

Naval War College Review

Volume 38
Number 3 *Summer*

Article 9

1985

The Hunt for Red October

Stephen P. Reinertsen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Reinertsen, Stephen P. (1985) "The Hunt for Red October," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 38 : No. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol38/iss3/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

PROFESSIONAL READING

The Navy has a long history of official and quasi-official support of literature and the arts, some good and some bad. It has every reason to be as proud of *Red October* as it was of *Victory at Sea*, WWII combat artists' paintings, Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* and the like.

Captain Stephen P. Reinertsen, US Navy Reserve (Ret.)

Clancy, Thomas L., Jr. *The Hunt for Red October*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1984. 387pp. \$14.95

Seafarer and author Peter Freuchen, concluding his epic *Book of the Seven Seas*, reflects “. . . sailors have time to make up yarns and people on shore often like to believe them.” Of late, a nautical yarn sweeping the land reveals a flip side to Freuchen's observation: nowadays people on shore also have time to make up yarns and sailors often like to believe them. If not to believe, at least to rush to the nearest bookshop and buy them.

How about a sea story with over 155,000 copies sold in a few months—now in its seventh printing—fifth on *Time's* national best-seller list and first on Washington, DC and San Francisco lists—the Pentagon bookstore can't keep it in stock—acclaimed by President Reagan—paperback and foreign rights sold for princely sums—movie and TV negotiations underway?

Written by an insurance broker who's never before been in print, much less been to sea, and published by a small scholarly group out of their second-floor carrels over the Naval Academy Museum? With no agent, no Madison Avenue publisher hype?

Captain Reinertsen, back from overseas and US travels collecting tall tales, is writing an anecdotal history of the Navy/Lockheed P2(V) Neptune aircraft.

What's going on here, has fiction become stranger than truth?

For *The Hunt for Red October* author Tom Clancy and the Naval Institute Press, indeed it has. If not stranger than truth, certainly more wondrous. Consider: In 1983, the Institute Press rattled hardly any cages with a policy turnabout: they would publish their first work of fiction, if only they could find one "wet" enough. While somewhere the founding fathers may have winced, the decision wasn't exactly precipitous—it took 110 years.

Meanwhile, some miles south of Annapolis along Route 260 just west of Chesapeake Bay, 35-year-old Tom Clancy and his wife Wanda were prospering, serving about 1,000 southern Maryland clients from the O.F. Bowen Insurance Agency at Owings in Calvert County. Days, Clancy's beat-up old electric typewriter continued to underwrite insurance policies, while nights were given over to something new: hair-raising confrontations between Soviet and US missile-laden "boomers" and nuclear attack boats, playing deadly cat-and-mouse games—for keeps—all the underseas Atlantic a chessboard, with neither Washington nor Moscow blinking first—or at Armageddon.

Clancy's typewriter got little rest. For this improbable task landlubber Clancy didn't start quite from scratch. For tactical background, he had enjoyed a \$9.95 naval-engagement wargame (Harpoon) on his home computer. Then there was the 1975 real-world story of the attempted defection of the Soviet frigate *Storozhevoy* to Sweden, which Clancy had mulled over for years and was the original inspiration for *Red October*, plus a long-smoldering urge to do some serious writing.

Of practical help were his English degree from Loyola College in Baltimore, tips from some client friends—ex-USN submariners—at a nearby nuclear power plant, and every unclassified technical and tactical book he could get his hands on. He was not a total stranger at the Institute Press offices; earlier they had paid him \$35 for a *Proceedings* brief on MX missiles, and they kindly loaned him *Guide to the Soviet Navy* and *Combat Fleets of the World*. Not long after the Institute Press' decision to publish fiction, Clancy's first draft dropped in over the transom, and the rest is still making publishing history.

The novel's good-guy protagonists are Jack (Armstrong?) Ryan, the all-American CIA agent with ties to the White House and moles in the Kremlin, and straight-arrow senior Captain Marko Ramius, skipper of the *Red October*, the latest and finest missile boat in the Soviet submarine service. It seems that Ramius' beloved wife has been done in by the bumbling Moscow medics, and the brooding Ramius decides to get even by conning *Red October*, with her unique supersilent, supersecret propulsion gear, on a zigzag course 4,500 miles westward under the Atlantic—bound for Norfolk.

