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# RED STAR ROGUE

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 The Untold Story of a  
Soviet Submarine's Nuclear  
Strike Attempt on the U.S.

KENNETH SEWELL WITH CLINT RICHMOND

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A SOVIET SUBMARINE'S  
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ON THE U.S.



KENNETH SEWELL

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**AS RIVETING AS  
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**RED STAR ROGUE**

**The Untold Story of a Soviet Submarine's Nuclear  
Strike Attempt on the U.S.**

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*For the men and women of the United States  
military who served our country with little or no  
recognition, at countless outposts guarding land,  
sea, and sky during the long years of the Cold War*

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*Kenneth Sewell  
Columbus, Ohio  
September 2005*



# FOREWORD

SHORTLY AFTER THE OPENING of trade relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the early 1980s, I was assigned to work with Chinese engineers at the Beijing research facility of the Ministry of Aeronautics Industry. It was, for me, the first of many memorable trips to this once-secluded country. It was likewise memorable for my Chinese hosts, because I was the first American they had ever met.

The scientists and engineers I worked with were well educated in the basic technical skills of their fields. But they were completely ignorant of what the world was like outside China. The leadership had only recently permitted peasant farmers to sell their excess produce in the cities, though many Chinese had not yet learned to cook since leaving their communes. This was years before the Tiananmen Square massacre, and everywhere there was a feeling of optimistic uncertainty.

Like most visitors to China in those days, I had been assigned a "government watcher." One day as we ate lunch, he was called away, leaving me alone with a group of engineers I had come to know fairly well. They were nervously glancing around to see if anyone was watching. A man was placed at the entrance, obviously as a lookout.

With a great show of courtesy and some embarrass-

ment, the young engineer who spoke the best English began by asking me, "Mr. Sewell, may we inquire about an incident that we heard of some time ago?"

The question took me by surprise, and I must admit to feeling a twinge of fear. It had been only a few years since I had served on the crew of an American submarine under the command of a highly classified organization. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I did have information that could compromise intelligence operations critical to American security, and I had no idea how much these people knew about my past.

"Here it comes," I told myself, preparing for the third degree. So I was stunned when my chief inquisitor timidly asked his question.

"We have heard rumors for some time now, that American spacemen have landed on the moon," the young engineer whispered, with a grave look on his face. "Is this correct?" He quickly produced a Western trade magazine and pointed to an article. Over half the magazine had been censored, blacked out; but in one obscure paragraph was a reference to the American Apollo moon missions of the 1960s and 1970s.

I stood dumbfounded for several seconds. These highly trained engineers, the finest of Red China's aeronautical specialists, were surely joshing me. But they all leaned closer to hear my answer. They were not kidding.

During the remainder of our lunch break, the Chinese engineers pressed me for the details of the U.S. astronauts' seven moon landings. When the commissar—my minder—returned, the enlightenment abruptly ended.

Mao had warned his comrades, “When you open windows, you let in the flies.” In this case, I was proud to be one of the first flies. The Chinese government was so repressive, their society so closed and secretive, that information about one of the greatest engineering and scientific accomplishments in human history had been withheld from the country’s best technical minds.

Years later, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, this memory came back to me. *What haven’t we been told?*

No one knows better than an American submariner the need to protect our military and technological secrets for the security of our nation. But archiving old secrets long after the crisis has passed deprives us of knowledge that free people need to make enlightened choices. Burying our history beneath layers of cover stories, security classifications, and deliberate deceit for the purpose of protecting mistakes or reputations of bygone leaders is a violation of a free people’s rights. In the military, the highest restriction placed on a document is called a “need to know” classification. But at some point, after a crisis has passed, there is a higher authorization that we Americans must be granted—and that is the “right to know.”

If our democratic way of life and the self-rule of free people everywhere are to survive, then those we elect to lead us are not entitled to keep vital information from us forever.

On September 11, we learned that Islamist fanatics would resort to any and all means to achieve their goal, the destruction of the United States of America and the freedom it represents. It has long been reported that

these terrorists have actively sought to obtain nuclear weapons. There is no doubt, now, that they would use them if given the chance.

This is why I have written *Red Star Rogue*. For some time I have known about a horrifying incident, perhaps the darkest secret of the Cold War era. It involved a failed attempt by a lone Soviet submarine, a rogue, to launch a nuclear missile against a sleeping American city. Yet, for no reason of national security, this three-decades-old secret remains buried in mystery, rumor, and purposefully leaked disinformation.

In 1968, in a desperate bid to win the Cold War, a small group of radical Stalinists came within seconds of a sneak attack that would have killed a half-million Americans.

After spending years searching for answers to satisfy my own concerns about this incident, I submitted a detailed outline of my research to one of the few people still living who knew the entire story. Because of this person's impeccable credentials and integrity, I was sure if my conclusions were wrong, this man would tell me.

A few days later he responded, "You have made a great start in developing the credible and probable scenarios that have had that effect on history that we call the end of the Cold War (it is not over yet)."

