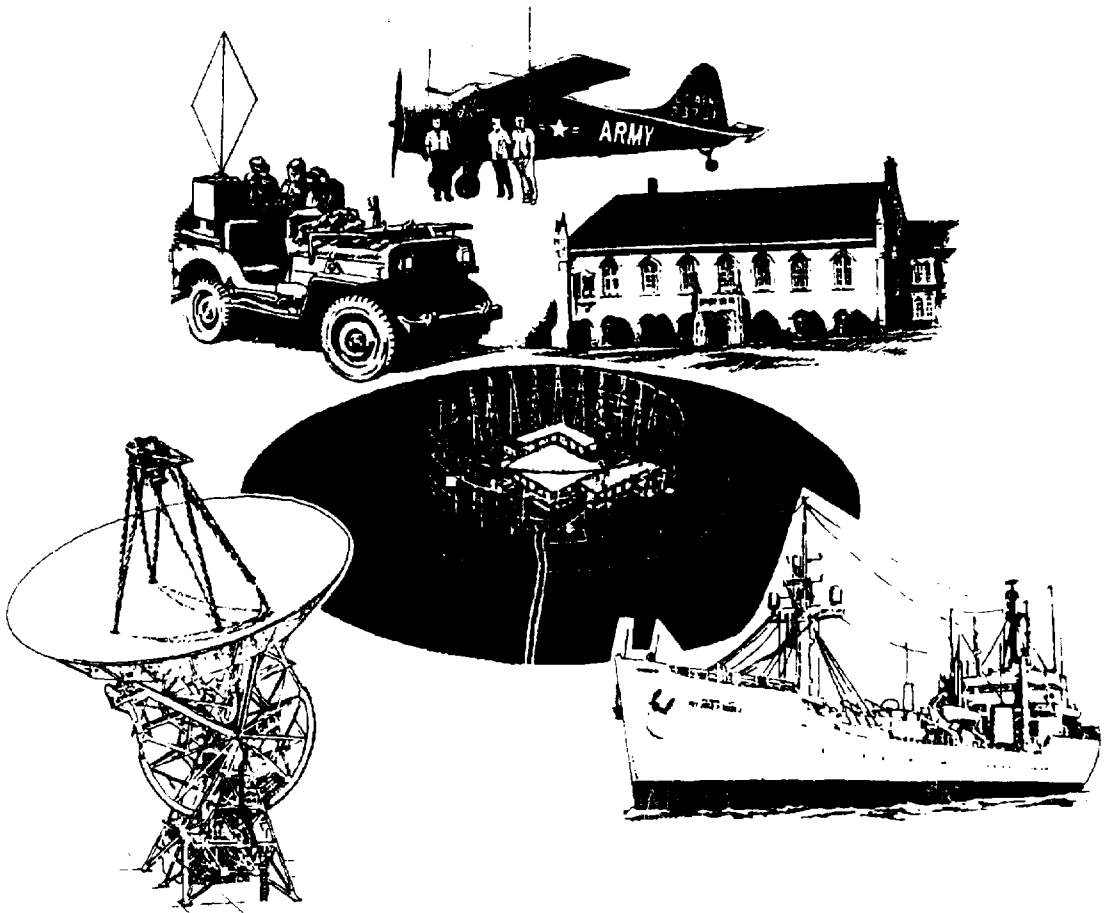


UNITED STATES CRYPTOLOGIC HISTORY



American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945-1989

Book II: Centralization Wins, 1960-1972



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THE CRISIS IN THE GULF

Well, I am the guy who rose from the ashes, and twenty years later telling you I saw it, and there were no boats.

Adm. James B. Stockdale, Navy pilot, concerning the 4 August attack

In the many years of conflict in Vietnam, no single incident stands out as more controversial than the 4 August 1964 incident in the Gulf of Tonkin. In it, two American destroyers patrolling in international waters were supposedly shot at by North Vietnamese gunboats. In retaliation, an angry president launched the first air raids on the North, and a few days later Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, giving Lyndon Johnson a free hand to deal with North Vietnam in whatever manner he felt best suited the situation. For America, it was the beginning of an apparently irrevocable descent into the maelstrom.

