

## The Still, Small Voice: Aftermath and Conclusions, 1975 and Beyond

The enduring achievement of historical study is a historical sense – and intuitive understanding – of how things do not work.

Sir Lewis Namier

### (U) The Aftermath, 1975-1979

(U) With the fall of Saigon, the overt war in Indochina was over. Across half of the Southeast Asian landmass, communist movements had emerged triumphant over the U.S.-supported governments. American foreign policy in the region appeared to be in ruins. In some countries the strife would continue as successor communist regimes tried to impose order on their populations. These internal problems would spill over the borders into two final spasms of large-scale fighting.

(U) In Laos, the decades-old war in that land of mist-covered peaks, plateaus, and impenetrable jungle ended as the last government strongholds surrendered. The final battles between the Pathet Lao forces and the Royal Laotian Army and its allied,  organized, tribal battalions of Hmong and Meo had begun in March 1975. By May, the communists had driven the government's forces from many of its positions. That month a small aerial evacuation was organized by the United States to remove some of the Hmong soldiers marked for retribution by the Pathet Lao. By August, the Pathet Lao completed their occupation of all local government centers. In November, the national coalition was dissolved. The two princes, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, flew to the royal capital of Luang Prabang and convinced King Savanh Vatthana to abdicate.

(U) In the wake of the communist takeover, reeducation camps, called "Seminar Camps" by

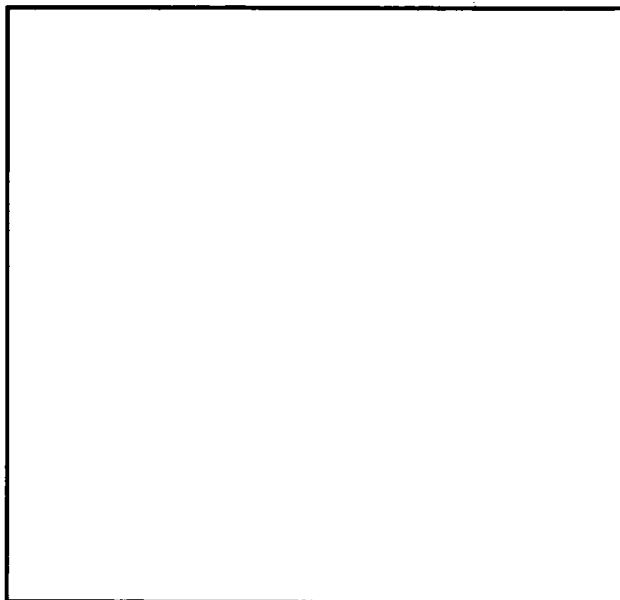
the Pathet Lao, were set up to hold the former rightist and neutralist leaders. In March 1977, the royal family was placed into one of these camps. Within a year, the king and the crown prince succumbed to the harsh treatment of their internment and died. The queen survived another three years in confinement before she perished. All were buried outside the camp perimeter in unmarked graves. Their deaths marked a sad anticlimax to the decades-long struggle in Laos.

(U) In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge, triumphant over the American-supported regime of Lon Nol, continued its war, except that now it was directed against the people and culture of that country, renamed Democratic Kampuchea. Within days of the fall of Phnom Penh, Khmer Rouge troops and political cadre roused the city's 2 million inhabitants – nearly half were refugees – into the countryside. From there, the communists initiated a regime to remake Cambodian society into its own image of a "pure" peasantry and proletariat freed from the sins of an urban, traditional, and yet westernized society. A countrywide system of labor camps was set up, and the inmates were forced to work on huge agricultural projects. To those familiar with the history of Cambodia, this forced labor system was reminiscent of the legions of slaves who struggled to build the architectural marvels for the Angkorian monarchs of the medieval Khmer kingdoms.

(U) The estimates of the numbers of deaths during the Khmer Rouge regime vary greatly – a Khmer figure of 800,000 to Amnesty International's total of 1.4 million, with some projections as high as 2 million. Whatever the numbers, the percent of Cambodia's wartime population that perished under the wave of starvation, disease, neglect, beatings, shootings, and "plastic bag" treatment ranged from 11 to 20, an incredi-

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ble figure considering Cambodia's population in 1972 was around 7.1 million. The severity of these conditions varied within Kampuchea. Those living in the east near Vietnam suffered less than those Cambodians forced to the jungles in the north and west of the country – the traditional strongholds of the Khmer Rouge.



(U) Ironically, the slaughter only ended with the Vietnamese invasion in December 1978. Ever since the victory of the communists in both countries, there had been strife along the Kampuchean-Vietnamese border. Efforts to solve the disputed boundary, which had antecedents as far back as the French colonial days, never made any progress. Talks were suspended in late 1977. By late 1978, both sides had fought several pitched battles along regions once familiar to American forces, such as the Parrot's Beak and the Fishhook. Inside Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge indulged in a new spasm of purges and massacres directed against their own party cadre who were sympathetic with Hanoi.

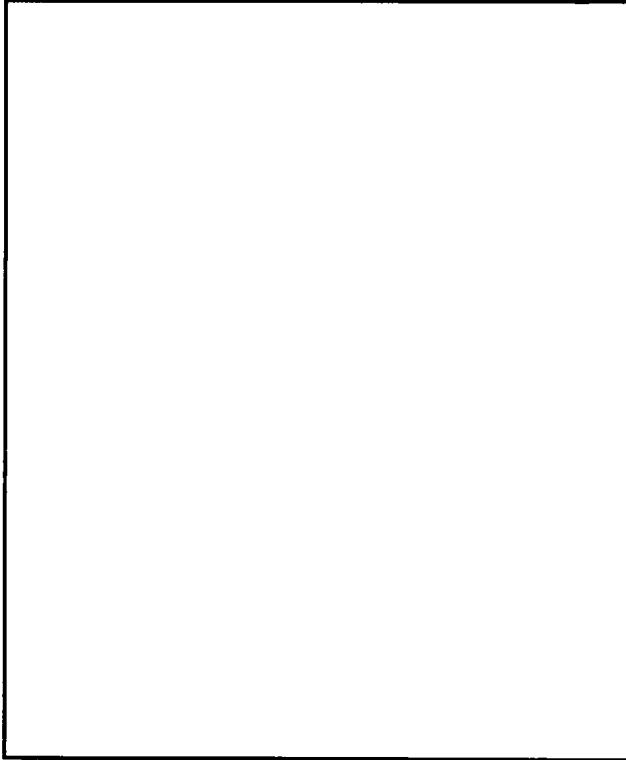
(U) In November 1978, Vietnamese forces launched a full-scale border crossing. Once across and established, Hanoi announced the formation of a Kampuchean Front for National Salvation

which was opposed to the Khmer Rouge. On 25 December 1978, the PAVN threw twelve divisions of its troops and three regiments of opposition Khmer troops against Phnom Penh's forces. By early January, the Vietnamese had driven beyond the Mekong River and had taken Phnom Penh. By March the PAVN units had reached the Thai border. A puppet regime was established by Hanoi. Fighting between remnants of the Khmer Rouge and other anti-Vietnamese groups inside Cambodia continued for years, subsidized by the PRC and United States. For the Cambodian people, at least the horrific slaughter was over.

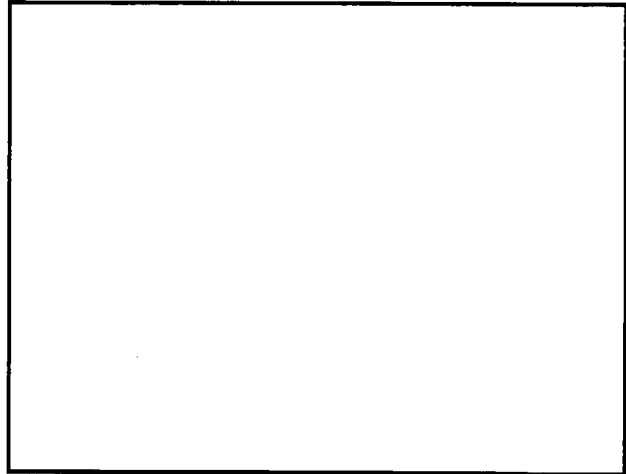
(U) After the fall of Saigon, the newly formed Socialist Republic of Vietnam was in a difficult situation. Except for the Soviet Union, Vietnam was politically isolated. A long campaign of harassment and discrimination directed against ethnic Chinese living in the Tonkin region precipitated a crisis between the China and Vietnam. This was exacerbated by the ongoing border conflict between Vietnam and Kampuchea, the latter whom the PRC supported. There were economic issues, as well, since both countries were involved in the dispute over the Spratley Islands, some of which were believed to sit atop rich oil reserves in the South China Sea.

