

# The phantom skipper and a deadly cargo

By Alex Hendry and Brian McKenzie

A MYSTERIOUS British seaman was involved in the disappearance of 200 tons of uranium ore—enough to make 60 atom bombs—it was alleged yesterday. He was named as Peter Barrow, captain of the ship that carried the potentially deadly cargo.

But Barrow is apparently a man without a past. No record of him exists at the Cardiff registry that lists all British seamen.

Nor was anyone of that name ever a member of the two British organisations for Merchant Navy officers.

The phantom skipper is only one link in a baffling chain of events.

Details of the complex business deals behind the uranium shipment were disclosed yesterday by a former Common Market nuclear security chiefs who also revealed Barrow's involvement.

The cargo vanished between November 17 and December 2, 1968. Despite police and C.I.A. investigations it still has not been traced.

Common Market sources

## Missing ore enough for 60 A-bombs'

have claimed it ended up in Israel—but Israeli authorities strongly deny this.

The ore was bought by a West German firm, put in falsely labelled barrels and loaded on to a Liberian-registered freighter, the Scheerberg A, at Antwerp.

Its destination was a company in Milan. But it never arrived.

The Italian company turned out to be a "front," the ex-security chief Professor Enrico Jacchia said in Rome yesterday.

The Common Market and the International Atomic Energy Agency had been powerless to investigate the case properly, said Professor Jacchia.

## Spy couple sought

BONN: Police were seeking a couple yesterday as a secretary from West German Chancellor Schmidt's offices was arrested for spying.

there must be at least one nine-letter word in the list. No plurals; no foreign words; no proper names. TODAY'S TARGET: 34 words, good: 42 words, very good: 51 words, excellent. Solution on Monday.

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION: Calf caul cell cleat cleft clue cult cutlet cuttle fault felt flat flea FLUCTUATE flue flute fuel lace late leaf least left luce lute tactful tale tate teal.

ANTHONY TUCKER on the  
disappearance of nuclear material

# Loss horizons

MAYBE WE should feel queasy about the disappearance in 1967 of 200 tons of yellowcake (concentrated crude uranium oxide) but before assuming it was diverted to obscure terrorism we should at least ask what they could do with it.

Unless they possessed a nuclear reactor and a plutonium separation plant or, even more exotic for terrorists, a uranium enrichment plant, the best they might do is paint their wagons or poison the water supply. The point is, and this seems somehow to have slipped out of sight in the excitement, that it is a long and difficult way from yellowcake to a credible weapon.

That does not mean that the loss is not a serious indictment of Euratom's security procedures at the time, or that nuclear materials should not be subject to security measures of the highest stringency. But we need to keep the issue in perspective. Any technically organised nation wanting uranium for illicit purposes could extract it from seawater or from the very lean ores which abound in most parts of the world but which are so far below the commercial horizon that people forget they exist. The Free Wales Army, given the motive and a secret milling and concentrate plant, might at this moment be building up a uranium stock from the incredibly lean ores of North Wales.

True, it might be cheaper to make a deal with a fly-by-night import-export organisation than to extract your own uranium but the motive for either must spring from the ability to do something with it. And the most obvious thing to do with yellowcake, if you have a nasty future in mind, is to convert it into uranium dioxide (the form used for nuclear fuels) and put it through a reactor on a suitably short time-base cycle.

Given a plutonium extraction plant, even on the pilot scale likely to exist in every country possessing research or power reactors, a small but adequate yield of weapons-grade plutonium would flow into the operators' coffers.

Before anyone leaps to the conclusion that Trawsfynydd nuclear power station has fallen into the hands of the Free Wales Army it

needs to be said very firmly that we are talking about difficult processes involving high technology and not the sort of thing even your most sophisticated and well-heeled terrorist group would attempt. The hijacking of materials from the top end of the nuclear process is a very different matter and that is where the security measures may well need to improve.

But the difficulties inherent in doing something nasty with yellowcake can tell us something about those who diverted it. It tells us that in 1967 they had a reactor and enough know-how to fabricate uranium dioxide rods and extract plutonium.

There was, of course, India, but India was by then producing her own yellowcake and had everything she needed for a weapons programme. There were the beginnings of nuclear programmes in Egypt, Iran and Pakistan, and both Brazil and South Africa were moving rapidly in that direction. But both Brazil and South Africa can produce their own yellowcake from commercially acceptable ores, while Egypt, Iran and Pakistan at that time had research facilities too small to conceal a plutonium programme.

That, as you probably guessed, leaves Israel and may help to explain the surge of rumours about Israel's nuclear potential back in the early 1970s, although these were discounted at the time because they did not match the likely output from other research reactors.

That may or may not reduce the queasiness: one of the problematical things about yellowcake is that it is a very stable kind of substance and you can leave it around in drums for years while your programme catches up.

Suppose it is out there somewhere—not in Israel—but in Iraq or one of the new African states just waiting for the right time. The answer, sadly, is that any country willing and able to provide the nuclear establishments needed to make use of it could find a route to weapons without the fortuitous presence of supplies of yellowcake. It might make things easier but its absence would not pose an insuperable barrier, for the nuclear suppliers' club does not own the earth.

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