NSA25X1
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The Desoto Patrols

The attack on the destroyers originated with the Desoto patrols. These were begun in 1962 as patrolling operations along the Chinese coast. There were three objectives: intelligence collection, realistic training, and assertion of freedom of the seas. Naval Security Group detachments on board pursued the collection of ELINT and naval COMINT. However, to naval authorities the mission of freedom of the seas clearly stood first, and training second; intelligence was the third priority. By December, the patrols had been extended to the coasts of Korea and North Vietnam.⁵⁸ The rationale was to support special operations under OPLAN 34A.

OPLAN 34A stemmed from CIA covert operations which had been going on since the early 1960s under various names. Most of these involved the nighttime coastal insertion of ARVN commando forces, whose mission was sabotage. By early 1964 the Army had taken over most of the operations, under OPLAN 34A. The Desoto patrols were extended to North Vietnam primarily to provide SIGINT support to the commando raids.⁵⁹ In addition to NSG afloat detachments on board Desoto craft, the Army was tasked with SIGINT support from positions at Phu Bai.⁶⁰

The operations got off to a very bumpy start in February 1964, but they eventually smoothed out. Although there was considerable behind-the-curtains controversy about their effectiveness, the raids were having at least harassment value by July 1964. The tiny North Vietnamese navy was beginning to pay them close attention.⁶¹

North Vietnam could mount only a modest defensive threat. Their first-line combatants were twenty-four *Swatow* motor gunboats acquired from the Chinese over a

period of years. More threatening, however, were twelve Soviet-built motor torpedo boats delivered to Haiphong in late 1961, capable of fifty-two-knot speeds. These, in addition to a few minesweepers, subchaser and district patrol craft, represented the North Vietnamese navy.⁶²

The 2 August *Maddox* Patrol

The increasing harassment value of OPLAN 34A was certain to make the North Vietnamese more belligerent. On 1 August NSA went on record as warning the Navy that their own Desoto patrols might be in danger of attack.⁶³ A day earlier, the destroyer *Maddox* had begun a patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin.⁶⁴

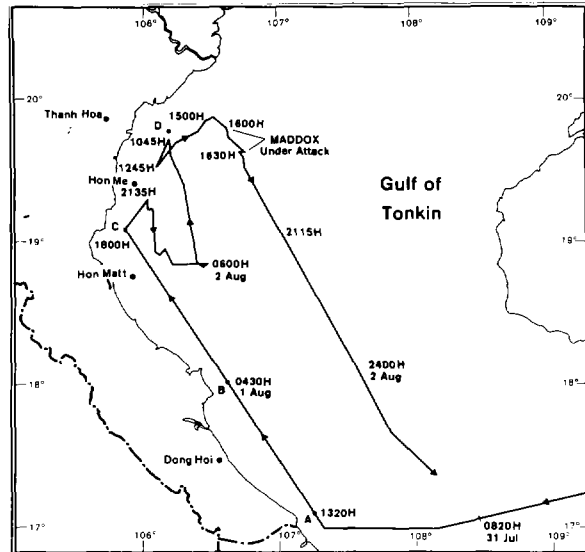
On 2 August the North Vietnamese decided to attack the *Maddox*. During the morning hours, two SIGINT units, a Navy intercept unit in the Philippines (USN-27) and a Marine detachment collocated with ASA at Phu Bai (USN-414T), reported that North Vietnam's naval headquarters had directed preparations for attack. This series of reports was flashed to Captain Herrick, the task force commander on board the *Maddox*, as the morning wore on. The information was sufficiently unsettling that Herrick questioned the day's patrol, considering it to be an "unacceptable risk."⁶⁵