(U) The Chinese kept up a diplomatic offensive during most of 1978. The political and diplomatic war over the ethnic Chinese (Hoa) continued with Beijing sending a few symbolic ships to "rescue" them from Vietnam. In December, Vietnam invaded Kampuchea. Ten days before this, the United States and China normalized relations. In January of 1979, the Chinese premier, Deng Xiaoping, arrived in Washington and told President Carter that China intended to teach Vietnam a lesson and sought Washington's support. Although concerned about Soviet reactions, and overriding the objections of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Carter acquiesced to the Chinese premier's plan.<sup>1</sup>

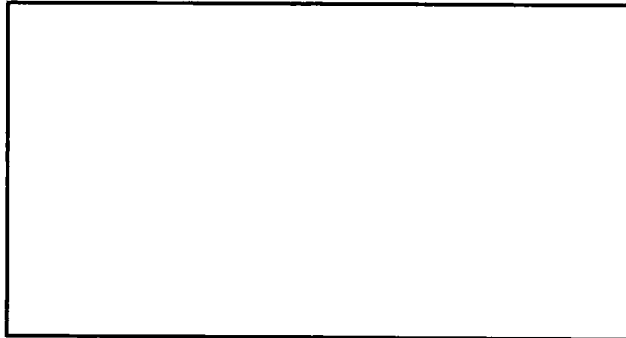
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(U) The already fragile economy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was further damaged by this [redacted]. The damage to the industrial base in the North caused by the American bombing campaigns had been extensive. There was little relief in the prospect of integrating the southern part of Vietnam. The South had been devastated by the earlier war: 9,000 out of 15,000 hamlets had been destroyed; twenty-five million acres of farmland and twelve million acres of forests had been leveled. The social structure was in shambles: one million widows, 879,000 orphans, 181,000 disabled victims of the war. The festering legacy of the combat remained in the shape of the thousands of tons of unexploded ordnance that inhibited agricultural recovery and hamlet reconstruction. The long-term medical effects of the estimated nineteen million gallons of herbicide dumped by the United States on Vietnam are only now being documented.



(U) The victorious communist hierarchy, locked into inflexible wartime attitudes, refused to accommodate any moderating policies. Vietnam sank deeper into the morass of poverty and corruption. Although the predicted "blood-bath" never happened, the communists set up an Asian version of a gulag which for years earned the condemnation of the rest of the world. Resistance centers would develop against the new regime in Ho Chi Minh City, as Saigon was renamed. These were located in places and with groups that carried a familiar ring because they had been associated with the struggle against the French colonial administration: Montagnards in the Thai Nguyen region, remnants of the Hao Hoa religious sect, pockets of former VNQQD and Dai Viet nationalists, as well as tattered groups of ARVN hiding out in Phouc Tuy Province. The Vietnamese communists had won a war, but not the peace. It would be years before the SRV emerged from the depths. Slowly, and incrementally, relations with the United States were normalized until formal recognition was achieved in 1995.



(U) As for the United States, the war was a difficult experience to come to grips with. The failure in South Vietnam was considered a defeat for the country and its policy. But the war was South Vietnam's to win or lose. The Saigon regime always had been a brittle affair. Born out of a negative urge to compete with Ho's nationalist-communist autarky, South Vietnam was seen by many Vietnamese in the North and South as little more than a neocolonial follow-on to France, and later, as a creature of American policy. It could have never been the framework upon which to build a viable country. Nor could it have ever been the linchpin of an American foreign policy designed to contain communist regimes in the region. Saigon could never rally the population to its cause, nor achieve a measure of uncorrupted governance which would assure its viability.<sup>5</sup>

(U) In the aftermath of the fall of Saigon, the search for the war's meaning proved to be fruitless. At first, Americans seemed to just want to forget it had happened, but this proved as impossible as it had been to ignore its images broadcast daily on the evening network television news. Many of the wartime leaders indulged in a campaign of blame setting – pointing at politicians, students, journalists, and the Vietnamese themselves as culprits. However, the U.S. political and military leadership had set the strategy, defined its limitations, designed the war plans, and fought the battles. In the end, all of their efforts proved to no avail. The Johnson administration misunderstood the nature of the conflict and the enemy. The simplistic ideological imperatives of the Cold War, as well as the naive hubris of “nation-building” simply did not apply to the reality of South Vietnam or the rest of Southeast Asia. The intervention was misdirected because the various administrations misunderstood the core issue of the conflict: Vietnamese nationalism.

(U) Two paradigms emerged from the war that, for years, would exert a grip over American policy: the MIA issue and the effect of the “Vietnam syndrome” on foreign policy. Over the

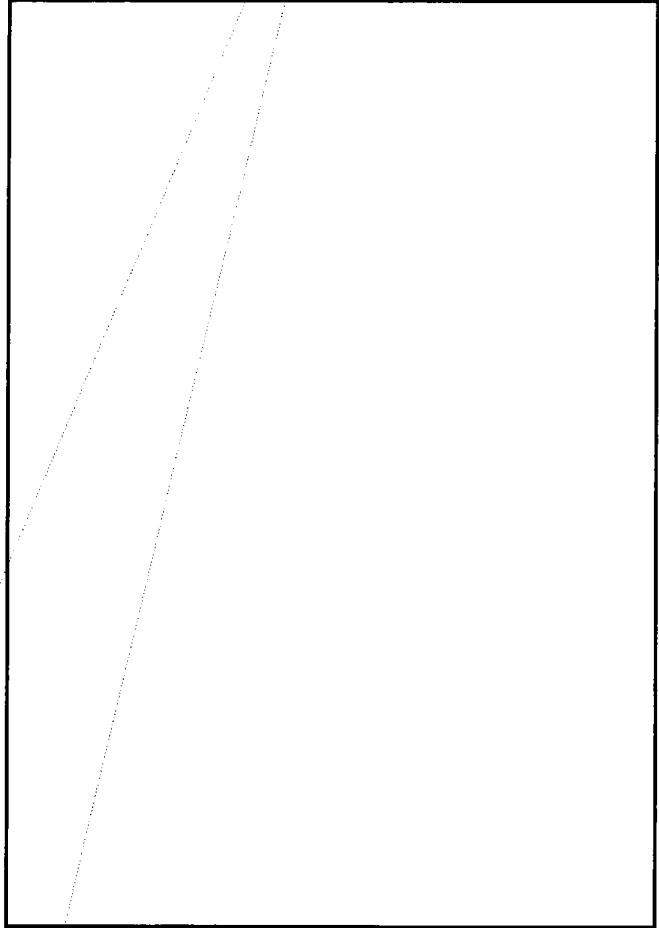
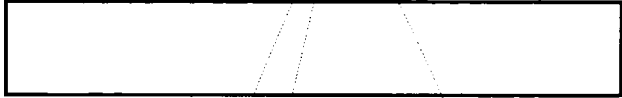
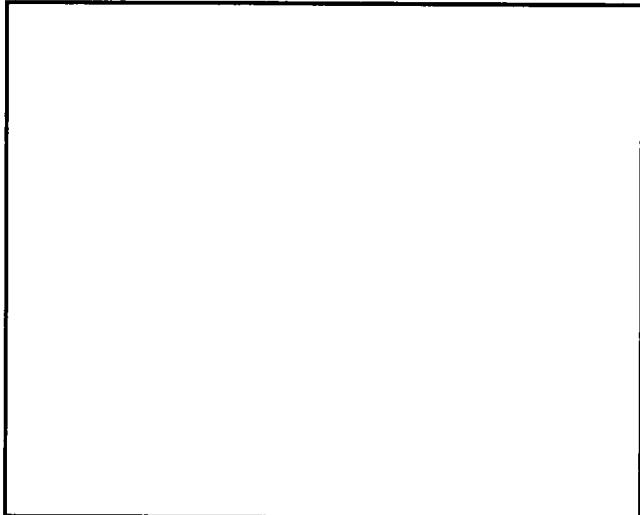
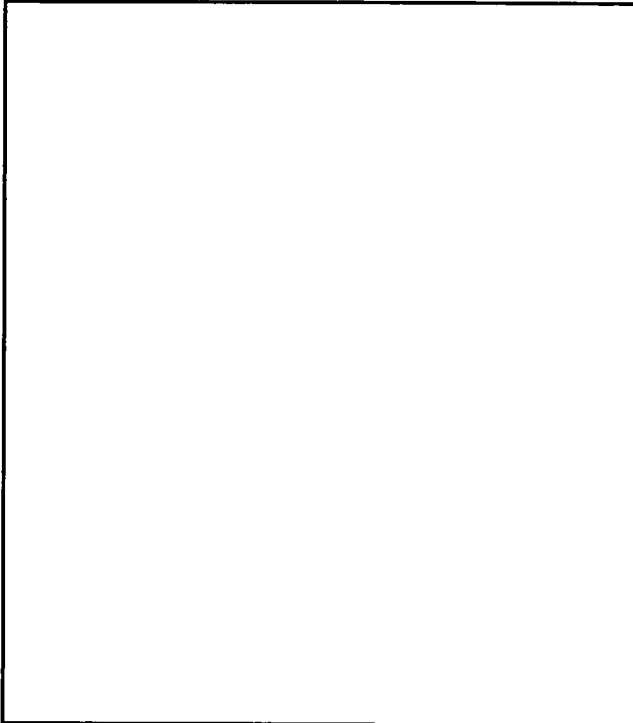
years, the fate of Americans missing in action became a popular issue that grew into a vivid image that increasingly dominated the imagination of many Americans. Fueled by Hollywood films, and pressed by powerful advocacy groups, the idea of jungle camps filled with American POWs, apparently abandoned by the government, seemed to fill deep emotional longings for redemption or another chance to “win” the war, or a more visceral effort to “get back” at the Vietnamese. In the end, the MIA issue proved to be no more than a myth driven by deep political and psychological motives. However, it did have one negative, concrete effect: for years the MIA issue remained an impediment to normalized relations between the United States and Vietnam.