As I dug deeper, it became increasingly difficult to have *in the clear* contact with my covert mentor, and my inquiries exposed me to those whose job it is to keep these things secret. Because of the classified nature of his former career and his lifetime commitment of confidentiality, my contact was unable to go public.



But I still managed to update him on my findings. Near the conclusion of my research I again asked him to review my work. His last response was, "So go, man, go. They do not yet suspect that you have an important message for the American people."

The public not only has a right to know, but now they have a need to know. In the current climate of perpetual war against terrorism, we can only hope that lessons learned from this Cold War incident will provide insights that can help us make the right choices in this increasingly dangerous, post-9/11 era.

*Kenneth Sewell*

# CONTENTS

Foreword	xiii
PROLOGUE	1
PART ONE: THE INCIDENT	5
PART TWO: THE INTELLIGENCE	151
PART THREE: THE COVER-UP	273
EPILOGUE	401
AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT	409
Notes	415
Index	447

# PROLOGUE

THIS WAS NOT SIMPLY AN ESPIONAGE WAR. IT WAS NOT JUST ONE SIDE AGAINST THE OTHER. IT WAS A DEADLY STRUGGLE OF IRRECONCILABLE IDEOLOGIES, WHERE THE DEFEAT OF THE OTHER SYSTEM WAS THE SOLE GOAL.

—*Former KGB Major General Oleg Kalugin*

IN EARLY 1968, the world nervously watched as the armies, air forces, and navies of the United States and the Soviet Union taunted each other in dangerous face-to-face standoffs around the globe. This tension was at its highest in the oceans of the world, where submarines of both sides played deadly games of hide-and-seek. At no point during the Cold War, including the dramatic confrontation of the Cuban Missile Crisis in September and October 1962, was the stalemate as close to escalating into World War III as in the first six months of 1968. Yet only a handful of military men and espionage agents—and a few key politicians in the inner sanctums of the Kremlin and the White House—knew just how close the world came to the long-feared nuclear Armageddon.

Asia and the Far East were aflame, with the Cold War turning hot in a major conflict fueled by the United States and the Soviet Union. American boys were dying by the scores each week in the steaming jungles of Indochina. That year, 1968, was the bloodiest of the war, with 16,869 Americans killed in action.

In the People's Republic of China, Mao's Red Guards

were well along in the murderous Great Proletarian Revolution, better known as the Cultural Revolution. Mao's criticism of the post-Stalin Soviet leadership had resulted in a split between these two Red giants. The followers of a radical Maoist policy turned on Red China's longtime patron, the Soviet Union, in the early 1960s, which led to open clashes at several spots along their twenty-four-hundred-mile border. Having originally supplied the Chinese with Russian nuclear missile and submarine technology, the Soviets withdrew their military assistance. Relations had deteriorated to the point that Soviet diplomats and military advisors and their families were forced to flee their posts in China, some barely getting out of the country with their lives.

On January 23, 1968, North Korean gunboats, in a brazen act of piracy on the high seas, fired on and captured the American surveillance ship *USS Pueblo*.

On January 30, 1968, war-weary Americans were shocked by the news that the Vietnam War, far from nearing the end that politicians had promised, had blazed into a new inferno. The North Vietnamese regular army and battalions of Viet Cong guerrillas launched a surprise attack on thirty provincial capitals in South Vietnam. Within days of the Tet Offensive, America suffered its highest casualty counts of the war: 543 GIs killed and 2,547 wounded in a single week.

Exhausted by the war, on March 31, President Lyndon Baines Johnson announced he would not seek reelection. Just four days later, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis.

On May 24, 1968, an American attack submarine, the *USS Scorpion*, went missing off the Azores while



conducting a clandestine mission to investigate an unusual assembly of Soviet warships in the eastern Atlantic. Immediately, U.S. officials suspected a possible Soviet navy connection with the disappearance. Ninety-nine American officers and sailors were lost.

After successfully winning the California presidential primary, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles on June 5. Two hundred thousand antiwar protesters marched in New York City, a major event in the long national war protest that would divide the nation for years to come.

Across the globe, Communist-inspired, Soviet-supported insurgencies raged in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Overtly, the Soviets began supplying client states such as Syria and Egypt with the latest missile technology, while behind the scenes they were supplying arms to revolutionaries throughout the Third World.

In Moscow, resentment over the Cuban Missile Crisis still simmered in some elements of the military, the KGB, and the Kremlin, despite the replacement of the bellicose Nikita Khrushchev by Leonid Brezhnev three years earlier. Seldom during the long years of the Cold War did the Soviets more aggressively rattle their sabers. In Europe, the Cold War heated up with the Prague Spring. Western intelligence learned that the Warsaw Pact was about to put down the unrest in Czechoslovakia with a brutal invasion.

In short, America and the world were seething in violence and bitter turmoil during the first months of 1968, when the events described in this book took place.

It was into this volatile mix of intrigue and open hos-