Just after noon, USN-27 intercepted a message from one of the coastal control authority at Port Wallut to one of the *Swatows*: "Use high speed to go together with the enemy following to launch torpedoes." USN-27 issued a Critic on this inflammatory declaration, and Herrick had it in hand almost an hour before the attack was launched. It was preceded and followed by other North Vietnamese messages leaving no doubt that they were headed for a major engagement. It could, of course, have referred to the 34A operations that had been going on earlier, but Herrick knew nothing of those operations. He had to assume that the North Vietnamese meant him - and he was right.⁶⁶

At about 1600 local, three PT boats launched a high-speed attack on the *Maddox*. Herrick replied with surface fire, and within half an hour the torpedo boats withdrew. About that time air cover showed up, commanded by Admiral (then Commander) Stockdale from the carrier *Ticonderoga*. Stockdale's crew shot up the fleeing torpedo boats, sinking one and putting another out of action.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, the two SIGINT stations continued to monitor North Vietnamese communications, keeping Herrick informed of what was happening on the other side. The patrol made for the mouth of the Gulf and withdrew. Back at Fort Meade, NSA declared a SIGINT Readiness Bravo.⁶⁸

There was no doubt of the attack. Not only was it launched in broad daylight, but it was preceded and followed by communications (intercepted by the Navy and Marines)



Track of the *Maddox*, 31 July-2 August 1964



Captain John J. Herrick, commander of Destroyer Div 192,
with Captain Herbert L. Ogier, commander of the *Maddox*

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making the entire attack procedure and objectives crystal clear. SIGINT gave impeccable warning, and Herrick came to rely on it almost implicitly.

The Johnson administration chose not to reply militarily to the attack. But at the White House the mood was grim, and there was a feeling that they could not let another such attack pass unnoticed.

The 4 August Patrol

After assessing the 2 August attack, the administration decided to keep the *Maddox* in the Gulf at least through the 7th to assert freedom of the seas and to add a second destroyer, the *Turner Joy*, which had been part of the *Ticonderoga* task force. With two vessels, Herrick headed back to the Gulf on the 3rd.⁶⁹

After spending the day near the coast of North Vietnam, Herrick withdrew both vessels to the central Gulf of Tonkin for the night. Through intercepts of Vietnamese radar transmissions, he knew that he was being silently shadowed by at least one North Vietnamese PT boat. Moreover, this tended to be confirmed by reporting from San Miguel that one of the *Swatows* involved in the previous day's activity (T-142) had been ordered by a naval authority to "shadow closely." During the night a 34A task force shelled a radar station and a security post, fleeing to Da Nang at daylight.⁷⁰

Herrick believed his vessels were in imminent danger, but the next morning he was nonetheless ordered back to the area of the previous two days' patrol. The *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* loitered in the general area where the 2 August attack had taken place. At about 1700 they turned back toward the central Gulf to spend the night.⁷¹

At about the same time that Herrick was ordering his two-vessel task force back to the central Gulf, the Marine detachment at Phu Bai issued a Critic on an intercepted message from Haiphong ordering three of the boats involved in the 2 August attack to make ready for military operations that night. To Herrick this was very ominous, since he had been shadowed by a North Vietnamese vessel or vessels the night before. Based on this and follow-up messages from Phu Bai, he sent a message stating that he believed that the Vietnamese were preparing to attack.⁷²

At 2041, the *Maddox* appeared to pick up radar contacts on North Vietnamese PT boats. For the next four hours, the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* zigzagged through the central Gulf, apparently pursued and attacked by unknown and unseen vessels. The crews of the two vessels claimed to have had radar and sonar contacts, torpedo wakes, gun flashes, and searchlights, and fired repeatedly at whatever seemed to be attacking them. When air cover showed up from the *Ticonderoga* task force (led by Stockdale), the pilots could not see any boats, but it was an unusually murky night with very low overcast and poor visibility.⁷³

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The American destroyer *Turner Joy*

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After the engagement, San Miguel reported that T-142 claimed to have shot down two "enemy planes" and that "We sacrificed two comrades but are brave and recognize our obligations."⁷⁴

