

# TRAGEDY IN ALAND WATERS

**T**he lair of 50 Soviet Navy men who comprised the crew of S-2 submarine which sank after hitting a mine on January 3, 1940 while trying to break through to the Gulf of Bothnia is covered by gray waters of the Baltic Sea at the Market Lighthouse on Aland Archipelago close to the border between Finland and Sweden. From now on nobody can disturb the rest of the perished as the place of sinking of the submarine has been marked on all charts as closed for navigation, diving, fishing and any other activity. Finland officially recognized the place as a Russian military burial.

"Finnish partners officially notified the Russian side that the wreckage of the Soviet S-2 submarine from the Baltic fleet which sank on January 3, 1940 presumably after hitting a mine near Aland Archipelago in the territorial waters of Finland has been included into the list of Russian (Soviet) military burials in compliance with the 1992 Russian-Finnish cooperation agreement on perpetuating the memory of Russian (Soviet) military in Finland and Finnish military in Russia who died in World War Two," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement.

The list of burials comprises close to 90 objects in various parts of the country. The main ones are located in the towns of Mikkeli and Hanko. Most of them are common graves where numerous yet unidentified soldiers are buried.

The work in archives continues.

The status of the burials is stipulated by the mentioned agreement which determines that all military monuments are protected in both countries. In Finland the interior ministry and partially the education ministry are in charge of the implementation of the agreement while in Russia it is the task of the defense ministry and partially of the foreign ministry.

"We are grateful to the partners for a positive resolution of the important issue for the Russian Federation. Respect to the memory of perished seamen is very important for their relatives and close kin and for all Russian citizens. We are satisfied with the constructive cooperation with the Finnish side in the framework of the Russian-Finnish intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in perpetuating the memory of killed servicemen," the Russian foreign ministry said.

Russia requested to recognize the place of the submarine sinking as a military burial in 2009 when a group of Swedish and Aland divers discovered the wreckage on the Baltic Sea bed.

## LONG WAY TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

– It is a worthy end of the long story, said chairman of the St. Petersburg Club of submariners Retired Captain 1 Rank Igor Kurdin.

The story was truly long. The S-2 shipwreck has been a mystery for long which historians worked to disclose in archives of various countries by comparing reports of Soviet and Finnish military, eyewitness reports and other evidence. Since late '90s Aland historian

Kenneth Gustavsson has been engaged in the search for missing Soviet submarine. After a many-year effort he established the coordinates of the wreckage and the likely cause of the sinking.

– Work with World War Two documents which I carried out from 1998 in archives of Russia, Finland, and Sweden helped me get a full picture of the developments at the Market Lighthouse in January 1940, Gustavsson said.

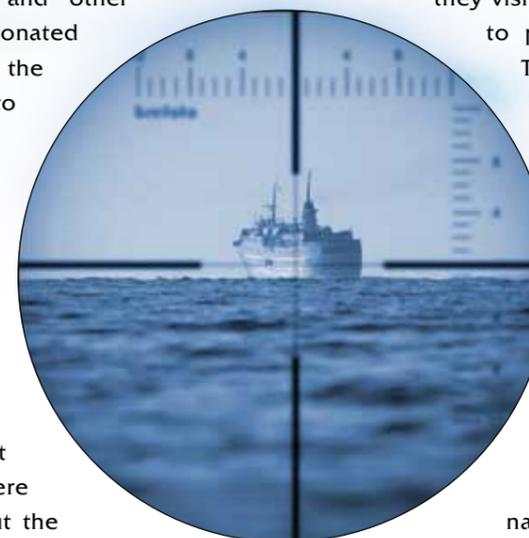
– For me it is a proven fact that S-2 hit a mine while sailing through Finnish mine fields and sank. It is confirmed by radio interceptions, Finnish military reports and other data. The mine blast detonated onboard torpedoes and the submarine broke down into three parts. The wreckage lies on the seabed this way. The submarine was discovered in area 8904 on Finnish Navy charts. It lies at a depth of thirty meters close to the wreckage of two XIX-century ships. After long research I know a lot about the S-2 story. There are various versions about the cause of the sinking but I am convinced that it hit a mine. The blast was seen from the Market Lighthouse and recollections of the light-keeper have preserved. He saw S-2 which first surfaced and then submerged. A powerful explosion followed sending a black cloud over the water surface.

## THREE LONG FOG HORNS

After S-2 was discovered in August 2009 then Swedish military attache in Russia Christian Allerman proposed to the Petersburg Club of submariners which existed for 18 years to find the relatives of the dead Navy men. Since then the S-2 story developed into international cooperation of seamen, researchers, military, authorities and many others who were not indifferent to the fate of the perished submarine.

St. Petersburg seamen found descendants of seven S-2 crewmembers from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Krasnodar. In August 2010 they visited the place of the wreckage to pay tribute to the deceased.

