

Crew in the control room (opposite) had only seconds to save the *Dechaineux* (below) after the sub was flooded.



RED ALERT

It could have been our worst military disaster since *Voyager* – a flood on board HMAS *Dechaineux* that threatened the lives of all 55 crew. For the first time, *Cameron Stewart* reveals the full story.



The only comfort for Able Seaman Geordie Bunting was that his death, and those of his 54 fellow sailors, would have been swift. HMAS *Dechaineux*, the pride of Australia's submarine fleet, would have sunk like a monstrous black rock to the frigid depths of the Indian Ocean. As the stricken submarine went down, Bunting and his crew would have listened helplessly to the creaks and cracks as the water pressure outside leaned against the hull like an elephant. There would have been no survivors.

This might have been merciful – every submariner is haunted by the tale of the doomed Russian submarine, the *Kursk*, in which crew who survived an onboard

explosion wrote notes to loved ones while sitting on the seabed awaiting a rescue that never came. But on this day, off the coast of Western Australia, the *Dechaineux* was in waters too deep to reach the seabed intact.

“It would have been like crushing an empty Coke can in your hand,” says Bunting of the water pressure that would have collapsed the vessel. “We were too deep to hit the bottom alive.”

Until now, Bunting, his crewmates and the nation's top brass were among the select few who knew just how perilously close the *Dechaineux* came to suffering this fate on February 12, 2003, when a burst seawater hose caused a catastrophic onboard flood just when the submarine was at its deepest diving depth. ▶

“I don’t think there was anybody on our boat who wasn’t shit-scared that day,” says Bunting. “Another five seconds and we would have been in big trouble ... another ten and you have got to question whether we could have surfaced.”

“We were talking seconds, not minutes,” says Mike Deeks, the then commander of the Navy’s submarine force. “It was a very serious, significant flood.”

For the first time, *The Weekend Australian Magazine* can reveal the full story of how Australia almost lost a submarine and its entire crew. It is a story that the Navy glossed over at the time, hiding the true gravity of the accident which, but for a few seconds, would have been our worst military disaster since the *Voyager* tragedy in 1964 left 82 sailors dead.

But in the close-knit, secretive world of Australia’s submariners, the *Dechaineux* accident is still talked about in whispers. They refer to it simply as “the flood”.

“It changed my life,” says Bunting, a father of two, who nearly drowned. He has agreed to talk about the incident for the first time. “I am still nervous about it now; I wake up at all hours with funny thoughts in my head. It is the closest I would like to come to death.”

The accident has also had a lasting impact on the operational policies of the Navy’s six Collins Class submarine fleet – since the *Dechaineux* was nearly lost, no Australian submarine has been permitted to dive as deep again.

SOWHAT REALLY HAPPENED UNDER the Indian Ocean on the morning of February 12, 2003? As families frolicked in the midsummer heat on the beaches of Perth, the *Dechaineux* was conducting training in the Navy’s West Australian exercise area, about 40 nautical miles off the city’s coast. In command was Peter Scott, a tall, rangy character who was popular with his crew, not least because of a reputation for calmness under pressure. He had once helped steer home a crippled British Navy submarine in the North Sea when it was swamped by a wave with its hatch still open, causing seawater to surge in, short-circuiting computers and sonar equipment.

On this day, the 37-year-old Scott was putting the *Dechaineux* and its crew, which included six women, through their final paces in preparation for a deployment to the waters of North Asia. The objective was to cruise silently beneath the ocean’s surface, possibly for months, listening, watching and reporting everything around them.

Such deployments require submariners to live in a bizarre world with no defined day or night. Life is broken up into six-hour shifts – six on, six off – with the only concession to the calendar being pizza on Saturday nights. The crew’s single luxury was a portable barbecue that could be pulled out when the sub surfaced mid-ocean so they could hog out and fry sausages on the hull.

