

Aboard HMCS Potemkin

A great and mighty Canadian armada of nuclear submarines will soon cruise north at flank speed, armed to the teeth and ready to defend our cherished Northwest Passage against all comers. This nautical fable is the latest fantasy to emerge from the Potemkin Village of National Defence where hot air has come to substitute for cold steel.

Anyone who actually believes that Brian Mulroney is going to come up with funds to build the proposed 10 submarines will likely also believe in the *Flying Dutchman*.

At today's prices, even small French nuclear submarines of the Rubis class cost around \$600 million each. This figure will probably double by the time the subs are, if ever, delivered. Add in potfuls more money for training, updated sonar systems and a new northern communications network.

At least one major new naval base will have to be built in the high Arctic, complete with repair facilities, stores and munitions storage areas protected against air attack. Nuclear submarines have two sets of crews, with rest and recreation facilities. Note also that even if the impossible occurred and Canada did come up with the cash to buy 10 subs, only five or six would be on station at any one time: The remainder would be tied up for repairs and maintenance.

So what we are looking at for 10 nuclear attack subs is \$6 billion for the boats plus another \$1.5 billion or so for support facilities and extras. This does not include operating costs. Does anyone really think that Ottawa, which refuses to buy even minimal ammunition stocks for its ground forces, will shell out all this money? Not when wimpish politicians think daycare is more important than national defence and sovereignty.

Nor are these the only problems. Undersea operations in the ice-bound Arctic waters require spe-

Punch



"Mr. President, honored guests and members of the society: This evening I'd like to trace the origins and examine the cultural influences of chicken a la king."

ERIC MARGOLIS



cially reinforced hulls and sails, highly trained and experienced crews and officers and excellent command, control and communications (C3).

The vastness and complexity of the high Arctic waters demand an underwater acoustic system like the American SOSUS network. These powerful hydrophones serve much the same function at sea as does radar in vectoring interceptors to their targets. Without accurate and timely target detection and location, five submarines cannot hope to effectively patrol Canada's northern maritime border.

And even if all these systems were deployed, under-ice operations in the Arctic would still be perilous and difficult. Narrow, shallow waters characterize much of the Queen Elizabeth, Baffin and Parry islands. Much of these waters remains poorly charted — or not even mapped.

Grinding ice confuses sonar transmission. Strong magnetic forces make navigation and radio reception tricky and undependable. Threading through underwater ice canyons while avoiding free-floating ice or surprise shallow spots requires the kind of seamanship our tiny navy has almost forgotten.

What's more, with Ottawa's usual record of dithering and pork-barrel procurement, we can almost be certain that by the time any subs are built or acquired they would be obsolescent and ineffective. Submarine warfare technology is undergoing important changes — more about this in a forthcoming column.

Now is precisely the wrong time to buy technology that will be soon outdated by new generations of Soviet and American subs.

Submarines are not the best way for Ottawa to exercise Arctic sovereignty. Let's not forget either about Canada's NATO commitments, which call for defending the North Atlantic sea lanes.

What Canada needs is more regular Arctic patrols by CP-140 Aurora maritime patrol aircraft, suitably updated to counter new, quiet-running Soviet subs. Some form of airborne radar system (AWACS) is also essential, one that will give broad air and sea search patterns. Add in at least two air bases with long-range interceptors and some regular ground patrols.

Canada must also have the ability to mine the strategic defiles of the Davis Strait, the Gulf of Boothia, Lancaster Sound and the Lady Ann Strait. Doing so will, as I have previously written, close the back door to the North Atlantic to Soviet attack subs.

Most important, it's time Ottawa stopped trying to flimflam Canadians by issuing phony plans that will never come to be. Politicians in that dreary spot just love to promise weapons systems that take 10 years to procure — and then postpone or cancel them when no one is looking.

The only sovereignty this protects is the politicians' tenure in office. Keelhauling is too good for them.