

COLUMNISTS



Journalists sub-par on sub debate

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HMCS Corner Brook (R) cruises around the Bedford Basin in December 2006. (JEFF HARPER / Staff)

When New York Times writer Paul Krugman observed, "The people who talk the most understand the least," he could easily have been thinking about some Canadian television reporters and commentators as they breathlessly told of the damage to the submarine HMCS Corner Brook.

The boat struck bottom in 45 metres of water near Nootka Sound on western Vancouver Island, June 4 of last year, cutting a four-by-five-metre hole in the boat's front. CBC TV News showed "exclusive" photographs and alluded to efforts by the Royal Canadian Navy to covertly raise the vessel out of the water "under cover of darkness."

Last week, CBC Newsworld's Power Panel, comprising CBC's national affairs journalist and representatives of several communications and government relations agencies, spoke about Canada's four submarines that "basically don't work," "that have always been broken," and that "haven't been able to deploy or deploy properly."

Missing from the debate was that the damage was to the front of the submarine's fibreglass casing. Four metres inside the damaged casing is the pressure hull, made of 3.8-centimetre HY 80 steel, and this is the main compartment where the crew and controls are located. While the vessel is in the water, the space between the casing and the pressure hull is flooded.

The special high yield (HY) steel alloy is designed to military specification to allow submarines to withstand the pressures of deep dives. This special steel has a yield stress of 80,000 pounds per square inch, corresponding to a depth of about 1,800 feet. While the casing was damaged, the pressure hull, able to withstand incredible stresses, was untouched.

There have been questions about why the navy took the ship out of the water at 4 a.m., "under cover of darkness." The RCN's deputy commander, Rear-Admiral Mark Norman, explained that the 2,500-tonne submarine was raised out of the water onto the SEASPAN floating dock *Careen*, timed to take advantage of high tide and to minimize water turbulence from other vessel traffic in the harbour.

There were suggestions that the navy was reluctant to release information about the accident.

The grounding happened on June 4 and the RCN issued a news release the following day, announcing that the submarine "struck bottom while conducting submerged manoeuvres during advanced submarine officer training." The board of inquiry, convened on June 10 to investigate the matter, released its results on Dec. 16.

Canada's submarine community could be forgiven for their disappointment at the level of ignorance demonstrated by some commentators about the employment and deployment of our Victoria-class submarines. These vessels, an essential component of the RCN's fleet, have actively contributed to the navy's exercises and operations, accumulating some 900 days at sea since they came into service in 2003.

HMCS Windsor spent 146 days at sea in 2006 alone, and participated in several large U.S.-Canada training activities and exercises, and conducted several sovereignty patrols off Canada's East Coast for intelligence gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance.

HMCS Corner Brook spent 463 days at sea from October 2006 until her June 4 accident. She participated in various NATO and Canada-U.S. exercises, and deployed to the Arctic in 2007 and again in August 2009, where she conducted a counter-narcotics exercise and covert surveillance patrols near Baffin Island. In 2008 and 2011, the boat deployed to the Caribbean Basin and the Eastern Pacific as part of Operation CARIBBE, a U.S.-led, multinational effort to interdict drug trafficking.

HMCS Corner Brook's grounding should not be trivialized. It was a serious incident and had the potential to be a tragedy. However, commentators should not overstate the accident and ignore the important contributions which Canada's submarines make to training, sovereignty and prevention of drug trafficking.

The accident was the result of human error, not the submarine's systems. The boat's commanding officer was reassigned ashore, indicating a loss of confidence in his ability to exercise sound judgment.

Since the accident, several broadcast journalists commented about the need for a public debate about the utility of these submarines. The public would benefit from such a debate, but only if those on whom we depend for full and accurate information meet their obligations.

The information about HMCS Corner Brook's accident is available on the RCN's website. The only question remaining is: Why didn't the reporters and commentators take a few moments to read it before going on air?

Tim Dunne is a Halifax-based communications consultant and military affairs writer, a Research Fellow with Dalhousie University's Centre for Foreign Policy Studies and a member of the Royal United Services Institute (NS) Security Affairs Committee.