(U) In foreign policy, the memory of the war acted as a brake on a number of overseas involvements with the potential for another Vietnam. Through the decade of the eighties up to the Gulf War, interventions were done swiftly with little public discussion. They were concluded just as quickly. Some failures, like Somalia and Lebanon, were terminated after a disaster, rather than trying to retrieve a situation that could have led to a longer conflict. Meanwhile, administration efforts failed to develop popular support for the long simmering civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. If claims could be made that the “Vietnam syndrome” had been cured after the Gulf War victory, one only had to consider the rapidity at which the United States disengaged once Kuwait had been liberated.

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~~(S//SI)~~ Not surprisingly, American SIGINT, like the rest of the country, took a very limited review of the war. A postmortem was organized at NSA in July 1975, but it evaluated only the immediate material cryptologic losses from the defeat of South Vietnam. A detailed equipment inventory was done which included all cryptologic and COMSEC pieces left behind by the U.S. or carried by the defeated ARVN. This study was widened to

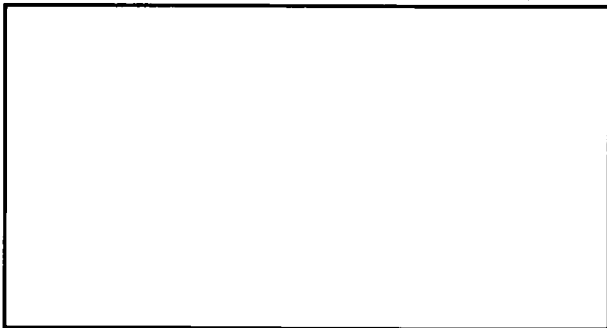
include interviews with the escaped members of the DGTS who were queried on the effectiveness of destruction procedures at the various Vietnamese sites. Although the amount of lost material and equipment was staggering, the numerous paper and machine COMSEC systems NSA had provided the South Vietnamese were dated and constituted only a negligible technological and cryptographic compromise.<sup>6</sup>



~~(S//SI)~~ The work of producing an "official" history of SIGINT in the war had already collapsed. A joint effort at a cryptologic community-wide history of the Indochina war, which had started back in 1967, had come to an abrupt end by 1971. The original goal that the members had envisioned was for a multivolume effort by NSA and the SCEs, documenting various phases and significant incidents of the war. But it had run aground during the withdrawal in 1971-2.<sup>15</sup> The last NSA-published history, *SIGINT Support to the Air War*, was published in February 1972. Other volumes, some in draft form, were stopped. The Army Security Agency's official history never got beyond a draft stage. The Air Force Security Service produced a few special histories on the

Teaball and Iron Horse programs and some works on the early years of the involvement, but by 1974 its history of the war had come to an end. It seemed the SIGINT community simply was uninterested in any thoughtful reflection on its efforts during the conflict.

(U) In 1976 the last U.S. SIGINT site in Southeast Asia, the ASA base at Ramasun, Thailand, closed down. Ever since the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh, the Thai government had been looking for a way to expunge the last American presence in the region. Thailand was getting heavy political pressure from the PRC and was facing the prospect of growing political and regional insurgencies in the north and southeast.

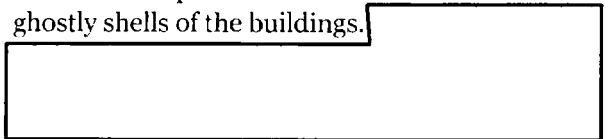


(U) However, the situation in Thailand was just too volatile for things to remain as they were. It needed only a small tinder to set it off, and that came in the form of the Leuchai incident in late 1975. Leuchai was a Thai national who was the manager of the officer's club account at Ramasun. He was accused of irregularities with the club's funds, was summarily fired, and was escorted off post. Leuchai's friends organized demonstrations by students from the local university, who, traditionally, had been vocally anti-American. Leuchai came back to Ramasun and was arrested at the gate by the American military police, who believed that the base was sovereign American territory.<sup>17</sup>

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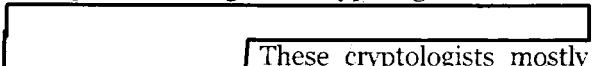
~~(U)~~ Leuchai was released, but the clock was now running out for Ramasun station. After a series of orders to cease operations followed by

