

Submarines of U.S. Stage Spy Missions Inside Soviet Waters

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WASHINGTON, May 24—For nearly 15 years, the Navy has been using specially equipped electronic submarines to spy at times inside the three-mile limit of the Soviet Union and other nations.

The highly classified missions, code-named Holystone, have been credited by supporters with supplying vital information on the configuration, capabilities, noise patterns and missile-firing abilities of the Soviet submarine fleet.

It is not known how many men and submarines have been involved in the underseas spying, but at one point in the early nineteen-seventies, at least four such ships were known to be in operation.

Concern About Detente

Critics of the program, who include past and present members of the National Security Council, the State Department, the Navy and the Central Intelligence Agency, contend that much of the intelligence gathered by the submarines can be obtained through other means, such as satellites, which are far less provocative and less vulnerable to Soviet interception.

The critics also question whether such intelligence operations have any place in the current atmosphere of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Many of the critics acknowledged that they had agreed to discuss the operation in the hope of forcing changes in how intelligence was collected and utilized by the Government.

All the sources agreed that

the Soviet Union was aware of the Holystone program, although perhaps not specifically of when and where the boats were on patrol.

Adding to the objections to the missions raised by the critics, according to many former high-level Government officials interviewed, has been the number of accidents and near-misses involving the submarines, such as the following:

¶Two known collisions with Soviet submarines.

¶The grounding—and eventual escape—of a Holystone submarine within the three-mile limit off the east coast of the Soviet Union.

¶The accidental sinking of a North Vietnamese minesweeper by a submarine on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam war.

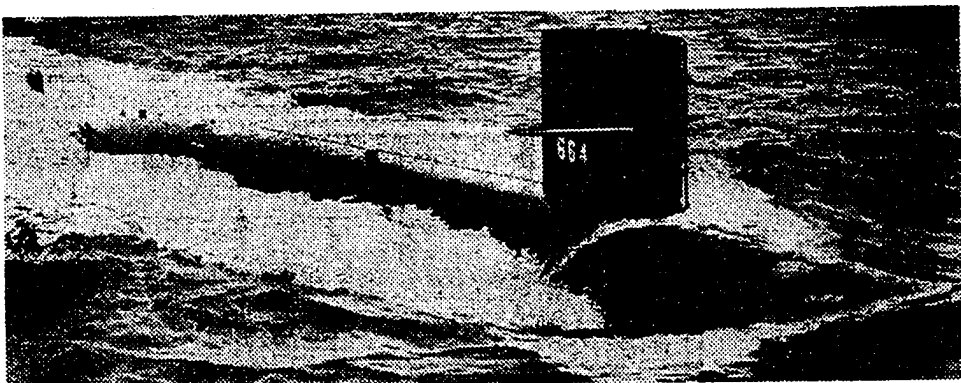
¶The damaging of a Holystone submarine that surfaced underneath a Soviet ship in the midst of a Soviet fleet naval exercise. Despite a search by the Soviet vessels, the submarine, whose conning tower was damaged, escaped.

Question of Control

Furthermore, many former officials say that the Holystone program raises questions about the Government's over-all intelligence reconnaissance programs and their control, which thus far do not seem to be a major factor in the Congressional select committees' investigation of intelligence operations.

It could not be learned how often penetration inside the three-mile limit was made, nor

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A nuclear-powered submarine of the Sturgeon class

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could it be learned whether such penetration needed special clearance. All the sources agreed, however, that Holystone missions had repeatedly violated the territorial waters of the Soviet Union and other nations.

One source said that the submarines were able to plug into Soviet land communication cables strewn across the ocean bottom and thus were able to intercept high-level military messages and other communications considered too important to be sent by radio or other less secure means.

As outlined by the sources, Holystone was authorized in the early nineteen-sixties, and its reconnaissance operations were placed by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara under the direct control of the Chief of Naval Operations, the four-star admiral who heads the Navy.

At various times during the Vietnam war, officials in Washington reportedly delegated responsibility for missions to the Navy admiral in charge of Pacific operations.

Control over the program was apparently tightened after North Korea seized the United States spy ship Pueblo in 1968, sources said, and the schedule of Holystone missions now have to be approved every month by the 40 Committee, the high-level intelligence review panel headed by Secretary of State Kissinger.

Navy sources familiar with the program said that Holystone involved a minimum of cost because the Navy utilized nuclear-powered basic attack submarines of the Sturgeon, or 637 Class, and simply added more electronic gear and a special unit from the National Security Agency to turn the attack submarine into a reconnaissance vessel.

