

'Good Ol' Boys' Raised Russian Sub

CIA Glomar Recruits 'Chewed Tobacco and Wore Cowboy Boots'

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Good old country boys from Dixie, two-fisted drinkers and oil roughnecks, all "men of good true grit," were recruited for their reliability, expertise and patriotism to man the Central Intelligence Agency ship Glomar Explorer on its cloak and dagger mission last summer.

"Bimbo," "Cowboy," "Curley" and "Big John" were some of the nicknames of the men selected from Alabama, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas, Mississippi—men familiar with drill rigs and ships, men who wore their patriotism on their sleeves and pledged to keep a secret.

They were men from towns like Houston and Floresville and Bridge City and Pasadena in Texas, Brookhaven, Miss.; Slidell, La.; Millry, Ala., and Little Rock, Ark.

Their mission and the Explorer's was to raise a sunken Soviet submarine from the ocean floor 750 miles northwest of Hawaii last summer. The 618-foot ship, built by Howard Hughes' Summa Corp., salvaged parts of the nuclear-armed sub which had sunk in 1968.

"We were looking for a certain type of man," said a source familiar with the CIA hiring procedures. "He had to have a very clearable background. You can't imagine how many of these men turned up with eight or 10 arrests on their records, and they had to be turned away.

"The man the CIA wanted didn't have exceptional intelligence, but did have a great sense of loyalty to his country and his family.

"He was an expert in what he did, handling a pipe or a crane or whatever. And he knew how to stay quiet. Lots of these old boys don't talk much anyway," he said.

"You can bet a lot of them didn't come in wearing suits. Somebody in a fancy suit might get thrown out. These were tough old boys, who could get drunk and fight like a bear.

"I remember Big John sitting in a classroom at Redwood City, (Calif.), where we were studying up on the Geneva Convention treaty. That was so we would know what to do if the Russians decided to come aboard the Explorer.

"And Big John sitting there memorizing some part of the Geneva Convention treaty and kidding and saying, 'I'll just knock the hell out of any of them Russians who sets his foot on the ship.'

"Of course, we were told not anything like that was to be done and Big John knew it," the source related.

"All these men who met the CIA people had nothing

but the highest respect for them. The CIA guys knew their jobs.

"These guys, most of them, chewed tobacco and wore cowboy boots. And they all signed documents pledging themselves to secrecy, and that's hanging over every goddamned one of us right today," he said.

The crew members hired for the mission were given 18-month contracts, which included bonuses of \$150 monthly. But they knew the CIA treated everyone very well and they are still hoping they will get bonuses of \$5,000 of \$10,000.

Indeed, they were treated well. They were provided with spacious quarters on the ship, plenty of steaks, whiskey, and a special kind and lobster tails, beer and camaraderie on the part of the CIA agents who schooled the roughneck workers, drank with them, lived with them and earned their respect.

To make certain that the crew members were well treated, one man was delegated to act as a sort of "den mother," according to the source.

"He saw about motel reservations, and rooms and all sorts of things like that. In his room he always kept a couple cases of whiskey and beer. If the boys wanted a couple of drinks at night, ole den mother had it all there."

Some places around the Redwood City waterfront were off limits to the crew because they might be dangerous, or because of prostitutes or simply because of poor security.

"These men considered it an honor to be selected when they found out what we were going to do," said a source who knew most of the 140-man crew.

The CIA agents handled the crew members, as would any good agent who sends a spy into the cold—with respect and patience.

"Everyone we met from the CIA was an expert in something, and a good guy," said the source.

The CIA is keeping in constant contact with the crew members now that the ship is docked at Long Beach, Calif. Just three weeks ago an agent dropped into a large Southern city for a meeting with an employer of the Glomar Explorer venture.

"They wanted to let us know they were around," the source said of his meeting with the young CIA agent. "They want to let us know there are future projects coming up. Sometimes it seems they want to remind you that when you get hooked up with a project like this (with the CIA),

sometimes you can't ever get untangled from it, or them.

"But they also want to pat you on the back. They're good at that. They tell you, 'Don't worry. We're standing right behind you.' And, don't you know, it makes you feel fighting good!

"They want to tell you a lot of reporters may come knocking on your door and that we should stay quiet. They're real nice about it, but I know they keep track of everyone."

The crewmembers attended classes with eight to 10 men in a class. The basic courses consisted of elementary nuclear studies (because the Soviet ship would be contaminated by the nuclear warheads it carried), submarine design and the Russian alphabet.

The men learned that alphabet so they might recognize letters on various items aboard the Soviet submarine and then relay them through a communications system connecting them to two Russian language experts.

The CIA used little advertising to attract men to the job. Rather, the intelligence agency men knew enough to realize that word would spread about the Explorer and its ostensible mission to draw off valuable mineral deposits in the form of nodules from the ocean bottom. They offered good money and adventure, and the mystery of being associated with Howard Hughes, one of the most mysterious of all men.

"We were hired, many of us, out of the fifth floor of the Tishman Building on Century Boulevard in Los Angeles," said the source.

"There was a picture of the Glomar Explorer on the wall (in the interview room) and part of the pitch to the new employees was that Hughes had recently located a fantastic mineral deposit in the Pacific.

"Most of the time the response from the prospective employees was something like, 'We've heard a lot about this ship.'"

There always was a plentiful supply of nodules, as a constant reminder to the employees about the purpose of the project.

The Seascope, another Global Marine ship, had picked them up from the ocean bottom. Often the men sitting across from the CIA agent doing the hiring saw a nodule or two lying on the desk or on a nearby filing cabinet.

Sixteen divers were hired for the mission, and when it was learned that so many divers were sought a lot of questions were raised. Why

were so many divers needed if the vacuum sweeper under the ship was going to suck up the mineral nodules?

The prospective employees first met a CIA contract man who did the initial interviews in the Tishman building. In a room adjacent to his was another CIA man known as Howard Imamura, about 49, who was the ostensible assistant but who actually decided on whether a man was a good enough prospect to undergo the clearance procedures.

"Clearance took about three months for each man," said the source. "If a man got that far we would have him sign a contract saying he would be paid \$25 a month (during the security check). If it took longer than three months you almost could be sure he wasn't going to make it.

"The men looking for jobs were told they would be working for Howard Hughes and that Howard Hughes is a strange man and not to be alarmed if someone came into their neighborhoods and asked about them," he said.

"They were . . . paid the retainer of \$25 a month so they couldn't file a suit for invasion of privacy. . . .

"The CIA man next door to the first interviewer would ask them a lot, like did they ever use drugs. One young man who said he smoked a lot of marijuana cigarettes was hired anyway because someone pulled some strings for him and he worked out fine. . . .

"Nobody was hired who had ever belonged to a union because we didn't want union trouble. Sometimes he advertised for specialized experts, but most all the men came because they had heard about the job by word of mouth. In fact I heard 95 per cent of the men who called in were not hired.

"No Jews were hired because of some possible involvement with Israel. No one from the Scripps Institute because it had been involved in some of kind of government work. And no blacks.

"A lot of the men were told the information on their background was needed for visa details," he added.

One employee, musing about his experiences, said: "Sometimes I would look around and see average people and I would wonder, 'Why can't I be like that?'"

Riding late at night in his car, smoking cigarette after cigarette, on the streets of a large Southern city where he now lives temporarily, he wonders about it all. He is pretty sure life will never be the same.