

Thinking Sideways Podcast
Episode 003: The Glomar Explorer
Hosts: Steve, Devin, and Joe
Transcriber: Hoopy Frood

[Theme Song Plays]

[Joe]: Hey there, it's time for a little unsolved mystery action. You guys up for that?

[Steve]: Woo-hoo!

[Joe]: Okay, well, first off my name's Joe.

[Devin]: I'm Devin

[Steve]: I'm Steve.

[Joe]: Let's get rollin' here. So our story starts in the early 70s. There was a break-in at the Hughes Corporation. The break in lead to the revelation that a ship that had been built by the Hughes corp, The Glomar Explorer; which was ostensibly built exploration and mining of Manganese Modules from the ocean floor was not actually built for that purpose at all. It was actually part of a CIA project that the Hughes Corporation was providing cover for. So the Glomar Explorer was, it turns out, not mining Manganese Modules at all. It was raising a Soviet Submarine.

[Steve]: What's a Manganese Module?

[Joe]: I'm not even sure what the hell that is.

[Steve laughing]

[Joe]: But yeah there apparently are Manganese Modules on the ocean floor and Manganese is a rare metal that's worth a lot of money I guess. So, ya know, if it weren't so darn expensive to go retrieve those things off the ocean floor then we could actually be grabbing those things and utilizing them, but apparently we're not.

[Steve]: Okay.

[Joe]: So anyway, as a little aside: the cover story was so effective that some major corporations actually put a lot of money in researching how to retrieve Manganese Modules themselves from the ocean floor, and see, the joke was on them. So, let's get back to 1968. In April 1968 the Soviet Submarine K-129 sank in the Pacific about 800 miles NW of Hawaii. It was an early Soviet boomer, and I'm sure you all know what a boomer is. But for the few of you who don't know, that's a submarine that carries nuclear missiles. The idea that if somebody launches an attack on your homeland and wipes out all your land-based missiles, well you've still got some hidden out at sea to fire back at the enemy. We've got them, the soviets have them; the Brits and the French have them, and the Chinese have them. Anyway, that's a boomer.

So this is one of the earliest attempts at a boomer. It was a diesel submarine that had been lengthened, the sail had been made larger to accommodate three vertically mounted, nuclear-tipped missiles. They were liquid fueled and that's probably why the submarine sank, because liquid fueled rockets tend to be a lot more prone to accidents, which is why we use solid fuel rockets in our boomers. So anyway, it sank. We didn't know about it at first. What happened is the Navy noticed a huge surge in Soviet Naval forces coming into that part of the Pacific, obviously looking for their lost submarine, and so that caused us to go back and review our SOSUS Records, and I'm sure you all know what a SOSUS is. For the few of you who don't -

[Steve]: I'm scratching my head.

[Joe]: Yeah, SOSUS is an underground network of Sonar receivers that we've got in certain strategic places around the world, and we actually pick up all kinds of noise and run it through computers and figure out what's going on in the ocean.

[Devin]: Oh, is that how we heard The Bloop?

[Joe]: The Bloop? Probably.

[Steve]: Oh yeah, it's a giant listening network.

[Joe]: Yeah, it's a big, underwater listening network.

[Devin]: We'll talk about The Bloop later.

[Joe]: Yeah, okay. I remember The Bloop. So anyway, in response to this, the US went back and reviewed all of its SOSUS records and determined that yes indeed there was some sounds. There was first of all a big boom associated with an explosion, and then somewhat after that some other sounds associated with an implosion; the death of a submarine. So apparently they probably had a problem with one of their rockets. They surfaced, it exploded, and then eventually the ship wound up sinking in about two miles of water. And so using triangulation, etc we were able to figure out roughly where it'd gone down. So at that point – And by the way, the project was eventually named Project Azorian, but they code named it Project Jennifer. It was code named Project Azorian, but they told the press it was Project Jennifer because that's just the way they are, the government.

