

Britain's Nuclear Armed Trident Submarine: Rigged Safety and Security, Royal Navy Whistleblower

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Engineering failures on Trident submarine place crew at risk and raise doubts over whether missiles could actually be launched, says whistleblower.

A Royal Navy whistleblower has exposed a shocking catalogue of equipment failures, security breaches, and near-miss accidents on board HMS Vanguard, one of the Navy's nuclear-armed Trident submarines.

William McNeilly, a 25 year old engineering technician, has published an account of a patrol on board HMS Vanguard on the internet (online [here](#) and available to download at the bottom of this article), describing in detail a series of alarming incidents and describing the submarine as being "in the worst of the worst condition". His account not only puts safety standards in the Trident programme under the spotlight, but also brings into question HMS's Vanguard's ability to successfully fire its battery of missiles were the command to launch a nuclear attack ever given.

McNeilly's dossier – an account of his first patrol on board HMS Vanguard – reveals that the ageing submarine was dogged by equipment failures during the patrol. Safety procedures were regularly disregarded, security procedures were casual, and secret information was accessible to unauthorised personnel.

He also alleges that safety proficiency exams were rigged and that, as a result of manpower shortages, key posts are filled with under-qualified staff.

McNeilly says he has published the account in order to alert the public to the "shockingly extreme conditions that our nuclear weapons system is in right now", giving a grim warning that "it's only a matter of time before one of the Trident submarines are lost". I tried to make the changes from within", he says, but "I expressed my concerns too many times without any action being taking". He believes that most of his colleagues know that "the Trident programme is a disaster waiting to happen, but they never tell the public".

McNeilly describes how, on his first time on board a Trident submarine, a group of trainees were taken into the control room and told not to touch anything. "A crew member responded by saying "it doesn't matter none of it works anyway, you can touch what you want." Everyone laughed".

According to his account HMS Vanguard failed to pass two critical tests intended to confirm whether it could have performed a successful Trident missile launch while on patrol. Problems caused by seawater entering the submarine's hydraulic system prevented a test to ensure that the submarine's missile hatches would open correctly and a 'missile

compensation test' was failed three out of three times. "Billions upon billions of tax papers money" is being spent on a system "so broken it can't even do the tests that prove it works", McNeilly writes.

McNeilly's account criticises lax security standards at the Faslane submarine base, declaring that "it's harder to get into most nightclubs than it is to get into the Green Area" which controls access to Vanguard class submarines. He warns that identification is rarely checked, equipment and baggage is not searched, and PIN code security apparatus at gates is not working. "If airport security and Nuclear weapon security were both compared to prisons, the airport would be Alcatraz and Base security would be house arrest", he says.

McNeilly documents a series of faults with Vanguard's service systems. There were "constant problems" with two distillers used to provide fresh drinking water for the crew, with one not working at all and the other only working intermittently. There were "a lot of problems" with the ship's electrical equipment. One of two turbo generators used to generate electricity was faulty and one of two back-up motor generators was "dysfunctional".

Some crew members complained that the submarine's atmosphere was not circulating at the proper specification at times when on patrol. "For a while everyone was sleepy and then there were times people couldn't sleep. Too high or too low O₂ [oxygen] or CO₂ [carbon dioxide] levels can cause this". Problems with humidity levels in the submarine meant "there was water dripping from the roof onto all sorts of electrics".

McNeilly claims that safety procedures were often disregarded and short-cuts taken. Alarms on the Control and Monitoring Position (CAMP) console, which monitors the condition of the Trident missiles, regularly went off but were frequently muted by crew members. Watchkeepers in the CAMP and missile compartment "completely disregard" rules which say the posts must be constantly manned. One sailor was caught using a Bluetooth speaker to play music in the missile compartment, despite a safety requirement that "Electronic equipment in the MC other than that required for safety and security must not be operating".

McNeilly claims that an exam on strategic weapon system safety and security was "a totally farce". "They told everyone most of the answers, and any answers people didn't know they just copied from the person beside them" Personnel who had missed the exam were told to "pick a number between 27 and 30. The number they picked was their test result".

During the patrol a control room panel operator accidentally activated a firefighting fog spray in the weapon stowage compartment. McNeilly records that "None of the electrical isolations that are required to be made were made; creating a high risk of fire in a compartment which contains torpedoes". Water was sprayed over "everything in the compartment; torpedoes, lights, torpedo monitoring panel; everything" and the compartment was flooded.

A "loud continuous bang" at the front of the submarine which was "heard by everyone" during the submarine's initial dive was ignored, despite suspicions that it may have signalled a problem with the submarines fore-planes, which play an important function in allowing the vessel to dive and ascend. McNeilly points out that, when not on nuclear patrol, submarines are required to remain on the surface for safety reasons if the planes are defective, but on this occasion "the safety concerns were as always, dismissed".

Rubbish was stored in unsuitable locations, creating a fire hazard. Despite a previous fire which had broken out when toilet rolls were stored beside electrical cabling, “in numerous compartments on the boat you’ll find plastic bags filled with rubbish sitting on top, underneath and beside electrical cables and equipment that generates heat”. The pressure in gas bottles containing nitrogen gas, used as a drench to extinguish serious fires in the submarine missile compartment, fell below the specified pressure needed to safeguard the fire-fighting function, but the reaction of McNeilly’s superiors was “there’s nothing we can do whilst we’re the on-patrol SSBN”.

McNeilly believes many of the problems occurred because the Navy’s strategic weapons programme “is so short on man power it’s unbelievable”. The rate at which people are getting pushed through the system because of manpower shortages “is scary. There are leading hands doing the jobs chiefs used to do. There is a SWS [strategic weapons system] leading hand who still hasn’t got his DV [developed vetting] clearance and he’s in the position of a launcher supervisor”.

The account mentions disturbing personality traits among some of the submarine crew members, describing some of the personalities on board as “alarming”. “Probably the most worrying” was a strategic weapons system rating “whose hobby is killing small animals” and who has an interest in watching violent pornography. Another crew member “physically attacked someone” and was “aggressive with five different people; he threatened to kill two of them”. McNeilly states that “there have been suicides onboard” and “most people had breaking points at some point on patrol”. Worryingly, in the light of current nuclear industry concerns about the security threat posed by insiders, he tells how “a lot of people have had conversations with me about how easy it would be to take down the submarine”. It was “disturbing to know that the people serving on these boats are aware of many ways to destroy them from within”.

McNeilly claims he has raised concerns about the safety and security of the Trident weapon system through the chain of command on “multiple occasions”, but “not once did someone even attempt to make a change”. He now feels the only choice he has is to “ignore the threat or risk everything I have to inform the Government and the people”.

Disclosure of the information he has released will be seen as a major security breach by the Ministry of Defence. McNeilly is currently absent from the Navy without leave, and is believed to be in hiding somewhere outside the UK.

Download William McNeilly’s account of his patrol on board HMS Vanguard here:

 [William McNeilly Secret Nuclear Threat 120515.pdf](#)

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