

Ocean Gear Heard Soviet Sub Blasts

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By Thomas O'Toole
Washington Post Staff Writer

When a Soviet submarine exploded and sank in the Pacific Ocean in 1968, the three blasts were heard by an array of United States listening devices placed on the ocean floor northwest of Hawaii.

Computers plotted the probable resting place of the submarine, then an underwater photographic robot was run across the ocean bottom repeatedly until it found the sunken hulk in more than three miles of water about 750 miles northwest of Oahu, Hawaii.

Meanwhile, Soviet trawlers were searching the Pacific 500 miles away for signs of their lost submarine. The Soviets had no listening machinery on the Pacific floor near Hawaii and apparently had not been in precision radio contact with the submarine just before it was lost.

The implications of all this grew when the undersea pictures showed the submarine to be a diesel-powered Golf type (a NATO designation) vessel, whose "sail" or conning tower had been built to twice conventional size to take on three ballistic missiles carrying atomic warheads.

Enter Project Jennifer, the code name used in 1970 for an attempt by the United States to raise the sunken Soviet submarine, its nuclear missiles and the priceless code machine used to unscramble countless secret messages between Soviet naval headquarters and all its ships at sea.

The United States already had managed to salvage a number of Soviet missiles test-fired into the Pacific and Indian oceans, but they all had dummy warheads and no code

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machines. The lost submarine was a rare opportunity to get warheads and coding devices, either of which to intelligence people was in the goldmine category of an espionage find.

But how to raise a 2,800-ton submarine from a depth of 16,500 feet? No lifting or grappling device in the world could recover anything near that size from that ocean depth, where sea pressures were 8,000 pounds per square inch.

Before making any decision to build a ship that might be able to salvage the submarine, the Navy dispatched its deep-diving bathysphere Trieste II to the Pacific to take more detailed pictures. This is the same vessel that in 1960 set a record for ocean descent, diving to ocean bed almost seven miles down with two men aboard.

The Trieste II made a startling discovery about the Soviet submarine. The Russian boat had broken into pieces on the ocean floor, meaning that a salvage attempt was possible. The trouble was, the pieces were still so large no ordinary salvage attempt could retrieve them.

Even as all this went on, the Navy had concluded that it needed a new kind of ship to recover its own lost submarines. The loss of the Thresher in 1964 and the Scorpion in 1968 convinced the Navy of that, but there were other disasters and near disasters at sea pushing the Navy toward the same decision.

One was the sinking in 1967 in the Gulf of Alaska of an ammunition ship named the Robert Louis Stevenson, which went down in shallow water after being designed to sink in deep water where it would explode and help scientists conduct seismic tests in the Gulf. The ship literally was a sunken time bomb, unless it could be found, photographed and raised from the ocean floor.

Eventually, the ship was found in such shallow water that it would never explode, but about the same time a ship full of nerve gas was scuttled off the East Coast. Once more, the Navy realized it had a sunken time bomb and no way to defuse the bomb.

The Navy has had to go back every year to take underwater pictures of the sunken nerve-gas ship, to make sure none of the gas was leaking. This is the kind of frustration that was leading the Navy to conclude it needed some kind of a super salvage vessel.

The loss from a B-52 of four atomic bombs off Palomares,

Spain, in 1966 served to set in motion work toward a super salvage ship. The Navy came close to calling for a deep sea drilling ship to help in the recovery of the bombs just before it located them with a variety of underwater research vessels.

It was late in 1970 when the Nixon administration decided to build the Glomar Explorer at a cost of \$250 million to salvage the sunken Soviet sub. The Central Intelligence Agency was chosen as sponsor, for the simple reason that it didn't have to put the vessel up for contract bid.

In the no-bid contract, Howard Hughes' Summa Corp. was picked for other obvious reasons. Summa was experienced in spy satellites and in oceanographic work, it was a private corporation not scrutinized by the Securities and Exchange Commission, and Howard Hughes himself loved secrecy.

The secrecy surrounding the project was unusual. Navy submariners below flag rank were not told of it. Some of the highest ranking members of the atomic weapons establishment never heard of it, even though one of the two prime goals of Project Jenni-

fer was to get our hands on a Soviet nuclear weapon.

Despite its secrecy, Project "J" (as it later was called) was known to more than a handful. At least four senators and two representatives were aware of it. White House aide Charles Colson spoke last May of the CIA's ownership of an oceanographic ship he said was named the "Glomar Express."

The Glomar Explorer was built in a shipyard outside Philadelphia, where it was described as a deepsea mining vessel for Howard Hughes.

Nobody disbelieved the

cover story. Tenneco and Kennecott Copper were two of the biggest corporations in the world interested in deepsea mining. Executives of both companies followed the progress of the Glomar Explorer with the deepest interest, fully convinced that it was built to mine copper, manganese and nickel from the ocean floor.

When the Explorer finally left port for the Pacific last year, there were two crews of 170 men each assigned to it. It is believed that one crew mined for metals, the other

for the lost submarine, both in the same spot northwest of Hawaii.

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, President Ford confirmed the Glomar Explorer's mission and defended his order that nobody in government discuss it.

"I think if I go beyond what I have said . . . that I am opening up a Pandora's box,"

the President told the Los Angeles Times. "My associates will say: 'Well, you set the rules and then you violate them yourself.' It puts me in a fairly untenable position."

Was the Explorer's mission a failure or a success? The press has been told the Explorer recovered one-third of the sunken submarine, but not the code machine or the nuclear warheads. Intelligence sources have disputed this version, saying that at the very least two atomic warheads from torpedoes were recovered and at the very most everything was retrieved.

"I can tell you that the people involved in this recovery were ecstatic about what they got," one source said. "Absolutely ecstatic."