

Editorial

Substandard – Eyewitness reports Trident

In a 12,000 word report, Able Seaman William McNeilly details his experiences onboard HMS *Victorious*, one of the Royal Navy's four nuclear powered and nuclear armed submarines that sail from their homeport in Faslane, Scotland. McNeilly also probes security at Faslane itself, and finds it badly wanting.

Good practice in health and safety at work requires people to be diligent in observing what is going on around them, and for risk assessments to be prepared and regularly reviewed, and for designated procedures to be followed. The Royal Navy must have a major task in hand as a result of McNeilly's revelations. Defence Ministers have attempted to dismiss the Able Seaman's findings as 'factually incorrect or the result of a misunderstanding', but the United States Navy may take a different view. The United Kingdom leases 58 Trident ballistic missiles from the US Navy under a system of 'mingled asset ownership' (see *Spokesman 127*). What do the American authorities make of AB McNeilly's report, and its challenging comments about procedures for installing missile inverters onboard US Ohio Class Trident submarines, which seem to be much more stringent than on UK boats?

The words 'factual' and 'courageous' come to mind on reading AB McNeilly's account of his personal experiences at Faslane and his extended patrol on HMS *Victorious*. For the first time in some 30 years, we have a submariner's eyewitness account of how the Royal Navy struggles to operate a highly sophisticated and massively destructive nuclear armory onboard ageing boats with insufficient experienced personnel struggling with a chronic shortage of spare parts.

Should McNeilly's account be taken at face value? When it appeared, on 17 May 2015, the Russell Foundation immediately consulted Commander Robert Green, Royal Navy (Ret'd). He agreed that the report should, indeed, be taken at face value. Commander Green went on to say about McNeilly:

'His revelations of serious equipment defects and lax security in Britain's sole deployed SSBN [ship submersible ballistic nuclear], and alleged failure to rectify them when reported through the chain of command, provide a timely example of how the demands of operating such a sophisticated, hazardous weapons system lead to overstretch, cutting corners, and cover-ups. The conclusion I draw is that the RN is already out of its depth trying to operate the

existing Trident system, starved of resources and trying to get by on the cheap. Lord help them if they have to take on whatever replacement the Yanks deign to let the Brits have – if they do.’

We asked Commander Green to expand his informed observations, which we publish in this issue. We also publish John Ainslie’s extensive survey for Scottish CND of the safety of British submarines, which reveals a long history of fires, groundings, collisions and concealment. Written in response to McNeilly’s revelations, ‘Substandard’ provides telling context for assessing the mega-hazard posed by UK Trident boats. That the UK government wishes to prolong the risk for another 50 years, at a cost of some £100 billion pounds, suggest that, like the Royal Navy, it may also be out of its depth in managing such complex tasks.

Brendan O’Hara, the perspicacious new MP for Argyll and Bute, which includes Faslane, has signalled that Trident nuclear weapons and associated activities will be subject to much more searching scrutiny going forward. We publish some of his probing questions, together with the brief parliamentary debate initiated at Westminster by Alex Salmond of the Scottish National Party in response to AB McNeilly’s report. Jeremy Corbyn MP, frontrunner for leadership of the Labour Party, reminded the House of Commons of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons; a timely remark in the year that Hiroshima and Nagasaki commemorate the 70th anniversary of the atomic destruction of their cities and populations in August 1945.

Tony Simpson

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Michael Barratt Brown was a pillar of *The Spokesman*. When the magazine first appeared, in March 1970, he contributed an article, ‘The British Economy: What Future?’ which concluded: ‘A programme of socialist advance will be put forward in a later article’. Michael was as good as his word; hundreds of contributions followed, not all of them programmatic. Over the decades, his regular reviews ranged across diverse topics such as the quality of milk and the artist and designer, Edward Burne-Jones, whose work held a particular attraction for Michael. No more will his essays arrive to brighten our mornings. We bid farewell to our comrade and friend with a range of contributions.