

SUBMARINE SPYING DURING THE COLD WAR

OPERATION “IVORY BELLS”



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THE MOUNT EVEREST OF SPY MISSIONS



INTRODUCTION

Operation” Ivy Bells” was not a one-time intercept of foreign intelligence but an ongoing operation of multiple Soviet military channels, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, which lasted for years! Another reason for the high interest in our operation was the audacious nature in which it was done—with not one person risking his neck but a whole crew of a nuclear submarine.

Several things happened at the location of the dives that no one has ever written about before because those few books that mention this mission were written by those who were not assigned to the USS Halibut.

THE STORY

In March 2018, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank devoted to the understanding of global geo-political, military, and intelligence-gathering events around the world, issued a white paper entitled “Contested Seas: Maritime Domain Awareness in Northern Europe”, authored by Henry A. Kissinger chair and Senior Vice-President Kathleen H. Hicks.

Among the many topics and conclusions in the paper was that Russia was engaged in a massive effort in the Baltic and Norwegian Seas to intimidate the smaller powers in the area. One of their main efforts there and worldwide is the deep ocean interception of intelligence through the tapping of trans-ocean undersea communications cables.



An aerial starboard bow view of a Soviet Golf II class ballistic missile submarine underway.

On June 12th, the day of the Trump-Kim Jong UN meeting, CNN reported on the Russian effort to intercept undersea communication as a reason for new economic sanctions by the USA against certain Russian individuals and institutions.

It seems the Russians are finding new ways to gather information.

Only it’s not so new. The United States was engaged in the same type of intelligence gathering in the 1970s, using cutting-edge technologies - **some of which are still classified.**

The information gleaned by these US efforts was instrumental in American understanding of not only Russian military preparedness and plans but of Soviet command and control and the state of both the Soviet military and the Soviet political hierarchy.

“Operation Ivy Bells” was the brain-child of US Navy Captain James Bradley, a WWII submarine veteran and chief of Naval Undersea Intelligence in the late 1960’s/early 1970’s. By 1971, Bradley had successfully pitched his ideas to the then-unknown and ultra-secret National Security Agency (NSA). The submarine chosen for the project, SSGN-587 USS Halibut, would secretly enter Soviet waters in the Sea of Okhotsk in the Russian Far East.



USS Halibut left San Francisco sometime in the 70’s with the Mystic on her back

The Sea of Okhotsk was chosen for several reasons. First, it was the naval link between the Soviet Pacific Fleet’s base at Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Fleet’s headquarters on the Russian mainland at Vladivostok.

Much of the Sea of Okhotsk was off-limits to civilian fishing or other vessels and was heavily patrolled and monitored by sound-detecting underwater devices. For all of those reasons (which, summed up, meant that the area was ultra-important to the Soviets and likely to contain deeply held secrets), the area of the Sea of Okhotsk was chosen by Bradley, the Navy, and the NSA.

The Halibut (and later other subs) **were disguised as deep-water rescue and research vessels for any prying eyes. Their hulls and propulsion systems were made ultra-quiet.** On their hulls were mounted fake “deep-submergence rescue vehicles” or “DSRVs” that would normally have indicated a rescue/research vehicle. These were diving ports or lock-outs from which navy divers would exit.

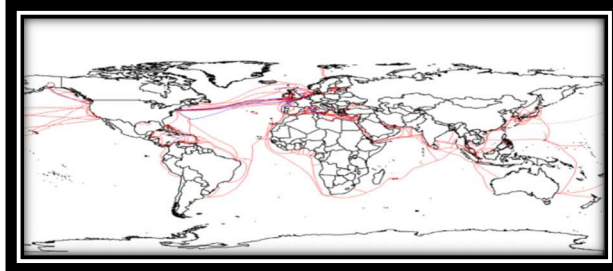


DSRV-1 (Mystic) docked to a Los Angeles-class attack submarine.

The divers themselves were among the first in the world to utilize some of the new breathing science that deepwater divers use today. At 400 feet (the depth at which the Soviet cable was found), divers using a typical SCUBA oxygen supply would only be able to stay underwater for minutes.