Back in Washington, the events in the Gulf grabbed everyone's attention. The initial indication that something was afoot was the Critic and follow-up from Phu Bai. These were called over to DIA from NSA just after 8 A.M. By 0900 copies of the reports were distributed to McNamara and Wheeler, and McNamara called the president at 0912. This kicked off a long train of actions that spanned the entire day.⁷⁵

Thus forewarned, the president had no trouble believing that an attack had actually taken place once he received the first news at 1100. McNamara convened a meeting to discuss possible retaliation. At a lunch with Rusk, McNamara, Vance, McGeorge Bundy, and John McCone, Johnson authorized an aerial strike on North Vietnamese targets. But soon thereafter, the White House was looking at a message from Herrick casting doubts about the attack. Adverse weather conditions and "overeager sonarmen" may have accounted for many of the alleged contacts. Based on this, Admiral Sharp in Hawaii (CINCPAC) phoned McNamara to recommend that the air strike be delayed until they received more definitive information. At that time a retaliatory air strike, scheduled for 0700 Vietnam time, was only three hours away.⁷⁶

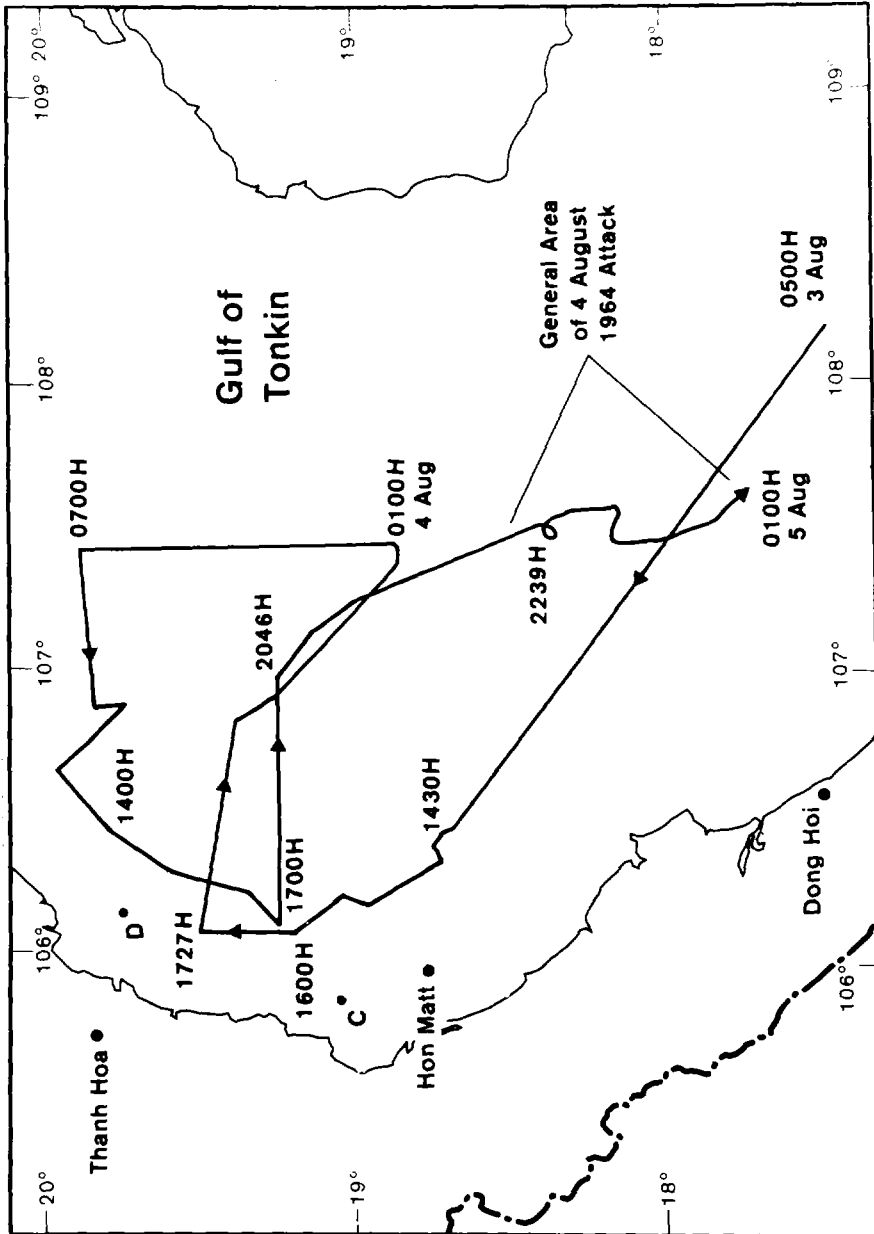
Soon after, Sharp received the new information about the supposed shooting down of enemy aircraft and the sacrifice of two vessels. Sharp, Admiral Moorer (CNO), and Johnson all became convinced that an attack had taken place, and Johnson authorized Pierce Arrow (the bombing attack on North Vietnam) to proceed. It was delayed almost three hours, though, and came very close to preceding Johnson's televised address to the nation announcing the Gulf incident and the American response.⁷⁷

