

## “It Stricted In My Board”

**CAPT David C. Klinger, USN (Ret) and CAPT Ralph H. Stoll, USN (Ret)**

*“The Russians stole my torpedo! It all started in the early morning of 24 June 1979, in the calm waters off the coast of Guam. The USS SAM HOUSTON (SSBN 609) was underway on routine sea trials. I was the Commanding Officer and I never imagined what would happen in the next 25 hours...”*

Thus began Dave Klinger’s opening paragraph of a true sea story on which he and I were collaborating before his untimely passing in December 2020. I was the Engineer Officer, and I fired that torpedo. To complete Dave’s



story I have recorded here my personal recollections of that event from over 40 years ago - - an international military and diplomatic incident eerily similar to the seizure of two American sea drones by an Iranian destroyer in the Red Sea in September 2022 and their ultimate release to two US Navy destroyers and helicopters.

SAM HOUSTON had completed a standard pre-patrol refit in Guam alongside USS HUNLEY (AS 31). Several Mark 37 exercise torpedoes had been loaded for a training exercise planned during the three-day sea trials in the local operating area. Departing Apra Harbor, we readily identified and visually tracked the Soviet AGI, ANEROID, that was known to be loitering in the area on an intelligence collection mission.



AGI ANEROID, viewed through SAM HOUSTON periscope, with the torpedo retriever stern visible to port

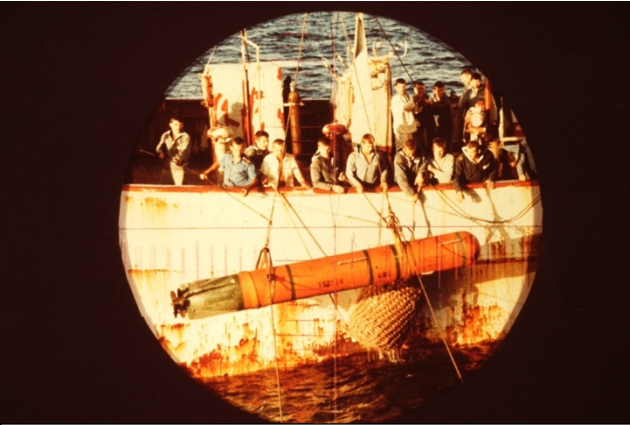
The early morning rendezvous with the torpedo retriever on the second day, several miles off Guam's southwest coast, was routine in calm, clear weather. We were visually tracking the AGI farther offshore in international waters, and it was not then in a position to interfere

with the exercise. The retriever was to act initially as the target and then to recover the spent torpedoes at the end of each run. In the exercise and while being observed by the Captain, I was the Approach Officer directing the attack in order to complete my last practical factor for qualification for command; final oral interviews were planned for the end of the deterrent patrol.

With the crew at Battlestations, we acquired and tracked the retriever to a final solution, matched sonar bearings, and I fired the Mk 37 wire-guided exercise torpedo. It ran normally to acquire the target, homed in to the pre-programmed safety range, and then turned away. Because there was still good continuity on the guidance wire connected to the torpedo, we allowed the torpedo to open the range and then attempted to steer it back toward the retriever for a second attack. The torpedo shut down when the battery was exhausted as expected, and the sonar team reported briefly detecting the weak end-of-run pinger. Back at periscope depth we contacted the retriever and commenced searching down the pinger bearing to find and recover the floating torpedo before the next exercise run.

The initial visual search did not quickly find the torpedo, and the pinger was no longer detected, so the ship and the retriever commenced a wider search in the area where the torpedo was thought to be floating. The ship was submerged at a shallow depth to get maximum height for the periscopes; the AGI was still being tracked and, while it had closed the

range, it was not assessed to be interfering with the search. As the search continued fruitlessly over the next 30 minutes or so, it was the Executive Officer on the #1 periscope who called out suddenly that the AGI had the torpedo along its port side and was hoisting it aboard that ship; his observation was quickly confirmed and then all Hell broke loose!



