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Soviet sub surge in Atlantic has puzzled Navy in chase

By **Barnard L. Collier**
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A report of significantly more Soviet submarines than usual cruising beneath the Atlantic Ocean and being chased by an augmented squadron of 15 U.S. Navy sub-hunting aircraft was received in Washington yesterday with conflicting responses.

Well-informed U.S. Navy sources privately described a puzzling "surge" of from eight to 10 Soviet submarines into the Atlantic Ocean during the past week to 10 days.

They were last reported somewhere east of Bermuda and west of the Azores.

A ranking U.S. intelligence official downplayed the report, which originated from the island of Bermuda. He said:

"This is routine. The Soviets send in two subs over normal twice a year. Four are normal."

However, the report of an unusually large number of Soviet submarines entering the North Atlantic in a loose pack through the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap (GIUK Gap) from the Norwegian Sea was characterized as "extremely unusual" and "unprecedented" by Navy officers on Bermuda, who asked not to be named.

There were assertions by Navy sources that Soviet submarines — however many there may be — are being kept under 24-hour surveillance by Navy P3 Orion anti-submarine hunter aircraft based at the U.S. Naval Air Station on Bermuda, which is 570 miles east of the North Carolina coast.

The base commander, Capt. Donald Gentry, confirmed there were "additional aircraft" currently on the base, but he declined to go into details. There are normally nine P3 Orions in the Bermuda squadron.

"I can say that our mission out here is to

provide anti-submarine forces which operate year-round," Capt. Gentry said. He added:

"I cannot really respond to specifics because it is a classified area we can't discuss. I cannot comment on the level of activity going on."

First word of a mysterious pack of Soviet submarines came in an exclusive story which appeared in the Royal Gazette, a major Bermuda newspaper. Kevin Stevenson, the newspaper's chief reporter, said yesterday that pilots and ground personnel on the base were working maximum hours to track the Soviet boats.

Mr. Stevenson cited sources who described the submarines as "SSBMs" — which means they carry strategic ballistic missiles with an 8,000-kilometer (5,000-mile) range and two re-entry vehicles.

But Navy sources in the United States privately emphasized that these submarines are not armed with nuclear missiles but are conventional attack submarines. One Navy source said that there were reports yesterday morning of a Soviet sub being spotted on the surface.

If Soviet submarines have actually "surged" in high numbers, the reasons for it escaped naval analysts here yesterday. But there was considerable guessing going on among them.

"One guess is that they may be out hunting for our Trident or Poseidon subs," said an analyst, who planned to pursue the mystery today. He continued:

"The Soviets are known for keeping their ships close to home and not deploying more than about 10 percent, except in certain exercises. On the other hand, we deploy 25 to 40 percent. If they have deployed extra subs, that makes this very interesting. Not ominous; interesting and peculiar."