

In Deepest Secrecy

Dutch Submarine Espionage Operations from 1968 to 1991

by

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English edition edited by Deborah Hogg, Gale Winskill and Jaime Karremann

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BWV Media I Marineschepen.nl Amsterdam

Cover image: HNLMS *Zwaardvis* (S806), collection Netherlands Institute for Military History

Cover design: Claudio Enema, Manoverboord.eu, Amsterdam

Design maps: Cas Fijen, Fijen Designs, Amsterdam

Photographer: Marleen Vermeulen

Design: bureau Janse, Deventer

Printing: BoekenGilde, Enschede

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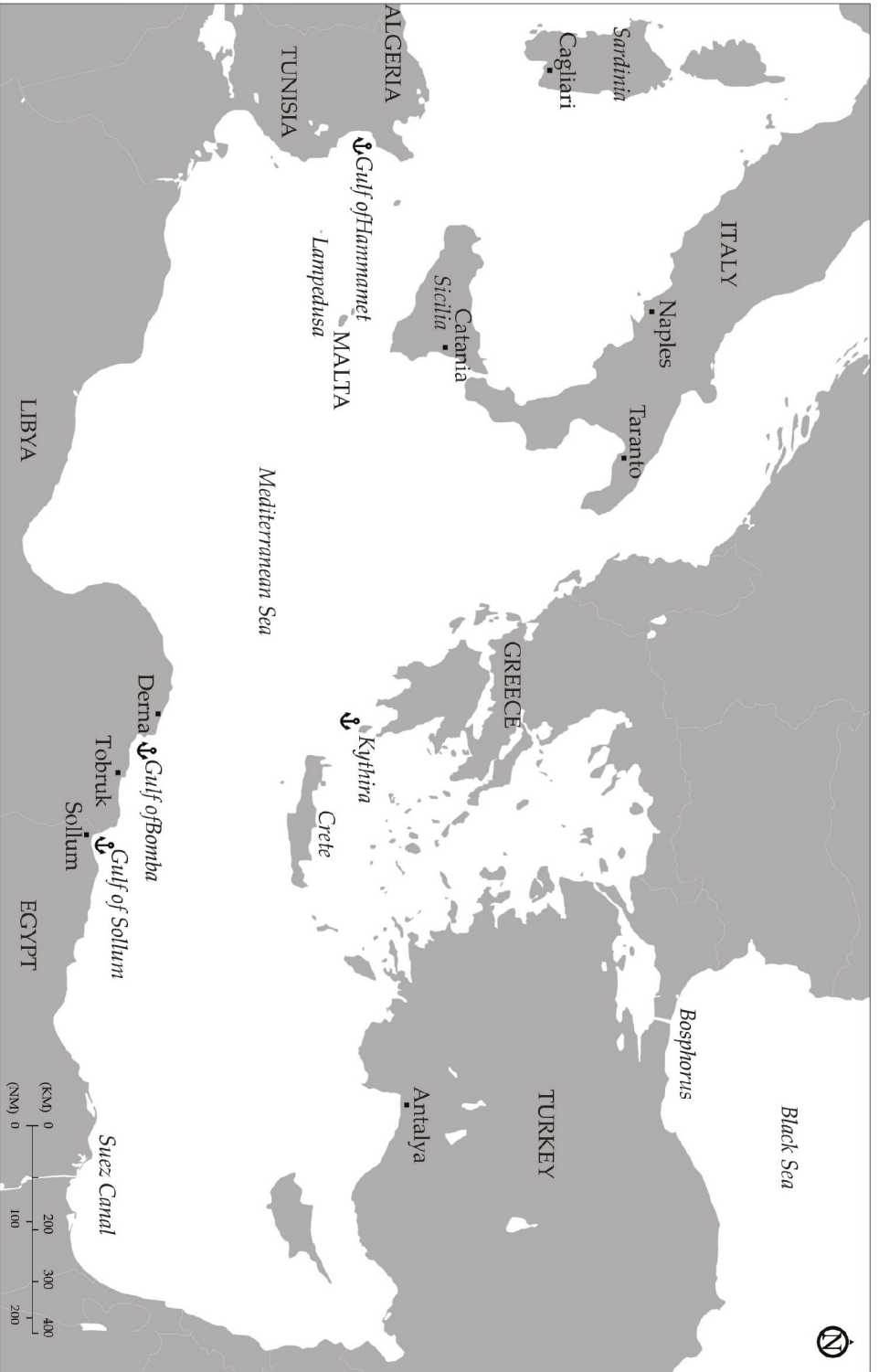
ISBN: 978-90-826995-2-4

