

# George Kamburoff

533 Westover Lane Pleasant Hill, CA 94523-2727  
(925) 256-1444 voice/fax george@kamburoff.com

Department of the Navy -- Naval Historical Center  
805 Kidder Breese SE -- Washington Navy Yard  
Washington, DC 20374-5060

RE: USS Scorpion

July 23, 2004

Sirs,

Recent information has led me to believe you have incomplete evidence regarding the loss of the USS Scorpion. Having some additional information, I called your office, and talked to Mr. Brian Ramso, who suggested I write up a narrative of my experience. I will summarize it here, then discuss the order of the events, finally add some other thoughts.

Summary: I am an Air Force veteran who served in Korat Thailand from 11/67 to 11/68, in the 553d Reconnaissance Wing as part of Igloo White during the Vietnam War. We used modified sonobuoys to seismically and acoustically monitor the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Khe Sanh, and other areas of interest.

In mid-1968, through the base AM radio station, I listened to the demise of a nuclear submarine (the Scorpion), in essentially real-time. The entire terrible drama was fed to Armed Forces Radio by a Lt. jg "Information Officer" reporting from Norfolk, and our base AFTN station aired it. This saga played out over the course of perhaps three or four hours, in episodes interjected into music, like a *War of the Worlds* drama for real.

What I heard is a little different from other accounts. In short, the Scorpion was *lost in action against a perceived threat*. It occurred days before officially acknowledged and reported, and we knew about it as it was happening.

Narrative: We were perhaps at the peak of the war, post-Tet. We had lost the Pueblo to North Korea, and were losing planes bombing the North (and other countries). Things weren't going well and tensions were high.

Wanting some background music in the radio repair shop, I heterodyned (combined) signals from a VHF aircraft radio and an RF signal generator, allowing us to receive the base AM radio station. After a few hours of elevator music, someone abruptly broke into the program to inform us he was Lieutenant jg somebody, Base Information (i.e., public relations) Officer at Norfolk, Virginia, reporting from the Communications Room. Why on Earth he would be allowed in the Communications Room, or discuss on-air where he was, or tell us any of this stuff, I don't know. It was mid-day in Korat, which meant it was about midnight in Norfolk. I think it was Friday or Saturday night there.

The Lieutenant junior grade Information Officer told us a US nuclear submarine, the Scorpion, was "returning from maneuvers in the Mediterranean", and had reported in from its "mid-Atlantic checkpoint near the Azores" that it was being stalked by another submarine, "presumably Russian". I was surprised this information was discussed in the clear, let alone on an Armed Forces Radio feed.

Then, he was gone, replaced by violins. I wasn't sure if it was real at first, but it seemed too slick for anything locally produced. Though nobody else in my shop seemed to pay any attention to it, the story would unfold through perhaps six reports.

Shortly, the "Information Officer" cut in a second time to announce that the Scorpion had requested permission to deviate from its intended route to play cat-and-mouse with the other submarine. The IO went on to explain the Scorpion was a hunter-killer boat, whose mission was anti-submarine warfare.

Two nuclear-armed boats in a confrontation during a period of high international tension didn't seem to be a good idea to me, and I found myself shouting irrationally at the radio speakers: "Don't let them do it!"

It seemed a long while before the next announcement, but the IO confirmed the Scorpion was given permission to pursue the other submarine. Then came the longest interlude before anything was said again about the Scorpion - an hour or two of musical drone while I worked on my equipment and paced the floor, wondering what was going on.

When it happened, it was dramatic. The music was abruptly replaced by very loud noise; the sounds of people yelling, chairs sliding across the floor, things falling over, the clutter of desk items, general pandemonium. Above it all was the shouted voice of the Lt jg, telling us something like ". . . we have information that the Scorpion has been lost with all hands!", . . . followed by the violins.

Maybe a minute later, it was confirmed, and the IO announced they would play a "sonobuoy recording" of the hull failing. After a few seconds of the music, he cut in and played what he said was that sonobuoy recording, which was unrecognizable to me. I was stunned. All those people were dead. What do we do now? What comes next?

Nothing came next. It was gone, like it had never happened. There were no more interruptions, no follow-up, no comments, not a single reference to the startling events that just been broadcast. There was no confirmation that it had happened from any source. I listened each day to the daily noontime Walter Cronkite report, for surely, it was important enough for national news.

It took two-three days, maybe more, if I remember right, before Cronkite reported something like "One of our submarines returning from maneuvers in the Mediterranean, failed to report in, . . ." The episode was then played out as a big mystery. The Navy churned up of untold miles of ocean looking for a wreck that wasn't lost.

Twenty years later, I watched a TV retrospective. In it, family members, told the overdue Scorpion would dock at its prescribed time after all, were shown standing on the pier in late May of 1968, waiting for a boat that had been down for days, for those we already knew were dead. That and another documentary induced me to send this to you.

It has been 36 years, now. Surely the need for closure and the requirements of history outweigh any political or institutional factors affecting the history of this event.

I think it is important for the families and others to know that those servicemen *died in action*, doing their jobs in a hot spot of the Cold War. They deserve that recognition and respect, while historians and the public deserve to know the whole story.

Reflections: There is a strange irony here. In 1985, the John Walker spy group was exposed and imprisoned. One of my daily newspapers printed his complete service record. When I saw what Walker was responsible for, I thought it was probably he who had that enemy sub waiting for the Scorpion, .. he who sold out his own buddies.

But I was even more interested to read that in May of 1968, John Walker worked on the night shift in that same radio room at Norfolk. Could Walker have been in that room when we lost the Scorpion, listening, like the rest of us, to the sound of those men – his fellow submariners, my fellow servicemen - die? If he was on his regular shift, it's yes.

What was the precise mechanism for the loss – a poor refitting? What happened to the Lieutenant jg? Will this information affect benefits of the surviving dependents?

I assume there is corroborating evidence for my story. Since I heard this on AFTN, somebody else certainly heard it. That temporary “Information Officer” (or records of him) must be around somewhere. And, since somebody dropped or inserted a sonobuoy, there must also be records, especially if there was a P-3 group stationed near the Azores.

It is in your hands now.

If I can help you with more specifics, you can contact me through US mail, email, or by telephone.

George Kamburoff  
533 Westover Lane  
Pleasant Hill, CA 94523  
[george@kamburoff.com](mailto:george@kamburoff.com)  
925 256-1444  
USAF 1965-69  
AF19839588