



Search

**U.S.**  
**World**  
**Business**  
**Tech & Science**  
**Culture**  
**Sports**  
**Health**  
**Opinion**



## A CRY FROM THE DEEP

BY **JOHN BARRY** ON 11/5/00 AT 7:00 PM

NEWS

The letter came from a steel tomb on the floor of the Barents Sea. "All personnel from compartments six, seven and eight moved to the ninth," wrote a round-faced, 27-year-old naval officer, Lt. Capt. Dmitry Kolesnikov. Nearly two hours had passed since the shattering explosion that sank the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk last Aug. 12, killing most of the 118 crew members almost immediately. The watertight ninth compartment was designed for escape, and it happened to be the farthest part of the submarine from the site of the explosion. "There are 23 of us here," wrote Kolesnikov. Apparently some of the survivors were hideously burned; others had been injured by flying debris. Two or three sailors tried to flee through a hatch on the top of the compartment but found the escape tube flooded. The lights were dimming, the temperature was dropping, water was leaking in and the air was turning foul. "None of us," Kolesnikov wrote, "can get to the surface."

The note began with neat, cursive handwriting, suggesting the lights were still on. It included a message for Kolesnikov's wife, Olga, whom he had married only three months before; Russian officials kept that part private when the letter was discovered last week. On the back of the paper, the writing is smudged, nearly illegible. By then, apparently, the lights had gone out for good. "I am writing blind," Kolesnikov scribbled. Then he wrapped the letter in plastic and put it into his pocket, where it was found after a Russian diver recovered the sailor's body and three others from the Kursk.

out for good. "I am writing blind," Kolesnikov scribbled. Then he wrapped the letter in plastic and put it into his pocket, where it was found after a Russian diver recovered the sailor's body and three others from the Kursk.

Kolesnikov's letter was a harpoon to the heart of his country. The Russian Navy had insisted the entire crew died within a minute or two of the explosion that sank the sub; it didn't matter, officials implied, that Moscow waited four days before requesting foreign help for a slow-starting rescue effort. For nearly a week after the explosion, Russian President Vladimir Putin continued his vacation at Sochi on the Black Sea, saying there was nothing he could do about the accident. Then came Kolesnikov's letter, bringing with it fresh recriminations. "I had a feeling that my husband did not die immediately," Olga Kolesnikova said in a Russian TV interview. She said Dmitry seemed to have "a premonition of death" before he went to sea for the last time and left her a romantic poem that talked about "when the time comes to die." "He's a lovely man," Olga said, tears spilling down her face. "I want to see him again and read his letter."

## **Keep Up With This Story And More [By Subscribing Now](#)**

Could Kolesnikov and the others have been rescued? Adm. Vyacheslav Popov, commander of Russia's Northern Fleet, says the 23 men would have died, probably by asphyxiation, "no later than Aug. 13, and most likely before midnight of Aug. 12"--long before effective rescue efforts were begun. "There was no way to save the sailors," insists Ilya Klebanov, a deputy prime minister. But what if Kolesnikov and his mates lived longer than the Russian Navy has admitted? Tapping sounds came from inside the submarine on Aug. 13 and 14, and a message was flashed out. "SOS. Water," it said. "If action had been taken in the first few days, it is possible those 23, at least, could have been saved," argues Vadim Solovyov, editor of a Russian military magazine.

But it took that much time, and more, to deploy the sophisticated foreign equipment that was finally called in after Russia's own rescue attempts failed. Britain's LR5 sub had to be flown from Scotland to Norway and then carried by a mother ship to the scene of the wreck. "It is unlikely that any survivors would have lived for more than one or two days trapped in Section 9," says Capt. Richard Sharp, former skipper of a British nuclear submarine and now editor of Jane's Fighting Ships. "This is not sufficient time for LR5 to reach and rescue. The fact that the Russians did not call for Britain's help earlier makes no difference to the survivors in this case."

The published portion of Kolesnikov's letter shed no light on the cause of the disaster. Russian officials have been pushing a collision theory. "I am 80 percent sure the Kursk collided with

another submarine," Adm. Vladimir Kuroyedov, chief of the Russian Navy, said a few days before the letter was found. "And in a couple of months, I will find the missing 20 percent and tell the world who it was." But so far, that Russian theory doesn't add up. U.S. and Norwegian sonar recorded the calamity: the sound of a small explosion, followed by the noise of a sub struggling toward the surface; then an immense explosion and the sound of the Kursk crunching onto the ocean floor. The NATO recordings show no trace of another sub in the area and no sound of a collision; if a Russian recording contained such evidence, it surely would have been released by now. President Clinton ordered the U.S. analysis to be sent to the Russians, who so far have not challenged it.

So what sank the Kursk? The likeliest explanation, according to Western experts, is that torpedo fuel exploded first--the Kursk was testing a new and cheaper but more volatile fuel--which soon set off the rippling explosion of missile warheads. Another possibility is that the Kursk hit a mine left over from World War II or the cold war.

The slow-moving recovery may eventually offer more clues--but not soon. The diving rig has been hired only until Nov. 13; by then, weather conditions will become too harsh. Last week snowstorms and howling seas were already shutting down the recovery operation. A complete autopsy on the submarine itself will have to wait until next spring or summer, when an effort is expected to bring the entire wreck to the surface.

Putin said the investigation would go on as "a last homage to our hero-sailors," and he promised "maximum openness" about the cause of the catastrophe. Three weeks ago his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, criticized Putin's handling of the disaster. "He should have reacted urgently and flown from Sochi to Moscow," Yeltsin told a British interviewer. "Fortunately," the ex-president added, "Putin is a quick learner." The lesson of the Kolesnikov letter is that Russians are still angry, heartsore and suspicious about their government's handling of the crisis.

**REQUEST REPRINT** OR **SUBMIT CORRECTION**

## Promoted Links

Ads by Revcontent

**You Already Pay for Amazon Prime -**

**You Should Never Shop on Amazon**

**Siemens Bluetooth Hearing Aids Will Change Your Life**

**25 Photos North Korea Doesn't Want**