



(U) Remembering the Kursk -- The View from Norway

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(U) Russian sub disaster made headlines around the world...

(S//SI) I arrived as the new SLO (SIGINT Liaison Officer) Oslo in July 2000. Barely a month later I would become a witness to a significant event that would involve Oslo Station for the next 18 months. This was the tragic explosion aboard the Russian submarine Kursk that sank on 12 August 2000 with all 118 crewmembers on board. During this period I witnessed first-hand some of the public and classified activities between Norway and Russia associated with the sinking and recovery of the Kursk.

(S//SI) The Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS) was perhaps the first, and in retrospect the only, intelligence agency in the world to know what had happened to the ill-fated Kursk, long before the Russians did. The saga began in the early morning hours on 12 August 2000. The NIS was tracking the OSCAR II sub Kursk (PL850) as it participated in a Russian Northern Fleet exercise. In addition to COMINT and ELINT, NIS used ACINT (acoustic intelligence) from sonobuoys as well as a towed array from the collection ship Marjata, operating nearby in the Barents Sea.



(U) OSCAR II 850 - Kursk

(S//SI) The NIS issued the following report, on Saturday 12 August:

SUBMARINE TECHNICAL EXCHANGE (STE). AT 0729 ZULU AN UNDERWATER EXPLOSION WAS REGISTERED AND TWO MINUTES LATER AT 0731 ZULU A STRONGER EXPLOSION WAS REGISTERED FROM PL850 OSCAR II. THIS CATASTROPHIC CASUALTY CAUSING ENTRY OF WATER INTO THE NOSE COMPARTMENTS AND PL850 HIT THE BOTTOM PROBABLY A FEW SECONDS LATER. BASED ON UPDATED DATA, PL850 OSCAR II WAS LOCATED AT BOTTOM OF THE SEA IN POSITION 6936.59N 3734.32E ATA DEPTH OF 108 METERS WITH PERISCOPE AND ANTENNAS ERECTED.

(S//SI) The Kursk experienced an explosion in the forward torpedo room followed by a larger explosion that ultimately sank the sub. This occurred without any distress calls or communications of its problems. In the words of the NIS report, "It seems as if the Northern Fleet was not aware that the explosions had occurred on one of their vessels. Thus, 3 ½ hours passed before any suspicion of problems on board OSCAR II 850 arose. Another 1 ½ hour passed before the sub call dissemination activity started."

(S//SI) Attempts to contact the Kursk by Northern Fleet Headquarters started on 12 August and continued until 14 August. Search and Rescue operations began on the evening of 12 August and continued through the 13th. A mini sub from the salvage and rescue ship Mikhail Rudnitskiy located the Kursk, and a closure area was declared beginning a period of salvage and security operations until the end of September. During this period it appeared that possible rescue could be attempted.

(U//FOUO) By Monday, the European news channels were reporting on the "missing" submarine. I received a call from a colleague at the NIS who provided the details reported above. It was clear from the open source news the Russians had no idea that the sub had suffered a catastrophic explosion. The BBC and EURONEWS sent reporters and cameras to Murmansk to cover the Northern Fleet Headquarters handling of the event.

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(U//FOUO) I recall standing in my Oslo apartment watching the BBC coverage of a meeting held by the Northern Fleet Command and relatives of the Kursk crew that were trying to find out any information about their loved ones. One woman was enraged and was yelling at the men on stage when a man and women in trench coats came up from behind and injected something into her neck. She immediately slumped and they took her away. I was shocked to witness this on live TV, shades of the KGB in the 50s.

(S//SI) Before the end of the week I had the opportunity to visit the NIS Signals Lab in the basement of their headquarters building and actually heard the explosions recorded by the sonobuoys and of the hull hitting the bottom. It was a chilling sound I'll never forget.

(S) It was clear that the Northern Fleet command had no information on the condition of the sub or crew. Once located, the Russians did not have the ability to reach the sub to conduct any type of rescue/extraction operations. Additionally, by Tuesday August 15, the Russians in press were accusing the Americans of ramming their sub with one of our ships or subs. Ironically, a US Navy ship pulled into Bergen, Norway with a (slightly) damaged hull. This, of course, drew immediate fire from Russia. The Defense Attaché in the US embassy had to work with the Ambassador to assure publicly that this was not related to the Kursk sinking.*

(S//SI) Eventually, rescue efforts turned sadly to salvage and recovery. It would be 14 months before the Kursk would be recovered. During this period the recovery of the Kursk remained a high interest to the US Intelligence Community, even after 9/11. Although all US intelligence focus turned immediately toward global terrorism, the NIS and the staff at Oslo Station continued to explore the mysteries of the Kursk. The CIA, ONI, NGA, and NSA, through partnering with the NIS, provided unique intelligence in all forms that continue to be of great value to the Community.

(S//SI) All during the recovery phase up until the time the hull of the Kursk was returned to Murmansk, the NIS monitored all aspects of the operation to the benefit of the US. The NIS Marjata was on station within visual distance of the recovery operation, providing daily reporting on the operation. During the recovery operations, the NIS [WINTERGARDEN](#) INMARSAT system, which had just gone operational in December 2000, provided a wealth of collection on the recovery activities.

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(U) Picture of the Kursk submarine in drydock near Murmansk shows the horrific damage caused by the explosion, with the hull torn open and the forward compartments devastated (Jane's)

(S//SI) It is now six years since the event, and documentaries appearing on the Discovery Channel describe in fairly accurate detail the events of the sinking and the recovery that was a significant technological feat. But for me, I still recall those months after the sinking and of the tremendous work by our Norwegian partner as well as the members of Oslo Station. The NIS exhaustively covered the event completely from the moment of occurrence and then during the ensuing months, using all forms of intelligence collection, but it's not something you'll see on the Discovery Channel.

*(U) SID *today* editor's note: According to Russian press, scientists subsequently concluded that the cause of the Kursk accident was the explosion of torpedo ammunition stored in the first (torpedo) compartment. The explosion had the equivalent force of 5-7 tons of TNT. The Russian report further noted that the time of the explosion coincided with the scheduled time of a torpedo training drill.

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(U) Do you have any information to add to this story? If so, please post your comment in the [SID today blog](#).

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