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Vindicating the USS Swordfish

Abstract

In response to the North Korean seizure of the U.S. spy ship *Pueblo*, an armada of ships and subs were sent into the Sea of Japan, including the USS *Swordfish*, a nuclear-powered submarine. Unfortunately, while conducting a covert surveillance operation off the coast of Vladivostok, *Swordfish*'s mast struck a block of ice. So she departed the area for the U.S. Naval Base at Yokosuka, Japan for repairs. When the Russians saw a photo of the damaged *Swordfish* in a Japanese newspaper, they (wrongly) assumed the damage resulted from a collision with their nuclear-armed submarine K-129.

Keywords: Cold War, K-129, North Korea, *Pueblo* Incident, Soviet Union, USS *Pueblo*, USS *Swordfish*.

Introduction

The USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2) was a U.S. Navy reconnaissance vessel disguised as a light cargo ship. On January 23, 1968, while on her maiden voyage, the *Pueblo* and her crew were seized by the North Koreans off the coast of Wonsan, North Korea, in an action known in Navy parlance as a “cutting-out” operation. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) responded by directing the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) to deploy three attack aircraft carriers, an anti-submarine carrier, numerous destroyers, and auxiliary vessels. By early February, a Task Force had formed in the Sea of Japan consisting of three aircraft carrier Task Groups—led by the USS *Enterprise*, USS *Ranger*, and USS *Yorktown*.²

In a desire to increase submarine posture in the Sea of Japan and Yellow Sea for the purpose of enhancing U.S. surveillance capability and ready combat presence, the JCS also recommended deploying up to nine diesel (SS) and nuclear (SSN) submarines into the Korean area for surveillance and patrol “as early as practical.”³ However, the Commander, Submarine Force, U.S. Pacific

1 Bill Streifer is an independent scholar in Florida (USA). Irek Sabitov is a freelance journalist in Ufa, Bashkiria, South Urals (Russia).

2 Mobley, 2003: 52; Mobley 2001.

3 Joint Message from JCS to CINCPAC, Info: CINCPACFLT, “Deployment of Submarines to Vicinity of North Korea,” Jan. 27, 1968; NSF, Country File, box 263, “Korea, *Pueblo* Incident, Military Cables, Vol. 1, LBJ Library.

Fleet (COMSUBPAC) considered such deployments redundant, which he said might lead to “prohibitive confusion in the ASW [Anti-Submarine Warfare] picture,” aware that ASW might not have been the basic motivation behind the redeployments.⁴

In the end, COMSUBPAC cancelled the out-chop from the 7th Fleet of two submarines (Segundo and Volador), deploying an additional four from Pearl Harbor: Flasher, Greenfish, Blueback, and Swordfish, as soon as possible, chopping to the Commander of the 7th Fleet no later than February 8.⁵ By the first of the month, however, the USS Ronquil was the only submarine presently in the Sea of Japan on Search and Rescue (SAR) station off North Korea.⁶



With this proposed gain in submarine assets, the 7th Fleet would have a total of seventeen submarines in the area, capable of manning nine stations for at least three months. However, this would mean sacrificing nearly all other theatre patrol commitments including the ongoing Vietnam War. As seen in the accompanying Chief of Naval Operations chart, by March 1, 1968, the U.S.

4 “Deployment of SS/SSN’s to Vicinity of North Korea,” 1968 CNO Briefing Notes, Jan. 29, 1968.

5 “Deployment of SS/SSN’s to Vicinity of North Korea,” 1968 CNO Briefing Notes, Jan. 29, 1968.

6 “Sea of Japan Operations,” 1968 CNO Briefing Notes, Jan. 31, 1968.

had six submarines in the Sea of Japan and along the Japanese coast. All but one was diesel-powered; the sole nuclear submarine in the area was the USS *Swordfish*.⁷

In response to this naval show of force, the Soviet Pacific Fleet, commanded by the “strong-willed and competent” Admiral Nikolay Amel’ko, was transferred to full combat readiness. All available combat-capable surface warfare ships sailed into the sea. And into the depths of the Sea of Japan, about 25 to 27⁸ Soviet diesel and nuclear submarines were deployed. In particular, all first-line nuclear submarines of the 26th Division took up their positions in their “allotted” areas.⁹