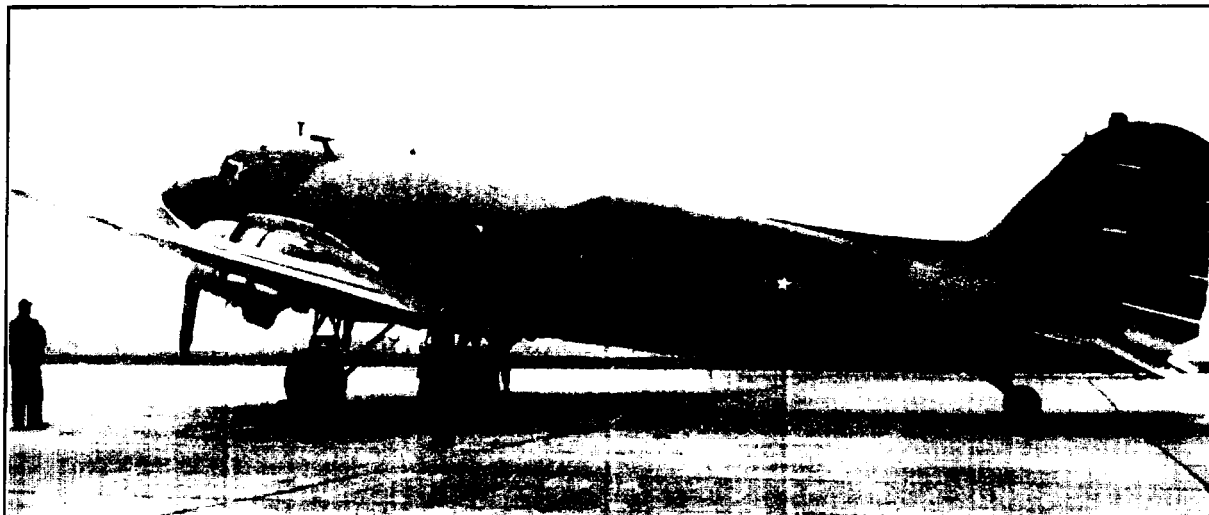
their cancellations, the final order to pack up came on 20 March 1976. The ASA personnel literally performed a SIGINT equivalent of a scorched-earth evacuation. The coaxial cable connecting the huge FLR-9 antenna complex to the operations building was cut with a fire ax. Every piece of useful equipment that could be carried was loaded onto trucks and driven the fifteen kilometers north to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. There, a waiting line of USAF C-141 jet transports was loaded up with almost seventeen tons of equipment and the last contingents of soldiers. By 20 April Ramasun was completely deserted. When the Thais arrived to take custody of the base, they inherited little except for about a hundred antiquated R-390 HF receivers and the ghostly shells of the buildings.



(U) For the cryptologists one last postwar issue from Southeast Asia remained to be sorted out. It was one that revealed that the SIGINT community was not immune to the emotional grip of the MIA controversy. This was the saga of "Baron 52."

~~(S//SI)~~ Baron 52 was the callword assigned to a USAFSS EC-47Q aircraft which was configured for airborne intercept and direction finding. The C-47 airframe was old, somewhere near thirty years of operations. Its slow speed and low ceiling made it especially vulnerable to newer anti-aircraft systems. At the time, the Air Force was in the process of phasing them out and turning some over to the South Vietnamese SIGINT organization, the DGTS. However, a few were still operational in some security squadrons. In early February 1973, a mission over Laos was being readied to fly. The EC-47Q carried a complement of eight, including four cryptologists from the

 These cryptologists mostly were morse or voice intercept operators who sat in the rear of the plane. It was their fate that was



(U) C-47 ARDF variant similar to Baron 52

to become the center of a twenty-three-year controversy played across newspapers, national television, and congressional hearings.

(S//SI) On the afternoon of 4 February 1973, the plane took off [redacted] to execute a "Tank Smoker" ARDF mission over southeast Laos. About two and-a-half hours later, Baron 52 reported that it had been fired at by radar-controlled antiaircraft batteries. Thirty minutes later, at 1900Z hours, the aircraft failed to make a required radio check. Repeated efforts to raise the plane by radio failed. Other American aircraft were vectored into the area to see if they could locate the plane. By 0030Z on 5 February, the flight was listed as overdue and search-and-rescue (SAR) operations were started. It was at this point that the problems began.

(U) Baron 52's emergency locator beacons had never been activated, so the only option left was to search visually for the plane over some of the most rugged terrain in Southeast Asia. On 7 February, the Air Force thought they had located the crash site, but a team arrived and determined this was a C-47 that had crashed a year earlier. It was not until 9 February that Baron 52's wreckage was discovered near Ban Phon, Laos, about

fifty kilometers southeast of Saravan, and a rescue team and chopper were dispatched.

(U) The SAR found utter destruction. The aircraft's position indicated that there had been a catastrophic flight failure. The plane had gone straight down, hit the ground and flipped over on its back. The rear fuselage, where the SIGINT crew worked, had been almost totally gutted by fire. The SAR team discovered the aircrew still strapped to their seats. However, the searchers could not stay to do a complete survey. The zone was "hot." Someone had fired a missile at their chopper, and armed men were seen moving in the nearby trees. They did remove one body. Their report concluded that there had been no survivors. It was a reasonable conclusion based on the evidence at the crash site. Unfortunately, the case was soon to be hurled into a sea of controversy.

(S//SI) A little more than five hours after Baron 52 had failed to make its radio check, an airborne collection mission, Combat Apple, intercepted a message between two unidentified entities that a "Group 217 is holding four pilots captive and that the group is requesting orders what to do with them from an unid[entified] unit

prob[ably] subordinate to the 55th.”<sup>18</sup> The report added the comment that “other transmissions” suggested that the unidentified terminals were possibly located in the vicinity of the North Vietnamese city of Vinh about 400 kilometers north-northwest of the crash site. Twenty hours later, the airborne mission issued a follow-up translation which differed in some details:

Presently, Group 210 has four pirates. They are going to the control of Mr. Van. They are going from 44 to 93. They are having difficulty moving along the road.<sup>19</sup>

The follow-up carried four footnotes, of which the last two were important: (1) The referenced Mr. Van was associated with binh tram 14 located about 165 miles north of the crash site, and (2) the references to “44” and “93” were, in reality, kilometer markers. Actually, both comments were speculation: “Van” was a very common name in Vietnamese, and the two numbers could have been markers anywhere. (The difference between “210” and “217” was caused by the similarity of the two numbers in spoken Vietnamese.)

~~(S//SI)~~ The main question was whether or not this information was relevant to the Baron 52 crash. The time of the intercept seemed to fit, but the transmission was from a unit probably in the Vinh area. The distance from the crash site to Vinh was some 400 kilometers, and the intercept seemed to suggest that, at the time of the transmission, the prisoners were already at or near Vinh. Considering the short amount of time after the loss of the aircraft, the difficult terrain, and problems in exchanging prisoners and arranging for transport between two separate communist forces (PAVN and Pathet Lao), it was clearly most unlikely that these transmissions referred to Baron 52.<sup>20</sup> However, the correlation between the crash of the EC-47Q and the intercept from Combat Apple already had been made, and it was because of this that the legend of the Baron 52 MIAs began.

~~(S//SI)~~ On 8 February, NSA published a *Southeast Asia SIGINT Summary* in which an Air Force analyst took all of the speculation about the kilometer markers and reported that the four fliers actually were in Laos and *were being transferred to binh tram 9* (and not already there as the intercept stated).<sup>21</sup> The floodgates of speculation were now opened. On 12 February, HQ USAFSS sent a message to NSA, citing as fact the speculation about the location of the prisoners being in Laos. The Security Service used this information to conjecture that the four prisoners might be survivors of Baron 52.<sup>22</sup> In the NSA reply to the message, this same AFSS analyst added more of his speculation, none of which was supported by the extant, meager intercept. He now stated that, in addition to the previous reports, vehicular transportation was indicated which would make for the possibility that the four prisoners mentioned were from the EC-47. He added that higher authorities were to be contacted if there were problems in movement; that the prisoners were to be given water; and that another entity had asked to be notified of the time of departure of the four.<sup>23</sup>

~~(S//SI)~~ Messages flew between HQ AFSS and [redacted] used the speculation by the Air Force analyst at NSA as the basis for the conclusion that the four cryptologists on the EC-47 had parachuted out of the plane and that the prevailing winds had blown them north, closer to the spot mentioned in the intercept.<sup>24</sup> A radioman [redacted] who had accompanied the SAR team to the crash site, told his commanders that he had not seen the rear cargo door or any parachute harnesses in the rear compartment. (Of course, no one on the team had a chance to inspect the rear of the aircraft nor the nearby pieces of the plane because of the presence of unidentified armed troops near the crash site.)

~~(S//SI)~~ All of this made an impact on the officers and men [redacted]. The unit tried to get the commander of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, the next level in the com-



mand echelon for the squadron, to change the status of the men from KIA to MIA. However, he refused, stating that the evidence was, at best, very tenuous.<sup>25</sup> Yet the story stuck, and many members [redacted] believed that the four cryptologists were still alive as prisoners.<sup>26</sup> The stage now was set for more embellishment and speculation to be added to the myth of Baron 52.