BISAC HIS027150 HISTORY / Military / Naval

NUR:689

www.naviesworldwide.com





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Introduction:

Queen's Day 1989: no street markets; no Amsterdam crowds; no Royal Family; no traditional games for this seventy-two-man Dutch crew. On this particular Saturday afternoon they were at sea, 30 metres (98 feet) below the smooth surface of the Mediterranean Sea. No singing or drinking there. Everyone was quiet, focused on their job. In the control room the operators scanned their sonar displays searching for new contacts (see Figure 0.1), hydraulics hissed in the distance when the helmsman adjusted the rudders, the officers bent over the chart relayed the positions and the commanding officer standing between two periscopes was deep in thought. The air-conditioning hummed softly in the background. Not long now, just a little bit longer. They needed to stay quiet and undetected, and sail past the fleet of NATO ships, helicopters, aircraft and submarines ... unseen.

The NATO units were not enemies. They were all on the same side. But sometimes you hid even your deepest secrets from your friends.

'Stay undetected' was an important part of the assignment given a few weeks before to the thirty-seven-year-old captain of the submarine HNLMS *Zwaardvis*. Lieutenant Commander Koen Hermsen was to carry out a highly sensitive intelligence-gathering operation with *Zwaardvis*: a patrol. *Zwaardvis* had to spy on, listen to, follow and photograph Soviet Navy vessels in the Mediterranean, and much more besides.

The most important thing, however, was to remain undetected, no matter what. It was imperative that *Zwaardvis* was not detected, by anyone. Gather intelligence but remain undetected, they had stressed to him.

That also meant that Hermsen had to enter into the Mediterranean unseen. But just when *Zwaardvis* was to sail secretly into the Mediterranean for a reconnaissance mission, a NATO exercise had been scheduled in the Strait of Gibraltar – the entrance to the Mediterranean. The strait was a challenge in itself, with Spain and Morocco only 7.5 nautical miles apart, forming a perfect bottleneck. Here, sea and ships pushed themselves through the narrowest part, resulting in strong currents and a throng of shipping traffic, monitored closely by NATO. Besides commercial shipping, the Navy of the Soviet Union also sailed in and out of the Mediterranean on a regular basis. For that reason, NATO member states had agreed that all NATO submarines were to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar *surfaced*. Any submerged submarine would therefore be Russian. Hermsen was unable to honour that agreement; it just wasn't allowed. He could not be detected, by either friend or foe. Maybe there were enemies around, but there were most certainly plenty of friends. And those friends had not just come along for the ride. The NATO vessels were there for Exercise Open Gate '89.¹

During that week a war was being simulated and the task of the NATO units was to keep the strait open while the enemy in the exercise tried to close the strait.² Dutch, American, French, Danish, Italian, British, Portuguese and Canadian destroyers, frigates, corvettes and tankers were protecting convoys of chartered merchant ships going in and out of the strait.³ The convoys were also being protected and attacked by diesel–electric submarines and a nuclear-powered submarine, as well as by a large number of aircraft, including anti-submarine warfare aircraft such as a Dutch P-3C Orion, a German Atlantic and a British Nimrod.⁴

Nobody on board the NATO vessels or organising the exercise was aware of the presence of HNLMS *Zwaardvis*, and knew

nothing of her highly secretive mission. Should the NATO ships discover *Zwaardvis*, they could sound the alarm on the assumption that it was a Soviet submarine, thus sabotaging *Zwaardvis'* silent entry.