The Sea of Japan is relatively small, comprising an area of 1,062 thousand square kilometers, or about 400 thousand square miles; that’s 2.5 times smaller than the Mediterranean, but deep-water with an average depth of 1536 meters, or over 5,000 feet. According to Captain I rank (Post Capitan) Aleksandr Samokhvalov (Ret.), a veteran Soviet submariner and participant in this naval confrontation, the Sea of Japan literally “boiled” from the propellers of warships and auxiliary vessels of the American and Soviet Pacific Fleet there. Underwater, while observing secrecy, Soviet submarines prowled about their areas in low-noise mode, while everyone on board waited for a signal to deploy their weapons. Though this naval confrontation under the sea is now long forgotten, Samokhvalov said, “the world stood on the brink of thermonuclear war.”¹⁰

Edward “Stu” Russell, a former Pueblo crewman and the ship’s historian, recalls meeting a retired submariner a few years back who was on a “boomer [a ballistic missile submarine] off the coast [of North Korea] soon after we were tagged.” He said his sub had to stay 200 miles offshore so they could launch if so ordered. “He thought their goal would have been to sink us to keep the secret stuff from the [North] Koreans,”¹¹ Russell said.

The damage to *Swordfish* based on first-hand accounts

Skate-class nuclear submarines like the *Swordfish* might have been the first specifically designed to conduct covert missions, a task aided greatly by her nuclear powerplant that gave both the sub and her crew underwater endurance.

7 1968 CNO Briefing Notes (chart), Mar. 1, 1968.

8 Given the Sea of Japan’s relatively small size, naval experts agree that “25–27” is a gross exaggeration.

9 Samokhvalov 2013.

10 Samokhvalov 2013.

11 Edward “Stu” Russell e-mail to author (Bill Streifer).

Some details of Swordfish’s mission following the Pueblo seizure—from the time she departed Hawaii, through her covert surveillance mission off the coast of Vladivostok, until the time she arrived at Yokosuka, Japan for repairs—were obtained from former members of the Swordfish crew.

IC2(SS) George Hudson, an electrician aboard the Swordfish at the time of the Pueblo Incident, recalled receiving a letter from the Navy, dated June 1971, authorising the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal (AE, Spring 1968) for Korean service. “Specifically, our Korean service was for deployment off the coast of North Korea after the hostile seizure of the USS Pueblo (AGER-2) by the North Koreans.” He said the letter also contained the medal and a corresponding ribbon. The Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal was only one of the many medals the Swordfish received during her three decades of service.¹² Although he said he couldn’t speak for the Navy, “all of us who were on the Swordfish during this 1968 operation,” Hudson said, “are eligible for the medal.” At that time, “most of us thought we were going to war over the incident.”¹³

Some aspects of the Swordfish incident remain in dispute. According to Hudson, the Swordfish had to abort her assigned mission when, on March 2, 1968, about a month after departing her home port in Hawaii, she suffered damage to her mast when it struck a block of ice in the Sea of Japan.¹⁴ The Navy, however, contends the damage to Swordfish’s masts did not prevent the submarine from completing her assigned mission. According to some, the damage occurred off the coast of North Korea. Others, including Norman Polmar and Michael White, the authors of Project Azorian: The CIA and the Raising of the K-129, believe the Swordfish was “*probably* damaged on an ice floe off the Soviet port of Vladivostok [Soviet Union].”¹⁵

According to QM1 Gary Cox, the Swordfish’s Quartermaster, her destination was the “near vicinity” of Vladivostok where she was to perform a covert

12 A page from OPNAVNOTE 1650 dated March 9, 2001 details the various awards the USS Swordfish (SSN-579) received, including the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal (code AE). The period of the award is specified only as “Spring 1968.” At that time, the AE was only awarded for service in the Korean Theatre (code “J”). Although no specific dates are specified for the AE medal (which could indicate that the dates of this operation were still classified when the OPNAVNOTE was created), we can somewhat narrow down “Spring” to exclude the period when she was awarded the Vietnam Service Medal (code VS) from March 31 to April 1, 1968. [OPNAVNOTE 1650, March 9, 2001]

13 Facebook Group (Closed): USS Swordfish (SSN 579) – Ship’s Crew (Officer & Enlisted), 2018.

14 Facebook Group (Closed): USS Swordfish (SSN 579) – Ship’s Crew (Officer & Enlisted), 2018.

15 Polmar, White 2010.

surveillance mission related to the worsening Pueblo hostage crisis.¹⁶ Following her collision with ice, the *Swordfish* remained in the vicinity of Vladivostok for about ten days before traveling to Yokosuka, Japan for repairs.¹⁷ The following first-hand account, which describes the extent of *Swordfish*'s damage when she arrived at Yokosuka on March 17, 1968, is from Doug Chisolm, a weapons officer aboard the USS *Redfish* (AGSS-395), who witnessed *Swordfish*'s entry into port. While conducting nighttime signals intelligence (SIGINT) operations at periscope depth, Chisolm said, *Swordfish* struck a chunk of ice that had broken loose from a glacier to drift undetected along the coast. The collision threw the standing officer of the deck off his feet, sheared off the submarine's electronic countermeasures (ECM) mast as well as a Special Operations mast, and bent back the attack periscope at a 45-degree angle.¹⁸

