleblower, 25-year-old Able Seaman William McNeilly, had released online an 18-page report containing serious allegations surrounding the safety and security of the British Trident ballistic missile-equipped submarine force, based at Faslane in Scotland.

McNeilly listed security breaches, fires, leaks, floods, failed tests, false alarms, and defective equipment. The missile compartment was used as an exercise gym; and there were doubts about whether missiles could be launched. The young submariner had been so shocked by what he saw and heard at Faslane and on a recent patrol in a Trident submarine that he raised his concerns with his superiors. When they did not take them seriously, he felt he had to risk imprisonment to warn the public.

Having released his report, he gave himself up to the naval authorities. Clearly embarrassed, they publicly dismissed his complaints as 'subjective and unsubstantiated', but announced an inquiry. This concluded that his allegations were 'factually incorrect or the result of misunderstanding'. Since then, McNeilly has blogged that he witnessed almost all of them himself or read about them in manuals on patrol, while the rest were recounted to him by experienced submariners.

The Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has now issued a damning report, *Substandard*, which appears elsewhere in this issue of *The Spokesman*. *Substandard* analyses McNeilly's allegations, and places them within the context of accidents and similar problems experienced by other UK nuclear

submarines. It makes disturbing reading.

A month on from McNeilly's bombshell, the Royal Navy confirmed he had been 'dishonourably discharged'. He has since revealed that all charges against him were dropped; and the real reason for his discharge was the damage he had done to the Navy's image.

This episode has indeed delivered a severe blow to the image of the British Submarine Service. Hitherto, they were seen as the Navy's most professional élite, second only to special forces. The problem is that Trident submarines have no fighting role, their mission being simply nuclear deterrence, for which they need to remain undetected. Yet on 4 February 2009, the British and French nuclear-armed and powered submarines on patrol in the Atlantic farcically collided. Furthermore, their role is to await a ridiculously unrealistic, and appallingly cruel, order to launch their nuclear-tipped missiles, with the real risk of being subsequently branded as no better than terrorists.

This helps to explain the apparent lapses in motivation and professionalism. The situation has clearly been exacerbated by shortage of spare parts, and skilled personnel – because the best of both are prioritised for the Royal Navy's attack submarine force. Underlying this is the reality that, since 1962 when the British government persuaded US President John F Kennedy to let the RN have a scaled down version of the Polaris force, the British Navy has struggled to 'keep up with the Yanks'.

My conclusion is that the Royal Navy is out of its depth operating the existing Trident system, starved of resources and trying to get by on the cheap. This dangerous situation – which the courageous actions of a patriotic young whistleblower have exposed – can only get worse if the UK Submarine Service has to take on whatever replacement the US is prepared to let the British have.

Amid severe defence budget cuts, the British Army and Royal Air Force see Trident replacement as a financially vulnerable irrelevance at a time when the security focus is on the so-called 'war on terror'. The main security threats in the 21st century include climate change, poverty, resource depletion, and financial crises, as well as terrorism. Nuclear deterrence prevents rather than assists the global co-operation required to solve them.

Trident replacement was an important issue in the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014, because British Trident submarines can only be based in Scotland. In the recent UK elections, the anti-Trident Scottish National Party won 56 out of 59 Westminster parliamentary seats in Scotland. With British public opinion divided and a

significant anti-nuclear citizen movement, the final decision on Trident replacement has been delayed until 2016.

The first anti-nuclear 'break-out' by one of the five permanent member states of the UN Security Council would be sensational. With the smallest nuclear arsenal deployed in just one system, the UK is the best candidate from among them to seize this unexpected new world role, which would overwhelmingly be welcomed by the international community.

In NATO, the UK would wield unprecedented influence – with wide support from non-nuclear-armed members – in leading the drive for a non-nuclear strategy, which must happen if NATO is to maintain its cohesion. It could cause heart-searching in the former British colonies of India and Pakistan, and open the way for a possible reassessment by the US, Russia, China and France. The Royal Navy, released from a militarily useless, politically controversial and implicitly unlawful role, which it is clearly struggling with, could refocus on what it does best: conventional deterrence, protection of maritime trade, and defence diplomacy.

**Robert Green served in the British Royal Navy from 1962 to 1982. As a bombardier-navigator, he flew in Buccaneer nuclear strike aircraft with a target in Russia, and then anti-submarine helicopters equipped with nuclear depth-bombs. On promotion to Commander in 1978, he worked in the Ministry of Defence before his final appointment as Staff Officer (Intelligence) to the Commander-in-Chief Fleet during the 1982 Falklands War. Now Co-Director with his wife, Dr Kate Dewes, of the Disarmament & Security Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand (www.disarmsecure.org), an updated ebook version of his 2010 publication *Security Without Nuclear Deterrence* is available. His 2011 Frank Kelly Lecture can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6oOdX0mnW0>, while earlier articles appeared in *Spokesman 127* (Trident Undone).*

With grateful acknowledgements to the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, which published a slightly longer version of Commander Green's article on its highly informative website (www.wagingpeace.org).