

FAMILIES OF THE SCORPION

Secrecy of disappearance compounded families' pain

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Even now they vividly remember that stormy day their lives were forever torn apart.

High winds and sheets of rain lashed the Hampton Roads area that Monday morning on May 27, 1968. Several dozen wives and families of the USS Scorpion crew gathered at Pier 22 at the Norfolk, Va., Naval Station, awaited the sight of the submarine returning from a three-month deployment to the Mediterranean.

Barbara Foli Lake was one of the Scorpion wives who braved the weather on that Memorial Day to watch for the submarine bearing her husband, Vernon Foli, a 3rd class electrician. She recalls the whitecaps on the harbor, and the rain that soaked her clothing and left her shivering under a dark slate sky.

"It was a very cold, very dreary morning," said Lake, who remarried several years after the Scorpion sinking and now lives in Eugene, Ore. "The wind was sucking the umbrellas away."

Lake, then a 23-year-old Navy wife, said she was eager to see the Scorpion return because her daughter, Holli, was approaching her first birthday and had not seen her father for three months.

"It was a terrible, stormy day," recalled Theresa Bishop, wife of Torpedoman Chief Walter Bishop, the Scorpion's senior enlisted man. Years after the event, she still had vivid images of the day, such as the large tree that had fallen at the corner near her Norfolk home, where she lives today. "It had been blown over by the storm and to this day I can still picture it," she said.

The week before, several families had received letters from Scorpion crewmen saying they were scheduled to return on May 24 or 25. But on May 24, Navy officials, using a recorded telephone message, informed the families the submarine would not arrive until May 27.

What the families did not know as they gathered at the pier was that the Navy had launched a secret search for the sub the day before, on May 23, a search involving a dozen ships and submarines aided by land-based patrol planes. The families were not warned that something might be wrong.

About three dozen family members were on the pier as the scheduled arrival time of 1 p.m. approached.

Looming in the foreground was the massive silhouette of the USS Orion, the 530-foot ship that provided maintenance and logistical support to the subs. The only flash of color came from a bright red flotation boom alongside the Orion where the Scorpion would tie up, and a small number of balloons and hand-painted signs from the families to welcome their sailors home.

But the signs would wilt in the rain and the space alongside the ship would remain empty. The Scorpion would never make port.

None of the families waiting on the pier knew their loved ones had died five days earlier on May 22, when the Scorpion exploded and sank to the bottom of the Atlantic, killing all 99 crew members aboard.

But as the families waited, senior Navy leaders already suspected the Scorpion had been lost with all on board. More than a decade later, three admirals on duty in 1968 confirmed they had mounted a secret search for the submarine.

One admiral said they didn't want to unduly alarm the families without hard facts. Another official 20 years after the sinking privately acknowledged the failure to tell the families was a mistake.

A Navy spokesman this week had no immediate comment on allegations the Navy had searched in secret for the submarine without notifying the Scorpion's administrative command or family members of the Scorpion crew.

The arrival hour of 1 p.m. came and went with no sign of the submarine.

"It was cold for that time of year," recalled Bill Elrod, a sonarman 1st class on the Scorpion who had flown home on emergency leave the week before and now waited at pierside with the family members. "I saw a bunch of the wives standing around in the rain, everybody anxious about when it was coming in."

Julie Smith Ballew (who also remarried several years later) could not be at the submarine piers to greet her 22-year-old husband, Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Robert Smith. She sat with her sister, Dee Ann Wright, in a lounge at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital 10 miles away, cradling her infant daughter, Sarah, born two days earlier. They expected Robert to come straight from the base to pick them up.

"If they had been on schedule (arriving May 24 as originally planned), Robert could have been here to see his daughter being born," Ballew recalled in a recent interview from her home in Wayland, Iowa, last week. "I was disappointed in that, but excited that he would be there to pick us up."

None of the family members suspected anything was wrong. The Scorpion was simply late, they believed.

But on the Orion, its commanding officer, Capt. James Bellah, was concerned. Serving as acting squadron commander that day, Bellah had expected to receive a routine message from the Scorpion as it surfaced off the Virginia coastline. But nothing had come in.

Bellah called Atlantic Submarine Force headquarters at the fleet compound a mile away to see if anyone had heard from the Scorpion. "We got no indication there was a problem with that submarine at all," Bellah recalled.

He sent an aide down to the pier to invite family members to come out of the rain, and a handful did.

The rest went home to wait. Lake said she stood in the storm for several hours until, "soaked and disappointed," she decided to go home.

Elrod returned to the Orion, keeping himself busy at the squadron office.

