

When Intelligence Made a Difference

— POST-WWII ERA —

The Genesis of the Incident at Sea Agreement

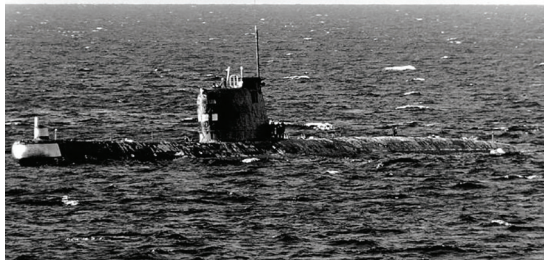
by Bob Alden

By the early 1970s, tensions at sea between the US and Soviet navies had reached a critical stage. Since the 1960s there had been numerous incidents of Soviet surface combatants, merchant ships, submarines and aircraft deliberately maneuvering or flying in unsafe ways in the vicinity of US Navy units. The US had filed numerous protests with the Soviet government to no avail. Without concrete evidence, the Soviets would counter that it was the US units that were at fault.

In the Spring of 1972, Destroyer Squadron 14, consisting of six ships, under the command of Commodore Robert Hilton deployed from Mayport, FL to the Mediterranean. A few weeks after the squadron arrived in the Mediterranean, the Soviets were in the process of relieving their squadron of eight deployed submarines with another squadron that had transited through the North Atlantic from the Soviet Northern Fleet. Both squadrons consisted of seven FOXTROT class diesel-electric attack subs and one JULIETT class diesel-electric cruise missile sub. The departing squadron transited outbound through the Gibraltar Strait and the relieving squadron came into the Med the same way. Their transit of the strait was timed so that the outgoing squadron submerged just before exiting and the incoming squadron surfaced a day later. This caused some confusion with NATO surface combatants that were conducting surveillance of the subs.

In late March, one of the newly arrived FOXTROT's was sighted at anchor along with some other Soviet ships, a DESNA class oiler, an UGRA class sub tender, a KOTLIN class destroyer and a PETYA class frigate at anchor in the Gulf of Hammamet off the coast of Tunisia. This anchorage was routinely used

FOXTROT



A NATO-designated Foxtrot-class submarine.



A NATO designated Juliett-class submarine.

by the Soviet Navy. Commodore Hilton was tasked to conduct surveillance operations of these units with two of his ships, USS WILLIAM S. SIMS (DE-1059), with Commodore Hilton embarked, and USS WILLIAM V. PRATT (DLG-13).



The US ships steamed around the Soviet ships in a wide circle, which enabled them to clearly observe any activity. The most interesting was noted was on the submarine when one morning the crew was mustered on deck in two parallel lines. A few of the sub's other crew members were forced to "run the gauntlet" while their shipmates beat them with ropes or clubs. US sailors on SIMS and PRATT were grateful that the US Navy did not conduct that sort of corporal punishment. In addition, the US ships observed numerous routine activities aboard the Soviet ships, such as swimming, drying laundry, various drills and inspections.



An aerial port bow view of the guided missile destroyer USS WILLIAM V. PRATT (DDG-44) underway.



USS W S SIMS (FF-1059) underway in 1987.

On March 30, the Soviet sub tender, destroyer and frigate got underway from Hammamet headed ESE at approximately 10 knots. The oiler had already departed earlier. Not long after, the FOXTROT submerged. The Soviets did not want the US ships to track the sub, so the destroyer started to maneuver dangerously close to SIMS and PRATT to throw them off. At one point, the destroyer steamed closely alongside PRATT so that the port bridge wing of the Soviet ship was just a few feet away from PRATT's starboard bridge wing. The Soviet destroyer also made sharp turns in between the U.S. ships and the position of the Soviet sub, which was still submerged in the area of the sub tender,



KOTLIN-class destroyer

to try and throw off the US ships' tracking of the sub by active sonar. These attempts were unsuccessful and both US ships were able to maintain continuous sonar contact.

It soon became apparent that the Soviet ships were headed for Egypt, based on their ESE course. SIMS and PRATT continued to track the sub with-

out difficulty despite more harassing maneuvers by the Soviet destroyer, but on April 2, Easter Sunday, that changed.

The US ships held Easter sunrise services on their fantails, and as the sun rose and visibility improved, three Soviet KASHIN class guided missile destroyers arrived in the area at high speed. Two of the KASHINs rode herd on the SIMS while the third joined the KOTLIN to do the same to PRATT. The KASHIN's were powered by gas turbine engines, which gave them better ability to rapidly change speed, back down or stop than the US ships, which were steam turbine powered. This should have put the US at a disadvantage, but despite Soviet efforts to harass and intimidate, PRATT and SIMS were able to hold their own against the radical and dangerous Soviet maneuvering. But it was fortunate that there were no collisions. After a few days, the KASHIN's departed as the other Soviet ships neared the Egyptian coast. At this point a pair Egyptian TU-16 BADGER bombers came out to conduct surveillance of the situation. As the ships neared Egyptian territorial waters, the US units broke away and headed for Gaeta, Italy, homeport of the Commander, U.S. Sixth Fleet. Commodore Hilton and the ships' commanding officers briefed Vice Admiral Gerry Miller, using imagery and other intelligence, including video tapes from a new video camera that had been provided to the PRATT for intelligence purposes prior to the deployment and was used extensively during the incident.¹



A port bow view of a Soviet Kashin class destroyer underway.

All the collected intelligence, including the video, were forwarded up the chain of command. Ultimately the video tapes were shown to Soviet government officials. Later representatives from the two governments and navies met for formal discussions.² On May 25, 1972, the Incident at Sea Agreement was signed by

2. The US had proposed discussions concerning incidents at sea to the Soviets in 1968. There were inconclusive talks in Moscow in October 1971. The talks in Washington, D.C. on May 17, 1972 were more productive.

Secretary of the Navy, John Warner, for the US and Fleet Admiral Sergei Gorshkov for the Soviets at the May 22-30 Moscow Summit meeting between President Nixon and General Secretary Brezhnev, also noted for the signing of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the first Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement (SALT-I). The Incidents at Sea agreement contained detailed guidance on maneuvering, distance specifications between units and aircraft, use of signals and prohibition of aggressive or threatening actions.³ As a result, incidents between the two navies lessened significantly. Intelligence, particularly the video imagery, had made the difference.

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3. The language of the agreement is at <https://fas.org/nuke/control/sea/text/sea1.htm>.