

Strange bedfellows: Howard Hughes and a CIA plot

NANCY: It's April 13, 1973, and a most unusual ship has begun its maiden voyage from Sun Shipbuilding and Drydock, in Chester, Pennsylvania, down the Delaware River to the Atlantic Ocean. The ship is jaw-droppingly large – 200 meters long, about the size of a battleship. It has a huge tower and derrick on the top that look a little like a cross between a kid's Erector set and a mini Eiffel Tower. The midsection of the ship contains an enormous hidden well that could be opened at the bottom. It was so big it could hold 7 Olympic sized swimming pools – and was called the moon pool, perhaps because it seemed big enough to swallow the Moon itself.

The ship, the Hughes Glomar Explorer, was built at the behest of the reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes at a cost of more than \$350 million – more than \$2 billion in today's dollars.

Hughes's widely publicized plan was to harvest mineral-rich manganese nodules from the Pacific seafloor at depths of nearly 5000 meters. No one had ever done anything remotely like this before.

Nevertheless, seabed minerals were in the collective consciousness. In 1969, a commission appointed by US President Richard Nixon had published a report called "Our Nation and the Sea," which outlined future plans for how the United States should manage and exploit its marine resources. While the commission saw no "urgent" need to develop "subsea hard minerals with maximum speed," it did foresee a future where marine minerals would play an important role in the country's economy.

Clearly, Hughes had read the report, and had decided to put his billions to work. After all, you don't get to be a billionaire if you aren't willing to be at the forefront of things.

Hughes' announcement, and the sailing of the Glomar Explorer, even kick-started university offerings in ocean engineering. You could say that the age of seabed mining had been launched.

Except the Glomar Explorer would never raise a single manganese nodule from the ocean floor.

Instead, its highly secret mission was to raise a sunken Soviet sub, lost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with all hands aboard in nearly 5000 meters of water. And while Hughes, a well-known patriot, lent his name to the endeavor, the covert operation to recover the sub was actually financed and operated by the CIA, the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Cue podcast music

Nancy: I'm Nancy Bazilchuk and you're listening to 63 Degrees North, an original podcast from NTNU, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Today's podcast extra is a followup to an earlier episode about Norway's decision to open its seabed to exploration and mining. If you haven't listened to it yet, you'll find it in your feed.

In the course of my reporting for that episode, I learned a lot of things that I couldn't include in the story. Like the weird, secret tale of the Glomar Explorer. The REAL story of this ship, conceived in the heyday of the Cold War in the US, is an amazing story on its own. But it also says a lot about how society looks at resources from the ocean, both then and now.

BRIDGE

Mats: To some extent you can say it's a wild story about the eccentric billionaire who's recruited by the CIA to help retrieve a sunken Soviet submarine.

Nancy: That's Mats Ingulstad, a historian at NTNU's Department of Modern History and Society. One of his research areas is the history of strategic metals and minerals. And he's as fascinated by the Glomar Explorer story as I am.

And what a story it is:

On February, 25 1968, a Soviet submarine known as the K-129 left Kamchatka, on Russia's Pacific coast, to head out on a 70-day mission in the vicinity of the Hawaiian Islands.

On board were 98 men, and three nuclear missiles, each with a one megaton warhead. *To put that in perspective, one megaton is 65 times more powerful than the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima.* Should war break out between the USSR and the US, the K-129 would have launched its three nuclear missiles at strategic targets on the US West Coast.

The K-129 was scheduled to send a short message on March 8, but nothing was heard. When the sub missed a second planned transmission, the Soviets began searching for their sub.

Most visible to the Americans were the flights of Soviet reconnaissance aircraft, which flew nearly 300 missions over the area where the sub was thought to be located. Documents about the whole affair describe the Soviets abandoning all pretense of secrecy, and communicating without encryption as they worked, more and

more desperately, to find the sub. After two months of searching, they gave up.

They never found it – but the Americans did.

And once they found it, the American military began trying to figure out a way to bring it up.

Remember, the Cold War was in full swing, and the idea that the US military could get its hands on Soviet nuclear warheads, or code books, or missile guidance systems – or anything that would tell them more about Soviet submarines and nuclear capability – BIG PAUSE it was as irresistible as it was impossible.

A 2000 ton submarine under nearly 5000 meters of water. Raising something like that? Nothing like it had ever been done before.

Enter Howard Hughes.

MUSIC BREAK

Nancy: One of the many challenges of bringing a 2000 ton submarine up from the depths of the Pacific Ocean was that there would be absolutely no way to hide what was being done.

Or ... was there?

Once the CIA got the go-ahead, they came up with an idea: instead of hiding what they were doing, they'd come up with a plausible story and do their work in full view of the world. Enter a secret plan, code-named "Project Azorian".

The agency reached out to Howard Hughes to see if he would be willing to provide the cover story for Project Azorian. Hughes was a logical choice: he was known for making big, possibly risky

investments that paid off. He also had a number of US government contracts.

Mats: The way the story is sometimes told is that this cover story helps make deep sea mining look viable, because if Howard Hughes is investing in it, it must be something that's possible.

Nancy: But Mats said the CIA did a good job of picking its cover story. It turns out that lots of companies really *were* interested in deep sea mining, even without Hughes. A perfect way to hide something in plain sight.

