

Crabb, Emsworth Cockles and the Cold War

by Steve Miller

In April 1956 there was a Cold War going on between the Soviet Union and the West.

But what did I need to know about that? I was 13 years of age and although living in Emsworth, I was attending Portsmouth Building School for Boys. One school day the science teacher, Mr Monckom, announced that 10 lucky boys from our class had been selected to pay a visit to Portsmouth Dockyard to see three Soviet warships that would be arriving in Portsmouth.

The Communist Party First Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev, and Soviet Premier, Nikolai Bulganin, were coming to Britain on a goodwill visit on board the *Ordzhonikidze*. The cruiser, together with two other warships from the Russian Navy, would be docked at Portsmouth. The warships were scheduled to arrive on 18th April 1956. The visit was to last four days. It was all part of Khrushchev's plan to try to rid the Soviet Union of the ruthless reputation it had gained during Josef Stalin's brutal rule.

I was one of the 'lucky 10' selected for the visit and that's how I began to get a little closer to the Cold War.

After meeting the rest of the party at school on Sunday 22nd April we set off for the Dockyard. On arrival we were met by our hosts from the Soviet Navy. We were escorted around the ships by friendly Soviet seamen exchanging Navy cap badges and Russian cigarettes in return for small change sterling coins.

We concluded our visit with fond farewells and handshakes whilst clutching our spoils. Not a hint of East/West conflict, Glasnost and Perestroika abounded almost 30 years before Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the policies. All was sweetness and light above the waterline but something more sinister may have been taking place in the murky waters below the boats! But more of that later!



*Russian Cruiser
Ordzhonikidze (above)*



*Red and Gold Soviet cap
badge (left)*

Fast forward 13 months or so to Sunday 9th June 1957. Being an Emsworth boy, summer weekends always involved some activity close to the sea. This particular Sunday we (myself and four or five pals) had planned a day out on the sands around Pilsey Island to do a spot of cockling.

It was mid-morning as we approached the Thorney Airfield gatehouse on our bicycles and it was obvious something was different this day. There were extra guards at the gate and they informed us that there would be no cockling expeditions as the sands at Pilsey were 'off limits' to all personnel.

Disappointed, we headed back down the Thorney Road where we were met by an Emsworth fisherman. We related our story and the fisherman informed us that the gatehouse security had no jurisdiction over certain areas of foreshore and they could not prevent our planned expedition. So with renewed optimism, together with our well-informed companion to carry out negotiations, we approached the gatehouse again.

After a few minutes of much deliberation we were through and cycling merrily on towards Pilsey Sands.

When we arrived, it was low tide and the sands as always were exposed for a considerable area. But on the west side of what was Pilsey Island at high tide, there were canvas screens erected on the sands. Official looking men milled around the area and we guessed that this had something to do with the original stance of the gatehouse personnel.

However, we were there to do a job and without a further thought of what was going on behind the screens, we spent the rest of the day cockling on the sands. Back at home, even before our cockles had finished their saltwater soak, rumours started to circulate around Emsworth. The town was buzzing with stories regarding the reasons for the additional security on Thorney Island and the mysterious screens on Pilsey Sands.

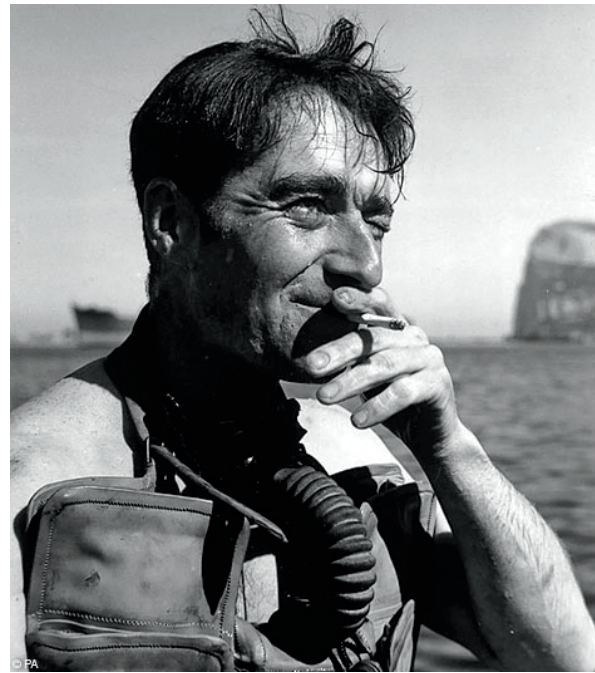
Apparently a body had been found in Chichester Harbour by fishermen and landed on the sands at Pilsey.

Police and Ministry officials had been summoned and they had called for the additional security measures to be put in place whilst they carried out their investigations. One thing was certain amongst the rumours, there was a body and there was some attempt to keep too much detail from the general public.

Even now there is a great deal of uncertainty about what really led up to that Sunday in 1957, but after months/years have passed a 'story' has emerged which goes like this...

The body is now popularly believed to have been that of Commander Lionel (Buster) Crabb. Crabb was a Royal Navy diver in World War II. He was awarded the George Medal and an OBE for his wartime exploits.

Apparently MI6 recruited Crabb in 1956. In an April 1956 assignment, Crabb dived into Portsmouth Harbour to investigate 'certain features' of the Soviet cruiser *Ordzhonikidze*. But he was never seen alive again. Crabb's companion, who had stayed with him in the Sally Port Hotel in Portsmouth, removed all



Commander Crabb

his belongings and also took the page of the hotel register on which they had signed in. Ten days later British newspapers published stories about Crabb's disappearance following an underwater mission.

MI6 tried to cover up this mission. A week after our school outing on 29th April 1956, the Admiralty announced that Crabb had vanished when he had taken part in trials of secret underwater apparatus in Stokes Bay in the Solent. The Soviets responded by releasing a statement stating that the crew of the *Ordzhonikidze* had seen a frogman near the cruiser.

A little less than 14 months after Crabb's disappearance, a body in a diving suit was brought to the surface in their net by two fishermen off Pilsey Island in Chichester Harbour. The body was brought to shore in a landing craft operated by members of RAF Marine Craft Unit No. 1107. It was missing the head and both hands, which made it impossible to positively identify the body given the technology available at that time. Expert witnesses claimed that the body had the same height as Crabb, the same

Continued overleaf

*Crabb, Emsworth Cockles and the Cold War
continued*

body-hair colour, and was dressed in the same clothes: Pirelli two-piece diving suit and Admiralty Pattern swim fins. Crabb was allegedly wearing a similar outfit when he embarked on his final mission, wherever that may have been?

However, neither Crabb's ex-wife, nor his girlfriend were able to identify the headless body as that of Crabb.

A pathologist examined the body and stated in a short report for the inquest that a careful examination of the body failed to reveal any body scars or marks that would positively identify Crabb. In a complete turnaround, following a subsequent re-examination, the pathologist reported that he had found a scar in the shape of an inverted Y on the left side of the left knee, and a scar on the left thigh, about the size of a sixpenny coin.

*But did this prove that it was Crabb's body
pulled out of Chichester Harbour?*

*Did he die in Portsmouth Harbour during his
dive?*

*Was he murdered by MI5 (responsible for
home intelligence) owing to his unreliability
and the fact that the mission would cause
embarrassment to the government?*

Did he defect to the Soviets?

Was he acting as a double agent anyway?

We have a story, but the truth surrounding these mysterious events may never be known.

A little more may be revealed when Cabinet papers are belatedly released in 2057. Too late for me!

The only thing that is certain in all this, my friends and I, on two separate occasions, were very close to this Cold War 'mystery' of the 1950s.