

Ordeal is every submariner's nightmare

By NARENDRA SETHIA
Special to The Guardian

LONDON — The accident that has befallen the Russian Oscar-class submarine Kursk, more than 100 meters beneath the surface of the Barents Sea, is the ultimate nightmare upon which every submariner reflects at some stage during the course of his career — and, in many cases, even long after he has retired.

Until the second half of this century, few submarines were fitted with escape equipment, as it was believed that, given the operating circumstances of a submarine, such equipment would be superfluous. But in later years, the powers-that-be bowed to public pressure and fitted submarines with escape hatches, making a great show of conducting escape training exercises, though most submariners will tell you that they had little confidence of survival in the event of a serious accident at any appreciable depth.

An escape tower might be handy when you're in a depth of 30 meters in the North Sea, but when a submarine is more likely to be operating in the deeper waters of the Atlantic, Pacific, or Arctic, it is more likely to be regarded as a useful storage compartment than as a viable means of escape.

I first read the book "Das Boot," which chronicles the

missions of a German U-boat during World War II, while serving on a nuclear submarine about 20 years ago. I could not sleep for several nights, and had recurring dreams that our "boat" was on the bottom, 150 meters down, and unable to surface.

In my dreams, men lay perspiring in their bunks and their only sounds were whispered words and fear. In my dreams, all machinery had been shut down, and I could hear condensation dripping off the maze of pipework, and electrical wiring sparking in the darkness. Today, with the Kursk down and seriously damaged after an unspecified collision, the men on board — if they're still alive — must be feeling awake, what I could only feel in my dreams.

In "Das Boot," of course, the submarine in question was of 1940s design. The Kursk, by contrast, is a modern (launched 1995), 14,000-ton nuclear-powered submarine that bears little resemblance to the "boats" of that era. Air-conditioning, movies and good food are all features of modern submarines, and, with water-making equipment on board, submariners are even able to enjoy regular showers — something unheard of 40 years ago — or even 20 years ago on a diesel-powered submarine.

Despite the amenities, life on board any submarine is still



INSIDE A RUSSIAN SUBMARINE of the same class as the stricken Kursk.

cramped by most people's standards. There may not be sufficient bunks for every crew member and, on one long patrol, I remember we carried so much food that we had to use every inch of deck space and effectively raise the level of the deck by two feet. We were able to stand upright only after we had eaten our way through the food.

The cramped conditions and the fact that a submariner's only "view" of the outside world is by means of electronic listening devices, intensifies one's feeling of isolation. There are no windows through which to peer, no sun or sky at which to look. All that the men on the Kursk can see are the instruments, machinery and pipework that surround them, and the anx-

ious looks on the faces of their colleagues.

The fact that the Kursk has not apparently attempted to surface reinforces the fears that her damage must be serious. The possibilities include damaged propulsion systems, ruptured ballast tanks that would prevent her from achieving positive buoyancy, and flooding as the result of collision or other mishap.

With her nuclear reactor shut down, Kursk may not be able to operate air purification equipment such as electrolyzers, which produce oxygen, or scrubbers, which eliminate carbon dioxide. The air will grow stale. As carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide levels rise, the crew will develop severe headaches. I have experienced that and

even remember being unable to light a match on account of low oxygen levels. But I, at least, was not sitting at the bottom of the Barents Sea.

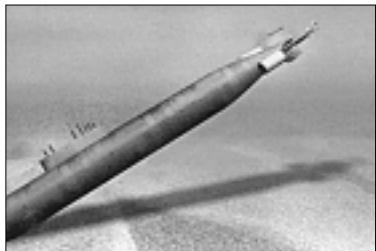
At 480 feet, the submarine is subjected to extreme pressure. Without the assistance of a DSRV (deep submergence rescue vehicle) or a diving bell which could withstand the stresses encountered at that depth, escape will be all but impossible.

The U.S. Navy's DSRVs are incompatible with non-U.S. submarines, and it is unlikely that the Russians have similar technology. The tragic reality is that the Kursk is likely to become an iron coffin, the name by which submarines have been known for nearly a century.

