

Anyone Seen NEMO?

By Commander Chris Baldwin RNR



NSRS embarked onboard SD NORTHERN RIVER sailing from the Port of Glasgow

Having spent the best part of 30 years in the Royal Navy in either frigates or destroyers, or as a Mine Warfare and Clearance Diver, it was something of an anomaly that I sought the opportunity to become the Operations Officer of the NATO Submarine Rescue System (NSRS). Submarine escape, rescue, surface abandonment and survival (SMERAS) has traditionally been a speciality of the submarine community. In fact, not many members of the RN know anything about NSRS and even for the submariner community, it is something of an enigma. First of all, it isn't actually a NATO asset but the legacy of its inception left it with the 'NATO' tag. Its 'nom de guerre', as the NSRS, has stuck from when there were several more countries involved in developing a rescue system as a contingency for a KURSK type catastrophe. The KURSK was an 'Oscar' Class Russian Navy nuclear submarine that sank in the Barents Sea in August 2000, following an explosion in the torpedo compartment of the boat. A number of crew remained alive for a few days after the accident, but sadly, by the time the UK submarine rescue system was requested to assist by the Russians and to attempt a rescue all the crew had died. In reality, the system is owned by France, Norway and the UK and currently it is operated by JFD (James Fisher Defence) under contract in a Government Owned Contractor Operated arrangement. This means contractors are responsible for maintaining, mobilising and operating the equipment, apart from the military team that operates the Transfer Under Pressure (TUP) complex. The TUP is used for the decompression of rescued submariners and due to it being a deep air saturation system, as opposed to a mixed gas one like those found in the offshore energy industry, it needs government personnel to operate it. As a tri-nationally owned system, the NSRS's priority is to respond to a disaster involving a submarine from one of the three participating nations. For this reason, the TUP is operated by diving and medical specialists from all three countries. In this respect it is a unique

arrangement in terms of military and private commercial co-operation which really shows just what can be done through co-operative, collaborative ventures.

Obviously, there are challenges with this heady mix of public, private and international interests. Differing opinions, contrasting cultural norms and of course the language element means that decision making when dealing with what would undoubtedly be an extremely high profile and stressful situation can be even more problematic. However, there is a real sense of team spirit in the TUP Operating Group or TOG, comprising of French, Norwegian and British Navy divers, medics and supporting contractors. Existing NATO protocols enable medical and diving leadership to function effectively. It is an accepted operational condition that the submarine in distress determines where the overall leadership responsibility lies. For a UK submarine the medical specialists from the Institute of Naval Medicine (INM) will carry out that task. It does become a little less clear were the system to be called to respond to an incident involving a third party's submarine. However, NSRS already has Memoranda of Understanding with the US and Sweden for mutual rescue support. NSRS was put on stand-by to respond to the Argentinian incident involving the ARA SAN JUAN which was lost in late 2017 and some members of the management team were deployed to Argentina to provide advice and equipment in the effort to locate and assist the SAN JUAN. Sadly, the wreck of the submarine was located in deep water and it was clear that there had been no survivors to be rescued as a consequence of the accident.



French, Norwegian and British TUP Chamber Control Operators

As the NSRS Operations Officer, my biggest responsibility is ensuring the operational capability of the system remains at the level of readiness expected by the three governments. This reactive status is enshrined in another Memorandum of Understanding, signed at Government level, which requires that the NSRS be available to respond to a rescue situation for the three participating nations (PN) anywhere in the world and to be able to start the first rescue operation within 72 hours of