



All Hands Down: The True Story of the Soviet Attack on the USS Scorpion

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Forty years ago, in May 1968, the submarine USS Scorpion sank in mysterious circumstances with a loss of ninety-nine lives. The tragedy occurred during the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and it followed by only weeks the sinking of a Soviet sub near Hawaii. Now in All Hands Down, drawing on hundreds of hours of interviews, many with exclusive sources in the naval and intelligence communities, as well as recently declassified United States and Soviet intelligence files, Kenneth Sewell and Jerome Preisler explain what really happened to Scorpion.

In January 1968, a U.S. intelligence ship, USS Pueblo, was seized by North Korea. Among other items, the North Koreans confiscated a valuable cryptographic unit that was capable of deciphering the Navy's top-secret codes. Unknown to the Navy, a traitor named John Walker had begun supplying the Navy's codes to the KGB. Once the KGB acquired the crypto unit from the North Koreans, the Russians were able to read highly classified naval communications.

In March, a Soviet sub, K-129, mysteriously sank near Hawaii, hundreds of miles from its normal station in the Pacific. Soviet naval leaders mistakenly believed that a U.S. submarine was to blame for the loss, and they planned revenge. A trap was set: several Soviet vessels were gathered in the Atlantic, acting suspiciously. It would be only a matter of time before a U.S. sub was sent to investigate. That sub was Scorpion. Using the top-secret codes and the deciphering machine, the Soviets could intercept and decode communication between the Navy and Scorpion, the final element in carrying out the planned attack.

All Hands Down shows how the Soviet plan was executed and explains why the truth of the attack has been officially denied for forty years. Sewell and Preisler debunk various official explanations for the tragedy and bring to life the personal stories of some of the men who were lost when Scorpion went to the bottom. This true story, finally told after exhaustive research, is more exciting than any novel.

All Hands Down: The True Story of the Soviet Attack on the USS Scorpion Details

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Author : Kenneth Sewell , Jerome Preisler

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Chucky says

I served in 1979 aboard the USS Seahorse (a fast attack submarine) & like many others always heard about the Thresher & the Scorpion. While the incidents surrounding the Thresher were known, any questions about the Scorpion were met with "don't ask".

This book is way overdue. I am astonished that anyone with the government would even allow it, much less answer any questions. Yes, I understand that this is still not an official acknowledgement however, the research & evidence is overwhelming ("when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be truth.)

The Navy's treatment of those left behind was unforgivable. The coverup even more so. Thousands of US servicemen have sacrificed their lives for no other reason than love of this country & as witnessed by today's political climate, our leaders will sacrifice NOTHING! The Cold War was merely a game between politicians who I'm convinced were in fact cronies. The Scorpion crew deserved better! They were indeed the tip of the spear & we owe them our lives & freedom. I hope for their sakes we succeed in ousting the reds (and they are many) from our own government.

My favorite story from the book was how Barbara Foli & her daughter said goodbye to Vern. It was touching, heartfelt, & speaks to the beauty & spirit in each of us. Of course the Chicago newspaper would misunderstand! Media & politicians have no soul. I highly recommend this book. Scorpion & her crew must never be forgotten. I just await the day that our government give them their due (instead of trying to blame outstanding & highly professional sailors). It won't happen though

Read Ng says

I was reading something else and the event of K-129 came up. So this book is my introduction to some of the events surrounding this event.

I would have liked extended narrative regarding the Prologue events with the USS Pueblo and the K-129, but those are different stories with their own books, so I can see how they are only briefly touch upon in this book. I also now have further interest in John Walker (what a despicable person or at least he comes across as such in this brief introduction), but again, he has his own series of books and story to tell.

The narrative in this book suits me. Factual, informative, and conveys a sense of dread the families must have felt. It also shows just how close the start of WWII we stood. I would have enjoyed just a bit more of the technical details regarding the mechanics of submarine operations, but that would have detracted from the stories of the families. I guess I will be looking for further information regarding some of these events in the future.

Also this is the first book I have read where the Notes at the end of the book were just as informative as the book itself. Be sure to read the notes.

Have a GoodReads.

Tom Schulte says

Detailed in research in taut in the telling, this is a breath-taking, further revelation of how close 1968 came to seeing The Cold War turn hot and nuclear.

Diesel-electric powered submarine of the Soviet Pacific Fleet, K-129 sank on 8 March 1968. It was one of four mysterious submarine disappearances in 1968; the others being the Israeli submarine INS Dakar, the French submarine Minerve (S647) and the US submarine USS Scorpion (SSN-589). This book is about how the Scorpion was lost on 22 May 1968, with 99 crewmen dying in the incident. We have since learned K-129 went rogue (Red Star Rogue, by the same author) and how close was that to nuclear conflict? At the time, the Soviets did not think it anything other than a loss to American aggress and begin to plot revenge. Part 1 was getting navy crypto gear and manuals off the USS Pueblo in an operation where Russia backed North Korea. Part 2 fell into the Soviet lap when spy John Walker as a walk part of his family spy ring provided them with the keylists and manuals to listen in crucial navy communications. This allowed them to be on top of the Scorpion and torpedo it.

