

Falsified Test Certifications Hurt Contractor and Put Lives at Risk

Written by Nick Sanders
Thursday, 19 May 2011 00:00

On May 6, 2011, Robert Ruks, age 34, a former quality inspector at Huntington-Ingalls Shipbuilding (formerly Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding) (formerly Newport News Shipbuilding), pleaded guilty to two counts of making false statements in connection with inspections of welds on submarines constructed at the shipyard.

According to [this report](#) at DefenseNews, Ruks inspected and certified more than 10,000 welds during his 4 year tenure as a “non-destructive testing weld inspector.” He performed inspections on the submarines New Mexico, Missouri, California, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and the North Carolina. All of the subs in question are of the [Virginia a-class](#) nuclear powered fast attack type—the U.S. Navy’s latest.

About 10 percent of the welds that Ruks inspected (or more accurately failed to inspect) were classified as [SUBSAFE](#), meaning that they were hull integrity or other safety critical welds. As the DefenseNews story noted, “A defective pipe joint weld on a submarine that Ruks had certified as properly done could have caused the loss of the submarine.”

[Another article](#) stated that, “In May 2009, the Navy announced that an investigation was under way after an inspector at the Newport News shipyard admitted falsifying three weld inspections, saying he had done them when he had not.” Apparently, that investigation led to Ruks, after his co-workers reported him to shipyard management. As the DefenseNews article reported—

Questioned on May 14 of [2009] by his supervisors, Ruks admitted he had falsely certified inspecting three lift pad welds on a submarine although, according to a statement of facts filed with his plea agreement, the inspections were not performed. Ruks lied again on May 22, 2009, when he was questioned by agents from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. According to the statement of facts, while Ruks admitted falsifying the lift pad weld certifications, he lied to the agents about the number of other ship and submarine hulls he had failed to inspect. ... As a result of Ruks' false weld certifications, Northrop Grumman was forced to expend 18,906 man-hours to complete the reinspections, at a cost of \$654,000

It was reported that the reinspections found that 14 structural welds and two pipe welds were unsatisfactory—which (as we noted) may have put Navy lives at risk during submarine

Falsified Test Certifications Hurt Contractor and Put Lives at Risk

Written by Nick Sanders
Thursday, 19 May 2011 00:00

maneuvers.

The articles report that—

Ruks' guilty plea was accepted Friday by U.S. District Judge Mark S. Davis in federal court in Newport News. Ruks faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000 for each count, as well as three years of supervised release on top of any prison term he may receive.

As part of Ruks' plea deal, he agreed to a "restitution order" that could require him to pay the U.S. government all of the \$654,000 that it cost to reinspect and rework some of the 9,506 welds he certified on six submarines, court records show.

The final amount, however, is yet to be determined.

We too often focus on cost accounting and other issues, or on the mundane corrupt actions associated with procurement. It behooves us all to remember that fraud and corruption can spring from almost any source, and that there are people out there who think little of putting lives at risk in order to make their own lives easier.