[Steve]: I really want there to be twenty-seven of them.

[Devin]: Yeah.

[Joe]: So everybody thought it was Project Jennifer, but actually it was Project Azorian. So yeah, there was a guy who was part of the whole thing, he was on The Halibut which was a spy sub that went out looking for the wreckage of the submarine. Eventually, many years later, like in the 90s, he wrote a book about it called *Spy Sub*. And in his book The Halibut was called The Viperfish.

[Steve and Devin laughing]

[Joe]: Exactly. So everybody; the Soviets, the Chinese, we all know it's called The Halibut, but he was still required to call it something else, so he calls it The Viperfish. That's how silly they are about this stuff.

[Devin]: Of course.

[Joe]: Yeah. I know, so the guy's name was Roger Dunham, and he was on board The Halibut, and The Halibut was equipped to trail an apparatus behind it which they called The Fish. The Fish was basically – remember this is in like, the early 70s and we didn't have digital photography and all that stuff. So what they had to do, is they had to trail this thing underneath the sub and behind the sub and do race track patterns; just go up and down in a grid pattern over the ocean floor. And then regularly haul the thing up back into the boat, pull off the film canisters, and develop the film.

[Devin]: Oh my god.

[Steve]: Ugh.

[Joe]: Yeah. And so, eventually the day came and they were down there for weeks looking around and eventually the day came when “Hey, we spotted something.” And so they had pictures of something on the ocean floor, you know the K 129. So, they had found what they were looking for and at that point that's when it's time to figure out what to do with it. It was laying on its side and one of the missiles had slid out of the top of the sail. There was this thought that got around that we should probably try to raise it. So The Glomar Explorer was built for that express purpose; of raising the submarine to explore their missile technology, maybe get a look at their code books.

And so The Glomar Explorer was purpose built for this very mission. It had this thing called the Claw; then it had a moon pool in the middle of the ship. The moon pool was just a big pool that was open on the bottom and it had doors that could close, but it could open up and it was 199 feet long. At either end of that there were these crane-type arrangements that essentially what they did is lower down these big, steel pipes; slowly lower them down. There were these other big, machinery pieces that would grab; and these were I believe 60 feet long, and they were threaded on either end. So you would lower this thing down all the way- these two pieces of steel that are attached to the claw, and then the cranes bring up two more big, huge tubes of steel and they are threaded into the ones below.

[Devin]: Like making a tent.

[Joe]: Yeah. And then those things are slowly lowered and the next pair of tubes are brought up, threaded in, slowly lowered. So the process of actually getting the claw down to the K129 took many days, and bringing it back up took many days. So, it was revealed many years after the fact that what had happened – the claw had five claws to it essentially that were like five individual claws that could grasp the submarine and then bring it back up. And so, unfortunately they had an unfortunate incident. According to what the Navy said they went down too fast, they slammed the claw into the ocean bottom.

[Steve]: Oops.

[Joe]: Yeah. And then they managed to maneuver it over to the submarine – and I don't know if I mentioned, but the claw actually had propellers and stuff on it. 'Cause they were such a long ways away, there was nothing they could do from there end as far as pushing on the pipes or anything to guide this thing. So they had to basically, using underwater cameras and lights and everything like that, they would use propellers that were mounted on this thing to pull it in various directions to get it centered over where it needed to be. They centered it over the wreckage and then they hooked the wreckage with the claw.

[Steve]: This makes me think of – if you ever take a tape measure and you run it out to about six foot; it's trying to bend and not quite break and you're trying to get it over to touch something. That's difficult, and that's just a six foot tape measure. This was two miles down?

[Joe]: Yeah. Two miles down.

[Steve]: Ugh.

[Joe]: Long ways down. It was a very difficult operation.

[Devin]: Tedious is, I think, the word that comes to mind.

[Joe]: Yeah. That too. And yet somehow they alas, on the way up, some of the claws broke and part of the submarine fell.