Periscope image of torpedo lifted alongside ANEROID

Immediately the retriever was notified, and the Captain ordered me, the OOD, to surface the ship and go to the Bridge. The AGI, with the torpedo now aboard, had turned away

from the Guam coast and commenced a slow transit offshore. In the Radio Room, the Captain established voice communications with the Squadron Commander aboard the HUNLEY and then to the entire Navy chain-of-command; meanwhile the XO and the Operations Officer began writing and then transmitting as fast as possible the first of many nearly continuous highly classified FLASH precedence messages to report the situation, provide updates, and to obtain guidance.

On the Bridge we called the torpedo retriever to come up on our port side at about 500 yards. Also operating nearby in visual range was a US Coast Guard buoy tender, BASSWOOD, and we contacted that ship to take station on our starboard side at about 500 yards. Once formed up, our unusual three vessel “Surface Action Group” headed offshore to trail the AGI while awaiting further guidance. Meanwhile I was trying to remember my yard patrol craft (YP) training as a midshipman in case we had to maneuver the “formation” to avoid the AGI. Below decks the remaining exercise torpedoes were pulled back into the torpedo room and warshot torpedoes were made ready in all torpedo tubes.



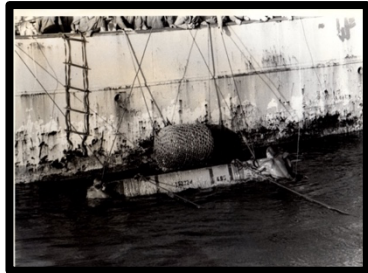
As the intensity of the military and diplomatic actions between the United States and the Soviet Union increased during the day, we continued to track and report on the AGI's movements. Early in the afternoon the torpedo retriever was detached to return to Apra Harbor, and before dusk the Coast Guard buoy tender, BASSWOOD, was detached to continue other operations. By then the initial guidance was for SAM HOUSTON to continue trailing the AGI alone but to maintain a position no closer than about 5000 yards aft, on the AGI's port or starboard quarter. And so onward we went slowly into the clear starry night in calm seas while a high-level diplomatic solution was negotiated. Down below, the crew was sarcastically commenting that we should just let the Soviets keep the torpedo with its old technology to set back their program a decade or more!

By midnight, about 16 hours after the incident began, the negotiations were completed, and a plan was communicated to the ship. The AGI slowed down. The Captain had been in the Radio Room, and I had been on the Bridge as OOD nearly continuously that entire time. The expectation was, just after the approaching sunrise, about 0700, the AGI would come to a complete stop and put the orange painted MK 37 exercise torpedo back into the water, and one of two scenarios would unfold. The large torpedo retriever was underway from Apra Harbor at its best speed to our position. If it arrived in time, it would go alongside the AGI and recover the torpedo. If the retriever was late, the AGI would move away from the floating torpedo so SAM HOUSTON could maneuver alongside the torpedo, put our rescue swimmers into the water, attach lines and then hold it alongside the hull until the retriever arrived to collect it.

Dawn arrived and the retriever came steaming over the horizon just in time to go alongside the AGI as SAM HOUSTON, with its man overboard party ready to go topside, closed the range to monitor, record,

and report on the high stakes encounter. As planned, the AGI stopped, put over a fender, and lowered the torpedo into the water; the retriever's swimmers attached lines to it and hauled it aboard without incident.

### Torpedo recovery alongside the ANEROID



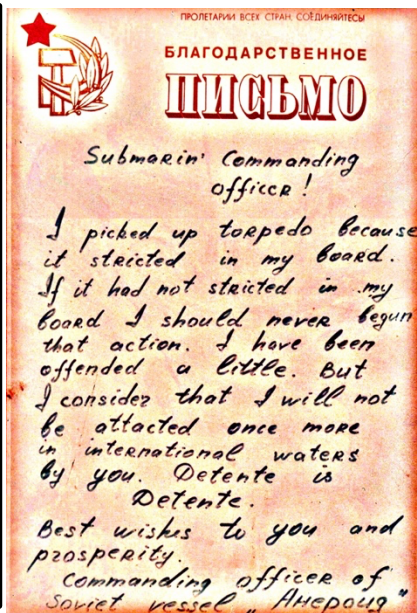
The AGI then took a slow speed course heading farther offshore and away from Guam. The retriever sped back toward Apra Harbor, and SAM HOUSTON submerged to continue what remained of its sea trials time. Finally, back in port and moored at Polaris Point, the Captain immediately went up to the Commodore's cabin on the HUNLEY to report in person. And then the rest of the story, unbeknownst to us on the ship, unfolded.

