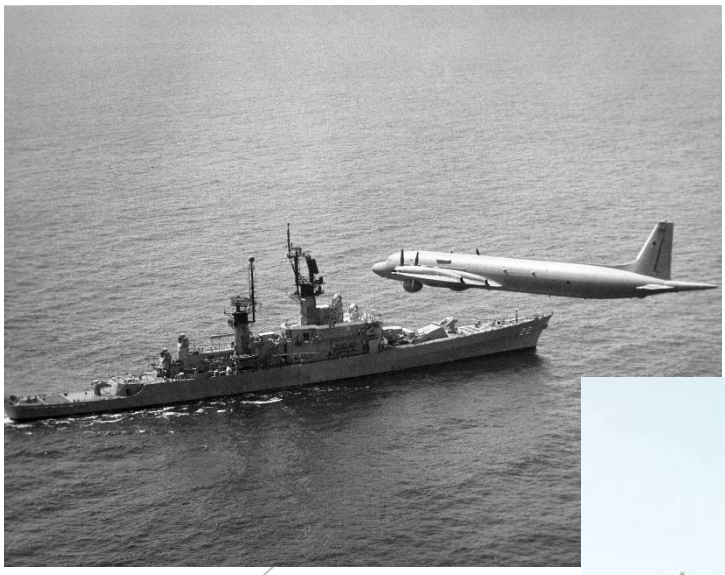
Surrounded

- U.S. Navy Spy Missions of the 1970's





By Kevin Murphy

Author's Note: This is a sailor's memory of events from 1977, written nearly fifty years later. I was 21 years old at the time and knew only what was shared with the crew. Some of the technical and intelligence background here is research I did years afterward, trying to understand what we may have been doing out there. I've kept those two things separate on purpose — where I'm remembering, I say so, and where I'm reconstructing from public sources, I say that too.

Overview

Fifty years later, one image still surfaces before any other: gun mounts, gyro-stabilized against the swell, never losing us for a second. Two Soviet warships had us surrounded in international waters, then came the Russian MIGs, screaming low overhead, and back on the ships fantail sat a 'secret' van full of sailors nobody was allowed to talk to. This is my story — and what the U.S. Navy was quietly doing on a routine patrol in the Sea of Japan 1977

By the 1970s, the Cold War had largely moved offshore. In the Sea of Japan and the waters off Vladivostok, American and Soviet warships passed within sight of each other more often than most people realized. Shadowing each other, circling, near-collisions, radars and weapons systems locked on each other as well an obvious language barrier. Most of those encounters were never made public. The ships involved didn't talk about them once they got home, and the sailors who lived them have mostly carried the stories quietly for fifty years. This is one of them. It's mine.

The Ship … USS England CG-22, US Naval Station, San Diego, CA.

After serving 3 years aboard the USS Preble DDG-46 out of Pearl Harbor, I was transferred to the USS Englang CG-22 for my next tour of duty. I had mixed feelings about leaving Hawaii since it really is a paradise plus my shipmates were the best! But … Hawaii is considered overseas duty with a limit of 24 months at the time..The USS England (CG-22) was a *Leahy*-class guided-missile cruiser originally commissioned as a Destroyer Leader (DLG-22) before being reclassified as a cruiser (CG) in 1975. The ship was also armed a little differently then the Preble with (2) Terrier misssle systems, ASROC anti-submarine rockets, torpedos and twin 50 calibers in case we were attcked by WWII fighter planes … well we did used to joke about their effectivness against Russian MIG jets. At the heart of these systems was the NTDS tactical computer systems that I worked on as Data Systems Technician 2nd Class.

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These NTDS systems pulled in all the analog data from the ship's radars, sonar, and electronic weapons systems along with data from other ships in the task force with similiar capabilities into a single tactical picture inside the ships Combat Information Center. They extended the range of our ships defenses significantly and with current enemy aircraft and long range missle capabilities this was now an essential part of Naval Warfare strategy. Before NTDS systems, that same picture was built by hand with grease pencils on plotting boards!