This off-beat lifestyle created some quirky behaviour on board, and the *Dechaineux*’s crew had a well-earned reputation for eccentricity. In particular, they had a peculiar habit of watching submarine disaster movies while underwater – the *Dechaineux*’s red-headed sonar operator, Melanie Ellerton, boasted she was the only crew member not to have seen the submarine thriller *The Hunt for Red October*. When I travelled on the *Dechaineux* in late 2002, only months before the accident, Scott’s own bedtime reading was the gruesome tome *A Time to Die: The Kursk Disaster*.

HMAS *Dechaineux*, the fourth of the Navy’s six Collins Class submarines, had been commissioned in February 2001. It

closely guarded military secrets, because to reveal it would give a substantial advantage to an enemy. The Navy works it out by estimating at what point the submarine’s systems will start to fail and then building in a safety margin.

“No systems are expected to fail at deep diving depth, but if something goes wrong down there then that is a very good time to get scared,” said one crew member, who asked not to be named.

Scott had ordered the *Dechaineux* down to deep diving depth in order to test its systems under maximum pressure. Because of the potential for danger all crew members were at their stations, alert for any sign of danger as the submarine glided silently into the deep. Bunting

came back the other way,” he recalls. “Then the water flooded in and I got tossed around like a washing machine.” He adds, “It was coming in so fast I thought it was all over.”

Bunting did not yet know it, but a different hose had broken, spraying icy seawater into the small room at a pressure strong enough to knock him clean off his feet. Such was the force that a heavy piece of metal attached to the hoses to help keep them in place flew centimetres from Bunting’s head, narrowly avoiding what would almost certainly have been a fatal blow. The metal elbow zoomed past the front of his head, hit a wall and then rebounded behind his head, miraculously missing him on both occasions.

What happened next took place in a matter of seconds, but for most of the *Dechaineux*’s crew, those seconds were the longest of their lives. Twenty-six-year-old Able Seaman Greg Sullivan was standing near to Bunting’s area when he heard the explosion. He ran instinctively towards the noise of rushing water and peered down the hatch into the small motor room that was rapidly filling with water.

“I could see Rocker [Bunting] in the water,” he recalls. “It was like a washing machine and he was semi-conscious and getting tossed around. We realised straight away that this was a bad flood.”

In the space of only seven or eight seconds, some 12 tonnes or 12,000 litres of seawater had poured in. The water was already up to Bunting’s chest and rising rapidly. “I then blacked out under the water for a couple of seconds,” says Bunting. “I became wedged underwater between the ladder and the motor.”

Bunting’s wife, Arna, recalls her husband later telling her that at that moment he believed he was drowning. “He said that he felt a strange calm presence under the water,” she says.



“It would have been like crushing an empty Coke can,” says Geordie Bunting.

did not have a squeaky clean record at the time of the flood. In November 2002, while I was aboard, the submerged submarine suffered a dangerous hydraulic burst which saw oil spray out at high pressure in the torpedo room. Two crew members dressed in full firefighting regalia charged in to prevent a fire and an explosion – an incident that Scott later described as “uncommon, not routine and potentially very serious”.

But it was nothing compared with what was about to befall the *Dechaineux*. Around mid-morning on February 12, Scott, who declined to be interviewed for this story, ordered his submarine to descend to what was known as “deep diving depth” – the deepest depth that the submarine can safely operate at.

This depth is one of Australia’s most

was standing in the lower motor room at the back of the vessel. “I was there to keep an eye on a hose which we had just replaced,” he says. The room, a cramped space measuring no more than two by three metres, sat underneath the submarine’s main motor room – the crew entered and left this small room via a hatch in the deck.

As the submarine dived steadily deeper, Bunting’s gaze was fixed on the newly replaced hose – part of the Auxiliary Sea Water System that provides cooling waters for the motors and which is exposed to sea pressure at all times. Bunting says he was staring at this hose when he heard a deafening noise from across the room.

“There was a loud bang and something hard flew past my head and then

AS BUNTING WAS FIGHTING FOR his life, his colleagues in the main motor room sounded the alarm over the submarine’s intercom. “FLOODING, FLOODING, FLOODING IN THE MOTOR ROOM.” The words were enough to freeze the blood of the *Dechaineux*’s entire crew. At deep diving depth a flood was the most serious mishap a submarine could suffer. In the main control room, Lieutenant Commander Geoff Wadley, who was officer in charge at that moment, recalls, “I thought, ‘bugger’,” he says dryly. “Any incident at deep diving depth is very serious and your heart definitely skips a beat.”

