

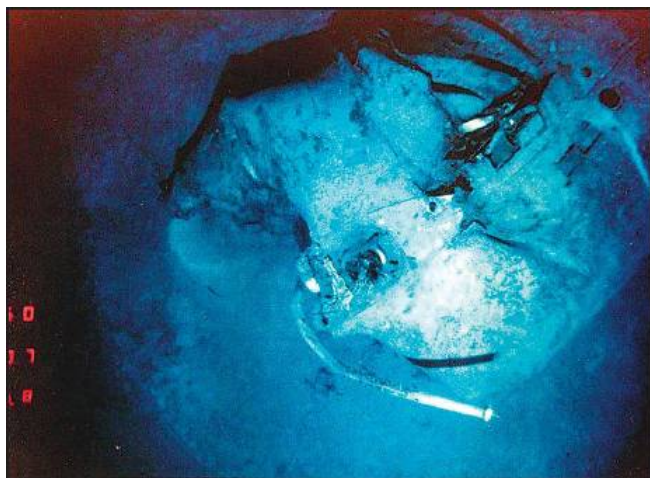
PHOTOS COURTESY OF U.S. NAVY The USS Scorpion at its launching on Dec. 19, 1959

Hard to fathom

**Politics blamed for Navy's
silence on submarine lost 40
years ago**

By Bill Eichenberger
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

On the evening of May 22, 1968,
somewhere in the middle of the
Atlantic Ocean, the submarine USS
Scorpion surfaced and made a radio
transmission to fleet headquarters.
It would be the vessel's last.



A section of the hull of the sunken sub, photographed in 1986

Five days later on the nightly news, Walter Cronkite announced that the Scorpion was “overdue” at its home port of Norfolk, Va.

The Navy sent out two separate, fruitless search missions before contacting families of sailors and holding a memorial service that served as a tacit acknowledgment that all Scorpion hands had perished.



“I always thought the Soviets had sunk her,” said Kenneth Sewell, a Columbus engineer and the co-author, with journalist Jerome Preisler, of **All Hands Down**. “But I couldn’t for the life of me figure out how they did it. It would have taken a wolf pack to track her down and sink her,” he said, “and the Scorpion would have done some damage (to Soviet vessels) herself.”



Kenneth Sewell

Several years ago, Sewell — who served in the Navy from 1970 to 1979 — began research for a book about the North Korean attack on the USS Pueblo (also in 1968).

He hired a Russian reporter to interview a former Soviet admiral who, in the course of a rambling conversation, revealed that the Scorpion had, indeed, been sunk — by a torpedo launched from a helicopter.

The Navy had to suspect the Soviets. After all, a Soviet sub, the K-129, had sunk under mysterious circumstances only a week before the disappearance of the Scorpion. Many sailors suspected at the time that the Scorpion was sunk in retaliation for the United States having sunk the K-129.

But the Navy never came to a definitive conclusion about the fate of the Scorpion, and the entire episode faded from memory.

Sewell recently spoke about the incident and his book.

Q: The spy John Anthony Walker plays a key role, doesn’t he?

A: Yes. He was providing the Soviets with monthly keys to break the Navy’s codes. They had secured a code box when the North Koreans captured the USS Pueblo. That was really the only way the Soviet Union could have successfully tracked the Scorpion: by having the key to the code.

Q: Because the Scorpion was a feisty sub?

A: Oh, yeah, she was a dogfighter. She ran fairly quietly, for a sub of her day, and she was faster and more maneuverable than anything the Soviets had.

She was on a training exercise in 1960 with NATO forces and was being tailed by British ships on the surface. The sub’s skipper, Norman “Buzz” Bessac, had been

told not to go too deep or too fast. They assumed the Soviets would be monitoring the exercise and didn't want them to know her capabilities.

But Bessac pretty much said, "The hell with this." He took her down deep and ran so quietly and so quickly that the British radioed that we'd lost a ship. Meanwhile, Bessac surfaced, looked around and saw the sub was completely alone and said, "Where the hell is everyone?"

Q: Why was getting to the truth about the sinking of the Scorpion so important?

A: I can tell you in two words: the families. Because it wasn't anything the crew did wrong. They were the best-trained sailors in the world and they were well-led. They weren't responsible for causing an accident. And there weren't any "mechanical" problems, either. They just walked right into an ambush.

Q: You've already received several e-mails from family members, haven't you?

A: Yes. The wife of one of the sailors told me she woke up the morning after reading *All Hands Down* and felt as if she were 10 pounds lighter, as if she'd been carrying that weight around for 40 years and now it was gone. I think the families deserved to know what really happened. And I don't think the truth ever really hurt anyone.

Q: Why did the Navy decide not to tell the truth?

A: It was a political decision. President (Lyndon) Johnson was in the middle of a very unpopular war in Vietnam. And he'd been heavily criticized for not taking action against North Korea after the *Pueblo* incident. If it had become clear that the Soviets had sunk the *Scorpion*, there would have been more calls for retaliation, and Johnson was trying to avoid an all-out war against the Soviet Union. I don't have any problem with that.

Q: But so much time has passed. Why hasn't the Navy come clean?

A: I'm not sure. Part of it is, if you say, "We lied to you back in '68," even though that was 40 years ago, that admission can call into question the things they're saying today. So it's easier not to say anything.

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