Entering the Mediterranean unseen was a daunting task for a submarine at the best of times, but with the sentries holding a military exercise at the gate this became a huge challenge for *Zwaardvis*. Yet, even then, the silent, submerged submarine always had the advantage. Moreover, Hermsen and his team had been preparing for a long time and had devised a watertight plan.



Figure 0.1. Sonar operators in control room of HNLMS *Tijgerhaai* (*Zwaardvis* class) post-modernisation, March 1989. (Image: AVKDM/Collection Netherlands Institute for Military History)

Following a visit to the port of Lisbon, the Dutch submarine submerged. First, *Zwaardvis* moved stealthily along the southern side of Faro, Portugal, towards Cadiz in Spain. Long thick lines, representing the tracks of warships sailing south of *Zwaardvis*, began to appear on the sonar displays. This was the exercise area of NATO's standing naval force, STANAVFORLANT, which included the Dutch S-frigate HNLMS *Bloys van Treslong*, which

specialised in anti-submarine warfare.⁵ Tension on board *Zwaardvis* was mounting, but they were still far from being detected. The ships could not hear or see the submarine at all. The distance was still far too great.

That distance would reduce rapidly as *Zwaardvis* had to pass right through the exercise area. Indeed, Hermsen did not want to sail past the southern coast of Spain in the strait because then he would have to sail past the British navy base in Gibraltar, the hub of the exercise.

By evening, *Zwaardvis* sailed in the direction of Morocco, just before the Strait of Gibraltar, and sneaked past the exercise area of the NATO squadron. Not a single ship, helicopter or aircraft noticed that a 2,640-tonne submarine was sailing towards the entrance of the Mediterranean right under their nose.

Close to the Moroccan coast *Zwaardvis* changed heading again and in the late evening, the night before Queen's Day 1989, the submarine slipped silently through the strait which was almost as hectic at night as it was during the day. The NATO exercise continued through the night and *Zwaardvis* manoeuvred at very low speed beneath the naval ships, tankers, fishermen and ferries. It was a good thing it was so busy, because the noise made it especially difficult for anyone to hear the quiet *Zwaardvis*. At the same time the hard rock seabed created countless echoes on the sonar displays of ships, if they decided to *ping* actively on an unknown, suspicious contact.⁶

In the early morning, *Zwaardvis* left the Strait of Gibraltar. The most difficult part was over, but the risk of detection was still present, for this too was an Open Gate exercise area. Danish anti-submarine corvettes, among others, prevented a relaxed passage towards the Mediterranean. Therefore, Hermsen had chosen to steer *Zwaardvis* close to the Moroccan coast.

This Saturday in April promised to be a beautiful day for *Zwaardvis*. The sonar operators in *Zwaardvis*' control room kept an eye on the contacts on their screens, but these were not hostile.

Gibraltar lay miles behind them and *Zwaardvis* was sailing

quietly into the Mediterranean at a depth of 70 metres (230 feet). Slowly, the crew began to breathe a sigh of relief. Suddenly, the engine room reported that the main electric motor had gained considerable resistance, although the need for propulsion had not increased. Hermsen immediately reduced speed and depth, and raised the periscope. The experienced commanding officer knew instinctively what was happening: *Zwaardvis* had been caught.

Although still submerged, Hermsen could see the tail of his submarine in the clear waters of the Mediterranean and worse, long fishing lines with huge tuna hooks and large orange balls. Surfacing now or even returning to periscope depth was not an option. That would almost certainly mean detection in the clear, smooth seawater. Hermsen decided to wait until dark.