Instantly, watch leader Lieutenant James Lybrand instituted what is called Emergency Operating Procedure, which is designed to quickly stop the flooding and get the stricken boat back to the surface. The cry of, “Shut all hull valves!” rang around the control room as crew members pressed the key command to



Retiring tomorrow? Plan today.

Even if you're retiring in just a few years, a Westpac Financial Planner could really help make a difference to your retirement income.

To begin with, the right plan can help boost your retirement income by restructuring your investments. And if you're close to retiring then we can help maximise your age pension or other social security entitlements.

What's more, by using the Westpac Retirement Income Calculator, your Financial Planner can examine your current savings and show you the incomes that our different retirement strategies might deliver.

To start your retirement plan, arrange your obligation-free meeting today. After all, don't you deserve a more comfortable retirement?

Call 1300 550 237 or drop into any branch.



Things you should know: This information is current as at 4 July 2005 and has been prepared without taking into account your objectives, financial situation or needs. Because of this, you should, before acting on this information, consider its appropriateness, having regard to your objectives, financial situation or needs. Westpac's Financial Services Guide can be obtained by calling 131 817, visiting www.westpac.com.au or visiting any of our branches. Westpac Financial Planners are representatives of Westpac Banking Corporation, ABN 33 007 457 141, AFSL number 233714. Saatchi WSD1061/G

shut all of the submarine's external valves en masse, hopefully stopping the flow of seawater.

Within seconds of the flood being announced on the intercom, Captain Scott – who had been outside his cabin – stormed into the control room and took command. Without knowing how seriously damaged his submarine was, Scott's immediate task was to urgently gather speed to give the *Dechaineux* the power to climb back towards the surface, while at the same time blowing the ballast tanks to make the submarine lighter. This was standard emergency procedure, but with a flood at deep diving depth, it was no guarantee of survival.

As these emergency procedures were implemented, none of the crew knew whether they would make it back to the surface. "It seemed like half an hour but in reality it was probably about 15 seconds," recalls Wadley in the control room.

Says Bunting: "It was pretty bloody close, mate ... there would have been a lot of people frozen in the moment."

THE *DECHAIENEUX* HAD TAKEN ON so much water that the 3000-tonne submarine did not immediately respond to the emergency commands. While the crew in the front half of the vessel were holding their breath, those down the back were surrounded by too much mayhem to be contemplating the odds of survival. "I was thinking we could be in trouble – you knew [the sub] was taking longer than it should [to start to surface]," says Greg Sullivan. "But we were busy and it was only afterwards that I thought more about it."

With Bunting semi-conscious and trapped in the water, Sullivan and Petty Officer Michael Morris leaned down through the hatch of the flooded motor room and fished him out. "I remember getting pulled up by the top of my lapels," says Bunting. "I was drenched and freezing with lumps and bumps on my head, so they laid me down on the deck and then they went back [to the flood] to figure out what happened."

Sullivan peered back down into the motor room and, to his enormous relief, could see that the flood had been halted for the time being as a result of the control room immediately shutting off the external valves. But there was no certainty it wouldn't start again, so he raced to grab some tools while Morris dived into the flooded room to examine the damage.

Meanwhile, the *Dechaineux's* chief engineer, Johnny Ryan, ran from the front of the submarine towards the motor room to give his captain a first-hand report of the accident. Ryan sprinted down the narrow corridors, at one point passing by a framed quote from Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "Whoever

does not have the stomach for this fight, let him depart."

Bunting said later he was moved by Ryan's courage. "They all called him 'Johnny Crazy', because he was the only bloke who ran towards a flood, not away from it."