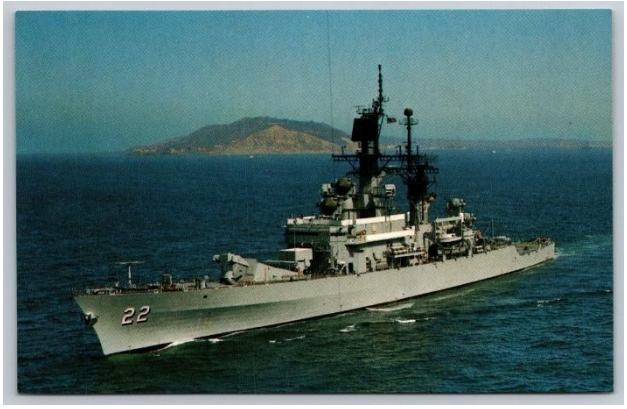
At the time I thought of the job as nothing more than keeping machines running. It took me years to understand that I'd had a front-row seat to something larger — that the system I maintained was the nervous system tying together a warship's sensors, her weapons, and whatever quieter work was happening elsewhere aboard. At the time I was just a 'twidget' as we were called, who fixed the computers. In hindsight, I was closer to the center of the conflict than I knew.

In October of 1977, we sailed out to join the Seventh Fleet for a WestPac deployment. Our new homeport for this deployment was Subic Bay. PI.

The Van on the Fantail

This is where the story actually begins …

After a few weeks at sea we pulled into Subic Bay in the Philippines for fuel, supplies, and some rest. Subic became our home port for the WestPac deployment, along with other ports of call including Yokosuka, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, though most of our time was spent in the P.I.



One morning, as we were preparing to get underway for what we thought would be a routine patrol, we noticed a large van being installed on the fantail. Later, a detachment of armed Marines came aboard and entered the van. There no announcements or orders of the day that explained what was going in so we were left to our own ideas as to what was the plan for thi equipment? The obvious guess was spy or 'spook' gear. As it turns out, the obvious guess was correct.

I remember the lock on that door. It was unlike anything I'd seen. It didn't take long for the rumor to circulate that the van was lined with explosives in case of capture — along with several other rumors and stories. The explosives were not a far-out idea — we had them in my work center for the crypto gear too, in case of capture.

You have to understand that 1977 was a much simpler world. No internet, no cell phones, no social media, and more to the point — we were sailors. We followed orders. The idea of speaking up about anything simply did not occur to us. These men would not talk to us, and it wasn't long before we were basically advised not to bother those guys and to stay away from them.

There was no official word about any of it. Our course was the only real clue, and our course was northerly, toward Vladivostok, Russia, and a major submarine base for the Russian Navy!

Surrounded

A few days out at sea everything still felt routine. Nothing unusual except our heading.

Then one morning we woke up at sea with company. Two heavily armed Soviet Navy warships were now at our side and escorting us. One a heavily armed cruiser, probably a Sverdlov-class cruiser and the other a smaller but still heavily armed destroyer escort. More than likely a Kashin-class destroyer.

I don't remember a General Quarters alarm sounding right away but there are more 'relaxed' conditions of GQ that require 24 x 7 CIC operations that were likely used for this situation.



It was business as usual, except for the Russians.

At first everybody processed it privately, or within their own work group. The 'old salts' were suddenly in enormous demand, and young sailors like me hung on to every word they said.

Then the Soviet ships began to circle us. The high stakes game of cat and mouse had begun …

Russian warships of that era carried a remarkable weight of weaponry — the design philosophy valued armament over crew accommodation in a way ours did not. And now all of it was trained on us. Their mounts were gyro-stabilized, so no matter how the sea moved or how their ships came around, those guns and missile rails stayed locked on. That's the image that has stayed with me for fifty years. Not the noise or the speed of anything. Just the stillness of those barrels, staying locked on us through every swell.

Later that day the MiGs came over, weapons systems locked on as well.

The message wasn't subtle. We had come too close, and they intended to find out what we were made of. The territorial limit the Soviets claimed was twelve nautical miles — the two-hundred-mile figure people remember from that era is the economic zone, which is a different argument entirely, and one they were also happy to make.

Whatever the legal fine print, one thing was clear on our end: in their eyes we were all spies that day. Not just those guys in the van.

A few other things were clear too. We were outnumbered. We were outgunned. And they knew both. We reached for gallows humor first, the way sailors do — partly to settle ourselves, partly to look unbothered in front of each other. But underneath the bravado, morale was getting thin. Everyone was waiting on our leadership. What's the next move? Because whatever it is, we would very much prefer not to aggravate these people further.My senior chief kept it light and kept us working. Fifty years on, I understand what he was doing far better than I did then.

The Captain's Plan

After lunch, the word came down.

I've never been certain who originated what happened next, but my captain executed it, and I give him full credit for it.

The Soviets were riding close now, and the intimidation was working. So the crew got the order to lay topside and assemble at the aft end of the ship. Nobody told us why.

After the crew had assembled topside, a sailor was marched aft — where a firing squad was waiting for him along with a ships officer.

