

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4"- 'ROYAL NAVY'

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

TRANSMISSION: Tuesday 29th May 2007 2000 - 2040

REPEAT: Sunday 3rd June 2007 1700 - 1740

REPORTER: Allan Urry

PRODUCER: Paul Grant

EDITOR: David Ross

PROGRAMME NUMBER: 07VQ3910LHO

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

“FILE ON 4”

Transmission: Tuesday 29th May 2007

Repeat: Sunday 3rd June 2007

Producer: Paul Grant

Reporter: Allan Urry

Editor: David Ross

ACTUALITY AT PORTSMOUTH HARBOUR

MAN VIA LOUDSPEAKER: Also, looking to our right hand side, we now have six warships inside Fareham Creek. Fareham Creek is known locally as Rotten Row. It's where all the old warships are placed before they are disposed of.

URRY: Portsmouth Harbour, where once the might of Britain's warships was on proud display. Looking around these days, it's more of a graveyard for gunboats and aircraft carriers, grey ships at anchor, the victims of a squeeze on the defence budget, according to Opposition MPs.

MAN VIA LOUDSPEAKER: the latest idea is to take them all out to the North Atlantic, where the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy will use them for target practice.

URRY: Morale has already taken a huge blow after Iranian forces seized a boarding party of British sailors and Royal Marines in the Gulf without a shot being fired. With the official report into the hostage affair expected within days, File on 4 examines the bigger crisis facing the senior service. Our investigation has uncovered safety concerns aboard the submarines which carry Britain's independent nuclear deterrent. We've disguised our interviewee's voice.

MAN (DISGUISED VOICE): If this Government wants a premier league weapons platform, and that's what Trident is, but you'd need to have the pieces for it, you'd need to have the equipment, you need to have the skills and they don't have that. They want a premier league system and they're paying third division prices for it.

URRY: Sailors are complaining about broken equipment and low morale. So has the Navy been cut to the bone by a Government which has committed Britain's armed forces to military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, but is using peacetime defence spending to pay for them?

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY IN HOUSE OF COMMONS

SPEAKER: ... statement, Secretary Des Browne

BROWNE: Mr Speaker, I am sure the House will wish me in the time available to focus on the incident which has attracted the most public and parliamentary attention over the recess, namely the incident in which fifteen of our personnel were captured and detained by the Iranians, and the events that followed.

URRY: The Defence Secretary, explaining to a sombre House of Commons how events unfolded on the 23rd of March, a low ebb for the Royal Navy. It began at 7.53 in the morning, when HMS Cornwall, a frigate, launched two small boats with a Lynx helicopter in support, which intercepted a merchant ship with a suspect cargo.

BROWNE: The boarding team boarded the vessel and, at 08.46, the Royal Marine boarding officer reported the ship secure. The Lynx was tasked to return to Cornwall. By 09.00 the helicopter was back on board and put at thirty minutes' notice to fly.

URRY: But less than five minutes after the helicopter touched down on its frigate, the Iranians made their move.

BROWNE: At 09.04, one of the two Royal Navy boats reported Iranian Revolutionary Guard navy activity nearby. Very soon afterwards, one of the boats reported that the Iranians were “beside them”. By 09.06 voice communications with the boats were lost, and shortly after, all communications were lost.

URRY: According to the Defence Secretary’s statement, it wasn’t until 22 minutes later that the Lynx was launched again, but it was unable to find the UK boats. At five past ten, one was spotted being escorted by Iranian vessels, but by then it was too late.

HANCOCK: I just think that when the full story is told about this, a number of real questions, if they’re not answered, will continue to rankle. Why were these people allowed to be deployed so far from the ship without proper protection?

URRY: Members of the Defence Select Committee like Mike Hancock, the Liberal Democrat MP for Portsmouth South, have been pressing the Government for answers about what went wrong. He’s been told he’ll have to wait for the report of the official inquiry. But a key question is what happened to the air support for the boarding party, the Lynx helicopter, which had been on the mission but returned to its ship. Why didn’t it stay in the air, providing what the military calls “top cover”, an eye in the sky and a menacing presence to those who might try to attack? Mr Hancock believes cost saving measures such as fuel rationing may have played a part.