In a letter to Senator Robert C. Smith (R, New Hampshire)—thirty years after the fact—Admiral Perry M. Ratliff, Director of Naval Intelligence, stated that on March 2, 1968, *Swordfish* “struck an iceberg while operating in the Sea of Japan, and as a result sustained damage to one of her periscopes.” Since the damage didn't require immediate return to port, Ratliff said the *Swordfish* “completed its previously assigned operations prior to arriving in Yokosuka.”¹⁹

The *Swordfish*'s initial response to the Pueblo seizure was recalled in some detail by two former members of the crew: QM1 Gary Cox, Quartermaster, whose recollections of the incident were described as “vivid,” served as assistant navigator aboard the *Swordfish* between 1967 and 1970. Lt. Cdr. Jerry A. Koebel, the Quartermaster of Watch (QMOW) aboard the *Swordfish* when she suffered damage to her “sail, periscope, and masts,” said he was aboard the *Swordfish* when it departed Pearl Harbor in February 1968. “[We] basically did flank speed all the way to North Korea. Was hoping we were going to nuke the crap out of those aholes,” he said.²⁰

As Koebel recalls, the Officer on Deck (OOD) at the time of the accident was Lt. Dave Copley. On periscope at the time,²¹ Copley “ended up with a black eye when we hit an ice pack. It really impacted our abilities since whenever we increased our speed, it shook the heck out of the whole boat... We

16 Sewell, Preisler 2008: 242.

17 CNO Briefing Notes, March 1–17, 1968 (Parts A & B).

18 Sewell, Preisler 2008: 32.


19 Rear Adm. P.M. Ratliff, USN, Director of Naval Intelligence, letter to Sen. Robert C. Smith, Dec. 13, 1999.

20 Facebook Group (Closed): USS *Swordfish* (SSN 5790...; Sewell, Preisler 2008: pp. 26–27, 242; Polmar, White 2010, xvi (acknowledgments)

21 George Hudson (who recalls the incident differently) thinks “Lt. Byers was on the scope when we hit.”

put wood under the [periscope] to stop the scope from breaking off and being pushed down and flooding the boat.” Later, when the Swordfish pulled into Yokosuka, Koebel (as the sub’s Signalman) said he “stood on top of the sail to try and hide [the damage].”²²

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**DECK
 LOG BOOK**
 OF THE
 U.S.S. SWORDFISH SSN 579

SSN 579
IDENTIFICATION NUMBER

Attached to:

11	Division,
1	Squadron,
V	Flotilla,
PACIFIC	Fleet,
14	Naval District,

Commencing 0000 I 1 MARCH, 1968,
(Time, Date and Year)
 at SPECIAL OPERATIONS
(Location)
 and ending 2359 I 31 MARCH, 1968,
(Time, Date and Year)
 at SPECIAL OPERATIONS
(Location)

Approved by: J. J. Higdon
J. T. RIGSBEE Commanding
CDR USA

TO BE FORWARDED DIRECT TO THE BUREAU OF NAVAL PERSONNEL AT THE END OF EACH MONTH

Koebel said the crew was not even sure what they had hit at first. “We just went deeper and headed south to get out of the area. A couple days later, we came back into the area and saw ice pack everywhere...Was pretty scary at the time...” Ironically, Koebel said they were “actually testing some under-ice

²² Facebook Group (Closed): USS Swordfish (SSN 579)...; Sewell, Preisler 2008: pp. 26–27, 242; Polmar, White 2010, xvi (acknowledgments)

detection sonar that failed to alert us to the ice.” Cox recalls how the collision had sheared off one of the ECM masts, “and it rained all over the periscope station the rest of the run. Vibrated like hell, too.”²³ The damage to Swordfish’s masts would have also prevented her from submerging, which would have run the risk of taking on more water. In 1969, the USS Guittaro (SSN-665) sank while at pier in a matter of five minutes as water poured into a forward compartment.²⁴

The details of Swordfish’s preparation for sea, prior to her departure for Vladivostok appear in the sub’s deck logs. On January 30, 1968, one week after the Pueblo Incident began and three days after the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s demand for increased submarine posture in the Sea of Japan, the Swordfish was stationed at West Loch, the weapons pier at the U.S. Naval Submarine Base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. At 1:30pm that afternoon, one Mk 45 exercise torpedo was offloaded and three Mk 37-1 warshot torpedoes were on-loaded.²⁵ All Mk 37-1 torpedoes were conventional, not nuclear tipped.

