

## **Covert ops off Murmansk**

As some of you will recall most years during the cold war the Royal Navy sent a warship and RFA to the Barents Sea to show a presence and scoop up hardware and information emitted by the Soviet military in the area. What we, in HMS GLASGOW, did not expect in June 1985 was the chance to recover the black box recorder from a test firing of a soviet ballistic missile, fired by a submerged submarine.

### *Soviet submarine firings*

Mid way through our deployment one of RFA Olwen's Sea King helicopters, during its early morning recce of the area, reported seeing three submarines on the surface with a number of frigates and torpedo recovery vessels in close company. One of the submarines was an old Bravo Class, padded so that she could act as a torpedo target.

We closed.

For reasons which I never fathomed, the Soviets remained five miles outside territorial waters. This allowed us to get right in amongst them and remain as close as we wanted for the next eight hours. The other two submarines were of the Victor II or Victor III classes. For a number of years, the eight-foot-high pods, fitted to the stern of all Victor IIIs, were of great intelligence interest to the West and had even led to an underwater collision between one of the Victors and the submarine USS Drum, as she closed, to take photographs. By the time we sailed for the Barents Sea the mystery had been solved, but today it was the home for a towed array which could be streamed astern to detect and identify ships and submarines literally thousands of miles away. On this day the array was not streamed, nor was the radio cable which allows submarines to receive messages at very low frequency while still submerged.

We initially assumed that we would witness torpedo practice and eventually we did, but not in the manner that we had anticipated. At the 0800 briefing, one of the embarked US Intelligence Officers went through again the torpedo capabilities of the Victor III submarines and as time permitted we practiced again lowering our boats into the water while the ship was still going at twelve knots, in case an opportunity arose to nick one. It was a fairly dangerous evolution, only made possible by the use of especially versatile boats embarked for the intelligence operation, and much practice. An RN Intelligence Officer gave us his best estimate of what else might be happening in the Barents Sea that day. There were two points of note, one a report emanating from an American Electronic Intelligence (Elint) satellite that the Aircraft Carrier Kiev had sailed from Murmansk and was steaming at 12 knots, on her own, towards the icecap. We sent a message to the American Embassy in London asking for confirmation because none of our helicopters had seen her. They confirmed but we had to ignore the information for the time being. The second point, of passing interest, was that the Soviet High Command in Moscow had declared that there might be a ballistic missile firing somewhere in the Barents Sea, that day. On a lighter note he

reminded us that the Duke of York was due to marry in a few hours, so we duly hoisted the Union Jack and brushed our hair.

Through the morning the Victor II and Victor III submarines dived and surfaced and dived and surfaced. At midday the Victor III, which was one and a half times as big as HMS Glasgow and with a maximum speed submerged of 32 knots, surfaced and then moved to the West at about 25 knots. We followed, keeping equidistance between her and the other submarines. After about an hour she reversed course and re-joined the others. The diving and surfacing recommenced. At about 1800 our Russian linguists reported that a Vice Admiral, embarked in the Victor III, was talking to the Commanding Officers of all the submarines on the local area voice radio circuit, the only radio that was not encrypted. He was evidently very angry and said words to the effect that if the submarines did not get their act together soon the Commanding Officers were heading for Siberia. Those snooping could confirm by the call-sign that it was a vice admiral talking and the fact that he was using an uncovered circuit indicated that the encrypted ones were defective. I was glad to hear that the Soviets also had trouble with their communications!

Not much later the submarines dived and in HMS Glasgow we went into our ultra-quiet state. This included stopping the main engines and all but one diesel generator, but



not before I had turned the ship to face the Victor III and preventing anyone moving around the ship except in socks. Those operating the research sonar, which we had had fitted in Gibraltar, were closed up and recording all sounds emanating from the Soviets. Soon they reported that the torpedo tube doors were being opened and a minute later that a torpedo was being fired. In fact, the torpedo did not move horizontally towards the Bravo as expected

but vertically out of the water. I retain a wonderful picture in my mind of a missile breaking the surface, with the Duke of York's Union Jack in the foreground. The missile continued climbing, into space, tracked by our radars. It then turned towards the Bravo submarine and dived, following a ballistic trajectory. Immediately we saw the missile breaking the water-line on its way up I revoked the ultra-quiet state and ordered revolutions for full power. We also launched our helicopter. At this stage all the submarines were submerged, the Bravo some six miles from us, and the torpedo recovery vessels and frigates another five miles beyond. Very soon our helicopter pilot reported on an encrypted radio that he could see something, cylindrical, in the water.

We called away the boat's crew and closed. As we were approaching it the two Victor submarines surfaced but we managed to put ourselves between it and all the Soviets and now at twelve knots launched our speed boat. The boat's crew recovered the object, returned under the davits and within a very short time were back on board.

For the next few hours the Soviets scoured the sea for what was in fact a 'black box' recorder and we pretended to do the same. On four or five occasions our Russian linguists heard the Soviet vessels comparing notes, emphasising that HMS Glasgow could not have stolen their recorder, because we were always under surveillance and they would have noticed if we had stopped to lower a boat. There was much celebration in HMS Glasgow.

When we returned to Rosyth, a bomb disposal team met us and without further ado removed the recorder, if that is what it was. I heard nothing more until I visited GCHQ about a month later. I was told, second hand, that there had been an armed tamper proof seal which was made safe without difficulty. Much more interesting, I was told that the missile carrying torpedo was new and undertaking its short range proving trial. Furthermore, the data was encrypted and GCHQ personnel were busy trying to crack the code. The only information I gleaned thereafter was that we had indeed been party to the short range proving trial of a new Soviet ballistic missile carrying torpedo, which had a minimum range of about five miles and a maximum range of about 1500 miles. In preparing for this little book I checked out the internet and now think the torpedo come missile come torpedo come black box recorder was a sub-surface to surface or sub surface to sub-surface hybrid with a nuclear head but with a much more limited maximum range. Others might think it was an enigma.