HANCOCK: Well, I’ve been told by people who have been flying regularly in that condition that there is very much a restriction – it’s use as little as you can, come back to the ship as soon as possible. Once the crew seem to be okay on board, then your job is over, there’s no overhead watching, no ability for the helicopter to hang around for any length of time. And, of course, the chopper returns to the ship. By the time it’s turned round it’s going to take it half an hour to forty-five minutes to get airborne again, it probably has to be refuelled and all the implications there.

URRY: Have you been told specifically about this incident, that fuel rationing was a problem in the hostage situation?

HANCOCK: Only from scuttle that's been around this place and around the Navy in Portsmouth. I know from people who've actually done the job in the past, they've told me that they were flying under very tight restrictions. So, from what the rumours are saying and what people have said about their own experiences, I can't imagine much has changed.

URRY: You wouldn't be surprised to hear if that were a factor then?

HANCOCK: No, absolutely not.

URRY: Another concern is the use of HMS Cornwall, a frigate designed for the open oceans, as the support vessel for the boarding party. According to defence analyst Paul Beaver, the warship struggled to manoeuvre in the shallows of the Shatt Al Arab waterway, because its draught is too deep. Mr Beaver argues it's a warning sign that the Royal Navy is no longer properly equipped to operate effectively in such waters.

BEAVER: You just have to look at what the Navy sent there. It sent HMS Cornwall, probably the best blue water ship that the Royal Navy has built since 1945. But it's not really a ship to be operating close in shore, in fact it couldn't get any further up the Gulf than its actual positions, around one and a half to two nautical miles away from the boarding party.

URRY: But it does have a critical role in protecting oil interests there, doesn't it, which you might argue that's its primary role. Why not use it for other things as well?

BEAVER: The weapons systems on board, are you going to use their harpoon weapons which have a range of 78 nautical miles, are you going to use that against the small Iranian boats? We don't have the weapons systems that can deal with small Iranian boats, those sort of craft. It isn't configured for that. It really isn't the right thing to have there.

URRY: The inquiry into the affair, headed by Lieutenant General Sir Rob Fulton, is expected to report within days. Paul Beaver believes it may highlight a more fundamental issue.

BEAVER: I just wonder if the Iranian hostage situation isn't a warning bell - hang on a minute, we didn't quite get that right. We'll have to see what General Fulton's report says, but I've got a feeling that if it isn't suppressed, then we're going to have some big question marks about having the right people at the right time in the right place with the right equipment.

URRY: The Ministry of Defence said it wouldn't comment on the issues until after the report. But these days Admirals have fewer choices about the ships and equipment they can deploy.

ACTUALITY AT PORTSMOUTH HARBOUR

MAN VIA LOUDSPEAKER: Well a very good morning, gentlemen, and welcome aboard this Jenny M harbour tour this morning. As we get underway from Gunwharf Quays, if I can just run through the safety aspects of the vessel with you. Up on the stern of the ship...

URRY: A trip around Portsmouth harbour reveals worrying signs of a service under stress. It's got so bad that the Navy can't afford to keep all its ships running at sea, even some of those in the prime of their life. They're tied up here, some are for sale, others for scrap, and yet others in a state of what the MOD calls extended readiness - not really going anywhere. The evidence is plain to see, even on one of the harbour tours run for sightseers.

MAN VIA LOUDSPEAKER: So, over on our right hand side, we have two mine hunters, that's Cottesmore and Dulverton decommissioned last year ..

URRY: Lieutenant Commander Rob Hoole has now left the Navy, but he has got a detailed knowledge of many of the warships here and he's aboard this harbour cruise with me today.

Those are the sort of ships you were sailing on, are they not?

HOOLE: Yes, I was the first CO of HMS Berkeley. She was only eleven years old when she was sold to the Greeks.

URRY: What are we coming up to here? These ships tied along the side here. What are they?

HOOLE: Just the other side of the jetty is HMS Invincible, one of the aircraft carriers which we had in service, and as you can see she looks a bit sad and bare and a bit forlorn, and Invincible is apparently in extended readiness for eighteen months.