By 4:30 that afternoon, after Swordfish had returned to berth S-10 at the U.S. Submarine Base at Pearl, her reactor was shut down. This was the normal cycle as Swordfish prepared to set out for sea; but it would be another three days—on February 3, 1968 at 9:00am that morning—before her “Special Operations” would begin.²⁶

Officially, the nature of Swordfish’s Special Operations, and her destination when she departed Pearl Harbor, remain classified. In fact, Swordfish’s deck logs for March 1-17, 1968 consist of a single page—with the boxes that would normally indicate her position three times each day were left blank. The following deck log remark of March 1, however, suggests that Swordfish was operating under submarine orders out of Yokosuka: “Underway on Special Operations in accordance with COMSUBFLOT SEVEN Operation Order (OPORD) 315-68 as before.” As Lloyd M. “Pete” Bucher, the captain of the Pueblo, recalls in his first-hand account of the Pueblo Incident, he met Rear Admiral Frank L. Johnson, who would later be Bucher’s OTC (Officer in Tactical Command) when Bucher served on the staff of COMSUBFLOT SEVEN in Yokosuka.²⁷

23 Facebook Group (Closed): USS Swordfish (SSN 579)...; Sewell, Preisler 2008: pp. 26–27, 242n; Polmar, White 2010, xvi (acknowledgments)

24 “Nuclear Submarine Sinks in 5 Minutes at Coast Yard; Crew Safe,” *New York Times* (UPI), May 17, 1969, p. 1.

25 Swordfish’s deck log, 30 January 1968, 3–29 February 1968.

26 Swordfish’s deck log, 30 January 1968, 3–29 February 1968.

27 Swordfish deck log, 1–17 March 1968; Bucher 1970, p. 126.

Swordfish's Special Operations, which would continue throughout the month of February, ended at 6:00am on March 17, when she arrived at the U.S. Naval Base at Yokosuka, Japan (at the entrance channel of Tokyo Bay) for repairs. By 8:00am that day, she was moored starboard side to Pier No. 7 at the U.S. Naval Ship Repair Facility at Yokosuka. As was customary, standard 2-inch mooring lines were doubled. The Senior Officer Present Afloat (SOPA) was from Amphibious Squadron Eleven. Other ships present included various units of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, yard, and district craft.²⁸ Swordfish departed Yokosuka nine days later.

The Loss of K-129 and Soviet Suspicions

On April 10, 1963, while the USS Thresher was conducting routine deep-diving tests in preparation for future deployments (at roughly 300 meters below the surface of the water), she sprung an internal leak due to a faulty pipe joint. The leak, in turn, caused an internal cascade failure including electrical shorts and an engine shutdown. Because of this, the Thresher was unable to blow her ballast, and was lost at sea with all hands. This tragedy put a spotlight on the problem of submarine safety, resulting in months of analysis to determine the root cause of the failures and how to prevent them. The result was a series of testing and documentation initiatives which came to be known as SUBSAFE. The point of SUBSAFE was to ensure that a Thresher-style disaster would never happen again.²⁹

SUBSAFE covers all aspects of sub design and construction, with a series of rigorous tests and checks at every step in the process; but SUBSAFE is more than a one-time certification. Whenever a sub is repaired or reworked, it must undergo the same rigorous checks to ensure seaworthiness. The level of testing and certification is expensive and time-consuming, but necessary. More importantly, it worked. Since the full rollout of the SUBSAFE program, not a single SUBSAFE-certified vessel was lost in non-combat situations.³⁰

After Swordfish had undergone repairs at Yokosuka, it too must have undergone SUBSAFE certification. This and the fact that Swordfish was back in service so quickly (after only 9 days) suggests the damage was not severe, particularly since even minor hull damage to a submarine can be potentially

28 "Special Operations," USS Swordfish deck log, 1–17 March 1968.