[Steve]: So they actually managed to hook it?

[Joe]: Yeah, they actually managed to get this thing wrapped around the sub, the claw was fully on the sub, bringing it up, and unfortunately some of the claws broke on the way back up, under the stress, and most of the submarine was lost. Essentially the nose remained, and the rest of it broke away.

[Devin]: Huh.

[Joe]: Yeah, so that is the official story. Of course there's a lot of problems with that story.

[Devin]: Did they get the nose? Did they bring it up?

[Joe]: Yeah, they did bring the nose up. They brought the nose up; they actually found the remains of some Soviet sailors. They gave them a burial at sea, supposedly.

[Steve]: Wait. Didn't they already have one of those?

[Joe]: Yeah, good point. But they didn't find much of value. There are several problems with this story.

[Steve]: Okay.

[Joe]: The K129 was 328 feet long.

[Steve]: The sub that they were retrieving.

[Joe]: Yeah, 328 feet long.

[Devin]: 328 feet.

[Joe]: 328 feet long. The moon pool of the Glomar Explorer was 199 feet long.

[Devin]: Huh.

[Steve]: Okay.

[Joe]: Now, if it was purpose built for the raising of a submarine that's 129 feet longer than the moon pool, you kind of got to ask why exactly didn't they make it a longer moon pool? When questioned about that, a Navy spokesman said that the plan was to haul it up and then have divers go down and cut the ends of the submarine off, because they were mainly interested in the middle part where the missiles were.

[Steve]: They were just going to cut it off?

[Devin]: But, that's more than half of the sub isn't it? That they would have to cut off.

[Steve]: About half.

[Joe]: Yeah, almost half. 328 feet; I'm assuming they would have had to cut it to no more than 190 feet long; to give it a little bit of play. 195 feet at the most. So yeah, they're losing a lot of sub there.

[Steve]: And it's a sub. It's not as if it's just a shell, and you cut the outside shell and it falls apart.

[Joe]: Exactly. The process of cutting the ends off; you're talking weeks.

[Devin]: At least.

[Joe]: Many weeks, because there's framing, there's decks, there's all kinds of piping and tubing all over.

[Devin]: That's the sort of things they do for months on a dry dock on a ship.

[Joe]: Yeah, exactly, but doing that underwater especially -

[Steve]: At sea.

[Joe]: At sea with waves and everything. The next problem is that somehow the nose remained. Somehow the nose remained in the claws even when the rest of the sub broke away. But it seems rather unlikely that even if there was damage to the sub – and I'm sure there was – it wouldn't be so extensive that the nose wouldn't have been pulled out with the rest of the wreckage out of the claws; it seems unlikely.

And last of all, how did they get the nose into the moon pool? Because, theoretically, the nose should have been sticking way out one end of the claws, if the rest of the sub had stayed behind.

[Steve]: Yeah.

[Joe]: So how exactly did they get that nose into the moon pool?

[Steve]: And there's no record that says quote-unquote “This is what we did”, correct?

[Joe]: Mm-hmm. How do you mean?

[Steve]: As in, this is how we got the nose into the moon pool.

[Joe]: Oh, yeah, no, they never explained that.

[Steve]: Well, I'm just thinking, okay let's just run with the story. We pull it up and a big chunk of it breaks away. Oh crud the only part that we've got left is what we meant to cut off and it won't fit in the hole. It's like trying to get something in your car that's too big; you have to tie it onto something and cinch it down and I can just imagine they would've gone in with some kind of cabling and attached the super structure, let go with the claw and it would have drifted down and then they would have craned it up through the moon pool.

[Joe]: That is entirely possible. They could've done something like that.

[Steve]: Okay.

[Joe]: They could've – I don't know if they had anything on board that was capable of hauling that much weight, besides the claw itself.

[Steve]: Uh huh.