URRY: What does that mean, extended readiness? This is a Ministry of Defence phrase, isn't it?

HOOLE: Well it means virtually mothballed.

MAN VIA LOUDSPEAKER: First off here is the A big ... These are two of three frigates that have been sold to the Chilean Navy. The Chileans got themselves a very good deal.

URRY: Destroyers and frigates are the backbone of the surface fleet. The trouble is, the Navy can't afford the cost of running them all anymore. Three frigates with plenty of life left in them will continue to serve, but now on that'll be for a different Navy - they've been sold to Chile.

Is this the Chilean flag we can see flying?

HOOLE: That's the Chilean ensign at the stern, yes.

URRY: It's been renamed already, has it?

HOOLE: They've been renamed, renumbered, repainted.

URRY: How much would these ships have cost to have been built?

HOOLE: Well I gather they were approximately £140 million each.

URRY: And how much are these three being sold for then?

HOOLE: £134 million for the three of them. That's quite a bargain. These three still had a lot of life in them and, you know, they really are good ships.

MAN VIA LOUDSPEAKER: ... buy one and get two free.

URRY: So the Government is selling frigates at giveaway prices to Chile. But is that because they are not really needed? Not according to the former First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Alan West, who was in post when the decision was taken.

WEST: I was not happy with that as a decision. It meant that our total numbers of destroyers and frigates was going down from about thirty-one and it was going to go down to twenty-five. And when one looked at the tasks and the things that this nation required to be done around the world, twenty-five was too few. But in getting rid of frigates that cost £140 million, something like that, when they were new, after eight years seemed a great waste in terms of the capital value of those ships and utility of those ships.

URRY: But they've got rid of, as you put it, because – what – the Navy couldn't afford to run them anymore?

WEST: Yes. With the money that was there in the programme, we had to balance our books and we couldn't balance our books if we kept them and we ran them, and if you get rid of some ships it means you can get rid of some people, so it squeezed the overall numbers of people in the Navy, squeezed the support costs of the Navy, so all of that, of course, helps you run within your running costs. But I just think for the amount of money involved, when you think of the capital costs that have been involved, I think it was shortsighted. And, looking at the tasks this country has, we need about thirty destroyers and frigates, and I believe we have too few at the moment.

URRY: The Minister for the Armed Forces, Adam Ingram, told File on 4 that in his view the Navy is still able to cope.

INGRAM: Well, this was something which was presaged in 2004 in the White Paper and it was a case of looking at what the future horizons would be, as best as we could examine them and come to conclusions on them, also knowing that there was a very big new shipbuilding programme underway. And therefore the decision was taken that we should therefore position ourselves on the basis of what the current spending was to what our future spending would be and what our future needs would be.

URRY: Because the former First Sea Lord says that about thirty of these warships are needed, but the Navy's only got twenty-five.

INGRAM: I'm a great admirer and, I think, a friend of Admiral West, but what he sent in evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee, he said that, I think the balance we came to was about right.

URRY: What he's now saying to us – and I'll quote him directly – 'I was not happy with that as a decision.'

INGRAM: What I'm going to do is go into a debate about Admiral West through you. I'm quite prepared to talk to Admiral West about all of this. He's on record in a very specific way. The point is that this happens all the time. There are repositions, restructuring. We have a major investment in the armed forces in this country - £32 billion worth. Now that is a very sizeable commitment from this Government towards the armed forces.

URRY: But is the Government getting the best deal for taxpayers when it sells off frigates it claims are surplus to requirements? The Chileans got three for the price of one, but even then, most of the return didn't go back into the public purse. The contract was for £134 million, but it seems most of that went to BaE Systems, a private company, to refit them.

INGRAM: We had two options. One would have been to have scrapped or to find a buyer from an ally. That's exactly what's happened.

URRY: What sort of return has the taxpayer had then on the selling of those ships to Chile?

INGRAM: The return would be that there is certainly £134 million was the benefit to industry overall. The work was then carried out by BAE Systems in terms of the refit, in terms of the training aspect of it, and that must be of benefit to this country.

URRY: There's no dividend to the public purse or to the Royal Navy for this, is there?