29 "How the SUBSAFE Certification Program Contributes to Submarine Safety," Busby Metals, May 17, 2019; <https://busbymetals.com/subsafe-certification-program-contributes-submarine-safety/>

30 "How the SUBSAFE Certification Program Contributes to Submarine Safety," Busby Metals, May 17, 2019; <https://busbymetals.com/subsafe-certification-program-contributes-submarine-safety/>

deadly at depth. According to Rear Admiral Anatoly Shtyrov (Ret.), a former Vice-Chief of Intelligence of the [Soviet] Pacific Fleet, however, the damage might have been more severe than had previously been reported. In 2005, Shtyrov wrote³¹:

“Intelligence data indicate that during the K-129 submarine is going to patrol in the Avachinsky Bay, the U.S. Navy multi-purpose nuclear-powered submarine *Swordfish*, which, quite possibly, could establish covert surveillance of [our] submarine, was on duty...It is known for certain that on March 11-12 [sic], that is, 3-4 days after the K-129 submarine was out of communication, the *Swordfish* submarine arrived at Yokosuka Naval base (Japan) at night [sic] with a crumpled hull of the conning tower. During the night, in the mode of heightened secrecy, the conning tower was urgently repaired (straightening, patching, painting), and at dawn the *Swordfish* submarine, hastily left the base. Later it became known that the entire crew of the submarine signed a non-disclosure agreement of a certain secret.”³²

Shtyrov said it can be assumed that the *Swordfish* submarine conducted a covert surveillance of the K-129 submarine, and that the latter was inadvertently rammed by a tracking American submarine. “The collision was unintentional, of course,” Shtyrov said, since “the Americans are not fools; they also want to live.” According to Shtyrov, as a result of the collision, it’s possible that a U.S. submarine struck K-129 in the area of the 3rd compartment (central post) with the frontal part of the sub’s conning tower. Taking in a huge mass of water, he said K-129 “could not cope with the rapid loss of buoyancy and sank at a depth of over 5,200 m [over 3 miles]...”³³

At the conclusion of a Government Commission, held at the headquarters of the Pacific Fleet (Vladivostok) in June 1968, Leonid V. Smirnov, Vice Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union and head of the Commission, said bluntly that the Commission should have indicated the culprit in the sinking of K-129. When Smirnov asked Admiral Amel’ko who he thought the culprit was, and Amel’ko replied he did not know, Smirnov said the guilty had to be found.³⁴

However, once Rear Admiral Igor Razumovsky, the Chief of Intelligence of the Soviet Pacific Fleet, brought Admiral Amel’ko a copy of a Japanese newspaper that reported *Swordfish* had “urgently returned from the sea before

31 Shtyrov’s comments contain numerous factual errors concerning the USS *Swordfish*.

32 Shtyrov 2005.

33 Shtyrov 2005.

34 Amel’ko, 2003.

the set time because of the broken periscope,” something that had never happened in the press before, Amel’ko said he was “firmly convinced” that the American submarine discovered K-129 as it left its base at Petropavlovsk, on or about March 1, 1968. Amel’ko said “American ships had carried out intelligence about our bases. More than once we determined that they had tracked the passage of the K-129, and at a moment of inaccurate maneuvering rammed the K-129.”³⁵

The Russians have since suggested numerous possible explanations for the loss of K-129. Some former high-ranking Soviet naval officers believe the damage resulted from the intentional ramming of K-129 by the Swordfish; other say the collision might have been accidental. A third group believe Swordfish is innocent; the damage caused by a collision with ice in the Sea of Japan, far from where the K-129 sank. Mikhail Voznesensky,³⁶ a Russian TV and print journalist, and the author of *The Stolen Submarine K-129* (perhaps the only Russian-language book dedicated to the topic), offered twenty possible scenarios. Down the list at position 7 is the possibility that Swordfish had intentionally rammed K-129. Voznesensky’s eighth version—quoting R. Golosov, the former Chief of Staff of the 15th Submarine Squadron of Kamchatka Flotilla—is rather interesting. According to Golosov, in 1974, a U.S. Navy surface officer informed the Soviet consulate (allegedly in Boston) that in 1968, his ship hit a submarine (supposedly a Soviet one) causing her to sink. A Boston newspaper then published a story on the subject.³⁷

Other possible explanations have included a main engine explosion (rejected by Russian Naval experts as “absolutely groundless technically,” though it should be noted that 37D diesel engines “had a tendency to explode”) and a battery explosion, although the explosive energy of hydrogen would not have been sufficient to destroy the pressure hull of K-129. Human error was also considered.³⁸

Even if Swordfish’s innocence could be proved, the U.S. Navy might still not be off the hook. According to Capt. Peter Huchthausen, a former U.S. Naval attaché in Moscow, until 1997, the identity of the U.S. vessel involved in the

35 Studies in Intelligence 1978.

36 Voznesensky worked as a TV journalist in Vladivostok. In 1990s, he moved to Moscow where he worked for the newspaper *Moscow News*, then on television, and then on the Pravda.ru website.

