# The Jennifer Project

In 1973, the ageing but nonetheless still extremely versatile industrial magnate, **Howard Hughes**. He founded a new venture aimed at extracting manganese nodules from the ocean floor. Found in vast deposits at the bottom of the ocean in some places, these nodules – ranging in size from the palm of a hand to a melon – consist of concentric layers of iron and manganese hydroxide.

The deposits discovered during that period promised enormous financial gains, which Hughes did not want to miss out on, so he had a specialised vessel built, the **USNS Hughes Glomar Explorer** .



## The final mission of the K–129

The diesel-electric-powered **K-129**was launched in Komsomolsk-on-Amur in December 1959 and was converted in Vladivostok in 1967 into a Golf-II (Project 629A) class submarine. It became one of the six submarines in the Project 629 ballistic missile-carrying fleet. **In February 1968** the vessel, with 83 sailors on board, set out on its third 70-day patrol, which it was required to carry out in complete radio silence.

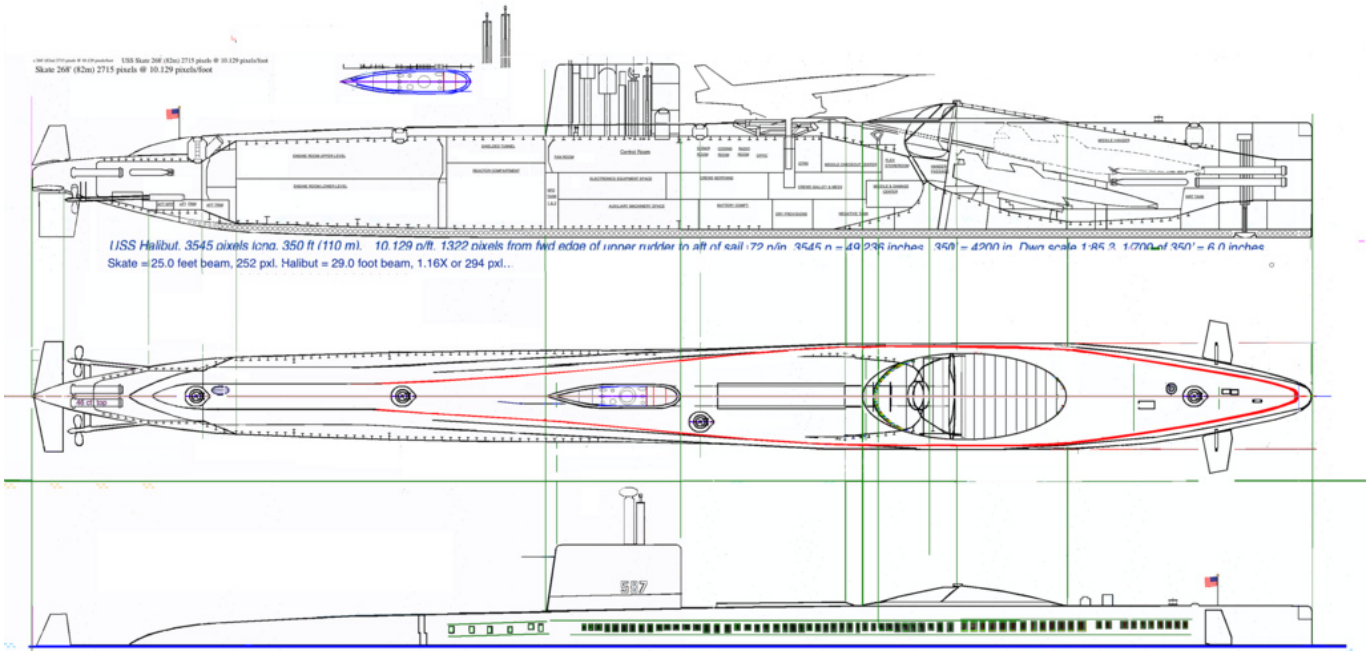
Consequently, by mid-March, the Soviet command centre in Kamchatka began to grow concerned when the vessel failed to make two consecutive radio check-ins. First, via a broadcast to the entire fleet, they ordered it to break radio silence and report in. When this attempt proved unsuccessful, a large-scale search operation was launched for the vessel, which had been declared missing.