[Joe]: But you know, they could've actually attached cables, dropped it, let it be suspended, bring the claw back down, grab it -

[Steve]: Yeah!

[Joe]: - And bring it back up. So that's entirely possible, if that's what they did.

[Steve]: I'm just thinking – okay let's say this story is true; the cover story that is the cover story for the first story. Let's just say that's true; that's the only plausible way I can see it happening.

[Devin]: I agree with that.

[Joe]: Yeah.

[Devin]: But, it is suspicious that if, you know, they custom built the ship – and you know I don't know anything about structural integrity of ships or anything like that – I don't know if it was impossible for them to do that.

[Steve]: To make it actually big enough?

[Devin]: To make it that long, you know, especially the moon pool. The ship would have to be pretty big.

[Joe]: It would have had to be very big to accommodate that large of a moon pool.

[Devin]: Um, but why would you do that?

[Joe]: Well, why would you go do all this trouble and expense to raise an obsolete, diesel submarine? I mean, really.

[Devin]: Yeah, I guess that's the real question isn't it?

[Joe]: There wasn't much in there. The Soviets had liquid fuel rockets, which was a technology that we had already abandoned in favor of solid fuel rockets.

[Steve]: Mm-hmm.

[Joe]: So it's not like we were really jonsing for their rocket technology. And of course -

[Steve]: And they were nukes, right?

[Joe]: Yeah. So it would have been probably possible they would have had some usefulness to see their nuclear war heads and tinkering with those a little bit. There would have been some usefulness there. But again, it probably would have been easier to just grab one of the rockets that had fallen out and have a much smaller operation that just goes down and grabs a rocket.

[Devin]: Yeah. So, are there theories about these problems?

[Joe]: No, I have no theories myself. Well, I have theories, but I don't believe them very much.

[Steve laughing]

[Joe]: There are a couple of theories. Oh and one other thing I wanted to mention too is that there's a guy who was involved with this project called John Craven who actually wrote his memoirs. He was in the Navy; not actually with the Navy; He was a scientist and he was involved with the Sonar search for not only the wreckage of K129 but he was actually the guy that orchestrated the search to find it through the sonar records; pin point its location. And he also was part of the search to find The Scorpion which was a US submarine that sank in 1968. It was a Skipjack class sub that sank in the Atlantic of the Azores. So he wrote his memoirs, and in his memoirs he was talking about Project Azorian and he had seen the photos taken by The Halibut and he was surprised to hear that what the photographs were of was a diesel submarine.

[Devin]: Hmm.

[Joe]: That's what he said.

[Steve]: Did he say what he thought they were going to be?

[Joe]: He – no, he didn't say what the photographs were of. He just said basically that it was not a diesel submarine.

[Steve]: Have these photos ever been released?

[Joe]: Not that I know of, no.

[Steve]: Hmm, and this happened, again, what was the year they pulled it, '68?

[Joe]: Nah, that was the year that the submarine sank. It was the early '70s when it was actually pulled up.

[Steve]: Oh. Okay. Freedom of Information Act extends how far back?

[Joe]: I don't know, I would say it's long past time to release those things, and actually I have not yet researched that. My bad. I should probably try to find out if any of those photographs have been released. But I really suspect they haven't been released, because what I suspect actually happened is that when the K129 sank – say for example the rudder is straight and the stern planes have been straightened, and so you start to sink, and eventually if your nose is a little off you'll start going vertical. And at that point your control surface system of the submarine basically acts like flutes on an arrow.

[Steve]: And they drag you downward.

[Joe]: They drag you downward. Essentially you're going to wind up going straight down. So when the K129 it probably went down nose first and the nose was completely demolished, and so that's why the navy felt very comfortable saying that they'd recovered the nose. Because the nose no longer existed anyway.

[Steve]: Okay.

[Devin]: That's fair.

[Joe]: What I believe is that the Glomar explorer was built for another mission and it performed that mission; and then later on as part of their little cover story, they went out to this part of the Pacific where this submarine had sunk and they parked out there for weeks, and pretended to raise the wreckage of the submarine. That is my belief.