The sequence of events at the White House was driven largely by SIGINT. The reliance on SIGINT even went to the extent of overruling the commander on the scene. It was obvious to the president and his advisors that there really had been an attack - they had the North Vietnamese messages to prove it.

But to the analysts working the problem at NSA, things did not appear to be so obvious. The preplanning messages could, after all, have been referring to reactions to the Desoto patrols. Or the entire series of messages might have been old traffic referring to the attack on the 2nd. NSA sent out frantic requests to the units involved (Phu Bai and San Miguel) to forward their raw traffic. NSA also requested verification from SIGINT intercept operators on the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. The ships' operators had nothing - their intercept capability (all VHF voice) was completely blocked by the ships' radios during the period of the incident. As for the mainland intercept, it took hours to obtain, and the first NSA follow-up was issued without the benefit of the messages intercepted in the field.⁷⁸

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Track of the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*, 3-5 Aug 1964

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The first NSA report indicated that the vessels supposedly planning for operations on the night of the 4th apparently did not participate in the events regarding the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. A subsequent wrap-up on 6 August homed in on the 2 August attack (easy to substantiate), conveniently avoiding the direct issue regarding the 4 August incident.⁷⁹

The NSA analyst who looked at the traffic believed that the whole thing was a mistake. The messages almost certainly referred to other activity - the 2 August attack and the *Desoto* patrols. The White House had started a war on the basis of unconfirmed (and later-to-be-determined probably invalid) information.⁸⁰

There had been no dissembling in the White House. The messages looked valid, and Lyndon Johnson had come to be a believer in SIGINT. When he ordered the attacks, he was sure he was right. He wasn't, and it was not until NSA analysts laboriously pieced together the SIGINT information over a period of days that it became obvious how big a mistake had been made. The Johnson administration defended its actions in public for years, but the reality eventually sank in. Even the president was heard to say in later years, "Hell, those dumb stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish."⁸¹

Some months previously, William Bundy (deputy secretary of defense) concluded that Johnson would need some sort of congressional endorsement for the expanding American role in Vietnam. He felt that a declaration of war was too blunt an instrument, and its chances in Congress were slim. What was needed, he believed, was a joint resolution, similar to that which Congress had given to Eisenhower during the Quemoy and Matsu crisis in 1955. Bundy drafted a resolution that gave the president the right to commit forces to the defense of any nation in Southeast Asia menaced by communism.⁸²

The resolution was ready by June 1964, and the Pentagon had already identified some ninety-four targets in North Vietnam, in case the president should direct military retaliation. Everything was ready but was put on hold. Some sort of provocation would be needed. The Tonkin Gulf crisis was just such a provocation. The administration hustled the resolution through Congress with only two dissenting votes. It was shepherded through the Senate by the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, William Fulbright.⁸³