This unusually high level of activity also aroused the interest of the US Navy. They requested the NAVFACs (*U.S. SOSUS Naval Facilities*) to retrospectively analyse the signals from their deep-sea hydrophone network, SOSUS. The authorities had already been monitoring submarine activity, and so they identified that a powerful explosion had occurred on board the vessel on 8 March 1968. Using triangulation, they narrowed down the submarine's last known position to an area of roughly one thousand square kilometres with relative accuracy. After a few months, the Soviets called off the search operation due to a lack of results, *and the K-129 was recorded as 'missing'*.

## The Flatfish's mission

Not so the Americans. The submarine's ballistic missiles and torpedoes, equipped with nuclear warheads, along with its code books and other Soviet military technology, had sunk to the ocean floor along with the vessel, and this promised to be a major haul in the midst of the Cold War, worth every penny to the US government. The Navy first deployed the **USS Halibut** and the **USNS Mizar** research vessel to locate the wreck.



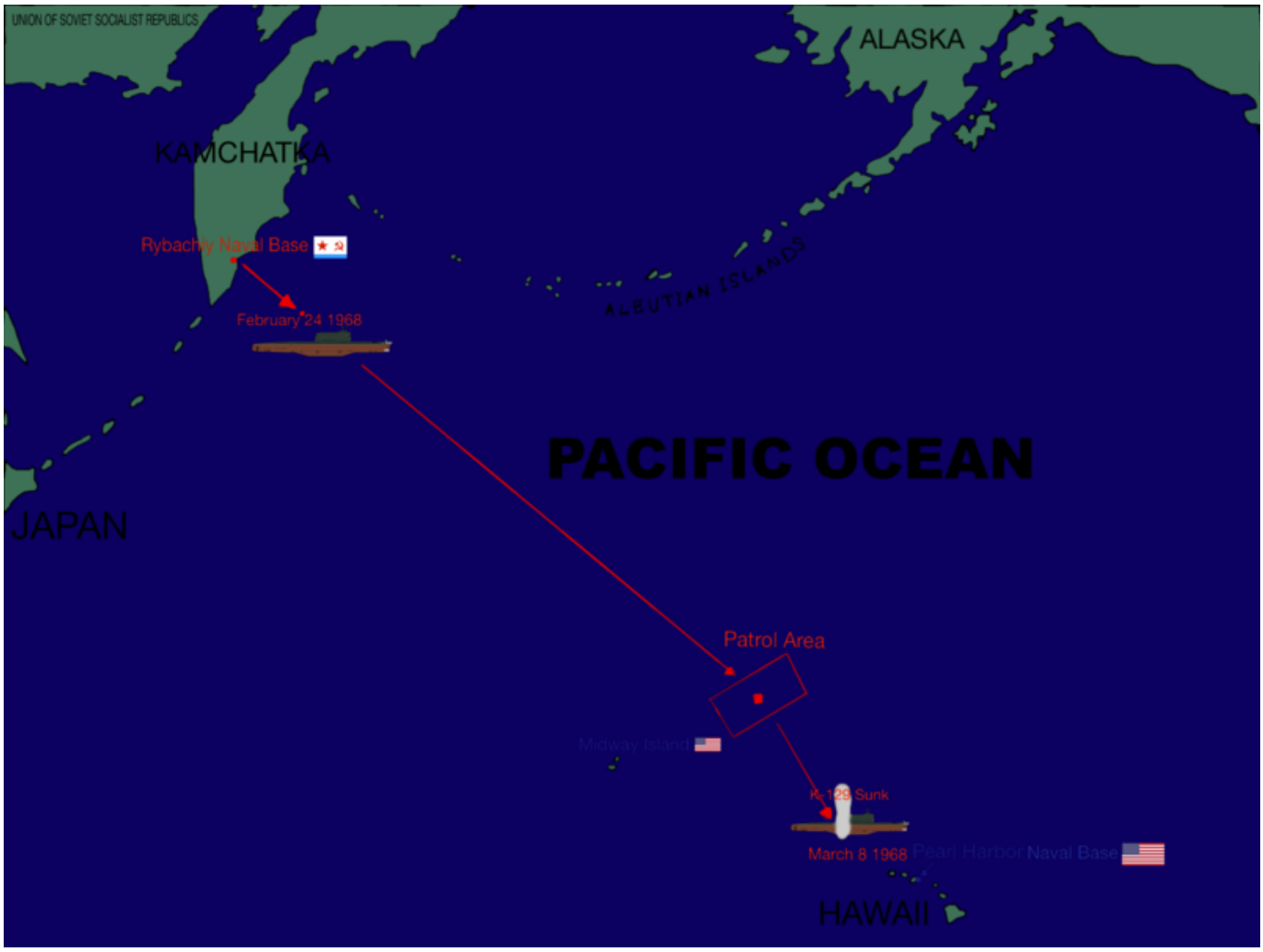
The Halibut (meaning ‘flatfish’ in Hungarian) was a specially modified, odd-looking submarine, equipped with deep-sea cameras and a caisson; its primary purpose was to *“tap”*, but it was also perfectly suited to rescue and exploration operations.

