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Hostile Waters

by
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Peter Huchthausen, Igor Kurdin and R Alan White
Random House; 1997

'Truth is often stranger than fiction' so the old saying goes. It's also more exciting as this publication clearly demonstrates.

The book concerns the last patrol of the K219, a Soviet 'Yankee' class ballistic missile submarine from its departure from Gadzhievo in Northern Russia to its demise in the 18,000 feet deep Hatteras Abyss off the coast of Nth America.

The authors are Igor Kurdin, a former Executive Officer of the K219, Captain Peter Huchthausen USN Rtd, and R. Alan White a professional writer. The story is a merger of two literary styles, a factual retelling of the patrol from the Soviet perspective based on interview and testimony with the actual personnel. The second is a fictitious account of what is 'likely' to have happened on the American side, based on Soviet observations, interviews with USN officers and "the authors' long experience in naval affairs". The two are intermingled in a style very reminiscent of a Tom Clancy novel and indeed Clancy contributes the foreword to the book.

The result is a very entertaining and at times gripping read. The accounts from the Soviet side display a nice balance in the description of human factors and the technological aspects of running a Soviet nuclear submarine. The tempo increases rapidly as the accident occurs and the damage control fight begins.

Health personnel especially the Workplace/Occupational specialists will be both fascinated and appalled by the dangers accepted by the Soviets as routine and which often resulted in major morbidity and mortality. The book succeeds because all the elements of a great story are present: a malevolent enemy, extreme crisis, heroism and the spectre of Armageddon hovering. The fact that the incident involved great tragedy is given the deference afforded such accidents.

The American response is fictitious because of the secrecy surrounding USN submarine operations and their reluctance to speak on this incident. Here the book is less effective because it is clearly a novelist's unsuccessful attempt to match the real-life drama occurring on the Soviet boat.

The book is enhanced by its final chapter, which describes the outcome to the personnel involved. The story concludes 10 years later in February 1995 back at the now deteriorating submarine base at Gadzhievo with a poignant tribute to K219's commander and those who lost their lives.

The Naval Institute has published its own review of this book in its October 1997 edition of Naval Proceedings and was quite scathing of the "wholly fictitious narrative ... of what was supposedly happening onboard the USS Augusta (SSN 710)". They may be correct, but we'll never know!