

Halifax could be wiped out by an accident on a nuclear weapons-capable vessel

Where the not-so-peaceful waters flow

By Peter Brown, reprinted from Peace Magazine



Unknown to most Canadians, U.S. nuclear weapons by the dozens are coming into Canada and sitting for a few days at a time in the middle of some of our largest cities.

As a favour to the United States, the Canadian government allows American warships to dock in Canadian harbours so that the ship crews can enjoy "R and R" in port cities such as Victoria, Vancouver, Halifax, St. John's, and Quebec City. Since about 85 per cent of the major combat vessels in the U.S. fleet are equipped to carry nuclear weapons, the result is that Canada is playing host to the weapons of World War Three on a regular basis.

How frequent are these visits? Quite common and growing more so. In 1985 there were 35 different nuclear weapons-capable vessels which spend a combined total of 272 "shipdays" here (a shipday is one day in port for each ship). This is roughly two-and-one-half times the year average of 120 shipdays for each of the previous ten years.

The U.S. Navy has a very convenient policy of "neither confirming nor denying" the presence of nuclear weapons on its ships. This allows the American and Canadian governments to sidestep the issue of whether we are allowing these weapons into Canada. Supposedly, this policy keeps sensitive military information from potential enemies.

But common sense tells us that the Soviet Union would assume the presence of nuclear weapons on all U.S. ships capable of carrying them, anyway. And they would probably be right. Chances are that any warship on active duty carries its full complement of weaponry.

In the words of retired U.S. Admiral Eugene Carroll, "It has been my experience...that all U.S. warships that are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, do carry nuclear weapons."

The nuclear arms on these warships include tactical, intermediate, and strategic weapons. Even the smaller weapons, however, fit into the dangerous new strategies developed by the "limited nuclear war" strategist at the Pentagon. A major accident with any of them would be an unequalled disaster for a city like Vancouver or Halifax.

Nuclear depth charges are the nuclear weapons most frequently carried into Canada. There are two kinds: ASROC (launched from surface ships) and SUBROC (launched from submarines). Both are designed to destroy enemy submarines. ASROC and SUBROC are among the oldest nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal and

lack many of the safety features in more modern weapons, making an accidental leak of radioactivity all the more likely. In fact, a recent U.S. Navy list of more than 600 accidents with its nuclear weapons put ASROC right at the top of the list.

These weapons might also be used to start a nuclear war, according to current U.S. thinking. The U.S. plan for anti-submarine warfare includes possible attacks against Soviet missile-carrying submarines early in a conventional war in order to "alter the nuclear equation" in favour of the U.S. before the war goes nuclear—which is a surefire way of guaranteeing that it does go nuclear.

The Tomahawk is a sea-launched version of the cruise missile. Its nuclear version does carry a nuclear warhead while it's in Canadian territory. Tomahawk is now being deployed on the U.S. Navy's Los Angeles class subs. Four of these subs spent a total of 41 shipdays in Canada in 1985.

Because it blurs the distinction between conventional and nuclear war, the Tomahawk is a very dangerous weapon. It comes in nuclear and conventionally-armed versions, which are virtually indistinguishable. The Soviet forces would probably not wait for an incoming Tomahawk to hit them to find out which kind of warhead it was carrying. They would assume the worst and respond with a nuclear attack of their own.

Poseidon and Trident are the real giants of the U.S. naval arsenal. These missiles have a range of up to 4,600 miles and are loaded aboard R.S. ballistic missile submarines. One of these subs, the U.S.S. Benjamin Franklin, which four days in Halifax in 1985, carries nearly 13 megatons of firepower—nearly four times the firepower used in all of World War II.

A case can be made that naval nuclear weapons are more dangerous than land-based weapons, because they are more likely to be used. According to naval expert

Desmond Ball, "the U.S. Navy is much more self-contained than the other services and its autonomy is cherished as a primary value." Unlike army or air force generals, navy commanders have the authority to fire their nuclear weapons without the permission of the U.S. President under some circumstances. Because the navies of both superpowers operate so close to each other these days, and because many ships carry both conventional and nuclear armaments for the same purpose, it's easy to imagine a minor engagement or a misunderstanding leading to either side's launching a nuclear weapon. Once that fateful decision has been made, there may be no turning back holt of worldwide nuclear war.