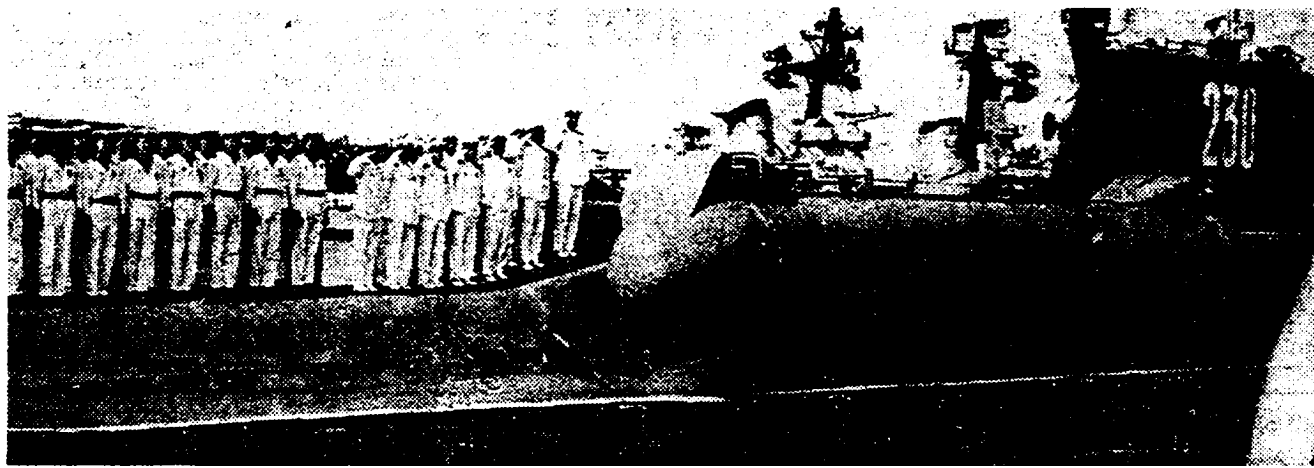
The National Security Agency, with headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., near Washington, serves as the major source for intelligence and interception communications. It also is in charge of developing unbreakable codes for electronic transmission and breaking the codes of other nations. A highly secret N.S.A. unit was aboard the Pueblo when it was captured.

Inside the Navy, the Holystone patrols are considered a source of pride; Pentagon officials recalled that the Navy guarded clearances for the operation and that official knowledge of it outside the service was limited to a few high-ranking civilians.

The program still is under the direct control of the naval intelligence command and is known as OPPO 099U inside the Navy. There is no sign of that office in the published Pentagon telephone directory, nor is its chief operational officer, Capt. Jack B. Richard, listed.

The sensitivity of the program is dramatized by the fact that the Navy has set up a separate channel for recruiting the seamen for the Holystone missions, according to men involved in the recruiting.

The recruiting, much of which is reportedly carried out at overseas Navy bases, is considered so sensitive that the candidates are not permitted to know exactly what they are being asked to do. Special tests are administered, including ex-



An important aspect of the missions was the gathering of information about missiles fired from Soviet submarines. The missiles aboard this Soviet sub are concealed by the launching tubes. Photo is from a Moscow press agency.

tensive psychiatric testing, before a seaman is judged qualified, sources said.

As of a few years ago, an intelligence summary of the program was made available every Thursday in the Chief of Naval Operations' briefing theater on the fourth floor of the Pentagon. One participant recalled that the Holystone missions were discussed after the regular intelligence briefing for high-ranking admirals and the top Navy civilian officials.

The lights were dimmed and slides were utilized to show where the missions were on station, the source said.

The participant recalled seeing close-up photographs of Soviet submarines that had been taken by a Holystone vessel.

At that meeting, which took place in the early seventies, the Navy officially briefed the program as if the Soviet Union had not detected any of its Holystone missions, the source said.

In numerous interviews, however, many Government officials described that belief as inconceivable, particularly in view of the known accidents involving Holystone vessels and Soviet submarines.

One former Government official recalled that the Navy once turned down an internal recommendation that the Holystone operation be publicly disclosed. The argument was that the Navy had nothing to lose because the program was well-known to high officials in the United States and Soviet Union and because some Government lawyers said that it was at least arguable that the operation was in accord with international law and thus was legal.

The Navy declined the suggestion, the official said, in what was interpreted to be an admission that not all the Holystone operations could stand up to public scrutiny.

One former Government intelligence official recalled a Holystone briefing in the mid-sixties in which he and others were shown photographs of the underside of an E-Class Soviet submarine that appeared to be taken inside Vladivostok harbor, a main Soviet submarine port.

"On that same mission," the official recalled, "the [Holystone] submarine scraped the bottom of one of the E-Class submarines and knocked off some of its equipment."

He recalled that someone asked during the briefing whether that had been the only such incident, and was told

"No. It's happened at least two other times."

On March 31, 1971, according to a copy of a C.I.A. memorandum made available to The New York Times, another Holystone collision involving a Soviet submarine occurred.