(U) Five years after the crash, in a 3 August 1978 story on the television program, *Good Morning America* columnist Jack Anderson, citing messages and reports from 5 February and other days, added that the search team had found only one crew member and that another surveillance report sighted four prisoners about sixty-five kilometers from the crash site.<sup>27</sup> In September 1985, the same Air Force analyst who had written the first speculative reports, and now retired, filed an affidavit in support of a court action on MIAs in Southeast Asia. In it, he claimed that between five and seven members of the EC-47 had been captured alive and sent to North Vietnam. He made this statement despite the SAR report of the four dead crew members. He added that the Defense Intelligence Agency had concurred with his analysis back in February 1973.<sup>28</sup> He repeated these assertions before the U.S. Senate's Veteran's Affairs Committee in January 1986.

(U) The story only got worse. Another former AFSS analyst, Terrell Minarcin, told the UPI in January 1992 that the North Vietnamese had shipped as many as 300 American POWs to the Soviet Union as slave laborers. He also recounted how airborne intercept aircraft picked up communications between prison guards asking why the prisoners had not been shot already.<sup>29</sup> Of course, he had no substantiating evidence. Minarcin then went one step better and entered himself into the Baron 52 controversy. Since he served in the [redacted] at the time of the loss of the aircraft, he claimed to have known all of the crew. On 11 September 1992, he appeared on the ABC newsmagazine program *20/20* and publicly iden-

tified a supposed picture of one of the crewmen allegedly held in captivity in Laos, Joseph A. Matejov. Still on camera, he then broke down and cried.

(U) Minarcin's pathos made for wonderful public theater. But, in the end, his version, as well as that of the first AFSS analyst, did not match the facts of the case. Two months after Minarcin's dramatic show of tears, a joint U.S.-Lao recovery team arrived in the hills of southeast Laos to conduct a thorough search of the EC-47Q crash site. The team examined the crash and the surrounding area. Inside the wreckage of the plane they recovered all eight parachute harness assemblies. The inescapable conclusion was that no one had gotten out of the plane before it had crashed and burned. The team also found the remains of the seven crewmen. (One had been recovered during the original SAR effort.)<sup>30</sup> These were shipped to the Army's forensic laboratory in Hawaii. In 1995, the laboratory identified the remains as those belonging to the seven crewmen of Baron 52. They were buried in Arlington Cemetery on 8 January 1996. More than the remains of the men of Baron 52 were buried that day: some of the ghosts of the MIA controversy were interred as well.

### **(U) Conclusions**

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(U) In the preface to this history, we asked two questions: how did American SIGINT operate within the framework of the war, and did SIGINT have an effect on the direction or outcome of the war? In the course of this history, it was possible to make evaluations of SIGINT's role in certain critical events and phases of the war. [redacted]

We also considered how SIGINT affected the effort against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and its support to the air war. It is not necessary to review these judgments. Rather, we will now consider

SIGINT in the larger context, and try to formulate some general conclusions about the nature and efficacy of American SIGINT during the war, as well as its effect on the course and outcome of the Indochina War.

(U) Overall, the American SIGINT effort produced a mixed bag of results. In some respects it was quite successful, especially the application of technology against Vietnamese communist communications. The most obvious triumph was the utilization of airborne platforms to solve shortcomings in D/F and intercept of low power, short range, and line-of sight communications. In direction finding, the use of aircraft solved the twice-binding limitations of physical security and slow results. No longer would ASA ground teams be forced to close to a dangerous proximity of an enemy's transmitter. At the same time, the aircraft could quickly move to obtain multiple fixes on a single target or on a number of targets. This was particularly useful against guerrilla communications that operated briefly and on low power.

~~(S//SI)~~ Also, aircraft proved to be the platform with the versatility by which tactical voice communications could be intercepted effectively. Communications that fixed sites could hear only sporadically or seasonally, such as the "Vinh window" and the North Vietnamese air defense network, could be intercepted and exploited on a continual basis. Add to this capability the communications suite through which the intercept, in either its raw audio state or in an initially processed textual format, such as a Kleilight, could be passed speedily to a reporting site and then on to a command center. In this, one can see the beginnings of true real-time SIGINT support to military operations.

~~(S//SI)~~ In terms of technique, the ability of American cryptologists to detect in advance, and with accuracy, major communist military operations was a significant success. The application of classic T/A techniques from other problems,  to that of the Vietnamese com-

munist was impressive. The traditional ability of D/F missions, both ground and aerial, to track and locate communist units and command elements, was enhanced by these techniques. This combination brought an ability to discern communist military intentions well in advance of the initiation of operations, often in the preparatory stage. The tempo and thrust of American ground operations in South Vietnam, especially at the operational level with the so-called search and destroy sweeps, relied heavily on SIGINT.

~~(S//SI)~~ These successes point to the conclusion that effective tactical SIGINT support, especially for the ground war, but also for parts of the air war over North Vietnam, had rebounded



~~(S//SI)~~ Not surprisingly, the Vietnam experience caused the ASA to rethink its approach to tactical SIGINT. The lack of front lines, a terrain inhospitable to conventional communications, an air-mobile U.S. Army, and an enemy always improving its COMSEC and cryptography forced ASA to relearn the tactical SIGINT lessons it had developed during World War II and Korea. In Indochina, army cryptologists had digested some

important lessons. SIGINT, most of it in the form of targeting information, became the intelligence source of choice for many U.S. Army maneuver unit commanders in Vietnam.<sup>31</sup>

~~(S//SI)~~ However, these feats of SIGINT technology and technique, while impressive, were balanced out by some significant failures during the war. These major failures were in three areas and seriously undercut the value of its information and the effect that SIGINT had on the war. These were technical ability, organization, and policy towards the ARVN COMINT effort.

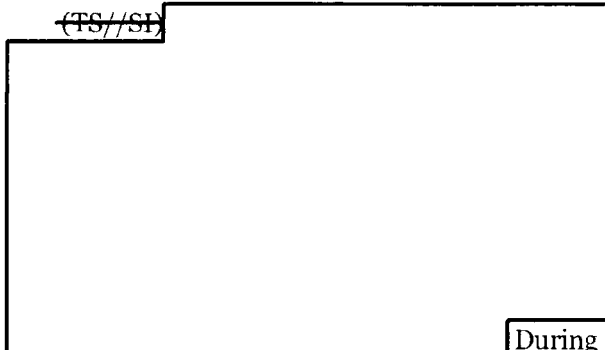
~~(S//SI)~~ **Technical Ability:** There were a number of technical failures and shortcomings in the American SIGINT effort. The ARDF capability, which was such a panacea to the ground-based D/F problem, ultimately proved to have limitations when it came to precise targeting needed for effective air strikes. As it turned out, results from ARDF were still not precise enough; often, security practices by the communists were sufficient to seriously limit ARDF's effectiveness. Often, the actual target located by the aircraft was, in reality, a transmitting antenna and not the command center. This problem was amply illustrated during the invasion of Cambodia when B-52 raids, guided by ARDF results, were unable to hit the COSVN complex as it relocated away from the advancing ground troops.

~~(S//SI)~~ Another technical shortcoming was the consistent lack of qualified SIGINT analysts, especially linguists. This shortage, measured both in sheer numbers and in quality language specialists, was endemic to the American effort.