He was blindfolded. Given a cigarette. And then, with no ceremony and no delay, the order was given.

Take aim. Fire.

Shots cracked across the fantail and the sailor dropped to the deck.

Nobody was fooled for long. Whoever they'd picked wasn't exactly giving an award-winning performance, and we all knew blanks when we heard them. Before the moment could even settle, they were heaving a dummy over the side to simulate the body going into the water.

The crew broke out in simultaneous laughter across the deck …

And then came an order we were all extremely happy to comply with. We manned the lifelines along the port side and mooned the Soviet Navy.



Quite the day at sea.

We went back to our watch stations feeling about ten feet tall, which was precisely the point. The Russians hung on a while longer, escorted us away from Vladivostok, and eventually peeled off. We had a couple more MiG passes, close ones, before it was over. We all now had a legendary 'sea story' to tell, and we were looking forward to our R&R in Subic!

Why It Worked …

While a typical day at sea for a US Navy ship doesn't usually include a 'firing squad,' it turns out there was real substance behind what the old man did that afternoon.

Being surrounded does specific things to people. The brain runs continuous threat assessment, and it doesn't stop to rest. The adrenaline that carries you through the first hours burns off and leaves you hollow and mechanical. Judgment degrades — for the leadership as much as for the crew — right when good judgment matters most.

Everybody is afraid in that situation. That's biology, not weakness. What military training does is condition you to keep functioning while afraid: the shaking hands and the dry mouth and the tunnel vision are all still there, but muscle memory and the simple accountability of the men next to you keep you executing.

Dark humor is the other half of it, and it does three things at once. It breaks the tension. It strips the threat of some of its psychological power — you cannot be entirely terrified of something you've just made a joke about. And it binds the group together, reminding everyone that whatever this is, nobody is facing it alone.

The firing squad was that mechanism, staged deliberately and at scale. It took a crew that was quietly coming apart and turned it, inside of ten minutes, into a crew that was laughing and showing its backside to a superior force.

What We Were Probably Doing

This section is research I did decades later. In 1977 I knew we had an unusual van full of quiet men aboard. I did not understand the mission or the technology behind it.

By the mid-1970s, the Navy had largely stopped using dedicated spy ships. The losses of the USS Pueblo and USS Liberty in the late sixties had made the problem obvious: sending lightly armed converted cargo hulls into hostile water was getting people killed and captured. The intelligence mission moved onto real warships — guided-missile destroyers and cruisers — carrying temporary cryptologic teams known as Direct Support Elements.

There were sound reasons for it.



A destroyer like the USS England could sail right up to the edge of Soviet waters and call it a routine freedom-of-navigation patrol. We didn't look like a spy ship. We looked like exactly what we were the rest of the time — a heavily armed American combatant. The Soviets knew we were there. What they couldn't be certain of was what was aboard.

We also already had the infrastructure. A destroyer carried extensive sensor arrays, mast-mounted antennas, and electronic warfare gear. A team coming aboard could patch their own

receivers and recorders into what the ship already had, using her height and her existing antennas rather than installing anything conspicuous.

And unlike an unarmed intelligence ship, we could fight. If the Cold War had gone hot while a cryptologic team was aboard, they were sitting on a platform with missiles, torpedoes, and guns that could shoot its way back to deep water.

Another part of this story that I was curious about after all these years was how did we communicate with the Russians? In Russian, English or maybe some International Maritime Code?

Well, prior to 1972, communication between US and Soviet naval vessels was highly erratic and tense, often resulting in dangerous close encounters, games of "chicken," and collisions.

In order to defuse these Cold War tensions and provide clear, concise communicatins that BOTH sides could easily understand eventually lead to the United States and the Soviet Union signing the **Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA)** on **May 25, 1972**. This bilateral treaty established a strict protocol for bridge-to-bridge communication. The agreement explicitly designated the following:

- **VHF Channel 16** as the standard voice radio frequency for ships to communicate directly with one another to signal maneuvering intentions and avoid collisions.
- Because language barriers were a significant hurdle, they relied heavily on the International Code of Signals(ICS). They transmitted specific phonetic letter-and-number combinations over the radio, or used visual backups like **flashing light signals (morse code)** and **signal flags** to quickly convey standardized safety messages.

So instead of trying to speak English or Russian over the radio, the crews looked up specific codes in an identical, pre-translated book carried by both navies. They would transmit a combination of **one to three phonetic letters** over VHF Channel 16 (or flash them via Morse code).