INGRAM: Well

URRY: You've sold them for scrap value ...

INGRAM: Yes, but there's a balance to be struck in this. When we no longer have a requirement, and that was a judgement which was made, and it wasn't just made by the bean counters on the basis of money. All these things are taken into account on the basis of the best military advice available.

URRY: It's not just the declining numbers of ships causing concern, it's the state they're in. We've spoken to ratings, technicians and middle ranking officers, who've told us about a patch and mend Navy, in which parts are in short supply and personnel have to make do. They've told us that puts them under increasing pressure, forces them to work longer hours and drives down morale.

MAN: You'd like to think we're a front line, very modern force and that everything that we want we get and it's all new and modern equipment, but the reality is we're working sometimes on sixties and seventies technology. There have been occasions say when I've waited a good year to eighteen months for bits of stores. You work with what you've got.

URRY: Some wouldn't be interviewed, but others like this man, a former weapons engineer who left the service less than six months ago, preferred anonymity. His job was to keep his warship's main anti aircraft defence, Sea Wolf missiles, operational. But he struggled to get key components.

MAN: The weapons system I worked on is made up of two different radars – one part for general tracking, the second part was for low level tracking of aircraft, which is priority for when you're down the Gulf. There has been situations where the second radar's not working properly and you have to almost compromise and tell the computer that controls it to tell it lies, that it's looking at something else, to ignore the receipts that it's getting from the second radar.

URRY: But you've had problems getting parts for these radars, have you?

MAN: Yes, these are notoriously hard bits of equipment to get hold of. There has been times when you have to battle the relevant authorities to get the piece of kit that you need.

URRY: The former First Sea Lord, Sir Alan West, who left the job only last year, agrees that making do is having an impact on the men and women who go to sea expecting to be able to perform at their professional best.

WEST: What really demotivates them is that they're working flat out to make sure their system, their ship, their aeroplane is the best in the world. If suddenly they're told, well, sorry we haven't got this spare, sorry you can't have that, that is really demotivating. If they can't get to sea and do their business and if they can't go and exercise so that they do the exercise necessary to go and do the action they've got to do, those things are very demotivating.

URRY: Personal morale has been hit by other cuts and family life is said to be suffering. The former weapons engineer says after months at sea, his ship would chug home slowly in order to save fuel, adding to the crew's frustrations.

MAN: Coming back off trips away, you'd do eighteen, twenty knots coming home, but it's not unheard of to do twelve, because we have to save fuel. It can add days on to your trip away and that's important when you've been away for three, four, five, however many months. There's nothing worse than coming back across the Atlantic and bobbing around and knowing you could have been home a week earlier.

URRY: Even after months at sea, if his ship arrived back in port too late, it was forced to stay at anchor, because the Navy wouldn't pay overtime to dock workers.

MAN: Quite often it has been policy for ships to either anchor off that evening, depending what time they've got in, and going first thing in the morning, because after a certain time you have to pay extra for the riggers and the handlers and the people that are involved on the shore side to get you alongside.

URRY: You have to pay extra?

MAN: Yes, obviously they're on overtime after a cut-off point of four or five o'clock, whatever it is, you know if you're on your way back to port and you're going to be late, you're not getting in that night, so you anchor off and watch the shore through your binoculars.

URRY: And you've got family waiting ashore?

MAN: You just get very frustrated, very annoyed and try to explain to your children why Daddy's not coming home for another night, it's because he's parked a couple of miles down the road ...

URRY: But you were told that you couldn't go in because of this business about saving money on overtime.

MAN: It's common knowledge amongst sailors that if you get to port after a certain time, you're not going alongside because it costs.

URRY: The Armed Forces Minister, Adam Ingram, told this programme that he is prepared to investigate these concerns.

Well, what do you say to men who've been telling us that after months at sea, they have to chug home at half speed because there are fuel restrictions, which further delays the time they have to spend with their family?

INGRAM: If that was something which had happened, I would then raise it appropriately within the MOD to find out what the answers to that were. Did people suffer as a consequence of this? That should not be acceptable. The point of someone saying this does not mean to say that that is across the board, it's happening every day, every week, every month, year upon year.

