

NAG NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2015

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NAG DIARY

Next Meeting

**Planning our response to safety issues at
Aldermaston and Burghfield**

**7pm Wednesday 26th August
at the RISC Centre, 35-39 London St, Reading RG1 4PS**

“A Complete Mess”

These are the words of a “senior defence source” as quoted by the Sunday Times of 16th April 2015. They relate to “the whole nuclear side of things” within the Ministry of Defence - all MoD nuclear weapons-related work, the dockyards, the submarine programme, and warhead manufacture and maintenance.

AWE Aldermaston is still in what the Office of Nuclear Regulation (ONR) terms as needing “enhanced regulatory attention” (special measures) for the third year running. According to ONR's annual report 2014/5, things are not improving at Aldermaston. At Burghfield they are getting worse, although Burghfield is still under the normal ONR inspection regime. The bit about AWE in the ONR report that is of most concern to us at the local level is “delays in undertaking safety reviews” and “overall deterioration in safety performance, due to shortages of suitably qualified personnel, ageing facilities and significant commitments to build new nuclear facilities”.

The situation reported in our Spring newsletter about the delays in replacing the old corroding-pillar A45 uranium handling facility with the new 'Pegasus' building to make warhead components and

fuel pellets for nuclear submarines continues. So does the replacement at Burghfield of the warhead assembly/disassembly facility. Both are well past their use-by dates.

The wider context

It now emerges that the whole of the UK's nuclear weapons programme is beset with similar problems. The Sunday Times of 16 April reported on a four-month review undertaken by MoD covering the whole of the UK nuclear weapons programme. The text of the review's conclusions is not publicly available, but it was understood to have looked into a number of problems, including:

- under-achievement by private sub-contractors.
- confusion over who is responsible for what at Government level – the Cabinet Office, MoD Headquarters, MoD Defence Equipment and Support organisation and the Royal Navy are all involved.
- confusion over responsibility for the MoD's nuclear-related property holdings, which include not only Aldermaston and Burghfield but also facilities at Barrow, Derby, Devonport and in Scotland, Faslane, Coulport, Rosyth, and the Vulcan site at Dounreay.

An MoD insider told The Times “There is going to be a major shake-up one way or another because it cannot continue as it is now”. One of the options which the review is thought to have considered is the creation of a single body bringing together policy-makers, AWE and personnel from the submarine programme.

With the General Election imminent, the review got shelved for the incoming PM to deal with. Within hours of David Cameron's re-election as PM, senior civil servants had handed him proposals for a radical reshape of the way the UK's nuclear weapons programme is managed. David Cameron forthwith set up a new Cabinet sub-committee to oversee the Trident replacement programme, with ten “task forces” to push the programme through.

So it's panic stations at the political level to get the Trident replacement programme back on track as quickly as possible. The risk we fear is that in the rush, safety matters will become an even lower priority than they are now.

The continuing saga of the 1000 drums of radioactive waste

This looks to be another instance of safety taking a low priority.

On 13th April 2015, the ONR issued a statement that it had finished investigating AWE's failure to comply with a formal instruction to reduce in volume 1000 drums of intermediate level radioactive waste (ILW – as reported in our newsletter of Autumn 2014). ONR decided not to prosecute AWE for failing to meet their legal obligation to comply with the instruction, but said it would consider what action is needed .

NAG responded by issuing a press release, pointing out that AWE have broken the law and should be prosecuted like any other person or body that breaks the law. Any householder ordered by the local council to deal with hazardous material in their garden would receive a summons if they had not complied by the due date. Yet AWE not only has failed to deal with this incomparably more hazardous and long-lived waste, it doesn't even have a long-term strategy yet for dealing with it – and ONR are letting them get away with it year after year. This raises questions about ONR's ability

to function as a protector of public safety.

We wrote to ONR on 4th June expressing our concern. ONR has replied stating satisfaction that “the current conditions under which the waste is stored are acceptable and do not give rise to significant risk to the public or the workforce”. This is not, in our view, a material factor in assessing whether the law has been broken or not and whether a prosecution is warranted. It is a factor for a court to take into account in mitigation in deciding on the seriousness of the offence. We requested a copy of the ONR's report in which they decided not to prosecute under the Freedom of Information Act, and asked what action ONR proposed to take to ensure that the hazard is reduced.

