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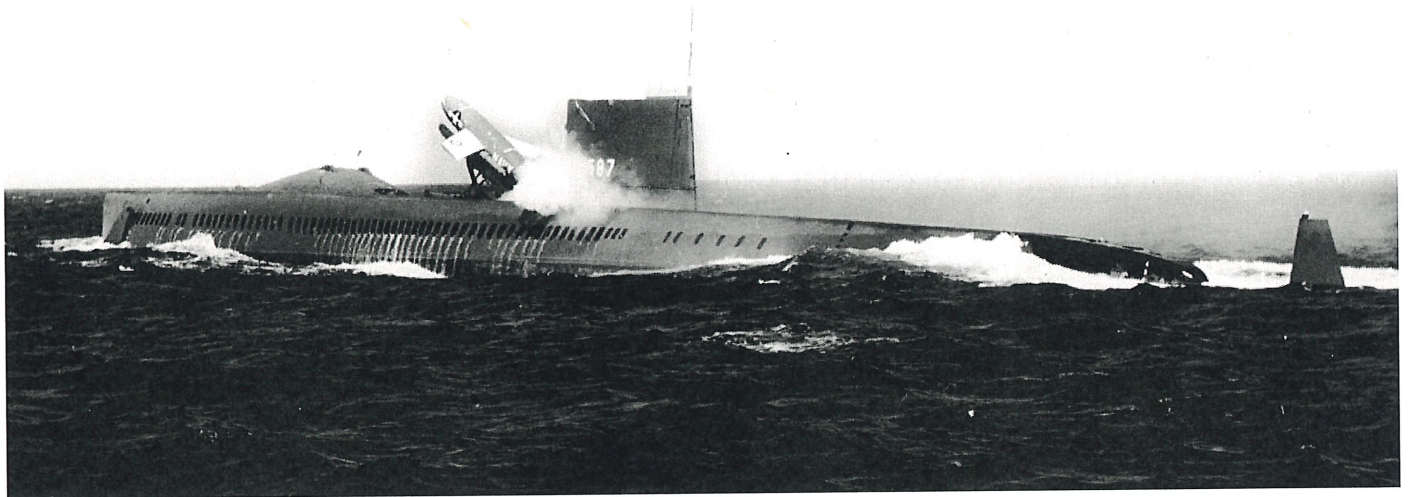
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HISTORY

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

New Zealand has a nuclear reaction

WRITTEN BY VAUGHAN YARWOOD



US NAVY

THERE IT WAS, “a sleek dark shape” on Wellington Harbour, caught in the early light. The date was **May 20, 1960**, and the brand new atomic-powered submarine *USS Halibut* had come calling as part of a shakedown cruise in the South Pacific. Less than 15 years after Hiroshima, New Zealand was experiencing its first nuclear encounter. *Pictorial Parade*, which reported the event, saw nothing untoward in the visit. Along with footage of a vintage car rally in Morrinsville, trap-shooting in Christchurch and the High Commissioner inspecting troops somewhere in the jungles of Malaya, it recorded the Minister of Defence, Phil Connolly (himself a former navy man), and a gaggle of other officials clambering below decks to exchange pleasantries with the submariners.

USS Halibut is the first nuclear submarine designed to launch guided missiles. “...,” said the *Pictorial Parade*’s journalist, who neglected to mention (or did not know) that Regulus was built to deliver a thermonuclear warhead across 900 km of ocean. “The next development: undersea launching...”



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inspired by the birth of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (1959) and the country's first nationwide Hiroshima Day commemoration marches (1961).

Just four years after the submarine left New Zealand waters, France raised the political temperature by transferring its atmospheric nuclear tests to Mururoa atoll in French Polynesia. By 1972, stirred by anger at the ongoing tests in what they viewed as their backyard, 10,000 New Zealanders signed a petition. Others, including Cabinet minister Matiu Rata, sailed to Mururoa aboard a peace flotilla. In 1973, the new Labour Government of Norman Kirk dispatched two navy frigates to the test zone, telling the crew of *HMNZ Otago* that they would act as a "silent witness with the power to bring alive the conscience of the world".

When, three years later, the newly elected National Government of Rob Muldoon reversed policy, welcoming nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed ships, the announcement triggered massive street marches. In 1977, some 365,000 people put their names to a petition. One after another, *USS Truxton*, *USS Pintado* and *USS Haddo* were harried on arrival by spectacular protest fleets.

Then Labour Prime Minister David Lange closed the door to such visits. (Ironically, it had been an earlier Labour leader, Walter Nash, who invited *Halibut* to these shores in 1960.) *Rainbow Warrior* followed, and the declaration of a nuclear-free New Zealand.

Watching footage of Phil Connolly stepping down into *Halibut* 52 years ago, who could have foreseen that New Zealand's prime minister would be attending a Nuclear Security Summit to caution the world's leaders on the dangers of the technology getting into the wrong hands, as John Key did in March this year. Or that his dire warnings about nuclear weapons would be endorsed by an African-American President of the United States.

More by [Vaughan Yarwood](#)
