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David H. Sharp. *The CIA's Greatest Covert Operation: Inside the Daring Mission to Recover a Nuclear-Armed Soviet Sub.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012. xiii + 328 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1834-7.

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Acquiring the *K-129*

During the Cold War, the United States devoted significant attention to foreign materiel acquisition and exploitation–obtaining foreign equipment (largely military) and analyzing it to identify capabilities and vulnerabilities. During the 1950s, air force intelligence personnel participating in Operation BEACHCOMBER walked Alaskan beaches in search of material that might have floated over from Siberia. A more important effort was the acquisition of MiG aircraft or their parts through a variety of means–recovery from war zones, gifts from allies, or purchase. But the most costly and daring operation involved recovery of a Soviet submarine.

It was early March 1968, when a diesel-powered Golf-II class submarine, designated *K-129*, sank in approximately 16,700 feet of water about 1,560 miles northwest of Hawaii. Along with the ninety-eight sailors on board, the 330-foot, 2,500-ton submarine also carried three R-21 (U.S. designation - SS-N-5) nuclear missiles with a range of 700 nautical miles and two nuclear torpedoes. The ability of the United States–through the underwater arrays belonging to the Air Force Technical Applications Center (AFTAC)–to determine the location of the submarine led the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to launch an operation, code-named AZORIAN. The objective was to recover the submarine along with its missiles and cryptographic equipment.

The CIA's effort to recover that submarine became the subject of a February 7, 1975, story in the *Los Angeles Times*–"U.S. Reported after Russ Sub." That was followed by a March 18 radio broadcast by Jack Anderson on the operation, and a March 19 article in the *New York Times* by Seymour Hersh. The veteran reporter had learned of the operation in 1974, taken his knowledge to the director of Central Intelligence, William E. Colby, and had been persuaded to sit on the story until the operation concluded or another media outlet reported it.

Subsequent to the initial newspaper accounts, the subject became the focus of two books–Clyde W. Burleson's *The Jennifer Project* (1977) and Roy Varner and Wayne Collier's *A Matter of Risk* (1978). Over the succeeding decades the recovery effort was also discussed in several books on a variety of topics–including espionage, discovering the ocean's secrets, and Howard Hughes.[1] A major step forward in detailing the history of the operation was the recent work of Michael White and Norman Polmar. White produced the 2009 film *AZORIAN: The Raising of the K-129* and coauthored with Polmar the 2010 book *Project AZORIAN*. (An unclassified and very favorable review of the book and film appeared in the March 2012 issue of the CIA's in-house journal, *Studies in Intelligence*).

Until 2010, the CIA considered virtually everything about the *Glomar Explorer*, the ship used in the recovery effort, to be classified. A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request filed in the wake of the first stories on the operation led the CIA to respond that it could "neither confirm or deny" any CIA connection with the *Glomar Explorer*–a response that was upheld in court and led to "glomarize" or "glomar response" becoming terms of art in describing such responses to FOIA requests.[2] The CIA did allow former director Colby to discuss the existence of the operation and his attempt to prevent disclosure in his 1978 memoir, *Honorable Men.* And the agency published an unclassified review of *The Jennifer Project* that appeared in the spring 1979 issue of *Studies in Intelligence.* It also released a video, "Burial at Sea," that the CIA filmed of the burial ceremony for some of the *K-129* crew members, whose bodies had been recovered as a result of the operation. That video had been delivered in 1992 by the director of Central Intelligence, Robert Gates, to Russian President Boris Yeltsin.[3]

But there was no official release of any significant details about the recovery operation from the CIA. *Studies in Intelligence* carried several articles devoted to the oper-

ation starting in the late 1970s, but they all remained classified for decades. Included were "Project AZORIAN: The Story of the Hughes Glomar Explorer," "Security: Hidden Shield for Project *AZORIAN*," "Engineering for AZORIAN," "Project AZORIAN Phase II," and "At Sea with the Law"–all of which were published in a 1980 issue. A 2007 FOIA request by the National Security Archive led to the release of the first of those articles–although not without significant redactions. Researcher Matthew Aid had discovered a reference to the article in a declassified history of the National Security Agency. The released article (posted on the archive's Web site in January 2010) was followed by the release of portions of other articles.