For example, a Russian officer could simply say, **"Uniform. Uniform."** over the radio, and the US Navy quartermaster would look at their manual and immediately understand it meant: **"You are running into danger.**

The common practice at the time was also for BOTH Captains to read a short script first but after that, ICS standards **ONLY** were used for bridge to bridge communications. These scripts had a lot to do with a Captains personality. The Russian opening scripts were usually to the point “you are operating in Russian waters and you need to turn around immediately or you will be fired upon”. I would have loved to have heard Capt. Jeremiah’s reposnse that day!

Fifty Years Later

My story is one of hundreds, I'm sure. Every sailor who served at the height of the Cold War has one. It was also the tail end of Vietnam, when recruitment was neither popular nor a national priority. The slogan then was "It's not just a job, it's an adventure," and that really is why I signed up. The Navy delivered on it, and it also handed me the technical skills that I later was able to leverage into a life-long career in computing.

I hope the story was worth your time. It's over fifty years old now, but it gives some sense of what the Navy was actually doing out there, and of how we managed under that kind of pressure.

Opinion: A Call to Action

I'm publishing this now for a reason.

Our sailors are in the headlines lately and not for good reasons. I understand the reluctance to complain about conditions, and I understand the absence of any real channel for registering a complaint — that has been standard procedure across every military branch for centuries.

I never spent nine months at sea without a port call. But every sailor who served onboard a ship at sea remembers food rationing or walking to the head at the other end of the ship because yours was not working. We lost power and had no AC for a time while operating near the Equator. None of it was fun but … most of my patrols were under thirty days. The longer you stay out, the more completely your survival depends on the supply chain behind you.

Which brings me to Bahrain.

In the current war with Iran, the enemy could not sink our ships. Thank God. But on February 28, 2026, they didn't need to — Iranian missiles and drones hit Naval Support Activity Bahrain in Manama, the Fifth Fleet's headquarters and the Navy's primary logistics hub in the region. More than six months later the base remains unusable. The Chief of Naval Operations has said plainly that the Navy is not getting back in there anytime soon. The acting Secretary of the Navy put it more bluntly still: they blew the hell out of Bahrain.

Support now runs out of Diego Garcia, roughly 2,200 miles from where our carrier strike groups are operating. A Defense Department inspector general report has pointed to logistics cycles now stretching fourteen to eighteen days. Rebuilding Bahrain has been estimated at more than $400 million, and that's if it's attempted at all.

That's the context behind the stories you've been reading about the USS Abraham Lincoln and her nearly nine-month deployment. Those sailors aren't short of food because someone forgot to order it. They're short because the warehouse is two thousand miles further away than it was designed to be.

So my ask is this. Write your representatives and senators. Ask them:

1. What is the plan to replace Bahrain — and is Diego Garcia the answer, or a stopgap? For how long?
2. How much is being requested in the budget to restore or replace that capability?

3. Where does this rank against everything else in the Iran mission?
4. What are the lessons learned from a nine-month deployment? Is that the new standard? Have our shipyards been building ships that can sustain it?
5. Can we develop a long-term fleet supply strategy with real resilience built into it, instead of a single point of failure?

Keep our servicemen and women in your prayers!

References and Further Reading

Given the classification around this program, the internet isn't rich with sources, but there are a few worth knowing about …

Common Signals Used by Cold War Navies

Some of the most frequent single-letter codes utilized under the International Code of Signals during this era included:

Signal	**Meaning**
Charlie (C)	Yes (Affirmative)
Delta (D)	Keep clear of me; I am maneuvering with difficulty
Mike (M)	My vessel is stopped and making no way through the water
November (N)	No (Negative)
Tango (T)	Keep clear of me
Uniform (U)	You are running into danger
X-ray (X)	Stop carrying out your intentions and watch for my signals

Multi-Letter Action Codes

For more complex coordination, multi-letter codes allowed the ships to share specific tactical movement intentions without a translator: [2]

- **"RU1"**: "I am carrying out maneuvering trials."

- **"NE4"**: "You should proceed with great caution; there are submarines in the area."
- **"UY"**: "I am preparing to launch/recover aircraft." (Crucial for aircraft carriers).

Search terms that turn up useful material:

Cold War Navy SIGINT missions

Cryptologic Direct Support Element (DIRSUP)

Naval Security Group (NAVSECGRU)

Sources:

Station HYPO — Naval cryptology and information warfare history

Command Operations Reports (CORs) — daily ship's logs, a matter of public record

U.S. Naval Cryptologic Veterans Association

Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) at NSA — documents the specific 1970s-era receiver racks, telemetry processors, and antenna arrays being fielded on surface ships