In the control room up front, the tension was palpable as the crew willed their stricken submarine to respond to the commands to gather speed and climb. "There was a period of time before the submarine reacted and there was a lot of tension in the air," says Wadley. All eyes were fixed on the depth gauge – the single dial that would effectively determine the fate of 55 lives. After what seemed like an eternity, the front of the *Dechaineux* slowly started to rise.

In the control room the relieved crew stifled the temptation to cheer. They knew they were still a long way from the surface with no guarantees that another flood would not break out and pitch the submarine back towards the ocean floor. Scott ordered the *Dechaineux* to climb on a 20-degree angle – twice the normal angle of ascent – causing coffee cups in the mess area to slide off the tables and crash to the ground.

Crew members describe the next three minutes as if it were a lifetime. Wadley recalls that in the control room the initial flurry of loud orders was followed by an eerie silence as Scott and his senior officers watched the gauges and held their breath as the submarine slowly climbed.

"It was a long three minutes because whatever faith you have in your boat, you don't know how bad the flood is," says one crew member who was in the control room during the ordeal.

But the *Dechaineux* did not let them down – after what seemed like an eternity, the submarine's black hull finally exploded out of the Indian Ocean and into the summer sunlight.

Despite this, Scott and his crew knew they were not yet out of trouble. "When you get to the surface you can still sink again," one crew member says. "You still don't know if you have contained the flood."

Says Bunting: "Once you have blown all your ballast tanks you have no guarantees."

Scott was now busy planning how the *Dechaineux* would limp back to Fremantle – a journey that would take around eight hours and was described by one crew member as "hours of uncertainty". "There is no roadside service for breakdowns out there," the crew member says.

Back on dry land, at the HMAS Stirling naval base, submarine chief Mike Deeks knew nothing about the underwater drama until a belated transmission rolled in from the ocean. "We had a message from *Dechaineux* ▶

◀ saying that the submarine was on the surface and that it had suffered a serious flood, but it was safe," he recalls.

At the dock Decks, along with naval medical staff, was there to greet the submarine. Captain Scott let his shaken crew go home to tell their tale. Bunting's wife, Arna, remembers the first telephone call she received from her husband after the accident. "He didn't say much - he just said, 'Oh you might have to get me some smokes and put some beer in the fridge.' He said his smokes had got wet. I thought, 'How could they get wet?' That was when I knew something had gone wrong." Wadley recalls the look on his wife's face when he told her what had happened. "She was initially quite upset, but I told her that it is indicative of our training that we handled it well."

WHILE THE *DECHAIENEUX'S* CREW was recovering, the Navy went into overdrive. The Collins Class submarines had already suffered their share of bad press, with media labelling them Dud Subs, among other things. But this was a safety issue of the highest order. The Navy immediately ordered its other five submarines back to port and banned all deep diving until the accident could be investigated.

In Melbourne, the Defence Science and Technology Organisation carried out urgent and extensive tests on the types of hoses that had failed and caused the flood. Four days after the accident, the Navy finally conceded that there had been an incident at sea and that "a number of tonnes" of water had entered the *Dechaineux* after a hose failed. But the Navy did not let on about the size of the flood and the crucial fact that it had occurred at deep diving depth.

Yet the *Dechaineux's* crew knew exactly how close they had come to disaster. "We all had a pretty good idea how completely catastrophic it could have been," says one senior crew member, who asked not to be named. "If it had been any worse we wouldn't have got up and if our propulsion system had failed we certainly wouldn't have made it."

"We were probably only 20 seconds away [from sinking] if the flood had continued," he adds.

Several other senior naval sources confirm that 20 seconds is the best estimate of how close we came to losing the *Dechaineux*. No definitive figure has ever been placed on it, partly because of disagreement between naval engineers and scientists, but most estimates range between 15 and 25 seconds. When asked by *The Weekend Australian Magazine* to confirm whether the *Dechaineux* was 20 seconds from disaster, the Navy offered this cryptic reply: "All floods in submarines are serious and time is clearly a critical factor."