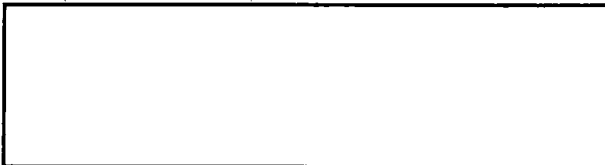
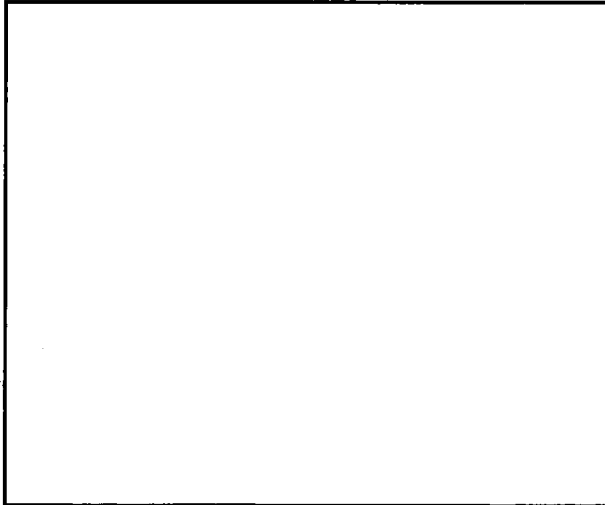
The number of linguists, let alone superior ones, was never sufficient to deal with the enormous volume of intercept. And it only got worse as the amount of intercept increased. It was seen that special operations such as Bolo and Son Tay strained the limited pool of available linguists. It also was seen how a limited linguistic ability affected the Gulf of Tonkin crisis. However, it was

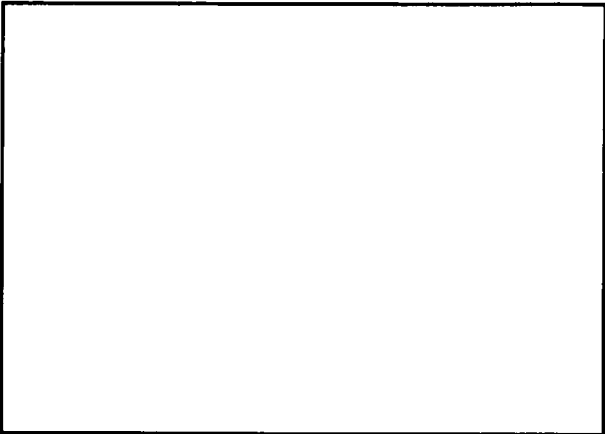
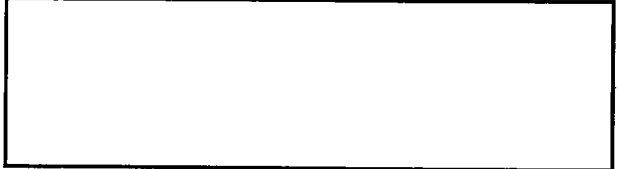
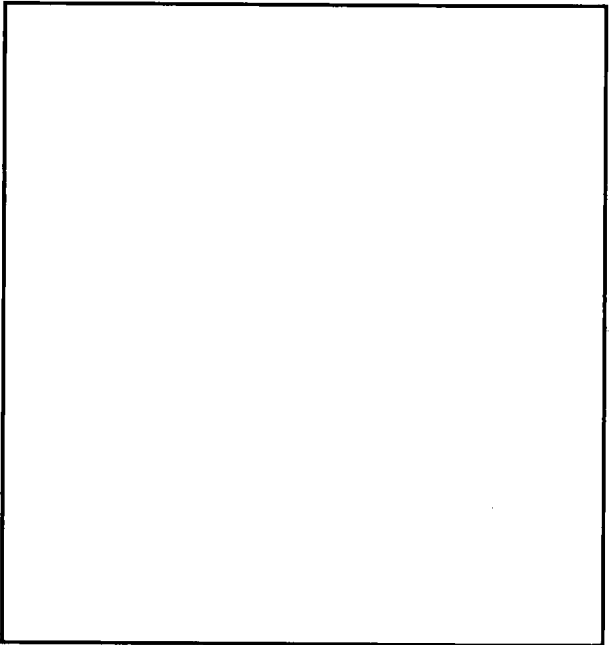
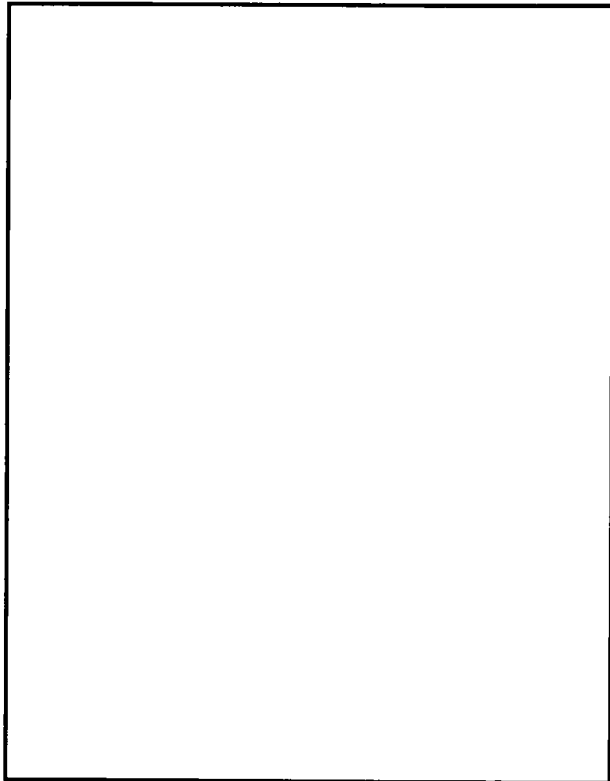
the success against the communist tactical voice problem that was the most telling. The flood of intercept became too much for the American linguistic pool to handle. A partial solution, the Dancer program, was tried. Yet security concerns, a narrow operational application, and the technical shortcomings of the Vietnamese for years hampered the benefit this source of language ability could have made on the U.S. SIGINT effort in Southeast Asia.

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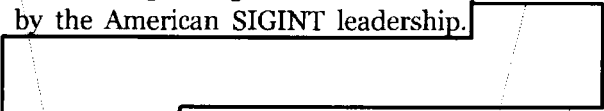


During this period, it was not the sophistication of Hanoi's cryptography that hindered cryptanalysis, but the short shelf life of its systems. Even then, the time between intercept and decryption was still months.





~~(S//SI)~~ **Organization:** The sprawling, regional, multiservice, multinational SIGINT undertaking during the war was never centralized by the American SIGINT leadership.



Yet, by 1962 significant numbers of cryptologists served all over Southeast Asia. These included personnel from all four services (the Marine Corps was still part of the Navy Department) and the COMINT efforts of other countries. A plan had been developed that year for a Joint SIGINT Authority to corral these disparate elements under one control, who, in turn, was to be subordinate to MACV. However, bureaucratic impediments emerged in the form of Army and Air Force objections to outside control of its service cryptologic elements. At the same time, neither MACV nor CINCPAC was willing to assume command responsibility for a consolidated SIGINT effort. The ensuing solution never really addressed the problems inherent in the arrangements without a central authority.

~~(S//SI)~~ The logical figure to assume control of all SIGINT in the region, the NSA/CSS Representative, Vietnam, defined his position in nebulous terms such as "facilitator" or "coordinator." His command structure was under the existing NSA Representative hierarchy in the Pacific region - subordinate to the representatives in Hawaii and, for a while, the Philippines. Locally, the NRV had enough authority to mix it up with

field sites over the control of certain intercept positions, but he never had enough to leverage complete missions or to organize a response to a crisis. That authority was split among NSA, the 509th ASA Group, and the headquarters of the Service Cryptologic Elements. Many SIGINT resources, especially collection and ARDF aircraft, in the region remained beyond his effective control. A few early attempts at centralizing some SIGINT functions – processing and reporting at the SEAPIC – failed to take hold. In spite of later, repeated MACV calls to create some sort of centralized processing or reporting center, similar to its own Joint Intelligence Center, SIGINT continued to operate as a set of loosely associated entities.