An immediate concern for Canadians is the danger of a nuclear weapons accident on a warship docked in one of our cities. As stated above, the U.S. Navy admits to a long list of accidents, several of which probably caused radioactive material to enter the environment.

However, all of the more severe accidents (which the U.S. military calls "broken arrows") so far have occurred far from population centres. But now that nuclear warships spend so much time in the harbours of big cities, there is a real chance that a community like Halifax or Vancouver could be made permanently uninhabitable.

The worst kind of nuclear accident would be a fire or explosion of the conventional explosives which surround the weapons' nuclear core. This would cause the radioactive elements to escape into the atmosphere in a cloud of plutonium oxide.

Plutonium is perhaps the most toxic substance known. On millionth of a gram, if inhaled, is enough to cause lung cancer. A nuclear warhead contains about five kilograms.

The plutonium oxide cloud from a major nuclear weapons accident could be as much as 28 miles long by two-and-one-half miles wide, according to a U.S. government study. Within that area, radioactive poisons would be everywhere—in the air, in the water supply, on the surfaces of cars and buildings, and on human skin.

Another U.S. study of this kind of accident estimated that, if just .001 per cent of the plutonium in the environment entered

human lungs, up to 50,000 cases of lung cancer could result.

There would undoubtedly be an attempt made to evacuate the area but it is hard to see how hundreds of thousands of people could be moved in time to avoid their contamination. But even if the evacuation succeeded, a clean-up of the radiation in the deserted city could never find and remove all the deposited particles of plutonium. Any of these contaminants left behind would remain deadly for thousands of years.

The U.S. government once conducted an experiment to see if an imaginary community of only 7,000 people could be made livable again after a hypothetical "broken arrow". They found it couldn't be done.

So why does the government put our ports at risk in this way? Operation Dismantle, a national disarmament organization, was told by the Department for External Affairs that "Canada considers allowing ships of the USA and other NATO allies to transit Canada's internal waters is an important element in Alliance cooperation."

It's hard to see how these visits do anything for our military security—except weaken it by giving the Soviets another reason to target our cities. We are contribution, not to deterrence, but to a naval nuclear weapons build-up that is making war more likely. And we are risking nuclear accidents bigger than Chernobyl right in the middle of large Canadian cities.

Operation Dismantle believes these visits deserve at least as much public attention as the flight-testing of the cruise. Peace activists in Halifax and on the West Coast are doing good work in publicizing the visits to their cities, but so far the federal government is not feeling much pressure on this issue because there is yet no national campaign.

Dismantle is now trying to build the public profile of "porting" by assisting groups in port cities and by contacts with M.P.s and the media. As a first step, Operation Dismantle has prepared a booklet, *Unsafe Harbours*, which is probably the only detailed treatment of this issue from a Canadian viewpoint. It is available from Dismantle, P.O. Box 3887, Station C, Ottawa, Ontario, K1Y 4M5 for \$2.00.

Stop the warships

Visits of warships of either superpowers to Canadian ports pose a grave danger to the cause of peace and Canadian sovereignty, stressed delegates to this weekend's conference of the Atlantic Region of Canadian University Press.

The conference passed a resolution brought forward by *The Gazette* which calls on student papers "to work to build the movement in the Atlantic region to stop the warships."

Over the past six years, people in the ports of Halifax, Quebec City, Toronto, St. Catherine's, Vancouver, and Nonoose have repeatedly staged protests or organized actions such as last summer's Peace Flotilla in Vancouver. Thirty boats tried to stop 11 U.S. warships from entering the harbour and berthing at Expo's celebration of July 4.

Although many of the warships are, or can be, armed with nuclear weapons, the ARCUP delegates rejected a proposal by the *Muse* from Memorial University of

Newfoundland to restrict the resolution only to nuclear warships.

Delegates from the *Gazette* pointed out that the U.S. has a policy of neither confirming nor denying nuclear weapons on warships, and the Canadian government has a policy of not asking.

The resolution reads as follows: Whereas the militarization of Canadian waters and the arms race between the superpowers constitutes a grave danger to the world's people, and

Whereas there have been over 15 U.S. warships stationed in Halifax Harbour, including nuclear submarines armed with ballistic missiles, in 1986, "International Year of Peace"

Therefore, be it resolved that this ARCUP conference firmly opposes the presence of U.S. or Soviet or any foreign warships in Canadian waters, and

Be it further resolved that this conference encourages its member newspapers to work to build the movement in the Atlantic region to stop the warships.