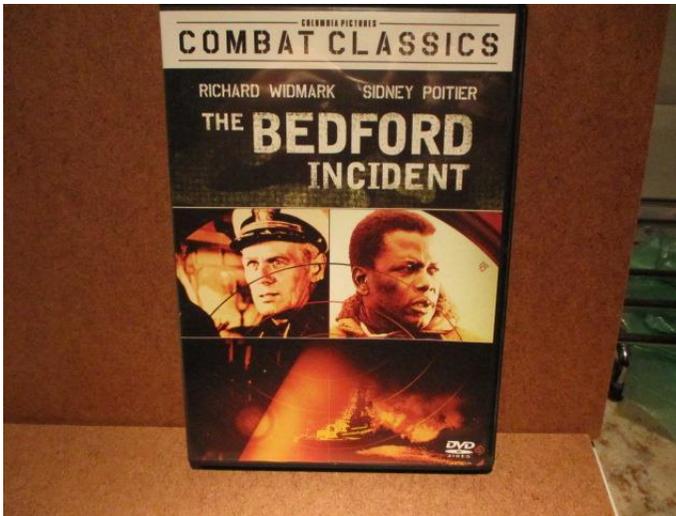


The Bedford Incident

By Rod Fraser



The above photo shows a promotional picture for the 1965 film, *The Bedford Incident*. Richard Widmark and Sidney Poitier were the two lead actors in this film, which tells the story of the *U.S.S. Bedford*, a destroyer assigned to shadow a 'stealthy' Soviet submarine during the Cold War. It is a very good film.

The book is even better. It provides more drama, greater detail, interesting explanations, and a different plot and ending from the film. If I had to choose, I'd pick the book without a second thought.

For this reason, I'll review the book for this article and leave you to enjoy the film on your own.



During the cold war, the U.S. Navy regularly followed or otherwise monitored the ships of the Soviet navy, and in particular their submarines. These submarines were tasked with probing NATO defences, and the high tech destroyers of the U.S. Navy, such as the *U.S.S. Bedford*, were there to prevent this, and to discover useful intelligence concerning the Soviet navy's operations and tactics.

This book is a tale of one such mission, the *Bedford's* physiological battle with a particular Soviet submarine near the coast of Greenland sometime in the 1960s. The *Bedford* is commanded by Captain Erik Finlander, an extremely able naval officer, well regarded in the Navy, and by his crew.

The crew are capable, alert and devoted to their captain and his ship. They are seldom on 'sick call' because Finlander makes the *Bedford* an exciting place to serve. His task (and theirs) is to regularly engage with Soviet submarines and simulate what in wartime would be considered a 'kill'. In the cold war, they stop short of the '*kill*', but the excitement of the chase and the desire to win at all costs is only too real.

On this particular mission, the *Bedford*, using a variety of techniques, locates a Soviet submarine, and tracks it over time. When they have it cornered, in the 'territorial waters' of Greenland, they attempt to force it to surface.

If and when this happens, the submarine is photographed with a view to humiliating its crew and showing the superior skills of the U.S. Navy. Then the game begins anew when the *Bedford* finds another submarine in the days or weeks ahead.

It is a game of psychological warfare, which in the opinion of the medical officer (Lieutenant Commander Chester Potter) and a former German submarine commander (Commodore Wolfgang Schrepke) — now assigned by NATO to the U.S. Navy as a consultant — Finlander is pushing too far. It is extremely dangerous.

The Russian submarine commander and crew are forced under water for hours, if not days, with diminished oxygen and fearing for their lives. They may have no idea this is just a game. In the opinion of Potter and Schrepke, the aggressive tactics of the *Bedford* could lead to the submarine firing a torpedo to stop the belligerent behavior of the destroyer.



Captain Finlander was a naval officer in WWII during

which time a submarine torpedoed his ship and left him adrift, fearing for his life on a cold sea. While he was eventually rescued and returned to duty, he is not quite rational when it comes to his thinking of submarines. Of course, he understands the United States and the Soviet Union are not at war. But within the limited 'terms of engagement' of the cold war, he is obsessed with winning.

Interestingly the *Bedford* crew have a nickname for the submarine. They call it '*Moby Dick*'. It's apt. It's easy to see the parallel between Finlander's obsession with the Soviet submarine, and Captain Ahab's pursuit of the great white whale.

In Herman Melville's novel, '*Moby Dick*', Captain Ahab cares only for finding and destroying the whale who bit off his leg on an earlier voyage. When '*Moby Dick*' is finally sighted, Ahab's hatred robs him of all caution and his pursuit of the whale drags Ahab to his death at the bottom of the sea.



In the final section of the book, Finlander has located the submarine and is about to force it to surface. Everyone is tired on the *Bedford*, after such a long and exhausting search for the submarine. Nerves are strained.

In the control room, Schrepke pleads with

Finlander,

"He's ... desperate ... at this point, Captain. You're going to force that submarine to fight. This is a careful, responsible commander you're dealing with, but he has reached his limits.... Let him go or he is going to fight."

Finlander replies, "I'm not going to shoot first, Commodore. But if he fires a torpedo at me, then I'll fire one."

"FIRE ONE!" Ensign Ralston echoed in response, in a high pitch of excitement as he pressed the lever to fire the ASROC rocket targeted on the submarine.

The captain and other officers in the control room watch in horror as the rocket sweeps out over the sea to find the Soviet submarine they had hunted and harassed for days beyond its endurance. Within minutes, the rocket found and destroyed the submarine known as *'Moby Dick'*.



What had happened? An American destroyer had fired on and destroyed a Soviet submarine during the cold war. By accident certainly, but without provocation. This was an act of war. If it was found out, it would lead to World War III.

There were thoughts of covering it up by the Captain and senior officers. And attempts were made to do so. But it was Commodore Schrepke who concluded the only effective way to cover it up was for him to act alone, "to obliterate this wrong".

Slowly he made his way to the rockets on the ship and armed them. Then he withdrew his pistol from his pocket and aimed it at the warhead. In his final words on this earth, before he pulled the trigger, he said this.

"Only when Captain Ahab vanishes from the face of the seas along with his 'Moby Dick', and not a single trace of either is left to inflame the vengeance of their kin ... only then can there follow peace."

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