URRY: Why has finance got so tight that the Navy can't afford to pay overtime to a handful of dockers to get a warship alongside?

INGRAM: If there is substance to it and therefore it damages the capacity of people to carry out their job, then part of my job is then to put a system under test as to why that is the case.

URRY: Do you hear complaints about patch and mend, the problem of not being able to get spares now, which was a decision that was taken by the Navy three or four years ago, wasn't it, to reduce store support?

INGRAM: Well, again I'm told that this has been common over a good number of years. The way in which they will take a piece of equipment in stores from one ship which may be laid up because of refit or whatever else, to give it to a ship which is in a more operational state of readiness and may actually be deployed.

URRY: People say this is demotivating though, you get trained up as a professional person to keep an expensive piece of weaponry going, for example, and you can't get the proper parts for it, it's dispiriting for people.

INGRAM: I have no doubt there are times when there are people at the sharp end, wish more was happening or something different was happening. I don't detect that there is great collapse of morale that some people are trying to inject into the mood of our armed forces.

URRY: Whilst those in the surface fleet struggle to keep the show afloat, it's underwater where any shortages can have the most serious consequences.

ACTUALITY WITH SUBMARINERS

URRY: Among submariners, we've discovered deep concern. Some have told File on 4 they are increasingly worried about the mechanical condition of their boats and the pressure they are under to keep them seaworthy. All submariners are trained to know their boat and the systems on which it depends, intimately. Their lives can depend on it and they regularly train for emergencies, as this recent BBC TV programme found out.

EXCERPT FROM TV PROGRAMME

URRY: It also means they know when things are wrong. Paul Reidy spent seventeen years in weapons engineering on subs, latterly as a Petty Officer. He says in the later stages of his career, when he was aboard the nuclear powered Trafalgar class of attack submarines, he became worried about their boats.

REIDY: I would find a lot of problems with certainly hole connections, a lot of leakage, hatches, equipment not finished.

URRY: What's the problem with hatches?

REIDY: Hatches are always constantly leaking. You speak to any submariner, I'm sure I'm not the only one. A hatch will probably seal between fifty and a hundred metres down. Now yeah, great, it's sealed at a hundred metres, but surely a hatch should seal at two metres, three metres. It's going to seal deeper because of the

REIDY cont: pressure. It's not so bad for experienced guys like me and some of the other guys, but when you've got new joiners, they see water coming in the hatch, they're not going to be too happy, you know, and you're getting it in through pressure hole connections which are, basically you've got equipment on the outside of the pressure hole, you have to, so you need some way of making a connection between inside and outside, so you have what's called a pressure hole connection. I've seen those leak, and I've seen them leak on electrical equipment in your main control room.

URRY: Water all over the control room doesn't sound good.

REIDY: It doesn't sound great, no, especially when it's in the electrics. I mean we're talking maybe, you know, half an inch, but over quite a wide period till it finally seals. But, you know, as a professional you get on with it and you mop it up, but it's not ideal.

URRY: Another former submariner who served five years aboard the Trafalgar class boats experienced failures of the vessels' primary electrical systems, which is far more serious. He explained how, had it not been for a stroke of good fortune, he and his crewmates might have sunk to the bottom of the ocean, trapped inside the hull of a submarine with a nuclear reactor on board. We've agreed to withhold his name.

MAN 2: On patrol, having a loss of 24 volts which powers a panel where they basically control the entire submarine from, that went down and you lose the ability to pretty much do anything – operate the ballast system for air in the tanks. Short of actually moving the submarine, you can't do much else.

URRY: And that's happened to you, has it?

MAN 2: Yeah, it happened quite a lot, happened quite a few times. Generally it's only quick, one second and then it comes back, but there's a few occasions where it's not come back and you've been run on a battery that's not really up to the job either. All the pumps that pump the water overboard were gone, so we'd be sunk because of a little flood.

URRY: And how deep down were you when this was happening?

MAN 2: Deep enough to never get back again is probably the best way to answer that.

URRY: But how did you get back again then?

MAN 2: Because of the way we were moving, we were all right because we were already coming up, so if we weren't coming up we would have been a lot deeper than we were, and we would have been stuck there.

