

US sub joyride kills nine Japanese

# The USS Greeneville and the arrogance of power

Kate Randall  
21 February 2001

It is by now abundantly clear that the February 9 collision of the nuclear sub *Greeneville* with a Japanese fishing boat off the Hawaiian coast was an entirely avoidable tragedy, the result of gross recklessness and irresponsibility on the part of the US Navy. Nine people on the *Ehime Maru*, including four high school students, were killed when the sub broke the surface as it completed an “emergency blow.”

The potentially dangerous maneuver was executed by the commander of the sub not as a strategic military exercise, but rather to impress a group of 16 well-heeled civilians brought aboard the *Greeneville* as part of a public relations effort by the Navy to bolster support for its nuclear submarine program. Two of these civilian visitors were at control posts when the submarine rammed into the Japanese boat.

The incident has provoked justifiable outrage in Japan, especially among the relatives of the victims and survivors of the *Ehime Maru*, a fishing boat owned by a high school in the Japanese town of Uwajima. The boat had been carrying students on a fisheries training mission. At a news conference at the University of Hawaii last Friday, relatives of the victims demanded to know why civilians had been allowed to sit at the submarine's controls.

The Japanese victims' relatives released a list of 31 questions they want the United States to answer, including who was steering the *Greeneville* at the time of the collision and why the sub's crew did not “do their best” to assist survivors after the boat sunk. One of the relatives' questions reads: “Do you let the civilians experience the emergency blow to let them enjoy the thrill of a roller coaster ride?”

The Navy has initiated a high-level investigation into the accident, but the military has already admitted that the

maneuver was performed for the benefit of the civilian visitors, and that their presence may well have distracted the sub's commander and crew. There are also questions as to whether proper safety procedures were followed in carrying out the maneuver. There is little doubt that the *Greeneville*'s actions placed at risk not only nearby boats, but the submarine's crew and the civilians on board.

Before performing an emergency blow, a sub rises to about 60 feet below the surface and raises its periscope to scan the surrounding area for other vessels. When the sub's commander determines that the area is clear, the vessel dives to a depth of several hundred feet over the next 10 to 15 minutes. The ship then rapidly forces compressed air into its tanks, forcing out water, which initiates a rapid ascent to the surface taking two to five minutes.

Many factors may have led the *Greeneville*'s skipper, Commander Scott Waddle, to miss sighting the *Ehime Maru* before performing the emergency blow. Cloudy weather and three- to six-foot waves may have hampered visibility, or the scope may not have been raised to an adequate level to account for the choppy seas. With the island of Oahu as a backdrop, the Japanese boat may have been camouflaged.

The sub was reportedly following Navy procedure by using only its passive sonar when it hit the Japanese boat, instead of its accurate active sonar devices. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) officials say that for more than 10 years the Navy has rejected NTSB recommendations that subs utilize active sonar when operating in coastal waters to avoid just such an accident.

Another anomaly is the fact that the *Greeneville* was two miles outside the Navy submarine training area, a 14-by-4-mile “test and trial area” marked on navigation charts. The Navy is also investigating whether the sub

delayed before shooting to the surface, which might have allowed the Japanese boat to enter the sub's vicinity undetected.

Taking all of these factors into consideration, the decision to carry out the procedure appears all the more reckless. The accident brings into focus a picture at odds with the image of the military generally presented to the American public—that of a highly trained, efficient and professional operation. What is exposed is another side of the military—its social character as an institution of the US economic elite, in which military brass rub shoulders with and provide favors to wealthy supporters.

The presence of civilians aboard the USS Greeneville was not exceptional. Last year, more than 11,000 civilians rode on Navy ships in the Pacific, including 213 visitors aboard naval submarines. A standard ride on a sub can be dull, so captains often run the vessels at high speeds and steep angles to dazzle their guests. Last year, the Navy also invited 2,000 civilians on board aircraft carriers on the West Coast to watch planes catapulting off flight decks.

These public relations operations place additional stress on naval crews. An ABCNews.com report cites former submariners saying that such VIP visits “can be annoying, prompting endless cleanings and inspections of the ship's areas prior to the civilians arriving,” and that “they can often come right after a long arduous cruise, when the crew is particularly fatigued,” further heightening the possibility of accidents.

The Navy runs a program called Operation Tiger, through which friends and family of sailors can ride on a variety of naval vessels. But regular visitors to Navy ships also include VIPs from government, industry and the media, who are often offered cruises of up to three days. The civilian guests on the Greeneville were from this latter group.

Many of the 16 civilians were major contributors to the USS Missouri Memorial Association, a group established to restore and maintain the battleship on which Japan surrendered at the end of World War II. In addition, at least a third of the submarine's guests were associated with the Texas oil industry. The Navy would not comment whether any of these individuals were invited to ride on the submarine due to ties to President Bush or Vice President Cheney—both Texas oil men.

Needless to say, the average US citizen does not receive an invitation to cruise on a nuclear submarine or aircraft carrier. Until this month, the vast majority of Americans were unaware that well-to-do businessmen and journalists

routinely take such trips.

While the tragedy was an accident, it was an accident waiting to happen. That the victims were Japanese was likewise a matter of chance. The incident does, however, bespeak the arrogance of the American military, which polices the world in defense of American corporate interests, inevitably expressing the brutality and contempt in which the US ruling elite holds the vast majority of the world's people. The onus lies not with the average sailor or soldier, but with the class interests which he or she unwittingly defends.

There is, moreover, a cruel symbolism in the fact that the submarine struck a Japanese boat, as the Japanese people have suffered the brutality of the US military in particularly horrendous ways. The world will never forget, nor forgive the American ruling class for incinerating the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs. It remains a historic fact that the only country to use nuclear weapons in war is the United States, and the only people to suffer the consequences are the Japanese.

American military depredations against Japanese civilians are more than a distant memory. The ill-fated civilian visit aboard the Greeneville was arranged by Admiral Richard C. Macke, the former commander-in-chief of US forces in the Pacific. Macke was forced to retire in 1985 following statements he made after three American soldiers pleaded guilty to raping a 12-year-old Japanese girl in Okinawa, the home base for 26,000 of the 48,000 American troops stationed in Japan. Macke made the offhand remark that the rape could have been avoided if the men had simply paid for a prostitute.

Relations between the US military and the Japanese public were already strained before the February 9 incident. Okinawan residents' hostility to the US military has grown following several recent assaults on local women by US servicemen. The government on the island a short time ago adopted a resolution enabling police to detain criminal suspects more easily. Okinawan authorities have asked the US military to hand over a Marine suspected in a series of arson attacks.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**