Twenty years ago, the Cold War was alive and well, and Russia was "the enemy." As I think of the Kursk now, I do not see her crew as Russians but as fellow submariners.

The close-knit community of submariners signifies a profession in which, even in war, there is no gulf of nationality or language, but a singularity of human spirit which transcends such borders. My heart goes out to every member of the Kursk's crew and to every one of their relatives. I feel sure that all other submariners the world over will feel the same as I do.

(Narendra Sethia served on HMS Conqueror.)



VIDEO ILLUSTRATION shows the Kursk's approximate angle.

Submarine sinking list

The Associated Press

The following five nuclear submarine wrecks have sat on the ocean floor for more than a decade, according to the Norwegian environmental Bellona Foundation:

- **April 10, 1963:** USS Thresher sinks off the New England coast with 129 men aboard. It sits at a depth of 2,559 meters.
- **May 22, 1968:** USS Scorpion sinks east of the Azores in the Atlantic with 99 men aboard. It sits at 2,958 meters.
- **April 11, 1970:** Soviet November-class sub sinks in the Bay of Biscay outside Spain in the Atlantic Ocean, killing 52 people. It sits at 4,606 meters.
- **Oct. 3, 1986:** Soviet sub catches fire and sinks east of Bermuda, killing four. A top Russian scientist said nuclear warheads on the sub broke open spewing plutonium into the Atlantic. U.S. experts said the plutonium had probably contaminated the sea floor but not endangered marine life. It sits at 4,921 meters.
- **April 7, 1989:** The Soviet Komсомоlets catches fire and sinks off Norway, killing 42 of the 69 sailors aboard. It sits at 1,350 meters. ■

Hospital ship 'fully ready' to help

By MIKHAIL ANANYEV
Reuters

SEVEROMORSK — The hospital ship Svir is ready for action in the homeport of the sunken submarine Kursk. The medical staff are on standby, the equipment on board and beds prepared for the stricken crew.

But the whisper going around Severomorsk is that there might be nobody left to save.

With little official information, residents speak quietly of many dead on the Kursk, stranded at the bottom of the Barents Sea with more than 100 sailors on board since last weekend.

Many in this naval town, home port of the Kursk and the rest of the Northern Fleet, are fearing the worst while hoping for the best.

"The ship is fully ready for its task, we are waiting for our orders," said Capt. Anatoly Shkarban, standing on the deck of his large white hospital ship with red crosses emblazoned on its sides.

Its crewmembers are hoping that when they are given the order to speed out to sea and reach the accident, they will be able to take living people on board their boat and not corpses.

Shkarban said it would take



A VIDEO CLIP shows members of the Kursk during a port call in October 1999.

around three hours for the ship to reach the area of the accident, where rescuers have fought storms and worked round the clock in, so far, vain attempts to send rescue capsules down to the Kursk.

The Russian Navy is now awaiting the arrival of a special British underwater rescue vessel, which is heading to the accident zone from the Norwegian port of Trondheim.

It is expected to arrive on Saturday.

The Svir can comfortably take more than 100 sick on board and the crew said places for 90 relatives of the Kursk sailors have been set aside to travel with the ship when it heads to the accident zone.

The ship is fully equipped with surgical equipment, the cots on which the patients will lie have been set up and 70

medical personnel on shore are ready to travel.

Medical officer Anatoly Freze said crewmembers were expecting mainly to treat cases of hypothermia, poisoning due to breathing the increasingly thin and sickly air on board the Kursk, and psychological trauma.

One or two relatives of those on the submarine have started to gather on the ship, locking themselves in cabins rather than facing the outside world.

In the town, built to house Navy personnel and closed to all but residents and those with special permits, people are following the events out at sea closely, wondering when and if the crew will come out alive.

"Some in Severomorsk are saying that the naval command has already ordered the preparation of graves," said one elderly man, Valentin Sergeevich, who did not want to give his last name.

The governor of Murmansk region has issued a statement saying the whole of his district in northern Russia is with the relatives in their hour of distress and asking people to keep believing in a positive outcome. But the mood has become dark.

"Of course it is very horrible, but many of them are probably dead," said Valentina, a worker in a shop. ■