37 The Library of Congress (Serial and Government Publications Division – Newspaper and Current Periodical Room) was unable to locate a 1974 “Boston” newspaper article concerning the accidental sinking of a Soviet submarine. Further searches of electronic newspaper indices have not located an article of this type.

38 Voznesensky 2005.

K-129 incident was “closely guarded as a politically sensitive and potentially damaging secret.” In October of that year, a witness, who wished not to be named, told Huchthausen that the loss of K-129 had indeed resulted from either a collision or an accidental weapon launch by an unnamed U.S. Navy ship.³⁹

In the CIA’s view, K-129 sank due to an accident—cause unknown.⁴⁰ Some former Soviets including high-ranking Soviet naval officers, however, believe that Swordfish sank K-129. Others, mainly Ed Offley, a U.S. Navy Vietnam War veteran and military-reporting specialist, believe the Russians later sank the USS Scorpion (SSN-589), a Skipjack-class fast attack submarine, to revenge the alleged intentional sinking of K-129 by Swordfish. Incidentally, the Swordfish sailed from Naval Station Pearl Harbor, Hawaii bound for the Sea of Japan following an overhaul and refueling, and refresher training for her crew. This was on February 3, one day after the Scorpion had received her orders.

Offley’s conspiracy theory was spread in August 2007 with the publication of his book ‘Scorpion Down: Sunk by the Soviets, Buried by the Pentagon.’ Russian authors and former Soviet high-ranking naval officers do not unanimously argue that K-129 was deliberately sunk by a U.S. submarine, nor do they all agree that the Soviet Navy sank the Scorpion in retaliation.⁴¹

In Russia, the plot: “Scorpion was sunk in retaliation for the sinking of K-129” has been used in several articles, but only in a *review* of Offley’s discussion of his book on the topic; a presentation that took place a day earlier in Fairfax, Virginia. One such review appeared on the website of the RIA Novosti News Agency. The text of that review included a commentary by former Soviet Vice Admiral Vyacheslav Popov (Ret.)⁴² who concluded: “This is a purely journalistic fiction about the alleged clash of two submarines and the wreck of one of them as a result of a torpedo attack of the other.” Another article, based on a review of Offley’s book, was published on the website of the Russian online newspaper *Vzgliad* (“View”), the last paragraph of which describes Offley as a conspiracy theorist⁴³:

39 Huchthausen, Sheldon-Duplaix 2009: 172.

40 Studies in Intelligence 1978.

41 Offley 2007; Waddell 2013.

42 During Soviet era, Popov was not yet assigned to Commander of the Northern Fleet, a post he was promoted to on January 26, 1999. That same year, he was promoted from Vice Admiral to Admiral. After retiring in December 2001, Popov worked briefly at the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Atomic Energy, and between 2002 and 2011, he was a Senator from the Murmansk Oblast (Russia). Incidentally, Popov is the elder of three brothers each of whom became the commander of a submarine.

43 RIA Novosti News Agency, June 2007.

“Meanwhile, several veterans of the Russian submarine fleet, who were interviewed by the journalist of the newspaper *View*, gave nearly identical comments on the ‘Offley version,’ which boil down to two points: “The author is a conspiracy theorist who wants to ‘cut down the cabbages’ [a Russian expression] on long-standing tragedies. [And] the reasons for the wreck of the Soviet and American submarines can only be speculated.”⁴⁴

The Russians became convinced that K-129 was lost as the result of a collision with a U.S. submarine following the arrival of the damaged USS *Swordfish* at Yokosuka; this, plus the fact that K-129 had stopped communicating with its base only days earlier. According to Voznesensky, the Americans took unusual security measures when the damaged *Swordfish* arrived in port. For one, only American personnel were involved in the repairs. This practice Voznesensky called “routine.”⁴⁵

As for the “special” measures of secrecy, all documents related to U.S. nuclear submarines are marked NOFORN (“Not Releasable to Foreign Nationals”). Also, under no circumstance could a non-U.S. citizen approach the hull of the *Swordfish*. A Japanese staff worked part-time at the Naval Base at Yokosuka, of course, but none were ever allowed to set foot on the pier, let alone board the U.S. nuclear submarine.⁴⁶ While suspicions of the guilt of *Swordfish* continued for decades among some former Soviet/Russian officials, the U.S. Navy believed that K-129 had suffered a catastrophic internal explosion.⁴⁷