The Russians brought a handful of Russian soil to the place and took home some sea water from Market Lighthouse. It is an old maritime tradition the water buried together with the dress coat of a perished Navy man symbolizes his new grave on land. The sea which is mostly used to Swedish speech this time heard Russian Orthodox Eternal Memory, Eternal Rest lity for the dead prayed by Archpriest Alexey Krylov from the Chesmen Church of St. Petersburg. A wreath with a Baltic fleet sailor hat was floated. Finnish seamen present at the ceremony breached the rules when the wreath was floated and sounded three fog horns and lowered the flag of Finland on the mast of the coast



guard vessel which delivered the Russians to the burial place of the submarine.

## FROM DISCOVERY TO MEMORIAL

In the same year of 2009 the Russian side requested the Finns to recognize the place of S-2 sinking as an official military burial. The Finnish military inspected the territory around



and said it was first necessary to defuse munitions found on the wreckage. Although a powerful explosion that ruined the submarine detonated most of munitions close to one ton of explosives in TNT equivalent were discovered onboard: torpedoes and artillery shells, as well as several mines close to the wreckage.

In May-June 2012 the Finnish police and defense forces carried out a unique operation in area 8904 to defuse S-2 munitions. The work lasted for over eight weeks and involved three vessels and 50 people. Munitions were lifted from a depth of 25 meters. Mines and torpedoes were destructed in a safe sea area, while grenades were withdrawn to a land range for elimination. After the operation a proposal was submitted to the defense ministry of Finland to ban the site of the wreckage for diving and swimming and mark it on charts. Access to the area is granted only to research expeditions upon a special permission of the Aland Board of Antiquities.

– We were the pioneers, said Aland police chief Teijo Ristola who headed the operation. It was the first demining of a wreck in Finland. After the operation we checked the area to verify its safety. It was important also because it is now a part of a reserve and we had to comply both with general security requirements and nature preservation norms. During preparations and holding of the operation we maintained good contacts with the Russian consulate in Mariehamn, the capital city of Aland Islands.

The operation was unique as it was carried out within the boundaries of the only fully demilitarized zone in Europe. Aland Islands which used to be the westernmost foothold of the Russian empire were demilitarized according to the 1856 Paris peace treaty and the status of the territory remains the same up to now.

## THOSE AT SEA

The operation to defuse S-2 munitions and subsequent proclamation of the place as an official military burial put an end to disputes about the future fate of the submarine and the possibility of lifting it and the bodies of the crew from the Baltic Sea bed. According to international maritime rules a perished submarine is a sacred and untouchable common grave. People on Aland Islands are convinced the issue has been finally closed: neither divers who discovered the submarine nor participants in the defusing operation discovered any human remains at the place of the shipwreck.

– It is hardly possible to lift any bodies for burial on land specifically because the blast that

ruined the submarine was very powerful, said Teijo Ristola. – It may be possible to find some bones on the seabed, but nothing more. In this case the rules for their lifting will be determined in compliance with Finnish laws.

Kenneth Gustavsson agreed:

– If we recall how powerful the explosion was that ruined the submarine it will become clear that lifting of bodies is unlikely. It is better to leave them on the seabed where they rest in a common grave. Therefore, Aland people suggest to leave it as it is and not to disturb the rest of perished seamen. A memorial plaque has been put on the Baltic seabed in area 8904 to commemorate the crew of the S-2. It was brought there in 2012 by relatives of the seamen from Russia. Aland divers mounted it soon after the commemorative ceremony.

## END OF STORY?

No new major turns are envisaged in the story of S-2 submarine. The relatives of the crew now have a point on the map of Europe where they can come to pray for the dead. The official burial status reliably protects the rest of Soviet seamen. All Finnish and Swedish participants in the research were thanked on behalf of the Club of submariners. In March 2011 the Russian defense ministry decided to award the medal for Merits in perpetuating the memory of perished defenders of the Motherland to Kenneth Gustavsson, head of divers Bjorn Rosenlef, Swedish Navy commander aide Christian Allerman, divers Morten Zetterstrom, Patrick Palm, Richard Juhanson, and Aland governor Peter Lindback. It was a decoration for their big personal contribution to determining the place of wreckage of Baltic fleet submarines S-7, Sch-305, and S-2 as well identifying the names of the submariners and the fates of missing Navy men.



Historians and seamen have still a lot to do in the Baltic Sea. Kenneth Gustavsson said several submarines have not been found yet.

– According to archive data which I collected three Soviet submarines sank there in 1942. Two of them were found: in 1998 S-7 was discovered and in 2007 - Sch-305, he said. They are all in Swedish territorial waters. The Sch-320 submarine has not been found. There are no German submarines there as during World War Two the German Navy carried out no operations in the area. Only by the end of the war after Finland concluded a truce with the USSR in 1944 the Germans planned to attack Aland Islands but dropped the idea. There can be a total of several hundred various shipwrecks in that area of the Baltic Sea beginning from the XVI century.

The St. Petersburg Club of submarines is now focused on the search of relatives of the crew of another submarine, S-6, which was recently found in Swedish territorial waters.

– Now we are looking for families and succeeded to establish seven contacts, Igor Kurdin said. We shall keep working, look for contacts, and help relatives of killed servicemen find their burial places so that they can come and bow to their memory like it happened with the S-2 crew.

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