With the use of a mixture that contained more helium than nitrogen (the air in SCUBA tanks is 80% nitrogen/20%oxygen), divers could stay underwater much longer, without risk of nitrogen narcosis, better known as “the bends”, which can result in death. **The Americans found the Russian military cable 120 miles off the Soviet coast in an area marked as forbidden to civilian vessels - this gave them a good hint as to where to look.**

They then attached a device twenty feet long to the cable, which wrapped around its entire diameter. All communication that went through this cable (and it was considerable) was recorded on the device to be picked up by another US submarine. So confident were the Soviets in the security of their cable that much of the communications was in the clear (not coded). US intelligence even got to listen to phone conversations between Russian officers, their wives, mistresses, and each other about issues that had nothing to do with naval strategy.



2007 map of submarine cables

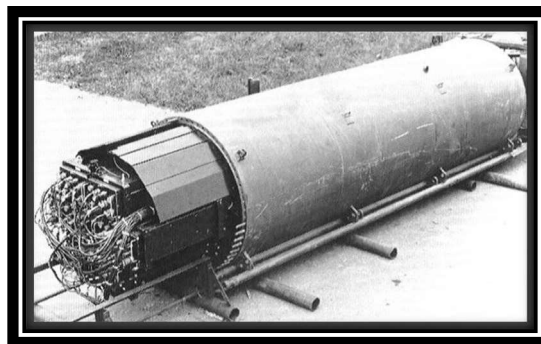
Much of this technology is still highly classified today. The cable was not pierced, which might let in water and clue in the Russians, and the device was pressure triggered to detach itself should the cable be removed from the ocean floor.

So secret was this project that most of the sailors on board did not know what the true objective of the submarine was. They were told that they were on a top-secret mission to retrieve pieces of a subsonic Soviet underwater missile that had blown up. This was true. While the divers were deploying their device, the rest of the crew searched for the remains of this missile - which they found. The mission was in actuality... double secret!

This program continued for almost ten years. The amount of intelligence gleaned from it can only be guessed, though some of the less important information was released at the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. In 1981, the submarine USS Parche went to retrieve a device from the cable, and found that it was not there - the Soviets were onto the program! It's a testimony to the skill of the crew of the Parche that they remained undetected, even though the Soviets had to know they were coming.

After a long analysis, it was determined that NSA agent Richard Pelton, who was in massive debt, had been selling the Soviets classified information for some time. Part of this information was "Operation Ivy Bells". Pelton served twenty-nine years in federal prison, being released in 2015.

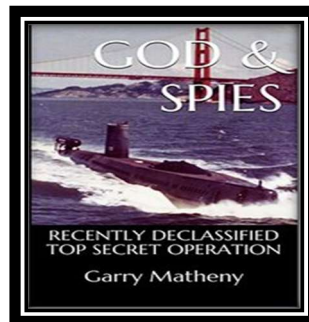
So the Russians are tapping or trying to tap undersea cables in the Baltic and Norwegian Seas. The US knows about it. What are we doing now? Who knows??



A photo of the spy pod that was attached to the Russian communications cable



The Regulus guided missile submarine, USS Halibut (SSN 587) carried out Operation Ivy Bells.



GM Matheny was a US Navy saturation diver on the nuclear submarine USS Halibut. Involved in "Operation Ivy Bells". America's most important (and most dangerous of the Cold War) clandestine operations.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Now retired, David LeJeune was a Navy saturation diver who participated in several later missions. Although he was unable to answer many questions, he says that the information that he and his fellow divers uncovered led to the successful completion of the SALT II talks, which was eventually signed in 1979 and restricted each country's nuclear delivery systems.

LeJeune also says the tech and gear they were using were cutting-edge. "We were using technology that is so far advanced from the civilian community that the public doesn't know that capability even exists."

For a decade, the U.S. wiretapped this comm line at the bottom of the Sea of Okhotsk. The Halibut and other subs would venture into the Sea of Okhotsk a couple of times a year, picking up the tap and replacing it with a new and often more advanced one. It was an intelligence gold mine, consistently providing the U.S. with invaluable information.



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