Under a sparkling, star-strung sky, the huge black fin of *Zwaardvis* broke cautiously through the surface of the Alboran Sea at 01:45. The coxswain, a non-commissioned officer of the Seaman Branch, went on deck and cut the long lines from the front hydroplane using a large axe. *Zwaardvis* had been on the surface for well over an hour. The submarine was free again and dropped back into the depths.

The first obstacle of the journey had been tackled successfully. *Zwaardvis* continued on the long journey towards the patrol area on the other side of the Mediterranean, in the Gulf of Sollum, Egypt.

The NATO squadron taking part in Open Gate headed north. In June, more than a month later, these five ships were moored in Den Helder for the 1989 Dutch Navy Days. HNLMS *Zwaardvis* was moored one jetty down, a long queue of day-visitors next to her, people wearing colourful summer clothes waiting patiently for the tour. The submarine was waiting too... as if nothing had happened.⁷

For decades, these submarine patrols were among the best kept Dutch secrets of the Cold War. Only a select group of people in the Navy and in the political leadership at the Netherlands Ministry of Defence (MOD) was aware of these operations. To colleagues in the surface fleet and other branches of the armed forces, let alone people outside the MOD, the intelligence-gathering missions were top secret. For a long time, these missions were so secret that even the crew members, barring a few, were not allowed to know where they were during a patrol. Families and partners were given very little information. They were told only the dates of departure and arrival in Den Helder.

It seemed only right that these operations should have been kept so secret, just as operations these days are classified too. The six Dutch submarines of the Royal Netherlands Navy were among the greatest Dutch spies of the Cold War and spies operate best when out of the spotlight.

To date, much about these Cold War operations remains secret – operations which were not NATO operations. Even the 1968 missions have not been fully opened to the public. As a result, the patrols remain an unknown, but nevertheless important, part of Dutch history. Whereas to many in the West the Cold War consisted of preparing for a possible attack from the East, for a submarine on patrol it meant operating beyond the front line. ‘For a submarine and its crew, a patrol was 95 per cent war,’ said a former submarine captain. Short of opening fire, the Netherlands with its submarines was, for twenty years, one of the few countries involved in the slow-motion conflict that we call the ‘Cold War’.

For twenty years the Dutch military was mixed up in this almost-war and hardly anybody knew about it. That is, until 2006, when the groundbreaking book *Klaar voor onder water* [*Ready to dive*] was published and stories about Dutch submarine activity had never been made public. Shelves full of books had been written about US and British submarine operations. *Klaar voor onder water* describes the history of the Dutch Submarine Service

from its creation in 1906 up to its centenary, covering the story of Dutch Cold War submarine operations for the first time in about thirty pages.

In Deepest Secrecy goes even further.

Never before have the Dutch patrols been written about in so much detail as here, in *In Deepest Secrecy*. There were not just a few patrols, but many secret Dutch submarine operations in the period from 1968, when the long patrols started, until the end of the Cold War in 1991. For the first time, information is presented within this volume about great successes and failures; the technology, and the people; fear, morale, risks, mistakes, solidarity, hardship and brilliant plans.

Everything contained in this book is true: all the names of the people and the vessels are real.

In order to paint a picture of these patrols, extensive use has been made of public source material available in the National Archives in The Hague. All available logs (more than one hundred) from the six submarines involved have been studied extensively during the writing of this book, yielding a lot of information, although even these records do not contain all the detailed information about these patrols. The top-secret patrol reports do, however, describe the events minute by minute. These reports remain classified and will continue to be filed away for a very long time.

To be able to tell more about the patrols, nearly thirty ex-submariners were interviewed about their Cold War patrols. Many had never talked about their own experiences during their secret missions in so much detail before. They told the story of over 1,000 Dutch submariners who carried out covert operations during this period.

