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Unsafe British nuclear subs recalled

By Michael Evans
Defence Editor

BRITAIN is to be left without its strike force of nuclear submarines because safety fears have forced the Royal Navy to recall them all.

The fleet of "hunter killer" nuclear-powered submarines is expected to be out of action for months after a decision yesterday to cancel all operations following the discovery of a serious defect linked to the reactor system.

The decision to take all 12 vessels out of service followed a detailed inspection of *HMS Tireless*, a Trafalgar class boat which limped into Gibraltar in May with a leak in pipe-work running from the nuclear reactor system.

The arrival of the submarine caused a major diplomatic row between the Rock and Britain when the Ministry of Defence said it wanted to repair the damage at a dock in Gibraltar.

VLAD, ME OLD MATE -
HOW ABOUT A SUB?



The operational impact on the Navy following yesterday's decision will be devastating because the submarines play a crucial role in Britain's

The Navy will not know until next week whether the whole fleet has been affected or how long it will take to repair the defect.

But the sources said it appeared to be a "generic" fault — either a design or quality control issue — which indicated that all 12 submarines may be suffering the same problem.

The four strategic deterrent Vanguard class submarines armed with Trident ballistic missiles are not affected because the design is "totally different". They will remain fully operational.

However, Britain's nuclear deterrent patrols will not escape some impact from the recall of the hunter killers because one of the key roles of the Trafalgar class and Swiftsure class boats is to protect the huge Trident submarines from "enemy" boats when they leave their base at Faslane on the Clyde and go on patrol.

Now the MoD will have to use other methods of protection during initial stages of nuclear deterrent patrols, with other Royal Navy assets or the RAF.

Only two nuclear hunter killer submarines are currently on operation overseas. As soon as the recall decision was taken in London, Rear Admiral Robert Stevens, Flag Officer Submarines, sent a signal to them to return home as quickly as possible.

They are expected back in the next two or three days.

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Although after initial checks, the *Tireless* problem was believed to be a simple defect in welding, experts later realised there was a more serious defect, and the decision was taken to bring all the hunter-killer submarines home. Royal Navy sources said it was vital to put safety first and accept that there would be "op-

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Four submarines, *HMS Sceptre*, *Spartan*, *Trenchant* and *Torbay*, are in deep refit and will be repaired as part of the programme.

Navy sources said that the submarines still had their nuclear safety certificates, but it was felt prudent to make sure every boat was inspected as soon as possible because of the likelihood that all of them suffered from the same defect. It is not known how much the repairs will cost.