

**Field Guide to Coronado History:
The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming**

By Bruce Linder

What would you do if you picked up a newspaper to be greeted by the eye-catching headline: NAVY PUZZLED: SUB HULK FOUND OFF BEACH HERE.

Better yet, what if you started reading and discovered that the sub was right off the Silver Strand and the Navy had no idea where it came from, calling it “unaccounted for?”

And what if this was at the height of the Cold War in 1958?

Well, if the submarine wasn't ours ... who'd be sneaking around spying on San Diego and Coronado and, perhaps, ran aground? Who had the world's largest submarine fleet anyway? The Russians!

For those sharp enough (or old enough) to know, this is the exact plot of the 1966 Academy Awards nominated movie, “The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming,” starring Alan Arkin, Carl Reiner, and Eva Marie Saint. There, in a Cold War parody, a Russian captain wanted to take a good look at America through his periscope and ran aground on a sandbar.

Rather than a movie, though, our Silver Strand story is all true and began with a San Diego Union report on July 25, 1958. It was a story told by two young San Diego State students who had dived to discover this sunken hulk off Coronado Heights at the southern end of the Silver Strand and were claiming salvage rights.

For years, there had been stories of fishermen catching their nets on something below the water and so Frank Ball and Wells Gowdy had simply devised a plan to pull on their gear, activate their fish-finder sonar and get rich.

They discovered the wreck on July 8th; dove several more times, even dynamited off the sub's two heavy propellers and precariously winched them aboard their small workboat. After three weeks of fooling around, they finally told the authorities and caught them dumbfounded.

For 24 hours, confusion and scuttlebutt circulated in equal measure until the Navy finally sent their own professional divers to the scene to uncover the nefarious plot and identify nationality.

Their first report from the scene surprised no one: "It was a submarine," the divers reported, but they "couldn't identify the class in the murk." Confusion continued. Trying to be helpful, many former submariners flooded the Navy with stories including one remembrance of an F-class sub based at Coronado's sub piers before World War I sinking off the coast.

Slowly the story came together and it was quite the story.

The two big props held markings of "1944" and that finally convinced the Navy that the mystery sub really was American. She turned out to be S-37, commissioned in 1923. At the onset of World War II, S-37 was assigned to the Philippines and immediately entered the fray against the Japanese. At one point, she attacked a Japanese convoy and S-37 became the first U.S. submarine ever to sink a destroyer.

After earning 5 battle stars, S-37 returned to San Diego in 1943 to serve as a training ship at the new ASW School. In early 1945 she was retired and stripped to serve as a bombing target. While being towed to sea, though, her towline parted and she drifted and sank along the Silver Strand.

Alas, our intrepid college students never obtained permission to salvage, but five years later in 1963, a second salvage attempt was made to clear the Strand of this war relic.

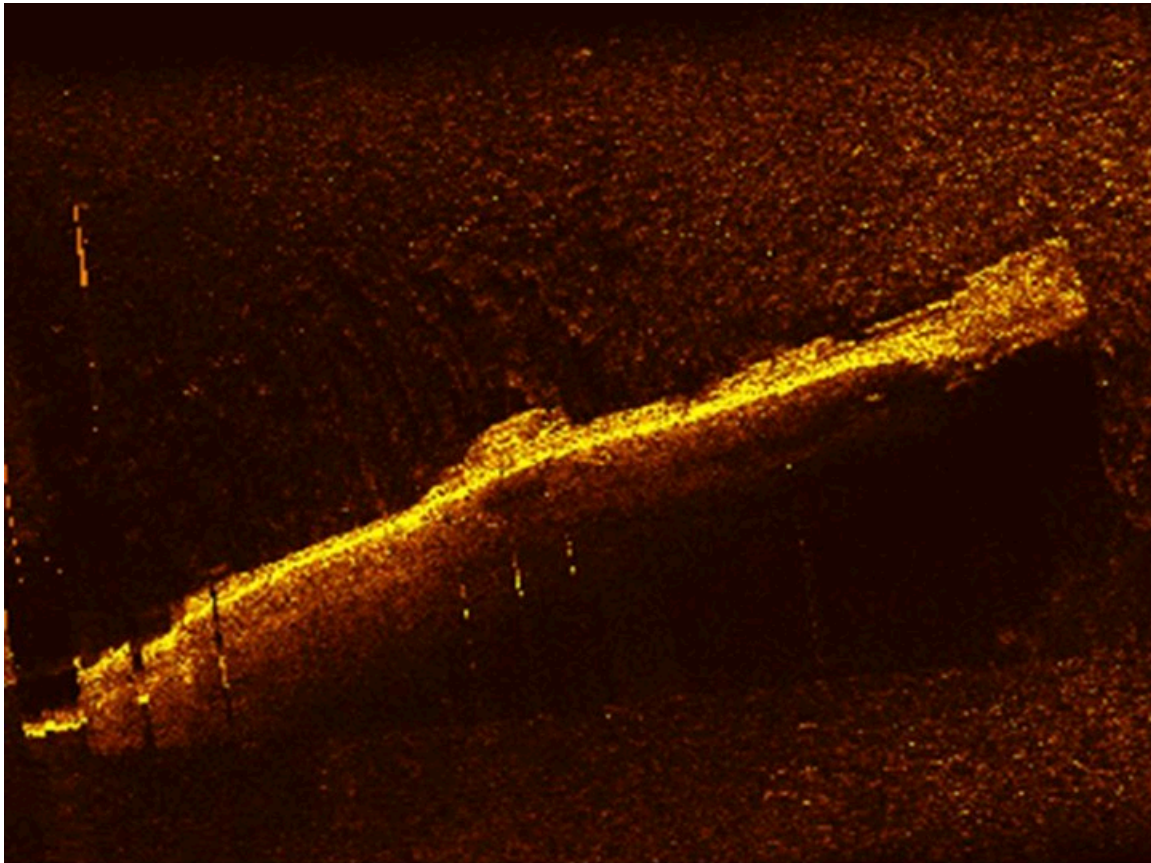
Salvage diver Jim Reeder, with his brother and father, spent months pumping air into the sunken craft and patching holes. Finally, with

the aid of a tug and large flotation pontoons attached to the submarine, S-37 popped to the surface. Briefly.

A few minutes of sunlight were all she experienced. The pontoons slipped with the action of the surf, a couple of photographs were taken, and S-37 rolled over and sank back to the bottom.

Today, S-37 still remains in her long-time resting place about 25 feet deep, directly off the Navy's new Silver Strand Training Complex. She's shrouded in marine growth, buried in sand, and difficult to make-out in turbid water.

You can't see it from the beach, and hardly see it even when you dive; but, of all things, you can see S-37 today (if you look really, really closely) on Google Earth — a tiny, faint toothpick of gray below the sea's surface. 32.36.244N / 117 08.238W.



*Underwater remote vehicle acoustic scan of submarine S-37 (2015).
Courtesy US Navy.*

