

CBS EVENING NEWS

10 January 1985

>USSR/SUBMARINES>RATHER: Tonight, a CBS Evening News Insight report on the cost of Soviet numerical superiority in submarines. The Soviet Union has about two and a half times the number of submarines as the United States and holds a slight edge in the number of nuclear U-boats. Bill Lynch has been investigating how Moscow gained the edge and at what price.

LYNCH: Fire at sea, terrifying to submariners. While this smoky incident in the Sea of Japan last fall may have been just a drill, real mishaps are all too common on Soviet subs. On paper, the Soviet navy has a mighty force of more than 370 submarines, half of them nuclear-powered. But in practice, Soviet subs have proven deadly for hundreds of Russian sailors. Half a dozen fatal incidents, never before reported, of sinkings, fires and repeated radiation leakage emerged from censored CIA reports obtained by CBS News. Since the mid-1960s, six Soviet subs have been reported lost at sea, taking some 500 crewmen to their deaths. The CIA documents tell for the first time of the 1968 sinking of a Northern Fleet sub at the virtual doorstep of its base on the Kola Peninsula. CMDR. ROY CORLETT (Ret.) (Soviet sub expert): For every accident that you hear about, there must be a great many which don't receive publicity.

LYNCH: Soviet sailors drill for the worst and often face real-life disasters. One CIA report describes a nuclear sub in the Baltic suffering violent shocks and radiation leakage in 1981. Part of the crew was sealed off as the sub was towed home, and they all later died of radiation poisoning. As many as 30 crewmen died on the icebreaker Lenin in the mid-'60s, after what a CIA source described as a 'meltdown of her nuclear reactor,' the worst type of nuclear power emergency. ADM ANTHONY WHETSTONE (Ret., Royal Navy): The Soviets neglected to ensure complete safety in certain areas, and they, they have paid the penalty for that.

LYNCH: By contrast, the U.S. Navy says it puts safety first. Except for the loss of the Thresher and the Scorpion in the 1960s, the Navy claims a spotless nuclear safety record. Soviet admirals, who traditionally put less emphasis on crew health and safety, may have learned from their disasters how to improve their newest subs. CORLETT: They don't hesitate to experiment even where this costs money or even where, in the event they may have gone disastrously wrong.

LYNCH: Whatever role past disasters played in the latest Soviet sub designs, Western navies now face a potential adversary who can dive deeper, run faster and quieter than before. Bill Lynch, CBS News, Washington. <