Ballew and her sister gave up waiting at the hospital at 3 p.m. and drove home, passing by the submarine piers on the way. She called Jann Christiansen, the wife of Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Mark Christiansen, who told her the word was the submarine would now arrive at 8 p.m. Smith settled in to feed her newborn.

By 5 p.m., Elrod left the Orion to return to his apartment where he told his wife there was no word

from the Scorpion. At that point, he said, most people felt the severe weather had hampered radio communications, and the submarine would either radio in or show up anytime.

"There was not a clue (anything was wrong," Elrod said. "The thing that played in everybody's minds (was) the storm was making them late."

But concern over the submarine was now crackling up and down the Navy chain of command. At 3:15 p.m., the official message had gone out from the Atlantic Submarine Force declaring a "missing submarine" alert that would make banner headlines the following morning. Up and down the East Coast, Navy ships and aircraft squadrons were scrambling to launch a second, highly publicized search.

The families heard of the search when a Norfolk TV station broke with a bulletin shortly after 6 p.m.

"I will never forget that news broadcast," Ballew said. "I had just sat down to feed Sarah and turned on the news. The first words out of the commentator's mouth were, `Submarine Scorpion missing.'"

"I was in shock," Ballew recalled. "I couldn't believe it! The Navy had been telling us all day that it would be in anytime."

Theresa Bishop was washing dishes at home when her 9-year-old son, John, came in from the living room and said, "There's something on TV about the Scorpion missing."

"I went totally numb," she recalled. "Nobody said anything. We just sat around waiting for the telephone to ring" with some Navy official offering an explanation.

Ninety minutes later a Navy official called to confirm what the TV reports had disclosed, she said. Friends and neighbors began arriving at the Bishop home for the first of many long nights of watching and waiting.

Bishop said her last memory of that Memorial Day evening was the distant sound of sirens and alarms emitted from dozens of Norfolk warships as they began moving out on the open search for the Scorpion.

Even then, some family members described their mood as concerned and anxious but still hopeful, a mood fostered by the ambiguous information they were getting from the Atlantic Submarine Force.

"They were continuing the hope that they (the Scorpion crew) were delayed by the bad weather," Ballew remembers being told. "I went to bed that night praying the morning would bring news that they were back safely."

The news of the search spread rapidly throughout the nation.

In Bellmore, N.Y., Adrian Christiansen, Mark's mother, answered the phone. It was her daughter-in-law Jann Christiansen, informing her that the Scorpion was long overdue.

Vernon and Sybil Stone, parents of Machinist's Mate 2nd Class David Stone, were eating dinner in their Ames, Iowa, home, when his brother called from New Jersey with the news of the Scorpion alert. They called an emergency Navy number where someone confirmed the sub was missing.

Elrod said he knew in his gut the Scorpion had sunk from the moment news of the Scorpion search broke. "They (the Navy) never announced anything like that if the boat was merely out of touch," he

said. "I knew the boat was gone."

For the next nine days, Bishop recalled, she and the Scorpion families remained "stuck in limbo." Hopes faded as search teams scoured the Atlantic without detecting a clue.

Finally, on June 5, the Navy formally declared the Scorpion and its crew lost at sea and presumed dead.

By then, most of the families had braced for the bad news, several relatives said.

"We were just numb by then," said Dorothy Little, whose younger brother, Richard Summers, was a 3rd class yeoman on the Scorpion. "It was not a complete shock when they announced it," she recalled in an interview from her Statesville, N.C. home.

A memorial service the next day for the crew in Norfolk attracted hundreds of family members and fellow submariners, who heard the Navy's senior chaplain try to console them.

"For the ninety and nine whom we mourn today, there has been no deliverance from the deep," Rear Adm. James Kelly said. "The separation of deployment has lengthened into the separation of death."

On Oct. 31, five months after the sinking, the Navy announced the wreckage of the sub had been found.

Except for several small pieces of metal debris recovered, the Scorpion was left where it rested, its crew entombed inside the steel hull that had been their home at sea.

Most family members interviewed say they are generally satisfied with the way Navy officials kept them informed as a Court of Inquiry held its hearings and concluded that the Scorpion sank because of an unknown mechanical malfunction.

But today, 30 years after the tragedy, many family members -- even those who agreed with the secrets inherent in the submarine force and its Cold War operations -- say the time is ripe to get the full story of what happened to the Scorpion. Others prefer to let the matter rest.

Barbara Foli Lake said she never believed the official Navy account that the sinking was because of an unknown mechanical malfunction.

John Bishop, 9 years old in 1968, later joined the Navy and has served a career in the submarine force like his father, Chief Walter Bishop.

"I've given nearly 20 years of my life to the submarine service, blood and bone marrow," he said. "I want to know what happened to my father. I want closure."