When the retriever went alongside the AGI, below decks, out of sight, was a squad of fully armed US Marines from the HUNLEY's security detachment, under the direct command of its Commanding Officer, Captain Roger Bacon, who was topside, wearing a dungaree uniform to blend in with the crew.

And while alongside the AGI and after the torpedo had been recovered, a package was handed down to a retriever crewman. When opened on the tender, the package contained a bottle of Russian vodka; it was accompanied by a handwritten note in English on pink Russian stationery with a Cyrillic letterhead.

The letter stated:

*"Submarin' Commanding Officer! I picked up torpedo because it stricted in my board. If it had not stricted in my board, I should never begun that action. I have been offended a little. But I consider that I will not be attacted once more in international waters by you. Détente is Détente. Best wishes to you and prosperity. Commanding Officer of Soviet vessel "Anepoug"."*



The Commanding Officer, Dave Klinger, was personally handed the letter and the bottle of vodka by the Commodore, Captain Stan Severance.

The vodka was eventually portioned into smaller vials and mounted on several plaques that were given to some of the participants. For all involved it was a great sea story that had a safe, satisfactory ending while being constantly told and re-told throughout the ship on deterrent patrol.



# EPILOGUE

1. After the ship departed Guam on its deterrent patrol, about 11 August 1979, a Navy press release appeared in several local publications. It briefly described the incident with the AGI, including that the torpedo had been taken and then returned with a bottle of Russian vodka, but it was careful to omit the names of the ship and the Commanding Officer. It suggested that two Coast Guard ships and maritime patrol aircraft had been the military units directly involved in the recovery of the torpedo from the AGI.

2. When the ship returned to Guam at the end of its deterrent patrol and before the Blue crew flew back to Hawaii, I completed the qualification for command card through an oral board that included the Gold crew CO, CDR Bill Owens. I recall that most of the discussion topics centered around command responsibilities consistent with events that arose during the AGI incident.

3. An unusual – and inaccurate – account of the AGI incident also appeared in “*Blind Man’s Bluff – The Untold Story Of American Submarine Espionage*”, written by Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew, originally published in 1998. In Appendix B, under a subsection titled “Trawlers and Spies”, there is a two-paragraph description of the AGI torpedo “snatch”, as well as supposition about a much wider US military response as the incident was happening, including carrier battlegroups,



Collage of press clippings

and then afterwards. I have no personal recollection of any of those additional actions.

4. The AGI came so close to successfully stealing the exercise torpedo. If the recovery had been on the far side of the AGI where it was not visible to the XO's periscope search, we might never have seen it being lifted aboard the AGI and, instead, the torpedo would have been reported lost during the exercise. The AGI departed the scene at slow speed, perhaps to deceive us after the exercise torpedo was aboard. The letter from the ANEROID Commanding Officer implied that the torpedo had hit the AGI's "board" (rudder?) but of course the torpedo still had the turnaway safety feature if, in fact, it had acquired the AGI instead of the retriever at some point during its extended run. I have occasionally wondered about the reception that the ANEROID's captain received when the AGI returned to Vladivostok at the end of its intelligence collection mission – was he commended or reprimanded or worse?



ANEROID's Captain on the bridge

5. Finally, substantial credit and thanks for completing this story belongs to Karolyn (Klinger) Welch, the daughter of Dave and Marilyn Klinger. As the Klinger family's historian, she provided the file of nearly 35 photographs and press clippings that Dave preserved, plus his draft of the opening paragraph to start this story. Each photo refreshed our memories of a quietly relished and very personal sea story that is now being told.

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