Shortly after the flood, a Marine Accident Investigation was conducted. But try as it might, the Navy could find no fault with the hoses that caused the



Captain Peter Scott "didn't raise his voice once - he was as cool as a cucumber".

flood. Every hose was tested - and continues to be tested - to pressures greater than the deep diving depth, and ten per cent of each new batch of hoses are pressure-tested to destruction.

"During these tests, no hose has ever failed at less than four times the maximum designed pressure," a Navy spokesman says.

In other words, the Navy has never been able to properly explain what happened on the *Dechaineux*. All Collins Class submarines use the same hoses today as the one that ruptured on February 12, 2003. But rather than risk another accident, the Navy has reduced the deep diving depth of its submarine fleet and hence the pressure on the hoses. In other words, it has traded key military capability for safety. And it has worked: since the incident, no other submarine has suffered a major flood.

Deeks - like the Navy - maintains that the incident is more of a good news story than bad. "It is a good news story for three reasons," he says. "One, the sailors near to the flood reacted exactly as they should have. Two, what they did

proved to be the right thing - in other words, the emergency procedures worked. And three, the design of the submarine worked. It took what was basically the worst possible flood and proved that the submarine could handle it."

Unfortunately, not all of the crew members have so easily handled what took place that day. "Emotionally, I don't think he has ever recovered," says Bunting's wife, Arna, about her husband.

"I am just a lot more nervous these days," says Bunting. "I know that there are still guys who were on [the *Dechaineux*] who are still nervous about it today."

Immediately after the accident, Bunting and several fellow crew members spoke to psychiatrists about their fear of going back on the sub. The crew had only a few weeks to recover before the *Dechaineux* would be given a safety clearance and ordered back to sea. But Bunting decided the best way to conquer his fears was to get back on the boat.

"The psych was not too keen on me going back, but I thought I should do it not just for me but for my crewmates."

To the amazement of some old Navy

salts, only weeks after the accident, the entire *Dechaineux* crew reported for duty. "Every single one of those crew members went back to sea and they dived again," says Wadley proudly.

In part, this was out of respect to their captain, Scott, whose coolness during the crisis had won over his crew. "They told me he was totally calm throughout the whole thing," Bunting says. "I think deep down he shat himself as much as anyone, but he didn't raise his voice once - he was as cool as a cucumber. The boys said he was awesome."

For the *Dechaineux's* crew, the flood turned out to be the most unlikely of bonding experiences. "It really brought the crew together," says Wadley. "Everyone was really proud of the way the boat behaved and the way we all got through it - there was a lot of pride."

For Bunting himself, there were some personal demons to contend with once he was back at sea. "I wouldn't go down into that [lower motor] room for a while unless we were on the surface or at periscope depth," he says. Bunting owes his life to the actions of others and soon after the accident, Scott nominated his rescuers, Sullivan and Morris, for bravery awards. To the disgust of some submariners, neither has yet received such an award - a delay that one source claimed was due to the Navy's reluctance to highlight the incident.

When questioned about this, the Navy says that some bravery nominations arising from the *Dechaineux* flood have now been forwarded to the Australian Bravery Decorations Council, which will make a final decision. But the council will not meet until November and no awards will be handed out before next March at the earliest.

But one plaudit has been quietly awarded already. Buried amid the names on the recent Queen's birthday honours list was a Conspicuous Service Cross for one "Lieut-Commander Geoffrey Wadley for exemplary leadership as Executive Officer of HMAS *Dechaineux*".

The crew who were on the sub on the day of the flood are no longer together - most have moved to other submarines, or to desk jobs, or have left the Navy. And yet there remains a powerful comradeship among the men and women who came through the crisis. Says one: "It has become like a badge of honour to have been on board on that day."

For some, the most vivid memories are not of the accident itself, but rather the poignant exchanges between the crew and their captain on the days that followed. "It was amazing to watch," says one sailor. "The guys - big burly blokes - would come up to him and say, 'G'day Scotty, it is good to see you.' The captain would stare straight into their eyes and reply with a grin. 'It's good to be here.'"

Everyone knew what he meant. **©** Staff writer Cameron Stewart's last feature for the magazine was *Left Behind* (April 16-17), about Australia's military widows.