

Naked in the minefield

The spectacle was ludicrous and deeply dismaying. The same U.S. destroyer and frigates that were supposed to be defending the two reflagged Kuwaiti tankers on their perilous voyage up the Persian Gulf, were seen hiding behind the 400,000-ton supertanker *Bridgeton*. And, as events showed, with good reason. The mine that damaged the huge tanker would have sunk one of the smaller U.S. warships.

How could the U.S. Navy be so stupid as to send warships and tankers into a potentially mined area without minehunters or minesweepers? Let's hope it was because the White House forced a reluctant Navy to do so. Otherwise, there must be some awfully dim Gilbert and Sullivan admirals in charge of America's fleets.

The abashed Navy lamely said that mines were "unexpected" in the area. Or, in other words: "Hey, you I-ranians, fight fair!" Pretty pitiful.

This farce perfectly illustrates a point that I have been making for some years in this column. Which is that the U.S. Navy and its Canadian counterpart have no defences against mine warfare and could, in wartime, face disaster.

As I wrote some time ago, just one Soviet mine-laying sub could close down every major Canadian Atlantic naval base. Today, Canada has no ability to clear mines and the U.S. has only three old fleet minesweepers and a tiny, not very effective force of minesweeping helicopters.

Both nations have long been talking about building minesweepers and minehunters. Attempts by the U.S. to develop non-metallic-hulled minesweepers have been a total failure. Canada's new pie-in-the-sky defence white paper rightly calls for minesweepers but we may never see them in our lifetimes.

Interestingly, modern minehunting and sweeping technology is readily available off the shelf from France, Italy, Holland and West Germany. But the Pentagon, true to form, sneers at foreign-made systems and refuses to buy them, preferring to

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waste years trying to reinvent the wheel.

Nor are minesweepers popular. The U.S. Navy is run by carrier admirals who always find the \$20 billion or so needed to build a large attack carrier and its escorts but can't seem to scrape together a few million for minesweepers. Of course not, for these poky little ships are unglamorous and a dead end as far as naval postings go.

Air force and army generals do the same: They love to buy new planes and tanks but never buy enough spare parts or ammunition to support them.

Meanwhile, the Soviets have amassed more mines than the rest of the world's navies combined. The Soviets, in fact, have long been pioneers in mine technology — poor man's warfare.

We are not talking about those evil old horned devices that were seen bobbing about on the surface in war movies. Today's mines include moored contact devices — the type the *Bridgeton* ran into — plus the more dangerous acoustic and pressure versions. The latter are triggered by the sound of a ship's propellers or changes in surrounding water pressure. Microelectronics allow these influence mines to be programmed to explode only under certain types of ship, and halfway down their hulls for maximum effect.

Other advanced mines carry homing torpedoes; they lie on the bottom listening for the right acoustic signature of a passing submarine.

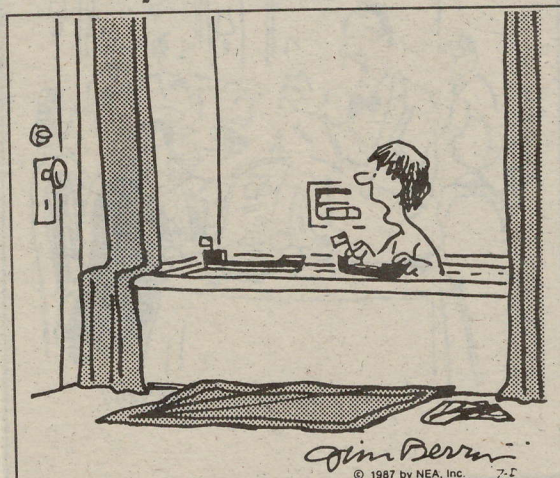
Mines can be laid by aircraft, submarines, motor boats, fishing trawlers — just about anything that floats or flies. There have been hints that the massive Soviet fishing fleet that operates off the U.S. and Canadian coasts has large quantities of mines aboard that could be sown just before the outbreak of war. Soviet minelaying subs and aircraft would complete the job.

If this happened, the best estimate is that the Soviets could close down most of the East Coast and Gulf of Mexico ports from St. John's, Nfld. to Brownsville, Tex. Look at the trouble the U.S. Navy is now having in the Persian Gulf and multiply by 100. Surprise mining would also shut in port at least 40% of the U.S. Navy, including many missile submarines.

This threat has been known for years. Still, the carrier admirals have refused to act and, instead, spent their time and money in fantasy plans to sail up into the Barents Sea and attack the Soviet Navy in its bases. How the Navy will do so when it won't be able to get its warships or replenishment units out of port remains a mystery.

What's most incredible about all of this is that in World War II it was massive mining and submarine attacks by the U.S. Navy that brought Japan to its knees. But the admirals have forgotten this and remember only Midway.

Berry's World



"What would you say if I told you that I was reflagging Kuwaiti tankers?"