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Silent Steel: The Mysterious Death of the Nuclear Sub USS Scorpion,

James H. Patton Jr.
instance, while Graham suggests that China’s Song diesel submarine program may have “fail[ed] . . . to develop ac-
cording to schedule,” it is now note-
worthy the extent to which Song
development appears to have pro-
gressed in parallel to China’s importing
of Kilo diesel submarines from Russia.

Graham projects that SLOC security
will continue to preoccupy Japanese
planners as a fundamental national
concern. He breaks significant ground
by showing that Japanese policy mak-
ers, motivated by increasingly “realist”
threat perceptions, are exploring new
directions in the pursuit of SLOC secu-

ity. The extent to which these emerg-
ing impulses can transcend funding
constraints (imposed increasingly by
demographic and economic challenges)
and constitutional limitations (still pro-
tected, to some degree, by domestic
politics) remains a pivotal question for
all concerned with East Asian security.

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Johnson, Stephen P. Silent Steel: The Mysterious
Death of the Nuclear Sub USS Scorpio. Hobo-

Several years ago I received a phone call
from Stephen Johnson asking about my
service on the USS Scorpion (SSN 589),
my first ship, between the fall of 1961
and the winter of 1962. He explained he
was writing a book about its loss in late
May 1968 with its entire crew of ninety-
ine. I spoke with him at some length
and sent some material about the vast
“SubSafe” program changes that oc-
curred within the Submarine Force af-
ter the loss of USS Thresher (SSN 593)
in April 1963. Silent Steel is the exqui-
sitely researched result of my tiny input
and that of more than 230 others—
ranging from the widows of Scorpion
sailors, submarine design engineers and
naval architects, and a list of active-
duty and retired personnel that reads
like a “who’s who” of the then and now
Submarine Force. The bibliography it-
self spans two dozen pages of applicable
books, journal articles, official reports,
memorandums, and other miscella-
nous correspondence.

Anyone expecting to find a clear and
unambiguous set of events and circum-
stances that “explain” the Scorpion’s
loss will be disappointed. Rather, along
with fascinating personal insights into
some key players, the reader will find
erudite and technically credible discus-
sions on the facts and assumptions of
any number of popular and not so pop-
ular theories. For example, his dispassion-
ate and objective examination of
much of the same material that was
available to formal Navy courts of in-

quiry virtually rules out any concept of
“hostile action” and substantially weak-
ens the plausibility of incidents involv-
ing the ship’s own torpedoes. He subtly
chides some advocates for having
drawn three-significant-figure conclu-
sions from one-significant-figure as-
sumptions. In addition, by bluntly
describing some bureaucratic foibles
and tragic administrative decisions
(such as shortchanging Scorpion’s
SubSafe package during a 1967 refuel-
ing overhaul to save money), Johnson’s
work leads one to perceive that—as is
true in virtually all submarine disasters
that we know something about—there
had to have been some series of compli-
cating, cascading events that over-
whelmed any efforts by the crew to bring
the (perhaps minor) initiating casualty under control. For those who delight in finding small technical mistakes, there are a few, if one looks closely enough—for example, the Scorpion’s fire control system was not a Mark 113 but a vintage Mark 101. But none detracts from the overall high quality of the investigative effort.

Even without a specific “cause célèbre” event to dissect and review for “lessons learned,” Silent Steel provides much to think about for anyone interested in or involved with combating casualties at sea. There is even some consolation, however small in comparison to the loss of life, in the knowledge that the United States has come to realize to a significant degree in the years since that “material readiness is a consumable”; we are reluctant to run ships (and people) as hard as we did in the early to mid-1960s. When I rode Scorpion, it averaged more than three hundred days a year at sea. Today, even with dwindling platform resources, the Submarine Force has begun to say no to many of the increasing operational requirements from senior regional and national commanders.

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This State Department volume, the first of five that will cover the end period of the Vietnam War, documents major foreign policy issues of the Nixon administration, with a focus on U.S. policy toward Vietnam, Cambodia, and to a lesser extent Laos during the period of January 1969 to July 1970. What a time it was!

In the 1968 presidential campaign, candidate Richard M. Nixon stated that he had a plan to end the war in Vietnam. As it turned out, the “plan” was embryonic. When he took office he moved slowly, convinced that how the United States ended the war would have an enduring impact on future American foreign policy. Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security adviser, became the key figure in the effort to end the war, a program that became known as “Vietnamization.”

Vietnamization was directed toward the upgrading of South Vietnamese forces, which was to be accompanied by phased withdrawals of U.S. forces. Completion would depend on how things went in Vietnam. This work, in addition to documenting policy efforts to move this program along, also documents efforts to convince Hanoi that it was dealing with a strong adversary: for example, secret U.S. bombing of Cambodia, integration of the secret war in Laos with the conflict in Vietnam, and covert operations against North Vietnam.

One of the principal themes developed here is the search for a negotiated settlement, first in the Paris Peace Talks and then through secret meetings between Kissinger and North Vietnamese foreign minister Xuan Thuy and special adviser Le Duc Tho. Here, and throughout the book, Kissinger’s memorandums to Nixon are the key documents. Many appear in Kissinger’s memoirs; however, in this work they are more complete.

In March 1970, Cambodia’s Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown by the Lon