URRY: But if, as you say, you had been going down, what then?

MAN 2: If we were going down, obviously ... able to do with the power that was left would have been pump as much air in the ballast tanks as possible and trying to get us to go up. If there wasn't enough air, we'd have just kept going down and eventually all over, sort of thing.

URRY: The man told us how fuses kept blowing, disabling the circuits – something, he said, was a common occurrence.

MAN 2: They just weren't looked after. You'd be down having a cigarette and you'd hear them pop and the boat's staff would replace them constantly and do all the maintenance they could, but the parts were twenty-five years old, they should get replaced. There are going to be wear and tear in that environment, but you'd see things that had, you know, tags from the 1980s on it, and this is electrical components they haven't replaced.

URRY: And why haven't they replaced them?

MAN 2: You'd have to ask them that. I put it all down to money.

URRY: That was the talk among the crew, was it?

MAN 2: Yeah, all money and everything in the military is about money. They're a business aren't they, they have to kinda do it to the lowest cost.

URRY: File on 4's obtained an exclusive interview with a senior rating still serving on the vessels which form the cornerstone of the UK's entire defence policy - the four Vanguard class submarines which carry Britain's independent nuclear deterrent. There's always one boat on patrol at all times, relying on total secrecy by hiding from the outside world. It cruises for weeks on end through the depths of the North Atlantic, carrying sixteen Trident D5 missiles, each capable of delivering multiple nuclear warheads. But cost cutting has even affected them. We've disguised our interviewee's voice.

MAN 3: The oxygen production equipment on board, it's very good equipment but we're continually having problems with it. Of course you will have problems, but these are continual problems. They're just being patched up, they're just being repaired, problems with the batteries.

URRY: Batteries are a vital piece of equipment?

MAN 3: The battery is a vital piece of equipment, because it's a power source. God forbid anything happened in an escape situation and you couldn't the reactor wasn't working or it was shut down, you would rely on the battery. So many things that just seem to go wrong. I mean, the guys do an unbelievable job fixing it, they really do, and how they keep it going is beyond me, it really is. But the boats, don't get me wrong, the boats are safe to go to sea, but I'd say they are just safe to go to sea.

URRY: Just?

MAN 3: Yes, just.

URRY: It's not only the submarines under strain. Those who serve in them are feeling the pressure.

MAN 3: You've got to get so much work done and it's an awful big work package, but they're going to cut the time that you have to get it done in, so it's getting less and less and they're giving you more and more work to do. They're knocking weeks off things just to get boats ready.

URRY: Give me a for instance, give me a tangible example.

MAN 3: To get the job done may take two to three weeks, and however guys, you haven't got three weeks to do this, you've got seven days to get it done, simple as that.

URRY: And can you get three weeks work done in seven days to the sort of level of professionalism and satisfaction that your crew would want?

MAN 3: The Royal Navy can, because they've got a 'can do' attitude.

URRY: But what effect is that having?

MAN 3: The guys are done in, they're knackered. Home life is poor. The sea time you accept, that's one of those things, but it's the time alongside, when there's a work package on and you're just working and working and working.

URRY: What do you see as the consequence of this continual pressure on submarine crews and the hours that you're having to work? What's happening because of that?

MAN 3: Well it's very simple, people are leaving. There's people going home because they don't want to go to sea. There's people going to sea ...

URRY: People are running from the service?

MAN 3: Yes. They're not cowards or anything, far from it, but they've just had enough and they don't believe that they're listened to.

URRY: The man also told us how the four Trident subs were raided for spares, because of shortages.

MAN 3: If you need a piece of equipment and you haven't got it and you can't get it from stores, you'll go to another boat that isn't going anywhere and you'll get it off them. So it's like having two cars or three cars and you say, right, one of them's got to go on the road so I'm going to take bits from the other two cars to make this one work.

URRY: And that's happening even on Britain's independent nuclear deterrent threat?

MAN 3: It is indeed. We often laugh and joke about it and say we would win Scrapheap Challenge hands down because of the ingenuity of the guys and what they've got to take.

URRY: But in a way, isn't that what's supposed to happen? You're supposed to make do and mend?