~~(S//SI)~~ Like many other problems in Vietnam, this lack of centralization came home to roost when the Tet Offensive erupted in late January 1968. We saw how NSA was dissatisfied with the lack of centralized and coordinated reporting from the various SIGINT sites in Vietnam. Fort Meade stepped over the NRV and the intermediate NSA Pacific representatives, assumed control, and issued a single series designed to report on the “possible general offensive” in Vietnam. However, despite a limited, initial success, the reports failed to provide adequate warning of Tet. The report series suffered from a diluted central theme; information contained in it tended to confirm MACV’s belief that the attacks being prepared in South Vietnam were intended to distract attention from Khe Sanh. But more to the point, by being removed physically from Vietnam, NSA could not take the actions appropriate in meeting the threat of a general offensive. For example, we saw the NSA series was not current, often a full day behind events. Nor was it as broadly inclusive as it might have been; many reports from stations in the southern part of Vietnam were not cited in the report series after the first report was issued. NSA never alerted the elements of the SIGINT system – the NRV, 509th ASA Group, the field sites – to the impending assaults. NSA, situated half a world away at Fort

Meade, simply could not substitute for a centralized SIGINT authority in Vietnam.

~~(S//SI)~~ **Policy towards South Vietnamese COMINT:** From the earliest days of the intervention in the region, the American attitude and approach to the national COMINT agency of South Vietnam can be portrayed, at best, as “at arm’s distance.” The overriding attitude, the one that defined this circumspect relationship, was the concern about the poor security program in the Vietnamese COMINT organization. This was an opinion held by people at all levels of the hierarchies of the American cryptologic and intelligence communities.



Whether the anecdotes about the security failures signified a general trend of communist infiltration or just a series of security incidents cannot be determined completely.

~~(S//SI)~~ However, it was this historic concern in Washington that fed the misconceptions about the origins and nature of the great communist communications and cryptographic change in 1962. These apprehensions held, despite the considerable SIGINT evidence to the contrary that Hanoi’s changes had been occurring for some time. As a result, the American distrust was set in stone. In many ways this fear over security hobbled the relationship between the American and Vietnamese cryptologists for the rest of the war. For thirteen years, the two organizations cooperated and collaborated in a most restricted manner. Exchanges were conducted under the most rigorous terms. Joint operations, were, in large part, never truly “joint”; the Vietnamese were more like an adjunct entity, quarantined from any contact with the Americans, except for their specific mission. This distrust destroyed early joint efforts of the 3rd RRU at Tan Son Nhut. It increased the impetus for U.S.-only operations at Phu Bai and other sites. American SIGINT operations generally were isolated from those of the ARVN.

~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//X1~~

~~(S//SI)~~ In the long run, this situation adversely affected both sides. Vietnamese cryptologists, specifically cryptanalysts and traffic analysts, lost the opportunity to learn through interaction with their American counterparts. On a broader organizational level, the Vietnamese COMINT organization lost even more. Ever since the ASA had ended its participation in the Sabertooth I training program, the South Vietnamese cryptologists had gone almost eight years without a sustained training program supported by the Americans. Saigon's COMINT organization registered little improvement in most tasks. Saigon's independent ARDF and ground D/F missions remained largely irrelevant to the larger American SIGINT effort.

~~(S//SI)~~ For the Americans, another result of this estrangement was that the South Vietnamese COMINT organization became something of a mystery, and remained so for years. What were its capabilities? How did it operate? Could it deliver intelligence to the military and political leaders in Saigon? How much support did it need to maintain its operations? Truth was, after eight years of being in the same country, the Americans there, principally the NRV and the 509th ASA Group, did not know much of anything about their South Vietnamese opposites. When the hurried plans for the Vietnamese Improvement and Modernization were okayed in 1969, the Americans, before they could evaluate Saigon's needs, had to send observers to get reacquainted with its personnel, mission, and capabilities. Even then, the improvement plans generally proved to be ill-suited, never matching the Vietnamese strengths that pointed towards a mobile, tactical COMINT entity. Instead, NSA and ASA dumped money, equipment, and training on an organization simply unready, technically, and not disposed, culturally, to become a smaller version of NSA.

~~(S//SI)~~ NSA also was affected adversely in an operational way by the estrangement. The Vietnamese COMINT personnel represented a

linguistic source for American SIGINT that was never properly utilized. This was a result of the aforementioned security concern about the Vietnamese and their vetting system. The only use made of the Vietnamese language capability was as transcribers in the Dancer program, and that was severely limited, so much to the point that, for years, it was ineffective and a bone of contention between [redacted] and the Americans. By not using the Vietnamese as intercept operators, the Americans passed up the chance to add thousands of "ears" to the intercept effort.

~~(S//SI)~~ Could this inclusion of the Vietnamese into American SIGINT operations have worked? The answer is yes, at least in collection, the front end of the SIGINT process. There was one example of how an integrated effort could work, one created by the circumstances of the moment. During the siege of Khe Sanh, a joint marine-ARVN intercept team operated in the bunkers. Both units had arrived separately, and, in keeping with the general atmosphere of non-relations, were unaware of the other's presence for some time. Eventually, they joined up and divided their tasks optimizing their respective skills. The Vietnamese intercepted the NVA tactical voice transmissions and transcribed them. The marines translated the take and reported it to the local commander. Yet the possibilities illustrated at Khe Sanh never registered. So, while American SIGINT went begging for linguists for intercept, transcription, and translation duties, hundreds of Vietnamese languished in the backwater of their COMINT effort.



~~(S//SI)~~ It is hard to say whether these three problems in the American SIGINT system affected the outcome of the war in Indochina. Wars are complex affairs, involving the interaction of a number of factors. They are won when realistic strategies are defined and the proper mix of resources – military, political, social, and economic – are brought to bear in achieving them. These factors are best realized at the so-called

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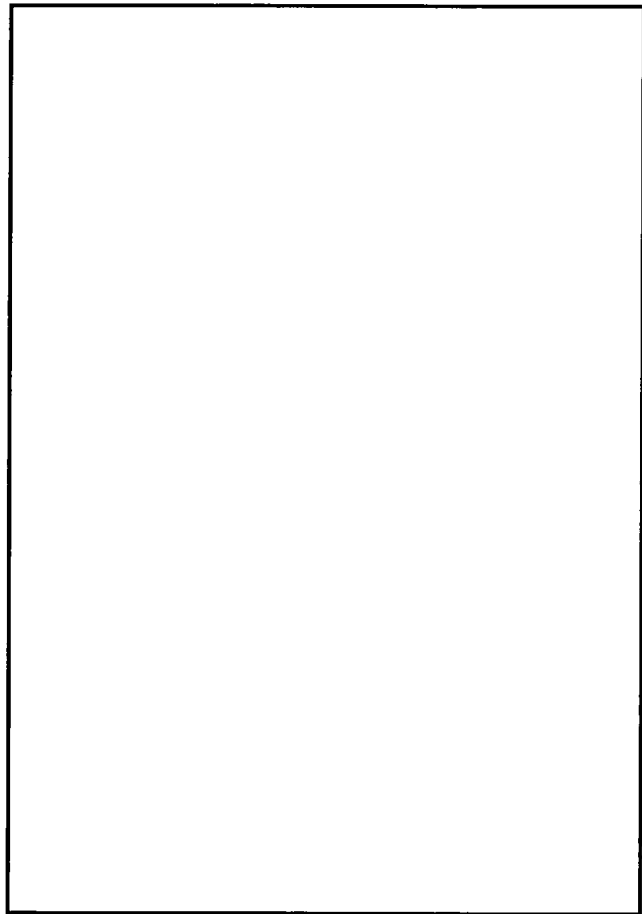
front-end, often seen in the sharpest relief in the individual combatant. Intelligence, and SIGINT is part of this mix, plays an important but still secondary role. It offers insight into the enemy's plans and capabilities. It can be a force multiplier. Yet it is no substitute.<sup>32</sup>

~~(S//SI)~~ Unlike World War II, in which Allied COMINT could provide insight into the Axis' strategic plans and capabilities, and had something of a role in Allied strategic planning, SIGINT in Indochina played a largely secondary role.

 American SIGINT could not provide direct information on Hanoi's strategic military, political,  activities. The only help SIGINT could provide was on the infiltration rates of Hanoi's troops after 1968. For the most part, though, SIGINT was confined to support of Allied military operations. This role was hardly insignificant, and SIGINT did contribute to a string of American military successes starting in 1965. However, Allied military operations were such – that is, largely a reaction to communist military initiatives in South Vietnam – that they could not achieve the elusive “victory” sought by Washington.