One other thing that stuck out to me was how the bereaved families lost resources and roofs in how they were rather callously handled by the Navy once the sub was declared lost.

Don says

Ppld.org: 40 years ago, in May 1968, the submarine USS Scorpion sank in mysterious circumstances with a loss of 99 lives, during the height of the Cold War. Now, drawing on hours of exclusive interviews as well as recently declassified US and Soviet intelligence files, Sewell and Preisler explain what really happened to Scorpion. When a Soviet sub mysteriously sank near Hawaii, hundreds of miles from its normal station, Soviet naval leaders mistakenly believed that a US sub was to blame. Using a cryptographic unit acquired from the North Koreans to decipher classified Navy communications, they set a trap for revenge.

Ervin Vice says

The book is full of would-haves, might-haves, almost-certainty's. That should warn the discerning reader that what lies within is pure speculation. What bothered me a little more, though, were the distracting, outright errors. They betoken sloppiness. For instance, if you are in the Atlantic near the Canary Islands, Africa is to the East, not the West. And Wonsan, North Korea is nowhere near the Tsushima Straits. If they get these things wrong, what else are they getting wrong? Despite this, I was inclined to trust the authors' portrayals of the families and loved ones of the crew. They can't lie or make things up about them without getting into trouble. Also, since Ken Sewell himself is a former submariner, I can lend credence to his descriptions of typical shipboard operations and living/working conditions. But if you want to get closer to the truth about what led to Scorpion's demise (we'll never be 100% sure) then I would recommend "Silent Steel" by Stephen Johnson.

Bear says

This is a sobering, engaging book. I had read part of it in a bookstore, waiting for my girls, and then the Library became my next source to finish; I had to wait a couple of weeks, but when I got it I was captured (and ask the booklady about how hard it is to keep my attention on a book without falling asleep). It appears to be a well-researched book; you can tell sensationalism just by the wording, and this book maintains an even keel. The fact I was part of the Military during the Cold war only enhanced my appreciation of this book and the events it describes. Many people begin to talk about what they are sworn to keep secret once they realized how much time they might not have left on earth; and there is something healing about revealing facts which should be (but are not) allowed to see light under standard classification. What I had reinforced was the fact nations and those humans who are elevated to positions of authority within them are more than fallible in their actions; in fact, I contend it is harder to maintain true black/white once you are in leadership positions. You are at the mercy of all around you, and gray is your color. The choices are either evil or less evil in some cases... I was also amazed at how the military used to handle families; one anecdote in the book highlights how the widow of one of the sailors was given an airplane ticket to her home of record, even as the moving van was driving up to her door, all within a few weeks of notification of her husband's death. The fact the movers packed an opened canned ham does not surprise me; that's the fault of the moving company. We were always told, "If you don't want it packed, don't leave it in the house". Today, there are family services which are charged with keeping the family up to speed on entitlements, rules, etc., and commanders tend to be heavily involved to ensure the families are taken care of. The overall tone of the book should serve as a warning to us; there are elements within an enemy nation which will stop at nothing to make a point or win; after all, that's what war is about. You have losers, you have winners, and there is no prize for second place. Our misguided efforts to make sure everyone wins something in school, no matter how much effort a person puts in, is degrading and leads kids into a form of "why bother?". Life has NEVER been fair, and depending on your opponent, it can be brutal. That message needs to be learned every day; I'm not saying be doom and gloom, but "All Hands Down" puts a chilling perspective on what goes on in the upper halls of politico-military events. The CIA operative who is quoted as saying "99 men and their families are not worth starting a nuclear war" is not far off in a clinical, worldly-sense. Of course, the perspective is different if you are one of the 99 and their families, or one of the millions in a nation who would not otherwise pay a price. That is what we are dealing with today, and the MSM just don't get that concept. All in all, a book worth reading and re-reading.

Thomas Stevenson says

The loss of the USS Scorpion in 1968 turns out to have been a Cold War tit for tat. Sewell's account explains what happened and why as well as how the role John Walker played in enabling the Soviets to locate the Scorpion so it could be torpedoed. Here are the mysteries that take place in the dark of international relations!

Mike says

I found this book interesting and well researched. It is consistent with what I have heard over the years, and presents an interesting theory to explain it all. Even if you don't reach the same conclusions as the author, it is a good read.

Cindy says

My Father had a friend who went down with this sub. Such a sad story.

John says

An excellent book for those trying to figure out major events in the Cold War. This is the first treatise that I've seen to connects the Walker spy ring with the capture of the USS PUEBLO and the mysterious sinking of the USS SCORPION. What a tragic web! The writer does a nice job of telling the many personal stories while describing events in a factual and objective manner.

