

'Russian spy whale': the disturbing history of military marine mammals

30 April 2019, by Gervase Phillips



The beluga whale was reportedly very friendly. Credit: Jorgen Ree Wiig/Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries

Norwegian fishermen were [reportedly approached](#) by a beluga whale wearing a Russian harness, complete with GoPro camera holder, [sparking speculation](#) that the animal had been trained to gather intelligence by the Russian Navy. While this theory has not been confirmed, it is entirely plausible: armed forces around the world have a long and disturbing history of exploiting marine mammals.

In the late 19th century, European militaries had [come to appreciate](#) that thoroughly-trained and well-handled dogs could perform useful military services, such as finding wounded soldiers on the battlefield and guarding military installations and outposts. Over the course of the 20th century, new roles were found for them: notably, [detecting mines and explosives](#) during World War II.

Given the success achieved with dogs, it was perhaps inevitable that experiments would begin with other intelligent and trainable [animals](#), including marine mammals. The earliest of these

experiments took place during World War I, when Britain's Royal Navy unsuccessfully attempted to train [sea lions](#) to locate German submarines.

The early training – conducted at a facility on Lake Bala in Gwynedd, Wales – went well. But once the sea lions [were released](#) into the open sea, they were generally found to be more interested in pursuing shoals of fish than U-boats – much to the frustration of the officers involved.

Navy dolphins

These efforts were revived by the US and other nations during the Cold War, following the discovery that dolphins use [echolocation](#) to navigate underwater, emitting high frequency "clicking" sounds and listening for the echos that bounce back off their surroundings to locate and identify nearby objects.

A number of species of marine mammals, including dolphins, porpoises, sea lions, orcas, belugas and pilot whales, drew the attention of rival militaries. Not only do these animals possess extraordinary sensory and physical abilities, they can also change their behaviour – traits which meant they could be trained to perform much the same tasks at sea that dogs performed on land.

In coldly scientific language – and with little acknowledgement of the sophisticated intelligence and capacity for emotion expressed by these animals – one American manufacturer of military sonar equipment [described them](#) as: "Self-propelled marine vehicle[s], or platform[s]; with a built-in sonar sensor system suitable for detecting and classifying targets; and carrying an on-board computer ... capable of being programmed for complex performance."

The United States Navy began its [marine mammal](#) programme in 1960, originally hoping to both improve the hydrodynamics of its torpedoes, and its

ability to detect objects under water, by studying dolphins. Yet the scope of this programme appeared to expand rapidly. Dolphins were soon being trained to locate enemy mines and lost objects on the seabed.

According to [American journalist David Morrison](#), a team of dolphins was also deployed to South Vietnam to guard the US fleet anchored in Cam Ranh Bay against saboteurs in 1971. He also asserted that navy dolphins were transported to the Persian Gulf in 1987 to detect Iranian mines, and guard against enemy frogmen attempting to attack the US Navy's floating command post.

Protests for porpoises

The use of these animals for military purposes has caused much controversy over the years. One of the more disturbing questions concerns what exactly these dolphins have been trained to do, should they encounter enemy saboteurs. In 1976, Michael Greenwood – a veteran of the Navy dolphin project – [claimed that](#) dolphins assigned to the "swimmer nullification program" were equipped with syringes filled with carbon dioxide to kill intruders.

Despite vehement denials from the US Navy, such allegations have frequently resurfaced. Soviet Russia [reportedly trained dolphins](#) in a similar manner at a facility in Crimea on the Black Sea. In 2000, [the BBC reported](#) that many of these dolphins were sold to Iran, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The facility was re-opened by the Ukrainian Navy in 2012, but since the Russian annexation in 2014 has been [back in the hands](#) of the Russian Navy (although Ukrainian sources [claim that](#) the dolphins have since starved, having refused to accept food from Russian handlers).

The treatment of these animals has been another matter of long-standing concern. David Morrison reported allegations of systematic mistreatment and poor standards of care for animals in the American programme, noting that it had become the focus of animal rights activism. According to [one report](#) in May 1987, "someone billing himself only as 'Charly Tuna of RainBoWarriors', cut the nets around four of the San Diego dolphin enclosures".

Certainly, a great deal of the secrecy continues to surround the military use of sea mammals. And as Morrison observed as far back as 1989, this reflects "the fear of exciting [public opposition](#) to its efforts, opposition sparked by the great affinity that so many humans feel for these engaging creatures".

More recently, animal rights organisation People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) [has protested](#) the US deployment of dolphins to the Persian Gulf, stating: "It is not ethical to put animals in harm's way ... War is a human endeavor, and while people and political parties may decide war is necessary, animals cannot."

Whatever the exact origin of the (apparently friendly) beluga whale discovered in Norwegian waters, the story serves as a reminder that marine mammals are still commonly exploited for military purposes in the modern world. Their replacement by robotic submersibles seems, at the moment, a regrettably distant prospect.

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