The search expedition was crowned with success on 15 June 1968; the wreck was found not far from Oahu at a depth of 3,900 metres, not far from the Hawaiian archipelago. In January 1969, the new US President, **Richard Nixon**, the National Security Adviser **Henry Kissinger** briefed on the situation.

Nixon transferred the matter from Naval Intelligence to the **CIA** and awaited proposals for a solution from the intelligence agency. The whole affair was highly sensitive for the US government, as the ship had sunk in international waters. Firstly, they waited six years for tempers to cool.

## Project Azorian

It would obviously not have been a very good idea, in the very midst of the Cold War, for the CIA or any other US three-letter government agency to run a *‘rescue programme’* to salvage the submarine under its own name, so a civilian organisation – or rather, the *‘Iron Man’* and superstar of the era, **Howard Hughes** with this highly delicate task. The footage clearly revealed that there were nuclear torpedoes on board the K-129; indeed, according to some theories, the launch of one such torpedo may have caused the accident.

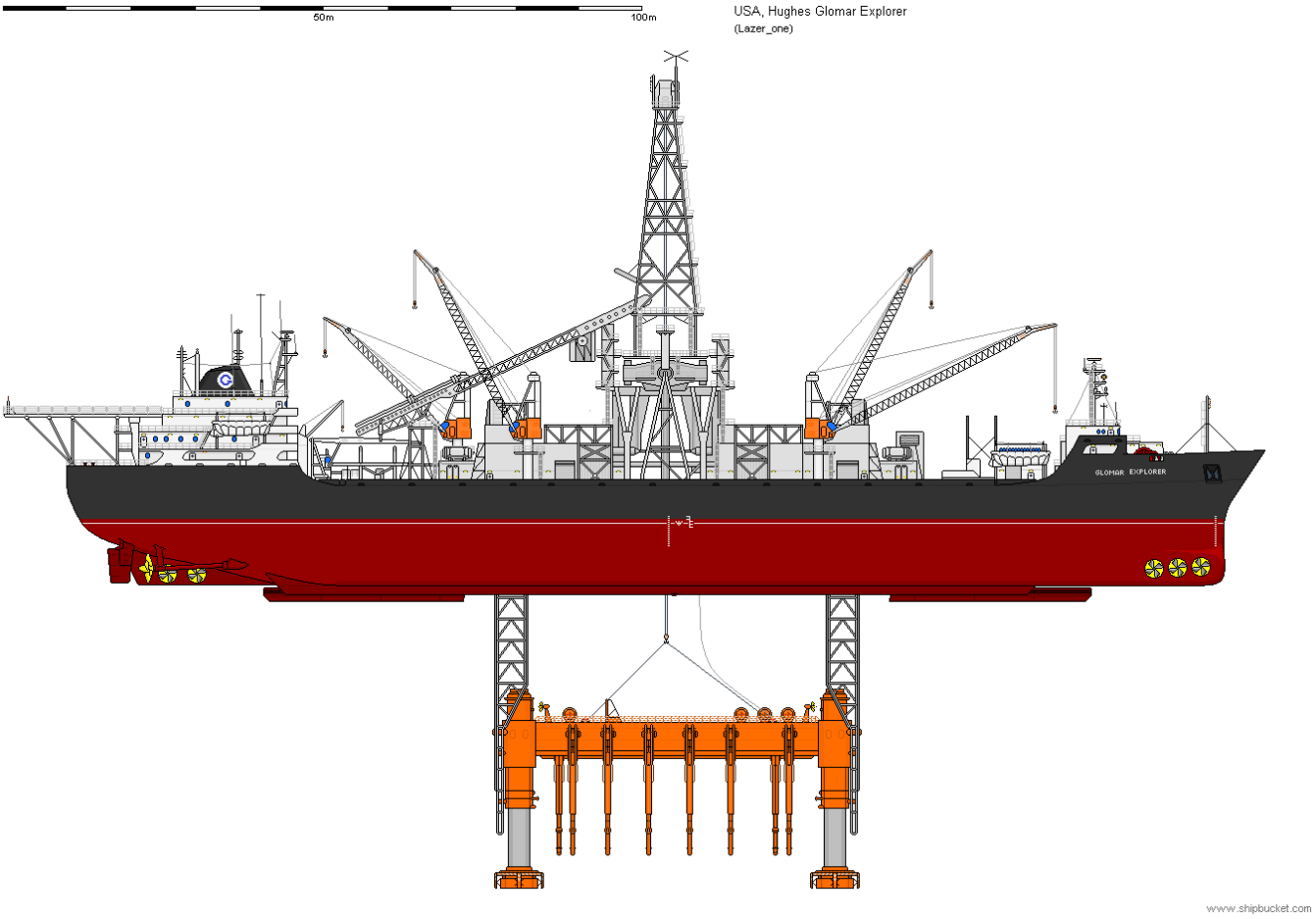



The highly eccentric Hughes maintained fairly close ties with the government; he contributed

substantial donations to Nixon's election campaign, and his global advertising firm, **Mullen & Co.,** was effectively a front company for the CIA (and was brought down by the Watergate scandal).

At the helm of the project was **John Parangosky**, an agent who had previously been involved in the development and operation of the U-2 (and later continued his work on the Corona project). Initially, they considered a remotely controlled special submarine, but the technical limitations of the time made this solution infeasible, so they opted for a salvage vessel instead.

Yes, this brings us back to the USNS Hughes Glomar Explorer mentioned at the start of this post. Incidentally, it was indeed a deep-sea research vessel, as claimed, but it was designed not for manganese mining, but for the recovery of the K-129. The vessel, which cost 1.7 billion dollars at today's prices, was built around a structure specially developed for the recovery operation: a frame integrated with gripping arms. This was to be lowered onto the submarine, and the wreck, secured by the gripping arms, was then hoisted into the ship's internal dry dock.

