



**The Most Audacious
Spy Operation in the
History of the US Navy!**

Operation Ivy Bells

At the height of the Cold War, several US intelligence agencies joined with the Navy to conduct a spy operation as covert as it was audacious. Highly skilled and specially trained divers snuck into Soviet waters and attached a sophisticated electronic bugging device to an underwater Soviet cable.

For nearly a decade, American officials had access to Russia's greatest secrets and knew precisely what malicious plans the Soviet leaders were conspiring against them. When the Soviets discovered the secret, American lives were placed in jeopardy. Read the gripping account of Operation Ivy Bells.

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A bitter cold front blanketed the eastern shores of the Soviet Union on that wintry night when the *USS Halibut*, a Navy submarine, secretly slipped into the heavily guarded Soviet waters deep in the Sea of Okhotsk to carry out an incredible mission.

The submarine proceeded silently to the prearranged point and then ground to a halt. A handful of Navy divers emerged from the decompression chamber and dived to the sea floor to carry out Operation Ivy Bells.

This was a very risky operation. The Sea of Okhotsk is huge, covering an area of 600,000 square miles in the northwestern Pacific, and is surrounded on three sides by the Siberian shore. At that point in the Cold War the Soviet Union had declared these waters to be Soviet territory, and it protected its borders aggressively, barring entry to any foreign ships and certainly not granting access to American military vessels.

The Soviet Navy had even planted a network of listening devices on the sea floor to warn them of the presence of unwanted guests. Since the sea was the site of regular naval maneuvers, the entire area was patrolled by both surface and underwater craft. The chances of an enemy ship, silently slipping into these waters, carrying out a successful operation and then departing without being discovered, were virtually nil.

There is no doubt that had the Russian Navy discovered the American submarine in its protected waters it would have sunk the vessel immediately. Even worse, there was a good chance that the *Halibut*, the most sophisticated submarine in the US Navy's arsenal, would fall into the hands of the Soviets and reveal priceless technological secrets—including the details of Operation Ivy Bells in which it was now engaged.

Still, US Navy officials considered the potential benefits of this mission to be so overwhelmingly worthwhile that they were prepared to risk everything in the attempt.

A Risky Mission

The National Security Agency (NSA) was created in 1952 to oversee electronic surveillance activity around the world. It is the largest agency in America's broad intelligence community, as well as one of the most secretive. It has twice as many employees as the CIA and carries the highest budget of any individual spy agency anywhere in the world.

The NSA is capable of eavesdropping on any telephone call placed anywhere in the world and can read any e-mail, fax, text message or any other form of communication. During the Cold War, the NSA was primarily preoccupied with turning its satellites, super-computers and latest bugging devices to spy on America's greatest enemy, the Soviet Union. The NSA was even able to listen to the conversations Soviet leaders held on their car phones with the Kremlin!

Although, unlike the CIA, the NSA does not send its men into the field to collect information, relying instead exclusively on electronic eavesdropping, the life of an NSA operative is still not guaranteed. The reason for this is that NSA agents must accompany military personnel to the front lines as they install the devices and then listen in to them wherever this service may be wanted, thus putting them into the battlefield. At NSA headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland, there is a special memorial to the NSA agents who lost their lives in the line of duty.

Operation Ivy Bells was masterminded



Map of the Okhotsk Sea where Operation Ivy Bells took place.

by Captain James Bradley, director of underwater war activity at the Navy intelligence division. Bradley was a World War II veteran who served in the war as captain of a small warship that participated in the Pacific theater. He served as commander of a transport ship in the Vietnam War and later he joined the submarine service. Later still he became a naval espionage officer and in 1966 he was promoted to his position as director of underwater war activity.

In his new position, Bradley was constantly dreaming of ways to break into the Soviet intelligence centers. One day in 1970 he had a brainstorm. He studied the map of the Sea of Okhotsk and its surrounding territories. On one side in the city of Petropavlovsk lay a missile submarine base while on the opposite side in the city in Vladivostok, home to the Soviet Union's largest port on the Pacific coast, was the headquarters of its navy's Pacific fleet.

Bradley knew that the two headquarters were in constant contact and he imagined that communications between the two were carried by an undersea cable that stretched from the missile base across the sea to the fleet headquarters and from there all the way on to Moscow.

"Imagine if we could send a submarine in to attach a microphone to that cable," Bradley thought to himself. "We'd be able to hear every conversation carried by the cable. We'd know exactly what Soviet military leaders are thinking. We could collect accurate reports of the strengths and weaknesses of Soviet military forces. We could learn the details about the Russian navy's maneuvers in the Sea of Okhotsk and at the same time we would learn about Russia's military plans."

The idea opened up the possibility of accessing a gold mine of intelligence that US leaders were dying to get their hands on. There were just a few small problems with Bradley's inspiration.



Threat Operations Center of the NSA at Fort Meade, Maryland, where America's analysts eavesdrop on conversations and analyze possible threats to the US.



Satellite dishes used for eavesdropping on international communications at NSA's UK listening post.



An aerial view of the super-secret NSA headquarters.