MAN 3: Well no, not really. If this Government wants a premier league weapons platform, you need to have the pieces for it, you need to have the equipment, you need to have the skills, you need to have all this in place in case anything goes wrong, and they don't have them. They want a premier league system and they're paying third division prices for it.

URRY: Despite these criticisms, the Armed Forces Minister, Adam Ingram, is sceptical about the testimony of our source, and insists the nuclear submarine fleet is safe to put to sea.

INGRAM: The safety requirements of submarines are of the very highest. If people are saying that those within the chain of command are making a decision that is sending submarines to sea which are inherently unsafe, they are wrong.

URRY: I think they're worried about it being on a knife's edge. I don't think, I've not heard anybody say these boats are actually unsafe, they're worried about it being on a knife's edge.

INGRAM: That's a critical point.

URRY: We've interviewed a submariner who is serving on the Trident nuclear subs and in his view it's only just safe to go to sea, only just. Now is 'only just' good enough for Britain's independent nuclear deterrent?

INGRAM: Well, I don't accept that. The description has never been put to me – 'Minister, I'm going to tell you something, that the Trident submarines which we put to sea are only just safe, that they're on the margin of safety.' That's not put to me and I don't think that would be the common view of the crews who man those submarines. The attitude, the morale of the crew who serve on it is of the highest standard.

URRY: But the Government's critics say they've little doubt that the service at large is suffering. A shortage of ships and spares, fuel restrictions and low morale is creating problems above and below the water. The Navy's being asked to do too much with too little, according to those who argue for more funding. But there's no sign of any let up. Earlier this year Tony Blair, in a speech aboard HMS Albion in Plymouth, made it clear that he wants to see Britain sticking to the tasks his Government has set.

ACTUALITY OF TONY BLAIR SPEECH

BLAIR: There are two types of nation similar to ours today. There are those who do war fighting and peacekeeping, and then there are those who have effectively, except in the most exceptional circumstances, retreated to the peacekeeping task alone. Britain does both, we should stay that way.

URRY: Central to that is a strong Navy. The Government's vision was set out in 1998, in a strategic defence review. One of its main recommendations is that the Navy should get two new aircraft carriers. But that vision has been overtaken by events, according to defence analyst Paul Beaver.

BEAVER: The strategic defence review, which was a brilliant document at its time, I don't think anyone faults it in 1998, it's now nearly ten years later and perhaps we should be looking at a new one. But it said that the cornerstone will be the carrier strike groups, two aircraft carriers with the new aircraft to go on board, the American joint strike fighter, an amphibious readiness group as well for our Royal Marines. That's certainly very good, keeping the strategic nuclear deterrents, keeping the nuclear powered submarines. That's fine, that's the big picture. But when you've done the big picture, you also had to do the smaller picture. We didn't expect to be in Iraq in 2007 when the strategic defence review came up. We didn't expect to be in Afghanistan. We are now in a totally different ball game. We're fighting two medium scale enduring conflicts, mainly army based, boots on the ground, with the Navy in a supporting role. The Navy isn't geared up for that.

URRY: And others say it's worse than that. The Liberal Democrat MP Mike Hancock, believes the Navy's being forced to pay the price for Britain's commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr Hancock, a member of the Defence Select Committee, argues ministers at the MOD have failed to persuade the Treasury to underwrite the full costs of the two campaigns, and so capital spending on the procurement of ships and equipment has been cut back.

HANCOCK: I doubt if there is a capital programme at the moment that isn't being reassessed, and because of that failure on their part to get significant funding from the Treasury to underwrite both of the major deployments completely

URRY: But the vast majority has been underwritten by the Treasury, hasn't it

HANCOCK: No it hasn't, I think that's a myth. If you really examine that, you'll find that many hundreds of millions, if not billions over the five years have had to be borne by the MOD themselves.

URRY: But what evidence can you point to, to demonstrate unequivocally that the Government effectively has been robbing the Navy in order to pay for the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan?

HANCOCK: The failure to order the full deployment of Type 45s. They cut back there from, they are down now to basically six and probably no more. Astute submarines, colossally expensive, programme highly over budget but no real commitment to other ships to come in ...