To stop him, the Soviets throw everything they have into, onto and over the Atlantic; contrariwise, the Americans go all out to help him escape.

Peacetime rules of engagement, while still operative, tend to get bent by contact area commanders. Time and again, the White House and the Kremlin go to the brink—tension mounting—then back off to await the next contact.

Clancy freely admits he wants the good guys to triumph. While we live in a world infinitely shaded in grays, it is pleasant to be led through simpler labyrinths, however illusory, wherein the righteous ultimately win and villains get their just deserts. This is reading for fun, whopping good fun. According to our Commander in Chief, upon inviting the Clancys to lunch at the White House, “The perfect yarn . . . non-put-downable.” It would be terribly unfair to the few of you who may not yet have read it to reveal more of the plot—so I shall not.

However, to qualify for the “Professional Reading” section of the *Naval War College Review*, a book review should deliver at least one solemn professional observation, in this instance a hypothesis: Should the portrayal of a sub skipper crippled by a veto-wielding “political observer” and a surly crew of poorly trained enlisted draftees even approach reality in the USSR submarine service, then we may all breathe a bit easier. Alas, viewed from an entire career retrospective in ASW, I fear Clancy’s Red October crew is only good fiction.

While we’re waxing solemn, a tiny few of the old guard on both coasts have grouched about the Naval Institute Press going “commercial” in electing to publish fiction. Had *Red October* not been a success, I doubt we would have heard from them.

In rebuttal, let us here call up what the founders had in mind: “The advancement of professional *literary*, and scientific knowledge in the naval and maritime services, and the advancement of the knowledge of sea power.” (Emphasis is mine.)

The Navy has a long history of official and quasi-official support of literature and the arts, some good and some bad. It has every reason to be as proud of *Red October* as it was of *Victory at Sea*, WWII combat artists’ paintings, Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific* and the like. Contrast last year’s nighttime soap bomb, NAS Emerald Groupie or whatever, which must have had some kind of Navy cooperation, with the squeaky-clean, on-its-own-merits success of *Red October*.

The Institute Press is taking all this steady as she goes. Says the marketing director regarding alleged “profit.” “The income has to go for other projects. The *Proceedings* of the U.S. Naval Institute has to be subsidized by the book program And our various membership activities benefit by the book sales. But there’s no profit.” While they have no immediate plans to publish another novel, they will “. . . publish occasional fiction that meets our standards.”

For a collegiate press noted for naval academia tomes, *The Bluejackets Manual* and Dutton’s *Navigation and Piloting*—their average press run is 3,000—

5,000 copies—they may be forgiven a few Cheshire cat grins above the Museum these days.

I read the book prior to learning of Clancy's background; the dust jacket and introductory pages were silent on the subject. Curious, I mailed copies to two friends, both ex-USN nuc boat skippers. Their telephoned reactions were nearly identical: after bawling me out for losing a night's sleep, they suspected, as had I, that Clancy could only have emerged dripping wet from the underseas USN to write with such technical acumen. While they both had some reservations about the plausibility of the underseas tactics and scenarios, they brushed these aside and pronounced the book a fascinating read.

Red October probably will not give either Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* or Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* a run for the all-time maritime literary sweepstakes; it matters not. Among contemporary writers, however, this reviewer ranks *Red October* as standing tall among Edward L. Beach's *Run Silent, Run Deep* and successor submarine novels, and Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*. In my opinion, the early Michener tales rank a cut above Clancy's first, in sensitivity, lucidity and character development. While these are tall trees for a first-time author to stand among, Clancy has earned it. "I didn't get kissed by the muse," he told *Time* magazine, "It was hard work."

With aplomb, Clancy has proved that he can write a great adventure yarn. The old electric typewriter has been replaced with a Macintosh computer wordprocessor, and all systems are go. The report is we will be reading more of Jack Ryan, the all-American CIA agent; also, Clancy is collaborating with Larry Bond, a naval analyst, on a book tentatively to be called *Sunset*.

We await with pleasure. Our hearty congratulations to Tom Clancy and the Naval Institute Press for *The Hunt for Red October*!