Tstultz69 says

The average citizen cannot truly appreciate the cold war until you read a book like "All Hands Down". I believe this to be a perfect example of the tensions between the US and the USSR. Any number of situations similar to the fate of the USS Scorpion, could have led to WWIII. Luckily, we had level headed men in charge that were able to work through problems without total destruction. For some reason I kept thinking about the movie "The Day After" while reading this book. Extremely well researched through interviews with ex-military and declassified documents from the USSR and US, the fate of the Scorpion can now be understood.

Terry says

I was at sea aboard the USS Permit when we received word of the loss of the USS Scorpion in May 1968. On board, the loss provoked much discussion of the loss, five years earlier, of the USS Thresher (the USS Permit was the 2nd of the USS Thresher class of submarines, and after the Thresher went down the class was renamed the Permit class). Sewell's is a harrowing tale that deflates a lot of balloons of memory as it explores the current probabilities vs the possibilities that were offered up at the time for the disappearance of the Scorpion.

solo says

Sewell made a business out of peddling submarine conspiracy theories as historical facts (q.v. Red Star Rogue).

from the dust jackets ("Kenneth Sewell and Jerome Preisler **explain what really happened to Scorpion**") to the language of the book which constantly mixes fact with fiction and all too often presents *both* as fact, the result is quite unappealing. dragging in the families just makes it so much more distasteful...

John Walker is made the linchpin of the story, and this book is at least as much about him as it is about Scorpion. for it turns out that the only thing those crazy russkies were missing to just go ahead and sink a US sub - on a whim, during peace time - was to *finally* know which ocean to find one in!

as one would expect, credible evidence is mainly notable by its total absence. see Blind Man's Bluff for a mainstream, a lot less sensationalist but somewhat more realistic (and better written) cock-up theory.

don't get me wrong, weaving some creative fiction into a framework of established historical facts can be a lot of fun (q.v. quite a few of Tim Powers' books), but then trying to sell it as "history" or a "non-fiction" book is... disingenuous at best. Ken and Jerome do **not** know "*what really happened to Scorpion*", but that shouldn't stop an honest hack from "*explaining*" it to every one else, right?

Alain Dewitt says

I enjoy reading books about submarines, both fiction and non-fiction. This is a fairly recent book that purports to shed new light on the loss of the USS Scorpion in 1968.

The writing is quite good. The authors do a good job of educating the reader about life on a submarine, as well as introducing us to the men who served on board Scorpion. They also interweave several related narratives regarding the loss of the Soviet missile sub, K-129, and Navy traitor, John Walker.

SPOILER ALERT!

For a long time, conventional wisdom regarding the loss of Scorpion was that she was lost due to a 'hot running' torpedo (a torpedo that fires while still in the tube). This book purports to debunk that theory. The authors' claim is that Scorpion was deliberately sunk by the Soviet Navy in retaliation for the loss of K-129 which they believed was lost due to an undersea collision with another US Navy nuclear submarine, USS Swordfish. The authors contend that the Soviets laid a trap for Scorpion and sunk her via a helicopter-launched torpedo just off the Azores.

Even more sensational is the authors' claim that the US Navy knew that Scorpion had been attacked and sunk by the Soviets and deliberately covered it up.

The problem is that they don't really provide solid evidence of this in the text of the book. If you read the notes associated with the chapter they offer some evidence as to Soviet culpability in the form of an interview with an unnamed Soviet admiral. However, I find this far from conclusive. As to the claim of the Navy cover up, no real solid evidence is offered. Instead the authors rely on deductive reasoning to assert a cover up. Again, this is far from conclusive and the authors should have taken care to let the reader know of the tenuousness of these charges.

This is not to say that the book is a waste of time. It's still an enjoyable and informative read; it just doesn't pack quite the punch the authors had hoped.

Barry Sierer says

I was a skeptic of this theory when I started this book. The idea that the Soviets set a trap for, and deliberately sank a US submarine in the midst of the cold war (risking WW III) seemed like a stretch to me. After reading the book and taking some time to look over the author's notes, I believe that Sewell and Prielser have put together a theory that is sound overall, but still has a few issues.

The first issue is that the helicopter that allegedly sank Scorpion was piloted by "KGB Special Forces". Why would the KGB be carrying out a highly technical anti-submarine operation that is probably outside of their skill set?

The second issue; did the Soviet Politburo really decide to risk WW III by sinking a US Submarine? (despite US provocations) This is not touched on by the author and it's possible that the politburo calculated that this was worth the gamble if they felt that the Soviet/US military balance was tilted in their favor.

The third and most troubling issue, is the reliance on the expertise of Dr. John Craven, Chief Scientist of the Navy's Special Projects Office. Craven's opinion is held in high regard by the authors as Craven was deeply involved in the investigation of the Scorpion. The book states that Craven stated on the record that he believed Scorpion was sunk by a torpedo explosion that was external (pg. 192). However, 20 year later, Craven stated with new information, he believed that the explosion that sank Scorpion may have been caused by a faulty torpedo battery. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Scorpion...

This revision is not mentioned in the book.

Despite the problems with this theory, it is still worth the read to explore the mystery of the Scorpion's loss.