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution did not become a political issue until three years had passed. In July 1967, with antiwar passions heating, a reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette* quoted a former radarman on the *Maddox* as saying that North Vietnamese vessels had not been in the Gulf that night and that he believed his radar contacts had actually been reflections of the *Turner Joy*. This article came to Fulbright's attention. This appeared to wipe out the rationale for the resolution, and Fulbright, who was being gradually converted to the antiwar cause, felt that he had been hoodwinked, perhaps deliberately, by the White House in 1964. He began gathering the relevant material, including SIGINT reports obtained from the Department of Defense. When he felt he had enough, he convened a hearing on the Gulf crisis.⁸⁴

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The hearings, held in February 1968, made the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution infamous and converted it into a weapon in the hands of the antiwar activists. During the proceedings, Fulbright managed to cast considerable doubt that the 4 August attack ever took place. Inconclusive radar and sonar hits, mysterious weather conditions, the lack of a single verifiable ship sighting – all were used to beat down the Johnson administration's contention that the retaliatory action and the resolution itself were justified.

But the central contention of the hearings became the SIGINT. When Fulbright brought McNamara to the stand, the secretary of defense kept referring to "intelligence reports of a highly classified and unimpeachable nature. . . ." He meant, of course, the SIGINT reports that, first, indicated that the *Swatows* should prepare for nighttime operations, and, second, contained the after-action reports alleging that aircraft were shot down and the loss of the two boats. The committee kept pressing McNamara and eventually dragged out of him virtually the full texts of the messages involved. McNamara resisted, but it was very hard to defend his actions without resorting again and again to his most convincing pieces of evidence.⁸⁵

These public disclosures damaged the SIGINT source – all the messages had been from decrypted North Vietnamese naval codes which were still in use in 1968. But it did not sell the case to the disbelieving committee, despite McNamara's contention that "No one within the Department of Defense has reviewed all of this information without arriving at the unqualified conclusion that a determined attack was made on the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* in the Tonkin Gulf on the night of 4 August 1964."⁸⁶

In fact, not all DoD people were sold on this contention. NSA, for one, had failed to fully support the administration's position. It had confirmed the 2 August attack but had never confirmed the 4 August engagement. The Agency had concluded that the two *Swatows* instructed to make ready for action that night had never participated in the action with the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. The after-action reports could have referred to the 2 August engagement.

But it didn't really matter. The administration had decided that expansion of American involvement in Vietnam would be necessary. Had the 4 August incident not occurred, something else would have. Another expansion of the war occurred the following February, following the mortaring of an American installation at Pleiku. McGeorge Bundy said at the time, "Pleikus are like street cars. If you miss one, another will come along." He could have been talking about the Gulf of Tonkin crisis.

Notes

1. Histories of Vietnam and Southeast Asia abound. Three of the better ones, which were used in compiling this history, are Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983); and George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).
2. Herring, 58.
3. Historical Study of U.S. Cryptologic Activities in Southeast Asia, 1960-1963, 1964, CCH Gerhard collection; William D. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*, Cryptologic History Series - Southeast Asia (Ft. Meade: NSA, 1969).
4. CCH Series VI.HH.12.10.
5. VI.H.H.12.10.
6. Ibid.; oral interview with [redacted] 23 January 1986, by Robert D. Farley and Tom Johnson, NSA OH 4-86.
7. Herring, Kennedy Library papers.
8. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*.
9. Herring, Beschloss.
10. Beschloss.
11. Gerhard Collection.
12. William D. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*.
13. NSA Retired Records, 28515, 84-245; Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*; oral interview with [redacted] 23 December 1992, by Charles Baker and Tom Johnson, NSA OH 08-92.
14. NSA Retired Records, 28515, 84-245; [redacted] and William D. Gerhard, *SIGINT Applications in U.S. Air Operations*, Cryptologic History Series, Southeast Asia, Part I: Collecting the Enemy's Signals (Ft. Meade: NSA, 1972).
15. CCH Series VI.H.H.23.2-23.5.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.; VI.H.H.12.10; [redacted] "NSA in Vietnam: Proud and Bitter Memories," *Cryptolog*, Oct. 1975, 3-6; [redacted] interview: Gerhard Collection; *Essential Matters: A History of the Cryptographic Branch of the People's Army of Viet-Nam, 1945-1975*, United States Cryptologic History, Special Series, Number 5, translated by David W. Gaddy (Ft. Meade: NSA, 1994), 98-111.
18. Herring; MSgt William E. Fleischauer, "History of Project 78," in ASA annual history, 1959, available at Hq INSCOM.
19. CCH Series VI.H.H.12.10.
20. Gerhard Collection.
21. Ibid.; CCH Series VI.H.H.6.22.
22. CCH Series VI.HH.6.22.; VI.HH.12.10; Gerhard Collection; Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*.