The same year that the archive filed its FOIA request, David H. Sharp, the director of recovery operations for the AZORIAN project, found himself reading a recent book that concerned the project which "was full of inaccuracies and absurd conspiracy theories" (p. x). That motivated him to produce, by June 2008, a manuscript providing a high-ranking insider's account of the recovery operation. The reaction from the CIA's Publication Review Board was not favorable, which claimed that publication would be likely to "cause serious harm to national security" (p. xi). Sharp hired Mark Zaid, a Washington lawyer with substantial experience in such cases. And not long after the agency released the "Project AZORIAN" article, Sharp received word that almost all of his manuscript was approved for publication.

The result is *The CIA's Greatest Covert Operation*, an account based partly on the released *Studies in Intelligence* article; on a variety of public sources; and most important and predominantly on Sharp's memory, personal notebooks, and the unclassified deck logs for the *Glomar Explorer*. The result is an account that will be essential for an understanding of the operation and for what will undoubtedly be future efforts to tell the story of the operation–for there are still significant details left to discover. A substantial part of Sharp's account provides significant details on the challenges faced in the evolution from initial concept to completed mission. Those challenges included conceiving and building a ship that could be used to recover the *K-129*, devising a security regime that would allow the recovery to proceed as a totally covert project, attaining approval from higher authority in the face of significant opposition, and accomplishing recovery. In addition, there was the challenge to the individuals involved in the effort of coping with the substantial risks they faced. Even when the details may not be of enormous interest in themselves they serve to highlight how much had to be accomplished to give the mission a reasonable chance of success.

How to recover the submarine was far from obvious, as there was no precedent in either the military or civilian worlds for trying to recover a 2,500-ton object from the ocean floor. Sharp reports on the proposals that were considered but rejected–including attaching rocket boosters or attaching flotation bags or pontoons to the *K-129*. He describes such first concepts as "unimpressive" (p. 11). One risk was that compressed air in the submarine would expand and lead to an uncontrolled ascent which would lead to the submarine crashing into the recovery ship or just appearing on the ocean surface–quite possibly in full view of the Soviet Navy.

Ultimately it was decided to attempt to use an ongoing deep ocean mining program as a cover and lifting the lost submarine from the ocean floor with a capture vehicle whose claws would enclose the *K-129*. The capture vehicle, referred to as "Clementine," would be lowered and raised by a lifting pipe (17,000-feet long and consisting of 570 joints) from the 200-foot well of a specially built ship, the 619-foot long *Glomar Explorer* whose bottom could open to allow the vehicle to exit and enter. Once the submarine was in the well, the safety and exploitation experts would take over. The capture vehicle would originally be constructed in a barge, the *HMB-1*, which would eventually be submerged underneath the *Glomar*. After its roof opened the capture vehicle would be raised into the *Glomar* and the barge would reemerge without its top secret cargo and return to its port. Of course, that had to be done in weather and ocean conditions that might be less than favorable.

It was also particularly challenging to devise and convincingly implement a cover story. The CIA and other agencies were used to developing collections systems as well as conducting operations covertly. But AZORIAN represented a unique challenge. There could be no trace of U.S. military or intelligence community involvement in the project, for the Soviets would strongly object to any attempt to recover their submarine and its secrets. Their objection would almost certainly be expressed not only by speeches in the United Nations and propaganda blasts in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) but also by a confrontation on the high seas involving Soviet submarines or warships.

That meant the need for an apparently completely civilian mission and apparently completely civilian origins for the ship, as well as communications systems, including secure systems, that a civilian ship would employ. The cover story meant that the *Glomar* could not carry weaponry that would belie its claimed mission or, even if there was space, accommodate the contingent of

marines that Colby wanted to be deployed on the ship. In addition, personnel associated with the project could not be linked to the CIA and as tight security as possible within the government needed to be maintained.

As a result, it would be claimed that the recovery effort was aimed at extracting manganese modules from the ocean floor. Hughes was approached and approved a plan to have his privately held company serve as the ostensible prime mover in the effort, eliminating the need for company management to inform stockholders or the Securities and Exchange Commission that he had been awarded a classified contract. A survey of several geographically dispersed potential extraction sites was conducted to avoid giving the impression that the effort was concerned with one particular location. Project director John Parangosky would view construction from a distance, employing binoculars. Security also involved creation of a special security system–the JENNIFER Control System–for control of documents related to the project as well as creation of a Special Projects Staff to serve as the program office for the effort. And instead of a cover story for the staff there was no story at all. In addition, before departure on the recovery mission, CIA personnel entered a hotel room with their real identity and left with a new one–leaving behind real credit cards, driver's licenses, and anything with a monogram. What remained of their identity was inside their head.