U.S. intelligence and naval officials have long denied U.S. involvement, and in 1975, after U.S. K-129 salvage efforts became public, the CIA denied having anything to do with the accident. According to Pentagon sources, the U.S. Navy brass did not even become aware of the accident until a massive, but apparently unsuccessful, search by Soviet vessels was observed in the area. U.S. officials later provided the burial-at-sea videotape for the six Soviet crew members whose remains were recovered during those salvage efforts. The videotape, parts of which were later broadcast on Russian television, reportedly was shown to the relatives of K-129 crew at an earlier date.⁴⁸

In 1975, the CIA announced the recovery of “part” of a sunken Soviet submarine that yielded military secrets that they thought might have “significant

44 Nechayev 2007.

45 Voznesensky 2005.

46 Voznesensky 2005.

47 Alpern 1975: 24.

48 Alpern 1975: 24.

national security implications.” The recovery was the culmination of a six-year intelligence effort involving construction of two huge vessels, ostensibly to pioneer commercial ocean mining of manganese nodules on the ocean floor, but whose actual purpose would be the recovery of the Russian submarine at a depth of several miles.⁴⁹

An analysis of the recovered wreckage supplied evidence confirming the Russians had been arming conventional undersea craft with Polaris-style nuclear missiles and also with nuclear-tipped torpedoes. In the CIA’s view, the discovery held great significance for the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT). What CIA agents learned also led them to believe they were on the verge of breaking the Russian code.⁵⁰

Swordfish Prompts Soviet Suspicions

About ten days before *Swordfish* arrived at Yokosuka for repairs, K-129, a Soviet G-II class nuclear-armed submarine, called by its side number, PL-574,⁵¹ sank with all hands in the Pacific Ocean, 1,560 miles northwest of Oahu, Hawaii. Retired Captain 1st Rank Pavel Demytyev said the captain of K-129, Vladimir Kobzar, and his commanding officer, Rear Admiral Viktor Dygalo, were both experienced and talented naval officers. With K-129 out of contact and overdue, the Soviets undertook “a massive two-month search effort covering a broad area from Petropavlovsk to the patrol area northeast of Hawaii.” Their search, however, was fruitless.⁵²

Russian suspicions of *Swordfish*’s involvement in the sinking of K-129 began when records indicated that the sub underwent nighttime repair of a bent periscope at Yokosuka. However, it is not known for certain how the Russians learned of this damaged U.S. nuclear submarine. According to one theory, KGB port watchers observed the arrival of the *Swordfish* in broad daylight at the U.S. Naval port of Yokosuka on March 17, 1968;⁵³ but did KGB port watchers exist in Japan?

During hearings before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services in the mid-1970s, Vice Admiral Daniel Murphy, Director of ASW [Anti-Submarine Warfare] and Ocean Surveillance programs in the Office of the Chief of Naval

49 Cohen, Reason 1975.

50 Cohen, Reason 1975.

51 “Investigation into 1968 Sinking of Submarine K-129,” *Izvestia*, July 3, 1992 (morning edition), p. 8 in JPRS Report: Central Eurasia, Military Affairs, Issue 28, FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service), 1992.

52 Eckelb2007.

53 Murphy 2011.

Operations, discussed Soviet ocean surveillance systems, the purpose of which was to detect, locate, identify, and target U.S. surface ships. “They do have some submarine surveillance, but not much,” Murphy said. “They used electronic intelligence; that is, listening to our radars and our communications. [deleted] human intelligence is also employed—by that I mean port watchers, people who are watching our ships come and go.”⁵⁴

The prevailing theory, however, is that the Russians became aware of an article in a Japanese newspaper showing the Swordfish with bent mast docked at Yokosuka. A small article, with the heading “US Nuclear Sub Docks at Yokosuka, 21st time,” appeared on the front page of *Asahi Shimbun* (morning edition). Below a photo of the damaged sub, the caption reads: “The U.S. nuclear submarine Swordfish entered port with a bent periscope at wharf #7 of U.S. Navy Yokosuka Base.”⁵⁵

In an effort to convince the public that the damage to Swordfish was unrelated to the sub’s response to the North Korean seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, the Japanese article—quoting the U.S. Naval Command at Yokosuka—failed to mention “ice.” Instead, the article said the “damage was likely caused by *hyoryubutsu* [漂漂漂],” meaning flotsam or wreckage.⁵⁶ Beyond a mention of the Swordfish’s bent mast and her supposed collision with “flotsam or wreckage,” the article neglected to mention the real reason for Swordfish’s arrival at Yokosuka or her subsequent repair.⁵⁷