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23. Ibid.
24. CCH Series VI.H.H.18.9.
25. [redacted] "Deployment of the First ASA Unit to Vietnam," *Cryptologic Quarterly*, Fall/Winter 1991, 77-93.
26. CCH Series VI.HH.1.10.
27. Gerhard Collection.
28. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*.
29. CCH Series VI.HH.15.12; Gerhard Collection.
30. James Gilbert, "The Beginnings of Airborne Radio Direction-Finding" in U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command, Historical Monographs, 1983 Series Vol. 1.
31. Gerhard Collection; CCH Series VI.HH.12.10.
32. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*; CCH Series VI.HH.12.10.
33. CCH Series VI.HH.15.1.
34. Ibid.
35. Interview with David Gaddy, February 1993; Jules Roy, *La Bataille de Dien Bien Phu* (Paris: Rene Julliard, 1963); Gilbert.
36. Gilbert; Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*.
37. CCH Series VI.HH.12.10.
38. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 201 ff.
39. CCH Series VI.HH.12.10; Gerhard Collection.
40. Herring.
41. VI.HH.12.19; [redacted] interview; Gen. Pham Van Nhon, Manuscript history of DGTS, available in CCH.
42. Nhon, Manuscript history of DGTS; [redacted] interview.
43. CCH Series VI.HH.12.10.
44. Ibid.
45. Gerhard collection; CCH Series VI. HH.12.10.
46. Karnow.
47. Herring.
48. Karnow, Herring.
49. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*; Brown; "The CCP"; Gerhard collection.
50. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*.
51. CCH Series VI.HH.12.10.

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52. Morrison interview.
53. CCH Series VI.HH.1.40.
54. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*; Gerhard Collection.
55. [redacted] et al., *SIGINT Applications*.
56. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*.
57. Gerhard Collection.
58. Ibid.
59. Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, Vol. II: From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965* (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1986).
60. Ibid.
61. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War*, Gerhard Collection; Marolda.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. CCH Series VI.HH.24.10.
65. Marolda.
66. Marolda; CCH Series VIII.13.
67. CCH Series CIII. 13.
68. Marolda.
69. Marolda; CCH Series VI.HH.24.10.
70. Marolda.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Marolda; CCH Series VI.HH.24.10.; VIII.13.
74. Marolda.
75. CCH Series VIII.13.
76. Ibid.
77. Marolda.
78. Marolda; CCH Series VIII.13.
79. CCH Series VIII.13; oral interview with [redacted] 22 Dec 1987, by Robert Farley and Tom Johnson, NSA OH 33-87.
80. CCH Series VIII.13.
81. [redacted] interview.
82. Karnow, 374.

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83. Karnow.

84. Ibid.

85. David Wise, "Remember the Maddox!", *Esquire*, April 1968; NSA oral history with Lt Gen Gordon Blake, by William Gerhard and Renee Jones, 5 June 1972, unnumbered.

86. CCH Series VIII.13, contains a full text of the hearings.

87. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, The Gulf of Tonkin, the 1964 Incidents, Hearings, 90th Cong, 2nd sess., with Hon. Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, on 20 Feb.1968, in CCH Series VIII.13.

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