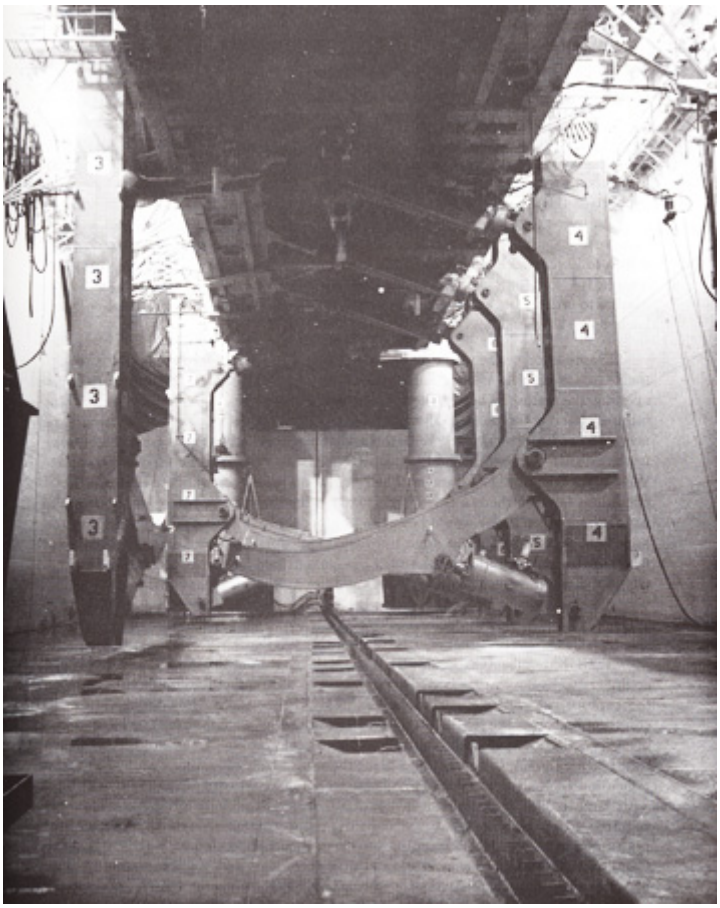



The salvage attempt began on 7 June 1974 at the scene of the accident. Not many sources remain regarding the operation itself and its success, but it is almost certain that the salvage operation was not truly successful; the salvaged wreck was probably heavier than anticipated (or the lifting mechanism was undersized), so, on 12 August, when a third of the lifting had been completed, some of the gripping arms broke and about two-thirds of the submarine fell back to the seabed.

They managed to salvage the remaining third (the front), where they reportedly found torpedoes and code books. A CIA report on the project has survived (it (available at), but the number of redacted sections almost exceeds that of the unredacted parts, and it contains little information about the salvage operation itself or its results. However, it does report that the Soviets very quickly caught wind of the mission's true purpose and continually demonstrated their presence – yet, interestingly,

they did not interfere with the extraction.

Clearly, even at home, the CIA could not sweep a project of this magnitude under the carpet, so it was first reported in 1974 by the **New York Times** got wind of it, but the government managed to silence them. The **Los Angeles Times**, which ran the story – or at least part of it – on 7 February 1975; what's more, following a misunderstanding, they managed to rebrand the Azorian project as **Project Jennifer ** for its readers. Even after the article's publication, the CIA refused to confirm or deny the recovery.



Following the operation, the Glomar Explorer was laid up for a time, then converted into an oil exploration vessel. It was used for oil exploration in this capacity until 2015, under the name GSF Explorer, before meeting its end at the Zhoushan shipbreaking yard in China on 5 June 2015 – without ever having explored for manganese, as per its original (cover) purpose. And yet.

Deep-sea mining is developing very rapidly even today, in parallel with the rise of the technology applicable to it. It cannot be ruled out that developments aboard the Glomar Explorer also contributed to the technological revolution currently underway.

Companies in this sector are sending underwater mining machines and oversized vacuum cleaners to the seabed, amongst other things, to extract the manganese nodules mentioned at the start of this post. Perhaps if the Glomar Explorer had been launched on its mission in accordance with its original cover story, everyone would have been better off.

Perhaps.

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