These men shared a small space with seventy colleagues and were away from home for many months on end, chasing Soviet ships in the deepest coldest seas, or in warm shallow waters. They secretly observed the Soviets, risking their own lives because political and military leaders knew that the results of the submarine patrols were of vital importance to the Free West. Still, the men

who did this work, sometimes for many years, never received any recognition for it. They were not awarded any medals because their patrols were so secret. And they are not allowed to call themselves 'war veterans', because the military personnel who served during the Cold War are not referred to as such. Yet anyone reading their stories might feel that these men are indeed just that.

I wrote this book on my own initiative and at my own expense. The Ministry of Defence, the Royal Netherlands Navy, Dutch Submarine Service (Onderzeedienst) and Military Intelligence and Security Service (Militaire Inlichtingen – en Veiligheidsdienst, MIVD) were informed at an early stage, but did not contribute to the book.

This book describes events from recent history and some issues remain sensitive, even though all the submarines described were decommissioned a long time ago. Yet, the stories in this book should be told now. Of course, one day in the distant future these stories will be historical fact and everyone will be allowed to know all the details of all the patrols. But by then the archives may have been destroyed and the men who carried out this work may no longer be alive. This book is not just *about* them, it is also *for* them, their families and their friends. Moreover, it not only tells the stories from the archives, but also recounts personal experiences, a verbal history that has never been recorded, because many things within the small submarine community seemed so ordinary at the time and took place in its own secret environment. Keeping diaries was forbidden. Filming and taking photographs during patrols was severely restricted and communication with the outside world about the submarine was almost impossible and rarely allowed. Journalists or other inquisitive people were not (and still aren't) welcome during patrols. This history, which is quite special to the Netherlands, can only now be recorded based on the memories of those men born between 1930 and 1970.

Fortunately, in addition to this book, there is another tangible memory of Cold War operations: the submarine *Tonijn*, which has been an exhibit at the Dutch Naval Museum – the

Marinemuseum – in Den Helder, for some time now. *Tonijn* was one of the Submarine Service's greatest spies. Like HNLMS *Tijgerhaai*, the submarine carried out thirteen intelligence operations, and no other Dutch submarine accumulated more days on patrol during the Cold War than *Tonijn*.

If you ever visit the Naval Museum, go to the parking area and stand next to *Tonijn*. Look up at that black colossus 79.5 metres (260.8 feet) in length, 2 propellers, 3 cylinders, 8 torpedo tubes, which once had a maximum displacement of 1,826 tonnes and carried 70 crew members, has. *Tonijn*, managed to hide herself extremely well as she lurked beneath the Soviet ships, spying on them and taking photographs. Nobody ever knew she was there – not in the Netherlands, Russia, Tunisia, Egypt, Ireland or Norway.

In all the years that *Tonijn* has been moored in Den Helder, her secret actions have hardly been talked about. This book, however, brings the facts to the surface. It is time to set *Tonijn* free from the Naval Museum, just for a moment, and relieve her of her important but sleepy existence as a museum ship. It is also time to raise the other five Dutch submarines from the archives too. It is time for their stories to be told.

1

Operation IJsco, HNLMS *Dolfijn's* icy adventures

On 4 April 1949, the founding treaty of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was signed. In NATO, Western European countries combined their forces with those of the United States and Canada across the North Atlantic against their new rival – the Soviet Union.

Collaboration within the alliance and the threat from the Soviet Union brought about a new situation for the Royal Netherlands Navy, with a new area of operations extending as far as the frozen north. After World War II, as the Dutch Submarine Service no longer played a significant role in the Dutch East Indies, it was able to focus on the NATO Treaty Area better than the rest of the navy could. That was a challenge for the Submarine Service, which had achieved many successes during World War II, but had also lost a lot of men and submarines.

At the time when NATO was founded, the Dutch had seven submarines, including three old pre-World War II O-boats. Four submarines had been acquired from the Royal Navy, two after the war. These four had been built in Great Britain as T-class submarines and were brought into operation in the Netherlands as the Zwaardvisch class.