Following the Swordfish’s departure from Yokosuka, *Reuters* in Tokyo reported: “The Americans nuclear powered submarine Swordfish today left the United States Yokosuka Naval Base south of here after a nine-day visit for rest and supply.” Similarly, a small article in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* said the Swordfish arrived at Yokosuka for a “rest and recreation visit” for her 98-man crew.⁵⁸

In August 2000, in “Russians Suspicious of US in Sub,” AP reporter Robert Burns described Russia’s continued suspicions that Swordfish had played a role in the loss of K-129. When Moscow requested a copy of Swordfish’s deck logs to trace its movements, Burns said the Pentagon refused. Their refusal to turn over the deck logs to the Russians must have only further raised suspicions. Instead, the Americans would only say that the Swordfish was actually 2,000 miles from K-129 when it sank to the ocean floor. According

54 U.S. Senate 1975, 1976.

55 *Asahi Shimbun*, 1968.

56 *Asahi Shimbun*, 1968.

57 *Chicago Tribune*, 1968.

58 *Cincinnati Herald*, 1968: 16.

to Roger Schumacher, the Washington-based deputy director supporting the 2007 U.S.-Russian Joint Commission on POW/MIAs, a Commission created 15 years earlier to help account for U.S. military personnel who disappeared during the Cold War, the Americans had turned over “excerpts” from the deck logs of two U.S. nuclear submarines to the Russians in 1995: the *Swordfish* and the *USS Halibut* (SSGN/SSN-587),⁵⁹ a Special Operations platform capable of ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare) operations, that was in the area of K-129 at the time. Unaware of the *Swordfish*’s role in the U.S. response to the *Pueblo* Incident, Burns could only speculate: *Swordfish* “apparently had a hand in some highly sensitive operations before and after the K-129 incident,” he said.⁶⁰ Little did he know that the *Swordfish* was actually sent in response to the North Korean seizure of the *USS Pueblo*, and that her mission was to conduct surveillance on the Soviet Fleet of ships and subs out of Vladivostok.

When Cdr. John Taylor Rigsbee, the captain of the *Swordfish*, heard about the Soviet interest in his damaged submarine, he said he was surprised to learn that anyone even noticed *Swordfish*’s bent periscope, or how the damage might have resulted from a collision with a Soviet submarine. At the time, it seemed all eyes were on Mount Fuji, he said, which looked especially magnificent the day *Swordfish* pulled into port. Soviet intelligence, it seems, wasn’t gazing at the horizon after all.⁶¹

Could the *USS Swordfish* have sunk K-129 and still managed to arrive at Yokosuka, Japan on March 17, 1968? No. When *Swordfish* departed Pearl Harbor in early-February, in response to the *Pueblo* Incident, she headed straight to the Sea of Japan post haste. There, she conducted surveillance along the North Korean and/or Soviet coasts. And on the day of the K-129 disaster, a chart in a 1968 CNO Briefing Note shows her parked just south of Vladivostok, some 2000 miles from the spot where the wreckage of K-129 was later discovered: QED.

Only recently, a show on Russian television (“Mysteries of the Century with Sergei Medvedev: The Mystery of the Sinking of the K-129”) again addressed the possibility that *Swordfish* sank a Soviet submarine. First broadcast on September 2, 2019 at 20:25 (Moscow time) on Russian TV’s *Zvezda* (“The Star”),⁶² a channel associated with the Russian Ministry of Defense, the show’s

59 In February 1965, the *USS Halibut* became a unique nuclear-powered guided missile submarine turned Special Operations platform capable of ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare) operations.

60 Burns 2000, Eckel 2007.

61 Sontag, Drew 1998: 79–80n.

62 <https://tvzvezda.ru/schedule/programs/content/201608171125-c7qn.htm/2019921748-S0ljQ.html>

experts expressed a wide range of opinions, including the long-standing rumor that Swordfish had rammed K-129, either intentionally or accidentally.

Although Sergei Medvedev, a Russian journalist, filmmaker, and host of the TV show, rejects all notions of Swordfish's guilt, he repeated a suggestion by others that Swordfish may have shadowed K-129 since it departed Krasheninnikov Bay. This scenario, too, however, is simply not possible since at the time of K-129's demise the USS Swordfish was preoccupied with responding to the Pueblo Incident.

Our Consultants

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