

Recollections of Vadim Orlov (USSR Submarine B-59) We Will Sink Them All, But We Will Not Disgrace Our Navy.

The crew of B-59, under the command of Second captain Valentin Savitsky also had to drink the cup of hardships to the bottom. Many things happened on that trip: the diesel coolers got blocked with salt, rubber sealing got torn, and the electric compressors broke. When in the vicinity of Cuba, in the evening, the boat came to the surface to charge the accumulators, American anti-submarine aircraft appeared in the sky. They had to submerge urgently. But the charge in the accumulators was practically zero.

Let us give the floor to the witness of the events—Second Captain Retired V. P. Orlov, who was Commander of Special Assignment Group (OSNAZ) on submarine B-59. Vadim Pavlovich is third generation naval and intelligence officer. His father—Navy officer Pavel Andreevich Orlov--was transferred to the Main Intelligence Department (GRU) of the General Staff during the Great Patriotic War. In 1945 Orlov's family was sent to the United States. Thus the 8 year-old Vadim with his father, mother and younger brother found themselves in the United States. In childhood, and residing in the country [United States], it was easy for him to learn the foreign language. Very soon, he had a sufficiently good command of English.

---“Even before the Cuban Mission of the 69th Brigade, submarines conducted intelligence gathering on autonomous missions, says Vadim Pavlovich,--However, it was conducted on so to speak handy means. As a rule, the boats were not equipped with special equipment, and the available radio technicians were engaged in the interception of the radio signals of the potential enemy. For the first time in the Soviet naval practice, special OSNAZ groups were assigned to the boats, which went to Cuba, and they received special equipment. We were all young specialists, who just completed the courses of retraining for signals intelligence several months ago. When they selected us for the OSNAZ, it appears that they took into account my good knowledge of English. Because it is not enough to intercept a communication, one has to understand it.

I cannot say that we received a good welcome in the 69th Brigade. Preparing for the length of the planned trip, the boats had to take additional food reserves, and those were stored in compartments. The officers of the Brigade Headquarters were also on the boats. In other words, even without us, the ships suffered from lack of room and overpopulation. And there we were, with all our equipment. We also needed separate rooms. In addition, the OSNAZ groups were not small. The group of B-59 consisted of 9 people. This “excess” [of people] was due to the fact that some of our specialists were supposed to establish ground posts of signals intelligence in Cuba. In short, when I turned up on the board of B-59, Second Captain Valentin Grigorievich Savitsky upon reading the instructions, in which it was said, in particular, that the OSNAZ groups was supposed to ensure security of the submarine for the length of the mission, muttered angrily,--“It's interesting—how are you going to ensure our security?” His reaction is understandable. An experienced submariner, he saw a green youth in front of him, a 25-year old Senior Lieutenant, who had never been on a submarine on an autonomous mission before. It was only later, when we started to produce reliable reports about the actions of the NATO anti-submarine forces that the attitude toward us began to change—from rejection--sometimes even sharply negative—to respect.

The anti-submarine forces of the opponent, especially the aviation, were ready for an encounter with us from the very beginning of our sail to the Cuban shores. And even though myself and other commanders of the OSNAZ groups knew about the goals and the route of our mission, without which it would have been impossible to plan and carry out our work, we could not have expected this kind of counteraction [by the opponent]. In the beginning, the Norwegian

hydroplanes were searching for us, then at the Farer line—the British “Shackletons.” Then it was the turn of the American “Neptunes.” But judging by the events, they had not succeeded in discovering us. In any case, not until we reached the Sargasso Sea. There they got us. A naval forward searching aircraft carrier group headed by the aircraft carrier “Randolph” confronted submarine B-59. According to our hydro-acoustic specialists, 14 surface units were following our boat. Together with the navigator, we did parallel plotting [on the map]—he did the route of B-59, as he was assigned, I recalled my first naval specialization—and plotted the movements of the American ships. For some time we were able to avoid them quite successfully. However, the Americans were not dilettantes either— following all the canons of the military art, they surrounded us and started to tighten the circle, practicing attacks and dropping depth charges. They exploded right next to the hull. It felt like you were sitting in a metal barrel, which somebody is constantly blasting with a sledgehammer. The situation was quite unusual, if not to say shocking—for the crew.

The accumulators on B-59 were discharged to the state of water, only emergency light was functioning. The temperature in the compartments was 45-50 C, up to 60C in the engine compartment. It was unbearably stuffy. The level of CO2 in the air reached a critical practically deadly for people mark. One the duty officers fainted and fell down. The another one followed, then the third one... They were falling like dominoes. But we were still holding on, trying to escape. We were suffering like this for about four hours. The Americans hit us with something stronger than the grenades [depth charges]—apparently with a practical depth bomb. We thought—that’s it—the end. After this attack, the totally exhausted Savitsky, who in addition to everything, was not able to establish connection with the General Staff, became furious. He summoned the officer who was assigned to the nuclear torpedo, and ordered him to assemble it to battle readiness. “Maybe the war has already started up there, while we are doing summersaults here—screamed emotional Valentin Grigorievich, trying to justify his order. “We’re going to blast them now! We will die, but we will sink them all—we will not disgrace our Navy!” But we did not fire the nuclear torpedo—Savitsky was able to rein in his wrath. After consulting with Second Captain Vasili Alexandrovich Arkhipov [deceased] and Deputy political officer Ivan Semenovich Maslennikov, he made the decision to come to the surface. We gave an echo locator signal, which in international navigation rules means that “the submarine is coming to the surface.” Our pursuers slowed down.

[Source: Alexander Mozgvoi, The Cuban Samba of the Quartet of Foxtrots: Soviet Submarines in the Caribbean Crisis of 1962, Military Parade, Moscow, 2002. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya, The National Security Archive]