Although the T-boats were relatively modern and had proved themselves with the British during World War II, it was not known whether they were suitable for operations in the far north, where the Northern Soviet Fleet had to pass in the event

of war. The Dutch Submarine Service decided to carry out a test. Nearly a year after the founding of NATO, one of the T-boats was given the task of going to the northernmost waters of the NATO Treaty Area, bordering the Barents Sea. It was a new step for the Submarine Service and one not without risk.

In 1950, the thirty-one-year-old Lieutenant Commander Hendrik van der Veen was captain of the T-boat HNLMS *Dolfijn* (ex-HMS P47, built by Vickers-Armstrong), which had been chosen for the icy journey. The code name for the sea trials in northern waters was 'Operation IJsco (Ice Cream)'. Van der Veen was tasked with sailing to the Greenland Sea to test man and machine in the freezing waters. Upon approaching the polar ice, *Dolfijn* had to snort – in other words, 'snorkel' – to charge her batteries, using the diesel engines while remaining submerged. When snorting, the snorkel induction mast, the air-inlet of the engines, stuck out above water. Extensive experience at this had already been built up, but not in cold waters that, considering developments in international relations, might become of interest.

The operation order for Van der Veen contained four positions where *Dolfijn* was supposed to snort, the most northerly of which was located 75 degrees north and 10 degrees east, approximately 95 nautical miles south-west of Spitsbergen.⁸ This was exceptionally far north for Dutch submarines, and those areas were also still unknown territory for British and American submarines.

Dolfijn had to sail in one leg to the positions laid down in the operation order and then moor in Tromsø, northern Norway, located further south. As well as large quantities of food and drink, new and extra warm clothing for the sixty-five crew members was brought on board.

At 11:00 on Monday, 13 March 1950, HNLMS *Dolfijn* left the Waalhaven Submarine Service base in Rotterdam for this extraordinary trip, followed by a cinema newsreel's camera crew.

The crew of *Dolfijn* must have anticipated many challenges and surprises on this journey, but it was unlikely that they had expected to face many submariners' greatest fears. At Hoek van

Holland, two hours after departure, the men were already given a taste of things to come. The submarine collided with the Rotterdam naval tug R.S.8. But this did not jeopardise the journey as the bow of the submarine was only slightly damaged.

HNLMS *Dolfijn* headed north, where the weather continued to worsen. At a speed of 9 knots *Dolfijn* approached the southern tip of Norway. The wind continued to gain strength and by Wednesday evening, 15 March, it reached gale force 7–8. The submarine was tossed violently in the high waves. On Thursday the wind measured a strong gale force 9.

Back then the fin of the submarine, the conning tower, was much lower than it is now. Just behind the gun was the bridge, really no more than a tub. Gazing out over the white crests, the lookouts and the officer of the watch were virtually unprotected from the rough seas and strong winds. Their new waterproof, sailcloth jackets kept the men dry in the rain, but the engulfing waves soaked their clothes as the cold seawater poured down their necks and inside their coats. Worse still, they often found themselves up to their waists in water after a large green-grey-white cresting mass of water washed over them. The new, well-greased leather boots were not lined and once they were wet it was impossible to get them dry again.

Moreover, visibility became poorer and poorer. By Thursday evening the weather was so bad that they decided to close the forward torpedo room to ‘watertight’; an emergency procedure when there was an increased risk of collision, so that the fore-end of the submarine – where, among other things, torpedoes were stored for the torpedo tubes – could sustain a leak in the event of a collision without water flooding the entire ship.

HNLMS *Dolfijn* reduced speed to ‘half ahead together’ and crawled up along the Norwegian coast to a position at Trondheim, where they had to commence snorkelling in accordance with the operation order. To make matters worse the commanding officer Lt Cdr Van der Veen had been taken ill. He was so sick that at 22:00 on Thursday, 16 March, *Dolfijn* sent a telegram to Rotterdam