We are still waiting for a reply. In the meantime, on 13th July ONR issued a statement that they had served an Improvement Notice on AWE. Had we perhaps spurred them into action? Not exactly: the ground has shifted. This new Improvement Notice was not about getting the drums dealt with. It was about AWE failing to demonstrate that its long-term strategy for managing Higher Active radioactive waste adequately reduces future risk to the public and the workforce, and follows the failure to comply over the 1000 drums.

In the next paragraph of the statement ONR admit that AWE have broken the conditions of their licence over this and are in contravention of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

The Improvement Notice requires AWE “to recommend options to ONR (that is, a feasibility study for action, not action) by 30 September 2016” (that's right, 2016)- “for how it will manage all Higher Active radioactive waste in a way that closes this compliance gap”.

In other words, ONR thinks that the best way of getting AWE to follow an order it has already ignored is to issue another order – while the volume-reduction of those drums has been shunted into the long grass because there are more pressing priorities than safety.

The Staffing Problem

Further confirmation of our fears about safety came in the annual report 2013/4 of the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator (DNSR), an obscure internal MoD department rather than an independent external regulator. The report – which was not issued until the beginning of 2015 - identifies DNSR's number one safety concern as MoD's inability to retain qualified nuclear skilled staff, civilian or military. This has been going on since 2006. The number two priority was safety performance, in particular, the effect of changes to organisational arrangements on safety.

It appears that people with the necessary qualifications are choosing to work in the nuclear energy rather than the nuclear weapons field. Whatever the reasons, all the findings of regulators concerned with nuclear safety need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

So it was with some alarm that we learned from media reports on July 30th that AWE are shedding 500 jobs, “to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of operations”. AWE's press release can be seen in the media section of the AWE website.

The cuts will be in “some support functions and activities of the business”, and will represent about 12% of the workforce.

Good for profits.

HMS Valueless?

Submariner William McNeilly served as an engineering technician on Trident submarine HMS Vanguard. He was so horrified by what he saw and experienced on his first patrol that he spoke to his superiors about it. Having been brushed off, he published a dossier of the poor condition of the boat and its equipment and the lax safety and security arrangements. His allegations can be seen on the website of the Nuclear Information Service (NIS) at <http://nuclearinfo.org/article/uk-trident/submariner-trident-%E2%80%9Cso-broken-it-cant-even-do-tests-prove-it-works%E2%80%9D>

He questioned whether Vanguard could actually launch its missiles if ordered to do so. The hatches which seal the missile launch tubes wouldn't open during two tests because sea water had entered the hydraulic opening mechanism. Also during three further tests the boat would not have been able to achieve the stability needed to make an accurate launch because a compensation mechanism wasn't working.

Life on board for the submariners was made difficult by problems with the drinking water supply, temperature regulation and air conditioning. Condensation dripped from the ceiling onto electrical equipment. There were many other problems, but Able Seaman McNeilly was particularly concerned with the lack of security, saying "it's harder to get into most nightclubs" than to access HMS Vanguard". In the exam for safety and security new submariners were told most of the answers. Staffing shortages were another major concern – the programme was "so short of manpower it's unbelievable".

The Navy rejected his allegations as factually incorrect or resulting from misunderstanding, and (he claims), asked him to sign a document withdrawing his allegations. He refused, and countered that all his allegations were witnessed personally or seen in documented reports on the patrol. He was arrested for "failing to report for duty" and held in Portsmouth. Then the charges against him were dropped and he was dishonourably discharged from the Navy. He received no court martial or other punishment, although the MoD regard his disclosures as a major security breach.

In further online comments, Mr McNeilly adds that it is "shocking that some people in a military force can be more concerned about public image than public safety".

Nuclear Awareness Group

Newsletter editor: Evelyn Parker rxeparker@yahoo.co.uk