Receiving approval was also a challenge. Over the years between the initial go-ahead for the effort and President Richard Nixon's final approval on June 7, 1974, there were numerous objections raised to continuing the efforts. There were the difficulties experienced in the first sea trials. There were those who objected to the escalating cost of the mission, including naval representatives who feared the substantial cost would mean less funding for the navy's underseas intelligence efforts. There were also legal concerns raised by the State Department and Department of Justice, who thought the U.S. recovery effort might be bordering on piracy–or perhaps crossing the line–despite, as Sharp notes, the precedent set by the Soviets, who in 1928, had recovered and then incorporated into their navy a British submarine. There was even one alarmist in the State Department, Sharp reports, who "expressed concern that the AZORIAN project could end up precipitating World War III" (p. 133).

And no matter how well those building the ship and its components did their job the crew still faced a number of challenges, including the fear that something could go terribly wrong. Among the challenges were possibly severe weather and turbulent ocean conditions that could interfere with recovery or damage the ship. And if the lifting pipe snapped during the recovery the ultimate consequence could be a ship split in half. Then, there was the chance that the expected Soviet scrutiny of the operation could lead to the boarding of the ship. Only five years earlier, the USS *Pueblo* and its crew had been captured by North Korea, as noted by Sharp, and the possibility of captivity must have crossed the minds of several crew members.

The final challenge of course was to recover the submarine. How much of the submarine was actually recovered was a subject of contention in the years since the operation became public. According to Sharp, "only a thirty-eight-foot section of the bow was brought up into the well of the *Hughes Glomar Explorer*.... The parts of the submarine that the intelligence community most wanted to analyze–the remaining nuclear missile and the hardware and documentation that would have been located in the sail of the submarine–were all lost when the major piece of the target broke away during the ascent" (p. 266). There was a desire to go back and retrieve the remainder, and the anticipated follow-on effort was designated MATADOR, but the press disclosures meant an end to that project. As Colby wrote in *Honorable Men*, "there was not a chance that we could send the *Glomar* out again on an intelligence project without risking the lives of our crew and inciting a major international incident" (p. 417).

A key question in evaluating AZORIAN was whether it was worth what Sharp notes was the reported 350 to 500 million dollar cost of the program. Sharp's perspective might be surprising. He suggests that what the United States obtained was "probably not" worth that investment. However, he argues that the *compromise* of the mission meant that once the Soviet Union learned that the United States had recovered part of the submarine it was forced "to assume that the United States might have recovered all of its submarine–including the nuclear missiles, cryptographic gear, codebooks, ship's log, and the other valuable artifacts that the CIA had hoped to gain" (p. 266). The result would maximize Soviet uncertainty and require considerable expenditures to compensate–specifically, changing operational procedures, cryptographic hardware, and reporting protocols.

But it is also possible that the transformation in the Soviet nuclear ballistic missile submarine force that was taking place between 1968 and 1975 compensated for any compromises or feared compromises as a result of the recovery. During those years the SS-N-5 and the Golf-

II class submarine became historical artifacts, replaced by Yankee and Delta class submarines, carrying missiles with far greater ranges–the SS-N-6 staring in 1968 (with a range of over 1,300 nautical miles) and the SS-N-8 starting 1973 (with a range of well over 4,000 nautical miles–allowing it to threaten U.S. targets from Soviet home waters).

What is certain is that much remains to be discovered about the *Glomar* episode–from both the Soviet and U.S. sides. Sharp's book is a significant contribution in advancing the story of a rather unique operation (at least as far as is known). He writes that he "would love to see the agency show more pride in what they managed to accomplish with the *Hughes Glomar Explorer*" (p. 269). Recently, the CIA held a conference and released documents pertaining to the 1971 deep sea recovery of a wayward film capsule. Hopefully, a similar conference and document release on the *Glomar* lies in the not-too-distant future.

Notes

[1]. William J. Broad, *The Universe Below: Discovering the Secrets of the Deep Sea* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 78-80, 256-257; Donald L. Bartlett and James B. Steele, *Howard Hughes: His Life and Madness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 534-537, 541-549; and Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew with Annette Lawrence Drew, *Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Espionage* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 187-197.

[2]. Matthew Aid with William Burr and Thomas Blanton, eds, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book #305, "Project AZORIAN: The CIA's Declassified History of the *Glomar Explorer*," February 12, 2010, www.gwu.edu7nsarchiv/<wbr>nukevault/EBB305/index.htm.

[3]. Ibid.

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