The memo, sent on April 1 to Richard M. Helms, then the Director of Central Intelligence, said that "the collision is reported to have occurred about 17 nautical miles offshore—beyond the 12-mile territorial limit claimed by the U.S.S.R. No Soviet reaction has been noted."

Eighteen months earlier, a Holystone submarine was beached for about two hours off the Soviet coast, a former Government aide recalled. The incident created concern inside the National Security Council, the aide said, because of the possibility that a major international incident would develop if the ship was discovered.

Another former Government official recalled being briefed in the late sixties about the collision of a Holystone vessel with a North Vietnamese minesweeper in the Gulf of Tonkin. The North Vietnamese vessel, which apparently had been provided to the Vietnamese by the Soviet Union, sank within minutes.

In January, 1974, Laurence Stern reported in The Washington Post the existence of the underwater intelligence operation and its code name, but details about the missions, including their extent and the difficulties they encountered, have never been previously disclosed. The dispatch drew no official reaction either from the Soviet Union or the United States.

One source said that there was no significant modification of the Holystone operations after the Post article, which angered the Pentagon, although the Russians now seem to be increasing their counter-detection efforts against the reconnaissance missions.

Much of the Soviet effort and similar detection efforts by the Chinese utilize radar in an attempt to track the periscopes of the Holystone submarines, the source said. On occasion, Holystone submarines have been subjected to intensive hunts by Soviet destroyers and aircraft, the source added.

The combination of the various misfortunes, the increased Soviet and Chinese detection efforts, and the apparent unwillingness of the Navy or the 40 Committee to monitor the operations closely have con-

vinced many former Government officials that Holystone's risks now outweigh the acknowledged value of the intelligence collected.

"It provided useful stuff all right," one former high-level intelligence analyst said, "but it was a risky kind of business."

A former high-level C.I.A. official suggested that Holystone was symptomatic of many of the current Pentagon intelligence collection and reconnaissance programs. He specifically referred to a high-level briefing during which Navy intelligence officials showed close-up photographs of an abandoned Soviet nuclear-powered vessel, the apparent victim of an on-board accident.

Similarly, a former White House official recalled that Mr. Kissinger was known to be a strong supporter and close observer of the Holystone operations. Mr. Kissinger attended briefings on the project, the former aide said, in the early days of the Nixon Administration.

Despite the emphasis on photographs, most of those interviewed agreed that photography was the least significant aspect of the Holystone missions.

Far more important, they said, was the information obtained through the N.S.A.'s electronic means about Soviet long and short range submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

Since the Russians normally test-fire many of their sea-based missiles inland to avoid close United States observation, the Holystone missions often penetrated close to the Soviet shores to observe the missile launches.

The missions were able to get what one official termed a "voice autograph" of various Soviet submarines. These were described as detailed tape recordings of the noises made by submarine engines and other equipment.

Such recordings were care-

The reconnaissance boats were also invaluable, he said, in following the flight and eventual crash of the Soviet missiles, providing constant information on guidance and electronic systems.

"What bothers me," the official said, "is the fact that the Soviets know we're there. This isn't like overhead [satellite] intelligence. This is provocative."

Closeness of Probes Denied

WASHINGTON, May 24 (AP) Senior Pentagon officials confirmed tonight that the United States Navy has used specially equipped submarines to spy on the Soviet Union, but denied that the missions had violated that nation's three-mile territorial limit.

The Pentagon and the White House refused to comment officially on the report in Sunday editions of the New York Times, but a senior Navy admiral said: "No submarines have been closer than three miles."

However, several Pentagon officials acknowledged that nuclear-powered submarines have conducted intelligence-gathering operations for some time off the coasts of the Soviet Union and other nations.

fully maintained, the official said, and Navy technicians have been able to perfect a method for identifying specific Soviet submarines, even those tracked at long range under the ocean.

"We can follow boats through their life cycle," the expert said, meaning that technicians are able to keep track of a Soviet submarine from her launching until she is decommissioned.

The Russians are believed to be far behind in this kind of underwater intelligence, the source said.

A number of sources described the Holystone information as being important to the United States-Soviet Strategic Arms Limitations Talks that led in 1972 to an interim five-year accord. The accord, among other things, placed certain limits on the number of land-based and submarine-launched offensive ballistic missiles both sides could maintain.

"One of the reasons we can have a SALT agreement is because we know what the Soviets are doing," one official said, "and Holystone is an important part of what we know about the Soviet submarine force."

This official, who was involved in some aspects of the arms talks, described the submarine reconnaissance program as "the kind of intelligence operation that has a high payoff and whose risks seem to be minimal."

But another official, who told of other important intelligence information that was obtained from Holystone, said that the project seemed to "very provocative" and was inadequately supervised.

In this official's view, the most significant information provided by Holystone was a readout of the various computer calculations and signals that the Russians put into effect before firing their long and short range submarine missiles.