

The Pueblo Incident: In the Midst of the Cold War

by Bill Streifer and Irek Sabitov

In response to the North Korean seizure of the USS Pueblo on January 23, 1968, an armada of U.S. ships and aircraft carriers were sent into the Sea of Japan in a show-of-force known as Formation Star. Meanwhile, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the Pacific Command to deploy up to nine diesel and nuclear attack submarines to the Korean area for “surveillance and patrol...as early as practicable.” In addition to the USS Ronquil, the following U.S. submarines were sent: Bonefish, Caiman, Flasher, Gudgeon, Queenfish, Segundo, and Swordfish. Unfortunately, the last two failed to complete their missions as originally planned.

In reaction to this armada of U.S. ships and subs (and in defense of North Korea, their Communist ally), the Soviet Pacific Fleet, commanded by the “strong-willed and competent” Admiral Nikolay Amel’ko, was transferred to full combat readiness. All available combat-capable surface warfare ships sailed into the sea, and into the depths of the Sea of Japan about 25 to 27 Soviet diesel and nuclear submarines were deployed.

According to Captain I rank (Post Capitan) Aleksandr Samokhvalov (Ret.), a veteran Soviet submariner and participant, the Sea of Japan literally “boiled” from the propellers of warships and auxiliary vessels of the American and Soviet Pacific Fleet there. Underwater, while observing secrecy, Soviet submarines prowled about their areas in low-noise mode, while everyone on board waited for a signal to deploy their weapons.

Though this naval confrontation under the sea is now long forgotten, Samokhvalov said “the world stood on the brink of thermonuclear war.”

A new book on the Pueblo Incident is in the works. Authored by Bill Streifer (a researcher and independent scholar) and Irek Sabitov (a Russian journalist and former newspaper editor in Ufa, Russia), “The Pueblo Incident: In the Midst of the Cold War” emphasizes possible and well-documented Soviet involvement in the Pueblo Incident -- from before the incident began, through the Soviet naval response to the seizure of the Pueblo, to the Soviet role in U.S.-North Korean negotiations for the release of the crew.

The book’s last chapter is an exposé on the U.S.-Soviet cooperative effort during the search-and-rescue operation following the North Korean downing of a U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane over the Sea of Japan in April 1969, four months after the crew of the Pueblo returned home.

Unlike other books on the topic, ours relies heavily on newly-declassified U.S. Navy, CIA, and NSA documents, and multiple Russian/Soviet sources, including interviews with former U.S. and Soviet naval officers and men, including submariners.

If you have any knowledge (first- or second-hand) concerning the U.S. submarines sent into the Sea of Japan following the seizure of the USS Pueblo, including the USS Ronquil (SS-396), please contact the American author (Bill Streifer) at bill.streifer@gmail.com .

-- Bill Streifer