~~(S//SI)~~ Yet, if SIGINT could not contribute to Washington's strategy for winning the war, it was not without an impact, for better or worse, on two of the most critical events of the war: the incidents in the Tonkin Gulf and the Tet Offensive. Earlier, it was illustrated how SIGINT failed the Johnson administration, when, in 1964, it did not report all of the information that it held concerning the actual activities of Hanoi's navy on 4 August. Instead, only certain reports that substantiated the Navy's claim that the two destroyers had been attacked were provided the administration. Other SIGINT was manipulated, or misrepresented as relevant, while contrary information was withheld, and access to all of the nearly sixty translations and reports was denied. Without all of the SIGINT information, a decision by Washington to respond to Hanoi depended on

the flimsy evidence from the handful of SIGINT reports that loosely supported the notion of a second attack. Over the years, NSA refused to release the entire record to either the secretary of defense or the foreign relations and intelligence committees of Congress. On those occasions when NSA was requested to supply information, it offered only the “official” version contained in the 1964 chronology. For thirty-seven years, the scope and nature of NSA's failure remained unknown.



OGA

~~(S//SI)~~ In large measure, these two failures by the American SIGINT community were the natural result of the technical and organizational shortcomings that historically plagued the American SIGINT effort from its very first days in the Indochina War. It is easy to see how the crimped analytic capability, especially in cryptanalysis, and the lack of sufficient qualified linguists affected NSA reporting in both instances.

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The organizational shortcomings, specifically the lack of a centralized, in-country SIGINT authority, left the reins of control of both crises in the hands of an NSA that was nearly half a world away. Communications links, no matter how fast, robust, or how large a data capacity, could not maintain control or contact over the disparate SIGINT field sites, representatives, support groups, and collateral agencies and commands. The personnel at NSA at Fort Meade were removed from the context of the situation in Southeast Asia. The nearby "one voice" of SIGINT that MACV had wanted was not there.

**(U) Notes**

1. (U) Young, 310.

3. (TS//SI) Ibid., 34.

4. (TS//SI) Ibid., 133.

5. (U) Olson and Roberts, 282.

6. (S//SI) N0865, "COMSEC Assessment of Loss in RVN" - Information Memorandum, 30 July 1975. CCH Series VI.HH.25.3. (S//SI)

First of all, South Vietnamese keying material could not be used to decrypt American teleprinter or speech traffic. Secondly, the Adonis (1950s-design KL-7 off-line encryption device, of which 451 might have been lost in Saigon) had already been compromised in the loss of the *Pueblo*. Modifications and upgrades to the KL-7, and its phaseout by the KW-7 and newer systems, had reduced its vulnerability considerably. The Nestor (the KY-8 family of tactical Wideband speech security equipment, of which 216 may have been lost in Saigon), had already been lost in vast numbers - over a 1,000 during the war.

7. (S//SI) See 2/00/4131-75, "B3 Front Reports Search of Overrun RVN 23rd Division Headquarters, 1538Z 14 March 1975 and 2/00/4139-75, "B3 Front Military Intelligence Section Subordinate Reports Contents of Captured ARVN 23rd Division COMINT Facility, 1624Z 14 March 1975 and comments in 1219Z 15 March 1975 FM NSA to IAPC, Subject: Loss of ARVN 23rd Div COMINT Room", CCH Series VIII.30.

8. (S//SI) N0772 "NSA/CSS SIGINT Equipment Identification List." 1 July 1975; SIGINT Damage Assessment, RVN June 1975, CCH Series VIII.30, and (TS//SI) NSAPAC REP (V) to DIRNSA, 300702Z August 1970, [redacted] 4687-70. For more detail, also see NSAPAC REP (V) Threat Study, "NVA/VC Exploitation of U.S. Communications in SVN," 15 March 1969.

9. (U) Gaddy, 194.

10. (TS//SI) Johnson, Vol. III, 25.

11. (S//SI) *Quarterly Management Review* (QMR), Third Quarter FY 73, April 1973, 56; QMR, Third Quarter 1975, March 1975; QMR Third Quarter 1976, March 1976, CCH Series X.G.11.

12. (S//SI) Ibid., QMR, 1975, 56; QMR, 1975, 49.

13. (S//SI) QMR, First Quarter 1979, December 1978, 48-49, 95.

14. (S//SI) Oral History interview, [redacted] 14 July 1994, by OH 38-94; Oral History interview, [redacted] 26 January 1986, by Gerald Haines, OH 04-86.

15. (S//SI) Memorandum, P2 to Director NSA, "Status Report, SEA Cryptologic History" 8 January 1969, Serial P2/020, CCH Series XII.NN.

16. (TS//SI) Johnson, Vol. III, 34.

17. (S//SI) Oral History interview, [redacted] 23 December 1992 by Charles Baker and Thomas Johnson, OH 08-92.

18. (S//SI) 2/[redacted] 182-73 (VCJ) Songbird, 05124Z February 1973.

19. (S//SI) 2/[redacted] 179-73 052335Z February 1973 Follow-up Number one and final to USA-29 2/R0/182-73.

20. (S//SI) No clear identity of the four "pirates/pilots" was revealed in the transmissions. From POW interviews it is likely that at least one was an American: U.S. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Phillip A. Kientzler. He had been shot down on 27 January in Quang Tri



Province, south of the Demilitarized Zone. His weapons officer did not survive. On the same day, in roughly the same region, a USAF OV-10A (Bronco) reconnaissance aircraft was shot down. The last indications were that one of the crew reported his imminent capture. Apparently, though, he did not survive. Kientzler was moved north to Hanoi after his capture as were another two dozen military and civilian prisoners held by Viet Cong forces in northern South Vietnam. This transfer was in preparation for the DRV releases of prisoners that occurred between 12 February and 29 March 1973. Any of these particular groups of prisoners could have been the four referred to in the intercept. (U) Rochester and Riley, 570, 586;

[Redacted]

21. ~~(TS//SI)~~ 3/00/3799-73 082000Z February 1973. The name of the analyst was [Redacted] who retired from the AFSS as a senior master sergeant after a twenty-year career.

22. ~~(S//SI)~~ Analyst Notes, "Loss of Baron 52 and Crew, 5 February 1973." 10 February 1987, CCH Series XI.NN.IX.C, Baron 52, 10, Directorate of Operations (DO) [Redacted]

- 23. ~~(S//SI)~~ Ibid., 11, DO [Redacted]
- 24. ~~(S//SI)~~ Message [Redacted]
- [Redacted] Subj: Release of Information. 271000Z February 1973, DO [Redacted]
- 25. ~~(S//SI)~~ Analyst Notes, 12, DO [Redacted]
- 26. (U) Ray Kania, "Fighting Forces: For Air Force intercept operators in Thailand eavesdropping on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, what they heard could be ominous." *Vietnam*, December 1998, 14.
- 27. ~~(S//SI)~~ Analyst Notes, 13, DO [Redacted]
- 28. ~~(S//SI)~~ Ibid., 14, DO [Redacted]
- 29. (U) UPI Wire "Agent Says Vietnam POWs Were Shipped to Russia." January 3, 1992.
- 30. (U) CDR JTF-FA Honolulu HI 121242 MAY 1993, Subj: "Analysis of Material Evidence Associated with REF NO 1983." See Section 5 for details of the inventory of material retrieved at the crash site, DO [Redacted]
- 31. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Johnson, Vol. II, 548.
- 32. David Kahn, *Kahn on Codes: Secrets of the New Cryptology*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1983), 119.
- 33. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Zaslow OH 17-93, 34-35.

(U//FOUO) Mr. Hanyok is a senior historian with the Center for Cryptologic History. He worked in the NSA/CSS Archives from 1992 to 1994 and in the National SIGINT Operations Center from 1990 to 1992. Mr. Hanyok has also served as a collection officer in G Group (1976-1979), in the COMSEC Doctrine organization (1979-1982), as a Traffic Analysis intern (1982-1984), and as an analyst in A Group (1984-1990). He holds the title of master in the technical track program of the Intelligence Analysis Career field.

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