

OUTLASTING SOVIET SUB

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Ted Davis still has a bottle of Jack Daniels Old No. 7 corn whiskey presented to him 37 years ago by Adm. Jerauld Wright.

It's on a shelf in his Kings Grant home and was part of a 12-bottle case his submarine won for exhausting a Soviet submarine that was forced to surface in the North Atlantic.

Unfortunately, the bottle is empty.

"Yeah. The cleaning gal got her nose in it several years ago," said Davis, a retired Navy captain.

Davis, who commanded the diesel-powered submarine Grenadier in the Cold War days of the late 1950s, still treasures that bottle, its black and white label now yellowing with age.

Wright offered the prize to the first Navy unit that wore out any nonfriendly submarine.

"Arleigh Burke and Jerauld Wright got into this big argument," recalled Davis, a 1947 Naval Academy graduate who spent more than 40 years in the Navy.

"Burke was CNO then. Wright told him Russian submarines were off the coast, and we knew they were there. But we were never able to surface one and prove it.

"Burke said: 'I don't believe you, and won't until you surface one.' So that is when Wright put out the proclamation. That started it all," Davis recalled.

Wright, who died at 96 at his home in Washington, commanded the Atlantic Fleet from Norfolk from 1954 to 1960. In 1958, he challenged his unit commanders to find a Soviet submarine.

The original proclamation, which has since disappeared, was on the wall outside Wright's office for years. Davis was presented with a smaller copy and displays it on his wall at home.

"Whereas, the presence of unidentified submarines in the approaches to the United States has been frequently reported, and

"Whereas, the submarines have been uncooperative in declaring either their identity or their intent as is required by the customs and usages of honorable seamen, and

"Whereas, tangible evidence that these surreptitious operations are being conducted would result in appropriate embarrassment to those involved

“Therefore, I do hereby pledge to donate one case of Jack Daniels Old No. 7 Brand of Quality Tennessee Sour Mash Corn Whiskey, made as our fathers made it for seven generations at the oldest registered whiskey distillery in the United States, established 1866, to the first Scene of Action Commander in the Atlantic who produces evidence that a non U.S. or known friendly submarine has been worn out.”

For years, the Grenadier's actions were classified.

But in 1984 Davis wrote his account of it in the December edition of Proceedings, a monthly magazine published by the U.S. Naval Institute in Annapolis.

The account details the 12-hour sub hunt off the Icelandic coast, beginning in the early afternoon of May 28, 1958, when a sonar report picked up what was thought to be a Soviet submarine 10 miles away.

The contact faded after 20 minutes, but Davis' crew marked the position and assumed the sub was returning home. The Grenadier tracked slowly on the same course, remaining above the Soviets and running quietly at 5 knots.

“We surfaced, put four engines on and sent our message to Commander, Submarine Forces Atlantic: ‘Have contact on Soviet submarine, can track indefinitely.’ ”

Davis also called for air support from a P-2V patrol plane and settled down for a long cat-and-mouse game.

The Grenadier's batteries were fully charged and it had a fresh air supply, unlike to the Soviet sub, which was near the end of its ability to stay submerged. In those days, subs generally had to surface every 24 hours.

“We were right on top of him,” Davis recalled.

The Soviet sub was having some problems, Davis said. “He was very noisy and we could tell he was having some difficulty.”

After several hours of trailing, the Grenadier's crew members became more proficient and confident. They could tell when the Soviets were trying to come up for a look, or going deeper.

With the P-2V on station, Davis introduced humor into the event. As sonar would report the target coming up, he signaled the aircraft, flying at wave-top height, to drop flares at the Soviet sub's periscope.

“We would have liked to have taped the other sub's commanding officer's remarks as he was eye-to-eye with the aircraft commander. We played that game about once an hour,” Davis said.

About 11 p.m., sonar contact was suddenly lost. The Soviet sub had apparently stopped. So did the Grenadier.

Though the night would never get black in the Northern Hemisphere, the darkest part would occur at 1 a.m. May 29. The word was passed to expect the sub to surface at that time.

“At 0100, just as predicted, the contact surfaced,” said Davis. “She was a Soviet Zulu-class missile-firing submarine. We taped the whole sequence and then sent this message:

“Have surfaced my contact. Request Jack Daniels report aboard earliest and Jack Daniels Jr. be sent to duty involving flying.”

That was Davis' way of telling the fleet he had accomplished Wright's request and wanted the case of booze. The reference to Jack Daniels Jr. was for a half-case to be sent to the P-2V patrol plane.

Wright personally presented both.

In addition to Davis, two other Grenadier crew members known to reside in the area are: Bob White of Norfolk, former chief of the boat who retired as a lieutenant commander; and Thomas R. Duvall of Chesapeake, who was an ensign at the time.

After the Grenadier left, the Soviet submarine remained on the surface almost 24 hours recharging its batteries and sucking in fresh air.

Davis' executive officer, now retired Rear Adm. Eddie Welch Jr., was due to take another assignment. Davis radioed for a helicopter to pick him up at sea. Welch rushed the tapes and the tales to Wright's headquarters.

Even today, Davis claims there have never been any similar incidents. Nuclear-powered submarines can stay submerged nearly indefinitely and, unlike the diesel subs, wouldn't be forced to surface.

During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, Wright, then retired, reportedly gave away another case of whiskey to the destroyer Charles P. Cecil, which chased a Soviet sub throughout the Caribbean. A third case may have gone to another Navy unit off Gibraltar in 1967, although details were never released.

But Davis dismisses the Cuban incident.

“In the Cuban crisis, there were seven to eight subs down there and some of our destroyers got contact on these guys. They would lose it and get it back again.

“But then a message came out to all of them to surface before this becomes a real shooting crisis. So it ended like that.”

Davis said he has always felt the award was a one-time offer to prove Burke was wrong and Wright was correct in his assessment of Soviet subs operating off the U.S. Atlantic coast.

“There was always a lot of competition between Burke and Jerauld Wright anyway. We felt that was the end of it and so did everybody else.

“It was a one-time offer. Otherwise, every time someone said they saw a Russian sub, he'd go broke buying booze.

Above, Adm. Jerauld Wright presents a case of Jack Daniels Old No. 7

corn whiskey to the crew of the submarine Grenadier 37 years ago.

37 years ago by Adm. Jerauld Wright.

Retired Navy Capt. Ted Davis, who commanded the diesel-powered more than 40 years in the Navy.