URRY: But isn't that the answer? It's over budget. I mean, you can understand why the Government want to put that in check.

HANCOCK: But we were told these were essential for the defence of the nation and you can't have it both ways. If they are essential to the future defence of this nation and to give us that edge that we desire, then they have got to be paid for. Now if they are saying we can't afford them because we are spending money elsewhere, say that, but they are not saying that. There isn't a naval officer serving now who does not foresee major problems unless the Brown Government changes its priorities in the way in which we as a nation want to deploy our forces.

URRY: The Conservative Shadow Defence Minister, Dr Julian Lewis, says he too is worried that the long term viability of the Navy is being put at risk.

LEWIS: What is going on here is that, in its desperation to pay the bills and fight these two present medium sized conflicts, the Government is enfeebling and perhaps irreparably enfeebling the armed forces in terms of dismantling their infrastructure and indeed their frontline forces, even if they're not on the front line of these two conflicts, in a way that will leave us at great risk for the future when other conflicts arise, because one thing history teaches us, the vast majority of conflicts in which

LEWIS cont: we do find ourselves embroiled arise totally without significant periods of advance warning.

URRY: Is the Navy still an effective fighting force?

LEWIS: Yes it is, but the problem is, it may not remain so because you cannot go on cancelling orders, failing to replenish the fleet with new ships, and above all, taking money out of the peace time defence budget to pay for current conflicts, which are of indefinite duration. They are demanding more and more of our armed forces and they are paying less and less in terms of percentage of the country's resources to do this.

URRY: But the Minister for the Armed Forces, Adam Ingram, insists that, despite opposition concerns, the Government is spending enough on defence to see the Navy through.

INGRAM: We have increased our defence budget by 7.5% in real terms over the last ten years. We have spent in excess of £6 billion on top of that to deal with the operational requirements both in Iraq and Afghanistan. A large proportion of that operational expenditure, which we're not funded for but which we get from the contingency fund when operations happen, goes on the procurement of equipment, equipment which is essential. And to date, when a demand is made from theatre for an essential piece of equipment, it has been delivered.

URRY: It's GDP which is a crucial measurement, isn't it, of defence spending, and that has fallen, hasn't it, since Labour has been in power from 2.7% to 2.2% if you take Iraq and Afghanistan out of the equation.

INGRAM: It's important, if you want to use it as a measure. I think the real measure we have to use are the two which I've given you. We actually have a growing economy, so we've spent 7.5% more in real terms, and I say this to those who say we should be spending more ...

URRY: But do you accept that the GDP percentage has fallen?

INGRAM: Hold on a moment. I say to those who say we should be spending more, because they don't tell us where they would spend more, how they would spend more.

URRY: The current First Sea Lord has been saying, hasn't he, that he needs £1 billion and he's still asking for his aircraft carriers which haven't been ordered.

INGRAM: He was not saying he needed £1 billion ...

URRY: He said he'd be happy if you gave him £1 billion to spend on his Navy and he'd need two aircraft carriers.

INGRAM: Well, in terms of the aircraft carriers, we are very firmly committed to those aircraft carriers.

URRY: Why haven't they been ordered then?

INGRAM: Because we are still in the process of finalising the deals. What we're now doing, of course

URRY: Nine years since they were proposed in the strategic defence review

INGRAM: Absolutely and ...

URRY: Nine years!

INGRAM: What we're seeking to do is to get the best price and best value for money, to get it on time and, importantly, to maintain that essential part of British industry, the shipbuilding industry.

URRY: You're asking them to do too much on too little, aren't you?

INGRAM: We're asking them to do what we require of them, and they're doing it because we've given them the equipment. The reality is they're doing the job that's been asked of them. This is not a Royal Navy that cannot go to sea. It's the very opposite.

URRY: The Navy will be bracing itself for the findings of the Fulton Report into the hostage affair – and they won't have to wait long. Attention at the time focused on the decision to allow sailors to sell their stories. But the inquiry is said to have looked beyond that. The question is, how much light will it cast onto the wider problems we've been hearing about in this programme? That would take a much bigger review into what we expect of our Navy in the 21st century.

SIGNATURE TUNE