Mats: The CIA is latching into something which increasingly is looking feasible. You have American companies, such as the Kennecott Corporation, which was a huge copper producer and was fearful of nationalization of its assets in Chile, for instance, they had been looking into deep sea mining for several years. And another player was the Reynolds Metals Company, which had gotten into aluminum during the Second World War.

Nancy: Mats said the Reynolds Metals Company had actually built a deep submersible out of aluminium, called the Aluminaut, that it envisioned playing a useful role in deep sea mining. So companies WERE already investing.

Mats: So it speaks to the enthusiasm and the expectation that deep sea mining is about to happen. And that's been the case for, for many, many decades. That this is something that will happen eventually. And it is in the future. We have the technological capacity to do it.

Nancy: Be that as it may, it would still take 4 years after the Soviet sub went missing before the CIA was able to send the ship, the Glomar Explorer, to where the sub had gone down, about 2500

kilometers northwest of Hawaii. I guess they weren't worried about anyone else raising it off the sea bottom.

This wasn't all construction time, no, no, no. Part of this crazy story is what happened to the ship during its preparations before it actually began its mission.

Nancy: For one thing, the ship was built on the east coast of the United States, and had to sail to the west coast, where it could be fitted out with the special CIA spy equipment it would need for its mission.

But the ship was far too big to pass through the Panama Canal, so it had to sail roughly 20000 kilometers south and west, around the tip of South America and through the Straits of Magellan. The plan for the trip involved a stop in Valparaiso, where the ship would get some new technicians, supplies and a bag of personal mail.

Nancy: This, it would turn out, was a case of incredible bad timing.

The Glomar Explorer was due to arrive in Chile on Sept. 12, 1973.

On September 11, a group of military officers, led by General [Augusto Pinochet](#), seized power in a coup. The declassified CIA report describes the experience of the new crew, waiting in Valparaiso, like this:

“At approximately 0600...the Americans were awakened by noise outside the hotel... it was evident that the revolution had started, as there were soldiers, tanks, armored cars and other military vehicles...

“As attested in his trip report, which reads like a Hollywood script, Tom Williams, the Global Marine representative, encountered much intrigue and suspense in getting the seven technicians,

supplies and parts loaded on the Hughes Glomar Explorer in the midst of the revolution.”

I have tried my best to find Tom Williams’s trip report, but to no avail. For this, we will just have to use our imagination.

Nancy: From there, it was relatively smooth sailing to Long Beach, California, where 24 vans containing classified equipment were loaded into the ship. And then off they went, arriving at the recovery site on July 4, 1974. Due to the complicated nature of raising a 2000 ton submarine up from more than 5000 meters of water, it took nearly a month before they could actually lift the sub, and 8 days before they were able to bring it into the Moon Pool.

There was a fair amount of excitement during the mission, including a visit by a Soviet ship with a helicopter on board. The declassified document that describes the whole project said the captain ordered the crew to load boxes on the Glomar Explorer’s helipad to prevent the Soviet helicopter from making a surprise landing. It made many passes over the Glomar Explorer, no doubt taking pictures, but the cover story held.

The declassified document that I’ve used for much of this story doesn’t say how much of the sub they were able to recover in the end, but subsequent reporting suggests that the sub broke apart on its way up from the depths.

Mats: It turns out it's more difficult than assumed to operate at great depths. And so they lose half of the sub on the way up.

Nancy: We might never have learned about this strange story had it not been for some enterprising reporting by national journalists, including Seymour Hersh, who would later go on to win the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the Vietnam War.

And what first tipped journalists off was... a 1974 burglary. For US political history fans, this is pretty ironic. US President Richard Nixon was famously forced to resign in August 1974 in part because of a burglary in the Watergate complex. But this particular burglary involved stolen files from Howard Hughes's holding company, the Summa Corp.

The initial police report said that the thieves stole \$68,000 in cash, two Wedgwood vases, a ceramic samovar, two butterfly collections, three digital watches and an antique Mongolian eating bowl, among other things.

But it later came clear that they also stole two footlockers of documents, which included detailed information about the Glomar Explorer's top secret mission. This was used in an elaborate blackmail scheme that may or may not have succeeded. Eventually, the word leaked out, in spite of the CIA's best efforts to keep the lid on the story.

The Los Angeles Times broke the news – with a number of inaccuracies - on Feb. 7, 1975, followed by many other followups. You can find links to some of these articles in the show notes.

When these national stories broke, the CIA came up with an answer to the media storm that ensued: they responded to media requests by saying they could neither “confirm nor deny” the existence of Project Azorian. This response has become known as “the Glomar Response” and has become an almost hackneyed response by government agencies when it comes to media questions they'd rather not discuss.

Nancy: In the end, as best we know, all that engineering – and the millions of taxpayer dollars – appear to have been for naught, at least when it came to raising the Soviet sub.

Nancy: The Glomar Explorer did, however, get a new lease on life after being mothballed for two decades by the US Navy. It was an expensive and difficult retrofit – especially the electrical system, “which did not go where it was supposed to go,” according to a contractor’s report on the retrofit. “It only went to the CIA’s covert control room.”

Of course.

But in 1998 it did sail again, this time refitted as a drillship, looking for other riches in the deep: Oil.

Nancy: I’m Nancy Bazilchuk, and you’ve been listening to 63 Degrees North, an original podcast by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. My guest on today’s show was Mats Ingulstad. You can find links to many of the documents I used to put together today’s episode in the show notes. Writing, editing, production and sound design by me, Nancy Bazilchuk. Thanks for listening.