Now whatever it was they actually raised, I'm not sure. It could have been the wreckage of The Scorpion which I mentioned a few minutes ago. There was actually speculation in the submarining community that the Scorpion had been sunk by the Soviets. So there probably was motivation to raise the wreckage and find out what precisely had sunk the Scorpion.

[Steve]: Ah.

[Devin]: How big was The Scorpion?

[Joe]: Well, that's the problem. The Scorpion was 252 feet long.

[Devin]: So also too big for the -

[Joe]: Well, yeah. When it hit it kinda hit nose-first, so what happened is part of the after section telescoped in.

[Devin]: So it scrunched.

[Joe]: So it did get compressed somewhat. I was doing a little research to try to find out exactly how extensive the damage was and basically how short the Scorpion had become from its impact. I've seen pictures – and of course these pictures could be doctored pictures, too.

[Devin]: Sure.

[Joe]: Because they were able to take underwater pictures of The Scorpion, but if it was actually

torpedoed they would probably airbrush that. Because they'd be admitting that well, if the Soviets have basically declared war on you by committing an act of war, then you have to do something about it.

[Devin]: Yeah.

[Joe]: So, the story I've heard- I know some submariners, and submarines are known as a silent service because they never talk about their stuff., But of course, they talk all the time. I heard from a couple of them that yeah [unable to make out what is said].

And I had read that the Navy had indeed, the wreckage somewhere. But again, could be just pure b.s.

[Steve]: Pure garbage.

[Joe]: So anyway, it's a mystery. So we don't know. It could have been the wreckage of maybe an experimental Soviet sub, or maybe one of our experimental submarines. It could have been a UFO.

[Steve]: So obviously we don't know exactly what it did, but after this mission, what did they do with The Glomar Explorer?

[Joe]: The Glomar Explorer got refitted. Actually I had the good fortune to actually see The Glomar Explorer. It was right here in Portland, that was I think '98 or '99- somewhere in there. I was taking a jet boat ride; you know the jet boats?

[Steve]: Yeah.

[Joe]: Right there by the USS Blueback.

[Steve]: Right.

[Devin]: Yeah.

[Joe]: The Almighty Blueback. So, I took a jet boat ride and then we went up to cascade general shipyard and right outside the shipyard was The Glomar Explorer. It was here for a refit. Apparently – and I forget exactly what they refitted it for, but it's still in service, and it's 619 feet long.

[Steve]: So how wide was the moon pool?

[Joe]: How wide was the moon pool?

[Steve]: Yeah, I'm trying to get a general scale of this ship- of the Glomar.

[Devin]: So like, how big is the Glomar.

[Steve]: Yeah. I mean is it a giant block floating in the ocean essentially? I'm just trying to get an idea.

[Joe]: It actually looks like a ship. I've actually got a picture here. It's 619 feet long, and you can see those towers there. Those are the towers that those great bit steel pipes go in.

[Steve]: Oh, I'm glad you showed me the photo, because it looks just like any other ocean-going vessel.

I expected this thing to be some crazy wide and flat thing to accommodate the weight and pull.

[Joe]: You thought it would look like some sort of floating dry dock.

[Steve]: Yeah. Essentially that's what I would have expected it to be.

[Devin]: Me too.

[Joe]: It's 619 feet long, it has a regular bow and everything. It's just got that fenced in beam. Let's take a look at this. So anyway it was moth-balled, eventually refitted, and eventually got sold off and it's still in service today.

[Steve]: Feeling the radiation of it.

[Devin]: Do you know what they're doing with it?

[Joe]: Yeah it was converted; caches general modified to what they call a dynamically deep drilling ship, capable of drilling waters down to 7500 feet.

[Devin]: Oh so it's oil drilling.

[Joe]: With some modification it's up to something like 11,500 feet.

[Steve]: So Devin's right, it's a giant drilling ship now.

[Joe]: Yeah. Basically yeah. Kind of like an oil platform. I think more for exploration-

[Devin]: Than a mobile...

[Joe]: It's probably too valuable a thing to actually use as an oil platform.

[Devin]: Sure.

[Joe]: But yeah, it's still in service. And who knows; knowing the Navy, they're obsessed with secrecy but there's probably still a couple of code books lying around in some old back room.

[Steve]: So, the Hughes Corporation built this and when the Hughes corporation went down did any other information ever come out? I mean, I know he was a fanatic for secrecy, but I'm just curious if anything ever slipped out other than that break in that initially told us what was going on.

[Joe]: Not that I'm aware of, no. It was all still secret. I mean, they're pretty good about keeping secrets, believe it or not.

[Devin]: Do we know if that break in was motivated by secrecy?

[Joe]: It could have been motivated by a desire to get the cover story out there.

[Devin]: Sure.

[Steve]: Wait, which cover story?

[Joe]: Yeah, exactly; there's always more than one.

[Steve]: No, I'm serious, what was the cover story originally?

[Joe]: The original cover story is that it was built for the mining of Manganese Modules

[Steve]: Okay, then there's a break in.

[Joe]: Then there's a break in which blew that cover story apparently. So now we get to the next cover story which is they're raising an obsolete diesel submarine off the Pacific Ocean floor.

[Steve]: Okay, except that doesn't hold water, no pun intended.

[Joe]: But cover stories are always like that. You never have just one. They're like an onion. Peel back the layers, to the next -

[Devin]: The next, stinky tier.

[Joe]: Yeah, exactly.

[Steve]: So, it's possible that the break in had motivation.

[Joe]: It's possible that for some reason, perhaps they wanted to tweak the Soviets a little bit.

[Steve]: That's true. It was the '70s.

[Devin]: Yeah.

[Steve]: And it's still the Cold War.

[Joe]: Yeah, perhaps they didn't necessarily want to tell the truth about why exactly they had built this ship and done whatever they'd done with it. They decided that maybe it'd be fun to tweak the Soviets. We've already done what we wanted to do with it. Lets take it out to the Pacific, park it somewhere, pretend to be raising their sub and then we'll blow our little cover story and tweak the Sovs.

[Steve]: Are there any wild theories? Any theories out there that are weird and crazy?

[Joe]: I have not heard any. This thing is like not really part of the theory circuit. This thing is not that huge. It's not a story that a lot of people are really into.

[Steve]: Okay I was waiting to hear that this is where we discovered Velcro or something crazy like that.

[Devin]: Yeah. A few years later, Velcro! You explain that.

[Steve]: Timing.

[Joe]: Yeah exactly. There it was on the ocean floor.

[Hosts laughing]

[Devin]: The logical place for Velcro.

[Joe]: What the hell is this? Look at this wow!

[Steve]: I can hold my shoes together.

[Devin]: It's perfect!

[Joe]: I love Velcro.

[Devin]: Who doesn't?

[Joe]: Are we gonna do a show about Velcro?

[Devin]: Let's do a show about Velcro.

[Steve]: We'll have to do that.

[Joe]: Mysteries with Velcro. Well anyway, that's about it with the story. If I think of anything that I overlooked, I will just sandwich it in at the beginning of the next story.

[Steve]: Or we can just update the website.

[Joe]: I am going to continue to research this story. It's a fascinating story and I think that someday we'll finally find out what they actually did with The Glomar Explorer.
For those of you who are interested in following up with more fascinating detail or if maybe you just want to go over it again.

[Steve]: It's thinkingsidewayspodcast@gmail.com

[Joe]: And if you'd like to write us, if you're Dr John Craven and you want to talk about some of the details of that stuff; we'd love to hear from you. Anybody else out there also, Roger Dunham
That's it for tonight.

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